

THE LOSS OF THE PERSONAL IN A TECHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY

October 27, 2006

One of my oldest friends and Oxford colleague, Sir John Houghton, was first a physicist at Jesus College, Oxford, then later Director General of the Meteorological services of the U.K. For most of his distinguished career, he has spent his life tirelessly warning the nations of the world about the threat of 'global warming'. He has long been the Co-chair of the Scientific Assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. He narrates that after a meeting with Mrs. Thatcher's government in 1992, he came out with a cabinet minister who cheerfully remarked, "I will not live to see this forecast you have been making". Yet the first evidence of climatic change was already apparent in the 1980's, namely the damage being done to the earth's ozone layer. International action was promptly taken through the Montreal Protocol to phase out the chemicals responsible. But it will still take at least a century to recover fully the ozone layer. But the complexity of recognizing global climatic is so great, that in the year 2000 a meeting of FCCC, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, failed to agree on what were even the first steps needed to be taken towards pursuing a common action. Many still believe that a global problem such as climate change is so great that it is beyond the capacity of the world community to achieve any workable solutions.

I cite this issue of global climatic change, to suggest that the impact of technology upon our society is analogous. In neither case do we advocate the brake be placed upon human development by the paralysis of science and technology. Just as in an academic community like Regent, we are not advocating limits to be placed upon future scholarship. But what we are advocating is that we place more understanding upon the accelerating advances of technology, and of the impact these are making upon the human spirit, and indeed upon the distortions being made of the Christian faith. As technology drives forward major cultural changes within our society, these are also affecting the credibility of how we communicate Christianity, both now and in the future. Yet so universal are these effects that many Christians seem ignorant, even innocent, of their impacts upon their lives and upon their expressions of faith. To a youthful generation many of these changed relationships appear so normal, indeed so inevitable, that they are taken for granted and never questioned.

So all we can do, is to illustrate in a fragmentary way perhaps, how technology is affecting us. Take autism for example. It was reported in the national newspapers on October 19, last week about this social dis-ease. Researchers at Cornell University have discovered that child autism began to increase significantly after the 1980's, just after cable television was installed in California and Pennsylvania; but there was no increase in Amish communities, which do not watch television. Moreover, the increases were greater in western states such as W. Washington and Oregon, where the annual rainfall is much higher and so where young children stay much longer inside the house throughout the winters. Researchers concluded that about 40% of autism in these western states could be attributed in young children watching too much television. Abnormal activity in the visual-processing areas of young children has been noted, to the extent that now the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends against any TV for children two years or younger. Yet autism affects not only human relations, but

also our Christian faith. For I have found evidences of "religious autism", of children growing up without any sense of the need of God, as well of the lack of parental bonding. The more autonomous the sense of our identity is becoming, with all the gadgets we now can utilize, the more the technical effects of autism are likely to intensify, both socially and religiously.

Another obvious influence we are seeing today is the impact of mobile phones. Yesterday young people gathered in crowds to associate together on "youth night", usually Saturday or Sunday night in church. It was the opportunity to socialize, at a stage of life, where "hanging around" together performed a critically important function. Youth leaders now complain that in place of the traditionally large crowds, youth now prefer a more intimate social unit of a few friends, who are in constant communication throughout the day with each other, which they do readily by cell phone. Then they complain of the loss of intimacy within church life, which is unsuited to this kind of intimacy. Older folk too, are complaining that the personal attention they now seek, as a result of the "therapeutic revolution", is more readily given them in the business world, than within the life of the church. Indeed, institutional life is being greatly affected by the degree of individual attention being so much more intensively sought elsewhere.

We only need to look at the old albums of photographs of the holidays of our parents and grandparents, to find ourselves visually in contrasted worlds. Further scrutiny will show us how differently they behaved with each other, what they valued, indeed how they lived, in contrast to the sweeping impacts technology in all its forms has now affected us. The older we are, the more we realize the changes, which is why I am able to warn you, as belonging to an older generation. In 1962, my wife and I visited the Seattle World Fair, horrified by the technical innovations Bell telephone exhibited for "the home of the future". It all seemed so alienating then, but today it is taken for granted. Yet even then Jacques Ellul was warning us of the implications of belonging to "The Technological Society", although little attention was being paid to his prophetic voice. When I addressed the Congress on Prophecy in Jerusalem in 1971, which was convened by Carl Henry, I was the only speaker to address the future issues of technology. Later, when Bruce Waltke joined Regent, the President of Dallas Theological Seminary - where he was then teaching, commented to Bruce that he was going to an odd place, with people like Houston around! For he acknowledged he had no idea what my address had intended to convey in Jerusalem. For it had nothing to do with "dispensationalism", which is all he thought prophecy should be about.

