Chapter 1: Introduction

Music used to be an intimate, communal experience. Before Spotify, before CDs, before cassette tapes, before eight tracks, and before phonographs, music was played in bars, in concert halls, and in family gatherings around a piano or guitar. The first electrical audio recordings, a technology developed in the 1930s, were reproductions of the live musical experience—they enabled people to sit in their libraries, close their eyes, and, although they might be alone, imagine themselves in a concert hall filled with people listening to a brilliant cellist.[1]

The advent of audio recordings began an evolution of the nature of music itself. Most recorded music today no longer simulates a concert experience; instead, the record has typically become the standard musical experience and concerts have sought to simulate that recorded performance. Indeed, much of our music today is created digitally on computers in a studio without any instruments at all, and, from its very beginning, is divorced from the interactivity of a live performance. When we think about music today, we often do so in terms of the personal experience of streaming our individualized playlists into our earbuds, rather than thinking about the communal experience of participating in the creation and consumption of music with other people.

As much as music was transformed by the invention of recordings, it pales in comparison to the degree to which the world is being transformed by the proliferation of the internet. When the internet was invented in the mid-1980s, our world entered a seismic paradigm shift that is now fundamentally re-shaping the way we view the world, understand ourselves, and interact with others.

The impact of digital interconnectivity may best be understood by comparing it to the way primary oral cultures were revolutionized by the invention of writing. Walter Ong, in his book *Orality and Literacy*, argues that our minds have been so formed by the written word that

---

[1] The first acoustic recordings were made in the 1880s, but they only had limited impact as a technology because they were limited in their ability to be recorded and reproduced. In comparison, the development of electrical recordings caused a dramatic shift in the way music was conceptualized. For more, see Timothy Day, *A Century of Recorded Music: Listening to Musical History* (Yale University Press, 2002), 16–18.

the act of writing has actually changed the way we process, store, and reference information—even when we speak. In 1982, he wrote that, "Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness."[2] He also describes how difficult it is for us to conceive of a culture that has no written words:

> The purely oral tradition or primary orality is not easy to conceive of accurately and meaningfully. Writing makes "words" appear similar to things because we think of words as the visible marks signaling words to decoders: we can see and touch such inscribed "words" in texts and books. Written words are residue. Oral tradition has no such residue or deposit.[3]

Our entrance into a world of digital communication promises a similar kind of revolution that is already changing some of the basic frameworks of our consciousness, such as how we understand ourselves, how we experience ourselves in community, and how we as a culture make sense of all the information that now flows between us.[4] We are still in the infancy of this paradigmatic shift, and its outcome is not yet determined—we cannot yet see the ways in which this shift is impacting us. As A. K. M. Adam wrote in an email correspondence with Clint Schnekloth, "We don't have a perspective on the changes in which we're participating."[5]

Indeed, Henry Jenkins argues that we, as participants in this world of converging new media, are responsible for shaping the future of digital existence.[6] As Christians, if we believe in the timelessness of the gospel of Christ, and if we want to see the world become the new creation described in Scripture, we cannot be content to passively watch the future be shaped; we must be actively engaged in drawing this new paradigm as a place for the embodiment of the kingdom of

---

[2] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: 30th Anniversary Edition*, 3rd edition. (London ; New York: Routledge, 2012), 77.

[3] Ibid., 11.

[4] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Revised edition. (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2008), 1–19.

[5] Clint Schnekloth, *Mediating Faith: Faith Formation in a Trans-Media Era* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 3.

[6] Jenkins, 11–12.

God. To do that, we also must be both optimistic and pragmatic about the potential of online connectivity. If we mire ourselves in fear of the internet's dangers, we can only be late-adopters of its opportunities and will be unable to contribute in a positive way to its formation;[7] if we see only the possibilities of the internet, we are likely to fall prey to its dangers.

In the work you are reading right now, I am attempting to lay a balanced foundation for the church to embrace the digital world as a positive extension of ourselves. I begin with the assumption that the church can, will, and should exist within the digital sphere in one way or another, and I try to center that conversation on the earliest Christian understandings of what it means to be the church. The apostle Paul used letters—the most advanced communication medium of his day[8]—as one of his critical tools for shaping the life and future of the churches he founded. His letters allowed him to extend the influence of his teachings far beyond what he could accomplish in person; they allowed him to communicate with Christians across regions, across social strata, and (whether he intended it or not) across time as his words were shared with neighboring communities and passed down to subsequent generations. He used media to connect with groups all over the known world.

The analogy between Paul's letters and the digital media of our own era is imperfect—as we ought to expect in comparing media and cultures separated by two millennia—but Pauline ecclesiology is nonetheless a rich resource for guiding our adoption of social media to enrich both our localized and our global faith community. Rather than applying his methods and messages directly to our new context, though, we must translate them in ways that remain faithful to his vision of the church and make sense of them within our own emerging paradigm.

A full consideration of Paul's mediated communication with his churches would be greater than the scope of this work allows, so our study will concentrate on his correspondence with the church in Corinth. The two surviving letters are well-suited for our purposes for a

---

[7] Walter Ong notes that Plato feared writing the way some people fear the digital world today, and even used remarkably similar arguments against it. These same arguments were also used against the printed word when the press was invented. For more on this, see Ong, 78–79.

[8] Paul himself recognized the power of the written word. See, for example, 2 Cor 3:6: "The letter kills but the spirit gives life."

number of reasons: scholars are confident that Paul was the actual author of them,[9] there was a long-lasting, complex relationship between Paul and his readers, and Paul addressed a wide range of relevant situations and messages. In addition to the biblical text, we will consider the modern trajectory of media as an agent of social change, a study which blends rhetorical criticism, communication theory, and technological innovation.

The challenge, then, is to create an outline of an ecclesiology that can exist within the context of our emerging digital world—to create a sketch of what an online church might look like. As we begin this conversation, we ought to give some definition to two key words: "online" and "church."

When we discuss *online* church, we do not do so purely from a perspective of a technological achievement, but from that of the paradigm shift mentioned previously. There are already a variety of books about how the local congregations could be enhanced by using emerging technologies as tools for growth, such as live-streaming worship services and using other kinds of connectional resources that augment or simulate a traditional, in-person community. These types of augmented experiences are based on the assumption that online worship should replicate the form of ecclesial gathering that is experienced in a physical capacity each Sunday in our pews.

Yet this approach fails on two counts. First, because it presents technological adaptations as solutions—in a world where technology is evolving at a blindingly rapid rate—it is often obsolete as soon as it is published. The recommended tools no longer exist or, at the very least, no longer function they way they did a month ago. Second, it fails to recognize the scale to which our culture is changing in response to technological advancement. New technology cannot be reduced to a new toolset, but must be recognized as the inauguration of an entirely new understanding of and engagement in the world.[10]

---

[9] There is some disagreement on parts of 2 Corinthians, but most scholars agree that Paul was the actual author of both letters. Beyond the question of authorship, there is some disagreement whether 2 Corinthians is actually one cohesive letter or is an aggregate of several different letters interposed with one another. In addition, the letters themselves testify that there was at least one letter that is now lost to us (and probably more than one such letter). For the sake of simplicity, we will refer to 1 and 2 Corinthians as Paul's two letters to the church in Corinth throughout this work.

[10] As we will discuss in more detail later, we should not miss Marshall McLuhan's warning that the medium quickly becomes the message itself.

We are not creating a simulated church, as if it were a replication of a material church within a virtual environment, but are asking how we might build a genuine manifestation of a Pauline ecclesiological community in the context of our digitally-connected future. This distinction is subtle, perhaps, but important. It is similar to the difference between creating humanoid robots (replicating the embodiment of a human within a mechanized form) and creating smart home gadgetry (using artificial intelligence and digital interconnectivity to extend the daily functions of human existence). For the church to be the missional body it was called to embody, we must grasp the future of the world in which we live and trace the trajectory of that reality to anticipate the strengths and needs it will introduce for coming generations. We must cultivate a vision that sees the weaknesses of the shifting paradigm and empowers us to counteract it.

The scope of an online *church* cannot be restricted to the context of a worship environment but, particularly when viewed through a Pauline lens, must encompass a comprehensive life of cruciform existence. When Paul discussed what it meant to follow Christ, he did not describe a weekly gathering, but a continual posture of participation in the cross of Christ, an active embodiment of giving oneself to the pursuit of reconciliation and the Spirit-empowered life that only comes through death.

Some work has been done to explore the potential of online worlds for ecclesial community, but that work has focused on creating robust virtual modes of church that exist parallel to the traditional, material reality of the church. While neuroscientists recognize that there are not necessarily any psychological differences between the experience of an online community and a physical one,[11] there are ontological differences in the way we think about ourselves and others in the physical world and in the digital,[12] and the "virtual" communities others have discussed are often distinct worlds into which people enter for a time and then leave as they return to their "real" material lives. Much like the misconception that the church is a building in which Christians worship on Sundays, these virtual world churches fail to integrate their community into the minute-by-minute existence of the body.

---

[11] Schnekloth, 4.

[12] Sara Running Danger, "Critical Vision: Word and Image in the Postmodern Age," *Word & World* 3 (2012): 227–236.

In the emerging paradigm of online connectedness, we cannot view digital experiences as distinct from material existence—the online world permeates our daily life, and a useful digital ecclesiology must assume the continual synchronicity of our digital and our material reality. The digital is an extension of an embodied existence, not a disembodiment of it. This study, then, does not explore the potential of an online church as if the online were isolated from the material, but with the understanding that being online is one characteristic of what it means for us to be the church and that we ought to be an embodiment of Christ within that space just as we are in our physical lives.

To that end, we will begin by considering the nature of online connectivity—specifically, the potential, limitations, and dangers of social media—before moving into an overview of the Pauline ecclesiology developed in 1 and 2 Corinthians, and then synthesizing the two into a sketch of what it might mean to be a digital church.

Chapter 2: The Online World of Social Media

What is social media? It is amorphous, and definitions of the term are constantly shifting with the rapid evolution of technology. As new forms of online communication become available, the delineation between social media and interpersonal relationships continue to blur.

What we think of today as social media began under the umbrella term "social network," and it was distinguished by its ability to foster multidirectional communication. Whereas in the late 1990s and early 2000s most of the internet consisted of one-way communication—a web developer would post information for others to consume, but mechanisms for active engagement and response were limited—social network websites like Friendster, Myspace, and the fledgling Facebook empowered people to share updates about their life and then participate in online conversations around those updates.[1] These social networks, which developed the internet's capacity for digital conversations, were the catalyst for a radical paradigm shift that came to be known as "Web 2.0"[2] and has come to fundamentally redefine words such as "friend," "like," "post," and "share."

In 2009, Andreas M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein defined six broad categories of social media: "collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds."[3] In the years since, though, the distinctions between many of those categories have blurred and new categories have been added. In 2014, Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg, linguistics experts who specialize in digital communication, described social media as any kind of "internet-based sites and platforms which facilitate the building and maintaining of networks or communities through the sharing of messages and other media."[4] This type of definition would include established social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter,

---

[1] Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg, *The Language of Social Media: Identity and Community on the Internet* (Springer, 2014), 2.

[2] Paul Anderson, *Web 2.0 and Beyond: Principles and Technologies* (CRC Press, 2016), xxvii–xxix.

[3] Andreas M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, "Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media," *Business Horizons* 53, no. 1 (2010): 61.

[4] Seargeant and Tagg, 3.

Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat, and would also include emerging platforms that provide niche communications outlets, such as Slack (instant messaging and collaboration), Twitch (live streaming of video game consoles), and Zoom (video chats).

As our society becomes more broadly connected to the internet, and as connection speeds increase to allow for faster transfer of data, we are integrating these social media platforms more deeply into our daily existence. A 2018 Pew Research Center study revealed that in 2017 more than two-thirds of all adults in the United States used social media and more than three-fourths of all adults owned a smartphone.[5] Another study, which concluded that over two-thirds of adults in the United States use Facebook, determined that approximately three-quarters of them use the platform daily.[6] Psychologist Sherry Turkle, who studies the impact of technology on our perceptions of self and our relationships with others, has spent decades interviewing people about their uses of technology. In her most recent book, *Alone Together*, she noted that we are increasingly tethered to our smartphones—we are connected today in ways that we have never been before.[7]

The Potential of Social Media

This rapid integration of social media into our lives has not happened by chance. From its earliest days, social media has promised the world to us. It has allowed us to have routine conversations with friends and relatives from whom we would have otherwise grown distant; it has empowered us to share the ordinary moments of our lives (which are sometimes the most meaningful parts) with the people we care about; it has brought us access to people, cultures, and languages from all over the world; it has given us knowledge and insight into the most obscure corners of our curiosity, and all at the tips of our fingers—or, today, at even just the prompt of

---

[5] Jacob Poushter, Caldwell Bishop, and Hanyu Chwe, "Social Media Use Continues to Rise in Developing Countries but Plateaus Across Developed Ones," *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project*, June 19, 2018, accessed September 13, 2018, http://www.pewglobal.org/2018/06/19/social-media-use-continues-to-rise-in-developing-countries-but-plateaus-across-developed-ones/.

[6] Aaron Smith and Monica Anderson, "Social Media Use in 2018," *Social Media Use in 2018*, March 1, 2018, accessed March 28, 2018, http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/.

[7] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (Basic Books, 2011), 155–170.

our voice. Early advocates for the potential of the internet often referred to it as a "global village" which would make the world flatter—more globalized—and draw the entire world closer together.[8]

When we cannot remember an acquaintance's job, we can look it up on social media. When we are looking for a movie recommendation, we can ask our friends online. When we are interested in opposing viewpoints, we can find them and engage with them in real time on social media. This is the power of social media: it has the potential for an unprecedented awareness of the diversity of the human experience and, from that awareness, an increased capacity for empathy.[9] Turkle, describing her research into the relationship between humanity and technology in the mid 1980s (nearly twenty years before social media became prominent), described her own sense of optimism about how computers could change the world:

> [The book] *Nineteen Eighty-Four* describes a society that subjects people to constant government surveillance, public mind control, and loss of individual rights. I find it ironic that my own 1984 book, about the technology that in many a science fiction novel makes possible such a dystopian world, was by contrast full of hope and optimism. I had concerns… [b]ut, in this first work, I focused on how evocative computers fostered new reflection about the self.[10]

Beyond the potential for exposure to global perspectives, social media has also created a world in which we can respond in real time to one another. Physical distance no longer needs to cause a delay in communication—we can interact with questions and ideas immediately. Twitter, as a platform, is built upon this idea of immediacy; its timeline displays a feed of microposts that are sorted chronologically,[11] so as new tweets are posted, old ones get pushed to the bottom, and the result is that the lifespan of a tweet is usually measured in minutes. Other social media platforms use algorithms to feed users content based on their likelihood to interact with it, rather

---

[8] Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat 3.0: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (Picador, 2007), 60–66.

[9] Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (Penguin, 2009), 564–591.

[10] Turkle, xi.

[11] While this is generally true, Twitter is testing ways to introduce algorithm-based feeds into the chronological timeline. We will address these algorithms in more detail shortly.

than based purely on chronology, so their posts have an extended lifespan, but they maintain the immediacy of the medium through comments and direct messages.

The speed with which users interact often leads to entire conversations happening in real time. This immediate responsiveness is possible because we are perpetually connected. By having social media apps on our phones, and by allowing those apps to notify us the instant we receive responses, the only temporal boundaries to our responsiveness are self-imposed.

Perpetual connectivity affects us in other ways, as well. For many people, social media has become a default activity to fill in the gaps of day-to-day life. In moments of boredom, we can turn to social media to participate in conversations, see what our friends are doing, or simply entertain ourselves. Our passive time can become active moments of engagement, learning, and relationship building.

The Limitations of Social Media

If you ask almost any social media user, though, they will tell you that the potential of social media is often not fully realized in practice—sometimes as a result of the nature of the medium itself, and sometimes as a result of the way we use it.

Take, for example, the promise of global connectivity: social media delivers on its promise to make it possible for an individual to connect with far more people online than they could in person. On Facebook, a normal person can have up to five thousand "friends"; on Twitter, a person can follow an unlimited number of others.

In the early years of social media, people tried to make as many connections as they could, but the breadth of the networks quickly became a problem because there was far more information being shared than could possibly be consumed. If a person had a relatively meager two hundred online connections, and each of those connections posted twice each day, that would be four hundred potential conversations to filter through. This created cognitive overload for users, which became a barrier to the very promise of engagement—if logging into Facebook was not a rewarding experience, users would discontinue logging in.

To prevent this disengagement, different social media platforms have taken different tactics, but all have made some use of programmatic algorithms to determine which content is

most likely to generate engagement for an individual. These algorithms examines a person's history on the platform, cataloguing every interaction (such as comments, "likes," and shares) the person makes with other posts and generating an engagement profile that knows the types of posts the person prefers (such as videos, inspirational quotes, and text) and what topics they are most likely to respond to (such as political statements, jokes, and life updates). Based on that data, the platform filters the posts that it shows the person, prioritizing those posts that it thinks will create a rewarding experience for that individual.

Each social media platform approaches these algorithmic filters differently—some allowing users to directly influence them more than others—but they all function to fundamentally limit the user's exposure to the overwhelming volume of content in their network, thus counteracting some of the potential for unlimited online connection. In fact, recent research has suggested that the human mind has a limited capacity for social connections and that those limits are neither erased nor expanded when online connectivity is compared to in-person social groups.[12]

As our society is starting to mature in our use of social media, we are beginning to use platforms that allow us to connect in smaller groups rather than promising us unlimited connectivity. For example, Facebook has begun to minimize their focus on users' ability to add new friends, and is now emphasizing the more personal relationships that can be developed in Facebook "groups," which are smaller communities with a shared interest of some kind. The early idea of the internet as a global village has been redefined. As Patricia Wallace describes,

> Though I like the 'global village' metaphor, the Internet is not really like that most of the time. With respect to human interaction, it is more like a huge collection of distinct neighborhoods where people with common interests can share information, work together, tell stories, joke around, debate politics, help each other out, or play games.[13]

The size limitation of an individual's network is not the only way in which social media has failed to deliver on its promises, though. While that one was largely unforeseen when the

---

[12] R. I. M. Dunbar, "Do Online Social Media Cut through the Constraints That Limit the Size of Offline Social Networks?," *Open Science* 3, no. 1 (January 1, 2016): 150292.

[13] Patricia Wallace, *The Psychology of the Internet* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 17.

medium was birthed, other limitations have been more predictable, such as the incapacity for a digital medium to meet physical needs.

No one seriously believed that the digital would entirely replace the physical, but that has not prevented technological optimists from trying to conceive of ways in which it *could*. For example, platforms have been created based on the idea that virtual worlds should existed side-by-side with the physical world, and that users could use these worlds as an escape from reality. These virtual worlds were simulated (that is to say, digital) universes where users created avatars to represent personage and were able to live entire lives—building homes, developing relationships, attending church services, and so on—all while the users themselves were sitting in chairs at their computers. A platform called *Second Life*, which was one of the more dominant of these virtual worlds, is still active and thriving today. Its leadership boasted as recently as 2017 that the platform had more than 800,000 active users each month.[14]

These types of immersive, alternate reality worlds have also frequently appeared in popular culture, although they have often been portrayed in a negative light. The film trilogy *The Matrix* was one early, popular example of this kind of digital existence. In it, the nature of reality is questioned as the film expresses that the world as we know it could be a digital projection on our minds. Similarly, in the *New York Times* bestselling book *Ready Player One*, which was adapted into a blockbuster film in 2018, nearly the entire dystopic narrative takes place within a virtual world that was built as an alternative to a crumbling American society. Also in 2018, the British television network Channel 4 partnered with Netflix to create a television show called *Kiss Me First*, based loosely on a book of the same name. This show features a similar kind of virtual world, but it thematically explores the interaction between that alternative reality and the physical reality; it challenges the idea that a virtual would can truly be distinguished from a physical one.

The trajectory of social media adoption has followed a similar trendline as that suggested by *Kiss Me First*. While the idea of an alternate reality was lauded by many early technology enthusiasts, the most dramatic growth has come in platforms that integrate the digital world into

---

[14] Samuel Axon, "Returning to Second Life," *Ars Technica*, last modified October 23, 2017, accessed September 15, 2018, https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2017/10/returning-to-second-life/.

our day-to-day physical reality.[15] Rather than building immersive worlds to replicate or replace the physical, the future of social media appears to be in creating digital tools that make social connection easier.

Thus, within the social media landscape, there is a growing self-awareness that social media cannot and should not completely replace the physical. To state it differently, there are some human needs that can never be replaced by a digital world. The feeling of human touch, face-to-face conversations, and other kinds of physical interactions can be augmented by digital connectivity, but the digital tools are fundamentally there to enhance and extend human relationships.[16]

The Dangers of Social Media

In addition to recognizing the limits of social media, the maturation of the digital world is allowing us to understand some of the dangers of this new medium. As with the limitations of social media, some of the dangers are inherent to the medium itself and some are a result of the ways in which we have tended to use it.

In Marshall McLuhan's classic, seminal work on media theory, he makes the case that any medium necessarily transforms society and, consequently, society comes to rely on that medium to function.[17] The example he uses is the medium of electric light. Before the light bulb existed, our daily habits were built around the availability of daylight; as the light bulb became commonplace, our habits were extended beyond the limitations of daylight and we could work, socialize, and so on at all hours of the evening. Now, with light bulbs being ubiquitous for us, we

---

[15] This is an idea called media "convergence," wherein different types of digital media are being assimilated together into forms that can be used together with one another. For more on this, see: Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Revised edition, (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2008), 4–6.

[16] This is not a new idea, but one that has been affirmed in recent years as we have seen our society's relationship with the internet and social media mature. Marshall McLuhan's philosophical development of media in the 1960s hinged on the idea that "the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology." Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man : Critical Edition*, ed. W. Terrence Gordon, Critical Edition, (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2003), 19.

[17] McLuhan, 93–105.

need human-made light in order to function as a society. The medium, which began as an extension of human functioning, became a leash to which we are tethered.[18]

The same principle applies to our adoption of social media. What began as a tool that extended our capacity to connect with one another is redefining our society so that we rely on it. As we have used it, it has shaped us.

One evidence of this is found in the way we interact with others online. As discussed previously, the promise that the internet could be a "global village" has now been tempered into definitions of smaller groups, or "neighborhoods" of online connection. In practice, though, those groups are still far larger than what we are accustomed to interacting with on a daily basis, and for us to process the information we are given in our social media feeds, we simplify our perception of the humanity of the people who are posting, seeing them as one-dimensional avatars rather than complex persons.[19] Turkle describes this effect, saying:

> [T]he connected life encourages us to treat those we meet online in something of the same way we treat objects—with dispatch. It happens naturally: when you are besieged by thousands of e-mails, texts, and messages—more than you can respond to—demands become depersonalized. Similarly, when we Tweet or write to hundreds or thousands of Facebook friends as a group, we treat individuals as a unit. Friends become fans.[20]

This kind of dehumanization does not typically occur when we are face-to-face with individuals, but it almost seems inevitable online.[21] Across social media channels, conversations seem to consistently transform into bitter, unproductive disputes, and this tendency is intensified by the use of algorithms.

