

# Media Messages Matter: Christ, Truth and the Media

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Editor's Note: This Cape Town 2010 Advance Paper has been written by Lars Dahle as an overview of the topic to be discussed at the Multiplex session on 'Media Messages Matter: On Global Technologies, Glocal\* Trends and Gospel Truth?'. Responses to this paper through the Lausanne Global Conversation will be fed back to the author and others to help shape their final presentations at the Congress.

## Media and Technology: Introductory Reflections

Wherever we live in today's globalized and pluralistic world, information and communication technologies increasingly influence and impact our human lives, our Christian witness and our Christian ministries. The missional issues related to media and technology are therefore of real significance to themes and topics at the Lausanne III Congress. The varieties of local, global and glocal media messages certainly provide complex and ambivalent contexts for the key task of making the case for the truth of Christ in the 21st century.

The rapidly developing information and communication technologies of today's world constitute a radically different media context for the Lausanne III Congress compared to the previous two Lausanne world congresses in 1974 and 1989, not to mention the much earlier conference in Edinburgh 1910. This is illustrated by defining features of the Cape Town 2010 Congress such as the Lausanne Global Conversation and the Cape Town GlobalLink.

The nature of the topic of this Cape Town 2010 Advance Paper invites contributions and reflections from others. This is partly due to the fact that the various contemporary media are no longer the privileged and exclusive area of media enthusiasts, media professionals and media academics. When it comes to media, most if not all of us are participants, observers and producers. Therefore everyone involved in Cape Town 2010 is a potential discussion partner in this area. But it is also partly because the current media situation is fundamentally different between technology-rich regions and other areas of the world, even though the situation in many places changes rapidly. Therefore we need voices and perspectives from various technology and media contexts to reach a more global understanding on key missional issues related to the media.

This essay is written in appreciation of previous significant work in Lausanne contexts on media and technology. The Manila Manifesto (1989) reminds us that the world of the modern media is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, 'the mass media have contributed to the devaluation of truth and authority, by replacing word with image?'; but on the other hand, 'the Christian media have a powerful influence both in sowing the seed of the gospel and in preparing the soil?'.<sup>[1]</sup> There are also two significant Lausanne Occasional Papers on Radio in Mission (1989)<sup>[2]</sup> and on Media and Technology: The Rainbow, The Ark and the Cross (2004)<sup>[3]</sup>, both of them with a number of valuable insights.

## From Media and Technology to Media Messages Matter

Our various uses of media and information technologies shape our everyday lives and give us potential access to a variety of media cultures. Such contemporary media cultures may be global, local or glocal. The latter term ('glocal?') describes the fact that current media cultures often combine global and local elements and perspectives, both in terms of the actual messages and the ongoing interpretations. These media contexts create a number of challenges and opportunities both for authentic human living and credible Christian witnessing.

This advance paper suggests a missional framework for engaging the world of the media, and

identifies media awareness, media presence and media ministries as three highly significant topics. The framework and the topics will be further explored at the multiplex session *Media Messages Matter: On Global Technologies, Glocal Trends and Gospel Truth* and in the subsequent related dialogue sessions.

This multiplex session will offer a fivefold interaction with media:

- 1) Understanding the changing information and communication technologies and how they impact our human lives and our Christian witness;
- 2) Understanding how a classical Christian view of truth, humanity and morality may shape our interactions with the information and communication technologies and how such responsible stewardship may be an individual and corporate witness to 'One God and One Lord';
- 3) Understanding how contemporary glocal news and entertainment media may constitute significant secular and pluralistic challenges to bearing witness globally to the truth of Christ;
- 4) Understanding how various media genres and formats may be used as lenses through which we can analyse and understand contemporary culture and biblical truth;
- 5) Understanding how the biblical Gospel of 'God in Christ, Reconciling the World to Himself' (2 Cor. 5:19) may be communicated creatively, engagingly and interactively through the means of contemporary media technologies, platforms and formats.

These various dimensions are all related to the mission of the Christian Church, whether the focus is on (a) the biblical Gospel and its unique truth claims, (b) the cultural contexts and how they are shaped by various significant worldviews, (c) living and witnessing as disciples with both humanness and biblical integrity, or (d) the wide range of available arenas, approaches and formats when using media critically and creatively in Christian mission.

#### Media Messages Matter: A Missional Framework

'The world' is probably the biblical concept that comes closest to describing the media technologies and media cultures of our contemporary world.

