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‘THOU HAST GIVEN ME A BODY’: THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE VIRTUAL CHURCH

Travis Pickell

*“Thou hast given me a body,
Wherein the glory of thy power shineth,
Wonderfully composed above the beasts,
Within distinguished into useful parts,
Beatified without with many ornaments.
Limbs rarely poised,
And made for Heaven:
Arteries filled
With celestial spirits:
Veins, wherein blood floweth,
Refreshing all my flesh,
Like rivers.
Sinews fraught with the mystery
Of wonderful strength,
Stability,
Feeling.*

*For God designs thy body, for His sake,
A Temple of the Deity to make.”¹*

INTRODUCTION

There is no denying the absolutely revolutionary effect of digital and Internet technology on society in the twenty-first century. For many people, the Internet provides an instant connection to friends, family, colleagues, workstations, entertainment media, and other valuable (or completely trivial) information. As a result, the world is becoming more networked, opportunities for entrepreneurial growth are more widespread, and the speed and efficiency of

1 Thomas Traherne, “Thanksgiving for the Body,” quoted in David Brown, *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12.

everyday life is increasing rapidly.² Add blistering growth in digital Smartphone technology, which effectively turns every mobile phone into a web-connected personal computer, and one can easily see that “connectivity” is quickly becoming the new norm—and a key societal value.

Many churches, for which “connection” between people is also a key value, are attempting to harness the power of these new technologies in innovative and exciting ways. Some Christians view the Internet as an invaluable tool for evangelism, teaching, community building and pastoral care. There are even some who advocate the formation of standalone virtual congregations: churches whose primary (or only) mode of meeting together is through the medium of the Internet. And yet, despite this optimistic embrace of the virtual world by some, the ambiguous nature of technological advancement also necessitates critical theological reflection. As noted by a study on “virtual Christianity” sponsored by the World Council of Churches, “being too quick to employ new technologies may lead to the divine message being shaped or even substituted by a human medium.”³

This essay will analyze potential opportunities and dangers presented by the phenomenon of Virtual Churches (VCs). The main contention of this essay is that the VC phenomenon conveys a truncated, anti-biblical anthropology, ultimately undermining the very gospel it is trying to share. Toward that end, §2 will outline what is meant by VC—including aspects such as the nature of cyberspace, digital representations of the self (avatars) and worship as practiced by some online communities today. §3 will attempt to disrupt the idea of a morally neutral technological medium. Following Marshall McLuhan’s aphorism “The medium is the message,”⁴ it will show how technological media, regardless of apparently “sanctified” content, affect human society and psychology through implicit assumptions about what is important, normal, or even possible. §4 will then make the case for the importance of an embodied, Augustinian theological anthropology. Finally §5 will show how, by virtue of the “message” conveyed through its very “medium,” the VC movement is incompatible with such an anthropology. This essay will conclude with a call for a more critical engagement of the Church with the Internet—*engagement* because the Church is commanded to take the gospel into all the world (Matt 28:19), “and that includes cyberspace;”⁵ *critical* because “that society never existed in East or West, ancient time or

2 C.f. Thomas L. Friedman’s incisive description of the “flattening” of the world in the last 30 years. Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

3 Jean Nicolas Bazin and Jérôme Cottin, *Virtual Christianity: Potential and Challenge for the Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004), 2.

4 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 7.

5 Patrick Dixon, *Cyber Church: Christianity and the Internet* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications Ltd., 1997), 162.

modern, [one might add virtual or embodied] which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system.”⁶

WHAT IS VIRTUAL CHURCH?

