VIRTUAL CHURCH: THE SEARCH FOR KNOWING
AND BEING KNOWN IN THE 21st CENTURY

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Summary:

Can the church be "virtual"? How might this affect community? How might this affect the idea of biblical knowing? This paper explorers these and other questions.

Length: 15 pages

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.

Galatians 4:4, 5

Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first?
The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,
The races, neighbours, to marry and be given in marriage,
The ocean's to be crossed, the distant brought near,
The lands to be welded together.[1]

Walt Whitman

As an undergrad student in Bible College, we studied this passage (Galatians 4) and learned that it was in the fullness of time, that God sent his son Jesus, to dwell among us and to redeem us from the brokenness of our lives, so that we might live free in him. But what was this fullness of time? What did that mean? As we unpacked it, there were key ideas that emerged. The first idea was that because the Greeks had previously been the key players on the world stage, their influence was widespread, especially in relation to language and philosophy. Most of the known world spoke Greek. A second idea was the Pax Romana – the Peace of Rome. The Roman Empire had gained strength and influence due to their ability to access their empire through an intricate road system that connected them to each corner of the empire. Because of this, they were able to "keep the peace" more easily. The third idea was that the Jews contributed to the religious climate by offering a monotheistic perspective of there being only one God.

What is fascinating about "the fullness of time," is that even the coming of Christ had a technological dimension. The Greek language, spoken and written is a form of technology. Christ's story had the greatest chance of being told because of a common oral/written language.

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[1] http://www.daypoems.net/plainpoems/2103.html [accessesed October 15, 2006].

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An intricate road system made safe by an army is only possible through technology. Christ's story had the greatest chance of being shared because of God's use of technology.

In an age where the pursuit of technology seems to be a religion of its own; the Christian church, the Body of Christ, the bearers of Christ's story will have to ask ourselves, in the [fullness of the] time that we live today, how do we best tell the story? The purpose of this paper is to discover whether or not, the "Virtual Church" is possible, or should even be desired. The idea of a church being present on the Internet is not a new idea. There are many who have webpage's that provide access to information, but this is a question of people who come together in the vast metaphorical landscape that is the Internet.

As more and more people have access to computers and Internet technology, and as second and third world countries draw closer to the digital age as they gain more access, will the Christian church be ready to tell and share the story in new and significant ways? We will first tackle this topic by defining four key words: church, community, technology, and virtual/virtuality. Secondly, the idea of Internet as gathering place will be discussed. Can the Internet be a "place"? Also, unpacking Virtual Church will mean addressing identity and mission. As Christians, we have a unique identity and mission. How is this addressed by being online in a "virtual culture"? Through the lens of gathering, identity and mission, we may catch a glimpse of what may be possible in our future world.

Church/Community/Technology/Virtual – What does it all mean?

What is the church? Put simply, the church is people. Scripture uses the Greek word, *ekklesia* when it describes the church. The church *(ekklesia)* is:[2]

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[2] This definition of ekklesia is from the Strong's Lexicon found online at
http://www.blueletterbible.org/tmp_dir/words/1/1161650543-5310.html [accessed October 22, 2006].

- a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly
- an assembly of the people convened at the public place of the council for the purpose of deliberating
- any gathering or throng of men assembled by chance, tumultuously
- an assembly of Christians gathered for worship in a religious meeting
- those who anywhere, in a city, village, constitute such a company and are united into one body
- the whole body of Christians scattered throughout the earth
- the assembly of faithful Christians already dead and received into heaven

We could say that the church is the people of God who gather together – either in a local, distant, or eternal setting to practice their identity and live out their mission.

What is community? Community has become a "buzzword" in recent years, especially as people seek to perhaps *rediscover* what is it they feel is being lost? David Porter, an author seeking to establish a paradigm for online community gives a broad-to-short view of community.

> Community seems to refer primarily to relations of commonality between persons and objects and only rather to the site of such community. What is important is a holding-in-common of qualities, properties, identities or ideas. In common language it can refer to the location within which a community is gathered…this more common usage reduces the holding-in-common of the community to a matter of proximity. Community becomes shorthand for community-of-location…[3]

Walter Borgmann attempts to define community in the context of celebration.

