

Vignettes from the Life of Paul:  
The Reluctant Letter Writer  
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Introduction/Thesis: We know Paul through thirteen of his letters, but he regarded them as second-rate. Paul preferred the “incarnate” medium of orality to the dis-incarnated medium of a letter.<sup>1</sup>

I. Positive references to ministerial presence

A. Rom. 1:9-13 For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, *asking that somehow by God’s will I may now at last succeed in coming to you*. For *I long to see you*, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine. I want you to know, brothers, that *I have often intended to come to you* (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles.

B. Gal. 4:20 I wish *I could be present with you now* and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

C. 1Th. 3:6 But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and *long to see us, as we long to see you*—

D. 1Th. 3:10 ...as we pray most earnestly night and day *that we may see you face to face* and supply what is lacking in your faith...

E. 2 Tim. 1:4 As I remember your tears, *I long to see you*, that I may be filled with joy.

II. Reminders of the *manner* of Paul’s life when personally present.

1 Thess 2:5-11 For we never came (lit., “we never *were*,”) with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as *apostles of Christ*. But we were gentle among you, *like a nursing mother taking care of her own children*. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but *also our own selves*, because you had become very dear to us. For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: *we worked night and day*, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how, *like a father* with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

III. Negative (even painful) statements about ministerial absence.

1Th. 2:17-18 “But since we were *torn away from you* (the verb consists of the root for the word “orphan” with a preposition; note this language is also familial, yet refers to a broken family relation), brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire *to see you face to face*, because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but *Satan hindered us* (literally, “Satan cut us off,” καὶ ἐνέκοψεν ἡμᾶς ὁ σατανᾶς).”

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Ken Myers for introducing me to the distinction between incarnated and dis-incarnated media and communication, descriptors that are expressly and intentionally Christian. Myers appears to have gotten this from Marshall McLuhan’s “Laws of Media,” *Essential McLuhan*, ed. Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (New York, Basic Books, 1995), p. 370. Cf. also Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (Eerdmans, 1985), pp. 51-52, 244-248.

Note the almost-violent and sinister language Paul employed for being distant from others: “*torn away...Satan hindered us.*” Paul attributed his absence from the Thessalonians—an absence that required the second-best medium of a written letter--to a *diabolical* source.

Conclusion: We might well conclude that Paul--whom we know only through the medium of his written letters—regarded such letters as ministerially second-rate. Of course we have no objection to recording sermons for the benefit of those who are ill, or otherwise unable to attend the service (such as nursery workers or Covid-avoiders). Yet, in our digital-media-saturated culture,<sup>2</sup> we often accept mediated communication as though it were as normal and normative as non-mediated, face-to-face communication,<sup>3</sup> something the apostle Paul not only did not concede to be true, but something that he attributed to Satanic activity. If material bodies are inconsequential, why did the Creator make them? Did Christ not ascend *bodily* (*Book of Concord*, viii.12: “... the assumed human nature in Christ not only *has and retains* its natural, essential properties, but that over and above these, through the personal union with the Deity, and *afterwards through glorification*, it has been exalted to the right hand of majesty, power, and might...me” *WCF* 8:4: “On the third day he arose from the dead, with the same body in which he suffered, with which also he ascended into heaven, and there sitteth at the right hand of his Father.”)?

In a live setting, we cannot simply turn off what makes us uncomfortable (though we may “tune out,” as they say). There is an element of confrontation that requires either agreement or disagreement; we cannot as easily dismiss the public speaker as we can turn off our digital device. Nor, listening privately, are we as apt to raise questions about how others, in the public service, are hearing the message; does it comfort the grieving, encourage the faint-hearted, challenge the complacent? Listening privately, we do not encounter the Word preached as a *Word-to-the-public* (which is what Christian proclamation, or even the Greek *kerygma* of the first century *is*); we encounter it as a “*Word-to-me*,” which it is *not*. The digital world is almost inherently narcissistic; it converts nearly every *public* reality into a *private* reality. However, if I am not mistaken, Christianity is not a narcissistic religion; its founder encouraged other-love not self-love, encouraged self-control and self-discipline, not self-service, and even dying to self as a Christian duty.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps after the Covid restrictions, we can really appreciate unmediated fellowship with one another again.

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<sup>2</sup> As early as 2008, the Ball State University report indicated that the typical American spent more than 8.5 hours/day on a screen; that is over half of the waking day, meaning that the typical American, by that point, experienced more mediated reality than unmediated reality. And this was before smartphones or tablets such as iPads; the figures now are higher, and most studies indicate that the typical American views a screen for over 13.5 of the sixteen waking hours of the day.

<sup>3</sup> If Marc Prensky is right—and I judge that he is, while disagreeing with his recommendation that we accommodate ourselves to the matter—we now experience a cultural divide between what he astutely calls “digital immigrants,” who grew to maturity *without* digital devices, and “digital natives,” who grew to maturity *with* them. The latter are far more comfortable with them, far less likely to raise questions about their normativity. Cf. Marc Prensky, “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, Part One.” *On the Horizon*, 9, 2001, pp. 1-6

<sup>4</sup> There may be pedagogical value to digitized preaching; I can easily suppose that a seminary student might listen to several different preachers online, preaching the same text, to observe differences in homiletical style that may inform his own development as a preacher. Such a student might also benefit from observing a video of his own preaching, to observe whether he has distracting traits as a public speaker.