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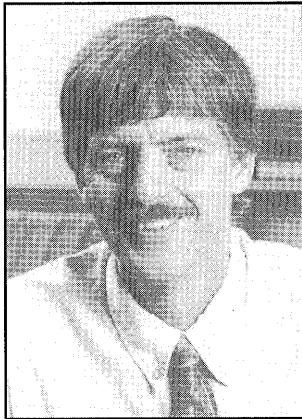
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Describing the Elephant: Christianity in a Media-Driven Culture



by Syd Hielema

Transforming society and discerning the spirits of the age: during my upbringing in a decidedly Kuyperian home and in my years as a student at Dordt College, these two goals were embedded within my being as central to the Reformed vision. In those days a generation ago, the atmosphere was somewhat triumphal, and the spirits to be discerned were often “out there,” clearly perceptible to the uninfected observer safely ensconced

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within the Kuyperian enclave. In our more humbly tentative context today, we recognize that these spirits of the age are all too present within ourselves as well. A “Christ transforming culture” community which neglects its calling to be a “discerning the spirits of the age *within us*” community is somewhat like a hockey team playing without a goalkeeper. How can one seek to transform a culture in the name of Christ when that culture has already succeeded in enculturating one’s vision of Christ? Paul’s rallying cry to the Ephesians comes to mind. When the people of God come to maturity in Christ,

we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Eph. 4.14-16)

The enculturated community is the infantile community, blown here and there like a raft adrift on the ocean. The deceit-discerning community that lovingly declares the truth is on the road to maturity.

The past thirty years have also seen a second significant shift: as we begin the twenty-first century, we live in a thoroughly electronic world, and its media have become the primary vehicles for the spread of the spirits of our age. “Their voice has gone out into all the world,” we might say, adapting Psalm 19. The purpose of this essay is to describe sixteen of these “media-enhanced” spirits and to suggest how each of these has contributed

to the shaping of the Christian community. Each one of these sixteen deserves a chapter of its own, and, obviously, a piece of this length cannot go into detail on any of these spirits. However, by providing a fairly rapid snapshot sequence of these spirits, I hope that the cumulative effect of these will become evident. These sixteen are not isolated phenomena, but together they form an organic whole in which each one strengthens the others in some way so that they combine to generate a powerful force whose overall effect is greater than the sum of its parts.

The task of such discernment is, in some ways, plainly impossible. The discerner is himself shaped by the spirits of the age that he seeks to discern and he has been—to some extent—blinded by them. Discernment is necessarily somewhat like the four blind men attempting to describe an elephant, each one feeling a different part of its body and coming to vastly differing conclusions concerning its shape. That parable illustrates the need for a discerning community to compare notes together. These sixteen brief descriptions are presented then as the “sightings” of one blind man inviting the community to compare and revise.

1. The postmodern shrug: relativism

One of the first-fruits of living within the explosion of information available in an electronic world is the democratization of truth. The media bombard us with so much information that we cannot process it all. In the latter half of the twentieth century the primary medium for disseminating information has shifted twice, from print media to mass media to web-based media, and each of these shifts has introduced a loosening of both the formal and informal regulatory power of “truth watchdogs.” Reputable print publishers maintain fairly stringent standards of reliability, and the public knows (though it may not care) that the *National Enquirer* follows different standards than *The New York Times*. Mass media such as television and movies have loosened these standards, but as *mass* media they are subject to careful scrutiny in the press, and reviewers serve, at least to some extent, as reliability wardens. The Internet has multiplied the information available exponentially and in so doing has become a medium that is impossible to monitor.¹

While relativism as a spirit of the age predates the Internet explosion, web-based information dissemination provides a perfect vehicle for strengthening the democratization of truth, i.e. it embodies the principle that the medium is the message very well. All truths are equal: what works for you is good for you; what works for me is good for me. The only standard that we can impose upon each other is the standard of tolerance. Truth as it is understood in the Christian faith is a phenomenon that requires a boundary between truth and the lie. Virtual reality is a phenomenon that obliterates boundaries of many

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kinds and severely tests the boundary between truth and lie. The 2000 American presidential election symbolizes the results of this development in two ways: first, the truth of who really won the election will never be known, revealing that both the electoral system and the judiciary are incapable of establishing clear and absolute truth within what is arguably the most important institution in this democratic society. Second, the public is more amused than traumatized by this realization. The ambiguity of truth is assumed and accepted.

This spirit of relativism is heightened by the media’s inherent and necessary intrigue with the unusual. In an electronic world, the standard for weighing the value of information relies less on the criterion of truth and more on the criterion of intrigue. While humankind has always been drawn to that which is bizarre and mysterious, the electronic world has moved such realities from the margins of daily life to the center, a movement epitomized in the coining of a new term: “infotainment.” Even such educational channels as The History Channel or The Discovery Channel, often offer programming that features the bizarre or trivial rather than significant scholarship or learning.

How have these shifts affected our understanding and practice of the Christian faith? They have done so in a number of ways. First, in some ways

there are greater possibilities for the Christian faith to join the public forum; the removal of boundaries has also removed barriers that have excluded the Christian faith from public discourse. Furthermore, the shrinking of the planet has provided Christian communities with opportunities to engage in more cross-cultural experiences and to cross-fertilize with believers in other contexts, and this broadening of horizons contributes greatly to faith maturation. These benefits contribute considerable strength to the worldwide community of faith.

Second, while Christians have more opportunities to add their voices to the public outpouring of speech, the overwhelming proliferation of voices means that none of them needs to be taken seriously. Some have referred to this as “the post-modern shrug,” or the “whatever” syndrome. Yes, we’ll allow everyone to have their say, and even provide a listening ear upon occasion if it’s intriguing enough, but don’t expect what you say to change who I am.

Third, this democratization of truth has effected two parallel but opposite results in the Christian community. On the one hand, it has generated a smorgasbord approach to doctrine with a particular fascination for the more intriguing aspects of faith. Personal theologies that speculate about angels, the end times, how the Holy Spirit speaks, and so on, abound. Recently, I heard of someone lamenting that the Holy Spirit had instructed his wife to travel to Nebraska to meet a man whom she had encountered in a chat room. He was certain that this was the beginning of an affair, but how does one argue against the voice of the Holy Spirit in a postmodern age? In such a climate, a belief system that calls for steadfast faithfulness through good times and times of struggle does not fare well. As sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow writes, the current intrigue with angels reveals that “Americans are turning to the ‘middle beings’ instead of working on the more difficult relationships, namely with God and with our neighbors.”²²

On the other hand, we are seeing the repudiation of smorgasbord theology evidenced in a desire for sound and solid theological and biblical teaching. As believers sense the poverty of building one’s house on self-constructed

theologies, a yearning for stronger foundations sets in. However, I am convinced that the tide has not yet turned. While these yearnings will continue to grow, the tidal wave of smorgasbord theologies of intrigue has not yet peaked.

