



FACE . . .

Pastor on Facebook? We Might Learn Something

ADAM P. WHITE

Several weeks ago, I joined the Presbyterian Church of Facebook. I'm still unsure what this means. As a Facebook congregation, we have not yet gathered. We have not heard the word of God read or proclaimed. We have not celebrated the Eucharist. Nor have we been sent out into the world as bearers of the gospel. Most telling, however, is that, as of now, I have not been invited to serve on a committee.

Facebook, in its own words, "helps people communicate more efficiently with their friends, family and coworkers." Some see Facebook as a kind of virtual public square to work toward civic and political aims. Others see Facebook as part of a technological transformation breeding narcissism and ignorance in adolescents.¹ Still others have had the audacity to ask whether Facebook is "better at being Church...than my brick and mortar Church."²

Facebook, it says, has more than 350 million active users, 50% of whom log in on any given day—this from a site launched as recently as 2004. The exponential growth of Facebook and other social-networking sites demonstrates one simple reality: human beings desire connections with others, and they will seek raw material for furthering those bonds wherever such ties may be found. This should not surprise us, since we learn from Scripture at the outset that it is "not good" that the human creature "should be alone" (Gen 2:18). The desire for relationship is required baggage for creatures created in the image of the Triune God; our very being longs to be in communion with other creatures and with our Creator.

It is tempting to cast technology as a scapegoat for breakdowns of family, church, and face-to-face interaction, a thinning of the so-called "normal" spheres of human relationship. Certainly, technology can crowd out other ways of relating. Anyone who has seen two tweens texting or tweeting one another while literally feet apart will resonate with this concern. With everything instantly accessible through networks, we increasingly spend time physically present only to machines. As William Cavanaugh has compellingly argued, desire for efficiency, to make all things present, may ultimately result in radical absence.³ Absence is a poor substitute for presence, and a laptop is a poor substitute for face-to-face flesh and blood.

¹Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future* (New York: Penguin Group, 2008).

²Jon M. Sweeny, "Is Facebook...Church?" *The Lutheran* (July 2009) 38.

³William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 59–88.

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Pastor on Facebook? Not for Me

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In 1811, Jane Austen wrote *Sense and Sensibility*, a novel centered around the lives of two young women, Elinor and her sister Marianne. Elinor is sensible, guided by good judgment. Marianne, her younger sister, is prone to the whims of her emotions, or sentiment. One day, Marianne sprains her ankle only to find a dashing stranger, Mr. Willoughby, come to her aid. He invites her to visit his estate, falsely encouraging her to believe he is in love with her. After his unexpected departure to London, Marianne writes a series of letters to Willoughby, and because the letters are so warm and intimate, Elinor assumes her sister is engaged. However, when Marianne and Willoughby finally see one another in person, he snubs her, breaking Marianne's heart. In not seeing Willoughby face to face, Marianne created a false reality.

Sometimes it's just best to show up in person.

Facebook is a form of mediation, and there are thousands of ways we find to mediate our lives. Mediation, in and of itself, is not a bad thing; it helps soften the edges of life. So mediation—be it television, texting, music, books, Facebook, journals, letters, blogs, film, e-mail, or the arts—does not fit neatly into moral categories. Facebook and other forms of social networking do a lot of good; they bring people together, keep people connected, are a great way of relaying news, and they are a “safe” way to interact, especially with new people. So why have I, as a pastor, chosen not to be on Facebook?

First, I already feel as if there is an umbilical cord attached between me and a lighted rectangular screen almost all of my waking hours. Be it my cell phone or my computer or a TV, I find that most of my day is spent interacting with others via a mediated form. Although I would feel helpless without the Internet, and my cell phone now seems like a necessity, I have chosen to not participate in Facebook because, well, enough is enough.

Also, as a pastor, there are boundaries issues that I haven't sorted out yet. I realize that friending someone on Facebook is not the same as *being* friends. But I have also heard lots of my Facebooking friends tell me that when someone “unfriended” them, they were a little confused and hurt. As a pastor, I want to be careful to draw a distinction between being friendly and being a parishioner's friend. Facebook seems to muddle those boundaries.

