Building Church Community in a Digital Age

by

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Date: April 5, 2019

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This paper examines how individuals’ social interactions are influenced by the media environments they inhabit (Media Ecology) and the consequent impact on the practice of developing community in the local church (Ecclesiology). Too often, leaders in the church are uninformed about the ways media use, not simply content, is affecting the social structures of community. Consequently, technology in the church is uncritically embraced and little attention is given to what adaptations need to be made for the church to remain authentic to its Christ-given identity and mission. More specifically, this paper focuses on the obstacle and opportunity of building community in the local church, designed to be densely-knit, in a time of “Networked Individualism,” characterized by sparsely-knit, technologically-mediated interaction.

This paper argues that leaders in the church should strive to establish and preserve close-knit church community, however countercultural, because such community is the best reflection of the community within God’s self. Also vital to maintaining densely-knit community in the church is that human beings are biologically wired to be in close communion with others and thrive in such environments. After providing a biological and theological defense for dense community in the church, practical suggestions are provided for maintaining close communion in the church in light of technologically-mediated engagement. Specifically, an argument is made for
prioritizing and encouraging face-to-face conversation amongst parishioners in the local church. Additionally, the paper takes a look at the ways media is currently used in local congregations and determines the merits of such use based upon their virtue or vice relative to maintaining close, embodied community. Finally, utilizing the Biblical narratives of the Tower of Babel and Pentecost, the paper concludes by viewing technology use and close-knit community from the perspective of soteriology and argues that the remedy for humanity’s insecurity and path to true greatness is found in Spirit-filled, densely-knit community.
Dedication

I dedicate this work to my wife, Angel, and two children, Elijah and Alivia.

Ministry, including this work, is not possible without your love, inspiration and sacrifice. I am eternally grateful for you.
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repaid, is the embodied expression of God’s love for me. I thank you for being a wonderful partner in life and love.
Chapter 1: Introduction

In the New Testament, the primary term used for the Church is *Ekklesia*, which referred to an assembly or people gathering with common purpose.¹ This nomenclature, adopted from secular contexts, conveys the belief that community is at the core of the church’s identity. Not only was assembling essential but also the distinctive identity of members gathering in Church was shaped by God’s gracious initiative to deliver and call them into fellowship through Christ.² Gathering as a community that is concerned with faithfully responding to God’s call in Christ is still foundational to being the Church, both locally and globally. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, reflecting upon the distinctive nature of Christian community, argued that “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ.”³ This central tenet of community is evinced in the celebration of the Eucharist, our common worship, and in practicing and maintaining the bond of fellowship.

Indelible to being the Church is gathering as community; community can exist without church but the Church, which is called to be faithful to the Lord, cannot exist without community. Therefore, fostering faithful community within the church should be a primary goal for leaders serving local congregations. As the mores of the larger society evolve, particularly perspectives on community and social engagement, clerical leaders

must seek to understand these changes and the influence such changes have on the Church. More specifically, attention should be given to the influence of technology or media environments upon perspectives of parishioners and, consequently, praxis within the church environment.

1.1 Media Ecology

Media Ecology is the field of discourse that focuses on “how media communications affect human perception, understanding, feeling, and value; and how interaction with media facilitates our chances of survival.” Media technology is not neutral and solely assessed by its practical utility (content or use of media), but rather all technological mediums, independent of content, shape individuals and overall culture. Based in this line of thought, Marshall McLuhan, a pioneer in the field, coined the phrase, “The medium is the message.” With this statement, McLuhan communicated his conviction that all media is an extension of human beings and serve to amplify some aspect of human capabilities. In other words, we create our media and then, in turn, our media shapes us. This means that all media must be assessed for its social and psychological impact, which ultimately leads to changes in culture and society as a whole.

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6 Ibid., xxi.
Marshall McLuhan argued that there are four primary questions that should be asked when seeking to anticipate or determine the impact of particular media. These questions are:

1. What does the medium extend? This refers to what part of human capacity is enhanced. For instance, in McLuhan’s reasoning, the telephone extends the capacity of the ear.

2. What does the medium make obsolete? Each new medium changes the function of a previous medium. For instance, the invention of the light bulb made domestic, oil lamps obsolete, changing their primary usage for ambiance or as an emergency option in the event of electric outages.

3. What does the medium reverse into? This law focuses upon the potential dangers inherent within each medium. For example, the photo is intended to capture reality but can devolve into airbrushed reality seen on many magazine covers that creates an unrealistic standard that is unattainable for most individuals, resulting in extreme insecurity.

4. What does the medium retrieve? In the words of the sage of Ecclesiastes, “Nothing is new under the Sun,” as each new medium borrows from some

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8 Ecclesiastes 1:9.
previous medium. For instance, the radio retrieves the oral and aural aspects of the oral culture. The printing press retrieves the written medium.\(^9\)

Each of these questions can serve as a springboard for assessing the social impact of technology.

### 1.2 The Church and Past Media

The theological environment, far from impervious to the larger culture, has historically been influenced by new media forms, beginning with the phonetic alphabet to more modern digital media forms. Mnemonic devices utilized in Scripture, particularly the acrostics in Hebrew poetry, reflect the heavy emphasis placed upon memorization in oral traditions.\(^10\) Also, the emphasis on discipleship or apprenticeship, exemplified in the ministry of Jesus, is a primary form of learning in an oral tradition; listening, repeating, and engaging in corporate reflection is the “study” of pupils in an oral community.\(^11\) Compared to orality, the phonetic alphabet is an abstract device and perhaps influences the monotheistic teaching that is emphasized in the Old Testament. In his book, *Soft Edge: A Natural History and Future of the Information Revolution*, Paul Levinson argues that the abstract concepts of monotheism—marked by an omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient God—were palatable when presented by an equally

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\(^11\) Ibid., 9.
abstract device—the phonetic alphabet. The breadth and depth of the written word’s impact is exponentially increased with the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century. The printing press has been attributed with fertilizing the spread of the characteristics of the written medium—abstraction, individualism, and objectivity—ultimately, laying the foundation for modernity. The linear reasoning or “systematizing” of Systematic Theology corresponds to the linear nature of the printed word. Moreover, the printing press was a catalyst for the Protestant Reformation in that the propaganda and widespread traction necessary for such a movement was made possible through the printing press.

The linearity, abstraction, individualism, and “objectivity” of the modern era was then supplanted by a kaleidoscopic pluralism or relativism as electronic media, particularly the telegraph, changed the way information was received and perceived. Shane Hipps contends that the telegraph set the foundation for postmodernism because “information was as a mosaic of unrelated data points with no apparent connection, cause, or meaning.” With the telegraph, information was removed from its historical, local context, which is in stark contrast to the information shared in tribal communities of oral cultures. Consequently, the idea of an overarching or foundational narrative,

13 Elizabeth Einstein contends that the Protestant Reformation was the first religious movement to “fully exploit its [the printing press'] potential as a mass medium.” See Elizabeth Einstein, The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 145.
espoused by modern thinkers, is called into question. Instead of a foundational or metanarrative, stories are given weight based upon the personal experiences of individuals. This aversion to a metanarrative is exactly how Jean-Francois Lyotard defined postmodernism; instead of a common foundation, he contends that there are various narratives that are heterogeneously presented for individuals to determine the credence they will give to each narrative.\(^{15}\) Considering the impact of the Telegraph upon the reception and analysis of information, it is no surprise that the notion of “absolute truth,” is rejected, including that proclaimed by the Christian community, anchored in the Scriptures. In some sense, the Church loses its hegemonic position as the culture spurs cynicism for its foundational metanarrative.

With the proliferation of decontextualized information, the radio and television enable the masses to share common experience as the same information is received at the same time. With the inception of the radio, churches and preachers seized the opportunity to extend the reach of their services and sermons through broadcast. In 1921, Calvary Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh broadcasted the first religious program on radio, which paved the way for other religious programming.\(^{16}\) Televangelism becomes prominent approximately 30 years after the radio, with Billy Graham being one of the foremost televised preachers during the twentieth century. As


a consequence of televising services and sermons, concerns for production and appearance become vital. Neil Postman argues that an element of entertainment or amusement perverts the sanctity or authenticity of the liturgy when it is broadcasted, so it is no surprise that televangelists, both consciously and unconsciously, can succumb to the demands of entertainment. For instance, Postman mentions that while sharing a set with popular entertainers of his day, such as Dionne Warwick, Billy Graham quipped, “God loves those who make people laugh,” which Postman contends was an honest mistake in which Graham mistook NBC for God.\textsuperscript{17} As opposed to print culture, the image or visual presentation becomes essential with televised religious programming.

Salient to the discussion on religious programming on radio and television is the fact that these new forms of disseminating religious content obviated the need to physically gather in the same space to share the liturgy. This is also one of the reasons Postman cites for televangelism inevitably diluting the authenticity of religious experience. He states, “there is no way to consecrate the space in which a television show is experienced,” which he opines is in stark contrast with churches or synagogues that are consecrated through design, iconography, and the decorum of the celebrants.\textsuperscript{18} The masses could now receive aspects of the liturgy without sharing the same physical space. Ultimately, these methods of mass, electronic dissemination retrieve some of the communal aspects of an oral/aural tradition, but they do not completely supplant the


\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 118-9.
individualism of print media. Poet T.S. Eliot, commenting on the impact of television on social interaction, stated, “It is a medium of entertainment which permits millions of people to listen to the same joke at the same time, and yet remain lonesome.” These revolutionary media forms, consequently, set the foundation for the hybridity of being connected while maintaining an autonomy characteristic of the individualism of modernity.

1.3 *Networked-Individualism: Mobile Devices and Social Media*

If radio and television opened the door for connecting beyond the bounds of space constraints, newer forms of communication technology have seemingly shattered all physical barriers. “Networked individualism” is the coinage for a change in interpersonal and organizational connection that displaces tightly-knit groups for connection that is anchored in permeable boundaries, diverse interaction, and a flatter hierarchy. These connections are characterized as “heterogeneous, specialized, sparsely knit, and loosely bounded.” Information Communication Technology (ICT) has only bolstered networked individualism. Specifically, the internet and the platforms for social connectivity it contains have enabled its users to bridge space and time and connect with individuals millions of miles away. Pauline Hope Cheong coins this new iteration of the

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web, which encourages greater levels of interconnectivity and personal expression, as “Web 2.0.” The ubiquity of mobile internet connection means that people are “always on” or connected. Within the sphere of internet, individuals are able to be alone but still connected to networks in which information is exchanged and emotional support is provided. Internet based networking also exponentially increases the number of networks one can simultaneously engage, which some contend contributes to creating an age of distraction. As the breadth of connections is like the span of an ocean, the depth of engagement can be like a puddle. As the internet is becoming more personalized in nature, the depth and nature of engagement is completely determined by individual preference. Internet connectivity has completely revolutionized the way individuals connect and establish relationships, which ultimately changes the dynamics of community.

Computer-based social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) were not the genesis of our networked society but they have exponentially expanded the breadth of social connection. Transcontinental connection is now possible through the click of a button. In 2015, 3.2 billion people worldwide used the internet and in the United States 69% of adults utilized social media networks. With Facebook, Twitter,
and other digital social networks, more people are connected and, figuratively speaking, the world has certainly grown smaller. A study of retweeted messages on Twitter found that about 83 percent of all Twitter users are only separated by 5 steps from other users and about 50 percent are four links away. Consistent with the trends of internet-based networking, the depth of engagement is limited. One can have thousands of “friends” but engage deeper than a superficial level with only a few. With respect to religious groups on Facebook and user engagement, Mark Johns notes that many people like or join religious groups as a way of affirming the goal or purpose of the organization but have limited engagement or integration into the life of the organization.

Perhaps even more significant than decreasing the degrees of separation between individuals, social networks have been influential in the reconceptualization of foundational relationships through language. Facebook, in particular, has reshaped the traditional understanding of “friendship,” as every interaction with another individual is packed under the categorical umbrella of friendship. One can request, reject, unfriend, and share with friends or other users. Some of the friendships on Facebook may stem from offline friendships that fit the more traditional understanding; however, online interactions are more nuanced but are all categorically labeled as friendship.

2009, “unfriend” was the word of the year for the New Oxford American Dictionary. Twitter utilizes a term that is central to the Christian faith, “follower,” as the bedrock for interactions within their network. Essentially, followers have the ability to see a user’s shared content and who they are connected to on the network. In a Twitter world, traditional understandings of discipleship or following Christ are more nuanced; the great hymn of the church, *I have decided to follow Jesus*, can have a completely new hermeneutic.

As opposed to the earlier apocalyptic concerns that the virtual world would completely eclipse offline or “real-world” interaction, the offline and online worlds have merged. Studies, such as Robert Putman’s well-researched and widely read book, *Bowling Alone*, which analyzed the decline of participation in traditional, close-knit, community groups (bowling leagues, churches, civic groups, etc.), sagaciously raised awareness of a disconcerting trend in American society: participation in tightly knit groups is declining. Specifically, for the purpose of this work, participation in churches is declining as well as levels of commitment to a local church. In his study, Putman makes the following claim regarding engagement or commitment in religious groups:

> Privatized religion may be morally compelling and psychically fulfilling but it embodies less social capital. More people are “surfing” from congregation to congregation more frequently, so that while they may still be “religious,” they are less committed to a particular community of believers.\(^{28}\)


\(^{28}\) Putnam. *Bowling Alone*, 74.
Putman’s observation of individuals “surfing from congregation to congregation” is accurate, but what Putman does not do is connect this offline behavior to the nature of the online networked-society that gives more weight to individual preference or choice and fosters the loose commitment described.

More recently, studies reveal that younger Americans, born after 1980, are less inclined to attend religious services than previous generations. Amongst the reasons given for not participating in religious organizations is an aversion for organized religion or hierarchies. Twenty percent of “Nones,” individuals that do not affiliate with any religion, claim that the hierarchical structure or “business” nature of religious organizations deters them from joining. This perspective is also a reflection of the networked-society which seems to be more egalitarian with respect to leadership and authority. As individual expression is encouraged on the internet, neophytes are given the same liberty to express their views on subjects as experts and, in some instances, may be given more credence depending upon platform and presentation. Wikipedia is an example of this “prosumer” culture, as content is produced and edited by users, notwithstanding the lack of expertise of some contributors. A generation that is accustomed to this flattened system of engagement expects to contribute to the

construction of their faith and will resist anything that is remotely antidemocratic, including church governance or communal structure.

With more permeable boundaries and easier access to information that resides outside the traditional organizational lines, a theological eclecticism is increasing as perspectives may be shaped by a variety of individuals and a combination of views. The traditional tenets of the Christian faith can be coupled with or challenged by other religious views. With the exception of a minority of radicalized members of faith communities, there is a greater appreciation for interfaith exchange. It is not simply tolerance of other religious perspectives but an embracing of truth that may be found therein. Barry Wellman, commenting on the change in Protestant-Catholic-Jewish relations, writes, “Such distinctions have paled even more than race and now often become conversation points rather than reasons for discrimination.”31 Leaders of congregations must understand that their voice is now one in a choir of other leaders that share theological views that find resonance with parishioners. Now, at one’s fingertips, are myriad teachings and religious beliefs that have a magisterial tone or quality. One of the fastest growing sects amongst African-American males, the Black Israelites, spread their views utilizing video and media outlets. Also, more radicalized groups, such as ISIS, are propagating their vitriol beyond their physical boundaries

31 Rainie and Wellman, Networked, 33.
through media that is accessible over the internet.\textsuperscript{32} We can correctly presume that individuals living in our interconnected world are conversant with views that are outside of their own tradition.

The autonomy present in today’s networked generation does not translate to individual reclusiveness but rather individuals connect with others in a way that does not restrict the powers of the individual—personal choice is first priority. The individual is the center of his/her own universe and is able to connect at the times, in the places, and to the extent that he/she sets.\textsuperscript{33} Consequently, one is able to regulate the extent of vulnerability, inherent in any connection, by controlling the depth of interaction and disconnecting when one is made uncomfortable. The nomenclature used for devices conveys this ego-centered culture of networking—Apple’s “I-devices,” and the designation of tablets and computers as “personal” are some examples. In Freudian terms, this generation’s technology caters and contributes to an ego-centered existence—all to the detriment of community that calls for belonging through self-denial. Christine Pohl, commenting on the impact of our individualistic impulses upon the church community, writes:

While we readily recognize the ways in which the larger culture challenges Christian beliefs and commitments, we don’t always notice how profoundly our expectations, desires, and practices are also shaped by our culture. We bring the values of self-actualization, individual success, consumption, and personal


\textsuperscript{33} Rainie and Wellman, \textit{Networked}, 19 and 55.
freedom—and the choices that result from them—to church life, just as we bring them into family and work.34 As the larger, media-driven culture exerts strong influence upon Christian community, wise leaders will be keenly aware of the competing values that encroach upon the Christ-centered life of God’s people.

1.4 Christ-Centered community in view of our networked culture

Mark Zuckerberg recently wrote a commentary on “Building Global Community,” and disseminated this piece on Facebook. He opens by explicitly stating that a primary goal of his company is to “connect the world,”35 and proceeds by outlining five ways Facebook intends to build a desirable global community. One of the five ways is to “build supportive communities that strengthen traditional institutions in a world where membership in these institutions is declining.”36 Zuckerberg acknowledges that there is a serious problem with participation in traditional communities that primarily connect offline and even intimates a correlation between this decline and a decaying spiritual well-being and characteristics such as “hope for the future.” To rectify this decline and consequent spiritual decay, Zuckerberg argues for creating “very meaningful groups” or groups that reside at the core of the social networking experience. His contention is that as more people connect in “very meaningful groups” online, this will enhance offline connection as well. While this social

36 Ibid.
infrastructure may encourage the exchange of information and ideas, this proposed remedy ignores the fundamental changes in interpersonal interaction that are a consequence of connection mediated through Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs). The decline of empathy, especially within younger generations, is a byproduct of this paradigm shift to networked connection and is certainly exacerbated by technologically mediated connection. Insecurity with the imperfections and vulnerability that accompany fallible humanity living in a sinful world encourages inauthenticity that is exacerbated through mediated connection. The attentiveness that is required for conversation and soul-to-soul connection has been deleteriously impacted by ICTs. Finally, commitment that requires sacrifice is discouraged by a technological culture that caters to the personal comfort of consumers.

Increasing the breadth of our reach and support through “meaningful groups” on a social network, as Zuckerberg proposes, will not fix the fundamental problems of our networked society. Interestingly, to corroborate his claims regarding the challenges individuals are facing, Zuckerberg references the comments of a spiritual leader, a pastor. According to Zuckerberg, the pastor commented, “People feel unsettled. A lot of what was settling in the past does not exist anymore.”37 The pastor speaks to the present problems and is not referenced with regard to a solution, but I believe that the remedies to this “unsettled” feeling can be found within the local church. Clerical leaders that

37 Ibid.
understand the current landscape of networked individualism can shape ministry to leverage the benefits of technology but counteract the drawbacks.

Leveraging personal choice and connecting individual-to-individual provides myriad benefits, but, at the same time, one must consider what is sacrificed on the altar of this new form of connectivity. How are densely-knit, traditional groups, such as the church, impacted? The Church, called into fellowship through the self-immolation of Christ and characterized by the active presence of the unifying Spirit, is commissioned to be a distinctive community. The Church’s very nature, this purposeful distinction, challenges many of the social mores characteristic of a networked society. Specifically, connecting as sparsely-knit individuals and placing individual comfort and choice as ultimate is inconsistent with the biblical image of authentic, Christ-centered community and a deterrent to its realization in a local church context.