2. The privatization of faith and its reduction to morality

This descriptor of our culture is the opposite of the previous characteristic, and that in itself is telling: in the context of a culture’s dynamics, it is possible for opposites to co-exist. The privatization of faith posits a firm boundary between the public sphere and the private, and one’s faith must be cordoned off within the latter. This distinction is not at all new; it was developed in depth by Immanuel Kant, firmly embedded within the beginnings of the American nation, and lies at the heart of the separation of church and state in American society.

Though this distinction has many ramifications, the key one for our purposes here lies in a parallel distinction between facts and values, science and morality. Science describes how the world works, whereas religion draws up ethical systems. The former deals with the “is” of reality, the latter, the “ought.” The predominant purpose of the Christian faith, then, is to encourage moral values, to be the voice for right living. As our age has become increasingly immoral, and as the mass media and the Internet have exacerbated that trend, the primary concern of the Christian community has been to address this rising immorality. Furthermore, major cultural issues such as the decline of sexual mores are framed as moral issues, and when morality is widely accepted as a matter of personal choice, there can be no commonly accepted standard for judging these issues.

The Christian community does function in an important way as a moral conscience of society. However, to do so within the boundaries of this public/private distinction raises a serious problem: we are fighting on the wrong battlefield. It’s as if we are fighting a sea battle with ships on land, which guarantees defeat. At its center, the Christian faith is not about morality. Rather, it is about the gracious covenanting faithfulness of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit who call us to new life and to participate in their kingdom project of making all things new. People who are in Christ

are new people, and they see the world through new, Spirit-shaped eyes. This ontological foundation grounds all moral discourse.

A specific example helps to illustrate this. One who accepts the public/private distinction and the reduction of faith to morality may develop certain standards for sexual behavior, teach these standards in the church, home, and school, and avoid movies and music that undermine these sexual standards. A “clean” movie which features “wholesome” interaction between men and women is acceptable, whereas one that features skin, suggestive language, and erotic behavior is not.

This approach ignores the ontological foundation of morality. Sexual standards are rooted in certain understandings of reality that are much deeper than simply positing rules. These deeper understandings lead to questions such as these: What does committed love look like? What does it mean to be a Spirit-led male or female? How does this compare with cultural accounts of male or female? What is the role of sex within a relationship? Might there be sexual dynamics in one’s relationship with God? What is the shape of a community which encourages habits of God-praising sexual activity? How does my new identity in Christ transform the pleasure of my sexual behaviour?

The key to pondering foundational questions such as these is noting their two crucial characteristics: first, to be human is to have answers to such questions *whether one is aware of these questions or not*. In other words, the question is not, “do we have answers to such foundational questions?” Rather, the question is, “do we realize how our actions are based on the answers we have already developed to these questions?” To be human is to live with assumptions concerning what it means to be male or female, even if one has never given the issue a moment’s thought. Second, the (often unarticulated) answers to these questions have *a greater shaping power over one’s lifestyle than the rules that govern one’s life*. How one sees reality provides deeper guidelines than one’s moral code if these two phenomena conflict.

Herein lies the rub: it is easily possible that a “clean” movie provides more perverted answers to some or all of the questions listed above than a “dirty” movie. A clean movie may portray maleness in ways that seriously distort the wonder of

being a child of God created in his image as a man. However, this movie may strike the Christian as “clean” because the public/private distinction blinds one to the reality-shaping power of media that appear to be “morally pure.” This point cannot be overemphasized because the media constitute the greatest reality-shaping power of our culture. Why is it that the Christian community is overflowing with young women suffering from eating disorders? Surely in part this stems from the frightening interweaving of a faith that calls them to “be perfect” with the media that cruelly prescribe what female perfection must look like.

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3. Individualism

Individualism is deeply rooted in American culture. There is a strong sense that one must be independent and self-sufficient in order to be mature. As with the previous point, the spirit of individualism was not born through the media. However, the information technology explosion has exacerbated this tendency in the following ways:

(1) The shrinking of geographical space has made people much more mobile, which means that people frequently live far away from their extended families. Furthermore, becoming rooted in a community takes years of hard work; not only do people live far from their communities of origin, but they also move more frequently. The more mobile a culture is, the lower the numbers of rooted-in-community people there are. This absence of community-rootage exacerbates individualism.

(2) The pervasiveness of media is part of a general increasing busy-ness of life: we are bombarded with sounds, sights, and information incessantly; we are bombarded with new technologies and gadgets that raise the bar of human “needs” constantly, which in turn requires people to work more hours per week and arrive more weary at their homes. This busy-ness erodes people’s time and energy to build relationships, and therefore

contributes to individualism. Furthermore, a weary people find it easy to relax on the couch with a remote in their hands; the TV demands little of us. Relationships demand personal attention and response.

(3) Developments in media and technology promote the individualising of the home. Easy availability has made it commonplace for a sound system, television, telephone, and a web-connected computer to be present in every person's room. Busy schedules may interfere with common family meal times, but the microwave has made it simple to heat up personal-sized food portions whenever necessary. At its extreme, the home becomes a hotel for separate individuals, each one living on his/her own schedule, wired to his/her own media realities, passing like ships in the night. We no longer need each other to work or to play. The growth of relationships through "wasting time together" seems less and less necessary and becomes less and less available. The decline of meaningful relationships in the home is accompanied by a rise in Internet-based relationships, with this ironic but predictable result: researchers have discovered that "extensive Internet usage seemed to cause greater social isolation and even depression."³

This technologically exacerbated individualism contributes to the shape of our theology. Christianity in our culture has placed more emphasis on having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ than at any other time in history. The privatization of faith has not only reduced faith to morality; it has also combined with the individualism of our culture to focus on one's personal relationship with Jesus Christ.⁴ Certainly such a relationship is integral to the Christian life, but the Bible has more to say about what it means to live as a Christian community than it has to say about our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. This imbalanced emphasis is heightened by the fact that we are too busy and too tired to build community, and that we don't dare to practice one of the central acts of community building: holding one another accountable (because a relativist society teaches tolerance as its chief virtue).

This exacerbated individualism leads to one other significant result: Scripture calls upon the Christian community as a unit to address the problems and issues with which it is confronted and to

develop communal strategies for letting its light shine in the darkness. However, this particular problem undermines the community's ability to address the issue as a community. We're too busy to think about it, too tired to strategize, and too afraid of each other to try to develop common approaches. It is "you in your small corner and I in mine," and the devil follows the divide-and-conquer military strategy.

