

The Facebook Dilemma

A Theological Reflection by Craig Smith

A lot of Christians seem to be alarmed by Facebook and Myspace. Even more of Jesus' followers are perplexed by these and other sites dedicated to virtual social networking (VSN). I know this because I hear from those who are either worried or wondering on a regular basis. Parents are the ones most likely to approach me with questions about whether or not to allow their children to have Facebook profiles or to play around with Second Life, but lots of other people seem to be trying to figure out how to think about this stuff too.

The thing is, I'm not really sure what to think about this stuff. On the one hand, both Myspace and Facebook are kind of fun and both sites have allowed me to stay in touch on some level with lots of people that I would otherwise lose track of. On the other hand, hardly a day goes by that I don't hear some horror story about a sexual predator using VSN to lure an innocent girl into a trap. Of course, this kind of thing happens all the time in the non-virtual world, too, but that doesn't seem to draw the same kind of attention these days for some reason.

Here's the thing: the basic guidelines for responsible use of VSN (or for parenting children using VSN) are readily available. Hundreds of blogs, articles and websites have been published, many from a Christian perspective, that give excellent parameters for the safe and balanced use of VSN. That's not ground that needs to be covered again. On the other hand, it seems to me that there are far fewer resources out there focused on helping us figure out how we should *think* about VSN; that is, resources dedicated to what VSN is, why it's so popular, what it can and can't do and what we, as followers of Jesus, ought to do with it (or about it, I suppose, depending on how we answer the other questions).

So, here are some theological issues related to VSN that I find myself thinking about a lot these days. These thoughts are a bit intellectual, but we'll turn to some reflection on the practical application of these ideas in future editions of Deep & Wide. For now, though, give this stuff some thought. These are hardly fully-worked-out philosophical ideas, but works-in-progress and I'd love to hear your thoughts, additions, subtractions, rebukes, etc. To provide a forum for that, Shepherd Project has started its very own VSN site which we invite you to join at www.shepherdproject.ning.com.

Let's start with what seems to me the most obvious theological issue...and yet the one that seems to have received the least attention:

Disembodied

One of the most interesting things about VSN to me is that it takes place entirely in the world of cyberspace. I realize this is a glaringly obvious statement, but I guess what I'm really intrigued by is the fact that VSN is really *disembodied socializing* and I think this is a far more significant fact than most people realize.

See, Christians tend to think that the essence of our humanity resides in our spiritual nature, but this is simply not true and certainly not biblical. We do have a spiritual nature, to be sure, but we're not primarily spirits. Rather, human beings are *embodied* or *corporeal* creatures (i.e. we have physical forms). Who we are is inextricable from this characteristic. We have never been, and will never be, purely spiritual creatures, existing as non-corporeal/disembodied souls. Although we may exist in a non-physical state between our death and bodily resurrection at Jesus' return, this is an unnatural, temporary state brought on by the presence of sin and its puppet, death (2Co. 5:2-4).

Human existence as it was meant to be experienced necessarily involves a physical body. This is an absolutely critical truth and yet it is frequently overlooked by Christians, many of whom seem to think that our bodies are nothing more than shells for the "real us", our souls. I can't tell you how many funerals I've attended where someone makes the comment that the body we're placing in the ground "isn't really them." This is true to a point, of course, since who we are is not defined entirely by our physical form. But the implication of saying that the body "isn't really us" is that the "real us" is somehow entirely independent of the body and this simply isn't a biblically supportable notion. Ironically, such an idea is deeply rooted in Gnostic philosophy, a dangerous heresy the early church spent a great deal of time combating but which seems to have settled deeply into the marrow of contemporary Christian thinking.

When God said "let us make humanity in our *image*" He used a Hebrew word (*ts'lem*) which always refers to a physical object which was meant to represent someone or something else. In fact, the word for image in that

verse is often used in the Bible to refer to idols, which are physical objects that the pagans used to represent their gods and goddesses, and which they hoped would be used by the gods and goddesses to manifest their presence in the world. This is why such idols/images were revered, not because the ancients believed the things themselves were divine but because they believed the spirits used these objects to make their presence tangible in the physical world. I explain this whole thing a lot more fully in my book *The Kingdom For The Kingless* if you're interested.

