

Digital Discipleship 3 - Disembodied and Dehumanised

During the Covid Pandemic, as more and more churches moved towards livestreaming, I posted this on my blog, imagining a hypothetical church livestream

“Left-click the bread icon to consume the bread. >Click<
>>> Thank you. You have eaten the bread.
Left-click the cup icon to consume the cup. > Click<
>>> Thank you. You have drunk the cup.”

I was being deliberately extreme and provocative to jolt people into seeing that viewing a church service on a screen was not true worship in the fullest sense. You can't eat the bread or drink the cup on a screen. You cannot baptise someone online. In fact, when you're behind a screen, you also cannot show hospitality to one another, you cannot greet one another with a holy kiss, or a modern equivalent – a hearty handshake, a warm embrace. You cannot share your home, and in the truest sense, you cannot sing together, because you aren't together.

The Covid pandemic exposed just how badly the web has deformed our understanding of what it is to be an embodied human being. We found out that many people thought that as long as you had a good, live image on a screen, you were assembling, you were gathering, you were worshipping corporately, you were fellowshiping, you were in each other's presence. Oh, they might have added the word virtual to those words: a virtual gathering, virtual presence, virtual assembling. But as happens to words, we use them, and forget their original meaning. If something is virtual, it's not actual. If it is virtually something, it is still not completely or really that something.

As we think about digital discipleship, and submitting our online lives to the lordship of Christ, a huge area of obedience is if we are being faithful to our design of embodied human beings.

Human beings are embodied beings. What that means is that the body is not just a container for your brain, it is not just a vehicle to move your mind around. Your body is fundamentally you. What it means to be a human made in God's image is partially to experience life through your body, and your body's senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch. There is also sense of balance, movement in space. There is proprioception: the sense of your body in space, the experience of effort, the experience of temperature, of pain, of pleasure. Your knowledge and experience of life is mediated through your body, and it is meant to be.

The human body is the crown of God's creation. It is so good, that God the Son had always meant to assume human nature in the fulness of time, and take up into Himself a human body. Our destiny is not to be disembodied spirits, but to have glorified, resurrected bodies. Being embodied is fundamental to our nature, and our purpose.

One of the evil effects of the internet becoming our dominant mode of communication, information, and even business is that it mediates life through a flat screen, and reduces all we experience to a two-dimensional image, sometimes with sound. That is a fundamentally disembodied experience. It does not involve smell or taste, tactile sensation. It's not even a fully robust visual or audio experience, because in real life we have depth perception, 360-degree vision. The human eye is estimated to have 20 times the resolution of an 8K Tv. On the web, we stare at one spot for hours. The more we do this, the more we become accustomed to thinking of life as mediated information, and even thinking of relationships as communicated information. Our internet habits have the potential to deeply disembody and dehumanise us, which can have disastrous effects.

I want to describe those effects under three headings, disembodied relationships, disembodied reality, and disembodied religion. When we've seen the problems, we'll suggest four biblical responses.

1) Disembodied Relationships

One pastor made this observation: “Technology tends to draw you closer to those you are far away from and farther away from those you are close to.” A married couple might spend many evenings in the same room—she checking the Facebook pages of people who live on other continents, and he in a theological chat room debating with opinionated people from around the world. That husband and wife are physically close to each other, but their technology is drawing them dangerously far apart, offering superficial electronic relationships in the place of their meaningful face-to-face marriage relationship.”

Tim Challies claims that a study from the University of Stanford found that for every hour we spend on our computers, traditional face-to-face interaction falls by nearly thirty minutes.

These are relationships losing their embodied character. In this series I've already mentioned how often you will see groups of teenagers, sitting somewhere together, everyone texting someone who is not there. A couple at a restaurant taking call after call, text after text, reading messages on their watch. One study found that Gen-Z far prefers to text someone than pick up the phone and call or even meeting.

So even though the technologies allow more communication, they are ironically causing less communication. We end up dedicating less of ourselves to more people, widening our network, and shallowing our existing relationships.

It deadens existing relationships. Not only does it deaden our existing relationships, it distorts our understanding of relationships. It gives us online relationships that are quite different to embodied relationships.

