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There's an App for That—or Is There?

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A couple years ago, I preached on Christmas Eve from Luke chapter 2, about the shepherds in the field hearing the angels' news that a Savior was born. I painted a picture of them hearing this heavenly message with their faces raised to the skies and jaws dropped, astonished that such news had come to them. And when the angels departed, I said, they didn't grab their phones to confirm the knowledge, but went to Bethlehem themselves.

I hoped to capture that sense of living in real time, of God's good news as an address that happens not beyond us but *to us and for us*. I learned later, however, that among the young adults in the balcony, someone was heard to mutter, "OK, boomer."[1]

Outside the church, there are voices aplenty warning us of the deleterious effects of our digital devices on relationships, mental health, and democracy itself. Some of the most ardent followers of digital sabbaths and banning screen time for small children are the same people whose livelihoods depend on Silicon Valley and constant technological advances. Sherry Turkle, a professor of Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT, has written one of the most thoughtful critiques of how technical advances have deteriorated our social abilities in *Reclaiming*

[1] For the record, I am not a baby boomer by any definition.

Certainly the Covid pandemic has accelerated a process, already underway, by which congregations and church organizations communicate with their members and others by electronic means. But it is up to these organizations to determine how and when such communications are actually faithful parts of their Christian ministries.

Conversation.[2] But inside the church we have tended to bifurcate the conversation into those conservative skeptics who just resist change and the entrepreneurial evangelists who just want the church to take advantage of all the tools available for the spread of the gospel. (In twenty-four years of ministry, I have learned to be forewarned any time someone starts a sentence with "Why can't we *just* . . ."). Turkle's advice is applicable here: "The digital world is based on binary choice. Our thinking about it can't be."[3]

I count myself among the digital skeptics, but the pandemic chastened all of us who leaned into high-touch environments and away from digitization of our ministries. We have been forced into using every means possible to stay connected to our members across distances, and I am grateful beyond measure that twenty-first-century technology has made it possible for anyone with a device to connect with a teacher, a pastor, or a friend. As I write this, it would be foolhardy to say anyone knows what the "other side" of the pandemic will look like in the life of the church, but it is not too early to ask deeper questions about how the devices in our pockets are shaping our people's spiritual lives. For the purposes of this small examination, I want to look not so much at the internet's impact on Sunday worship life—because that would have to be its own article—but at prayer and devotional practices in particular.

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Personal Devotion: The Bible in Your Pocket (or Earbuds)

There are a number of different mobile technologies available to churches, religious leaders, and Christians. Mainline churches most commonly provide written and spoken content via mobile technologies in the form of daily devotionals to their congregants. Christians can subscribe to podcasts of daily lectionary readings; they can also download an app that provides easy access to the Bible, the Small Catechism, or a daily devotion. These adaptations are the most common simply because they are the easiest to program—little more than providing a way for someone to sign up for an email, or converting a webpage into a mobile format. If a person is looking for a particular denominational approach or for content generated by their local congregation, they usually have to settle for a technical platform that is more basic. But the notion that someone in their same denomination

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

[3] Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 329.

or tradition is also completing the same practice of devotion provides an unspoken sense of community that many find important, all the more so if people in their local congregation are listening to or reading the same material. In these formats, the digital versions function essentially the same way as a *Christ in Our Home* (Augsburg Fortress) or *Upper Room* devotional booklet: the material is provided in a convenient format, but the "user" still needs to remember it is there.

A slight step up in technology from email or blog devotionals are devotional or Bible reading podcasts. A popular example is Ascension Press's *The Bible in a Year* podcast, which reads through the whole of Scripture in a programmed way with a daily podcast of 10–15 minutes. Father Mike Schmitz, a popular Roman Catholic priest, is the sole reader for these podcasts, offering the user a sense of connection to a single pastoral voice. The delivery model eases the challenge of a person trying to remember their place in Scripture or needing to have their own Bible accessible, while also promising some sense of collective action because others are carrying out the same challenge in real time.

Prayer and Meditation Apps

While the church has considered a local congregation the primary locus of spiritual life, the secular world has meanwhile been producing new tools for individual meditation at a rapid rate. As *mindfulness* has become a household word, the practice of mindful meditation is promoted in health care, education, and business sectors. Secular applications for meditation are a booming business in mobile technology. Companies such as Calm, Headspace, and Insight Timer have been around for a decade or more—a lifetime in the app world. *Businesswire* reports that Calm and Headspace collectively had 65 million app downloads and 50,000 daily users across 180 countries in 2021.[4] These larger platforms market themselves not just to individuals but to corporate human resource departments, promising a calmer, more focused workforce with the use of the applications. Within these apps one can choose silent or guided meditations, short lectures on the practice of meditation, and calming music or stories for sleep. And of course, the app will remind you to use its resources as often as you like.

