

Chapter 18

Digital Pneumatology: Presence and Power of the Holy Spirit in the Metaverse (Guichun Jun)

Introduction

One distinctive feature that has influenced the ministry and mission of the church since the second half of the twentieth century is digitalisation – the revolution that began with the invention of computers and accelerated with the Internet. On the one hand, some theologically conservative Christians feel anxious about the rapid development of digital devices and their negative influences on spirituality due to the dichotomic view of secular and sacred things. On the other hand, some churches actively use various digital devices and mass media (radio, television, and the Internet) not only for effective evangelism and ministry to spread the gospel but also for charismatic ministries, such as faith healing by touching the screen when televangelists pray.¹

At the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the fourth industrial revolution began to bring a fundamental change in all aspects of human life and work, including religious practices. Recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, churches have actively used various digital platforms such as YouTube and Zoom to conduct online worship services and prayer meetings and to communicate with their members. According to a survey, approximately 72 percent of respondents reported that the pandemic changed the way they practice their faith, with many adopting new private religious practices in the home or joining

¹ Shane Denson, “Faith in Technology: Televangelism and the Mediation of Immediate Experience”, *Phenomenology & Practice* 5(2), (2011): 94, [Available at: https://shanedenson.com/articles/Denson_Faith_in_Technology.pdf], [Last accessed: 25th April 2024].

services online.² A report by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research indicated that 80 percent of US churches in November 2021 utilised a hybrid worship service in which congregants simultaneously gather in person and online.³

One notable trend in religious practice in this contemporary digital age is the launch and development of churches in the metaverse. The first metaverse church (VR Church: www.vrchurch.org) was established in 2016. Since then, many metachurches in virtual space launched in order to reach more people by transcending time and distance. The concept of the death of distance⁴ by technological revolution is fulfilled not only in business and communication but also in religious practices. Digital technologies converged into the metaverse enable the church to function anywhere at any time with anyone. As a church in the metaverse exists as a fully virtual reality church, every user participates through their avatars in religious activities, such as Sunday worship, small groups, Bible studies or prayer meetings. Due to the nature of avatar-mediated interactions, some believers feel concerned that religious experiences in virtual spaces cannot be replaceable with the ones in the traditional Christian community. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that believers have been increasingly participating in various religious activities in the metaverse since the pandemic.⁵ D.J. Soto, founder of VR Church,

² Manmit Bhambra and Austin Tiffany, "From the Sanctuary to the Sofa: What Covid-19 Has Taught us about Sacred Space", *LSE Research Online*, last modified 10th October 2021, [Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/110575>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

³ Hartford Institute for Religion Research, "Navigating the Pandemic: A First Look at Congregational Responses", *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations: Innovation Amidst and Beyond COVID-19*, last modified 14th December 2021, [Available at: https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Navigating-the-Pandemic_A-First-Look-at-Congregational-Responses_Nov-2021.pdf], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

⁴ Frances Cairncross, *The Death of Distance 2.0: How the Communications Revolution will Change Our Lives* (London: Texere, 2001): 2.

⁵ Luis Anders Henao and the Associated Press, "Religious People are Increasingly Attending Worship Service in the Metaverse", *Fortune*, last modified 31st January 2022, [Available at: <https://fortune.com/2022/01/31/virtual-worshipping-services-religion-metaverse/>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

intimates that a radical shift in terms of theological understanding of the nature of the church and the characteristics of its ministry is coming in the age of digitalisation.⁶ Despite these rapid changes in religious practices and phenomena triggered by technological advancement, there has been little theological reflection on them. In particular, not enough attention has been paid to digital pneumatology to understand the person and the role of the Holy Spirit in the intersection of theology and technology.⁷ Therefore, this chapter intends to explore the theological possibility of digital pneumatology to understand that the Holy Spirit can present and work in digital spaces in reference to the metaverse.