Later, I began to be convinced that nothing short of another Reformation of major social forces was needed to help us to appreciate the impact technology was producing upon all our relationships. For technology has become prescriptive of everything we do, not just in the use of tools, but in administrative, economic and religious activities; indeed in the way we behave and interact with each other. Now I am retired from college life, I can see this more clearly. I never lack calls of students anxious to be encouraged and mentored - support that the institutional bureaucratic life cannot give them. For while these prescriptive technologies are often exceedingly efficient and effective, they come with a great social mortgage, of living in a culture of

institutional compliance. We are for ever being more conditioned to accept technical orthodoxy as 'normal', as the only way of 'doing it'. Techniques for Bible study, for prayer, for youth activities, programs for evangelism, teaching practices, you name them, they are all about organized procedures and technical processes. Thus human relations need to be "fixed", church life needs to be "organized", our faith needs to be given the right "tools", to use and promote. It prescribes a new grammar for communication that is soul-less, for it is all for a task-oriented society, tasks that can be planned, coordinated, and controlled, to produce predictable results. Like an oil slick that spreads over the surface of everything, prescriptive technology demands cultural compliance to accept it always as 'normal'. For it is producing its own definition of 'reality'.

There is a growing concern in North America about the threats to the well being of the "middle class". Long service employees are losing their jobs and their futures because of the technical globalization of manufacture. Medical services are so technically geared towards efficiency that their expenses are creating family bankruptcy in paying the hospital bills. Education fees are rising so fast that even many of our college students are accumulating debts that may take many years to pay off, at the cost of future well being. Advancing technologies intensify the gaps then between the richer and the poorer. Indeed, many technologies are basically anti-people. Persons are seen as problems whereas technologies are seen as solutions. This tendency is perhaps most exaggerated in post-war cultures like Japan, where the prediction is that the whole nation will have become a robotic culture by the year 2020, if not by 2015. It predicts the "technological imperative", that whatever can be done technologically, will be done, having primary consideration over human values.

Just two days ago, on a walk with a younger friend, he told me about his upbringing in an unemotional family, where to speak about one's feelings was inconceivable. It reflected an ethnic background, intensified by the scars of the Second World War, where just to survive, the luxury of expressing one's feelings was wholly suppressed. But to-day, my friend is strongly emotional, the opposite of how he was brought up. The transformation began, he noted, when he volunteered a few years ago, to go with a Pentecostal mission to a third world country, living with peasants who had none of the gadgets we fill our homes with. These people freely expressed their emotions, lived with simple but loving relations, and their faith in Christ was very personal. This deeply changed my friend, and so he wants to share more of his life outside "the technological society". So we too, can respond to this foreboding sense of technological determinism with two re-actions. The immediate one is to do nothing, and to despair, as we see the negative consequences increasing. The other is to open our eyes wider, travel further like my friend, to see the Christian life more globally, as well as to look back more intimately into the history of God's people. Then we can gain both insight and moral courage, to make more of our own choices. That certainly is the cultural change happening around us now, in moving from a "mass culture" towards a more "preferential culture", where more and more people are making multiple choices for the ways they want to live, to believe, and to act. Thus societal values are melting like the effects of global warming, to replace society within more tribal values and choices. These in turn, will become increasingly more personal, as well as more individualistic and even narcissistic.

