Easter 1997, and I was at an academic conference on the theme “The Communication of God.”

A Jewish philosopher was speaking to us about the promise of online communication; he was passionate and committed and fairly persuasive. (I was already involved back then in running an experimental online theology discussion group, and so I was ready to be convinced.)

At the end, however, someone stood up and commented, “As a Jew, this will work for you – you believe in the power of word, of text. For those of us who are Christians, who believe the Word became flesh, textual interactions will never be enough.”

Is social media a tool for Jews (and Muslims) but not for Christians, a tool for people who meet God in a book, but not for people who have seen God face to face?

If you have read my previous two articles, it will not surprise you that I want to say “no,” but the question is a serious one.

As Christians, we confess that God would not – perhaps could not – reveal Himself to us without meeting us in the flesh, without touching, embracing, kissing us.

When we talk about doing “social,” don’t we have to insist that, theologically, the social is about the physical, about bodily presence? Isn’t social about kissing and hugging, not just tweeting?

I want to say both yes and no. The “yes” first: It is at the heart of Christian theology that we have met God incarnate, God become a human being – and it is at the heart of Christian theology that one day this will be the essence of our experience.

All “media” will be done away with – the Holy City will be without a temple – and we will know God in an unmediated (un-media-ted!) way for all eternity.
If this is perfect communion, then mediated communion, sociality sustained by the use of media, is necessarily imperfect.

We need to take this seriously: our future is life with God, and the promise is that, with unveiled faces, we will see God face to face. That is heaven; that is perfection; that is what social should look like.

In Jesus’ earthly life, this perfection was briefly anticipated. We met God properly. We have to confess this, but there is also a caution to be raised: we met God but, according to the gospels, virtually none of us noticed.

The demons knew who Jesus was, and the centurion at the foot of the cross said something profound; beyond that, we have to say there was much misunderstanding. Peter got something right, but immediately something wrong. Almost everyone else simply missed the point.

We need to take this seriously: presented with perfection, sinful humanity, with the exception of one centurion, missed it.

When we turn to Acts, however, Jesus is (physically) absent, but now His followers understand who He is.

Of course, the difference is the coming of the Holy Spirit, not the invention of Twitter – but the central story of salvation should make us question the claim that, theologically considered, true human communication is only possible through physical presence.

The farewell discourses of John’s gospel emphasize this theme. “It is better for you that I go away,” says Jesus – because then the Spirit will come.

With the texts in view, we might ask three questions that will help us to think theologically about communication, and so about social media:

â— Why did no one understand who Jesus was during His earthly life?

â— Why will the coming of the Spirit be “better” than His physical presence?

â— And why, if the going of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit is something “better,” will the return of Jesus not be an unhappy reversal of that “better” moment?
First theological theme: Why did no one recognize who Jesus was during his earthly life?

The best answer I have seen to this first question comes from my friend, Dr. Mike Higton of the University of Cambridge, who suggests that, before the death and resurrection of Jesus, we had no categories to understand who He is.

Peter could confess Him as Messiah, but immediately after the confession Peter misunderstood the core of what that meant (Matthew 16:21-23).

A crowd saw His miracles and wanted – rightly – to make Him King, the true heir to David’s throne, but they could not understand what His kingdom would be like, and so He slipped away to avoid their misapprehensions (John 6:15).

God in the form of a slave (Philemon 2)? God dying under a curse (Galatians 3:13)? It was beyond our comprehension until we saw it, and so we needed to see it before we could begin to name it.

Jesus’ death and resurrection so transformed our understandings of the ways God could act and be that until they had happened, we had no language that could speak of who Jesus is, no words that would adequately name Him.

And so He cautioned silence (in Mark alone, see 1:44; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26; 8:30; 9:9): whatever we said would be misleading, inadequate – idolatrous even – because we lacked the words to speak properly of what was happening among us.

To say nothing was to be less wrong than any of the things we could find to say – until the events of cross and resurrection changed our understanding of what was possible; then we could begin to find words to speak the truth.

With the need to see Calvary and the empty tomb before we can grasp what it means to name Jesus as the Messiah, we are dealing with something of infinite importance.

The same pattern – of not being able to comprehend something until we have experienced it – is true of many lesser realities of our lives as well.

I lost count of the number of people I heard speaking about a visit to the recent London Paralympics: “I went expecting to feel pity; instead I felt awe.”
Before actually experiencing genuinely great athletic performances by people with disabilities, many of us failed to grasp what the Paralympics could be; the experience changed the possibilities of our thought.

**The advent of social media has similarly changed our possibilities**

Our potential for communication, and for community, is different to what it was, even very recently.