There are many in the Church today who have no idea that something called VC actually exists. And yet, the VC is a growing phenomenon, becoming ever more mainstream daily, as evidenced by the proliferation of Internet campuses hosted by some of the most successful churches in America.⁷ An Internet campus is a website through which one can participate in chat-room discussions and online prayer groups with other members of the community, and, perhaps most saliently, where one can view the worship service live from one’s home. An Internet campus is often one of a number of satellite campuses in which a church’s worship service is broadcast to other groups meeting outside of the main campus building, which for reasons such as geography or space limitations cannot attend. An Internet campus, however, is not a VC, at least not as I am using the term in this essay. One may imagine the difference in that a VC is a church that meets corporately⁸ only by means of an Internet campus. Or, to put it another way, a VC is a church that meets in cyberspace. In the early days of VC, members of the online community would simply log into a website where they could read sermons, access educational websites, or share prayer requests, joys, concerns, and experiences with other members of the community. In these early manifestations, the experience was primarily text-based, mediated through chat-rooms and Internet forums.⁹ Eventually, however, VCs began to move toward more visually mediated ways of interacting in cyberspace, utilizing online virtual “worlds,” such as Second Life.¹⁰

6 Andrew Walls, “The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture: Is There a ‘Historic Christian Faith’?” in *Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity*, ed. Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2009), 139.

7 Notable examples include McLean Bible Church in Washington, DC (<http://www.mcleanbibleinternet.org/>); Liquid Church in Morristown, NJ (<http://live.liquid-churchonline.com/>); Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, CA (<http://saddleback.com/internetcampus/live/>); Life Church in Edmund, OK (<http://internet.lifechurch.tv/>); and North Point Community Church in Atlanta, GA (<http://northpointonline.tv/blog>).

8 This is an instance in which language is stretched to its limits by encountering new phenomena. As will become clear later in this essay, one of my critiques of VC is that its assumed theological anthropology is disembodied, and therefore in one sense *incorporate* (*corpus*=*body*). By “corporately” I mean “as a group.”

9 For two enthusiastic portrayals of some of these earlier essays into virtual community see Patrick Dixon, *Cyber Church: Christianity and the Internet* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications Ltd., 1997), and Walter P. Wilson *The Internet Church*. (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000).

10 <http://secondlife.com/>. Some VC communities, such as “The Church of Fools” (<http://www.churchoffools.com/>) and St. Pixels Church of the Internet (<http://www.stpixels.com/>), have created their own virtual worlds in which to meet, but many communities are utilizing the widely used and already established Second Life. E.g.

In these virtual worlds one's presence and all of her experiences are mediated through her online persona, or avatar. According to Philip Rosedale, the creator of Second Life, an avatar is "the representation of your chosen *embodied* appearance to other people in a virtual world."¹¹ One might say that a person's avatar is her mode of "incarnation"¹² in the virtual world. Through one's avatar one may visit new places, meet new people, have conversations, sing, paint, or even dance—all within the virtual world. VC advocates describe the avatar-mediated experience as an "embodied" existence in a world that is every bit as real as the one most people inhabit on a day-to-day basis. In fact, the goal is an experience that cannot be differentiated from a non-cyber experience. In this way "virtual" and "real" are not, for them, antithetical terms: the more virtual something is, the more real it is—and this is the case with virtual relationships, virtual community, and even virtual embodiment. Some VC advocates even look forward to a "fusion" of virtual reality with neuroscience, effectively making an avatar more than simply a visual representation of someone, but actually an extension of that person's self into cyberspace—psychologically, physically, and emotionally. A decade ago, an enthusiastic Walter Wilson wrote the following:

The future is not only about silicon. It is about biology. When the two are combined, they begin to move together. We can now see some things that stagger the imagination, such as a neobiological civilization of intelligent machines... The world of the born—all that is nature—and the world of the made—all that is humanly engineered—are becoming one in the same. Machines are gradually becoming biological, and biology is becoming engineered.¹³

All of this, however, represents only some of the most extreme aspects of the attempt to establish VC. Most of the actual engagement with VC, or with other Internet-related Church endeavors, is actually a great deal more commonplace—whether it involves speaking casually with other Christian users on an Internet game such as Second Life, posting a prayer request to an online listserv, or

LifeChurch.tv, Second Life Bible Church (<http://www.dokimos.org/secondlife/>), and the 1st Presbyterian Church of Second Life (<http://www.1pcsl.org>), to name a few.

