What do you think?
Was this study guide useful
for your personal or group
study? Please send your
suggestions to
Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Religious Authority in the Age of the Internet

As the Internet changes how we interact with one another, it transforms our understanding of authority by creating positions of power, flattening traditional hierarchies, and providing platforms that give voice to the voiceless. How is it reshaping Christian leadership and institutions of authority?

Responsive Prayer

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer for all who find their
 livelihood and leisure in virtual technologies,
 **that they may have the wisdom and will to use them properly,
 in service of human life and creativity;**
for all who hunger for friendship and community, and for all
 who feel alone,
 **that they may find the love and acceptance they seek in the
 presence of God and the communion of saints;**
for all who seek to follow the way of Christ and dwell meaning-
 fully with others in the virtual realm,
 **that they might be gracious and discerning, witnessing to
 the faith through their life and practice.**
Ever-living and ever-loving God, breathe your life into us that we
 might live the words we pray and be signs of your great love
 and presence in the world. **Amen.**

Scripture Reading: Jude 1:20-25

Reflection

If we think the earliest Christians who lived so close to the time of Jesus and in the presence of his apostles always knew whom to trust and follow, we would be wrong. Jude warns them of "certain intruders" who are morally shameless and deny the authority of Christ (4). Those leaders are full of themselves, and their pretentious and flattering speeches are misleading some believers (16). In this crisis of authority Jude instructs Christians as they faithfully "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (3), to be merciful toward the errant leaders, their confused followers, and others whose faith is wavering. Jude's recipe of discernment and mercy to restore faithfulness would seem to be wise counsel for us today as we face new and complex challenges to religious authority in the Internet age.

Before Heidi Campbell and Paul Teusner focus specifically on how the Internet challenges religious authority, they remind us to put its impact into the context of other societal changes. "Even before the rise of the Internet," they note, "people's lifestyles were becoming increasingly mobile and they tended to identify less with a local congregation or Christian denomination. Increasingly their religious identities are tied to personalized networks of friends and acquaintances they know through telecommunication technologies, rather than to local religious communities bound together by geographic and family ties."

Campbell and Teusner identify three ways that the Internet is transforming the authority of religious leaders and institutions.

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

▸ *The Internet is changing how we understand Christian community and, therefore, how we gain and maintain religious identity.* It "fuels a challenge to the traditional hierarchical and familial understanding of community," they note. "As people connect online and form networks of relationships that extend beyond connections within congregations, the organizational structures of traditional denominations have less power in determining religious identities."

▸ *The words and actions of religious leaders are increasingly susceptible to scrutiny by alternative voices online.* With snippets of text, videos, and hyperlinks—the preferred discourse of social media platforms —more and more people are challenging sermons they hear and religious essays they read. "In the online media era, anyone with a camera and access to YouTube is empowered to expose and criticize public figures."

▸ *Internet culture is challenging traditional Christian structures, especially those that appraise and correct theological knowledge.* For instance, Web sites, blogs, and Facebook pages can provide new "spaces for people to re-examine the doctrines, symbols, and practices of religious tradition" that are "free from the constraints and control of religious authority."

"The Internet not only increases access to alternative sources of religious information, but empowers people to contribute information, opinions, and experiences to public debates and conversations," Campbell and Teusner conclude. "Christians must develop new skills in technological literacy. They also need new skills of discernment to see how the Internet has created a new social sphere that facilitates spiritual interactions, establishes new authorities, and legitimizes practices for their community."

Study Questions

1. How is the Internet directly impacting the ministries of your congregation and Christian denomination? Discuss some ways it has enhanced their work. Consider how it is impacting the authority of local and denominational leaders.

2. When congregations assess how to use new technologies, Roger Owens says they should start from the conviction that "the Church is God's own technology—the medium through which God makes the gospel available to the world." What does Owens mean by this? Do you agree?

3. How will congregations and denominations be different in fifty years due to the Internet? Will those changes be good?

Departing Hymn: "You Alone Are Holy"

You alone are holy,
you alone, O Lord;
truth, mercy, and judgment
shine forth in your Word.

You alone are holy,
O Ancient of days,
your boundless creation
is filled with your praise.

Fanny Crosby (1909), alt.
Suggested Tunes: WYE VALLEY or EUDOXIA

Religious Authority in the Age of the Internet

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	*Standard Plan*
Responsive Prayer	Responsive Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To identify ways that the Internet is transforming the religious authority of congregational and denominational leaders and institutions.