I can tweet something in a moment that, potentially, can be seen by the whole world. Twenty years ago, that was impossible, unless I happened to be one of a handful of media moguls.

Our ethics, and our laws, are struggling to catch up with our changed possibilities: people are prosecuted for tweeting jokes that 10 years ago they would have made in the pub with impunity; we are all struggling to work out what good online ethics – even good online manners – look like.

There is an interesting pattern to the way people adopt new technologies. To begin with, it’s the geeks and the enthusiasts – the ones who want it because it is new.

Mass adoption usually begins when we discover the technology can do something that we are already doing, but can do it better: personal computers moved off hobbyists’ benches onto business desks because word processing was more efficient than typing.

Then, however, we discover that the technology offers possibilities we never imagined before, and that is the real tipping point for adoption.

Word processors were great, to continue the example, but spreadsheet programs transformed the way businesses could do budgets and projections.

Tweak the unit price of a component here, and you can immediately see exactly what effect it has on costs and profits all the way down the chain. This was new, and this was transformative.

I believe that we are still in the first stage with social media: most of us use it to do things we could have done anyway.
As I indicated in my previous piece, my own suspicion/expectation is that a combination of more natural interfaces and localization services will be the real game-changers, but I could well be wrong.

I am sure that somehow, soon, we will discover new ways of living community through social media, and that these will be transformative of our lives and expectations.

“Transformative” does not mean either “good” or “bad.” When we encounter change, some of us instinctively embrace it as new and exciting and so good; more of us instinctively recoil, seeing it as something threatening and disorientating and so bad.

Churches do the same, but often try to dress up a straightforwardly conservative reaction in ethical clothes.

I have read tracts from the 1970s denouncing the switch from an organ to a band as evil – and tracts from the 1790s denouncing the switch from a band to an organ in just the same terms.

I have books on my shelf that are horrified that we have moved from hymnbooks to overhead projectors (they’re not very new books) – after all, Jesus and Paul used hymnbooks, didn’t they?

I’m not saying the move from band to organ, or from organ to band, or from hymnbook to overhead projector, or from overhead projector to data projector, was necessarily good.

I am saying that for a minority of us our instinctive reaction is to embrace the new, simply because it is new. For most of us, our instinctive reaction is generally to oppose the new, for the same reason.

We need to temper this instinct, whichever is ours, and to come to a reasoned and theological account of the real issues.

To do this well will take much work and a fair amount of argument – good ethical reflection always does, but let me offer a couple of examples of what it might look like.

Accountability - social media is “part megaphone, part tape recorder”
First, at the moment I see social media in part as a megaphone and in part as a tape recorder: it (at least potentially) amplifies anything we say so that many more can hear, and it captures what we say so that it can come back to haunt us.

Both of these functions are ethically neutral in themselves, but might make us think hard about the ethics of our communication: if I knew that this joke could be retrieved from Facebook any time in the next decade, would I still want to tell it? I know that my friends agree with me about this, but what will I do with other people who don’t if I broadcast it via Twitter?

Social media makes our comments and our relationships a bit more public. I think we should welcome that: it makes us more accountable in crucial areas of our lives.

Of course, before the industrial revolution, that accountability was a normal part of everyday life: in the village, everyone knew everyone else’s business, naturally and inevitably.

First in the cities, and then, with the coming of motorized transport and commuting becoming normal, in the villages too, we became much more isolated and alone – and so much less accountable for our lives and actions.

Secrecy became the norm for human lives in the post-industrial West. This was not good. In this case social media is – at least potentially – reversing a recent social trend, and one which I believe was unhelpful to us.

Who are we listening to?

For a second example, social media offers us, more than perhaps we have ever had before, the opportunity to listen only to those who think like us.

Of course, I could always choose my newspaper and my friends, but that level of social isolation was only partly effective: much of my social interaction would necessarily be with neighbors and colleagues who might be very different to me.

Online, my self-isolation can be much purer; I can block every voice I do not want to hear and perhaps even begin to delude myself that the world thinks like me, just because I am only listening to the tiny proportion of it that does.

Of course, such self-isolation is a bad thing, liable to make us deluded and
uncharitable.

The crucial point here, however, is that I have to make some decision about who I will hear, listen to and engage with online; my neighbors and colleagues come to me as brute givens, that I cannot escape or change; my social media feeds, by contrast, are entirely under my control.

Here, then, the world of social media offers us a new temptation, and a new set of moral decisions that we are forced to make, that we have to work out how to negotiate in a responsible and Christian manner.

