



## STATEMENT DC010

### Witnessing through Computer Bulletin Boards

Many Christians stay on the alert for new avenues of evangelism. One increasingly popular means for this is the computer Bulletin Board System, or BBS. In 1978 there was only one BBS in the world. There are now close to 90,000, serving about 20 million users. A BBS is basically a computer hooked up to a telephone line, giving callers access to electronic mail, games, computer programs, documents, and other types of data. Its name comes from the cork bulletin boards we're all familiar with, where notices are posted for passersby to see. Similarly, most BBS's offer *message areas* — usually categorized by wide-ranging topics such as "For Sale," "dBASE," "Biogenesis," or "Reincarnation" — where one's messages can be seen by others who may reply privately or publicly.

BBS's represent an alternative to commercial information providers such as America Online, CompuServe, Delphi, Genie, and Prodigy. These commercial services run on distributed mainframe systems costing millions of dollars. They can accommodate thousands of users simultaneously, book airline reservations, and offer many special data retrieval services. However, the cost can be high: at their *cheapest* rates annual charges (10 hours of connect time per month) will run from \$240 (Delphi) to \$590 (CompuServe). In contrast, most BBS's run on personal computers out of the owner's home.

They normally accommodate only a few users simultaneously and mainly focus on two things: message bases and file downloads. (A "download" involves a transfer of a file from the BBS computer to your computer.) Thus, the annual cost of calling a BBS is much less than that of using a commercial system. Indeed, many BBS's give callers unlimited access to their services for free.

**Getting Connected.** To dial a BBS, you need a computer and a modem. Happily, the computer you use does *not* need to be compatible with the BBS. Macintosh users can connect with MSDOS BBS's, and vice versa. A modem (from *modulator/demodulator*) is a device that modulates or translates the digital codes used by the computer into analog (wave-like) tones for the phone lines, and back again.

You'll also need a communications or "terminal" program to run the modem. Popular terminal programs include Pro-comm Plus, Smartcom, Crosstalk, Microphone, and WinComm. Prices on these usually range from \$40 to \$150. Within the communications program, add the phone numbers of the BBS's you plan to call. Many secular BBS numbers are listed in the newsstand magazines *Computer Shopper* and *Boardwatch Magazine*. However, please exercise caution here. Though there are exceptions, secular BBS's often have "adult" sections that are unacceptable for Christian ethics and interest, and hundreds are living fulfillments of Romans 1:29-32. As a beginner you'll find excellent witnessing opportunities on Christian BBS's (yes, many unbelievers call Christian systems). As you become more experienced, you can venture out to secular systems that are not ethically offensive (there are some out there).

The first time I called a BBS I was petrified, certain I would do something wrong. Most new callers feel the same way. Relax! You can't "hurt" the BBS, and in most cases the worst you can do is waste your own time. A combination

modem program-and-textbook, such as Phil Becker's *Introduction to PC Communications* (Que Corporation, \$25), is helpful in getting started.

Certain BBS's also let their callers use "handles" or pseudonyms, such as Dr. Hackmeister, Madhatter, or Cyberlord. Though some people prefer this anonymity, the majority of Christian BBS's nonetheless ask callers to use their real names. This policy tends to create a more open atmosphere of honesty among the users.

BBS messages fall into two types: substantially private mail (E-mail) between two people, and public messages posted in topic-oriented areas where everyone can read them. In the latter case, topical areas are called *echoes* if the messages are copied (or "echoed") to other BBS's in a network of cooperating computer systems. A message you post in Chicago may be echoed to thousands of BBS's across the world in less than 48 hours. (An echo is *not* the place to ask local questions, such as how the BBS works. Take those questions to E-mail.)

**Basic Witnessing Tips.** Here are four tips to keep in mind when witnessing on BBS's. First, read message areas *thoroughly* before posting. There are often rules for leaving messages, generally posted monthly. If you don't see any, ask. Try to follow the ebb and flow of conversation, and if you need to, tape James 1:19 to the top of your monitor.

Second, respect topical echoes. Posting the *Four Spiritual Laws* in a desktop publishing echo is tacky; refrain from leaving "off-topic" messages. If religious questions come up in a technical echo, continue the conversation in a different echo or via E-mail.

Third, be concise. Brief messages or questions, sometimes with a verse of Scripture or two, have better impact than lengthy essays. I have spent hours composing long messages to cultists, only to discover that they stopped reading after three or four screensful.

Fourth, know your facts, and spell accurately (e.g., messages criticizing "Mormon" doctrine are singularly unconvincing). You don't have to write your messages on-line, off the top of your head. Compose them off-line, checking your facts, and upload them into the message base later. Ask the BBS sysop (system operator) to tell you about *off-line reader* programs, which automate this task for you.

The public BBS arena, combined sensitively with private meetings (Gal. 2:2), has already yielded many genuine conversions.

— *Eric Pement*

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