

Relationships: Face Time

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Some time ago, I came home to find my two college-age kids another college-age friend, all sitting in the same room of the house. All three were engaged, not with each other, but with their keyboards and computer screens. Nothing was wrong with what they were doing, yet I found it surprising, even odd, that all three were “connecting” with someone or something outside of the room rather than connecting with each other.

Today, if we are a technical initiate at all, we will become acquainted with words or phrases like Facebook — “Friends” and the “Wall,” Twitter Updates (Tweets), a Blog, a Forum, e-mail, IM’s (Instant Messages), Chat Rooms, Blackberrys, and Text Messages. These tools or types of communications have several benefits. They keep us a little more in touch with each other and our daily comings and goings. They allow many people to exchange ideas. They save time and postage, allowing rapid and immediate delivery. Large groups can be contacted all at once. Others can contact us or we can contact them whether we are on the road, at work, in the house or at our children’s practice

field. What a day we live in!

Without intending to minimize these benefits, there are also certain drawbacks to this age of electronic communication. Besides the issues of distraction and personal safety, electronic communication can keep people at arm’s length. Whatever the communication is that takes place “at a distance,” it is not the same as seeing someone or a group face to face. Non-verbal communication is missed, as is tone of voice. “I love you, too” can be said earnestly or sarcastically and have totally different meanings in electronic fashion, yet be readily understood person to person. There’s less privacy, and unless we turn off our cell phones, there are more interruptions and distractions. There’s less “alone time” and “down time” at a personal level, so our “batteries” become drained rather than recharged. Sometimes, even the environment of face-to-face conversation and relationships, is more conducive to a more intimate level of communication. Loving accountability, which we all need from others (and which we all need to give from time to time) can have more of an edge when done by text message rather than in the context of face-to-face relationships. Work is required to rightly relate. Christianity at its core is relational. Think about it. Terms or phrases like Father and Son, brother and sister, and “my little children” are all relational. “God so loved the world” is relational. In fact, the Scriptures say that it is antithetical to say we love God — but that we do not love our brother or sister. Our horizontal relationship with each other is always a reflection of our vertical relationship with God.

Relationships have, at their core, a certain level of association. The Bible uses terms like sheep in a flock, branches on a vine, members of a body, and people in a family to say we are individuals yet always part of a group. These dynamics are part of God’s design. The degree of commitment and closeness with those we relate to is supposed to mark us as incredibly distinct from the rest of the world: “By this all men will know that you are My disciples,” Jesus said, “if you have love for one another.”

Such a biblical love is not instant; it is cultivated. It’s not immediate; it is developed over time. It’s not built in short, rapid communication, but in longer, transparent vulnerabilities conveyed in an environment of mutual trust and acceptance. This kind of trust and acceptance shares numbing pain and difficulties with personal sin — and that receives hard, often unwanted, words because we know we need them. Even if we don’t know we need them we trust a friend when he or she says that we do. This kind of love is mutual, because those same levels of communication are received and given in both directions.

Such love is also patient. This unique kind of love is not necessarily the “feel good” love that the world sells. It’s a “do the right thing, and relate rightly” kind of love — even if it is hard and painful. The Scriptures tell us that systemically, we are of “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” Yet if

this is the case (and it is), why are believers so quick to point out our differences. When conflict arises, why are we so quick to backbite, gossip, grumble, complain, or even break off a relationship, leaving a friend or group — rather than gently working through the conflict, no matter how long it takes, to complete resolution? The former kind of response is not the kind of love that marks us as Jesus' disciples. The latter can be exhilarating or painful for all involved, but it yields a stronger bond conveying that our relationship with each other is more important than getting our way. That particular kind of love is distinct from that of the world.

When Jesus first selected His disciples, He appointed them "so that they would be with Him" (Mark 3:14 – italics mine). It's not surprising that in being with Him, they noticed that He would often go off by Himself to pray and that He would pray with them. Soon they asked Him, "Lord, teach us to pray." Electronic communication doesn't teach us what we'll gain naturally by osmosis just by being with each other — the gradual, often unconscious process of assimilation or absorption of lifestyle, character, and wisdom. It's hard to see tender affection, gracious hospitality, and selfless serving of one another without spending time together. Discipleship is intensely relational in more ways than mere expression. It is life impacting life in a more total, comprehensive way.

Biblical community is being vitally connected with "one another," too. We are to pray for one another (I know of a military couple who has done this via e-mail, because it was the only way they could pray together while one of them was deployed). We are to love one another, to be devoted to one another, to give preference to one another, to be of the same mind towards one another, to accept one another, and to be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other as God in Christ has forgiven us. In fact there are almost forty "one another's" in the New Testament. It is impossible to connect at the level the Scriptures call for us to connect without significant and quality face-to-face time.

In the early church, Acts 2 tells us that Christians met day by day in the temple and from house to house. The picture I get is that they worshipped together and they were constantly in each other's houses. It seems more spontaneous than planned. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to sharing their lives, to eating together and celebrating communion together, and to prayer. These types of relationships invite others into our lives and welcome the "intrusion" of the unplanned into the planned or better, of the friends and family into our sphere of relationship where iron truly sharpens iron, where the wounds of a friend are discovered to be faithful, and where we find encouragement and are stimulated to love and good deeds. In short, we grow into Christ-likeness.

In an age of electronic communication that so often is "at a distance," let us make sure that we do not have only surface-level relationships that trend towards detachment and isolation. Real relationships move from acquaintance, to the discussion of facts, to the sharing of opinions, and to the exchange of feelings. At the deepest levels we explore the spiritual aspects of our relationship with God and where He and His Word are making an impact on our lives, and where He helps us discover that we are falling short and need to change and to grow. We explore serving Him together and enjoying fellowship with His people in church, in small group, and one on one. Having "face time" with people — both with those who don't know the Lord and with those who do — and lots of it, is the best way I know to take our relationships and our ministry with people (and theirs to and with us) to the next level.

So how are your relationships? How is your ministry to others? Is it "at a distance" or "face-to-face"?