On Christian Engagement with Digital Technologies: A Reformed Perspective

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Abstract

This essay proposes that the Reformed theology of ordinary life has promising principles that can be applied to the recent challenges of the digital age. It first examines how contemporary scholars have grappled with the challenges posed by virtual life, highlighting their advantages and disadvantages. Then, it suggests that the Reformed attitude for sanctifying ordinary life leads Christians inevitably to embrace discipline in their use of technology. The author recommends digital resistance and digital intentionality as judicious parameters for Christian engagement in a digital age.

Keywords

Theology of common life, Christian vocation, technology, digital technologies, Christian life, Reformed worldview

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Digital technology has changed people's lives in the twenty-first century. A recent survey indicates that the average American spends almost 24 hours a week online.[1] Technology facilitates communication, access to information, and shopping and enables various forms of entertainment. However, studies

[1] Harlan Lebo, *Surveying the Digital Future: The 16th Annual Study on the Impact of Digital*

have shown that the misuse of digital technology has side effects on the quality of interpersonal relationships,[2] has generated new virtual vices,[3] and is interfering in the functioning of our brains.[4] How should Christians stand in the face of this scenario?

In this essay, I argue that the Reformers' affirmation of *ordinary life* has promising principles that can be applied to the recent challenges of the digital age. The English Puritans coined the concept of *weaned affections*, which encourages us to love the things of the world as divine gifts and keeps us *weaned* from the world so that we do not enjoy it instead of enjoying God. From this perspective, I will maintain that digital technology is beneficial as an expression of human creativity but also has damaging potential. In taking this approach, I offer some guidelines for helping Christians acknowledge the positive components of digital technology without becoming naïve to its threats.

I will first look at how recent scholars have grappled with the challenges posed by digital life. Then, I will argue that the Reformed principles for sanctifying ordinary life lead us to embrace digital discipline in our use of technology. Finally, I recommend such discipline and intentional use of digital technology as good parameters for guiding Christian use of these tools.

I. *Digital Challenges*

What is digital technology, and why does it matter to Christians? Nicholas Carr defines technology as tools that supplement or amplify our innate capacities. These technologies can be divided into four categories: one set, encompassing the plow, the darning needle, and the fighter jet, extends our physical strength, dexterity, or resilience; the second, including the microscope, the amplifier, and the Geiger counter, extends the range or sensitivity of our senses; the third, including the reservoir, the birth control

Technology on Americans (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 2018), 6, https://www.digitalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/2018-Digital-Future-Report.pdf.

[2] Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

[3] Margaret E. Adams, *Internet Addiction: Prevalence, Risk Factors and Health Effects*, Psychology Research Progress (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, 2016); for the damaging effects of digital technology on children and adolescents, see Kimberly S. Young and Cristiano Nabuco de Abreu, *Internet Addiction in Children and Adolescents: Risk Factors, Assessment, and Treatment* (New York: Springer, 2017).

[4] Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: Norton, 2010).

pill, and the genetically modified corn plant, enables us to reshape nature to better serve our needs or desires;[5] and the fourth, including the map, the clock, the typewriter, the abacus, the slide rule, the sextant, the globe, the book, the newspaper, the computer, and the Internet—the so-called *intellectual technologies*—is those we use to extend or support our mental powers, "to find and classify information, to formulate and articulate ideas, to share know-how and knowledge, to take measurements and perform calculations, to expand the capacity of our memory."[6]

Carr also argues that intellectual technologies are the most significant of all, given their lasting power over what and how we think.[7] For instance, the invention of the book forced humans to think deeply; to read a book is to practice an unnatural process of thought, one that demands sustained, unbroken attention to a single, static object. The book requires readers to train their brains to ignore everything else around them and to resist the urge to let their focus skip from one sensory cue to another. To read a long book silently also demands an ability to concentrate intently over a long period of time.[8] Therefore, because of the invention of the book, readers have become more efficient and more attentive.