Local churches are called to be a concretized expression of our Lord, advancing the Kingdom of God, in the physical space and time in which they are found. The ethics of the church community should not be governed by the technology of our times but rather the teaching and ministry of our Lord. The Church’s ethics are unbelievable and perhaps even incomprehensible to a larger culture that does not believe in God’s work through Christ. In their classic theological treatise, *Resident Aliens*, Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon argue, “Christian ethics arise, in great part, out of something Christians claim to have seen that the world has not seen, namely, the creation of a
people, a family, a colony that is a living witness that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

When individuals called to live in this colony or family of God are more influenced by technology, consciously and unconsciously, than God’s work in Christ, it is incumbent upon pastors and leaders to seek the reestablishment of Christ-centered community. Such a pursuit will require countering the perspectives and proclivities of a networked society and encouraging participation in practices that force parishioners from their propensity for shallow connection, mediated through devices and anchored in personal comfort.

Far from being simply a means of diagnosing extant problems of our networked society, the local church is one of the most viable means to rectifying some of the personal and communal challenges faced as a result of technologically mediated connection or networked individualism. The church is a place where densely-knit community is not a relic of the past but a necessity for mission and celebrated for the irreplaceable benefits therein. The Church is a community for authentic, face-to-face conversation. As opposed to hiding brokenness, the Church is a community where human frailty and vulnerability is confronted by divine grace and forgiveness. The church is a community where heterogeneity is embraced and explored as God’s vision. Therefore, in sum total, the Church is a community in which the “unsettledness” people

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feel can be assuaged and the traditional anchors of community that have been abandoned can provide firm foundation for our humanity.

Considering the historical interrelationship between media ecology and theology, the present influence of networked individualism should not be surprising. Instead of seeking to deny or escape such influence, sage Christian leaders will allow their theology and ecclesiology to inform their adoption and use of technology within their local church. The ultimate aim for all leaders should be to maintain the Church’s integrity to its mission. As this chapter has discussed the interrelationship between media and the church, as well as the present social influence of media in shaping a networked society of sparsely-knit connection, the proceeding chapters will continue to argue that building authentic community should be a primary concern for church leadership and will provide more specific ways the local church can maintain missional integrity within a networked culture. By doing so, the church can remedy some of the pervasive problems emanating from technologically mediated interaction or the networked society that has been spawned. More specifically, chapter 2 will provide a theological foundation for close-knit community as well as a biological explanation for the necessity of such community within the church. We will proceed in chapters 3-4 with practical ways of maintaining community. In chapter 3, we will discuss the importance of conversation and empathy as a basis for communion in the church as well as provide practical suggestions for how leaders can build such communion in the local church.
context. In chapter 4, we will assess the virtues and vices of some of the ways technology is presently used in some local congregations, with respect to establishing and maintaining authentic, close-knit community. Finally, utilizing the Biblical stories of Babel in Genesis 11 and Pentecost in Acts 2, chapter 5 will conclude with soteriological considerations surrounding technology and close-knit community in the church and provide future research possibilities concerning the ecclesia within a rapidly changing media landscape.
Chapter 2. Densely-Knit Community: A Biological Necessity and Theological Foundation

And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common...And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts. (Acts 2:42-44, 46).

2.1 A Densely-Knit Community

In Acts 2:42-47, Luke provides a description of community within the early church. This picture of harmonious interaction, selfless sacrifice of possessions for the communal good, shared meals and miraculous displays of God’s power through the apostles is idyllic.¹ Within the context of the Greco-Roman world, Luke’s description of the fellowship amongst the church in the immediate wake of Pentecost is distinctive and counter-cultural, and most notably is the cohesion and friendship that transcends social and status barriers. Commenting on Luke’s social purpose of utilizing the friendship tradition in his description of the church, Alan Mitchell writes, “Firmly grounded in the life of the polis, friendship was normally sought by political equals, people of the same

¹ David Mealand argues that Luke adopts from Greek Utopianism and common values with respect to a Golden Age. Greek Utopianism was expounded upon by Greek philosophers and citizens valued with respect to a “Golden Age.” An example is seen in Plato’s writing, where holding goods in common was a feature of ideal society. See David Mealand, “Community of Goods and Utopian Allusions in Acts II-IV,” The Journal of Theological Studies, New Series, 28.1 (1977): 96-99.
status.” The communal image presented by Luke not only stands in sharp contrast to the ancient Greco-Roman world, but also to the mores of interaction in our world today, which is marked by capitalistic individuality. Considering the influence of capitalism in our western context, the most challenging of the actions described in Acts 2:42-47 is probably the relinquishing of personal possessions; consequently, the description of sharing money and property helps one in a western context to grasp the extent of the connection practiced by early believers. The depth of community described appears impractical and improbable, but this impossible koinonia is experienced as a manifestation of the Spirit’s power.

Will Willimon comments that the real miracle of Pentecost is the fellowship experienced by this community that goes beyond casual friendship or banal kinship.

Certainly some aspects of Luke’s presentation of community within the local church is contextual to the first-century and, therefore, not paradigmatic for all local congregations (worshipping in the temple, apostolic leadership, etc.). In light of the networked society we occupy, filled with technologically mediated connectivity, this Lukan picture of a densely-knit community, dining together and sharing possessions,

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3 One modern day Acts 2 community is Bruderhof Communities. In their “Foundations of our Faith and Calling,” they state, “Church community is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Any attempt to force it into being will produce only a disappointing caricature. Without help from above, we human beings are selfish and divided, unfit for life together.” The Bruderhof, “Foundations of our Faith and Calling” (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing, 2012), 7.

may serve as a guide for the twenty-first-century church that is tasked with the blessed opportunity of reimagining and creating authentic community in a time characterized by isolation and feelings of loneliness. Specifically, the advocacy of this chapter is not for leaders cloning their church after the church described by Luke in Acts, but rather pursuing the spirit and density of their engagement. Cultivating a densely-knit congregation, characterized by soul-deep intimacy produced by the Spirit is both a biological necessity and theological viability. Close-knit congregational community is encouraged because human beings are biologically wired for such and thrive when intimately connected with others. As a creationist, I contend that the foundation for this wiring, as well as the ability to connect with others in deeper ways, is rooted in God’s self.

2.2 A BIOLOGICAL NECESSITY

In 1943, psychologist Abraham Maslow presented, in hierarchical structure, a theory on the most primal needs that motivate human behavior. In his paper, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” Maslow argues that these needs, in order from most influential to least, are physiological needs, security, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Maslow states, “undoubtedly, these physiological needs are the most pre-potent of all needs. What this means specifically is, that in the human being who is missing

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5 A Study conducted by Harris Poll on behalf of the American Osteopathic Association found that 72% of Americans said they experience loneliness. About a third of the 72% said that this is at least a once-a-week occurrence. See Mary Marcus, “Feeling Lonely? So are a lot of other people, survey finds,” CBS News, October 13, 2016, at https://www.cbsnews.com/news/many-americans-are-lonely-survey-finds/ accessed (April 24, 2018).
everything in life in an extreme fashion, it is most likely that the major motivation would be the physiological needs rather than any others.”⁶ Physiological needs appear to be most paramount until viewed from the lens of infants’ dependency upon their parents, both prenatal and post-partum, for physical needs. Arguing for inverting Maslow’s pyramid, social cognitive Neuroscientist, Matthew Lieberman, writes:

What all mammalian infants, from tree shrews to human babies, really need from the moment of birth is a caregiver who is committed to making sure that the infant’s biological needs are met. If this is true, then Maslow had it wrong. To get it right, we have to move social needs to the bottom of his pyramid. Food, water, and shelter are not the most basic needs for an infant. Instead being socially connected and cared for is paramount. Without social support, infants will never survive to become adults who can provide for themselves.⁷

Human dependence in conception, prenatal care, and infancy accentuates the primal necessity of close-knit social engagement. The constant flow of nutrient-rich and life-supporting blood from the mother to the fetus through the placenta and umbilical cord, at the very beginning of human life, is an early biological marker of the depth of human interdependence. This dependence and necessity for connectedness continues in infancy, as children are unable to do anything for themselves without the aid of caregivers. This necessity for connectedness is ongoing throughout one’s life; independence, often perceived as a sign of maturation, is illusory. The importance of close human connection

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⁷Matthew Lieberman, Social: Why our Brains are Wired to Connect (New York: Crown, 2013), 42.
can be biologically supported by human neurology, adolescent development, and adult health trends.

### 2.2.1 Human Neurology

Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (FMRI) is a tool that measures brain activity through changes in oxygen and blood flow that occur as a result of neurological triggers. When a particular area of the brain is active, it requires more oxygen and, therefore, the flow of blood to that particular area within the brain will increase. This enables researchers to know which parts of the brain are activated when engaging in different tasks. Utilizing FMRI, Matthew Lieberman argues that our brains respond to social pain in the same way we respond to physical pain; the same neurological regions activated during times of physical pain are activated when one experiences threats in social connections. To prove his point, an experiment was conducted in which participants were asked to play a ball-tossing game with two other individuals. Each individual was responsible for deciding to whom they wanted to throw the ball. After a short time playing the game, one participant was completely excluded and had to watch as the ball was tossed back-and-forth between the other players, which simulated social rejection. Monitoring the brain of the rejected participant, scientists discovered that the

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9 Lieberman, Social, 4.
same regions activated during physical distress were activated when experiencing feelings of rejection. The level of brain activity corresponded directly with the extent of one’s emotional reaction to rejection. This means that the separation of physical and emotional pain caused by social struggles does not have a neurological basis. In fact, our biological response completely contradicts the aphorism often quoted in childhood to encourage children to ignore verbal attacks, “sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” Our neurological response confirms the truth that our social needs are just as fundamental as our physical needs.

In 2001, neuroscientists from Washington University studied the brain’s activity while individuals were at rest or not performing specific tasks that would induce activity within the brain, and discovered a “baseline” of neural activity. Based on their findings, they called the brain’s resting state the “Default Mode Network,” or regions in the brain that show lower levels of activity while performing tasks and higher levels while an individual is not actively engaged in tasks. What is fascinating about this default neural mode is that “the network in the brain that reliably shows up during social cognition studies is virtually identical to the default network.” More specifically,

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10 Matthew Lieberman speaks about this experiment in a Tedx talk given in St. Louis in September 2013. To listen to this talk, see TedxTalks, “The Social Brain and its Superpowers: Matthew Lieberman, Ph.D. at TEDxStLouis,” YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNhk3owF7RQ


12 Lieberman, Social, 19.
the regions in the brain associated with attributing mental states to others and empathizing with others is also a part of the Default Mode Network.\textsuperscript{13} Have you ever wondered how individuals that are not present in your physical space or distant acquaintances can “pop-up” in your mind? Often, individuals may call and say, “You just came across my mind, so I decided to check on you.” Perhaps this wandering social thought might, in fact, be evidence that even when we are not consciously thinking, our brains are wired to consider the social aspects of our existence. This, certainly, is a basic form of empathetic living that underscores our ability to consider the needs, perspectives, and desires of others.

“Mentalizing” is described by psychologist Jon G. Allen as “the spontaneous sense we have of ourselves and others as persons whose actions are based on mental states: desires, needs, feelings, beliefs, and the like.”\textsuperscript{14} Essentially, when we interact with others around us, we presume that the impetus for their actions is a particular state of mind. If we hear that a colleague’s parents took ill, we may call and speak in a consoling tone because we believe the individual is grieving. Similarly, if our spouse wakes up and is moving rather slowly, we might assume that she is still tired and needs a cup of coffee to boost energy. All human exchange is based upon mentalizing, which some

\textsuperscript{13} Rogier Mars et al., “On the Relationship between the ‘Default Mode Network’ and ‘The Social Brain.’” 

\textsuperscript{14} John Allen et al., “Understanding Mentalizing: Mentalizing as a Compass for Treatment,” Menninger, at \url{https://www.menningerclinic.com/clinicians/clinical-resources/mentalizing} (accessed June 1, 2018).
have coined, “mind reading.” Our ability to read the minds of others is also a neurological wiring. To determine which parts of the brain are activated when one is engaged in mentalizing, scientists have experimented by providing sentences to individuals, some of which have required them to determine the desires or beliefs of others while others have not. They observed that when an individual was engaged in mentalizing, the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex, temporoparietal junction, posterior cingulate, and temporal poles were most active in the brain. On the other hand, individuals that have autism and struggle with understanding the thoughts, desires, and beliefs of others have lower activity in these regions. Navigating simple and complex social settings requires that we are able to think about the thoughts of others and adjust our actions accordingly, which requires that our brains, specifically the regions mentioned above, are optimally functioning.

The default network and neurological regions involved in mentalizing reveal that the brain is wired for social connection, but does the brain respond differently to different types of connection—through, say, the use of technological devices? Does verbal communication that enters our auditory senses have a different impact on biological responses than communicating through instant messaging? To test this, scientists from the University of Wisconsin-Madison conducted an experiment with

15 John Allen states, “Thus we are all mind readers, and mentalizing entails accurate and effective mind reading” (ibid.), while Matthew Lieberman claims, “We use our capacity for mind-reading to support our motivation for connection” (Social, 112).

16 For information on the experiment and results see Lieberman, Social, 115-116.
sixty-eight girls, between the ages of seven and twelve, in which the participants were tested for hormonal responses to instant messaging versus verbally communicating with their parents.\textsuperscript{17} Researchers discovered that “unlike children interacting with their mothers in person or over the phone, girls who instant messaged did not release oxytocin; instead, these participants showed levels of salivary cortisol as high as control subjects who did not interact with their parents at all.”\textsuperscript{18} This study reveals that not all interaction is equal with respect to bonding. With regard to neurological responses, a text message is not a substitute for hearing the voice of a loved one. Such knowledge does not bode well for a generation that is inclined to communicate through text messages or social media rather than orally.\textsuperscript{19} The biological necessity for hearing the human voice, as demonstrated by the body’s neurological response to the human voice, should be an impetus for prioritizing conversation.

Not only is the need for close interpersonal interaction seen through our responses to the human voice as opposed to a text message, but also through the biological importance of human touch. British Anthropologist Robin Dunbar argues that the inordinate amount of time primates spend in grooming others is distinctive and is


\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.

not merely hygienic, but also for the purpose of bonding. The bond created by social grooming in wild baboons, Dunbar contends, has implications for protective alliances, reproductive success, and the amount of time baboons sleep when the lactation demands of their children increase (baboons take time away from sleeping to maintain time spent in social grooming). This study also revealed that touch releases endorphins that are important in the mechanisms of pain control, as well as oxytocin, which can result in lower blood pressure and reduce stress. Human touch, invariably, has positive psychological benefits, which suggests that human touch is a necessity for healthy existence.

An example that lamentably demonstrates what happens when touch is withheld can be found in the experience of thousands of Romanian children born under the dictatorial rule of Nicolae Ceausesco. Ceausesco, desiring to increase the population, passed “Decree 770,” which made it illegal for women under 45 not to have children, fined individuals without children, and banned contraceptives. Consequently, the spate of births that ensued after Degree 770 caused the population to boom; however, families were unable to care for their children and many were forced to send their

21 Ibid., 263.
22 Ibid., 264-265.
newborns to understaffed, state-run orphanages known as leaganes. With a 20-1 child-to-caregiver ratio, children growing up in these institutions were severely neglected and egregiously suffered as a result of social deprivation. Mary Carlson, a neurobiologist from Harvard, and her husband Felton Earls, a psychologist from Harvard, visited Romania to study the physiological and neurological impact on children growing up in the Romanian orphanages. They concluded, “The muteness, blank facial expressions, social withdrawal, and bizarre stereotypic movements of these infants bore a strong resemblance to the behavior of socially deprived macaques and chimpanzees.” Carlson and Earls removed some of the children from the Leagane and placed them in a 4-1 child-to-caregiver ratio to study the neurological and physiological impact. Children placed in this environment had lower levels of stress-inducing hormones and experienced significant strides in physical growth and in mental and motor development. Upon returning to the Romanian orphanage, the physiological and neurological improvements the children experienced while in a more nurturing environment were reversed.

25 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 422.
The neurological impact of close social connection and ensuing physiological benefits means that not only is our spiritual being enhanced by densely-knit fellowship, but our physical health as well. Passing the peace or other moments of fellowship, during which we speak and embrace each other in worship,²⁸ are not trivial or tangential, but rather an essential practice for our spiritual and physical well-being. In such participation, physiologically, we are reducing stress, spurring growth, and encouraging deeper social bonds that are necessary for thriving during times of personal or communal crisis. When the local church gathers for fellowship, our human capacity for mentalizing means we may be able to discern hidden or unspoken pain through indicators, however subtle, that would not be discerned without being in close proximity. Essentially, our fundamental needs are being met simply by being together.

2.2.2 Adolescent Development

In healthy scenarios, the bond between mothers and their children is special. There is no greater physiological connection than an embryo growing in the womb of its mother. The strength of this social bond is often second to none. Mothers are protective of their children and older children are often protective of their mothers. The unique bond between mothers and their children has been scientifically tested and corroborated. Neuroscientist Maryse Lassonde studied the impact of mothers’ voices on

²⁸ Pioneering family therapist, Virginia Satir, is credited with saying, “We need four hugs a day for survival. We need eight hugs a day for maintenance. We need twelve hugs a day for growth.” See https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/virginia_satir_175185
their day-old newborns by testing the babies’ neurological response to the voice of their moms with the voice of strangers. She discovered that “newborns process their mother’s voice more actively than they do a stranger but they also process it differently.”

The mother’s voice stimulates the left side of the brain associated with language development and motor skills, whereas the stranger’s voice activated the right side of the brain that is associated with voice recognition. Not only do babies uniquely respond to their mothers, but mothers are also uniquely wired to respond to their children.

Commenting on the unique bond between mothers and their children, developmental psychologist Susan Pinker says, “These young babies, some just a few days old, are hardwired to connect face-to-face, and adults are similarly programmed to respond with alacrity to their crying, gazing, and cooing.” This special bond that exists between children and parents is necessary for the baby’s survival and development.

This primal social connection that every human being has (mother-and-child) is a fundamental indicator of the importance of relationships for healthy development in adolescence. Even after a child is weaned off their mother’s breast and past toddler years, strong social connection is necessary for a healthy and full life. Adolescence is generally categorized into three developmental stages: 10-13 (early adolescence), 14-17

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(middle adolescence) and 18-early twenties (late adolescence).\textsuperscript{31} One unique aspect about early adolescence is the penchant for risk-taking. This inclination to take risks has a biological foundation. During this period, the part of the brain that evaluates rewards versus risk, the limbic system, develops rapidly. However, the part of the brain which controls impulses, the frontal lobes, develops much slower.\textsuperscript{32} Consequently, teens may identify an activity as high-risk but still engage because, biologically, they have not developed the self-control to quell the impulse for such behavior. Also, FMRI studies have shown that the reward response teens experience from high-risk behavior is much greater than their adult counterparts.\textsuperscript{33} The high-risk nature of this stage can be a cause of great frustration for parents or caregivers. However, the same means through which babies survive during infant years is the same way that adolescents are guided through this stage—relationships.

With this propensity for risk-taking, the influence of the social network adolescents have during this time cannot be overstated. Parents exert significant influence on the decisions their children make with regard to drug use or sexual activity. Youth in this stage need adults that can provide guidance while also affording them the


\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 24
opportunity to develop their reasoning, which unfortunately may require experiencing adversity as a result of poor decisions. Children at this age are aided by limits that their parents set, such as curfew or restricting the places they are permitted to frequent or even their circle of friends. Shared, open communication between parents and their adolescent children reduces the risk of delinquent behavior.\footnote{Elizabeth Gancy & Manfred Van Dulmen, “Fathers Do Make A Difference: Parental Involvement and Adolescent Alcohol Use,” Fathering 8 (Winter 2010): 93-108, at http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.823.2928&rep=rep1&type=pdf (accessed on June 21, 2018).} Indeed, participating in activities with fathers has been scientifically proven to reduce stress and alcohol use.\footnote{Ibid., 95-96.} During a time when children are seeking greater levels of independence, it is just as imperative that parents seek to maintain close relationships with their adolescent youth because strong parental relationships are the greatest deterrent to risky behavior.