Digital Pneumatology

Digital pneumatology is a new field of study for the theological exploration of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in digital spaces. It seeks to understand how the Holy Spirit is presented in digital spaces and how believers experience the work and the power of the Holy Spirit through advanced technology. As there has not been a significant amount of academic writing in this particular field yet, digital pneumatology is currently based on the theological presupposition that the Holy Spirit can be present and demonstrate his power and attributes in digital spaces in the same way that he is present and active in physical spaces. It is theologically legitimate to speculate that the presence or manifestation of the Holy Spirit is not

⁶Luis Henao, “Faith in the metaverse: A VR quest for community, fellowship”, Religion News Service, {January 31, 2022} Available at <https://religionnews.com/2022/01/31/faith-in-the-metaverse-a-vr-quest-for-community-fellowship/>

⁷ Recently, Chris Green and Steven Félix-Jäger edited a book, *The Spirit and the Screen: Pneumatological Reflections on Contemporary Cinema*, which examines contemporary films through the lens of Pneumatology to understand how the concepts of the Spirit shed light on filmmaking. The contributors identify “Spirit figures” in movies (showcasing characters moved by the Spirit) and uncover implicit and explicit representations of the Spirit in popular culture. This book aims to explain the nature of film and filmmaking from the Pentecostal perspective and introduce cultural hermeneutics to connect the person and work of the Spirit to popular cultural symbols. However, the inclusion of this book in the category of digital pneumatology is somewhat strained as it lacks a robust conversation about the person and role of the Spirit at the junction of theology and technology.

limited by physical boundaries, and that his power can be perceptibly experienced in any space, including digital spaces. COVID-19 has played a significant role in developing this theological speculation into a form of digital pneumatology that the classical understanding of the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit can be extended to digital spaces. Churches and mission agencies have used various digital platforms to spread the gospel and form digital communities for worship and fellowship. Robert Wuthnow⁸ and Nancy Ammerman,⁹ prominent sociologists of religion, and Heidi Campbell,¹⁰ an outstanding scholar in religion and digital culture, commonly say that digital technologies can create online and virtual platforms not only for complementing traditional practices and accessing religious resources but also for providing new opportunities for enhancing religiosity (or spirituality) in digital spaces. Nicky Gumbel, founder of Alpha Course, mentions his theological belief that the Holy Spirit can be present and work through virtual platforms like Zoom. He states in an interview with Premier Christianity, “The Holy Spirit is not limited by the technology that we use. The Holy Spirit can work through a Zoom call, just as much as he can work through a live meeting.”¹¹ This perspective highlights a growing recognition among religious leaders that virtual spaces can serve as platforms for spiritual experiences, transcending physical limitations traditionally associated with religious gatherings.

⁸ See Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989): 268-96.

⁹ See Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 288-304.

¹⁰ See Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media: Media, Religion and Culture* (Hoboken, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2010): 41-63. Heidi Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022): 1-22. Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network* (New York: Lang, 2010): 53-74.

¹¹ The Economist, “Your Own Personal Jesus: Online Services Swell the Church of England’s Congregations”, *Economist Website*, last modified 4th June 2020, [Available at: <https://www.economist.com/britain/2020/06/04/online-services-swell-the-church-of-englands-congregations>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

Many church leaders and mission agencies have the same belief as Gumbel that digital platforms will be continually used for their ministries, such as virtual worship services, prayer meetings, and other spiritual practices. Therefore, it is time to deepen our understanding of the evolving relationship between digital technologies and Christian spirituality from the Pentecostal perspective. Early in 2023, a great spiritual awakening took place at Asbury University in Wilmore, Kentucky. Spiritually hungry Gen Z students seeking transforming power from above experienced an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The occurrence gained widespread popularity on the Internet, particularly on the social media platform TikTok, where the hashtag #asburyrevival garnered over 100 million views.¹² The university campus could not accommodate the huge influx of more than 15,000 worshipers daily.¹³ As a consequence, the University allowed several YouTube channels to do live streaming of the worship services after several days. One of the channels was SermonIndex.net. Over 150,000 people from all over the world joined the live-streaming services for several days and testified by leaving comments that they also experienced the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit while watching them online in their own physical spaces.¹⁴

On the one hand, one can legitimately raise concerns about the potential risks and dangers of relying on digital technology for spiritual experiences. Some may argue that digital

¹² Thomas Lyons, “When a Christian Revival Goes Viral: At Asbury University, in Kentucky, A Student Chapel Service Turned into a Revival That Has Captivated TikTok”, *The Atlantic*, last modified 23rd February 2023, [Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/02/asbury-kentucky-university-christian-revival/673176/>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

¹³ Heather Preston, “Asbury Relocates Revival off Campus, Following Overcrowding”, *Premier Christian News*, last modified 21st February 2023, [Available at: <https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/asbury-relocates-revival-off-campus-following-overcrowding>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

