## SimChurch:
## Being the Church in the Virtual World

Douglas Estes,
Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 2009,
256 pages, 16.99 USD, paper

Reviewed by: Mark R. Teasdale,
E. Stanley Jones Assistant Professor of Evangelism,
Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary,
Evanston, IL

In *SimChurch* Doug Estes takes as his basic assumption that the world has moved into the digital age, bound together by technology. This technology, mostly visible in the internet, is transforming the next generation of inhabitants of planet Earth such that they can easily cross traditional boundaries of geography, language, and time through social networking and virtual reality. Indeed, Estes argues that technology has reached the point that we can speak of a "virtual world" that people can inhabit as fully as they can inhabit the "real world." Given this state of affairs, which Estes insists is current rather than something to prepare for in the future, Estes calls the church to marshal its forces immediately so that it can provide a significant ministry presence in this virtual world. The reasons for this ministry are twofold. First, "the virtual world is by far the largest unreached people group on the planet," thus beckoning the church to hear the Macedonian call coming from them to share the gospel (29). Second, if it does not embrace and engage in this world as fully as possible now, it will be left behind as the population of the world becomes ever-more oriented toward living substantial portions

of their lives in virtual worlds. This would put the church at a huge disadvantage in being credible to people in the future.

Drawing from his own research and experience as a pastor, as well as the experiences of well-known virtual churches (e.g., Lifechurch.tv, Church of Fools, Flamingo Road Church, i-church, Anglican Cathedral, St. Pixels), Estes sets out to address the reasons why many Christians are hesitant to respond to this call for the church to enter the virtual world. He explains early on that he will seek to address these concerns three ways: theologically, missionally, and ethically. In the theological sphere he discusses "the nature, purpose, possibilities, and limitations of virtual churches" (29). Missionally, he focuses "on the role of avatars, on virtual spirituality and ministry, and on development of community in a virtual church" (29). Ethically he addresses "the question of virtual identity, personal holiness, and the dangers and limitations of niche ministries" (29). Throughout the book, in addition to addressing these issues, Estes helpfully includes several insert pages that explain the technological terminology, along with the basic ethical concerns surrounding the technology. These are useful for those unfamiliar with this technology and/or the lifestyles connected to the digital age.

The book is surprisingly rich, taking seriously questions of ecclesiology, sacramental theology, pastoral care, congregational leadership, and Christian witness. It also includes sections that survey, albeit too briefly, biblical and historical sources that the church might bring to bear in making sense of the possibility for ministry in virtual worlds.

Estes acknowledges both the arguments for and against churches participating in ministry in virtual worlds and seeks to provide a balanced approach to these. Often he does this by reminding the reader that the pitfalls churches can face in the virtual world are no different from the pitfalls churches face in the real world. He avers, for example, that churches can be just as duplicitous in the real world as in the virtual world and that people can hide their identities just as surely whether you meet them in flesh-and-blood or meet them through their digital avatars. At the same time, while being decidedly in favor of virtual world ministry, he is willing to admit that there are certain problems that the virtual world creates for churches that have yet to be solved.

One of these problems is that of the sacraments. Openly operating out of a Free Church ecclesiology, Estes recognizes that there are theological reasons why those who are members of other Christian traditions cannot share in his willingness to allow churches in virtual worlds to experiment with ways to administer the Eucharistic elements or the Baptismal waters apart from a person being physically present in a real world church. Even those who are willing to allow for this sort of experimentation need to be aware of the ways that these sorts of practices in the virtual world could warp or cheapen the sacraments.

At the same time he points to these unique problems, Estes also notes that there are certain unique abilities that the church has in the virtual world that it does not have in the real world. Primary among these is the ability to allow for greater participation in the life of the church by those who attend the churches in the virtual world. He gives the example of how several churches that have internet campuses include as part of the

online worship service the capacity to chat online with those who are in the service even as the service is underway. Moreover, these churches employ "ipastors" whose sole job is to interact with the people who are online so that they feel welcomed and capable of participating.

Estes concludes his book with one attempt at an admittedly outlandish prediction about the future. He suggests that in the future all churches will have to include an online ministry as part of their basic existence (224). Much as churches now consider it a boilerplate part of ministry to maintain at least a basic website, they will consider it part of standard ministry practice to have virtual outposts that will provide people who are at home in the virtual world a portal for interacting with the church.

An important caveat to note is that, while Estes touches upon the various ways that churches can operate in the digital age, his primary focus is specifically on how the church operates in *Second Life*, a specific virtual world in which people can interact with their virtual surroundings through the use of avatars. While this emphasis makes sense in that *Second Life* is currently the most immersive non-game virtual world (compared to MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* which are meant to be fantasy virtual worlds built around a gaming concept), it should be noted that this emphasis could quickly be obsolete. As Estes himself notes, the pace of technological change is so fast that it could well be in the not-too-distant future that people will be using holographic projections to transform the appearance of the insides of their homes to fit with whatever adventure they want to undertake (think the holodeck from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*). Given this caveat, Estes' book is best seen as a way for pastors to grapple with the implications

for engaging in ministry in the virtual world rather than as a specific guide for how to launch an internet campus in *Second Life*.

Perhaps the greatest contribution that this book offers is forcing churches to revisit their ecclesiology. Just as the advent of distance learning has forced those in the teaching profession to re-evaluate what their core pedagogical goals are so that they can determine what they need to carry with them into their digital classrooms, so the advent of ministry in the virtual world requires theologians, pastors, and laypeople to make an intentional effort to think through what the core practices and beliefs of the church are. Only once this prior ecclesiological work is done can they then consider whether it is possible to migrate these marks of the church into a virtual world.

Based on this, the best use of this book would likely be in either a seminary course that is exploring new modes of mission and evangelism or in congregations that are already leaning in the direction of engaging in virtual world ministry. In both cases, the text could deepen the readers' thoughts about how to carry out the mission of the church while also opening them to the recognition of what is already possible virtually and giving them some concrete examples of churches that are already in the virtual world. It is unlikely this book would change the mind of anyone firmly set against virtual churches, but it could at least equip those who desire to engage in such ministry with some talking points for fruitful discussions with their counterparts.

At intervals throughout his book Estes weaves a short story about a first century Jew who converts to Christianity. In the story he relates how this man struggles shifting from worshiping in the beauty of the synagogue to worshiping in the plainness of a

person's house. He misses the liturgical ritual, the architectural beauty, and the sense of being in a holy place. By the end of the story, however, his sense of loss is replaced by his amazement at the growth of the Christian movement and the way that the community of Christian believers has forged a sense of belonging and hospitality that makes up for the Jewish accoutrements to worship. Estes clearly means to draw an analogy between this story and the way the church could operate in the virtual world. This is the strength of this book. Even if we do not agree with the free church perspective that allows Estes to embrace so freely the practice of ministry in the virtual world, we can at least allow Estes to remind us that dealing with the virtual world is not a simple matter of deciding we are comfortable with technology or not. Rather, it is a matter of understanding what our identity is as Christians and considering how that identity propels us into ministry to all people in all places, even virtual places.