Along with parental relations, social relationships with peers are extremely significant and influential during adolescence. As children grow, they spend less time with parents and have more unsupervised time with peers. Consequently, more attention is given to the opinions and expectations of peers.\footnote{B. Bradford Brown, “Peer Relationships in Adolescence,” in Handbook of Adolescent Psychology, ed. Richard Lerner and Laurence Steinberg (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley and Sons, 2009), 75-76.} In fact, the risks adolescents are willing to take are elevated, often, by peer-influence. To prove this point, psychologists from Temple University used FMRI to study the brain of forty adolescents’ response to their peers. The researchers recruited 14 teenagers, 14 college students, and 12 young adults to play a video driving game while their peers were...
observing in another room. The incentive offered for completing the course in a certain amount of time was a cash prize. Players had to make decisions, therefore, about driving safely with a lower risk of crashing and reduced reward or driving faster with a high-risk of crashing and higher reward.\textsuperscript{37} Young teenagers tested both when playing in isolation and with two peers observing ran about 40 percent more yellow lights and experienced 60 percent more crashes. The biological explanation for taking more risk when being observed by peers is that the regions in the brain associated with rewards were highly activated when friends were viewing.\textsuperscript{38} According to an author of the study, Dr. Laurence Steinberg, the experiment exposed a new understanding of peer pressure. He states, “I think it is helpful to understand because many parents conceive peer pressure as kids directly coercing each other into doing things. We’ve shown that just the knowledge that your friends are watching you can increase risky behavior.”\textsuperscript{39} During this stage of development, the presence of friends is vitally important in motivating behavior, both positive and negative.

\textbf{2.2.3. Healthy Adults}

Friends are not only vital during adolescence but also strong friendships or social connections are influential upon the health of adults and senior adults. Longevity and


\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
the quality of our life are significantly impacted by the depth and quality of our friendships. Happiness, illness, longevity—mental, physical and emotional health—are linked to the quality of adult relationships. Susan Pinker, writing on the impact of friendships upon health, says, “neglecting to keep in close contact with people who are important to you is at least as dangerous to your health as a pack-a-day cigarette habit, hypertension, or obesity.”40 She contends that people without strong social support are more than twice as likely to die prematurely.41 There is an African proverb that says, “It takes a village to raise a child.” The same may be true for a healthy life—“it takes a village to have a healthy and long life.” Although we give a considerable amount of attention to the health benefits of diet and exercise, we do not focus as much on the associated health benefits of strong relationships.

Social-personality psychologist and Michigan State University professor, William Chopik, conducted a longitudinal study, analyzing the health and subjective health of older adults over a six to eight year period, to determine the influence of relationships. He discovered that there is a positive correlation between friendship strain and chronic illnesses.42 With regard to one’s perceived health, there was also a positive correlation between subjective health and positive relationships with one’s spouse, friends, and

40 Pinker, Village Effect, 22.
41 Ibid., 22
children.\textsuperscript{43} The findings of this study are particularly true for seniors, which could be a result of the enduring nature of these relationships. Speaking on the pronounced benefit of friendship in older adults, Chopik stated, “You have kept those people around because they have made you happy, or at least contributed to your wellbeing in some way … Across our lives, we let more superficial friendships fade, and we’re left with the really influential ones.”\textsuperscript{44} This means that not all friendships are created equal; the depth of our friendships is consequential and impacts the endurance of our relationships. If more superficial relationships tend to fade as one ages, the question is will online friendships, generally more superficial in nature, survive the test of time? Will enduring friendships and the attendant health benefits be experienced by individuals whose social interactions are governed by the mores of a networked society characterized by sparsely-knit interaction?

As adults pursue full and long life, more attention should be given to the areas in the world where people live healthier and longer lives, often referred to as “Blue Zones.” In his book, \textit{The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who’ve Lived the Longest}, Dan Buettner mentions five Blue Zones in the world: Icaria, Greece; Loma Linda, California; Sardinia, Italy; Okinawa, Japan; and Nicoya, Costa Rica.\textsuperscript{45} In his

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 416.


studies of these areas, he discovered some common characteristics of the individuals that lived the longest, three of which were relational in nature: Belonging to a faith-based community, having close and strong family connections, and having close friends and strong social networks. Zia Teresa, a centenarian living in Sardinia, Italy was asked about the key to her longevity, she responded, “it's because they love me.” She was referring to the village of friends, family and neighbors that regularly visited her for conversation and with whom she shared a deep bond. Zia’s response was more specific than the generic, religious answer that her friend gave for her longevity, “Because it’s God’s will!” Although her friend’s answer is more general, she is not incorrect. In fact, based on what we know about the biological benefits of social interaction in all stages of life, we understand that God’s will for our lives is that we be deeply connected with others. So much so, that God has intertwined our biological health with our social engagement. Combining both Zia’s and her neighbor’s answer is appropriate considering the evidence provided for the biological necessity of relationships—It is God’s will that we be loved and give love to others in a close-knit community!

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47 Pinkner, Village Effect, 55.
48 Ibid.
2.3 A Theological Foundation

As a creationist, I believe the biological wiring that necessitates social engagement is established by God. Since God is the creator, all anthropological study must be properly rooted in theology. Christian anthropology is anchored in a belief that all of humankind and the individual person is God’s creation and is created in the *imago dei.*\(^{49}\) Genesis 1:26 says, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’”\(^{50}\) Humanity, consequently, better understands what it means to be created in the image of God as we grow in our knowledge of God’s self. Karl Barth, speaking of the image of God and Genesis 1:26, argues that the “let us” refers to the “plurality in the divine being ... the differentiation and relationship ... the loving co-existence and co-operation, the I and Thou...”\(^{51}\) Barth contends, consequently, that at the core of the image of God is relationship with the other, and human relationships are analogous to the relationships within God’s self.\(^{52}\) Consistent with Barth’s view, for the purposes of this study, it is my contention that the social, biological wiring mentioned in the previous section is illumined as we understand God’s social nature. The social

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\(^{50}\) Study Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2007).


\(^{52}\) Ibid.
nature of God can be examined and understood from the perspective of the Trinity, which has implications on our understanding of the communion and fellowship for which humanity was created.

In addition to understanding the nature of anthropological communion and fellowship through the theological lens of the trinity, one must examine the role of the Spirit in creating God-intended communion in relationships. Fellowship that embodies the nature of God’s self is impossible without the Spirit. This study of anthropological communion in the church, therefore, intersects with pneumatology as well. Particularly, the Holy Spirit’s role in creating densely-knit, authentic relationships within God’s church is essential to understanding the theological basis of Christian community.

2.3.1 The Trinity and the Image of God

One of the staple hymns of the church in my tradition, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” exclaims the Trinity as a part of a beautiful doxology:

Holy, Holy, Holy, 
Merciful and mighty
God in three persons
Blessed Trinity.53

The Trinitarian adoration expressed in this song is based in an understanding of God as three substantively equal persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. Although the term trinity is not mentioned in the Bible, the truth of the three persons of the Godhead is supported in

several passages. At the Baptism of Jesus, God the Father speaks a benediction upon the life and ministry of Jesus, “‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’”\(^{54}\) As the Son of God is being baptized and God the Father is proclaiming a blessing upon his life and ministry, the Spirit of God descends as a dove and rests upon Jesus.\(^{55}\) Speaking of the essential unity and equal nature between himself and God the Father, Jesus declares, “I and the Father are one.”\(^{56}\) In John 14, as Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure, he reveals that at his departure God will send the Holy Spirit as a helper and guide.\(^{57}\) Finally, the Great Commission to make disciples, given to the followers of Christ at his ascension, is Trinitarian: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”\(^{58}\) All three persons of the Godhead: Father, Son and Spirit, are intimately connected—in community—and intricately involved in God’s revelation and plan.

At the center of God’s self-revelation to humanity is the trinity. Although the trinity is a core part of God’s revelation and Christian theology, the practical significance for the church, worship (beyond lyrics of songs), and relationships is not always understood. Regarding the essence of God’s nature, John Calvin contended that one’s pursuit of God’s essence should focus more on adoration than investigation and any

\(^{54}\) Matthew 3:17  
^{55}\) Matthew 3:16.  
^{56}\) John 10:30.  
^{57}\) John 14:15-17.  
^{58}\) Matthew 28:18-19.
inquiry of God must start with God’s works by which he comes close to humanity. Far from being an arcane theological proposition lacking practical import, the doctrine of the trinity is consequential for our understanding of humanity being created for community.

The trinity is the theological foundation for Christian anthropology. Stanley Grenz says, Christian anthropology views the human person and humankind as a whole “in relationship to God.” The God whose reality illumines Christian anthropology is not some generic deity, however, but the God of the Bible, whom Christians confess as the triune one. For this reason, the specifically theological context in which theological anthropology must be developed is that of the confession of the triune God. Hence, Christian theological anthropology is trinitarian theological anthropology.  

Since our understanding of humanity, created in the image of the God revealed in the Christian tradition, is informed by a triune God, what is the practical significance for our lives? How does the image of persons-in-relation in the Godhead affect our understanding of personhood and the actions that align with full-humanity? James Torrance, commenting on the anthropological significance of a Trinitarian view of God, writes, “God’s primary purpose for humanity is ‘filial’, not just ‘judicial’, where we have been created in the image of God to find our true being-in-communion, in ‘sonship’, in the mutual personal relations of love.” Torrance’s accent on the filial and not simply

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the judicial means that the Trinity has bearing on human relationships and, therefore, is just as significant as soteriology and directly related to ecclesiology. The trinity suggests that interpersonal relationships with each other are just as significant as justification before God because humanity finds “true being in communion.” Essentially, the loving, communal interaction between the Father, Son, and Spirit should be foundational in our considerations of the essence of the imago dei.

2.3.1.1 Perichoresis

Relationship within God’s self, between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is dense; the triune God is closely-knit in communion. This intimate communion is conveyed by the term perichoresis, which refers to the mutual indwelling of the three persons of the trinity. This union amongst the Father, Son, and Spirit is indivisible and unbreakable. With regard to proximity, “not one of them occupies space, so to speak, that the others do not.”62 The trinity is so dense that the persons of the trinity exist within one another. There is perfect harmony and indivisible unity.

In the exposition of the gospel of John, this perichoretic intimacy between the Father and the Son is discussed. Their relationship is described from the perspective of eternal intimacy in the beginning. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was

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with God, and the Word was God.”

John continues discussing the unique revelation that Christ offers in making God known by emphasizing the intimacy between the Father and the Son, “No one has ever seen God; the only God who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.”

With respect to mutual indwelling, one of the strongest statements that indicate perichoretic union is spoken by Jesus in John 14:11: “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”

The mutual indwelling between the Father, Son, and Spirit, while maintaining distinctive personhood, was a point of contention for some of the Church Fathers. It was a challenge to understand how individuality in inseparable mutuality could coexist. How could God be both one and three? Athanasius provided an explanation through the terms ousia and hypostasis. God, in essence, is one ousia or being and within the one being there are three hypostases or persons. Within the trinity, individuality and community are not competing but rather perfectly complementary. Community amongst the triune God is sustained through perfect love that is demonstrated in the concern that one person of the trinity has for the other persons. The persons of the trinity cannot exist independent from the others. Therefore, within God’s self, we have an example of perfect, densely-knit community.

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63 John 1:1.
64 John 1:18.
The intimacy of shared knowledge, space, and essence within the triune God is the closest community possible. All human relationships, divorced from the Holy Spirit, fall short of the dense union within the trinity. A couple’s physical union during copulation or the marriage bond may be the closest human parallel to the mutual indwelling between the Father, Son, and Spirit. Even these, however, fall short of perfect perichoresis. Sexual partners eventually go separate ways after intercourse and married couples may share a home but are still not indivisible, as evidenced by the reality of divorce. The persons in the trinity, however, are indissoluble.

2.3.1.2 Triune Intimacy as Revealed through the Economic Trinity

Two broad categories are provided as designations for understanding the trinity in terms of external revelation as opposed to who God is internally or eternally. The triune God, as revealed in the work of salvation for humanity, is designated as the economic trinity. Conversely, God within the eternal and divine life is referred to as the Immanent Trinity. Some might argue that this is a contrived dichotomy because what we know of God is solely through his revelation to us in the work of salvation. It is impossible to know God’s true essence or Immanent Trinitarian nature independent of revelation. Karl Barth believed that everything we know about God comes through revelation. He wrote,

66 Grenz, Social God, 38.
We have consistently followed the rule, which we regard as basic, that statements about the divine modes of being antecedently in themselves cannot be different in content from those that are to be made about their reality in revelation. All our statements concerning what is called the immanent Trinity have been reached simply as confirmations or underlinings or, materially, as the indispensable premises of the economic Trinity.\textsuperscript{67}

Notwithstanding one’s position on the immanent or economic Trinity dichotomy, God’s Trinitarian revelation in the work of salvation, specifically during the incarnational ministry of Jesus, enhances our understanding of the intimacy present between the Father, Son, and Spirit. Also, the language used provides the best metaphorical comparison to our own experience. God is Father, Jesus is Son, and the Spirit is called a helper, counselor or advocate. The familial ascriptions for God and Jesus find close resonance with human experience. Similarly, the Holy Spirit as a helper, advocate, or friend has profound resonance for most, if not all, individuals. Therefore, the economic Trinity enables us to see the practical manifestations of \textit{perichoresis} and, therefore, the resonance for community and relationship.

Through the Son’s union with the Father, it is made apparent that an outward expression of perichoresis is conversation. Jesus declares that his speech in the world is dictated by what he hears from his Father.\textsuperscript{68} The Son also communicates with the Father through prayer. Frequently, Jesus retreats to commune with the Father in prayer on the

\textsuperscript{67} Barth, \textit{Doctrine of Creation}, 479.

\textsuperscript{68} John 12:49.
Mount of Olives. The strength of their communion through conversation is exemplified through the confidence the Son has that the Father is listening and hears him. Prior to raising Lazarus, the Son speaks to the Father and declares confidence in their communion through conversation: “Father, I know that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me...”\textsuperscript{69} Even in the nadir of his life, in the excruciating pain of crucifixion and feelings of dereliction, Jesus communes with the Father through conversation. The first word spoken from the cross is “Father (forgive them for they do not know what they are doing)” and the last word also is “Father (into your hands I commit my spirit)” and they both initiate prayers—conversations with God.\textsuperscript{70} This means that at the darkest hour of his life, the Son was still communing with the Father through conversation.

Another outward manifestation of perichoresis is a deferential, self-giving for the sake of the other. Both the Father and Son are fully invested in honoring and esteeming each other. Jesus, during incarnation, willingly submits to the will of the Father in order to bring glory to God. This willing submission creates an apparent conundrum for a cursory reader of Scripture because Jesus, equal with God, says, “the Father is greater than I.”\textsuperscript{71} As discussed above, the Son is essentially equal to the Father as they share the same essence or ousia. Therefore, Jesus’ comment on the superiority of the Father is an

\textsuperscript{69} John 11:41-42.

\textsuperscript{70} Both of these words on the cross are recorded in Luke’s gospel—Luke 23:34 and Luke 23:46.

\textsuperscript{71} John 14:28.
expression of deferential submission. D. A. Carson comments on this verse by
denouncing the Arian impulse to argue that Jesus is substantively less than God. He
writes, “In the clause before us, ‘the Father is greater than I,’ cannot be taken to mean
that Jesus is not God, or that he is lesser than God … the greater than category cannot be
legitimately presumed to refer to ontology, apart from the controls performed by
context.”72 He further expounds upon this passage by emphasizing the willing
subordination of the Son to the Father: “this verse attest to the pattern of functional
subordination of the Son to the Father … the Son is God sent and obedient.”73 The Son,
in his obedience and submission, accomplishes the mission of bringing glory to the
Father.

Not only does the Son glorify the Father, but the Father also glorifies the Son. In
fact, there seems to be a symbiotic relationship between their glorifications of each other.
In John 17:1, Jesus says, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may
glorify you.” In John 17:1, the Father’s glorification of the Son is referring to the
revelation of the unique identify of the Son through crucifixion. The hour that Jesus
refers to is the time of his death on an ignominious cross. It is through his death on the
cross that God will exalt Jesus and, because of the interconnected nature of their union,
exalt himself through Jesus. Andrew Lincoln, commenting on this verse, highlights the

73 Ibid., 508.
intersection of the Father and Son: “Throughout the narrative, Jesus’ cause and God’s
cause have been intertwined. If Jesus is honoured or glorified, this will mean that God is
also honoured and glorified. Jesus’ hour of exaltation through death will be the
paradoxical establishment of the reputation of both God and Jesus.”74 This is a perfectly
harmonious duet, in which both the Father and the Son are concerned about the needs of
the other.

The Holy Spirit’s role in the triune relationship is often overlooked or
underemphasized. This is not surprising because, although fully God, the Spirit has a
“background position” within the trinity.75 This “background position” does not mean
that the Spirit’s role, in comparison to the Father and Son, is less important. In fact, to
the contrary, no work of the Father or Son could be accomplished without the Spirit. The
intimacy of the Spirit’s relationship with the Father and Son is seen in that the Spirit is
sent from the Father (according to Eastern Tradition) and from the Son (according to
Western Tradition).76 In John’s gospel, as he prepares his disciples for his departure,
Jesus says, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with

2005), 434.
75 Bruce A. Ware, Father, Son, & Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books,
2005), 104.
76 The Western church added the filioque clause to the Nicene Creed to express an understanding that the Spirit
proceeds from both the Father and Son. The Eastern Church contends that this perspective minimizes the impact of the
Father’s role. For a discussion on this controversy, see Robert Letham, Holy Trinity, 202-203.
you forever, even the Spirit of truth…”\textsuperscript{77} These words support the procession of the Spirit from the Father at the behest of the Son. As Jesus continues this conversation, he adds, “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of Truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.”\textsuperscript{78} This verse seems to support the Western Church’s view that the Spirit processes from both the Father and Son. The filioque debate is indicative of our struggle to understand the depths of perichoresis or the inseparable union amongst the Trinity. As indicated by the scriptures, both are correct and speak to the density of relationship that the Spirit has to the Son and the Father.

Similar to the deferential interaction between the Father and Son, the Spirit does not seek its own interest. Instead, the Spirit is invested in the other two persons. The Spirit serves the Son as an empowering agent, as Jesus pursues the will of the Father. This is first demonstrated at Baptism when the Spirit descended and rested upon Jesus.\textsuperscript{79} Immediately after, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tested.\textsuperscript{80} Upon successful completion of the testing, the Bible says, “And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee…”\textsuperscript{81} It is evident through the description of the onset of his ministry that the Spirit of God would be an enabling source for the Son to do the work of the

\textsuperscript{77} John 14:16-17.
\textsuperscript{78} John 15:26.
\textsuperscript{79} Matthew 3:16f.
\textsuperscript{80} Matthew 4:1.
\textsuperscript{81} Luke 4:14.
Father. Although not often overtly credited for his role, Bruce Ware says that the Holy Spirit “stands behind the obedience and miraculous power of Christ, and in this Jesus is rendered truly a model for us in our lives, this side of Pentecost.”