¹⁴ YouTube Video, “Asbury University Revival Live 2023 – Feb 15, 2023 (Worship – Part 1)”, *YouTube*, Channel: SermonIndex.Net, 16th Feb 2023, [Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FpKv5O2wMI&ab_channel=SermonIndex.net], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

platforms diminish the authentic sense of community and fellowship in the physical spaces and increase the sense of spiritual superficiality and religious consumerism only by accessing online content without physical interactions with other believers in the traditional church contexts. On the other hand, as a counterargument, digital technology has been used to foster spiritual experiences and growth for decades. From the viewpoints of religious phenomenology and empiricism, technology contributed to enhancing and deepening spiritual experiences and growth to a certain degree,¹⁵ although theological challenges and practical limitations remain in the intersection between digital technologies and spirituality. This debate has opened up a new avenue for theologians and practitioners to move forward from religious phenomenology to digital theology – in particular, digital pneumatology – to reimagine the future possibility of Pentecostal theology and ministries in the metaverse for Gen Z and beyond.

Presence of the Holy Spirit in the Metaverse

Grace Rose raises a thought-provoking question: “Will the metaverse leave God and His congregations in the past or will it be an extension of God’s creation and support His church beyond our wildest imaginations?”¹⁶ Ozan Sönmez rightly points out that many Christians remain trapped in the dualistic Christian belief that separates physical spaces and virtual spaces concerning the presence of God, while large numbers of believers have already utilised technological advancement to form their spiritual communities and interact with the Spirit of

¹⁵ Don Iannone, “The Two Faces of Digital Spirituality: Contrasting Motives for Digital Spirituality”, *KOSMOS: Journal for Global Transformation*, last modified February 2023, [Available at: https://www.kosmosjournal.org/kj_article/the-two-faces-of-digital-spirituality/], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

¹⁶ Grace Rose, “How Will God and the Church Fit into the Metaverse?” *Comm-entary* 18(1), (2022): 4.

God in digital spaces.¹⁷ The metaverse already has become a new way of life in all aspects, including religious practices in all religions. For example, Muslims can participate in the pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to holy Mecca through a digital platform in the metaverse called “Experience Makkah” since 2015.¹⁸ Jewish believers can pray and place a slip of prayer in the Western Wall through the metaverse.¹⁹ These unprecedented digital opportunities have opened a new door for religious people not only to satisfy their religious hunger and promote their religiosity but also to experience their gods in immersive virtual spaces.²⁰ As the empirical approach of the sociology of religion and religious phenomenology informs that God is already in cyberspace through his Spirit and people encounter him,²¹ it is meaningless to ask questions, such as “Does God exist in the metaverse?” or “Has God entered into the metaverse?”²² The aforementioned phenomenological human experiences of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the metaverse require further theological reflection to develop a digital pneumatology.

¹⁷ Ozan Sönmez, “Context before Technology: The Possible Utopian/Dystopian Elements of the Metaverse with Examples from Great Literature”, in Enis Karaarslan, Ömer Aydın, Ümit Cali, and Moharram Challenger (eds), *Digital Twin Driven Intelligent Systems and Emerging Metaverse* (Singapore: Springer, 2023): 299.

¹⁸ Lara Katharina Schneider, “Religious Acts in Metaverse: Catholic Christianity”, *GRIN*, last modified 15th March 2023, [Available at: <https://www.grin.com/document/1338328#:~:text=A%20metaverse%20makes%20sacred%20sites,confessions%20and%20other%20religious%20rituals>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

¹⁹ Luis Andres Henao, “From the Western Wall to Mecca: VR Lets Virtual Pilgrims Explore World’s Holy Sites”, *The Times of Israel*, last modified 8th August 2022, [Available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/from-the-western-wall-to-mecca-vr-lets-virtual-pilgrims-explore-worlds-holy-sites/>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

²⁰ Seiji Kumagi, “Development of Buddhist AI, AR, and VR toward the Establishment of Buddhist Metaverse”, *Kuensel*, last modified 10th October 2022, [Available at: <https://kuenselonline.com/development-of-buddhist-ai-ar-and-vr-toward-the-establishment-of-buddhist-metaverse-tera-verse/>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

²¹ Lavinia Byrne, “God in Cyberspace: Media and Theology Project Public Lectures”, *Cambridge Theological Federation*, 2000, [Available at: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/files/imports/fileManager/god%20in%20cyberspace.pdf>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

²² Euronews and AP, “God Has Entered the Metaverse – and Faith in the Virtual World is Flourishing”, *Euronews.next*, last modified 3rd February 2022, [Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/next/2022/02/01/god-has-entered-the-metaverse-and-worship-in-virtual-worlds-is-booming>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

