Introduction

The aspect of our modern culture I explore in this essay is the Cyberculture. I address three aspects of the Cyberculture suggested by the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. The perspective of God, Creator Father directs attention to the Cyberculture as an expression of technological power and creativity. The Person and Work of Jesus Christ lead to Part Two: the Cyberculture for personal identity. The third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit directs the third question I put to the cyberculture. Can people be shaped in Christian community within the cyberculture?

First a few words about what I mean by "cyberculture." The English language word "cyber" derives from the Greek word "kybernan" meaning to guide, to pilot, or to govern. The specific form of governance or control meant by Cyberculture is that made possible by computers. The word "culture" in the phrase Cyber-Culture means a way of life, i.e. the customary beliefs, social forms and material traits of a social group. So, when I speak of a Cyberculture, I mean a way of life, patterns of beliefs, social forms and material traits of people for whom computers use shapes their daily existence.

I believe we should distinguish two forms of the emerging Cyberculture. One set of cyberculture citizens own computers and spend enough time using them that they have changed their beliefs, how they relate to people and how they live each day. In this sense, Cyberculture is socially restricted: it is a culture in which young, white males predominate. It also is a culture primarily within the western world. Further, it is a culture populated by people who can read and type. Finally, it is populated by persons who can afford the several thousand dollars needed to own a personal computer, its accessories and for access to the Internet and the World Wide Web.

The second form of the Cyberculture has many more citizens. In fact, it includes everyone for whom access to, transmission of, and storing digitized information, graphics and images through computers decisively influence their lives. It is hard to think of anyone who is not part of Cyberculture in this second sense. Recall that computers enable the globalization of the economy; recall that contemporary banking, air transport, education, industrial production all are dependent on microprocessors and computer technology generally. We see that almost every living person is directly affected in his or her way of life today by the computer age.

Further, in deciding whether Christians should take the Cyberculture seriously as a part of our larger contemporary culture, we must ask whether the Cyberculture is here to stay. There seems no question that the Cyber culture will spread, engaging more and more people at ever deeper levels of their daily lives and their sense of their self and their ways of relating to other people. Cyberculture, like the revolution from writing to print culture inn the Renaissance as described by Marhall McLuhan and Walter Ong, will profoundly shape our way of life.

Three developments will make the Cyberculture grow: integrating computers with television sets and satellite broadcasting, the production of faster microprocessors and the lowering of prices for hardware and software. All three changes are accelerating.
We should, of course, be wary of breathless, overblown speculations about the growth and influence of the Cyberculture. When telephones became widespread, people predicted that it would only be used by businesses and that they would return work back to the household. In fact, after the phone system spread, people continued to leave home to go to work and they used the phone as much for personal communication as for business. Nevertheless, we can safely assume that the Cyberculture, as a way of life, as sense of self, a way of relating will increasingly spread. Because the Church, while it should not be of the world, is certainly in the world and ought to be, we should examine the cyberculture.

But Christians should examine the cyberculture from a Christian standpoint, and that means from the standpoint of God as revealed in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. We Christians need not just a theological assessment of cyberculture in its present form. Even more we need to learn how to ask the right questions about Cyberculture so we can assess its future development from an authentically Christian standpoint. Some very thoughtful attempts have already been made, and I have tried to draw on as many of them as I could. What I have not found, yet, however, is a Christian assessment grounded in a foundational and systematic theological perspective, such as provided by the doctrine of God, the Trinity. That is what I attempt here.

II. Cyberculture as Power

In this section I discuss Cyberculture as a form of human power. My standpoint for both describing and assessing the Cyberculture as power is God’s creative and redeeming power as revealed in Jesus Christ. Can citizens of cyberspace experience this kind of power?

Digital Technology—A New Kind of Power?

What kind of power rules cyberculture? David Lochhead, professor of systematic theology at the Vancouver School of Theology, and a leading, if not the leading theological explorer of Cyberculture, astutely perceived the magical aura the computer has for many people, especially for men. That magical aura, Lochhead said, emanates from the computer as an instrument of power. Computer programmers exercise total power of creation and destruction of computer programs. Computer ads feature men increasing their power through purchasing ever more potent software and hardware. Computer talk is power talk: one gives commands, one inserts, one views, one formats, one accesses, and one uses tools. We computer users speak of virtual reality, gigabytes, disk drives, and scanners. It is the language of control, of reach, of supervision and of productivity.

That cyberculture is a power culture should not surprise us. Computers are a technology. Technology is an extension of human power. Like any technology, computers allow humans more easily, more quickly, more cheaply, more safely, more comfortably to control some aspect of their environment. What do computers do? Primarily, they move information. Computers are a means of controlling information --- collecting it, storing, retrieving it, organizing it, and transmitting it. One of its most remarkable ways of doing this us by the hypertext function: the capacity to click on the hypertext word and be connected to other texts, text files on the same topic, any place in the world.