Finally, deference towards the Son and the Father by the Spirit is explicitly stated in John 16:14-15: “He [the Holy Spirit] will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” Just as the Father glorifies the Son and the Son glorifies the Father, the Spirit glorifies both by revealing the Son to disciples post-Ascension. With regard to Christian community—life within the Church—the Spirit’s role is most vital in enabling Christians to embody the life of Christ as witnesses. Essential to this embodiment of Christ’s life is dense, closely-knit fellowship that reflects the perichoresis within the triune God. Christian community, by virtue of the responsibility to be a witness, must represent the intimacy, deference, communication, differentiated unity, hospitality, and life within God’s self—existing amongst the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Again, Ware is helpful here as he enumerates the significance of the Trinity, he argues, “The doctrine of the Trinity—one God existing in three Persons in the ways we have described—provides one of the most important and neglected patterns for how human life and human relationships are to be conducted.”

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82 Ware, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, 105.
83 Ibid., 22.
communal—relational by nature—the image of God cannot be reflected in isolation or in sparsely-knit union, but is best expressed in the density of Christian community, as Christians interpenetrate one another’s lives through communion. Considered as a paragon of authentic community, the trinity provides a theological foundation for guiding and leading community in the *ekklesia*.

### 2.4 PNEUMATOLOGY AND ECCLESIOLOGY

When the Son ascends to the Father after fulfilling his Father-given purpose, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Church is established at Pentecost. It is clear from the outset that, similar to the ministry of Jesus, the Spirit will have an empowering role in the Church. Specifically, the Spirit will help the newly formed community to live in a way that bears witness to their Lord. Acts 1:8 says, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” The church is called-out to reflect and embody the very essence of the triune God, an essence which is fundamentally communal. The Church, collectively, is the image of God. Stanley Grentz emphasizes this point by arguing, “To be the people in covenant with God who serve as the sign of the kingdom means to reflect the very character of God. The church reflects God’s character in that it lives as a genuine community—lives in love—for as the
community of love the church shows the nature of the triune God.”

Not only do we reflect the character of God, but Grenz argues that we also participate in the very nature of God through the Spirit. The Spirit is the connection that enables the church to participate in the “divine life,” through which we become the “children of God.” As God’s children, the members of God’s church become the brothers and sisters of Jesus and are privileged to experience the love that exists between the Son and the Father.

The familial bond amongst the community that participates in the divine life is also a byproduct of the Spirit. Koinonia within the church is not conjured or contrived, but established and preserved by the Spirit. The heterogeneity within the church is vast; there are people of every socio-economic class, nation, gender, and race. Yet, by the bond of the Spirit, there is unity within such vast diversity. It must be stated that the church and unity described here is ontological, which means that the description provided is not anchored in naiveté or denial of historical and present tensions that splinter the Body. Ontologically, the Spirit produces a bond within the ekklesia that is equally as strong as the bond within the triune God. The writer of Ephesians describes this Spirit-produced bond as he challenges the community to maintain it,

“eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord,

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84 Stanley Grenz, Theology for the Community of God, 629.
85 Ibid.
one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

The one, catholic Church evinces the strength of the Spirit and unity amongst the members of the trinity. Eastern Orthodox ecclesiologist, John Zizioulas, says, “As a result of the mutual work of the Son and Spirit, catholicity of the church means two things: unity of the church (as a result of being the body of Christ) and diversity of the church (as a result of its being the fullness of the Spirit).”

Pentecost accentuates the differentiated unity that exists within the Church through the Spirit. Tongues, first mentioned at Pentecost and later discussed in the Pauline epistles, has incited tense theological debates regarding the nature of tongues and the evidence of the Spirit’s indwelling. Are tongues ecstatic speech that must be spiritually interpreted or intelligible languages? Is speaking in tongues the absolute sign of Spirit-indwelling? Although there may be some value to these debates, the nature of tongues spoken at Pentecost is not the most important theological truth concerning the church derived from Pentecost. Rather, the unity experienced and consequent community formed in the diversity of tongues present is paramount and precedential. What invokes awe and wonder—the miraculous work of Pentecost—is that the diversity of languages did not create division. Luke writes, “And at this sound the multitude

86 Ephesians 4:3-5.
came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language.”88 The narrative emphasizes that they “came together,” even as they heard in their own languages.

The wonder of this unity at Pentecost is accented when this event is placed in juxtaposition with the disunity and mayhem that diverse tongues create at Babel in Genesis 11. Aaron Kuecker comments on the startling and profound unity at Pentecost in contradistinction to Babel,

Pentecost marks not the reversal of Babel, but the subversion of shared language as a necessary basis for common identity. At Babel, the proliferation of languages leads to the proliferation of social identities and profound disunity. At Pentecost, it leads to the formation of one new social identity and profound unity.89

Kuecker’s comments are helpful in that they direct us to think more broadly than the nature of the tongues spoken at Pentecost to the nature of Christian fellowship and individual identity within the one Church. Essentially, the diversity of tongues is reflective of the diversity of individual identities within the Church. Globally, the Body of Christ is comprised of rich, poor, black, white, male, and female. Every race, gender, socioeconomic class, and individual identity marker is included in Christ’s Church. Yet, through the Spirit, this diversity does not ignite mayhem or toxicity but rather one, new identity in Christ. Language is the prime carrier of culture, according to Kuecker, but in

this instance language is subordinated to the Lordship of Christ, which is all accomplished by the work of the Spirit. Ultimately, Pentecost reveals the power of the Spirit-bond over and against all identity-distinctions within the Church.

The individuality of believers with respect to the community of the Church is also significant because individuals are indwelled by the Spirit to become a part of the communal Church. Generally, the profession of faith is both personal and public. Personal in that the individual must believe and commit, but also public in that the individual must make this commitment public in order to belong to the community called Church. Holding the individual and community in proper balance is important to understanding the nature of Christian community. Which one is primary—the individual or the community? In Christian community, does the individuality of the person cease to exist, which ultimately is the basis for harmony? To the former question, it is important to understand that the community does not exist without individuals, but the individual is not transformed into a more perfect reflection of the image of God without the Church. This means that individuality is not obliterated in Christian community. We do not have to deny our identity or differentiated existence for the sake of harmony. At the same time, however, individuality is not prioritized over the community or our new identity in Christ. Discussing the interrelationship between individuals and the Church, Wolfhart Panneberg argues, “we cannot think of the church

\[90\] Ibid., 15.
preceding individual faith. Yet it would be equally mistaken to think of the church’s fellowship as in some way secondary and supplementary to the faith of individual Christians.”91 In an age of hyper-individualism and sparsely-knit, individual-to-individual connection, the Church’s theology, with respect to the individual, is a necessary challenge to prevailing culture.

2.5 Scripture and Church Community

The Koine Greek of the New Testament is a vivid and descriptive language. In comparison to English, Greek is much more adept in conveying subtle but significant nuances in the biblical narrative. One such instance of the Greek’s dexterity in conveying meaning is related to the singular and plural forms of “you.” The Greek language is able to convey whether the author is referring to an individual or to the corporate Body (entire church). In English, we do not have a formal way of conveying the plural form of the second person pronoun. During informal conversation, speakers may convey this using the term, “ya’ll.” In formal literature, however, the English is limited with conveying a plural form of “you.”

As a result of the limitations of English, well-intentioned readers of Scripture may miss the communal nature of the church in some passages. In fact, in a culture consumed with individualism, some scriptures that have a communal focus are

innocently read from an individualistic lens. Although the reader is well intentioned or benign in intent, there are malignant consequences of reading scriptures that have a corporate focus from an individualistic lens. Here are a few examples of some scriptures that have a corporate focus but are read from an individualistic perspective.

*Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?* (2 Corinthians 3:16)

*And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.* (Philippians 1:6)

2 Corinthians 3:16 is speaking of the corporate church in Corinth. The church community, as a whole, is the place where the Spirit of God dwells. God’s Spirit is active within the church community. The truth of this verse does not discredit the Spirit’s indwelling of individual believers, which is discussed in 1 Corinthians 6:19. The primary concern, however, of 2 Corinthians 3:16 is the corporate Body, not the individual. Many well intentioned readers will miss the communal importance of what is being stated.

Likewise, Philippians 1:6 is focusing on the good work that God has begun in the entire church and not simply individuals that are members of the church. The primary audience is the entire community, not solely individuals. God has started a good work in that local community and will continue to perform the work started until the day of Christ’s return.

One might argue that this is semantics or splitting hairs, but in a time rife with individualism and sparsely-knit community, it behooves the church to reread the Bible
and recognize the communal focus in many prominent passages that are generally applied to individual discipleship. Certainly, what is true for the whole may also be true for the individual, but many post-modern readers only see the personal and miss the corporate application without this discussion. Pastors and teachers should be intentional about exposing the communal emphasis of the Scriptures by accenting when and where the “you” plural is being used in reference to the Church. As Scripture is read and interpreted from a communal perspective, Christians and local congregations will be able to receive a necessary indictment on practices or proclamation that preferences the individual above the community. Likewise, congregations or Christians can receive important affirmation for practices and proclamation that affirms the importance of the entire Body.

This chapter has discussed the biological foundation for close-knit, interpersonal relationships and a theological foundation for the presence of such relationships in the church. Ultimately, human beings are created by God to live and thrive in community. God’s purpose for community, quintessentially, is seen in the Spirit-enabled community of the Church. The Church, ontologically, is the most complete expression of the imago dei. As this chapter has discussed the biological and theological theory of close-knit relationships, the next two chapters will discuss practical ways close-knit relationships are fostered in a local church context.
Chapter 3. Communion through Conversation

And they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them … and he said to them, “What is this conversation you are holding with each other as you walk …”? When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him … they said to each other, “did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road …?”

(Excerpt from Conversation on Emmaus Road).¹

3.1 Conversation and Communion

A discussion on modern technology devices cannot happen without mentioning the name of technology pioneer and Apple co-founder, Steve Jobs. Concerning mobile devices, Jobs was arguably the foremost influential technology pioneer, as the iPhone and iPad are products of his genius and spawned the creation of similar devices by other companies. On January 9, 2007, Jobs walked on a stage in San Francisco with an iPhone in his hands and said, “Today, Apple is going to reinvent the phone … here it is … the iPhone.”² Considering Jobs’ influence, it was quite surprising to many when Walter Isaacson, his biographer, revealed that Jobs discouraged his children’s use of iPads. He wrote, “Every evening Steve made a point of having dinner at the big long table in their kitchen, discussing books and history and a variety of things. No one ever pulled out an

iPad or a computer. The kids did not seem addicted at all to devices.” Based upon Isaacson’s revelation concerning Jobs’ parental habits related to tech-use and dinner, it is evident that Jobs recognized the value of conversation, particularly at the dinner table.

For all of his genius with technological devices, Jobs’ parental decisions bespeak concern for the potential adverse effects of technology. Even a cutting-edge tech mogul such as Jobs, extremely prescient technologically, deferred to the traditional space and method of communion—sharing a meal and having discussion with his family.

Although Jobs was not a professing Christian but rather affiliated with Buddhism, his emphasis on conversation at the dinner table aligns with an image of koinonia. In Scripture, the Kingdom of God is metaphorically compared to a great feast to which guests are invited. The full consummation of the union between Christ and the Church is compared to a wedding feast in Revelation 19:7-10. Most explicitly, on the night Christ was betrayed he shared the Passover meal with his disciples and reinterpreted the symbolism of the meal to point to his own sacrificial death on the cross. The Church, as a foremost act of remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice, is to reenact

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this meal until sharing it together in the age to come. Consequently, celebration of the Eucharist is one of the distinctive markers of Christian community.

The Gospel of John’s description of the Last Supper teaches us that conversation is an essential part of communion and includes the beautiful imagery of fellowship happening over a shared meal. John 13-17 provides insight on the intimacy of the communion shared between Jesus and his disciples and the conversation that happens at the table of fellowship on the night that Christ was betrayed. Jesus washes his disciples’ feet and has conversation with them that includes discussion on the following topics: servanthood, loving one another, the promised Holy Spirit, the importance of remaining connected to him for the purpose of bearing fruit and persecution in the world. John’s narrative of this last meal helps believers to understand the significance of conversation in communing with others. Considering how part and parcel conversation is to communion, perhaps it is an indictment on our celebration of this meal in worship services—individuals can partake in “Communion” without ever having a true conversation with someone else who partakes. Considering the digital age in which we are living and media’s influence upon social interactions, local congregations have an opportunity to build communities of fellowship through fostering opportunities for

6 Matthew 26:26-29.
7 Read about the Upper Room conversation Jesus had with his disciples on the night of his betrayal in John 13:1-16:32. John 17 is also a part of this discourse, but it is an intercessory prayer to God for his disciples.
conversation; this is not only an opportunity but a necessity because of the conversation-
void times in which we live.

3.2. A Decline in Conversation and Empathy

In a recent interview regarding Artificial Intelligence, Prem Natarajan, Vice
President for Alexa AI at Amazon, demonstrated how Alexa can respond to human
speech and commands. Natarajan simply said, “Alexa, good afternoon.” Alexa
responded by opening the blinds, providing the weather report, heating the kettle in the
kitchen, and playing music. Children are growing up in a time when conversation with
robots is commonplace. “This is the first generation to grow up with ubiquitous AI—a
world in which almost any question unanswered, item purchased or whim fulfilled is
possible with a command of ‘Alexa’ or ‘Ok, Google’ or Hey Siri.’” Although these
interactions or pseudo-conversations are efficient and perhaps even satisfying because
Alexa responds to our desires on-demand, conversations with devices lack the depth of
face-to-face human conversation. There is so much, particularly with respect to learning
and empathy, that is sacrificed because machines cannot replicate the dynamic, soul-to-
soul connection that conversation fosters.

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8 “Amazon is using AI in almost everything it does,” CNN Business, YouTube, October 5, 2018,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DtyC0UxTw.

9 Samantha Kelly, “Growing up With Alexa: A Child’s relationship with Amazon’s Voice Assistant,” CNN Business,
Conversation with machines satiates appetites that are cultivated by a culture which places high value on efficiency and individual desires. With respect to efficiency, conversation with Alexa is not filled with the awkward silence that happens in face-to-face conversation with humans. To the contrary, conversation with Alexa is succinct and utilitarian in that the desired end is always reached: a question is answered, compliment offered, joke is told or appliances in one’s house are turned on. This is “clean” conversation without the messiness of a contrary opinion, emotional vulnerability or misunderstandings. It is no wonder, then, that in 2017 over a million people popped the big question to Alexa: “Will you marry me?” Alexa and similar robotic conversation partners do not require empathy and patience, two eschewed virtues in our culture of immediate gratification and personal satisfaction.

Conversation between two humans, interacting face-to-face, is more awkward and certainly less efficient, yet this is how discovery happens. Sherry Turkle says:

But in creative conversations, in conversations in which people get to really know each other, you usually have to tolerate a bit of boredom. People often struggle and stumble when they grapple with something. Conversations of discovery tend to have long silences. But these days, people often tell me that silence is a “lull” from which they want to escape.11

As a result of being constantly connected and overstimulated by devices, face-to-face conversation is considered “boring” because it is not as scripted or a linear path towards one’s desired end. Face-to-face conversation includes unexpected moments of silence or digression that appear purposeless but are actually pregnant with the potential for true learning and connection. However, according to Turkle, individuals are now discontented with this boredom and seek opportunities to escape. Bored with face-to-face conversation, they take flight on the wings of their devices. She writes:

Our mobile devices seem to grant three wishes, as though gifts from a benevolent genie: first, that we will always be heard; second, that we can put our attention wherever we want it to be; and third, that we will never have to be alone. And the granting of these three wishes implies another reward: that we will never have to be bored.12

Consequently, face-to-face conversation has declined and the quality of the conversation we have has been adversely affected. If you visit any local Starbucks or establishment which desires to foster community amongst patrons, you will notice that majority of the patrons are in front of a screen rather than in the face of a person: there is more screen time and less face-to-face time. Tali Orad, founder of LimitScreen Inc., a business that provides a home automation device for parents to set limits on screen time, recently wrote about an experience she observed at Starbucks. Two mothers were meeting having conversation, but the little boy at the table was glued to his mobile device. Orad

12 Ibid.
provides commentary on the harmful impact of this interaction upon the development of the child and then provides a sobering statistic cited by a Boston Medical Center: “75% of adults took out a mobile device almost immediately when they were eating with kids at a fast food restaurant.” Screens are sabotaging face-to-face conversation, even over a shared meal.

A very unfortunate consequence of a lack of face-to-face conversation is a decline in empathy. In 2014, UCLA performed an experiment in which fifty-one pre-teens were taken to stay five days at an overnight camp without access to screens (television, computers, and mobile phones). Prior to and after this five day retreat and technology fast, they were tested on their ability to read a person’s emotions based upon facial expressions and verbal cues. Compared to the fifty-four students that remained with their screens, the students that were removed from their devices showed significantly more improvement in their ability to recognize the emotional states of others. Researchers concluded, “Given that a pre-requisite for effective socialization is learning and practicing how to communicate with others in person, face-to-face experiences must be emphasized in the socialization process.” This study suggests that time spent in front of screens atrophies emotional intelligence. Sending a text message may be more

13 For Orad’s full article and this statistic, see Talid Orad, “Screen Time is Sabotaging our Relationships: When Parents are using screens as babysitters, children are paying the price,” Thrive Global, March 16, 2018, https://thriveglobal.com/stories/screen-time-is-sabotaging-our-relationships/.

efficient, but sending a text is not the same as sitting in front of a person and talking.

Face-to-face conversation enables one to feel what is tacit and the emotions connected to what is spoken, both would be imperceptible without being present with the other person. Screens protect us from these raw emotions, which is why some people prefer to apologize and have disagreements through text messaging; face-to-face interaction is too much of a risk.\(^\text{15}\)

This lack of empathy and interpersonal distance in technologically mediated interaction is one of the impetuses for vitriolic and abusive exchange online—cyberbullying. Online or protected by a screen, individuals can spew hate and demean another without having to face the emotional carnage that is left in the wake of their callous actions. Sherry Turkle recounts the story of a principal of a middle school in New York City describing an incident in which he was enraged by a student’s callous treatment of a classmate online. One student named Luis had a father that committed suicide. Luis was having a difficult time with his tragic loss. Another student named Anna became upset with Luis for interrupting her in the lunch room and, consequently, goes on Facebook and writes: “I hope Luis ends up just the way his Father did.” When asked why she would say something like that, Anna’s response was, “It was just on Facebook.” Turkle concludes that Anna’s behavior can occur because “Facebook gave

\(^{15}\) Sherry Turkle speaks of individuals’ preference to argue and apologize via text messaging. See Turkle, *Reclaiming*, 29, 32-33.
her a way to think about other people as objects that can’t be hurt … the presence of a
face and a voice reminds us that we are talking to a person.”

The devices through which we communicate with others can desensitize us to the soul of the other and blur our vision of their humanity.

