Virtual Christians Lack Community

By David Lee Burris

[Abridged Art of Manliness Column Followed By My Own Comments – d.l.b.]

The absence of camaraderie is often at the root of why soldiers sometimes struggle so acutely to adjust to life after deployment. They come home, Junger says, and realize for the first time what an "alienated society" they truly live in. What they need, he argues, is a country that "operates in more of a community way."

He then adds: "But frankly, that's what *we* [all] need."

Unfortunately, true *community* in our modern world is hard to find for soldiers and civilians alike. Instead, we increasingly live out our lives as members of *networks.* This transition from community to network life is truly at the heart of the increasing feelings of loneliness and anxiety that many people experience in the modern age. We've never been so "connected" — and yet so isolated at the same time.

Networks vs. Communities. John Gatto sharply elucidates the differences, and argues that if we truly want to experience "the Good Life" and develop fully as human beings, we need to spend more time in communities and less time in networks.

Networks Are Large & Anonymous; Communities Are Small & Intimate

Because networks are so large, anonymity reigns. Members do not meet face-to-face, do not know if the people they interact with digitally are even who they say they are, and may have no idea who also belongs to the network. Because of the lack of physical intimacy, <u>a culture of honor and shame</u> cannot function.

In contrast, communities have inherent limits on their size. According to <u>Dunbar's Number</u>, most humans can't maintain more than around 150 meaningful relationships. Anthropologists have found that hunter-gatherer societies hover around 150 members before they split. In Western military history, the size of a military company — the smallest autonomous and fully functioning unit — has been around 150 members.

If a community gets too big, people get overlooked. And because members no longer face the social scrutiny of their peers, they can opt out of contributing without shame or consequence. Once that disengagement happens, community life slowly begins to crumble.

Networks Are Artificial, Top-Down; Communities Are Organic, Bottom-Up

Networks are typically artificial; they rarely form organically. And they are invariably created, and then governed, in a top-down fashion. Policies & regulations are decreed from on high with little or no input from the majority of the people who make up the network. Because those at the top are so removed physically and psychologically from those at the bottom, the solutions ultimately proffered are often out of touch and highly ineffective.

Even when the powers that be in a network ask for input from its lower-level members, the request for feedback is usually a token gesture lacking in any efficacy. When networks solicit feedback, the aim is to pacify members with the illusion, and only the illusion, of their having a voice and influence.

Communities, on the other hand, are organic and autonomous. They're made up of a collection of real families that are bound together by geography and shared values. When facing a problem, individuals within a community band together to come up with a solution that will work for them. Because the people trying to address problems within the community — including its leaders — are familiar with the group's unique needs, the solutions that are generated are typically more effective.

Networks Encourage Passivity; Communities Require Contribution

Because there are so many people in a network, members assume someone else will take care of problems that arise. But because that's what everyone else is thinking, nothing gets done. The anonymity of the crowd allows the passive bystander to escape shame.

Networks not only breed passivity, but encourage consumption. They're all about what you can *get*, rather than what you must *give*. Oftentimes you can buy your way into networks, and because you're paying for the service, you don't feel obligated to offer any other form of contribution. The network doesn't ask for anything either. It's a transaction. In a network, the members provide the money, and the network provides the experience. You are wholly consumer, rather than creator.

Even when contributions are mildly encouraged, because networks are large and anonymous, people can get away with taking from the pot but not adding to it. For example, you can join an online forum, and post some questions in order to pick the brains of other members. While it would be nice to offer advice in return, you're certainly not obligated to do so. You can come in to a network, get what you need, and leave.

In contrast, in communities you get *and* you give; you can take from the collective pot, but you're required to add to it too. There's a sense of duty and obligation on this point. In a community, the group is small enough that people know who is and who isn't being taken care of, and who is and who isn't stepping in to help. If you don't pull your weight and you're perfectly capable of doing so, you face social repercussions.

Networks Are Location Independent; Communities Are Attached to Place

With networks, you do not actually have to be physically in the presence of the other members of the network to participate in the group. You can work from home or take part in online discussions while you're vacationing across the world.

Communities, on the other hand, are attached to a physical place. They require you to be geographically close to your fellow community members. Necessitating physical presence, and face-to-face interactions, communities force individuals to be accountable to one another.

Networks Divide a Person Into Parts; Communities Nurture the Whole

Networks only ask for the part of a person that's pertinent to that particular network's limited & specialized aim. The offering of only one narrow slice of ourselves is especially pernicious on social networks where we show others a glowing highlight reel of our lives, but hide the not-so-pretty behind-the-scenes parts.