Omnipresence of the Holy Spirit

From a biblical and theological standpoint, it is acknowledged that all things were created by God, and nothing was created without him, as stated in John 1. This understanding affirms that virtual spaces are not a product of human creativity but a part of God's creation. Therefore, one can reasonably claim that virtual spaces, such as the metaverse, exist within the universe God created and sustains.²³ This origin of the virtual spaces enables us to have a theological inference for God's presence in the metaverse through the concept of the omnipresence of God. In other words, the concept of God's omnipresence extends beyond the limitations of time and space, allowing him to exist in all corners of the universe and beyond. As the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is similarly present in all places, reflecting the divine essence of God. This understanding of God's presence in all locations logically extends to the virtual realm, including the metaverse, where the Holy Spirit also can be present. Jeff Reed,²⁴ founder of Thechurch.digital, uses the principle of Henry Blackaby, author *Experiencing God*, to argue that God is always at work around us through his Spirit, even in virtual realms.²⁵ Therefore, the aforementioned empirical experiences of a divine encounter in the metaverse prove possible if the omnipresent God is present there through his Spirit.

Transcendence of the Holy Spirit

²³ Guichun Jun, "Virtual Reality Church as a New Mission Frontier in the Metaverse: Exploring Theological Controversies and Missional Potential of Virtual Reality Church", *Transformation* 37(4), (2020): 300, [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378820963155>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

²⁴ Jeff Reed has written two books concerning mission in the metaverse: Jeff Reed, *VR & The Metaverse Church: How God is Moving in this Virtual, Yet Quite Real, Reality* (London: Leadership Network, 2022). Jeff Reed and John Harris, *Sharing Jesus Online: Helping Everyday Believers Become Digital & Metaverse Missionaries* (London: Exponential, 2023).

²⁵ Jeff Reed, "Blackaby's Experiencing God: Metaverse Edition", *TheChurch.Digital*, last modified 15th March 2022, [Available at: <https://be.thechurch.digital/blog/can-we-experience-god-in-the-metaverse-what-does-henry-blackaby-think>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

One common feature found in the intersection between pneumatology and the metaverse is that both involve the idea of transcendence. Pneumatology aligns the Holy Spirit with transcendence, the ability to go beyond human understanding. Similarly, the metaverse enables individuals to surpass physical barriers and experience what may be impossible in the physical world. The Holy Spirit's transcendence implies that he exceeds the limits of physical realities, operating on a transcendent level beyond physical reality. The metaverse's transcendent nature allows individuals to explore new dimensions and realities beyond their physical senses, offering unique ways of encountering and connecting with God. Consequently, the metaverse provides a way to transcend limited understanding of the Holy Spirit's presence and power beyond the physical world, similar to how pneumatology associates the Holy Spirit with transcending human understanding. This new perspective of digital pneumatology in light of the transcendence of the Holy Spirit may enable believers to experience God in ways that were previously impossible in the physical world.

Immanence of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is not only transcendental but also immanent in all his creations. On the one hand, the Holy Spirit is beyond humanity's full experience and perception of both his attributes and power. On the other hand, his presence and power permeate humanity's mundane so that he is knowable and graspable. In particular, since the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers' lives is promised with empirical evidence as he guides, teaches, rebukes, and loves his people with his wisdom, power, and authority. This nonphysical sense of immanence and indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers may be extended to the metaverse through the embodied relation between humans and their created avatars.

Don Ihde, a philosopher of science and technology, proposes four types of human and technology relations. One of them is embodied relations, which can serve as an appropriate theoretical approach to explain how one can empirically experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in the metaverse through one's avatar. Through its immersive nature, the metaverse plays a significant role in mediating human users' sensory experiences in embodied relations with their avatars. In Ihde's theory, avatars are not only representatives of their human users through digital anthropomorphism but also the virtual presence of the users through the digital embodiment by the technology merging of the physical world and virtual world. This immersive nature of interconnectedness between human users and their avatars not only enables the users' cognitive functions to perceive things in the metaverse but also enhances the sense of homogeneity through psychological, emotional, and spiritual intimacy.²⁶ In particular, this sense of homogeneity between the self and avatars helps believers to have empirical experiences of the presence of the Holy Spirit when they engage in collective religious activities, such as worship services or prayer meetings in virtual communities.²⁷