Community, to begin with, is generally used to designate a number of people with a common bond of some sort, a common interest or habit…a community of memory and of practices of commitment, and refers to a group who are in one another's bodily presence and engaged in a common enterprise that is an end rather than a means.[4] They both say that there is "common" bond that draws people together – shared qualities, interests, practices – and proximity, or the close presence of others is desired.

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[3] Porter, David, ed. *Internet Culture*. (New York, NY: Routledge Inc., 1997), 8.

[4] Borgmann, Albert. *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), 47.

What is technology? Throughout the twentieth century, technology was used to refer to a complete range of techniques, organizations, and knowledge in addition to tools, machines, and utensils.[5] It is difficult to define technology narrowly. American sociologist Wilbert Moore defines technology in such a way that allows for a shaping of culture. Technology is best understood as the application of knowledge to the achievement of particular goals or to the solution of particular problems.[6] As we dream of new endeavors or are confronted with old problems, technology is there to help realize solutions. Stephen Monsma creates a definition that is useful as we look at church through the unique and suspicious lens of the Internet. Monsma defines technology today as a distinct human cultural activity in which human beings exercise freedom and responsibility in response to God by forming and transforming the natural creation, with the aid of tools and procedures, for practical ends or purposes.[7] We have been given this story of God. We have been given this responsibility to use it to form and transform our culture. We live in an age with unprecedented technology. Monsma's definition provides clear direction and reason to use technology towards God's purposes.

What is virtuality? In the mid and late 1990's, the term "virtual reality" was faddish and trendy. Movies like "The Lawnmower Man" made wearing oversized "TV glasses" fashionable. I remember a game, where I put on a helmet that had screen and voila, I was in a motor-cross race. This is not the same as virtuality. David Porter attempts to define virtuality as he traces its etymological roots. In everyday speech, the "virtual" seems most often to refer to that which appears to be (but is not) real, authentic or proper-although it may have the same effects…. but this sense of virtual arises from a complex history of relations between reality, appearance, and

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[5] Monsma, Stephen V. *Responsible Technology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986,) 11.

[6] Goyder, John, *Technology + Society: A Canadian Perspective*. (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1997), 10.

[7] Monsma, 19.

goodness.[8] There is right way at viewing the virtual. Virtuality can be viewed as guarding that

which is true and honest.

> The roots of "virtuality" are in "virtue", and therefore in both power and morality. In an archaic form, the virtual and the virtuous are synonymous. Another sense of the virtual – which we might think is unconnected – refers to optics, where the virtual image is, for example, that which appears in the mirror…The deepest roots of virtuality seem to reach back into a religious world view where power and moral goodness are united in virtue. And the characteristic of the virtual is that is able to produce effects, or to produce itself as an effect in the absence of the "real effect". The air of the miraculous that clings to virtue helps to obscure the distinction between real effects of power and/or goodness and effects that are as good as real.[9]

Virtuality as Porter describes it sees that the "effect" of a virtual experience can be the same

effect of the "real" experience. As it relates to the world of the Internet, Mark Wolf provides his

own definition of virtuality. The world of cyberspace is a "virtual" world, a metaphoric

construct. Virtual as defined in computer science is "something whose existence is simulated

with software rather than actually existing in hardware or some other physical form.[10] I'm

virtually typing on a typewriter as I hit the keyboard with my fingers and see the text come up,

yet it's not a typewriter at all, and the document that I'm typing on is not really paper. This is a

virtual construct, having the effect of the "real" thing, but supported by software that makes it as

good as real.

How do these definitions help to shape the idea of a Virtual Church? As we have

discovered, the church is gathering of people – locally, distant, and eternally present who partake

in activities that help them realize their identity. Community is where like-minded people gather

around bonds of connectedness that shapes a particular memory or story. Technology is the

vehicle through which culture can be formed and transformed though human cultural activity.

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[8] Porter, David. *Internet Culture*., 9.
[9] Ibid., 9.
[10] Wolf, Mark J. ed. *Virtual Morality: morals, ethics, and new media*. (New York, NY: Peter Lange Publishing, 2003), 180.

