

Imaging Christ in Digital Worlds: Continuity and Discontinuity in Discipleship

Stephen Garner, Laidlaw College, New Zealand (sgarner@laidlaw.ac.nz)

Introduction

Digital technology and media are ubiquitous, a part of our everyday world whether we like it or not. Our friends and colleagues use it, our news media pays attention to it and its affects in our world, government agencies disseminate information with it and are themselves shaped by it, and digital technology and media increasingly form many of the threads in the fabric of everyday life. We live in a world where we are wrapped in media and colonized by technology; so much so that it is almost impossible to escape from them even if we tried to do so.

For the people of God, the followers of Jesus Christ, this raises important questions about how we should live in such a world: What place does God have in the digital spaces we create and inhabit? What does a ‘good life’ look like in this world? And, how do we find the wisdom to make good decisions leading to this ‘good life’ for ourselves and for others as we negotiate faith and life in offline and online spaces and in the liminal zones between those places? At their heart, these questions are about discipleship, our following and imaging of Christ, that connect to a range of topics such as worship, relationships, ethics, and mission that are lived out in the everyday world. In this paper, we will explore some of the contours of discipleship in digital spaces and culture, highlighting both continuity and discontinuity with common understandings of discipleship.

Digital Theology

The exploration of discipleship in digital spaces falls into what Pete Phillips identifies as the broader field of “digital theology”. Differing from the related field of “digital religion” which is more focused on the phenomena of religion in digital culture and a sociological analysis of that, digital theology takes as its starting point the assertion the theology is “the critical study of the nature of God, or of God’s interaction with the world, or of the world’s exploration of

the mystery of faith”.¹ For Phillips, digital theology represents four different but related categories: mediated education; digitally-enabled research; theologically-resourced engagement with digital culture; and, theological ethical engagement with digital technology and culture;

Firstly, digital theology can be seen as how digital technologies are used to mediate or teach theology, typically as part of formal academic study where the discipline provides the content and technology provides the communication mode. Most commonly this is located in the delivery of theological education and training through online or blended learning, but might also include things like didactic mobile apps and video games.

Secondly, digital theology concerns the enabling of theological research through digital technology, media, and culture, where research moves from individual engagement with primarily physical texts to collaboration with widespread networks of researchers, working with flexible digital facsimiles of physical texts, as well as data analysis and visualization, and engagement with online religious practices.

The third dimension of digital theology considers digital culture as the context in which theology is done. Here there is a genuinely reflexive dialogue between digital culture and theology, where theology offers guiding principles related to participation in digital culture and digital culture offers guiding principles by which we participate in theology. This resonates with the definition of contextual theology put forward by missiologist Stephen Bevans that describes an ongoing theological process of bringing the experience of the past found in the Church’s Scripture and Tradition into genuine dialogue with the experience of the present located primarily in social locations shaped by factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economics, health, and power. In this form of contextual digital theology, the experience of the present embraces the digital world we find ourselves in, raising questions and possibilities for theological engagement.

The final location for digital theology is an extension of the last category and provides a theological-ethical critique of digital technology and culture, appraising its strengths and weaknesses impacting upon individual and communal human flourishing and well-being. An example of this is Nadia Delicata’s work on the role of natural law in the digital context

¹ Peter Phillips, Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero, and Jonas Kurlberg, "Defining Digital Theology: Digital Humanities, Digital Religion and the Particular Work of the Codec Research Centre and Network," *Open Theology* 5, no. 1 (2019): 37.

highlighting that ethical approach as one which might supply wisdom in a culture of content-creation and making.²

In this paper, the discussion sits primarily within the third category, looking at how discipleship and digital culture engage and inform each others.

[Slides here on reflection about constructing a well-rounded, robust digital theology based around a set of theological categories]

Discipleship

Discipleship lies at the heart of everyday Christianity, defining the identity of the followers of Jesus Christ. Christ's call to follow him in times past or present marks those who respond as his disciples. The biblical understanding of this discipleship is embodied in answering Christ's call (Mk 1:16-20), following Christ no matter the cost (Mt 10:34-39), demonstrating love towards others (Jn 15:12-17), forming communities (Matt 18:20; Act 2:43-47), and communicating the good news to all the corners of the earth (Mt 28:16-20). All of these are oriented around an everyday vocation of loving God and loving neighbour.

