<u>VIEWPOINT</u>

Virtual Christianity: Evangelicals, America, and the Big Show

by Glenn R. Paauw

The great machines of our technological age produce some very powerful entertainment. Today's typical teenager, raised on *Sesame Street*, Saturday morning cartoons, commercials, and now MTV, has been treated to an impressive display of technological images, all moving at an incredible speed before his or her mesmerized eyes. And this is just the beginning. Already we are fast-forwarding to a whole new world with an even better show.

The next step is what is called Virtual Reality. This electronically created experience "tricks" one's brain into thinking it is in a real three-dimensional place. Instead of merely watching images on a screen, one now enters the world of images.

Already there is talk of fascinating applications of this new entertainment supermachine, including virtual rock concerts, virtual war games, and virtual sex. And, given the current culture, is there any doubt that few limits (if any) will restrain those applications? After all, the new, powerful technologies do not improve human nature; they merely magnify the depths of the human heart.

What would evangelicals do if they had Virtual Reality at their fingertips? It's a troublesome question. American evangelicals have had a long, well-documented love affair with technological progress. We've married the Great Commission to the great machines with the oft-repeated blessing, "The message doesn't change, merely the method." Believing that the old, old story can be told equally well in any new, new medium, evangelicals have excelled at delivering the message in culturally relevant forms.

There are many reasons for evangelicalism's technological optimism. More than a few historians have noted the strength of the bond between American culture and our expression of the Christian faith. The strands of that bond include a deep commitment to individualism, a depreciation of history and tradition, and a tendency toward popularization and anti-intellectualism. Combine these forces with the essentially free-market orientation of our vast empire of parachurch ministries and publishers, and the result is an innovative, entrepreneurial spirit. New, market-driven expressions of the faith thrive in this environment.

Today, evangelical enterprises are working overtime to keep in step with the visually dominated, fast-paced, technological times. We have Nintendo-like Bible adventure video games, cartoon versions of Jesus' parables, music videos showing Satan and his demons being shot down in a Western-style gunfight, and Jesus as the leather-jacketed leader of a Christian street gang.

All these phenomena should compel us to examine more closely our enthusiasm for the electronic gospel. Why do we so naively assume that these powerful new media are really neutral conveyers of our cherished timeless truths? It is time to ask not just the usual "Will the technology reach more people?" but more importantly, "What message will actually get through?"

In fact, the new forms of communication are increasingly biased against a "message" at all (in the sense of communicating rationally understood content). The dominant media today form a funnel, allowing only the visually stimulating, emotionally exciting, and lightning-paced to reach us. But evangelicals seem unaware that when a particular medium follows its own strengths, it necessarily shapes and molds what is communicated.

One might attempt to fight the medium by producing content-heavy lectures on television, but that's "bad television" and it won't survive. Boring video games won't sell. In the end, the medium calls the shots.

We would like to believe, of course, that the technology itself is neutral, able to be used for good or ill. But this neutrality is true only in the most limited of moralistic senses. To plug in Bible stories to replace pornography ignores the similar structure of the experiences. The shifts toward the new, the fast, the exciting — these are not neutral biases. They change the very way we live and relate and understand. The fact is, the electronic media have been remaking our message for some time.

It's not that evangelicals haven't confronted today's media-saturated world; they have. But the preoccupation has been primarily with the surface effects, the moral content of the various electronic media. Our products simply try to add "values" to all the entertainment.

Authentic expressions of the depth of Christian theology do not fare very well in this environment. High-tech popularizations of our faith have little regard for the more serious, less action-packed material in the Bible. It is no accident that video Christianity tends to be Christianity *lite* — a faith minus the meat and reduced most often to moralisms. Cartoon Christianity tends to be just that — laughable.

A recent Christian video, for example, uses animation to turn biblical depictions of the pain of violence into cartoons on the level of Roadrunner and Coyote. When my kids viewed the video's depiction of the man on the road to Jericho being beat up, they thought it was funny. The production itself turned violence into slapstick. They were supposed to laugh, despite the intention of the original Author. In this case the medium — an animated cartoon on video — reshaped the message and miscommunicated the Bible's meaning.

Everywhere, on all sides, the pressure mounts to conform to the onslaught of visual media. To compete with the powerful visuals of the electronic show, print media are trying to adapt. We see shorter articles, bigger type, more white space, action photos, and computer-enhanced design. Bibles must be simplified — even for adults. To get any attention at all, reading material must become what it is not, trying to match TV's sound-bites for brevity and its flashy imagery for visual appeal.

On these terms, reading material doesn't stand much of a chance. After all, behind that shiny hologram on the Bible cover, one still must deal with all those laws in Leviticus and complicated passages in Romans. Who can make it through that stuff anymore?

