

# Virtual Reality Comes to Church

BY L. ROGER OWENS

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**T**he prolific writer Wendell Berry, in a little essay called “Why I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer” (1987), lays out the standards he uses to judge whether to adopt a new technology.<sup>†</sup> His writing with a pen and paper and his relationship with his wife who types and edits his work should not, in his judgment, be disrupted by an expensive, electric energy dependent piece of technology that will not produce demonstrably better writing results. Berry chooses the way of rejection.

Congregations and people of faith face the kind of choice Berry had to make. Confronted with new information technologies, people of faith and church leaders have to make choices: Will we adopt this new technology wholesale? Will we reject it? Or will we thoughtfully adapt it? These questions are not easy to answer, and many of us are not equipped with the knowledge or wisdom to make informed choices. The following four books aim to help us understand better the ways new digital technologies can both form and deform our lives so that in our use of them we can be wise rather than foolish.



Shane Hipps has written a wonderful book, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009, 208 pp., \$16.99). A former advertising specialist for Porsche, Hipps was an expert on selling

new technology to the public. But then he read the work of Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) – the man who taught us that “the medium is the message” – and discovered that technological innovations are not neutral. They shape the users in hidden and sometimes damaging ways. Since as a culture we are largely blind to the ways technological media shape our lives, Hipps wrote this book with a single purpose: to help us restore “an intentional relationship to our technologies” (p. 150) so that we can use technologies without being used by them.

The first thing Hipps does is help us understand what technology is. Taking his cue from McLuhan, he argues that technologies are essentially extensions of human powers. For example, the telephone extends the human powers of speech and hearing. There is a hidden danger, though, with extensive technologies: when pushed to an extreme, every technology “will reverse on itself, revealing unintended consequences” (p. 37). In order to adopt and adapt technology well, we must acquire the wisdom to not only see how a new technology extends human powers, but also discern its potential to “reverse” – to misshape and distort human life and faith.

Along the way, Hipps gives many examples of the ways technological innovations have shaped the practice of the Christian faith in unintended and often deleterious ways. The printing press extended the ability to communicate the gospel. Yet print technologies transform the faith from an epic story, displayed in stained glass windows and participated in sacramentally, into propositional formulas that can be printed on tracts and handed out in bus stations. A naïve approach to technology says, “The message stays the same – technology is just used to communicate it more effectively.” But clearly, the message changes as well. For Hipps, wise use of technology must anticipate ways the medium will change the message.

Hipps celebrates the way that computer technologies and the Internet are creating a new visual, right-brained culture. The hegemony of the printed word is coming to an end. This will allow for the restoration of lost aspects of Christian faith and practice – namely Christianity’s epic, visual, and sacramental dimensions. But Hipps fears that digital technology may have untoward consequences for faith: we might be exchanging the tyranny of the left-brain for the tyranny of the right-brain. We need logical, left-brain muscles to understand the Bible, but “our digital diet sedates the left-brain, leaving it in a state of hypnotic stupor” (p. 147). Even though we might be reading more than ever because of the Internet, digital media is changing *how* we read. This medium will change the message as well.

Best of all, Hipps’s treatment of technology is grounded theologically in his conviction that the Church is God’s own technology – the medium through which God makes the gospel available to the world. The gospel is not simply a proposition to be believed that can be tweeted in 142 characters or less. Rather, it is the gift of a people whose life together – the medium – is its own message.



If the key virtue of Hipps's book lies in his use of a wide-angle lens to help us see broadly technology's potential to shape and misshape the life of faith, the next three books use a narrow lens, each one examining a particular innovation digital technology has made possible.

Of the three, Quentin J. Schultze's *High-Tech Worship? Using Presentational Technologies Wisely* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004, 112 pp., \$14.00) sets the standard for theologically informed and yet practical examinations of technology in the Church. When many congregations are spending enormous sums of money to refit their sanctuaries with computers, screens, and projectors, Schultze steps back and asks: What can guide our application of this technology? How can we know when and why to

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“upgrade” our worship to make it technologically “up-to-date”?

His answer is a kind of liturgical *phronesis*, a worship-shaped wisdom. Before we launch into a pro-and-con discussion of presentational technologies in worship, we need to know what worship is and what it is for. Worship, according to Schultze, is a dialogue between the Creator and the creature; it is initiated by God and we respond with praise and thanksgiving. Thus, worship is an activity that is good in itself.

Worship as an intrinsically good activity means that worship media—whether books or projectors—must be evaluated on their ability to facilitate the worshipers' worshipping well. Can they improve our praise? The ability of presentational technologies to mimic contemporary entertainment culture, produce emotional responses, and attract the unchurched are beside the point because these are extrinsic purposes to which worship is often put. Understanding the *true* reason for worship can guide our application of new technologies.