Definitions of discipleship are various, picking up one or more of the aspects listed above. For example, Michael Wilkins notes the marks are true disciples are remaining in Jesus and in his words, being known as people who live one another, and possessing a life bearing fruit.

For discipleship to be understood and practiced most clearly, the view of Jesus with his disciples from the Gospels must come first as we attempt to apprehend what it is like for discipleship today: living a fully human life in this world in union with Jesus Christ and growing in conformity with his image.³

Others, like William Cox and Robert Peck define discipleship in greater detail, teasing out all the things they think a disciple should be equipped to do:

Christian discipleship is a major, all-encompassing theme of the Bible - Old and New Testaments alike. Pivotaly articulated in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18- 20), it addresses all dimensions of life, is deeply grounded in teaching and mentoring, and applies to practically all age levels. Its content includes but is not limited to expectations such as comprehensive Bible knowledge, witnessing strategies, interpersonal relationships, apologetic skills, logical reasoning, world/life-view

² Nadia Delicata, "Natural Law in a Digital Age," *Journal of Moral Theology* 4, no. 1 (2015): 1-24.

³ Michael J. Wilkins, "Disciples and Discipleship," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2013), 211-12.

integration, parenting, teaching, personal integrity, spiritual warfare, faith-learning integration, stewardship of creation, sustained allegiance, miracles, and so on.⁴

While others, such as Nestor Miguez, see discipleship in the context of personal and communal transformation connected to God's mission in the world:

The same should be said about discipleship: the disciples, as persons and as community – for to be a disciple is to be part of a learning community, are transformed in the exercise of their mission, participate in new experiences, open their eyes to new horizons of life, learn to appreciate other realities and cultures, and see new facets of their own faith and new dimensions of their relationship with the divine. The revelation itself becomes more revealing. And as long as that happens in the missionary community, that same transformation inserts itself in a different way in the world and in the church. The disciple becomes an agent of transformation who experiences and spreads the renewing power of the Spirit.⁵

And finally, Philip Meadows in considering mission and discipleship in digital contexts argues that:

mission-shaped discipleship is about seeking to be filled, transformed and overflowing with love of God and neighbour at the interface of embodied and virtual life. As such, our participation in the mission of God is substantially expressed through works of mercy, in which God's love for our neighbours reaches out through us in a holistic way.⁶

In his recent doctoral work examining Christian education and discipleship in the context of the Uniting Church in Australia, Craig Mitchell noted a helpful set of criteria developed by Eugene C Roehlkepartai for evaluating growth or maturity in Christ by emphasizing the lived experience of faith rather than adherence to particular doctrines.

1. Trusting and believing in God
2. Experiencing the fruits of faith
3. Integrating faith and life
4. Seeking spiritual growth
5. Nurturing faith in community
6. Holding life-affirming values
7. Advocating social change
8. Acting and serving

⁴ William F. Cox, Jr. and Robert A. Peck, "Christian Education as Discipleship Formation," *Christian Education Journal* 15, no. 2 (2018): 243.

⁵ Néstor O. Míguez, "Missional Formation for Transforming Discipleship," *International Review of Mission* 106, no. 1 (2017): 8.

⁶ Philip R. Meadows, "Mission and Discipleship in a Digital Culture," *Mission Studies: Journal of the International Association for Mission Studies* 29, no. 2 (2012): 180.

From these Mitchell developed four broad focus areas of ongoing discipleship - faith, community, practice, and mission.⁴ In this paper we will use these four areas to explore some intersections between discipleship and digital culture.

Growing in faith

In the context of growing in faith I will pick up on four examples of where digital technology and media intersect with the idea the disciples are those who are being nurtured in their faith towards a deeper relationship with God through Christ.