Since social media platforms want to show us the content with which we are most likely to engage, their algorithms tend to prioritize two types of content: posts with which we

---

[18] McLuhan, 19–35.

[19] This is the same effect that Martin Buber describes when he talks about the philosophical difference between approaching relationship with a person as "I-Thou" rather than as "I-It." Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (Blurb, 2018).

[20] Turkle, 168.

[21] Daniel Kahneman examines the impact of a simple photo on snap judgments regarding the subject's association with attributes such as likability and competence. See Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 1st edition. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 79–92.

enthusiastically agree, and posts with which we adamantly disagree; we tend not to interact with posts which we passively support, are mildly disapproving of, or are indifferent toward. When we agree with a post, we are likely to share it, "like" it, or discuss it positively (or, if we see that someone else disagreed with it, we may defend it). When we disagree with a post, we are likely to initiate a conversation with the person who shared it to argue against it.

The algorithms, then, encourage us to separate the digital world—and the friends we have within in it—into a binary, split between those who think like us and those who do not. The simplicity of this binary of in-groups and out-groups allow us to more quickly filter our perception of individuals[22] and their place in our constructed worldview[23] so we can continue scrolling through our social media feed, but it is not helpful in the task of authentic connection, precisely because it encourages us to displace our own fears, anxieties, and dislikes onto others.[24] We reduce the humanity of those persons to either a friend or a foe, damaging our capacity for nuanced communication and finding commonality in the midst of our differences.

Not all of this dehumanization is attributable to algorithms, though. Social media makes it easy for us to portray a version of ourselves that is filtered, a fantasy of who we want to be. As Turkle has found, "At the screen, you have a chance to write yourself into the person you want to be and to imagine others as you wish them to be."[25]

In face-to-face communication, we can be somewhat selective with how we present ourselves—we can dress in a certain way, cover blemishes with makeup, and reveal particular parts of our personality and story—but there is something fundamentally honest about being with someone in person. The nuances of those interactions—their immediacy, the richness of visual

---

[22] Kahneman attributes this tendency to a psychological system he refers to as the "availability heuristic," which encourages individuals to quickly make decisions based on the ease with which the mind is able to sense (rather than actually count) positive/negative interactions. For example, when we are able to immediately sense that we have had several positive interactions with someone, we are more likely to regard them as members of our in-group. Because we rely on this availability heuristic so frequently, we do not take time or mental effort to generate an actual comparison of positive and negative interactions with a person before judging them. See Kahneman, 112–145.

[23] In their introductory book on theological thinking, Howard Stone and James Duke refer to these filters as "templates of the mind" or, when used for theological work, "theological templates." For more on this, refer to Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically*, 3 edition, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 44–47.

[24] Turkle, 236

[25] Turkle, 188.

and audible details, and the permanence of responses—reveal a lot about a person's character. But on social media, we can intimately control the ways in which we present ourselves. If we are bored of a conversation, we can leave it without consequence; if we do not know the answer to a question, we can look it up and present it as if we knew it all along; if we feel an emotional response, we can hide it behind a wall of text; if we feel a photo of ourselves is unflattering, we can take it again.

The nature of social media today encourages us to present an entirely favorable depiction of ourselves online, and that creates a disconnect from reality. It does not allow others to see in us all the complexity of our humanity, and our fantasized self-presentation is a barrier to authentic community.

Social media, with its vast potential, but also with its significant limitations and dangers, gives us a platform that can be used as a medium for the development of genuine Christian community. Through a close examination of how the apostle Paul used the technology of his day as a medium for uniting, organizing, equipping, and challenging the church in Corinth, we can build an understanding of how Paul believed a church ought to function as it embodied Christ.

Chapter 3: Paul's Corinthian Ecclesiology

The ecclesiological framework developed in the two letters of Paul to the church in Corinth is, of course, limited to the particular issues and context into which Paul was writing, and we should be careful in our interpretation to recognize those limits. A full Pauline ecclesiology is beyond the scope of our work here, but a careful consideration of the Corinthian letters will give us a sufficient basis upon which to build a basic ecclesiastical model. In this chapter, we will discuss the basic posture of the church as united in the wisdom of God and the mission of the cross, then sketch a simple model of sacramentality in worship,[1] and conclude with Paul's methods for the church's continuing growth and faithfulness.

For Paul, letter-writing was a long-distance replacement for oral communication—an attempt "to accomplish what would otherwise be done in person,"[2]—and he intended for his letters to be read aloud to the congregation by his messenger to the whole community.[3] The messenger was probably coached by Paul to convey tone (like sarcasm and irony) and theology in the letter's reading and to be able to expound upon the messages contained in the letters themselves in response to questions and challenges.[4, 5] Because of this synthesis of oral and written communication in Paul's approach, it is impossible to separate his use of the written medium from his use of oral rhetoric. Our analysis must take a balanced approach of considering the impact of the medium, his rhetorical methods for navigating relational difficulties, and his theological positions regarding group dynamics.

---

[1] The discussion of sacraments will focus primarily on the Lord's supper because the practice of baptism, while assumed in these letters (see 1 Cor 10:1–2, 15:29), is not broadly discussed.

[2] Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*, 12.3.1994 edition. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 76.

[3] Ibid., 35–36.

[4] Ibid., 38.

[5] In fact, many scholars conclude that Phoebe was the messenger for Paul's letter to the church in Rome (Rom 16:1–2) and thus was deeply involved with the interpretation of that letter. For more on this, see Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *When in Romans: An Invitation to Linger with the Gospel According to Paul* (Baker Academic, 2016), 5–9.

All of this must be understood within the social context of the church in first-century Corinth before we can interpret it into the twenty-first century context. We will examine the concept of Christian cruciformity in his communication with the Corinthians, a concept which also pervades Paul's letters to other churches, as well as Paul's emphasis on the wisdom of God as a specific message tailored to the believers in Corinth.

The Potential of the Church

When the apostle Paul looked at the city of Corinth, he saw a place of incredible potential for believers to embody the cruciform gospel of Christ. When he wrote to the church there, he was not doing so as an outsider to the community. He had been involved in the church from its very beginning; he saw them as his family, repeatedly referring to the members of its community as "brothers and sisters" and considering himself the "father" of the community.[6] According to the account in the book of Acts, Paul lived in Corinth for eighteen months as he founded the church there, actively shaping its community and theological development while he worked as a tentmaker to support his ministry (Acts 18:1–4, 11).

At the time that Paul was in Corinth, around 51 CE, the city was a young, vibrant place of economic opportunity and, as N. T. Wright describes, was "excessively proud of its *Romanitas*, it's 'Romanness.'"[7] About two hundred years before, the city had been destroyed by a Roman army and had lain desolate for over a hundred years; in 44 BCE, because of the city's location along an important shipping trade route, Julius Caesar had made it a Roman colony and imported freed slaves and other eager members of lower classes to populate it.[8] Over the next few generations, the city flourished under the ambitions of its inhabitants, who quickly formed a fluid social stratification that was somewhat unique in the Roman world—there was a thriving upper

---

[6] For example, see 2 Cor 11:2. In Paul's earlier letter to the church in Thessalonica, he explicitly referred to himself as the "father" of that community. Although he did not make the claim as explicitly in his letters to the Corinthians, it is likely that he saw himself in the same capacity. James W. Thompson, *The Church According to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ* (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014), 43–46.

[7] N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018), 211.

[8] Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters*, Second Edition. (Eerdmans, 2016), 274–275.

class, as well as a significant lower class who were, in spite of their economic status, offered opportunities to rise in the city's social hierarchy.[9]

The concepts of honor and shame carried deep social meaning in the first-century world, because they were the cornerstones of one's social identity. Honor was the currency of public life. Bruce J. Malina, in his seminal study of the cultural anthropology of the New Testament world, describes honor in this way: "Honor is the value of a person in his or her own eyes… *plus* that person's value in the eyes of his or her social group. Honor is a claim to worth along with the social acknowledgment of worth."[10]

Within those bounds of the honor-shame system, though, the city's denizens had a seemingly unlimited potential for social mobility, and this capacity led them to form social and trade-based associations (called *koinon*) to promote their own self-interests. For the inhabitants of Corinth, just as in the rest of the first-century Roman world, a person's self-identity was formed through the groups and classes in which they were members.[11] For most Corinthians, these groups were divided along social strata; Paul's task in shaping the church, then, was to break them away from this cultural expectation and encourage believers to form their group identity, their *koinonia*, not around social honor, but around the shamefulness of submission to the cross of Christ.

Unity in the Cross (1 Cor 1:18–31)

From the beginning of his letter, Paul asserted that the potential of the Corinthian church was connected to its willingness to assume a posture of cruciformity to one another. After Paul left Corinth, the church quickly became divided into "parties" based on which apostle each party chose to follow—these factions mimicked the group segmentation of the greater Corinthian society. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians was written to correct this division within the community, a point he made clearly within the first few verses of the letter: "Now I appeal to

---

[9] Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Kindle Edition. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), location 251.

[10] Malina, Bruce J. *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. 3rd edition. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, 30.

[11] Gorman, 12–13, 21.

you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose" (1:10).[12]

Paul urged them to be unified amongst themselves and, to discourage factions within their group, he established a clear distinctive between insiders and outsiders of the group. Insiders were those who understood the wisdom of God, and outsiders were those who thought God's ways foolish. By giving the Corinthians an external group from which to distinguish themselves, Paul made it possible for them to rally around a shared value that could transform their self-identity[13]: the willful obedience of the Messiah to be crucified.

He wrote that the wisdom of God was on full display in Jesus' crucifixion—the punishment that was Rome's method of humiliating political dissidents[14]—and that the cross was not simply something Jesus *did* for humanity in the past tense, as if the church was a passive recipient of its freedom, but that it was a posture into which Christ *called the church to participate*, to offer their lives in a continual overpowering of death.[15]

This idea was nonsense to the world because it asserted that the path to life was through constantly following Christ's willing subjection to the way of death, trusting in the power of God for resurrection. For Judeans,[16] this was foolishness because their boundary markers were formed by adherence to their Scriptures, and many of them waited expectantly for a conquering warrior like King David to deliver them from the heathen Roman government.[17] For Greeks, this was foolishness because their identity was formed on the basis of their social and philosophical

---

[12] All Scripture quotations are from the NRSV unless noted otherwise.

[13] This is a common method for developing group identity. For more, including how this group identity functions in individualistic cultures like our own, see Michael A. Hogg and Scott Tindale, eds., *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Group Processes*, 1st edition. (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 319–325.

[14] Hays, 803.

[15] Michael J. Gorman summarizes Paul's gospel in two words: participation and transformation. This understanding of Pauline Christianity is a fundamental part of my interpretation of the letters to the Corinthians. For more on this, see Gorman, 140–160.

[16] The term "Jews" as a reference to the people of Israel was not used at the time of Paul's writing, so to avoid anachronism, I use "Judeans" here instead.

