

## **ANGED STATUS: COMMUNICATING JESUS THROUGH DANGEROUS MEDIUMS**

The people of God have always been quick to adapt to new communication mediums to communicate the Gospel. While Luther's use of the printing press is often held forth as the archetypal example of this adaptation, the use of contemporary mediums to communicate Godly truth is as old as Genesis, and carries through the Old Testament, into the New. The first ambassadors of the divinely appointed king, Jesus, spread the reach of his kingdom self-consciously using methodologies employed by ambassadors of the competing empire of the day – Rome. They described their efforts using terminology consistent with imperial media campaigns - the very word “Gospel” was a proclamation of good news relating to the Emperor.

Those who proclaimed this word saw themselves as heralds, apostles, ambassadors, and messengers – agents and carriers of the good news of the Kingdom of God. These messengers employed communication mediums used by other messengers – the written and spoken word, oratory, and imagery – but never embraced these mediums without adapting them to their message, and as was the case with their Old Testament forbears, rejected methodologies and mediums that conflicted with their theology and their message. The paradigm of the crucifixion, the self-renouncing voluntary humiliation of their king (Philippians 2), profoundly impacted the communication methodology, the content, and the image these messengers presented.

Media platforms grow and evolve, and have developed alongside human culture, and shaped human culture, since God spoke creation into being, and Adam, as God's image bearer, spoke to name the animals. While platforms change – the nature of communication remains the same, a triumvirate of speech, writing, and image – each carrying data, and each able to be applied and transmitted in different mediums via different networks. The statues, inscriptions, and proclamations of one generation were made more efficient by technologies that linked people together. Eventually roads gave way to rail, and the telegraph wires, which gave way to the wireless device driven communication of the World Wide Web. The campfire gave way to the public

forum, which gave way to the book and the print media, which gave way to the radio and television, which gave way to social media.

There is nothing profoundly new about social media, or what it reveals about our humanity. Instead, Social media is media on steroids. A powerful convergence of all previous forms of media broadcast via an unprecedented network. It is a multimedia fusion of text, speech, and image, recorded and encoded as bits and bytes. Beamed into homes, and pockets, via new technologies. Enabling communicators to send and receive data using new tools, in a new medium. This presents an opportunity for Christian communicators. Even before the rise of the Internet, media ecologist Marshall McLuhan said: *“Today, thanks to electric information, the speed of communication, satellites, Christianity is available to every human being. For the first time in history, the entire population of the planet can instantly and simultaneously have access to the Christian faith.”*<sup>1</sup>

The nature of social media taps into something of the nature of humans – it makes all of us communicators, which I will suggest is what we, as image bearers, were created to be in the very beginning. Social media users present an image to a potentially global audience. The priesthood of believers has new opportunities to carry the image of God to new corners of the globe. At the same time, there are dangers. Social Media has the potential to be a new Tower of Babel, a monument to human ingenuity setting us up in idolatrous opposition to God, a temple to our own knowledge, a glorification of our own image.

Since McLuhan, media theorists have long accepted that mediums are not neutral – that tools shape craftsmen, while craftsmen use tools to shape the world around them, the increasing understanding that what we do and consume alters our bodies and our brains, especially through the insights surrounding neural plasticity, sounds a startling clarion call about the potential dangers of social media. But can these dangers can be navigated? Can Christians avoid the Charybdis of promoting self-image on these

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<sup>1</sup> M. McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*, (Oregon, Wipf and Stock, 2010), 209

platforms, and the Scylla of being conformed by the powerful myths surrounding social media, in order to use these platforms to point others to Jesus? How should the people of God respond to, and use, Social Media to communicate the good news? How are we to think of, and use, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and whatever comes next, as the people of God who are being transformed by God's Spirit into the image of God's Son (Romans 8:29)? What values does this medium encode in us that need to be rejected in order for us to consistently present the good news about a crucified king?

This essay suggests that all of us bear the image of the object of our worship, that this image-bearing communicates something to others in whatever medium we communicate through, that mediums are not neutral, and carry the ability to reshape us from the inside out, and that any use of a communication medium – starting from the medium that is the *ethos* of our own lives, through to how we approach social media such as Facebook – must be deliberate, in these ways:



- Deliberately **incarnate** and **cruciform** – our usage of these networks should use the networks in the way people expect, but our use of the medium must be shaped by the story that shapes our lives.
- Deliberately **an exercise of our renewed minds** – shaped by our new identity, avoiding being conformed to the image of our world, and the myths and values of worldly mediums.

Before discussing these three points, I will first agree with a famous Canon commercial from the early 1990s – when it comes to communication.<sup>2</sup> *Image is everything*. I will suggest that this is clear from the very opening chapters of God's communication with, and through, his creation. I will suggest that understanding God's communicative act in the person Jesus as the paradigm for communication provides us with a communication praxis to apply to any medium.

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<sup>2</sup> Canon, *Image is Everything*; Andre Agassi, (1990)  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpuFEpbE0d0>

## IMAGE IS EVERYTHING

The Triune God is a communicative being, communication is part of his essence.<sup>3</sup> God speaks creation into being, bringing order out of chaos, speaking creation into its good function as a cosmic temple created to bring glory to himself, and God finishes the creative act by speaking to himself as he says “*let us make man in our image.*”<sup>4</sup> Adam shows that he is like God by speaking the names of the animals into existence – creating and ordering by speaking (Genesis 2:19-20).

The creation of the world, and of man reveals something about God, and about us. God is a communicative being. Humans, likewise, made in God’s image, are communicative beings.<sup>5</sup> We communicate *like* and *about* the object of our worship – we communicate from the heart – we were made to communicate about God, but at the heart of humanity’s rejection of God’s rule, in the events of the Fall, is the desire to be like God ourselves – not to bear God’s image, but to bear our own image, to shape our own lives. The serpent’s deception cunningly attacks the very heart of our created being.

*“For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and **you will be like God...**” – Genesis 3:5*

Adam and Eve were *already* created to be like God, the desire the serpent awakens is the desire to set the communication agenda for one’s self. The result is a shattering of the *imago dei*.<sup>6</sup> Adam’s son Seth carries his image, not the divine image. A refraction of a refraction.<sup>7</sup> God’s representative in his Garden temple is removed, Adam and Eve’s connection with the image they were created to reflect is broken. Their hearts, and the hearts of those who came after them, were darkened.<sup>8</sup>

The desire for autonomy in image bearing is a desire that is reflected in the events in Babel, which occur as a result of humanity’s misuse of their

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 1:26

<sup>5</sup> For more, see Appendix.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 3:2-7

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 5:3

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 6:5

communicative ability (Genesis 11:1), but the misuse is motivated by the desire to communicate about themselves, not their creator.

