

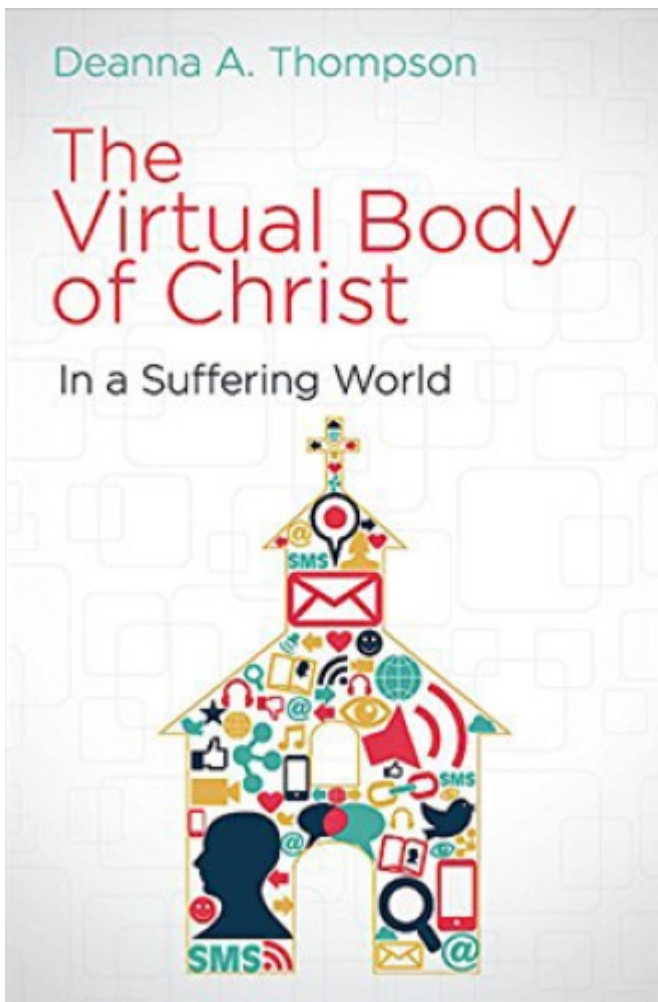
The grace of real and virtual presence

Theologian Deanna Thompson used to criticize the pervasive technological creep overtaking our lives. Then she was diagnosed with cancer.

Sunday's Coming Premium

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In Review



The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World

By Deanna A. Thompson
Abingdon

Last fall's election was one of the most divisive in recent memory. For those of us with online lives, the difficulties of the campaign season were often compounded and exacerbated by constant and unavoidable trolling, comment wars, and anger-inducing posts from our Facebook friends. Many of us finally started to heed those hand-wringing cultural critiques of online life and social media. We began to believe that our various forms of virtual reality are dangerously individualizing and isolating, distracting us from the real things in our lives. Desperately searching for connection, we turned away from the social media practices that had shaped so many of our relationships.

Theologian Deanna A. Thompson admits that she was, long before 2016, one of those critics of the pervasive technological creep overtaking our real lives; she was, in her words, "a committed, self-righteous skeptic about the potential benefits of digital connectivity." She didn't even own a mobile phone.

And then, cancer. Which, surprisingly, led to her seeing the positive possibilities of our virtual worlds.

Thompson has written quite powerfully and eloquently about living with a stage IV cancer diagnosis in *Hoping for More: Having Cancer, Talking Faith, and Accepting Grace*. If her new book is not quite as powerful as *Hoping for More*, it is no less necessary. *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* is not simply a reflection on our virtual lives: at its heart, it's a plea for an expansive imagining of life.

"Incarnational living in the digital age," Thompson argues, "translates into a radical openness within the community of the church not only to hearing the cries of our neighbors but also to imagining new ways of serving neighbors in love through both the virtual and actual worlds." Grounding her understanding of the church in a Pauline conception of the body of Christ, Thompson calls us to imagine the body of Christ beyond the limits of our physical bodies. She calls us to a radically open love that she refers to as the practice of being Christ's hands and feet in the world. And today this love has the virtual potential to be worldwide.

Thompson's argument for radically open love rests on a both/and framework that is both personal and theoretical. On a personal level, her conversion to the possibilities of virtual relationships began with both the actual and the virtual healing presence

of her friends, family, and church as she learned to live with cancer. When she was in pain, she found that it was often easier and just as meaningful to post an online update or read an encouraging text than to struggle through an in-person visit.

Sometimes becoming undone in the presence of one person after another not only increases the physical, mental, and even spiritual exhaustion those of us who are really sick experience, but it also can reinforce the fear (as we come face-to-face with the myriad ways that being ill has distanced us from what it looks like to be well) that our former lives are over, never to return again.

While she continued to recognize the necessity of physical presence in the healing and comforting that were offered to her, Thompson also began to feel the healing and comfort that came through virtual presences.

At a more theoretical level, Thompson's argument recognizes the both/and nature of human life. It is often quite easy to dismiss our virtual lives as somehow less real than our actual lives, making an easy (although grammatically quite strange) distinction between virtual reality and actual reality. Both are real. Certainly there are differences between physical presence and virtual presence, but these differences are not strictly between reality and less-than-reality or between experiences that are to be valued differently. Borrowing from theologian Kathryn Reklis, Thompson insists that "whether or not a particular human interaction is real or good . . . 'requires more than assessing whether it is virtually mediated or not.'" Life, whether virtual or actual, is always more interesting than that.

Mixing the categories of virtual and actual, and drawing on Teresa of Ávila's poem "Christ Has No Body," Thompson claims that if Christ is present today, "Christ is present *virtually*, through the bodies and the actions of his followers." This claim is grounded in Thompson's Pauline conception of the church as the body of Christ—a conceptualization that is already virtual.

Thompson notes that when Paul envisioned the body of Christ he drew on resources available to him from Greco-Roman culture. At the same time, he introduced several innovations and divergences from the traditional understanding of communities. Using New Testament scholar Michael Gorman's language of *cruciform hierarchy*, Thompson explains how Paul "levels and then reverses the hierarchical relationship among the members of the body. . . . Acting as Christ acts, Paul proclaims, means

that the weakest and least honorable among [the body of Christ] deserve the greatest attention and place of honor (1 Cor. 12:22-23).” This attention transforms cruciform hierarchy into cruciform love, a radical love offered to the weakest members of the body. It is this love of Christ, mediated and practiced in the love of the church that is, Thompson suggests, embodied in the continuum of our real lives, both virtual and actual.

Thompson is not offering a utopian celebration of our digital salvation. She is quite clear about the limits of the digital revolution. She insists that we remain aware of the ways in which our world is fractured by a series of digital divides occasioned by socioeconomic gaps and ableist assumptions; that we pay attention to the often hidden social, political, and environmental costs of the material production of our virtual lives; and that we remember that our worlds, both actual and virtual, are mired in sin. Yet, at a time when many people are searching for community and healing relationships, this book reminds us that love begins with a resounding yes, a willingness to live into worlds that are both actual and virtual—and are greater than we are often able to imagine.

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