By splitting the person up, the network promises efficiency. But according to Gatto, "this is, in fact, a devil's bargain, since on the promise of some future gain one must surrender the wholeness of one's present humanity. "This doubtless generates much business for divorce courts and therapists of a variety of persuasions."

Communities, on the other hand, nurture the whole person. A community, as Gatto puts it, "is a place in which people face each other over time in all their human variety: good parts, bad parts, and all the rest." There's no identity splintering in a community.

When a person suffers a crisis in a community (say for instance a debilitating accident), the community comes to help the whole person. Food is brought over; yard work is done; rooms are cleaned; hats are passed around; spiritual and emotional comfort is given. The same person steeped in network living would have to depend on paying strangers specialized in different areas to get the same sort of help: a cook, a house cleaner, a yard worker, and a therapist.

Beware of Networks Wearing Community's Clothing!

For most of human history we ran in small, intimate tribes. We're social animals, and our brains are evolved for life in close groups. We crave the bonds and sense of belonging and stability that communities provide. In the modern age, these vital communities have disappeared, so we have turned to networks to fulfill our social needs. But networks can never be a fully satisfying replacement for communities.

The façade of community quickly disappears when emergency strikes in your life and you really need somebody. Your fellow online "tribe" members might raise some money for you if they even know about your problem, but they won't come visit you or provide actual human-to-human services. The fact that the only thing online communities can really do for their members is raise money is a telltale sign that they're actually just networks and not communities. Community contributions should "pinch" — they should feel like a sacrifice. Lots of people are willing to click on a link to Paypal, but how many will come over to clean out your bedpan? As Gatto puts it, "when people in networks suffer, they suffer alone."

The lack of genuine care from people in network life isn't malicious. They are more than likely very caring people. The problem is they're part of the network, and networks artificially divide us from each other. The unfortunate result of networked life is that it makes us feel lonely even when we're surrounded by masses of people. Gatto describes the sad, shallow nature of networked life:

"With a network, what you get at the beginning is all you ever get. Networks don't get better or worse; their limited purpose keeps them pretty much the same all the time, as there **just isn't much development possible**. The pathological state which eventually develops out of these constant repetitions of thin human contact is a feeling that your "friends" and "colleagues" don't really care about you beyond what you can do for them, that they have no curiosity about the way you manage your life, no curiosity about your hopes, fears, victories, defeats."

So, beware of false tribes, which come to you in community's clothing, but inwardly are ravening networks.

Learning How to Live in a Community Again

Meet physically. There are churches out there that offer online "services" where you watch the sermon online, give money online, and even pray and chat with other members online. The intention is good — bringing the bread of life to those who otherwise might not get it at all. But such a set-up only feeds one part of the soul; their need for community will remain famished. Online interactions can be fun and convenient — a *supplement* to our lives — but they can't *substitute* for in-person meetings.

Share your whole self. The more your group encourages people to bring their whole self, rather than just a slice of it, the more the group feels like a community.

Be prepared to sacrifice. Oftentimes people lament that they want to be part of communities, but what they really mean is that they want to enjoy the benefits of communities without having to deal with any of their responsibilities and hassles. They want to get, but not give. Being part of a community means not only taking from the pot, but putting into it; if you aren't willing to help out your fellow members when they're in need & deal with the annoyances inherent to any close-knit group, you'll never move beyond existing in a network.

Live by family. The heart of community is family; not just their nuclear family, but their extended family. For centuries people lived near their parents and grandparents, along with their uncles, aunts and cousins. They were your go-to, tight-knit support group. In our present age, one's parents and siblings are strung out all across the country. [We can correct by revisiting the values of generation's past. d.l.b.]

Christian Theology of Ethics Professor at George W. Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University, Roger E. Olson, in the **_Christian Post warned_**:
"Virtual reality replaces bodily & physical reality... Or the two are confused—as if the difference does not really matter. Can a pastor really 'pastor' (shepherd) a congregation if he or she never is among them? Is there really total commensurability — spiritually — between seeing and hearing a local pastor preach, pray and teach bodily, physically, and seeing and hearing a speaker via satellite feed or internet connection?"

