

Fellowship Face to Face, Part 1

Donald S. Whitney

I sent and read dozens of emails today. In addition to the Internet contacts with people I had here in my own city and country, I heard from a pastor in Wales, exchanged several posts with a friend in Canada, and bought an old fountain pen from a woman in Germany through an online auction. What a great blessing to enjoy these things so easily. But as a result of the time involved at the computer, I haven't talked face to face with anyone all day. Why does it seem that the more I have and the faster I can accomplish things, the more distant I feel from people?

Because of the efficiency and convenience provided by technology, we chat and buy more and more through electronic means, but less and less in person. As long as we maintain meaningful face-to-face relationships, especially with fellow Christians, then our electronic relationships will remain in a good and healthy place. But if we interact with people *primarily* through glass or some sort of technological screen—such as a television or computer monitor—we shouldn't be surprised that our relationships begin to seem distant, shallow, or artificial.

Even from the low-tech times of the first century, the timeless words of the Bible speak directly to this contemporary problem. Notice how the apostle John acknowledged the superiority of face-to-face fellowship over written communication: "I had many things to write, but I do not wish to write to you with pen and ink; but I hope to see you shortly, and we shall speak face to face" (3 John 13-14). While John used and clearly valued the printed word, he would not let that substitute for what can be communicated only in the intimacy of Christian fellowship.

Similarly, Eugene Peterson observes that "words can be put into two piles: words used for communication and words used for communion. Words used for communion are the words used to tell stories, to make love, nurture intimacies, develop trust. Words

used for communication are used to buy stocks, sell cauliflower, direct traffic, teach algebra."¹ While both piles of words are necessary, the words of communion—the words that nurture Christian fellowship—are best spoken face to face. Don't let the explosive increase in the *means* of communication keep you from *personal* communion with other believers. For to the degree that our communication diminishes our communion, we lose something that's part of the essence of Christianity.

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¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Subversive Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994, 1997), p. 178.