The Internet is another intellectual technology that has significant implications for how we think. As a machine of immeasurable power, the Internet is subsuming most of our other intellectual technologies, and it is becoming our typewriter, printing press, map, clock, calculator, telephone, post office, library, radio, TV, movie theater, market, entertainment, work, and so on.[9] It is precisely because of this ability to combine many different kinds of information on a single screen that the emergence of the Internet fragments content and disrupts our concentration.[10] Accordingly, the shift from paper to screen is not only changing the way we navigate a piece of writing but also the degree of attention we devote to it and the depth of our immersion in it.

Thus, the chief challenge that digital technology poses to modern life is distraction. In fact, some scholars suggest that we live in an "Age of Distraction."[11] Carr notes that distractions in our lives have been proliferating for a long time, "but have never been to a medium that, like the Net, has been

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[5] Ibid., 44.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., 45.
[8] Ibid., 63–64.
[9] Ibid., 83.
[10] Ibid., 91.
[11] Cf. Justin W. Earley, *The Common Rule: Habits of Purpose for an Age of Distraction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019).

programmed to so widely scatter our attention and to do it so insistently."[12] He argues that digital technology is improving our primitive reasoning (multitasking and scanning abilities) while decreasing the more sophisticated way of thinking that had formerly trained us to be more attentive thinkers.

Living in a distracted age is also a challenge because most people tend to downplay the power of technological artifacts, considering them neutral. The basic assumption is that "our instruments are the means we use to achieve our ends; they have no ends of their own."[13] The idea of being somehow controlled by our tools is unthinkable to some. For example, the media critic James Carey declared that technology is technology: "It is a means for communication and transportation over space, and nothing more."[14] I believe Carey's instrumentalist view of technology is flawed because he overlooks that every technology embodies an intellectual ethic or a "set of assumptions about how the human mind works or should work."[15] James Smith rightly captures this nonneutral ethics of technology:

> Every technology is attended by a mode of bodily practice … whether we're hunched over a desk, glued to a screen; looking downward at a smartphone, our attention directed away from others at the table; or curled up on a couch touching a tablet screen, in every case there are bodily comportments that each sort of device invites and demands. Apple has long understood the bodily nature of this interface. In this respect, we already take for granted how revolutionary the touch screen is: a new, differently tactile mode of bodily interface, a heretofore-unimagined level of intimacy with machines.[16]

Therefore, if technologies have an embedded intellectual ethic leading us to a mode of being, thinking, and acting in the world, it should matter to Christians how to engage with them. Instead of remaining naive to the supposed neutrality of such technologies, we should be aware that many of our life routines follow paths laid by technologies that came into use long before we were born.[17] Smith draws our attention to what he calls "the iPhone-ization of our worldview." His basic argument is that the iPhone

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[12] Carr, *The Shallows*, 113.

[13] Ibid., 46.

[14] James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 107.

[15] Carr, *The Shallows*, 45.

[16] James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 142.

[17] Carr, *The Shallows*, 47. Smith says, "What appear to be 'micropractices' have macro effects: what might appear to be inconsequential microhabits are, in fact, disciplinary formations that begin to reconfigure our relation to the wider world—indeed, they begin to make that world." Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 143.

invites us to live in the world differently, to assume that the tool—and, by extension, the world—exists to serve us and always be at our disposal.[18]

Having said that, what would be the advantages and disadvantages of engagement with digital technology? Primarily, we should admit that digital technology has been advantageous for everyday life. For example, the Internet is shortening the distance of relationships between friends, relatives, nations, and peoples all over the world. Through video calling apps, for example, my wife and I keep in touch with our relatives in Brazil almost daily. Although video calls do not replace real relationships, it helps people to bridge the distance remarkably. The Internet is also positive because it gives us easy and rapid access to unprecedented volumes of information online. Nowadays we access books, scholarly articles, and surveys on a digital platform that would be practically inaccessible, expensive, and hard to find in printed form.