It seems to me that without recognizing this key anthropological fact that we are corporeal creatures, we can never hope to assess the VSN issue accurately. If the "essence" of humanity were our souls and the rational activity which our spiritual natures make possible, then cyberspace ought to provide an environment *more* conducive to true humanity than the "real" world. After all, in cyberspace our bodies are essentially irrelevant. But of course, cyberspace doesn't make us more human. If anything, we are less human on the internet.

Now, to defend a statement like that, I have to define more carefully what I mean by "human." As I've already suggested, it seems to me that to be human is to be an embodied spirit. However, I think a genuinely useful definition would have to go a bit further and would have to include some statement of God's purpose for making us in the first place. So here is how I would say it: a human being is an embodied spirit meant to function as God's representative in the physical creation. Again, I argue for both pieces of this definition more fully in my book *The Kingdom For the Kingless*.

Now, if this is what it means to be human, then the evidence clearly suggests that we tend to be less human in cyberspace. Certainly we do not exist in cyberspace in corporeal form. The "I" in cyberspace really consists of nothing more than our intellectual activity. In that sense, our physical form is irrelevant to who we are online. This is not necessarily a bad thing, nor is it entirely unique to cyberspace. Physical books, articles, notes, memories, etc. are all similarly nothing more than the residue of our intellectual activity. My point is only that what can be found of "us" online is entirely non-corporeal whereas we actually exist as physical beings in the real world. Thus, if being human necessarily involves the body as I have suggested, then we will always be less human online than in the real world.

On some level this is mere semantics, however, and really of less interest to me than the issue of how we *act* on the internet. It seems quite clear to me that the things that we do online are quite often less human than the things we do in the real world, assuming again that my definition of "human" is correct. What I mean is this: if part of being human involves the ways that we represent God, then we must ask ourselves: do we represent God better or worse in cyberspace?

I think that two follow-up questions will suffice to establish my own view on this matter:

Are we more likely to view pornography online or in the real world? Clearly the answer is that we are more likely to view pornography online. People who would never take the risk of buying a pornographic magazine in a bookstore are regularly tempted into a sordid web of pornography online simply because such actions seem less likely to be found out online. People who would never go to a movie theater showing XXX films will watch them in streaming form online. It would appear, then, that there is something about the real world which actually curtails our sinfulness to some degree.

Are we more loving online or in the real world? My experience is that face-to-face interactions with people are far more pleasant than virtual interactions. Whether through email, instant messaging, blogs or any of a dozen other kinds of cyberspace communication, people are far more aggressive, blunt, cold and uncaring online than in the real world. Things that we would never dare to say to someone while looking at them, or even while talking on the phone with them, we say without hesitation online. This is also true of letter-writing, and for all the same reasons I suspect, but this merely reinforces my point: the more removed our bodies are from the direct act of communication, the less genuine humanity is reflected in that communication.

Of course, some might argue that all of this simply means that we are being more "real" online: if we are too frightened of the possible consequences to go to a pornographic movie or tell someone what we really think about them, then cyberspace actually allows us to be more honest about who we actually are and what we actually think. I have no doubt that this true, but honesty and humanity are hardly the same thing.

I might honestly despise a person I've met, for any number of reasons, but I'm hardly representing God better by verbalizing the depths of my dislike. Of course, I'm not representing God well by putting on a fake smile and pretending this individual is my favorite person in the world, either, but you see the point: God is truth and to represent Him well, we must also be truthful, but if the truth is that we feel something that is in itself ungodly, then making sure that everyone knows we feel this way is not truly representing God.

What I'm suggesting is that while cyberspace may allow us to "be ourselves" without all the masks and pretension, who we are that is revealed more fully online is less, not more, human.

Contrary to popular maxims (such as "to err is human"), genuine humanity is not defined by our mistakes and weaknesses. Our perversion, hatred, lack of compassion and selfishness, all of which come out so easily online, are not the things which characterize genuine humanity but the things which have come to characterize *fallen* humanity; that is, humanity twisted and warped by an inherited propensity towards sin. I have yet to encounter or even hear of someone who is more genuinely caring, kind, compassionate or faithful online than in the real world. The opposite reality, however, is extremely common in my experience. So, yes, we may be more honestly "ourselves" online than off, but the face that we show the world there is not the more human of our visages.

Well, that's enough to ponder for now. Next time we'll take up the issue of the infinite tune-ability of cyberspace and how this may impact our development as individuals.