*“Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”* Genesis 11:4

It has been suggested that the tower of Babel is best understood as a ziggurat, a religious building that formed part of a temple precinct, so that the people in Babel were essentially attempting to build a temple to their own glory,<sup>9</sup> these were *“places where people worshiped the creature rather than the Creator.”*<sup>10</sup>

While temples and idols made of stone were problematic for Israel, the real issue was what this did to the hearts of the people involved, and what this did to the image they bore in their lives. The hearts of idol worshippers became the home of idols.<sup>11</sup> Paul sums up the heart matter, and its link to idolatry, in Romans 1 – human hearts are darkened when an exchange is made from the glory of God, for images made to look like moral humans and animals.<sup>12</sup>

The function of image bearing and its relationship to identity, or “whose name” one lives for, is so central to the Biblical narrative that it serves as a theological yardstick that measures whether or not a nation or individual is following Yahweh at any given moment. Pursuing a name for one’s self, or being conformed into the image of a man-made idol is at the heart of prophetic rebukes,<sup>13</sup> and, importantly, Psalm 115, which compares those who pursue the glory of the Lord, with those who pursue their own glory (Psalm

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<sup>9</sup> G.J Wenham, ‘Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story,’ *I Studied Inscriptions From Before The Flood: Ancient Near Eastern Literary and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1-11*, ed. R.S Hess and D.T Tsumura, Sources for Biblical and Theological Study, Volume 4, (Eisenbrauns, 1994), 403, also W.E Vogels, ‘The Tree(s) in the Middle of the Garden (Gen 2:9, 3:3),’ *Science Et Esprit*, 59.2-3, (2007), 129-142, 140, J. V McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary: Volume 1: The Law (Genesis 1-15)*, (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1991), Kindle Edition.

On the relationship between Babel and Facebook, see J. Dyer, *From the Garden to the City: The Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology*, (Grand Rapids, Kregel, 2011), Kindle Edition, Location 1778

<sup>10</sup> J. V McGee, *Genesis*, Kindle Edition, no pages

<sup>11</sup> eg Ezekiel 11:21, 14:3

<sup>12</sup> Romans 1:21-25

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix.

115:1), by worshipping dumb idols they make with their own hands (Psalm 115:4-5), the Psalmist declares: *“Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.”*

Every human bears the image of the objects or gods they worship. Secular essayist David Foster Wallace expressed this truth and its associated frustrations, in a famous, now published, commencement speech to Kenyon College in 2005, *“There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing is that **pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive.**”*<sup>14</sup>

While Israel was forbidden to make images of worship,<sup>15</sup> they were, as a nation of priests, meant to be images of worship, a communicative medium to connect the nations to God.<sup>16</sup> Those who bear the image of the God who communicates are made to communicate; this function forms the basis of comparisons between the people of God, and the people of mute idols throughout the Old Testament.<sup>17</sup>

Being made in God’s image means being made a communicative agent, the Fall means that we communicate about whatever it is we turn into our gods, gods who serve us and our name, and that those who would exercise their communicative nature as the creator intended require a heart transplant – stone hearts shaped by stone idols are to be replaced with living hearts shaped by the living God.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> D.F. Wallace, *This is Water: Thoughts Delivered on a Significant Occasion*, (New York, Little Brown and Co, 2009), 99-115, also: *“If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never feel you have enough... And the so-called real world will not discourage you from operating on **your default settings**, because the so-called real world of men and money and power hums merrily along in a pool of **fear and anger and frustration and craving and worship of self** ... The **freedom all to be lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation...** The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day... The alternative is unconsciousness, **the default setting, the rat race, the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing.**”*

<sup>15</sup> Exodus 20:4

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix. Exodus 19:4-6, Deut 4:5-8

<sup>17</sup> eg 1 Kings 18:22-46, Isaiah 44

<sup>18</sup> Ezekiel 36:26, for more on the image of God in Ezekiel, see Appendix

The arrival of Jesus, God's communicative act par excellence, the arrival of a man who *is* the image of the invisible God, his death, resurrection, and a believer's subsequent union with him, in his body, the church - changes what it means for people to bear God's image, now and in the glorified future, we are now being conformed into the image of Jesus.<sup>19</sup>

Humans are image bearers of whatever they worship – Christians are image bearers of Jesus undergoing a process of transformation driven by a new heart, and a new mind.<sup>20</sup> Image bearing has a communicative function – not just because images have always functioned to communicate (just as they do now on Social Media), and this is part of the story of humanity's function told in Genesis.<sup>21</sup>

### **THE COMMUNICATING FUNCTION OF IMAGES (A SHORT PRECIS OF APPENDIX)**

Images have always been communication mediums, created with a communicative function. This function is not limited to pre-literate, or illiterate cultures, but was profoundly important for identity formation and declaration in cultures where literacy was not widespread. In the Ancient Near East, around the time of the composition of the Old Testament, kings of nation-states gave their kingdoms legitimacy through forging close links between religious and political imagery, they were the image of their god,<sup>22</sup> and statues of the king were placed around the empire to reinforce his majesty, the use of this imagery was particularly important in diplomacy and conquest, because images were a universal language that transcended cultural barriers.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Colossians 1:15-20, Ephesians 1:18-23, 5:23-32, Romans 12:3-5, 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, Romans 8:29

<sup>20</sup> Deuteronomy 30:6, Ezekiel 36:36, Jeremiah 24:7, 31, Romans 12:1-2

<sup>21</sup> See Appendix

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, 199, P.A. Bird, 'Male and Female He Created Them: Genesis 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation,' *I Studied Inscriptions From Before The Flood: Ancient Near Eastern Literary and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1-11*, ed. R.S Hess and D.T. Tsumura, (Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 1994), 338, M.B Dick, 'Prophetic Parodies of Making the Cult Image,' *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of Cult Image in the Ancient Near East*, Ed. M.B. Dick, (Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 1999), 8

<sup>23</sup> J. Watts, 'Story, List, Sanction: A Cross Cultural Strategy of Ancient Persuasion,' *Rhetoric Before and Beyond the Greeks*, ed. C. Lipson and R. Binkley (Albany, SUNY Press, 2004), 197. For more on the communicative function of images in the ANE, see Appendix.

