

“How Connected Do We Need To Be?”

12/24/2000 ~ Philip Siddons



It's been a technological year so far. I taught a class for the Religious Studies Department of the State University of New York at Buffalo on Paul's strange first letter to the Corinthians. I've been able to experiment with the use of their relatively new online course software called *CourseInfo*.¹ It has a quiz generator which the students loved because they could take the tests at home without leaving the squalor of their meager abodes. With virtually all the time in the world to take the quizzes, they could look up any answer in their class notes or the web-stored lectures.

Actually, the quizzes have served as a forced review of the class material, achieving my original goal: that they never sit in a church and hear a talk on 1st Corinthians and not be aware of the historical, religious, cultural and linguistic things prompting Paul to write such a diverse and difficult response to their problems. If their ministers ever fail to do their homework before their Sunday presentations on Corinthians, they'll know it.

Yet many of these students won't because churches, by in large, aren't making that connection with the 20's age group. The clergy and the staunch leaders of the denominational franchises may get their second chance when these young adults return for the wedding and baptism certifications.

It's odd to me that some people spend their lifetime having nothing at all to do with a local church and yet be hell-bent-to-leather to make sure they participate in two church rituals – baptism and a wedding in a church building. It's almost like they have to have these two good luck charms in order to move ahead several squares on their Americana board game of life.

But when the pager on my hip starts to vibrate, it reminds me that I have succumbed to the lure of yet another gadget. This time, it's the Motorola “Talkabout”[®] pager. Perhaps their Marketing department wanted to create an image of a

“walkabout” in the Australian “outback.” . . . *Tie me kangaroo down sport*, . . . whatever.

My last pager stopped functioning and the service provider suggested I subscribe to paging and email services with the cell phone I already own. This, I figured, would dictate that I have to leave the phone on all the time to get pages. The attractive young woman behind the counter suggested I also purchase a vibrating cell phone battery so the whole phone can vibrate. What they fail to realize is that cell phones are too big to be pagers. Can you imagine carrying around a beeper the size of a banana and have it suddenly begin vibrating in your pocket or purse? Good grief, you could get arrested or something. Perhaps I could use it in an audition for the cast of Ally McBeal.

“Excuse me but I think there is a phone over on your desk that is having a seizure.”

This little technological wonder looks like a miniature computer from a kid's gum ball machine with a keyboard small enough to be operated by a touch typist eight inches tall. It is the width and thickness of the palm of your hand. The little screen displays the telephone number of the individual paging you if the caller chose option number one but it can do more.

Those calling my pager number can also choose option two, allowing them to leave a voicemail message. When a voice message is left, the display indicates a voice message is waiting, prompting me to dial the number on the nearest phone and listen to the message.

Option number three of this paging service connects the caller with a live operator who will type whatever the caller dictates and that message appears on the pager screen.

“Pick up eggs on your way home.”

“I am sorry I missed the class quiz on line but my computer isn't working and I couldn't get on one at the school library because my car wouldn't start.”

¹ made by Blackboard.com.©



Imagine standing in line, looking down at your pager and it says, “My divorce lawyer has documented all of your shenanigans and we’ll see you in court.”

You look up and respond to the person behind the counter, “*I’d like a cheeseburger, a fries, chocolate milkshake and several aspirin please.*”

There is even an internet address assigned to this device so people can type a note directly to my pager from their computer. Since I can read these messages anywhere I am, I’ve also instructed my *Outlook Express*® email software on our computer to forward all received communications to my pager. Since the pager uses wireless and internet technology, I can actually type a response to the text messages sent to the pager and there isn’t a cost-per-minute fee.

But with this much accessibility, I wonder just who I think I am? The Almighty? There are not that many people who need my immediate attention. Maybe I’m having a midlife crisis? Someday, into the not too distant future when they add the live video function, are we going to have to rent a small locker into which to put these things to get a little privacy? Someday, will we be surprised to see Leno or Letterman trying to have a video conversation with us from our pocket when we reach for change to pay the paper carrier? “Are you truly happy with your cellular carrier?” one of them might say.

Perhaps it’s our loneliness that prompts us to want to be so accessible in our cellular and internet connectedness. Frankly, I would like it if God would send me a digital message once in a while.

“Nice going on how you handled that road-raged jerk of a driver” God might type to me.

“Buy Lucent Technologies stock – now!” God might advise.

“Missed you in worship services yesterday” I’d be reminded.

“Stop everything and go back and apologize. She was right and you completely missed the most important thing. I don’t know why I ask her to stay with you.”

Maybe it’s fear. Perhaps we’re hoping *someone* will send us the one little encouragement or bit of information that will come at just the right time. Maybe the Almighty has been sending messages we’ve ignored. Missed any messages lately?

“With our cell phones and wireless palm devices, we are now able to be so connected that we can be in touch with anyone and everyone at any time, do business anywhere. But has you noticed that, in the process, we run the risk of never being in touch with ourselves? In the overall seduction, we can easily forget that our primary connection to life is through our own interiority – the experiencing of our own body and all our senses, including the mind, which allow us to touch and be touched by the world, and to act appropriately in response to it. . . .

“With all this talk about connectivity, what about connectivity to ourselves? Are we becoming so connected to everybody else that we are never where we actually are? We are at the beach on the cell phone, so are we there?”²



Philip Siddons can be reached by email at:

siddons@adelphia.net

² Jon Kabat-Zinn, p. 152-153, *Coming To Our Senses, Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness*, (New York: Hyperion, 2005) ISBN: 0-7868-6756-6