I am largely in agreement with Schultze. His “yes-but” approach to technology and his willingness to adapt technology to the Church's purposes rather than blindly accepting it is wise. I wish he had included a chapter on indigenous worship to balance his emphasis on tradition as a guide to using technology. There are more people under thirty-five than ever with no reli-

gious affiliation, and faith communities that are going to reach these people will have to discover how worship can be congruent with the media that are so much a part of their lives. Worship at its best has always been able to incorporate, even if it has to tame, the artifacts that make up a culture. Now those artifacts happen to be high-tech, and our worship planning cannot ignore this. If Schultze had not dismissed the evangelistic potential of worship as extrinsic, his approach might have seemed a little more receptive and less skeptical. For this reason, the book will be very useful for established churches, like my own, considering the introduction of presentational technologies, but it will be of little use to new-church planters who are planning worship from the ground up.



In an astonishingly short period of time, half a billion people have joined the social network on Facebook. The point of Jesse Rice's *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected Are Redefining Community* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009, 240 pp., \$12.99) is not to retell the story of Facebook's meteoric rise, but to help people of faith negotiate online social networks wisely by understanding their appeal and their hidden dangers. Rice agrees with Hipps that every new technology that extends human powers—in the case of Facebook, the power to connect with others—also has hidden consequences. Christian users of Facebook, Rice suggests, should know these consequences if we are going to use Facebook for our purposes rather than allowing it to use us.

Rice attributes Facebook's rapid rise in popularity to a theological principle—all of us are looking for a home. There are a number of ways Facebook promises to fulfill the need for a home. He lists several homelike qualities of Facebook, like "home is where we can 'just be ourselves'" (p. 82). For many, the connections one makes on Facebook are filling the need for a home in a restless world.

But what are the hidden consequences, Rice wonders, of finding "home" in online community? There are a number, and they are worth paying attention to. Rice has a background in psychology, so it is no surprise that the many hidden consequence he points to are psychological. When we are hyperconnected, we feel powerless; we have increased anxiety; we begin to feel like the world is our audience and we are on stage; we are tempted to fashion our identities out of nothing; we become unable to pay attention to "what's now" and focus only on "what's new"; we suffer from a lack of real relationships; we live with increasingly fuzzy relational boundaries. His list goes on.

Perhaps most significantly, according to Rice, the illusion of real connection that Facebook offers has the potential to keep us from the kind of relationships we most desire: real relationships with real people in real community—not a virtual home, but a real one. When we have found our home online, what will make us keep looking for our home in God through the Body of Christ, the Church?

Rice's conclusions are not startling. I am not surprised by the psychological consequences of being hypeconnected. But it is good to have them documented. And it is even better to have his helpful suggestions on how to live with Facebook without letting Facebook take over our lives. Rice suggests ways we can engage Facebook with intentionality, humility, and authenticity. That way we will not lose our real selves beneath the masks of our online profiles.



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While the previous three books show us ways we can adapt new digital technologies to worthwhile human ends by engaging them with intentionality and suspicion, Douglas Estes's *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009, 256 pp., \$16.99) does nothing of the

sort. The book promises to be an examination of the possibility of virtual churches, and so I expected a nuanced treatment. But Estes is a cheerleader. He thinks virtual churches are real churches. He thinks the virtual world is a real world. And he thinks the gospel can be transmitted from one avatar to another. His book is a 250-page apology for virtual churches.

To the question, "Does a virtual church offer real community?" Estes only asserts, again and again, that he has met people who testify to more authentic community in a virtual church than in a real church. But assertions are not arguments. Estes needs to engage Hipps's arguments, because he has no sensitivity to the hidden consequences of letting people think church can happen in a virtual world. When people are allowed to play church in the virtual world and led to think it is the real thing, they might be missing salvation itself.

His discussions of Holy Communion and Baptism in virtual churches prove the point. That Estes can even entertain the possibility of these sacraments being participated in by meditating on an image of the sacrament on the computer screen, or that they might be "outsourced" to real churches, shows the impossibility of this form of virtual connection being church. It also shows that he has little sympathy for an understanding of the Church as God's embodied community in the world, as anything more than the transmitter of a particular message.

Hipps is right, the medium is the message. And if the Church, God's enfleshed people in the world, whose life together is a sign and foretaste

of God's kingdom, is God's medium, then in a virtual church the gospel itself has been erased. These baptized bodies that live and play, work and pray together are God's message: in Jesus a new humanity is possible. Indeed it is more than possible, it is a reality. But it is a flesh and blood reality, not a virtual one.



Wendell Berry said he was not going to buy a computer. He has an intentional relationship with technology. He knows when and why he will adopt technological innovations. Rejection, even for him, is not the only path. And if these books show anything, it is that people of faith cannot, if we want to be faithful witnesses to the God who redeemed the real world in Jesus, follow the simple path of rejection. But uncritical adoption might be worse. What we need, and what Hipps, Schultze, and Rice help us discover, is gospel wisdom, a way of navigating life in the world that is shaped by the life of this world's incarnate Lord. Such wisdom can open our eyes to the powerful ways technology can shape and misshape our discipleship. And only with eyes so opened can we be with our technologies both wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

## NOTE

† Wendell Berry, "Why I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer," *What Are People For?* (San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1990), 170-177.



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