**3.3 A Conversing Church**

In a time marked by a decline in conversation and empathy, it is imperative that there are places and spaces where conversation is encouraged in community and, consequently, empathy developed. As members of the local church are called to commune with one another, conversation should be a primary concern of leaders that are responsible for developing community. If we have been in church leadership at a large church, we have almost certainly had discussions on “communication challenges.” Generally, when addressing communication challenges, leaders are focusing on systems within the church (ministries, staff, officers) working as one cohesive unit or the most effective methods to disseminate important information to parishioners in mass (social media, video announcements, emails). All of these communication issues are associated with concerns for efficiently disseminating

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17 In 2012, Association of Religious Data Archives’ research showed that 42.7% of churches have 50 members or less. Using this data, I am defining large as any church with over 100 members, which in this study was approximately 33% of congregations. See “Size of Congregation,” *The Arda*, 2012, [http://www.thearda.com/ConQS/qs_295.asp](http://www.thearda.com/ConQS/qs_295.asp).
information and removing blockages to the flow of communication within the organization.\textsuperscript{18}

Certainly, organizational communication challenges are valid concerns for leadership to address, but it is my contention that the most important communication challenges church leaders should address, especially in our digital age, are relational and not organizational. William Fore argues that communication is not just the transmission of information but rather “the process in which relationships are established, maintained, modified, or terminated through the increase or reduction of meaning.”\textsuperscript{19} Communicative concern within the local church should reflect a primary focus on the establishment and maintenance of relationships. How can church leaders establish a strong community or communion through fostering conversations between members in the congregation? Given that some immediate families prefer to address disagreements through text rather than face-to-face, the church that encourages face-to-face conversation could be teaching individuals that live within the same household to speak to one another. This would not only benefit immediate families but also the wider family of disciples within the congregation and beyond. Perhaps, this is why the Bible

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Thomas Rainer produced a podcast interview with a staff member of Brentwood Baptist, a large congregation. They classified types of communication issues into these four general categories: Technical, Content, ROI (What is the Win?) and Resources. See Thomas Rainer, “Four Communication Problems Churches Face and How to Solve Them—Rainer on Leadership #373,” October 20, 2017. \url{https://thomrainer.com/2017/10/four-communications-problems-churches-face-solve-rainer-leadership-373/}.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} William Fore, “A Theology of Communication,” in \textit{Television and Religion: The Shaping of Values and Culture} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1987), 38-54, \url{https://www.religion-online.org/article/a-theology-of-communication/}.
\end{itemize}
speaks of interpersonal conversation more than effective organizational communication flow or even effectiveness in homiletical style. The leaders’ pursuit of a conversing community should first be grounded in biblical teaching and then practically implemented through intentional programming that helps to shape communion.

3.3.1 A Biblical Concern

Due to the low value given to face-to-face communication, leaders that desire to foster community through strong interpersonal communication must first establish its importance. The best place to begin establishing the importance of face-to-face communication is in the Word of God, the authoritative text for Christians that have vowed to live according to a different mold than the status quo of the larger society.20 Communication that encourages communion starts within God’s self and is expressed towards others. The Pontifical Council for Social Communications, established by Pope John Paul II, said,

Indeed, all human communication is grounded in the communication among Father, Son, and Spirit. But more than that, Trinitarian Communion reaches out to humankind: The Son is the Word, eternally “spoken” by the Father; and in and through

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20 Romans 12:2: “And be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” In this verse “be conformed” is the Greek word συσχηματίζομαι and means “to form or mold one’s behavior in accordance with a particular pattern or a set of standards.” See Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 506.
Jesus Christ, Son and Word made flesh, God communicates himself and his salvation to women and men.21

God’s communication to humanity through the incarnate Word is a strong foundation for establishing the importance of communication. John’s prologue identifies Christ as the Word, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”22 Logos, the ascription given to Christ, is derived from the verb ὄνομα, which has a basic meaning of “to say or to speak.”23 This means that one of the ways we can understand the person and ministry of Christ is through the lens of communication, as Christ was the embodied, spoken expression of God’s thoughts and character in the world. According to John 1:18, Christ was the “full explanation” of God in the world.24 God affirms the significance and importance of communication in Christ, the Son. In fact, the importance of the message is emphasized based upon the medium of God’s communication: “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.”25

22 John 1:1.
24 The word translated “made him known” in John 1:18 is ἐξηγέομαι and it means to expound upon in detail, generally in a systematic way or “to tell everything.” See Louw and Nida, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 410.
Particularly for the purposes of interpersonal, face-to-face communication, the incarnate Word is God’s “face-to-face” expression to the world. Jesus, the incarnate Word, completely closes the distance of space and time for the purposes of revealing God to the world. God-incarnate spoke, face-to-face, with humanity and this is ultimately for communion. St. Francis De Sales argues that this communion between God and humanity is the most excellent form of communication:

[God] considering that amongst all the different communications there was none so excellent as that of uniting himself to some created nature, in such sort that the creature might be engrafted and implanted in the divinity, and become one single person with it, his infinite goodness, which of itself and by itself tends toward communication, resolved and determined to communicate himself in this manner.26

God completely closing the gap through the incarnation of the Word is the quintessence of communion through communication and should be the example for all relationships based upon God’s work in and through Christ. God’s speech through the incarnate Word exposes the deficiency of any other form of speech; God’s speech was not perfected and all-sufficient until it came through the Son-in-flesh, who was existentially capable of speaking face-to-face with humanity. The Incarnate-Word of God says that effective, face-to-face communication is the best means of bridging relational gaps for the purpose of unity and empathy.

After discussing the importance of the message as a consequence of the medium God uses, the writer of Hebrews also discusses the empathy Christ now has as a result of his incarnational ministry, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”  

Jesus’ face-to-face communication establishes empathy, which the writer says should evoke confidence that impacts our speech before God: “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and grace to help in the time of need.” The incarnational ministry of Jesus means that person-to-machine or person-to-machine-to-person conversation is not best for establishing true communion.

A good illustration for this truth, found in the Old Testament, is the relationship between David and his son Absalom described in 2 Samuel. The relationship is acrimonious—Absalom murders his brother Amnon and is estranged from his father for three years. However, despite the tension that exists between them, they both seem to possess a desire for reconciliation, although there is a major impediment to communion in their relationship: they lack face-to-face communication. Their communication with each other is mediated through David’s military general, Joab. They can efficiently pass

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27 Hebrews 4:15.
29 The entire story of Absalom’s life is told in 2 Samuel 13-18.
messages or share information, but never engage interpersonally, face-to-face. When David’s anger abates, he sends Joab to communicate to Absalom that he is permitted to return to the royal city, Jerusalem—however, he is not permitted to come before the face of the King. This restriction is enforced for two years until Absalom responds negatively by igniting Joab’s field and David permits him to come before his face. It is not until they come face-to-face that they are able to reconcile, as Absalom bows and David kisses him.

Interpreting this passage through the lens of twenty-first-century communication, one might say that David and Absalom were effectively passing information through the mediation of Joab—an image of modern technology—but never conversed face-to-face. Consequently, their communion is harmed. In light of this hermeneutic, another portion of the story is significant. In 2 Samuel 14:25-26, immediately after discussing David’s decree restricting Absalom from coming before his presence, the writer describes Absalom’s physical attractiveness and narcissism: “From the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him. And when he cut the hair of his head (for at the end of every year he used to cut it; when it was heavy on him, he cut it), he weighed the hair of his head.” With the lack of communication

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30 2 Samuel 14:23-24, 29.
31 2 Samuel 14:33.
and communion, this description of narcissism is expected. It is a sharp contrast to the empathy that is possible through face-to-face communication.

Whether utilizing the positive example of communication in the Incarnate-Word, the negative example of David and Absalom, or the views of other biblical passages, a leader that seeks to cultivate strong, interpersonal communication in the local church must first establish its importance. After which, programmatic considerations must be given to establishing a conversing community.

### 3.3.2. A Programmatic Priority

In a large congregation, it is possible for members to attend “church” and never engage in conversation that fosters communion. One of the saddest indictments on some local congregations is that although they should have an express purpose of living in the communion established through the Spirit, they are programmatically deficient in encouraging this purpose. In such congregations, *koinonia* is contrived at best or completely absent at worse. Passing the peace or greeting during the fellowship moment is not sufficient for encouraging communion within the congregation. It is very possible to attend the worship service, sit next to the same pew-mate each Sunday, and still remain strangers. Don Kimball comments,

> We need to reconnect people to one another, and, as we will see shortly, this is where we will find God doing his best work. In many church services, we remain strangers while worshipping in ceremonies that call us to love one another. If we
are going to carry out this command of Christ, we are going to have to rebuild our relationships into daily events that reveal God, others, and ourselves.33

Reconnecting people or encouraging communion should be a priority that is reflected programmatically through unconventional approaches that encourage face-to-face conversation. Language is important, but the nomenclature in church vision statements, bulletins or other publications is vacuous without strategic programming that promotes conversation.

In my own congregation, with an average of 600 attendees on weekend services, some parishioners who attend church every Sunday have expressed struggles with loneliness. This is not surprising considering that “one-in-ten Americans says they feel lonely or isolated from those around them all or most of the time.”34 If ten percent of individuals experience loneliness, then this means that there is a high probability that every Sunday someone sitting in the pews is struggling with feelings of isolation. Being surrounded by people but not closely connected with individuals within the church reflects the sparsely-knit connection of technologically mediated relationship—shallow interaction that enables us to be together but yet still alone. In fact, it could be argued that online viewers of our worship services are not forfeiting much by not being physically present; one might ask what happens in church that requires them be


physically present to experience? If church is a transactional experience—parishioners receive music, a message and announcements about upcoming events, then give in the offering to financially support the church—what aspect of this transactional experience cannot be accomplished virtually? When leaders, however, place an emphasis on connecting people within their church, beyond the brief greeting in the service and make church relational rather than transactional, physical presence is not deemed extraneous but rather a necessary part of being and doing church.

3.3.2.1 Discussion Groups

Renowned pastor and leader, Andy Stanley, commented on the vitality and strength of his church by stating that North Point would continue to thrive and do ministry even if the building exploded, staff was removed and he was no longer around. He credits his church’s strength to the community formation that they have done. He stated,

On Monday and Tuesday of the following week, thousands and thousands of adults would gather in homes all over the city and pray together, and do Bible study together … because at the end of the day, circles are better than rows. And from day one, we have been committed to creating a culture that is all about circles and not rows. We are famous for our rows. But the strength of our churches is what happens in circles.35

In our generation of sparsely-knit connection, it is important that we direct members who are accustomed to sitting in rows to circles in which relationships can be encouraged. There is strength in sharing your joys and pains with other people.

As a pastor, I have witnessed the strength in circles in our men’s ministry. Several years ago, I was led to bring men together for a study that I was introduced to at a conference: Authentic Manhood—33 The Series Men’s Bible Study. This series focuses on practical, biblically based instruction on manhood. The curriculum is clear and concise, but the strongest part of the series is that men are encouraged to form groups for discussion and accountability. Discussions are facilitated by questions that help members go deeper and encourage honesty. Naturally, initial meetings are opportunities to develop the trust that nurtures vulnerability. As members grew closer in their circles, however, the conversations that took place were honest and liberating. Discussions on abuse, relational challenges, personal struggles and other topics that would be impossible on a Sunday and improbable without coming from rows and entering into circles were happening in this group. During a period of seven weeks, men were strengthened and provided testimonies about reconciliation with children and how they were taking courageous actions in their future to be godly men.

Leaders in local congregations will need to be strategic about creating opportunities for their members to enter into circles, similar to the circles the men of my

church experienced. One may need to provide strong guidance related to engaging in conversation because conversation may not initially happen organically. The skills necessary for having a discussion, face-to-face, should not be assumed. In fact, having a discussion face-to-face is something that will make many, especially younger generations accustomed to engaging through technology, uncomfortable. Although younger generations may have never developed the skill for interpersonal, face-to-face discussion, some older generations are experiencing a decline in this ability as well. A fifteen year old from Pennsylvania, named Mitch, commented,

I think my mom has forgotten how to talk. I kind of feel the reason why so many of us keep using our phones even though it takes away from meaningful conversations is that some people have kind of forgotten how to really have a good conversation because they’ve used their phones for long … it gets awkward talking in front of real people—they haven’t done that.37

At this time, when some people have forgotten how to have a conversation or have never developed the skill, church leaders should provide structured opportunities and guidance to families and individuals related to engaging in dialogue. Dialogue may not happen organically, which means that fostering dialogue will require intentionality. One example of creating space for intentional dialogues, one from which the church can learn, is the ministry of Dr. Gregory C. Ellison, II. In response to the verdict in the George Zimmerman trial in July 2013, Dr. Ellison decided to create a space for

37 Turkle, Reclaiming, 115.
“transformative dialogue that embraces difference, cultivates hope, and leads to change.” 38 From this experience, “Fearless Dialogues, a grassroots organization committed to creating unique spaces for unlikely partners to engage in heartfelt conversations that see gifts in others, hear value in stories, and work for change and positive transformation in self and other.” 39

Fearless Dialogues has provided opportunities for spiritual transformation. In an interview regarding the ministry, Georgette Ledgister, a co-leader of the dialogues, comments regarding these transformations, “we see these breakthroughs, these epiphanies, these in-breakings of the Holy Spirit that we can’t account for. The ways in which people open themselves up for transformation, there is no magical formula for that.” 40 Fearless Dialogues demonstrates the powerful potential existing in spaces where individuals come together for meaningful, honest discussion without fear of judgement. Such transformation is what we see with the disciples that are traveling on the Emmaus Road. What transformations might take place in the lives of individuals affiliated with local congregations if opportunities for “fearless dialogues” were intentionally planned and facilitated by ministry leadership? Churches should leverage the access they have to parishioners that attend regularly and direct them to not simply face the pulpit or stage,


39 Ibid.

40 “Rev. Dr. Greg Ellison & Georgette Ledgister-Fearless Dialogues as Ministry,” YouTube, July 13, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUMbPMG6yWw
but to take time to look at each other and engage in substantive dialogue. This is most necessary for today’s church.

3.3.2.2 Shared Meals

Another programmatic opportunity, which is most necessary as leaders seek to foster conversation, are shared meals. Individuals familiar with church tradition may associate shared meals with the meals that are served prior to an evening service, church picnic or on special occasions. Such meals may be beneficial, but the meals that will be most resourceful in establishing community and conversation are not the meals in which a large number of members come and are served, but rather ones that require individuals or families to carve out personal space and time for connection.

In Scripture, shared meals are often used as symbols of communion. The early church is reported to have regularly gathered in common space for meals. Acts 2:46 says, “every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.” Jesus shared meals with sinners and tax collectors—even in the face of being chided.\(^{41}\) Christine Pohl argues that eating together was not only a means of ensuring the poor were fed but also a way of maintaining identity in a hostile world.\(^{42}\) Shared meals were considered as creating a sacred space in which individuals “could find their true humanity together in the

\(^{41}\) Matthew 9:11.

presence of God.” John Koenig argues that it is in this welcoming at table that individuals become what they were meant to be as they share new life together. Shared meals were important to shaping and living into the new community.

This practice of coming together and sharing a meal is not only beneficial but most necessary for our times. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, dinners—a prime time and space for conversation—have been invaded by digital connections so that people at the table have divided attention. Consequently, conversation suffers. Turkle speaks of a fifteen-year-old girl who reacted when her father took out his phone at a dinner to research facts relevant to their discussion. She said, “Daddy, stop Googling. I want to talk to you.” This girl’s response demonstrates our soul’s desire to talk and connect deeply with family, friends, or even strangers. Local congregations have an opportunity to provide space and guidance for sharing a meal and having conversation. What would happen if we could actually have individuals that sit next to each other in the same pew each Sunday come together later that day or week, in a mutually agreed upon space, to share a meal? What would happen if the young woman still trying to navigate the murky waters of young adulthood had an opportunity to share a meal with a sage senior whose experience and testimony could provide necessary affirmation and

44 Ibid. 52-53.
counsel? Our members could live in the new humanity—the *imago dei*. Everyday meals could be transformed into sacred spaces where the power of authentic connection is experienced.

During such meals, members would have to be given specific instructions regarding technology. To ensure quality, leaders should provide some standard or rules for engagement during the meal. General practices at dinner in this generation of ubiquitous connection, such a technology use or even presence, will hinder the effectiveness of these meals. Therefore, standards concerning technology use, attention, and even conversation starters should be provided. This may seem unnecessary or too pedantic, but in many cases the instructions will prove paramount to accomplishing the goal of building community. Included in the instructions should be opportunities to debrief with leadership about what made members uncomfortable with sitting-down, free of technological distractions and having face-to-face discussion over a meal. Introspection is an opportunity for confession; what common practices in one’s life are most problematic to living into the new life? Introspection is also an opportunity for growth; what changes will I make in the future to encourage deeper connection with others?

One example of planning intentional shared meals for the purpose of connection is “The People’s Supper, a collaborative effort of Hollaback, The Dinner Party, and Faith
Matters Network.” In 2017, dinners were hosted as opportunities for relationship building across political, ideological and identity differences. The People’s Supper says regarding its purpose:

It’s about us, and our relationships to one another. Too often, we exist in echo chambers and see each other as monoliths: one-sided stereotypes who can be reduced to a single word or phrase. Instead, we want to go beneath the headlines to see each other as real people with real struggles, real fears, real hopes, and real dreams.

Mealtime is seen as a prime opportunity to build community and to share stories. Anyone interested in hosting receives a guide and training on facilitating meaningful conversations. The People’s Supper has a pulse on our times and is leaning upon ancient tradition, practiced in the early Church, to build community. Their intentionality in creating sacred space over meals is an example for local congregations. Instead of making assumptions or reducing the humanity of others to stereotypes or caricatures, congregants can come together to explore the depth of personality and experience in fellow members.

This chapter has discussed the importance of fostering a conversing congregation in a time of declining conversation and empathy, as well as provided some practical,

programmatic ways of accomplishing this purpose. In the next chapter, we will discuss the virtues and vices of specific digital technology in the local church setting.
Chapter 4. Judging Technology Use in the Church: The Virtues and Vices

Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete.  

(2 John 12)

4.1 Technology is Not Neutral

In his letter addressed to “the elect lady and her children,”1 likely a local congregation, the Apostle John expresses a desire to share more with this community, but not through the technological medium of ink and paper. Rather, he prefers to share with them face-to-face, which he concludes will be more fulfilling than simply conveying the information from a distance through written communication, particularly with respect to the joy of their fellowship.2 This verse is a biblical example of a leader’s discernment of the most appropriate form and use of technology, for the purpose of enhancing community. John is not totally opposed to the use of writing, which is evidenced by his gospels and letters in Scripture. He recognizes, however, that there are limits or weaknesses to every technology and, therefore, leaders must be judicious about their use as they seek to build joyous community through fellowship. John is physically

1 2 John 1.
2 Joy is the intended purpose for the spoken and written message about Christ. This joy comes through fellowship with Christ and with the disciples. See Stephen Smalley, Word Biblical Commentary: 1, 2, 3 John (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 14.
distanced from the local congregation he addresses.³ Although writing and sending his thoughts in a letter would be the more efficient option, John recognizes that efficiency in disseminating information is not the ultimate concern when the primary goal is to build community. In the interest of building the best possible community, full of joy, John chooses face-to-face communication.

John Dyer provides contextual insights on John’s technological preference. He comments,

A few hundred years before John wrote his letters, the Greek philosopher Socrates expressed concern about the technology of writing. He believed that learning in dialogue was the key to helping people grow in wisdom … John seems to be aware of the drawbacks that writing, as a technology, brings. In fact, he says that he would prefer to not to use it for communication because he valued embodied, face-to-face reality more than the disembodied words of a letter.⁴

A strong insight Dyer provides through his commentary is that even as John utilizes the technology of writing or ink and paper, he recognizes “drawbacks.” There is a dual recognition of the promise in the technology he is utilizing as well as the problems, both the virtues and the vices. Such recognition is critical for Christian leadership in local congregations.

³ “Apparently, the chosen lady’s group is not close by, but in a neighboring town or at some distance. [There is a view] the elder is writing to a group of churches in his sphere of authority in the vicinity of Ephesus.” See Thomas F. Johnson. 1, 2, and 3 John, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 161.