There is in the Bible a fundamental ambivalence about 'the world'. On the one hand it is God's good creation, loved by him and to be redeemed by him; on the other hand it is the place of human and satanic rebellion and opposition to God. We have to bear both of these in mind, in creative tension, in all our missional reflection and engagement in the world. In evangelical circles there is a tendency to think of 'the world' primarily in the second negative sense, and we need to be willing to appreciate the other dimensions, for example in terms of what we can learn from all cultures of human beings made in the image of God.[4]

The same ambivalence is true of media and technology. They reflect humanity's dual character. We are uniquely created in the image of God as communicating persons, with community, creativity and curiosity as key features. But we are also devastatingly damaged by sin, with rebellion, self-centredness, and lostness as defining elements. This tension within us as humans is well captured in C. S. Lewis' memorable phrase from *Prince Caspian* (in *The Narnia Chronicles*): 'You come of the Lord Adam and the Lady Eve', said Aslan. 'And that is both honour enough to erect the head of the poorest beggar, and shame enough to bow the shoulders of the greatest emperor on earth. Be content.'

We have now started outlining a biblical worldview perspective on humanity and therefore also on media and technology. One of the most helpful current definitions of a worldview is found in the classic textbook *The Universe Next Door*:

?A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) that we hold (consciously or unconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.?[5]

Such a multidimensional understanding of worldview as a concept illuminates the world of the media. Media messages may then be understood as communicating elements ? or traces ? of various religious and secular worldviews. These elements (or traces) are found in the stories, the statements, and the presuppositions of the media. In many news and entertainment media messages produced in the Global North, influences from secular worldview perspectives such as (secular) humanism, naturalism, nihilism and postmodernism seem to be prominent. These perspectives are often supplemented in fictional stories by traces of religious worldviews including eastern pantheistic monism and New Age religiosity. All this underlines the importance of an appropriate understanding of key worldview traditions and trends for missional engagement with the media.

The increasing importance of media and technology for human existence in today?s world underlines the importance of missional reflection, discussion and action in this whole area. The underlying theological principle behind this holistic engagement is the fact that ?if our mission is to be true to God?s mission, then it must embrace the wholeness of the earth and engage with the wholeness of human existence and need?[6].

### Enabling Media Engagement: Gospel Truth and Truth Criteria as a Foundation

A critical and creative engagement with the plurality of media messages is an integral part of making the case for the truth of Christ in a globalized world. This presupposes a basic understanding of the nature of truth and a proper application of this understanding to various truth claims in media messages in general and specifically related to various worldviews.

This essay suggests that the combined use of three key truth criteria is the most constructive way forward whether we talk about truth as a key concept, truth claims in various worldviews, or truth in media messages. Accordingly, truth may be understood as (1) that which is coherent, consistent and makes sense, (2) that which corresponds to reality and the known facts and (3) that which changes and transforms. The proper combination of these three truth criteria opens up for a more holistic view of truth that is neither pre-modern, modern nor postmodern.[7]

If truth is to be understood as that which is coherent and makes sense, which corresponds to reality, and which changes and transforms, we need first of all to apply these central criteria to the case for the truth of Christ.

When looking carefully at the apostles? apologetic ministry in the New Testament, we discover a responsible use of these key truth criteria, sometimes explicitly but maybe more often implicitly. One clear instance is Acts 26:27-29, where we find the apostle Paul in a challenging setting in Caesarea. He argued in a dialogue with King Herod Agrippa II (and with governor Festus in the background) for the truth and the reasonableness of the Christian Gospel, since it corresponds to the known historical facts and is consistent with the Old Testament prophets. Agrippa admitted also to the persuasive, life-changing nature of Paul?s message about Jesus Christ as unique Saviour and Lord.

This New Testament example illustrates that these key truth criteria may be taken as a helpful way of understanding three significant aspects of the case for the truth of Christ specifically and the biblical worldview in general:

(1) Coherent and consistent: The specific case for the truth of Christ is set within a coherent understanding of the triune God, the nature of humanity, and their relationship. The biblical worldview at large presents a consistent and gradually unfolding message of creation, sin, redemption and restoration.

(2) Corresponding with reality: The specific case for the truth of Christ is based on key historical facts about who Jesus was and what actually happened through His life, death and resurrection. The biblical worldview at large is rooted in creation, fall and God's redemptive acts as fundamental realities, as well as in significant historical narratives and in the everyday lives of the many biblical characters.

(3) Changing and transforming: The specific case for the truth of Christ includes the unique and life-changing Gospel of grace, salvation, forgiveness and hope, because "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). The biblical worldview at large acknowledges and points to processes of changing and transforming at various levels. These include living in authentic human relationships, receiving forgiveness of sins from God, and being "salt and light" in the world.

All this implies that we may appropriately claim the biblical Gospel of Jesus Christ specifically "and the biblical worldview at large" to be true in the full and holistic sense of the word. Furthermore, these essential biblical perspectives provide us with an appropriate foundation for our critical and creative interaction with current media technologies, cultures, and messages. As "Gospel Truth people" we discover the urgent need to be committed to all aspects of media "to media awareness, media presence and media ministries.