11 Quoted in Aaron Britt, "On Language: Avatar," *New York Times*, August 8, 2008, New York Edition. Italics added.

12 In classical Hindu, the term "avatar" (ava = 'down'; ti = 'cross') is most often translated into English as "incarnation." C.f. Noel Sheth, "Hindu Avatara and Christian Incarnation: A Comparison," in *Philosophy East & West* 52, no. 1 (January 2002): 98. *Religion and Philosophy Collections, EBSCOhost* (accessed July 29, 2010). C.f. Mark Howe, "Online Church? First Steps Towards Virtual Incarnation," *Grove Pastoral Series*, P112 (Cambridge: Grove Books Unlimited, 2007).

13 Wilson, *The Internet Church*, 47-48. This commingling of the technological and the biological was given popular expression in the movie "Avatar" (2009), which provides a (somewhat) conceivable expression of the extrapolation of the logic of virtually embodied experience, such as those described by some proponents of VC. Technology could one day plausibly enable people to embody a virtual avatar in a digital environment, in much the same way.

simply interacting with friends on social media sites such Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace. These are things that many Internet users do every single day. Given the capability of rapid information exchange, as well as the already well-established trends in online social networking, why would anyone ever challenge the assumption that the Church ought to leverage technological advancements in the service of God’s kingdom? If people are spending more and more time on the Internet, shouldn’t the Church go there in order to share the gospel with them? Surely, if the Church does not utilize the Internet to spread the good news, it will only abandon it to ever more devious forms of content. After all, like any other technology, the Internet is a medium—and if a medium, is it not the content that matters most?

THE POWER OF THE TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIUM

This was the view of David Sarnoff, founder of the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and president of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA). After a distinguished career in telecommunications, Sarnoff received an honorary degree from the University of Notre Dame. In his acceptance speech he said the following: “We are too prone to make technological instruments the scapegoats for the sins of those who wield them. The products of modern science are not in themselves good or bad; it is the way they are used that determine their value.”¹⁴ This view of technology as inherently amoral (neither moral nor immoral) is the predominant view today, as it has been in most periods of technological optimism.

Marshall McLuhan, a younger contemporary of Sarnoff, reached a different conclusion. McLuhan, a brilliant—if eccentric—communications and media theorist, witnessed the rise of mass media and discerned its philosophical and sociological import to an almost prophetic degree. In his book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, he analyzed the history of technological advancement, with particular attention to the effects of new technologies on those who use them. Contrary to the view expressed by Sarnoff—that the technological medium itself is neither good nor bad; what matters is the message the medium carries—McLuhan asserted that, in fact, “the medium *is* the message.”¹⁵ The medium of communication, according to McLuhan, actually does more to affect us than the content. Any new technological development—eyeglasses, pocket watches, tennis shoes, airplanes, written language, etc.—is a medium that implicitly carries with it a set of assumptions about what is important, normal, or even possible. These underlying forces usher in drastic changes regardless of the content carried by the medium. According to McLuhan, these changes are inherent within the technological medium itself—not a result of the content actually printed on the pages of the books themselves. This is what is meant by “The medium is the message.” “The ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.”¹⁶

14 Quoted in McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 11.

15 Ibid., 7. Italics added.

16 Ibid., 8.

Not one to mince words, McLuhan referred to Sarnoff's comments as "the voice of the current somnambulism."¹⁷ Further, he adds, "our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot."¹⁸ Such a view of technological instrumentalism is actually dangerous because "any medium has the power of imposing its own assumptions on the unwary."¹⁹ Focusing on the "content" is misguided because "it is only too typical that the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium."²⁰ For McLuhan "the 'content' of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind."²¹