Spiritual Communion and Community of Believers

The three aforementioned theological presuppositions grant a legitimate reason for building spiritual communities to worship and fellowship among believers in the metaverse. The promise of Jesus saying, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them" (Mt. 18:20), is also valid and applicable in the metaverse. This carries significant

²⁶ Anthony Steed, Ye Pan, Fiona Zisch, and William Steptoe, "The Impact of a Self-Avatar on Cognitive Load in Immersive Virtual Reality", *IEEE Virtual Reality (VR)* (2016): 67-76, [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1109/VR.2016.7504689>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

²⁷ Robby I. Chandra and Noh I. Boiliu, "The Metaverse's Potential Impacts on the God-Centred Life and Togetherness of Indonesian Christians", *Theologia Viatorum* 46(1), (2022), [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4102/tv.v46i1.157>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

theological implications. First, from the ecclesiological perspective, churches in digital spaces are equally valid with the traditional churches in physical spaces in terms of their nature and functions. This does not mean that virtual churches can completely replace the value of real-life relationships and the richness of physical interactions among believers in traditional church contexts. However, virtual churches can prove efficacious in building missional communities and enhancing spiritual experiences collectively when believers together seek God who is present in virtual spaces. In particular, the idea of fostering communities and engaging in spiritual activities in virtual spaces in the same way we do in physical spaces can be an inclusive act of practising communion of Gen Z believers who are digital natives seeking different ways of believing and belonging and those who are housebound when physical proximity is not possible.

Second, from the perspective of pneumatology, the Spirit of God plays the role of fostering communion and community among believers in both physical and virtual churches. For example, 1 Corinthians 12:13 states that all believers are baptised by one Spirit into one body. Based on this verse, communion and unity among believers can be achieved and maintained through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit among believers. This pneumatological understanding of communion and unity can be extended to virtual churches in the metaverse as believers gather, worship, and fellowship together in God's presence.

Power of the Holy Spirit

God's omni-attributes remain inseparable. If God is omnipresent, he is also omnipotent. If God is present in the metaverse, it logically follows that he can also operate his power in the metaverse. It means that, as the Holy Spirit is present and operates his power in physical spaces, the same holds true for virtual spaces. The power of the Holy Spirit for transformation,

sanctification, impartation, and restoration is not constrained by the boundary between physical and virtual spaces.

Then, how does the Holy Spirit operate his power in the metaverse, and where are the impacts of his power effectively and evidently demonstrated? We need to revisit Ihde's mediation theory to find answers to these questions. The embodied relation between the human and the avatar provides a framework for understanding the spiritual interplay between the Holy Spirit and human beings through their avatars in the metaverse. The psychological and emotional intimacy between the human and the avatar can also apply to their spiritual interconnectedness. It means that the spiritual integration and unity between the human and the avatar are indivisible as they are considered as one entity within the virtual environment and homogeneous as a strong sense of alignment exists between the human's real identity and the anthropomorphic avatar reflecting the human user's appearance, characteristics, and cultural behaviours in interactions with others in the metaverse.

Due to this profound sense of inseparable and homogeneous interconnectivity, the power of the Holy Spirit can impact the lives of believers in physical spaces as they interact with him through their avatars in virtual spaces. It is important to remember that the ultimate purpose of the power of the Holy Spirit working in the metaverse by interacting with the avatars is to transform, sanctify, and restore individual believers to sincerely follow Christ as his disciples in the physical world.

Transformative Power for Regeneration

The Holy Spirit is the sole agent of salvation. In other words, without the inward work of the Holy Spirit, all the human efforts to save a soul can never be effective.²⁸ The ultimate purpose of the Father is to redeem us, and the Son has accomplished the Father's redemption plan for fallen humanity. This divine gift of salvation cannot be accomplished, however, without the agency of the Holy Spirit. As salvation is not understood as an event but a process, the Holy Spirit plays several important roles in the process of salvation. First, the Holy Spirit convinces individuals of their sinfulness and convinces them of the need for forgiveness through Christ. Second, the Holy Spirit brings a spiritual new birth to truly repentant individuals, enabling them to begin a personal relationship with God. Finally, the Holy Spirit indwells believers' lives and seals them to secure their salvation as eternal inheritance. D.J. Soto confirms that the Holy Spirit's transformative power for spiritual conviction, regeneration, and preservation works in the metaverse in the same way that he does in physical spaces.²⁹ The metaverse has become a new harvest field for modern missions as digital natives who formerly experienced a deep sense of emptiness and even identified as atheists have testified that they encountered God and were saved by hearing the gospel through the work of the Holy Spirit in virtual spaces.³⁰ In other words, biblically and theologically authentic conversion experience has happened to people in their physical lives while they participated in various activities of churches through their avatars in the metaverse. Through the embodied relation between human and avatar in the immersive

²⁸ Yuzo Adhinarta, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Major Reformed Confessions and Catechisms of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Monographs, 2012): 69.