In a previous lecture on loneliness, I explored how people are increasingly experiencing this sense of being alone within our culture, to the point of one influential psychiatrist stating that loneliness is the basis of all psychiatric disorders. Others are speaking of the pathological features of the technological world as becoming expressive of trends towards both schizophrenia and paranoia. The former looks outwardly, to play the diverse roles of a fragmented life, such as people who become pleasers in childhood. Later they then become increasingly addicted to such diverse role-playing, that they end up with a loss of self identity. So they see themselves performing with multiple personalities, and without a core sense of the self. The tendency towards paranoia is the opposite, of those who have an inner sense of the self that is highly resistant to outside influence, and thus with a strong tendency towards inwardness. To protect this inner core, the social tendencies are towards being defensive, suspicious, untrusting, and even of breeding hostility. For the cultural pressures from the outside appear so strong and threatening. Fear, frustration, anger all pay a heavy toll upon one's stress levels, leading perhaps to psycho-somatic illnesses as a consequence. Such pathologies may not be extreme, but they do provide a negative emotional framework within which to understand common emotional tendencies to-day, that differs from those of the past.

We need therefore to distinguish to-day "incremental change" from what some are calling "deep change". In spite of the remarkable changes that technology has generated and is generating even faster, these are still only incremental changes. Robert Quinn, the author of the book *Deep Change*, describes incremental change as "the result of a rational analysis and a planning process. Incremental change usually does not disrupt past patterns-it is an extension of the past." This is what most institutions generally experience-ongoing, incremental change. It is how those who learn to effectively lead institutions spend most of their time, pragmatically so, mastering, accelerating, and directing the process of incremental change.

But times come when something different seems to be required, and this is what is meant by "deep change." For it requires "new ways of thinking and behaving. It is change that is major in scope, discontinuous with the past, which distorts existing patterns of action and involves taking risks. "Deep change" means surrendering control." For that reason we fear it, and we try to avoid facing the need. When we speak of the Christian institutions to-day needing to anticipate another "Reformation of the Church", as radical perhaps as that of the sixteenth century, as I have been speaking about for the last forty years, we are speaking of a "relational reformation", that is "deep change" indeed! But if we look at the sixteenth century, it was just not single individuals, such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others who brought the Reformation about; they operated in conjunction with major cultural and political changes as well. Likewise, we are now witnessing major cultural and demographic forces that are contributing to "deep" changes in contemporary Christianity, whether we are aware of them or not.

Globally, there are now more "independent" and "indigenous" Christian denominations numbering an estimated 386 million members, compared to the 342 million in the historic Protestant mainline churches of the Reformation. The former are

fast growing in countries such as in Africa, in Brazil, and in the Philippines. We can summarize these "brutal facts" like this: Most of the church's future global growth will take place in fresh, locally rooted expressions of Christianity that demonstrate promising vitality, but also display disturbing independence and isolation from the wider more institutionalized church life. In the next fifty years, if present growth rates and trends continue, the world will be home to over 1 billion Pentecostals. But our traditional global ecumenical institutions, comprised largely of the historic Protestant and the Orthodox churches will become seriously marginalized from the major streams shaping the future of Christianity. Most of the latter will thrive in their indigenous, cultural independence, growing very rapidly. But they also face the challenges of any relatively young church, that is to say, living without ties to the history, witness and tradition of the historic church. The Catholic Church, which is projected to lose 20 million members in Europe in the first quarter of this century, will gain dramatically in the southern hemisphere, with possibly 100 million members in Africa, 50 million in Asia, and 140 million in Latin America. The majority of these Christians still lie outside the prescriptive advanced technologies we have been describing, living poorly but perhaps with simpler, truer, personal relationships. In contrast, the elaborate bureaucratic structures of western denominations may melt away as irrelevant to an increasingly secular society. It may be that the growing Chinese diaspora will become the great missionary movement of the coming future, in conjunction with the great majority of future missionaries being sent out from the southern hemisphere. Whereas a few decades ago 70% of all evangelicals were located in the northern hemisphere, primarily in the U.S.A. today, 70% are in the churches of the global South. At the beginning of the 20th Century, 81% of Christians were white. By the century's end, the number was 45%. Other astonishing data are given by the World Christian Encyclopedia, published by the Oxford University Press, which estimates that there are now a total of 33, 380 denominations in the world. But only 347 are members of the World Council of Churches, and only a few hundred more who are not members belong to the complex and duplicative web of other ecumenical bodies. So this can assure us that the future majority of Christians are not being drawn into the same secularized, technical expression of Christianity as we are facing now in our own world. What remains an issue is how we shall adjust within the northern hemisphere to other expressions of Christianity so different from our own traditions.

