

# How Would Jesus Call?

## A Column for the *Dallas Morning News*

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An article in the April issue of *Wired* magazine makes some frightening predictions about the dangers of three cutting-edge technologies. Though *Wired* is better known for treating the latest gadgets and high-tech systems either with irreverent glee or awe-filled reverence, this article, written by Bill Joy, cofounder and chief scientist of Sun Microsystems (and thus a high priest among the digerati), sounds more apocalyptic than messianic. Joy warns that future developments in genetic engineering, robotics, and nanotechnology (the development of microscopic machines) may pose a serious threat to human existence. All three technologies aim to create self-replicating mechanisms.

Joy's article makes some very serious points that ought to be of particular concern to theologians and religious ethicists. Even if his most ominous fears prove to be as ill-founded as Y2K hysteria, his concern for attending to the unintended consequences of technology is instructive.

With few exceptions, religious people have not given enough thoughtful attention to the social and cultural consequences of emerging technologies. When technical devices are used for obviously immoral purposes (e.g., pornography on the Internet), Christians express concern. But church leaders and theologians give far too little attention to the subtle ways in which technologies reshape our lives and thereby re-configure our moral understanding of the world.

Technologies are usually developed to make a particular task more convenient, and convenience is valuable. But it is not the only valuable thing, and it is up to individuals and communities to determine when an increased level of convenience is actually a hindrance to other human values.

Cell phones, for example, make it easier for us to have immediate access to others and to remain perpetually accessible. But certainly there are times when cell phones should be turned off or left at home. Some restaurants now require guests to disable their cell phones while dining. This shows respect for the ambience of their dining rooms and honors the desire of other diners not to be forced into the role of eavesdropper.

I'd like to suggest that Christian people in particular give some attention to cell phone etiquette. A thoughtful set of manners regarding cell phones could be a small but significant way of reducing the sum total of dehumanizing behavior in American culture. Such manners could demonstrate the high value Christians place on embodiment, expressed in our doctrines of Creation, Incarnation, and Resurrection.

What could cell phones possibly have to do with the Incarnation? Both involve the significance of physical, embodied presence before others.

The presence of another person before us is a kind of moral claim, asking for the recognition appropriate to a fellow human being. Likewise, when we make ourselves present to others, we are showing respect. Thus when we visit someone in the hospital or in prison (a situation Jesus alludes to in Matthew 25) instead of just phoning or sending flowers, we demonstrate by our presence a higher level of regard for their well-being.

The idea of presence is an important one in Biblical religion. In his second letter, the Apostle John writes, "I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face." The Church is called the *ekklesia*, the assembly, the place where believers are present to one another to encourage one another to love and good works.

By contrast, holding a telephone conversation while walking down the street or up an aisle at the supermarket pointedly ignores the presence of others. The importance of physical presence is thus de-valued. It also poses a kind of challenge to passers-by.

In an earlier, less hectic time, when you wanted to make a phone call, you isolated yourself temporarily in a telephone booth (ask your parents if this is an unfamiliar term). This guaranteed privacy for yourself but also spared strangers the awkwardness of hearing half of your conversation, especially if the conversation involved intimate personal details. The more primitive technology imposed limits on where your body was when you made a call, but certain notions about presence and boundaries were also encouraged.

Just because we are now able to make calls anywhere anytime doesn't mean that we should. Whether or not we should is a question that, to my knowledge, hasn't even been raised.

To treat the presence of another person with indifference is not just rude. It is dehumanizing. Bill Joy's dire predictions about technologies destroying humanity may not come to pass. But there are already many instances of the thoughtless use of technologies diminishing humanity. The unexpected and untested convenience of cell phones has brought us into territory previously uncharted by convention. The devices come with technical instructions, but no guidance about their well-mannered use. Encouraged by a theology of human dignity, embodiment, and the value of presence, Christians have the resources to make some small but notable difference in this cyborg culture. Resistance is not futile.