Samuel D. James
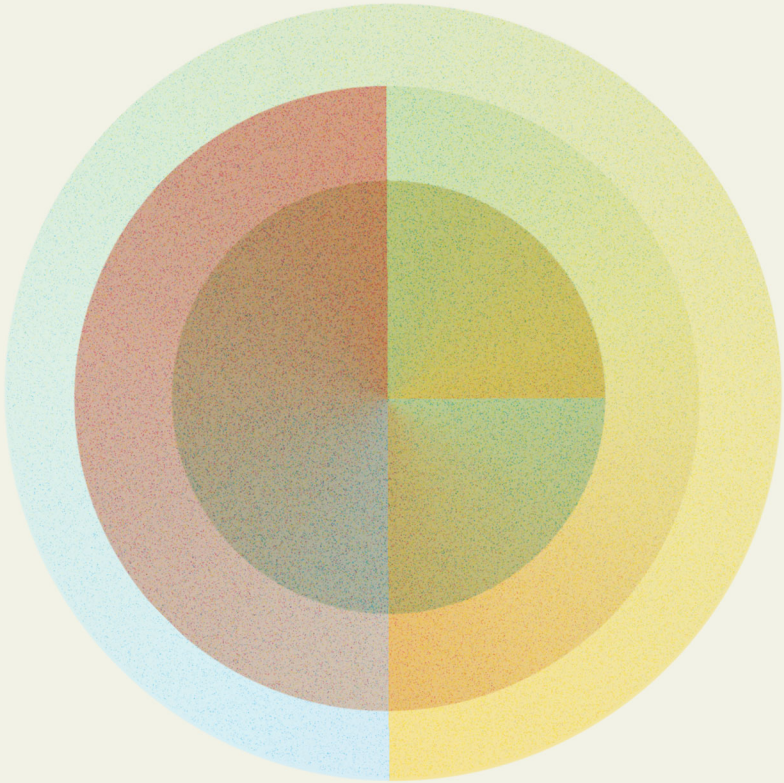
Digital Liturgies

Rediscovering Christian
Wisdom in an Online Age

"This accessible but penetrating book shows how our late-modern, secular culture provides liturgies: soul-shaping practices and narratives that train us to turn from God to the sovereign self, from God-created nature to self-created reality, from living for truth and love to living for power. If you can't see them, you can't resist them, and the author gives you resources to do both. Samuel James has written an essential book. He is one of the small but growing number of young thinkers to whom the church must listen if it is to learn how to be effective in evangelism and formation in a post-Christendom world."

Tim Keller, Founding Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City; Cofounder, Redeemer City to City

"This is such a wise and insightful book. Its power lies in the way it exposes truths not just about the digital world but about us: the things we want, the way we try to find them, how the internet weaponizes them in ways we may not have noticed, and what we can do about it. Penetrating without being frightening, and positive without being naïve, *Digital Liturgies* is the guide we need."

Andrew Wilson, Teaching Pastor, King's Church London

"*Digital Liturgies* is a book that issues both a challenge and a call. Samuel James challenges our perspective by pulling back the curtain so we see that technology's effects are not neutral, and our digital habits tilt us toward an online world that makes the wisdom of God seem like foolishness. But James also calls us to a better way, reorienting us toward greater understanding, wisdom, and the practices of resistance necessary for faithful and fruitful living. An accessible book full of profound insight."

Trevin Wax, Vice President of Research and Resource Development, The North American Mission Board; Visiting Professor, Cedarville University; author, *The Thrill of Orthodoxy*; *Rethink Your Self*; and *This Is Our Time*

"Virtually everyone I know feels exhausted by or enslaved to some aspect of digital life. In this book, one of the sharpest Christian minds helps us discover what exactly we're looking for in our screens. *Digital Liturgies* points a path beyond the outrage, anger, shame, and boredom that we accidentally download into our souls."

Russell Moore, Editor in Chief, *Christianity Today*

"After the first few chapters, I decided my teenagers should read this book, and maybe their whole school as well. Such good sociological insights. A few chapters later I decided I wanted my church to read it. Such helpful spiritual and pastoral insights too. By the book's end, however, I realized I needed this book. It applied the gospel to me and my online habits, and I need worthier ones. What that means, friend, is that I'm pretty sure you also need this book. It explains the digital water we're all swimming in and how that digital water has reprogrammed us more than we realize."

Jonathan Leeman, Editorial Director, 9Marks; Elder,
Cheverly Baptist Church, Hyattsville, Maryland

"Modern-day Christians are so trained to think about the *what* (content) that we don't often enough consider the *how* (form). *Digital Liturgies*—wisely, clearly, and compellingly—helps us to consider the ways in which we are formed by the digital world in which we live. Samuel James not only introduces some of the most important thinkers on this most defining quality of our age, but he also offers his own fresh insights."

Karen Swallow Prior, author, *The Evangelical Imagination:*
How Stories, Images, and Metaphors Created a Culture in Crisis

"Secular man is trying to supplant the divine Creator with a false one—the almighty algorithm. As Samuel James argues, we utilize digital tools believing that through them, we can make the world into our own image. With careless passivity, digital tools end up conforming us into its Silicon Valley–engineered image—alienated, fragmented, compulsive, and angry. There is no evangelical thinker I am aware of who has thought as critically, cautiously, and self-critically about the toll of digital life on our spirituality, psychology, and embodiment as Samuel James. From one of the most talented writers of his generation of evangelical thinkers, *Digital Liturgies* is one of the smartest books I've read from one of evangelicalism's brightest lights."

