Shifting Sensibilities:
Some Consequences of Digital Technology

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Faith in the Digital Age

The digital age that we have entered is moving rapidly toward ubiquitous technology. Even toasters now have electronic circuits. Greg Shapley writes, "The history of the human being is the history of technology—of the production of interfaces to interact and communicate with each other and the rest of the physical world," so now we have entered a new phase of existence.[1] What does this all mean for faith and religious practice—if anything? The first thing we have to recognize is that this is not merely another change in the long road of progress. Engagement with digital systems is fundamentally different than engaging analog systems. Let me provide a simple example. Imagine that you are in a conversation with a church member that is very personal and that has been going on for several minutes. It's about a problem with her teenage daughter. She's explained the change in her rela-

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tionship with her daughter and her daughter's new moodiness, the sudden spurts of anger, the refusal to do her homework, and so on. The mother is out of work and has no health insurance. She asks, "Is a psychiatrist worth what it will cost me?" Just as she asks the question, another parishioner, a divorcee, bursts into your office. Hearing the question, she blurts out: "My ex is a psychiatrist, and he's a worthless bum."

The conversation you were having with the mother was analog in nature; it was continuous; it rose and fell, became intense and then calmed. Its emotional content varied—it was an analog of your, and her, internal state—but the divorcee treated the conversation as though it were digital. She had no context for her remark other than the one sentence she overheard. She treated that content as though it contained all the information she needed to understand the situation—or perhaps she thought she was being clever or funny. In any case, she inserted her comment as though it had a certain import, but the meaning you or the mother took from it would be entirely different. This is the direction of our current culture. Information is available in bursts of disconnected data that can be combined and recombined at will, without context, and with nuance left to the mind of the beholder.

The basic shift in sensibility required to function appropriately in this new cultural context has a variety of implications, not only for people living their individual lives, but also for community and relationships, for worship and religious practices. It is both social and psychological, and it is potentially theological. Why? Erik Davis states, "The moment we invent a significant new device for communication—talking drums, papyrus scrolls, printed books, crystal [radio] sets, computers, pagers—we partially reconstruct the self and its world, creating new opportunities (and new traps) for thought, perception, and social experience."[2]

I would argue that one reason it is more difficult to convince people (especially teenagers) that they should not use cell phones for either voice or text while they drive is that they are creatures of the digital age. They can't help it. They see the world with digital eyes: things are not continuous (analog); they are discrete (digital). Texting and driving are two completely different and unrelated activities. So why should doing the one affect doing the other? History is not a long series of connected, cause-and-effect events, but something you look up when you need it on Wikipedia. Parents' warnings are no more authoritative than one's own desires or the advice that comes from a peer group—and the peers are probably seen as more relevant and engaged. They share a perspective on the world that is subjective, biased,

and not the result of wisdom gained over time, through professional education, or by the observation of consequences. This is not entirely new, of course. We all disobeyed parents' strictures from time-to-time. The generation gap goes back at least fifty years, but in the new digital age, the prevailing philosophy defends and legitimizes such refusals. When parents lament that "I gave you birth, raised you, cared for you," as though that merits some special consideration (as it would in an analog universe), it rings hollow in the digital age where mistakes are as easily erased as the pops and clicks of long-playing records in the transfer to a compact disc.

IDENTITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Where does identity come from in such a world? We haven't wiped out the significance of DNA, or the role of parenting and church life altogether, but these "inputs" are just that—signals to be combined with other inputs that have equal or greater force, or simply shunted aside. It used to be difficult and exacting work to edit sound or image in the analog world. Everything would have to be just right for the splice not to be heard or seen. Now the analog sentence can be cut up and reassembled word by word, or syllable by syllable, remixed and processed in such a way that a person can be made to say just about anything. Jump-cuts in images can be smoothed over with slick transitions, cutaway images, or changing speed such that it also becomes unnoticeable. We do the same thing in deciding who we are. We take the bits and pieces of a thousand different inputs, treat them all as equal, and create an ever-changing, dynamic, pastiche identity that can be represented in various contexts as corporeal or virtual avatars—representation is everything.

In the Reformed Christian tradition, pastors were often referred to as "domini." They had an authority based on theological education and the *imprimatur* of ordination that demanded they be taken seriously. In the church today, this sensibility probably continues to hold sway—because the church is aging and those who stick with it are largely from the generations that accepted this role. But churches that continue in this vein often see their young people departing in droves—sometimes to other types of worship experiences and, sometimes, to none at all. People fret about this and blame the type of music sung in services, the lack of on-screen lyrics, the fact that the elders don't seem to be interested in young people and that worship committees exclude them from participation. But the problem may merely

be that the role of the church in the lives of young people is just one input among many, and the domini-logic of the church is a square peg that is easy to abandon in a world of round holes. Young people are less denomination-bound, less tradition-bound, and less hierarchical in their thinking because they are digital in orientation, while the church continues its analog practices. Churches that attract such young people are "relevant," which really means that the pastors and staff are relationally driven, not theologically driven. (They may be both, of course, but it is the former rather than the latter that is the draw.)

