

March 2009

DIGITAL DISTRACTION

As the season of Lent approaches, many Christians are considering what type of sacrifice they will make to remember the 40 days that Jesus is said to have wandered in the wilderness. As a sign of the times, the Wall Street Journal reported recently that some Christians are vowing to exit the digital wilderness of social networking sites for the Lenten season. While online sites like Facebook and MySpace are immensely popular with young people, it appears that a significant percentage of adults regularly frequent such sites. Some of these adults admit that it has become a mild form of addiction, as they log on 20-30 times a day to contact their hundreds of “friends.”

The word *acquaintance* might be a more accurate, though less flattering, description for those lists of names. Most thoughtful people realize that when you dilute a word such as *friend* by a factor of 200 or 300, that word no longer bears any resemblance to its original meaning. Aristotle observed that true friendship is a rare blessing, something to be cherished and maintained throughout the course of one’s life. He lists three basic kinds of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The first type is based on utility, and being based on mutual gain, is relatively impermanent, changing according to circumstances. The second type is based on pleasure. Aristotle notes that this kind is prevalent among the young, as their lives are regulated largely by their mercurial feelings. These friendships come to an end when tastes change and pleasures are no longer shared in common. The third type of friendship is based on goodness, or virtuous conduct. Aristotle praises this as the highest type, because it is not based on personal gain or selfish pleasure, but on true caring for the well being of another person.

Those who are lucky enough to have a few such friendships in their life may consider themselves fortunate. Aristotle recognizes the value of the other two categories, but he places a premium on the third type, which often lasts a lifetime, or as Theosophists might believe, several lifetimes. H. P. Blavatsky once said that we are “ceaselessly self-deceived” by our own ignorance. Digital technology offers much to enhance the quality of our lives, but like a double-edged sword, it also has the capacity for endless distraction to those ensnared by the cult of personality.

David P. Bruce
Director of Education