Gaymon Bennett, professor of religion, science and technology at Arizona State University, compares technology to an idol, a religion that does not recognize weaknesses. He writes,

The trouble with the [Silicon] Valley, the trouble with the gospel of the iPhone, ubiquitous computing, and automation, is that it has been pursued as if technology doesn’t have a shadow. The lack of moral realism is problematic twice over. One because it invites power without restraint. But also—and just as important—because it constitutes what entrepreneurs call an “opportunity cost.” You won’t bother with soul-searching if you think an engineering patch will do.5

Gaymon’s words remind us that there is a “shadow” with technology and, therefore, Christian leaders should not allow the tech-behemoth to proceed without restraint—sovereign and unquestioned. This is most critical for leaders that are responsible for shepherding the souls of human beings, especially because “engineering patches” do not work for the development and healing of the soul. Soul-care cannot be programmed or accomplished through algorithms and, consequently, is one of the areas that exposes the lie of technology’s infinitude; there are limits to technology’s strength and, therefore, when not used wisely technology can be damaging.

Christian leaders should be prudent in their use of technology. Such prudence requires a proper balance of the tension of technology’s virtue and vice. Prudence with technology does not require proceeding as a technophobe, rejecting all new technology

and living in a cloistered tech-free community. This is probably impossible for many clerics; our ministries and lives are inextricably connected to new technology. Prudence is also not adopting and utilizing every new technology presented as the latest and greatest. It is recognizing and rejecting “the asymmetrical power Silicon Valley has come to exercise over our imaginations, desires and habits, a power potently linked to the belief that all this innovation will eventually save us (make us healthy wealthy and wise)—if we just let it do its job.”6 In an idolatrous tech environment, it behooves those responsible for building local congregations to exercise caution.

All technology, independent of use, shapes individuals and how they relate to other people. The belief that technology’s virtue or vice is totally dependent upon how we use it is a deceptive untruth. No matter how simple or complex the technology used, it has an impact on the user. John Dyer illustrates this well through the discussion of what would be considered banal technology in our times: a person digging holes with shovels. He says,

Over time, as we dig hole after hole, reshaping the world as we see fit, our hands, arms, and backs will be changed as well. Those blisters will turn into calluses, and our once weak arms will grow stronger and more muscular. Our minds too will

6 Ibid.
develop a sense of the land and how to best approach it. When the job is completed, the tool with have transformed both the creator and the creation.\footnote{Dyer, \textit{From the Garden}, loc. 555 of 3483.}

This illustration is primarily concerned with the physical and psychological, but Christian leaders must also be concerned about the calluses of the soul and the strengthening or atrophying of our communion with others, which is critical to the \textit{imago dei}.

\section*{4.2 The Virtues}

Could you imagine worship without the use of technology? Attempting to preach in a large auditorium without the amplifying aid of a microphone and speaker system would certainly be difficult on the preacher’s voice and would render inaudible the sermon to the person sitting on the pew farthest from the stage. How impossible would it be to efficiently send an important message to members, perhaps about a last-minute schedule change due to inclement weather, without the aid of email, a phone, text message or social media? How difficult would it be store and retrieve information about your members and analyze the strength of congregational participation in ministry events and programming without the assistance of strong church management software? Leading a congregation without the use of digital technology would be challenging.
Furthermore, tech-entrepreneurs that have the gifts and heart to develop software that will support administration in the local church have the opportunity to use their gifts for redemptive purposes. If Paul were writing in our post-modern world on the spiritual gifts that help to develop the body and encourage community in the church, would he not speak of abilities with digital media? My church is deeply indebted to tech companies that create software specifically for the local church. A few of the programs we currently use are Elexio for Church Management, Subsplash for our App, and Right-now-Media. In the media-driven milieu in which we minister, not engaging with and through digital media is an egregious neglect and missed opportunity. Knowing the importance of media, our church hired a full-time Media Specialist, whose primary role is to create digital content that conveys the gospel message we are teaching, manage all teams serving in media related areas and serve as the primary administrator of our social media pages.

Since churches should utilize technology and media in ministry, how is such use to be governed? The virtues of digital media technology are primarily its utility with respect to data-tracking, sharing information in mass, marketing, expanding the breadth

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8 The Apostle Paul references spiritual gifts in Romans 12:3-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:1-11. It is the opinion of the author that the lists are not exhaustive.
12 “Say hello to the streaming library of Bible study videos that inspires faith every day of the week,” Right Now Media, February 21, 2019, https://www.rightnowmedia.org/.
of the ministry’s reach and for generating revenue through digital contributions. I will expound upon each of these areas in more detail based upon my experience in church leadership and use of media for the aforementioned purposes.

4.2.1 Tracking Data

Data may seem to some to be irrelevant to the church’s spiritual matters. Such a belief or aversion to data, however, is actually a result of rejecting quantifiable evidence of effective ministry. Effective ministry, in some ways, is quantifiable; growth is one strong sign of effectiveness. Will Willimon, writing about judging effectiveness of pastors as a Methodist Bishop, says,

We define clergy effectiveness in one biblically based word: growth. Effective pastors know how to lead growth. List of nice-to-have qualities are useless and therefore un-Wesleyan. A pastor who grows things is effective; a pastor who knows only how to lead shrinkage is ineffective.\textsuperscript{13}

Therefore, in order to objectively measure growth, data is needed. Data is not only important for secular companies, but it is also vital information for church leadership. Attendance trends, financial trends connected to contributions, participation in discipleship programs, church demographics analysis, time-stamped information on Sunday services or the amount of downloads of tools provided to members are important when seeking to understand ministry opportunities and effectiveness.

\textsuperscript{13} William Willimon, \textit{Bishop: The Art of Questioning Authority by an Authority in Question} (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 52.
Compiling data that is easily retrievable for key leaders and personnel is vital in establishing common goals and uniting to see the goals accomplished. Franklin Covey, author of the acclaimed leadership book, *The Four Disciplines of Execution*, says that one of the keys to execution is “keeping score,” or tracking the key measures of success.\(^{14}\) This means that setting quantifiable goals and keeping strong data that measures the success or failure of the goal could be the difference between stagnation and strength; therefore, data is important to execution.

Strong church-management software can be a tremendous aid to efficiently gathering data and analyzing community practices within your local congregation. Depending upon how extensive the data-input, leaders are capable of determining strengths and opportunities related to their congregation. Strong, digital church-management software, some of which are browser based, provides virtually constant access to vital statistics. Queries, such as “number of members in a small group” or “single parents with children under 5” can be searched and data populated in mere seconds. Both queries are doorways to keen insights for ministry. With respect to the former, if small groups are a major goal for ministry but participation is marginal, then leaders know that current strategies for growth of groups is failing and must be amended. Similarly, with concern for the latter, if there are several single parents with

children under five, perhaps programming related to specific concerns for single parents of young children may be fruitful. This is an example of algorithmic software being used virtuously for the purpose of understanding community and making decisions.

Data-driven planning and programming is one of the ways that the church could learn from Google. In the book, *How Google Works*, the authors state:

> One of the most transformative developments of the Internet Century is the ability to quantify almost any aspect of business. Decisions once based on subjective opinion and anecdotal evidence now rely primarily on data. Companies like ours aggregate anonymous signals from mobile phones to provide accurate traffic data in real time.\(^{15}\)

If more churches were concerned about what the data on their community reveals, leaders would certainly be more knowledgeable about how to lead the congregation from the present to the preferred future.

### 4.2.2 Sharing Information

One of the primary reasons for utilizing technology is that it is a means of efficiently disseminating information in mass at the same time. It is impossible for church leaders to personally call or have a meeting with each member in a local congregation in order to share information regarding an upcoming event, a prayer concern or congregational need. Peter Fischer-Nielsen, commenting on pastors’ use of the internet writes, “The informational use of the internet is one that the pastors have

most embraced. Besides the word *information*, the pastors describe this activity with terms such as *education, enlightenment, dissemination,* and *presentation.*

In one text message, our leaders at Baptist Grove can send notifications to over 1000 individuals in less than a minute. Elexio, the company my church utilizes for church management and communication, argues that churches should utilize texting because over 90% of American adults own a phone, 81% use their phone for text messaging, and the 160 character limit on SMS messages allows for quick exchange for both the sender and receiver.

Not only is text messaging utilized to share information but also email, social media posts, and weekly digital publications. Utilizing some of the methods mentioned has been the most effective means of sharing information to our members.

As leaders choose to utilize some of the resources mentioned above or others, they are literally an arm’s-length away from communicating with the members of their church. As we understand how members are being shaped by digital media, leaders must acknowledge that their own personal aversion or penchant for digital technology does not determine their members’ use; leaders should assume that their members utilize all the tools mentioned above and others. If they do not, church management

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18 My church calls our digital publication the E-Message from the Hill. We have reduced the amount of printed copies we provide on Sunday in favor of sending a link to the digital publication. This also is a costs savings for the church because of reduced printing expenses.
software can inform you of failed attempts to send information. Therefore, responsible leadership requires some form of engagement and sending information through the digital means available. Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, writes,

Real communication is happening in the digital world, on the Web, and on the smart phone in your pocket. Real information is being shared and globally disseminated, faster than ever before. Real conversations are taking place, through voice words and images, connecting people and conversations all over the world. If the leader is not leading in the digital world, his leadership is, by definition, limited to those who also ignore or neglect that world, and that population is shrinking every minute. The clock is ticking.¹⁹

By virtue of individuals inhabiting digital spaces, responsible leaders will recognize the urgent need to engage and share information on and through such platforms. Sunday morning should not and cannot be the only time information is shared with parishioners.

4.2.3 Marketing

Marketing is another term that often, amongst some church leaders, evokes sentiments associated with secular practices of companies that advertise their commodity for profit: Nike, Budweiser, Geico, Apple and other companies that dominate commercial time on large networks. Consequently, there is a belief that the church should not engage in marketing because marketing is too secular an endeavor.

The marketing landscape amongst secular companies is precisely the reason marketing and branding is important for ministries. Consumers are accustomed to receiving messages about items that can improve their lives or help them become a better version of themselves. Mara Einstein writes,

That religious products would turn to branding makes perfect sense in the current cultural environment. To remain relevant in our commercial culture means at minimum being heard among the multitude of competing messages. Branding faith becomes shorthand for reaching the new religious consumer.\(^\text{20}\)

Leaders in the church must realize that in this commercial age individuals will experience the church’s messaging or evangelistic witness as a commodity being marketed. The first question one might ask regarding relationship with Christ or the ministries of our church is consumeristic in nature, “what’s in it for me?” Therefore, although our motives should be worthy and not for financial profit, marketing is a necessity in our times. Marketing our message is no different than the actions of the early apostles and writers that proclaimed the good news. The term used to express the good news about Christ, \(\varepsilon\varepsilon\alpha\gamma\gamma\ell\imath\omicron\nu\), was also utilized for secular purposes, particularly with respect to the power of the emperor and the consequent benefits for the

\[^{20}\text{Mara Einstein, Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age (New York: Routledge, 2008), 13.}\]
people under his rule. Therefore, the evangelistic preaching and witness of the early church can be viewed from the perspective of marketing in a milieu of competing narratives regarding salvation or the benefits experienced by individuals who believed the message that was being proclaimed.

Digital media is paramount to effective marketing in this digital age. First and foremost, a strong website that accurately reflects the vision and ministry of the church is important to attracting new, younger parishioners. Statistics show that almost 60 percent of individuals searching for a local church, between the ages of 18-29, went online for information. This means that churches that are concerned about reaching younger individuals must prioritize their digital presence online. If a church does not have a website, they will be considered irrelevant. Beyond just having the website, churches should make sure that the content is updated and the website reflects an active, dynamic ministry.

Beyond a church website, presence on social media pages (Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter) should also be a priority. These platforms usually provide affordable, targeted marketing. The majority of churches do not have large budgets for marketing, which means that strong leaders will use digital tools purposefully with the intent of

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21 “The term was used to announce the coming redemption accompanying the appearance of the emperor and the good tidings of the redemptive event that would affect the lives of the inhabitants of the empire.” See Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 71.

reaching their targeted audience. Social media platforms help maximize advertising dollars and a small budget can go a long way. Relying on organic reach alone is not enough. Churches are able to narrow the scope of who they want to reach by location, gender, age and other demographic specifications. Darby Jones, e-marketing Coordinator at United Methodist Communications, strongly advocates for Facebook marketing. He writes, “When you advertise on Facebook, you can reach almost any demographic imaginable, efficiently and effectively. This focused advertising helps you reach those who may be interested in your specialized ministries, day-care facility or other offerings.”

Every church should have something to offer their local community that will meet an individual or communal need; advertise this offering on Facebook or another platform.

As traffic comes to a church’s well-maintained page or feed, individuals that have never physically come to the church will be immersed into its vision and culture. Bala Musa and Ibrahim Ahmadu argue that churches that utilize digital platforms to market their brand will create “taste communities and followers who are attracted by a particular style of preaching, music, worship, leadership, experience, etc... Churches in the west are able to immerse their audience and members in a digital bubble of

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interactive religious experience …” 24 The interactive nature of social media platforms provides opportunity to hear from users as well regarding how they are engaging the content and the ministries of the church.

4.2.4 An Ever Expanding Reach

No longer is church confined to the physical building, the virtual space enables us to reach individuals in other parts of the world. One of the ways this capability is utilized in my own ministry is through livestreaming our Sunday Services and mid-week Bible Studies. In 2018, our services were viewed in the United States, Canada, South Africa, Mexico, Barbados, Puerto Rico, Singapore, Italy, Greece Germany, India, Dominican Republic, Philippines, Denmark, Jamaica and Nigeria. Simply through the use of the internet, a converter box and our streaming provider Livestream, 25 we are able to reach far beyond the bounds of our physical location.

Streaming services allows members that are indisposed, vacationing or on business travel to virtually watch services. When members are physically unable to be present, they appreciate the ability to connect virtually through the internet. Paul Clifford, author and producer of Churchtechcast.com network of live-streaming shows, writes, “A live stream provides another opportunity to keep from missing a week, when


25 https://livestream.com/
Irregular attendance due to scheduling conflicts is a general problem in some congregations; livestream is a viable option to keep members connected. Some leaders may be concerned that providing an online stream of worship may discourage some from participating and attendance may decline if services are streamed. Although there is no empirical data that discusses the correlation between livestreaming and Sunday morning attendance in the physical space, several pastors that livestream proclaim the benefits of doing so. Bobby Gruenewald, pastor and innovation leader at Life.Church says as Life.Church offers online streaming for more than 11 years, the physical campus attendance continues to grow. Sometimes people who normally are physically present do attend the online campuses, but their attendance online may have replaced being absent altogether. Gruenewald believes that “online [worship] can keep people connected that would otherwise drop off.”

Livestream can also be used as a form of outreach to groups that are unable to physically be present for worship. The church I lead was asked to provide online worship to residents of a local senior facility, as many desire to receive encouragement from a worship service but are unable to be physically present. St. Mark’s Baptist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas livestreams their missions trips and enable individuals

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that could not physically attend to connect to the work being done.\textsuperscript{28} Life.Church Open Network streams content to provide support to church leaders and staff. Resources that will strengthen leaders and local congregations are provided for free.\textsuperscript{29} Hillsong Leadership provides “Online Open Week,” a global church summit for church leaders in which webinars on various, relevant topics are provided.\textsuperscript{30} Life.Church, Hillsong and other churches that are effective in ministry are able to empower other leaders in local congregations through sharing insights gleaned along the way; this is an example of reaching beyond the local membership and staff to help others through livestreaming content. Streaming content is filled with virtuous opportunity to have an impact beyond the walls of the church.

\textbf{4.2.5 Generating Revenue}

What church could not use more revenue to support their mission and ministries? Church leaders often face the challenge of financing vision and may have to pare down original plans to make them more financially feasible. Therefore, opportunities to increase revenue through digital technology are important. The traditional form of collecting cash or checks through the offering plate on Sunday morning should still be utilized, but is less effective because people are carrying less cash on them. In a recent survey, 50 percent of people said they carry cash with them

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} https://livestream.com/saintmarklr/SmarknGhana
\item \textsuperscript{29} https://open.life.church/resources
\item \textsuperscript{30} https://hillsong.com/network/onlineopenweek/
\end{itemize}
less than 50 percent of the time and 76 percent said that when they carry cash, it is less
than $50.31 This means that individuals may have a desire to give and have money in the
bank to do so, but do not have cash on them at the time of the offering. Therefore,
churches should provide as many digital means of financially contributing: text-to-give,
online credit card, ACH, giving-kiosks or give through an app. Along with providing
these options, regular promotion about their availability should be a priority. Tithe.ly, a
company focused on increasing giving in churches, says, “Merely providing ways for
people to give online or with their mobile device is not enough. You have to promote the
options people can use to give consistently.”32

As attendance in the physical building fluctuates due to parishioners’ schedules,
churches that have effective online giving strategies will be able to receive financial
support more consistently because they have options that are not dependent upon being
physically present. Also, some members will desire to schedule an automatic draft
which relieves the hassle of having to process their contribution every time they desire
to give. This routinizes giving and helps to establish more consistent giving across the
church. The per-transaction merchant fee associated with processing online
contributions is far surpassed by the associated benefit of more consistent and increased

31 Shawn Carter. “Here’s how many Americans Say they Don’t Carry Cash,” CNBC. November 2, 2017,
32 “9 Proven Strategies to Increase Online Giving in Your Church,” Tithe.ly, April 9, 2018,
https://get.tithe.ly/blog/increase-online-giving.
financial support. Churches that are not utilizing digital options for giving are not maximizing their potential to fund ministry.

4.3 The Vices

I have attempted to lay out some very practical ways technology can be used in the church to help build a more effective ministry; namely, tracking data, sharing information, marketing, expanding the ministry’s reach and increasing revenue. The virtues of technology, however, must be held in tension with the vices of technology as well. Similar to the Apostle John, who wrote to a local congregation while recognizing the limits of the ink and paper he was using, church leaders have to recognize the limits of the digital media we utilize and the potential drawbacks in forming authentic community. In dialectical fashion, the strengths and opportunities must be considered against the weaknesses and liabilities. Such awareness is what inoculates leaders and churches from compromising their express purpose and strong potential to build authentic community as a result of the use of technology. Steve Talbott, emphasizing the importance of awareness, writes, “I don’t think modern technology necessarily alienates us from the world it mediates but a lot depends upon our recognizing how it can be used to do so.”

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33 Steve Talbott, Devices of the Soul: Battling for Our Selves in the Age of Machines (Sebastopol, CA: O’Reilly Media, 2017), 112.
As discussed in Chapter 2, the local church community should be densely-knit because such a community aligns with the Trinitarian community within God’s self and is what it means for humanity to live in the imago dei. If we use technology without vigilance or restraint, however, it can severely inhibit community in the church and the people we lead. Church leaders have to remember that we are engaged in soul-care and our utilization of technology will shape the soul, either constructively or destructively.

The practice of soul care, according to Church Father, Gregory Nazianzen, is to minister to the core of the individual—their values, commitments, choices, thoughts, feelings memories and hopes for the future. This description of the care that church leaders provide helps with holding the tools we use to accomplish this task in proper perspective. More specifically, the business of soul-care, tending to the core of an individual’s life, is not always data-driven, efficient, transactional or based in a market of consumption. Also, it is my contention that the care of the soul happens most effectively in embodied community. The vices, therefore, of technology-use in the Church are when data is prioritized over discipleship; efficiency in disseminating information quells opportunities for silence; marketing cultivates a culture of pretense and consumption; expanding reach leads to disembodied community.