McLuhan, however, was no conservative reactionary. He was not simply decrying the use of technology as inherently evil or dangerous. Rather, the contrary is true. McLuhan supported technological growth and development; only he recognized that new technologies, in turn, affect humanity. His aim was to decipher and anticipate the effects of media in order to better control them. He saw every new technology as an extension of the reach of humankind, and he wanted to prevent the inversion of the relationship. Through uncritical use of new technology, there is always a danger that humans become subject to their own creation on some level; "subliminal and docile acceptance of media impact [makes new media] prisons without walls for their human users."²²

Perhaps the most amazing thing about the analysis McLuhan proffered in *Understanding Media*, is that rather than becoming outdated after almost 50 years, it is more applicable today than ever. Consider the following quotation, written decades before the Internet became a popular medium:

Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media.²³

Those familiar with the open-source online encyclopedia Wikipedia, or the rapid-fire social media platform Twitter, will instantly recognize parallels with McLuhan's vision of a collectively shared "creative process of knowing." McLuhan's analysis is as relevant as ever, and it would behoove us to pay attention to him.

17 Ibid., 11.

18 Ibid., 18.

19 Ibid., 15.

20 Ibid., 9.

21 Ibid., 18.

22 Ibid., 20.

23 Ibid., 3-4.

In a book published earlier this year, technology writer Nicholas Carr did just that. In *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*,²⁴ Carr attempts to answer the question: How is today's technology, specifically the Internet, affecting us? What he has found is that the "process of [shared] knowing" described by McLuhan is happening today on a wide scale. This has had the effect of dramatically increasing access to information and knowledge on a broad scale. But the price we are paying for width and breadth of information is a shallowness of thought. Carr argues that our brains are "plastic," that is, they are molded and shaped continually as a result of how they are used (or not used). Carr warns: "One thing is very clear: if, knowing what we know today about the brain's plasticity, you were to set out to invent a medium that would rewire our mental circuits as quickly and thoroughly as possible, you would probably end up designing something that looks and works a lot like the Internet."²⁵ We are becoming a distracted people, and this is evidenced not only sociologically and anecdotally, but also neurologically. The next section of this paper will explain how the idea of VC conveys a theological anthropology that devalues the body. What is important to note here, however, is that apart from the theological and philosophical assumptions involved, prolonged uncritical engagement with the Internet itself may actually physically harm our bodies, by molding and shaping our neurological connections in ways that we cannot actually understand without further research and reflection.

ARE WE OUR BODIES?

A CASE FOR AN EMBODIED THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

At this point it may be helpful to recall the early discussion of the VC (§2). Those who argue for the validity of VC stress that congregations that meet virtually in cyberspace are participating in "real community." The relationships that are formed are genuine, so much so that when a long-time member of the community stops attending virtual worship meetings, the community is likely to follow up to see if something is wrong.²⁶ Apart from the highly problematic issue of the sacraments,²⁷ VC advocates argue that a virtual congregation lacks none of the essential marks of the Church. In fact, many will point to the fact that physical proximity was never a prerequisite for Church community, going so far as to call Paul the first "cyberapostle"²⁸ because he used the technology available (pen,

24 Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010).

25 Carr, *The Shallows*, 115.

26 C.f. Howe, "Online Church?"

27 I have chosen not to focus on sacramentology in this paper, as important as it is, because of the wide range of views on sacramentology in the Church. Whereas an argument against the VC on the basis of the impossibility of virtual sacraments could be sidestepped by those with a lower view of the sacraments, the argument against a truncated theological anthropology stands for any Christians who hope to avoid the charge of latent Gnosticism.

28 Dixon, *Cyber Church*, 153.

ink, written language, etc.) to communicate his presence virtually throughout the known world. But for Paul, virtual presence was always a regretful concession, never the ideal situation. He repeatedly professed his desire to be physically present with those to whom he writes (Rom 15:32; 1 Cor 16:6; Gal 4:20; Phil 1:26). Much of the New Testament suggests that there is something about “meeting together” (Heb 10:25) physically that is essential to human community.