This imagery served to reinforce the persuasive power of speeches and texts. Persuasive texts from the time invoke the ruler's status and image, made familiar through imagery, and such texts were written to be read out loud.<sup>24</sup> This persuasive function of imagery became more sophisticated over time, and across empires. In New Testament times, the Roman Empire had mastered the use of imagery, especially in the age of Augustus, whose rule was based largely on his image-driven propaganda.<sup>25</sup> During the reign of Augustus, every Roman city had temples and shrines where he was represented and worshipped with the gods.<sup>26</sup> The image of the emperor became the model for imitation, in fashion and hairstyle, but also set the standard for virtues and values.<sup>27</sup>

In a similar period, Cicero, and his intellectual descendants, were establishing the vital role one's *ethos*, a concept similar to image or the modern "brand," played in written and spoken persuasion.<sup>28</sup>

The use of imagery was not limited to emperors, or professional communicators like Cicero, imagery could be used to build one's status. Romans seeking to advance in society would commission images of themselves, or their ancestors, engaged in significant tasks, or alongside their chosen gods in a perpetual game of one-upmanship.

*"The disintegration of Roman society created individual rivalries and insecurity that led to exaggerated forms of self-promotion even among people who had nothing to gain by it. What began as a traditional agonistic spirit among the aristocracy denigrated into frantic displays of wealth and success. But the scope of opportunity for such display was often still rather limited."*<sup>29</sup>

The limiting factor on these image-based displays was that statues are a medium constrained by space and time, these small status building images

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<sup>24</sup> Watts, 'Story,' 1997-207

<sup>25</sup> P. Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. A. Shapiro, (Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 1990), 3-4, 159-160, 297, 336, coins were powerful mini-images, 54-57, 161

<sup>26</sup> Zanker, *Images*, 235-236

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, 129, 336

<sup>28</sup> See Appendix

<sup>29</sup> Zanker, *Images*, 15



were difficult to move beyond the wall of one's home. People would only encounter them when visiting, and seeing the images on one's wall. In this sense, statues and imagery, as status builders functioned as a primitive form of Facebook. The development of photography, and the use of imagery in print, broadcast, and now online, has radically re-altered the way we process information, images communicate in a non-linear and abstract way to the right hemisphere of the brain – the opposite of text based communication.<sup>30</sup> Social Media is an image-based, image-creating medium.

When the Biblical account of image bearing is understood against this theological and functional background, we begin to approach a framework for dealing with modern social media, which shares much in common with the social media of the Ancient Near East and the Roman Empire, where political and religious persuasive, identity-shaping, communication was a multimedia mix of spoken, written, and image based communication.<sup>31</sup>

#### **COMMUNICATING LIKE GOD (PRECIS OF APPENDIX CONTINUED)**

*“In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...” - Hebrews 1:1-2*

Even though humans are made in the image of God, we are categorically not God. The ontological gap between God and man is so great that it can only be bridged by God's initiative, not ours. Any communication between God and us requires God *accommodating* us.<sup>32</sup> God accommodates humanity by

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<sup>30</sup> T. D Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach: The Media have shaped the Messengers*, (New Jersey, P&R Publishing, 2009), Kindle Edition, Location 99, S. Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2009), Kindle Edition, Location 116, 675, “Our brains process printed words and images in different ways. The printed word is processed primarily in the left hemisphere of the brain, which specializes in logic, sequence, and categories. Images are processed primarily in the right hemisphere, which specializes in intuition and holistic perception rather than linear analysis. I apprehend an image all at once, while I read text word-by-word and line-by-line. Image culture dramatically shapes the way we think. It also determines what we think about. Images are not well-suited to articulate arguments, categories, or abstractions. They are far better suited for presenting impressions and experiences,” 1518, 1401 “Images aren't the only thing in electronic culture that fuels the right-brain. The digital age has transformed the meaning of literacy. We still rely heavily on text, but the text-based communication of the Internet and instant messaging generate a fundamentally different kind of literacy—an unusual right-brained sort of literacy.”

<sup>31</sup> H.A. Innis, *Empire and Communications*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1950), 8-9

<sup>32</sup> J. Calvin, ‘The Argument,’ *Commentary on Genesis, Volume 1*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, retrieved,

speaking to humanity in ways humans can understand – using language, culture, imagery, and actions that we can interpret, he does this by *incarnating* his message in our mediums, and the ultimate act of *incarnation* came in the person of Jesus – God’s word made flesh.<sup>33</sup> Humanity can know something of who God is in, and through, Jesus – in his life, and especially his death on the cross.<sup>34</sup>

The medium is the means by which the communicator embodies or incarnates his, her, or their, self in the communicative act.<sup>35</sup> In the incarnation of Jesus, God’s character is “*spoken, embodied and lived*” in the *logos*, made flesh, accommodated to a human audience, proclaiming a message of “grace and truth,”<sup>36</sup> as God’s image made visible.<sup>37</sup> The incarnation is a communicative act of person, word, and action,<sup>38</sup> a perfect fusion of medium and message. McLuhan, who coined the phrase “the medium is the message” also said: “*In Jesus Christ, there is no distance or separation between the medium and the message: it is the one case where we can say that the medium and the message are fully one and the same.*”<sup>39</sup>

For God to reach out to man, an ontological gap must be bridged, a similar, no less naturally insurmountable ontological gap occurs between those humans who are being transformed into the image of God’s son, by the presence of God’s Spirit, and those who are not – their dulled, veiled minds require an intervention from God which removes the veil, as God transforms those who follow Jesus into his image, by the Holy Spirit.<sup>40</sup> This ontological gap needs bridging – and the bridge, the way God speaks, is through the person of Jesus.<sup>41</sup> In order for the people of God to serve as God’s heralds and

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[http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/comment3/comm\\_vol01/htm/TOC.htm](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/comment3/comm_vol01/htm/TOC.htm) no pages, P.D. Molnar, ‘God’s Self-Communication in Christ: A Comparison of Thomas F. Torrance and Karl Rahner,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 50.3, (August 1997), 288-320, 290, 301, 294

<sup>33</sup> J. Balserek, *Divinity Compromised: A study of Divine Accommodation in the thought of John Calvin*, (Doerdrecht, Springer, 2006), 65-66, John 1

<sup>34</sup> S.J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei*, (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2001), 42

<sup>35</sup> K.J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1998), Kindle Edition, Location 6275

