Minimize Electronic Spirituality, Part 2

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I found a website recently which promoted itself as an "online church." It claimed to provide opportunities for worship and fellowship, "just like a local church." Such "churches" position themselves perfectly for current trends according to *American Demographics*, for "approximately 16 percent of teens say they will find a substitute for church experiences online within the next five years. Net spirituality is already the choice of 10 percent of nonChristians and 14 percent of Christians."[1]

Electronic spirituality is the use of resources like a computer or the Internet for the sake of the soul. Some Christians practice electronic spirituality primarily to enhance their individual devotional lives while others do so to connect with other Christians and to develop their interpersonal spirituality. In Part 1 I addressed the former. Here I want to address my concerns about the latter, and in particular the attempts of believers to experience the congregational spiritual disciplines of fellowship and worship online.

Let's think first about online worship. While watching a church worship service may be a blessing for those who cannot attend, watching worship can never replace the experience of assembling and participating with other worshipers. Online worship produces observers of worship, not participants. The spirit of worship in Scripture is not, "Let's watch worship," but "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us *go* into the house of the Lord,'" and "Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name *together*" (Psalm 122:1; 34:3, emphasis added).

Those few who do actually worship simultaneously while watching online still remain separated from the spiritual experiences that only those present can enjoy. Like couples who have been married

online while watching each other on a computer monitor, the congregational worship of God without the presence of others just isn't the same experience. Besides, the temptation to do other things during the slower parts of the service or sermon, like checking email during the offering, distracts the online observer in ways that would never occur to those immersed in the actual worship gathering.

The blessings of Christian fellowship cannot be successfully digitized either. While we can benefit from a *kind* of fellowship with other Christians via the Internet, the exchange of nothing but disembodied words makes it only a kind of half-fellowship. I thank God for the technology that enables me to stay in touch so easily with fellow believers I know around the world, but that's not all the Christian contact I need. Fellowship that is only electronic and never personal is not true fellowship.

The apostle John was inspired to tell us in, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren" (1 John 3:14). In other words, one of the ways we gain assurance of our salvation is by measuring the strength of our love for our Christian brothers and sisters. And like any other real love, this love cannot be content—no matter how many emails it receives—to love only at a digital distance. When the brothers and sisters of your local church gather for worship and fellowship, Christian love compels you to be with them. For there are some aspects of Christian fellowship you just can't download.

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[1] As quoted in *Current Thoughts and Trends*, August 2000, p. 17.

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