

**DIGITAL LITURGIES: REDISCOVERING CHRISTIAN WISDOM IN AN ONLINE AGE**, by Samuel D. James. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023. 191 pages. \$16.99 paperback.

Often, when Christians think about the impact of the internet, social media, or digital technology, they are concerned about the content found on them or the time spent on them. These are essential concerns, yet they ignore the more fundamental question that many, including Christians, have largely forgotten to ask: in what sense is the internet, social media, or digital technology shaping, molding, and forming us as a people and society into particular ways of thinking, feeling, acting, and believing? Samuel D. James, the associate acquisitions editor at Crossway, takes up this question in an accessible and winsome way in his book *Digital Liturgies: Rediscovering Christian Wisdom in an Online Age*.

Drawing on the work of James K.A. Smith in his Cultural Liturgies trilogy, James argues that the social internet is a profoundly spiritual and liturgical environment that trains our hearts to desire a particular vision of the good life (10). James argues that “*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*” is an epistemological environment, a spiritual and intellectual habitat, the superstructure of nearly every experience, and even a place of worship habituating users into vice (12, *italics original*).

James proposes that recovering the Biblical concept of wisdom, defined as living with, not against, the grain of reality that God has created, with its practical, ethical, and theological dimensions as embodied creatures of God, is vital to reforming God’s people to “see how flimsy, how untrue, how unsatisfying the spirit of the web age really is” (12).

James arranges his book into two parts. In the first part, entitled “Truth and Technology,” James lays out the theoretical foundation the second part assumes. In Chapter 1, James contrasts the embodied wisdom and “givenness” of the Creator’s design and desire for his creatures with the disembodied and dislocating habitat of the internet and social media (26-32). In Chapter 2, James draws on cultural theorist Marshall McLuhan’s famous axiom, “the medium is the message,” to make the case that digital technology is not a neutral tool but is explicitly reshaping us and our understanding of the world (35). We can observe this phenomenon by looking at the invention of the airplane. The invention of the airplane shrunk our conception of the world, and the fact that airliners can travel such far distances in hours has significantly shaped how we think about

ourselves and the world we are embedded in. In Chapter 3, James concretely explores how the internet, digital technology, and social media are rewiring neurological connections in our brains, shortening our attention spans, and retraining us as readers through the use of hyperlinks to encounter more and more content but to exert far less cognitive power evaluating or devoting sustained attention to what we have read.

In the second part of the work, entitled “Digital Liturgies,” James explores five values that permeate our individual lives and shape and form our collective life together in a digital age. He calls these values “digital liturgies,” which consist of habits, beliefs, and narratives that shape us to desire a particular vision of the good life. The five chapters proceed similarly. He first describes a problematic communal or individual character trait that digital media is forming us to desire and embody, like outrage or consumption. He then contrasts that character trait with an alternative character trait found in the embodied wisdom of the Scriptures.

The five digital liturgies James describes are “authenticity,” “outrage,” “shame,” “consumption,” and “meaninglessness.” These five chapters are the best part of James’ work. He persuasively describes how these liturgies are malforming us individually and as a people. For the sake of space, I’ll briefly describe one of these liturgies: “Authenticity.”

The internet helps reinforce a culture of authenticity for the expressive individual where the greatest value is being true to oneself and that actualizing one’s desires, perspectives, and feelings is the epitome of the good life. Social media and the internet are focused on the individual user and her story. On the internet, we can choose who we want to be, how we want to present ourselves and our views, and who we want to interact with. Online individuality has created an environment where public debate and difficult conversation involving conflict and conciliation is seldom found. Moreover, it significantly impacts our ability to retain the good of politics or work together for goods held in common in contemporary public life. As an alternative, James argues that Christian wisdom helps us understand that the final authority in life is the God who calls people to follow him as a disciple. As disciples, we are called to serve our neighbors in a particular place in time by dying to ourselves and living with and for those around us in love according to God’s will.

James’ work is an accessible introduction to the role that technology has upon us as a people and a culture. James’ work helps make us aware of the digital waters we swim in and how the waters drive and toss us more than we realize (James 1:6). There is no going back to a pre-online world. In fact, the rise of the “metaverse,” transhumanism, and AI makes it clear

that we are going even farther into the labyrinth of human and technological integration (42–43). James reminds us that monitoring the content we view or putting the phone in the drawer on Saturday morning is not a sufficient response to maintain humanity in our digital age. Instead, God's people must attend to practices, people, and the promises of God as they delight in the contingencies and difficulties of creaturely life.

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