These four areas are:

- Digital storytelling;
- Digital photography;
- “Reading” the Bible;
- Didactic video games;

Digital storytelling

Digital storytelling combines the development of identity narratives, created digitally using audio and visual software, with people theorizing about the construction of those stories from their lived experience, and producing new socio-cultural understandings of themselves and the world around them. The creators identify a significant identity-shaping moment in their lives that they then use to create written, audio, visual and musical narratives that combine to produce a three-minute digital film. The creators then reflect critically upon both the process and the final product.⁵

Recently, pastoral theologian and educator, Mary Hess, has been developing digital storytelling as a key tool in religious education and faith formation. Taking her lead from the foundational work carried out by the US-based Centre for Digital Storytelling, Hess defines digital storytelling as:

This form of digital storytelling, then, is *not* a loose umbrella for any and every story to be found in any digital format. It is *not* shorthand for film and tv, or even much that can be found on *YouTube* or *Vimeo*. It is, rather, a community of practice that focuses on helping

⁴ Craig Mitchell, “(Re)Forming Christian Education in Congregations as the Praxis of Growing Disciples for a Missional Church” (Doctor of Philosophy, Flinders University, 2018), 92. Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, *The Teaching Church : Moving Christian Education to Center Stage* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1993), 36-37.

⁵ Rina Benmayor, "Digital Storytelling as a Signature Pedagogy for the New Humanities," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 7, no. 2 (2008): 188-204.

people to find their own voices, to hone stories from their own experience, and then to craft and share their stories using digital tools.⁶

One particular dimension of digital storytelling that Hess highlights is that it makes us think about time differently. In order to reflect, narrate and create a digital story, one needs to slow down and listen to oneself and others, and to become more aware of the world around us. This is also a trait that will be encountered when we consider photography as a location for spiritual practice.

Hess also comments that having produced one or more digital stories, typically in the range of 3-5 minutes participants also became more critical in the engagement with other media. It also brings to the fore that theology is a communicative event that demands not just articulation of information, but also critical reflection, interpretation, and understanding of faith as it is participated in. The process and outcome of digital storytelling is participative for those narrating, as well as for others who then encounter the story and reflect upon it.⁷ Moreover, this particular approach might also reflect a kind of resistance to the globalizing power of digital technology. Here new technologies are used to engage locally and globally, but in such a way as to reinforce the voice of the local.

[Example – The Forgiveness Project; Storytelling - Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, MN]

Digital Photography as Spiritual Practice

Digital photography provides an interesting medium for theological education and spiritual formation. The ubiquity of cameras in mobile phones and tablets, as well as compact and more sophisticated digital cameras, which can all capture both still images and video connect to what Roman Catholic pastoral theologian, Eileen Crowley, identifies as our increasingly participatory culture. In this environment, media-art-making and media-art-sharing become a normal and natural part of the mundane world, with people perceiving that their contributions matter and elements of social connectivity emerge from engaging with others production and consumption.⁸

Crowley contends that intentional use of photography in the everyday world can aid in the development of religious imaginations, connect individuals into communities, and form a part

⁶ Mary E. Hess, "A New Culture of Learning: Digital Storytelling and Faith Formation," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 53, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19-21.

⁸ Eileen D. Crowley, "'Using New Eyes': Photography as a Spiritual Practice for Faith Formation and Worship," *Dialog* 53, no. 1 (2014): 30.

of spiritual practice contributing to discipleship. She works with people to recognise and articulate both visual and verbal metaphors through the practice of photography which open people's eyes to the world around them, their own location, and where God might be present. Various approaches to the use of photography are used by Crowley depending on the target audience. In one example, she works with theology students to expand their religious imaginations through photographing their everyday world. Sometimes that is directed around a particular reading or topic for a week, at other times the students can pick what they want. In this activity, students might be asked produce a short reflection in response to their own and others' photographs and to a starting phrase such as "In God's eyes, the world is...", "God is..." or "A community of faith is...". Students are also sometimes asked to create a narratives that connect their photos across a week or a term, to present their work as a form of installation, and to explore how visual metaphors present in their work helped them articulate an experience or understanding of the divine in relation to the world.⁹

In another example, Crowley works with parishioners to use photography as way of a spiritual practice. People are taught a number of basic skills about photography and then spend an hour or so a week taking photos in their everyday world. Those photos are brought back to the group where they share the connections between their own and others pictures and their faith journeys. One of the significant themes that comes through in this practice is that of slowing down and really looking at the world around them, of discovering things that they hadn't noticed in our neighbourhoods, and how the discipline of photography had spilled over into disciplines like prayer and contemplation.¹⁰

[Example – <http://photogsp.weebly.com/>; Photo essays]

Biblical engagement

Biblical literacy is often seen as a marker of faith development in discipleship. For some communities this might be tied to regular daily devotional reading of the biblical text, for others it's demonstrated in a deep awareness of the themes running through the biblical text and how they shape faith and life, while others connect discipleship to a sense of being under the authority of scripture. Others find growth in faith tied to spiritual disciplines such as *lectio divina* and Ignatian meditation that are oriented around imaginative and contemplative engagement with passages of Scripture both large and small.

