Weak Ties Still Bind

Professor Thompson’s *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* is one of a growing number of theological treatments of modern technology. Thompson’s book stands out in this burgeoning subfield for its creativity, nuance, and courage. Because a stage IV cancer diagnosis and the subsequent experience of being “really sick” (3) is the context for Thompson’s work, I want to be very clear that my use of the word “courage” is broader than the common (and frankly, overused and somewhat patronizing) use of the term towards people who are or have been ill. Thompson’s text is courageous *because* it is creative and nuanced. She has the courage to do what few theologians have done with regard to the topic of digital culture: to suggest in theologically serious terms that there is more here than just more sin, and that it is a real human space (warts and all) within which the church not only can but must translate its self-understanding as the body of Christ.

In what follows, I reflect on different aspects of Thompson’s text, focusing on what I read to be the most persuasive and salient features of her argument. I want to also pose a question or two for Professor Thompson on these aspects. Because I find her text theologically rich, it only makes sense that the areas in her work that I find the most appealing are also the areas in which I want to offer a few suggestions for further theological engagement with this unavoidable topic. In her first chapter, Thompson invokes Stanley Hauerwas to describe a standard by which we might measure our church communities (19). In doing so, Thompson gets right to the heart of the matter for theologians, most of whom find digital culture worthy of study because it represents new (and increasingly totalizing) ways of being social. The church, we theologians might say, is social life *par excellence*. It is the place in which, through Word and Sacrament, we strive imperfectly to recapture life with God and with each other we once enjoyed in the Garden. An emphasis on the social dimensions of the
church has worked itself out in various ways across Christian traditions. It undergirds both the universalism of Catholicism as well as the sometimes singular focus on local communities in Protestantism. It also works out in different ways within the same tradition. For example, it supports both the *societas perfectas* of ultramontane Catholicism, as well as the communion ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council.

The particularly Hauerwasian contribution to this longstanding view of the church lies in his contextualizing it in an American framework, namely within democracy and capitalism. Hauerwas insists upon the social reality of the church against the simulacra of social connection forged by capitalism and democratic politics. Such insistence is incredibly effective in critiquing cultural dynamics with values out of step with the gospel. The persistent temptation of this insistence, however, has two, mutually reinforcing sides. The first is to idealize the church to such a degree that one’s picture of the church is neither reflective of its human realities nor its susceptibilities to history. The second is to understand one’s cultural context as so thoroughly sinful as to be incapable of bearing the grace of God beyond its direct and instrumentalized contributions to the church community. The first I hear in Hauerwas’s words, quoted by Thompson: “When the church is being the church, it should be a strong-tie environment made up of people ‘who have learned how to be faithful to one another by our willingness to be present, with all our vulnerabilities, to one another’” (19). Thompson forges ahead here by insisting that online networks foster both weak- and strong-tie environments. Surely this is a strong point, and one that needs to be made. She makes it predominantly from her own experiences of sickness, and the online communities from whom she drew support (22–23).

In the spirit of Thompson’s argument here, I want to suggest that we can go even further within the categories of weak- and strong-ties vis-à-vis the church. Near the end of her book, Thompson writes of people in her offline faith community with whom she is also connected online, “I am often struck by how much more I know about those same people’s joys and sorrows from my virtual connections with them than I know about most fellow church members whom I am not connected to online” (99). Her acknowledgment here is in response to Hauerwas: seeking after those strong-tie relationships so central to the church,
Thompson argues that the internet can be a place to find and foster them. But need we begin with the assumption that the church should be held to the standard of a strong-tie environment? Thompson’s experience of “hybrid” relationships with her fellows does indeed speak to the potential of online contexts augmenting of ecclesial social life. What the statement above also acknowledges, however, is that our social relationships within the church often fall short of the standard described by Hauerwas. One might, of course, lament this reality. I believe we’d be better served to understand the church as a social body whose members often connect with only weak ties, bolstered by few and precious strong-tie relationships. Thompson’s experiences on this point, I think, challenge Hauerwasian ways of thinking about the church as ideal because of its strong ties. This ideal puts undue pressure on the social relationships between members of faith communities, and tempts us toward easy rejection of cultural forms (such as the internet) that do not meet this standard. Though I’ve made much here of the weak- and strong-tie language of social science, ultimately Thompson draws on Paul for her vision of the church in the digital age. As her title suggests, Thompson grounds her understanding of the social life of the church in the Pauline image of the body of Christ. She takes great care to present various aspects of Paul’s life and ministry that demonstrate, as she titles the chapter, that “the Body of Christ has been and will always be a virtual body.”

Central to this incisive and important assertion is the medium of Paul’s ministry: the letter. She focuses on Paul’s use and adaptation of ancient language conventions within the letters, highlighting his use of “body” imagery “to help communicate his vision for what it means to be this new community that sees itself unified in Christ” (35).

It is on the subject of virtuality that I find my most pressing question for Thompson: How exactly does the “virtual” relate to the “network”? Before giving her analysis of Pauline ecclesiology summarized above, Thompson acknowledges that to understand “virtual” to mean “almost” (as we often do in its common usage) is inadequate (40). Later, she insists that virtual interactions can indeed be incarnational, and in some cases, more so than face-to-face counterparts (58). But throughout the text, “virtual” remains for the most part theologically undefined, and variously exchanged for terms like “network” (51), “connect/connection” (49), and “shared participation” (48). These
terms are not synonymous, even though virtual space often facilitates them. We will benefit greatly from definition of such concepts as we proceed as digital theologians. In particular, virtuality is much richer and much more ripe for theological inflection than we see in its communicative or connective abilities. For example, Thompson draws on Elizabeth Drescher to describe Paul as a “networked communicator” (42). This is surely a correct description for Paul, and his letters functioned as symbols of the network(s) created by his communication. But this can obscure a more complex reality: Paul himself is mediated in the letters, for indeed so much of his ministry occurred in his physical absence (a fact Thompson acknowledges). Most recipients of Paul’s teachings would have heard the letters read aloud. Paul’s letters, therefore, operated (and continue to operate) as a virtual space wherein Paul’s very presence as well as the presence of the other communities to which he was in correspondence, is mediated to the hearing church. Thompson comes just shy of calling Paul’s letters themselves a virtual space, but I think his argument here goes in such a direction. Furthermore, I think that there is great potential here for both theologians and biblical scholars to think deeply about the mediating dynamics of text and text-based culture. That is, while Paul’s letters lend themselves to the category of virtuality in a special way given their moment in ecclesial history, I think all of Scripture itself opens itself to a new hermeneutic of the virtual, especially when understood as the productive space between presence and absence. Thus understood, virtuality becomes a hermeneutic for understanding the vast array of mediating structures within the church even outside of Scripture. Architecture, statuary, sacred objects, music, sensory experiences like incense, devotional spaces, relics, and much more open themselves to new theological analysis of virtuality. Saturated as we are in spaces that blur the lines between presence and absence, we are ready to encounter anew the paradoxes of dualities at the heart of gospel.

By framing her work in the context of her own illness, Professor Thompson has given voice to just one of the many human experiences that challenge the theological temptation to renounce technological culture. I want to close by thanking her for writing it, and for writing it
the way she did, for the text itself functioned for me as a virtual space wherein I encountered the body of Christ.