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Digital Liturgies (with Samuel James)

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Alastair Roberts

'Digital Liturgies: Rediscovering Christian Wisdom in an Online Age' (<https://amzn.to/3LNn8Q3>) is a new book by Samuel James. Within it he explores some of the ways that the Internet, especially social media, is shaping us and what we might do about this. He joins me to discuss it.

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Transcript

Hello and welcome. I'm joined today by the author of a new book, Digital Liturgies, Rediscovering Christian Wisdom in an Online Age. Samuel James, it's wonderful to have you with me.

Thank you, Alastair. It's so good to be here. So Digital Liturgies, this book that you've written, is a book by you as an evangelical, principally for evangelicals, about how the internet shapes us.

And here's just one passage from the book. When I tell someone that it's about the spiritually formative power of the web, this, your book, I can almost always see a mixture of understanding and confusion in their faces. The confusion may owe to the fact that many evangelicals do not intuitively attribute spiritual significance to things.

Objects, places, and other material realities don't seem morally or spiritually important.

We tend to emphasize the limits of material things, what they are not. The church is not a building.

God's Word is not a leather-bound book, but the canonical words within that book. Our attention is fixed on the immaterial, often to the exclusion of the material. Evangelicals have tended to historically adopt new technologies very optimistically and to focus very much upon ideas and content as the thing to be wary about.

And certainly in our approaches to new digital technology, that's, for the most part, been the posture that's been taken. Where do you differ from such approaches? And can you give some reasons why, particularly on the basis of evangelicals' own convictions and commitments, why we should share some of your concerns about online media? Yeah. So I think in my experience growing up as an evangelical, I think it's important to remember that all of us just have one set of experiences and we can't speak for absolutely everyone in the broad tradition.

But I do think in the evangelicalism into which I was born and which I've remained now in my adult life, there has been such an emphasis on the neutrality of material things. So something is just how you use it. It's not inherently good.

It's not inherently bad. It's simply responsive to the wishes of the person using it. And whether this was talking about certain medical technologies or television, the logic of that approach definitely, I think, became the dominant way of thinking of the internet among the church culture in which I was raised and myself.

We just kind of took it for granted that there was nothing about the internet itself that had a particular effect on us. It was simply a tool like a screwdriver or a drill. Depending on what you want to use it for, it could be good or bad.

And I think the problem with that approach is twofold. One, and primarily, and I spent a good amount of time in the book addressing this, that's really not the way the Bible talks about the material world. The way the Bible talks about our relationship to creation, our relationship to the things that we construct is more complicated than that.

It seems to me in Scripture that there is a pretty profound pattern of certain things having a spiritual effect on us. And there's lots of positive examples of this. For example, the people of Israel, they're not simply told the law once a week or a few times a year.

They're given festivals. They're given assemblies. They're given events.

They're given certain material things, certain types of clothing, certain types of things that they use to kind of remind themselves of who Yahweh is and who they are as people. And when you read things like the construction of the temple, there's such an attention to detail in those texts that it really raises the question, wait a minute, God sees value, spiritual value, in the way things are designed, in their particular nature, in

their given nature. And so what I am kind of looking to do in the book is to kind of interrogate whether, as modern evangelicals, do we have a category for that in our own spiritual lives? Do we have a category for the idea that actually something material can have an effect on us beyond the things that we choose to use it for? And the first person that I read, really the most influential person that I read on this issue when it comes to the internet was Nicholas Carr in his book, *The Shallows, What the Internet's Doing to Our Brains*.

Here was a person who was not writing from a spiritual perspective, who wasn't writing from a biblical perspective, but in 2010 he published this book and the results of his research showed very compellingly that the human brain responds to the technology of the internet in a very different way than it responds to analog technology like a book or a magazine or a piece of printed material. And his point in the book is that the internet creates certain kinds of readers simply by virtue of exposing human cognition to this medium. So good, bad, ugly, that's simply what happens, that we have empirical research to testify that internet thinkers are thinking differently than offline thinkers.

And when I finished that book, I asked myself, okay, what's the theological implications of this? Because so many of my, well, first of all, me and so many of my peers, we're talking about scripture and theology online all the time. We're talking about contentious issues. We're kind of talking about what the gospel really means.

