"Digital Natives, the Importance of the Nonverbal, and Niebuhr: Response to Wes Avram's Essay" by David G. Forney for @ *This Point*, © Columbia Theological Seminary

Wes Avram's essay on faith and social media is well timed. In October 2012, Facebook announced the historic milestone of 1 billion users, with the U.S. users eclipsing 50% of the population (of Facebook users or of U.S. users?).[1] The introduction of social media into our lives is not only about an increase in efficiency but also reveals more fundamental changes. For Avram, the technological change is not just "utilitarian" but "ontological" in nature. He passionately argues that social media, like Facebook, is significantly adding to the dissolution of the boundary between our public and private realms. And this dissolution has him theologically anxious: "I am anxious about how developments within our technological culture do more than simply change how we do things. I'm interested in how they change how we *see* things, how we relate to each other, how we think of ourselves, what counts for knowledge, how we think about the church, and perhaps how we think of God." Again, this is a timely essay that raises important questions about what it means to be socially connected in the twenty-first century, and I appreciate many of his concerns.

In this response to Avram's essay, I have three observations. First, I propose reflecting on this conversation in light of the lessons learned from the educational field's discussion of *digital natives* versus *digital immigrants*. Second, I briefly introduce the notion that another way social media erodes community is through the loss of the nonverbal communication. My final observation is that Avram's essay hints of a "Christ and culture in paradox" approach to thinking about faith and Facebook, an approach that I do not believe is the most productive way forward. Rather, I suggest that Niebuhr's "Christ the transformer of culture" is a more fruitful avenue to reflect on the church's engagement with social media.[2]

Digital Natives Versus Digital Immigrants[3]
When I was a freshman engineering student in the mid-1980s, the dean of the school remarked that over the next 25 years, we would technologically advance as much as we have since the Renaissance. The dean's claim astounded me. I was amazed at the possibilities while simultaneously feeling a bit fearful at the prospect of that much change in such a short time. So are we advancing that rapidly? We are in terms of the sheer amount of data we are creating. For instance, the Sloan Digital Sky Survey started work in 2000, and it collected more data in its first few weeks than had been amassed in the entire prior history of astronomy. Now, a decade later, its archive contains an incredible 140 terabytes of information.[4] The telescope's successor, the Large Synoptic Survey Telescope, is due to come online in 2016, and it will acquire 140 terabytes every five days.[5] The exponential volume of data we are producing is extraordinary, but I am still a bit fearful

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[1] Lim Young-Hui, "1 Billion Facebook Users On Earth: Are We There Yet?" Forbes, September 30, 2012, http://www.forbes.com/sites/limyunghui/2012/09/30/1-billion-facebook-users-on-earth-are-we-there-yet/
[2] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, (Harper & Row: New York, 1978).
[3] There are several other labels used to describe this proposed dichotomy. For instance Don Tapscott proposed "The Net Generation" in *Growing up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998). I use Prensky's nomenclature because of it wide adoption.
[4] http://www.sdss.org/. Accessed on May 5, 2013.
[5] http://www.lsst.org/. Accessed on May 5, 2013.

about the consequences of so much rapid change. This is why I appreciate Avram's invitation to think about the implications that, as he states, "aren't always obvious."

In 2001, Marc Prensky introduced the term "digital native" to the field of education. Prensky argued that "students today think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors, as a result of being surrounded by new technology," and, furthermore, he compared these digital natives with "the older generation," the "digital immigrants."[6] Since publication, Prensky's concept of natives versus immigrants has been widely popularized. Prensky's digital immigrant is the individual who did not grow up in a digital world (i.e., born before the production of the personal computer) but who has been exposed to digital technology later in life. With broad brushstrokes, Prensky goes on to describe immigrants as those who are mistrustful and fearful of digital technology and who lack the skills to use it. Moreover, immigrants can never become natives—it isn't in their DNA.

A digital native is an individual who has grown up immersed in digital technology, who is intensely interested and even devoted to technology, and who is technologically adept. "Unlike those of us a shade older, this new generation didn't have to relearn anything to live lives of digital immersion," declare Palfrey and Gasser of the Berkman Center at Harvard Law School. "They learned it digital the first time around."[7] I believe this notion of the digital native is parallel to Avram's description of ontology, "the environment in which we swim and so the milieu in which we decide what tasks are worth accomplishing, how it is that we'll accomplish them, and who we are as we do them."

Armed with this stark dichotomy, Prensky goes on to argue that because natives are immersed in digital technologies from birth, they learn in completely different ways than older generations. Since 2001, many have adopted this classification and have even expanded it beyond just a learning style to cognition and behavior.[8] Avram observes this same phenomenon in his own life: "Because I came to consciousness in a world without Facebook, Twitter, Vimeo, Vine, LinkedIn, YouTube, Tumblr, Pinterest, anon, my experience of these technologies will never be the same as my children's. I'll see things they won't. They'll experience things, and be made by these technologies, in ways I won't." Like Prensky, Avram argues that his children are being "made by these technologies." This is more than just a difference in generation; it is "ontological."

