Mission-Shaped Discipleship in a Virtual World

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Christian approaches to the internet and the virtual world are divided. There are technological instrumentalists who think we should embrace virtual life as something to be sanctified, by using it for the purposes of discipleship and mission.[1] And there are technological determinists who think real Christians should sanctify the world by resisting virtual life, as something that inherently dissipates authentic spirituality.[2] This places us on the horns of a dilemma. We either side with the determinists and risk damning the world; or we side with the instrumentalists and risk losing our souls. I seek an alternative way forward that affirms the instrumental value of virtual life without resorting to the naivety of technological neutrality; while acknowledging the deterministic tendency of virtual life without yielding to the inevitability of technological domination. I interpret the virtual world as a social arrangement within the fallen creation, under the thrall of 'principalities and powers'.[3] And I draw upon the resources of Wesleyan theology and spirituality for outlining some key practices that might help us live as a sanctified and redemptive presence within it.

1. The Virtual World

The New Testament concept of 'world' (cosmos) can describe the original goodness of creation in communion with God, but more often a state of fallenness and alienation, and in need of redemption.

1.1 The 'World'

Oliver O'Donovan describes worldliness as the fallen tendency of humanity to abuse our stewardship of creation by reconstructing the cosmos to our own sinful ends.[4] By participating in the ways of the worldliness, our lives become disordered, and no longer conform to the creative intent of God or our true destiny in the kingdom. The nascent

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1 Cf. John Jewell, *Wired for Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004); Douglas Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009); Elizabeth Drescher, *Tweet if You Love Jesus: Practicing Church in the Digital Reformation* (New York: Moorehouse Publishing, 2011).

2 Cf. Douglas Groothius, *The Soul in Cyberspace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997); Albert Borgmann, *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003); Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

3 Brad Kallenberg, *God and Gadgets: Following Jesus in a Technological Age* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011); Jana Bennett, *Aquinas on the Web? Doing Theology in an Internet Age* (London: T&T Clark, 2012).

4 Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, 2nd Edn, (Leicester, Apollos: 1994), 227.

goodness of creation, and human creativity, lies in its potential to mediate the presence and purposes of God, and to reorder our fallen lives. John Yoder describes the fallenness of the world as 'a blend of order and revolt'.[5] The world is redeemed when it is brought under the reign of God, as a new creation in Christ, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit. From this perspective, I suggest that the virtual world can be understood as a fallen realm within the order of creation and, therefore, capable of redemption and even having redemptive value for everyday life in the mission of God.

1.2 The Virtual Cosmos

From a sociological perspective, human beings can be described as 'world building' creatures, who engage in the social construction of reality; that is, the capacity of persons and groups to create over time their own settled ways of thinking about and living in the world.[6] Everyday life is deterministic insofar as we inherit its dominant social habits; but instrumental insofar as we may be 'free' to make our own way through life with the resources it provides. The virtual world has been socially constructed and legitimated as a space of freedom on the internet to extend our personalities, relationships and communities beyond limits of physical embodiment.[7] This is accomplished through virtuality as a habitable space (from social networking websites like Facebook to online worlds like Second Life) or as a convergent realm within everyday life (especially through mobile information and communication devices). Determinists note, however, that the experience of virtuality is increasingly and inescapably diffused through all the institutions of everyday life;[8] and we are all becoming 'social cyborgs', permanently and seamlessly connected to the internet through our digital devices and wireless networks. I have found it helpful to analyse these competing narratives of virtuality in three ways.[9]

First, the virtual world offers unfettered expressivity; as the experience of freedom from the body makes it possible to construct virtual identities, or 'avatars', of our own choosing.

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[5] John Howard Yoder, 'The Otherness of the Church', in: Michael Cartwright, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Scottdale, PA: Herald press, 1998), 56.