Andrew T. Walker, Associate Professor of Christian Ethics,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Fellow,
The Ethics and Public Policy Center

Digital Liturgies

Digital Liturgies

Rediscovering Christian Wisdom in an Online Age

Samuel D. James

For
Mom and Dad

Contents

Introduction

What the Web Means for Our Spiritual Lives

I REGISTERED FOR my first Facebook account the summer after graduating high school. Like so many others, I started using the site because friends were already there, and the last thing you want to do in high school is miss what everyone else is doing. I signed up, quickly sent friend requests to Andrew and a couple other guys in my class, and assumed this quaint little thing would add up to a few hours of social fun and maybe a way to keep in touch with some classmates who were going out of state to college.

In other words, I wasn't at all prepared for the spell that Facebook would work on me.

The hook was almost instant. It only took a couple weeks before I was compulsively checking Facebook as often as possible to see if anyone had responded to my friend requests (or even better, if someone had sent one to me!). Even after adding only a few dozen friends, looking through profiles (we used to jokingly call it "stalking") started to take up bigger and bigger chunks of my day. In the early days before the "Like" button, if you wanted people to know you appreciated their profile picture or a funny status, you had to

comment on it. Notifications for comments became a deliriously intense source of both satisfaction and anxiety. Somehow, an entire adolescence's worth of insecurity, crushes, ambition, and identity became compressed and contained inside a small, red, pixelated square at the upper corner of our family PC.

A story like that probably hits close to home for many, and if that were all there is to it, it might be little more than a warmly nostalgic remembrance of a piece of pop culture that we all seemed to share for a few years during the Barack Obama administration. But that's not all there is to it.

Like many others, my story doesn't end with a few nondescript years of Facebook use, followed by an adulthood that left algorithms behind. Rather, my first Facebook account in the summer of 2007 was the beginning of a way of living that was completely foreign to my parents. As the years passed, Facebook changed designs and features, but what didn't change was how central digital media had become to my normal life. Instead of being a diversion that I stowed away in the corner for occasional use during the doldrums of offline life, my online activity became the most consistent, the most regular, the most habitual thing about me.

I would go to classes, then scroll Facebook. A couple hours at church on Sunday were followed by several hours of email, instant messenger, and (later) YouTube. Through the years, the centrality of the social internet was established more and more for me personally as well as seemingly everyone else. Blogs and tweets took up a huge percentage of my reading; I became twice as likely to text someone than call, even family. The transformation in the broader society became evident as I got older, as almost everyone I knew began talking about "fasting" from social media or their New Year's resolutions to look less frequently at screens.

In just a few years, these digital technologies had gone from something we were all excited to try, to something we were all desperate to somehow escape (at least temporarily).

That's one story, which a lot of us now in our mid-thirties know well. But there's another story to tell about our relationship to digital technology, and it's about much more than how much time we burn on it. This story is about the way that these technologies shape and mold. It's about what it means to be humans, created in God's image, whose lives are increasingly mediated by screens, algorithms, and pixels. What if the reality we need to face is not so much about how we overuse and overlove a valuable tool, but about what happens when a tool is no longer just a tool? What if the issue is not that we aren't making the internet more humane; it's that the internet is making us less so?

What's Water?

In 2005 Kenyon College invited the writer David Foster Wallace to deliver the commencement address. Wallace began his speech to the graduating class with a short fable. Two young fish are swimming in the ocean, and eventually an older fish greets them. "Hello, boys. How's the water?" The two young fish look at each other completely confused, and then ask: "What is water?"

"The point of the fish story," Wallace explained, "is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about." This illustration, while also good for a light chuckle from an audience, communicates a profound truth. What we are immersed in is taken for granted, and what is taken for granted is not thought about. Wallace wanted the graduating class of Kenyon College to know that the hardest task that awaited

them was not "changing the world" or "making a difference," but paying attention to the right things:

> Twenty years after my own graduation, I have come gradually to understand that the liberal arts cliché about teaching you how to think is actually shorthand for a much deeper, more serious idea: learning how to think really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience. Because if you cannot exercise this kind of choice in adult life, you will be totally hosed.[1]

In other words, we are the fish. We swim each day in the depths of our modern world, floating past places, things, and ideas that we don't even see because of how familiar they are. We take our day-in, day-out life utterly for granted, not consciously but automatically, and the result is that we rarely if ever think seriously about those things that are closest to our experiences. We just accept them without trying, like a fish spends a lifetime without ever knowing that the world he lives in is called "water."

Being unable to notice or think reflectively about something does not change its reality. Taking something for granted does not diminish its significance any more than living in an underground shelter darkens the sun. What Wallace was getting at in his speech to the graduates of Kenyon College was that our ability or inability to really see the "water" of reality around us is ultimately about how well *we* are living. The water is there; it's a given, inescapable.

---

1   David Foster Wallace, "This Is Water," commencement speech (2005), *fs* blog, accessed November 14, 2022, https://fs.blog/.

The question is not whether we will live in the water; the question is whether we will be able to see it as water.

This Is Water

Because the social internet has come to dominate and reorient our lives, it can be difficult to imagine how it might be affecting our emotions, our values, or our worldview.[2] Many people who are young enough to feel invested in social media are not old enough to clearly remember life before it, while often those who can remember life before social media simply have no category for the immersive effect that it has on those who are younger. Further, the sheer omnipresence of digital technology can obscure its nature. As the social internet seems to blend in seamlessly to the fabric of day-in, day-out life, it doesn't occur to us that it could actually be bringing an ideology or a value system into our lives. Like fish in water, it's just all we know, so we don't see it clearly.