To illustrate this shift, Avram describes the radical difference between his essay readers' understanding (i.e., immigrants) and his children's understanding (i.e., natives) of a library. For immigrants, the library is "the touchstone, tool, and location for research," whereas, for the natives "it's weird and dead." Avram's library illustration points to the reality that Wikipedia has replaced Britannica, blogs have replaced newspapers, and Facebook has replaced face-to-face. Again, Avram states, "This is not utility. It is ontology. It is the indication of yet another flip underway, whereby

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[6] Marc Prenksy, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon*, 9(5), 2001, 1-6.
[7] John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*, (Basic Books, Philadelphia, 2008), 18.
[8] See Zheng Yan (editor), *Encyclopedia of Cyber Behavior* (Hersey, PA: Information Science Reference, 2012).

physical presence now temporarily supplements virtual presence rather than virtual presence temporarily enhancing physical presence."[9]

If, indeed, Avram agrees with Prensky's native-immigrant dichotomy, I would offer readers two important cautions about this view. First, research since 2001 suggests only a small minority of the population can be considered natives. "Recent research has shown flaws in the argument that there is an identifiable generation or even a single type of highly adept technology user."[10] Moreover, Bennett writes in the *Encyclopedia of Cyber Behavior*:

> [p]eople adopt technologies for a wide range of reasons and have diverse patterns and habits, and the skills they develop are often narrow and highly contextualized (i.e., fit for a particular purpose). As a result, it would be wrong to generalize about a section of a population on the basis of how they use technology, and in particular on the basis of presumed exposure to technology.[11]

While we are clearly witnessing the rapid development and adoption of digital technology (such as social media), we need be cautious not only about its utility, but especially about ontological claims. To generalize about people born after 1980 by calling them digital natives is overreaching. Or, as Siva Vaidhyanathan (who teaches media studies at University of Virginia) states, "This is essentially a wrong-headed argument that assumes that our kids have some special path to the witchcraft of 'digital awareness.'"[12]

The second caution I would offer centers around *digital divides*, which are the apparent access gaps (both physical gaps and gaps in ability) among groups due to digital technologies. Age, gender, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, and/or geographic location can contribute to the creation of these divides. This second caution focuses on the transference of our particular context to the global. Avram states that he is "interested in how they (social media) change how we see things, how we relate to each other, how we think of ourselves, what counts for knowledge, how we think about the church, and perhaps how we think of God." If by "we" he means congregations like his (or the one I serve), namely, congregations that are affluent, North American, mostly white, and Protestant, then his essay has application. But caution is warranted when considering Avram's questions outside of this particular context.[13]

For me, Avram's ontological claim raises the question: Are our current technological changes, especially social media, just a blip on the screen for the church (like the telegraph, telephone, and television, all of which had an impact on congregations but did not radically change them), or are these changes a sea change in human social interaction that will have an ontological

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[9] To further make the point, the term virtual is understood as an immigrant's language. Natives move so seamlessly among these realms, this distinction is unrecognizable to them; for natives, real and virtual are diaphanous.

[10] Sue Bennett and Karl Maton, "Beyond the 'Digital Natives' Debate: Towards a More Nuanced Understanding of Students' Technology Experiences," *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning* (2010), 26, 321.

[11] Sue Bennett, "Digital Natives," in Zheng Yan (editor), *Encyclopedia of Cyber Behavior* (Hersey, PA: Information Science Reference, 2012), 213.

[12] Siva Vaidhyanathan quoted in "The Net Generation, Unplugged," *The Economist*, print edition, March 4, 2010. Online at http://www.economist.com/node/15582279.

[13] For a recent overview of digital divides, see Ali Modarres, "Beyond the Digital Divide," *National Civic Review*, Fall 2011, Vol. 100, Issue 3, 4-7. Online at wileyonlinelibrary.com.

impact? As with every change, we will need more time and distance (not just trending) in order to better answer this question.