Digital tools are also useful platforms for buying and selling products. A 2015 survey finds that "roughly eight-in-ten Americans are now online shoppers: 79% have made an online purchase of any type, while 51% have bought something using a cellphone and 15% have made purchases by following a link from social media sites." A survey done in 2000 registered only 22% of Americans shopping online. In other words, today, "nearly as many Americans have made purchases directly through social media platforms as had engaged in any type of online purchasing behavior 16 years ago."[19]

The public and free participation by the population in their city, country, and world affairs without intermediaries such as newspapers, book publishers, and the like is also a remarkable breakthrough of digital technologies. For instance, when someone wants to express their opinion, be it in writing, audio, or video, they just have to turn on their smartphone and publish whatever their political, social, spiritual, or artistic beliefs are on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or YouTube. Due to this revolutionary and democratic potential of communication, new professionals called YouTubers, content creators paid by YouTube according to the reach of their publications, have appeared.

Despite their several advantages, digital technologies also have disadvantages. The side effects of virtual tools can be classified into the categories of thinking, relating, and acting.

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[18] Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 143.

[19] Aaron Smith and Monica Anderson, *Numbers, Facts and Trends Shaping the World: Online Shopping and E-Commerce* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2015), 2, https://www.pewinternet.org/2016/12/19/online-shopping-and-e-commerce/.

Firstly, developmental psychologists have shown the effects of different types of media on people's intelligence and learning capability. Patricia Greenfield holds that "every medium develops some cognitive skills at the expense of others." Greenfield grants that the Internet and other screen-based technologies have led to the "widespread and sophisticated development of visual-spatial skills." However, she also points out that our new abilities in visual-spatial intelligence go hand in hand with a weakening of our capacities for the kind of deep processing that unfolds "mindful knowledge acquisition, inductive analysis, critical thinking, imagination, and reflection."[20] Likewise, neuroscientists have claimed that the constant shifting of our attention when we are online may make our brains more nimble when it comes to multitasking, but improving our ability to multitask actually hampers our ability to think deeply and creatively. In other words, what we are doing when we multitask is learning to be skillful at a superficial level.[21]

Secondly, Sherry Turkle makes the case that our virtual habits have hampered our relationships, whether individually or in community. She first indicates how our moments of solitude have been challenged by our habit of turning to our screens rather than inward. Without solitude, she argues, we cannot construct a stable sense of self: "It is only when we are alone with our thoughts—not reacting to external stimuli—that we engage that part of the brain's basic infrastructure devoted to building up a sense of our stable autobiographical past." Solitude is also significant for our relationships because it allows us to reach out to others and see them as separate and independent. If children always have something outside of themselves to respond to, they do not build solitude. She concludes, "So it is not surprising that today young people become anxious if they are alone without a device. They are likely to say they are bored. From the youngest ages they have been diverted by structured play and the shiny objects of digital culture."[22]

Multitasking is also damaging relationships in the household, with friends, and with romantic partners.[23] In the family environment, Turkle notes that children complain about having to compete with smartphones

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[20] Patricia M. Greenfield, "Technology and Informal Education: What Is Taught, What Is Learned," *Science* 323.5910 (2009): 69–71. See also Carr, *The Shallows*, 141.

[21] Carr, *The Shallows*, 140–41. Maggie Jackson, *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2008), 79–80. See also Don Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 108–9.

[22] Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 61–62.

[23] Ibid., 59–102 (Solitude and Self-Reflection); 103–210 (Family, Friendship, and Romance); 211–92 (Education and Work).

for their parents' attention during meals. "At dinner and in the park, parents and children turn to their phones and tablets. Conversations that used to take place face-to-face migrate online," she remarks.[24] She comments that while adolescents have had difficulty expressing themselves face-to-face, they seem to be successful online,[25] commenting on the narrative of a high school senior girl to exemplify this relational paradox: "Amy barely says a word to boys at school or a party, but she rushes home to talk to them online. There, Amy says, you can 'take a breath,' relax, and plan what you are going to say before sending your message." Turkle explains that in person, teenagers imagine that the conversation can get out of control, go flat, or stop dead; online, however, adolescents feel playful. As a result, the social mores around cell phones have moved most friendships toward online exchanges.[26]

