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THE VIRTUALIZATION OF CULTURE AND THE NEED FOR AN EMBODIED CHRISTIAN ALTERNATIVE

by John Dyer

If you've walked the streets of Los Angeles lately, you might have run into Chuck McCarthy, an aspiring but underemployed actor in Los Angeles who recently came up with an intriguing side business. For seven dollars an hour, he advertises a service where instead of walking pets, he walks humans. McCarthy, a hulkish but soft-spoken man with long hair and a chest-length beard, initially came up with the idea as a joke. But after posting advertisements on Craigslist and Facebook, McCarthy's inbox was flooded, indicating that he had tapped into a deep need among people who feel too lonely, scared, or socially awkward to take a walk on their own or with a friend. Now, in his job as People Walker™, McCarthy gets flooded with requests to accompany moms trying to handle a day at the zoo with toddlers, widows kickstarting a new exercise routine, and anyone who just needs to be heard for a while. Reflecting on why this joke-turned-business has resonated so profoundly, McCarthy says, "We're on phones and computers constantly communicating but we're not connecting as much. We need that human interaction."[1]

McCarthy's story serves as a prime example of the sense of disconnectedness and placelessness that many people in our modern world seem to be experiencing. Our Internetconnected devices offer us an amazing world of information and connectivity, yet many people seem to be experiencing the very opposite. Rather than feeling more at ease and experiencing deeper relationships, many of us find that modern life feels fragmented and disconnected.

Now, before you get worried, I want to assure you that this article is not bashing modern technology or blaming Google and Facebook for all our woes. Rather, what I'd like to suggest is that a great deal of our angst comes from a more subtle restructuring of human life that I've labelled "the virtualization of culture." What I mean by this is the tendency of digital technology to take a physical good or practice and to create an electronic, nonphysical, or virtual equivalent of that object or practice.

This might not seem like a major problem at first, but I hope to show that healthy, grounded culture is composed of physical objects and rituals around those objects, and that when we rely too heavily on virtualized, digital equivalents of those

cultural goods, we risk unmooring ourselves from the world and from our own humanity.

SCRIPTURE, CULTURE, AND TECHNOLOGY

Before discussing the "virtualization of culture," its possible causes, and its potential answers, it would be helpful to frame a basic understanding of culture and technology. Of course, precisely defining the word *culture* is difficult, and there are perhaps as many different understandings of culture as there are cultures themselves. However, Ken Myer, in his brilliantly aphoristic definition, covers a lot of ground very quickly when he writes that culture is "what human beings make of the world — in both senses."[2] In other words, culture is both the physical things we make (which Stanley Grenz has lumped into the four categories of "objects, images, rituals, language"[3]) and the meanings we make and derive from those things. Emil Brunner made the connection between the objects themselves and their significance when he wrote that culture can be thought of as "the materialization of meaning."[4]

In the modern world, one of our major cultural goods is technology. Depending on the definition, the word *technology* can include any useful thing that humans use, including the clothes we wear, the pipes that bring us clean water, the paper and devices we use to read, and the phones we now carry around with us.

I take it that when God gave the command to "cultivate the garden" in Genesis 2, the use of technology was both assumed and sanctioned. Throughout the biblical story, we find God working through human creativity and technology, including Noah's Ark, the Stone Tablets, the cross on which Jesus hung, and — one day — the promised New City, full of cultural symbols such as roads, trumpets, and banners.

Technology and creativity are clearly part of God's plan for humanity, and yet we also realize that the things we make tend to remake us. When we use a shovel, our hands develop blisters and callouses, and this happens regardless of whether we are using the shovel to honor God or harm another. When we use cars, we tend to live further from the places where we work and worship. So it is with all of our tools. There are morally good uses and morally bad uses of any technology, but what we often miss is that when we repeatedly use any tool, it tends to harden us in a particular direction. So what kinds of cultural callouses have we developed from modern, digital technology?

