

It's Viral

Swine flu. I think the pigs got a bad rap but it is a lot more colorful than calling that latest virus H1N1. In all the news about H1N1 (doing my bit for my beloved pork products) an idea that had been rattling around in my brain (I know. There is a lot of room there. You don't have to say it) started to come into clearer focus.

Is the gospel a virus? The more I saw how this current virus spread the more the question seemed reasonable. Why? Because there are two questions that are vital to the ministry of the church and my ministry.

How does the good news spread? How does the kingdom grow?

Questions like these fascinate me and have challenged leaders in the kingdom for a long time. These questions have spawned movements, methodologies, seminars and a few books (that's an understatement). However, after 30 years of experience in these movements, methodologies and sometimes fads, I have become convinced it is a lot simpler than we have been taught. The truth about church growth and the spread of the good news isn't a marketing campaign. Bad news for seminar producers, publicists and book/dvd sellers but good news for God's people.

God's word does not directly refer to viruses. In the Old Testament there are hygiene rules that only make sense in the context of bacteria and viruses. Have you noticed the best way to prevent yourself from getting a virus is still cleaning your hands regularly. Anti-viral drugs are a shot in the dark. Cleaning your hands regularly works just as good.

The closest the Bible comes to referring to something like a virus is when it speaks of leaven or yeast (in the more recent translations). Both words refer to the same thing, an organism (actually mould. Yuck) that converts food into alcohol and carbon dioxide by fermentation. It is a small organism that effects large amounts of food, like bread, and causes it to rise.

Jesus spoke of yeast when He tries to explain to us what the kingdom of heaven is like. *"... The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."* (Matthew 13:33). The kingdom of God is that little living thing that affects the whole world. Doesn't that sound like a virus? I know it isn't a virus but it's actions and effects mirror that of a virus.

Yeast is like a virus. It's influence can also be a bad thing. Jesus talked of this in *Matthew 16:6* when He said, *"Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."*

Viruses like all germs, bacteria and invisible thingies (technical term) spread through a network through the mechanism of touch or close proximity. That's why washing your hands limits the spread of the network. It limits the influence of a touch.

The good news of Jesus is like a virus. It spreads as one person in a network of people passes it from one to another.

Jesus told his followers to go into the entire world and preach the good news to all the creation. There were eleven men who were initially given this task (Mark 16:14-16). How could Jesus reasonably expect that these eleven could take the good news into the whole world, when they didn't even know of all the people that lived all over the world?

Jesus knows that humans are social creatures. He made us that way. He created us with a desire to be with others. So I can see Him thinking. If these eleven men touch 100 people each with the good news over the next year. Whether it was 100 or one, Jesus knew that in a very short time the whole world would be touched by the good news. That's the spreading power of a virus that only needs touch to spread. As long as humans keep touching the virus keeps spreading across borders, oceans, cultures, and all the barriers that occur.

He did not make the spread of the good news dependent on church programs, highly talented persuaders or even published materials. He gave them a verbal message that He called good news and told eleven men to tell as many as they could and tell those people to tell others.

I am not knocking church programs, evangelism methodologies etc. What I am saying is that long before any of these things the key parts of the evangelism of the world was set in place.

The spread of the gospel virus is not a straight line. If it was, the good news would be stopped easily by breaking this chain. Once one link is eliminated a chain loses all its value and purpose.

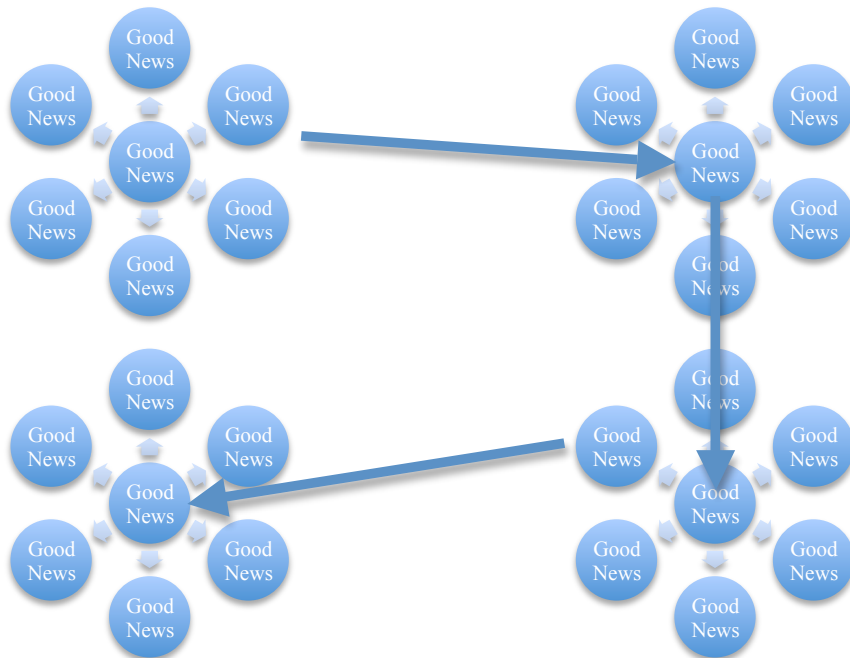


However a viral network that spreads in all directions and is almost impossible to break.

