Technocentrism, Disembodied Relationship and Sabbath:

A Critical, Theological Response to Technocentrism through the Lenses of *Alone Together: Why*

We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other and *Sunday, Sabbath and Weekend:*

Managing Time in a Global Culture

Marissa Papula

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A couple lies in bed beside one another, phones in their hands, scrolling through their respective newsfeeds.

A photo of one's recently deceased beloved is posted to social media. Acquaintances post their sympathies in the comments.

Neighbors in an elevator thumb along their phone screens, ignoring one another.

A student minimizes his lecture notes to check a notification during class. Opening one notification leads to an email reply, then another tab opens, then a chat is initiated with a friend. That the student is in class is now irrelevant.

Our text messages substitute for time together. Our best news is shared via email or in photos posted for all to see, rather than with embraces and champagne toasts. Our deepest secrets are poured anonymously onto the Internet for others' consumption. We text, email, scroll, and post our way through meetings, meals and milestones; multitasking, somehow creating more time, and yet realizing our opportunities for authentic relationship shrinking as our expectations for productivity are ever expanding. We are privy to the life events of our high school teammates, but are unable to verbalize our suffering in the presence of another, face to face, sans a keyboard.

We live in a culture of instant gratification, constant communication, and lives that play out across a screen rather than in places, among people.

It has become dangerously apparent that our technological means of communication have encroached upon even the farthest, most sacred reaches of our lives. It seems that no room in our home, no activity, no relationship is too precious to resist the intrusion of the buzz of a cellphone or the ping of a tablet. Incessant bids for our attention come at all hours, across various screens

with ringtones and vibrations that have us conditioned to reach for our devices and unlock our screens with Pavlovian urgency. This barrage of mobile communication has warped how we as human beings relate to one another. No longer are we able to easily imagine the person on the other end of the email thread or the authentic daily reality of the person whose Facebook profile is our latest fodder for time-wasting. Instead, we have reduced those whom we text, email and follow to mere objects on the other end of our networks. Our relations have become impersonal and disembodied.

The intersection of technocentrism and theology, appropriated via a hermeneutic of embodiment, call for the construction of a theological response. Drawing deeply upon insights from *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* and *Sunday, Sabbath and the Weekend: Managing Time in a Global Culture*, perhaps a meeting point can be located that can serve as a vista for a future that affirms the dignity of human persons as relational, creative, and embodied, and honors the *imago dei* of each individual. Our Christian faith calls us to recognize that our personhood transcends our roles as transmitters of communications, networking points, and social media profiles. This bears significant import with regard to the nature of how we relate to one another. We must critique how technological developments are contouring our "human becoming."[1]

A theological anthropology of Trinitarian relationality serves as an entrée into understanding how our social nature has been warped by the prevailing technocentric paradigm of society. According to Genesis 1:26, humanity was created in the image and likeness of God.

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[1] Elaine Graham, *Words Made Flesh: Writings in Pastoral and Practical Theology*. (London: SCM Press, 2009).

"Let us create [humanity] in *our* image and likeness;" the plural possessive points to the Trinitarian nature of God. God is inherently relational; God is true communion. Having been created in the image and likeness of this Triune God, humanity is intrinsically relational. The nature of this relationship, named simply, is love. The human creature is a social one, brought to life in and for love.

In the Christian tradition, this love incarnate is Jesus Christ. In his time on earth, Jesus lived in community, touching, teaching and breaking bread with those he encountered. His life was colored by vibrant and challenging relationships, encounters with those on the margins, and a strong social presence.

With Christ as our model and guide for theosis, as we endeavor to bring about the reign of God, navigating our relationships and the resources of our culture to move toward our realized eschatology, I wonder: how would Jesus use a smartphone?

In his own interactions, Jesus' body was a medium of communication and connection. Many of his healing miracles involved personal touch. When Lazarus died, he went to be with Mary and Martha, and he experienced his grief viscerally. His communication, during his lifetime was not mediated, let alone via media such as Instagram photos or Tweets. He gathered people together, and preached in his bodiliness.

Though a spiritual practice of meditating upon the movements of Jesus may not be espoused by all faithful, in evaluating whether or not our behaviors are spiritually nourishing, or whether or not they draw us closer to God, the life of Christ could serve as a valid litmus in our discernment. Certainly not are holy or faith-full, but when our daily or even hourly actions are

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merely filling time and draining our energy, should we not pause to ponder their place in our lived theology? And in analyzing these behaviors and cultural bends through the lens of embodiment, should we not begin with God embodied?

In her 2011 book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, Sherry Turkle examines the impact of our technological communication practices and presence in virtual reality. We are perpetually attached to our technological devices, quick to respond to messages, and constantly documenting and sharing. And yet, we are detached from reality and one another.

Turkle refers to examples similar to ones those cited already (she mentions parents texting while they push their children in strollers, staff answering emails during meetings, children sitting outside in their neighborhood playing on their phones instead of any sort of pick-up game), but she delves more deeply into a few particular cases. One example is that of Pete, a married father of two young children who enjoys an alternate life online. Pete is a member of an Internet community where his avatar, Rolo, is "married" to a woman named Jade, with whom he chats each day. She writes that "Pete and Jade talk about sex and gossip, but they also talk about money, work, and matters of health."[2] The relationship is quite intimate, despite their lack of physical encounter. He credits his relationship with Jade with sustaining his marriage, as their conversations provide an outlet for intimacy and anxiety that does not exist in his own family. Turkle notes that he divulges these details as he texts with one hand and pushes his children on a

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[2] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other,* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 159.