Virtuality is where something can be effected in such a way that there can be the semblance of something real (like talking with my neighbor) and doing that activity in a virtual environment (Internet chat room). Each of these will help to shape what a Virtual Church may or may not look like.

GATHERING

From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. And they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

Acts 14:26-28

From this passage in Acts, we see that the church gathered together, heard the story of Paul and Barnabas' experiences and they lingered at that location. Can the Internet be a place, a location, a destination through which people can gather, share each other's stories, discover and create relationship? The church is a gathering of people. How does one measure or define proximity? Can there be a sense of the gathered body that might look different than being in the same physical room with each other?

Mark Wolf helps to create a lens through which the idea of a virtual presence is seen. The important question here is not can they be "community" or a "church", but what type do they represent?[11] Or perhaps the question can be asked, as we are called to be formers and transformers of culture, is there new way of viewing community and being the church in today's world? Wolf writes, the congregations of the disembodied [the virtual church?] is a mediated gathering via the Internet of members of the "Body of Christ" universal. In one sense it presents

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[11] Wolf, Mark J. *Virtual Morality*, 179.

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a new way to understand "the Church invisible".[12] There is already a Scriptural precedent for the idea that the Body unified is that worldly presence of the Body. Proximity seems to be less of a question.

The Internet, or cyberspace as Wolf describes it is a landscape where people are able to travel. Cyber space is not a tangible space, but a mythical space where people can "move" to and create a new life by exploring the uncharted "world of information".[13] Different people in cyberspace look at their virtual communities through differently shaped keyholes. In traditional communities, people have a strongly shared mental model of the sense of place--the room or village or city where their interactions occur. In virtual communities, the sense of place requires an individual act of imagination.[14] One of the intriguing aspects of the Internet is that people can build virtual communities on the basis of interests and ideas rather than geography. Christian can create on-line communities that are welcoming and non-threatening to non-Christians based on common interests.[15] Geography becomes a geography of ideas and experiences, virtual park benches where stories are shared.   The popularity of chat rooms devoted to stimulating relationships – everything from legitimate friendships to cybersex encounters – points to a hunger for relationships within the context of a community, even a virtual community.[16]

Cyberspace is about making connections, not just with data but with the individual creators of the information. This information is usually shared and received through text, through the words shared.[17] Wolf argues that these very words can provide the very context of structuring a body. What's being sent back and forth over the wires isn't merely information, its

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[12] Wolf, Mark J. *Virtual Morality*, 179.
[13] Ibid., 180.
[14] Rheingold, Howard. "The Virtual Community"[on-line]; http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book [accessed October 22. 2006].
[15] Wolf, 231.
[16] Ibid. 229.
[17] Ibid., 231.

bodies – not physical objects, but the information necessary to reconstruct the meaning of the body to almost any desired depth or complexity.[18]

> Conceptualizations of the body influence how individuals are seen to communicate on-line and issue of identity…"Our words are our bodies"… forcing a re-examination of the body as both physiological (noumenal) entity and phenomenological experience… the Internet might present a seduction rather the subduction: a challenge to modernity's assumption of self and body, of individual and community…Electronic communication is essentially blind; it erases social cues so that status, power, and prestige are not communicated contextually or dynamically. What is seen are the words on the screen from which individuals can construct themselves and other "bodies" they are communicating with.[19]

As interaction happens with others online, our imaginations interpret the body of the text and construct an identity of the person. This identity becomes the body in the virtual community.

The virtual community involves ongoing participation in the sharing of one's experiences and knowledge in an environment of like-minded individuals seeking to do the same. Community then is built by a sufficient flow of "we-relevant" information. The "we" or the collective identity that results is structured around others who are seen as familiar to the "me".[20] The individualist is not going to find community on the Internet. Even here, active participation seems to be a component in community building. The spirit of community is essential to the vitality of virtual communities. That which holds a virtual community intact is the subjective criterion of togetherness, a feeling of connectedness that confers a sense of belonging.[21] The Internet represents, for those who are community minded or searching, an almost limitless potential for an interconnected life. No longer limited by geographical happenstance to the interactions that might develop in a town or neighborhood or workplace, individuals can free

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[18] Ibid., 182.
[19] Ibid., 181.
[20] Porter, 125.
[21] Ibid., 29.