Over the past several years, Christian theologians and others have described the emerging generation of Western adults as belonging to the spirit of "expressive individualism." The scholar Robert Bellah defines expressive individualism this way: "Expressive individualism holds that each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality is to be realized."[3] In other words, what most people in the modern, secular world believe is that the key to their happiness, fulfillment, and quest for meaning in life is to arrange things so that their inner desires and ambitions can be totally achieved. If these desires and ambitions

---

2 I first heard the term *social internet* from my friend Chris Martin. See his book *Terms of Service: The Real Cost of Social Media* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2022).

3 Robert Bellah, cited in Carl Trueman, "How Expressive Individualism Threatens Civil Society," Heritage Foundation, May 27, 2021, https://www.heritage.org/.

align with those of the community or the religion, great! But if not, then it's the community or the religion that must be changed or done away with. Life's center of gravity, according to expressive individualism, is the self.

In his helpful book *Rethink Yourself*, Trevin Wax describes this worldview as the call to "look in," to peer inside your own wants and sense of self to find meaning in life. He writes:

> The "look in" approach to life means that your purpose is to look inside yourself in order to discover who you truly are—to find what makes you unique—and then to take hold of your authentic self and emerge with it intact and uncompromised. Who are you? Only you can figure out the answer, and the way you find out is by looking deep into your heart to discover your uniqueness, to come to terms with what you most want from life.[4]

Expressive individualism is the quintessential secular creed. It is the chorus of nearly every chart-topping song, the subtext of every Disney film, the final resting place of contemporary education, parenting, and even much contemporary religion. How and why this happened is a fascinating story.[5] For now, the point to take away is that expressive individualism is part of the "water" that surrounds us modern, twenty-first-century people. We rarely notice it because it is all we know, yet we remain immersed.

---

4 Trevin Wax, *Rethink Yourself: The Power of Looking Up Before Looking In* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2020), 11.

5 See Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism* (New York: Basic, 2017).

What's crucial to realize is that alongside the philosophical revolution of expressive individualism, the digital technology revolution has exploded, and in the process it has provided the revolution of expressive individualism with its most important, most enchanting, and most effective vehicle.

What you and I know as the internet is a very recent development; the barest, most essential version of internet computing existed in the latter half of the twentieth century, but it was unusable for anyone except trained professionals. The commercial internet—otherwise known as the World Wide Web—is a product of the 1990s. In 1997 about 21 percent of Americans said they had used an internet technology in the past three months. In 2007 that percentage was 75 percent. By 2018 over 85 percent of Americans—or about 250 million people—were using internet technology at least semiregularly.[6] Perhaps even more significantly, the number of people who spend much of their time logged on has skyrocketed in recent years: 85 percent of US adults report being online every day, and about a third say they are online "almost constantly."[7] In other words, in about twenty years the internet has gone from a hobby of the few to the routine of the majority.

Part of the reason for this is that the internet has not just stayed a recreational pastime, a way to watch funny videos, read sports statistics, or send the occasional email. Many industries are now centered around the internet. These jobs require constant access to email, videoconferencing, file hosting, social media, and more. In the twenty-first century, it is perfectly plausible that a typical

6   "Share of the Population Using the Internet," International Telecommunication Union, Our World in Data, accessed November 14, 2022, https://ourworldindata.org/.

7   Andrew Perrin and Sara Atske, "About Three-in-Ten US Adults Say They Are 'Almost Constantly' Online," Pew Research Center, March 26, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/.

employed person would spend most (if not all) of his workday online, spend most (if not all) of his break catching up on social media or listening to a podcast, and then go home to spend most (if not all) of his free time watching Netflix, playing online games, or just browsing the web.

While some of us can still feel occasional pangs of guilt for "bingeing" too much TV or losing track of time aimlessly scrolling through our social media feeds, the point is that this kind of rhythm does not stand out as strange in our modern world. We can tinker around the edges, but the life bordered on all sides by the internet is neither rare nor surprising in our era. From work to dating, from movies to music, from friendship to even church—the screen is mediating much of our modern life.

If the web is the water we live in, expressive individualism is the chlorine that permeates it.

Tool or Teacher?

The internet is a lot like pornography.

No, that's not a typo. I did not mean to say that the internet *contains* a lot of pornography. I mean to say that the internet itself—i.e., its very nature—is like pornography. There's something about it that is pornographic in its essence.

If this sounds confusing, you're not alone. It sounds confusing because over the past few decades, the tendency among Christians has been to focus on what the internet provides instead of what it is. Consequently, evangelicals have indeed talked a lot about the scourge of online pornography. But while much attention has been given to how the web can supply us with spiritually dangerous pictures and videos, much less attention has been given to how the *very form* of the web shapes us in the image of the spirit of the age.

Few Christians would dispute that there is much on the internet that harms us. But by divorcing what the internet presents from what the internet intrinsically is, we are fighting against the symptoms of a more fundamental disease that we are failing to treat. "Staying pure online" is a worthy ambition, but defining purity to mean only one thing—the avoidance of certain content—not only misses the richer biblical ideal of wise living, but it ironically makes us more vulnerable to the allure of godless ideas and rhythms of life. It is entirely possible—in fact, all variables equal, it is likely—to faithfully avoid vulgar or explicit content on the web while simultaneously being shaped by it in a profoundly sub-Christian way.

This may sound incredibly strange. If we are avoiding sinful content online, how in the world can the internet "shape" us in a negative way? We try to avoid articles, podcasts, or videos that undermine Christian belief. Technology is a neutral tool; what matters is how we use it, right? The key (many might say) is to use the web only for good things: to keep up with friends, to consume wholesome content, to be more efficient at our work and school. Resist the allure of pornography or anti-Christian content, and the web is our friend, right?