<sup>36</sup> John 1:1, 14, Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 6729, 8506

<sup>37</sup> Colossians 1:15

<sup>38</sup> Grenz, *The Social God*, 34-35

<sup>39</sup> McLuhan, *Light*, 103

<sup>40</sup> 2 Cor 3:6-18

<sup>41</sup> Hebrews 1:1-2

ambassadors,<sup>42</sup> we are called to preach “Jesus Christ as Lord” to the lost using appropriate mediums and methods that allow us to embody the message of the crucifixion.<sup>43</sup>

*“...we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God... For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake... We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus...”* – 2 Cor 4:2, 5, 10-11

For Paul this means suffering for the Gospel and for others, from a position of humiliating humility, echoing his understanding of the incarnation.<sup>44</sup> How we live forms our image, or ethos, and communicates who we are to others, as we hear and are conformed by the message, we become the medium, as Paul says to the Corinthians:

*“You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”* – 2 Corinthians 3:2-3

The Gospel also supplies believers with renewed minds.<sup>45</sup> This renewed mind, in Philippians 2:2, leads to humility, unity in the body, transformation of behaviour,<sup>46</sup> and communicative action.<sup>47</sup> This same renewed mind led Paul to give up his rights, and sacrificially “become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.”<sup>48</sup>

Communicating about Jesus requires not just conforming our lives to his life, but to his death, in a manner that supports our message. Those who follow

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<sup>42</sup> 2 Cor 4:5, 5:20

<sup>43</sup> 2 Cor 4:2-12

<sup>44</sup> M.J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001), 30-31, 335, Philippians 2, 1 Corinthians 9-11:1, 2 Corinthians 4-5:20, 6, 11, Galatians 1:15-16, 6:17, Calvin, *Inst.* 3.2.34

<sup>45</sup> 1 Corinthians 1-2, esp 2:6-16, D.J. Treier, *Virtue and the Voice of God: Towards Theology as Wisdom*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2006), 48

<sup>46</sup> Philippians 2:5, Romans 12:1-7, Treier, *Virtue*, 51-52, 56-58, 64-65, B. Fiore, ‘Paul, Exemplification and Imitation,’ *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, ed. J.P. Sampley, (Harrisburg, Trinity, 2003), 240

<sup>47</sup> *ibid*, 63

<sup>48</sup> 1 Cor 9, esp 9:22, 10:31-11:1

Jesus, bearing his image, are a “medium,” but also use different mediums to incarnate the message of the Gospel in timely ways, to win some. This renovation of the image we bear also reinstitutes the functional nature of bearing God’s image.<sup>49</sup> Being conformed in the image of Jesus, imitating him, from renewed minds has a communicative function,<sup>50</sup> and this is linked to Paul’s approach to Christian communication – Paul’s approach to communication is to imitate Christ in accommodating, incarnational, cruciformity.<sup>51</sup> A question then is how might Paul approach social media, in order to win some?

## COMMUNICATING AS IMAGE BEARERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Most Christian accounts of Social Media focus on the dangers of the medium, the cheapening of relationships and community, the disembodied communication it fosters, the competing values inherent in platforms like Facebook, the conforming power the Internet and these mediums exert over participants, and increasingly the dangerous results these mediums have on our minds, on how we think, process, and remember information.<sup>52</sup>

While I will argue that many of these dangers are real, and present, the sheer global scale of the audience of popular social media platforms, and the convergence of traditional forms of media into these new media platforms, means the opportunity to consider how these mediums might be adapted in order for Christians to present the Gospel, must be considered. I suggest that while there are several “myths” associated with Social Media that give it certain power, there are also a number of common categories and functions of these mediums, especially Facebook, that can be subverted, or crucified, in order for Christian communities to supplement, but never replace, real community using these tools. The key to using social media well is unlocking the myths, approaching the medium and its categories theologically, and

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<sup>49</sup> Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 349, 360

<sup>50</sup> S. Kim, ‘Imitatio Christi (1 Corinthians 11:1): How Paul Imitates Jesus Christ in Dealing with Idol Food (1 Corinthians 8-10), *BBR*, 13.2 (2003) 193-226, 225-226

<sup>51</sup> Treier, *Virtue*, 60-61, Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 56

<sup>52</sup> e.g. T. Challies, *The Next Story: Life and Faith After the Digital Explosion*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2011), Kindle Edition, J. Rice, *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected Are Redefining Community*, (Colorado Springs, David C Cook, 2009), Kindle Edition, Dyer, *From the Garden to the City*, Hipps, *Flickering Pixels*.

using these platforms to authentically preach Christ in community, with humility.

The essence of social media is not new, if anything the “mass media” was new media, dominating for what must now be considered a relatively small period of time between the rise of the newspaper and the invention of the Internet.<sup>53</sup> Prior to the advent of the newspaper, especially the newspaper owned by a global media baron or corporation, information was disseminated through social networks, groups of people gathered around a shared interest, or location, in the public square, in coffee houses, in churches, or in extended family networks and household.<sup>54</sup> Between the time of the New Testament and the printing press, urgent information was distributed by handwritten letter, sometimes letters were designed to be circular, the telegraphy system profoundly changed the nature of person-to-person communication, and, coupled with the printing press, allowed the development of a global mass media. The model of information distribution prior to the mass media’s formation was similar to modern day social media, only without the speed and amplification brought about by the Internet.<sup>55</sup>

The communication revolution brought about by the Internet, especially as bandwidth has increased and the Internet has become truly multi-media, is largely the result of technological developments being used for their natural communication ends. There are two schools of thought when it comes to the impact and use of communication technology and new mediums,

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<sup>53</sup> T. Standage, *Writing on the Wall: Social Media - The First 2,000 Years*, (New York, Bloomsburg, 2013), Kindle Edition, Location 3603, “The Internet is proving to be one of the most powerful amplifiers of speech ever invented. It offers a global megaphone for voices that might otherwise be heard only feebly, if at all. It invites and facilitates multiple points of view and dialogue in ways unimplementable by the traditional, one-way, mass media,” 4043, “After a one-hundred-and-fifty-year hiatus during which the person-to-person aspect of media was overshadowed by centralized mass media operating on a broadcast model, the pendulum has swung back.”

<sup>54</sup> Standage, *Writing on the Wall*, 2972, Newspaper readers were no longer participants in the public sphere: “Readers were no longer seen as participants in a conversation taking place within the newspaper’s pages; instead they had become purely consumers of information and, potentially, of the products and services offered by advertisers. This shift was lamented by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, published in 1962. To Habermas, the advent of coffee houses, salons, literary journals, and a free press in eighteenth-century Europe had constituted the emergence of a public sphere, providing spaces in which citizens could discuss matters freely in public, as social equals.”

