



session four my mediated identity

THE CATFISH PHENOMENON

I love to watch documentaries. The real-life stories depicted through documentaries always intrigue me, and they also lead me to consider what it says about our culture at large. One of those documentaries that sparked by intrigue while at the same time prompting me to larger cultural analysis was entitled "Catfish."

In this documentary, a guy named Nev begins an online relationship with a girl named Megan. As the relationship progresses online, Nev begins to realize that something is off and there are some apparent lies being told. Nev and his friend decide to confront Megan at her home and they come to realize that it was all a hoax constructed by Megan's mom, Angela. It was Angela who had been corresponding with Nev online and not Megan. Further, as the story unfolds, it is revealed that "Megan" did not exist at all. Angela had simply taken pictures of someone she did not know, created a fake Facebook account, and corresponded with Nev using that fake Facebook account.

It is a heartbreaking story; and the greater tragedy is that this is not an isolated story. Nev ends up creating a whole television show on MTV walking through similar circumstances with other people who are in online relationships. I have watched a few of these episodes, not all of them, and the conclusions are all very similar: the online relationship is often built upon at least one false identity. There seems to always be one person who is fabricating their identity online in order to create and sustain a relationship with the other person. Each episode builds itself up to when the people finally meet in person, and there is always this "shock factor," where one person has to reveal who they really are and the inconsistency with their online persona. The face-to-face meeting is often met with sadness and anger, but then there is typically this final plea made by the person who was lying. They say something to the effect of, "Well, even though I do not look like how you thought I looked or appear as you thought I appeared, you still had feelings for me. I was still the person you were talking to." The other person usually offers a conflicted response, admitting that they did like talking with the person, but they still struggle to reconcile their affection for their fake persona and real-life persona - their mediated identity and their unmediated identity.

Digital technology and social media has changed the way we think about our identity, who we are, and how we appear to the world. This is no insignificant matter, and it has serious consequences. How are we being trained to think about our identity and other people's identity? Are we able to control our identity? How do I live a genuine and authentic life in the digital world? These are questions that we must address.

MEDIATED REALITY

High-minded scholars and philosophers often debate around the topics of reality and identity. We do not need to venture too far into ontology, metaphysics, or epistemology to conclude that much of our reality is mediated. Now 'mediated reality' is a phrase that has come to be used by technology experts and technology marketers as a step beyond virtual reality and augmented reality, but when I use mediated reality, I only mean that some kind of media constantly stands between us and the rest of the world. For us, much of life is experienced through a screen.

We mostly experience the world through our smartphones, laptops, and televisions. These things - smartphones, laptops, and televisions - are mediums, and they act as a passageway between you and the rest of the world. This is the main way the current generation experiences the world: through media. Therefore, the digital world is one that we experience by means of a mediated reality.

What are the consequences of this mediated reality? Is this necessarily bad? In one sense, mediated reality affords us many things that we could not otherwise experience. For example, it gives us a greater reach with our relationships - e.g., we can Facetime our family, friends, and loved ones when they are miles away or even in another country. Mediated reality also grants us a look into the global world and not just our local experience - e.g., we can see how people in India and Africa live, and this perhaps paints our own experiences in a different light. Nonetheless, while there are some benefits to our mediated reality, there are also some dangers.

Because we live in a mediated reality, our vision of the world is filtered, tinted, and modified by the media through which we view it. When we observe the world and other people, and also when others observe us, it is mostly a representation of reality and not reality itself. We see what is going on in the world by viewing a representation of that reality in a video on the news. We see others by seeing how they represent themselves on social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook. We long to be known and identified by how we represent ourselves on the Internet. Everything is filtered, which means everything is a mixture of reality and representation.

REALITY & REPRESENTATION

What is the difference between reality and representation? To simplify it, reality is the way things are and representation is the way things appear. These two things are not always at odds, but there is the possibility that the way things are can be different from the way things appear. We see this in major news networks all the time. One news network takes a story - a set of facts or "reality" - and represents it in a certain way; and yet another news network takes that same story - the same set of facts - and represents in a different way. People who had the story communicated to them on one network understand and experience reality differently than people who had the story communicated to them on another news network. The key is to recognize that both sets of people experience the story according to a representation of the story rather than the reality of the story.

As to not venture too far into the complexity of the matter, we can simplify it this way: because much of our lives and experience of the world is mediated, this means that we mostly experience representation more than reality. In other words, we experience things more as they appear as opposed to how things really are. With this increase in mediation there is a higher possibility of us observing things only as they appear and not as they are. This sets in motion a struggle for the truth and battle for authenticity that is outfitted with weapons of experience, which are extremely powerful weapons. Our experience of the world not only provides us with tools for how to discern truth and live rightly within the world, it is also determines much of how we seek to understand our identity and how we ought to represent ourselves to others. How you see the world represented determines how you will seek to represent yourself in the world.