One’s views about the essentials of community reflect deeper assumptions about what it means to be human. Theological anthropology, the study of what it means to be human in relation to the divine, ought to be an important aspect of any reflection on ecclesiology because it influences how one conceptualizes fundamental Christian doctrines, such as sin, salvation, sanctification, eschatology and ethics.

In a recent book, James K.A. Smith elaborates three theological anthropologies that are dominant in the Church today. The first, and probably the most prevalent, is the rationalist picture of humanity—“as old as Plato but rebirthed by Descartes and cultivated throughout modernity, [this model] sees the human person as fundamentally a thinking thing.”²⁹ The resulting theological anthropology is characterized by a view of humanity as “essentially immaterial mind or consciousness—occasionally and temporarily embodied, but not essentially.”³⁰ Smith argues that this rationalistic anthropology was “absorbed particularly by Protestant Christianity (whether liberal or conservative), which tends to operate with an overly cognitivist picture of the human person and thus tends to foster an overly intellectualist account of what it means to be or become a Christian.” When the Church functions under this anthropological model salvation occurs through the dissemination of religious knowledge and stress is laid upon orthodoxy (right doctrine), often to the exclusion of orthopraxis (right action) and the formation of patterns of intentionality (right loves).

This rationalist anthropology is not without its critics. Some, especially within the Reformed tradition,³¹ have charged this viewpoint with reductionism and an insufficient account of human knowing. “Before we are thinkers,” they say, “we are believers.”³² One’s thinking, more often than one may realize, has its proper basis in faith. At some level there is a prior element of trust in some “authority,” be it one’s parents, teachers, or textbook writers. According to this

29 James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 41.

30 *Ibid.*, 42.

31 C.f. William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984); Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

32 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 43.

theological anthropology, human beings are “essentially religious.”³³ This view attempts to move a person’s center of gravity, so to speak, from her head to her heart. But as Smith points out, it is unclear whether the “person-as-believer” model goes far enough in this direction. Smith continues,

While in the person-as-believer model, the human person is not a “brain in a vat,” she still seems like an isolated, disembodied island of beliefs. In this model, the “believer” feels like a chastened rationalist . . . to put it otherwise, if I bump into a “thinking thing” and a “believing thing” on the street, I don’t think I’d notice much difference.³⁴

The problem with both of these theological anthropologies is that they are truncated. They “reduce us and our core identities to something less than they should be.”³⁵ “As a result, significant parts of who we are—in particular, our noncognitive ways of being-in-the-world that are more closely tethered to our embodiment or animality—tend to drop off the radar or are treated as nonessential.”³⁶ In short, the person-as-thinker and person-as-believer models are “insufficiently Augustinian.”³⁷ They do not properly take into account the complex relationship between human desires, intentions, habits, and loves— aspects of humanity about which Augustine wrote prolifically.

For Augustine, the most fundamental way that one relates to the world is through love. “To be human is to love, and it is what we love that defines who we are. Our (ultimate) love is constitutive of our identity.”³⁸ The problem (after the fall) is not that we do not love, but that our loves have become disordered.³⁹ Whereas the only proper object of one’s ultimate love is God, humans tend to love lesser goods—above all themselves.⁴⁰ Psychologically, our loving intentionality “takes the structure of desire or longing.”⁴¹ “The whole life of the good Christian is a holy longing. . . . This is our life: to be trained by longing, and our training through the holy longing advances in the measure that our longings are severed from the love of this world”⁴² and turned towards God.

One might ask, how does our love get aimed in different directions? For Augustine, this takes place through our habits or dispositions. According to Smith,

33 Ibid., 43.

34 Ibid., 45.

35 Ibid., 46.

36 Ibid., 46.

37 Ibid., 46.

38 Ibid., 51.

39 St. Augustine “Sermon 335c: On the feast of a martyr,” in *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. E.M. Atkins and R.J. Dodaro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 59.