[17] J. Ayodeji Adewuya, *Holiness and Community in 2 Cor 6:147:1: Paul's View of Communal Holiness in the Corinthian Correspondence* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2011), 46–49.

ascendance, and they lived in constant pursuit of greater honor. The wisdom of God did not make sense within the context of the world's priorities.

Paul's point was not that followers of Christ necessarily needed to proceed to a physical death as Christ had done, but that they were to find their identity, their boasting (v. 29), in the Lord (v. 31), rather than in any human accomplishments. In verses 27–28, he reinforced this idea by making an intertextual allusion to Jer 9:23–24,[18] a Hebrew prophecy that Walter Brueggemann calls a "triad of bad bragging" which contrasts the wisdom of the wise with the delight of YHWH. Brueggemann diagrams the prophecy in this way:

Do not let the wise boast of their *wisdom*.
Do not let the mighty boast of their *might*.
Do not let the wealthy boast of their *wealth*.

Brag in *steadfast love*.
Brag in *justice*.
Brag in *righteousness*.[19]

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, creatively reinterpreted Jeremiah's triads, challenging the believers to embrace an alternative reality to the wisdom of the world—a complete reorientation of priorities centered around rejecting the accumulation of power and embodying faithfulness to God above all else. With this orientation, the Corinthians could not form their group identities around apostolic leadership, rhetorical proficiency, or other measures of social status; their only boast could be in Christ, and him crucified. For Paul, then, the reimagined prophetic triad was shaped like this:

God chose the foolish to shame the *wise* (according to the world).
God chose the weak to shame the *strong* (mighty).
God chose the low and despised to reduce to nothing *the things that are exalted*.

Christ became *righteousness*.
Christ became *sanctification*.
Christ became *redemption*.

---

[18] Gail R O'Day, "Jeremiah 9:22-23 and 1 Corinthians 1:26-31: A Study in Intertextuality," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109, no. 2 (1990): 259–267.

[19] Walter Brueggemann, "Bragging about the Right Stuff," *Journal for Preachers* 26, no. 4 (2003): 27–32.

In this way, the Corinthians were to find the wisdom of God in God's perfect righteousness, just sanctification, and loving redemption, which is to say that they were to find their group identity in participation in the humility, weakness, and love of Christ's crucifixion. In his call to unity, Paul did not encourage the believers to unite behind the truth of his own doctrine, the strength of his arguments, or the power of his charisma, because those things were all shadows of the wisdom of the world. While the world sought power, status, and wealth, they were to unite around their shared participation in self-giving weakness that trusted in God's faithfulness to transform death into resurrection life.

The Cruciform Mission (2 Cor 5:14–21)

The mission of the church, then, is to live into that call of participation in the cross of Christ. Paul most likely wrote his second letter to the Corinthians a year or more after his first letter,[20] and his relationship with the church had deteriorated in the meantime. Whereas the theme of 1 Corinthians was unity within the church (reconciliation with one another), Paul's theme in 2 Corinthians was reconciliation between himself and the church.[21] This focus was highlighted in 5:14–21, where Paul discussed his motivation for pursuing reconciliation— namely, he was compelled by the love of Christ as a model for "the ministry of reconciliation" (v. 18).

Building on his previous letter,[22] where he had developed the idea that the wisdom of God was based in God's perfect righteousness, just sanctification, and loving redemption, Paul now expanded the discussion to include the call of believers to embody God's wisdom in their relationships with the world. According to Paul, Christ "died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them" (v. 15). Michael J. Gorman describes these verses in 2 Corinthians as "Paul's most fundamental expression for this

---

[20] Witherington, 351–352.

[21] Ibid., 396.

[22] For the sake of simplicity, I refer to 1 and 2 Corinthians as Paul's two letters to the church in Corinth, but Paul wrote at least one or two other letters to the Corinthians which have been lost (see, for example, 1 Cor 5:9). In addition, some scholars believe that 2 Corinthians is an editorial compilation of several letters.

participatory life [in the mission of God] that is, in fact, salvation itself."[23] He further summarized this mission, saying,

> ...it is God's way of bringing about a seismic shift in the story of the world…. The God-given commission for the community of the new creation is to embody the saving justice of God in the world—to incarnate it, so to speak—in such a way that the message of God's reconciliation in Christ is made visible in the midst of the world's alienation. This entails a community that practices love, mercy, and forgiveness within the community toward outsiders.[24]

The cosmic nature of this charge should not be missed. It was not simply a reconciliation between God and the church, or between God and individual believers; Christ's death and resurrection accomplished reconciliation for the whole world. Witherington writes, "Christ died for the sins of the world, not merely the elect…. Christ died so that all those who believe in him might live for him, patterning their lives on his."[25] The act of being transformed into God's righteousness—accomplished through the reorientation of their priorities to align in self-giving faithfulness to the cross of Christ—was in itself a missional act[26] because it communicated the priorities of God to the world. Each act of reconciliation was an incarnation of the Spirit-empowered movement of turning death into resurrection life.

Because of the cosmic scope of God's reconciliation through Christ, the task of the believers was to "regard no one from a human point of view" (v. 16). In his first letter, Paul created a group distinction between believers and unbelievers, but here Paul challenged the church in Corinth to see the world—those outside their Christian community—as equals under the reconciling event of Christ's death.

---

[23] Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2015), 23.

[24] Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 364.

[25] Witherington, 394.

[26] Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 33.

Thus, as the believers lived their faith within their daily lives, they were to seek to win unbelievers to Christ[27] not by condescending to them or rhetorically debating them (those acts would be products of the world's wisdom), but by being ambassadors of Christ, demonstrating the transformed nature, the new creation, that came from God.[28] To be effective ministers of this reconciliation, the believers needed to ensure that they themselves were reconciled to God, and that they were righteous in their faithfulness to the wisdom of God.

The Structure of the Church

The potential of the church we have just outlined was not one that Paul believed would happen as a natural by-product of their existing together; after all, he wrote the letters because the church had failed to live up to the expectations he had for their community. Indeed, the majority of the text in these letters was devoted to addressing specific instances of misconduct or poor decision-making. A full consideration of Paul's advice is beyond the scope of our discussion, but we will consider two core components of the life of their church: their practice of worship in the Lord's Supper and the structure of their leadership as members of a body.

Sacramental Worship (1 Cor 11:17–34)

Paul had grave concerns about the ways in which the Corinthians were engaging in worship. He was concerned they were presenting themselves—as a corporate body—unworthily before God (11:29–30). Paul wrote about the gravity of this situation in regards to the way they came together to participate in the Lord's Supper.

The problem was that, when they came together as a church to eat and drink in the name of the Lord, they divided themselves along socioeconomic lines. Witherington notes, "the social stratification of the congregation was overemphasized and exacerbated. A serious division between haves and have-nots was thus threatening the fragile unity of the Corinthian Christian

---

[27] This evangelistic emphasis was a mostly implicit part of Paul's letters to the Corinthians, but it was clearly a part of Paul's vision of the church. For example, see 1 Cor 9:19–22.

[28] Raymond F. Collins, *Second Corinthians (Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament)* (Baker Books, 2013), 124.

community."[29] Those who were well-off arrived earlier to the meal than those who were poorer; the wealthy picked the best food, started drinking early, and gave the leftovers (if any remained) to the latecomers from lower social classes.[30]

This kind of hierarchy was common in Greco-Roman cultic meals and celebrations,[31] but Paul argued that such division had no place in a community that was bonded over the cross of Christ. The pride of the wealthy—and the resultant humiliation of those who had nothing—was not a remembrance of Christ, but was a demonstration of "contempt for the church of God" (v. 22). A community properly centered in cruciformity could only participate in the Lord's Supper as equals with one another; any practice of the Eucharist that favored some over others was a failure to recognize the cross as an act of transformation—an act of reconciliation—for all. As a proclamation of "the Lord's death" (v. 26), it was to be not simply a *remembrance* of the cross, but an *act of embodiment* wherein the believers were to participate in the cross by denying their own privileges to treat all as equals. Bearers of the cross of Christ could not wield the Lord's Supper, or any other element of their worship, as an instrument of division against those for whom Christ had died.[32]

Thus, when Paul said that whoever participated in the Supper "in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord" (v. 27) and discussed "all who eat and drink without discerning the body" (v. 29), he was using the term "body" in a way that spoke to the identity of the church as the body of Christ,[33] a foreshadowing of the full metaphor he would detail in the next chapter (to which we will turn shortly).

Indeed, Paul's purpose for discussing the Lord's Supper in this passage was not to offer a doctrine of Eucharist, but to remind the Corinthians that their identity as followers of Christ compelled them to treat their worship as a sacramental embodiment of the community of God, an opportunity for them to abandon the social stratification of their culture and embrace their shared

---

[29] Witherington, 241.

[30] James W. Thompson, *The Church According to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ* (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014), 88.

[31] Hays, 4253.

[32] Hays, 4314.

[33] Witherington, 251–252.

identity in Christ.[34] Witherington describes this sacredness of the community, saying, "Paul does not talk about sacred buildings, but he does talk about holy persons and holy occasions when such people gather for worship and fellowship."[35]

The sacramentality of Christian worship, then, was centered on the communion—the community—of the believers. The ritual of the supper was of secondary importance to the worthiness of the body, a metaphor we may now consider more fully.

Leadership and the Call of the Body (1 Cor 12:12–31)

In this portion of his letter, Paul described the church as members of a body. It was not uncommon in Greek and other ancient discourse to craft a social argument around the idea of a body, but it was typically used as a model for power, as an argument that the lesser members (such as the feet) should submit to the authority of the more influential members (such as the head or the heart).[36] Paul turned that rhetoric on its head, asserting that all the parts of the body needed one another—a member could not be a part of the body if removed from the body[37]—and that the "honorable" (honor-filled) parts were no greater than the "less honorable" (shame-filled) ones (vv. 23–24).

Paul, in his letter, taught the Corinthian believers to count all of its members as honorable, as worthy of respect, and his justification was that it was God who had "so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member" (v. 24). Robert J. Banks describes the use of gifts within Pauline communities, saying, "Distinctions no longer provided a way to maintain an advantage over others. Instead they provided the basis for serving others."[38] Paul's metaphor therefore achieved two simultaneous goals: it was first a recognition that each believer had a unique and vital contribution to the functioning of the body, and was also a call for them to honor one another in their diversity—it was, as Witherington noted, "both diversity in unity and

---

[34] Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 320–322.

[35] Witherington, 242

[36] Ibid., 253–254.

[37] Adewuya, 173–174.

[38] Robert J. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting*, Revised edition. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 1994), 127.

unity in diversity."[39] This call for honor was a call for them to value one another and empathize with one another in the understanding that God had placed in each one of them a special gift and an indispensable contribution to the community.

In one sense, we might argue that Paul called for an upside-down form of leadership wherein the ones in a position of authority within the body—those who might be considered clergy today—were to be engaged in self-giving service to other members of the body. In his two letters to the Corinthians, though, Paul did not truly recognize any kind of special spiritual authority for individual leaders within the body. He did not describe roles for clergy or special responsibilities for the administration of baptism, the Lord's Supper, or other sacred duties in any of his surviving correspondence with the Corinthians.[40] Instead, he spoke only of the importance of service as a demonstration that they understood their corporate value as the body of Christ.[41] Banks points it out this way: "Paul is not using 'servant' instead of 'leadership' language to highlight inferior as opposed to superior tasks or positions. He uses it to highlight the dependent character of the work and responsibility in contrast with the independent stance that often goes with leadership."[42] Their service to one another was ordained as itself an act of worship, which is to say that every believer needed to take leadership in the work of service—for anyone to be disengaged was to harm the whole body.