HOLOGRAPHIC CONCERTS, VIRTUAL MEMORIES, AND ELECTRONIC DATES

Let's first consider the wonder of music, which until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could only be heard in a live setting with human artists. Once recording technology was invented, a new, virtualized form of music created an entirely different set of social practices around music and fundamentally changed the relationship of artist and audience. Listening to music was no longer the same kind of communal culture experience but instead became a commodity purchased by an

individual to be used how he or she pleased. Early recorded music generally was played through speakers around which a crowd could gather, but the creation of the Walkman and headphones not only altered the relationship of the artist to the audience but also the audience members to themselves.

With the digital world, we have taken this kind of movement several steps further, but not in the ways we initially expected. In the early days of the Internet, cultural critics worried that the "virtual world" would be a completely separate space that we "jacked into" and preferred over the "real world." What we've seen over the past twenty or more years is that, in reality, people move fluidly between offline and online worlds many times per day. We go running with a smartphone tracker, check our email while waiting in line at the grocery store, and send texts to friends we're about to meet in person. While all this is happening, we may not have noticed that our smartphones have developed the uncanny ability to absorb many of our culture goods and practices into themselves. Without these physical goods as a part of our lives, many of us feel an even deeper sense of disconnection and placelessness.

Take, for example, the concept of memory. As we age, much of who we are and who we conceive ourselves to be is tied up in our memories. The sights, sounds, smells, and feelings of our upbringing, our adolescence, our formal education, our first jobs, and our first loves anchor our sense of identity. Now consider what people mean today when they say the word *memory* in common speech. We might hear someone say, "I lost my camera. All my memories were in there!" or an advertisement that promises to "backup and protect all your precious memories." Memory itself, in this case, is being virtualized and offloaded to the cloud.

In 2016, Snapchat released a feature called "Snapchat Memories," which it calls "a personal collection of your favorite moments." Ironically, Snapchat began as a reaction to the kind of social media where everything was stored permanently. Instead, their original platform allowed users to send self-destructing photos. While Snapchat has often been maligned for people using these features to send explicit content, many users found it to be a way to restore the kind of serendipitous fun that could happen before everything was recorded. Like the sideways faces we used to make to one another when our grade-school teacher was looking the other way, Snapchat's self-destructing photos enabled people to interact in ways that required the use of their actual memory to preserve. This move toward a product called Snapchat Memories illustrates what I mean by the *virtualization of culture*. They have taken a simple cultural ritual — making a funny face to a friend — and given it a virtual representation, one that exists without place and outside of one's mind.

Facebook has a similar feature where, on logging in, users are presented with what Facebook calls memories, which are pictures or videos one has posted several years before. What really happened in space and time is always colored by the layers of our memories and experience, but now those events are further colored by Facebook's algorithms and filters.

The rituals of dating too have been virtualized. The pickup lines and cheap cologne of yesteryear have been replaced by carefully edited images and swipes to the

left and right. On the positive side, dating apps can be a godsend for finding a person with similar beliefs and interests in a large, disconnected city. But as the industry has evolved, newer apps such as Tinder have come to transform our conception of place. Although I have never personally used Tinder, as I understand it, it is a location-based application that displays eligible men and women who are physically nearby. One can look through the profiles of several people, swiping left or right to indicate one's desire. If that person also indicates desire, the app makes it possible for the two people to communicate and possibly meet. Notice that the process of "finding" a date on Tinder makes the bars, churches, and coffee shops around us largely irrelevant. The point of Tinder is that no physical location is "holy ground" for finding a life partner but instead the ritual of swiping right is itself holy. Users of Tinder find themselves in a place, but abstracted from it, the rituals around their meetings and communications are virtualized into an electronic form. In the end, while they might be satisfied temporarily on a physical level, they are left further displaced from the world and from significant relationship.

The point here is not merely to put a sad face on the ephemerality of a Snap or the potential for immorality with Tinder. Instead, we are observing how early worries about "jacking in" to a completely distinct "virtual world" that was disconnected from the real world were largely misplaced, but only just so. Rather than entering entirely virtual spaces, we have instead taken the elements that comprise a healthy culture — objects, images, rituals, and language — and which anchor us to the world through meaning and purpose, and we have replaced those real-world objects with virtual representations.