It is ironic indeed that despite the impressive array of excellent study Bibles, commentaries, dictionaries, and other helps available to us, as a group we could not answer even the simplest questions about the Bible when George Barna's researchers interviewed us. If we honestly look at the results that matter, not merely annual sales figures and units moved, we have to admit that something has gone wrong. Biblical illiteracy is a problem among born-again believers, people who *have* been reached but now spend more time watching the Show than reading the Book.

So what is a culturally relevant ministry to do? Switch to a shorter, easier, faster version of everything? Admit that in the age of the 3.5-second attention span the *One-Minute Bible* just takes too long? Get over our outdated obsession with black marks on flattened, dried-out wood pulp and start producing 24-hour-a-day Christian MTV?

How does a religion based on a substantial amount of content from a book survive in this environment? Increasingly, it survives in a reduced form — less to know, but more to see and feel and experience. This shorter, easier, faster Christianity is a diminished Christianity.

Will the show go on? Will we continue to fall all over ourselves in the rush to inject some values into the latest electronic medium? Unfortunately, we seem to be well on our way to Virtual Christianity. Given our history of adoring technology, of falling under its spell like everyone else, we will soon see the Virtual Reality "Battle of Armageddon" Bible adventure game. How else will we reach the video game generation with the good news?

And what could be more effective for evangelism than Virtual Bibleland? Who could possibly resist a gospel appeal after actually being there at the Crucifixion and hearing the Roman centurion say, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"? But perhaps we will only get Virtual Conversions — thrilling, moving, exciting — but not quite real when the machine gets turned off.

Can we stop and think before our Christianity becomes virtual and our faith becomes less than real?

I am not advocating a mindless fear of the new and strange, like some 1940s fundamentalist Christian condemning motion picture technology to hell. By now we have had some experience with various electronic and visual media. It's time for a tough, hard look at their real-life effects and lasting impact. Although it goes against the grain of our instincts as American evangelicals, perhaps we should rethink our participation in the Big Show.

First, when we do decide that a particular technology is appropriate for our use, we must still be frank with ourselves about its strengths *and* its weaknesses. What are the biases of this new technology? What distortions of Christianity might this medium foster? Our televangelists, for instance, apparently did not stop to think what their television techniques would do to the message they brought. In contrast, we must commit to using new methods thoughtfully, critically, and carefully.

Second, more time, energy, and resources must be put into efforts to move people beyond the artificial life offered by new technologies to the authentic life of following Jesus in the real world. This authentic life involves knowing His Word and living His ways.

The experiences produced by the new technologies are addicting. Everyone is "wowed" by them. But hypnotized videots cannot relate very significantly with others, nor experience much of God's full creation. Real social interaction and group experiences are decreasing in our culture as more and more people enjoy their own isolated experience of the show. Attempting to "redeem" video games, television, and personal computers by adding moralistic content is not going to change that.

We talk fervently about "reaching people," about bringing the good news to a new generation that doesn't read books or listen to long sermons. But do we really think that once we've contributed to their ongoing entertainment, albeit with the gospel, they will willingly and easily turn into reflective Christians that meditate on God's *written* Word? What steps are we taking to make sure this happens?

In fact, it is not happening. Maybe the way we are reaching people has something to do with the kind of Christians they are becoming. Our all-consuming drive for "relevance," revealed especially in our embrace of entertainment, has not produced disciples of Jesus so much as shallow fun-seekers.

Evangelical Christians rightly seek to "reach people where they are" — even in the entertaining world of the technoshow. The question today is whether we are content to leave people where we reach them. Even more perplexing is the question, "Have we ourselves comfortably settled in with them?"

Real Christianity means we must live our lives, work out our relationships, raise our children, and fulfill our mission in *real* reality. It means getting to know our neighbors, playing outside with our kids, serving meals at our local street mission, or taking a walk with a friend to just talk.

Evangelicals have done all they can to match the technical quality of the Big Show, while making sure the fun is *good* fun. But it's time to offer something more. The frenetic pace of the electronic media produces restlessness and disquiet. Too often what we're left with, even after the values-added versions, is mere agitation. The Bible causes us to realize that God's salvation brings rest and peace. As one of the Reformation catechisms (the Heidelberger) reminds us, we can "begin already in this life the eternal Sabbath." How truly refreshing it would be to our frantic world if we fulfilled our role as agents of this rest, of God's shalom, rather than merely imitating the agitators.

God has revealed Himself as the Word. He came and walked among us in the flesh. *For real*. He is a majestic God whose profound depths we can never fully communicate to the world. But we can take the time to pass on what we know faithfully. Our current temptation is to reduce Him to the slick, the silly, and finally, the unreal. It doesn't have to be this way. We don't have to settle for Virtual Christianity.

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