PERSONAL REMARKS:
Fellowship Isn't On-Line

It is my informed opinion that the first century local churches did not waste any time taking weekly attendance nor did early Christians ever evidence a desire to be elsewhere other than where the saints were assembled. The often-quoted Hebrews 10:25 admonition to not "forsake the assembly" was written in the chapter context as circumstantial to religious persecution by pagan communities, Jewish majorities, or Roman authorities.

Furthermore, it is also my opinion that the dominant congregational discipline today that correlates pew-sitting to faithful Christian living is also a measure that the early church would never have understood. In the late half of the 20th Century many local congregations made the transition from taking attendance as a tool to publicly withdraw from the unruly to instead utilize attendance to determine who has instead withdrawn themselves & need to be taken from the member directory.

There is no verse of scripture that can support a policy that equates routinely warming a church pew with faithful living. Every rebellious teen that grew up being forced to show-up on Sundays knows that a person can be present without really "being there."

However, the 2020 Coronavirus Pandemic has put a new twist in the minds of many making them to think that remotely *watching* church services as they stream makes for an identity equivalent & faithfulness measurement to both *being* & *doing*. As the previous column outlined — internet networking and digital streaming are not a replacement for community. Our First Century Standard for the local church was an active community richly involved in each other's lives & life choices... In other words, let our post-pandemic new-normal continue to access church service stream as necessary supplement not as a substitute for in-person worship - except for occasional & exceptional circumstance.

Casual Observation & Remote Viewing Alone Don't Meet The Biblical Definition Of Christian Fellowship

1st **Corinthians 1:9**

The word "fellowship" is from the Greek *koinonia*. The following English words translate the family of English words: "communion, common, sharer, partake, partner, contribution." In New Testament application, Thayer divides it into three parts: (1) the share which one has in anything, participation; (2) intercourse, fellowship, **intimacy**; and (3) a benefaction jointly contributed, a collection, a contribution. On the last application, Thayer adds, "as exhibiting an embodiment or proof of fellowship." Or, the contribution shows a fellowship that already exists.

Fellowship pre-supposes that the ones in fellowship have **things in common**. The word "fellow" is an Old Norse term for comrade or associate. **It shows a state or condition in which such persons move.** This is how we use the terms today showing our participation with others as we speak of **friendship**, partnership, sonship, etc.

In *1st Corinthians 1:9: "God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto   the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord."* This passage establishes that something existed that was known as the fellowship of Jesus Christ. This fellowship involved the Godhead and "ye-the church of God which is at Corinth." By studying the epistle, we learn that this fellowship involved changes in their state with God and with each other, as well as a change in their relationship.

The things that were common to every Christian were their state. They had each been lost and were now in a common salvation (Jude 3). Their very nature had been changed, and all had a divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). They all shared in one common faith (Titus 1:4). And, they all had a common responsibility of "sounding forth the word" (Phil. 1:5). Their state and relationship is why they had fellowship (Acts 6:1-6).

Two Senses of Fellowship

In one sense, a Christian does not control fellowship with other Christians, either in state or relationship. Since God does the calling (I Cor. 1:9), it is God who decides who is in fellowship and man has nothing to say about it. We are partners because we share those things that are common to all Christians. While we may disagree about many things as we grow in the Lord, it does not change the fact that we are in fellowship.

In another sense, a Christian does exercise control of fellowship. It is something he extends or denies. We make judgment as to who we will walk with and endorse according to biblical instructions. Those that we believe are in fellowship with God, we "welcome such" (3rd John 8). But, those that we believe are not adhering to the doctrine of Christ, we refuse to fellowship (2 John 9-11). The Jerusalem church made a judgment about Paul, because of his previous conduct, that they would not fellowship him (Acts 9:26). Later, they did fellowship him, after Barnabas persuaded them that Paul really was genuine.

So, in the areas of fellowship, as state or relationship, it's co-extensive with salvation; it is universal and completely under God's control. In extended participation, it can be refused, it is limited, and it's often local. It is under a Christian's control by guidance of the Word. Judgment has to be made in this area.

A Study in Ist John

I John 1:1-4 *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;)*

That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write unto you, that your joy may be full.

There are several irrefutable conclusions that we can reach about these passages. (1) **Fellowship considered apart from persons would be meaningless. There has to be someone to be in fellowship with.** (2) The fellowship of Jesus established apart from the apostolic witness is impossible. What many consider as fellowship is not the fellowship that the Bible is talking about. (3) The only means we have to share with the Father and Son is to share with the witnesses through their declared message.

I John 4:7-11 Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved if God so loved us, we ought to also to love one another.