34 Christopher Beely, Leading God’s People: Wisdom From the Early Church For Today (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 57 and 59.
4.3.1 Data over Discipleship

Peter Mommsen provides a unique view, more positive in nature, on the Luddite’s vehement opposition to technology. From his perspective, their willingness to die in their opposition to machinery and their destruction of machines was rooted in a straightforward message: “people come before machines and profits.” Mommsen says that their resistance was anchored in an understanding of human dignity and preeminence over machines. Notwithstanding one’s espousal or rejection of this argument, I believe that the message—people are first—is applicable to all leaders, especially Christian leaders. This priority is germane to the discussion regarding technology because as we have the ability to track data in our congregation through powerful tools and to plan ministry based upon what the data reveals, it is important to understand that data does not equal discipleship. In churches in general, but especially in larger churches, individuals can become numbers in the crowd. Software enables us to track their giving, attendance, and demographic data (gender, occupation, age, marital status, etc.). Software, however, does not obviate the need for interpersonal engagement that aids in moving the individual into God’s purposes for their lives.

Recently, Facebook faced a herculean crisis as a result of a breach of member privacy and data. Cambridge Analytica, a political data analytics firm, was able to retrieve data from users, without consent, and used the data to support the strategies of

Donald Trump’s political campaign. Consequently, Mark Zuckerberg had to testify before Congress and was challenged on his business model and acquisition and selling of user data to third parties. The maelstrom over Facebook’s data breach and the distrust that ensued is a macrocosm of the consequences of reducing individuals to data and using data in a utilitarian fashion. In the church, the breach of security and data is not the major concern but there is the danger of utilitarianism in which leaders become primarily concerned with data and give little attention to taking time to provide soul-care and spiritual counsel regarding members’ values, commitments, hopes, memories and feelings.

Practically, software helps leaders to know how many individuals have joined the church and are regularly attending services or events, but cannot reveal the experiences of an individual’s soul. In a data-driven world, church leaders can give primacy to the data or numbers and little attention to the condition of the hearts and minds of the parishioners. This is why a staple in many pastors’ bios is membership numbers or data, which is mentioned as evidence of the individual’s charisma—the church has grown from 100 to 2000 members in a short number of years. Certainly, such growth is a major accomplishment but the numbers or data is not the only information


of consequence. The growth of parishioners’ lives in their pursuit of Christ-likeness, which cannot be understood solely through quantifiable means, is also paramount.

There is information that data cannot reveal, only conversations and interpersonal interaction can. Therefore, software should not be used as a replacement for discipleship but as a guide that helps to direct and focus the work of discipleship. This point was made profoundly clear to me during a discussion with a leader from INJOY stewardship solutions regarding the role of financial data. In supporting his claim that financial data is actually a tool for discipleship, he told the story of a man whose contributions had significantly declined. Although once a faithful giver, when his contributions declined, nobody from leadership reached out because they were completely focused on the bottom line. When they informed the leaders to check on him, the pastor discovered that the parishioner that had slacked in giving was experiencing a time of marital strain and he was severely depressed. Through this interpersonal interaction, the pastor was able to provide marital counseling and which in turn brought about reconciliation. The financial data provided information that was useful in directing leaders to a possible spiritual need, but someone still had to engage with this parishioner on an interpersonal level to find out exactly what the need was and to help him face the difficult experience in his life.

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38 “Customized Church Capital Campaigns,” Injoy Stewardship Solutions, https://www.injoystewardship.com/
Leaders in the church should have an appreciation for the complexity of the human spirit, which should lead to an understanding that ministry cannot be algorithmic. The process for spiritual formation is not programmable and is thus unpredictable. Strong leadership and forming community requires sensitivity and dexterity in ministering to the very complex needs of parishioners.

4.3.2 Efficiency over Silence

It was stated above that one of the virtues of technology was that leaders could use it to efficiently disseminate information through text, email, or social media. There is a spate of information that is constantly being presented to individuals in this digital age. Notifications on mobile phones, information on social media feeds, and the news ticker on some television stations are just a few examples. In the sea of information coming at parishioners, the church could simply add itself to the list of organizations and institutions that are sharing information or recognize the limits of efficient dissemination of information and encourage the importance of silence through disconnection. This is most necessary because, according to Stephanie Bennett, professor of communication and media ecology at Palm Beach Atlantic University, “The huge increase in information flooding our brains makes dramatic new demands on their
capacity for mental processing, which in turn may help explain why stress and related anxiety disorders are on the rise.”

If leaders in the church are not vigilant, with the influence of the Information Age they might begin to believe that more information is what is needed to build the lives of parishioners. I believe the words of Carter G. Woodson are an important reminder for the times in which we live: “The mere imparting of information is not education.” What, then, is education if it is not simply the imparting of information? John Rhodes, Director of Development for Community Playthings and Rifton Equipment, commenting on why educational technology was removed from Bruderhof schools, writes, “The reason: the heart of education is not the transfer of knowledge, but the nurturing of relationships…” If the central task of church leaders is nurturing relationships and empowering parishioners to do the same, then the church, must at times, bow-out of the rat-race to incessantly disseminate information. This does not mean that information is never shared with parishioners or the community through digital mediums but that sharing information is assessed in light of its limits in shaping relationships that are crucial to development.

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There is a difference between sending a mass text and connecting, one-on-one, with parishioners to discuss their life experiences and their growth as disciples. Understanding this difference and the importance of densely-knit community will compel leaders to encourage their parishioners to seek a reprieve from the deluge of information through digital mediums and take time for solitude and unmediated connection with others. Stephanie Bennett says she gave an assignment to her students—“fast from electronic media for twenty-four hours.” Her students written responses on the assignment were entitled, “‘My Day from Hell’ or ‘Death take me now.’” The responses she received from students shows how distressing disconnection is for individuals inclined to live with ubiquitous connection. Although this disconnection is distressing, it is most necessary for the health of our souls and our relationships.

Encouraging parishioners to disconnect from their devices for a period of time would not only be distressing for the individual but may also be a challenge for the organization—the church administration or operations. So much of what we do and the information we send is dependent upon digital technology. How would the church function for a week without being able to send text messages to members, post on Facebook, or provide the digital, weekly newsletter through email? Yet, through such disconnection perhaps pastors and leaders would come closer to the purpose and

mission for the church—to build relationships that are held together through the bond of
the Spirit. Community Playthings, the Bruderhof Communities manufacturing business,
decided that email was having a harmful effect upon relationships amongst coworkers—
“email was a technology with low emotional bandwidth: excellent for sharing
information, poor or even often awful at creating and sustaining warmth in
relationships.”\(^{43}\) Consequently, the workers decided to abandon email. This reprieve
from email only lasted a week or two, but when email was reintroduced everyone was
vigilant of the potential dangers for healthy relationships.\(^{44}\) Although email seems like a
relic in comparison to new digital technology that is constantly being introduced, this
story is an example of the importance of disconnecting to remember what is of ultimate
importance—human relationships—and to recalibrate where necessary.

4.3.3 Marketing Breeding Church Culture of Consumption and
Pretense

Marketing is a necessity in a culture driven by consumerism where the first
question individuals ask is, “What’s in it for me?” Therefore, the church should market
its ministries and services and provide concrete answers to consumers’ questions. Yet, as
marketing is a necessity and priority, leaders must be aware of the limits and potential
dangers of such marketing practices. When marketing Christ and the gospel, there is
temptation to dilute the message to cater to the individual’s consumptive impulses

\(^{43}\) John Rhodes, *Anabaptist*, 51

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 54.
desire to satisfy every perceived need. Also, because the church is comprised of broken individuals that are becoming whole, it is often a messy rather than pristine place. With marketing, however, the messiness is often not presented for fear that it might dissuade some from joining the community. Church marketing often includes presenting the immaculate on websites, photographs, or posts on social media. Such practices could actually indulge and create a church culture of consumption and pretension.

Steering clear of the potential pitfalls of marketing “brand Jesus” as a local congregation, means being aware of what such marketing can engender in the lives of those we reach. More specifically, as Craig Bartholomew notes,

A kingdom perspective and not a consumer perspective must shape the life of God’s people. But that is easier said than done; we become so used to our consumer culture that it seems natural and right, and we allow it to reshape all aspects of our lives. And the church is not exempt from this danger. A growing chorus of voices warns that Christians are letting consumerism shape their core values rather than letting a Christian perspective shape their consumption.45

In this time of networked-individualism, individuals are being shaped by devices that enable them to connect on their terms and be the god of their own universe. As church is marketed through these mediums in an ego-centered age, leaders must question whether their approach is conforming to mores that should be challenged rather than embraced by the church. More specifically, church community is not designed to revolve

around the individual’s desires and maintained on the individual’s terms. Community, in Christ, is not—“Ichurch”—or one in which the individual takes precedence over the whole. “What’s in it for me” may be the initial question that individuals ask but authentic community in the church should also seek to push people beyond this initial question to asking, “What can I give or sacrifice” for the sake of community.

Discussing the proclivity towards selfish consumption in our culture, Alan Storkey says,

It is possible to think of consumption as an expression of individualism and self-worship. We could believe that the primary religious focus of modern life is the ego and see consumption as one of the ways in which the self gathers worshippers … I think it [this view] has been overtaken. In the dynamics of our culture, consumption has now become the dominant faith and individualism, together with other subordinate commitments, serves it.46

Storkey presses the problem of consumption further by saying that it goes beyond just satisfying the self to being an idolatrous faith. The meaning of life, our relationship with the world and others is determined by a consumptive impulse. If this is the case, then the tech devices we utilize are the sacrosanct altars upon which we express our devotion. In a sense, our connection with devices is like “baptism” because our lives are totally immersed and, consequently, our identity is being shaped. How the church

navigates the murky waters of marketing while challenging such idolatry is most critical
to the souls for which we are responsible.

In addition to breeding church culture of consumption, digital marketing can
also spawn a church culture of pretense or inauthenticity. The majority, if not all, church
websites present a pristine image of the church—the church at its best or as the
membership envisions the church. Consequently, at times, the website is not always an
accurate depiction of the church as is. A church with primarily senior adults will have a
website filled with young adults and children. When young families attend such a
church looking for the children and young adults, they feel duped by the false
representation of the demographic makeup of the congregation. Pictures on Instagram
are filtered and posts on social media present the church as perfectly united and
fulfilling its mission, both amongst the members and in the world. Similar to the
personal threads and posts of individuals, churches present a very filtered or edited
version of community.

This edited presentation of life on social media is one of the reasons the pseudo-
community therein is inauthentic and can have a negative psychological impact.

Acclaimed psychotherapist, Barton Goldsmith, says,

What is really going on with social media is that you are comparing your life to
just what is shown to you, and most people only want to show the good stuff. So
if you are reading all the positives (and some may be made up), it can end up
making you feel like you have no life, because all your “friends” are posting pics from their vacations, their dinners, and their projects.47

When individuals assess their lives in comparison to the flawless lives presented by their peers on social media, their own mental health could be adversely affected. A recent survey of the impact social media has on teens and young adults showed a correlation between the amount of social media use and feelings of anxiety and depression. The analyst stated, “seeing friends constantly on holiday [vacation] or enjoying nights out can make young people feel like they are missing out while others enjoy life…these feelings can promote a ‘compare and despair’ attitude.”48

In such a milieu, what impact does the presentation of a “perfect church” community have on the individuals reading our pages? It seems that there is a desire for authenticity or a place where imperfection is not denied or intolerable and the church is a great opportunity for authenticity in human fallibility, but church marketing does not always convey this, especially on the social media platforms on which digital messaging is often disseminated. Authentic community is harmed rather than enhanced by such practices. I once heard a preacher giving an appeal for membership at his church say, “We are not a perfect church, but that is why you can belong.” This is an honest admission that the church community, existentially, is flawed because people are

flawed. I believe that individuals that live in the world of edited and filtered life on social media need and would welcome this message.

4.3.4 Expanding Reach and Disembodied Community

Technology has enabled churches to stream services and establish multi-site churches where the sermon from the pastor is telecast into each location at the same time. Some pastors have even preached their sermons utilizing holograms. In 2010, CNN did a story, “‘Virtual Preaching’ transforms Sunday sermons,” on what was a growing phenomenon and has only continued to expand since that time—pastors utilizing technology to establish multi-site churches through virtual preaching,49 thereby enabling the pastor to “be in two places at one time.”50 Such use of technology was lauded by some as a revolutionary means of expansion or reaching more people with the gospel. Critics, however, such as acclaimed professor of preaching at Emory University, Thomas Long, expressed displeasure about the disembodied nature of the sermonic moment. Long said, “There’s something about embodiment—that the person who delivers the sermon is actually there—that’s important … it is important in the same way that someone physically visits someone in the hospital or buries a loved one—they don’t fax it in.”51


50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.
As years have passed since this CNN article, churches continue to expand through such use of technology and some churches have completely online campuses. A few such notable online campuses include i.Church with Ron Carpenter, Life.Church with Craig Groeschel, Northpoint.Live with Andy Stanley and Calvary Chapel Web Campus with Doug Sauder. The stated vision for these campuses and ones similar to them are anchored in the desire to share the message of Jesus Christ with more people. Calvary Chapel’s Web Campus says, regarding its mission, “[the online campus] plays an important role because of its ability to share the message of hope and redemption to a great multitude of people—through the Internet, a modern ‘gateway for life … through online community, you can connect with others, build relationships, grow in your faith, pray and ask great questions.” Life.Church provides a minute long video which details their vision for their online campus, stating that the campus was birthed from an understanding of what it means to “go to all the world” and, today, the world is online. Therefore, they seek to build community—the church—online, in which members can experience worship at the same time, join in public chat forums and private chat with

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55 “Calvary Chapel Web Campus,” Calvary Chapel Fort Lauderdale, https://www.calvaryftl.org/Campus/Web%20Campus
56 Ibid.
one of the volunteers that can offer prayer for personal concerns.\textsuperscript{57} Life.Church and others are extremely conscientious about how they make their online community as strong as possible, even going to the extent of hiring online campus pastors to support the parishioners that gather online. As much as conscientious effort is put into providing online communities with all the tools of offline community, it still does not change the disembodied nature of such experience.

I believe Thomas Long’s word of caution regarding disembodied community is just as relevant today as it was when he first offered it. As a virtue (mentioned above) streaming services allow members that would potentially miss worship all together to remain virtually connected. As a vice, however, the virtual experience is offered and seen as a primary means of engaging with the church, and an embodied or densely-knit community is perceived as extraneous—a view that is discordant with the incarnational nature of our faith (discussed in chapter 2). Moreover, human beings are not designed to thrive in sparsely-knit, online communities. Even the attempt to establish online Life Groups with the members who join-in online can be unsuccessful. One online Life Group leader at Life Church spoke regarding the transient nature of the online groups, “It was hard seeing so many people come and go … I just haven’t seen the stability in our group that I would like, and which I think would be easier to maintain in an RL

\textsuperscript{57} “What is Church Online?-60 Sec,” YouTube, October 18, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=22&v=yPKNEmQMO0A.
(‘real life’) group.’”\textsuperscript{58} One of the reasons given for such “in-and-out” engagement with online groups is that one of the things that appeals to online worshippers is the ability for “self-determined” engagement.”\textsuperscript{59} Authentic community is not connecting at the times and to the depth that one desires but at the level that the Spirit produces, which is always beyond the comfort of carnal preferences.

In defense of disembodied leadership or community, some may summon the New Testament. One pastor stated, “Biblical church leaders like the Apostle Paul wrote letters that were then distributed to churches across the Roman Empire. The church leaders weren’t physically present with those letters … but that didn’t make the message any less profound.”\textsuperscript{60} To such thinking, John’s comments, again, are helpful. The Apostle John recognizes the limits to the ink and paper he uses with respect to the experience of joy amongst the congregation. John recognizes somethings are hampered by the form of communication or tool of mediation. Therefore, it is not that telecasting sermons or participating in a virtual community is inherently sinful, but is it most instrumental for the development of community? Presence cannot be discredited or jettisoned as insignificant. Leaders must ask, “What is missing when the primary preacher is not

\textsuperscript{58} Tim Hutchings, “Creating Church Online: Networks and Collectives in Contemporary Christianity,” in Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture, ed. Pauline Cheong, Peter Fischer-Nielsen, Stefan Gelfgren, and Charles Ess (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 214.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.


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physically present with the community in corporate worship?” Thomas Long’s question about how the preacher would feel preaching to a screen is also helpful. I do not know any preachers who always preach to screens and never before people. The preacher that is reluctant to admit deficiency due to a lack of physical presence during the sermon, while preaching virtually to masses, may be given better perspective when assessing this medium from the angle Long presents.

Virtual preaching in multi-site churches also begs the question, what is the role of the individual that serves as the primary teacher of biblical truth beyond proclamation on Sunday morning? Does serving as the primary teacher of the Bible necessitate an intimacy in which individuals are able to see a faithful example in community? Joe Hellerman, professor of New Testament Greek at Talbot School of Theology, argues, “By its nature, the sermon-on-a-screen approach dangerously isolates the cognitive from the relational aspects of our faith. Shepherds in the New Testament world did not bring a food truck to feed their sheep. They fed the flock themselves.”

Essentially, the example of pastoral leadership in the New Testament was relational and pedagogical. Paul shared his very life with the church in Thessalonica. When writing to the Romans, a church that he has not visited, Paul feels the need to mention his great


62 1 Thessalonians 2:8: “So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.”
desire and intentions to visit them that they may be mutually encouraged. This density of relationship between the leader and congregation should not be understood as an obsolete relic of the past, which technology now enables us to transcend. Rather, an inextricable part of leading in Christian community is being a connected, incarnate leader.

4.4 To Use or Not to Use

As new technology is developed at an increasingly rapid pace, church leaders will have to determine whether the ministries they lead will adopt or reject these new technologies as tools for building the church. Therefore, all ecclesiastical leaders that are doing ministry in a tech-saturated and driven world should be versed in the social impact technology is having on the people for whose souls they are caring. A basic understanding of media ecology is in the best interest of pastors and all that shape ministry focus and direction in churches. It may be wise to form technology councils in churches that can help with assessing the church’s use of technology and the overall impact such use is having on parishioners.

Each decision made regarding personal and congregational use should be intelligently assessed and periodically reassessed to ensure that the original thoughts regarding viability and impact are still accurate. Technology is not neutral and as the virtues and vices mentioned in this chapter have shown, the promise and problems of

technology are contiguous; a thick line of discretion determines the extent to which a particular technology is a virtue or vice in our local church contexts. The aim of this chapter is not to prescribe solutions or answers for specific technology use in any ministry, but rather to show some of the opportunities and obstacles of common technology methods currently used in many ministries. These opportunities and obstacles are examples of what leaders should consider with any technology that is utilized for ministry. As the pros and cons are properly weighed, decisions can be made in the confidence of strong deliberation.

Three premises that I believe are fundamental to every decision made about technology are:

1. People, created in the image of God, are primary and take precedence over the tools we use.

2. Churches are places of soul-care and decisions related to technology should be made with a focus on the impact these tools will have on the soul.

3. Because of the incarnational nature of our faith, church community is designed to be embodied. Densely-knit community is the context in which the soul thrives.

Where leaders ultimately land regarding each technological tool’s use after taking the three premises above into consideration will be contingent upon the particular nuances of their context and the specific vision God has given for their community. The hope is that thoughtful engagement will prevent Christian leaders from being carried by the strong winds of technological advancement without recognizing the “shadow” present
in every technology. Faithful use of technology begins with strong awareness of all that is at stake by our affirmation or renunciation of the technological tools available to us.
Chapter 5. Conclusion

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words ... And they said to one another, “Come let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly” ... Then they said, “Come let us build ourselves a tower with its top in heavens.”