More strictly, computers don’t deal with information; they deal with data, with bits of information. Information is more than data. Data is simply a unit of information. To become information,
much less knowledge or wisdom, data must be combined in some meaningful way. To become information or knowledge, data must be interpreted by being set in wider contexts of meaning.

Every technology subjects a part of the world to an abstract form, rule or process. The beauty of digital technology is the incredible simplicity of its rule. It is the rule of on/off; yes/no; odd/even; plus/minus. This simplicity of means, combined with the massiveness of effects, is part of the magic of computer technology, of the Cybeculture as power.

Digital technology gives us a massive expansion of human control over data and information. In enabling us to control data and information digital technology is different in kind from earlier technologies. Nicholas Negroponte, Director of the Media Institute at MIT, expresses this contrast between industrial technology and digital technology as between the world of atoms and the world of bytes. A steam engine moving a locomotive is moving atoms, physical objects. Computers move bytes, a pattern of electrons. Moving electrons differs remarkably from moving atoms. For one thing, bytes are electrical impulses and can move at the speed of light. Compared to that, even Japan’s Shinkansin are turtles. We will discuss digital technology’s ability to practically eliminate space and time as a factor in communication.

**Technology and the "Eclipse" of God**

Modern technology, whether the technology of moving atoms or moving bits is relevant for religion for two reasons.

First, the culture-transforming development of machine technology since the late eighteenth century has eclipsed God for many people in our culture. Many people experience technological power as an alternative to God’s power. The Bible may speak of prayer moving mountains. But when people want to move a physical mountain they use explosives, power shovels and trucks. Many sick people turn to God in prayer for healing; but most people, if they can, turn to medical technology. We sometimes pray for good harvests; but farmers with access to technology use genetically developed seed, insecticides, fertilizers and irrigation control to protect, and increase and harvest their crops. Millions of people put their trust in technology as the best way toward a safer, healthier, move comfortable life.

The spread of technology in the west has been one cause of the eclipse of a sense of God’s reality in daily life. Indeed, technological power seems to many to have divine attributes. Technology’s potential power of control is endless, something like the omnipotence we ascribe to God. Technology’s development seems unstoppable and inevitable, something like God’s providence. Further, people look to technology, as they once did to God, as the source for fulfillment and happiness.

Thus, one significance of cyberspace will be a darkening of the eclipse of God’s reality, God’s power for many people in the church and in the culture. Cybertechnology will continue to cause people to think belief in God as Lord and Ruler of the Universe is outdated and irrelevant. When you have modern science and technology, the social and psychological sciences, why do you need God?

No only has the advance of technology made the sense of the reality and relevance of God weaker, technological culture has secondly subtly transformed the role that religion continues to play in society generally. The great religions of the world, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and certainly Christianity, traditionally concerned ultimate salvation, usually as something that is
given fully only beyond history although it may be discovered in history. As technology grew to shape our culture more and more thoroughly, religion, much to the surprise of Marxists, does not disappear. But its function changed for many people. Religion becomes a kind of spiritual technology for the private and personal side of our lives here and now.

This is not just true of New Age cults. It describes what happened to much traditional Christian belief and piety. People thought of God as a means to their life enhancement here and now. The crassest form of this is the piety of personal or business success through religious faith. But even those close to classical Christian tradition feel the pull to think of faith, worship, prayer and other religious acts as means of establishing personal meaning in our lives now. And, further, God became less the personal Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ and increasingly is thought of as an impersonal energy humming through nature and human nature waiting to be tapped into by crystals, ascended masters, physical exercise or methods of meditation.

Aware of the challenge that traditional technologies and now digital technology pose to our experience and understanding of divine power, how should we theologically assess technology generally and cybertechnology specifically as a form of power?

**Affirming Technological Power**

First, whatever cyberculture’s effect on our awareness of and understanding of God, Christian theology has good grounds for affirming human technology. The Bible begins with God placing humankind a garden to be stewards. God also commands humanity to multiply and fill and control the whole creation. Humans are created in God’s image; God gives to humans a share in his control and governance over the whole world, both human society, in the form of government, and over nature, through human technologies.

And who would deny the great benefits technology has brought us? Despite the occasional calls to return to nature, who of us would or should reject medical, communications and transportation technologies? Precisely because of technology’s great benefit to humankind, we need to take its measure soberly and accurately, from a Christian theological point of view. The following points are, I think, suggested from a classical Christian theological perspective.

