Virtual Reality
Virtual Reality, Part II

Studio Session 77
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We've been talking about this enormous change that has come into the world—probably such a foundational change as would result in society, human society, being completely reordered. One of the ways in which human society is being re-ordered, it is being made into a single society that is interactive. To understand the change that is called "virtual reality" we must understand something of how far-reaching it is. Now the reason it became so far-reaching was not because somebody set out to make it so. It is because it simply evolved along various lines to take advantage of the way human thinking had changed and how humans perceived that their society needed to be reordered in order to accomplish various things—primarily supplying itself with goods that were needed and services that were required while protecting itself.

So not only are individuals involved in this change to virtual reality, governments and nations are just as involved. For example, and just for the purposes of definition, virtual reality used to be considered cyber reality, which is a computer-created reality but now cyber reality is just a room in the house of virtual reality because virtual reality has come to have implications far beyond just computer-produced results. It's that the computer *aids* the human in the quest for the shaping of reality to restore control to the human being. You see, individuality has been lost.

In the 1900's we had the event of the global corporation. We had the oncoming of global empires, and as a result the human—and human individual accomplishments—were dwarfed. As mega-trends developed the human began to feel smaller and smaller, but humans being what they are wanted somehow to be able to reach out and take back the control over their daily lives, over their daily decision making. They realized that information, and the ability to move information—not only to acquire it but to move it around, from everything from relationships to finances—the human needed to be empowered through information—the ability to have, to control, to manipulate, to project information.

Information then became the commodity of exchange as well as the way to identify human beings as being unique: your unique file, your information, your "15 minutes of fame" was what was important. In the last discussion we saw a little bit of how this trend developed. We looked back at the time of Darwin, and the Theory of Evolution,

and how it legitimized all of the ambitions of human beings to participate in their own ability to govern themselves in self-government, beginning with the time of the Magna Carta and coming forward through various constitutions of law. Humans now want privacy and individualism to reflect their personhood and so there is this ongoing desire to participate in global things while retaining one's individualism. Other social factors that have occurred make it easier for the populations of the world to buy into this concept of reality—virtual reality, namely the reality you may create to serve your needs for individualism and individual choice which reality you create out of component parts. You are no longer stuck with the hand, as it were, that you were dealt.

In the last discussion we spoke about how sequencing the genome—not particularly a cyber occurrence—has given focus, impetus and legitimacy to the human quest for this restoration of individual personhood. Now you can go shopping at the flea market or sell your goods all over the world on EBay, not just down at the local flea market. Young people used to meet in study hall. Now young people meet, court—and will soon be able to marry—online. The chat room has replaced the study hall and the dating services have replaced the matchmaker… have *become* the matchmaker. Everything that has to do with relationships, in terms of being introduced to relationships, is becoming more and more the product of online functions. And businesses even are forming to allow for the creation of relationships.

Not all of this is good by the way, and with all of these new developments, unique problems follow. The Internet—like anything else—is neither good nor bad. It will reflect the attitudes and the character of its users and as such then, the Internet will be no more than the mirror of society's condition. It will not be good, it will not be bad, but its participants—the people who participate in it—will determine its character, and in that sense it will be fully reflective of human society. We're watching how society itself has been changed in order to accommodate virtual reality. What we used to consider the nuclear family—the building block of society (to put more conventional terminology to it: the "Leave it to Beaver Family"… the family of the same husband and wife and children)—now comprises 12% of the population according to recent surveys.

Forty-seven percent of families in the nation are what is said to be "blended" families. Now what that means is that for a child growing up, one in two—half of the families—do not know who their brothers or sisters are going to be, except perhaps who their parents bring home and what the children of those people that their parents bring home are. That's the blended family: mine, ours and yours so to speak. So families today, and children growing up in families today, one out of every two are the subjects of this form of social order. Relationships are not permanent, so they create rules to intensify the relationship while it lasts.

Again, virtual reality is not necessarily a permanent reality. It is reality for the moment; it is reality for as long as reality lasts. That's one of the more significant changes that

has come about. Before, people wanted enduring things, lasting things. Now, people want the intensity of the experience while the dynamic remains, but assume that the dynamic is transitory. So people do not look at working for a company any more for 30 years—that's not security. They want to make as much money, build as fine a resume as they can while they are doing that job. But the generations of today do not look for retirement from the company in which they had worked for 30 years, with a gold watch.

They [generations of today] do not look for that kind of retirement. They look for "moving on," "moving up" and eventually perhaps to start their own business utilizing the capital they acquired from previous employments and the experience and contacts that they acquired. So every job is designed to give you a portfolio of experiences—some different aspect that allows you personally to become bankable. Nowhere is this more commonly seen than in the American entertainment industry in which young people now, who used to be stars are now moguls—they are extremely well-versed in the business of being famous.

So again, a population has arisen that's founded in a virtual family—not a permanent family, but various elements put together, the purpose of which is to maximize the experience for the time of the duration of the relationship. So it's a common perception that a marriage today, with an average of six years (six years is the average lifespan of a marriage today). So the society is rapidly approaching the point where you are likely to be asked if you are not "bored" with the same person if you've been married for a whole lifetime. And the thought of being married to one person for 50 years is inconceivable to the minds of this generation because they are not being raised in families of permanence. Therefore, *reality does not equate permanence* in the minds of the majority of the citizenry that is rising up in the world today. So virtual reality is not permanence. It is intensity of experience for the time of the experience.

