

Love's Personal Touch

12 Having many things to write to you, I did not wish *to do so* with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, that our joy may be full. 13 The children of your elect sister greet you. Amen. (2 Jn. 1:12-13)

There is a movement out there known as transhumanism. Transhumanism is the idea that human beings will one day evolve beyond our bodies, into some other form. Different transhumanists have different ways of seeing that happen. Some believe we will replace our aging body parts with computer replacements. Some believe we will be able to merge our bodies with implants, and merge our mind with biotech, connect our minds to the Internet through an implant.

The most extreme transhumanists believe that with the advanced technology, the mind itself could ultimately be copied to a computer, uploaded, and that a mind could be duplicated or transferred to a computer. One of the leading advocates is Ray Kurzweil, who is a director at Google. He is sure that we will be able to upload our minds to a computer by the year 2045.

A lot of people have objected to these ideas, citing plenty of ethical and legal problems that would arise, if it were to take place. But others have simply made this objection: when is a human no longer a human? If you were just a brain, kept alive by artificial means, and able to think and artificially sense the world through machine sensors, would you still be human?

When does technology help us to be human, and when does it replace what it means to be human? That's not just a question for scientists, ethicists and science fiction writers. It's a question for Christians. And in some ways, it's a question that this Covid-19 epidemic is raising.

As a result of the lockdown, churches around the world have not been able to meet. Public gatherings have been forbidden, and the church has been left to turn to technological tools as a way of continuing to minister during this time.

We can be very thankful for these tools. If it weren't for our computers, for the Internet, we wouldn't even be able to do what we have done: send each other emails and WhatApps, record messages and sermons and send them, listen to music that we send to each other, read articles and books that we can send. We're very thankful for these tools. I can't imagine how much lonelier it would be like had this happened twenty or thirty years ago.

But at the same time, some Christians have turned to these technologies during the lockdown in ways that are quite disturbing. Like the transhumanists who are not concerned with the question of how did God design a human being, many Christians are not asking the question, how did God design the church, and its worship, and its fellowship? They are not asking how technology can help us to do what God commanded. They are asking how what God commanded must fit into their new technologies.

Let me give you some examples. A church in Miami launched a virtual reality church, where, from the comfort of your lounge, you can put on the VR headset and experience the sights and sounds of a church service as if you are there.

Now, plenty of churches advertise that their services are live, and you can tune in and watch the service live, and supposedly participate. Forget the fact that you are alone in a room, staring at a machine, but it is live, interactive, and it's even called an online gathering.

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If you go to YouTube you can find the videos of a few virtual baptism ceremonies. One church

exists entirely as a 3D animation, and you can go to this church with a graphical representation of yourself, and a few people have been baptised by having their digital character baptised in, what is basically, a live computer game.

We have now become so used to screens mediating to us all our information. Digital media have become the primary means for us to get our information, for us to communicate, for us to learn. And if we are not careful, we can begin to forget those aspects of human life that cannot be communicated through wire, no matter how live, how immediate they may be. The tool, which is meant to be a servant, becomes a master. Instead of our technologies assisting us to do what we must do as Christians, we start conforming our Christianity to whatever the technologies can do.

It has already begun. A friend sent me an article by a man who consults for churches. IN that article, he said, "The church of yesterday could get by with a completely on-campus experience, but the church of tomorrow will not. People are getting used to the ease and accessibility of distance-based church life, so we need to embrace the change as permanent, and start adapting. He goes on to say, that social distancing will become semi-permanent, and people won't want to be around others, shaking hands, hugging, let alone eating bread from the same plate. In other words, according to him, we need to follow where the technology goes.

Coronavirus and the lockdown are forcing us to face an important question. When is church no longer church? When is worship no longer worship? How much of true Christian worship and fellowship requires our bodily presence and our bodily participation? Just as we ask the transhumanists, when is a human no longer a human, we have to ask, when does the technology so change what we're doing that it is no longer what the Bible regards as worship or fellowship.

I did not expect to find something of an answer at the end of 2 John. In fact, I had planned to mostly pass over these words as the final goodbyes of John's letter. But as I thought about it, I think we find a lot of truth in these last words of the epistle.

Now I don't claim they have a hidden meaning. They are not some prophecy about Coronavirus. But since they are part of inspired Scripture, and therefore truth, they teach truth about Christian living, about the human condition. And in this one verse, I believe we can find guidance for the way ahead.