Digital technology also challenges romantic affairs. Commenting on the new apps that promote virtual romance, such as Tinder, Turkle argues that those tools give us the impression that we have a limitless choice of romantic partners.[27] She contends that "it offers a dialogue that is often not a dialogue at all because it is not unusual for people to come to online conversations with a team of writers." Still, virtual romance makes a false promise. She notes that it is easy "to think that if you feel close to someone because of their words on a screen, you understand the person behind them. In fact, you may be overwhelmed with data but have little of the wisdom that comes with face-to-face encounters."[28]

Thirdly, technology also plays a negative role when it comes to acting, particularly in our distracted manner of working. Taking lawyers as an example, Turkle exposes the concept of productivity held by young professionals. For many, productivity is "sitting in front of the computer and banging out emails, scheduling things; and that's what makes us productive." In contrast, she argues for a mutual causality between sociability and employee productivity. For her, face-to-face conversations lead to higher productivity and reduced stress; she notes, "Call centers are more productive when people take breaks together; software teams produce programs with fewer bugs when they talk more." Therefore, she points out that our interactions with other people help us foster new ideas, develop originality, and make the workplace more enjoyable.[29]

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[24] Ibid., 105.
[25] Ibid., 141.
[26] Ibid., 142.
[27] Ibid., 180.
[28] Ibid., 181.
[29] Ibid., 250–53.

II. *Digital Discipline and a Theology for Ordinary Life*

How should Christians deal with technology? Is it possible to "sanctify" digital technology? What principles can help us use technological tools judiciously? To answer these questions we ought to find out the reasons, purposes, and methods of Christian interaction in the world. I argue that the Reformers' affirmation of ordinary life has valuable insights that will help us in our engagement with digital technology. I will first introduce the Reformed thought on how to sanctify all occupations of life and then apply it to Christian use of technology.

Charles Taylor claims that no movement had more historical significance in affirming ordinary life than Puritanism.[30] He suggests that the entire modern development of the affirmation of ordinary life was foreshadowed and initiated in the spirituality of the Reformers, peculiarly Calvinists, and more particularly Puritans.[31] In reclaiming the Puritan affirmation of ordinary life and trying to apply it today, I am not suggesting "a lifestyle transplant" from the seventeenth century to the twenty-first century. Instead, I advocate that some principles the Puritans developed in their context remain promising for us insofar as they are recontextualized to our reality. To grasp their affirmation of everyday life, I will address three questions about Christians' interaction with the world, namely, *why*, *for what purpose*, and *how?*

In the first place, Christians should engage in ordinary life because it is part of God's *calling* to humanity. John Calvin argues that humans were created by God to interact in the various activities of life and that no sacrifice is more pleasing to God than when someone diligently applies themself to their calling for the benefit of all.[32] Calvin rejected the medieval notion that to withdraw from ordinary life and devote oneself to the service of God alone was the perfect form of the Christian life.[33] As Lee Hardy interprets him, "We become most Godlike not when we turn away from action, but when we engage in it. For God is not the cold, pure intellect of the pagan philosophers, but a full-fledged person, actively engaged in the governance and redemption of this world."[34]

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[30] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 211–33.

[31] Ibid., 216, 218, 223, 227.

[32] John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 2:143.

[33] This view was endorsed earlier in the fourth century by Eusebius of Caesarea. See R. W. Forrester, *Christian Vocation* (New York: Scribner, 1953), 42.

[34] Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 57.