**The Ambiguity of Fallen Human Power**

First, human technology is an expression of human power and therefore will be filled with all the ambiguity of sinful, finite and fallible human beings. The ambiguity of technology is much better grasped today than 100 years ago. We now are aware of the ecological deterioration our industrial technology has brought. Medical technology works wonders. But it poses new and intractable ethical and social problems, for example end-of-life decisions and the problem of an imbalance between old and young people in western nations. Thus, the basic doctrines of creation and fall should lead Christians to a sober, unromantic affirmation of technology. Certainly believing digital technology will usher in a utopian global utopia combining connected and individual self-expression, is impossible for Christians. We are too realistic both about human greatness and human capacity to misuse all our inventions.
Cyberpower and the Power of Love

If the first point is a sober affirmation of human capacity to create technology, the second point is that digital technology embodies a very different kind of power from the divine manifested in Jesus Christ. Technological culture, as we said, is the power of control over something less than human. This is not the kind of power we can associate with God as revealed in Jesus Christ. One of the most remarkable claims of Christianity is that the power of the true God, the God of Jesus Christ, is a power that displays itself in giving life, giving self, in healing, reconciling and affirming. The kind of human power closest to God’s creative power is the human powers to give birth, to be creative in the arts, in science, in technology, in government. But cybertechnology is simply the power over information. Both technological power and loving power have an intentional character, i.e., are outward directed forms of power. But, digital power, as a technological power, reaches out to grasp and control. The texture of Gods’ love and of human love in God is the power to care, to protect, provide and support.

My point here is not that technological power is evil because it is controlling and manipulating power. Controlling and manipulating the physical world can serve human need and be done to God’s glory. Rather, my point is that the power of love and the power of technology are different in kind and should not be considered the same nor confused with one another. Cyberculture is not the kingdom of God as some cyberutopians suggest.

Cybertechnology and Temptation to Sin

But it is not just enough to say that technological power, as controlling and dominating power, is different from loving power. Our sinful tendency to want to control and dominate others and exploit the world for our selfish advantage makes technology into a constant temptation for sinful misuse. With every advance in our human ability to control and manipulate there is an increase in our temptation to do so. Given, therefore, the Christian realistic, not pessimistic, understanding of human nature, we can predict that computers will be used in sinful ways to manipulate exploit and oppress people, as well as to help them.

Recently, the Washington Post discussed the case of an Health Maintenance Organization receiving computerized information from their bill-processing company about a member’s prescription for an anti-depressant. The HMO then notified the member that her prescription orders would be monitored and her continuation in the HMO would be determined in part by how quickly she came to grips with the condition requiring her taking the antidepressant.

We touch now on a concern widely shared about cybertechnology: that it will infringe on our legitimate privacy and personal freedom by having access to information about us. The Critical Art Ensemble, a small group of artist-thinkers and writers call this phenomenon, the "data body." The data body is that totality of sets of data about us that can be gathered by marketers and the government from the Net, or in the words of the Critical Art Ensemble, “the marketing apparatus and the repressive apparatus. When our insurance files, tax files, communication files, consumption files, medical files, travel files, criminal files, investment files, banking files, education files can all be obtained on line, each of us can be reduced to a set of data which becomes a surrogate self. Each of us has heard stories of citizens learning with surprise how much information about them is obtainable on the Net.
Cybertechnology and the Transformation of Work

Human work is a basic way we serve others and thus share in, are shaped by and show forth God’s creative love. Christians will want to concentrate on how cybertechnology affects human labor. In cybertechnology, human work is being transformed in at least four ways.

First, cybertechnology can make work both easier and more intense. Computers make some work easier to do. Anyone who remembers typing a paper all night because every mistake required retyping the whole page, will immediately know what I mean. Another example is the collecting, storing, organizing, and retrieving of vast amounts of information. Cybertechnology is also allows one to do some work in other places than an office away from home.

But, paradoxically, cybertechnology also increases the intensity of work. Because I can produce more or less finished texts on my own computer more quickly than on a typewriter, I expect of myself and others expect of me to produced more than I did in the past. Because digital technology allows me to be reached by email, by portable telephone, by fax, in my car, or on my sabbatical or on vacation, my boss may require me to be accessible to their work demands 24 hours a day, every day of the year.

Second, cybertechnology is removing workers from the process of production and from those for whom workers work. An example is the critical care unit in a modern hospital. The nursing station monitors, by means of cybertechnology the condition of patients’ heartbeat, respiration and blood pressure and their location, if they are ambulatory. Yet, the nursing and other staff is more remote from the patient than before. The same is true of telebanking and of teleshopping. Because of computer technology, workers are becoming separated from their work and from those who are served by their work. Related to this separation between worker and work because of computers, the process of workers becoming deskilled through the increasing use of computer-guided production. Workers are losing the skills of hands on production and are becoming button pushers and machine-tenders, while computers run the machines themselves.