swing with the other.[3] This notion of escapism from the monotony of daily life is not new, but the simultaneous nature of these dual lifestyles is indeed novel. Pete's story, though perhaps dramatic, serves as a valuable entrée into understanding the current practices of contemporary Western communication and online presence. According to Pew Research Service, as of October 2014, sixty four percent of American adults own a smartphone.[4] USA Today wrote in January that fifty eight percent of the "entire adult population" of the United States uses Facebook.[5]And while Facebook or smartphone usages do not necessarily correlate with the leading of an online double life, this notion that we can depersonalize our interactions and create a new identity for ourselves has encroached upon commonplace. Turkle writes that texts and emails typically evolve from "gruel" alternatives to other forms of communication to our primary medium of correspondence. Similarly, sharing on Facebook or other social media platforms escalates from an infrequent, relevant update to the creation of the illusion that one's life is enviable, full of colorful meals worth photographing, milestones worth sharing, and otherwise esoteric activities and ideas that generate popularity and affirmation. Our way of being with others transcends the physical and almost inevitably involves the virtual.

In bringing this study of technocentrism and sociology into dialogue with a theological anthropology of the body, Turkle provides an interesting avenue into this conversation. She

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[3] Turkle, *Alone Together*, 159.

[4] Mobile Technology Fact Sheet, *Pew Research Center*. December 2013 (Updated October 2014). http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/mobile-technology-fact-sheet/

[5] Weise, Elizabeth. "Your Mom and 58% of Americans Are on Facebook." USA Today. January 9, 2015. http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2015/01/09/pew-survey-social-media-facebook-linkedin-twitter-instagram-pinterest/21461381/.

posits that mobile technology has rendered each of us "pauseable."[6] On social media platforms, we can choose whether or not to acknowledge what someone has shared. With text messaging or email, we can let a message wait or ignore it. And for those with whom we are physically present, we can sit in the midst of a verbal conversation, but text someone else or interact with what another has shared. The constructs of etiquette surrounding this ability to "virtually leave" or socially multitask are still in the determination phase. Some norms have already been established: texting during family dinner is rude, allowing your cellphone to ring in the theater is taboo; but there are still interactions that are seemingly deemed trivial enough to allow for the invasion of technology. We text while we exchange with the cashier at the grocery store, silently scroll through our feeds while we wait at the doctor's office (will the presence of magazines in waiting rooms become obsolete?), we schedule appointments via text or online, we send vituperative emails to customer service representative. The blurred demarcations among acceptable spheres of device usage and decorum render us ill-equipped the challenge the potentially dehumanizing ramifications of such rampant "connectedness."

It is strange that the advantages of this growing innovation and technology are named as "access," or "connection," because this expanding paradigm is breeding just the opposite. We are, in fact, disconnected from one another. Our communication not only lacks non-verbal cues; it is starved for accountability. We become anxious at the thought of detachment from our devices, and yet, we are incredibly detached from one another. This "pauseable-ness" and detachment warps our notions of relationship and personhood. No longer are we capable of

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[6] Turkle, *Alone Together*, 161.

tending the human in our midst, with flesh and blood and hopes and worries. We would much rather keep him or her at "phone's length," interacting with them on our own terms of expedience and availability. This lack of presence and the emphasis on personal convenience blinds our vision of the person before us. He or she is reduced to a message to respond to, a profile to browse, or a resource to access. The disembodiment of our communication has objectified us.

This objectification thwarts the expression and embrace of our personhood. In bearing the *imago dei*, the communion to which humanity is called is not one of vibrating messages and likes. Our texts, messages, and profiles are not inherently unholy; however, when we allow them to substitute to genuine human connection that tends to those in our midst and demands our attention and vulnerability, we should caution ourselves against the loss of our capacity to socialize, to thrive in community, to love. We are commissioned to live as embodied beings. Otherwise, I reckon, we would not have been fashioned as physical creatures. When our relationships disregard this element of our personhood, we should ponder the authenticity of the interactions.

A theological appropriation of this technocentric objectification transcends the sphere of relationality and intersects with our capacity for work and our understanding of Sabbath.

Beginning again with the *imago dei,* humanity's creation in the likeness of God implies not only our inherent social nature, but our creative faculties as well. Humanity bears the innate capacity for inventiveness and industry, and this is yet another realm of our bodiliness upon which technocentrism is being inscribed. Furthermore, the technological advancements that are

produced by humanity's creative capacities must be evaluated against their potential for facilitating our ontological realization and bringing about the reign of God.[7] God rested on the seventh day, and yet, with the intrusion of digital communication, we cannot sleep through a single night without our professional obligations pinging at our bedside. The boundaries between work and rest have become deeply blurred. We have no notion of how to appropriate Sabbath in the 21st century. Exploring the crossroads between technocentrism, theology, and Sabbath, is perhaps a further trajectory for exploration on this topic.

A practice of 21st century Sabbath as a response to the increasing societal ills that result from our growing technocentrism is a spiritual, ascetical exercise that could reorient our gazes away from our screens and toward one another. To put down our mobile devices and behold the human beings in our midst would affirm our social nature, and allow us to cultivate relationships as the embodied (and not virtual) beings we are. We are not transmitters of messages, or Twitter handles, or a collection of well-filtered Instagram photos, or email addresses; we are human beings, created in the image of a Triune God who is social, creative, and fashioned us in bodies so we may live embodied. As people of faith, we must thwart the inscription of technocentrism upon our bodies and reclaim right relationship with technology, others, and God. Orienting our attachment to technology in a spiritual framework may free us from the fetters of the relentless bids for our attention that the incessant buzz of our devices prod us with. There are various theological hermeneutics through which we can evaluate technocentrism, but an anthropology of embodiment is a fine starting point for critiquing this bend in our cultural norms.

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[7] Graham, *Word Made Flesh*, 323.

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