4. Instant gratification of fabricated desires

"You arouse man to take joy in praising you, for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you," declared Augustine centuries ago,⁵ thereby asserting that desire is central to what drives us as human beings. A desire is an emptiness that seeks to be filled. When Jesus declared, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled," he was declaring that humanity desires many different things, but desiring righteousness is all that really counts, an orienting of all other desires to this central, over-riding desire. "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart" declares David (Ps. 37.4), thereby asserting that such delight leads to the transformation of our desires so that we desire the things which God desires.

In many ways the media send the same message: "Delight in us and we will transform your desires into our image." Media-driven desires are those that are quickly addressed and just as quickly depleted again. This rhythm is reinforced both through the consumerism that envelopes the media and the character of the media themselves. The media package reality for us in neat little bytes that make sense of the world around us. The thirty-minute sitcom presents a life problem and deals with it rather quickly, and we are taught that life comes at us in neat and manageable prepackaged chunks.

In this context, Christianity too can become a faith driven by the satisfaction of desires through neatly packaged byte-sized solutions. Life is a problem to be solved, and Christian bookstores are filled with how-to books that will give us the recipes and steps for solving the problems. The Bible then becomes a source book for constructing the recipes that will solve our problems and prayer

is the medium for bringing our problem lists to God. Taken to an extreme, prayer becomes consumerism on one's knees.

Fortunately, life in general and our walk with God in particular are not problems to be solved. Rather, following Jesus is a way in which to walk, a way that has ups and downs, joys and pitfalls, a long obedience that is filled with struggles that are never eliminated on this side of the grave. God doesn't solve all our problems; at best he transforms our understanding of the problems by situating them within the story of his covenanting grace, and he thereby transforms our desires so that our desires become his desires.

I recently heard of an unusual situation that illustrates this dynamic. A congregation comprised mainly of retirees in Colorado sensed a call to youth ministry, even though their fellowship contained no young people at all! Once a week they gathered to pray, asking the Lord to equip them and to open their eyes to the need for such ministry. This continued for more than a year. Their small skiing town was a haven for disenfranchised young adults who gathered from all over the country. One day a young man was killed in a skiing accident, a man whose family had no interest in him, dead or alive. His friends approached this congregation asking for help in conducting the funeral. These patiently praying folk discerned in this event the Lord's response to their waiting. They cared for this grieving subculture in a manner that laid the foundation for ongoing, long-term ministry to them. They allowed their desires to be shaped by the heart of God, even though their method appeared to be utterly bizarre and irrational.

5. Compartmentalized anthropology

For more than two and a half millennia Western civilization has described humankind as a compartmentalized creature. The Ancient Greek dualism of the body and soul has been adopted and adapted in various ways, dividing us into creatures who have intellect, emotions, bodies, wills, spirits, and so on. The electronification of our culture contributes to and exacerbates this compartmentalization. The media by necessity engage particular dimensions of our humanness, focussing on images and using them to evoke emotional, vis-

ceral responses from participants. Furthermore, cyberspace heightens this compartmentalization by removing the human body from person-to-person interaction. The prevalence of casual sexual activity resonates with this devaluing of the human body. Some believe that the intrigue among the young with body piercing, tattoos, etc. is a way of declaring, "I am an embodied person; you cannot remove my body from the realm of daily life."⁶

Western Christianity is thoroughly situated within this tradition of compartmentalizing the person, removing the body from the practice of worship, emphasizing the intellect, and, most

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But following Jesus
is a way to walk.*

recently, following the culture's swing from the intellect to the emotional, visceral, and experiential in the trend towards contemporary worship. The presence of this anthropology can be discerned in a striking manner by contrasting discussions within the Reformed community of two statements that occur just four verses apart in I Tim. 2. In vs. 12 Paul declares, "I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man," and we have divided churches over conflicting interpretations of this exhortation. Four verses before this Paul teaches, "I want men everywhere to lift holy hands in prayer" (vs. 8), a command that is routinely disobeyed and not even discussed in almost every Reformed community that I am familiar with. Why the difference? I suspect it has to do with the politicization of gender issues in our culture on the one hand and the Christian community's assumption (in contrast to Paul's) that our bodies are irrelevant when we worship. Anthropology shapes hermeneutics.

This anthropology also plays a significant role in the worship wars that exercise many congregations at present. Usually these wars are cast as traditional versus contemporary, but those are rarely the actual issues being debated. Rather, the issues most frequently have to do with a more cerebral,

intellectual approach to worship contrasted with a more emotional, experiential, and visceral approach, and this shift is congruent with the shift from a print-based culture to an image-based one.

There is an encouraging aspect to this reshaping of our worship at the hands of the media: increasingly, worship leaders are recognizing that this anthropological pendulum shift calls for a repudiation of compartmentalization and a recovery of forms of worship that honor more holistic anthropologies. That great biblical textbook for worship, the Psalter, provides a feeling-rich and intellectually stimulating testimony to such a holistic approach.

6. Commitment and choice

One of the fruits of these first five spirits of our age is that we live in a culture in which the right to choose is more than a fundamental human right: choice is woven within our ontology. At the center of the universe stands the autonomous human being who declares, "I choose, therefore I am." With the expansion of information, the shrinking of the global village, and the ability to alter through technology previously unalterable dimensions of reality (e.g., one's gender), more choices are available in more areas of our lives. Consumer capitalism feeds upon this broad range of choices. Choice is assumed in almost every area of our lives: romantic partner, denomination or congregation, career, where to live, what to buy, what to watch or listen to, what school to attend, how to deal with pregnancy, what to believe, sexual orientation, the shape of one's identity. Very little about one's life can simply be assumed. This proliferation of choice presents a terrible burden to the young: so many dimensions of life must be sorted out and decided. Furthermore, this plethora of decision-making is intensified because almost every decision that one makes can be "re-decided" at some future date. The virtue of loyalty—which accepts limits to one's options—is seen as naive and even irresponsible. This primacy of choice has led to the ironic situation in which the arguments used to support abortion are also being used to argue for public support for Christian schools: we have a right to have a choice. Choice is a fundamental value in a consumer driven society.