The web allows us to control things that are not usually in our control during face-to-face encounters. For example, when online we can adjust our image digitally, or even turn off our screens entirely. We can flatter ourselves and begin to believe our own enhanced, stylised version of ourselves, and prefer it to flesh-and-blood encounters. Social media offers you the opportunity to build and portray an image of yourself as near-perfect, so as to be fawned over, flattered and validated by a circle of sycophantic “friends”.

Further, social media allows us to artificially control our ‘circle’. Those who affirm, validate and like our posts are our friends, and those who don’t are haters that we can block. We can style our appearance to solicit likes, comments and praise, believing our flatterers and persuaded by our own hype. Social media can give us the artificial sense of a busy social life with much fellowship when we have 1500 Facebook ‘friends’ or 500 ‘followers’. But these are disembodied relationships with little of what happens in real life. Genuine relationships require patience, forbearance, forgiveness, time in one another’s presence, and shared loves. Disembodied relationships can be controlled by a mouse-click.

Disembodied relationships also have a curious relationship to what is public and what is private. Social media encourages you to share personal, even intimate, details with ‘friends’, who may be little more than acquaintances. The fact that a ‘friend’ becomes a silent witness of your self-

broadcasts creates a strange situation of exhibitionism and voyeurism. An exhibitionist is one with a compulsive desire to get other's attention, and display what should be hidden, while a voyeur is a prying observer, secretly watching what is private for the sordid or the scandalous. Social media creates exhibitionists and invited voyeurs: sharing and viewing personal moments inappropriate for the level of relationship. Social media encourages me to share personal moments with the few who have some right to see, and to forget the many who do not. It likewise encourages me to peer into an acquaintance's life, and to forget that I have very little reason to do so. The nature of loving relationships is a voluntary, mutual, progressive self-disclosure. When we are face-to-face, it's as if we immediately and intuitively understand these boundaries. But online, the disembodied nature begins to warp our relationships. The essence of modesty is to understand that what is not for other's consumption is to be kept veiled.

Disembodied relationships lead us to act very differently than we would if we were in people's physical presence. The unkind, aggressive and vicious language which takes place on social media has caused some psychologists to coin the term online disinhibition effect. This simply means that behaviour which would be considered unacceptable face-to-face becomes common when people are behind screens, particularly if they are anonymous.

Disembodied relationships are not normal relationships, that's for sure. Consider these questions. Is it unkind or rude to ignore or refuse friend requests? Is it acceptable to "friend" an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend if you are married? Should married men and women have a host of friends from the opposite sex? How should Christians deal with someone who has been disciplined by a church of like faith? Should they all un-friend? Should they refuse to 'like' or comment on posts? Should they remove the person from the newsfeed? Or should they keep him or her to find out if there is any repentance, or if others are interacting with the person? This is the blurriness that disembodied relationships bring.

2) Disembodied Reality

For many people, their primary and first encounter with the world is now mediated through a screen. I remember being at one of the Acrobranch places with my children where you climb trees and zipline and cross walkways. And I remember seeing a woman who was there alone, and as she got on the zipline, she had her screen and selfie-stick, and never took her eyes off the screen the entire time she ziplined. It was as if she could only experience that moment through the screen, as if only once recorded, uploaded and shared was a it a real experience.

Many people are losing touch with the world God made, and are living only in the disembodied reality mediated to them through a screen. Looking and touching a screen is a very different activity to wood-carving, playing the piano, weightlifting, or baking a cake, hitting a ball. Think of it this way: imagine filming the average screen-user from the other side of the screen, where you cannot see the content of his screen. If you knew nothing about phones and screen, and you watched a video of the average screen-user, how would he appear to you if we watched the replay of his actions for an entire hour? To most members of the human race who have lived before our era, he'd appear odd: mostly sedentary, sometimes motionless, a few flicks of the finger or hand here and there, with the occasional smile, frown or grimace while peering into the blue glow of the screen. Hours upon hours simply looking at a little rectangle.

