Christianity at StackExchange: An Interesting Idea **[1]**

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Today I stumbled across a proposal [2] for a new StackExchange [3] (Q&A) website which focuses specifically on Biblical Hermeneutics. I find this proposal very intriguing.

(Please excuse me if I am overly excited in my writing and completely go off track, but as a Christian who is also a Computer Scientist, I find this topic fascinating!)

StackExchange "is a network of free, community-driven Q&A sites". Perhaps the best known StackExchange website is StackOverflow [4], which is a general software programming Q&A website. As a programmer, I have made use of it many time before. I witnessed how it steadily started topping Google search results for programming related questions. In doing so, it has displaced many older and well-established websites and forums: a sign of its growth in popularity.

So how does a StackExchange website work? Surprisingly, much of a StackExchange website is nothing new. Users post questions, which are answered by other users. Each user has a profile which indicates that user's involvement at the website. This profile includes a "reputation", which is some quantified measurement of involvement. In this sense, StackExchange websites are just like most other discussion-based websites which have existed for a decade or more. But there are a few things which make StackExchange remarkably effective. Some of these things may seem subtle, but they form part of a winning formula. The first—and possibly the most important—is that, when you ask a new question, the website automatically and immediately suggests similar questions. This has a couple of implications: it minimises the number of "duplicate" posts for a single issue, as well as redirects everyone with the same question to one place to find the answer. Many other similar websites are plagued by duplicate posts; new users do not know that their question has already been previously answered and seasoned users get frustrated from seeing the same old question yet again. Another thing which makes StackExchange popular is that one's reputation is calculated both by personal contributions and the response of the community to your contributions. And, along with reputation points, there is the concept of "badges". Badges are similar to "achievements" which are popular in contemporary computer games. Badges are earned for various "feats", such earning a particular score for a question. They have no significance other than bragging rights (and those whom you will brag to will certainly not care about them). It appeals to the "hoarding" mentality which many people have. StackExchanges also brings a "Web 2.0 feel" to discussion websites, which have traditionally felt very bland and unexciting1. Finally, StackExchange websites are free and "open". If you want to contribute, you must register, but if you are only looking for a quick answer, you can browse all questions and answers without registering2. Many, if not most, discussion websites operate like this, but many also do require subscription in order to view answers to questions, and comments.

But while the creators of StackExchange had many good ideas about how to do a Q&A website (which is contemporarily relevant) correctly, they had another good idea: let us not limit ourselves to the IT domain! They started off with websites like StackOverflow, ServerFault and SuperUser, but now there all sorts of Q&A websites which are built on the same design principles, such as for maths [5], physics [6], photography [7], cooking [8] and English [9]. To manage these websites and explore the possibilities of new Q&A websites, there are a few "meta" Q&A websites. One of these is Area51 [10], which is where I found the proposal for a Q&A website for Biblical Hermeneutics.

Biblical Hermeneutics is not the only "Christian"-related StackExchange website which has been proposed. There has been proposals for, amongst others, Evangelical Christianity [11] and Roman Catholicism [12]. There has also been a proposal for a general Christianity [13] Q&A website. I would guess that, eventually, only the proposal for a general Christianity Q&A website will be accepted.

Up to this point I have given a lot of background to StackExchanges, how it works and its processes. There is a reason why I did this: the reader needs to understand where this proposal under

discussion comes from in order to have an idea of what the implications down the road can be.

If StackExchange decides to go forward with this proposal, the topic of Christianity might very well be the most controversial project which they have undertaken to date. Where religion is concerned, there will always be disagreements and arguments, often heated. Since early days the Internet has been a battlefield of words between theists and atheists, and it is a given that both parties will be involved in the new proposal. But what worries me more, is the involvement of ultra liberals who, frankly, advocate heresies. I am not saying that they should be excluded from discussions: no, that is not how things should be done. Rather, if these people come across as authoritative without sufficient opposition from orthodoxy, then it can have devastating effects on the casual reader. For such a venture to succeed, therefore, I think that Christians actually need to be *involved*, especially where it comes to safeguarding vulnerable people who seek answers to difficult questions on such forums.

If I am to gaze into the crystal ball which is flawed human foresight, I would guess that, were this proposal be accepted, it could grow rapidly. It will see the involvement of people from all across the spectrum: from ultra liberals, to atheists, to centrists to ultra conservatives. Not each group will be equally represented, however, and my guess is that members of the emerging church will dominate the community, as they are generally younger (note: younger, not necessarily young) and more tech savvy (although not necessarily hardcore Linux geeks, but they probably know more about technology than your mom does).

This could be a very challenging endeavour. The dynamics of the community will also be slightly different. At StackOverflow, for example, you typically get a question along the lines of "I did X and expected Y, but Z happened, what can I do?", and an answer is along the lines of "The reason is A and what you should rather do/try is B." So we are dealing with questions which have definite answers. In a Q&A website about Christianity, however, many of the questions do not have definite answers. Even if a question has a definite answer, people often do not like the answers and argue their own opinions. It is ok have different opinions on some things and to listen to the viewpoints of other people, but you can only go so far before you have to start asking yourself whether the current discussion is *benefiting* anyone.

Finally, it is worth noting the attitude with which some people participate in the proposal for a Christian StackExchange website. Simply on the front page:

- "I'll do as much as I can to help people understand God's word!"
- "I was born into a Christian family, and have been a Christian all my life. However, I seem to have more questions as time moves on, and need answers."
- "With all the misunderstanding out there of the Bible these days, this site will have much use!"

Clearly there is an enthusiasm as well as a desire for such a project. But what I think people should guard against (myself included) is not to think "*What can I bring to the discussion?*", but rather "*How does the Holy Spirit want me to participate?*" It is subtle, but it is about not being self-centred, but God-centred in thinking and discussions. I think we often rush off and share our knowledge and opinions on such forums without carefully considering what we are doing and who we are interacting with. Discussions such as these need to be done with love, patience and wisdom.

- 1. I mean apart from the interaction which obviously takes place with other people and which can be exciting. What is less exciting, however, is the "look": discussion websites have traditionally lacked the "bling" which people have come to expect from modern websites.
- 2. In other words, you can be a net consumer, as opposed to a contributor.

Categories:

- In the Media [14]

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