⁹ Ibid., 34-37.

¹⁰ Ibid., 31-32.

Pete Phillips notes that visibility is at the centre of digital culture, a visibility that connects with the historic ways in which Bible mediated through liturgy, preaching, symbolism, song, art, drama and festivals. He goes further to argue that in contemporary church settings, and in particular in reformed evangelical Protestant expressions, the visibility of the Bible is downplayed in favour of engaging with the words of the Bible - the printed text - and the act of reading. Contemporary biblical literacy becomes an exercise in logocentricity, rather than in the creation of a Christian imagination shaped according to the rules of a digital, and hence visual, biblical literacy.¹¹

What does this intersection of the biblical and the digital look like? Is it simply the location of the biblical text under the glass screen of a phone or tablet, or the text accessed through a website or a PDF document? And even if it was just these manifestations, what are the implications of this? Phillips notes that responses are varied, but tend to follow the line, “we scan things under glass: we read things on paper.”

Some argue that engaging with the Bible through glass or on screens is changing the way in which we both engage with and absorb the text. Digital engagement gives less context for our reading and readers cannot flip through the whole book and cross-reference different passages or make use of the kind of tactile and photographic reading strategies that book readers do subconsciously. Under glass, you can search for verses, books, people. You can change between books in a moment (or two) and read them in the dark. You can listen to some translations and choose to follow the English-language readings in church in any language you want. But is the engagement of the same quality? The argument seems to be that printed or chirographic literature leads to a deeper comprehension of the text, while digital Bible reading can often lead to a superficial skimming across the surface of the text. When we read texts under glass/on screens, we use skills associated with information retrieval, skimming the text, hunting for clues to meaning, and for salient facts. We rarely pick up narrative threads, context or adornment - the essence of aesthetic reading. We scan things under glass: we read things on paper.¹²

But is this true, and what might be some counter-examples? Take, for example, the *Streetlights Bible* project, which aims to use digital technology to engage the biblical imaginations of those who live in the digital world by producing an app-based audio version of the Bible that speaks to the rhythms of global urban culture.

We are a ministry of Creative Communicators called to intentionally engage global urban culture - primarily youth and young adults - with the Gospel of Jesus Christ by producing, translating, teaching and proclaiming God’s Word so all can understand. Our identity & call are founded on the belief that God’s Word is transformational and needs to be accessible and understandable to all people. ...

¹¹ Peter Phillips, "The Pixelated Text: Reading the Bible within Digital Culture," *Theology* 121, no. 6 (2018): 403-04.

¹² *Ibid.*, 405.

We believe that when God's Word is communicated relevantly, it shines His Light through His truth and displaces the spiritual darkness we all experience a part from knowing God. Our task is to "Unfold Him" through His Word to this digital age that presents many barriers to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as well as unprecedented communication opportunities to send out God's Word.¹³

The result is an audio Bible performance that mixes the musical style of rap, hip-hop, and poetry slam in chunks that can be consumed en-masse or piecemeal, supplemented by YouTube visual performances and additional curriculum material. This is not in itself unique or overly novel, but the digital technology allows the bringing of biblical text to a mobile device in a way that might stimulate a visual, imaginative biblical literacy in a way that words of a paper text might not.

Similarly, apps and websites, such as *YouVersion* - the most popular online Bible app - take advantage of digital platforms to move beyond just delivering a fixed biblical text to a mobile screen. There are Bible-reading plans supplied that actively remind you of your progress through reading particular texts, but also reading the text is connected to active responses and feedback loops. You can highlight text, make comments on it, and share those comments with other *YouVersion* users or your social media connections. There is the possibility that the text may become fragmented or disconnected from its wider contexts, but the text becomes something not just to receive but to respond to. The idea that we're read by the biblical text while reading it ourselves can be reinforced through it becoming more interactive.

