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How People of Faith Are Using Computers and the Internet (1998)

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Disembodied Souls in Cyberspace

For most of history, when people communicated they did so primarily by face-to-face conversation. Communication, thus, was a full-bodied event with facial expressions and body language clearly evident. With the development of telecommunications, though, communication has become more of a disembodied event as people communicate without their full physical presence. Groothuis explains:

Information technologies disembody the information they carry to various degrees. Even the shift from an oral to a written culture tended to disembody knowledge. What once required memorization and recitation by living persons could now be retrieved through the dead pages of papyrus, parchment, or paper. . . . Or take the telephone. It extends the voice far beyond the capacities of the vocal chords but also severs the voice from the face and body.(58)

Groothuis links the continuing trend toward disembodiment with cyberspace. He argues that cyberspace is a "disembodied medium" because "information is produced and exchanged through computers via telephone lines without the physical bulk of paper or the face-to-face element of conversation." (59)

With the Internet, according to Groothuis, people naturally act in disembodied ways. As the title of his book, *The Soul in Cyberspace*, indicates, people can escape their bodies and travel in cyberspace taking on different identities and sometimes acting in ways they normally would not if their physical presence were required. (60) Experimenting with sexuality is one example he gives. "When people enter cyberspace they may play multiple roles and possibly play characters of the opposite sex," he says. (61) A person who would never risk meeting with other transvestites in person can comfortably interact with other transvestites on the Internet. A man who would never look at pornography at a local magazine stand can anonymously visit pornographic Web sites. As Groothuis puts it, "The fantasy enclaves. . . allow for the adoption of any number of self-constructed identities."(62) These identities "leave behind all the richness of physical presence and embodied communication." (63)

What is the theological response to this issue? Groothuis argues that the answer is mostly found in the theological implications of creation and the incarnation. God created humans not just with souls but with bodies that were declared "good." The implication, according to Groothuis, is that human activity, including communication, is best when the body is present. Groothuis also

stresses the physical nature of the incarnation of Jesus Christ as being important in understanding how communication should happen:

At this point the Christian scholar can draw on the rich resources of the incarnation and its ethical entailments. Although God is essentially an incorporeal being, he created the physical world as good (Gen 1:31; 1 Tim 4:3–4). Despite the fall of human moral agents into sin through their disobedience, the second person of the Trinity deigned to enter the world by taking on himself a human nature. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). In speaking of his relationship with Christ, John also reports: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. This life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it" (1 John 1:1–2). (64)

The physical nature of the incarnation sets an important "pattern" for communication and relationships according to Groothuis:

Christ 's incarnation is God 's manner of redeeming erring mortals, but it also spells out a pattern of relationships and communication for Christian discipleship. Christian life and ministry should be incarnational in that the body of Christ should relish embodied fellowship and personal involvement with other believers and the nonbelieving world as well. In this way the reality of Christ can, in a sense, be "made flesh " through our physical presence. In Jesus ' high- priestly prayer to the Father he expounds this dynamic: "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (John 18:18). Just as Christ "made the Father known" (1:18) by his life among the living, so we should make God known by our personal presence in God 's world for the sake of his creatures. (65)

Groothuis argues that this "incarnational model of communication" can also be seen in Paul's letters. In Romans 1:10-11 Paul states, "I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong--that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith." Here, Paul stressed the importance of personal contact with his Christian friends. Groothuis points out that Paul "yearned to have an incarnational presence in the life of the Roman believers." (66) For Paul, then, "embodied fellowship is an irreducible and incommensurate quality that cannot be adequately translated into any other form of communication." (67)

As Groothuis puts it, "There is a dimension of intimacy and accountability that comes with a face- to- face, person- to- person encounter that is not available otherwise. " (68) The incarnational ideal for communication, however, does not eliminate cyberspace or other media of communication. He argues that we should use whatever media are important in particular contexts, but we must also "subject all means of communication to metaphysical and epistemological analysis (inquiring as to their nature, strengths and weaknesses) in accordance with the dicta of our Christian perspective." (69) This approach appears well- balanced.