### Encountering Media Messages: The Urgent Need for Critical Media Awareness

There is an urgent need globally to develop critical thinking and awareness on how media messages are communicated and interpreted, with an emphasis on issues of truth and reality, worldviews and spirituality.

Almost everyone everywhere in today's globalized world seems gradually "and at least potentially" to become both users of modern media technologies (such as satellite, Internet and mobile) and participants in modern media cultures (e.g. through television, DVDs and web-based social media). Through these global media technologies and cultures we are all constantly exposed to a wide spectrum of messages from various local and global media. These media messages include "facts" (such as news and documentary), "fiction" (such as movies, soaps and computer games), or "faction" (such as infotainment and reality television). When analysed properly, we discover that such media messages always contain traces of worldview perspectives and thus both reflect and shape current worldview trends. As evangelicals we need to engage these media "and such worldview trends" both critically and creatively as a global missional community.[8]

There is an urgent need to develop proper media awareness in local churches and youth ministries and to do this in global partnership. Such potential media awareness initiatives need to take into account both the global and the local media messages in any given cultural context. This means developing culturally relevant approaches and material, which integrate a number of complementary perspectives. Thus, we need to become more aware of how technological, aesthetic, cultural, worldview, theological and spiritual dimensions together contribute to the making of the modern news and entertainment media.

Such media awareness initiatives include the following issues and areas:

First, we need to understand the ambivalent nature of technology and how rapid technological changes are influencing contemporary media arenas, formats and genres.[9]

Secondly, we need to understand the cultural similarities and differences between local, global and global media texts and contexts.

Thirdly, we need to understand the aesthetics of various media texts, genres and formats and how to apply the appropriate hermeneutical questions. This may be illustrated in relation to cinema film where Tony Watkins presents an attractive set of illuminating interpretative questions to consider.[10]

Fourthly, we need to ask whether the various media messages we encounter present a true view of humanity. This includes asking the following questions:

- 1) Is the specific media image of humanity consistent and coherent? Does it cohere with a biblical view of creation, fall, redemption and hope?
- 2) Does the specific media image of humanity correspond to reality? Does it present both the glory and the tragedy of humanity?
- 3) Does the specific media image of humanity give space for real change and transformation, including forgiveness and character formation?

It should also be emphasised that a biblical view of humanity both is realistic and relevant. These characteristics can be confirmed daily when encountering media images of humanity in news and entertainment media messages.

Fifthly, we need to ask whether the various media messages allow and give space for religious convictions and faith perspectives. This includes giving voices to faith communities (such as evangelicals) that do not conform to political correctness.[11]

The multiplex Media Messages Matter will seek to present models for media awareness teaching in mission, church, school and family contexts.

Entering Major News and Entertainment Media: The Urgent Need for Appropriate Media Presence

There is an urgent need globally for appropriate, authentic and credible Christian role models, communicators and commentators in the general news and entertainment media.

There is often a lack of authentic Christian role models in the general (or major) media and a corresponding lack of proper training. As a global evangelical community, we need to practice an appropriate media presence in the news and entertainment media. This is where talented Christian journalists, documentarians and commentators have the opportunity to introduce neglected stories, key ideas and new perspectives. The same is true of gifted Christians in the areas of creative media and arts, where the creation of fictional stories may open up new ways of imagining Christian truths. One may add that there are increasing opportunities for media presence in the major news and entertainment media through the creative use of interactivity and social media.

The multiplex Media Messages Matter will introduce two significant cases of media presence:

The first example will be the major new documentary series Science and the God Question. The producer Iain Morris introduces the series in the following way:

? Think of Science and the God Question as a form of wrestling match. In it:

? Viewers are asked to wrestle with big questions of life that raise the ultimate question about the existence of God.

? Atheists and theists wrestle with the interpretation of scientific evidence in their search for truth about God.

? The producers, in making the series, are wrestling with the challenge of remaining balanced and fair while creating a forum in which it is hoped truth will be the ultimate winner.

Designed for people of any faith ? or none ? the first three programmes of the series are scheduled for completion by the end of spring 2010:

- 1) Cosmos and the God Question: Is There Space for God?
- 2) Life, Evolution and the God Question: Did Darwin Bury God?
- 3) Mind, Consciousness and the God Question: Is Belief in God a No-Brainer??

This new series is an attractive model for how Christians may use the documentary format to present key issues to a wider public in a balanced and fair way. In this specific case this includes giving atheists, pantheists, and theists a voice, with the possibility of comparing and contrasting these different worldview perspectives.[12]

The second case study will be an appreciative and critical engagement with a major movie, with introduction and commentary by Nick Pollard. This exemplifies the so-called Damaris approach:

?... Damaris has great respect for contemporary popular culture and believes that it is an expression of people?s search for answers to fundamental questions. Damaris engages in rigorous study of its content and context in order to identify, understand and respond to the underlying worldviews with integrity.