Meditation apps that have an explicitly Christian mission look remarkably similar to their secular counterparts. Pray, Abide, and Soultime all offer music and meditations specifically designed to help you sleep. This trend was evident well before the pandemic began but has been accelerated by the mass anxiety experienced across society since the emergence of Covid-19.[5] *Christianity Today*

[4] "Global Mindfulness Meditation Apps Market Outlook to 2027—A USD 4,206 Million Market by 2027," *Businesswire*, March 4, 2021, https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20210305005147/en/Global-Mindfulness-Meditation-Apps-Market-Outlook-to-2027---A-USD-4206-Million-Market-by-2027---ResearchAndMarkets.com.

[5] Emily McFarlan Miller, "Christian Apps Are Moving from 'Pray More' to 'Calm Down,'" *Christianity Today*, April 16, 2020, https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/april/christian-meditation-mindfulness-app-pray-abide-pause-psalm.html.

reported that while evangelical internet tools were previously marketed as a way to help devoted Christians attend to the Word and pray more frequently, now their overwhelming emphasis is to help you calm down.

Although the structure of the leading Christian apps is similar across platforms, some theological variations in their approaches can be found. Pray promises to help you "make time for God each day and track your progress . . . and just the right length for meaningful reflection that can fit in any busy schedule."[6] It features a Bible-in-a-year plan, kids' Bible bedtime stories, and "Pray Radio," which is audio content from celebrity voices like Tim Keller and Joel Osteen.

Abide, another broadly evangelical Christian meditation app, offers a simple daily meditation as well as a daily Bible reading. The daily meditations let you choose between "lite," basic, or longer versions. Its language is generally Protestant and Christ-centered, while not shying away from an evangelical devotion that strives to match God's grace to us with our devotion to God. Confession of sin regularly appears as part of the prayer practice, and daily Bible readings are not simply read but also interpreted. Complex theological language is avoided, but terms like *sin* and *salvation* are frequently used without explanation. In late 2021 the Abide blog was filled with messages about well-being. Individual health takes up the majority of verbiage, with the occasional nod to relational health, especially marriage.

Soultime, an app endorsed by Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby and produced in the United Kingdom, is "designed to help every Christian with their emotional and spiritual growth." It features daily themed meditations as well as a daily Scripture reading that can be either read or listened to. After you fill out an inventory identifying where you struggle most in your spiritual life, the app suggests a series of meditations on such themes as "forgiving yourself" or "valuing your imperfections." The app also allows you to choose up to five friends who will be notified if you report an emotionally tough time. The meditations are heavily focused on consolation and seldom offer confession of sin. One unusual feature is that the "bedtime" stories will read you a chapter of classic literature such as Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* or Lucy Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*.

While most apps don't confess to any denominational bent, Hallow, a Roman Catholic app, leans into its particularity. Hallow lets users choose between lectio divina, the rosary, prayers with the saints, or group-oriented novenas. It has a simple, colorful graphic style, which might lead one to imagine that it would refrain from more faith-specific language, but it certainly does not. An example is the feature that offers a daily meditation of praying with the saints. The meditation for October 21 tells the story of Mother Laura Montoya and closes with her own prayer: "Destroy me, O God, and upon my ruins build a monument to Your Glory." The idea that we might need to be so thoroughly rebuilt is conspicuously absent from apps like Calm or Soultime.

[6] Pray, Product Description, https://apps.apple.com/gd/app/pray-com-prayer-sleep-bible/id1161035371.

Except for Pray Radio, most sophisticated prayer apps lack star voices. Some apps allow you to choose a voice that will lead your meditation—but the names are not familiar ones. They are gentle voices that could easily be mistaken for a yoga teacher's, often with a personal address to the listener as if they are the only one there. "Before you go, I'd love to pray for you," says Naomi on Soultime. To hear a known pastor or thought leader, you have to turn to the podcast world, which abounds with familiar names. Indeed, the reality of twenty-first-century publishing seems to demand that popular spiritual authors like Kate Bowler and Emily P. Freeman, or well-known pastors such as Nadia Bolz-Weber or Richard Rohr, also promote their written work through a constant drip of podcasting, accompanied by Instagram feeds and Facebook pages. In the podcast world, there is talk of community among those who listen, and some authors are intentionally building online communities, but the crossover between embodied gatherings and online community has grown increasingly thin in the last two years.

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Marketed Christian apps do not propose to replace engagement with a worshipping community, but the absence of much reference to church life is remarkable. Few highlight Sunday as different from any other day in the rhythm of prayer—Hallow is a notable exception. As with many parachurch organizations, those who work on these tools may go into the work intending to support communal life, but there is nothing in their models that would keep the tools from becoming replacements for the embodied presence of a community. Family relationships are mentioned, but community relations—especially the kind of challenging community we might find in a church setting—are not very evident. Meditations on Abide make reference to "fellow believers," but the word *church* is notably absent outside of direct scriptural references.