In his recognition of the individuality of gifts and the way they were brought together in the Spirit as a community, Paul returned them to the corporate unity of the Lord's Supper, the ministry of reconciliation, and the cruciformity of their identity in Christ.

Handling Conflict in the Church

At times, the church in Corinth failed to live up to the cruciform identity to which they had been called, and Paul was not blind to that reality. When they stumbled, he challenged them

---

[39] Witherington, 254.

[40] Thompson, 221.

[41] Paul often used the Greek word *diakonoi*, which is often translated as "deacon" and in churches today has become a term for leadership within the church. This word is sometimes alternatively translated as "servant," which better connotes its true meaning to most modern readers.

[42] Banks, 132.

to seek the guidance of the Spirit of God and to measure success not by their accumulation of honor, but by their humility and empathy for one another.

The Spirit-Led Path to Maturity (1 Cor 2:6–3:3)

The church in Corinth seems to have developed a hierarchy of spirituality in which some believers saw themselves as more spiritually advanced than others. This idea was raised in 2:6 with Paul's discussion of what it means to be "mature" (*teleioi*), and the Corinthians viewed their maturity as a contrast to the immaturity, or infancy (*npioi*) of others in their community.[43] They found their markers of maturity in their intellect, their rhetorical skills, and their social status, because those were the cultural norms for measuring success—they gained honor through the means of their associations and their ability to debate with others.[44]

In this part of his letter, Paul rebuked the Corinthians for their stance—not by completely repudiating the idea that believers could be at different levels of maturity,[45] but by arguing that the knowledge of God was given by the Spirit of God and was demonstrated by their active participation in taking up the cross of Christ. As Gorman notes,

> Paul is not affirming two "levels" of Christian maturity, the "carnal," or "fleshly," and the "spiritual." Rather, he is labeling a certain kind of so-called spiritual maturity fraudulent, fleshly, and determined by worldly standards…. Now, for believers, failure to identify Christ crucified as the wisdom of God—with all the implications of that identification—reveals the absence of wisdom and of the Spirit, despite any and all claims to the contrary.[46]

Paul called the Corinthian believers to embrace their ecclesial identity in the reoriented wisdom of God, distinct from the wisdom of the world, where their mission was to be reconciled to one another as Christ had reconciled them with God. He expected them to demolish and reconstruct their culturally-defined social stratifications. He called them to abandon their pursuit

---

[43] Hays, 1055.

[44] Witherington, 43–45.

[45] Witherington, 122.

[46] Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 289.

of individualistic honor and seek instead to serve one another, considering every member of the body as an integral part of the community. This cruciformity could not be accomplished solely by human effort (2:11, 14), but could only be brought about by the revelation of the Spirit (2:12, 13). Thus, for Paul, the elevation of knowledge and status were not markers of maturity, but of immaturity; the proper mark of a mature believer was the presence and abundance of self-giving love in their lives.[47]

Yet Paul accused them of not living up to this standard. After he had developed this definition of Christian maturity, Paul boldly confronted them on their own spiritual infancy, criticizing them for still being "people of the flesh" (3:1) even after four or five years of opportunities for spiritual growth.[48] It was time for them to take the knowledge they had gained *of God* and put it into action *through the Spirit* in the way they related to one another. For Paul, the embodiment of love within their community was the proof of a mature faith.

Faithfulness to the Wisdom of God (2 Cor 11:1–15)

To this point, over the course of the two letters, Paul had used many examples and strategies to teach them that the heart of the good news of Christ was found in a posture of humble cruciformity and in the transformation of their community. As he brought his instructions to a close, though, he turned to address the problem of false teachers who would lead the Corinthians astray.

Paul said that these so-called "super-apostles" (11:5) may have used words that sounded like the gospel of Christ, but their prideful actions did not match the lifestyle that Paul himself embodied, and thus their lived proclamations were in opposition to the wisdom of God (v. 13).[49] In verse 4, Paul accused them of proclaiming "another Jesus." This was the only instance in all of Paul's writings where he referred to Jesus without the messianic title of "Christ"—when he

---

[47] This should not be interpreted as anti-intellectualism on the part of Paul, for it was not the knowledge itself that Paul considered immaturity, but the elevation of status *based on* knowledge and rhetorical skill. Banks notes, "Although for [Paul] love surpasses knowledge, ...only knowledge can introduce us to love and reveal its full dimensions. Love must be informed by knowledge and its proper application discerned for there to be a right evaluation of what is the most loving course of action." Banks, 72.

[48] Witherington, 132.

[49] Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 379.

referred to the Lord by name, he tended to prefer "Jesus Christ," which balanced both the humanness and the divinity of the Messiah, so this emphasis on Jesus' humanity is notable. Raymond F. Collins surmises that "Paul's use of the name Jesus without further qualification may imply that the interlopers are proclaiming an exalted Christ, with little or no reference to his suffering and death."[50] This kind of one-dimensional depiction of the Messiah was unacceptable for Paul, because the suffering Christ was the model that the believers were called to emulate in their own lives.

Paul saw himself as the father of the church in Corinth—the father of the bride of Christ (v. 2), as it were—but he was concerned that the believers had tarnished their purity by heeding the vain, self-indulgent teachings of the super-apostles. To softly chastise the Corinthians for being taken in by those false teachers, Paul used self-deprecating irony as a rhetorical device.[51] This allowed him to soften his criticism of the believers themselves so they were able to accept it, yet it still gave him the ability to definitively make his point and utterly condemn the super-apostles. Whereas the super-apostles achieved some measure of success as defined by the world—they had earned a position of honor—in their speaking and teaching, Paul had come in a better way: as a servant who had consistently demonstrated an attitude of humility. In Greco-Roman philosophy, humility was not seen as a virtue, but as a vice associated with the mentality and social status of a slave.[52] Paul turned the characteristic of lowliness on its head, arguing that humility was in fact an embodiment of the wisdom of God.

The faithful witness of the believers in Corinth, like the faithful witness of Paul himself in these verses, was to follow in the cruciform path of Christ, humbling themselves as a community and lovingly submitting themselves in service to the others in the body. There was to be no boasting in status, maturity, or knowledge (as the super-apostles had done), but only in the unity that came through their group identification with the self-giving weakness of the cross.

---

[50] Collins, 215.

[51] Witherington has noted that "perhaps the most important feature of this passage is its irony…. This passage is incomprehensible unless one recognizes that while Paul is boasting, it is all clearly tongue-in-cheek." For more on this, see Witherington, 443–444.

[52] Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment: Decision Making in the Church*, Subsequent edition. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 130.

Now that we have developed this sketch of Paul's concept of ecclesial community, we may examine how that ecclesiology can inform our development of a digital church.

Chapter 4: Translating Paul's Ecclesiology to a Social Media Context

Paul communicated with the church in Corinth through letters, the technological medium of his day, and by examining his usage of it, we can uncover guidance for our use of digital media today—the technological medium we use for distance communication—to foster genuine ecclesial community. The comparison of these two tools is imperfect—the world is vastly different than it was in the first century and the media themselves are not entirely analogous—so to find guidelines in Paul's use of media, we cannot directly transpose his writings into our own digital world; we must work to translate his methods, message, and strategies into our own context. In the previous chapter, we sought to understand Paul's concept of church as developed in his correspondence with the Corinthians, and in this chapter we will seek to translate that concept into a digital context.

We will begin by considering the ways in which the potential of the digital world can be harnessed within an online ecclesiology, then we will look at the modes and structures of gathering online, and will conclude by identifying some of the dangers of an online church and attempting to create boundaries to mitigate them.

Harnessing Potential

Unity Requires Diversity

Paul's primary concern for the church in Corinth was that they be unified, but that unity was one found in submission to the cross of Christ rather than in any kind of economic, social, or political uniformity. Throughout his communication with the church, Paul did not erase the distinctive beliefs and statuses of different believers, but affirmed the necessity and sacredness of diversity within them, as demonstrated in the metaphor of body in 1 Cor 12:12–31. Natalie K. Watson summarized this idea as she outlined the basics of a feminist ecclesiology:

> ...in the context of Christian theology and praxis this difference [in human beings] cannot be the basis for exclusion or marginalization but is rather a factor of enrichment for the

church…. Theologically such an affirmation of difference and particularity must be grounded in an understanding of Christ which describes Christ not only as the guarantee of the unity of the church, but also prevents such unity from being gained only at the price of diversity.[1]

Within our social media platforms today, which drive us to divide our "friends" into an antagonistic binary—those who think like us, and those who do not think like us—a digital ecclesiology must actively resist the tendency to reduce participants into either/or factions. Paul's development of the wisdom of God as an identity marker is helpful here, because it orients the church's identity around a posture of participation in the lowliness, weakness, and love of Christ's crucifixion, rather than any kind of particular doctrinal distinction, social status or, as is prevalent in social media today, political association.

The cruciformity that we explored in the previous chapter must be especially emphasized within the day-to-day existence of an online community because it is so at odds with the way social media users are accustomed to existing online. From the beginning of the group's formation, the humility and self-giving of cruciformity should be such a norm in the life and discussions of the community that it is readily identifiable as the attitude that binds the community together—that is to say that it ought to be both spoken and modeled by each member of the group, establishing a feedback loop that reinforces the group behavior.[2]

Creating this kind of culture is, of course, far easier to write about than to achieve; indeed, we might consider this challenge to be the penultimate task of Christian community—after all, that is precisely the challenge to which Paul found himself continually returning in his relationship with the Corinthians. The local church has always had some kind of natural limitations to its diversity. For example, the church in Corinth was basically limited to those who lived within the urban, Hellenized context of the city so, while it was diverse in its philosophical, religious, and economic representation, it likely did not have many believers who lived in

---

[1] Natalie K. Watson, *Introducing Feminist Ecclesiology*, Limited edition. (Wipf & Stock Pub, 2008), 49.

[2] Social psychologists have studied the influence of group norms on the formation of both group and individual attitudes. For more on this, see Michael A. Hogg and Scott Tindale, eds., *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Group Processes*, 1st edition. (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 259–278.

agrarian or rural cultural contexts.[3] Douglas Estes, in his book *SimChurch,* writes that, "While *geography* forces some degree of heterogeneity, the virtual world strongly encourages *ideological* homogeneity"[4] (emphasis added). In the social media world today, where geography is not a restriction, we naturally become divided into homogeneous in-groups and out-groups based on political stances and social groupings—divisions which are irreconcilable with Paul's understanding of diversity in ecclesial formation.

In an online ecclesial community, we must be particularly vigilant regarding the tendency of social media platforms to algorithmically segment users into isolated groups. During their participation in the Lord's Supper, the Corinthian church had allowed themselves to be divided into economic strata because this type of stratification at cultic meals was the norm in their society—this division had likely not been something they had sought, but had happened naturally based on their cultural assumptions. Paul's call to be a cruciform community meant that such social distinctions in their worship needed to be *actively* resisted. In the same way, our churches today cannot allow cultural or technological norms to go uncontested when they result in social division. We must continually examine our communities to see whether any kind of homogeneity has taken root, and we must structure our worship in such a way that those with less social power—the poor and marginalized—have equal seats at the table. Anything less is, according to Paul, not Christian worship.

Despite its challenges regarding the posture of cruciformity, the digital world is nonetheless uniquely suited to facilitating this kind of diversity in unity. Approximately ninety percent of the adult population in the United States had access to the internet in 2018[5] and, as mentioned previously, about two-thirds of adults are already using social media platforms.[6] While there are still portions of the population who are underserved in their access to high speed

---

[3] David A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, Ill. : Leicester, England: IVP Academic, 2004), 563.