Non-Verbal Communication

As a conversation partner in the faith and Facebook discussion, I want to introduce research on non-verbal communication. My concern about digital communication is that it strips away some, if not all, non-verbal communication. Research in communication finds that our non-verbal communication cues act as an indispensable means to convey the affective meaning of a verbal communication. As a result, people are able to interpret the implications of the verbal message through the non-verbal signals from the sender. For instance, one study shows that "only 7% of a message is sent through words with the remaining 93% sent through facial expressions (55%) and vocal intonation (38%)."[14] This has serious implications as we try to communicate digitally, especially with texting and tweets, and we are only beginning to become aware of the social implication.[15]

In the case of spiritual formation, I would argue that the non-verbal is crucial. For instance, in liturgy space matters. When gathered for worship, we take in the environment with all five of our senses. Research indicates that communication is generally received through sight (83%), hearing (11%), smell (3%), touch (2%), and taste (1%).[16] While there are no studies on the five senses in worship, my hunch is that touch and particularly taste are greatly heightened around the sacraments (the feel of water and the taste of bread). So, what does all this mean for the church as people rely more on digital communications? What will it mean if we find there is significant underdevelopment (or atrophy) of non-verbal communication when we come face-to-face in worship, education, and mission? Is there an increased role for the church to help people experience richer forms of embodied communication as the body of Christ? Can we imagine a world in which the sacraments are observed virtually?

Niebuhr's Christ and Culture

My final observation is theological. Over 60 years ago, Yale professor H. Richard Niebuhr delivered a series of lectures that resulted in *Christ and Culture* (1951). From this work, Niebuhr offers five typologies to help us think about issues such as the impact of technological changes and the church. Briefly, Niebuhr laid out five types for the relationship between Christ and culture. Niebuhr's first type, "Christ against culture," characterizes our sectarian drive, where we see everything outside the church as hopelessly corrupted by sin. At the other end of the typology lies the model of "Christ of culture," in which the absolute conflict of one against the other gives way to a harmony between them. In this view, we are being trained "in our present social existence for the better life to come."[17] Therefore, we are to discern and then champion the highest moral and spiritual common ground between the teachings of Christianity and contemporary culture. The third

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[14] P. W. Miller, Non-verbal Communication (3rd ed.), (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1988), 5.

[15] The creation of emoticons began because of an intuit sense that we were missing something in our instant messaging. However, these are not the same as non-verbal communication because they are a created through conscious desire of what we want to convey and not necessarily what our underlying attitudes, emotional orientations, and thoughts are.

[16] Barbara Pease and Alan Pease, *The Definitive Book of Body Language* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 2004), 192-208.

[17] Niebuhr, 84.

type is "Christ above culture," an outlook associated with Thomas Aquinas and many Roman Catholics. In this view, all that is good in human culture is a gift from God, where the good is synthesized by Christian revelation and the mediation of the church. The fourth type is "Christ and culture in paradox," or the "theology of the dualists" like Martin Luther with his two-kingdom theory. Below, I argue that Avram's essay most closely aligns with this view and, hence, I sketch it out more there. The final type is "Christ transforming culture." Niebuhr names those in this type the "conversionists," where "they believe his [Christ's] work is concerned not with the specious, external aspects of human behavior in the first place, but that he tries the hearts and judges the subconscious life; that he deals with what is deepest and most fundamental" in us.[18] In this way, society (like the arts, professions, education, family, and even Facebook) is to be completely converted to Christ because nothing is outside Christ's purview. I believe a more thorough discussion of all five of Niebuhr's types and the church's approach to social media would be invaluable. However, in this short response, I only briefly consider *Christ and culture in paradox* because I believe it is Avram's desired approach.

Niebuhr's fourth type, Christ and culture in paradox, sees the world as sinful (like Christ against culture) but not abandoned by God (because God preserves order against chaos through social structures). This is Luther's two-kingdom theory, where sinners are justified by grace but living in a world of necessary evils that leads to a private, personal morality with little intention of public influence.[19] There is a duality of Christ and culture, where both have authority that are in opposition to each other.[20] "[D]ualism may be the refuge of worldly-minded persons who wish to make a slight obeisance in the direction of Christ, or of pious spiritualists who feel that they owe some reverence to culture."[21] I believe Avram's essay is dualist as a pious spiritualist because his lens is one that sees faith and social media as two discontinuous moralities in two discontinuous realities.

Theologically, the dualist understands this two-kingdom conflict from the perspective of reconciliation, "the act we call Jesus Christ."[22] With those who are aligned with Niebuhr's Christ against culture, the dualist takes sin seriously and recognizes the gospel's claim that we participate in it. Yet the dualist realizes our inability to escape culture and knows that God sustains culture (and us within it). By definition, those in this type are bound to speak in paradox. The dualism of Luther is, therefore, dynamic and dialectical. "Living between time and eternity, between wrath and mercy, between culture and Christ, the true Lutheran finds life both tragic and joyful. There is no solution of the dilemma this side of death."[23] Consequently, dualists understand culture as a way to restrain evil and even anarchy rather than as a place to find Divine goodness and, thus, tend toward

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[18] Niebuhr, 190-191.

[19] Niebuhr, 42-43, 149-189.