... Damaris has great respect for people and their freedom, and acts as a humble guide to contemporary popular culture. Damaris invites people to evaluate and respond to the underlying worldviews.[13]

This illustrates how we may engage with contemporary entertainment media with biblical integrity and cultural relevance.

#### Establishing Independent Media Initiatives: The Urgent Need for Creative Media Ministries

There is an urgent need globally for creative and combined use of ?traditional?, ?old? and ?new? media formats and genres to communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ as authentic and relevant in the context of a holistic biblical worldview.

Alongside the major news and entertainment media, there is a wide spectrum of independent evangelical media ministries, often with a prominent history, complementary strategies and considerable experience. This includes global organizations such as FEBC, TWR and HCJB but also more recently established regional media ministries such as SAT-7 and COICOM.

Recently, the arrival of the Internet and related digital technologies has gradually introduced such media as key elements in most Christian organizations and local churches in technology-rich countries and regions. This is certainly true also of evangelical ministries and includes the increasing use of podcasting and of new social media such as blog, Facebook and Twitter.

We need a variety of strategic media mission initiatives and ministries in today?s global world. This involves the creative and critical use of various media platforms, genres and formats to communicate the Gospel Truth of ?God in Christ reconciling the world to himself? in the context of a holistic biblical worldview.[14]

When facing increasingly secular and pluralistic media contexts, we need to learn from Paul?s apologetic approach in Athens, where he argued for ?the Gospel of Jesus and the Resurrection? in the context of a holistic biblical worldview. Paul claims that the Resurrection of Jesus resonates with ultimate human concerns, indicates the uniqueness and authority of Jesus, and is based on sufficient, available historical evidence. And all this makes sense in the context of "natural theology" (i.e. God is both transcendent and immanent) and "ultimate authority" (i.e. God as the Author of Life has authority over life). These biblical perspectives and arguments are increasingly relevant for Gospel ministries in today?s changing media contexts.

## Media Messages Matter: Actions, Repentance and Fresh Commitments

It seems appropriate to end this advance paper by indicating some of the key areas related to media and technology where we as evangelicals need to be called to action, to repentance and to fresh commitments:

? We must engage media and technology proactively as God's ambassadors of truth, grace, love, peace and justice.

? We repent of our lack of proper media awareness, our neglect of appropriate media presence, and our often uncritical and inadequate use of media technologies and approaches in Gospel ministries.

? We repent ? as individuals and as a community in the midst of secular and pluralistic media cultures ? of our lack of critical reflection, our inauthentic and superficial relationships, and our neglect of genuine space for silence, biblical meditation and prayer.

? We commit ourselves as individuals ? and as a global missional community ? to making the case for the Truth of Christ in and through contemporary media arenas, channels and formats.

? We commit ourselves as a global missional community to a renewed critical and creative engagement in proper partnerships with media and technology.[15]

\* Combining global and local

[1] <http://www.lausanne.org/manila-1989/manila-manifesto.html>

[2] <http://www.lausanne.org/all-documents/lop-26.html>

[3] [http://www.lausanne.org/documents/2004forum/LOP48\\_IG19.pdf](http://www.lausanne.org/documents/2004forum/LOP48_IG19.pdf)

[4] The Whole Church Taking the Whole Gospel to the Whole World. Reflections of the Lausanne Theology Working Group (2010)

[5] James W. Sire: The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2009; 5th ed.) p. 20

[6] Christopher J. Wright: The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2006) p. 441.

[7] For a fuller explanation and application, see my 'Acts 17 as an apologetic model?' (2002) and 'Encountering and engaging a postmodern context: Applying the apologetic model in Acts 17?' (2002).

[8] The news and entertainment media as missiological challenges will be introduced in the multiplex by Margunn Serigstad Dahle and Tony Watkins.

[9] The technological developments and dimensions will be introduced in the multiplex by Joseph Vijayam.

[10] Tony Watkins: Focus: The Art and Soul of Cinema (Authentic Media/ Damaris Books, 2007); see especially [http://www.damaris.org/cm/data/damaris/downloads/books/focus/Questions\\_to\\_consider\\_when\\_watching\\_a\\_film.pdf](http://www.damaris.org/cm/data/damaris/downloads/books/focus/Questions_to_consider_when_watching_a_film.pdf).

[11] See [www.GetReligion.org](http://www.GetReligion.org) 'The Press ... just doesn't get religion?'. This is a project of Oxford

Centre for Religion and Public Life.

[12] For further information on this series, see <http://www.searchfortruthenterprises.com>.

[13] See <http://www.damaris.org/cm/damaris/approach>.

[14] The multiplex will present a spectrum of media ministries and approaches.

[15] For a guide to further resources related to media awareness, media presence, and media ministries; see my blog *Media Messages Matter*.

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