[6] Cf. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality* (London: Penguin, 1991); Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

[7] Cf. Tim Guest, *Second Lives: A Journey Through Virtual Worlds* (London: Hutchinson, 2007); Edward Castronova, *Exodus to the Virtual World* (New York: Palmgrave, 2007); Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

[8] Cf. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

[9] Much of what follows comes from my own personal observations, but also incorporate the critical reflections of technologists and cultural exegetes from a 'secular' perspective. Cf. Davey Winder, *Being Virtual: Who You Really Are Online* (Chichester: Wiley, 2008); Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011); Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget* (London: Penguin, 2011); Andrew Keen, *Digital Vertigo* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2012).

Social media enables us to do this by sharing a steady stream of photos, videos, blog posts, texts, tweets and other status updates. Through this kind of 'life-logging' we imaginatively communicate who we are, or would like to be, by managing the perceptions that others have of us. Unconfined by the givenness of physical embodiment, our avatars are not bound to mirror the givenness of age, sex, interests or employment. Although such freedom can be celebrated as an extension of the normal process of identity formation, there are also concerns about the inadequacy of avatars. Stories are told about the difference between representations and real persons, between virtual transparency and fully human authenticity. The soulful intimacy of face-to-face relationships exceeds anything offered by remote sharing. And the bodily intimacy that expresses tangible care simply cannot be reproduced by virtual means.

Second, the virtual world offers limitless connectivity; in the experience of being pervasively connected to everyone, everywhere and always. The downsides of disembodiment are mitigated somewhat by the benefits of 'telepresence', or the digitally-mediated sense of being somewhere else, or being with someone else, despite being separated by space and time. And the advantages of this 'always on' environment range from overcoming the feeling of absence to the profound experience of sharing life with others around the globe. This may be contrasted, however, with an emerging discontent about being 'tethered' to the internet: from those who long to be alone but suffer from 'disconnection anxiety'; to those who crave undivided attention in a torrent of notifications and news feeds. Stories are told about the difference between multiple connections and meaningful relations, between easy contacts and costly friendships. Comforting words and empathetic gestures cannot always substitute for practical actions and fully human embrace.

Third, the virtual world offers boundless community; through the experience of co-creating our own social worlds with other like-minded people. Many web based virtual communities are formed around shared interests that converge with the issues of everyday life. They offer everything from personal support to knowledge sharing, and spiritual pursuits to social activism. Nevertheless, stories are told about the difference between collaborative networks and virtuous communities. Online groups can be just as exclusive and vicious as any other, and arrangements of mutual self-interest are not known for cultivating relationships of costly and unconditional friendship.

In her research with digital natives, Sherry Turkle notices deep longings for values and practices that lie beyond their immediate experience. 'We have seen them feeling more alive when connected, then disoriented and alone when they leave their screens. Some live more than half their waking hours in virtual places. But they also talk wistfully about letters, face-

to-face meetings, and the privacy of pay phones. Tethered selves, they try to conjure a future different from the one they see coming by building on the past they never knew. In it, they have time alone, with nature, with each other, and with their families.'[10] Technological development constantly forces us to consider 'whether it serves our human purposes' and 'brings us back to questions about what really matters.'[11] In the end, Turkle asks all the right questions, but has no answers. Although she says the 'Luddite impulse' is not an option, her concluding advice resorts to nostalgia: to unplug, slow down, be still, practice solitude, be more intentional, and have more critically reflective conversation.

Social analyses of the virtual world typically leave us in a state of ambivalence. They can examine the division and convergence of embodied and virtual life, and account for the experience of those who live at the interface between them. What they cannot do is settle the argument between utopian and dystopian visions of virtual life, or settle any kind of direction for how our virtual world-building should proceed. They can observe that embodiment seems to matter, at the moment, but they cannot agree on why it should. They can describe how disembodiment can become an addiction, but they cannot say why it should be a problem. And if the determinists are right, then our emerging digital natives will gradually become naturalised citizens of a world that they no longer have the conscious resources to critique. The virtual world will go uncontested in its power to divide and re-order daily life in its own image, for better or for worse.