[20] Dualism is different than Niebuhr's first type, Christ against culture, which is the most uncompromising view towards culture claiming that "the sole authority of Christ over culture and resolutely rejects culture's claims to loyalty" (Niebuhr, 45). Niebuhr goes on to say that the "counterpart of loyalty to Christ and the brothers is the rejection of cultural society; a clear line of separation is drawn between the brotherhood of the children of God and the world" (Niebuhr, 47-48). For dualism, this view needs to be coupled with "some reverence to culture" (Niebuhr, 184).

[21] Niebuhr, 184.

[22] Niebuhr, 150.

[23] Niebuhr, 178.

antinomianism and a cultural conservatism. This, I believe, undergirds Avram's question of "how to live in the social media environment and still sense God as a presence requiring an absence."

Interestingly, for Avram, the boundary itself creates meaning. There is "virtue" in the immigrant's boundaries (in Avram's case, particularly the home and the library). His fear is that "the public is privatized, and the private world becomes a controlled portal of sorts with the space of the self now imagined as a kind of command center." Clearly, the intrusiveness of the digital world into the sanctity of the home has Avram "anxious" to the point where he asserts that "the virtually mediated social world is like God in this sense, with the screen a sacrament and the gestures of attention, touch, and input like prayer." Moreover, he states that "the Christian tradition has valued the private realm as both protected space where virtues can develop and a rhythm of interiority that allows the exteriority of the public to not become tyrannical. It is a zone of life free of market logic, competition, and instant judgment. Instead, the private is (ideally) ruled by commitment, acceptance, and challenging love." The Christian tradition here is one that adheres to Niebuhr's Christ and culture in paradox.

In Avram's essay, I personally appreciate his desire for his children to have the "virtues germane to spiritual formation—like patience, forgiveness, tolerance, discretion, restraint, and modesty." When Avram shared the story of reminding his son to practice logging off at 10:30pm, I found myself nodding in parental solidarity. Yet, I do not share in Avram's anxiety about the eroding boundary between public and private. While I do believe that many of our boundaries are shifting significantly, I do not believe sin lies *outside* and virtue formation *inside*. As Niebuhr argues, "rejection of culture is easily combined with a suspicion of nature and nature's God."[24] To privilege the private realm (like the library or even the home) over other locations, even virtual ones, as the place of spiritual formation can ultimately become idolatrous. Without a doubt, sin clings to all our efforts, but God works providentially throughout both the private and the public (and through the real and the virtual).

Toward the end of the essay, Avram quotes from Rigby as "a thoughtful nudge to the theological anxiety" he is experiencing. But rather than a "counter witness," I read this as part of the essay's dualism, especially with Avram's qualifier that we might not conserve "enough of the old way of being to assess the new." Avram's argument is not Christ against culture (even though, on the whole, it does lean in this direction), where "[t]he counterpart of loyalty to Christ and the brothers is the rejection of cultural society; a clear line of separation is drawn between the brotherhood of the children of God and the world."[25] In the end, Avram states, "Social media strive to mediate a world. Yet I'd like to think that we can still hold back a bit, and that we can help our children to do the same." My concern: is this really a constructive way forward? If so, what does "hold back a bit" look like in the church? And, more importantly, if it isn't, might Niebuhr's Christ the transformer of culture offer a more productive way to think about this theologically?

As I stated at the beginning of this response, I believe a Christ-transforming-culture approach is a more fruitful one because it "holds that to God all things are possible in a history that is fundamentally not a course of merely human events but always a dramatic interaction between

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[24] Niebuhr, 81.
[25] Niebuhr, 47-48.

God and [humankind]."[26] Personally, this trajectory helps me engage not only my own children and their peers in the youth group at church, but it also provides me with a hopeful perspective of what God might be doing in the real, the virtual, and all the other realms of creation. In other words, the *location* (social, economic, geographic, class, etc.) in which we experience the living God is not essential, or ontological. From Abraham and Sarah to a digital native, the essential is God's sovereign activity. "He heals the most stubborn and virulent human disease, the phthisis of the spirit, the sickness unto death; he forgives the most hidden and proliferous sin, the distrust, lovelessness, and hopelessness of man [sic] in his relation to God. And this he does not simply by offering ideas, counsel, and laws; but by living with men [sic] in great humility, enduring death for their sakes, and rising again from the grave in a demonstration of God's grace rather than an argument about it."[27] And I believe the incarnation accounts for the dissolving boundaries once thought sacred, the loss of hearth and home, and even the loss of a particular religious way of life. For ultimately, there is no argument about God's sovereignty over this world he loves so much because we are "being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit."[28]

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[26] Niebuhr, 194.
[27] Niebuhr, 191.
[28] 2 Corinthians 3:18.