<sup>55</sup> Standage, *Writing on the Wall*, 4043, “Social forms of media based on sharing, copying, and personal recommendation, which prevailed for centuries, have been dramatically reborn, supercharged by the Internet.”

Determinism and Instrumentalism.<sup>56</sup> Determinists believe this change is inevitable, that the changes wrought by new technologies are unavoidable, and people are destined to become part of “the machine,” while instrumentalists believe mediums are simply instruments that are employed by people for their own ends.<sup>57</sup> The rise of cyber-bullying cases that employ social media platforms are further evidence that these tools are capable of incredible abuse, while the use of social media in freeing oppressed peoples, or crowd-sourcing funds and support for charitable causes suggests social media can be a tool for good. The situation is somewhat more complex than these reductionist positions would allow. With Dyer, I would say that technology is neither inert, or an autonomous agent of change, but users interact with technology in complex ways, that imbue mediums with meaning, especially as many people use them in the same way,<sup>58</sup> in something like Strogatz’s theory of Spontaneous Order, where individuals are brought together, instinctively conforming into a pattern of behaviour.<sup>59</sup>

Mediums, as arrangers of culture, have the capacity to transform the message and the messenger, in unwanted ways, and can also function, themselves, as idols.<sup>60</sup> Media ecologist Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase “*the medium is the message,*” he saw new mediums as extensions of man that would “*affect the whole psychic and social complex,*” conforming societies as “*whole populations imitate and play with them.*”<sup>61</sup> He was concerned that use of media without due

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<sup>56</sup> Dyer, Garden, 1426-1444, “Instrumentalism gets its name from the belief that technology is merely the instrument of the person using it. The tool itself is neutral in that it is interchangeable with any other tool with no effect... technological determinism, says that technology is an unstoppable power that has become the driving force in society.”

<sup>57</sup> Dyer, Garden, 1451

<sup>58</sup> Dyer, Garden, 1467

<sup>59</sup> J. Rice, *The Church of Facebook*, 85, “Steven Strogatz, an expert in applied mathematics, uses to illustrate his theory of spontaneous order. In spontaneous order, Strogatz explained to an elite audience of entrepreneurs in 2004, live organisms and even inanimate objects fall into sync with one another in ways that seem unnatural and inexplicable... Steven Strogatz summarized his case for the prevalence of synchronicity at every level of nature, with examples from the subatomic to the farthest reaches of the universe. He pointed out more obvious examples like fish that move in schools and birds that travel in flocks. He tied in our human experience, as well. “We [humans] actually take pleasure in synchronicity,” said Strogatz. “We sing together. We dance together.” In fact, while he conceded the law of entropy that proves objects both animate and inanimate typically move toward disorder, he also claimed that the tendency toward the harmonization of objects might be an even more certain reality. “Sync,” Strogatz says, “might be the most pervasive force in nature.”

<sup>60</sup> M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1994) First edition 1964, 21

<sup>61</sup> *ibid*, 4, M. McLuhan ‘Roles, Masks, and Performances,’ *NLH*, 2.3, (Spring, 1971), 517-531, retrieved <http://www.mcluhanonmaui.com/2011/06/roles-masks-and-performances-by.html>, no pages

care would produce idolatry.<sup>62</sup> His axiomatic proclamation was not that the medium overcomes the message, but rather, that one ignores the effect of the medium at their peril because the medium engraves its image on the soul of the consumer.<sup>63</sup> For McLuhan, and his intellectual followers, *there are no neutral mediums*,<sup>64</sup> all mediums bring change in their sphere of influence, to their users, regardless of how they are used,<sup>65</sup> “*Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot.*”<sup>66</sup> Mediums bring meaning to communication, meaning that is tied to functionality.<sup>67</sup>

This position, where the tool shapes the worker, while the worker uses the tool to transform his or her world,<sup>68</sup> has recently been confirmed by insights from neuroscience – the understanding that we are uniquely able to incorporate tools into our person,<sup>69</sup> and that our brains are shaped and rewired by what we consume, and the mediums that deliver information to us.<sup>70</sup> Carr suggests our memory is radically altered by use of the Internet, and

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<sup>62</sup> McLuhan *Understanding*, 46

<sup>63</sup> *ibid*, 7

<sup>64</sup> Dyer, *Garden*, 196

<sup>65</sup> N. Carr, *The Shallows: How the Internet is changing the way we think, read, and remember*, (New York, Norton, 2010), Kindle Edition, 94

<sup>66</sup> Cited in Dyer, *Garden*, 1413

<sup>67</sup> Dyer, *Garden*, 2020

<sup>68</sup> Dyer, *Garden*, 548

<sup>69</sup> Carr, *The Shallows*, 3381, “WHEN A CARPENTER picks up a hammer, the hammer becomes, so far as his brain is concerned, part of his hand. When a soldier raises a pair of binoculars to his face, his brain sees through a new set of eyes, adapting instantaneously to a very different field of view... Our brains can imagine the mechanics and the benefits of using a new device before that device even exists... The tight bonds we form with our tools go both ways. Even as our technologies become extensions of ourselves, we become extensions of our technologies.”

<sup>70</sup> Carr, *The Shallows*, 126-204, 344-366, 1952, 2286, “The mental functions that are losing the “survival of the fittest” brain cell battle are those that support calm, linear thought – the ones we use in traversing a lengthy narrative or an involved argument, the ones we draw on when we reflect on our experiences or contemplate an outward or inward phenomenon. The winners are those functions that help us speedily locate, categorize, and assess disparate bits of information in a variety of forms.”... The brain of a person raised in the age of print, a person who learned from books and who read books in time of leisure or study, has a brain that is markedly different from a person who has learned primarily from images or who has watched videos in times of leisure or study... technology changes our biology, reshaping our brains, we become the product of our technologies in some deep and profound ways.” Challies, *The Next Story*, 660, 682, 672, “the digital explosion has even changed the way the adult brain functions. It has placed many of us into what has been described as a state of continuous partial attention, a state in which we devote partial attention to many tasks simultaneously, most of them having to do with communication.” Also, Dyer, *Garden*, 586-627, “From radio to television to the Internet, scientists and cultural critics have long contended that our communication and information technologies influence the way we think in the same way that shoes affect the way we run.”