This book tries to explain why the assumptions in the above paragraph are not quite right. Rather than being a neutral tool, the internet (particularly the social internet) is an epistemological environment[8]—a spiritual and intellectual habitat—that creates in its members particular ways of thinking, feeling, and believing. It's true in one sense that the web *is* a tool that responds to its users' desires. But the web is not a tool in the same way that a screwdriver

---

8 Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that asks about knowledge: how we can know things, what it means to believe correctly, etc.

or wrench is a tool. The web *speaks* to us. We talk to the web, and the web talks back, and this dialogue constitutes an ever-growing aspect of life in the digital age.

Rather than thinking of the web and social media as merely neutral tools that merely do whatever users ask of them, it is better to think of them as kinds of spaces that are continually shaping us to think, feel, communicate, and live in certain ways. In other words, the social internet is a liturgical environment. James K. A. Smith has written powerfully about the effect that certain habits and environments can have on our desires.[9] As we will see later on, even our most allegedly "nonreligious" spaces are deeply spiritual. They tell us a story about the good life: what it is, and how we can get it. These spiritual habitats train our hearts and make certain ideas and behaviors more desirable, and others less so, by immersing us in a particular narrative.

The web tells a story too. The disembodied, fragmented nature of the internet is not merely a quirk but a fundamental part of the web's nature and, thus, part of the story it tells. As we will see, the form of the internet has radically altered how we read, think, feel, and believe. The digital liturgies of the web and social media train us to invest ultimate authority in our own stories and experiences as they separate us from the objective givenness of the embodied world. How is it that in a supposedly relativistic, you-do-you age, so many people have been shamed or "dragged" online, helplessly watching their reputation or career be destroyed? The answer is not just that some people are mean but that the *form* of the web undermines moral reconciliation.

9   James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 19–27.

These are some of the "digital liturgies" that you and I encounter almost every day. They are not neutral. They are theological, philosophical, existential, and moral stories that leave constant impressions on us. They are soul-shaping narratives.

The Gospel's Analog Truth

One of the great things about being a Christian is that in a listless and frantic age, you don't have to chase after every new idea or attitude. To be a Christian is to go to bed every night knowing that you have a completely trustworthy, completely solid, and completely good word from the Creator of the universe. The maker of the stars put the wisdom, truth, and hope we need in a book, the Bible. The Bible reveals to us the grand narrative, the master story, that gives meaning and direction to our lives: the gospel of Jesus.

David Foster Wallace said his hope for the graduating class of Kenyon College was that by beginning to see reality for what it is, they would be able to "construct meaning from experience." The challenge for Christians in the digital age is different. We don't have to construct meaning; we have to cling to the meaning we've been given already.

Amid the white noise of digital liturgies that preach to us every day, the gospel is wonderfully satisfying analog truth. We'll say more about this later, but for now, by "analog truth" I mean that the story of the gospel is rooted deeply in physical reality. To preserve the good news of Jesus, God put his gospel in a physical book, inspiring real humans by the Holy Spirit to write physical words that tell a unified story about a speaking God, who was incarnated as a real human being to save us from our sin, free us from the slavery of self-obsession, and one day raise us up, body *and* soul, to live forever with him.

When we put the digital liturgies of our age up against the analog truth of the gospel, we see just how flimsy, how untrue, and how unsatisfying the spirit of the web age really is.

Before we begin, I want to offer one definition and two disclaimers.

First, in this book I will be using words like *internet*, *web*, *social media*, and *digital technology*. In most cases, these words will be used to refer to the same thing. This is important to acknowledge at the outset because, in technical terms, the internet, the web, social media, and digital technology are all distinct items. They share several things in common but are not the same thing. Throughout this book, however, these words will refer to one single idea: *the disembodied electronic environment that we enter through connected devices for the purpose of accessing information, relationships, and media that are not available to us in a physical format.*

Next, the first disclaimer: this book will not argue that Christians should stay off the internet. I'm not going to tell you to permanently unplug, find a cabin in the wilderness, and go "off the grid" so that you can be a better Christian. Not only would this be undoable for most of the people reading this; it would not accomplish what we might want it to. When Jesus prayed for his disciples a few hours before being crucified, he specifically prayed that instead of being taken out of the world, his followers would be preserved by the power of God's truth (John 17:15–17). Our immersion in the world's liturgies is not the deciding factor in our faithfulness to or love of Jesus. Rather, by identifying how the web shapes us, we can use these technologies more deliberately, more wisely, and more Christianly. To be in the world is not necessarily to be of the world.

Second, this book should not be read as a sermon by someone who has perfected what he is preaching. Something closer to the opposite is true: much of the last decade-plus of my life has been

a struggle to reclaim my time, attention, and affection away from the ephemera of online existence. That struggle has probably seen more failures than victories. What follows is the result not of an exemplary lifestyle but of a journey to understand spiritual and mental tensions within myself and within others close to me.

The formative power of the web matters to me because I have experienced it in myself and in others. I have felt a change in the way I read and think that I believe is directly connected to how the web has dominated most of my adult life. I have noticed changes in myself and in people I know: not just personality tics but meaningful shifts in how we form our opinions, how we relate to those who disagree, and how we invest our time.

Many times over the last several years I have experienced a sense that the truths of Scripture feel foolish or implausible, not because of any strong argument I encountered against them, but simply because they felt out of step with the ideas and memes and mentalities that proliferate online. And especially in the past few years, I've seen and heard testimonies of genuine, God-fearing people who became deeply foolish—not because of intellectual deficiency, but by giving themselves over day after day to petty controversies, cheap outrage, and minute arguments. So many times, when these problems have emerged, a digital liturgy that took root in the heart has been the culprit.

This is the story for many of us. It's a story about technology, yes. But more deeply, it's a story about worship.