Interacting with the biblical text this way is not without some side-effects though, with online Bible providers picking up one what kinds of text people tend to read and then promoting them through their "verse for the day" messages. This self-selection of texts has led to their increased frequency in provision via apps, esp. in the devotional spaces.⁷ For example, in the UK the most popular biblical text accessed and provided by these kinds of apps has shifted from Jn 3:16 to Jer 29:11, perhaps recognising an environment aligning with Christian Smith's idea of a "moralist therapeutic deism" obscuring the breadth and depth of biblical material.⁸

¹³ Streetlights, "About - Streetlights," accessed 2019, 1 July. <https://www.streetlightsbible.com/about>.

⁷ Laura FitzPatrick, "Favourite Bible Passage Gets Overhaul as Messages of Hope Resonate Better on Social Media," *The Telegraph*, last modified 25 February, accessed 1 July, 2019.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/02/25/favourite-bible-passage-gets-overhaul-messages-hope-resonate/>.

⁸ Christian Smith, "On 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' as Us Teenagers' Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith," in *Religion and Youth*, ed. Sylvia Collins-Mayo and Pink Dandelion (Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub., 2010), 41-46.

- Jn 3:16 - “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.
- Jer 29:11 - “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

Didactic video games

Didactic or educational video games fall into a group that includes evangelistic or apologetic functions, as well as for the instruction of the faithful. These games traditionally pass on religious truths, rules and concepts through the medium of gameplay with an ultimate goal of cognitive development rather than a more experiential, sacred experience. Stock games such as Bible charades, memory verse challenges, and Bible quizzes fall into this category.

In the digital space didactic games are also concerned communicating religious truths and content, typically through mechanisms or environments of that mirror popular digital games. For example, Scripture Union England & Wales’ mobile device game *Guardians of Ancora* invites players to “[e]nter the wonderful world of Ancora and play your way through exciting Bible Quests. With a new Quest each month, the stories of the Bible are really brought to life in new and exciting ways.”⁹ Supplemented with quizzes, audio and video, the game borrows common platform gameplay mechanisms and sets them in the Biblical world to draw the player into engagement with Biblical characters and content.

Alternatively, *The Aetherlight: Chronicles of the Resistance* reimagines the world of the Bible as an adventure game, inviting players to participate in digital roleplaying allegory of the Biblical story, promoting it as “Narnia for a Digital Generation.”¹⁰ As players and characters allegorically fulfil the roles of Biblical characters in a series of adventures to save the world of Aethasia, they are exposed to the Christian metanarrative in an digital context. The creators of the game state that:

Our dream is to give everyone from preteens to families a chance to experience the Bible and the hope of Jesus with their families through the engaging medium of computer games. Discover what makes The Aetherlight one of the most engaging and entertaining Christian desktop and tablet games for families by creating a free account for yourself!¹¹

⁹ Scripture Union England and Wales, "Guardians of Ancora," accessed 3 August, 2018. <https://guardiansofancora.com/learn-more/about-the-game/>.

¹⁰ Scarlet City LP, "The Aetherlight: Chronicles of the Resistance," accessed 31 July, 2018. <https://theaetherlight.com/parents>.

¹¹ Ibid.

Growing in community

Being in healthy and wholesome relationships with other believers and being part of communities formed as the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit forms an essential part of being a disciple. Yet community takes effort and requires a commitment to the welfare of those in the community and a constant desire to model Christ to one another. While we might tend to talk about community in terms of fellowship or belonging, we can also talk about growing into community in terms of questions such as “how ought I to live as a disciple of Jesus?” or “how out we, this church community, to live that contributes something gospel into the lives of the disciples here and people we live with?” In this section, I will look in particular at the ethical dimension to growing in community.

