WHAT IS THE VALUE OF TWITTER?

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I've always been somewhat ambivalent about Twitter. I quite enjoy using it, but I also find the limit of 160 characters makes it more or less impossible to say anything at all nuanced. So why do I use twitter? I think that there are three main reasons:

- The main reason I use twitter, is also the least serious. Quite simply, it can be great fun. I interact with a number of people who write very well and very amusingly. It probably won't change the world, but the humour makes me smile!
- It is a very good way of following news events. My first experience of this was following the results of the last US presidential election while at a workshop in the Philippines. Twitter gave me a very clear picture of what was going on. Since then, I've used it to follow the Trafigura scandal in Ivory Coast and London and more recently, the #civ2010 thread has allowed me to follow fallout of the last Ivorian election.
- The other main reason to use twitter is for more general interest. I follow a few technology gurus, the meteorological office, our local railway service and our internet service provider. I don't read everything they write in detail, but every now and then I come across an article or piece of news which is very useful.

A number of people have suggested that Twitter is now essential for Christian ministry. I must admit that I remain unconvinced by this. This blog automatically sends out a tweet every time a post is published, but it has much less impact on readership than Facebook. I'm far from convinced that twitter is mainstream enough in the Christian world for it to be of much value. I suspect that another technology will have taken over before Twitter actually acheives the sort of critical mass that would make it truly useful.

Whatever the value or otherwise of Twitter, it is clear that it has a very, very dark side. I mentioned following the #civ2010 thread in order to get news about the situation in Ivory Coast. For the last few months this has been an excellent source of thoughtful articles and insight into the situation. As you would expect in any tense political conflict, there was a degree of posturing and bias on the thread, but in general, it was a good way to find out what was going on. However, over the past week or so as things have become more tense in the country, twitter has taken a serious turn for the worse. There are far fewer reasoned or thought through articles and a lot more conflict and aggression. Sadly, the thread is now polluted with incitement to violence and revenge, racial hatred and outright lies. You can read a good analysis of it here. The situation is bad, but I fear that the hatred being poured out on twitter (by both sides) is simply aggravating things.

It is, of course, no surprise that Twitter can be used for evil - this is a fallen world after all. However, I do think that the way in which Twitter is being used in Ivory Coast should give us some pause for concern. It is easy for Christian ministries to jump on the latest technological bandwagon without giving any serious thought to the implications and consequences of doing so.

Yes, I know that the picture doesn't have Twitter on the screen - but I like it!