40 C.f. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 15.22, 19.24-26; *De doctrina Christiana* 1.27.28; *Confessiones* 1.1.1, 10.6.9; *Sermon 335c.5*.

41 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 50.

42 Augustine, *Homilies on 1 John*, 4.6 as quoted in Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 50.

our dispositions are “the *fulcrum* of our desire: they are the hinge that ‘turns’ our heart, our love, such that it is predisposed to be aimed in certain directions.”⁴³ Our dispositions, however—and this is the key point—are not primarily influenced by our rationality or our system of beliefs. Rather, “the *senses* are [the] portals to the heart, and thus the *body* is a channel to our core dispositions and identity.”⁴⁴ This is why embodiment must be absolutely central to any theological anthropology. From the earliest age, human beings experience the world as a constant influx of sensory experiences, some causing delight and others causing pain. As one comes to understand what experiences cause delight, she responds in kind, and habits—or dispositions—take root in her heart. “It’s as if our appendages function as a conduit to our adaptive unconscious—sort of attitudinal reflexes—that make us tend to act in certain ways toward certain ends.”⁴⁵ That is to say, “our primary orientation to the world is visceral, not cerebral.”⁴⁶

What Augustine understood was “that the Christian doctrines of creation, the incarnation of Christ, and the doctrine of the resurrection of the body all imply that the body has a high metaphysical status and is an integral and permanent part of human being.”⁴⁷ Our bodies, souls, minds, and emotions are all tightly wound together because they are all equally part of who we are. This more embodied Augustinian theological anthropology better reflects both human experience and the Biblical witness. While it is true that some major religious and philosophical schools of thought have encouraged a view of humanity that separates body from soul, effectively bifurcating the human person, the truth remains that humans are, in fact, integrated beings.

Today, there is a renewed interest in the essential importance of embodiment for theology. Feminist theologian Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel argues for a theology *of* embodiment. “In a variety of situations,” says Moltmann-Wendel, “we can distance ourselves from our bodies, but at some point they get hold of us and will not let go.”⁴⁸ In the Scriptures, she points out, if one “start[s] from the creation, not from the ‘fall’,”⁴⁹ one will find that God created a good world characterized by a celebration of embodiment. In the New Testament, if one looks at the life of Jesus one notices some intriguing phenomena: the centrality of physical healings to Jesus’ ministry,⁵⁰ the way in which Jesus’ teachings address the entire human situation (physically *and* spiritually),⁵¹ and the way in which Jesus enjoyed sharing meals with those around him.⁵² But above all, the

43 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 50. Italics original.

44 Ibid., 50. Italics added.

45 Ibid., 59.

46 Ibid., 60.

47 Miles, *Rereading Historical Theology*, 100.

48 Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995), 21-22.

49 Ibid., 36.

50 Ibid., 36.

51 Ibid., 37.

52 Ibid., 49.

doctrines of incarnation and resurrection emphasize the importance of the body to any theological anthropology: “a theological return to embodiment recalls the distinctive feature of Christianity, that God became body and in so doing has confirmed and healed all our bodily nature.”⁵³

WHAT VIRTUAL CHURCH CONVEYS ABOUT THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Of the three anthropological viewpoints just described, only the first two are compatible with the idea of VC. If what essentially makes us human is our ability to think and reason, then there is no reason why our presence cannot be mediated through a digital representation of the self (avatar). Humans can legitimately communicate with one another in this way. They may have enriching conversations with one another, and perhaps, even work out important intellectual and social problems. No doubt, valuable educational opportunities will arise as humanity learns to take advantage of cyberspace as a virtual meeting place, as is already happening with online distance-learning courses offered at colleges around the country. In a similar way, VC is completely consonant with the person-as-believer model. One must assume that many of those who are already inhabiting virtual worlds like Second Life do not yet believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. What better way to reach them than to start a digital church-plant right in the middle of their virtual neighborhood? If what is most important about us as humans is simply that we believe, then there is no excuse for the Church *not* to do so.