This elevation of choice requires a concomitant devaluation of commitment. Commitment says, "I will seek to be faithful no matter what to this particular phenomenon, and therefore all of its competitors are off-limits." Commitments are made to the Lord, to persons, to employers, to church, school and other institutions, to life-shaping principles. While the dynamics and requirements of commitment vary according to the phenomenon to which one is committed (i.e., loyalties to the Lord, one's spouse, and one's favorite hockey team each have unique dynamics), in each of these cases the ability to make and honor commitments suffers in an electronic environment that preaches the gospel of choice. This devaluation of commitment is exacerbated by the decline of social institutions that foster commitment: divorce rates are up, parents are too busy to raise children, virtual reality is a highly unstable place which is constantly changing, and denominations are giving way to independent mega-churches. Furthermore, cyberspace has enhanced the possibilities for undermining one of the most central commitments in human life: the commitment to one's own identity. In cyberspace one can choose one's identity, and research indicates that a high percentage of people active on-line create at least partially fictitious identities, and thereby evidence a lack of commitment to their own very selves.⁷

In the 60's and 70's the key question asked by the young was, "what is the meaning of life?" Now the key question implicit in their lives is "will you be there for me?" Is anybody, any God, any institution, even my own self, committed to me in any way? A recent study of aging baby boomers, for example, revealed that a growing fear among this demographic is the prospect of an old age devoid of committed relationships. In another example, a leader in inner city ministry in Boston was shocked when a drug dealer bragged to him, "You Christians aren't committed to this community. You drive in every morning and return home in the afternoon; your volunteers come in here for a week at a time. We're here all the time. We don't just sell drugs. We take care of people, we see them head for school in the morning and walk home in the afternoon. We regulate life on the streets, and if anybody gets in the way, we take care of them. We're there for them and

you are not.”⁸

This culture-wide decline in commitment has led to the demise of loyalties that once seemed automatic in the Christian community. This shift can be seen in a number of areas. The decline of commitment to traditional doctrine has fed into an upsurge in “construct your own understandings” of the Christian faith. Commitments to denominations and Christian institutions are clearly on the wane. In many places commitments to Christian schools cannot be nearly as assumed as they once were. This decline is complemented by a rising emphasis upon relational ministry within the church and other Christian institutions, an emphasis responding to the concerns of an uncommitted society: “will you be there for me?”

But there is a silver lining edging this cloud: we are also seeing a rise in passionate commitments to Jesus Christ combined with a desire to cultivate lifestyles shaped by the call to follow him. The challenge occasioned by this development is this: this passion is often accompanied by a lack of commitment to the Christian institutions that traditionally have shaped and equipped these commitments. Thus, in some ways Christian leaders must reinvent support-structures that can serve to honor the passions of believers who refuse to accept the shoulder shrug of “whatever.”

7. The LIAR syndrome

Neil Postman coined the phrase “low information-action ratio” to describe one result of the media bombardment.⁹ This ratio is simply explained: the media bombard us with information, but this information does not engage us into action. Rather, it fosters a passive receptivity. Marva Dawn describes how the shift to the Web has strengthened this LIAR syndrome:

The severity of the low information-action ratio is escalating rapidly as more and more people get hooked into the Internet. Already scores of people have told me that they fritter away too many hours and too much energy scanning and exploring. When I ask them what they do with the data they accumulate, very few give any response other than “I know I waste so much time, but it is so interesting.”¹⁰

The spirit of intrigue described above combines

with the sheer volume of information to effect the lethargy described by Postman. The immediate and short-lived outpourings of compassion in response to global disasters illustrate this syndrome in action, a response so common that relief workers routinely speak of “compassion fatigue” hampering their efforts.

The LIAR syndrome is further strengthened in the Christian community in combination with a common misunderstanding concerning the character of truth. Taking its cue from Enlightenment philosophy, Christians tend to perceive truth as “accurate statements about the character of reality,”

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statements that require a response of assent or denial. In other words, truth does not require an *active* response on my part; rather, it requires a *mental* response of some kind. Scripture operates with a different understanding of truth. Jesus declares, “I am the way, the truth and the life” (John 14.6), and thereby asserts that truth is a way to be followed, that is, following him. Therefore, John encourages believers with these words: “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth” (I John 3.18f.). The LIAR syndrome permits one to agree with true statements while living a lie; the Truth requires a transformed and transforming life.

8. The desire for convenience and the avoidance of pain

When I was a child, convenience stores began popping up everywhere, corner stores that carried a wide variety of the daily needs of people and were open 7 days a week from 6 am to midnight. I now see these tiny outlets as signposts pointing to what has become another dominant theme in our culture: the desire for convenience. This desire manifests itself in a variety of ways in

which obstacles to the carrying out of daily tasks are removed as much as possible. It can be seen in the growing number of prepackaged foods; the rising number of features on cars that are not options but essentials; the need for bigger and faster computers, more easily accessible air travel, more appliances to perform manual household tasks, more prescriptions and gadgets to remove pain and discomfort. The media contribute to this culture of convenience by making us very aware of all the conveniences that are available and creating a sense of need for these conveniences.

Convenience is a difficult spirit to analyse because, to put it simply, convenience is a lovely blessing. One must distinguish between conveniences that serve as *tools* that strengthen the Christian community as they seek to follow Jesus faithfully in our culture today, and convenience as an *overriding desire* to find the path of least resistance in all that one does. The ministry of the apostle Paul was enhanced by the conveniences available to him in the Roman empire's road system, its maintenance of law and order, and its use of Greek as the *lingua franca*. These conveniences gave him greater opportunities to suffer for the name of Jesus Christ, and many conveniences of our culture provide us with similar opportunities.

Convenience as a *spirit* that shapes our desires, on the other hand, enervates the Christian community. The Christian life is shaped by struggle; though this struggle can be discerned in every dimension of following Jesus, I will briefly look at four of these here.

First, the central love command requires sacrificial living, and this call goes directly against the grain of our culture. Self-sacrifice is embedded within the shape of our lives; teaching, parenting, being a spouse, worshipping and every other calling in the Christian life are, at root, self-sacrificing activities. In a culture shaped by the desire for convenience, this biblical description of love cannot be understood. Instead, love is often portrayed as a sentimental feeling that makes one feel good.

Second, the spirit of convenience easily leads to a laziness that undermines the practice of spiritual disciplines in the Christian life. C. S. Lewis captures this dynamic in *The Silver Chair*, the sixth

book of his Narnia series. Jill has been entrusted with the discipline of remembering four signs that Aslan has given her. However, travelling through miserably cold weather, all she can think about is the comforts of Harfang promised her by a green lady the group met on the road. "Oh, bother the signs," she sighs, and Lewis notes that "she had given up saying the signs over every night."¹¹ The desire for comfort has suffocated the practice. Spiritual discipline is rarely convenient and is often a pain. Yet, the way of obedient following and of growing to maturity in Christ requires habits of faithfulness such as "saying the signs over every night."