themselves from the accidents of physical location to create their own virtual places.[22]

Cyberspace creates an "identity workshop"…the identity of the individual is absorbed in the

connections the individual makes to other groups or links within a network. The self seems out

of context unless it is considered part of the whole.[23]

MISSION

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of
the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.
And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."
                                                                      Matthew 28:18-20

If there is an area that is lacking, regardless of the question of the Virtual Church or not is

the church's presence as a positive life changing voice on the Internet. For most congregations,

the "primary function of their web-sites is to promote their presence in a community and support

their basic faith and worship activities. The top five activities of existing church websites:[24]

- encourage visitors to attend a church service (83%)
- post mission statements, sermons or other text about church's beliefs (77%)
- provide links to other denominational or faith related websites (76%)
- provide links to scripture studies or devotional materials (60%)
- post schedules, meeting minutes, and other internal documents (56%)

Considering that the Internet is vast highway of people seeking and searching for

knowing and being known, there is definite room for improvement in terms of the institutional

church reaching out to those seeking. From an evangelistic perspective, the Internet is a mission

field that is ripe for the harvest… more than 2 million people log on each day in search of

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[22] Ibid., 60.
[23] Wolf, 184.
[24] Ibid., 226.

spiritual guidance and 21% of Internet users – 20 million Netizens[25]…have surfed for faith-related websites.[26] The good news is that individuals are doing just that. Individual Christians continue to advance the gospel; in cyberspace more visibly than the institutional church… few churches see on-line evangelism as being of primary importance. This is the perfect environment for sharing and inviting people into the story of Jesus. Monsma's definition of technology as a distinct human cultural activity in which human beings exercise freedom and responsibility in response to God by forming and transforming the natural creation, with the aid of tools and procedures, for practical ends or purposes; should cause us to boldly enter into the landscape of the internet.

> Jesus came to proclaim "the good news of the kingdom of God" (Luke 8:1). He came to break the power of the rule of dark forces of evil and to reestablish the gentle rule of God the Father. The kingdom of God is thereby the kingdom of shalom. This means that those who have been redeemed by Christ and share in his power through the Holy Spirit are, among other things, empowered to shape culture (which includes the doing of technology) in service to God and within his normative standards.[27]

The Net gives witnessing Christians on-line an opportunity to get back to the New Testament roots of evangelism: meeting people, a few at a time, and establishing meaningful personal relationships with them. Building relationships is the New Testament model for evangelism, and this approach resonates with many who log on to cyberspace in search of community, relationships and spiritual truth.[28]

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[25] Netizen can be defined as a person who is identifies closely with the internet, therefore there term identifies such a person to be a citizen of the internet.
[26] Wolf, 225.
[27] Monsma, *Responsible Technology*, 46.
[28] Wolf, 228.

CRITIQUE

The Virtual Church does have its issues. How and when of worship? What about the sacraments? In "Habits of the High-Tech Heart", Quentin Schultze offers his own criticism of technology, especially concerning community and its relationship to the Internet. He starts out by providing a caution. Our tendency to adopt every new information technology uncritically - without discerning the options, setting appropriate limits and establishing humane practices – is simply irresponsible.[29] This is a fair critique, especially in the way that some of church worship practices have adopted entertainment style technologies without thought to the messages they are sending.

In terms of community, Schultze questions whether technologies such as messaging help us connect better with each other. We celebrate the invention of messaging technologies such as the web without considering whether they will actually improve our capacity for understanding each other. Being intimate with information – with someone's message – is not the same as being intimate with the messenger.[30] This is in agreement with Neil Postman. Postman writes that we are a culture consuming itself with information, and many of us do not even wonder how to control the process.[31] Each new cell phone, or Blackberry ups the ante with information sharing. It is agreed, sharing for the sake of sharing will not build community.