What makes the VC phenomenon such a difficult ethical problem to unravel is the fact that there is some truth in each of these viewpoints. That we are rational beings is certainly a central part of our mandate to be stewards of creation (Genesis 1:27-30). And who would deny the importance of belief in the Christian life (John 6:29)? If, however, the medium *is* the message, then our ecclesiology conveys something about the gospel itself—whether we mean for it to do so or not. If a VC is a legitimate congregation of human beings mediated through virtual representations of the self (avatars), this suggests that what is most important about the self does not include the body. Doubtless some of those who are involved with VC would deny this as a misrepresentation of their views. But this misses the point. If McLuhan and Carr are correct, a VC will convey this “message” implicitly, rather than explicitly. In fact, no claim is being made about the explicit viewpoints of those utilizing this technology except the following: their anthropological views are incompatible with their mode of ecclesiology *if* they subscribe to the third type of theological anthropology outlined above. While humans may certainly be more than their bodies, they are also certainly no *less* than embodied creatures.

Some people see the VC as a new way of “embodying” the church in a digital age. This use of embodiment language, however, is artificial; what it conveys is only the semblance of embodiment, while leaving the actual body behind. While it is certainly true that when people participate in computer-mediated virtual worlds they experience somatic effects, this is only an accidental by-product of the fact

that they are in-fact using their bodies in the process of fleeing from their bodies. Any language of virtual embodiment, then, relies heavily on borrowing from actual embodiment in the process of denying its importance. Virtual embodiment is, in this sense, only derivative of actual embodiment, and is, in fact, ultimately a perversion of it.

As with any new technology, these dangers are implicit and subtle, and therefore, all the more pernicious. This is certainly the case with reference to the ambiguous relationship between technology and embodiment—between the body and the machine. As Wendell Berry once wrote,

The danger most immediately to be feared in “technological progress” is the degradation and obsolescence of the body . . . since the beginning of the technological revolution, more and more people have looked upon the body, along with the rest of the natural creation, as intolerably imperfect by mechanical standards. They see the body as an encumbrance of the mind—the mind, that is, as reduced to a set of mechanical ideas that can be implemented in machines—and so they hate it and long to be free of it. The body has limits that the machine does not have; therefore, remove the body from the machine so that the machine can continue as an unlimited idea.⁵⁴

If the body is not to fall into obsolescence in the face of technological advancement, as Berry feared, then how should the Church envision its engagement with the virtual world? Clearly, there must be some level of engagement. There are people who spend a great majority of their lives on the Internet, many of them participating in virtual worlds such as Second Life. They are not beyond the reach of the love of God, and therefore the Church must seek to reach them with the gospel. The virtual world is a mission field. Missiologist Andrew Walls offers a distinction that might be helpful here. He distinguishes between two opposing tendencies, “each of [which] has its origin in the gospel itself.”⁵⁵ The “indigenizing principle”⁵⁶ gives voice to the fact that the gospel can “make itself at home” in any cultural context (including the idiosyncratic cultural context of Second Life). But “along with the indigenizing principle . . . the Christian inherits the pilgrim principle, which whispers to him that he has no abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his society.”⁵⁷ In its engagement with the virtual world, the Church must hold onto a sense of *provisionality*. In advocating for standalone virtual congregations, VC enthusiasts unwittingly (and sometimes wittingly) send a message that relativizes the human body. The Church should engage the virtual world in the name of the gospel, but “making a place

54 Wendell Berry, “Feminism, the Body, and the Machine,” in *What are People For? Essays by Wendell Berry* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 190-191. Once again, the film “Avatar,” gives popular expression to the latent escapism implied in the ideal of virtual embodiment.

55 Walls, “The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture,” 137.

56 Ibid., 137.

57 Ibid., 139.

for Christianity in the virtual world does not mean that Christianity should itself become virtual or disembodied.”⁵⁸ Let us not forget the words of Traherne, “Thou hast given me a body.”