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SimChurch

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Church in the Virtual World

Today a new community of the people of God has begun. We won't find it on the streets of our cities. Many of us won't even recognize it as a church. We all know churches — some are traditional, some are modern, some are mega, and some are emergent. For all of their apparent differences, each of these churches is basically the same — variations on the physical church in the modern era.¹ Partisans of one of the thirty-two flavors of modern churches may protest, but at the end of the day, they all belong to similar faith communities in the real world. Each one has a building with a front door that you open; each one has people who shake your hand; each one has pastors, ministers, elders, or leaders who proclaim God's Word to you; each one is real, tangible, physically present. There are differences, but there are more similarities.

A change is occurring in the Christian church the likes of which has not happened for centuries. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the church is beginning to be different not in style, venue, feel, or volume but in the world in which it exists. A new gathering of believers is emerging, a church not in the real world of bricks and

mortar but in the virtual world of IP addresses and shared experiences. This type of church is unlike any church the world has ever seen. It has the power to break down social barriers, unite believers from all over the world, and build the kingdom of God with a widow's mite of financing. It is a completely different type of church from any the world has ever seen.

Annus Virtualis

We are all familiar with the internet, or cyberspace. The internet exploded onto the scene in the last decade of the twentieth century. Cyberprophets predicted the end of the world as we knew it, a prediction that proved to be inaccurate. The real world is here to stay, though the internet remains a large part of our collective society. What happened? These cyberprophets misunderstood the nature of the explosion. As with all revolutionary advances, there is a period of uncertainty and exploration immediately followed by a time of adjustment. For example, even though Nikola Tesla invented the radio in the early 1890s, it was almost forty years before the world really figured out how to use it.² The same is true of the internet; even though the internet is a creation of the twentieth century, we will be well into the twenty-first century before our world comprehends and fully utilizes its capacity.

Already the internet is a mighty force. In 2007, the number of internet users passed one billion for the first time.³ While this is only a little more than 20 percent of the world's population, at no other time in history since the time of Genesis has more than 20 percent of the world's population been in direct communication with each other. This statistic alone is theologically sobering. E-commerce has also kept up with the internet population boom; more than two trillion dollars changed hands over the internet in 2007.⁴ Only a few years ago, booksellers sold 100 percent of their books in retail stores, but today more than 33 percent of all books sold are sold online.⁵

This is but the tip of the iceberg. In the early days of the internet, elementary applications such as email and bulletin board systems were the norm. These early applications seemed transformative, but they harnessed only a very small percentage of the power of the internet. Today a new wave of experiences — from self-published digital content to blogs to wikis to MMOGs⁶ — has antiquated those early applications and pushed the internet one step closer to the day when the world will realize its full cybercapacity. If someone told you in 1980 that you could create your own movie or write your own book and sell it in a store that serves thirty million people, without the help of publishers, studios, lawyers, or marketers, you would have said they were crazy.⁷ Now it's possible.

These new applications are only the second wave of the virtual tsunami that is transforming our world.⁸ To grasp the magnitude of what is happening, it is vital that we see the internet not as a technological tool but as a paradigm shift in the way the world interacts on a fundamental level.⁹ For example, you could look at a mobile phone as a technological tool — a telephone with no wires. Yet to do so misses the point. The mobile phone is a small paradigm shift in our world because it makes us no longer inaccessible. With the mobile phone, family, friends, colleagues, and solicitors can reach us in the car, in the theater, in the boardroom, or in the bathroom. The difference between the impact of the mobile phone and the internet is the magnitude of the shift: the internet is causing a paradigm shift a hundred times greater than that of the mobile phone.

We can see this shift already playing out in both the education and business worlds. Many US public schools now offer “virtual academies” for elementary schoolchildren. A student of higher education used to be forced to travel to attend an institution and to sit in a respected classroom in order to learn, but today many colleges and universities offer virtual classes, and many of these institutions offer virtual degrees.¹⁰ Even venerable Harvard University has a small

campus in the virtual world. Similarly, the business world has begun to embrace video conferencing and training webinars. And this is only the beginning. The church is sure to follow.

For the remainder of the book, I'm going to be careful when I use terms such as *internet* or *worldwide web* because they can obscure the digital revolution that is at hand. Instead, I will speak more in terms of the virtual worlds that are opening up around us—virtual worlds that soon will make the internet of today seem incredibly limited. The future of the internet lies not in its being a tool for emailing others but in its being an immersive world where many people will spend as much time as they do in the real world.¹¹ In the next few decades, the virtual world will equal or surpass the real world in its reach into and positioning in many aspects of our lives. For many people, the virtual world will be the world where they carry on more interactions and conduct more transactions than in the real world. It will be the place where they find love, soothe their feelings, make deals, and worship.

Some may dismiss this as hype or science fiction. After all, didn't socio-technological gurus in the early twentieth century predict that we'd have flying cars and moonbases before the year 2000? They did, and so we can agree that predicting the future is a shaky business. Nevertheless, many of the developments we will speak of are happening already, even if in a limited way. The evidence is strong that they will continue to happen in the next three decades. Of the one billion people online, an estimated seventy million are already regular participants in virtual worlds,¹² and that number continues to grow dramatically.¹³ Virtual worlds are generating an estimated four billion dollars in annual revenue. And the sobering statistic: while no one knows exactly how much time residents spend in virtual worlds, a large percentage spend twenty or more hours *per week*, and many spend much, much more.¹⁴

At Secondlife.com, we get a good glimpse of what is on the horizon. Part of the second wave of the virtual evolution, Second Life

has been growing exponentially since its inception in 2003. It boasts fourteen million members already. Second Life is not a website per se; it's a virtual world where an individual creates an avatar, becomes a resident, and tools around town accomplishing many of the same things a person in the real world is able to accomplish. There's more. As of 2007, Second Life residents exchange more than one and a half million dollars in commerce *every day* in that virtual world. Second Life even has its own currency (the Linden dollar), a real-estate market, virtual millionaires and crime rings, and virtual churches.

A Brave New Worship World

Today a new community for the people of God has begun. The church is evolving from the real world into the virtual world. At this point, most churches have merely stuck their little toes into the waters of the virtual world; they have a website with limited interaction, little more than a rudimentary, first-wave billboard. Some have caught the second wave and are a bit more advanced, offering a degree of interaction or spiritual instruction through blogs, downloadable teaching points, or sermon podcasts. And a number of churches have prepared for future waves by creating worship experiences in the virtual world.

One such church is LifeChurch.tv, based in Edmond, Oklahoma. Led by Senior Pastor Craig Groeschel, Innovation Pastor Bobby Gruenewald, and Internet Campus Pastor Brandon Donaldson, LifeChurch.tv offers several weekly worship experiences in their virtual church. Some of LifeChurch.tv's worship experiences use an internet-campus model — broadcasting services with text interaction — but LifeChurch.tv also has created the beginnings of a much more immersive virtual church in Second Life. LifeChurch.tv bought real estate, hired a developer, built a church building, and created seating for avatars to attend church each week. During its best weekend in 2007, LifeChurch.tv's internet campus (broadcast, plus