

Face booking Before God's Face



By Rev. Peter H. Holtvliüwer

There seems little doubt about it: Facebook is here to stay. Like cell phones, emailing, texting and twittering, Facebook is part of a new social networking reality.

This of course is not news for the well-connected but for those just getting accustomed to cell phones and email, Facebook may catch you off guard. In the first quarter of 2009 alone, five million people joined Facebook every week! By March of that year there were over 200 million users with no sign of things slowing down. You don't have to go far to find church members who are among those millions. It includes teenagers, adults, parents and even grand-parents.

What is Facebook? Think of it as a massive meeting place on the Internet (www.facebook.com). Individuals set up a Facebook identity (for free!) and announce their arrival simply by signing up. Just as in person, certain parts of your profile are public and other parts you may keep private. You give permission for "friends" to view your private stuff, things like pictures, videos, updates or personal musings. You can then become "friends" with other people and view their stuff. People can find you and ask to be your "friend" to which you have the freedom to say "yes" or "no."

The attraction of Facebook is not hard to see. It gives you a chance to communicate with distant friends and close friends all at once. You can let everyone know what is happening in your life in one posting to your "wall" (think of it as your personal bulletin board). You, in turn, can keep track of developments in the lives of others. Facebook gives opportunity to reconnect with old friends, long lost relatives and long-forgotten acquaintances from all over the world. As Facebook attracts more users, the opportunity for more connections with friends old and new grows.

Relating in a Christian Way

As with most technology, Facebook is neither good nor bad in itself. Rather, its value depends on how you use it. Further, Internet relationships are not necessarily "fake" while in-person relationships are the "real" thing. You can be a hypocrite in both spheres easily enough and you can be genuine in both too. Facebook simply provides another location and means to carry on relationships and experience a form of community. The challenge we face is in adapting to this technology in a Christian way. Much as we are called to conduct face-to-face relationships in a God-pleasing manner, so we must also Facebook before the face of God.

One-stringed Guitar

One of the key challenges of relating to others on Facebook is understanding what it doesn't offer: in-the-flesh communion. It has less dimensions to it than person-to-person. You can't look into the person's eyes, give a handshake or a hug. You can't see the expressions on his face or hear the tone of her voice. You miss her laugh or sigh, his wink and smile. It is largely a relationship conducted brain-to-brain, through the means of the computer. As someone recently wrote, it is like trying to play the guitar with one string. "You can make music; it's just not as interesting or as good on a guitar with six strings."

That doesn't mean Facebook relations are useless or meaningless. They're just not full-orbed. You can't get to know a person's total personality unless you spend time together face-to-face and live life in the same space for a time. For that reason, Facebook can be a great tool to renew old friendships or carry-on current ones, but it is very risky to begin new relationships. Without a history of shared experiences and in-person dialogue, you will never really know the person you think is your friend on-line. You don't have to search far to find people stung by relationships begun on-line only to discover later (and often at some cost) that the friend was totally different in person. Be careful who you let in as your friend.

Who's a Friend?

Friendship itself is at risk of being redefined on Facebook in an unbiblical way. Suddenly your parents or children are let in as "friends" or people who are in authority over you (e.g. teachers, elders, bosses). There is no other category to connect through so all relationships are levelled to that of "friendship." Of course, friendship is a beautiful thing, but is your Dad really your "friend?" Certainly not in the same way that your classmate or peer or co-worker is your friend. So we should be careful on how we think about the concept of "friends" and be sure in our postings and emails that we give respect and honour where it is due (Romans 13:7 & Eph 6:2).

Even more concerning is the tendency to "one-way" friendship that Facebook offers. In that forum it is easy to let friends in and easy to be a friend to someone. It's not uncommon to have over a hundred "friends" and sometimes many more. There is no obligation. There is no expectation from you. This makes it easy to cave in to our natural tendency toward self-centeredness. You post things for people to read or see what kind of reaction you'll get from the group. Meanwhile, you are free to catch glimpses of the happenings in the lives of your friends without needing to get involved. It is easy to become a friendship "voyeur" – always looking on but rarely if ever participating in a two-way relationship of care and concern.

True Friendship

Friendship, we know, involves these things. Real friendship requires not only sharing ourselves but giving love to others in actions as well as words. The Bible says that a friend is one who sticks closer than a brother (Prov 18:24). Friendship involves loving your neighbour as yourself, looking out for the interests of others (Phil 2:4). In your Facebooking, resolve to be a genuine friend. Don't just post about yourself but also inquire of your friends. Pray for them, take some responsibility for their well-being.

