The story of blogging

Do you remember your first time? It might have been years ago, or it might have been just a few minutes before you sat down in a chair with this book. Your first time might have been at a friend's house, in a bookstore, at the office, or in the privacy of your own home. For some, the story is a little embarrassing, while others caught on right away.

What did you think when you first heard the word *blog*?

When Terry received a call from a reporter in 2003 with a question about church blogs, he put her on hold and shouted from his office, "Brian, what's a blog?" Another friend heard about blogging and thought it was something you do after having too much to drink. A fellow pastor assumed it was a disease requiring medical treatment.

Most people agree it's something odd that's of interest only to the MTV crowd, like hip-hop, IM, or ring tones. They couldn't be more wrong.

Before we can start a conversation about blogging, before we can make the case for blogging in the church, we need to understand what it is. We need to begin with a shared understanding of how blogging became a pivotal part of our culture and our communication. How did blogging go from punch line to household word?

Like most cultural phenomena, blogs spent their early years being ridiculed and dismissed. For many, personal blogs on the World Wide Web seemed like nothing more than online diaries written by people with way too much time on their hands. This was a perfectly reasonable impression. Blogs put the power of publishing in the hands of anyone within reach of a computer and made it as easy as

sending an email. Anytime you place a creative tool in the hands of millions of people, the result is likely to be chaotic, or at the very least a bit messy. Let's face it: cat photos and conspiracy theories will always be with us.

Before blogs, if you wanted to write something and publish it online you needed a website. To have a website, you needed a computer, the ability to write code, and a company to host your website. In other words, you needed money and technical expertise.

With blogs, you need an Internet connection, a web browser, and something to say. Nothing more, nothing less. Imagine a world where everyone has a voice, access to the marketplace of ideas, and the freedom to say whatever he or she wants. With blogs, that world is here.

What is a blog? A blog is a very simple thing: A regularly updated website with content organized by date and the most recent post on top. The typical blog contains short paragraphs or posts on various topics, with links to other blogs and online conversations. Readers are usually able to add comments. Most blogs make it easy to stay up-to-date by allowing you to subscribe, receiving updates and changes as they're made.

The blogging revolution was led by the people who developed the tools and technology that made blogs possible. The initial online conversations focused on code and protocols and other things programmers find interesting. People who previously had few outlets to share their knowledge and creativity were suddenly able to offer both to an audience of hundreds or even thousands.

Then a strange thing happened. People began sharing more than the latest coding techniques. Writing and publishing a post was so quick and easy that personal stories started showing up as well: vacation tales, book reviews, political opinions, and the news of a growing family were now intermingled with professional life.

Whereas you might expect mixing the personal and professional to cause confusion or distraction, instead it strengthened the connection between people in a new way. These comments, details, and asides gave people who had never met the sense that they knew one another.

As blogging began to spread, new people were attracted by the incredible range of topics and the ease of participation. No matter your interest, whether politics or travel or food or marketing or jazz or Java, someone else was writing about it online with passion. Conversations started. People who shared a common interest began posting comments and linking to other blogs, leading to the ad hoc development of new online communities.

These communities were built on top of a new technology called RSS, or Really Simple Syndication. Essentially, RSS is the content of a website converted into a format that software can easily interpret, often called an RSS feed. What's so cool about that? Glad you asked!

As people read more blogs, it became a chore to click through an ever-expanding list of favorite sites to see if any had been updated. So tools were built to allow blogs to come to you, by subscribing to a blog's RSS feed. Now you could get the latest posts from dozens or even hundreds of bloggers delivered to you simply, each day in one place. What would have been impossible months earlier was now commonplace. Avid bloggers were soon spending more time using one of these tools than their web browser, while avoiding a steady stream of browser-related security vulnerabilities, pop-ups, and adware.

As this change was taking place, email was drowning in tidal waves of spam and viruses. The inbox became a war zone as suspect marketers competed for attention and hackers attacked unprotected computers. Email communication, particularly for mass emails such as newsletters, was becoming largely ineffective as people were as likely to see it as they were to open it.

Blogs offer an alternative. When you subscribe to a blog, you remain in complete control. If you choose to unsubscribe, you can be sure you will never receive information from that source again. Have you ever clicked *Unsubscribe* in an email, only to receive message after message after message? We all have. With blogs, you are finally in control of what you do and do not receive.

Any one of these things would not have been enough to cause blogging to grow rapidly in popularity, but all of them together produced a powerful and volatile mixture that took blogging to the next level. The recipe of quick-and-simple publishing, free and low-cost tools, new technology, rapidly expanding communities, and the email crisis helped blogging become a cultural phenomenon.

BLOGS GO PUBLIC

In just three years, blogging was transformed from an obscure tool of the technologically savvy to a fixture of mainstream life. The transformation was driven by five critical, and sometimes tragic, events.

