Print-Based Culture Meets An 'Amazoogle' World: New Challenges To A Priesthood of Readers

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Justice can be served through information dissemination. This notion is perhaps supported by the quote from John: "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."[1] The concept of information having power in its own right is a matter brought up in Joss Whedon's work prior to the advent of the continuity of *Firefly* and *Serenity*. Rochester College professor Greg Stevenson wrote in his text *Televised Morality: The Case of Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* about that show's view of information: "Information that is wholly unsupervised and unrestrained is a potentially dangerous force."[2] Considering such a theme from *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* it appears that such retains its currency as we see such become part of the themes of *Serenity*. Joss Whedon noted in the commentary track to *Serenity* that the film was about "the right to be wrong".[3] While "the right to be wrong" is enhanced through the "Freedom of Speech" it is also curtailed through limitations on access to such expression.

"Churches of Christ" have the bulk of members found in the areas of Nashville and Fort Worth. This religious group is de-

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1   John 8.32 TNIV (Today's New International Version)

2   Gregory Stevenson, *Televised Morality: The Case of Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2003), 127.

3   Joss Whedon, feature commentary to *Serenity*, prod. Barry Medel and dir. Joss Whedon, 119 min., Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2005, digital video disc.

rived from the restoration movement started by Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell that also has brought forth the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as well as Independent Christian Churches/Churches of Christ.[4] Although originally considered to be a very loose religious movement Churches of Christ have crystallized into a distinct, organized religious entity.[5] Higher education institutions, lectureships, and journals have served as the principal means that uniformity has been created throughout such a grouping of autonomous congregations rather than through the existence of a national office and overarching hierarchy.[6] Pepperdine University communications professor Michael Casey has noted that Churches of Christ, following the lead of Alexander Campbell, have focused on maintaining a heritage predominantly based in print.[7] Information's power in this case is that it has historically been the glue that has held together a dispersed, loosely-bound religious tradition. That glue has been regarded as the tradition's main truths that it holds dear.

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4   C. Leonard Allen, *Things Unseen: Churches of Christ in (and After) the Modern Age* (Siloam Springs, AR: Leafwood Publishers, 2004), 15.

5   Richard Hughes, *Reclaiming a Heritage: Reflections on the Heart, Soul & Future of Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2002), 50.

6   Douglas A. Foster, *Will the Cycle Be Unbroken?: Churches of Christ Face the 21st Century* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 1994), 67.

7   Michael Casey, "Mastered By the Word: Print Culture, Modernization, and 'The Priesthood of All Readers' in the Churches of Christ," in *Restoring the First-century Church in the Twenty-first Century: Essays on the Stone-Campbell Movement In Honor of Don Haymes*, ed. Warren Lewis and Hans Rollmann (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 312-313.

The main repository of the Churches of Christ print heritage is located across the higher education institutions related to Churches of Christ. A major collection of print materials can be found in the Center for Restoration Studies at Abilene Christian University's Brown Library where such items are handled according to standard archival practices. At other institutions such as Faulkner University or Freed-Hardeman University materials from Churches of Christ authors or about that heritage are maintained in special collections that are cataloged and classified as if they were normal items in a library collection. In research those strongholds are the first places to consult relative to Churches of Christ history and Churches of Christ truth.

In *The Changing Nature of the Catalog and its Integration with Other Discovery Tools* Calhoun notes that catalogs only provide access to a small part of a much broader range of scholarly material available today. Calhoun notes in her discussion that that the Principle of Least Effort inheres in user populations to where library users will use poor quality information if it is easy to find rather than complicated to access yet quality materials.[8] The simplest way to put this is to state that the information-seeking behavior of a student today is such that a

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[8]   Karen Calhoun, *The Changing Nature of the Catalog and its Integration with Other Discovery Tools* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 2006), 24-25. Available at http://www.loc.gov/catdir/cahoun-report-final.pdf.