If this medium is actually potentially shaping how we even comprehend these theological questions, well, that in itself becomes an issue of Christian discipleship. It becomes an issue of spiritual formation to understand how is this medium actually affecting the way we think and the way we talk about this. So really, the book is an answer to that question of what is the theological significance of the internet as a medium? And I developed that more later in the book, but the book just kind of starts out by reflecting that, it is possible and it is in fact very biblical to think of material things as having these kind of positive, not necessarily positive in a morally good way, but active effects on us.

The title of the book is *Digital Liturgies*. What do you mean by liturgies? And can you give some examples of what you have in mind by that? Yeah, so in the book, I kind of define liturgies the way that James K. Smith defined it in his *Cultural Liturgies Trilogy*, and then also more popularly in the book, *You Are What You Love*, which is a wonderful book that I highly recommend. And what Professor Smith does in this work is he understands a cultural liturgy as kind of this competing set of spiritual practices that present a narrative of the good life to a person.

So whereas a church liturgy is this kind of set of practices, so public reading of scripture, the preaching of the gospel, confession of sin, the announcement of pardon, the fellowship, there's a set of practices that actually drive the plausibility of the gospel deeper into our hearts. The example I like to use with people is that if you showed up to

church and all church consisted of was somebody standing at the door saying, the gospel is true, now you may go home. What that person says is factually accurate.

What that person says is a true reminder, but that does not create the same heart conditions as the actual liturgy of the church. Because when you put the liturgy of the church in its context, you come away from that context feeling that the gospel is true in your affections in a way that's simply intellectually being told that it's true doesn't quite get to. And that's what a cultural liturgy is.

And so the idea of a digital liturgy is to basically conceptualize the internet the same way that Professor Smith conceptualized the shopping mall. It's his famous example that the shopping mall is a competing cultural liturgy because it has advertising and music and a certain set of behaviors and narratives that all kind of climax in the idea that you will be happier if you buy this product. Well, I think the internet, particularly the social internet, what we call social media and things like that, is in fact similar to the mall in that it's a habitat with a certain kind of plausibility structure attached to it that the more we are immersed in this digital habitat, the more certain behaviors and certain values feel plausible to our consciences in a way that they might not otherwise.

And so that's kind of the way I put together Nicholas Carr's observations about the cognitive effects of the internet with James K. Smith's observations about the affectional effects of cultural liturgies. So if you understand these kind of two concepts together, we come away with the idea of a digital liturgy that is being promulgated by the spaces that we're inhabiting online. So your book particularly focuses upon the social web and things perhaps like Facebook and Twitter to a lesser extent, Instagram or YouTube.

And there's a lot that could go on under the heading of digital media. We might think also of things like Google or Amazon, online gaming, things like that. Can you speak to some of the maybe the family resemblances between these different forms of online, digital, social media, and also speak to some of the differences and distinctives that really set some up against the others and maybe give them a peculiar character? Yeah, that's a good question.

So I think all of them have one thing in common, one important thing in common, and that is that they are disembodied spaces. So they are places that you can go to interact with where you actually don't need to be in a particular place. You don't actually have to exist in this space as an embodied person.

So you simply log on, whether that's Google, Amazon, Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, whatever. No matter the space, you are a member of this commons. You're a member of this environment simply by virtue of your kind of mental participation and your expression of yourself through digital characters, posts, likes, whatever.

So that's one massive thing that all these platforms have in common. I do think that

there's connecting tissue between certain platforms in a way that can be harder to see on the surface. So one of the things I talk about in the book is how the internet has really created a new way of kind of litigating truth claims, the customer review.

So the customer review has become essentially the primary thing that people of my generation and particularly younger consult when they go to evaluate whether they want to buy a product. I mean, it's almost as instant as finding the product itself. You see a page for it, and then you see the customer review of whether that's a product or a restaurant or even a doctor's office, something like that.