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Still, to blame Facebook and e-dentity for relational decay is to get the church off the hook. What is most disturbing is not that people are flocking to Facebook to extend and nurture their relationships. More disturbing is that, culturally speaking, the church is no longer a primary place where people expect such meaningful connections to be fostered. Why are people who are genuinely seeking connections with one another, connections with causes bigger than themselves, and even connections with God, increasingly looking to places like Facebook rather than flesh-and-blood Christian communities?

Perhaps instead of condemning instruments that seem to foster and further relationships, the church should (1) attempt to understand how such tools may be used actually to bring people face-to-face, (2) recognize the ways in which Facebook and similar technologies potentially strengthen connections when flesh-and-blood presence is not an immediate possibility, and (3) be critically honest about what such technologies are and are not.

Facebook is not a community unto itself, nor is it a church in its own right, nor is it a technologically rendered Lord's Table; and the Presbyterian Church of Facebook has done little to convince me of the contrary. Facebook, however, has been a means for some people (this author included) to connect more deeply with their loved ones who are presently absent. Facebook can be an instrument of reconciliation; I personally know of one case where Facebook opened up an avenue for conversation between estranged family members. And Facebook has allowed some to connect with those who are predisposed to concealing themselves from others (some extreme introverts report a freedom of disclosure they never experienced before while posting on social-networking sites). At times, Facebook has brought solidarity, strengthened communities, and allowed distant neighbors to pray for one another. This is no replacement for flesh and blood; at best it is an extension—a prosthetic, in Graham Ward's language, an artificial extension of already existing relationships.⁴

Yes, I use Facebook, but Facebook is not the center of my relational world. My yes to Facebook is a qualified one. I wonder if that's not precisely what is needed in a world that technology draws into ever new binary oppositions ("Friend Request: Confirm or Ignore"). As the people of God we have our own disciplines. We invite our communities to recognize that relationships—even ones mediated through technology—always carry possibilities that either enliven or deaden us to God, the source of all relationship; through catechesis and spiritual nurture we acquire the habits and practices to discern the difference. ⊕

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⁴Graham Ward, "Cities of the Good: The Redemption of Cyberspace," in *Cities of God* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 256.

Further, it is more than a little amusing to watch how some people present themselves on Facebook. I commented on the profile picture of one of my daughter's friends because she looked, well, gorgeous. Earlier that month, I had seen this same friend and, yes, she was pretty, but she hardly looked like the girl in the picture. "Oh," my daughter said, "that's Photoshopped." I know adults, too, who drive fancier cars and weigh less in their "better" cyber-selves. They admit to only posting things when they've done amazing things like just finishing a 13-mile run. Maybe that's okay, but one of the greatest joys of being human is being human together. So, when I interact with someone on Facebook, with whom am I interacting? Their vulnerable and far more beautiful real self, or their ideal self?

Worse, as with poor Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*, illusions of intimacy can happen. Currently, I know two people who have a very intimate relationship through Facebook, and yet have never met. For the one party involved it is clearly an emotional affair. As with Marianne and Elinor, things can become confused, and Facebook can provide an illusory world that seems both intimate and yet less dangerous because you don't have to look the person in the eye.

That's why, sometimes, it's just best to show up in person. There are some places you need to bring your body. Places like births and baptisms, seeing someone off for the first day of school or dissonant junior high choir recitals, worship and weddings, deathbeds and funerals. In these places, for very good reasons, our flesh should be gathered. Anytime a casserole is needed, it is a safe bet that a message on Facebook won't do the trick.

But most of all, our faith is of the flesh. At the very core of our faith is a God who, after lots of mediated correspondence, finally needed to show up in person. This is not to say anything was inherently wrong with the mediated message, but finally, we needed Jesus, a face. Jesus did not come with a different message; God is, was, and will always be God. But God needed to take on bone and blood and enter our lives, so unmediated that he became vulnerable, broken to the point of the cross, so that we might know that in all things God is for us—that there is nothing that can separate us from God's love. Mediation is neither bad nor good, right nor wrong. But we confess that at the very heart of our faith is a God who says we matter enough that he brings us his body. So, we, as people of faith, are now freed to do the same. We hold babies, we pray around tables, we sit with the grieving. We let the technological clutter slip, and we let silence be. ☩

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