Here God makes a great declaration when John says, "God is love," what a powerful message! If we recognize that, we understand what is required of us in sharing by loving one another. Brethren really need to pay attention to that. If you notice, the passage says the result of loving is truly knowing God.
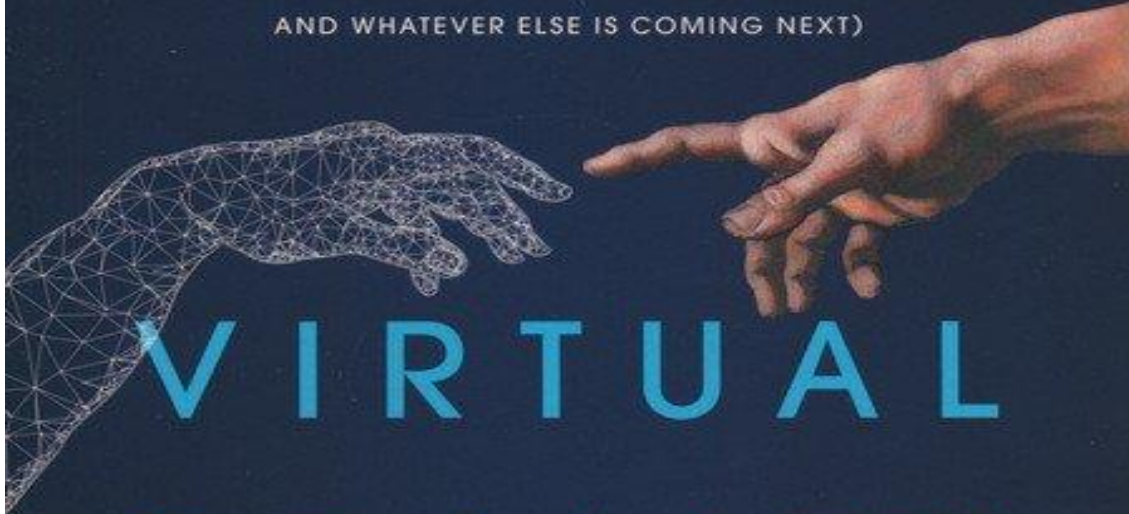
– Port Hueneme Church of Christ Bulletin

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ADDENDUM: THE FUTURE IS HERE! > IS THIS WHAT WE WANT?
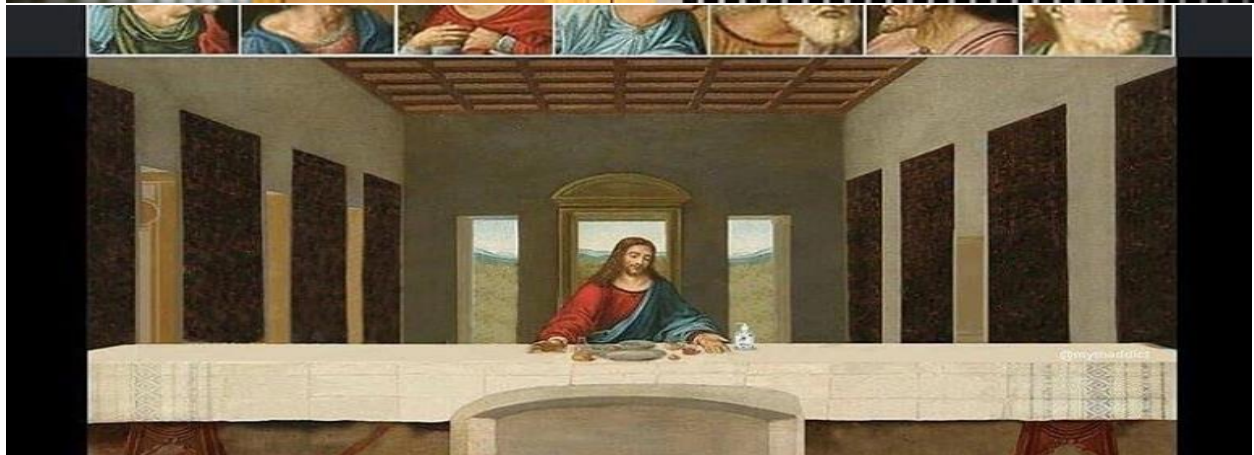
PITFALLS AND POSSIBILITIES
(OR HOW TO THINK BIBLICALLY ABOUT CHURCH
IN YOUR PAJAMAS, VR BAPTISMS, JESUS AVATARS,
AND WHATEVER ELSE IS COMING NEXT)

VIRTUAL
REALITY
CHURCH

DARRELL L. BOCK AND

JONATHAN J. ARMSTRONG

Moody Book Review: The Future of Church?