[4] Douglas Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World*, Kindle. (Zondervan, 2009), 214.

[5] "Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet," *Pew Research Center*, last modified February 5, 2018, accessed October 6, 2018, http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/.

[6] Jacob Poushter, Caldwell Bishop, and Hanyu Chwe, "Social Media Use Continues to Rise in Developing Countries but Plateaus Across Developed Ones," *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project*, June 19, 2018, accessed September 13, 2018, http://www.pewglobal.org/2018/06/19/social-media-use-continues-to-rise-in-developing-countries-but-plateaus-across-developed-ones/.

internet, particularly in rural communities,[7] there is no other community-minded medium in the nation with such ubiquitous access to a common resource.

The challenge, then, is to realize the potential given to us by the digital world: the potential to connect with one another in ways that do not isolate us within factions. An additional consideration in this task is the psychological reality that, as groups grow larger, humans are less able to adequately perceive the humanity of each member of the group. A community that seeks to be cruciform in its relationships with one another must be small enough to actually *have* relationships with one another, so the size of a particular gathering should be limited, rather than attempting to congregate hundreds or thousands of people into one community.[8] Describing the church in Corinth, David A. deSilva speculated that it was probably made up of around fifty members when everyone gathered together, but noted that they likely met in smaller "cell groups" that met in the houses of individuals within the community.[9] While the particular size of the Corinthian church did not likely have a self-imposed limit for the purpose of developing authentic relationships in the groups, we may embrace the idea that a larger worship community can be supported by the regular meeting of smaller cells.[10]

Since the digital world makes it so easy to enter and exit groups, cells where membership is self-selected tend to devolve into homogeneity, so an online ecclesiastical body must have a way to filter persons into groups characterized by unity in diversity, rather than the homogeneity that happens so naturally. One possibility would be to use temporal availability as a limiting factor so that individuals who are able to meet at a given time are grouped together, regardless of their demographic profile. Since a person's schedule is not directly connected to polemical or hierarchical associations, organizing cells around the availability of participants during certain

---

[7] Sharon Strover, "Reaching Rural America with Broadband Internet Service," *The Conversation*, accessed October 6, 2018, http://theconversation.com/reaching-rural-america-with-broadband-internet-service-82488.

[8] Research on social groups has shown that larger groups result in lower rates of participation and a reduced group identity around shared norms. In addition, larger groups come to rely more heavily on the charisma and leadership of a single person rather than distributing leadership among group members. For a more full discussion of this research, see Hogg and Tindale, 175–176.

[9] deSilva, 562.

[10] This idea is nothing new for most churches that meet in a physical context—it mirrors the traditional model where a congregational church service is held in addition to Sunday School classes or small group meetings. Many churches that broadcast their worship services online, though, provide no smaller group context for their online community.

days and times might, to some extent, foster diversity in group participants. Even this, though, ought to be approached cautiously, because people living in poverty often have more limited and variable schedules,[11] so temporal organization of cell groups, if embraced without care and some flexibility, could lead to the same socio-economic divisions that Paul condemned in the Corinthian church's practice of the Lord's Supper.

Connectivity Enhances the Mission

Once a cell has formed, the power of the digital context begins to emerge. Social media itself serves to level many the disparities between different economic and social classes, because individuals share equal access to the platform. This is evidenced in the rise of social justice movements like #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and many others where the voices of those on the margins have been able to effect real change in our society. Because many of the traditional markers of status (for example, clothes and cars) are minimized within digital communication, social media has become a compelling tool for sharing stories and information across the boundaries of class and status.

In addition, the technological tools of social media allow groups of people to be in dialogue and relationship with one another on a continual, non-stop basis, sharing the powerful moments of life in real time. Whenever there is a need, a celebration, or a question, it can be raised within the group at any time and group members can respond immediately. Games and leisurely activities can be shared online throughout the day. The development of group video chat platforms—systems for multidirectional video conversations, rather than one-directional broadcasts of video content—as a legitimate opportunity for group conversations[12] has enhanced the capacity for immediate responsiveness even further and has created the potential for digital media to become even more relationally intimate for groups.

One of the key dangers of social media is the tendency for users to dehumanize the people on the other end of the screen, but communicating via video provides key markers of

---

[11] Jason R. Williams, Yuta J. Masuda, and Heather Tallis, "A Measure Whose Time Has Come: Formalizing Time Poverty," *Social Indicators Research* 128, no. 1 (August 1, 2016): 265–283.

[12] Platforms like Zoom, Facebook Messenger, Apple's Group Facetime, Google Hangouts, Slack, and Microsoft Skype allow for groups of people to have real-time video conversations.

humanity that discourage such dehumanization—namely, by showing the facial expressions of the other users and their instinctive, unfiltered reactions to the conversations, the person on the other side of the screen is shown to be a real person, as opposed to the lifelessness of an avatar or a screen name.[13] Although there are still elements of humanness that are not communicated through the digital medium, such as smell and feel, the availability of video as a multidirectional communication tool has profound implications for the ways in which we can build community through small cells of people using digital channels, and it ought to be utilized as often as possible.

That is not to suggest that there are no complexities to meeting needs within a digital context. The Christian call to service within and beyond the body of believers is one of the most difficult calls to achieve online. We should not underestimate the importance of counsel and other methods of dialogical ministry, for which digital media can serve as an enhancement, but there are bodily needs that are more difficult to address.

One of the easiest ways to conceive of meeting physical needs from a distance is for group members to purchase services from local vendors. For example, if a person is in need of an emergency meal, a fellow group member could order a pizza to be delivered to their house. This approach, though, lends itself to the formation of an intra-group economic hierarchy; if the only viable way to meet needs is by spending money, that sets up an order in which the wealthier members of the group become the benefactors of the poorer members.[14] One potential remedy to this problem could be to channel all monetary gifts through a common discretionary fund to alleviate some of the perception of financial imbalances between group members, although it would also introduce additional administrative complexities to provide appropriate financial

---

[13] McLuhan would describe this transition in digital media as going from a "cold" medium (marked by the limited information available through textual or photographic discourse) to a "hot" medium (marked by an influx of information that provides contextual clues that must be interpreted by the receiver). The lack of information in a "cold" medium requires participation, or interpretation, by the receiver, whereas the density of information in a "hot" medium requires less interpretation, thereby allowing the intended message of the speaker to come through more clearly. For our purposes, this means that the receiver projects fewer of her own fears and assumptions upon the speaker. For more on "cold" and "hot" media, see Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man : Critical Edition*, ed. W. Terrence Gordon, Critical Edition. (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2003), 29–50.

[14] Strictly speaking, the existence of benefactors within ecclesial communities was not foreign to Paul; he recognized a variety of benefactors throughout his letters to various churches. While he did not prohibit such gifts in his letters to the Corinthians, he did call for the church to reject economic distinctions within their group dynamics. So the danger for us is not in the existence of benefactors in our groups, but in the divisions such benefaction could cause.

accountability. In addition, because we live in a capitalistic society where the fundamental status symbol is money, it would likely be difficult to re-shape cultural norms to equalize the perceived value of non-financial contributions with those of the financial ones, so this may not be an adequate solution for many groups.

There are alternative ways to think about serving one another in an online context. First would be to consider the myriad gifts that different members are able to contribute. In Paul's understanding of the church as the body of Christ, he demonstrates that each part of the body has a different and necessary contribution to the function of the whole. Similarly, each individual in an online community has a valuable contribution to make. For some, that may mean giving financially, but others may contribute technological assistance, prayer and counsel, or coordination of group activities. Another method of contribution would be to utilize extended social networks beyond the boundaries of the online ecclesial community. If a member of the church needs help that cannot be met virtually, fellow church members could recruit assistance from their broader social media connections—with the vastness of online networks today, there is a good chance that these extended networks have contacts in the geographic location of the need and would be able to connect the person in need with one or more helpful resources.

Through these methods, as well as the continuing development of new ways of integrating digital technology into the physical world, our society has an incredible potential to create authentic digital communities. Similar groups are already forming on nearly every social media channel, but most of them are shaped by their commitment to other causes such as neighborhood affiliations, shared traumas or experiences, and recreational activities. The foundation has already been laid for online communities that are genuine reflections of the cruciformity to which Paul called the church in Corinth. Let us turn now to examine the ways such an ecclesial community might be structured in order to foster groups that embody the wisdom of God in a digital context.

Establishing Expectations

Growing as Disciples into Leaders

For the church in Corinth, the Christian life was built around those small cell groups that met regularly in homes; similarly, a church that exists in a digital context must begin with small cell communities that meet regularly for fellowship and spiritual growth. The culture we have outlined for these cells is dramatically different than the broader social media culture, and members entering an online church for the first time will bring that old paradigm of social media with them into this new context. How might a digital church work to develop this posture of cruciformity and reconciliation within its new members, when that posture is so foreign to today's online experience?

Because the dangers of social media are such a ubiquitous part of our digital world, an online church needs a process whereby the church's standards of behavior and interaction are taught to new members. In the web industry, this is referred to as an "onboarding process"—an introduction to the key features and capabilities of a web interface. For the church, this onboarding process is not simply an overview of the technical components of the platform, but also a system for developing the posture of a disciple of Christ within this online context. The goal is to help the person to see themselves as a part of this digital community and to foster their growth into Christian maturity, not to indoctrinate them into any particular dogmatic positions, but to lead them into a Spirit-powered place of self-giving love.

This may be accomplished by creating an introductory group led by a seasoned member of the church; the class should meet for a fixed amount of time and, as it models the format of a standard group, should cover a variety of topics, including: how to use the technology, the basic tenets of the Christian faith, the ways in which this digital community is different from typical social media platforms, and the expectations the church has for its members. In addition, this introductory group should explore the particular giftings of each individual to better understand how the people might fit together. Upon completing the introductory group, the group members may be placed into existing cell groups or may form a new group of their own.[15]

---

[15] The experience of going through the introductory group will not only orient the group toward the mission and vision of the church, but will also help the group to form a cohesive group identity around that orientation and give them a shared experience that can be used as a catalyst for building relationships with one another.

Once a new group has formed, care should be taken that group hierarchy be avoided. Although individuals will necessarily have different roles in the group—one of which should be a group facilitator or moderator to serve as a point of contact for communication with the greater church body—leadership should be understood, as in Paul's letters to the Corinthians, as a position of humility and service to the body. The purpose of the group, after all, is the same as the mission of the church: the cruciformity of the community as a mission of reconciliation within the body and to the whole world. To that end, Letty M. Russell details an ecclesiastical structure that she calls "church in the round" wherein each person has equal voice and the church is continually attuned to the voices on the margins of society. In her model, "there are never too many leaders, for... power and leadership gifts multiply as they are shared and more and more persons become partners in communities of faith and struggle."[16] Russell's model of developing the gifts of the entire body fits well with Paul's description of gifts in 1 Cor 12 and ought to be embraced within our construction of a cell group.

A digital ecclesiology cannot begin and end with cell groups, though; it must also include a form of corporate worship.

Worship in Digital Relationships

Paul's consideration of the Lord's Supper can serve as a groundwork for our exploration of the structure of worship within a digital context. Many churches already broadcast their weekly worship through a live video stream to allow people around the world to tune into their worship service. This broadcast methodology is a significant first step toward a digital body of believers, but since it does nothing to foster a sense of community among online worshipers and, indeed, online worshipers are not able to meaningfully contribute to the life and function of the church, it cannot be considered a church body in and of itself. For Paul, each member had a purpose and was intrinsically valuable to the working of the whole (1 Cor 12:14–20).

