Free E-mail

By Russ McGuire - russ.mcguire@gmail.com

A few years ago I set up Gmail accounts for everyone in my family. I find the service to be reliable. Although we use e-mail clients on our PCs for our primary e-mail management, it's also very convenient to be able to check messages from any computer through the Gmail web interface. Best of all – it's free! Bottom line, I'm a happy customer.

But, a couple of weeks ago my wife woke me up because she heard on the news that Google is reading our e-mails. She was genuinely concerned. So, what's going on?

First of all, what are free e-mail services?

E-mail was one of the first applications developed for the Internet. To send and receive e-mail, you need to have an e-mail account. The most basic straightforward technical implementation involves setting up a user account on a server that's connected to the Internet that is running e-mail software (e.g. sendmail) and that has been designated in DNS as the mail server for an Internet domain (e.g. ccmag.com). However, most people don't want to bother with managing an Internet server, server software (especially sendmail), or DNS settings. They just want to browse the web and send e-mails.

Thankfully, ever since the early days of America Online, Internet access accounts came with a "free" e-mail account. The service provider managed the technical details and we enjoyed the blessings. That is, until we moved or otherwise decided to change Internet service providers. When that happened, we lost "our" e-mail address and had to notify all of our contacts of our "change of address."

Launched on July 4, 1996, HoTMaiL was

one of the first services to address this problem. HoTMaiL provided a free account that could hold 2MB of mail and was accessed via the web. The service could make money by displaying ads around the e-mail interface. By December of 1997 more than 8.5 million users had established HoTMaiL accounts and the founders sold the business to Microsoft. Similarly, in 1997 Yahoo acquired another early webmail startup called Rocketmail and rebranded it Yahoo Mail. Even today, many people have Hotmail and Yahoo Mail accounts. Other services have followed the model, most notably Gmail which launched in 2004.

So, what's the problem?

These "free" services cover their costs by making money on advertising. For the most part, these ads are only visible when you're using the web interface to read and send e-mails. At some point in time, these services began selecting ads that they think will be most relevant to you. How do they know what is relevant to you? Well, for one thing, they read your e-mail. No, they don't hire buildings full of e-mail readers in India – they simply program their computers to mechanically evaluate the content of your messages and correlate that data to ads that you will be most likely to click on.

Recently Google streamlined their privacy policies and Microsoft took advantage of the change to poke fun at Gmail's practices (including a somewhat humorous video: http://youtu.be/TDbrX5U75dk), even though Hotmail similarly "reads" its users' messages. I imagine it was this renewed attention that sparked my wife's concern.

Personally, this form of "reading my e-mail" doesn't worry me. However, a couple of years ago I noticed that LinkedIn was suddenly recommending to me a bunch of contacts that only had one thing in common – I had recently exchanged e-mails with them via my Gmail account. One was a hotel manager who had answered a question I'd submitted via their website. Another was an old college friend with whom I share no business contacts. E-mail messages traverse many nodes on the Internet on their journey from source to destination, and the from and to addresses could've been intercepted anywhere and then sold to LinkedIn, but the easiest place to get that information would be directly from Gmail. This type of use of information contained in my e-mail messages is much more concerning to me than simply displaying ads to me when I log into my Gmail account, and has raised my sensitivity to Google's privacy practices. I recommend setting aside some time to exercise some privacy control at http://www.google.com/privacy/tools.html .

A different type of concern with free e-mail services stems from ads tacked onto the bottom of e-mails you send to your contacts. I haven't had this problem with my Gmail accounts, but I have noticed e-mails arriving from friends with ads on the bottom that do not reflect what I perceive to be their character or associations. When using any "free" service on the Internet, it is always worth considering whether the service is costing you something more precious than money, namely your reputation or even honor to God's glory.

Are their alternatives?

Changing e-mail addresses is always painful. At this point, I don't feel that the risks are great enough to move away from using Gmail, but I will continue to monitor their practices.