Third, at the same time workers are becoming in some ways deskilled by computers, others are being replaced by computers. The introduction of computer technology into the work place has meant the loss of millions of jobs; computers now do the work which workers accomplished. Related to the loss of jobs is another change: almost every job today, no matter how menial, requires some computer skills. This process intensifies what C.P. Snow called the creation of the two cultures ---the scientific and the humanistic culture. Today there is developing a division in the work world: between those who can use computers and those who, because of illiteracy, or inability to obtain needed training, or lack of ability to learn computers, will be increasingly marginalized from the work force.

Of course, the production, distribution, programming, repair of computers has created millions of jobs. This only underlines one of my main points in this section. Although digital technology is categorically new, because it controls information and not physical things, it is like all past forms of technology can bring both great benefit and great disruption into people’s lives.

In conclusion, then, three points. Technology has always disrupted the existing shape of work and created new jobs at the same time as changing and eliminating others. I don’t think cybertechnology brings anything new into that picture. When computers stand between caregivers and those needing personal care, I think they do not provide a good context for the king of love Christians believe all people are called to by God. But when interpersonal relations are not
necessary for truly serving others, I think cyberspace can certainly be an arena of self-giving and service, and thus a place for sharing in and being shaped by God’s love.

**Vulnerability in Cyberculture**

This ambiguity about computer technology as a form of power is especially clear in my final point in this section. Digital technology vastly increases our control of information. But it also radically increases our vulnerability in the case of technological failure. Paradoxically, as our cyberpower grows we become increasingly vulnerable. As cyber culture spreads, each of us becomes more enmeshed in the computer web. We have all experienced the near total collapse of a bank’s and an airline’s normal activities when the computer system breaks down. When the computer networks among banks become interconnected with the computer networks among airlines and telephone systems and governments, we can imagine a catastrophic collapse of our whole system of interconnection, precisely because they are interconnected. Thus, one of the paradoxes of power in the cyberculture is a sense of an enormous increase in our power to control, but at the same time an increased sense of our vulnerability because of this very same interconnectivity. The one lesson we will each learn in cyberculture is the ancient Christian teaching that no one is an island and that each is part of the whole. This experience will grate against our western sense of autonomy and individualism, but we may be learning a truth about ourselves.

What have we said in this first section? Digital technology, new because a technology of bytes not atoms will continue the darkening of our sense of God’s reality and presence in daily human life. Its kind of power, the power to control information, is not as such God’s kind of generative, life-giving power. Because digital technology is an expression of human power, it will have the potential of both helping people and of harming them. We can expect that both will happen at the same time. Yet, God has given us the creativity to develop technology. This creativity is an aspect of God’s image in us. So we should affirm digital technology in principle and engage the tedious job of using it to help people, trying to limit its misuse against people, and living with both the rewards and frustrations of our growing dependence on it.

**II. Cybertechnology and Personal Identity**

Trinitarian Christianity has a deep concern for the individual and in personal identity. Therefore, in this second part of this lecture, we ask can human persons, as Christian faith understands us to be, flourish in cyberculture? Our first step is to ask what our faith says we are.

**Human Identity in Christian View**

First, Christian theology affirms that human beings are created by God and are intended for an eternal relation to God as the source and goal of their lives. Humans are neither the creators of themselves nor the sustainers of themselves in the Christian view.

Second, Christian theology underscores our embodiedness. Our true humanity includes our bodies. God created a physical universe; God created us from the earth. God’s Word came to us in an embodied person who was born, lived, died, was buried and was raised in some kind of a body. We are not just souls; we are embodied selves. This is important because in cyberspace, we leave our bodies behind. Digital technology abstracts us from our bodies and flies us around the globe as a byte-sized informational presence.
Third the Jewish and Christian traditions teach that human beings have a distinctive dignity among all God’s creation. Human beings are created in the image of God, whereas all other creatures do not possess that dignity. That dignity is the richness of our natural creativity, capacity for covenant and for community which God can shape and draw into his own life.

A fourth Christian teaching about human identity is that we are social beings. We are created in the image of God who is one being in three persons. Our social nature is not an accidental extra which we can have or not have or use or do without. Our connection with God, with other people and with the earth is part of our very identity. I will argue in the last section that these connections can’t be created by cyberspace but they can live and grow there in the digital culture.

Fifth is the claim about human identity opened up by the saving work of Christ. We affirm that we are forgiven sinners! We are sinners, i.e., we have a tendency to act contrary to God’s will and will often do act contrary to God’s will. Yet, we affirm that God has forgiven us by crediting or imputing to us, by grace, that perfect righteousness which Christ embodied in his ministry, suffering and death. It is very important to emphasize that this identity as forgiven sinner is grounded not in ourselves but given to us from God, who is beyond us, and received by trust and in thanks.