Intercessory Prayer: CaringBridge and the Virtual Church of God

Prayer for others is not only accomplished in liturgical settings; perhaps the most salutary internet tool for sharing intercessory prayer has been CaringBridge, which now offers a mobile version that easily allows someone's page to find updates and offer encouragement right from your phone. For pastors, this tool has greatly reduced some of the privacy concerns that often arise when a member of a congregation is ill. When someone is suffering from an acute or chronic illness, it can be difficult to judge how much should be public knowledge about their condition;

at the same time, one hates for every pastoral conversation to be bookended by what feels like a HIPPA disclosure. With CaringBridge, families and loved ones can broadcast whatever updates they wish, and congregational leaders can refer inquiring minds to the site. Especially in pandemic times, the gift of connection without contagion is an apt use of technology for people who simply cannot or should not gather with their congregation anymore.

Those who have employed CaringBridge to chronicle their own or a loved one's illness acknowledge that seeing the prayers of others written out in the semi-permanent ether can be both deeply comforting and at times unsettling. Much like the messiness of a "popcorn prayer" at church, we can be grateful for someone's prayers and yet a bit uncomfortable with the way they express those prayers. Perhaps the starkest example was a family awaiting an organ transplant who was told, "We know that God has [an organ] in mind for [this person]." Already acquainted with her own family's grief, this family member shuddered at the idea that God might choose one person to die so that her loved one could live. This same friend told me, "When we were in the most difficult days with our loved one, I stopped reading the content of people's posts. I simply read their names. Knowing *that* they were praying was the most important thing."

Of course, knowing that others are praying is precisely the benefit of communal prayer that liturgical assemblies and the liturgies of the hours provide. The mobile-technology culture promises to make it possible for us to engage with spiritual practices at any time and in any place, but asynchronous practice, even when you know who the other people practicing with you are, is qualitatively different from praying *at the same time.* Oliver Burkeman writes that "individual time sovereignty," so prized by our gig economy, has in fact made us less happy, because we have far fewer opportunities to walk, sing, relax, or eat with others *at the same time*. "On the one hand," Burkeman writes, "there's the profound sense of meaning that comes from being willing to fall in with the rhythms of the rest of the world: to be *free to* engage in all the worthwhile collaborative endeavors that require at least some sacrifice of your sole control of what you do and when."[7] Burkeman offers a secular rationale for what congregational leaders have known intuitively: it *does* make a difference whether you worship "on your own time" or pray on a schedule provided by a community. God may not care about our timing, but our fellow human beings most definitely do.

While our culture has focused on personal expression and choice, the tradition of the daily praying of the hours offers a communal alternative: praying the words of others, at times demanded by the liturgy, rather than following our own preference. The comfort in this is not necessarily that the words match our feelings in any moment, but the knowledge that we are part of a body that transcends time and space. When we pray *because* it is evening, or *because* it is Sunday, we do so because we know that others in our own community and across

[7] Oliver Burkeman, *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2021), chapter 12.

the world are doing the same thing. The synchronization itself has meaning, and experiencing it in an embodied assembly is even more powerful. As the great evening hymn proclaims:

> As to each continent and island
> The dawn leads on another day,
> The voice of prayer is never silent,
> Nor dies the strain of praise away.[8]

Adaptations

My casual survey of church members revealed a few surprising spiritual uses of their phones. As it is a device that is always on and always with them, many people are careful about their notification settings, not wanting every possible voice in that device to have the power to distract them in the midst of daily life. But they have employed the remaining functions for their own spiritual purposes instead, such as setting a reminder to pray for a friend at a particular time, or checking in a couple times a day on difficult emotions. Because these uses were *created* by them rather than simply allowed as the standard function of an app, they were greeted as the voices of their better selves, rather than as the nagging salespeople that apps sometimes seem to be.

What do we make, theologically, of a world where prayer—even explicitly Christian prayer—is lifted up as another measurable "life hack" that can improve your well-being? How do we speak of discernment while acknowledging the real benefits many find in these tools?

As our economy becomes more and more digitally driven, the commercial drivers of digital apps are more and more evident to users. Some apps, such as CaringBridge, remain nonprofit in nature, soliciting free-will contributions rather than charging fees. The most sophisticated apps charge a subscription fee for the full use of their features, and many will nudge you relentlessly to step up to their premium level if you are only using the basic features. Podcasts that are free usually have ads, often for products that bear no obvious connection to wellness or prayer. The broader the reach of the service, the more likely you will be required to pay for the experience. The financial necessities drive some users away, but others simply accept that this is the way the digital world works. Whatever community is being built within spiritual apps, it becomes increasingly

[8] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "The Day You Gave Us, Lord, Has Ended," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), #569.

obvious that the apps are no more immune from financial reality than your average brick-and-mortar church.