I. Christian Love Prefers Face to Face Communication

12 Having many things to write to you, I did not wish *to do so* with paper and ink;

John says, I could really go on, because I haven't run out of things to say. But he says, I didn't want to do so with paper and ink. The word ink is actually the word black. Their ink was a combination of water, charcoal, and gum resin that made ink. In our text "paper" means a kind of leaf made from the Egyptian papyrus plant. The pen was made of a reed, and was probably split.

Now you may not have thought of it this way, but paper is a technology. Pen and ink is a technology. Writing itself is a technology. All of these things are tools, technologies that man invented to record ideas, give them more permanence, send them to others. In fact, this particular technology is one that God chose to use to communicate His Word to man. The written word is great. It provides permanence. It allows us to go back and recall what was written.

But John feels that this technology is inadequate for what he wants to do. What does he want to do? He wants to share many things with this church. He will quickly run out of space on a papyrus

scroll. But John wants to teach this church, and disciple them, and mentor them. The swiftest pen travels too slowly for the utterance of the full heart. The most rapid writer falls far behind the fluent speaker.

But beyond that, John knows that face to face communication is far more expressive than writing them a letter. The effect of our words depends not, only upon what is said, but also upon how it is said. You cannot write or print tones or cadences of the voice, glances of the eye, or aspects of the features. When the Welsh preacher John Elias, who was part of the Welsh Methodist Revival of the 19th century was asked to allow some of his sermons to be printed, he replied, "You cannot print fire."

But perhaps someone objects, and says, yes, that's true for the written word as opposed to the spoken word. But we now have technologies that record the spoken word. Indeed, we can record the video and audio of the preached Word. One step better, we can now record and stream the video and audio as it happens. This is not what John was thinking about, was it? No, it isn't. But no matter how immediate, how live, how HD our technologies get, they still fall short of preaching in the gathered assembly. This is a recording, and all its limitations are painfully felt. Not being able to see you as I preach it.

Now with the internet, we have the luxury of reading and listening, and now even watching some of the greatest sermons ever. From the point of view of information, we have never been richer. But if you think the Christian life is simply mining information, then you have missed the point of what John is saying here.

Some things are only communicated in person. It is similar to what Paul said to the Corinthians: 15 For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet *you do not have* many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. (1 Cor. 4:15)

Paul tells the Thessalonians that they did not just impart truth to them, but their very selves:

8 So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. (1 Thess. 2:8)

There are things communicated not just in the words, but in the life that surrounds the words. There are things communicated not just verbally and non-verbally, but through example, and exposure and conversation. This is what John wanted with the elect lady. This is what Christian preaching and discipleship and worship does.

And even if we added video, and made it in real time, there is one thing that are not doing. They are still not placing us in each other's presence. That leads to the next thing John says.

II. Christian Joy Desires a Face to Face Meeting

but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, that our joy may be full.

John knows that he and this church are communicating. And he has joy just in the letter writing and receiving. But his words here tell us that his joy is partial until the face to face meeting.

And whenever you communicate with someone, you are communing with him, whether by letter, by email, phone, text. Some forms of communication have a great delay in time between sender and receiver. Our technologies have reduced that more and more, till we can now do video chats with

people overseas. These are wonderful, truly remarkable technologies.

But even when you see a loved one on a screen, it does not suffice. Christian love is not satisfied with a letter, a picture, or a sound, whether delayed by months, or instant. Why not, because it is not the person in our presence.

Paul wrote many letters, but often expressed his desire to actually be with those he wrote to.

Rom 15:24 whenever I journey to Spain, I shall come to you. For I hope to see you on my journey, and to be helped on my way there by you, if first I may enjoy your company for a while.

32 that I may come to you with joy by the will of God, and may be refreshed together with you. (Rom. 15:32)

1Co 16:5-7 Now I will come to you when I pass through Macedonia (for I am passing through Macedonia).

1Th 2:17-20 But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire.

Phm 1:22 But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.

2Ti 4:9 Be diligent to come to me quickly; **2Ti 4:21** Do your utmost to come before winter.

And Paul wasn't the only one. Jesus said that the kind of communion that would bring His disciples fullness of joy, the true society would be to be in His presence. In John 14, Jesus is dealing with His disciples' shock that He would be going away. He first explains that He is going away so as to prepare a place for them, so He can come again, fetch them, and here are the crowning words, that where I am, *there* you may be also. (Jn. 14:3)

He goes on to explain that He will be sending someone just like Himself. This Helper would teach them, and mediate the presence of the Father and the Son, so that a believer would still experience something of the presence of Christ. But ultimately, the final and perfect solution is when Jesus comes back and fetches us and we are in His presence.