Meadows reflects on this when he talks about discipleship as needing to be comprehensive, embracing all the different parts of human life as they converge. He contends that,

[t]he basic principle of convergence means that human life - relationships and community - can be expressed through digital media as well as the various traditions and practices of face-to-face contact. From an everyday perspective, convergence is what happens as people navigate the flow of life at the interface of embodied and virtual realities: from the development of personal identity to our participation in community.¹²

Moreover, “[f]rom the perspective of convergence, the virtual dimension of life provides a means for augmenting and extending fully embodied discipleship, rather than substituting or replacing it.”¹³

The sort of questions raised above are in many ways ethical questions where we seek to live in ways that are aligned with the gospel and promote the flourishing of both individuals and communities. Christian theological ethics locates this kind of talk within the context of Christian faith, practice and theology. It situates ethics as a quest to discover who I or we ought to be and live in light of theological reflection upon the person and work of Jesus Christ., and this includes how we live in our digital and media culture.

Approaches to Christian ethics are various including some that focus upon rules or duties that they see as binding upon individuals and community and emphasizes doing the ‘right’ thing in a situation, while others examine the anticipated consequences of an action in an attempt to maximize the ‘good’ or utility that might emerges from that action. Sometimes ethical

¹² Meadows, 164.

¹³ Ibid., 176.

decisions might be based upon how they align with a perceived moral order or *telos* within the wider world or universe, and some want to embody particulate characteristics or traits that are considered virtuous, and through practice automatically shape our response to the world around us.

In the context of digital media and technology each of these approaches display both strengths and weaknesses. Deontological or rule-based approaches gives us some deep principles and duties to carry out with respect to God and others, but these rules and duties may be hard to apply in the timely fashion in the dynamic, immediate space of somewhere like social media. Conversely, consequentialist approaches might give us an ability to respond more quickly in a media environment and to think about what our intended actions might bring about, but identifying the good or benefit might be restricted when the person or persons being interacted with are mediated in such a way that the effects of the action on them never known in flesh and blood terms.

Teleological ethics put social media in the context of a larger divine plan and the ends that God has for this world and those in it, but the disconnection from the material, created world may also obscure the ultimate end that should be in view shaping agency, while a focus on virtue puts the emphasis back on the idea of the kind of person we aspire to be in our everyday life whether online or offline, but needs a robust understanding of what Christian virtue and ongoing practice to be effective.

For our engagement with digital culture to be faithful and effective it needs a framework that is both wise and practical, to be able to response in consistent ways to both the activities and agents involved, as well as being able to adapt to the rapid change and new developments taking place in our technological and media cultures. In other words, it needs to be a practical wisdom that leads to effective, consistent character and behaviour that contributes to human flourishing. This kind of wisdom is often described as *phronesis*, a kind of practical wisdom that can be found in ancient Greek thinking of Plato and Aristotle, in the Hebrew understanding of walking in the way of wisdom, and in the New Testament gospels where we find this kind of terminology used of people who have wisdom informing right action (e.g. Mt 7:24; 10:16; 25:2; 16:23; Rom 8:5-7; Phil 2:2.5).¹⁴ Kellenberg puts it like this:

Practical reasoning on the kind of reasoning needed when there cannot be one clear, right answer “in the back of the book.” It is the mode of reasoning needed for coping with the

¹⁴ Brad J. Kellenberg, "Virtue Ethics," in *Christian Ethics: Four Views*, ed. Steve Wilkens (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 43-49.

messy, contingent, highly unpredictable world in which even the most reliable, brand-new machines can bend, break, or melt rather than work as they “should,” the kind of world in which relationships will cool, sour, and wither without constant care.¹⁵

Growing in practice

Discipleship which is growing in faith and developing a deeper sense of community will ideally be growing in practice, where our experience of love of God and love of neighbour are worked out in the everyday world. It involves the rhythms of life for the community of believers, as well as questions for how to live faithfully in the world.

In this section I want to pick up on reflection on the interaction between our worship and digital technology.

