

Social media is more than a tool

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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The biggest question about social media and the church is not how the church can harness the power of social media for good ends while safeguarding against bad ones (useful as such discussions may be). It's how social media is changing what it means to be church. The rise of social media brings up ecclesiological issues that challenge the very assumption that it is a tool for a separate entity called the church to control in any particular way.

Two recent posts shed light on this point. Over at the New Media Project at Union Theological Seminary, Jim Rice [brings up](#) Avery Dulles's influential book *Models of the Church*, which proposes five basic paradigms--overlapping, not mutually exclusive--for understanding the church. Rice suggests that social media might point to a sixth:

We now have vivid examples of the "universal body of Christ" that never before existed. These instantaneous global interactions made possible by new media offer analogies of God's transcendence and immanence that have the potential to lead to profound new insights and understandings about the very nature of God and God's realm on earth. . . . While the evermore interconnected nature of our world doesn't change the nature of God, it provides new models that can enrich our understanding.

Here on the *Century* site, [CCblogger](#) K. M. Camper [highlights](#) the new social website [Shop My Church](#), a directory of churches that offers information compiled not from official documents or statements from church leaders but from testimonials by individual churchgoers. The resulting online tool reflects a religious marketplace in which the authority to speak for a church has been flattened considerably:

Shop My Church, as a social media tool, shifts power away from the officially sanctioned leaders of the church to the laity to not only promote their churches but also to represent them. Lay people have always had an important role in spreading the word about their churches, but in the past they've had limited access to methods of mass public broadcasting. But today, anyone can have a Facebook, Twitter, or WordPress account, giving them the potential to reach a large number of people. Savvy church leaders are looking to these new media tools to help grow their churches, but they can't do it alone. It's doubtful, however, that congregants will allow themselves to be the mouthpieces of their leaders, and leaders should take notice.

Camper

aptly compares the cultural shifts underway to the much-documented relationship between the printing press and the Protestant Reformation. Printing wasn't just a new and useful tool for spreading the word. It massively democratized the world of ideas and letters, enacting--not just promoting--a theological shift in religious authority. In retrospect, it's impossible to say that print was or is merely a passive tool to be used for good or for ill. In limited but very real ways, print has changed what it means to be a person.

While it remains to

be seen whether social media's impact will be as profound, it's important to examine it at the most basic, theological levels. The New Media Project at Union--headed up by Verity Jones, former editor of the excellent and sadly defunct *Disciples World* magazine--is focused on just these sorts of questions. If you're interested in social media and theology, you should be keeping up with [this project](#).