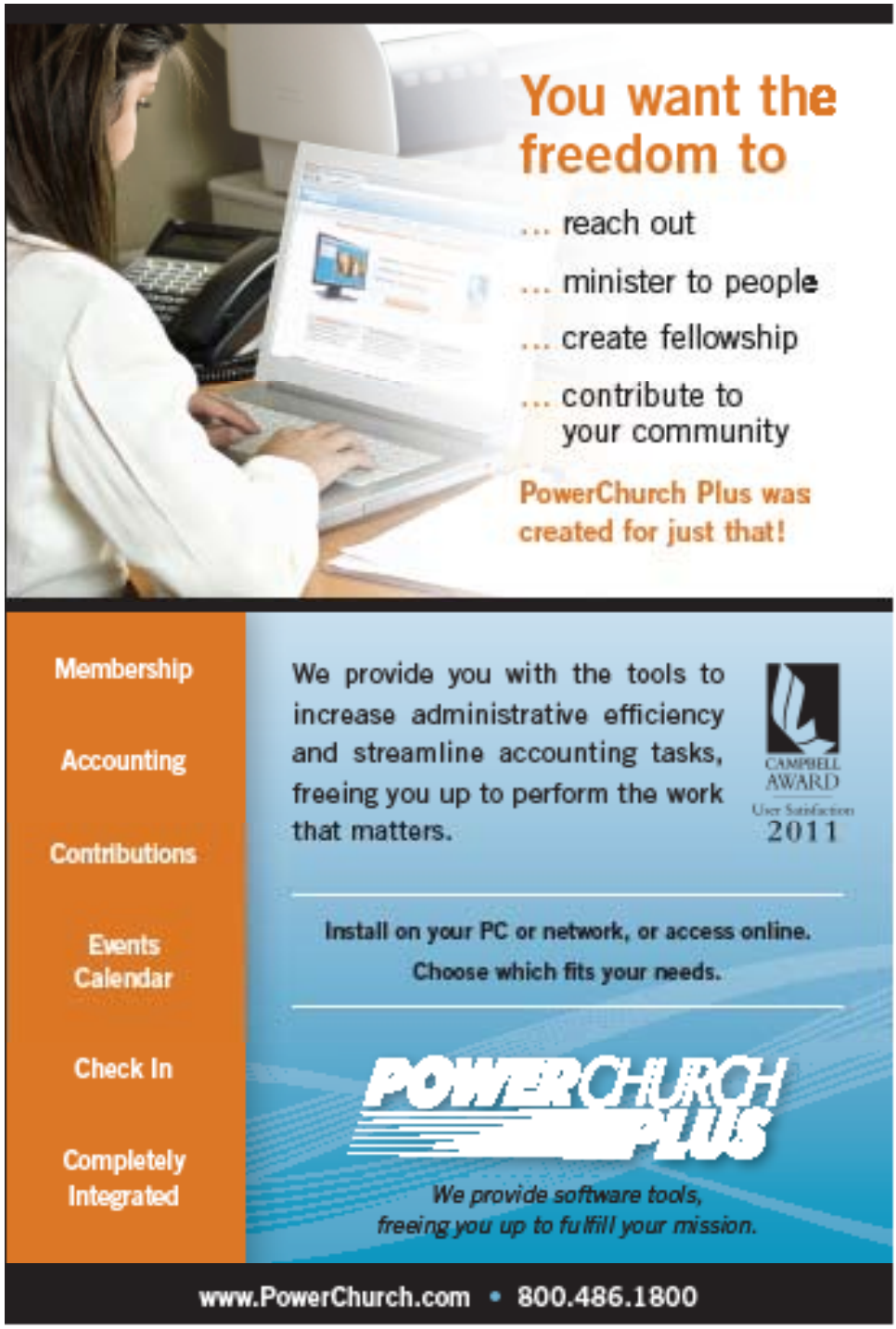
Part of my reluctance to change is that I'm not aware of any Christian alternatives that give me as much confidence in their features and reliability as Gmail. JesusAnswers.com offers an e-mail service, but the free option doesn't support my PC client – I would need to spend at least $36 a year for the premium service. Christian Fun Mail from Christian Web Host seems to use the exact same service (and pricing) as JesusAnswers, but with a variety of fun domain names. Worthy E-mail is another alternative that offers a small (100MB) inbox for $12.95 a year. The free service at Christ-Saves.us looks promising, but doesn't appear to support PC clients.

Please e-mail me at russ.mcguire@gmail.com if I've missed any that you believe are compelling. Hopefully, these alternatives (and others) will continue to develop into competitive options for those concerned about the practices of secular e-mail services.

It is my hope and prayer that these articles

on the power and danger of technology will encourage you in your daily walk with Christ. Whether it is the printing press, radio, television, personal computers, the Internet, mobility, Wi-Fi, social networks, smartphones, streaming video services, or e-mail, new technologies continue to advance our ability to know God and to serve Him, wherever we go.

Russ McGuire is an executive for a Fortune 100 company and the founder/co-founder of three technology start-ups. His latest entrepreneurial venture is Hschooler.net (http://hschooler.net), a social network for Christian families (especially homeschoolers) which is being built and run by six homeschooled students under Russ' direction.



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