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THE SOUL IN CYBERSPACE: A CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY OF TECHNOLOGY

We become what we behold—Marshall McLuhan

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE POSTMODERN CYBERSPACE WORLD

- A. The professor, the student, and his laptop: “My laptop has the Bible verses. I don’t need to memorize them.”
- B. Evaporating into the cloud: seminaries
- C. *Postmodern people*: media saturated, information glutted, and confused about the nature and meaning of truth
- D. How does *cyberspace* (computer mediated communication) affect the soul?
- E. Cyberspace: a vortex of transformation. Where are the signposts, maps, or guides?
 - 1. Jesus: the soul is of highest value, but it may be lost
 - 2. How do technologies affect our persons, our spirituality, our families, our churches, communities?
 - 3. How should we use them in personal relations, church communication, witness to the broader world?

II. TECHNOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN DISCERNMENT

- A. Avoiding worldliness; aiming at godliness
 - 1. **1 John 2:15-17**; Tribe of Issacar (**1 Chron. 12:32**)
 - 2. Francis Schaeffer, *God Who is There*: Beware of new forms of worldliness
 - 3. Avoid being “tools of our tools” (Henry David Thoreau)
- B. Avoiding irrelevance; aiming for holy engagement (“Against the world, for the world”.) Paul: speak wisely to outsiders (**Col. 4:2-3**)
- C. The nature of communicative technologies: “The medium is the message” (McLuhan)
 - 1. The medium shapes the nature of and reception of the message
 - a. More than content must be considered; otherwise, we are “sleepwalking” (McLuhan)
 - b. Not inherently good or evil or neutral
 - c. Media create ecologies or systems of human interaction that become part of the background. Bring them to the foreground for analysis, exegesis
 - 2. Examples: “Extensions of man” (McLuhan): attenuation and amplification
 - a. Radio/telephone: disembodies voice; increase in words as mere noise, rapidly and (often) vapidly of speech. Extends the voice across the planet.
 - b. Television: from the word to the image; lack of linearity, patience. But extends the image at the expense of physical presence
- D. Sensibilities and the *stewardship of the senses*

1. Sensibilities: orientation of our perceptual and critical faculties (Sven Birkerts, *Gutenberg Elegies*)
 - a. Image-oriented (vidiot) or textually-oriented (typographic)?
 - b. Entertainment or instruction?
2. Stewardship of the sensibilities
 - a. Submit to God; transformation of our minds for Christ (**Romans 12:1-2; Hebrews 5:14**)
 - b. Train ourselves to apprehend, conserve, and apply truth with virtue (Galatians 5:13-26)
 - c. The Church is the “pillar and foundation of truth” (1 Tim 3:15)

III. WHAT IS CYBERSPACE? (COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION)

A. Historical development

1. Computers: mainframes to PCs: miniaturization
2. Cybernetics: study of self-regulating systems
3. Cyberspace: William Gibson, author: video games, etc.
4. Origins of the Internet—ARPANET: military and science applications
5. With web, open to all. 1995 “year of the Internet”—*Newsweek*

B. The wired world

1. Connectivity: the “global village”—so called (McLuhan)
2. Computer systems—Millennium bug problem (Remember the hype?)
3. Speed of information transfer: potential *pathologies of velocity*
McLuhan: “Everyone tends to be a no one at the speed of light”
4. Protean, mercurial nature: can’t step into same data stream twice

C. Wired culture

1. Generation X, Y and electric media
2. Elements of cyberspace: all affect our sensibilities
 - a. Email
 - b. Blogs (weblogs)
 - c. Social media
 - d. Apps for everything
 - e. Video games as socializing forces, possibly more than TV eventually
Mortal Kombat; Doom, “first-person shooter games”—hideously violent: dismemberment, torture See Dave Grossman, Gloria DeGaetano, *Stop Teaching Our Children to Kill* (Crown, 1999)

D. Four typical approaches to cyberspace

1. Digitopian/cheerleader, technophilia—Bill Gates, some Christians
2. “Luddite,” technophobic—destroy the machines
3. Oblivion, utter ignorance, “sleep walking” (McLuhan)
4. Critical engagement—know the world; exegete the medium; bring the Word to the world with wisdom

E. Beware of the “god of technology” (Neil Postman, *The End of Education*)

- F. The danger of improved means to unimproved ends (Thoreau)

IV. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN POSTMODERNISM AND CYBERSPACE