All this is an introduction then, to the two books which I have just written or edited, and newly published this month. Both are a very small contribution, towards facing the huge issues of our growingly technical and institutional culture. This is the first time I have ever appeared in a public publishing event to promote my own books, but I do so, knowing that all the royalties are placed in a foundation I founded some years ago, to provide scholarships to help young people make significant transitions in their lives, as they too, "live dangerously on the edge". It is called the Institute of Religion, Technology and Culture. So for many years I have used the royalties of my books for charitable purposes, especially for Christian study centers established in university towns. You may not realize it, but in 1976 the Board of Regent College, accepted my vision that we should see Regent College, not just as an institution by itself, but also as expressive of a movement that was active in promoting other educational experiments. So we were involved in the establishment of New College at Berkeley California, the C.S. Lewis Institute in Washington, D.C., a Biblical Institute in

Salt Lake City, and the London Institute in England. Some of our alumni continue to dream of the possibilities of similar institutes in cities such as Brasilia, Tokyo, and Kuala Lumpur, while the Singapore Graduate School of Theology has a similar objective of providing lay training to professional people.

In my personal book "Joyous Exiles", I have described some of the choices I have made over my own life-time. I write six essays to symbolize the incompleteness of any one life, and do so dialectically because we live as Christians with many paradoxes. Some of these I summarize. These essays encourage the exercise of dialogue as a genre

appropriate to communicate personally, for in monologue we may tend to forget we are addressing other people. At the same time the essays are not explicitly autobiographical, as I do not believe in writing about myself. It was my son, Christopher, who requested I outline the personal convictions I have sought to live out as a Christian, before I depart this world. Nor do I believe in contemporary biography. I belong to an old school that believes modern history ends a generation before the contemporary generation, and so biography should be treated likewise within that canon. Let the living all die first, before they can be more objectively assessed in what they sought to do. Even so, you will note how influential a few mentors and elder statesmen have been in the crucial moments of my life. I leave that book then, for your own reflections. My main purpose was to write to encourage others who like myself, may find they are living marginally, either out of adverse circumstances, or from personal convictions, or from prophetic calling, to voice truthfully their Christian concerns. By providing a web site for the reader, I hope we can keep in touch with many like-minded Christians.

The second book is the first of two volumes of letters, "Letters of Faith through the Seasons". These contain the voices of many Christians, in remarkably diverse situations, who have made their own choices too. These voices, in describing intimate aspects of their lives, as the genre of the letter is intended to convey, encourage us all to pay attention to our own heart beat, and to respond truthfully, rather than becoming compliant to the cultural pressures around us. This project has been in my mind for at least half a century, as I have gathered letters for at least this period of time. Now it has been completed after much labor of love, as well as expense, since the purchase of copyright permission for so many letters is not cheap!

The thrust of the letters is the same strong desire to communicate the personal dimension of the Christian life and faith. Indeed, Seneca, Nero's tutor and friend, lists ninety two relational uses of the letter or epistolary genre. Indeed, in Roman society in late Antiquity, letter-writing was of great cultural and political importance. Likewise, early Christianity was a letter-writing movement, where twenty-one of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament take the form of letters; the book of Revelation is one letter that contains a further seven letters within it to the churches of western Asia Minor. The Acts of the Apostles also contains two letters within its narrative. So in our book, we have sustained this emphasis, by asking contemporary scholars and national church leaders, to add their letters of response to these New Testament letters. The pioneering scholar in this regard was Adolf Deissmann, who first explored the papyri in the trash heaps and libraries of sand

covered piles in the Egyptian desert, to recover these ordinary letters. Written privately and often so personally, to their recipient as a friend or as a group of friends, they have given invaluable insights into the ordinary lives of late Antiquity. Bruce Winter in one letter in our collection, explains how the New Testament letters, other than perhaps James, 1 and 2 Peter, and Jude, are personal – not official - letters, written in koine or everyday Greek, not in the official, literary style of the Roman authorities. So Deissmann distinguished such "real" letters from the official "epistles".