Worship

Writing in the mid-1990s, Susan White, reflected on the impact that technology was having on worshipping communities, particularly in light of developments in television and the high degree of dependence upon technology for the satisfying of short-term needs, whether those be physiological, psychological or social, combined with a high degree of media investment in identifying and intensifying short-term needs. For White, the implications of there always being a ‘technological fix’ for short-term problems becomes manifested in Christian-worshippers “who are likely also to expect that spiritual needs will be met in a similar way—quickly, professionally, and without a high degree of personal effort required.”¹⁶

A decade or so later, British Vineyard pastor and scholar Jason Clark, continued this reflection when thinking about consumer culture as a kind of liturgy or religion which digital culture also played a significant role:

We have so many people experiencing love, care, support (financially, materially, relationally), and, within our charismatic identity answers to prayer and experiences of Jesus intervening. Yet, after all this, there is all too often an almost existential shrug, as if to say “That was nice,” and then a turn to the real business of life, well away from any ongoing experience of Christianity, with us or with others. No amount of holistic, experiential, participatory and culturally relevant interactions would lead people to consider that a suitable response was the handing over of their basis of reality to one that is found in Jesus, with other people.

...

I started to wonder if, in a secular and consumer society where people *think* of themselves as nonreligious, they are in fact *deeply* religious. I found myself asking: what if the people

¹⁵ Ibid., 44f.

¹⁶ Susan White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 118.

we interact with are so deeply embedded in a *religious* system that they are unable and unwilling to convert to Christianity as an alternative reality? Is there something about this alternative religious reality that co-opts and undermines our best missional interactions, rendering them powerless? What is the basis of that religious system? Is it consumerism and secularism? And if it is, how can we best understand and respond to it?¹⁷

This realization of the power and rhythm of what can be thought of as secular liturgies is recognised by James K.A. Smith's reflection on social media as ritual. Here, Smith notes that there is a profound power in both secular and Christian liturgies that work to shape the imaginative and aesthetic experience of being human.¹⁸

The fact that we are "liturgical animals"—and hence imaginative, narrative animals—is a structural feature of creaturehood that cannot be effaced or erased, even by sin. Indeed, sinful systems exploit the same reality of our incarnate existence. If discipleship is a matter of Christian formation, and specifically the formation of the imagination, then we need to realize that these same dynamics of formation also characterize Reformation. Disordered secular liturgies, ordered to a rival telos, also work on the imagination.

So, for Smith social media, which might have positive aspects, is part of a wider disordering liturgy which promotes habits of gratuitous self-display and self-consciousness in every moment of life, and from which there is no easy escape. Smith's response to this is to turn to Christian worship as a counter-liturgy which reorganises the idea that we are the centre of the universe with the affirmation of that mediated by social media to a place and mindset where the call to worship asks us to find our selves in a new centre, that of being in Christ, which provides a new imagination for perceiving ourselves, God and the world around us.

In a society of mutual self-display and debilitating self-consciousness, it is a special grace to be invited into a story in which we are hidden with Christ in God. And being found in him, we are called out of ourselves to love neighbors and enemies, widows and orphans. In the performed story that is Christian worship, we are related to others as neighbors rather than as an "audience."¹⁹

Of course, Christian worship is not immune to the forces of secular liturgies, and Australian musician and scholar, Daniel Thornton, in his research into contemporary congregational singing in both Australian and global contexts notes a situation in which the concerns raised by White and Clark come into sharp focus. When looking at the way the Australian and global Hillsong church movement engaged digital media to share and promote its particular brand of worship he noted:

¹⁷ Jason Clark, "Consumer Liturgies and Their Corrosive Effects on Christian Identity," in *Church in the Present Tense: A Candid Look at What's Emerging*, ed. Kevin Corcoran (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 41.

¹⁸ James K. A. Smith, "Alternative Liturgy: Social Media as Ritual," *The Christian Century* 130, no. 5 (2013): 30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

Thus, it was not just the music which churches had access to, but also the full worship experience via video. These videos became promotional tools, but also instructional tools for other church worship teams to replicate. Interestingly, in more recent times, YouTube has become a core platform for CCS promotion, instruction, and perhaps even community. Hillsong's long history and experience in making engaging videos of their live worship music gave them an immediate advantage as Christians began looking to YouTube for their favourite CCS, or potential new CCS. Even though in the early years of YouTube (2005–2008) it was often third parties who were illegally format-shifting Hillsong DVDs and posting the videos on the site, these offerings nevertheless promoted Hillsong and Hillsong Music.²⁰

Responses to the pervasiveness of digital technology and its effect on the lives of individual Christians and their communities have been various. For some, the use of technology within the context of the worshipping community is seen positively. It assists with the delivery of worship services, particularly where resources might be limited, it provides ways of communicating within the community, it may allow connections to those who can't physically come to the church, and it can be seen as strengthening relationships through the use of social media, as well as being used to coordinate church ministries and outreach into the community.