Virtual reality—which is creating a reality out of component parts—has taken on all manner of forms. Needless to say, business has been a pioneer in utilizing virtual reality. We see it in the case even of computers—personal computers. IBM was one of the first and one of the major players in the field of personal computers but IBM had the business philosophy then—it doesn't now, but it had the philosophy then—of Henry Ford. "You can have any color you want of automobile," Henry Ford once said, "so long as it is black." The way that manufacturers thought of consumers was: if you manufacture the product, the job of the salesman is to convince the end-user that this is the product that they need.

Well Michael Dell, of Dell computers re-invented that business rubric by basically saying, "We can create for you exactly the computer that you want. Here are all the component parts, these are all the options, you decide what works best for you and we will mass produce it, have it to you in a time that is well-satisfying to you so as to become a competitive edge," giving you an alternative to going down to the store, buying

the computer on the shelf, paying for all of the accessories, whether or not you need them. And Dell became the leader in personal computing and set the standard by which industries now—beyond the computing industry—are being run. These standards are: give the consumer what the consumer wants, because the consumer will decide what "the good" is about.

So increasingly we are seeing moguls being those who are capable of articulating the popular will of the people. Consultants to major industries are people with "hip-hop" backgrounds, people who are streetwise so to speak. In all of these ways, and many other ways we are watching how virtual reality is redefining the society in which we live. Virtual reality being: create the reality that you wish—it doesn't have to be permanent, but you may create it and enjoy it for as long as you need to, as long as it lasts—out of its component parts. No one—so the rubric goes—no one is "stuck" with the hand they have been dealt. You can reformat—you can reinvent yourself—you can reformat the computer. These are terms that have come into our language which have suggested the recreation of reality in the thinking of man. And the world is caught up in it.

You see the computer is the tool that aids—the computerized tool—aids the human in determining what this reality is, in creating it and in maintaining it, and in changing it when it needs to be changed. For example, Bill Gates became the richest man, probably ever, as a result of his commercialization of the form of virtual reality—one of the forms, one of the tools that aids in the design of virtual reality. The Internet of course is a key part of the tooling of this creation of reality. But computers, and the Internet, together have created this access to the flow of information—both to giving and to receiving this information—and by that, to both define personhood and to secure one's individual "right to be"—"raison d'etre," as the French would say.

Great fortunes were made out of the development of the form. There are fortunes yet to be made—financial fortunes yet to be made—in further customizing this form. And the direction that this customizing will take—the direction will be towards speed, accuracy, the retention of information and the interactive nature of the tools of this reality. So increasingly you are seeing single gadgets compacting multiple forms. So in the simple mobile telephone now—a cellular telephone—you may have a telephone, a camera, a personal computer with which you can access the internet to receive and transmit data, a personal planner, your day-timer and various other functions in the palm of your hand in one simple gadget. Increasingly you will see all electronic gadgetry becoming more and more compacted to aid in the creation and maintaining of virtual reality.

The huge next wave however is going to be in the area of content, because after all, the *tools* of computers and the Internet—and the computerized "arm," if you like, of virtual reality—is all form. Substance, however, is quite another matter. We have watched as there has been a frantic trading in substance. AOL buys Time-Warner—Time-Warner representing substance: having programs, movies, music, publishing, books and those

kinds of things—all of those being "content" to be sent through the form of the Internet, or accessed through the form of the Internet or the digital revolution. Whoever participates in the creation of valuable content is in the line of the new commerce.

The new commerce is for the creation of consumable product within this form of virtual reality. To understand it simply, people would say, "Well what's the use having 160 channels of television if there is nothing to watch?" So creating "substance"—creating if you like, "content"—is going to be the next big issue. "Form" and "content" are somewhat like the garden hose and the water that comes out of the faucet. The water out of the faucet is "content," it's what you want to put in different spots in the garden. The garden hose is your flexible movement of the water around the garden. The Internet— and computers—are the flexible way to transmit information but the information itself is the "content."

Now there are some critical factors to be observed about this matter of virtual reality. First, in order to participate you must have a permanent, portable identity. The identity must be permanent and its portability is required because of the flexibility of the form of computer and Internet—aiding the function of virtual reality, creating a reality out of the component parts. This is going to be the next big thing. We all smile as we recognize at once, the absurdity and yet the truth of a lost identity. And we look at these commercials for loss of identity where an old Japanese man in Honolulu is buying skateboards in Kansas City, speaking with the voice of a youngster. Because we have all experienced— standing in front of the clerk who is looking at the computer screen, who cannot find our file, even if we have the paper documents, and being obliged to say to us, in effect, "Sir/Madam, I regret to inform you that you do not exist." Because if you do not have an identity, you do not exist.

What's more, if someone has stolen your identity then vis-à-vis virtual reality, it's not that that person is acting "for you" or acting "as if he were you." It is that vis-à-vis virtual reality, whoever possesses your identity is the only "you" that is recognizable. You are personally not recognizable in any other way, so that person doesn't act "*as* you," that person "*is* you," and you are that person. So that person may transact business in your name and, as far as the sellers are concerned, the merchants are concerned, another "you" does not exist. What are the implications of this vast new world and this redefinition of reality? What are the implications of these for the church? This is a critical discussion. Clearly, with this having changed, the church needs to understand what the changes portend for the church. It cannot be business as usual for if it is, we would be considered already irrelevant. Let's continue to discuss "virtual reality" and the future of the church. I'm Sam Soleyn. God bless you and I'll see you then.