1.3 Creaturely Witness

Brent Waters has argued that the challenge of all technological development lies in attempting to master or transcend the finitude of embodiment, and living at odds with our true creaturely destiny in Christ.[12] Any theological approach to the ambivalence of virtuality, therefore, must be shaped Christologically; which reveals that embodied life is not to be dominated or escaped, but embraced and redeemed. A commitment to the incarnation will reject any practice of virtuality that finally detaches us from the order of creation; and condemns any attempt at world building that denies the creative intent of God. The incarnation also reveals that God is providentially at work in the world, unfolding his redemptive purposes towards the new creation. As co-workers with God, our vocation is to participate in the task of re-ordering everyday life in Christ, through the power of the Spirit. For John Yoder, this redemptive agency is accomplished through the 'social holiness' of the

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[10] Turkle, *Alone Together*, 265.
[11] Ibid., 294-5.
[12] Brent Waters, *From Human to Posthuman: Christian Theology in a Postmodern World* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 118.

church as a missional community of disciples who provide a visible and embodied witness to our destiny in the kingdom of God; whether gathered in the church or scattered in the world.[13] The world cannot know what it means to be 'virtual,' apart from that which is not virtual; and it cannot know whether being virtual is either good or bad, apart from a being confronted by a way of life that does not take virtuality as its destiny.

2. The Power of Virtuality

In different ways, William Stringfellow, Jacques Ellul, John Yoder and Walter Wink have developed the biblical view that the fallen world is under the sway of 'principalities and powers',[14] and how they operate within the development of human social constructions.[15]

2.1 Worldly Powers

The powers were created good, for the empowerment of human society under the reign of God; but they are fallen and have set themselves up in opposition to God, overpowering us by stealth through the temptations of worldiness and sin. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, however, the powers have been unmasked, disarmed and submitted to the eschatological reign of God. Our vocation as agents of redemption, means participating in the victory of Christ over the powers through the sanctifying gift of the Spirit. The church is to be a community of disciples whose lives are being re-ordered in Christ, enabled by the Spirit to resist the the powers, and sent into the world by God to break their fatality over everyday life.

2.2 Simulation and Hyperreality

In what follows, I want to unmask tentatively the power of virtuality, as it exerts itself through the process of simulation, and captivates us to the habits of hyperreality. Simulation begins by introducing a 'split in the cosmos' between embodied and virtual life. It eventually overpowers us, however, when the distinction between them is erased. Jean Baudrillard claimed that we now we live in a 'desert of the real', a world in which film, television, and computer images are more 'real' to us than the prosaic experience of everyday life. The

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[13] Yoder, 'The People of God in the World', in: Michael Cartwright (Ed), *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Scottdale, PA: Herald press, 1998), 74, 81-87.
[14] Some key biblical texts include: Colossians 1:16-20, 2:15; 1 Corinthians 15:24-26; 2 Corinthians 4:4.
[15] William Stringfellow, *An Ethics for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, 3rd Edn (Waco, TX: Word, 1979), 78-84; William Stringfellow, 'Strategems of Demonic Powers' and 'Traits of the Principalities', in: Bill Kellermann (Ed), *Keeper of the Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994); Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom* (New York: Seabury Press, 1967); John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd Edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 134-161; Walter Wink, The Powers that Be (London: Doubleday, 1998).

virtual world is not just a representation of the real world, but has become a starting point from which we now understand and inhabit all of reality.[16]

The first stage of simulation is that we make a faithful image or copy of something real; which we value precisely because it reflects the real thing. Social media provides a means for extending our everyday lives in the virtual world, beyond the limits of embodiment. We build a profile, add friends, and join groups on Facebook, in order to represent ourselves online and enjoy the benefits that the virtual world affords. Theologically speaking, the power of virtuality appears in its most instrumental form, and capable of serving the kingdom of God.

In the second stage of simulation, the image 'distorts' the original; not necessarily in its imperfection, but because its features exceed those of the real thing. Our avatars can seem more expressive than our embodied personalities, and our online relationships can be so much more flexible and convenient than the demands of physical engagement. We experiment with our profiles on Facebook to present the kind of self image and lifestyle we prefer. But we also discover a dark side to our simulations: pornographers, online predators, cyber-bullies and identity thieves. As Christians, we can be tempted to inhabit the virtual world as a realm of freedom from God, and fall easy prey to our sinful nature.