The point is, while there are plenty of good things to read, watch and listen to on a screen, it is, for the most part, not a tactile, physical or very verbal experience. It tends towards the passive and the diversionary. With rare exceptions, a person on a screen during their leisure time is not creating,

making, meditating, contemplating.

Our experience of places, nature, sports, hobbies, activities, even ceremonies is meant to include sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell, movement, sitting, standing.

A few years ago, it would have been understood that a couple cannot get married online; they cannot kiss virtually. But now there are plenty of websites offering online marriage. One is called “Marry from home”. It would have been understood that if you invite a group of people to an online video chat everyone has their own meal (even if it's from the same recipe or restaurant), you're not actually having dinner together. You're having dinner alone, with a screen, showing you a few other people having dinner alone, all able to talk to each other. It would have been understood that birthday parties, anniversaries, baby celebrations might be viewed by someone who couldn't be there online, but to celebrate it is to be there.

And perhaps the primary culprit and ultimate form of this disembodied reality is pornography: for there the ultimate experience of embodiment: two covenant spouses sharing bodies in holy matrimony is replaced on a 2-D screen with simulated sex for a cold, loveless, private sexual experience.

There is something demonic about wanting humans to experience reality the way a disembodied spirit might: see some of it, hear some of it, but never experience it with the body.

3) Disembodied Religion

It is a sign of this disembodied, dehumanised view of life when many view Christian worship as primarily the communication of ideas. We think of only the ideas contained in the songs, the ideas preached and prayed, the ideas read and understood. And if that's all worship is, then all we need is mechanisms to transfer the information. In that case, an Internet connection and a screen is all we need. The only extraneous digit in this scheme of information transfer are those ordinances: baptism and the Lord's Supper, which don't seem to be convertible to pure information.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are those acts of worship which everyone seems to understand requires physical elements, the physical presence of God's people, and their physical eating and drinking and immersing. If we were to simulate this with graphics, icons, or little avatars, probably most would use the words artificial, inferior, or fake.

But if you think of faith as information, then you are not prepared for what AI will bring your way. AI will be able to produce Deep Fake versions of a church's preacher or pastor preaching either sermons he has written or sermons produced by AI. These can be streamed or played on the big screens on Sunday – for those who want to show up. If worship can be a screen, who can object? Better yet, AI will be able to harvest the very best public speaking techniques, the most popular preachers' voices, and the most pleasing faces, and use Deep Fake technology to create an ideal preacher who doesn't exist outside of cyberspace. Again, he'll preach sermons written by humans, or by AI, and rack up millions of views, subscribers and followers. The fact that he (or she) is a digital creation will be hated by some, but soon lauded by others as ideal: a preacher who won't fall into sin, won't be caught in scandals, and won't disappoint with hypocrisy. The Robot Pastor will become deeply attractive to many, many people looking for the flawless teacher.

And why not, if we've bought into disembodied religion? Why not create the ultimate preacher and have him preach live or recorded sermons?

Once faith is disembodied from real people meeting each other, and applying the truth to each other's lives, then we don't need spiritual power at work. We just need to transfer information.

But if religion is a matter of the Holy Spirit filling our bodies, inhabiting us, indwelling our spirits, then what the Spirit cannot fill cannot be an instrument of His. He does not fill AI chatbots. He does not fill AI Deep Fakes. He does not fill mere information. He does not fill technologies.

He fills people, people who are meant to love and serve other people.

So how should we respond to this disembodiment of relationships, reality and religion?

1. Train your body to obey Christ in relationships, reality and religion. I wonder how many Christians have a defective view of their body's part in their sanctification. Again, the body is not just a container or a vehicle. The body is the primary place of your actions in the world. You might have all kinds of wishes and intentions, but it is what you do outwardly that determines if those things have entered the realm of obedience. Yes, your heart governs your person, but the body is your heart's instrument. The body is the tool to express what your heart loves. In the context of faith and works, James says ²⁶ For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. (James 2:26)

A spirit needs a body to inhabit and express. Similarly, Christian beliefs need expression in actions, and actions usually involve the body.

Some Christians have a kind of internalist view of the Christian life: that it all happens in the mind and feelings. But consider how many verses call for us to be obedient with our bodies.