Marshall McLuhan once wrote about the impact of radio on young people that it "retribalized" them. Once FM radio developed as a clear alternative to AM in the mid-1960s and formats began to develop that allowed people to select a station on the basis of the type of music it played (its format) or the sorts of talk that would be heard, people could organize themselves into tribes that reflected the music that inspired them. We got punks, Goths, preppies, grungers, and rednecks. Some such groups were there before, but their personas took on new dimensions when they adopted particular musical styles. TV and film helped as well. Out of TV came the Trekkies. Film gave us Wookieepedia and the Jedi religion. These are all analog connections. But the website that allows you to select a fifteen-second clip of *Star Wars: A New Hope* to reshoot so that a new movie can be created (www.starwarsuncut.com) is digital. So are music remixes and novels written on Twitter;[3] so is the ability to be part of multiple communities with multiple personas, sometimes made up entirely of strangers—to be dynamic with one's identity. This is the new sensibility.

The Confusion of Public and Private

The development of the ability to compartmentalize that has been encouraged by our move into the digital age has many important consequences. I want to discuss only two of them here. First is the impact on our sense of public and private. By now we have all heard the stories of people who lost opportunities for love or employment when someone googled their Facebook page or searched for their name on YouTube. Facebook has actually resisted the call of privacy advocates to change its policies because, it says, people just don't care about privacy. The Internet has allowed us all to become voyeurs—if we so choose. And now we learn that over two-thirds of people in China use their mobile telephones "in the loo." In Australia, 10

percent of people use mobile phones during worship services and 16 percent while making love.[4] Talk about multitasking. In such a world, the distinctions between public and private begin to become ludicrous.

Joshua Meyrowitz warned of the tendencies to confuse front-stage and back-stage behaviors as a result of television's bringing people into places where they had previously been denied entry—women into men's locker rooms or children into their parents' bedrooms where punishment was discussed for the child's infractions.[5] Kenneth Gergen picked up on Meyrowitz's idea and expanded it to include other technologies that led, he said, to the "saturated self."[6] The Internet provides not only full saturation, but the implied invitation to share more and more of one's self with the world, either piecemeal or in one gulp—and, more likely, in both. It also provides the illusion that we can control the level of saturation by constructing multiple selves sharable on multiple sites with different sets of others, and that there is no necessity to think of the self as a grounded, authentic single entity. It is, instead, one comprised of multiple strands of identity that can be twisted into a multitude of shapes as occasions require.

In addition to this, the digital self combines quite nicely with the postmodern sensibility that questions all authority. No interpretation is sacred, unalterable, or superior to any other. If we take this perspective to its logical end, the result is the death of the meta-narrative—the great myths (including Christianity) that provide shape to our lives and world, provide an interpretive frame within which to understand existence, and give meaning to existence. "Why believe the Bible?" this logic would say. Why not simply pick and choose from any text (sacred or secular, fiction or nonfiction) that fits the existential moment and the requirements of that moment? In the digital post-modern world there is no easy answer to that, as all authority has been leveled. Faith is made shallow, changeable, responsive only to exigency.

The Relation of People to Space

The second implication, if that weren't enough, affects the church even more directly. It has to do with the relationship of people to sacred space. There are surely different types of worship spaces in America, from the National Cathedral, to storefront churches, to tent meetings. They each have a purpose. Some spaces have baptismal bowls, some pools. Some have enormous pipe organs, and others depend merely on the simple guitar. The conduct

of worship likewise differs, from high liturgy, to ecstatic dancing, and loud "Amens." Some churches center on iconography or emphasize the need for a mediator to reach a holy God. Others consider God a brother or best friend— an approachable confidant who is dependable in a pinch. But until now, all such worship services in all such spaces did share one characteristic: people entered into them because tradition, or calling, or curiosity, compelled them to do so. Although such spaces might be used for other activities during the week, on Sunday (or Saturday, if one was Adventist) the space became the gathering place of God's people who had come to worship.