Others, though, are more critical of the way technology and media shape the practice of the community, and so suggest alternatives which either reduce the impact of technology or have people think differently about it. One common example is the media fast, where people abstain or fast from digital technology and media for a period of time, and another is the creation of liturgies for the community that alter the role of technology in practice.

[Examples: Kara Root's "Liturgy of the Cell Phones"; Sanctuary First's prayer with mobile phones; Meredith Gould's contemporary take on Saint Teresa of Avila's well-known prayer, "Christ Has No Body"; Anglican Diocese of Oxford's "The Beatitudes and Social Media"]

[Growing in mission](#)

The final aspect of discipleship I will consider is the passing on the Christian faith to others. This takes many forms from preaching, evangelism, service in communities, and witness in life and faith to those around us.

Some of the earliest Christian developments in digital spaces were on 1980s dial-up bulletin boards. Here resources to encourage members within church communities, and particularly clergy through pastoral and teaching resources, were shared, as well as ventures into the

²⁰ Daniel Thornton, "On Hillsong's Continued Reign over the Australian Contemporary Congregational Song Genre," *Perfect Beat* 17, no. 2 (2016): 208-09.

emerging Internet world for the purposes of evangelism and mission. Both of these contexts have continued to develop, with the missional dimension taking a number of different developments.

One of these development are those who see the Internet, with its potential to reach people with the gospel or “good news” of God, providing evangelists with tools and opportunities to use in conjunction with existing media channels. The instructions in the Gospel of Matthew (Matt 20:18-20) to go and make disciples of all nations and in the Book of Acts to similarly witness to “the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:7-8) are transformed to support evangelism in the physical world supported by the Internet, as well as in the new online environment. For example, the Internet Evangelism Coalition sponsor the World Evangelism Day each year, providing resources to assist with evangelism in both online and physical contexts, specials at online retailers for things resources on evangelism, and general encouragement to share the Christian faith.²¹

[Example – Internet Evangelism Day]

Another of these developments are ventures to communicate the gospel to individuals and communities where it is hard to physically send missionaries and evangelists, as well as supporting Christian individuals and communities in locations where there may be no or few Christians with which to be in fellowship with. In addition to traditional printed materials and electronic media such as radio and television, social media and other internet technologies provide a platform where people may find out more about Christianity, seek resourcing in their own discipleship through teaching and prayer support, and be encouraged by other Christians in ways that are relatively safe and secure.

One example of this is *The Church Online* venture whose purpose is the development of an interactive church for new believers helping to build and grow in Christ through preaching, teaching, training and worship, especially in countries where there are no local churches or difficulties going to churches.²² This is a group resourced by Arab Christians in particular, with a calling to the wider Arab community.

[Example – The Church Online website and video]

²¹ <https://internetevangelismday.net/>

<https://www.facebook.com/internetevangelismday/>

²² The Church Online, "Who We Are," accessed 1 July, 2019. <https://churchonline.faith/index.php/about-us/>.

One further development are communication and media developments that better support those in mission environments away from their sending communities. Where previously communications between parties was enabled by slow postal services or personal visitation now the availability of relatively cheap satellite and mobile communications allow missions partners to remain in close communication with their sending communities strengthening the relationship between them.

Conclusion

Discipleship lies at the heart of everyday Christianity, defining the identity of the followers of Jesus Christ. Christ's call to follow him in times past or present marks those who respond as his disciples. Throughout history Christians has responded to that call in continuity with previous generations following Christ no matter the cost, demonstrating love towards others, forming communities, and communicating the good news to all the corners of the earth. At the same time, each generation of believers work out what the everyday vocation of loving God and loving neighbour looks like in their own contemporary context.

The development of digital media and technology provides one such context in which the followers of Christ faithfully bring the riches of Scripture and Tradition into dialogue with their experiences of this media world. This paper has highlighted some of the different ways in which this is being done, as well as some areas to think more deeply about, as those who have answered the call to follow Christ do so in continuity with past and present and look to the future with hope in Christ.

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