September 11

When airplanes struck the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the airwaves were full of horrific images. The websites of major news

organizations such as CNN and the *New York Times* were flooded with traffic to such a degree that many were unreachable. People across the country began blogging the attacks immediately, posting stunning amateur photos, emotional first-hand accounts, and names of the missing, as well as relaying information that was often unavailable elsewhere.

At a critical moment in our history, as major websites became unusable and cell phone networks collapsed under the load, a large number of people began turning to blogs for real-time information, real-life experiences, raw emotion, and moving tributes to fallen loved ones. Robert Scoble, then a prominent Microsoft blogger, wrote on the fourth anniversary of September 11: "That day was an inflection point for the blogosphere. It was the day that I realized our disaster experience had changed because now we could all share information—no matter where we were in the world—and have a global conversation."[1]

People hungered for the same passionate, emotional, and opinionated writing that had previously been widely criticized in the media. For the first time, unedited bloggers with digital cameras were on the same footing as professional journalists. For the first time, a widely decentralized communication network made up of average citizens feeding a rapidly forming online community was shown to be effective and empowering. On September 11, 2001, many people began to see the true power of blogs.

Trent Lott

In December 2002, Trent Lott had the opportunity to speak at the one-hundredth birthday celebration for Strom Thurmond, who was retiring from the U.S. Senate. In a room full of politicians and reporters, Lott, the incoming majority leader, spoke a few troublesome words about the former segregationist and candidate for president: "I want to say this about my state: when Strom Thurmond ran for President, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years, either."[2]

The comment quieted the room but was mentioned only briefly in the nominal coverage of the event. Over the next few days, few people were aware of it, and those who were assumed Lott's brief and written apology had sufficiently addressed the racially insensitive remarks.

Without blogs, that would have been the end of the story. Three months after September 11, however, blogging was becoming an increasing part of the national

conversation. A number of blogs began pushing the issue, particularly Talking Points Memo and InstaPundit, emphasizing both the offensive remarks and the media's limited coverage of them. Blogs also began researching Lott's political past, previous remarks, and voting record. As the din of conversation grew, editorial boards, political groups, and President Bush offered increasing criticism of Lott.

Fifteen days after the initial comments, Lott was forced to resign his position as Republican Leader, the first Senate leader ever to do so. For the first time, blogging had moved from commenting on the latest news to influencing and shaping the day's events. Once the door was opened, there would be no turning back.

Microsoft

On April 15, 2003, Robert Scoble, who was then a well-known independent blogger, announced on his blog that he had been hired by Microsoft. A month later, he began his position as a technical evangelist for the next version of the Windows operating system. At the time, Microsoft was seen as a highly profitable and hugely successful company with a very competitive, insular corporate culture. Few people used the terms *open, friendly,* or *accessible* to describe Microsoft or the people who worked there. In fact, few successful, dominant companies were viewed more negatively.

Prior to coming to Microsoft, Scoble had developed an influential blog of his own, and he continued to blog openly about his life and work after starting his new position. For the first time, customers had a largely unedited window into life at Microsoft. Previously, the inside of the corporation was exposed only during high-profile court cases when internal emails were subpoenaed.

Scoble wrote openly about his work, his coworkers, and the decisions of the company. His site constituted an open forum for Microsoft critics, frustrated customers, and angry developers. Functioning almost as a one-man public relations team, Scoble listened to the critics, defending Microsoft and admitting mistakes when appropriate. He connected users with employees who could help and passed along ideas and problems to teams inside the company.

Blogs began exploding within Microsoft. High-profile teams, particularly those working directly with developers, started blogs to connect with customers, share information, and gather feedback. Two years after Scoble was hired, there were

more than a thousand Microsoft bloggers, more than at any other public company. This new openness and honesty trumped the power of focus groups and allowed people to influence the company's future.

Blogging is widely credited with improving the public's perception of Microsoft and repairing the company's relationship with software developers. As Microsoft's story spread through numerous magazine articles and blog posts, companies large and small launched blogs, from IBM to the latest start-up, starting a conversation instead of another one-way marketing campaign.

Howard Dean

In early 2003, the suggestion that a liberal governor from Vermont would soon be the front-runner for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination would draw confused looks and uncomfortable laughter. Howard Dean began his campaign as a relative unknown, even within his own party. Six months later, he was regularly leading rallies of more than five thousand people, including nearly fifteen thousand in New York City, before the first vote had been cast. How?

The Dean phenomenon was driven by blogs and bloggers. The campaign was the first to adopt blogs as its primary means of communication. The Dean for America blog became enormously popular for its candor and openness. The blog was updated throughout the day and night, giving an incredible sense of the campaign's speed and energy. The fact that the blog permitted public comments, no matter how critical, only contributed to the sense of openness and community. Supporters had such a sense of ownership that they defended the candidate from attacks and critical comments before the campaign staff could respond.