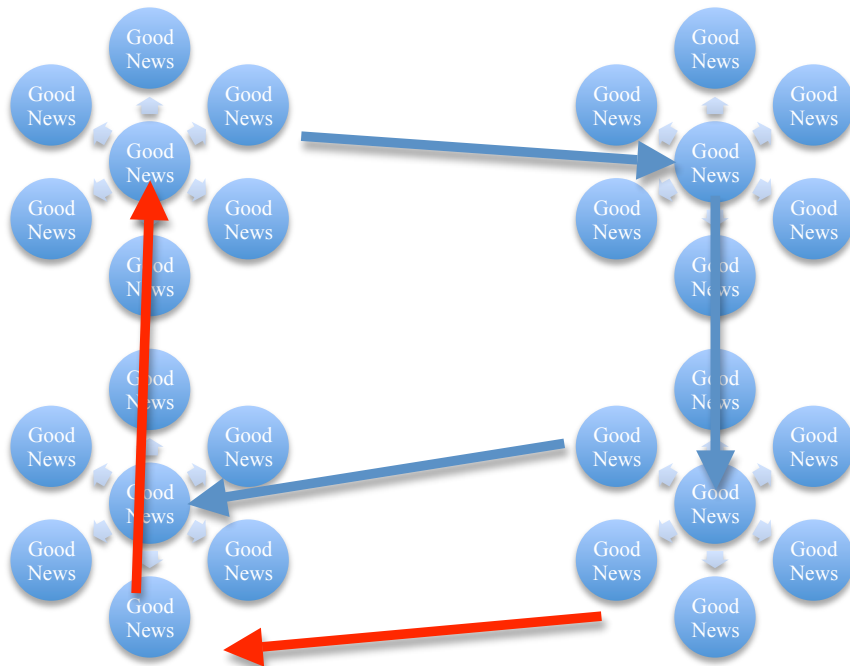


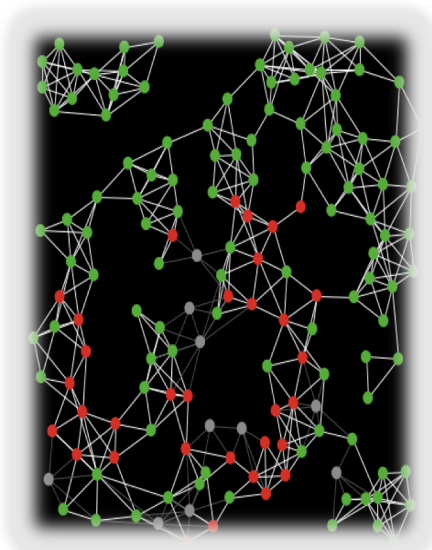
It uses existing networks that the immediate source of the good news doesn't even know about. The virus/gospel doesn't have to create these networks. These existing

networks exist for other reasons (friends, family, work, neighborhood, empire, internet social network, etc.) and the virus uses them even though they are not designed for this virus.



It even folds back on itself and touches the same networks though other paths.





The diagrams of the spread of the good news virus becomes very messy, very quickly.

However one truth starts to become very obvious. A huge number of people get touched by this virus very quickly.

Not all people get infected

Just as in the spread of biological virus, some people are immune to its effects. As well as this, some are effected for a little while and then shake it off. Jesus told a story about this in *Matthew 13:1-23*.

What can we do to make sure that the virus takes hold?

We have got to understand that our job as good news virus spreaders is to spread the virus. It will do the infecting and affecting. God puts it this way. *"I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow."* (1 Corinthians 3:6). The planter didn't make it grow. The waterer didn't make it grow. GOD MADE IT GROW.

God's word is able to do its job when we do ours. You and I must see that when we all do our jobs in the kingdom then the kingdom grows. *"From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."* (Ephesians 4:16).

My job and your job is to pass on the virus (in the context of true love for God and people).

The tragedy of the kingdom is that for people who have been Christians for a long period it is difficult to find people in your life who haven't been touched by the good news virus. It doesn't have to be this way but it often is.

You and I need to understand that God is sending new people (even some repeats) into our lives every week. We have got to get better at recognizing these people and focus on touching them with the gospel.

"But how do I do that?" so many ask. Try the Jesus way.

1. Love people – help them, feed them, talk to them
2. Invite people – to church, to Grace Café, to VBS, to lunch, to anything that gets them in contact with other good news people.
3. Live with people – don't cut yourself off from people. The longer you live with them the great the likelihood of infection.

None of these things take any great talent. They take courage, patience, and love but not a lot of talent. Whether you are 8 or 80 you can do this.

How to stop a virus

Most research on biological viruses is done so they can be stopped. The research shows that the best way is to identify who has the virus and stop them coming into contact with other people. The extreme version of this is quarantine. However we are interested in keeping the gospel virus spreading, not stopping it.

The key to the spread is people. That means that you are an important link. Your lack of action on opportunities God sends you in the form of people begins a limited quarantine. You don't want to do this but you will if you don't share the good news in some way.

It is sad to observe that even churches quarantine themselves. Paul talks of this in 1 Corinthians 5:9, 10 when he says *"I have written to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world."* Don't quarantine yourselves from the sinners of the world. That's totally opposite to God's plan. He wants you to infect the sinners with the gospel.

It all started with Jesus.

He began with his family, and then His neighbors, and then whomever He met. And those that He met called others and they called others. The gospel virus spread for two thousand years and then touched your life. Rulers have tried to eradicate it. Dictators have tried to burn it out. Scholars have ridiculed it. Sinful church leaders have degraded it in the eyes of the world. Yet, it marches on relentlessly. The gospel is unstoppable.

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