Finally, Christians affirm, from the standpoint of God the Holy Spirit, that we are being drawn into the future of God’s life as Holy Trinity. That is, we believe God, through the Holy Spirit is drawing us ever more deeply into a sharing in, a being shaped by and a showing forth of God’s self-giving life as Holy Trinity. Thus, our identity is determined by God, the Father, as our creator, by God the Son as our reconciler and by God the Holy Spirit as our sanctifier.

With this summary of traditional Christian understanding about human identity, we turn to the theme of human identity in cyberspace. The current literature raises the theme of personal identity in three ways. One is creating a fictitious identity; second is cyberspace as a zone of freedom; third cyberspace as a temptation to psychological regression.

The Counterfeit Self

First, cyberspace communication allows people to create for themselves a fictitious identity and present themselves to others as this self-created identity. I think people do this in cyberspace for two kinds of reasons.

The Pleasure of Creativity

One is the pleasure of creativity. Just as a fiction writer experiences satisfaction creating a new character and making that character as real and convincing as possible, so any of us on the Internet might enjoy creating a wholly new persona for ourselves. There is something enjoyable about creating a new personal identity. Closely related to this simple enjoyment of creativity is the expansion of one’s sense of self by splitting off a part of one’s real identity and rounding it off into a total identity. Here one creates a fictitious identity, which is not entirely unconnected with whom you really are, but an identity of an alter ego, perhaps someone you would like to be. The satisfaction here is exploring what it would be like if your whole identity is built around one trait which you really have but you have not really developed. Some psychologists hypothesize that this is possibility is largely positive. It enables people to experience and express different aspects of their self-hood, for which their everyday persona does not give adequate expression.
A second reason for creating a personal identity is less noble. Through a fictitious identity people can use and exploit others. One example is cybersex. Douglas Groothius, in *The Soul in Cyberspace*, describes a kind of sexual self-indulgence in a kind of game called MUD (Multi-user Dialogue or Dungeon) involving fictitious personae, none of whom exist in real life except in the mind of their authors. The worst form of sexual exploitation through fictitious identity is when adults hide behind false identities to seduce others, including children into different kinds of sexual relations, some of them in real life. Another kind of exploitation is financial. People can use a fictitious identity and look for example for unwary people to induce to make bogus investments. Because a user is present in cyberspace only in the disembodied, abstracted form of information, immoral exploitation of others and of the self are easy in cyberspace.

**A Free Zone**

Closely related to a fictitious identity is the protection reduced identity in cyberspace offers. Cyberspace offers people an arena for meeting and engaging with others that is relatively free from the prejudices they encounter in real life. They experience cyberspace as a free zone. Because email and bulletin board, and on-line chat meetings is a disembodied communication people are almost free from the grids of prejudice they meet in real life. People don’t see what gender, what race, what weight, what religion, what academic credentials, what social class you are on the net. Therefore, people particularly subject to such prejudices can enjoy an opportunity to be taken seriously for what we actually have to say about what we speaking, rather than some other attribute. Many experience this to be very liberating.

**Social Regression**

A third theme about human identity in cyberspace is the warning against the danger of social regression. We have noted that Christian teaching emphasizes that human identity is an embodied and social identity. Yet, we have just noted that in Cyberspace the self can, indeed must, present itself disembodied. Our bodies are the foundation for many of the prejudices and biases which people can avoid on the Net. In and through our bodies we have our gender, our race, our physical characteristics, and our ethnic heritage. We leave all that behind in cyberspace, because we appear there disembodied, a free-floating, virtual self, appearing on other people’s computer screens as words.

Yet the disembodied self of cyberspace is not the real self, certainly not the embodied self of Christian understanding. Christian theology and ethics calls people to the difficult task of learning to love in real life, with other people in real, embodied space and in real time. This difficult task can be evaded by using cyberspace as a retreat from the demands of living with people in their full reality. Some psychologists, therefore, worry that, like TV, so computers are an open opportunity for avoiding the rough and tumble of real community for the safer seas of virtual community. Just as too much TV can stunt growth in learning and psychological maturation, so also can too much time wandering the digital highway.

Next to this warning that the digital technology can impede social maturation, however, we can put a contrasting idea developed by Negroponte. He correctly observes that an important feature of digital technology is its ability to program bits about bits. Programming our video recorder is an example. We can program our video recorder to begin recording a program even though we are not there. Similarly, digital technology will increasingly enable us to program our equipment so that it gathers and organizes information from cyberspace according to criteria that meet our individual, personal professional and personal interests. This is why cyberspace
can be experienced as precisely the opposite of the existing mass media, whose content is
controlled at the source for a mass audience. Digital technology, bits programming bits, works
just the opposite. We the receivers can profile the kind of information want and thus reinforce
our individual identities in cyberspace. From the Christian Trinitarian perspective outlined above,
and in the light of what has been said about creating fictitious identities, what can we say about
the Net and personal identity?