PART 1

———————

TRUTH AND TECHNOLOGY

AS WE THINK ABOUT the formative power of online technology in our lives, we must start where all truth starts—with God. One of the reasons so few people can articulate the effects of the online world is that so few people have a baseline standard of human flourishing for comparison. The world is a thoroughly "tech-maximalist" place. As we will see, this is not an accident. Part of the reason is that much of our digital technology was invented according to a logic that sought to help humans transcend their humanness and achieve something more. Indeed, if there is truly nothing more to being human than endlessly optimizing ourselves, this makes perfect sense. Why not use every tool imaginable to escape the confines of our bodies?

Christianity, however, contradicts this narrative. As we open the Bible, God's word to all humanity, we see a meaning and a purpose much different. We see that we are not self-made but created in

another's image. We see that we are not infinite or self-existent, but creatures who depend on the world around us and on each other. Most importantly, we see that the question of how we should live, rather than being an unknowable mystery or a self-chosen adventure, is a truth we must receive. There is an objectiveness to reality to which we as human creatures must conform if we are to live whole and well. The Bible calls our response to this objective reality "wisdom." Wisdom is real; wisdom is embodied. And it is wisdom that is obscured in a digital world.

What is this wisdom? What does it consist of? And how exactly does our digital technology challenge our pursuit of wisdom? Those are the topics of part 1. My hope is to convince you in these pages that Scripture offers all of us a way of living that is both gloriously transcendent and radically practical. It is a gospel liturgy that offers staggeringly more than the enticing escape of digital life.

1

Embodied Wisdom in a Faceless Age

IN THE BLACK RECESSES of lonely space, a well-dressed man arrives nearly silent on an enormous space station. Before he begins his important astronomical work, he goes to a wall in the station, where there is a screen about the size of a small television. Almost absentmindedly, the man punches a few keys near the screen. In a matter of seconds, a face appears, looking at him through the glass: his daughter, on earth. Her visage is as clear and bright as if she were standing in front of him rather than on her bed some 230,000 miles away. Across such a chasmic gap, they talk with one another in tones no louder than if they were only a few feet apart. The video call is live and crystal clear, the audio perfect and near-instant. After a brief conversation, they say their goodbyes, and the last act for both of them is to reach their arm somewhere just out of camera shot to switch an unseen button. The monitor goes blank, and they are, once again, planets apart.

Because you are reading this at some point (most likely!) in the twenty-first century, the scene I've just described sounds like it could be some overwrought description of a normal day

for any astronaut in the Western world. Nothing about it feels extraordinary, because all of the technology in that paragraph, and the experience that the technology facilitated, is taken for granted in our era. We have names for it, like FaceTime, Skype, live-streaming, and 5G. Even those of us who prefer not to use these tools are barely able to move about in society without experiencing them.

But it wasn't always this way. In fact, the scene I've just described is not taken from the log of a modern astronaut but from one of the early scenes in the classic 1968 science-fiction film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.[1] The film, directed by Stanley Kubrick and based on a story by novelist Arthur C. Clarke, is a dazzling vision of the then-future. That scene is the work of moviemakers; it's a visual effect, and audiences who saw the film knew it. They knew that the idea of a man who could merely punch a few buttons, see his daughter on another planet, and speak to her in perfect real-time was just make-believe, as was the artificial intelligence HAL 9000 who plays the movie's most important role. In 1968, these were merely futuristic dreams on the silver screen.

Today we put those dreams in cheap cases and keep them in our pocket. Today those futuristic visions get plugged in to charge by our bedside every night. Today nearly everything from our work to our school, our hobbies, and even our church depends on what was once movie magic. We don't only take such things for granted; we get frustrated when they don't work as quickly, as clearly, or as efficiently as we think they should. They're such a part of our day that we get neck- and backaches from looking at them. We even develop psychological tics that

---

1 *2001: A Space Odyssey*, directed by Stanley Kubrick (Los Angeles: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, 1968).

make us think these futuristic machines are talking to us when they're really not.[2]

It's an astonishing thought that a piece of movie magic from sixty years ago would have already become so routine. Our technological world has changed in ways and at a speed that no other era of human civilization could comprehend. And the vast majority of us cannot even fully describe our own world. Most of us are like the comedian who joked that if he were transported back to the Middle Ages, he would announce to the people that smartphone and internet technology were possible, and when they asked how such tools worked, he would say, "I have no idea." It's funny because it's true. We really don't comprehend our own world. We are much like the fish in David Foster Wallace's fable who don't know what "water" is. We've swum in its depths our whole lives and have no category for anything else.

Our inability to really comprehend the technological revolution that has permanently altered nearly all of our lives is a profound spiritual, emotional, and cultural dilemma. Digital technology merely from the last thirty years has transformed Western society thoroughly and quickly, but our fundamental response has been mostly to just go with it. We buy the latest version, sign up for the freshest platform, stream the newest stuff. All the while many of us sense that our communities, our friends, and even we ourselves are somehow different because of all these screens and pixels. Our eye-strain headaches tell us something is different. Our lethargic desire to binge-watch tells us something is different. Our sense of anxiety and loneliness and isolation after a marathon of giving and receiving "Likes" tells us something is different. But we just don't

2 Elise Hu, "Phantom Phone Vibrations: So Common They've Changed Our Brain?," NPR, September 27, 2013, https://www.npr.org/.

have the ability to name it. We feel we understand our world less and less even as we have more and more access to it.