You want to see what other people are saying about it. And in the past, in order to know more about this particular product, you had to know somebody personally who had actually experienced it, purchased it, been to that office or been to that restaurant, and you had to communicate with them in a personal way. Well, now, because of the customer review, there's almost a social currency of something is desirable, something is valuable, to the extent that that is reflected on a positive customer review.

And if you see the negative customer review, it can turn you away. And that right there is a really profound shift in how we understand how to litigate truth claims. So, for example, if a company has negative customer reviews that maybe fabricates some details about an experience, there are some expensive legal recourses that they could go for.

But for the average person seeing that, that doesn't exist. Like they have no way to tell whether these reviews are truthful or untruthful. It's simply the currency that they're reading.

And I think that's true of social media as well. People talk about the death of expertise. They talk about the flattening of knowledge, the erosion of institutional trust and credentialism.

And these are complex topics that require care. It's not simply a monolithically bad thing that experts are held more accountable by online swarms. But I do think that's a profound shift in the way we evaluate claims.

It's a profound shift in how we make decisions and how we make choices in our personal lives and the things that we consult. So, I think that's one thing that, whether it's online shopping or YouTube, I think that's one thing that they have in common. And I think one difference though is that particularly with social media, because social media is a very personal thing compared to online shopping or compared to streaming Netflix or something like that, there are elements of commonalities between those platforms.

But when you're talking about social media, you're talking about really relationships. You're talking about developing a sense of who you are in a social context versus who

this person is. So, whether it's Instagram and you're posting pictures of your family or pictures of your vacation, well, that's something very personal.

That's something that 20 years ago, 30 years ago, you would have only shared with people who could go into your house and see your scrapbook or your photo album or your family photos. Well, now that's a part of your public currency. It's a part of your public identity, who you are.

So, these are very personal technologies. And I think the personal nature of social media is what kind of takes these spiritual and emotional effects and really amplifies them. It's one thing to talk about the disembodiment of the web or the decline of trusted institutions or the death of expertise.

It's one thing to talk about that in the abstract. But all of these effects are weaponized by the fact that we feel like we are existing with each other online. That this is a real community, that this is a commons, that who I am is out there in some way on social media.

So, I think that's one thing that kind of separates maybe your classical, an odd word to use, but more kind of typical social media platforms from other web technologies that may kind of have the same disembodied ethic, but are not quite as personal in the way they apply it. So, perhaps one of the strongest and most arresting statements in your book is found very early on. You say, 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. Can you speak a bit to that? It seems quite a strong claim to make and one that many people, I think, would instinctively resist. What is it about the internet that makes it pornography-like? Yeah.

So, I would say that the best place to start with understanding this is by defining pornography as specifically as possible and as fundamentally as possible. Pornography is taking something that can only really be an experience. It's taking something that is an experience shared between subjects and it's turning it into a consumable commodity for a third party.

So, you take the experience of sexual union and this is meant to be something that is entered into by two people, by a man and a woman, and you're creating this three-dimensional element to this that doesn't exist to it inherently. You're putting the two subjects in a box, so to speak, in a camera, and you're creating a spectacle out of this experience. And that spectacle is designed to be consumed, to be watched and then discarded and move on to the next thing.

So, if we understand pornography in that way, then I think it's not hard to conceptualize how the internet itself tends to have that effect on everything. It's not simply sex that is an experience that tends to become modified. It's everything.

It's friendship. It's beauty. It's food.

So, I give a couple examples in the book where I talk about on YouTube, there are genres of YouTube videos that get several hundred thousand views. And you can actually have people in the YouTube video, the content creator, kind of simulate friendship. So, they'll talk to the camera as if you're right there, or they'll watch a video and you'll kind of be watching them watch the video and it'll kind of give the allure of friendship.

It'll be this almost role play where this person on the YouTube screen is pretending to next to you, is pretending to be somebody who knows you. And the idea is that you can capture the essence of friendship in a YouTube video. And the person streaming a YouTube video can watch someone simulate friendship and that can be a pleasurable, consumable product for them.

Well, that's exactly what happens when someone watches pornography. That's exactly what it is. And whether it's something like YouTube and kind of people role playing friendship, or whether it's even the way we've attached the word porn to pictures of food and pictures of nature.