²⁹ D.J. Soto, "4 Lessons from a Metaverse Pastor", *The Future of the Church is the Metaverse*, last modified 30th September 2022, [Available at: <https://vrchurch.substack.com/p/4-lessons-from-a-metaverse-pastor>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

³⁰ Jeremy Lukens, "The Metaverse Is a New Harvest Field for Modern Missions", *Indigitous*, 8th June 2022, last modified 12th July 2023, [Available at: <https://indigitous.org/article/the-metaverse-is-a-new-harvest-field-for-modern-missions/>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

virtual environment, the power of the Spirit of God works in the minds and hearts of human users for spiritual conviction of their sins and the need for forgiveness. This conversion experience through the immersive metaverse environment will continually impact their spiritual desire to grow as disciples of Christ in their daily lives in the physical world.

Empowerment for Sanctification

The Holy Spirit empowers believers. Generally, the empowerment of the Holy Spirit is understood as receiving power for mission and evangelism.³¹ Certain contemporary Pentecostal scholars, exemplified by Bradley Truman Noel³² and Vinson Synan,³³ maintain adherence to classical Pentecostal doctrines, notably advocating for the distinct delineation between sanctification and empowerment as separate outcomes arising from the baptism of the Holy Spirit. However, Donald Gee, a prominent British Pentecostal theologian in the early to mid-twentieth century, believed that the ultimate purpose of empowerment of the Holy Spirit was to sanctify believers to live a holy life.³⁴ Gee's Pentecostal theology always emphasised the importance of the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in light of sanctification. In this regard, the power of the Holy Spirit strengthens and enables believers to overcome the power of temptation and sin and to live consecrated lives to experience progressive transformation into the likeness of Christ. If the metaverse is part of God's creation, and God is present there, his Spirit must play a crucial role in empowering his believers to live holy and righteous lives in virtual spaces.

³¹ Amos Yong, *In the Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2010): 171.

³² Bradley T. Noel, "From Wesley to Azusa: The Historical Journey of the 'Second Work' Doctrine", in Scott A. Dunham (ed), *Full of the Holy Spirit and Faith* (Wolfville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press, 1997): 52-53.

³³ Vinson Synan, *Century of the Holy Spirit 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal, 1901-2001* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001): 338, ePub.

³⁴ Donald Gee, *Wind and Flame* (Southampton, UK: The Revival Library, 2013): 32, ePub.

Neal Stephenson wrote *Snow Crash*, in which he introduced the metaverse as a utopia.³⁵ After thirty years, his imagination of the metaverse has been realised through the convergence of digital technologies and the Internet. However, the metaverse is far from the concept of utopia at present. In reality, all sorts of cyber-crimes take place in the metaverse, so an urgent need exists for meta jurisdiction to create safe virtual environments.³⁶ This is the reason why the empowerment of the Holy Spirit for believers' sanctification in the metaverse is so significant – to make the metaverse a safer and better place by demonstrating Christ-like characters and attitudes.

Impartation for Service

God desires to impart not only his power but also his life, wisdom, and all good gifts to his people. This nature of God's impartation is well-demonstrated throughout the Bible, especially in the history of God's redemption. For example, the self-impartation of the Son in the Incarnation and the Cross to obey the Father's will effectively shows the divine desire to bestow his grace and love to restore the fallen humanity into his image. Ten days after the Son ascended to heaven, the Father and the Son imparted the Holy Spirit to believers fervently seeking power from above on the Day of Pentecost. Afterwards, the Holy Spirit imparted his gifts to believers to give them spiritual abilities to fulfil their functions or callings for God's mission.³⁷

Notwithstanding the critical contention from cessationists, the transformative bestowal of spiritual gifts by the Holy Spirit continues to exert a profound influence on the spiritual lives of individuals and their theological perspectives. For example, Jack Deere, a former professor at

³⁵ Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash* (New York: Bantam, 1992): 37.

³⁶ Guichun Jun, "Mission in the Age of Digitalization: Metaverse, Metamodernism and Metanarratives", in Risto Jukko (ed), *Together in the Mission of God* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2022): 244-45.

