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How Embodied Human Creatures Converse... Online

David Edwards

Have you ever noticed just how much you can learn about what a person has going on in life without asking them a single question? All you have to do is hop on Facebook, scroll through twitter, or scan Instagram and you can see updates on everything! From the birth of a first child to the death of a loved one, from their favorite new show to Fantasy Football failures, it is pretty easy to learn a lot about a person and their life today with only so much as a couple of clicks on a screen or a keyboard.

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to be mean online? Not mean like calling someone a name or making fun of their outfit, but mean like calling into question their very humanity. Whether it is a music video on YouTube or political post on Facebook or just a clever tweet, each post or upload is never more than a few comments away from heated and unrelated arguments about sexuality, God, or the government. And on the flip-side, does it ever seem a little odd to read about a person's profound adoration for someone they have never met and probably never will? You might not have known it at the time, but what you were seeing was a disembodied anthropology which, in our circles, sets a person down the path toward a disembodied theology.

Now what exactly is a "disembodied theology"?¹ A disembodied theology reduces God's human creatures down to mere vessels, simply sending and receiving information. Like an email sent from one computer to another, nothing more is needed than a clear WiFi connection. This disembodied view of humanity causes us to lose sight of the fully embodied design God has for his human creatures.

A disembodied theology downplays the intangibles of communication. If we do not push back against this disembodied view of humanity and consequential disembodied theology, we are at risk of losing sight of the needs and gifts we need and receive as embodied human creatures. If we, as people, are no more than mere recipients and dispensers of basic information, then the necessity of the incarnation itself is called into question! Who cares that Jesus become a fully embodied human being...if all we needed were a few words from God in Heaven.

We, as embodied human creatures of God, are more than simple vessels sending and receiving information. Our existence as embodied human creatures influences all aspects of our lives, including the ways in which we communicate. Being physically present with a person in order to foster relationships matters. Being able to empathize with people, in response to our actions or experiences they have had on their own, matters. And while there are ways in which online communication can support those realities, it cannot replace them. Social media simply cannot sustain the fullness of our embodied reality as God's human creatures.

So, what do we do? In the following essay I am inviting you all, my brothers and sisters in Christ, current and future leaders in Christ's church, into a conversation. This conversation will take place in the dining hall, the dorm rooms, during after chapel coffee, and anywhere else two or three are gathered. To get the conversation rolling I came up with five "rules" (using the term loosely). I wanted to start painting a picture of what I think it could look like for embodied human creators to operate in the world of social media. What I hope is that we, as embodied human creatures of God, can work together to come up with ways to use social media in *support* of our embodied reality, rather than hindering it.

Rule #1: Recognize the Limitations.

As embodied human creatures, it is important to recognize the limitations of online communication. This is easily the broadest and most all-inclusive rule. If we break this rule, we are undoubtedly breaking one of the other rules, and if we break one of the other rules, it is guaranteed that we are breaking this first rule. If this rule does not stand, then the rest of them are at risk of falling apart.

Communication is complex and multi-faceted. Take a minute, think about everything that goes into a having a conversation: facial expressions, gestures, volume, tone. How much does *knowing* someone factor into having any sort successful communication? And all of that can be involved in a simple conversation. What happens when on a conversation online becomes a debate?

Debating with someone on Facebook, for example, is like arguing with someone on the other side of a crowded room. Everyone can hear the exchange, but only the loudest people get involved and there is not much hope of changing anyone's mind. Whether it is a debate over the implications of a vague Facebook post or how the Law of God functions in the life of a Christian, it is not long before the limitations of online exchanges become apparent.

It is not enough to acknowledge the limitations of communication though, we have to actually *do* something with that knowledge, thus the conversation continues.

Rule #2: Say It to Their Face.

We have probably all heard some version of the old adage, “Do not say it, unless you would say it to their face.” This is sound advice, but it is usually dealing with the *content* of a conversation. For the purposes of rule number two, I am not so concerned about the potential hurtfulness of a comment. Instead, Rule #2 is about the next logical step after Rule #1. As fully-embodied human creatures, if we are content with the conversation starting and stopping online, something has gone wrong.

If, for example, you are having a conversation of some substance in the comment section, for example, it should be assumed that this conversation will carry on in a one-on-one context and, ideally, in person. One-on-one conversation, especially in person, is where there is more promise for the conversation to move from an alternating exchange of ideas to the development of new understandings, growth, and progress.

One of the greatest gifts of Christian community is mutual conversation and consolation. It is in the context of conversation and consolation that we can hold each other accountable, pray with one another, confess our sins and receive absolution. The sharing and experiencing of these gifts is hugely limited if the conversation never leaves the keyboard.

Rule #3: Distinguish Connections from Community.²

As embodied human creatures, we want to be able to distinguish the differences between connection and community. Facebook allows us to connect with *billions* of people; and, by and large, connection is a great thing. Communication with people across social media platforms opens doors for new opportunities and new relationships, and helps maintain the ones we have had for years. But connection itself is not same as community. The embodied creature needs more than just online communication without an embodied community.

We can see how a site like Facebook has tried to respond to that need. While we, fully embodied human creatures, can see the limitations (from Rule #1) of social media, Facebook has tried to overcome them with certain enhancements. Over the years, they have added features like the “Like” button in 2009 and “Reactions”

in 2016. Yet a “sad face” in response to a painful prayer request or a “laughing face” in response to a funny life-event falls short of creating the depth of a real community. Connections can serve to help *foster* community which goes beyond the internet, but they cannot stand in place of it.

Rule #4: Take in the "Bad" Stuff.

I was on Facebook one day and I came across an article covering a recent school shooting. On that particular day, I found the nature of the article to be especially troubling. So, instead of reading the article, I continued scrolling through my feed until I came across a video that made me literally laugh out loud. Immediately after the laughter though, I was struck again by sadness.

It occurred to me, at that moment, that there was something wrong with that experience. Instead of ignoring the difficult things that come across our news feeds, I recommend we take them seriously. Part of being an embodied human creature is engaging in the whole range of experiences we have.

When something like what I experienced happens to you, I have a couple suggestions: If it is a news item, pray about it. If it is a personal post, pray again and consider following-up directly with the poster. After all that, I think getting offline can be a good idea. Getting offline, for a time, can allow the “bad” stuff to sit with us for a moment and help us remember the real, fully embodied human creatures who are experiencing what was posted about.

Rule #5: Keep Using It.

Like Rule #1, if we miss Rule #5, the rest of the conversation does not really hold together. An embodied human creature *can still* use online communication. Yes, it is important to set healthy limits, and yes, it is probably better for some of us to make a clean break altogether. In fact, there are all sorts of good and rational reasons to close down your accounts and move on, but that is exactly why I end with Rule #5. In the face of a potentially strong desire to depart, I am asking you to stay.

One of my underlying assumptions in producing this essay is that we agree that the Christian life is one lived, primarily, in service to others. Yes, we can take that too far, but being at peace with our Creator, we are here to serve our fellow creatures. With so many of our fellow creatures interacting online, experiencing the consequences of a disembodied anthropology, we have a responsibility to stay engaged and bring something better. We have the opportunity to bring the gifts of an

embodied theology, a thorough and substantial Christian community to a world where it is desperately lacking. So, please share your suggestions, your critiques, and your ideas for taking action, and let us share with the world how we can live as embodied human creatures together.

Endnotes

- 1 It was Dr. Joel Oesch from Concordia Irvine who helped me recognize the connection between online social networks and embodied theology. For his insightful and thorough treatment of the topic, see his 2017 book, *More Than a Pretty Face* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications).
- 2 Credit for this observation also goes to Dr. Oesch.