Third, prayer is often practised as a tool of convenience: one gathers up the difficulties in one's life and brings them to the Lord in the hope that these difficulties can be removed because they are inconvenient. Philip Yancey describes this spirit:

In my travels overseas, I have noticed a striking difference in the wording of prayers. When difficulties come, Christians in affluent countries tend to pray, "Lord, take this trial away from us!" I have heard persecuted Christians and some who live in very poor countries pray instead, "Lord, give us the strength to bear this trial."¹²

The act of praying assumes a surrendering of our lives to the Lord and an acceptance of the sacrifice that this entails. The heart of prayer is embodied in the Lord's prayer, and its central petitions, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," are petitions to place the kingdom of God at the center of the life of the petitioning community. Prayer is a commitment to the road of the cross, the road of inconvenience.

Finally, the desire for convenience affects the shape of one's eschatology. We live in the now and the not yet, declares the Christ-following community, but as conveniences multiply the longing for the not yet to be revealed diminishes accordingly. A generation ago Reformed Christians bemoaned the otherworldliness and its passive waiting for heaven implicit in much of evangelical Christianity. Today we need a greater sense of longing for all things to be made new, a longing that is fired not by passive waiting but rather by active engagement in the pain and brokenness of the now which, in turn, evokes the cry for the old order of things to pass away.

9. Special events

As I write this section, Superbowl Weekend 2001 has just passed. The week leading up to the game was filled with media stories preparing the world for the most watched television event of the year. Interspersed with the compulsory sports statistics was another type of statistic: the cost of a thirty second commercial this year was \$2.3 million; the price did not increase from the previous year because many of the dot.coms that competed for advertising time last year have since gone bankrupt. Most companies produce new commercials just for this event at a cost of up to \$1 million per commercial. The Monday morning sports announcers not only debriefed the game but also determined the winner of the best commercial this year: Budweiser.

An electronic world thrives on special events, and has the capability of creating special events *ex nihilo*. A bit of historical context serves to explain this phenomenon: since the Industrial Revolution, daily life has been demarcated by work days and weekends. Work days are characterized by boring drudgery that must be endured until the time of freedom: the weekend, whose arrival is heralded by the phrase "TGIF." This workday/weekend distinction establishes the rhythm of desiring special events, a rhythm that can be described as one of hibernation and temporary energizing. Life electronicized accentuates this rhythm: the media are experienced viscerally, and the intensifying of visceral experience places more value on special events that are, in effect, a variety of "superconcentrated" experience. Ordinary life is devoid of meaningful experience; the special event compensates by "packing it in."

The rise in importance of the special event is paralleled in the Christian community. In the last fifteen years, we have seen a dramatic rise in mission trips, retreats, conferences, rallies, service projects and conventions. Discerning the role of these events in the Christian life is somewhat difficult because their rise to prominence is due to two contradictory factors: the "electronification" of our culture and the recovery of a crucial Biblical motif.

On the one hand, the drudgery/special event dichotomy that shapes daily life is applied to the Christian life. Following Jesus from day to day is

difficult: I don't understand how my time at work or at home connects with my faith. I feel far from God and find worship at my home church dull and uninspiring. Growing in the faith does not require slow-moving, intellectual training, but a high-powered visceral jolt. My hope lies in the special event: I travel hundreds of miles, join many other believers with whom I quickly bond, hear inspiring speakers, sing moving choruses and return home refreshed and energized. This refreshment has a short-term residual effect, after which I relapse into the dullness of the daily grind until the next special event awakens my faith from its

*A biblical model of worship
contrast with a media-driven
rhythm of hibernation/
temporary energizing.*

hometown hibernation.

On the other hand, the biblical instructions for worship require believers to participate in special events not unlike those described above, but these instructions do not accept the rationale that flows from the hibernation/temporary energizing rhythm. Events such as the Passover, the feast of first-fruits and the feast of tabernacles required believers to travel long distances, join with many other believers and experience a wondrous time of refreshment. These special events were shaped by the following characteristics:

(1) Their principal goal was to remember the wonders that God had done and to situate the believers inside the story of God's covenanting faithfulness. These events did not seek to excite the participants (though they usually did), but to remind them of their identity as the covenant partners of this God.

(2) These events recognized the role of "specialness" in the faithful life, but they did not denigrate the "non-special" as drudgery. Rather, the rhythm of life was undergirded by a steadfast faithfulness, and the special event re-membered the community within this faithfulness and equipped them to return home to continue on its way. One did not endure the grind at home until

one came to life at the next special event; rather, one returned home from the special event equipped to continue on the road of faithful following.

The difficulty in sorting out these two ways of participating in special events is that the line between them is an invisible one. Different folks can attend the same event for very different reasons, one in the spirit of the biblical model and another anxiously seeking a spiritual high. It can be tempting for believers who organize such events to succumb to a media-driven model and exploit the common hunger for such manipulable highs. Therefore, it is incumbent upon Christians to structure and promote such events according to the biblical model and not according to the cultural model, and to equip local Christian leaders to prepare for and follow-up on these special events at home in ways that resonate with this biblical model.

10. The relationship between noise and silence

The electronic world is a noisy world. We are continually surrounded by images and sounds. Radios and televisions provide a visual and aural backdrop (if not foreground) to our home and work environments, computer screens are often with eyesight, and, even if our environment is devoid of electronic stimulation, cell phones and pagers make it available to us at any time. Researchers have discovered that working within sight of a visible telephone affects one's concentration, even if that phone never rings. Kenneth Gergen describes the result of this multi-connectedness as a state of "multiphrenia," which he defines as "the splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self-investments" brought on by the populating of the self through electronic connectedness.¹³ In other words, the overstimulating of our environment creates an inner noisiness that interferes with the development of a coherent self-identity.

This "noise disease" infects Christians by legitimating an inner and outer busy-ness that promotes activity (and especially kingdom activity!) over reflection and prayer, reinforcing this through louder and busier forms of worship. But, thankfully, we are also witnessing the gradual recovery of disciplines of silence within the Christian com-

munity. "Be still and know that I am God," declares the Psalmist (Ps. 46.10), and we can paraphrase John Calvin to observe that this knowledge of God which requires stillness is complemented by the need for quiet to grow in a knowledge of one's own identity. Just as multiphrenia hinders identity awareness, Spirit-filled silence fosters it. The discipline of fasting takes on a new meaning in our context: it can fruitfully become a fasting from electronic stimulation, a fasting that creates space for God.

11. History is bunk

In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, auto pioneer Henry Ford is deified and his statement "history is bunk" becomes a religious mantra that shapes this dystopian culture. In the decades since Huxley's novel was published in 1932, the media have become culture-shapers in ways that have enhanced an ahistoricism that resonates with Huxley's prophetic vision. The combination of electronic proliferation and speed have led to the waning of an historical sense. This proliferation comes in two dimensions: the sheer volume of information and its overwhelming perspectival diversity make it very difficult to situate the information that one receives within a larger, overarching historical context. Second, the speed with which electronically transmitted information is spread and the often rapid change in visual and aural images (especially in the medium of television) create a sense of experiencing life in the now cut off from an historical context. When reality is constantly being re-imaged and re-arranged, phenomena that are five years old quickly seem irrelevant and unimportant. Defining reality in terms of bytes is not conducive to placing information within a larger, all-encompassing context. We don't need to recite the "history is bunk" mantra in our culture. The media have trained us to accept this proverb subconsciously.