Our phones have absorbed so many of these grounding practices that the phone itself has come to represent "the world out there." Researchers have shown that its power is so great that the mere presence of a smartphone between two people having a conversation can reduce empathy and feelings of connectedness.[5] And yet more than 75 percent of smartphone users admit to *nomophobia* (the fear of losing one's phone), suggesting that we have a deep longing for the presence of the device at all times. Our phones, then, have absorbed much of what is meaningful in the world, becoming our most sacred cultural object; and yet, for all their promise and power, they have left us with a longing we struggle to name.

DISPLACEMENT IN THE BIBLE

The causes of our modern sense of displacement might be new, but the feeling of being disconnected is echoed throughout the biblical story; and in Scripture, we also find God offering ways back home. Where modernity offers freedom and mobility at the price of detachment and disconnection, the biblical narrative is profoundly concerned with the physical world and the importance of grounded places and practices. John Inge argues that "the Christian religion is not the religion of salvation *from* places, it is the religion of salvation *in* and *through* places."[6]

If humankind ever had a home, a sense of place and rootedness in the world, it was certainly the Garden of Eden. Sadly, in their desire for freedom, knowledge, and the ability to roam outside of God's will, Adam and Eve brought sin into the world. The price of their freedom was displacement; they were cast out of the Garden, left to wander, roam, and struggle, but never again to be truly at home. Their removal from the Garden is the archetype of displacement, and their longing for replacement and restoration echoes through the rest of the biblical story. Abraham, too, "was called to go out to a place….And he went out, not knowing where he was going" (Heb. 11:8), and it was in that displaced space where God drew near to him. The Hebrew people also experienced life away from their true home during their time in Egypt and the Babylonian exile.

It is in these moments of displacement, specifically the Israelites' time in the desert, that I think God offers us guidance for how to live in the present world. Recall the scene just after God spoke the Law to the Israelites, when they covenanted with Him to follow what He had commanded (Exod. 19–24). Moses again ascended Mount Sinai with Joshua, leaving the people at their most vulnerable. They were far away from the life they had known in Egypt, with all its sights, smells, sounds, and daily rituals, and as bad as their enslavement was, nothing about their present surroundings were familiar. Now, their leader had apparently abandoned them at the foot of a frightening mountain. Instead of an abstract, virtualized religion, the people longed for something that could anchor them in the world and give them a sense of place and meaning. In this moment of yearning, they gave in and handed their golden earrings to Aaron so he could make the golden calf.

We can interpret the golden calf as simple idolatry, setting up a false god in place of the one, true God, but it is Yahweh Himself who validates their need for physical goods and rituals that would anchor the Israelites to God's presence no matter where they were. In fact, God was preparing exactly what they were longing for in the chapters between the confirmation of the Covenant (Exod. 24) and the golden calf (Exod. 32). In Exodus 31, we see that God had chosen Bezalel, son of Uri, and assigned him the task of creating physical objects to represent the presence of God in their midst. This task was so significant that Bezalel receives the distinction of being the first person in Scripture referred to as being "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Exod. 31:3). In appointing Bezalel, God is telling us that while laws and doctrine matter, for them to sink in deeply and penetrate beyond the mind and into the soul, they need to be accompanied by an entire system and pattern of life within a community.

Later in the Pentateuch, we find God giving just that to Israel, transmitting to them an entire culture, replete with language, objects, images, and rituals, all meticulously crafted by Bezalel and his partner Oholiab. Each of these artifacts was designed not merely for functional value but also their capacity to shape the minds and hearts of the people, to display the value system of God, and to give the Israelites a distinct identity even as they travelled to their new home. In this, God understands the importance of the physical objects and spaces around us and the meanings they transmit to us through our daily rituals and religious gatherings.