How you see the world represented determines how you will seek to represent yourself in the world. @LNBCStudents #TechSeriesLNBC

So while it is critically important to understand that our experience of the world is mostly mediated, which means it is mostly a representation of reality; it is even more important to see how the mediated reality consequently forms a mediated identity. We experience the world in the form of representation, so we therefore seek for others to experience us in the form of representation. We begin to form our identity not around who we really are, but rather how we represent ourselves. The consequence is a mediated identity.

DIGITALLY DISINCARNATED

As we saw in the first example concerning the “Catfish phenomenon,” our identities have become a blend between our real life, face-to-face persona and our represented, online persona. While our identity has always consisted in some blend of reality and representation, the digital age has increased the quantity and quality of our representation. Due to the world that exists online and our smartphones, our identities have become subject to more mediation than ever before; and with that, we become digitally disincarnated.

Our identity is expressed more outside of our flesh and blood - disembodied - and is projected more in our online persona. In a new kind of modern Gnosticism, we begin to be identified more by how we appear online rather than how we appear in person.



Gnosticism teaches that humans are in a process of evolution that will eventually take them from hardware to software, from embodiment to an ultimate, inherently better, state of disembodiment.¹

1. Highlight Reels

It is only natural that once we set out to represent ourselves to others that we tend to highlight the good and approvable aspects of who we are and our experiences. Selfies prefer to be taken at the angle and with the lighting that best models one's face or body. The young mom is prone to share the video of her child happily playing or laughing as opposed to screaming and crying. The newlyweds are inclined to post photos of their joy and relaxation on their honeymoon as opposed to the argument that ensued concerning how to best get to the airport on time. The moments that we believe will impress others and elevate our status tend to be the things we share on our social media platforms. People know me only inasmuch as I want them to know me, and this also gives me the illusion of control.

Such a depiction of life and such a construct of our identity places us more and more out of touch with reality, which is often filled with hills and valleys, highs and lows. By only representing ourselves by our achievements, good qualities, and great experiences, we are actually discouraging being honest about the hardships, struggles, and suffering that everyone faces; and if we do not encourage people to be honest about their struggles, then we will never enter into a process to experience reform, transformation, and growth.

2. Spirit of Competition

There is a vicious cycle at work: the more we observe the highlights of others, the more we assume that their life is only filled with good moments and awesome experiences, so we respond in a similar fashion. It's what Kathy Koch notes as "the perfection infection."² We post our highlights, others post their highlights, and the representation is such that all is splendid. Being twirled around in the cycle of viewing and sharing our life's highlight reels, we slowly and surely feed a spirit of competition.

As we observe others achievements, we immediately begin to weigh them against our own. We seek to measure our life alongside the metric of their success. Unfortunately, since our measurements are often weighed against an unrealistic standard - one that does not consist in seeing the other person's failures and defeat - we spiral down into a pit of discouragement. We observe how great their life is as it is represented to us, and we compare that with our reality, and we crumble in misery. While this may be our initial response - discouragement - we answer it quickly by seeking to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and outperform their representation of themselves. The competitive impulse in us drives out to showcase a better representation of our experiences and ourselves.

3. Culture of Performance

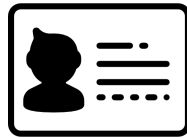
Digital technology and social media encourage us to live life on a stage. We have devices and applications that enable us to share every moment of our life. For many of us, it is more like we are the stars of our own reality television show rather than actual people living in reality. The amount of time, skill, and effort we employ to post the perfect picture, most captivating video, or most intriguing commentary on social events, begin to slowly replace real-life experience.³ For example, we are more concerned with getting pictures and video of the concert or sporting event rather than actually be

present at the concert or sporting event. We are more concerned with looking like we enjoyed a nice devotional time in the morning rather than actually doing a devotion in the morning - posting the perfect picture on Instagram with our highlighted Bible passages, our journal notes, half-drunk coffee, and the sunrise in the background. Why is this? It is because we are more concerned with utilizing the experience as a means to impress others than enjoy it for ourselves. We are more interested in representing our lives as a performance for others to admire rather than really living our lives.

4. Desire for Authenticity

The great irony in all of this is that most of us realize what is going on. We are not ignorant of the fact that people share their highs as opposed to their lows. We are not duped by the fact that the picture is filtered and edited. We feel and sense the fabrication that is all around us, and while we may engage in it ourselves, deep down there is a greater desire to take off the masks, clear the filter, stop the performance, and just be real. The mediated reality and our mediated identity leave us empty and create in us a greater craving for authenticity. In a world that is more mediated than ever, we desire authenticity more than ever.

