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VIRTUAL FAITH?

We do not exactly know who first coined the word for this new kind of reality but it all began some time in the early 1980s when the U.S. military and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration launched new systems for interactive computer-generated imagery. In 1989, the U.S. Department of Defense launched Simnet, an experimental network of microcomputer-based workstations that enabled military personnel to practice combat operations on interactive, realtime training systems, called "virtual reality."

Today the term "virtual reality" is used to describe an artificial computer-based environment that simulates reality through the use of interactive devices. One can send and receive information, and one's actions partially determine what happens in the simulated three-dimensional visual or sensory environment. The illusion of being present in this simulated setting is effected by motion sensors that pick up the user's movements and adjust the view on the screens accordingly. This computer-generated "reality" appears so real that it can hardly be distinguished from the real world. Software developers have quickly recognized the potential of such a virtual reality not just for the military and scientific community but also for the entertainment industry and those who are interested in exciting computer games.

In computer games such as "Sims" or in online games like "Second Life," the players are able to choose a character they want to be and begin to build their own virtual identity. All can be the person they want to be. Players are able to immerse themselves in a fantasy world that resembles the real world out there—only better, it seems. Being the master of their fantasies, they can interact with other manmade characters and live their lives in such a way as they would not be able to do in real life. And, even better, they can restart the virtual existence of par-

ticular characters in virtual reality at their own choosing or drop out at any time.

However, one predicament with such a digital environment is that in virtual reality the tangible dimension of space and things is significantly reduced if not eliminated. Spatial reality cannot be measured and experienced the same way as in real life. And time is not experienced the same either. In the digital world, there is something like an "eternal now"—everything is geared to happen instantly. Hence virtual life is faster than real life. Because space and time are virtual realities, the experiential understanding of these essential dimensions of human existence does not have the same quality as in real life.

Given the lure of such entertainment, one wonders, *Is there also something we could call "virtual faith"?* Is it possible to replicate real faith, through which we are able to move mountains or heal the sick. Virtual faith could lead us to be in a position to receive the answers to all our prayers. Virtual faith could enable us to fast-forward in life and evade those disturbing situations when life gets tough. And after some unsuccessful attempts, virtual faith would, at the end, perhaps still get us to a "virtual heaven,"

Virtual faith, if there is in fact anything like it, will never be as satisfying as real faith because it is missing some of the most important and essential dimensions of human existence. Real faith has to do with a personal and very real being: God Himself. Real faith is about a real relationship in a real world. It is about a relationship that has a unique and unrepeatable past and has a matchless hope in a future that is grounded in God's reliable word. Real faith is more than playing and re-enacting a fictive existence.

The beauty of real faith is that it is not artificial. It is real. It is so real that we develop real faith in real situations, in time and space. Here we make unique decisions that actually form and build our character. Virtual realities cannot substitute for real communication and real life. Faith, as the Bible describes it, is a living relationship with a personal Savior and living God.

The faith of the biblical writers was not based on some fictive myth. The apostle Peter writes: "We have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Peter 1:16, KJV). Biblical faith is based on the sure Word of God and the life experience of the real person Jesus Christ: "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we

unto you, that your joy may be full" (1 John 1:3, 4, KJV).

Even though we are not in a position actually to see and touch Jesus today, it is comforting to know that we can nevertheless really love Him and believe in Him, as the apostle Peter writes: "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy" (1 Peter 1:8, NIV).

The beauty of real faith is that it brings us in contact with new and live realities that we have not come up with ourselves and perceived before. Hence, real faith offers us surprising peace in the midst of many open questions. Through it we gain a true understanding of sin when we have cheated ourselves and others. Real faith opens our eyes to amazing forgiveness and undeserved love, when we cannot forgive and love others and ourselves. If we believe in God and are honest, He will surprise us in many very tangible ways, as only our Creator is able to do—only better than anything we could come up with in creating our own virtual reality.

Real faith grows in real life. The beauty of real faith is that it trusts a real Helper who is at our side, Jesus Christ, our High Priest, who has promised to sustain us when we really need it. Rather than living in a virtual world, where one is easily isolated from real life, Jesus helps us to live victoriously in the real world. Praise God.

"Faith is a living, bold trust in God's grace,
so certain of God's favor that it would risk death
a thousand times trusting in it."
—Martin Luther