So what has God given us, the church, to create a gospel-shaped culture grounded to the world where His Son became flesh? The New Testament is famously scant on details of how local churches should operate or be organized, allowing the Holy Spirit to conform believers into the image of the Son with unique expressions in different cultures. But Jesus did offer us two important practices: the physical gathering together of God's people, and the giving and receiving of bread and wine in communion.

DEVIRTUALIZING THE CHURCH

As the Internet developed, we evangelicals — particularly those of us in the non-denominational traditions — have discovered that many of the elements of our worship services could be replicated with digital equivalents. Many churches make their sermons available for download and provide a live stream of their church services for those travelling or too sick to come physically. Christian worship music, too, has become a digital product, available to be downloaded and consumed by an individual at will. And while we can connect to our own church's resources, we also have at our fingertips an infinite array of better sermons than most of our pastors can preach and more technically refined songs than our congregations can sing. The Bible, too, has undergone this process of virtualization. Where once the Scriptures were only heard in the church, the magic of the printing press made the Bible into a physical object one could own and hold, flavoring Protestantism with a decidedly modernistic individualism. Now in the age of smartphones, the Scriptures themselves have moved into the Cloud, making the Bible less a thing we own and cherish and more like Google Maps, available in a pinch but invisible otherwise.

What, then, might the church have to offer to a world that is always connected and yet overwhelmingly disconnected, that longs for touch and grounding, but finds only virtual goods serviced? If everything that makes us Christian has an online equivalent, what is unique about the gathered that makes it different from the church online? I would argue that it is the one focal practice that cannot be virtualized: the Eucharist. Although I personally lean toward Calvin's view of the Eucharist, I am not here to defend or deny a substantist view of communion. However, I believe that all of us can agree that, in the practice of communion, Christ has given us a cultural form that is distinctly Christian.

We have a set of physical objects, bread and wine, and distinct language (the recitations of the Upper Room) around which a community can gather that create for us a connectedness and rootedness in the present reality and future promise of the gospel. In this grounded practice, we acknowledge our current displacement, our suspension between the already and the not yet, between the Garden and the New Earth. If God had given us grapes and grain as the means of remembrance, perhaps those symbols would have us looking back to the Garden. Instead, He has given us bread and wine, the product of human labor, technology, and creativity, reminding us that we are not to

escape this world but to live creatively and redemptively within it, even as we long for our final home.

In a world that values speed, efficiency, and ephemerality, the regular practice of communion is a radically countercultural activity that is slow, inefficient, and decidedly embodied. For my own brothers and sisters raised in the free church tradition who have been reticent to embrace the regular practice of the Table, fearing it would lead to popery or, worse, shorter sermons, perhaps we can agree that with the 500th anniversary of the Reformation on the horizon, half a millennium has been sufficient time to assuage our worries. Rather than relegating the Lord's Table to a special occasion, let's restore it as a distinctly Christian practice and a powerful counterbalance to the digitally soaked world from which we seek refuge every week.

The antidote to our own drifting-but-never-dwelling age may be as simple as the regular gathering of the church around the Table. In the gospel proclaimed and embodied, the pulpit and the table, we offer something to the world that is entirely unique, unavailable in any store or on any website, at once both an acknowledgement of our current displacement and a hopeful look forward to our future restoration.

John Dyer (PhD candidate, Durham University) is the executive director of Communications and Educational Technology at Dallas Theological Seminary and the author of *From the Garden to the City: The Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology* (Kregel, 2011).

NOTES

1   Rory Carroll, "'We Need Human Interaction': Meet the LA Man Who Walks People for a Living," *The Guardian*; https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/sep/14/los-angeles-people-walker-chuck-mccarthy.
2   Quoted in Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).
3   Stanley Grenz and John R. Franke, *Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Post-Modern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000), 141–46.
4   Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization* (London: Nisbet, 1948), 62.
5   Andrew K. Przybylski and Netta Weinstein, "Can You Connect with Me Now? How the Presence of Mobile Communication Technology Influences Face-to-Face Conversation Quality," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, July 19, 2012, 244 (http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0265407512453827).
6   John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Burlington, VA: Ashgate, 2003), 92.