the easy access to information it supplies.<sup>71</sup> This is, of course, consistent with Psalm 115.<sup>72</sup>

Dyer (2011), Challies (2011), and Hipps (2009), each link the use of technology with the creation mandate, and the command for Adam to work and take care of the garden (Genesis 2:15). They, and others, emphasise the creative aspect of the *imago dei* as a guideline for approaching tools, but not specifically the communicative aspect, a more balanced approach to communication mediums factors the communicative function of our image bearing will produce a slightly more balanced approach.<sup>73</sup>

Social media is not simply a neutral tool to be employed for either sinful or sanctifying purposes. It brings with it its own methods, myths, and meanings, which reshape our brains, and which must be considered in order for the message of the cross to be presented consistently by those participants who bear the image of Jesus. Much as the Roman imperial propaganda machine had terminology and methodologies that could be adapted, rather than adopted, for the proclamation of king Jesus, social media's inherent values must be subverted for an appropriate "incarnational" union of medium and message.

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<sup>71</sup> Carr, *The Shallows*, 2882, 2895, "As the machines we use to store data have become more voluminous, flexible, and responsive, we've grown accustomed to the blurring of artificial and biological memory." 3145, "The Web provides a convenient and compelling supplement to personal memory, but when we start using the Web as a substitute for personal memory, bypassing the inner processes of consolidation, we risk emptying our minds of their riches."

<sup>72</sup> Challies, *Next Story*, 685, "We are molded and formed into the image of whatever shapes us. Here wisdom warns us that not all technologies are created equal in this regard."

<sup>73</sup> Dyer, *Garden*, 713-752, "Whatever he chose to do, he would be taking what God had made and remaking it into a creation of his own. And in doing so, Adam would be reflecting the creativity of his Creator (who, at this point in the story, had done little but create)." At 762-837, Dyer makes "language" a subset of the things we create.

Challies, *Next Story*, 108, "we are created and called to fulfill God's mandate: that we go into all the world, faithfully stewarding the world God has created and the message he has given us. Thankfully, God has already provided a story for our lives. It is a story of subduing nature and caring for his creation... From the beginning, technology has played a vital role in this story, of course. God has gifted human beings with remarkable ability to dream, create, and invent technologies that serve us as we serve him, technologies that enable us to better serve him." Also 222-276, "Whenever we express our God-given creativity by coming up with something that will help us be more fruitful, that will multiply and promote human flourishing in a way that honors God, we act out of the *imago Dei*, the "image of God" in which we were created... The things we create can — and will — try to become idols in our hearts. Though they enable us to survive and thrive in a fallen world, the very aid they provide can deceive us with a false sense of comfort and security, hiding our need for God and his grace." S. Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes your Faith*, Kindle Edition, 821



Facebook, for example, is built around an individual's *profile*, asking them to update their *status*, giving the opportunity to share content in a variety of mediums to present their preferred image of themselves to their network of connections. It feeds users information, and presents information to others, on the basis of an algorithm that measures popularity and affinity with others, rewarding people for securing status-building "likes" and interactions. Like the building of a presence in Babel, building a presence on Facebook is predicated on an individual's desire to make a name for themselves, often at the expense of others.

Social media taps into, and extends, popular utopian myths about the place of media technology in transforming human experience by transcending time, space, and power.<sup>74</sup> Such myths carried us through the age of the telegraph, the age of electricity, the age of the telephone, radio, and television, and into the age of computing.<sup>75</sup> Myths aren't falsehoods, they are the stories that "animate individuals and societies by providing paths to transcendence that lift people out of the banality of everyday life."<sup>76</sup> These stories are often "religious" in nature,<sup>77</sup> with technology and the universe being simultaneous divinized and computerized, technologist Kevin Kelly (2002) said "God is the Machine" and the "the universe is not merely like a computer, it is a computer," and media ecologist Neil Postman (1996) suggests when it comes to producing technology and the narrative that embrace it, "*whatever else we call ourselves, we are the god-making species.*"<sup>78</sup> The myths that are particularly relevant for Social Media regard its "*guarantees of instantaneous worldwide communication, of a genuine global village... a world in which people will communicate across borders without the filters and censors set up by watchful*

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<sup>74</sup> V. Mosco, *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace*, (Boston, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2004), Kindle Edition, Location 68

<sup>75</sup> Mosco, *Digital Sublime*, 54

<sup>76</sup> Mosco, *Digital Sublime*, 73, 120, Mosco believes real change happens through technology once this mythic status fades.

<sup>77</sup> Mosco, *Digital Sublime*, 210

<sup>78</sup> Mosco, *Digital Sublime*, 223, Postman also says "*our genius lies in our capacity to make meaning through the creation of narratives that give point to our labors, exalt our history, elucidate the present, and give direction to our future,*" also 702, "*Just as the universe that Newton described came to be viewed as a great clock, subject to the mechanics of a set of interchangeable machine parts, today's universe is increasingly seen as the computer writ large. One press account puts it this way: "In fact, the universe itself can be thought of as a giant computer, orchestrating the movements of the stars, the planets, even the subatomic particles. The goal then is to learn to compute the way nature does."*

*governments and profit-conscious businesses.*"<sup>79</sup> Marketers and venture capitalists are increasingly relying on myths to sell technological products.<sup>80</sup> Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other social media platforms that have not yet developed the ability to turn a profit, are particularly reliant on perpetuating such myths. As Challies points out that "*what becomes mythic is only one step removed from becoming idolatrous.*"<sup>81</sup> In many cases, a Christian use of communication mediums will necessarily involve the rejection of the accompanying myths, and replacement of these myths with Christian theological truths.