In the third stage of simulation, the image becomes something quite different from the real thing. Our newly constructed and much improved avatars, contacts and networks begin to take on a virtual life of their own. Almost inadvertently, the world of Facebook becomes a preferred place to be and to interact with others. The split in the cosmos is completed, as our lives become increasingly disconnected from the creative intent of God, and dis-ordered around our own self-centred desires.

Finally, we enter the stage of pure simulation, in which our images no longer even pretend to be real, because they have actually become 'better than real': so much more exciting, more beautiful, more inspiring, and generally more interesting than so-called real life. Facebook is not merely about logging our embodied lives online, but turning them into resources for constructing a world of our own. As we give precedence to our virtual lives, the virtual world redefines what we mean by authenticity, friendship and community. And the power of virtuality is sacralized, as we surrender ourselves to the ways of hyperreality.

Turkle's research on accounts of technology use reveals a narrative 'arc' that goes 'from seeing simulation as better than nothing to simply better'. She explains that 'we may

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[16] What follows is an elaboration of what Jean Baudrillard describes as 'successive phases of the image', in: *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 6-7. Cf. Umberto Echo, *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality* (Vintage, 1995) ; Albert Borgmann, *Holding On to Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

begin by thinking that emails, texts and Facebook messaging are thin gruel, but useful if the alternative is sparse communication with the people we care about. Then, we become accustomed to their special pleasures - we can have connection when and where we want or need it, and we can easily make it go away. In only a few more steps, you have people describing life on Facebook as better than anything they have ever known.'[17]

There are those of a more instrumentalist persuasion who self-consciously acknowledge and celebrate this process of simulation. Jane McGonigal claims that 'in today's society, computer and video games are fulfilling *genuine human needs* that the real world is currently unable to satisfy'.[18] She concludes that 'reality is broken' in a way that can only be fixed by embodying the values and practices of the virtual world in everyday life through the 'power of games'.[19] What she does not consider, of course, is that the power of virtuality may actually be responsible for breaking the real world, and creating the kind of hunger that it alone can fix.

From an instrumentalist perspective, the virtual world simply augments our embodied lives. From a determinist perspective, however, the split in the cosmos is not reconciled but reversed, as embodied life becomes instrumental to virtuality. The process of simulation does not lead to the abandonment of embodied life, but reshapes it in the image of the virtual; and there is a fear that real losses may be concealed behind convincing simulations.[20]

First, the danger is not that we might become less personal, but hyperpersonal: tethered to the internet in a kind of perpetual 'out of body experience' in the midst of everyday life. Embodied life becomes just one more medium to present the 'real self' that we have become used to online. Some lament a loss of true intimacy, while others are concerned about a constant (and often reckless) oversharing of personal messages for popular consumption that makes us insensitive to boundaries of prudence and modesty.

Second, the danger is not that we might become withdrawn, but hyperrelational: tethered to the internet in a state of 'continuous partial attention' towards others, even our closest family and friends. Embodied life becomes a means for surfing on the shallows of superficial relationships, never fully open or attentive to anyone. Some lament the loss of true

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[17] Turkle, *Alone Together*, 160-1.

[18] Jane McGonigal, *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (London: Vintage, 2012), 3.

[19] McGonigal is committed to the design of 'alternate reality games' which enhance our engagement with the 'real world' in terms of personal and social transformation: from curing cancer, to stopping climate change, spreading peace and ending poverty (Ibid., 6-15).

[20] For some explorations of this challenge, cf. Peggy Kendall, *Rewired: Youth Ministry in an Age of IM and MySpace* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2007); Jesse Rice, *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected are Redefining Community* (Colorado Springs, CO: David Cook, 2009); Adam Thomas, *Digital Disciple: Real Christianity in a Virtual World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2011).

relationality, while others are concerned about becoming multiply overwhelmed by token friendships, 'always on' but lacking the depth and demands that make them worth having.

