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Review

Leonard Sweet

Viral: How Social Networking is Poised to Ignite Revival

(Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2012), 240 pp. Paperback \$14.99

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<http://www.randomhouse.com/book/201624/viral-by-leonard-sweet>

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In this latest book project, Dr. Leonard Sweet hopes to influence readers to replace an outdated and dangerous cultural paradigm with a new one. This new way of thinking is rooted in the values of primitive Christianity but embodied afresh in 21st century digital culture. The author would free us from the distorted perspective of 20th century print culture. Though Sweet writes with contagious energy, celebrating the potential for digital environments to promote Christian faith and discipleship, the overgeneralizations of the two cultures he sets at odds and the decision not to engage with legitimate warnings about digital life leave *Viral* wanting.

Viral is "a tale of two tribes: Gutenbergers and Googlers" (10). For Sweet, these groups are intrinsically bound to a set of technological preferences. Throughout the book,

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Gutenbergers and Googlers are characterized and assessed on their basis for receiving (or corrupting) the story of Jesus and for modeling (or misrepresenting) the Christian message of the Gospel. Sweet confesses former allegiance to the cultural ethos linked to the 15th century media technology of Johannes Gutenberg, but from this affiliation with the values and thinking patterns of the printing press Sweet has "repented publicly and privately" (24). Presumably, the same is expected of us.

Sweet claims that the "TGIF" (Twitter-Google-iPhone-Facebook) culture of the Googlers is more predisposed to relationships and personal connections than the "antisocial" (140, 166, 196) media culture epitomized in the supreme Gutenberg artifact of the codex or book. Gutenbergers have been so thoroughly shaped by print culture's enthusiasm for argumentation and bold-type monolithic assertions that they have effectively lost touch with Jesus and his storied message of love and relationships. In contradistinction, Googlers have embraced digital technology formats that highlight the wonder of narrative and promote interactivity. According to Sweet, little else could be more fundamental to the essence of Christianity than an energetic devotion to relational interaction alongside a passion for stories. After all, the Word became flesh in order to reach out to others, and Jesus was the "master storyteller."

His caricature of Gutenbergers, however, is so overblown that it fails to be heuristically helpful. Sweet is right to identify for his readers a range of motivations and values underlying the church's varied responses to the digital era. Yet he condenses a vast interlacing web of socio-historical ideas inhabiting complex swaths of society into the

Gutenberg categorization, a demographic unit impoverished of relational values and plagued with modernist fascinations with goals, profits, and forceful rhetoric. With statements like "Gutenbergs failed to grasp the practical, relational, lived-out meaning behind all the right words" (23), Sweet easily dismisses five centuries of Christians. Though his critiques come with occasional acknowledgments of his own residual Gutenberg sensibilities, the sparse positive statements he offers seem like damning with faint praise.

Gutenbergs' outright failure to grasp the real essence of Christianity is juxtaposed with the extraordinary capacity of the Googlers to get it right. TGIF culture represents a return to the halcyon days of the early church members as relational storytellers: "Googlers harken back to the era of Jesus" (6). Readers are to take as axiomatic that moveable type technology is inherently disposed against stories and personal interaction, as if the Christian church was plunged into relational and theological dysfunction by both the printing press and the Reformation and required the shift to digital communications technology to recover its identity (the fact that early Christians produced propositional theology like creeds seems forgotten).

Sweet is certainly entitled to take Gutenbergs to task for a series of theological emphases and cultural practices he finds harmful. Within his polemical sights is a particular stereotype that arguably warrants critique: program-driven, numbers-oriented, argumentative Christians for whom theology is best expressed in propositions and assertions rather than stories and relationships. What Sweet does not seem to openly

acknowledge is that many of these alleged "Gutenbergers" are flourishing quite remarkably on Twitter, Google, and Facebook with their iPhones. The attitudes and values of those he beckons into the digital light are in many cases already in that light. Print culture and digital culture certainly differ in appreciable ways, but Sweet ties his envisioned opponents too tightly to a particular technological paradigm.

Googlers do receive gentle corrections later on in *Viral*, but their praise is so lavish that the critiques come across as awkward and inconsistent with the rest of the book. Though the older generations hidebound to a dying cultural moment are sadly incapable of true relational expression, Googlers' connectivity is understood as a healthy expression of relationality. The growing literature on dysfunctional relationships among digital technology users seems entirely ignored.

The North American church scene to which *Viral* has been marketed would certainly benefit from scholarly thinking expressed in accessible writing promoting a theological and cultural openness to digital technology. It would be difficult to envision a book more enthusiastic about the digital age than *Viral*, and Sweet is an academic who can write in colorful, readable prose. But in the assessment of this reviewer, he has placed into the fray a work that may well be jeopardizing his own cause. With the tribal lines drawn so rigidly and with Gutenbergers sustaining such stereotyped critiques, *Viral* seems more suited for entrenching tribal preferences than escorting the beleaguered holdovers of the 20th century into the enlightened TGIF paradigm. Moreover, Sweet is a master of sweeping statements that remain, for the most part, unqualified and lacking in nuance.

The absence of serious critical engagement with the important cultural, theological, and historical issues raised by these oversimplifications leaves the arguments hollow and suspect.