Taylor argues that the Reformers were innovative in denying the dualistic theology that separated godly life from ordinary life. He explains that whereas in Catholic cultures the term *vocation* usually appeared in connection with the priesthood or monastic life, the "meanest employment was a divine calling for the Puritans."[35] Thus, the Reformed repudiation of monasticism was a reaffirmation of lay life as a central locus for the fulfillment of God's purpose; for the fullness of Christian existence was to be found within the activities of this life, in one's calling, in marriage, and in the family.[36]

William Perkins elaborates on Christian interaction in the world by distinguishing God's general and particular callings to humans:

> The *general* calling is the calling of Christianity, which is common to all who live in the Church of God. The *particular* is that special calling that belongs to some particular men, such as the calling of a Magistrate, the calling of a Minister, the calling of a Master, of a father, of a child, of a servant, of a subject, or any other calling that is common to all.[37]

If Jesus himself submitted to work, claimed Hugh Latimer, then all kinds of work should be dignified. Latimer wrote, "The Savior of the world … was not ashamed to labor; yea, and to use so simple an occupation. Here he did sanctify all manner of occupations."[38]

In the second place, the purposes of Christian interaction in the world are the glory of God, the common good, and the exercising of our gifts. The glory of God is the tool that balances the Christian's love for the world. Although Christians are meant to enjoy the things God has given them in creation, they must enjoy the world while remaining detached from it, which means that Christians must love the world as God's good creation, but at the same time hate the world insofar as it turns their attention to the creatures rather than the Creator. To avoid this temptation, the Puritans developed the paradoxical notion that Christians should appreciate the world with *weaned affections*, that is, Christians should use the things of the world "but be not wedded to them, but so *weaned* from them, that you may use them, as if you used them not."[39] Additionally, the Reformers

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[35] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 223.

[36] Ibid., 218.

[37] William Perkins, "A Treatise of the Vocations of Callings of Men, with the Sorts and Kinds of Them, and the Right Use of Them," in *The Works of That Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the University of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins* (London, 1612–1637), 1:752 (emphasis added).

[38] Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 25.

[39] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 223.

concluded from the creation account that God made humanity a societal creature, and thereby "the divine intent for human life is that we be employed in mutual service."[40] The Pauline metaphor of the body in 1 Corinthians 12 also influenced the Puritan understanding of society.[41] Perkins understood that the family is a body; every church is a body, and the commonwealth also is a distinct body. Composed of several members, "each body of society has a clear purpose: the benefit, happiness and well-being of humanity."[42] To this purpose, God gives different gifts to humanity so that each person might occupy his place in ordinary life and exercise his gifts for the common good.[43] Thus, Perkins concluded that not using these gifts must be considered an offense to God and the neighbor.[44]

Lastly, as for methodology, the Reformers teach us to serve God in serving people and to make liturgical use of our time. Thomas Shepard taught that Christians should see themselves working in worldly employments for Christ.[45] Overall, the Puritans believed that common life is sanctified not by the level of the nobility of the work done but by how and for whom it is ultimately done. As Perkins said, "God does not look at the excellence of the work, but at the heart of the worker."[46] Therefore, when a Christian serves his neighbor with his work, knowing that through this he serves God, this work, according to the Puritans, is holy. To remedy the temptations to either idleness or overwork, the Reformers urged their congregations to work diligently and make a liturgical-sacramental use of time in everyday life.[47] By the word "liturgical" or "sacramental," the Puritans referred to the disciplined use of time that ought to be consistent with the particular and general callings of the Christian.[48] They saw every day as

[40] Hardy, *The Fabric of this World*, 58.

[41] Ibid., 62.

[42] Perkins, "A Treatise of the Vocations," 751.

[43] Hardy, *The Fabric of the World*, 60.

[44] Perkins, "A Treatise of the Vocations," 756.

[45] Thomas Shepard, *Certain Select Cases Resolved Specially Tending to the Right Ordering of the Heart, That We May Comfortably Walk with God in Our General and Particular Callings* (London: Printed by W. H. for John Rothwell, 1650), 10.

[46] Perkins, "A Treatise of the Vocations," 758.

[47] Richard Tawney notes, "For to the Puritan, a contemner of the vain shows of sacramentalism, mundane toil becomes itself a kind of sacrament … [The Puritan] remakes, not only his own character and habits and way of life, but family and church, industry and city, political institutions and social order." In Richard H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1948), 199–200.