So how do we live an authentic life in the digital world? How can our identities be more constructed around reality than representation? How does the Christian story and worldview encourage us to think about our identity? What does scripture have to say about living an authentic life? Let's turn our attention to those concerns: identity and authenticity.



IDENTITY

Who am I? How does one begin to answer that question? As Christians, we seek to understand who we are in light of the biblical story: creation, salvation, and restoration.

Creation: In order to understand who we are, we should look back to where we came from - the creation story. As human beings, our identity is found in being an image-bearer of God (*cf.* Genesis 1:26-27). We were created for a purpose, which is to glorify God and enjoy him forever; and unless we see that as the foundation of our identity, then we will be searching for purpose and approval in some other thing that will ultimately leave us unsatisfied. Our identity is that we were created in the image of God to glorify him and enjoy him forever.

Salvation: Nonetheless, as human beings who have sinful hearts, our ability to glorify God and enjoy him forever has been corrupted. Our power to fulfill the purpose of our identity is broken. However, God himself - Jesus, the Son - entered into the world in the form of man so that he could restore in us the image of God, equipping us with the power of the Holy Spirit to once again fulfill our purpose as human beings. Through the perfect life, atoning death, and resurrection of Jesus, our identity as human beings is fulfilled. Therefore, if we want to experience the identity that God has designed for us to experience, then we must find our identity in Jesus - our Lord and Savior.

Restoration: Even further, our identity as Christians are shaped by our hope - that through Jesus we will experience full restoration and the redemption of our bodies (cf. Romans 8:22-25). We have been saved and have experienced new birth in Jesus, but we also look forward to a day when all things are made new under the lordship of Jesus, including us (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:20-28). Therefore, our identity is one that we are yet to fully experience, although it is already sealed in the work of the gospel. As a Christian, my identity is not defined by how I represent myself online, by my social media profile, or by my appearance in general. My identity is rooted in the gospel - the story of scripture - how God made me, saved me, and will ultimately restore me through Jesus.

AUTHENTICITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

If that is our identity as Christians, then how can we live out that story? Living a life of authenticity means that we live in a way that faithfully and genuinely resembles our identity. As Christians, this means that we are called to live in such a way that resembles the gospel - that we are people who have been made in the image of God, saved by Jesus Christ, and who will be fully restored under his lordship for God's glory. If you are a follower of Jesus, then this is what it looks like to live an authentic life. Particular to the current study, however, we must observe some practical ways to do this in the digital age.

NUDGES

1. Care more about how God sees you rather than how others see you.

In our mediated world and the culture of performance it encourages, we are more tempted to be concerned with how others view us rather than how God views us. This is larger issue as it concerns our identity: do we seek to please God or man? One of the great hindrances in living for God and finding our identity in Jesus is that we seek the glory that comes from man rather than the glory that comes God (John 12:42-43).

In Matthew 6, Jesus teaches his followers to exercise their obedience not as to be seen by others, but to be seen by God in secret (Matthew 6:16-17). If we simply live our lives in a way to receive approval from others, then we will receive our reward in their approval - that is the extent of our reward. However, if we live our life to please God and we care more about what God sees rather than what others see, we will receive a reward from God. If we seek earthly rewards, we forfeit eternal rewards.

2. Prioritize face-to-face communication and relationships.

Mediation is not foreign to the biblical story or the Christian worldview. In fact, mediation is a critical component of the Christian faith. In the beginning, we were created to experience an unmediated relationship with God. In the Garden of Eden, when everything was good and perfectly according to God's design, mankind was with God face-to-face, unmediated. There was direct and immediate contact and communication with God.

However, with the fall and the entrance of sin into the world, this unmediated relationship was threatened; and unrighteous, sinful man would now require mediation to be in the presence of and be in a relationship with the righteous, holy God. Therefore, because of our sin, our relationship to God requires mediation - it requires something to stand between God and us.

God graciously provided ways for this mediation to take place, but he ultimately provided mediation in Jesus. So although our sin requires mediation between us and God, Jesus graciously fulfills that role by cleansing us from our sin and giving us His Spirit to dwell in us so that we can experience communion with God. By doing this, God set in motion a means by which humanity will once again experience God face-to-face one day (*cf.* 1 Corinthians 13:12; 1 John 3:2). As Tim Challies noted, "God promises that in the full and final redemption, in the new heaven and the new earth, we will once more experience him in the direct and mediated way we were created for."⁴

Therefore, "if the ideal means of communication between God and man is unmediated, so too is the ideal communication between humans."⁵ We see many examples throughout scripture where the writers of letters remark that although they are using mediated communication - i.e., writing a letter - their greater desire and preference is to be with them face-to-face (Romans 1:11-12; 1 Thessalonians 3:10; 3 John 13-14). Our deepest and most satisfying relationships are experienced through unmediated contact and communication, and we should therefore prioritize face-to-face communication and relationships.