Facebook's own myths include its "*mission to make the world more open and connected,*"<sup>82</sup> because "*the internet not only connects us to our friends, families and communities, but it is also the foundation of the global knowledge economy.*"<sup>83</sup> The data used to support the myth is the 1.1 billion people connecting to and through the platform each month,<sup>84</sup> the vision is to see five billion people connecting to Facebook using smartphones.<sup>85</sup> Each of these users has an average of 120 social connections from around the globe.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Mosco, *Digital Sublime*, 354, also 437

<sup>80</sup> Mosco, *Digital Sublime*, 463

<sup>81</sup> Challies, *Next Story*, 339

<sup>82</sup> Facebook.com, 'Is Connectivity a Human Right: Full Version,' retrieved online, [https://fbcdn-dragon-a.akamaihd.net/hphotos-ak-ash3/851575\\_228794233937224\\_51579300\\_n.pdf](https://fbcdn-dragon-a.akamaihd.net/hphotos-ak-ash3/851575_228794233937224_51579300_n.pdf), 1

<sup>83</sup> Facebook.com, 'Is Connectivity a Human Right,' 2

<sup>84</sup> Facebook.com, 'Mark Zuckerberg: Is Connectivity a Human Right?' 20 August 2013, no pages, retrieved online, <https://newsroom.fb.com/News/693/Mark-Zuckerberg-Is-Connectivity-a-Human-Right>

<sup>85</sup> Facebook.com, 'Is Connectivity a Human Right,' 2

<sup>86</sup> T. Standage, *Writing on the Wall*, 186-199



*Image Description: Facebook connections visualised. Lines represent friendships. Darker lines represent more friendships. Credit: Facebook.com, Is Connectivity a Human Right, <https://www.facebook.com/isconnectivityahumanright>*

In order for Christians to use these mediums in a manner that does not undermine the Gospel message, we must bust some of these mythic structures.

While there are many examples of myths associated with emerging platforms,<sup>87</sup> I will use Facebook as a case study – busting the coterminous myths of individuality and control, and of presence and community.

## **THE MYTH OF INDIVIDUALITY AND CONTROL**

One of the appealing narratives about social media, especially Facebook, is that it allows you to present the face you desire to present to the world. It purports to put you in control of your identity, yet this is a myth.

On any platform that is designed to serve a user data in order to maximise eye-ball time, to increase revenue through advertising, the user's experience

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<sup>87</sup> For a discussion of some of the myths surrounding Twitter, and social media in general, in the political sphere see M. Gladwell, 'Why the revolution will not be tweeted,' *New Yorker*, October 4 2010, retrieved online [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa\\_fact\\_gladwell](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell)

of the platform is controlled by scripts and mathematical algorithms.<sup>88</sup> These algorithms use data that online entities mine about our online habits, or information that we willingly supply. These platforms do not celebrate our individuality for our sake – instead, they objectify our likes and connections, using the data we supply to commodify us, and our stories.<sup>89</sup> On social media, the user is not the customer, but the product.<sup>90</sup>

The theological anthropology outlined above goes some way towards addressing the desire to build a desirable profile, or image, of ourselves online. The image one projects online will be the product of the God, or gods, ruling their hearts. For Christians, who are in the process of being conformed into the image of Jesus, this will involve sacrificial humility and authenticity, fuelled by a created desire to communicate Jesus to others – not through algorithms, as numbers – but as people, albeit people whose minds are veiled.

Communicating effectively on platforms ruled by algorithms requires understanding the rules of the game, or the elements of an algorithm. Just as Luther capitalised on the printing press by producing a wide range of populist material, in the vernacular,<sup>91</sup> Christians must understand the medium, and engage in apt ways, that reinforce the message of the Gospel. Carr suggests online content producers must grapple with changes in consumption and the way people's minds process information in how they present their content: "media companies have to adapt to the audience's new expectations. Many producers are chopping up their products to fit the shorter attention spans of online consumers."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> N. Carr, *The Shallows*, 3547

<sup>89</sup> Challies, *Next Story*, 3301

<sup>90</sup> Challies, *Next Story*, 3263, "Consider all of the data people add to their Facebook profiles, and you will quickly see why Facebook is such a valuable company—it has massive amounts of the most personal information on each one of us. It knows our hobbies and religions, our friend and family connections, our photographs and videos, and details of our activities as we've updated our statuses. It knows our high schools and colleges, our birth dates and anniversaries. Facebook has value simply in its expansive user base, but more so, in the information it contains. This information is a gold mine to advertisers, to those who want to present their products to us."

<sup>91</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>92</sup> N. Carr, *The Shallows*, 1545, "Snippets of TV shows and movies are distributed through YouTube, Hulu, and other video services. Excerpts of radio programs are offered as podcasts or streams. Individual magazine and newspaper articles circulate in isolation. Pages of books are displayed through Amazon.com and Google Book Search. Music albums are split apart, their songs sold through iTunes or streamed through Spotify. Even the songs themselves are

The key to taking control of the algorithms underpinning a medium, rather than ceding control, is to be aware of them, and to wield that knowledge to frame your desired narrative. On Facebook, the algorithm that determines what an individual sees, involves many factors, but includes: how often interactions occur between parties, the popularity of the post (measured by interactions), the type of post (more popular types are showed more frequently), and whether other people are hiding the post from their newsfeed.<sup>93</sup>

The reality that communication mediums conform us to their patterns of thought and values, by mediating the way we process information, presents a further challenge to our controlled use of a medium. The rewiring of our neural pathways can be controlled by awareness of the danger, and deliberate disciplined and intentional use of mediums. Some suggested skills for approaching social media in this way include setting boundaries and scheduling use, reflective use – both guarding the purity of one’s heart and mind (Phil 4:8), and prayerfully and intentionally using Facebook to love others, responding to articulated needs with real world actions, and praying regularly for those you interact with online (prayer has a significant ability to rewire the brain).<sup>94</sup> An important way to restore balance to the brain is an intentional commitment to other forms of information intake,<sup>95</sup> and output, this should include regular, reflective reading and meditation on Scripture, and a commitment to composing one’s thoughts outside of the short forms these platforms cultivate.<sup>96</sup>

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broken into pieces, with their riffs and hooks packaged as ringtones for cell phones or embedded in video games.”

<sup>93</sup> Facebook.com, ‘News Feed FYI: A Window Into News Feed,’ 7 August, retrieved online, no pages, <https://www.facebook.com/facebookforbusiness/news/News-Feed-FYI-A-Window-Into-News-Feed>

<sup>94</sup> See K.A. Bingaman, ‘The Promise of Neuroplasticity for Pastoral Care and Counseling,’ *Pastoral Psychology*, 62, (2013), 549-560, 557, who suggests that disciplined reflection and prayer has the potential to rewire the brain: “the longer one can engage in daily prayer or meditation, the more neurological changes will occur in the brain even though a daily meditational practice of even 10 minutes will also foster neuroplasticity. Neurologically, what is most fundamental is that one’s approach to prayer and meditation, however long and in whatever form, become a daily practice. Newberg’s studies reveal that “5 minutes of prayer once a week may have little effect, but 40 minutes of daily practice, over a period of years, will bring permanent changes to the brain”

<sup>95</sup> Higgs, *Flickering Pixels*, 1473

<sup>96</sup> T.D Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Preach*, 903, 978, Gordon suggests writing articles, letters, journaling and finding other ways to document one’s thoughts creates and cultivates a discipline that counters the effects of social media.