**Second theological theme: Jesus asserts that the coming of the Spirit will be “better” for the disciples than His physical presence has been; why is that?**

Two answers seem plausible: the exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of the Father after His death and resurrection is the completion of His ministry, and so we should rejoice when it happens because now He has completed His work of salvation for us.

As Tom Wright and Scot McKnight, among others, have suggested, the New Testament gospel points toward the enthronement of Jesus as the true king.

Second, there is a contrast between the local presence of Jesus and the universal presence of the Spirit.

Come the book of Acts, the mission of Jesus spreads across the known world, and the Spirit’s presence can be with Paul in prison in Ephesus at the same time as He is with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, and with whatever community resulted from the return of the Ethiopian eunuch baptized by Philip to his homeland.

It would be too easy at this point to laud the possibilities of social media for non-localized presence; there is a truth in this, but the analogy with the goodness of the Spirit’s presence is at least inexact, and it may be that my ability to be elsewhere present is significantly less of a good thing than the Holy Spirit’s.

God the Spirit can be fully present in many places, giving His whole attention to many situations; I cannot.
My social media feeds allow me to eavesdrop on a conference or a news event elsewhere, or to give my attention, sympathy, advice and prayers to a person who is many miles from where I am.

This can be a very good thing, but to do this is to disconnect at some level from the context in which I am physically present.

If I am alone in my office, that may not be an issue; if I am supposedly giving “quality time” to my children or students, it is.

Disengaging from local presence might still be the right thing to do, but it is important to realize that it comes at a cost.

Again, this is perhaps an intensification of a more basic human question; I reflect that, in the time we have lived in Fife, Heather has built a far better set of local relationships than I have, in part because my focus is more often on national networks than village ones. Heather is also active in national networks, but has the balance tilted differently to me.

This is a result of decisions we each have taken, and of responsibilities we each have accepted; neither path is “better” than the other.

My connection to social media feeds, however, now makes this a moment-by-moment question for me: should I, now, be fully attentive to what is going on in our home, or open to a more dispersed presence?

Again, in abstract neither choice is “better” than the other, but there is a constant decision to be taken, and in particular situations, one decision or the other might be catastrophically wrong.

I have not yet engaged in a social media fast, but I understand and respect those who have.

Like any fast, the point is not that what you withdraw from is bad in itself, but that there is an appropriate moment to pause for a period and remind yourself that it is dispensable, at least for a period, and that it may be interfering with more important relationships – with God, with your family, with your local church.

The choice to engage with social media can bring many goods, but it also comes with many costs, and a proper theological account of social media will
acknowledge both.

Prayers are asked for and offered over my Twitter feed – and that should not be underestimated – but if responding to a friend’s request for prayer means neglecting or delaying my daughter’s request that I read her a story, then I am presented with an ethical question that I must face seriously and answer responsibly.

**Third theological theme: why is the return of Jesus not a reversal of the “better” moment of the coming of the Spirit?**

Very simply, the return of Jesus does not entail the withdrawal of the Spirit.

Indeed, the promise is that the day is coming when we will know God fully: face to face and always with us. We will be able to look God in the eye, but also know His presence is looking at a sister or brother who is many miles from us.

So, to nuance my earlier argument a little, the fullness of relationship in the coming Kingdom is a form of unmediated community that encompasses both physical closeness and spiritual presence.

So the eschatological critique of social media I gave earlier, in fact, needs some clarification: mediated presence at a distance is not imperfect, but it is incomplete.

(Many of us know this: it is common wisdom that video conferencing works well among a group of people who have met each other “in the flesh” at least once, but not otherwise.)

That said, the problem I raised in the previous point still stands. God has no decisions to make about His local and dispersed presence: He can be fully present in both modes. I cannot and so have to decide responsibly and ethically how to divide my attention.

**Questions, questions**

What decision to make? It will be different for every Christian, but I return to my earlier reflections about the adoption of technology: for a minority of us – I include myself here – the temptation will be excitement over the new technology, a desire to throw ourselves into giving attention via social media because we now
can and never could before – and that is exciting! – as a result, however, we are in grave danger of neglecting those who have a right to expect our attention because they know our physical presence.

For a majority, the temptation will be the opposite, a desire not to engage with others through social media even when it might seem to be helpful or beneficial because such engagement feels strange and new and threatening.

The right questions to ask will be old ones, but informed by a realistic understanding of the possibilities of new technologies:

â— Where, under God, do our relational responsibilities lie?

â— What should we be giving ourselves to know and understand?

â— Where do we have responsibility to maintain and form old and new relationships?

â— What real duty are we tempted to neglect, either because the temptation of the new is too enticing, or because the threat of the new is too frightening?

Our engagement with social media should be shaped by seriously considering such ethical questions.

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