

Holy and digital: Mass frenzy

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 1, 2005](#) issue

I believe in one, holy, catholic, digitized Christian church. That's a credible postmodern paraphrase of the ancient creed. Why *digitized* instead of *apostolic*?

For the ancient Christians, *apostolic* signaled continuity through the centuries with the faith of the apostles and the churches they were believed to have started. *Apostolic* served as a sign of stability, a benchmark, a measuring point as the churches adapted to their times and places.

The substitution of *digitized* for *apostolic* makes sense in light of "Religious Experience in the Age of Digital Reproduction," an important article by Brigham Young University law school professor Frederick Mark Gedicks, in collaboration with Roger Hendrix, in *St. John's Law Review* (winter 2005). Digital reproduction, says Gedicks, allows for instantaneous reproduction of almost any images or words, and makes them available "everywhere." New markets result. All this helps explain the contemporary passion for "spirituality," which is "deliberately nonspecific about the spiritual forces animating" the universe of characters in many pop vehicles. Deity becomes "unattached to religion," a sort of "energy source."

Gedicks observes that "epistemological indeterminacy" empowers individuals to choose between innumerable versions of the real and the true. That choosing is hard on denominations, ecumenical institutions and theology. "The popularity of the less-judgmental, less-demanding spirituality produced by mass culture" means that the religious marketplace dominates. The "aura" and "authenticity" of any original event or text get diluted.

Digitization animates paradenominational church life, now marked by "cafeteria" or "grocery-cart" religion, in which individuals assemble collections of spiritual beliefs and practices satisfying for the moment. Gedicks quotes Alan Wolfe: "Talk of hell, damnation, and even sin has been replaced by a nonjudgmental language of understanding and empathy," leaving "a bewildering proliferation of idiosyncratic personal theology intermediating between the conventional poles of unbelief and orthodoxy."

Gedicks also visits the “Next Church” movement with Charles Trueheart: “No spires. No crosses. No robes. No clerical collars. No hard pews. No kneelers. No biblical gobbledegook. No prayerly rote. No fire, no brimstone. No pipe organs. No dreary eighteenth-century hymns. No forced solemnity. No Sunday finery. No collection plates.” Centuries of Christian tradition and habit “are deliberately being abandoned” as shoppers pick and choose.

Gedicks astutely examines fundamentalists’ paradoxical resistance to modernity and at-homeness in the digital revolution. “The very use of digital technologies threatens to undermine the theological control that is essential to fundamentalism’s ability to maintain the purity of its commitments against the pressures of change.” Yet fundamentalist and conservative evangelical churches often offer three varieties of services—traditional, contemporary and charismatic. “Evangelicals generally, and mega-churches in particular, are unapologetically focused on marketing their beliefs to mass audiences through mass media, and hold the preservation of their mass appeal as a high priority.”

As for the “religious marketplace of ideas situated within a postmodern world of epistemological indeterminacy,” Gedicks notes, “the more products that are offered, the less likely it is that any single one will be able plausibly to claim that it alone can access authentic religious experience.” And the dominant energy “is not the search for transcendence . . . but rather the search for immanence.” “I believe . . .”