³⁷ Jim Wainscott, *Eleventh-Hour Overcomers: In Pursuit of the Ultimate Prize* (Bloomington, IN: Westbow, 2013): 205.

Dallas Theological Seminary, used to be a cessationist, but he has become a continuationist after personally experiencing the Holy Spirit imparting spiritual gifts unto him.³⁸ Gordon Fee affirms that the Holy Spirit works ceaselessly to impart his spiritual gifts to believers to serve God and his Kingdom.³⁹ This stimulates our theological speculation to understand whether this continual impartation of the Holy Spirit in the physical world is also available in the metaverse as believers seek spiritual gifts and power. If the transcendental nature of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit is possible in the metaverse, the digital impartation of the Holy Spirit is also possible because God cannot violate his divine nature of imparting all the good gifts to his people where he is present and operates his power whether in physical spaces or virtual spaces. Furthermore, digital impartation may include the transmission of spiritual gifts or knowledge between believers willing to give and receive spiritual blessings from one another through the mediation of the Holy Spirit in a similar way that the Apostle Paul wanted to impart some spiritual gift to the church in Rome as stated in Romans 1. This theological notion of digital impartation posits the crucial function of digital platforms in facilitating spiritual experiences and practices that foster a sense of community among believers enabling them to acquire the spiritual endowments of the Holy Spirit for their service to God in both physical and virtual worlds.

Healing for Restoration

Mediatization, a process involved in the influence and changing role of the mass media in a variety of social and cultural spheres,⁴⁰ has impacted various aspects of Christian ministries

³⁸ Jack Deere, *Why I Am Still Surprised by the Power of the Spirit: Discovering How God Speaks and Heals Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020): 48.

³⁹ Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011): 607.

⁴⁰ Stig Hjarvard, "Mediatization and Cultural and Social Change: An Institutional Perspective", in Knut Lundby (ed), *Mediatization of Communication* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2014): 204.

and missions to evangelise unbelievers and promote Christian faith; in particular, divine healing ministry has taken advantage of it over decades.⁴¹ Media-mediated divine healing raises a question to understand how the divine healing power of the Holy Spirit can interplay with human faith through media. Although media itself does not have the power of healing, it is certainly used as a channel of healing. God transmitted his power through objects in the Bible, such as the mantle of Elijah to empower Elisha (2 Kgs. 2:13-14), the hem of Jesus' garment (Luke 8:40-48) and the Apostle Paul's handkerchief or apron to heal the sick (Acts 19:12). Even Peter's shadow could be a divine means of healing for the sick (Acts 5:15-16).

As technology has continually advanced, the trend of Christian ministries based on technology has shifted from mediatisation to digitalisation. Mobile applications for divine healing have been developed for believers, such as "The Healing App,"⁴² which provides Bible verses concerning healing and the users' testimonies of healing. The metaverse is also used for various medical purposes, such as supporting patients with mental health issues or elderly people with cognitive decline.⁴³ Research shows that socially anxious individuals benefited substantially from social skills training sessions in the metaverse since the programmes allowed them to engage and acquire skills in communication that boosted their self-esteem.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Sonny E. Zaluchu, "The Impact of Mediatisation in the Healing Ministry of African Preachers", *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42(1), (2021), [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v42i1.2198>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

⁴² "The Healing App," Apple Store Preview, [Available at: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/the-healing-app/id1293927143>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

⁴³ Dominikus David Biondi Situmorang, "Will Metaverse Become a More Exciting Place to Listen to Music Streaming for Mental Health?" *Journal of Public Health* 45(2), (2023): 363-64. Defu Zhou, Yi Jin, and Ying Chen, "The Application Scenarios Study on the Intervention of Cognitive Decline in Elderly Population Using Metaverse Technology", *Chengdu: Sichuan Society for Biomedical Engineering [Sheng Wu Yi Xue Gong Cheng Xue Za Zhi]* 40(3), (2023): 571.