One reason why *2001: A Space Odyssey* is a powerful film is that its technological Eden eventually falls. The HAL 9000 computer that operates with godlike power over the astronauts' space mission turns against its human masters. In the end, Kubrick and Clarke imagine a world where humanity's inventions become inhumane. The world of *2001* is a divided world where technological sophistication has tried to conceal a lack of something the Bible tells us is far more important, something that really can help us live fully and humanely in this wondrous, often terrifying world—

Wisdom.

What Is Wisdom?

What is wisdom? Culturally speaking, we often identify wisdom as the ability to make correct decisions. Many times, wisdom and "getting the right answer" are treated as synonymous; thus, we get the notion of the "wisdom of the crowd," which refers to the increased likelihood of arriving at the right answer if you poll enough people. We also conflate wisdom with experience, speaking of people who have seen or done a lot as "wise" and admonishing the youthful to "wise up," i.e., to stop being naive or aimless. In any case, the idea of wisdom is frequently a relative concept. It measures someone's aptitude in navigating a particular task or particular problem.

When the Bible speaks of wisdom, it speaks a bit differently. Christian wisdom is holistic. It does not reduce to book or street smarts, nor is it merely the sum total of our lessons learned. Instead, Christian wisdom is about living a life that responds correctly to reality. In his helpful book *The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom*, theologian Tremper Longman III describes biblical wisdom as contain-

ing three essential levels: the skill of living (practical), becoming a good person (ethical), and fearing God (theological).[3] All three ways of living are wise not only because they are commanded by an authoritative Creator; they are wise because they are responsive to objective realities in the world.

Practical wisdom is the art of being able to discern what's really going on in a relational, vocational, personal context. Particularly in the book of Proverbs (which, along with Job and Ecclesiastes, makes up a part of Christian Scripture known as "wisdom literature"), a truly wise person is someone who can discern the right course of action in a puzzling or tense situation. Longman describes this wisdom as "similar to what today we often call emotional intelligence. . . . Emotionally intelligent people, like the wise in the book of Proverbs, know how to say the right thing at the right time. They do the right thing at the right time."[4] In other words, while others misinterpret reality and do or say something unfit for the moment, the wise person can "read the room," looking past surface appearance and seeing people and problems for what they really are.

This wisdom requires more than memorized idioms and platitudes. It requires a living knowledge of what people and the world are really like. Someone armed with only aphoristic knowledge of human nature will offer advice to a friend that backfires spectacularly, because that advice is not actually rooted in awareness of objective reality. People who are enslaved to their impulses will make decisions that get them in deep trouble because their emotions make them indifferent to the facts of the situation. To be wise is to live daily life in light of reality.

3   Tremper Longman III, *The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), 6–25.

4   Longman, *Fear of the Lord*, 7.

This kind of wisdom doesn't stop at emotional intelligence, however. To live in light of reality also has a moral dimension, what Longman calls the "ethical level" of wisdom. If there really is such a thing as right and wrong, if objective moral standards are real in our universe, then a wise person must live in light of that truth as well. A desire to succeed at life is not enough. We have to be shaped in light of the reality of virtue.[5]

It was not that long ago that many in Western society believed that any talk of "objective morality" was misguided at best, despotic at worst. The philosophy of postmodernism was supposed to annihilate any appeal to universal ethical standards. "What's true for you is true for you, and what's true for me is true for me." But moral relativism has fallen on hard times, even—perhaps especially—among those who reject Christianity. Even the most committed relativists now will quickly agree that racial injustice is always wrong, or that violence and prejudice against women or LGBTQ+ people must not be tolerated in a just society. The contemporary West has rediscovered what the Bible never forgot: objective standards of right and wrong are woven into the very fabric of our existence. We cannot be fully human without them.

The third level of biblical wisdom according to Longman is theological. We will say much more about this particular level in a moment. For now, we can summarize the theological level of wisdom precisely the way the book of Proverbs summarizes it: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Prov. 1:7). Even after we try to discern

---

5 Longman, *Fear of the Lord*, 11. Longman cites biblical scholar S. M. Lyu's work *Righteousness in the Book of Proverbs*, where Lyu writes, "Proverbs instructs that the reader should learn and become wise and righteous. To reach that goal, the learner is expected to go through the reshaping of his inner person. His desires, hopes, and disposition must be reconditioned to reflect the ideal."

the objectively true path forward in everyday life and the virtuous standard to which we need to conform, there remains the most fundamental aspect of wisdom. Wisdom fears the Lord. Holistic wisdom looks at reality and sees its author, majestic and sovereign and worthy of loyalty. As Longman writes, "the 'fear' of the 'fear of the Lord' is the sense of standing before the God who created everything, including humans whose every continued existence depends on him. The emotion is appropriate for wisdom because it demonstrates acknowledgment that God is so much greater than we are."[6] In this sense, the baseline of true wisdom is the ability to see God for who he is and, so seeing, to respond in the only reasonable way. God is not an idea. He is not a philosophical thesis to be contemplated in a merely theoretical way. God is everywhere. He is omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. He is the only Creator and the only sustainer of that creation. He is the supreme sovereign over absolutely everything in our universe and any other. As the title of a famous book elegantly puts it, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent.*[7]

The essence of true wisdom, therefore, is to live fully aligned with ultimate reality: practical, ethical, and theological. To the extent that anyone is wise, he sees himself, the world around him, and God for what they truly are. As I remember one preacher putting it, a wise life is lived with, not against, the grain of reality that God has created.

"Sounds great," you may be thinking. "What does this have to do with digital technology?"

The answer to this question is the point of this book. If we want to live wisely according to Scripture, then we have to live in

6   Longman, *Fear of the Lord*, 12.
7   Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1972).

alignment with reality. Yet throughout Scripture and throughout human history, fallen, sinful people have used technology to try to invent an alternative reality for themselves, a reality meant to "liberate" them from the fear of the Lord and conformity to his revealed character.