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In modern parlance, prayer or meditation is defined by openness, by turning off the judgmental functions of our brain in order to be receptive to the Spirit of God—or receptive to something, anyway. Rowan Williams, in his eminently accessible book on the heart of Christianity, suggests that prayer in Christian tradition actually precedes theology:

> All Christian reflection, all theology worth the name, began as people realized that because of Jesus Christ they could talk to God in a different way. It was the new experience of Christian prayer that got people thinking, "If Jesus somehow makes it possible for us to talk to God in a new way, then surely there are things we ought to be saying and believing about Jesus." And so the great exploratory business of theology begins to unfold.[9]

Williams later concludes: "So, for the Christian, to pray—before all else—is to *let Jesus' prayer happen in you*."[10] While Williams does not assert that *only* the Lord's Prayer accomplishes this in us, it is the model through which we allow Jesus's Abba to be our Abba as we pray. In this sense, prayer is really the place in which we become the "little Christs" that Christians hope to be. We might well ask, Is this tool inviting me into the prayer of Jesus, addressing God with the confidence and intimacy Jesus shared with his Abba?

For Lutherans, conversation about prayer disciplines can easily lead into the age-old debate about whether we are turning a salutary means of grace into law. Most prayer and meditation apps draw on the metrics-driven approach to changing behavior. The phone will track how often and how long you spend on the app, and those numbers are fed back to you as encouragement to continue. If you are not praying or reading the Bible as often as you intended, the app becomes a nag, an accusing voice reminding you that you are not doing what you want to do. Oh, wretched sinner that you are! The phone becomes another instrument of the law in your pocket. If this is the case, one needs to ask where the gospel is heard, and it might not be from the same voice and device. Perhaps the law of the phone might drive us *more* to the gospel-proclaiming, embodied community. Maybe.

Years ago, journalist Judith Martin, aka Miss Manners, noted that society tends to replicate the institutions and practices it previously threw off as restrictive and old-fashioned. Rare is the US-born young person who expects their

[9] Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), 61–62.

[10] Williams, 62.

elders to play a role in matchmaking, yet they will happily follow the advice of an algorithm developed by a stranger. Lenten fasting is often depicted as a relic of an old-fashioned body-hating spirituality, but the web is full of tools for intermittent fasting for health, or practicing a "dry January." Younger generations avoid the "intrusiveness" of a direct phone call, yet seldom question the way in which social media drive constant sharing of private moments. We have developed secular versions of most sacred practices, and "personalized" apps for most congregational practices.

An attitude of healthy curiosity seems to be the best approach for pastoral leaders in addressing this trend. The needs that digital tools promise to address are real, and the desire for more constant prayer life can hardly be criticized. Most people are quite aware of their own inconsistencies in practice and attitude. Even more so, they recognize the ways in which their personal data accuses them as much as it optimizes their lives. Why, we might jokingly ask, are we not irritated by four notifications a day from an app, but very irritated if the church emails more than once a week? How is it that we are nervous about strangers taking advantage of our young or elderly relatives on the internet, yet we seldom question the way our own personal information is being harvested and shared across platforms? How do for-profit models of app services differ from the financial models of a local church community? If "the robots" are so good at guessing our desires and intentions, what does that say about how we get deeper into relationship with flesh-and-blood people with whom we share physical space?

Especially as we adapt to the pandemic world, it is vital that the church not approach these questions from a place of scarcity. It might be that virtual was "better than nothing," during lockdown, but we should avoid the progression Sherry Turkle calls "from better than nothing to better than anything." She explains:

> We begin with resignation, with the idea that machine companionship [or virtual prayer] is better than nothing. . . . From there, we exalt the possibilities of what simulation can offer until, in time, we start to talk as though what we will get from the artificial may actually be better than what life could ever provide.[11]

The convenience and relative lack of friction in a virtual prayer experience is undeniable, but as Christians we have good reason to ask whether Jesus meant "frictionless" when he spoke of abundant life.

All of these questions, however, are best asked in conversation, and it is real-time, synchronous conversation that takes the most effort and intention in these ongoing-pandemic times. Such conversation can seem risky to people who have gotten used to isolation or have been cocooned in their internet-enabled echo chambers of like-minded people. But talking with real embodied people with whom we share a physical community can also help us create new narratives, not

[11] Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 356.

driven by the harvested data of our apps or the crisis-driven urgency of the news, but shaped by the story of God-made-flesh coming among us.

Finally, it is the sense of *shared* faith that Jesus's prayer leads us to. Prayer addressed to *our* Father demands we know we are part of a whole; prayer that *we* be saved from trial and delivered from evil demands that we ponder how many others God wants to save and deliver. The voice of prayer is never silent, but my faith in its constancy is strengthened most when I can hear it, around me, out loud. ⊕

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