Perhaps you cannot do this with every contact called a “friend” but for those you really consider a friend, show that you care with a two-relationship of words and deeds. Wherever possible, meet with them in person from time to time. Consider limiting your friends to persons you can actually maintain a genuine two-way relationship of care with. Facebook friendship can be a wonderful complement to in-person friendships but it cannot be a replacement.

The Real You

Hypocrisy is quite possible person-to-person but it’s even more of a risk in on-line relationships. When you create your profile or put up photos it is easy to cherry-pick information. It can be out rightly false or partly false. It may even all be true but incomplete, presenting a much rosier picture of your life than it really is. More than in-person, we are able to control and manipulate our Facebook personalities and make people think a certain way about us that simply isn’t true – for example, that we are successful, humorous, have lots of friends, popular, intellectual, emotional, sensitive or whatever. A person’s life can be filled with problems but not a word of it gets on to their Facebook profile.

As we should be in person, let us equally be on-line – genuine and true. The Lord hates deceit and hypocrisy. Those things belong to the devil who is the father of lies (John 8:44). If we put up a show for people and an act for their benefit, not only are we in danger of God’s judgment but it brings no benefit to our friendships. People can’t help us if they don’t know we struggle or have issues. People can’t really know us either if we are pretending to be something we’re not (e.g. humorous, intellectual, successful). I’m not saying you should air your dirty laundry to everyone, but your friendship profile should be an accurate reflection of who God has made you to be. And with certain close friends you should endeavour to both share in their struggles and let them share in yours.

Electronic Slavery

Facebook shares a danger with those other forms of electronic communication, namely that we are always partly “on-line” even when we are not connected. We put cell-phones on our hips and Black Berry’s in our palms and lap-tops anywhere in the house, all with communication access. If that cell phone rings, we answer it – it doesn’t matter if we’re in the middle of a person-to-person conversation! We will interrupt whatever we’re doing to check email, take a call or a text, or take a peek at Facebook because our mind is always eager to see what the “latest” is.

The technology which opens the world to us can also make us a slave to the world. The on-line community is always calling for our attention, always demanding our interest and we are easily sucked into it. It’s not uncommon to hear of people addicted to checking email or Facebook. If they are somewhere without access for a few days, they exhibit symptoms of withdrawal. Before we know it, instead of mastering the technology we find that it has mastered us.

Finding Balance

As Christians, we should let nothing be our master except Christ alone (Gal 5:1). Facebook can be a part of our day but it should not rule our day. A good way to help keep Facebook use in balance is to limit the number of times you check it each day and limit the time you spend on it.

For example, allow yourself to check it twice a day for a 15 minute period each time. Consider giving it a rest for a day (why not on the Lord's Day?) and focus on other things. Also, get the message across to yourself that Facebook is not "everything" by putting a priority on other things. For instance, don't check Facebook till mid-morning or even after lunch (or after school), until some chores and other obligations have been completed. Give yourself space at the beginning and end of the day to commune with God. Let not the last thing you think about when you go to sleep be Facebook but the "Good Book."

To see whether Facebook is out of proportion in your life, stop yourself in the middle of using it and ask, "How is this making me feel? Am I getting anxious? Am I second-guessing myself? Am I nervous? Thrilled? Excited? Is Facebook influencing me too much? Do I seek friendship more through the computer than in real life? Am I neglecting relationships with people physically close to me in order to enjoy the friendships I have on-line?" These questions can help us analyze whether our Facebooking is healthy or not. If Facebook has become too dominant a force in your life and you can't imagine living without it, consider taking a "Facebook Fast" for a whole month. That disconnection can help you put things in perspective again.

Before the Face of God

It is tempting to think of Facebooking as something we do in our own little world. On Facebook, we control the environment, the persons who are in it and how we relate to them. But let's remember that all we do is done before the face of God. The one face we must always think of when we post or profile is the face of our Saviour who died to restore us to communion with Himself and with each other in God's covenant of love. Then our friendships will be true and honourable and God will be pleased.

Speaking of friendship, next time I hope to write about something called, "Friends with Benefits."

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Jesse Rice, *The Church of Facebook* (Colorado Springs, David C. Cook, 2009) p.50. This article is indebted to Mr. Rice for some of its analysis.