From the Tower of Babel to the golden calf, from the slave ships in the Atlantic to the crematoriums of the Third Reich, humans have tried from time immemorial to utilize their ingenuity to manufacture a different world with a different story than the one the Creator made. As we will see later, it is not just that we take neutral tools and use them in sinful ways. It's that the tools themselves can bend our vision of reality. In fact, to the degree that our "tools" not only alter how we experience God's world but begin to *distort* it, they become something other than tools. They become idols.

It is important to say at this point that this is not an antitechnology book. That we can craft and use tools that help us distort God and his reality is ultimately attributable to sin, not the material in the physical world that gave us the technology. The Bible is clear that God is completely sovereign over absolutely every molecule in the universe and that the material qualities of straw, wood, iron, gold, and silicon are what they are because God created them, and their very nature glorifies him.[8] Yet it is simultaneously true that because human beings are divine image bearers with a cosmic mandate to subdue the earth and represent God's rule on it (Gen. 1:27–28), our technology is massively theologically significant. We not only shape technology; technology shapes us. And certain *kinds* of technologies shape us in certain profound ways.

---

8   See Tony Reinke, *God, Technology, and the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022).

To live wisely is to live "with the grain" of the truth that a real God has revealed to us, but our computer-generated experience of life affects how well we can see and perceive (and thus, how well we can live according to) that truth. Stories have intrinsic power to change our lives. From the narratives of Scripture, to the ancient bards spinning mythical legends, to the great literature and drama and cinema of the modern world, stories captivate us at a level deeper than intellectual argument. As human culture transforms, so too do the stories we tell ourselves. And as we will see a little later, it is not simply the content of the stories that can captivate and change us but the form of these stories. *How* we hear can be just as powerful as *what* we hear.

In the online age, our default is to lose touch with reality. Left to ourselves and our machines, we find that wisdom often looks foolish, virtue often looks evil, and God often feels invisible. Every person living in a modern, digitally connected culture is constantly inhabiting a moral and intellectual habitat that distorts the biblical story of reality.

Perhaps this feels like overstatement. Sure, we all have the vague sense that we're too distracted by our phones or our apps. We wish we could read more and scroll less. But perhaps this is just a problem of time management. If we were just more disciplined or more productive, perhaps our digital immersion would be to our benefit rather than detriment. Maybe what we need are simply better corporations that will produce better and safer content for us to consume. Maybe the answer is that there is no answer, and it's time to stop worrying so much about it.

But the problem goes deeper than this. It's not just that our hyperconnected world consumes too much of our time and we need better techniques to rein it in. It's that many of these technologies

fundamentally alter our perception of reality. As we'll see later, the kind of digital technologies that we carry around in our pocket and look at aimlessly throughout the day are shaping all of us into particular kinds of thinkers, whose thoughts are formed in the pattern of those technologies. In other words, we are learning to look at reality and see something different from what is actually there.

If the essence of wisdom is living in light of reality, our digital habitats can undermine wisdom by cutting us off (in small but real ways) from that reality. To see this, though, we cannot start by looking at the technologies themselves. The only way to know for sure if a poorly tinted window has been obscuring our vision of the yard is to know what the yard actually looks like. We have to see what's on the other side of the glass clearly. Only then will the flaws in the glass itself become apparent for what they are.

Before we interrogate the digital technologies that shape us, we need to know what kind of shape we are supposed to have as humans. The Reformer John Calvin began his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by observing, "Our wisdom, insofar as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."[9] To be wise, we need to see ourselves for what we really are, and we can do this in light of God's word.

A Theology of Embodiment

When we look to Scripture to discover what we human beings truly are like, one of the first, most foundational things we discover is that *we are embodied creatures made in the image of God*. Every part of that description is important. Humans are made in the image of

---

9   John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 1.1.1.

God, reflecting his nature, representing him, and reigning on his behalf over the earth and animal kingdom. We are also creatures. We are objects of God's creative work, and as such, we exist in a permanent state of dependence on and submission to him. God is Creator, we are creatures, and this order will never be reversed. Our status as creatures does two things. It limits our power and authority as we realize that we creatures need God and he does not need us. Second, it bestows astonishing dignity and honor on us because we are neither accidents nor mistakes that happened in nature.[10]

Many evangelical Christians could probably explain in some capacity why it matters that humans are creatures made in the image of God. What is harder for many of us is explaining why it matters that we are *embodied*. Of course, no one disagrees *that* we are embodied (at least not yet). But the fact of our having bodies does not seem to carry a lot of significance for many Western people today. In fact, it's easy to get the impression of the opposite, that many of us see our embodiment as an obstacle to be overcome, a limitation to be transcended, or even a necessary evil to be suppressed.

As theologian John Kleinig has observed, "society as a whole does not know what to make of the body."[11] Kleinig points out that many modern people express confusion about the body through one of two ways. First, they become "obsessed" with achieving a body they desire, so they go to great lengths to get slimmer, fitter, stronger, or prettier. Kleinig sums up the situation: "My ideal self, the person I would like to be, must match that ideal body. Yet that ideal is never fixed. It changes as fashions change."[12] The result

---

10 For an excellent introduction to this idea, see Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

11 John Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made: A Protestant Theology of the Body* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 5.

12 Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 6.

for many people, however, is a profound and often debilitating shame over the way their body fails to look like the ideal body. This shame is expressed through an increasing alienation from our bodies, as we despair of having the image we desire and try harder and harder to separate our "inner self" from our disappointing physical self.