student would prefer to utilize a resource of dubious authenticity, accuracy, and veracity that is easy to access rather than spend time using books, electronic journal databases, and other materials from known authors that would require more effort in use. This is confirmed in qualitative research by the Online Computer Library Corporation OCLC ("OCLC") where it was found that college students were more familiar with using search engines to locate information compared to physical libraries.[9] Overall respondents to the survey cited in OCLC's research preferred search engines over libraries for their research in terms of favorability of information.[10] Eighty percent of the overall group of respondents stated that search engines were their first choice in seeking information while only eleven percent of respondents used physical libraries as their first choice in seeking information.[11] Considering the nature of the cultural record of Churches of Christ this presents challenges.

In light of the information-seeking world shown through OCLC's research as well as Calhoun's recommendations to the Library of Congress some problems may exist. How do Churches of Christ adapt to a world that privileges things found in a search

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9   Cathy De Rosa and others, contribs., *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources: A Report to the OCLC Membership* (Dublin, OH: OCLC Online Computer Library Center, 2005), 1-10.

10   *Ibid.*, 1-22.

11   *Ibid.*, 1-26.

engine over anything found in an archive or library? Consider-
ing the geographical distribution of Churches of Christ higher
education institutions seekers of information located great dis-
tances away from those institutions may be at a loss. Those
people may never know of various parts of church heritage that
are carefully preserved in books and other resources at those
institutions.

Digitization may not necessarily be the way to provide ac-
cess even though it appears to be the way forward as shown
through OCLC's research. Within the Churches of Christ context
the cultural record is maintained by academic institutions as an
incidental by-product of its educational mission. To undertake
a digitization project of this cultural record to make it avail-
able online would require a massive shift in the allocation of
resources to a degree that might perhaps compromise the ability
of those institutions to carry out their primary educational
roles. Without a massive infusion of funding from a generous
donor as well as copyright waivers for printed materials dating
back at least to 1978, if not earlier, such a project would be
extremely difficult.

Even considering the process restraints that may prevent
such digitization there also remain concerns arising from issues
inherent to the digital medium. A recent study by the OpenNet
Initiative found that at least twenty-five countries now re-

strict access to the Internet for political reasons as well as sociocultural reasons.[12] The contention is also offered that truth merely reflects zeitgeist and nothing more such as how the system known as Wikipedia is edited.[13] As noted by Rosenzweig in *Journal of American History*, Wikipedia is not reflective of a broad cross-section of society but rather is biased towards editing by male computer geeks.[14] Truth may set people free but in this instance who defines truth is perhaps a major concern. As Churches of Christ are not a dominant religious group across the United States the question is begged as to whether or not the church can be best heard in such a majoritarian marketplace of ideas. Conformity is prized and no "right to be wrong", as Whedon would put such, can be tolerated in such an electronic environment.

In a world rapidly advancing towards knowledge being available in only electronic form Churches of Christ face new challenges. How can the church and its members remain connected to the rich heritage of the past when access to that heritage can become increasingly more difficult through a lack of access to printed works and an absence of ubiquitous online copies? Without requisite funds and a single focal point to allow operation

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12   Jeffrey Burt, compiler, "the buzz," *eWeek*, 28 May 2007, 33.

13   Marshall Poe, "the Hive," *Atlantic Monthly*, September 2006, 93.

14   Roy Rosenzweig, "Can History Be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past," *Journal of American History* 93, no. 1 (2006): 127.

within the purview of copyright law Churches of Christ may be structurally incapable of approaching this new challenge.

Through education about the resources available and perhaps incorporating a formal information literacy requirement in academic programs beyond that currently practiced a heritage can be best preserved. Incorporating reality checks into overall teaching at the Churches of Christ-related academic institution may become necessary to prevent a major part of heritage and history becoming simply a lost, antiquated relic. With the ambiguous roles they have in the church's ecclesiastical polity, let alone the academic hierarchies of the various educational institutions, librarians perhaps hold the key to a future where heritage is not merely a relic but something understood as part of the greater whole of life.

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