[48] For a contemporary use of the term "liturgical" applied to Christian way of life in the world, see James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009); *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017). See also Tish H. Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

twenty-four hours of liturgy or service we render to God. Therefore, Shepard preached that Christians, making good stewardship of time, should separate time in the day for meditation and time for work.[49] He emphasized the need for rhythm between worship and work, subordinating our ordinary occupations to the "business of worship" and not as an end in itself.[50] For example, evoking the wisdom of Ecclesiastes 3, he argued that time should be administered in seasons. There is one season to worship God and another for "worldly employments." When our daily affairs take all our time, he argues, "nature brings grace into captivity." Similarly, we commit a great sin when we stop working on the pretext of seeking holiness—as was the case with monks.[51]

III. *A Digital Resistance*

Combining what scholars have said in the area of technology with the Reformers' principles for our engagement in ordinary life, I argue that the Christian use of technology requires both habits of resistance and habits of intentionality.[52] There are at least three temptations Christians must openly resist in their relationship with technology: omnipresence (multitasking), digital narcissism (self-display), and poor time management (idleness and addiction).

Omnipresence. According to Justin Earley, when we try to be present everywhere, we end up being present nowhere. Digital platforms, by their very nature, invite us to join in multitasking. Despite the relative productivity and velocity it might bring, this multitasking habit can lead us to consider that we can inhabit several places at the same time. Earley suggests that "this is why we must be attentive to our smartphone habits. The smartphone is a tool that enables many things, but it will never multiply our presence."[53] In fact, evidence shows that those who succumb to the supposed omnipresence inherent in digital technologies end up living a "fractured existence." He explains,

> Think of all the ways we now use our smartphones to fracture presence: working while vacationing, checking emails on a date, sexting with someone we'll never meet, taking calls while playing with our kids, interrupting our dinner with news

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[49] Shepard, *Certain Selected Cases*, 7.

[50] Shepard, *Certain Selected Cases*, 10–11. See also Robert S. Michaelsen, "Changes in the Puritan Concept of Calling or Vocation," *New England Quarterly* 26.3 (1953): 323.

[51] Shepard, *Certain Selected Cases*, 7.

[52] Earley, *The Common Rule*, 64.

[53] Ibid., 66.

> notifications, posting a conflict instead of talking to someone about it, taking pictures of people in distress instead of helping them, taking a picture of someone who doesn't know it, watching videos of someone who doesn't want to be watched, curating our whole lives on a media feed in order to be "with" everyone except the ones we are actually next to. These are all ways of fractured presence, and they do real harm, both to us and our neighbors.[54]

Self-display. Christians are also tempted to live in digital narcissism or what I call the idolatry of self-display. Against the search for God's glory or the common good, many Internet users invest their lives in the search for likes on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and views on their YouTube channels. The mechanism of social media tempts us to identify our value as human beings from the number of views, likes, and shares of our texts, photos, or videos. As Smith argues, we live in an age governed by an expressive individualism, and given the expansion of social media, it seems that "every space is a space of mutual self-display." As a result, "every space is a kind of visual echo chamber. We are no longer seen doing something; we're doing something to be seen."[55] Therefore, for everyone's health, especially to maintain a healthy Christian spirituality, we must resist the temptation to live our lives in an idolatrous quest for likes and views.

Poor time management. American adults spend more than eleven hours per day watching, reading, listening to, or simply interacting with media on screens.[56] It seems inevitable that we spend much of our time making use of digital technologies—some "virtual workplaces" require practically 100% of their workers' time, for instance. Leaving this professional use of digital technology aside, it is noticeable that our interaction with the digital world can easily become time invested in insignificant things. Smith calls this media inclination the "pedagogy of insignificance." He points out that online life is loaded with a narrative about what really matters in life, "clicking our way around the environment, constantly updating our 'status' and checking on others, fixated on our feed, documenting our 'likes' for others to see." By submitting to this, "we are slowly and covertly incorporated into a body politic with its own vision of human flourishing: shallow connections for instant self-gratification and self-congratulation."[57]

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[54] Ibid., 66–67.

[55] Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 146.