2. To anticipate how congregations and denominations will be different in the future because of the Internet.

3. To discuss how congregations should evaluate the use of new technologies.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Virtual Lives (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "You Alone Are Holy" locate one of the suggested tunes WYE VALLEY or EUDOXIA in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (*www.hymntime.com/tch/*). (Because the text is 65.65 and WYE VALLEY is 65.65.D, two verses are combined when sung with this tune.)

Begin with a Story

"Megan is a member of a conservative Christian community. Since going to university she has developed a keen interest in eco-feminism. She started a personal Web log where she journals her thoughts on the relationship between faith, politics, and the environment. Through her blog she has had many conversations with like-minded Christians and has formed a group called 'Three Places,' a small network of bloggers who discuss common topics and share links to each other's sites. She is asked whether she feels more at home, or more supported in her faith development, at Three Places or in her local congregation. She answers, 'I need both. My church makes me feel grounded, and the relationships are more real. But there are questions that I have that I can't ask at that church. The people I have met at Three Places are great, and it's really good to have that space to ask those questions. But all of our conversations are topic-based. It's not really church.'" (*Virtual Lives*, 66)

Heidi Campbell and Paul Teusner offer this case study to highlight the challenge that the Internet culture presents to traditional Christian structures. Are there young adults with experiences similar to Megan's in your congregation?

Responsive Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading together the responsive prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Jude 1:20-25 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The third study in this series, "Faithful Criticism of Popular Media Technologies," introduced the theme that technological innovations are not morally neutral. Each communication technology has its inherent biases and values or, as Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) famously put it, "the medium is the message." In this study Heidi Campbell and Paul Teusner focus on how an inherent value of the Internet—the "democratization of knowledge"

(i.e., the widespread access to information and opportunities to express opinions and interpretations of events)—is impacting the authority of religious leaders and institutions.

Study Questions

1. Divide members into three groups to review one of Heidi Campbell and Paul Teusner's three key points: the Internet is changing our understanding of community, providing platforms for criticizing religious leaders, and offering resources for appraising theological claims. Encourage the groups to brainstorm specific ways the Internet enhances the work of the congregation and denomination, and others ways that it makes those ministries more difficult. Consider how it is impacting the authority of leaders and institutions.

2. Roger Owens gets the idea that the Church is God's technology for making the gospel available to the world from reviewing Shane Hipps's *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith*. Owens writes, "The gospel is not simply a proposition to be believed that can be tweeted in 142 characters or less. Rather, it is the gift of a people whose life together—the medium—is its own message." He continues, "And if the Church, God's enfleshed people in the world, whose life together is a sign and foretaste of God's kingdom, is God's medium, then in a virtual church the gospel itself has been erased. These baptized bodies that live and play, work and pray together are God's message: in Jesus a new humanity is possible. Indeed it is more than possible, it is a reality. But it is a flesh and blood reality, not a virtual one."

   The question then becomes whether the Church can use technological innovations like the Internet to build stronger face-to-face communities of disciples that worship, work, live, and play together. "What we need," Owens says, "is gospel wisdom, a way of navigating life in the world that is shaped by the life of this world's incarnate Lord. Such wisdom can open our eyes to the powerful ways technology can shape and misshape our discipleship."

   For members who would like to pursue the topic of how the Internet and related technologies are nimpacting congregations, in "Virtual Reality comes to Church" Owens recommends these three books: Shane Hipps's *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith*, Quentin J. Schultze's *High-Tech Worship? Using Presentational Technologies Wisely*, and Jesse Rice's *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected Are Redefining Community*.

3. In *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (2008), Phyllis Tickle suggests that "about every five hundred years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at that time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur." At each of these junctures, "a new, more vital form of Christianity" has emerged with reconstituted organizations that can spread the faith "dramatically into new geographic and demographic areas…." She continues, "It would, quite literally, be impossible to exaggerate the central importance to the Great Emergence of the Internet and the World Wide Web."

   Encourage members to do some futuristic thinking. For instance, the influence of many religious denominations is waning. Will denominational identity be more or less important in the future? Will some other sort of Christian identity replace it? Consider the role of the local congregation. Will congregational identity be more or less important in the future?

   Do members foresee new and vibrant forms of congregations, denominations, Christian colleges, monasteries, and ministries forming, in part, due to the influence of the Internet? Do they think some Christians are taking false steps into the future by using the Internet in ways that threaten the community, leadership, and theological authority of the Church?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.