DISCIPLINES

1. Think purposefully about what you share and how you represent yourself online.

Here are some questions to ask yourself before you post or share.⁶

Will this ultimately glorify me or God?

Will this stir or soften healthy affections for Christ?

Will this merely document that I know something that others do not?

Will this misrepresent me or is it authentic?

Will this potentially breed jealousy in others?

Will this fortify unity or stir up unnecessary division?

Will this build up or tear down?

Will this heap guilt or relieve it?

Will this fuel lust for sin or warn against it?

Will this instill false hopes in others?

2. Do not hide your hardships, struggles, and suffering.

As Christians, our identity is in the fact that we have been declared righteous by the perfect life of Jesus - not that we are yet perfect. On this side of eternity, we are not perfect people; we are people who are in the process of being made perfect by Jesus Christ. As a follower of Jesus filled with the Holy Spirit, God is

forming us into the image of his perfect Son day-by-day through faith (Romans 8:29-30; 1 Corinthians 15:49; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Philippians 3:21; Colossians 3:10). In this is freedom: we are loved because of Jesus and not because of any level of performance that we achieve. Therefore, we are free to be honest and transparent about every aspect of our lives.

We need to learn to have a healthy practice of confession (*cf.* James 5:16). Nonetheless, we do not seek to make light of our sin or share our struggles with just anyone. We must share our pain and hardship in a wise manner.⁷ The best place to share our struggles and hardships are with other brothers and sisters in Christ. So the first place to confess sin is face-to-face with a mature brother or sister in Christ. Do not make social media your primary outlet for confession. After you have begun that process of confession and healing, think wisely about how you could use your hardship as a way to encourage others (*cf.* 2 Corinthians 1:3-5).

3. Seek for others to find their identity in Jesus and the gospel story.

The identity we are afforded by God in the gospel is something that offered to all of humanity - not just us (*cf.* Romans 5:12-18; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15). As Christians, we should live out our identity by seeking for others to also find their identity in Jesus. In order for others to fully experience who they are meant to be - who they are destined to be in accordance with God's design - we must point them to Jesus (*cf.* 2 Corinthians 5:17-18). Furthermore, the greatest means by which people will find their identity in Jesus is when they authentically see others living out their identity in Jesus (John 13:34-35).

ENDNOTES

1. Tim Challies, *The Next Story: Faith, Friends, Family, and the Digital World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 100.
2. Kathy Koch, *Screens and Teens: Connecting with Our Kids in a Wireless World* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2015), 71.
3. One study shows this by how our memories are hindered by digitally attempting to capture an experience: "One study allowed visitors to a museum to take pictures of certain exhibits using digital cameras. Researchers discovered that being able to take photos of what they saw made subjects less likely to remember the details about them." Philip Perry, "Cognitive Offloading: How the Internet Is Changing the Human Brain," *The Big Think*, January 2017, accessed May 30, 2018, <http://bigthink.com/philip-perry/cognitive-offloading-how-the-internet-is-changing-the-human-brain>
4. Challies, *The Next Story*, 93.
5. *Ibid.*, 94.
6. Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone is Changing You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 107.
7. Although it is specific to confessing the act of pornography, Heath Lambert offers some great advice for how to wisely confess sin in *Finally Free*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 75-87.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever thought about how we experience the world mostly through a screen? Does this bother you? Why or why not?
2. What are some of the practical differences you see with how people are online versus in real life?
3. What are some of the “representations” with which you are tempted to be identified? For example, are you tempted to always represent yourself as the hip, cool kid? Are you tempted to always represent yourself as the star athlete - the smart girl, the good church kid, the know-it-all?
4. What is your preferred way of communicating? Do you find it difficult to communicate with people face-to-face? Why or why not?



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STUDENT RESPONSE

Do you struggle to represent yourself as you really are? Why or why not?

Honestly, do you care more about how others see you as opposed to how God sees you? Why or why not?

Would you say that your identity is found in the gospel? How does Jesus change the way we see ourselves?

What are some hardships, struggles, and suffering that you find difficult to share with others? Is there someone you can begin sharing those with this week?

Who are three people in your life that need to find their identity in Jesus? How can you point them to Jesus?

PRAYER

Take a moment to write out a prayer to God, praising him for how he has created you to be in relationship with him, glorifying him and enjoying him forever. Ask that he would empower you with his Spirit to find your identity in Jesus, and that he would equip you to point others to find their identity in Christ.