3 And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. 4 They shall see His face, and His name *shall be* on their foreheads. (Rev. 22:3-4)

Real joy is found in real community and true society. Real community and real society means being in one another's presence.

Now here comes the sticky point. Haven't our technologies advanced to where we really are in each other's presence? We can see each other, we can hear each other, it's live, in full colour. This is surely light years ahead of what John was talking about. Wouldn't John or Paul been happy with Skype or Zoom?

III. Christian Love and Joy Require Bodily Presence

but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, that our joy may be full.

John says, I hope to come and speak face to face. In the Greek that's literally mouth to mouth. He doesn't mean mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, it's a Greek idiom. We would say eyeball to eyeball. I want to personally be in the same room as you, and have a conversation with you. In a letter, and we might say, through a screen, I can't discern what it is you need or how I may be required to apply that truth. And so we'll have to wait until we see each other face to face. John assumes a

bodily presence.

One of the great dangers of the social media revolution is it has given some people a sense that they have friends who aren't really friends, that they are part of a community, when they are really just an audience with many others, that they have a family online, when they really just have a connection with some people behind a collection of images. That's not to say that real friendships and even marriages haven't come about through the Internet. But the real key is, once the Internet sets it up, the closest relationships are no longer satisfied with screens. They have to be in each other's presence. It is not that you can't have some kind of friendship through the Internet. It's that the ultimate kinds of human relationships need each other's presence.

Much in Christian worship and discipleship in Scripture assumes and requires that we be bodily present with each other.

For example, the Lord's Supper is a meal, a family meal. It is a Table that the church comes to. In 1 Corinthians 11, five times the apostle Paul makes the point that the Lord's Supper is when the church is physically gathered together.

V 17: "when you come together" v. 18: "when you come together as a church" v. 20: "when you come together" v. 33: "when you come together to eat" v. 34: "when you come together". We have to be together to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. Four times in the New Testament, Christians are called to greet one another with a holy kiss or a kiss of love. That customary greeting in that culture has been replaced by the handshake or the hug, for the most part. But you can't do that if you are a virtual church, or if you are an eavesdropper on the livestream of a church.

You certainly can't baptise without physical presence.

Christianity stands in contrast to many religions in that it regards the human body as a good thing. It is God's creation. The body is not just a vessel to carry your brain around, or a life-support system for your brain.

Your body is part of who you are. Yes, you can exist separately from your body – 2 Cor 5 – absent from the body, present with the Lord. In fact, even in death, the body is still identified with the person. When Jesus died, Mary did not refer to the corpse of Jesus. She said, "they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." (Jn. 20:13). But that is not the ideal. The Christian ideal is resurrection, where we receive eternal bodies.

God the Son has united himself with a human nature, meaning that He forever now has a body. To the degree that we throw off embodied Christianity, with our physical gathering, and physical eating of the Lord's Supper and baptism, and greeting each other, and speaking face to face, we are adopting a kind of disembodied Christianity. A kind of Christianity only of ideas and information. A kind of Christianity that can be entirely transmitted through wires, screens, cell-phone towers and fibre optic cables. And that is actually quite a cold Christianity. It sounds as cold as the transhumanist vision for humans.

In the coming days, after Coronavirus passes, we'll be faced more than ever with the questions, why don't we just livestream? Why don't we go where everyone else is going, and encourage social distancing and just record and distribute sermons?

First, worship and ministry is much more than information and knowledge. It is also participation in the Lord's Supper, in corporate worship. It is time spent in each other's presence, learning, conversing, seeing an example, imparting our lives to each other. We need to be committed to the

physical assembling of the church, of being in each other's presence.

Second, any technology we use should be a help to true worship, not a fake substitute. But they can never become a substitute for assembling together, for gathering, for edifying each other.

Third, now is the time for us to think soberly about why God may have temporarily removed corporate worship from the church. For many years, people around the world have been craving an impersonal, disembodied church. They have wanted internet church, home church, online sermons. They have preferred armchair worship, convenience and comfort, and have rather looked down upon gathering, prayer meetings, membership, covenanting, and ministering to one another. Now they have enough home and internet church to make themselves sick, and none of those things they treated lightly.

Maybe now God is showing us just how cold and lonely it is to have things our way, how barren and empty it is to have a church that is all digital and not face to face. And when God restores it, may we display our gratitude by not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as *is* the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. (Heb. 10:25)