Third, the danger is not that we might become hopelessly individualistic, but hypersocial: tethered to the internet, we are 'alone together'. Embodied life becomes a means to form groups of mutual self-interest but low expectation. Some lament the loss of true fellowship, while others are concerned about seeking community without cost, continually in touch but never truly available, boundless in scope but without the bonds of responsibility.

2.3 Power Encounter

Hendrick Berkhof argued that we need to take up the Christian life as a daily power encounter: in which we live defensively, by resisting the deterministic influence of the world; but we can also live 'offensively,' as agents of God's redemptive purposes within it.[21] If the church is to be in the world, but not of the world, it needs to be an authentic community of disciples who take up virtual life as a form of spiritual combat. Everyday life for the Christian is a site of contestation in which the re-ordering power of the Spirit, strives against the disordering power of virtuality. This way of discipleship can be viewed from the perspective of incarnation in a number of senses. First, we are sent to address the world's ambivalence towards virtuality, as witnesses of authentic human life under the reign of God. Second, we are sent to heal the split in the cosmos by incorporating the virtual to serve our embodied lives, making peace between them, as new creatures in Christ. Third, we are sent to restore the instrumentality of virtual life to the mission of God, as a sanctifying presence in the world. So, I now want to consider what Wesleyan theology and spirituality can contribute to this challenge.

3. Real Christianity

Wesley is a pietist, for whom 'real Christianity' is marked by the life of God in the soul: a power of godliness that makes us holy from the inside-out. According to this pietist principle, 'real life' springs from the sanctifying power of the Spirit in the heart, and overflows in the holy love of God and neighbour. The forms of life we adopt are sanctified insofar as they become means of grace through which the life of God in the soul is cultivated and expressed. From this perspective, I suggest the power of godliness can flow through both embodied and virtual forms of life; or, more accurately, through the convergence that exists between them. Moreover, it is through the sanctification of this convergence, that the power of virtuality can

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[21] Hendrik Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1977), 36-64.

be dethroned and redeemed. The virtual world need not be opposed to the 'real world', since it can be made 'real' through the sanctifying presence of real Christians, among whom virtual life may become a means of grace. If we can speak about the authenticity of 'virtual church' at all, then it must be on these terms. From a Wesleyan perspective, however, I think we are better off setting aside ecclesiological wrangling about what constitutes 'real church' by focussing on real Christian discipleship that participates in the mission of God to renew the church and reach the virtual world.

The strength of the pietist principle, however, is also its greatest weakness. Founding real Christianity upon inward experience can lead to forms of private spirituality and solitary religion. The history of modern Christianity has been plagued with this tendency towards disembodiment: as evangelism is reduced to making converts; conversion is reduced to inner spiritual experience; and the management of inner experience has become the purpose of the church. It is not difficult to see how privatized spirituality can fall easy prey to the power of virtuality. In a culture where people are migrating from embodied life into the virtual world, the obvious solution is to do internet evangelism, make virtual converts, and incorporate them into virtual churches. By making this move, however, I fear the power of virtuality over the church becomes complete. If we turn to Wesley for an affirmation of virtual life, it is crucial that the pietist principle is set alongside his understanding of real Christian discipleship as spiritual combat against the disembodying powers of worldliness.

3.1 The Mystery of Iniquity

In the developing Methodist movement, Wesley observed the quality their spiritual life tended to be dissipated through 'friendship with the world', and urged them to avoid unnecessary attachment to non-Christians.[22] This is because he has a very high doctrine of 'friendship', as the intimate fellowship that exists between those who share the same way of life, and help one another pursue it vigorously. Those who are seeking holiness are set apart from those ensnared in worldliness, as people belonging to opposing kingdoms; walking different paths, to different ends, and under the rule of different masters.[23] For Wesley, real Christians should reserve the intimacy required of true friendship for those who help us 'on our way to heaven'.[24] His caution is not that others are inherently evil, but against the power of worldliness that works through them and creeps up on us by stealth.[25]