History is the vehicle by which the story of my life, our community, and our culture is situated within a larger whole that serves to make sense of our contemporary realities. Story is God's gift to us for making sense of things, and the ultimate gift comes to us in His story, the story of redemption history that begins in the garden and

travels by way of the cross and the open tomb to culminate in the New Jerusalem descending from heaven to earth. We live inside that story, that meta-narrative, and that story serves to define the parameters of all other stories, including the story of each of our lives.

The electronic world is also a story-telling world. Almost every thirty second commercial tells a little story, because marketing psychologists know that ultimately selling products is about helping consumers define the meaning of their lives. Television shows, movies, songs, conversations in chat rooms, and web-sites are all filled with stories, stories that point to the meta-narrative of consumer choice: we are invited to choose the stories that scratch our itches and thereby invited to choose our identity and meaning. Rather than losing (and finding) ourselves inside the all-encompassing story of God's faithfulness, story is diminished to the patchwork quilt that I compile for myself. Ultimately, then, ahistoricism and relativism are two sides of the same coin.

This "history is bunk" syndrome also affects our understanding and practice of the Christian faith. An individualized faith that focuses on Jesus living in my heart loses a sense of the larger picture of the redemption history of which I am a part in Christ. The division of Scripture into chapters and verses (which was done several centuries after the canon was completed) can blind one to the unity of entire books and encourage one to pick passages from here and there to supplement one's private walk with Jesus. Our lives are shaped by byte-sized media products and byte-sized Scripture passages; privatized faith permits me to read Scripture as a consumer, choosing the parts that confirm my identity and enhance my experience of walking with Jesus now. Paul clearly describes the work of the Spirit as situating me inside redemption history, so that I have been crucified, buried, and raised with Christ (Gal. 2.20, Rom. 6.1-14, Col.3.1-4), and have been given a deposit which guarantees what is to come (II Cor. 1.21f., 5.5, Eph. 1.13f.). However, according to "history is bunk" theology, the Holy Spirit is the agent whose primary role is to enable me to feel close to God NOW and to hear God speaking to me NOW. Therefore, I should not have expressed surprise when I learned that a college student had been led

by the Spirit to quit school and travel a thousand miles to move in with a divorcee she met in a chat room.

History is God's great gift to his pilgrim people. Without roots that are firmly grounded in God's faithfulness over the centuries, we are like the seed that fell on rocky soil, seed that sprouted up and quickly withered when the sun grew hot. Without the hope of Christ's coming again to make all things new, we are condemned to make the little stories of our own lives the end all of our existence. But inside the story of creation-fall-redemption-consummation we are given room to be free.

*Instead of seeing ourselves
inside God's story, we
choose from a barage of
byte-sized private stories.*

12. The achievement compulsion

I've heard it said that almost 80% of American Christians believe that the proverb "God helps those who help themselves" is a verse in the Bible. This erroneous assumption illustrates a spirit that has a long history in the ethos of the United States: "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps." The individualism mentioned earlier is of a particular variety: each person is responsible to make something of his or her life, and one's life situation is a consequence of one's effort. Because one is able to do more things more efficiently and more quickly, the illusion of being in control of reality strengthens the temptation to find one's identity in what has been accomplished. In an electronic world, this focus on achievement expands from that which one does to include how well one manipulates one's appearance and one's image. This expansion is noteworthy because in many ways the expansion has replaced the original stress on accomplishment and has become the primary focus of concern. The 2000 presidential debates focussed almost entirely upon image; the press not only covers events but also spends considerable energy both covering how spin doctors affect coverage and judging how effective the spin is. "Spinning" is a spectator sport: in an effective

spin, the public knows that it has been lied to, but the spin itself has been done so well—with sufficient doses of mock sincerity and intrigue—that the public applauds. And that is the ultimate achievement in an electronic world.

Craig Dykstra believes that the “achievement-compulsion” is one of the most powerful dynamics in the Christian community.

A person whose style of life is structured by the achievement compulsion is one whose self-image depends on “making it” in one way or another. Who one is, one’s identity, depends on earning the affection of others through the value of what one produces or does. This compulsion to achieve affects, almost to the point of determining, one’s behavior, attitudes, values and fundamental beliefs. . . . The more people succeed, the more they reap the benefits of the social system. Those who do not achieve, by contrast, struggle to find their place in the social matrix. . . . Achievement as a compulsion is fostered, accepted, and even celebrated in the church as much as anywhere.¹⁴

Obviously, within the context of such a compulsion, the grace of the Lord does not thrive. Furthermore, the dynamics of achievement are highly compatible with the family of spirits that thrive in an electronic world. It is a short and natural step from identity in achievement to identity in possessions, a spirit enhanced by media-driven consumerism. This compulsion necessarily breaks down community and promotes individualism. The electronic world calls out, “Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden,” for the achievement compulsion wears people out, and renders them ripe for the LIAR syndrome.

13. The shape of discourse

The everyday discourse of society reveals a great deal about its character and its manner of relating. Conversation and its attendant acts are a type of social glue that either build or break community bonds. Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann emphasizes the importance of discourse in his intriguing study of the greetings (or lack thereof) between Joseph and his brothers in Genesis. After reflecting on Joseph’s second meeting with his brothers in Egypt, Westermann concludes the following:

We find it strange that such an astonishing amount of emphasis is laid on what we call “outer forms”

or “forms of social intercourse.” That is, on such things as greetings, the polite inquiry, the wash, the gift, and the meal as an edification of a fellowship. In our text we notice that surprisingly much is conveyed in the simple processes of human encounter, such as a word of greeting or an inquiry. Or better, astonishingly much can happen because of them. Because of this we must conclude that the forms of encounter which have been given to every human being and to every human society must be taken seriously as possibilities for human contact which determine the nature of our common life.¹⁵

Because so much discourse takes place through the electronic media, to a great measure person-to-person discourse is shaped by electronic discourse.

In a media-shaped world human discourse drifts outwards to the extremes of politeness and rudeness. A pluralistic culture encased within the global village takes on some of the dynamics of small town discourse as described so well by Kathleen Norris, who writes, “I have observed that in the small town, the need to get along favors the passive-aggressives, those for whom honest differences and disagreements pose such a threat that they are quickly submerged.”¹⁶ An element of truth-masking politeness is an essential need for every community to keep its social wheels turning, but as this tendency shifts from a peripheral glue to a central dynamic, it suffocates growth in the way of the Lord. Paul describes the way of growth as one in which Christians are to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom” (Col. 3.16). The discourse of wisdom requires the lubricant of politeness around the wheel of truth-telling. Electronically enhanced toleration does not favor the speaking of such wisdom.