From the point of view of God, the Creator, and our ability to image god’s creativity in finite and
limited ways, I don’t think Christians can simply dismiss creation of fictitious identities as always
wrong. The Net may offer a person an arena of playfulness and creativity in creating fictitious
characters that that is justified by the duty to live into the creative personhood God gives human
beings. One must say, however, that such creativity and playfulness will be quickly limited our
duty to be truthful with others. It is difficult to understand how misleading another cyberspace
partner about one’s true identity can be justified in the light of our prima facie duty to tell the
truth, not to bear false witness.

I think that Christians can also affirm the use of fictitious identities to avoid the pervasive
misogynist and other prejudices on the Net. The Net, precisely because, it does not let others
see or hear you in real time and space, lets some people receive a fair hearing for their views
and to communicate unhampered by sexual, racial or other innuendoes. In this sense,
cyberspace, because it allows people to communicate in a disembodied way, ameliorates some
expressions of sin in daily life.

Identity creation in cyberspace, however, knows nothing of faith’s gracious receiving of new
identity from God. In cyberspace, the fictitious identities people create are autonomous
products, deriving from the will of the creator, who is the self, not God. Such self-determined
identities in Cyberspace are, in fact, but the most recent kind of self which our secular society
our secular society invites us to construct. In our contemporary culture, great emphasis is
placed on self-actualizing. One radical expression of this self-actualizing is the project whereby
a person constructs his or her own identity.

The most common manifestation of this is advertising. Many ads, as we all know, invite us to
think of the world as a kind of stage upon which we appear as the characters we choose to be .
Of course we are all encouraged to try to do this identity making by the companies that will sell
us the clothing and material goods to put this identity en scene. We are told by ads that wearing
this, smelling like that, looking like this will enable us to make that "statement” about ourselves
to the world. The ad, of course, shows us what we need to buy to make that statement. In every
case the ad implies we can create our own identity. In our contemporary society family history,
social and economic class and traditional gender roles less and less define who we are. So
many believe they must create their own identity. Cyberspaces’s fictitious identities virtual forms
of what many try to do in real life.

### III. CyberCulture and Community

A third question Trinitarian theology puts to Cyberculture concerns community. Can the virtual
community be a place where Christian community can thrive? Can the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of
community, work in Cyberspace to draw people to God the Father, in Jesus Christ through the
Holy Spirit ? Is cyberspace an arena where the Holy Spirit can form us and draw us into
communion with one another and God in Christ?
Christian Investment in Community

To begin to answer that question, we need to know what kind of community we believe God wills for us through the Holy Spirit. The church in history is to be a sign, a kind of symbol or icon, of that perfect community into which God in Christ is calling humanity by the Holy Spirit. In our creeds, four words, "one," "holy," "catholic," and "apostolic" identify aspects of the church as a sign of the perfect community of the Kingdom of God. Let us limit orient our discussion about community to two of these qualities, unity and catholicity.

The unity of the Church is not a visible institutional unity among Christians, which does not yet exist. The Unity, which the Church confesses about itself, is a oneness in Christ, a rich unity created by faith and baptism. The New Testament speaks of several aspects of this unity. It is a unity between Jesus Christ and us that is so close that we can say we are in Christ and that Christ is in us. It is also a unity, which we have not as isolated individuals, but share with others in Christ. And so profound is that community with others that we can speak of actually being members one of another. Third, that unity in Christ shares Christ’s dynamic oneness with his heavenly Father through the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, Christian community is grounded outside of us, in God, in Christ. And Christian community is ultimately not created by us but by God, the Holy Spirit. We need to keep this "supernatural" character of Christian community in mind, when we speak about Cyberspace’s potential for human community.

The church’s catholicity is its vocation to proclaim the Gospel to the whole of God’s world. This catholicity is manifested already in an imperfect way by its geographical spread around the globe. It is manifested also by the variety of nations and tongues in the church representing the whole of humanity. This catholicity can also be personally experienced as the hospitality Christians receive when they visit others churches.

A feature of both the unity and catholicity of the church is a tension between the present actual and the future ideal. With the unity of the church, so with its catholicity, there is an ideal, which is already partially realized in the concrete, historical institutional church. We believe the ideal will be fully realized at the end of history. Until then we strive toward realizing that ideal as fully as we can in the present life of the real, institutional church in history.

Thus, we Christians make radical claims about community. We say God has and is a community of love as One Nature in Three Persons. We say that the Trinity created humanity in the triune image so that we are created for community as well as for being distinct persons. And we believe God calls the whole world into a future, perfect community—the Kingdom of God. We say that this community joins people with one another but does not erase their individuality. We say this community is not just about human community but communion with God. We say that this community intends to be universal in scope, and that this unity and universality is already manifest in a fragmentary way in the historical church on earth. Given these radical claims about and concerns for community, we must take a profound interest in the virtual community possible in cyberspace.