The New Book, Virtual Reality Church, Is Ahead of the Curve.

It's Tuesday night and you just had an incredible worship experience. From the moment you entered the worship space, you were personally greeted by everyone you met. The worship music was **totally immersive**, and you could sing loudly and passionately without fear of others hearing your "joyful noise." You listened attentively as God's Word was faithfully preached. In fact, the message *moved* you — so much so that when the pastor called people forward for baptisms as a response to the message, you found yourself walking towards the front. Soon after you were in the pool being dunked by the pastor in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

As the service closes, you realize you just had a transformative experience with God. You know your life will not be the same.

On your way out, you make sure to wave goodbye to *the dragon who was sitting beside you in the service*. You remove your Oculus Quest 2 headset and just like that, you're back home in your pajamas, on your couch, by yourself, at 9:15pm on a Tuesday. Something real happened, but what?

Is this the future of church?

Pitfalls and Possibilities

Darrell Bock and Jonathan J. Armstrong envision a not-so-distant future in which church worship experiences like this are part of the norm. And with the way church livestreams have become ubiquitous during the COVID-19 pandemic, that future seems less and less far-fetched. In their new book, *[Virtual Reality Church](#):* *Pitfalls and Possibilities (Or How to Think Biblically about Church in Your Pajamas, VR Baptisms, Jesus Avatars, and Whatever Else is Coming Next),* Bock and Armstrong argue that Christians would do well to begin thinking deeply about virtual reality (VR) before it "reshape[s] our culture in profound ways" (28). The book is a guide for Christian leaders who are looking to assess both the evangelistic opportunities and potential shadow-side of this emergent technology and others like it.

Bock and Armstrong liken VR to previous tech advancements such as the internet, television, and radio. They argue that the church has always adopted new technologies for the sake of mission, elevating the importance of evangelistic mission over and against other potential downsides. It is through this lens that the authors believe Christians should approach VR, thinking seriously about the possibilities it may afford the church. While overtly positive about the future potential of VR, the authors also balance their optimism by considering the potential "pitfalls" of the technology.

They highlight this concern when they note that "[v]irtual reality becomes not merely a new way of visualizing the internet but in fact produces a new world. And so the worlds that we experience inside the goggles also transform the way that we see and know the world outside the goggles" (46). Virtual reality, then, is not just an external tool which we may or may not use; virtual reality actually *changes us* by changing the ways we perceive and interact with reality.

From here, the project takes a decidedly theological turn as Bock and Armstrong use Christian doctrines to evaluate VR's legitimacy for church practice. They then analyze the concept of "presence" using the incarnation and ministry of the Holy Spirit, exploring how VR may or may not achieve the biblical ideal.

Evangelicals, Early Adopters, and Embodiment

This book is unique first in that it offers an evangelical analysis of a cutting-edge technology and avoids simplistic, pragmatic arguments of whether or not the approach "works." Instead, the book provides a practical theological approach that helps readers think more deeply (and biblically) about innovative technologies.

In decades past, theological reflection on the church's use of emerging technologies has lagged behind actual practice. This volume addresses the topic well before most practitioners will even know what an Oculus headset is.

Virtual Reality Church is published early enough in the VR revolution that it can function as a helpful guide for ministry leaders as they wrestle with if and how to adopt the technology. Purveyors of the original online churches did not have such a luxury, particularly from a seasoned evangelical perspective. Along the way, readers will find that the book has much to say for other models of digitally mediated church as well.

Even so, the book is not without its limitations. First, a sustained discussion of human embodiment could have greatly assisted the authors in their evaluation of VR. While Bock and Armstrong hint at different aspects of the topic throughout the book, the explicit focus tends to be on God's presence in virtual worlds rather than on ours.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic when nearly every church was forced online, it is easy to imagine a not-so-distant future where virtual reality church becomes widely accessible. If and when that day comes, lay people and leaders alike will be grateful for a book resource like this.

Questions To Ask Ourselves:
Will VR Church Be Supplement Or Substitute?
Will God Consider VR Worship Acceptable?

THE FUTURE NOW: VIRTUAL REALITY CHURCH OFFERS BAPTISM