But the digital age, in addition to pulling people into its logic, also allows people to push messages out to others. And just as preachers hailed the coming of the telegraph as God's gift to reach the world, some now promote digital connections, via laptops and mobile telephones, to extend worship (or at least a taste of it) to the outside world in real time. There is no more waiting for the sermon to be posted to the web or the church newsletter to make it into homes via snail-mail; now the goal is immediate real-time connection. If we can't bring Muhammad to the mountain, then we'll take the mountain to Muhammad.

Pastors now encourage those in worship services to "reach out" with Facebook and Twitter to those who are not present—even as the service proceeds, as the word is preached. Tom Leonard writes, "The sight of churchgoers typing messages into mobile phones during a service is becoming an increasingly common sight as clergy seek new ways of reversing declining attendance figures."[7] A North Carolina church, he says, holds "Twitterfests," advising its members: "If God leads you to continue this as a form of worship, by all means do it." "Trinity Church, the venerable Episcopal church on Wall Street in New York," writes Leonard, "used Twitter last month to perform the story of Christ over Easter."[8]

The Church in the Digital Age

What will be on the agenda of the church council as a result? Should wireless be extended into the sanctuary? Is "Facebooking" during a worship service sacrilegious? Does reaching out horizontally to the world during worship diminish the vertical connection with God that the service aims to provide? What is the most important thing going on here—relating to God or relating to one's friends? Every pastor or church council that has not yet faced these questions will have to do so in the near future.

For every proposal that purports to open the portals of the church to the outside—taking worship there rather than inviting them here—there are both positive and negative consequences. "Go into all the world" seems a no-brainer. Of course, of course; but it also has the potential to limit the "fellowship of the saints," since those in the pews may be there only in body, with their minds compartmentalizing the world into the part that is "in church" and the part that is cocooning with friends in the outside world. Those sitting in the pews could be "tangled up" outside.[9]

But recall that worship services are analog—they progress; they have an order chockablock with meaning; they are linear. The message is attached to the Scripture, attached to the hymn, attached to the congregational prayer (at least in many traditions). A tweet doesn't capture that; a thirty-second video posted on YouTube or a photo pasted into Facebook doesn't either. They make the worship service like the proverbial vacation captured for review at a later date—but always as a pale imitation of itself.

Our culture, as a result of the development of digital technologies, has provided wonderful opportunities for education, interactive communication, entertainment, and continuing connection with distant others. None of us, I suspect, would be quick to give up our digital lifelines, but, as with so many other technologies developed in the last century, there are many questions that we have yet adequately to address. Yet address them we must. We will not do so uniformly, I suspect, and the result will be that those who answer Pilate's famous question, "What is truth?" in a way that accords with the digital culture's biases will thrive, while those who are at odds with it will struggle. But we should never lose sight of what Gérard Vincent has written, "In a totalitarian regime all barriers between private life and public life seem to be broken down."[10] And this creates certain dynamics that the church will have to deal with in the coming days.

There are enormous questions for orthodoxy raised by these developments. What constituted orthodoxy in an analog culture—continuity, consistency, constancy, collective wisdom, and creeds—is not the orthodoxy of the digital age. In this new culture, it is convenience, relationship, speed, access, ubiquity, freedom, interactivity, irreverence, and technical sophistication that attract adherents. Can these two cultures—each with its own distinctive axis—be reconciled by the church; or must some expressions of the Christian faith be marginalized that others might grow? Is the digital culture more in tune with the ecstasy of the Pentecostal tradition or the good order of the Reformation?

NOTES

1. Greg Shapley, "The Re-Wiring of History," *M/C Journal* 12/3 (2009): http://journal. media-culture.org.au/index.php/mdjournal/article/view/148 (Last accessed May 3, 2010).

2. Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (London: Serpents Tail, 1999).

3. See www.twitip.com/how-to-start-a-twitter-novel (Last accessed May 4, 2010).

4. "Mobile Use: In the 'Loo,' Library, Funerals": www.msnbc.msn.com/id/28896384/ ns/technology_and_science-wireless (Last accessed May 4, 2010).

5. Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

6. Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

7. Tom Leonard, "U.S. Churches Use Twitter to Reach a Wider Audience," *The Telegraph* (London), May 4, 2009: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/twitter/5274071/ US-churches-use-Twitter-to-reach-a-wider-audience.html (Last accessed May 4, 2010).

8. Ibid.; see also Paul Vitello, "Lead Us to Tweet, and Forgive the Trespassers," *New York Times*, July 5, 2009: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/05/technology/ internet/05twitter.html (Last accessed May 4, 2010).

9. See the www.tangle.com website, "an online community for Christians."

10. Gérard Vincent, "A History of Secrets?" in *A History of Private Life: Riddles of Identity in Modern Times*, Antoine Proust and Gérard Vincent, eds., Arthur Goldhammer, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1991), 145–281.