As we move in greater measure towards living as a Web-based culture, polite tolerance of those different from us may no longer be necessary. Marshall vanAlstyne and Erik Brynjolfsson have coined the term “cyberbalkanization” to refer to the forming of Web communities of like-minded persons who communicate only with one another.¹⁷ When community is removed from the restrictions of physical proximity, we no longer need to carry on significant discourse with those whom we see.

The shift from politeness to avoidance also

creates a larger space for rudeness. A culture fascinated with oddity fosters a rudeness that shocks momentarily (and therefore entertains), a rudeness that is further encouraged by the impersonality of Internet communication, which has even developed appropriate terminology (“flaming”) for those who vent on-line. Such rudeness transcends the area of speech and impinges on every area of human discourse. The phrase “road rage” refers to an important means of discourse in a mobile age: how does one interact with others while driving? A recent phenomenon in urban areas involves the spread of road rage in response to a vehicular event that once typified a culture’s respect for the stranger: the funeral procession. The combination of this larger space for rudeness, the inner speed fostered by an electronic culture, and the inability to respect death in a culture that avoids pain facilitates this disrespect for funeral rituals.

Tendencies towards both politeness and rudeness bedevil the building of the body of Christ, the former encouraged by a pietism that perceives love as “being nice to others” and the latter legitimated by the Enlightenment understanding of truth as accurate statements (thus, permitting me to be rude towards those who dispute the statements that I hold dear). However, the superficiality of polite fellowship and the pain of angry schism have challenged many believing communities to cultivate a third way, a way described well by Richard Mouw’s term “convicted civility.” According to Mouw, convicted civility is shaped by fruit-of-the-Spirit kindness and gentleness, is grounded in robust convictions, genuinely cares for the society at large, and treats every person as a human being like ourselves.¹⁸ Mouw recognizes that the history of Christianity provides ample illustration of the challenges involved in practising such civility, but the current climate of discourse cries out for believers to model a better way.

14. The difficulty of discernment

Practising the spiritual gift of discernment also functions as a third way winding between two extremes present in our culture. Discernment seeks to see both the presence of God and the power of evil amid the swirling array of relationships, structures, dynamics, and spirits present in a culture. Practising this gift is challenged by the

extremes of passive absorption and pervasive suspicion. The LIAR syndrome is congruent with passive absorption, soaking up the overwhelming information flood like a sponge that cannot process all that it receives. Information presented as entertainment, devoid of a meaning-giving context, does not lend itself to discernment. Thus, both the content and the media of an electronic culture lend themselves to passive absorption.

Pervasive suspicion is the flip-side of passivity. Both of these responses require no effort. Both refuse to engage in the reflection and wrestling

*Electronically enhanced
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that are required of discernment. The intense scrutiny present in a media-driven culture shaped by intrigue reveals that no one is free from fault; every cause is warped in some way. The largely helpful hermeneutics of suspicion that developed during the twentieth century has bred a culture-wide assumption that self-serving motives and actions lie behind every human act, no matter how noble it may appear. The prevalence of opinion polling in a consumer-driven environment has fed the sense that my uninformed, unthoughtful judgment on matters is important and meaningful. The combination of pervasive suspicion with passive absorption creates, at its worst, an arrogant cynicism.

Inside this tension, the believer is called to discern, to recognize both the presence of God and the power of evil amid the confusing array of available spirits. Discernment is the fruit of a set of skills that are not easily mastered in an electronic world: communal wrestling is essential as various “blind” seers seek to describe parts of the elephant; quiet, leisurely reflection enables one to turn thoughts inside out and mix and match them in unusual combinations to determine what fresh insights they might yield; probing questions allow one to see past surface images; the practices of

prayer and mutual accountability allow one to be made aware of idolatrous spirits infecting one's own being.

15. Electronic "community"

After creating humankind in his image, the Lord God declared that "it is not good for man to be alone" (Gen. 2.18). Jesus re-interpreted our fundamentally social nature when he promised that "where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matt.18.20). The New Testament *in toto* sheds light on this powerful statement by describing the communal identity of the Christian as "the body of Christ," a reality so powerful that the first words of Jesus to Paul were to ask, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?" (Acts 9.4) Being gathered into a dynamic, worshipping, wrestling, mutually supportive community of faith is a primary task of the Holy Spirit and a central calling of the born-again Christian believer. One illustration of the doctrine-distorting power of the spirits of our electronic age is that the Holy Spirit is largely perceived as an individual phenomenon who lives in my (personal) heart and whose presence I recognize by a particular set of warm, tingly feelings, especially during certain kinds of worship experiences.

Virtual reality is tough on the type of community described in the New Testament. The combinations of individualism, over-busied weariness, a lessening ability to interact with those who are not just like us, the challenges of truth-telling, and the passivity engendered by the LIAR syndrome discourage us from "wasting time" together in ways that give birth to the invisible, intangible, but powerful bonds of Christian community. This anti-community dynamic is even stronger in the culture at large which does not benefit from the church as a mediating institution that supports the cultivation of community.

Nevertheless, the desire and need for community is wired into the way we are, and all the anti-community dynamics of our culture cannot eradicate this desire and need; instead, these dynamics transform these desires and we find ourselves living in an age of electronic community. Psychologist Mary Pipher describes this new community very well:

The media forms our new community. The electronic village is our hometown. Parents and children are more likely to recognize Bill Cosby or Jerry Seinfeld than they are their next-door neighbors. Relationships with celebrities feel personal. We "know" celebrities but they don't know us. The new community is not a reciprocal neighborhood like earlier ones. David Letterman won't be helping out if our car battery dies on a winter morning. These vicarious relationships create a new kind of loneliness—the loneliness of people whose relationships are with personae instead of persons.¹⁹

Pipher continues by describing the results of such electronic community:

Parents have no real community to back up the values that they try to teach to their children. Family members may be in the same house, but they are no longer truly interacting. They may be in the same room, but instead of making their own story, they are watching another family's story unfold. Or even more likely, family members are separated, having private experiences with different electronic equipment. Children see and hear information that is not appropriate to their developmental needs.²⁰

Pipher's work focuses on the effects of electronic community in the home. The dynamics that she discerns are present within the church as well. Christian parents do not have a strong sense of standing firm with other parents to promote values that counter the values inculcated by the electronic community. I have invited Christian teacher groups and PTA meetings to attempt to develop common standards for media consumption habits within the home, but these efforts have produced only a helpless "It won't work. We can't tell each other how to regulate our media consumption." I'm left pondering whether this inability stems from a Spirit-led respect for our freedom in Christ or from the power of the electronic community to divide and conquer the body of Christ.