Today, scholars modify Deissmann's distinction, because Senators and other politicians such as Cicero and Seneca, did write many personal letters as well as more formal ones. For in Roman society it is less easy to distinguish political from family life as we may seek to do to-day. Moreover, the friendly-warm-hearted letters are not so easily distinguished from the more conventional approach, as both could be adopted in an artificial style, and thus not always as genuine as we might like them to be. The apostle Paul may truly be called the Father of Christian letter-writing. So an enormous amount of scholarly research has now been done on the Pauline letters, to explore his epistolary intent and style adopted as expressive of the tone and message being conveyed. But for our purpose the New Testament letters had a vast impact on these early Christian communities, so that today we possess over nine thousand letters of the early fathers of the Church, that help us to examine and explore all aspects of Christian domesticity and friendships in late Antiquity. The value we have placed upon them has been to see their place in the establishment of Christian doctrine, through the early Church councils, and thus helping us to see the development of thought of such mysteries as the deity of Christ, the personhood of the Holy Spirit, and indeed the mystery of the holy Trinity.

A unique use of the letter was the way the bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius used his annual Easter letter, in the first half of the fourth century, to state officially the moveable date of Easter every spring season. For he himself consulted the astronomers of the observatory of Alexandria, which was famous throughout the classical world. The bishop took this opportunity to make the occasion the composition of a pastoral letter, which he first wrote in the early spring of 329 A.D. He then continued to write annually for the next forty two years, to teach freshly each year, some pastoral insight about the meaning of Easter for his scattered church audiences.

Today, we are recognizing the need to recover personal communication at various levels. One is the use of rhetoric, truly "the art of persuasion", which indicates the role of personal address in the art of communication. Another is the role of dialogue, of which the letter is one side of such discourse, assuming that there will be response to the letter with another letter in response. Model letter writers, such as Aristotle, were thinkers whose letters were edited and passed on after his death, as were those of Cicero and Seneca. In addition there were handbooks compiled on the art of letter-writing such as the one attributed to "Demetrius", somewhere between 200 B.C. and 50 A.D., and that of "Libanius", somewhere between the fourth and sixth century A.D. The former describes twenty-one kinds of letter, illustrating stylistic principles in the art of letter-writing. The latter handbook illustrates forty-one differing types of letter, and appears quite independent of the previous handbook. In the

schools, older boys were taught the art of letter-writing, along with their more advanced studies in grammar.

As a form of real communication, the letter addresses an absent friend to foster further relationship, by reflecting the personality of the writer, and in sharing one side of a dialogue. Cicero speaks of the relief from sorrow, which a letter can communicate, as a form of talking to the other. Many times Cicero admits he has nothing to say, yet he writes often on a daily basis, simply to express his loyalty to his absent friend, and as a substitute for talking, which he longs to do. Seneca once wrote that his friend complained he wrote his letters too carelessly. Don't you realize he replies, that a letter should be a spontaneous form of communication, written to express immediate feelings, with nothing strained nor affected. Gregory of Nazianzus writes to Nicobulus (c.384-390), in the first letter in our collection, that one should have three aims in writing a letter: to be concise, neither too short not too long; to have clarity ; and yet to let the letter have charm, without being stilted or too self conscious in composing it. Thus we learn a great deal about the importance and art of cultivating friendship in late Antiquity from the vast number and diverse styles of their letters. Nothing gives us more understanding of the everyday life of Christian and pagan alike, than the letters they wrote. As letters of friendship, of praise and blame, as exhortatory and nurturing, as advice and teaching, as family letters, and as letters of mediation, we have wide examples of all these forms of personal communication. From them we can see how readily the New Testament letters, especially those of the apostle Paul, emphasize the domesticity of the Gospel to household communities, or to house churches.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the development of friendship among monks, promoted another vigorous epistolary culture. The letters of Anselm, of Bernard of Clairvaux, and of Adam of Perseigne, are some of the best known. The revival of Cicero's treatise on friendship, *De Amicitia*, was used by Aelred of Rievaulx to produce his own spiritual classic, *On Spiritual Friendship*, or *De Spirituali Amicitia*. Again, at the Renaissance letter writing was promoted, although we have not illustrated much from this period, but the letters of Sir Thomas More and of Erasmus illustrate the end of this tradition. Then the Counter-Reformation, as well as the Protestant Reformation, both launched remarkably strong developments of the pastoral letter, which developed into diverse forms of spiritual direction, and of other forms of pastoral counsel. For this period we have taken samples from diverse traditions, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox; indeed, even Armenian. Then with the rise of regular mail services in the eighteenth century, the culture of belles-lettres flourished, especially in England. Writers like John Newton developed his own magazine for the publication of letters, having an eye on a wider public than the recipient of a personal letter, as his collections such as the *Cardiphonia* illustrate. The popularity of letters continued into the nineteenth century, with important collections of letters becoming part of the literary legacy of influential writers and poets, such as Carlyle, Coleridge, Lamb, Gladstone, and many others. We conclude our survey with the use of the e-mail today, which I have collected liberally from a wide series of contacts and friends.