An online worship service may be the foundation for a digital church community, but for it to function as a body, it must allow church members to be active participants in the experience.

---

[16] Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church*, 1st edition. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 56.

Estes argues that online worship is not truly participatory unless the online participants have the capacity to disrupt the service in some capacity, just as worshipers in a physical context could shout at the pastor to disrupt the service.[17] Such potential for disruption changes the participant's perception of having real presence in the space.

Some elements of the worship, like the music and the sermon, may be best distributed as broadcast video (either live or pre-recorded[18]) because of the current technological limitations of true synchronization between the people joining the online service[19] or because of the impracticality of a single presenter being present in many instances of online worship, but other elements are well-suited for online participation, such as times of group socialization, prayers, announcements, and perhaps even some sacramental practices. Video chat software is one way online worshipers can be called upon to lead these components of worship, but even without video chats, the immediacy of social media can be used to facilitate text-based conversations as online liturgy.

The acceptability of practicing sacraments online will likely vary depending on the sacramental perspectives of different Christian faith traditions. The Lord's Supper[20] provides an example of such varied perspectives. Some churches, like Saddleback Church, have been practicing communion online for years[21]; other groups, like the United Methodist Church, have tested the idea of online communion and are resistant to embracing it;[22] still others, like the

---

[17] Estes, 66–72.

[18] My own church relies on pre-recorded video to distribute our senior pastor's sermon from the primary campus of the church to our other regional locations.

[19] Even "live" video has a delay in it because of the latency of uploading, converting, and transmitting the video stream through the internet. My own attempts to synchronize music between group members, such as singing "happy birthday" to a friend, have had comical results.

[20] As mentioned previously, Paul does not significantly address baptism in his letters to the Corinthians, so it falls outside the scope of this conversation.

[21] Saddleback Church, "Take Communion Online with Us," accessed October 13, 2018, http://saddleback.com/archive/blog/internet-campus/2014/01/24/take-communion-online-with-us.

[22] United Methodist Communications, "What Is the United Methodist View of Online Communion?," *The United Methodist Church*, accessed October 13, 2018, http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/what-is-the-united-methodist-view-of-online-communion.

Roman Catholic Church, have denounced the practice altogether because "the physical presence of the faithful and the manifestation of his faults to the priest in person in indispensable."[23]

Yet when Paul chastised the Corinthians for their practice of the Lord's Supper, his rebuke was not to correct a procedural problem in their observance, but to correct their embodiment of the community of God. Paul was more concerned that their relationships with one another were not worthy of the table of the Lord than he was that they followed a particular ritual.[24] Eucharistic embodiment, for Paul, was found in the cruciform unity of their community. If that cruciform communion of believers can be embodied within a digital context—a context in which the members of the body are really present, but not physically present, with one another— then the sacramentality of the Eucharist need not be compromised by the physical distance between them.

Nonetheless, we must not neglect to address the intersections of the physical and the digital. Paul could not have conceived of a world where people who had never met could know each other as intimately as we can today; for him, relationships could only be embodied in physical form. On the other hand, most people in our society today could not conceive of a world in which there was no digital existence, yet the trajectory of our society is not toward a disambiguation of the digital world from the physical, but toward a synthesis of the two, and it is toward that synthesis that our attention will now turn.

Setting Boundaries

Handling Interpersonal Conflict

No community exists without conflict between its members, and the susceptibility of social media to dehumanization makes conflict even more common and more volatile in an

---

[23] Randy Kluver and Yanli Chen, "The Church of Fools: Virtual Ritual and Material Faith.," *Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 3, no. 1 (2008), accessed October 14, 2018, https://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/religions/article/view/391, 119.

[24] Letty Russell notes: "The church has been careful to say that it is God in Christ who makes the sacraments efficacious, and not the ones administering the sacrament or the community in which they happen. But at the same time it has fenced the table by requiring that only those ordained and authorized in a particular pattern officiate. As we have seen earlier, the requirement for right administration has become not a commitment to justice, and doing what is right, but a commitment to the 'right' religious institution in which salvation is located." Russell, 142.

online context. Throughout his letters to the church in Corinth, Paul demonstrated appropriate ways to confront conflict and challenge conduct that was contrary to the wisdom of God.

A complete examination of each instance of correction is beyond the scope of our current conversation, but we may say that he used a variety of rhetorical tools in different contexts—irony, sarcasm, self-deprecation, accusation, apologetics, and gentle reproach, to name a few[25]—as he sought to orient the church around the posture of cruciformity according to the wisdom of God, as we have discussed at greater length in the previous chapter. In the same way, we cannot identify one particular method of reproach and reconciliation that is likely to work in every situation; rather, we should acknowledge that the skills and judgment required to facilitate community in an online context are at least as broad and critical as they are in a physical context. Training in conflict resolution and the skills for having difficult conversations should be an integral and ongoing part of every member's discipleship journey and participation within the group. That requirement for training ought to be even more emphasized for those functioning as group moderators.

In addition, the tendency of social media to devolve into objectifying other users may be exacerbated by one-to-one private messaging as such messaging leads to a privatization of the community experience, creating sub-groups within the cell group in which individuals may spread rumors or sow dissension. Although there are legitimate uses for private messages between group members, most groups may find that public communication (communication that is available to be seen by the whole group) is best for fostering a sense of commitment to the community, and the transparency of this public communication allows for accountability within the group. Just as Paul's letters were read aloud to the entire community, shaping their identity as one body, so ought our digital communications to be primarily presented before the whole body. A commitment to openness in group dialogue is critical to the function of a "round table" form of ecclesiastical leadership.[26]

While openness within the group is a key to an online ecclesiology, that openness does not necessarily need to translate beyond the bounds of the group. Social media has created an

---

[25] Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*, 12.3.1994 edition. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 328.

[26] Russell, 24–27.

environment in which privacy is a constant concern.[27] On many platforms, open groups and conversations can be shared publicly out of the context of the group's discussions and with an intent to cause harm to the individual who originally posted, and such a distribution of private conversations (meant for the group members) is damaging to the integrity of the group. Even on social media platforms that allow for closed groups, malevolent individuals can take screenshots of text-based conversations and share them publicly. While there are instances where public groups make sense, particularly as an entry point for outsiders to engage with the church community, most of the cell groups ought to be private to protect the privacy of group members and the honesty of their conversations. Within a cell group, an individual ought to feel confident that they can share their struggles and questions without fear of reprisal.

With a proper posture and a constant attunement to flattening the hierarchical social positioning of group members, the digital context can be a healthy place for growth and community. It is vital, though, that this digital community not become a retreat from the physical world, but an extension of it.

Integration of the Digital and the Physical

It is tempting, particularly for technology enthusiasts, to fantasize about a world where one's entire life can be lived through a digital medium with no interaction with the physical, but that is not the trend that we actually see playing out before us. Instead, we see the digital world extending and supplementing our physical existence. In our consideration of an online church, we must similarly resist a displacement of the physical world in which the body is rooted and into which Christ was incarnated. Such an escapism is antithetical to the very mission of the church, because the church cannot work to reconcile the world to God if it is not present in the world. There are needs and realities that cannot be lived within a digital context, and a digital

---

[27] I exchanged messages with a friend on Twitter who uses @XianJaneway as an "anonymous" account—one that is disconnected from her real identity—to shield herself from the stalking and abusive behaviors of family members. When she created this anonymous account, she did not expect that she would develop a community of friends, but she has found herself surrounded by people who support her, even if they do not know her real name. She said that within the community of anonymous accounts, many have revealed their identities to one another and met together in person (even going on vacations together), and Twitter has been a source of lifelong friendships for her. Twitter has an entire subculture of anonymous accounts, and this is just one story of many where people have created anonymous identities and been surprised that their anonymity does not preclude them from experiencing authentic community.

ecclesiology must be self-conscious of this truth and actively discourage users from segmenting their lives into a binary where their only sense of community is found online. A digital church can function as an authentic community, but it cannot be a person's sole community.

In many ways, this challenge is no different than participation in local church communities. Some local congregations have developed an insular culture where individuals have no significant relationships with people outside the body of the church—they do not know their neighbors or coworkers, those people with whom they ought to be interacting on a daily basis. The dangers of such an insularity in the physical world are significant, but they are heightened even further if the isolation occurs online because it is so easy to shut off—or be shut off from—the digital world. It is neither possible nor desirable to live exclusively online.

Paul's letters to the Corinthians carry an analogy to this reality in that he did not *only* write to the church there, but also founded it *in person* and returned to visit with the believers there. The bodily presence of Paul in Corinth was important to him, and it ought to be important to us even as we develop a concept of an online church. We may examine this interaction between the physical and the digital in two ways: the daily existence of believers in their own geographical locations (which is outside the ecclesial body) and the occasional gathering of the digital church in a common physical space.

In a church member's daily life, she ought to be actively engaged with the world around her. Paul did not foster an environment in which the church in Corinth was isolated from the world, but recognized a fluidity of interaction between the church as a body and those outside the church (for example, see 1 Cor 14:16). An online church, therefore, should encourage believers to be full participants in the world in which they live, developing relationships with their neighbors, sharing life with friends, and sharing in the work of reconciling the world to God.

In addition to encouraging members to engage with the world, our model should create a space for online participants to periodically gather as a church in person. This gathering would be a family reunion of sorts for the church as a body, and would serve as an opportunity for the entire digital community—the larger community beyond the cell groups—to gather in one place and experience the energy and life of the church. It would also be an excellent and meaningful opportunity for church members to participate in the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, particularly for those in traditions where communion cannot be held online. The Christian

holiday of Easter could provide an ideal time for such a gathering—just as the first centuries of Christians preferred to celebrate baptisms during Easter.[28]

Many of those who engage in church online may do so because they are unable to travel, take time off work, or arrange their schedule so as to attend in person on a regular basis; nonetheless, they may find it feasible to attend a gathering once or twice a year (or maybe even more frequently if the gathering is somewhat localized to them). The scarcity of such a gathering would give it a higher priority, so members would be more eager to attend it than a weekly gathering. Care should also be taken to avoid making this gathering a reenactment of the social stratification that occurred when the Corinthians held the Lord's Supper. The gathering could easily turn into a division between the wealthy, for whom travel is not an obstacle, and the poor; to help avoid such a problem, travel expenses could be offset by the shared financial fund to which individuals could contribute throughout the year, and the money could be distributed as each member has need.

Through the careful cultivation of a body that is committed to cruciform living, not only in their online interactions but also in their continuing involvement in the physical world, social media can be used as a tool for developing authentic community. By extending the church's embodiment in such a way within the digital sphere, we can be present and active in shaping the future of the digital as it continues to integrate into our daily existence and as it redefines our basic understanding of ourselves in the world.

---

[28] K. W. Noakes, "From New Testament Times until St. Cyprian" in *The Study of Liturgy*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold (USA: Oxford University Press, 1992), 121–122.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

There is much work yet to be done. We have used Paul's letters to the Corinthians to sketch a basic framework whereby we might conceive of an authentic digital community that is diverse, yet united in it its posture of cruciformity and orientation to the wisdom of God that finds its identity in its continual participation in the humility, weakness, and love of Christ's crucifixion. Such a community would be known by its refusal to recognize social or economic stratification, ordering itself instead in a way that emphasizes the equality of each member's personhood through their Spirit-given gifts. By so modeling the kingdom of God, the community would be a Spirit-filled embodiment of Christ in its mission to reconcile the cosmos to God.

