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The Dangers of Digital Discourse

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

In an age where digital immediacy can be confused for personal intimacy, we often forget that public communication will not have all the features of private communication.

Transcript

[Music] Greetings and Salutations! This is Life and Books and Everything and I'm Kevin DeYoung. Good to have you with us. Today I want to read through another recent article, this one from the World Opinions page.

You may have realized I am right there about every other week. So you can go check that out. Not only articles I may have there, but other columnists and contributors, that's the World Opinions page.

You do need to subscribe after getting a few free articles, but I think it's well worth it. So do check that out and grateful that they're giving me the opportunity to read this so you can listen to it here. The articles themselves in print will show up on my website, KevinDeYoung.org. It's about a month after they're posted and that's just to hopefully allow people to get them from world and not take away from that platform, but after a month, if you want to go back and find them, you can get them on my own website.

This is from March 18 from World Opinions, my article, The Dangers of Digital Discourse. It's no secret that the digital world can be rough. The way we talk about each other and to each other online is not often a model of careful reason and good faith, but maybe a little literary theory can help.

We've all heard the term genre before, it's a French word, meaning kind or sort. We use it as a designation for any type of communication, often written or spoken, with agreed upon features and norms. We see for example that the Bible contains different genres of literature.

There are narratives, laws, poems, prophecies, epistles, apocalypses, just to name a few. Each genre follows certain loose but noticeable patterns. There are common

constructions, repeated phrases, standard templates and the like.

If we read the Psalms, like Leviticus or Romans like Revelation, we are likely to misinterpret some passages and miss the meaning of others altogether, knowing what sort of thing we are reading or hearing is critical if we are to read and hear that thing correctly. Well what's true for the Bible specifically is true for communication more broadly. Take Twitter for example, and I can't help but think about the late comedian Henny Youngman's line.

We might paraphrase, take Twitter please. By definition a tweet is extremely brief, often devoid of context. We should not expect a tweet to deal with all the "yeah buts" or "what abouts".

Be sure it's still incumbent upon those writing tweets to say what is true and edifying, but it is also incumbent upon readers to understand what sort of discourse they are reading. Think about other kinds of communication. An official statement of faith or a year long study committee's work on a contested issue can be expected to anticipate objections to speak with maximum nuance and clarity.

Whereas amendments from the floor of a denominational assembly are usually going to be not as careful. A local church sermon is likely to be more "hortatory" and tied to a specific people at a specific time. A personal conversation with a friend or mentor or counselor is bound to be more intimate, having more give and take, and it will use language that encourages maximum rapport and mutual trust.

A thousand word blog post will be not as comprehensive as a 250 page book. You get the point, or at least I hope we do. Too often we pay little attention to genre and expect a specific type of communication to do what it wasn't meant to do.

An essay is not a letter, a journal article is not a Sunday school lesson. A blog post is not an exercise in active listening. With different genres come different expectations.

If you talk to your friend on the phone like you are preaching a sermon or issuing forth a doctrinal pronouncement, you probably aren't being a very good friend. A different type of communication is called for. We understand that personal communication should not sound like public communication.

But the opposite is also true, and this is where the internet has fostered a lot of bad habits and people who should know better. In an age where digital immediacy can be confused for personal intimacy, we often forget that public communication will not have all the features of private communication. Again, this is not an excuse for the writer to be rude, uncaring, unclear, but it does mean that the fair-minded reader will keep the genre in mind.

Public writing, especially in shorter forms like blogs and articles, cannot be expected to

deal with every caveat and everything that needs to be said on a given topic. Likewise, and this is really important, public communication will not normally sound the same as a counseling session. Or a conversation with a hurting friend? When someone objects, well, is that how you talk to someone crying in the chair across from you? The honest, healthy answer should be no, of course not.

We shouldn't speak to crying friends like we are reciting the Nicene Creed and we shouldn't be expected to write book reviews like we are praying with a hurting church member. A writer will be mindful that all sorts of people might be reading his material, but by the same token, a good faith reader will be slow to personalize what was meant for public consumption. Reclaiming some common sense when it comes to genre can teach us to write better and to read better.

It can also remind us that public and private are legitimate and indeed necessary categories. I don't talk to my wife like I'm drafting a blog post and I don't write blog posts when what I really need is to talk face-to-face with my wife. It's okay to have a personal voice and a public voice.

As long as the two voices aren't at odds, the presence of the public you and the private you is not hypocrisy, it's maturity. If we have something to say about a book or blog or big idea, the internet might be the place to go. But if what we really need is some gospel encouragement or a listening ear, I'd suggest that you go on a prayer walk.

Phone a friend, schedule a dinner date and stay far away from Twitter. This is the dangers of digital discourse from the world opinions and you can check it out online and read it for yourself. Until next time, glorify God, enjoy him forever and read a good book.

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