16. Home away from home

"Home is where the heart is," declares the old proverb, asserting a biblical truth in more profound ways than was likely intended originally. The concept of "home" is central to human identity, recognizing that who we are and where we live are really two sides of the same coin.

Those old chestnuts “Home on the Range,” “My Old Kentucky Home,” and “I’m a-goin’ home” all give voice to the human need and longing for home. We are creatures of time and space, creatures of location, people whose sense of security and rootedness are inextricably intertwined with a specific place and the web of relations associated with that place.

The creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2 are permeated with this sense of home. The creation is a hospitable place, able to host the man and woman and give them all they need as they image their creator in their home. The fall into sin is an account of dislocation in which this home becomes a place of ambiguity: both home and not home. This “now and not yet” dynamic continues throughout redemption history: Hebrews 11 describes the Old Testament believers as folks who “admitted they were strangers and aliens on earth...looking for a country of their own” (vs. 13f.). Jesus promises to the person who loves and obeys him that both he and the Father will “love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him”(John 14.23). Paul expresses the tension of this “now and not yet home” in his cry “I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body” (Phil. 1. 23f.). The Christian life can be characterized as a “home away from home,” life in the Spirit anticipating with intense groanings and longings the arrival of the new creation, ultimate home (Rom. 8). As people who are “home away from home,” we are deeply connected to the world God made, seeing within it the seeds of the new creation, recognizing that we are made of its dust and that our identity in Christ and our place in his world are inseparable.

In an electronic world, “home away from home” carries a different meaning. Whereas the spreading suburbs of America in the 50’s might have led one to say, “home is where my house is,” today’s phrase would be “home is where my mouse is.” Home is wherever my mouse-clicks might take me, and thus home is truly away from home, for I am no longer restricted by the confines of time and space. Virtual reality is home.

The Christian community’s vulnerable flank

vis-a-vis this transformation of home lies in its long and troubled history with gnosticism. “The word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1.14) provides the definitive biblical statement concerning “home.” Though the creation is an ambiguous home, God’s faithfulness to this home is summarized in the name “Emmanuel,” God with us. The Incarnation will be completed when Jesus returns and “the dwelling of God is with men” (Rev. 21.3). But the story of the Christian community is more often shaped by the gnostic belief that we must deny the flesh and become more spiritual, for our God is also a spirit. The

*Electronic “gnosticism”
reads an unbiblical notion
of home into Scripture.*

wonder of the Incarnation is surrendered for the less demanding road of a more-than-human Jesus who calls us to leave this world to be with him in heaven.

This gnostic spirit resonates with the electronic gnosticism present in our media-driven culture in which the wonderfully hard edge of time and place can be jettisoned for the fuzzy parameters of virtual reality. Care for the creation, ministry to the diseased, walking alongside the aged, confronting the hidden effects of structural injustice, and comforting the grieving all become unnecessary and even invisible when one’s home shifts to virtual reality, a place where the older order of things like mourning and death and sickness can all pass away. Just as the pre-electronic gnostics found their home in locations ranging from the spiritual mysteries to the sweet bye-and-bye, so today the click of a mouse is as effective as the *Brave New World’s* soma in banishing the hard edges of inhospitable home. The current craze with the *Left Behind* series of books and videos is fuelled by the coming together of second century “Christian” gnosticism with our contemporary electronic gnosticism, a combination that culminates in a hermeneutic that reads an unbiblical notion of home into Scripture.

Conclusion

A tiny voice inside my Reformed bosom dares to whisper that this account of sixteen electronically-enhanced spirits betrays the Reformed heritage. "We are not culture-despisers," complains this voice, "we are among those who engage the culture, recognize the dynamics within it that harmonize with the Lord's command to develop his creation, and then work for transformation in the name of Jesus." In terms of H. Richard Niebuhr's typology of Christ/culture relationships, this voice suggests that the Reformed "Christ transforming culture" birthright has been sold far too cheaply for a thin "Christ against culture" porridge.

That worried voice has a point. Traditional Reformed understandings of our "transforming vision" do not entirely fit with the type of analysis represented here. Our vision for following Christ in our context is necessarily informed by the reality of the interaction between the culture and the Christian community. In a context in which the prevailing culture significantly handicaps faithful following (as, I believe, ours does), the shape of transformation is reconfigured. Alasdair MacIntyre profoundly described this interaction in the closing words of his monumental work *After Virtue*:

What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. This time the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have actually been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness that constitutes part of the predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.²¹

Such a description does not constitute an invitation to despair. Au contraire, I hear in his words the joyful call to stand firm amidst the fuzziness and ambiguities of virtual reality, to cultivate practices that build community and personal maturity in Christ, to throw off the electronic ennui and weariness that hinders, and to see Jesus more clearly through the cacophony and over-stimulation of our day. What can be more joyful than waking up from electronic somnambulation and being set free to run the race set before us?

END NOTES

1. The distinction between the traditional mass media and on-line media is a bit blurry, moving from regional broadcast systems to cable and satellite systems to systems that make use of the Internet. Because the transition to the latter is just beginning, this essay will shift between these systems.
2. *After Heaven, Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), p. 137.
3. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone, the decline and recovery of community in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), p. 179.
4. The WWJD bracelet phenomenon illustrates both these trends: it is worn by individuals to remind them of what Jesus would do in their own life situations, i.e. one's moral code is shaped through personal relationship with Jesus.
5. *Confessions* 1.1.1.
6. Cf. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith, the irreverent spiritual quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), p. 80.
7. *Bowling Alone*, p. 176.
8. Eugene Rivers, speaking at the Princeton Forum on Youth Ministry, St. Simon's Island, GA, January 1999.
9. Noted by Marva Dawn in *Is It a Lost Cause? Having the heart of God for the church's children* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 182.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 182f.
11. *The Silver Chair* (New York: HarperCollins, 1953), p. 103.
12. "God at large," in *Christianity Today* 45,2 (Feb. 5, 2001), p. 136.
13. *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of identity in contemporary life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), p. 30.
14. *Growing in the Life of Faith, Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999), pp. 86f.
15. *Joseph, Eleven Bible Studies on Genesis*, Tr. Omar Kaste (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 80f.
16. *Dakota, A Spiritual Geography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1993), p. 113.
17. *Bowling Alone*, p. 177. Cf. n. 101.
18. *Uncommon Decency* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), pp. 9-18.
19. *In the Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding our Families* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), p. 13.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
21. *After Virtue, A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 263.