The Net’s Potential for Human Community

Can the virtual community of cyberspace be a place for Christian community? Let’s begin with the quality of unity. What depth of community can virtual community provide? The first point is that the virtual community of cyberspace is just that, a virtual community, not a real community in time and space. Virtual community is a community within the limits of machines. Digital
technology can connect people under the conditions set by this technology, whose strength is to
transmit, store, organize information in the form of bytes. That means that in cyberspace people
meet as constellations of information. They do not meet as fully embodied selves in physical
contact in specific places and specific times. We have noted that cyberspace reduces the self to
information and abstracts this data self from space and time. This does not mean that people
cannot experience any togetherness on the net at all. We certainly do. That email is the most
popular use of the Internet shows, people can do a lot of sharing through the Net. But the Net
can provide the possibility of community best when people already know each other on the
basis of previous face-to-face encounter. Until people who first met on the net have actually met
face to face, their community is less than real community; it is only virtual community.

The second point is that the Net cannot create community; it can only be a medium for
discovering and deepening human community that may already exist. One of the most striking
forms of community people develop on the net are affinity groupings. People who share a hobby
or an intellectual pursuit or a common problem discover others through the Internet and
experience. But notice that the basis of the community existed before the Internet; the basis of
the community was in the hobby or problem that is the basis for the sharing through the Internet.
The Net allows that common problem or common hobby to become the basis for sharing with
others, the basis for community.

Finally, the most important point about virtual community in relation to community in Christ is
that although digital technology cannot create Christian community, it can be an arena for
Christian community. Virtual community is a technological creation, i.e., a human creation. As a
human creation, it can never create Christian community, because Christian community is
community from God and in God, God alone can create and sustain Christian community. But
precisely God, the Holy Spirit transcends everything in this world, the Holy Spirit can certainly
work in and through cyberspace to create and sustain community in Christ.

Of course, we also are warned that the Internet has the potential for creating new divisions
among individuals and groups. One persistent concern of many is that Cyberculture will
privilege the technologically competent, those who have the education, time, money and
expertise to use digital technology’s resources. Those who lack the intelligence, the education
or the access to digital technology will fall further into the economic and social underclass.

Nevertheless we should not underestimate the value of virtual community, for all its limitations.
In the first place, affinity groups offer very substantial experience of human community to many
people. When the virtual community formed on the basis of meeting people on the Net sharing a
similar interest or having a similar problem is combined with meeting these people in real life,
we see the Net’s true potential for creating human community.

Further, we should not overlook the contribution the Net is making to democratic government.
We noted above that union in Christ is among those who enjoy equal dignity as the children of
God. This Christian kind of equality in unity has had profound effects politically in undergirding
democratic forms of government. Here, Christians can see the Internet as an ally. We read how
totalitarian regimes in North Korea, China the earlier Soviet Union tried to prevent the
development of the Internet, because it allowed people in those regimes to tell the whole world
what they were seeing daily, information which the totalitarian leaders did not what to be known. And, through the Internet people from all over the world can feed information about the wider
world denied people by new controlling totalitarian regimes.
Let us finally turn to the criterion of catholicity. Here, the Internet holds real promise.

**The Catholicity of the Internet**

The Internet, most of us know, began as a creature of the US Defense Department. For the US military to survive a massive nuclear attack on the US, a system of communication was needed whereby Command and Control and information could continue even when some centers of communication were destroyed. A communications structure which provided a myriad of alternative paths for communication, however, would allow Command and Control to continue despite the destruction of some communication centers.

Through the process of development the Internet, however, scientists and technicians discovered the value of the Internet for the exchange of data and information generally. Hence, the Internet became a tool of research and academic collaboration among scientists and scholars, one of its most important functions today. Networks of communication among national and international academic institutions and research centers widened the Internet’s communication network beyond government to academia.

The World Wide Web was originally designed as a network to help scientists locate information on the Internet in a simpler way. From there, the Net spread to business forms and larger government networks. The development of of the personal computer as a consumer item and the creation of Internet servers and other Internet providers, like America on Line and CompuServe allowed the Internet to become truly global. We are in the final stage of the spread of the Internet and the WWW around the globe. The next step of digital technology seems to be the integration of the Internet with Television and Video technology. This will greatly enhance the reach and fullness of connection possible through digital technology.

**Evolving Political Community**

Keeping the widening reach of digital connectivity in mind, let us next touch briefly on a second essential form of human community, political communities. Human political community began with localized tribal and clan groupings. These were combined by powerful leaders to larger and larger units until we reached the age of empires, a vast historical period lasting from the second millennia before Christ, to around the time of end of the Middle Ages in the West. The next phase of human community, at least in the west was the rise of national, sovereign states, based on common cultural tradition, biological affinity and shared geographical space. The phase when nation states were the basis of political unity is, however, slowly ending.