The two volumes of "Letters of Faith through the Seasons" begin with the season of Advent in December, break at the end of May with the significance of Trinity Sunday, then begin the second volume from June through to the end of November. The first volume celebrates "God's Season, the mystery of the Incarnation. For it proceeds from Advent, Epiphany, and Lent, to Easter and the subsequent events of the Ascension, Pentecost, and the reflections leading up to Trinity Sunday. The second volume celebrates the "Seasons of the Church" and of the individual Christian, in the period vaguely called the "Twenty Nine Sundays after Trinity". Yet on either November 1 or the first Sunday of November there is celebrated what traditionally was esteemed as the most sacred day of the Christian calendar, "All Saints' Day". For in the communion of saints, past, present, and future, it fulfills the prayer of Christ to his Father before his Passion: "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me, and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me". (Jn.17:21)

The second volume which will be published in late January or in February of next year will contain then letters of the seasons of the persecution of the church, of individual martyrs, of the horrendous events of our times, the mysteries of evil, as well as the representations of great courage and indomitable faith and of loving forgiveness. National leaders respond to the seven letters of the book of Revelation. Then contemporary exegetes such as Professor Thistleton who has written the commentary to end all commentaries on 1 Corinthians, each respond personally to most of the New Testament letters. Then we have letters expressive of diverse forms of suffering, followed by letters of Christians in a variety of professions. We then illustrate the very rich heritage of letters of spiritual direction and of counseling in both Catholic and Evangelical traditions, to conclude with letters that look to the future. In all, it opens up the reader to an extraordinary wide range of personal perspectives, and of entering into very diverse vicissitudes of the human condition.

Each letter is planned as a daily reading, to follow the Christian calendar, as I said between December 1 and May 31, as well as November 1. The later letters follow a differing variation of "seasons". Each letter is provided with a "Scripture Reading", a "Thought for the Day", and a "Prayer". Where possible the prayer is matched with the writer of the letter, so if the letter is by Augustine or John Newton, then the prayer will also have been researched to find an appropriate theme by the same author. I am very pleased at the publishing skill of Cook Communications who have presented an appropriate style, giving the reader the feel of actually reading letters. I chose Cook Communications, for their long ministry in supplying Sunday school materials for over a century now. They also unite two endeavors: to be a commercial publisher in North America; but to be also a philanthropic ministry in the developing world. For they have a massive distribution of Bibles, issue numerous translations in many languages of Asia, and provide rural pastors in Asia with small personal libraries of Christian books.

I conclude by thanking you all for your interest in coming to this lecture. I must confess no book I have ever written has given me more spiritual blessing and enrichment of spirit, than the collection of letters now published as "Letters of Faith through the Seasons". It has been like standing on the podium to conduct the symphony orchestra of many wonderful saints of God, and allowing all their personal

voices to be heard in the Hallelujah chorus. Some come as deep cries of grief and overwhelming suffering, others as deeply reflective of the mystery of God and his salvation. Some speak with great wisdom, others wryly with the salt of common sense. Some reach us from strange places like the heart of the Armenian Church in Yerevan, some from prison, one even from the White House on September 11, 2001. I pray that both books will encourage you to deepen your own personal walk with Christ, and to resist with all your might the pathologies of our contemporary technological society. I close with the prayer of our Lord in the night before his Passion: "Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me: I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them"(Jn. 17: 6). Amen