*“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but **be transformed by the renewing of your mind**. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”* Romans 12:2

While Facebook’s algorithm functions as something of a popularity contest, Christians educated in this aspect of the technology can work together to heavily weight posts and content, by interacting with them, to ensure they appear for more people. By interacting with one another online, in authentic conversations that demonstrate humility, and consistently promote the Gospel, Christians operating in community can use social media to demonstrate conformity to the image of Jesus.

Rightly understood, Christian community also subverts the individualism central to the mythic power of social media. Christians are not simply individuals who bear the image of God, but members of one body, the church, representing God as a plurality, in unity.<sup>97</sup> The church itself is both a medium, and part of the message of the Gospel. The role the church community plays is to authentically demonstrate the need for Jesus through brokenness, and the transformation Jesus brings by his Spirit.<sup>98</sup>

## **THE MYTH OF PRESENCE AND COMMUNITY**

One of the leading myths about the online revolution is that connections mediated by poles and wires, or even wirelessly, transcends physical distance, creating a new kind of proximity. Computer screens and keyboards act as a barrier to authentic relationships, and the ability that individuals have to hide behind the anonymity of a computer and use these tools, depersonalises, or digitises, the other.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Hips, *Flickering Pixels*, 1847

<sup>98</sup> Hips, *Flickering Pixels*, 1676-1766

<sup>99</sup> Challies, *Next Story*, 3312, “Time may well show that one of the digital world’s greatest effects on human beings has been to depersonalize us, to tear away our humanity in favor of 1’s and 0’s—to make us little more than their data. And increasingly we relate to one another as if we are not real people, not people with thoughts and feelings and emotions but people who are barely people at all. We relate to one another as if we are all computers, as if we are merely digital.”

The networks created in the digital realm are interesting in that they are no longer formed geographically, but around shared individual interests.<sup>100</sup> Even though connections are established around a common purpose, the nature of the medium prohibits the intimacy found in multi-faceted human connections.<sup>101</sup>

Challies suggests that pulling out of the real world, and plugging in virtually results in a “disincarnated” virtual self, and an associated non-presence in the real world,<sup>102</sup> trading pixels and binary code for reality, free from real responsibility,<sup>103</sup> *“We take our sense of self, our sense of presence, and transport it into the ethereal world of bits and bytes.”*<sup>104</sup>

This myth is undermined by the anaemic forms of communication produced by a lack of physical presence. Disembodied communication lacks the non-verbal cues that guide interpretation and make communication more effective.<sup>105</sup>

Breaking down this myth helps us to understand where online relationships fit within the communication schema, like the apostle John, we should realise that written communication allows us to extend our communication reach, and relationships, beyond physical presence, but that physical presence is required for “complete joy.”<sup>106</sup>

*“I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.”* – 2 John 1:12

One of the challenges facing those who participate in online communities is the opportunity this disembodied presence presents to reinvent one’s self, it

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<sup>100</sup> Challies, *Next Story*, 1779

<sup>101</sup> Hipps, *Flickering Pixels*, 1834

<sup>102</sup> Challies, *Next Story*, 1688

<sup>103</sup> Challies, *Next Story*, 1704

<sup>104</sup> Challies, *Next Story*, 1701

<sup>105</sup> Challies, *Next Story*, 1617, *“The truth is that text rarely, if ever, can equal the richness of a face-to-face conversation. It’s static, disembodied. It does not convey hand gestures, verbal tone, inflection, or facial expressions, things we are taught from birth to encode and decode.”*

<sup>106</sup> Challies, *Next Story*, 1593

have seen above that the use of social media to shape one's image is something of an illusion, but again, authenticity is vital to using online mediums to supplement real world community.<sup>107</sup> A pitfall of intentional authenticity is that it requires us to think about ourselves much more than we need to offline, there is a fine line between authentic self-reflection and narcissistic over-sharing.<sup>108</sup> One final danger in building a community of people on a platform designed to glorify one's self-image is that *"We are continually tempted to construct a Tower of Babel unto ourselves rather than work together on being the people of God, conformed into the image of his Son."*<sup>109</sup> Christians must be careful of these dangers when using such tools, Dyer suggests this care should lead us to carefully evaluate each tool, through experimentation, to set limits once we understand the values and myths inherent in the systems, to commit to using technology together, in community, and to cultivate a discerning use of tools to achieve our created purpose, bearing the image of God in his world by creatively exercising dominion over it.<sup>110</sup> Challies suggests the conforming power of these platforms means we need to anticipate myths and changes associated with mediums before we are overwhelmed.<sup>111</sup>

## **SHAPE OR BE SHAPED: SOME PRINCIPLES FOR ENGAGEMENT**

Christians have reason to use all means possible to reach some. Social media, by weight of numbers, is a medium worth exploring, provided those who use it as a tool are aware of the dangers and challenges presented. Christians bear the image of the communicative God, and are being conformed into the image of his son – whose life is the paradigm for all communication. There is every reason to believe that as *"God powerfully used the medium of the written word, the medium of the printing press, and the medium of the radio, he will use these new electronic media."*<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Challies, *Next Story*, 1688, "...even though these experiences promise something called community, this is a very different kind of community from the one we experience in the home, in the neighborhood, in the local church. We've seen that it is possible to be one person offline and a very different person online."

<sup>108</sup> Dyer, *Garden*, 2939, 2956

<sup>109</sup> Dyer, *Garden*, 2980

<sup>110</sup> Dyer, *Garden*, 3058

<sup>111</sup> Challies, *Next Story*, 561

<sup>112</sup> Challies, *Next Story*, 1342



The key values governing our use of any medium as those who seek to bear the image of Jesus, are *incarnational cruciformity* – which manifests itself in humility, authenticity, and a willingness to speak and live out the message of the cross in any medium,<sup>113</sup> and *embodied intentionality* – a deliberate rejection of powerful myths that come with any medium, and a commitment to life and relationships outside of these mediums,<sup>114</sup> such that these tools do not become idols themselves, or shape idols for us, and so that the renewing of our minds comes not from the tools we use, but from the one who would use us as his instruments.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Rice, *Church of Facebook*, 2236, 2306, 2314

<sup>114</sup> Rice, *Church of Facebook*, 2299

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