This dynamic that most of us experience—this connection we feel between our bodies and an ambient sense of shame or disappointment—is very near the center of the biblical story of the fall. After Adam and Eve sinned against God, their eyes were opened to the knowledge of good and evil. What did they see? They saw their naked bodies (Gen. 3:7). Their sin did not disrobe them; it did not free up their true selves, suppressed by fellowship with God. Instead, sin turned them *against* their true selves. The first experience of shame in the history of the world was between Adam and Eve and their own bodies.

Sin's power is visible not just in its capacity to alienate us from our bodies but to make this alienation the fundamental thing we are aware of when it comes to them. Because of this, we miss the good givenness of our bodies. By "good givenness" I mean the sheer reality that we exist in an embodied state and cannot do otherwise. Our bodies are given to us in our mother's womb. We are passive recipients of God's creative work. Even thousands of years before ultrasound technology, King David of Israel knew that the Lord had knit him together in his mother's womb and that the result was a body "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:14). What did David do to possess such a wonderfully made body? Absolutely nothing. His body was made for him without his input, without his effort, and without his agency, yet it is inarguably real and essential. The body has *givenness.*

Why does this matter? How does acknowledging the good givenness of the body do anything for us in a digital age? The answer is found in the discussion of wisdom above. We've seen now that the wise life is the life lived in light of true reality. The material world in general and our bodies in particular are part of that reality. Our bodies, in their good givenness, are a fundamental aspect of who we are as people made in God's image. Therefore, true wisdom requires us to live within and accept our physical embodiment. Our creaturely design is divinely ordered, something to inspire worship, gratitude, and joy. Biblically speaking, it's when we attempt to get around or beyond our identity as embodied creatures that we plunge headlong into despair and folly.

Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, our cultural moment in the modern West is profoundly hostile to the body. The internet, which dominates our lives as the primary medium through which we encounter most of the world, is an entirely disembodied habitat. Consequently, the internet trains our consciences to think of ourselves and the world in disembodied ways. We do not exist bodily online but through photos and videos that we carefully manipulate to construct a preferred identity. On social media, our "community" is not a room full of people physically present, whom we can reach out and touch, but a collection of usernames and avatars and timelines. This habitat itself tells us a story—a story that humans are not essentially people with flesh and blood, voices, and facial expression, but "users" whom we can sufficiently know from their words, profile pictures, and shares.

This is not just a minor tweak in how we think of what it means to be a human person. It is an intellectual and spiritual revolution. And there is much reason to think that a worldview of disembodiment has currently seized the reins of cultural power.

In 2022 Lia Thomas, who was born William Thomas, became the first openly transgendered "woman"[13] to win an NCAA Division-1 swimming championship.[14] The story became a hotbed of national controversy throughout the US, with progressive transgender activists celebrating Thomas's victory and other observers questioning how allowing a biological male to compete against females made any competitive or rational sense. Indeed, Thomas is merely one example, a symbol of a much larger transformation in Western society with regard to the relationship between biological sex and gender. In the span of a few years, transgenderism has gone from the very fringes of cultural consciousness to the mainstream, an astonishing revolution with radical implications in our politics, medicine, education, and parenting.[15]

How has the idea of a person being stuck in the "wrong body" become not just respected but orthodox in many circles? There are many legitimate answers, but this book offers an overlooked one: digital technology has recalibrated our worldviews and reshaped our consciences not to see the good givenness of our bodies. This isn't merely a problem of content; it's a problem of *form*. In other words, it's not simply that on social media and the web we read sentences that devalue the physical. Rather, the *nature* of online

---

13 Some Christians feel that putting transgendered people's gender identity in quotes or referring to them with their birth pronouns instead of their preferred pronouns is unnecessarily hostile and offensive and that it is best to advocate for gospel truth as much as possible without putting barriers between us and unbelievers. While I respect this perspective, I believe Christians have a responsibility to tell the truth about human identity and that this responsibility requires us to insist on a biblical and natural definition of gender.

14 Carson Field, "Out of Left Field: Thoughts on Swimmer Lia Thomas and the State of Women's Sports," *Abilene Reporter News*, March 21, 2022, https://www.reporternews.com/.

15 For more on how this happened, see Carl R. Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022).

presence itself powerfully reinforces the sense that we are not our bodies, that we have total control over our identity and our story, and that any threat to this feeling can and ought to be "deleted" so that we don't have to put up with it.

According to a vast amount of research, teens and young adults in contemporary American society feel significantly lonelier and more isolated than generations prior.[16] For many, friendship is an elusive art that seems to be slipping further and further away with each successive generation. Even worse, the emerging generation of adults in many economically developed parts of the world are failing to marry and start families, sometimes well into adulthood and sometimes completely.

Meanwhile, technologically speaking, it has never been easier in human history to "connect" with another person: to meet, get to know, and develop a relationship with someone even over vast distances. The trends of loneliness and unwanted solitude have not only resisted technological connectivity; they seem to have worsened alongside digital connectivity's ascent.[17]

The major argument of this book is that Christians can only understand and respond to these and other cultural shifts correctly if we understand them in the context of digital technology's undermining of biblical wisdom. Because wisdom is a submission to God's good and given reality, our immersion in computer and internet existence is a crisis of spiritual formation. Our digital

---

16 Vivian Manning-Schaffel, "Americans Are Lonelier Than Ever—but 'Gen Z' May Be the Loneliest," NBC News, May 14, 2018, https://www.nbcnews.com/. See also Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic, 2012).

17 See Jean Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria, 2017); and Turkle, *Alone Together*.

environments *dislocate* us, training us to believe and feel and communicate in certain ways that our given, embodied, physical environments do not. The more immersive and ambient the technology, the more extreme this effect.

But can technology really do this? Isn't it simply a neutral tool that can be used for good or bad?

The answer is complicated.