5.1 Tower of Babel

In Genesis 11, we read a provocative story about migrants from the east, in the land of Shinar, that purposed to “build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens,” and said, “let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” Cursorily, their desire seems to be innocuous and God’s response to this pursuit seems unreasonable. God says, “Behold they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come let us go down and confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.” Why does God respond this way? What is sinful about coming together as a community to make a tower for the stated purpose of connection or preventing dispersion over the whole earth? The people’s stated desires seem noble and God’s response appears harsh, a flagrant abuse of power.

Upon closer examination of Genesis 11, however, there is a key phrase that belies the seemingly innocuous desire to build and maintain community and reveals the more

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64 Genesis 11:1-4.
65 Ibid.
66 Genesis 11:7.
sinister pursuit of independence from God—“let us make a name for ourselves.” The people’s desire to build this skyscraping tower is for the purpose of making themselves great, independent from God. Their actions stand in sharp contrast with the patriarch of faith, Abraham, whose “great name” would be dependent upon God.67 Their creative efforts are also trenchantly opposed to Noah’s faithfulness in building the boat for the purpose of preserving the human race in Genesis 6:9-10:32. The root problem of the people’s pursuit in Shinar is a desire to transcend their human dependence upon God and, independent of God, make themselves great.

When this passage is read through a technological hermeneutic, the tower is a technological means through which the people will claim perceived greatness and preserve community independent of God. John Dyer comments,

> The people of Babel saw technology as a means by which they could overcome the limits of a sinful world and remain independent of God. When God created the garden, he put humankind in it to reflect his image. At Babel, we find humans creating a city as their anti-garden and a tower as an image to themselves.68

In the face of such a baleful pursuit, God intervenes and counters their efforts; the results are diametric to their original intent. Instead of establishing a unified community and preventing dispersion, their language is confused and they are dispersed

67 “And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Gen 12:2).
throughout the world. God’s stated explanation for intervention is “And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.”

Is God simply threatened by their potential or ability? Does God not want them to “outdo” God’s ability? John Dyer suggests, “God’s concern is that the people of Babel were abusing their creative powers to derail his design for humanity.” Particularly, God is concerned that without his intervention, the people would be able to “make anything” and that what they make will not align with God’s vision for humanity.

The ancient story of Babel has resounding resonance for our own times of rapid technological advancement. Particularly, when technology is created with a spoken or tacit intent to circumvent God’s vision for humanity or our use of devices derails us from God’s vision, the technology we create and use ultimately becomes the source of our destruction and division. Trusts and hopes that we invest into technological advancement—visions of exalted humanity through technology—stem from insecurity with the frailty and fallibility of our human condition. The primordial, tantalizing temptation spoken by the serpent in the Garden is still beguiling humanity today—“you will be like God.” The preoccupation in the Garden of Eden to “be like God” is akin to the aim of the people of Shinar—that to be like God they would no longer need God to

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70 Ibid.
71 The Hebrew word translated, “do,” is הָשָע and also means “to make.” It is used in Genesis 1 and 2 to refer to God’s creative work. See Michael E. Peach, “Creation,” in Lexham Theological Wordbook, Lexham Bible Reference Series, ed. Douglas Mangum et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).
72 Genesis 3:5.
achieve the apex of human potential or greatness! This is the same spirit that serves as impetus for some of our development and use of technology.

Unfortunately, using or developing technology in ways that oppose God’s vision for humanity leads, ultimately, to the demise of the individual and disintegration of community. The latter has been the primary concern of this paper and the opportunity to remedy such fragmentation through the local church. John Dyer comments, with respect to the communal fragmentation at Babel as a result of the abuse of creative power and making a technology (tower) that opposed God’s desires, “technology cannot be separated from the social world. Today much of technology is personalized and focused on the individual’s preferences, but in reality every technological choice we make takes place within the context of our culture and community.” Therefore, the impact and change that technology brings is never isolated to the individual, despite how individualistic devices and usage may appear. Consequently, the impact that our technology usage has on densely-knit community, most necessary for our lives, must be a primary concern for leaders in a community designed to be densely-knit—the Church.

5.2 Pseudo-Salvation through Technology

Dua Central to the doctrine of the Church is human fallibility and frailty, which would come under the systematic theological umbrella of hamartiology. In the Western context, the orthodox belief regarding sin is that as a result of the first sin, Adam’s sin,
all humanity transgressed and consequently has a will that opposes God’s. Ian McFarland writes, “the semantic range of the term ‘sin’ includes not only particular acts that contravene God’s will, but also the congenital state of opposition to God that subsists apart from and prior to any specific actions a person performs.”74 As all humanity is condemned by sin, all are in need of God’s gracious intervention, which is not conceived through any human ingenuity or effort. McFarland further explains the orthodox belief, anchored in Augustinian doctrine, “Against the contention that salvation, understood as the realization of life in communion with God, is at bottom a matter of human achievement, Augustine countered that it is properly conceived as utter gift ... all human beings stand in need of salvation that they cannot secure themselves.”75 This doctrinal belief is the explanation provided by the Church for the manifestations of human fallibility and the ultimate sign of human frailty—death. Every single individual existentially experiences the veracity of this doctrine, through personal transgressions, shame, insecurities and the unwelcome times of bereavement. Reinhold Nieburhr said original sin is “the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.”76

Similar to the people of Shinar who attempted to use technology to improve their community and grandeur, independent from God, we also attempt to remedy our

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75 Ibid., 155.
ontological problem through technology. Empirically, one of the ways we experience the
manifestations of sin is through a fear of vulnerability in relationships. We have a fear
of being rejected or disappointed by the individuals we engage interpersonally. The
answer to our fears is mediated interaction through technological devices that enable us
to connect at the depth and to the extent that we desire without causing us to be too
exposed, lest we show others our fallibility and experience the fallibility of those with
whom we are connected. Sherry Turkle says, “Insecure in our relationships and anxious
about intimacy, we look to technology for ways to be in relationships and protect
ourselves from them at the same time.” Interaction through devices enables us to
“edit” our fallibility, whether that is through drafting and erasing a text ten times to
make sure that what we communicate is “perfect” or filtering a photo to remove all
flaws before it is posted on social media.

Our anxiety for intimacy is not only seen in mediated interaction and networked
individualism but also, in some cases, in seeking companionship with robots. One
extreme example of the latter behavior was exhibited by “Davecat,” a nickname a man
acquired from video games, who married a doll created by Realbotix (formerly Abyss
Creations), a company whose stated purpose is to “produce the latest artificial

77 Relational tension is an immediate consequence of the “fall.” In Genesis 3:16, one of the curses pronounced is,
“Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.” The exact meaning of this verse is
debatable but there is a consensus that this refers to relational friction.
78 Sherry Turkle, Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other (New York: Basic
intelligence and robotics to build the future.”  

Davecat’s spouse, the doll named Sidore Kuroneko, cost $6,000 and had artificial skin and a wedding band saying, “Synthetic love lasts forever.” The reason Davecat, a technosexual, gave for being attracted to robotic companions was:

They’re humans, but don’t possess any of the unpleasant qualities that organic, flesh and blood humans have. A synthetic will never lie to you, cheat on you, criticize you, or be otherwise disagreeable. It’s rare enough to find organics [real human beings] who don’t have something going on with them, and being able to make a partner of one is rarer still.

Admittedly, relationships are hard work and are not easy because of our fallibility, but Davecat’s remedy of flight from the dangers of “organic” companionship for pseudo-companionship through technology is not God’s vision for humanity. One might perceive Davecat to be an outlier or extreme aberrancy, but I believe that more individuals will take this path as robots become more human and humans become more robotic.

Not only is technology used as an escape from the struggles of interpersonal relationship, but some people are looking to technology as a means to overcome the ultimate manifestation of our frailty—death. In a recent article, Michael Plato, professor of Intellectual History and Christian Thought at Colorado Christian University,

79 “We are a high-tech company researching and producing the latest artificial intelligence and robotics to build the future” (Realbotix, 2018, https://realbotix.com/).
informed readers that “Several Silicon Valley tech magnates … have already poured hundreds of millions of dollars into research dedicated to slowing or even stopping the aging process.”\textsuperscript{81} This pursuit is based upon an idea referred to as transhumanism—a belief that humanity can accomplish immortality through technology.\textsuperscript{82} Again, the primary impetus for transhumanists is the amelioration of humanity’s condition, specifically the terminality of life, independent from God. Some have placed their hopes for “resurrection” in the technology we create and use. Some are even having their bodies frozen with the hopes that “technological resurrection will be possible someday, that a cure for a fatal disease will be discovered, or that it will be possible to upload one’s mind into a computer, or even into a body.”\textsuperscript{83} In syncretic fashion, some Christians have combined the beliefs of transhumanism with Christian faith, arguing that “the intentional use of technology, coupled with following Christ, will empower us to become more human.”\textsuperscript{84} Technology, in this instance, is deified—a fourth element in the trinity that will contribute to the redemptive work of glorification.

All of these are contemporary examples of the same spirit that is present at Babel, placing ultimate hopes in technological advancement and jettisoning God and God’s vision for our humanity. Keen awareness of our frailty is not negative, but what is most

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 22.
essential is where we turn to solve our problems. Technology cannot and will not save us! If anything, overinvestment in technology, which leads to overindulgence, will ultimately lead to our destruction. If technology is not the source of our salvation, where can we “be made whole?” My contention is that we are made whole in closely-knit community. This is the type of community we were designed for and this is why in densely-knit community we thrive spiritually, emotionally and physically. This can be seen through the great reversal of Babel—the restoration of community—at Pentecost!

5.3 Pentecost-Community Restored

Pentecost, described in Acts 2, is a day where humanity truly does transcend the normal barriers of frailty and enter the realm of God-given greatness. Disciples that formerly abandoned and denied their relationship with the Lord are emboldened to confidently testify about the Lord. Peter preaches with such power that 3000 people are saved and baptized.\textsuperscript{55} None of these great works are accomplished in or for their own name, but rather in the name of the Lord and through the power of the Holy Spirit. Instead of disuniting cacophony or anarchy, the people come together; in their distinctiveness they are united. On this day, humanity is possessed by something completely “other” and is endowed with what could not be produced through any human creativity or ingenuity. Pentecost shows that the path to true greatness is not through technology but rather through the gracious gift of God—the promised Holy

\textsuperscript{55} Acts 2:41.
Spirit. It is this power that will empower disciples to live beyond the ontological problems experienced by all humanity. This power will cause the lame to walk, the demon-possessed to be freed and even the dead to be raised. I believe objective observers would look at the results of Pentecost in the lives of the Apostles and see “greatness.”

One of the immediate results of this God-given greatness or Spirit-possession is the re-formation and preservation of God’s vision for community—the Church is birthed. The Church, by the power of the Spirit, is the context in which the imago dei is restored and the individual is able to thrive through communion or shared-life. The power in this communion is that it reflects the very essence of God’s nature; the perichoresis of the Trinity is mirrored through the church’s fellowship. Church-community summons the best from humanity, while at the same time affording us the opportunity to be vulnerable in our frailty without fear of judgment. In the church, we can be affirmed as individuals created in the imago dei and, at the same time, reminded of our need to offer and receive grace because of our imperfections.

As human beings thrive in every stage of development through close communion with others, the local church provides a context in which individuals are able to blossom. Toddlers, adolescents, adults and senior adults can all thrive in the local church context as they each receive and give exactly what is needed for their physical and emotional health in community. The community possible through the local church
is not only a spiritual necessity but a biological necessity as well. Church, at its best, provides an opportunity for human beings to flourish.

The potential in church community, however, is threatened by ever-encroaching tech-driven mores of our culture characterized by networked-individualism. Shallow, technologically mediated engagement is the modus operandi of our culture. Consequently, even in the church, the way relationships are governed is, at times, more tech-driven than Spirit-influenced. It is extremely challenging when being the church requires that we have face-to-face conversation, but as a result of texting and social media interaction, the skill of having a conversation wanes. How can a community that thrives on truth and authenticity function in a culture where individuals constantly live editing their lives for presentation on social media? The physical embodiment of our faith, based upon the incarnational ministry of Christ, is challenged in a culture of virtual churches and community, which causes some to believe that physical presence is extraneous. The call to sacrifice for the sake of community is modeled by the self-immolation of our Lord, but cuts against the grain of a culture in which each individual is placed at the center of his or her own universe—connecting and committing at the level of their own comfort.

Yet, the obstacles of cultural opposition are actually a primary reason the church has prime opportunity to reach people that are afflicted by their own technological creation and consumption. The palpable manifestation of affliction in the lives of
networked-individuals is loneliness. As this paper has discussed, loneliness has reached epidemic proportions. There are gaping voids in individuals’ lives and this is because of a lack of engagement with community. Deuteronomy 8:3 says, “He humbled you … to teach you that humanity does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Feelings of isolation and loneliness in our times are the humbling experiences that teach us that humanity cannot live solely on the devices created by tech moguls and mediated connection with others; we need to live in accordance with God’s vision for our lives.

This is why preserving the bond of close-fellowship is paramount and should be the primary concern of church leadership in our times. Organizational and administrative communications is important, but of ultimate importance is fostering authentic communion amongst members. Leaders in the church cannot be swayed by the tornadic winds of Silicon Valley and allow local churches to be destroyed through unquestioned embrace of new technology. Leaders in the church must understand that the “gospel of progress” through technology may appeal to a Babel culture that seeks advancement independent from God, but this idolatrous message must be countered by the church’s proclamation, in both word and deed.

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86 In Ephesians 4:14, one of the results of effective administrative leadership is that the church “may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.” The primary application is fortifying the church against false teaching. This application can be widened, for our context, to false hopes placed in technological advancement.
The decisions leaders make regarding the use of technology and programmatic attention given to connecting members in their church in close, face-to-face interaction is more vital than ever. The church’s opportunity in this present age is to be a nexus for relationship building across political, generational, racial and socioeconomic lines. The beauty of our baptism into Christ and inclusion in the church is that the Spirit of God unites us in our diversity and makes authentic relationship possible. True connection through honest, face-to-face conversation is what is needed. Leaders in the church must push people past the comfort zone of mediated, shallow engagement. Soul-deep intimacy—relationship in which we can share our authentic selves with others—is the place of transformative miracles, epiphanies and breakthroughs. The power in connecting deeply with others through conversation and embodied connection cannot be overstated.

Therefore, acceptance or rejection of technology in the church should be done in the interest of maintaining the integrity of the church as a place for soul-connection. Soul-connection happens in embodied community, where people are valued above machines. Disciples are developed in densely-knit community that does not treat individuals as automatons from which data can be collected and utilized to mass-manufacture close followers of Jesus. The work of ministry is often slow and circuitous,

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87 Galatians 3:27-28 places emphasis on the unique communion made possible through our baptism into Christ and inclusion in the church: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”
which is certainly frustrating for leaders that lack the virtue of patience. Development in discipleship and progress in ministry never happens at the pace of my delight, but an expedited process through technological engineering will not lead to authentic transformation. Authentic transformation comes from sitting in close-quarters with others during the diverse vicissitudes of life—the joys, sorrows, pain, guilt, shame, delight and doldrums. This is the work of soul-care to which church leaders have been called.

5.4 Opportunities for Future Research

Technology is being created at a rapid pace; artificial intelligence is becoming more sophisticated and new devices are made available for the tech consumer every month. Unfortunately, devices that are promoted as encouraging sociability are having the exact opposite impact on human beings. The rapid pace at which this is happening means that research in this area struggles to keep pace, particularly with respect to the organizational impact such tech advancements are having on local congregations. Based upon what has been presented in this paper and other research in the field of Media Ecology, I believe more discussion on media’s impact on churches and leadership should happen in places that are specifically focused on training clergy. Workshops on how to incorporate the latest technology into the church may appeal but of equal or more importance are trainings that equip leaders with knowledge about how people are being shaped by media, and the necessity for sagacious use of technology in the church
is essential. Technological advancement is one of the most dominant influences on our culture and parishioners; this influence will only increase as tech behemoths continue to expand.

This research can be enhanced through more specific analysis that is directly concerned with local congregations. For instance, functional magnetic resonance imaging (FMRI) studies on the differences and similarities in neurological responses to parishioners that are connected in the physical rather than virtual space would be insightful and helpful as leaders judge the merits of streaming services and multi-site church, where sermons are telecast. Providing scientific evidence for the distinction between embodied listening and disembodied listening may help to solidify the importance of incarnational ministry.

Another opportunity for future research is a study on the nature of conversations in larger congregations. This could include a study on the length and location of, as well as topics of discussion in conversations that happen between laity-and-parishioners and clergy-and-parishioners. Since conversation is an intricate part of communion, a study on the relationship between conversations and personal and/or congregational growth would be very helpful for leaders that are seeking to programmatically prioritize building strong community. Empirical evidence, specifically focusing on the church that supports the need for conversation in the church would be most useful.
Finally, research on the influence of technology on churches and ecclesiastical leadership in a digital age of decentralized authority and a flattened hierarchy online is most vital. How does engaging in an online world, with its apparent egalitarianism, impact how traditional styles of leadership are perceived in the local congregational context? How will churches have to adapt to a potentially growing aversion to hierarchical leadership? Clergy are leading in time of swiftly shifting cultural dynamics that are spurred by digital engagement. Consequently, leadership styles and structures may have to adapt if churches will be able to effectively engage a new generation.

5.5 Benediction

In the church of my youth, before virtual worship was even a possibility, the church—embodied—would sing a congregational hymn. In this moment of congregational worship the many voices gathered would become one voice—a chorus of witnesses—singing the praises of God. Not everyone singing was offering this song in the right key or pitch, but the collective, united sound was mellifluous and the communal joy radiated throughout the sanctuary. One hymn that was sung, written by an African-American songwriter, Doris Mae Akers, was: “Sweet, Sweet Spirit.”

The impetus for the lyrics of this song was a prayer amongst choir members before worship. Doris thought that the choir was not “prayed-up” enough to minister. She asked them to pray again and during this prayer, the Spirit began to move in a powerful way. The presence of Lord was so powerful that Doris commented, “I hate to
leave this room and I know you hate to leave, but you know we do have to go to the service. But there is such a sweet, sweet Spirit in this place.”

This song speaks of the Spirit’s indwelling and palpable presence in community, gathered together in shared space. The presence of the Lord is seen in the expressions on the faces of the congregation. The love of God is present in this communion and this Spirit-filled fellowship “revives”—restores life—to all who are gathered together.

There’s a sweet, sweet spirit in this place
And I know that it’s the spirit of the Lord
There are sweet expressions on each face
And I know that it’s the presence of the Lord
   Sweet, Holy Spirit
   Sweet heavenly dove
   Stay right here with us
   Filling us with your love
   And for these blessings
We lift our hearts in praise (hearts in praise)
   Without a doubt we’ll know
   That we have been revived
   When we shall leave this place.

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**Biography**

Bankole Akinbinu was born and raised in Prince Georges County, Maryland.

Rev. Akinbinu accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior at age 10 and was called into the Gospel Ministry at age 16. He was licensed to preach in 2001 and ordained as a Baptist minister in September 2009.

In 2007, he received his B.A. in Bible Theology from Washington Bible College in Lanham, Maryland. Upon completion of his degree, he continued his education at Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey, earning a M.Div in 2010. While at Princeton, Rev. Akinbinu was the recipient of the Aaron E. Gast award, which is given annually to a member of the Princeton Theological Seminary community who demonstrates a unique gifting for ministering within a major metropolitan area.

Rev. Akinbinu has served as the Senior Pastor of Baptist Grove Church in Raleigh, North Carolina since January 2012. He is the dedicated husband to his wife of 11 years, Angel, and adoring father to their daughter Alivia and son Elijah.