- A. Technologies reinforce certain philosophical ideas—bad ones, in this case
Tend to undermine truth, morality, spiritual integrity, authenticity—if not interpreted correctly and monitored
- B. Surface over depth: Trivializing nature, nihilistic playfulness (Jean Baudrillard)
 - 1. “Meaning of life” Web search in *Virtual City*: random.
 - 2. Difficulty in assessing and evaluating information in cyberspace
The distinction between data, information, knowledge, and wisdom
- C. Image over reality/truth—already ingrained through television (See Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*)
 - 1. Graphical formats capture attention—not textual involvement.
 - 2. Draw attention without educating or edifying
 - 3. “Hyperrealities” (Jean Baudrillard); cartoons, fabricated scenes, characters, Laura Croft video game character
 - 4. Danger of losing truth, post-truth
 - 5. Video clips in sermons
- D. Persona over persons—artificial over authentic. (On the persona verses the person see Paul Tournier, *The Meaning of Persons*)
 - 1. Forum for gender surfing/morphing; “social counterfeiting” (Stephen Carter, *Civility*, 197)
 - 2. Virtual persons: “Virtual Valerie,” “Virtual girlfriend”
 - 3. Incivility in cyberspace (Stephen Carter, *Integrity*, 189)

V. KEEPING A CHRISTIAN MIND AND MINISTRY IN CYBERCULTURE

- A. The primacy of the personal
 - 1. Resist disembodiment and impersonality; embrace embodiment and personal presence
 - a. **2 John 12; 3 John 13**—joy of face-to-face interaction
 - b. **Romans 1:10-11**—mutual encouragement and giving spiritual gifts
 - c. Laying on of hands, the right hand of fellowship, holy kiss, weep with those who weep, laugh with those who laugh
 - d. Inexchangeable, irreducible, untranslatable, incommensurable
 - 2. No virtual church, cyber-congregation—communion, baptism, infant dedication, singing, laying on of hands, etc.
- B. The primacy of the truth (over image)—**Ephesians 4:15**
 - 1. Truth comes through personality: incarnational
 - 2. God’s truth for the soul (see Doug Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, chapter 3)
 - a. Revealed, not constructed
 - b. Objective, not subjective
 - c. Absolute, not relative

- d. Universal, not fragmented
 - e. Antithetical, not synthetic
 - f. Principled, not pragmatic
 - g. Unified, not fragmented
 - h. Eternal, not trendy: 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, etc.
3. Use media best suited for truth-telling, truth-bearing. Use the “truth filter”
- C. The primacy of integrity over artificiality, inauthenticity
- 1. Develop a Christlike self over time (1 John 2:5-6)—walk as Jesus did
 - 2. Resist temptation to play with identities in cyberspace or elsewhere
- D. *Summary: Embodied, discerning discipleship*
- 1. Combine personality, truth, integrity face-to-face; soul-to-soul
 - 2. Don’t let the digital eclipse the personal. Use the digital to enhance the Personal (follow-up emails after personal conversations or before them)
 - 3. Digital detox: fasting

VI. CONCLUSION: DENIAL AND AFFIRMATION

- A. Resist worldliness—don’t love sinful systems, structures
- 1. Dehumanization: amputates personal dimension
 - 2. Demoralization: diminishes our dignity and potential for God
Danger: being info-rich; wisdom poor
 - 3. Dematerialization: the lightness of cyber being
- B. Pursue godliness: heart, soul, strength, and mind (Matthew 22:34-40)
- 1. Be intentional, prayerful—“Clothe yourselves with Jesus Christ; don’t make provision for your sinful side” (Romans 13:14)
 - 2. Read and reflect before jumping into the data stream
 - 3. Be creative and cautious in use of cyberspace (Matthew 10:16)
- C. Technology: make it a servant; don’t submit to it as master (1 John 5:20)

Recommended Reading

- WRITTEN
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- 1. James Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains* (WW Norton, 2011).
 - 2. Andy Crouch, *The Tech Wise Family* (Baker, 2017).
 - 3. Douglas Groothuis, *The Soul in Cyberspace* (Wipf and Stock reprint, 1999). Available at: www.wipfandstock.com.
 - 4. Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (InterVarsity Press, 2000).
 - 5. Douglas Groothuis web page: www.DouglasGroothuis.com
 - 6. John L. Locke, *Why We Don’t Talk to Each Other Anymore: The De-Voicing of Society* (Simon and Schuster, 1998).
 - 7. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (McGraw Hill, 1964).
 - 8. Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (Knopf, 1992).
 - 9. Tony Reinke, *Twelve Ways Your Phone is Changing You* (Crossway, 2017)
 - 10. Tony Reinke, *Competing Spectacles: Treasuring Christ in the Media Age* (Crossway, 2019).
 - 11. Quentin Schultz, *Habits of the High Tech Heart* (Eerdmans, 2002).
 - 12. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (Basic Books, 2017)