The digital context is, in some ways, uniquely suited to these purposes. By its very nature, social media blurs the lines of distinction between social and economic statuses, creating a world in which marginalized voices can be found, heard, and amplified. The possibility of continuous connection to other believers means that a person can always have a supportive community surrounding them in prayer and counsel, and they can share much of the day-to-day existence of their lives with one another.

Yet, while there are creative ways that we can use online connectivity be present with one another from a distance, there are some tangible needs that cannot be met within a purely digital context. Indeed, it would be foolish to attempt to completely separate the digital world from the physical—the two coexist alongside and within one another, and a digital ecclesiology must be cognizant of this reality. The church should be present within a person's daily life, but cannot become the totality of that person's daily life. A church that meets in the digital sphere cannot replace the physical relationships that humans need.

Our increased access to the internet, with its capacity for global and perpetual connectivity, is changing the way our culture thinks and behaves, and no one knows exactly what the future of our society will look like. The digital world is still in its infancy, and we as the church must be participants in shaping its future to draw out the ways in which it can reflect the

gospel and minimize its potential for dehumanization. For us to impact its development, we must be present in the digital world as it matures.

The ecclesiological sketch developed here is only one outline of how we may be engaged in the work of cultivating digital communities, but I pray that it may deepen our commitment to translating our conceptions of what it means to be the church from being rooted solely in a physical presence to embracing the digital as an extension of our embodied selves. The body of Christ cannot content itself to sit back and watch as these new media become the message without us; the world needs God's story of hope and humanity to be woven into the fabric of its life.

Closing Note to Readers

I would absolutely love to hear your feedback on this piece. My goal is to turn this into a larger work, and your insight would be a huge help for me as I refine the next steps for it. As you read it, what was meaningful to you? What resonated? What seemed wrong? What ideas would you like to discuss further? To start that conversation with me, please email me at randy@discoverrg.com with your thoughts.

With gratitude,

Randy Greene

Bibliography

Adewuya, J. Ayodeji. *Holiness and Community in 2 Cor 6:14–7:1: Paul's View of Communal Holiness in the Corinthian Correspondence*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2011.

Anderson, Paul. *Web 2.0 and Beyond: Principles and Technologies*. CRC Press, 2016.

Axon, Samuel. "Returning to Second Life." *Ars Technica*. Last modified October 23, 2017. Accessed September 15, 2018. https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2017/10/returning-to-second-life/.

Banks, Robert J. *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting*. Revised edition. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 1994.

Best, Ernest. *Second Corinthians: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Kindle edition. Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community*. Translated by John W. Doberstein. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1954.

Brueggemann, Walter. "Bragging about the Right Stuff." *Journal for Preachers* 26, no. 4 (2003): 27–32.

Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. Blurb, 2018.

Clarke, Andrew D. *A Pauline Theology of Church Leadership*. Reprint edition. London; Gordonsville: T&T Clark, 2013.

———. *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth: A Socio-Historical and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 1-6*. Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2006.

———. *Serve the Community of the Church: Christians as Leaders and Ministers*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000.

Collins, Raymond F. *Second Corinthians (Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament)*. Baker Books, 2013.

Cooke, Phil. *Unique: Telling Your Story in the Age of Brands and Social Media*. Audiobook. Oasis Audio, 2012.

Couldry, Nick. *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice*. 1st edition. Cambridge ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2012.

Danger, Sara Running. "Critical Vision: Word and Image in the Postmodern Age." *Word & World* 3 (2012): 227–236.

Day, Timothy. *A Century of Recorded Music: Listening to Musical History*. Yale University Press, 2002.

deSilva, David A. *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation*. Downers Grove, Ill. : Leicester, England: IVP Academic, 2004.

Dunbar, R. I. M. "Do Online Social Media Cut through the Constraints That Limit the Size of Offline Social Networks?" *Open Science* 3, no. 1 (January 1, 2016): 150292.

Dunn, James D. G. *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*. 3rd edition. London: SCM Press, 2006.

Estes, Douglas. *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World*. Kindle. Zondervan, 2009.

Friedman, Thomas L. *The World Is Flat 3.0: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*. Picador, 2007.

Gaillardetz, Richard R. *Ecclesiology For A Global Church: A People Called and Sent*. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2008.

Gaventa, Beverly Roberts. *When in Romans: An Invitation to Linger with the Gospel According to Paul*. Baker Academic, 2016.

Gershon, Ilana. *The Breakup 2.0: Disconnecting over New Media*. 1st edition. Ithaca London: Cornell University Press, 2012.

Giles, Kevin. *What on Earth Is the Church?: An Exploration in New Testament Theology*. Reprint edition. Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2005.

Gillespie, Marie, David Herbert, and Anita Greenhill, eds. *Social Media and Religious Change*. Religion and Society; Religion and Society. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013. https://books.google.com/books?id=XfroBQAAQBAJ.

Gorman, Michael J. *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters*. Second Edition. Eerdmans, 2016.

———. *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2015.

Grieb, A. K. "People of God, Body of Christ, Koinonia of Spirit: The Role of Ethical Ecclesiology in Paul's 'Trinitarian' Language." *Anglican Theological Review* 87, no. 2 (2005): 225–252.

Hays, Richard B. *First Corinthians: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Kindle Edition. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.

Hogg, Michael A., and Scott Tindale, eds. *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Group Processes*. 1st edition. Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002.

Irvin, Dale T., and Scott W. Sunquist. *History of the World Christian Movement: Earliest Christianity to 1453*. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2001.

Ito, Mizuko, Sonja Baumer, Matteo Bittanti, danah boyd, Rachel Cody, Becky Herr Stephenson, Heather A. Horst, et al. *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media*. The MIT Press, 2009. https://dmlcentral.net/wp-content/uploads/files/Hanging_Out.pdf.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. Revised edition. New York, NY: NYU Press, 2008.

Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Scripture & Discernment: Decision Making in the Church*. Subsequent edition. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

Kahneman, Daniel. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. 1st edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.

Kaplan, Andreas M., and Michael Haenlein. "Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media." *Business Horizons* 53, no. 1 (2010): 59–68.

Kluver, Randy, and Yanli Chen. "The Church of Fools: Virtual Ritual and Material Faith." *Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 3, no. 1 (2008). Accessed October 14, 2018. https://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/religions/article/view/391.

Kroeger, Catherine Clark, and Mary J. Evans, eds. *The IVP Women's Bible Commentary*. 1st edition. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2002.

MacDonald, Margaret Y. *The Pauline Churches: A Socio-Historical Study of Institutionalization in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Writings*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Malina, Bruce J. *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. 3rd edition. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

McIntyre, Drew B. "Offer Them Christ Face-To-Face: A Response to Central Online's Proposal For Online Eucharistic Celebration," 2013. Accessed October 13, 2018. http://umcmedia.org/umcorg/2013/communion/offer-christ-face-to-face-mcintyre.pdf.

McKnight, Scot, and Joseph B. Modica, eds. *The Apostle Paul and the Christian Life: Ethical and Missional Implications of the New Perspective*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2016.

McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man : Critical Edition*. Edited by W. Terrence Gordon. Critical Edition. Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2003.

Minear, Paul Sevier. *Images of the Church in the New Testament*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

Mobley, Gregory. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*. Edited by Michael D. Coogan, Marc Z. Brettler, Carol Newsom, and Pheme Perkins. 4th edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Muggeridge, Malcolm. *Christ and the Media*. Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2003.

Noakes, K. W. "From New Testament Times until St. Cyprian" in *The Study of Liturgy*. Edited by Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold. USA: Oxford University Press, 1992.

O'Day, Gail R. "Jeremiah 9:22-23 and 1 Corinthians 1:26-31: A Study in Intertextuality." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109, no. 2 (1990): 259–267.

Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: 30th Anniversary Edition*. 3rd edition. London ; New York: Routledge, 2012.

Pervo, Richard I. *The Making of Paul: Constructions of the Apostle in Early Christianity*. Fortress Press, 2010. https://books.google.com/books?id=RbGDwsknbdsC.

Poushter, Jacob, Caldwell Bishop, and Hanyu Chwe. "Social Media Use Continues to Rise in Developing Countries but Plateaus Across Developed Ones." *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project*, June 19, 2018. Accessed September 13, 2018. http://www.pewglobal.org/2018/06/19/social-media-use-continues-to-rise-in-developing-countries-but-plateaus-across-developed-ones/.

Rifkin, Jeremy. *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*. Penguin, 2009.

Roetzel, Calvin J. *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context*. Presbyterian Publishing Corp, 2015. https://books.google.com/books?id=QH1lBwAAQBAJ.

Russell, Letty M. *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church*. 1st edition. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.

Saddleback Church. "Take Communion Online with Us." Accessed October 13, 2018. http://saddleback.com/archive/blog/internet-campus/2014/01/24/take-communion-online-with-us.

Schnekloth, Clint. *Mediating Faith: Faith Formation in a Trans-Media Era*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014.

Seargeant, P., and C. Tagg. *The Language of Social Media: Identity and Community on the Internet*. Springer, 2014.

Smith, Aaron, and Monica Anderson. "Social Media Use in 2018." *Pew Research Center*, March 1, 2018. Accessed March 28, 2018. http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/.

Solove, Daniel J. *The Future of Reputation: Gossip, Rumor, and Privacy on the Internet*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008.

Stone, Howard W., and James O. Duke. *How to Think Theologically*. 3 edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013.

Strover, Sharon. "Reaching Rural America with Broadband Internet Service." *The Conversation*. Accessed October 6, 2018. http://theconversation.com/reaching-rural-america-with-broadband-internet-service-82488.

Sturken, Marita, Douglas Thomas, and Sandra Ball-Rokeach, eds. *Technological Visions: Hopes And Fears That Shape New Technologies*. 1st edition. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004.

Thompson, James W. *The Church According to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ*. Grand
Rapid, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014.

Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Basic Books,
2011.

———. *Connected, but Alone?*, TED Talks, n.d. Accessed April 2, 2018.
https://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together.

United Methodist Communications. "What Is the United Methodist View of Online Communion?" *The United
Methodist Church*. Accessed October 13, 2018. http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/what-is-the-united-
methodist-view-of-online-communion.

Wallace, Patricia. *The Psychology of the Internet*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Watson, Natalie K. *Introducing Feminist Ecclesiology*. Limited edition. Wipf & Stock Pub, 2008.

Whillans, Ashley V., Elizabeth W. Dunn, Paul Smeets, Rene Bekkers, and Michael I. Norton. "Buying Time
Promotes Happiness." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (July 19, 2017): 201706541.

Williams, Jason R., Yuta J. Masuda, and Heather Tallis. "A Measure Whose Time Has Come: Formalizing Time
Poverty." *Social Indicators Research* 128, no. 1 (August 1, 2016): 265–283.

Williams, Myron. "Community, Discipleship, and Social Media." *Christian Education Journal* 12, no. 2. 3 (Fall
2015): 375–383.

Witherington III, Ben. *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2
Corinthians*. 12.3.1994 edition. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994.

———. *What's in the Word: Rethinking the Socio-Rhetorical Character of the New Testament*. Waco, Tex: Baylor
University Press, 2009.

Wright, N. T. *Paul: A Biography*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018.

———. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013.

"Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet." *Pew Research Center*. Last modified February 5, 2018. Accessed October 6, 2018.
http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/.