Schultze views the religious community as a place where people rub shoulders with other people. It is in this place that the purpose of religion is to reveal to people how they can be reconciled to each other, to themselves, to the physical world, and to God.[32] This is reminiscent of the story of God, the life that we are called to share and invite others into. Postman writes that

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[29] Schultze, Quentin J. Habits of the High-Tech Heart; Living Virtuously in the Information Age. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002.), 16.
[30] Schultze, 61.
[31] Postman, Neil. Technopoly. 70.
[32] Ibid. 72.

the story is what is lost when it comes to an overuse of technology. I mean a story of human history that gives meaning to the past, explains the present, and provides guidance for the future. It is a story whose principles help culture to organize its institutions, to develop ideals, and to find authority for its actions.[33]

> There are no virtual sacraments. Religious traditions sustain particular forms of human experience by maintaining a moral context for the meaning of life – a way of passing along faith and virtue from generation to generation. They co-opt time and space for the purpose of maintaining cultural continuity. This is why religious traditions could never exist purely in cyberspace, where novelty and de-contextualization uproot culture. Traditional practices are still the greatest contexts for binding human communication to moral wisdom.[34]

This story is lived in the real fabric of religious life. Living a religious life means being committed to the rebinding of both public life and private self, to humbly serving one's neighbor rather than merely to exploiting markets, building new organizations, or discovering technological innovations.[35]

CONCLUSION

Is the Virtual Church something that we should seek? There are many questions to be answered and many more to ask. There is something uniquely spiritual and Christ-centered that happens when a gathering of like-minded people gather in a physical location and worship together. Spiritual gifts are exercised, forgiveness is offered, worship is expressed, sacraments (especially the Lord's Supper where community is practiced) are participated in and God shows up.

What we do know for sure is that God is sovereign and that the Internet is new. We don't have a particular historical perspective yet that provides a trajectory for what is to come next.

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[33] Postman, 172.
[34] Schultze, 74.
[35] Schultze, 72.

This is a journey, a pilgrimage. There is nothing to say that faith communities[36]couldn't exist on

the Internet. Argument can be made that community is possible. Perhaps these communities are

niche communities that allow you to grow and experience in your faith journey, maybe calling

them cyber-pilgrimages. To be virtuous people in a high-tech world is to be neither moralists

nor pragmatists but rather sojourners who humbly seek goodness in an eternal adventure that

began before we were born and will continue after we die.[37] The question of building

community building needs to be continually asked and reflected.

> It is still true that for a longtime to come, technology will constitute the common rule of
> life. The Christian reaction to that rule should not be rejection but restraint. Technology
> should be revoked as the dominant way of taking up with the world and relegated to
> securing the margins and underpinnings of our lives. Within that environment we must
> make a clearing for the celebration of the Word of God…Christians must meet the rule of
> technology with a deliberate and regular counter-practice.[38]

> God isn't limited by our technologies. It was in the fullness of time that he came.

Technology is made for human beings; human beings are not made for technology. Religious

traditions remind us to keep first things first.[39]

> In relation to the discussion above, some further thoughts are provided concerning the

church, internet and virtual community.

> First, the church is a three fold combination of believers – all who have lived or will live,
> all who currently live, and those who physically gather in a specific place and time for
> the purpose of becoming like Christ as a community. It seems the "internet church" can
> participate in the first two but maybe not in the third. Physical proximity seems to be
> important.

> The second is that the internet is, by definition, non-authentic – there is no necessary
> reality of identity. I wonder if anyone has ever done a study to find out how many people
> use fake identities on line. Of course, the research would be completely impossible to

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[36] Taylor, Steve. "Postmodern Monastery"[on-line];
http://www.emergentkiwi.org.nz/archives/cat_postmodern_monastery.php
[37] Schutlze, 24.
[38] Ibid. 94.
[39] Ibid, 72.

substantiate. Maybe this is just an extension of the modern church where people hide anyway (which is a problem) but the extension is not necessarily good.

The third may be the most important. We have essentially had virtual community for a long time – maybe ever since the invention of the automobile. People who participate in "communities" of faith no longer live in proximate community. Often, people who worship together don't work, play, shop or do anything else together. They could have been almost as inauthentic in the past 80 years as they can on-line. In this way, the internet church is pretty much an extension of the modern, car enabled (drive in?) church. The question may be, "was the 20th century virtual church any worse than the internet church?" In many cases, maybe not.[40]

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[40] Additional commentary provided by Dr. Dale B. H. Dirksen, Associate Professor of Worship and Church Ministry, Briercrest Seminary.

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