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[22] John Wesley, Sermon 80, 'On Friendship with the World', in: Thomas Jackson (Ed), *The Works of John Wesley*, 1872 Edn, AGES digital CD-ROM, Vol. 6 (Rio, WI: 2002), ¶1-7. Hereafter, *Works*.
[23] Wesley, Sermon 81, 'In What Sense We are to Leave the World, *Works* 6:¶7-8.
[24] Ibid., ¶23-24.
[25] Ibid., ¶9f; cf. Friendship with the World, ¶13f.

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The prohibition against friendship with the world does not entail withdrawing from the world, since the providence of God has placed us in a myriad of personal relationships for the purpose of loving our neighbour. Our posture towards the world is not one of friendship as such, but of mission. It is salutary to remember, however, that even relational evangelism is a power encounter that comes with a health warning: 'If you do not raise their hearts to heaven, they will draw yours down to earth'.[26]

Wesley also makes it clear that the fallen world is not a God-forsaken place. The objective victory of Christ's death on the cross spans the whole of human history; since the Lamb was 'slain from the beginning of the world,' and his 'sanctifying Spirit began to renew the souls of men.' There is a 'mystery of godliness' at work in the world, which is the universal movement of prevenient grace. Alongside this, however, there is a 'mystery of iniquity' that undermines the sanctifying mission of God.[27] It has always been the vocation of God's people to reveal the mystery of godliness in a world of iniquity, by embodying a life of freedom the power of sin, as a witness to the kingdom of God. But the 'energy of Satan' works subversively in the church by duping us into exchanging missional lifestyles for friendship with the world. For Wesley, real Christianity is situated in an agonistic struggle between the mystery of godliness and the mystery of iniquity, the sanctifying power of the Spirit and the worldly power of sin.

3.2 Prevenient Virtuality

The mystery of godliness is 'preventing' insofar as it restrains the powers and prevents us from collapsing hopelessly into the ways of sin and death. It also accounts for the world's sense of ambivalence and discontent towards virtuality.[28] And this grace is 'prevenient' insofar as it invites and inspires human co-operation, to participate in the victory of Christ over the powers, and become co-workers with the Spirit in the way of salvation and holiness. This opens the possibility that virtual life can be made instrumental to the mission of God through the redemptive agency of real Christians.

The 'mystery of iniquity' is also at work among the people of God, however, and we are reminded that it does not take the powers of virtuality to disembody the church, or dissipate its witness in the world. Being gathered in the flesh does not guarantee that people are really present to each other; being face-to-face does not mean people will share lives together; and being in a neighbourhood does not mean people will love their neighbours.

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[26] Wesley, Leave the World, ¶19.
[27] Wesley, Sermon 61, 'The Mystery of Iniquity', *Works* 6:¶2-4.
[28] Wesley, Sermon 72, 'On Evil Angels, *Works* 6:§II.9.

Indeed, the church is duly chastened by seekers and believers alike, who have found greater authenticity in the spiritual life of virtual communities than locally embodied congregations.[29] This preference for virtual life should be taken as the symptom of an underlying spiritual disease, and an opportunity for self-examination. The future of mission will not depend on planting virtual churches, or making embodied churches more technologically relevant. Unless we are seeking real Christian discipleship we will have no real witness in the virtual world and no basis for discerning its benefits or withstanding its dangers.

3.3 Mission Spirituality

I conclude by outlining four core values of Wesleyan spirituality which could function as a 'rule of life' for mission-shaped discipleship as a power encounter in the virtual world.

First, being a sanctifying presence means seeking holiness as whole-life discipleship, in which our embodied and virtual lives are reconciled by the reality of holy love. The question concerning virtual life is not ultimately settled by the things we do, but by the kind of people we are, and a witness that flows from the inside-out. The life of God in the soul puts forth branches in both the embodied and virtual realms of everyday life; and holiness means reconciling these (making peace between them) through lives of spiritual integrity and authenticity. Seeking holiness adopts a resistive posture by denying ourselves an unhealthy 'friendship with the virtual world', and taking up our cross by putting to death the habits of hyperreality that would disembody our everyday love for God and neighbour. But seeking holiness can also redeem virtual life as we explore the full potential of virtual relationships for growth in grace, Christian fellowship, soul care and faith sharing.

