

# SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

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Top Headline for 2006: "Wikiworld"

What mattered most in 2006?

*Christianity Today* magazine has offered the ten top stories most critical to the shaping of evangelical life, thought and mission. It's a fair list, including the sex scandal involving NAE President Ted Haggard, the wave of state court decisions favoring traditional marriage, and the religious left declaring victory in midterm elections. *USA Today* posted a similar ranking of religious stories, with such notable additions such as the forgiveness flowing from the tiny Amish community of Nickel Mines, PA, following the death of five schoolgirls, Mel Gibson's anti-Semitic drunken rant, and the Episcopal divide (which should have been on the CT list of stories shaping evangelical life, and surprisingly was not).

But absent from any top news roundups, much less religious ones, may be the most significant cultural development in 2006 – our new life in "wikiworld," which is a term I can't believe I am the only one to conceive. And what do I mean by "wikiworld?" A "wiki" is a document or process on the Web that anyone can add to or modify. And most of us are now familiar with internet companies such as eBay or Wikipedia where the site's visitors create the content. Silicon Valley insiders call it "Web 2.0," signifying a second generation of internet. What we may not realize is how these 2.0 folk may be looked back upon as the forerunners of a massive cultural change.

At one level, of course, this is being widely recognized. One need look no further than *Time* choosing as its person of the year to be "You," complete with a mylar "mirror" on the cover for better self-reflection. In picking "You", *Time* noted the shift from institutions to individuals who are "transforming the information age" through websites such as YouTube and MySpace.

But the transformation, and thus significance of the transformation, may run much deeper than *Time's* early nod.

Consider a new business book by Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams, *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*. The basic idea begins with Ronald Coase, who in 1937 determined that companies exist because of transaction costs. In other words, it was more efficient to assemble all the right people and resources inside an establishment as opposed to

trying to find and coordinate those things in the world at large (this won Coase the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Science).

But no more. "A combination of the Internet, cheap computing, Web-based software, open source projects such as Linux and new ways of thinking about management are mixing together," writes Keven Maney in *USA Today*. "Doing business is becoming no more efficient inside a company vs. doing the same stuff outside a company – or without a company at all. In fact, in many ways, collaborating outside a company's structure can even be better."

Example: Goldcorp, a Canadian gold-mining company, was desperate for ways to find new places to drill. So they did the unthinkable: they posted all of their proprietary data on the internet and let anyone interpret it for possible drilling targets in return for potential prize money. Within weeks, submissions poured in. The process cut years off of exploration and catapulted Goldcorp from \$100 million in revenue to \$9 billion.

Proctor and Gamble pursues a similar strategy on a site called InnoCentive. When looking for a molecule that takes red wine off a shirt or absorbs smells in a diaper, it puts those requests out on the web where scientists around the world can see the challenge, work on a solution and sell it to P&G.

Or consider the Chinese motorcycle industry. The country defined a basic structure and standards but then leaves it to individuals and small companies to design parts or assemble whole motorcycles. China is now the largest motorcycle industry in the world.

Due to wkinomics, Maney concludes, "the 'company' as we've known it for almost a century is about to go the way of vinyl albums, floppy disks and perked coffee...Companies could run into an identity crisis that will hit them like the talkies hit Charlie Chaplin."

But what began with eBay, MySpace, Wikipedia and YouTube may not stop with revolutionizing how companies such as Goldcorp or Proctor and Gamble operate (or are even identified). The heart of the change involves the ever-widening rejection of professional/intellectual elites, and the diminution of those organizations which exist as either the gathering of such elites, or serve as the repositories of their supposedly exclusive knowledge. Further, those organizations that were once thought necessary for basic transactions of other natures – such as communal transactions – may also face a rude awakening.

Such as the church.

As posed by *USA Today*, "So if a core reason companies exist is to lower transaction costs, what happens if that reason goes away?" Do we have reasons for such institutions as a school, newspaper, court of law, or church beyond "transaction costs?" And my great fear *is* for the church, particularly in light of the woefully inadequate and often heretical ecclesiology present within the Christian faith at large which is already reducing both the value and definition of the church to utilitarian forms.

But regardless of how living in a wikiworld continues to expand and transform, expand and transform it will.

And that may just be the real headline of the year.

James Emery White

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