The first attempt to transcend the Nation State was the League of Nations and then the United Nations, which was established in 1945. Corresponding to this are international agreements, such as the GATT (General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs). The second major attempt to transcend the era of the nation state is currently underway. Three blocs of nation states are forming continental units, the Asian group built around Japan’s economy, the European Community, built around Germany’s economy, and the American unit, including Canada, the U.S., Mexico and Latin and S. America, built around the U.S. economy. Thus far, these continental units are primarily formed for economic strength against the other two units.

The United Nations and other nation-state coalitions are developing, as we realize that the problems facing each nation exceed the capacity of nation states to resolve. The real danger of ecological catastrophe, of nuclear catastrophe, of over-population of and disease pandemics
requires internationals political institutions. The development of the United Nations and of regional unions of Nations States, however, is in its infancy and lags far behind the global character of the economic, population, military, and ecological problems, which confront and can directly affect every person on the globe.

Comparing the widening community of digital connectivity with the evolution of political connectivity makes us realize that political community has not been linear in its widening interconnectivity as has virtual community in cyberspace. Second, the evolution of international political community is blocked by the lack of a transcendent basis for human community, a basis that only God can provide. Right now the capacity of human community to effectively transcend national units is very questionable, as the intractability of political conflict in the Near East, in the Balkans, in Africa the economic crisis in Asia indicate. Third, unlike the development of digital technology, political institutions are lagging far behind in the development of truly effective global political institutions.

The Church as Global Community

The Christian community began as a group of twelve following Jesus in his calling people into and embodying in their common life and actions the in-breaking Kingdom of God. The early Christian movement occurred within the Jewish People, whom God had called to be His people as a light to the nations. From the point of view of inclusive community, the early church’s realization that God’s Rule was meant for all people, opened the church to the Gentiles, and the catholic character of the Christian community was realized as a theological necessity.

The catholic character of the church was given greater scope with Constantine the Great’s Edict of Toleration of Christianity in the fourth century. The Church was thereby legitimized, and indeed privileged as a social institution. This began the long era of Christian establishment in the west, which has been called the Age of Christendom. Although the Age of Christendom is effectively over, it had one great significance for the global spread of the Church. Beginning with Spanish, French and English Colonialism in the seventeenth century and continuing through the early twentieth century, the movement of colonialism brought the Christian church into all the world. It is hard to say a good word about colonialism, but it did promote the historical realization of the church’s inherent catholicity.

This Church and cyber space shares this global character. have in common. Therefore, there can and should be a powerful synergy between this new technology of global communication and the Christian community. However, I want to close with two points, which should lead us to be quite sober about the potential of the Cybertechnology to promote human and Christian Community.

First, the Internet provides everyone with a medium to tell his or her own story. The Internet, by its very nature, is democratic, allowing everyone who has access to the technology to express his or her opinion, no matter how eccentric. Everyone can tell their story, their ethnic story, their racial, genders cultural and religious story. This wide access allows Christians to tell their story and to further its unity and catholicity. But the very wideness of access to the Internet also means that many versions of what Christianity is will appear on the Net. Neither Canterbury nor theological seminaries nor the Vatican can control what is presented as the Christian message. Therefore, if Christians want to use the Net as they should to share the Christian message and share Christian community they will have to be willing to engage both non-Christians and
Christians on the topic of what is the faith. This will require knowledge of the faith and an ability to articulate the faith, which many Christians do not have.

Second, the sheer diversity and quantity of information from around the globe can overwhelm and paralyze human engagement with human need around the world. Like TV, the cyberspace can easily become not a means of awareness, engagement and creative response to the needs of real people but an arena for mere spectatorship.

**Conclusion**

I have covered a wideness of topic that is like the wideness of the Internet itself. I have tried to look at the developing Cyberculture from a theological, specifically, a Trinitarian perspective. From the perspective of God the Father as creative power, I have discussed cyberspace as an expression of power, the power of digital technology. From the perspective of God the Son, Jesus Christ, I have asked how human identity might be formed and transformed in cyberspace. Finally, from the perspective of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Unity, I have looked at cyberspace as a potential of human community in relation to our evolving political units and the unity of the Church.

My goals have been two-fold. I wanted to provide a present theological assessment of the Internet as a manifestation of power, of human identity and of community. But more importantly, I hope to offer a theological framework, the framework of God the Holy Trinity, for theologically processing the reality and developments of the cyberculture. This second goal is the more important one. For I think we Christians need not only a theological assessment of the cyberculture as it is now. Even more, we need to develop together a way of thinking about the fast-changing cyberculture, so that we can think about it not just technologically, commercially, sociologically, psychologically but as Christians, i.e. those who believe and who are seeking understanding.