¹² Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. ¹³ And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. (Romans 6:12-13)

¹ I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service. (Romans 12:1)

²⁰ For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's. (1 Corinthians 6:20)

But I discipline my body and bring *it* into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:27)

What does this mean? I am an embodied being, meant to express my love and obedience to God in more ways than just hunched over a screen. I can kneel for prayer, I can read God's Word (sometimes maybe even aloud), I can produce song and music with my voice, I can go to another believer for a meeting, I can speak the truth in love, face-to-face, I can eat and drink to the glory of God, exercise to the glory of God, rest to the glory of God, adorn my body with clothes that glorify God, use my eyes and ears to take in what is pleasing to God, use my hands to make those things that will bless others.

In previous messages we mentioned doing worthwhile, difficult things that require bodily discipline like serving others in church, writing someone a note, learning a musical instrument, reading a Christian book or biography, studying the Word more intensely, taking 20 minutes to pray through a list.

2. Use digital communication, but pursue face-to-face fellowship and friendship. Audio and video calls are great, texts and emails are useful. But when you can, go and see a person.

¹² Having many things to write to you, I did not wish *to do so* with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, that our joy may be full. (2 John 12)

When you're with people face-to-face, don't feel obligated to respond to texts, messages and emails. Again, carve out phone-free times, switch off notifications, and be all there with the people in front of you.

3. Don't primarily or exclusively use screens to experience creation – experience it through your whole person and body: walks, hobbies, travel. Experience it in a way that causes gratitude. ⁴ For every creature of God *is* good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; ⁵ for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer. (1 Timothy 4:4–5) A walk down your own street, ten minutes in the sun in your own garden is more human than 30 minutes of scrolling.

100 years before the Internet, Spurgeon advised ministers not to be stuck staring at their page with their quill in hand all day. Substitute quill for mouse or scrolling finger, substitute screen for page or book, and the advice is still good:

“To sit long in one posture, poring over a book, or driving a quill, is in itself a taxing of nature; but add to this a badly-ventilated chamber, a body which has long been without muscular exercise, and a heart burdened with many cares, and we have all the elements for preparing a seething cauldron of despair,

Let a man be naturally as blithe as a bird, he will hardly be able to bear up year after year against such a suicidal process; he will make his study a prison and his books the warders of a gaol, while nature lies outside his window calling him to health and beckoning him to joy. He who forgets the humming of the bees among the heather, the cooing of the wood-pigeons in the forest, the song of birds in the woods, the rippling of rills among the rushes, and the sighing of the wind among the pines, needs not wonder if his heart forgets to sing and his soul grows heavy. A day's breathing of fresh air upon the hills, or a few hours' ramble in the beech woods' umbrageous calm, would sweep the cobwebs out of the brain of scores of our toiling ministers who are now but half alive. A mouthful of sea air, or a stiff walk in the wind's face, would not give grace to the soul, but it would yield oxygen to the body, which is next best.”

4. Never substitute a download, or a podcast, or a Youtube for a gathering with God's people.

¹⁹ “Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.” (Matthew 18:19–20)

³¹ And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:31)

The promise of the Holy Spirit's work among the gathered people of God is that He will take the means of grace and invest them with power, and we will see and experience Christ in ways that we could not have on our own. We will see Christ in each other, which we would not see when just listening to a downloaded sermon. We will see Christ as the Spirit illuminates the Word sung, the Word prayed, the Word read, and the Word preached, and this does not happen in the same way, when sitting solitary behind a screen.

There is no livestream, no technology that can make these happen. This is a promise given to those who gather together in the name of the Lord Jesus, striving for likemindedness. They are looking for Jesus: in one another, in the means of grace, and at the Table of the Lord.

We have to use the web in our modern world, but we must not let it make us in its image. The internet is disembodied information. We are not processors inputting information, storing data, and outputting information. We are not disembodied brains or minds. We are embodied beings, meant to have these bodies for all eternity.

So we seek embodied relationships, face to face. We seek embodied reality, the kind we can experience and give thanks for. We seek embodied religion, the kind that gathers, assembles, and that the Holy Spirit fills. And we discipline and train our bodies to live this God-honouring life.