⁴⁴ Suji Kim and Eunjoo Kim, "The Use of Virtual Reality in Psychiatry: A Review", *Journal of the Korean Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 31(1), (2023): 26-32, [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5765/jkacap.190037>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

The metaverse has more than 400 million active users every month,⁴⁵ and behind 400 million avatars are real people with various kinds of pain in all dimensions. As believers participate in worship services or prayer meetings in the metaverse, the Spirit of God can heal their physical, emotional, and spiritual diseases through their embodied relations with their avatars. According to J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, a lot of modern Pentecostals hold the belief that the Holy Spirit is present and active in virtual platforms, and they claim to have experienced divine healing of illnesses while taking part in online spiritual activities, like healing services or Holy Communion.⁴⁶ Although divine healing is granted by the power of the Holy Spirit, it often takes place in communal settings as believers gather to support one another. The metaverse can provide opportunities to form support groups for people with various issues, such as mental health, grief, addiction, social phobia, or trauma. By creating a virtually safe environment where people can share experiences and receive advice, fostering a culture of care, and building a sense of belonging, these virtual support groups can contribute to healing and restoration through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

The emergence of the metaverse has opened a new avenue for contemporary mission and church ministry. As Mark Zuckerberg says, “Metaverse isn’t a thing a company builds. It’s the next chapter of the internet overall.”⁴⁷ Reimagining pneumatology and Pentecostal ministries in

⁴⁵ Geri Mileva, “48 Metaverse Statistics: Market Size and Growth (2023)”, *Influencer MarketingHub*, last modified 20th July 2023, [Available at: <https://influencermarketinghub.com/metaverse-stats/>], [Last accessed: 4th May 2024].

⁴⁶ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, “Locked Down but Not Locked Out: An African Perspective on Pentecostalism and Media in a Pandemic Era”, in Heidi Campbell and John Dyer (ed), *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church: Theological Reflections on a New Normal* (London: SCM, 2022): 88-9.

⁴⁷ Mileva, “48 Metaverse Statistics”.

the age of digitalisation is an option Pentecostals may not consider but the necessary direction to pursue with a professional understanding of technology and theology.

All sectors of our society fervently explore opportunities to maximise the effectiveness of their work in the metaverse. As aforementioned, the health sector has been developing programmes to reduce pain or cure disease by using the benefits of the metaverse. Education is another sector using the metaverse to overcome the failed promises of the current pedagogy taking place within the traditional classroom setting and to provide children with access to the relevant, creative, collaborative, and challenging learning environments they need to succeed.⁴⁸

There is no need for further noteworthy descriptions regarding the remarkable progression in the utilisation of the metaverse across the domains of gaming, entertainment, business, and social networking. It seems that various sectors in our society are giving serious consideration to the importance of reimagining their visions and missions in virtual spaces. This shift is necessary to overcome the limitations imposed by traditional concepts and practices that have been developed and maintained in physical spaces for a significant amount of time. Fortunately, there are discussions and writings in various fields of theology related to the metaverse. For example, the book, *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church*, has compiled articles on profound theological reflections on challenges and opportunities in the age of digitalisation.⁴⁹

It is time for Pentecostal scholars and practitioners to delve deeper into theological discussions for developing digital pneumatology and ministry possibilities in the metaverse. As I theologically speculated and argued above, the presence and power of the Holy Spirit are not

⁴⁸ John D. Couch and Jason Towne, *Rewiring Education: How Technology Can Unlock Every Student's Potential* (Dallas, TX: BenBella, 2018): 148.

⁴⁹ Heidi Campbell and John Dyer, *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church: Theological Reflections on a New Normal* (London: SCM, 2022).

confined to physical spaces but permeate all corners of the created universe, including the metaverse. Religious phenomenology and sociology of religion already have embarked on research to explain human spiritual experiences in digital spaces and theorise them. In this significant transition time, digital pneumatology will play a crucial role not only in developing digital ministries for regeneration, transformation, impartation, and restoration in virtual spaces but also in laying the foundation of digital Pentecostalism to deepen and widen our understanding of the person and power of the Holy Spirit in this digital age.

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Abstract

The advancement of digital technology has brought a significant change in religious practices and ministry, offering an uncharted area for theological exploration. This article explores the concept of “Digital Pneumatology,” which focuses on the Holy Spirit’s presence and power in digital spaces, in particular the metaverse. By examining the intersection of technology and theology, this study investigates how the Holy Spirit is manifested and experienced in the metaverse. The article argues that the Holy Spirit’s influence extends seamlessly into virtual spaces, drawing on the theological principles of omnipresence, transcendence, and immanence. It examines how the Holy Spirit facilitates transformative experiences, empowers individuals for sanctification, imparts spiritual gifts, and provides healing within the metaverse. This research offers insights into the ways technology and spirituality converge, contributing to the development of contemporary Pentecostal theology and ministry in the digital age.