[56] Peter Katsingris, *The Nielsen Total Audience Report, Q1 2018* (New York: Nielsen, 2018), 4, https://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2018-reports/q1-2018-total-audience-report.pdf.

[57] Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 148.

Because of these enslaving and superficial traits of the virtual world, Christians must resist the temptation to idleness and addiction to technology. To sanctify all our activities in everyday life, it is vital to think about the Christian theology of time. According to the Reformers, our time needs to be lived and administered as worship; that is, all the acts of our day (such as waking up, praying, studying, working, meals, conversations, and rest) function as liturgical acts that express our love for and devotion to God. It seems that a certain type of "digital fasting" or "digital dieting" is paramount if we are to balance our daily life liturgy.

Earley suggests three disciplines that might help us deal with the distracting potential of smartphones. First, he instructs us to turn off our phones in the presence of friends and family: "We have to acknowledge that our phones are carefully designed to attract our attention." For this reason, "we have to do the hard work of governing them, because they will not govern themselves, and they would love to govern us."[58] Second, he encourages us to turn off phones at work. In the age of smartphones, the ability to resist distraction is not just becoming "the single most important career skill," he says, "It's also a matter of whether or not we love our neighbors through our work." Finally, he prompts us to turn our phones off to seek silence. As psychologists have pointed out, he argues, our difficulty with times of solitude is related to the ignorance of who we are: "To sit peacefully in silence requires knowing your soul, knowing who you really are, and being fundamentally okay with that and at peace with that. This is exactly why we avoid it; we don't know who we really are."[59]

IV. *A Digital Intentionality*

However, resisting the power of digital technologies is not enough. In order to work out a healthy engagement with the virtual world, it is necessary to articulate our relationship with such tools from the parameters of God's glory, the common good, and the liturgical use of time. First, of all, it is necessary to recognize that the Internet, for example, is loaded with anti-God and anti-common good information. Evidence shows that social media can lead us to fight against our neighbor in a competition for popularity or simply because we think we have the right belief. Unfortunately, the virtual atmosphere is pervaded by aggressive, hateful, and sensual content published daily. Some people who appear to be harmless show their black

[58] Earley, *The Common Rule*, 67–68.
[59] Ibid., 73.

side when they are in front of the screen of a smartphone. Because they "feel secure" in the online atmosphere, some people show unbelievable behaviors—perhaps even to themselves.

To tackle this problem, Christians ought to use digital technologies with intentionality. Turkle points out that "laptops and smartphones are not things to remove. They are facts of life and part of our creative lives. The goal is to use them with greater intention."[60] I believe that virtual tools can be productive if used without excess and for the two worthy purposes of God's glory and the common good. One principle that might be promising for this constructive engagement is that, in order to sanctify their virtual activities, Christians be more content creators than mere consumers. To be a creator of "holy content" for the Internet can be described in a number of ways. Rather than describing them in detail, we must ask ourselves: How can I glorify God and benefit people's lives through the Web? In terms of video production, answers to that question may range from creating a YouTube channel for sharing the gospel to another teaching how to make apple pies. Whatever these contents are, what legitimizes them will ultimately lie on the search for God's glory and the common good.

As for social media more oriented to photos, like Instagram, Christians could expose less of their bodies and more of their ideas and values through art, or something that in some way elevates us to wonder about our neighbor's good and God's elevation. Indeed, it has never been so important to think about the Pauline exhortation to glorify God with our bodies than in these digital times (1 Cor 6:20). While it does not replace the power and value of books, the digital platform is also a valuable tool for publishing our ideas, reflections on varied subjects, and testimonies about our spiritual journey. Paul's advice applies also to this new reality: "Test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil" (1 Thess 5:21–22).

Finally, our virtual entertainment needs to be intentionally oriented. Our individual leisure cannot be the only liturgical act of our life; otherwise, it becomes idolatry. Legitimate entertainment should be encouraged insofar as it is a part of the whole. A good liturgy of ordinary life entails time for silence and solitude, prayer, spiritual conversations and building relationships, hard work, taking care of our body, rest, and sleep.

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[60] Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 216.