Second, being a sanctifying presence is embodied through the use of spiritual discipline, as we seek holiness through works of piety and mercy. Embodied spiritual discipline can help us resist the dissipation of being 'tethered' to the internet, for example, by practices of 'technology fasting' (solitude and spiritual retreat), which have become popular among non-Christians as a means of freedom from the overwhelming power of virtuality in daily life. Being intentional about works of mercy can also re-attune us to the necessity of bodily presence and undivided attention in the service of others. Wesley reminds us that we cannot visit the sick by proxy. Virtual life may be redeemed through exploring virtual works of piety, especially engagement of word and prayer: such as online prayer guides, bible study,

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[29] Cf. Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 161f.

lectio divina, and various forms of spiritual reading and sustained theological reflection.[30] Mobile devices also make it possible to carry these resources into the routines of daily life, while making them more collaborative. Virtual works of mercy, such as soul care through spiritual conversation, can enhance embodied relationships between face-to-face encounters.

Third, being a sanctifying presence is maintained through sharing fellowship, in which we watch over one another in love. Regular fellowship can have a resistive dimension insofar as it encourages patterns of critical self-reflection and mutual accountability about our engagement with the virtual world. In small groups, we can resist the reduction of personal relationships to superficial contacts by investing in a few spiritual friends who penetrate the depths of true communion with one another, in the common pursuit of God. Sharing fellowship can also redeem virtual life insofar as it encourages mutual spiritual direction through the practices of Christian conference, theological reflection and moral deliberation online. This kind of spiritual conversation can be extended into forms of virtual 'society'; and in small groups akin to virtual 'bands'.[31] Such things become redemptive practices insofar as they contribute to the formation of fully embodied and whole-life discipleship. [Maybe even virtual ashrams!][Third spaces in the virtual first space]

Fourth, being a sanctifying presence has an impact in the world through the practice of evangelistic witness as a means of grace. We share life and faith with the expectation that the Spirit will awaken people to the reality of God's love, and become fully embodied followers of Jesus themselves. We must resist the temptations of virtuality to turn the gospel into a disembodied message for easy consumption, rather than the challenge long-haul commitment of making whole-life disciples. Evangelistic witness can redeem virtual life as a means for connecting seekers with the gospel, and offering initial spiritual guidance, through the unbounded outreach of evangelistic websites and social networks. Experiments in 'virtual church' and internet 'e-vangelism' may be redemptive only if they are made instrumental to the mission of God, by the witness of real Christian disciples.[32] And the power of virtuality is finally submitted to the kingdom of God when seekers are incorporated into embodied

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[30] Cf. Teresa Bythe and Daniel Wolpert, *Meeting God in Virtual Reality: Using Spiritual Practices with Media* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2004).

[31] David Bell has argued for a recovery of the 'now-neglected sociological concept' of Bundt, which he defines as 'an elective grouping, bonded by affective and emotional solidarity, sharing a strong sense of belonging'. Although his argument remains undeveloped, he suggests that the concept of 'virtual Bundt' may 'allow us to disentangle ourselves from...arguments about online community; by recognizing that the problem is at least in part the over-freighted term 'community' itself'. Cf. David Bell, *An Introduction to Cybercultures* (London: Routledge, 2001), 107.

[32] Cf. Andrew Careaga, *e-Vangelism: Sharing the Gospel in Cyberspace* (Lafayette: Vital Issues Press, 1999). There have been a plethora of books published on this topic in recent years.

communities of authentic discipleship; brought to faith in Christ, and set free by the Spirit, to live without compromise as a sanctifying presence in the world.

Sacraments -

Notion of 'home' - table practices

Friendship as a crucial category