The Dean message was also spread by hundreds of individual bloggers who wrote regularly about the candidate and organized "Meetups" in cities across the country. This online word-of-mouth campaign was far more effective in building support than traditional direct mail or online marketing. Would you trust an unsolicited brochure that arrives in your mailbox or the words of someone you've learned to respect over months of online conversation?

The blog drew an unparalleled number of people for a political site and helped the campaign break fundraising records. The campaign willingly ceded a great deal of control and responsibility to its volunteers, generating incredible enthusiasm and a sense of ownership.

The Howard Dean campaign was built from the ground up to challenge conventional wisdom. The campaign was the first to be driven by blogs and the web, and despite its ultimate failure it is still seen as the model of how to empower people to evangelize a cause, both online and off. If you give people the knowledge and the tools, and they are passionate about the cause, they will accomplish more than an expensive marketing push.

Dan Rather and the 2004 Presidential Election

During the 2004 presidential election campaign between George Bush and John Kerry, blogging officially went mainstream. Following the rise and fall of Howard Dean, blogs became an essential part of the major parties' national campaigns and were prominently featured on campaign websites. For the first time, citizen bloggers were invited to the presidential conventions, taking their place alongside journalists and other members of the media. Mainstream media outlets began incorporating blogs into their content; bloggers appeared on cable news programs next to the traditional talking heads.

As the political race intensified and tightened, Dan Rather and CBS News entered the fray on September 8, 2004, with a television report on President Bush's National Guard service. The segment questioned whether the president had fulfilled his service requirement and whether he received special treatment as the son of a prominent family. The claims were supported by a number of official documents from the president's file.

Coming less than two months before Election Day, the charges were taken very seriously. A few hours after the report aired, however, bloggers began questioning the authenticity of the documents. The criticism focused on the typeface seen in the documents and other inconsistencies.

Two days later, the story was picked up by the mainstream press and grew quickly into an avalanche of media coverage. Rather and CBS defended the story and evidence repeatedly, but each day new questions were raised—many by bloggers—that the news division could not answer.

Twelve days after the report aired, CBS News issued a statement that the documents should not have been used in the story; the network could no longer ensure the authenticity of the evidence. A number of employees were fired, an investigation was launched, and Dan Rather himself announced his retirement soon after the election.

Six weeks later, George Bush was reelected president. The National Guard story was considered inconsequential to the final result.

A NEW WORLD

The first of these five pivotal events occurred in September 2001, the last in September 2004. In those three short years, blogs played a significant role in launching a political community, bringing down a Senate majority leader and network news anchor, comforting and informing people in a time of crisis, and personalizing one of the world's largest corporations. At the beginning of 2001, most Americans did not know what the word *blog* meant. At the end of 2004, the publishers of Merriam-Webster's Dictionary declared blog the Word of the Year.

What changed?

Faith and trust in our institutions has been shaken. From the events of September 11 to intelligence failures leading to the war in Iraq, from high-profile corporate scandals to significant missteps by the press, there has been a dramatic rise in our mistrust of companies, the government, the media, and other organizations.

At the same time, the Internet has given us unprecedented access and information, stripping away the layers that previously separated us from organizations. In the past, many artificial barriers stood between us and a political campaign or a car company.

In this new world, we know the candidate's schedule, what she said at the last campaign stop, and which ZIP codes have contributed the most money. We know the dealer's cost of our new car and can build and order the vehicle online. We can book a flight with an airline directly and view the inventory level of our favorite online retailer. We can even read the unedited opinions of thousands of customers on companies, products, and yes, even churches.

The combination of rising mistrust with rising access has changed what we expect from organizations. We want a relationship, a true conversation, not a one-way recitation of marketing brochures and talking points. The result is that honesty and transparency are now valued above all else. The desire is not for perfection but for openness.

Having an ongoing conversation with people, whether customers, members, or constituents, builds a relationship of trust and connectedness. When an organization begins to share its story, including mistakes and missteps, people begin to feel a part of it. Before long, they want to help write that story and tell others.

BLOG YOUR CHURCH

As blogs continue to spread through organizations and popular culture, people are looking for a new kind of openness from the institutions that dominate their daily lives. A new conversation has begun, one that is filled with hard questions, humor, personality, truth, and passion. More and more people are communicating online in a brand new way.

The local church, the place where you navigate your spirituality, the place that helps form and shape your heart and soul, must be part of this conversation.

After the seminal events of the past five years, it is now clear that blogs are going to be with us for a long time. They cannot be ignored, and the church cannot afford to ignore them.

Blogging presents a rare opportunity for churches to be part of this new world instead of watching from the distance. Blogging is simple, inexpensive, and powerful. In other words, the impact-to-investment ratio is impossible to ignore.

Fifteen minutes after you finish this book, you can create your own blog and make your first post. Those few minutes, however, will change you and your church in ways you cannot imagine.