Now you have things like earth porn or things like food porn. And what that is, is that it's pictures of beautiful dishes or beautiful landscapes that are just promulgated to a feed. And the point of the feed is to get as much of these posts out there so that instead of tasting the food or instead of actually going to the locale, you will consume it online.

And it'll be like, oh, that was fun. That's a consumable thing. But places don't exist to be looked at via a screen and food doesn't exist to be stared at through a screen.

Food exists to be eaten and places exist to be explored. And so there's a sense in which even with something like food and geography, the internet creates this third hand experience that feels normal. It feels normal to be experiencing these things, or I shouldn't say experiencing, to be consuming what are properly experiences.

So that's kind of what I mean when I say that the internet has a pornographic shape to it. It's simply that the internet is a novelty machine that can crank out content without ceasing. And this content is consumed in lieu of kind of these embodied experiences.

Seems to me also the relationship that we have with the screen or the presence of the internet more generally in our lives has changed very significantly over the last few decades. So you mentioned in the book that it used to be far more opt in and now it's opt out, that it's very difficult not to be someone who's online. If you want to even do basic purchases, if you want to be involved in certain aspects of society, even buying a ticket

for something, you'll find you need to be online and you need to sometimes have a profile on a particular social media site.

You might need to give certain details of your online existence, whatever it is. There is a sense in which it's harder to opt out because a lot of the things that we formerly have enjoyed offline are now integrated to our online experience and can't be enjoyed without that. And it seems to me beyond that, there's a sense with the rise of our digital mobile devices, there's a sense of the ubiquity of the internet in a way that there wasn't.

It follows us wherever we go, it's in our pockets and there's no sense of being offline in the same way, except when we lose connection for a significant period of time and it can be a source of anxiety for people that they don't know what's going on, they feel disconnected and detached. And then there's also a movement from a more supplemental aspect of our existence, social and otherwise, where you'd go online, the idea of going online doesn't really have the same significance now when we're always online, but you'd go online and you'd engage in some sort of things in conversation with others. It was detached from regular life and then you'd come offline and now increasingly it's a simulation in which so much of our lives exist.

And then I think on the pornography aspect, the relationship to the screen is also important. There's a difference between consuming flat images to consuming videos to consuming something that's no longer just consuming a spectacle that's taking place outside of you, but becoming someone who's implicated in that spectacle. And I think increasingly there is a shift in the way that we're relating to our screens.

So now we have augmented reality, the reality of, or the digital reality increasingly is imposed upon our outside reality, or we have virtual reality, a sort of supplement or substitute for reality, or we can have artificially generated reality. And in each of these ways, that it's tailored to our desires and fantasies. And it's a realm in which we increasingly find ourselves detached from and also a realm which is an increasing competition with the concrete world of reality.

It seems to me that it's very hard to experience reality in a pure form now, given the way that the internet and online reality increasingly shapes our ways of engaging in, our sense of being connected within, our perspectives upon the world that surrounds us. What does it mean to relate to something that is increasingly becoming an analogy that you use very early in the book, like the water that we swim in? Is it possible to get outside of that water to halt its progress within our lives? How do we stand outside of that and get some sort of imaginative purchase upon what it is even? Yeah, that's a great question. So I do think it's possible.

And I think it's possible partially because, you know, theologically, I'm convinced that the Lord has put our generation in this particular era for a reason, and that none of these technological innovations are beyond, you know, his sanctifying power. So, you know,

when Jesus, I mean, the first century Roman world was pretty rough too on Christians. And so when Jesus prays for his disciples, he says, I do not pray that you will take them out of the world, but you will protect them from the evil one.

So that's our fear. So foundationally, yes, it is possible to resist these effects. I think at a practical level, though, we have to be pretty realistic about what it might take and the very countercultural ways that we might have to resist this.

I don't think, I don't even know if it's possible to truly feel how revolutionary the smartphone is anymore. Like we've just lost a sense because it's so assumed and it's everywhere. We've lost a sense of just being gobsmacked at how in less than 20 years, our relationship to the outside world, our relationship to the web, our relationship to each other's communications has been completely redefined.

Like it is a complete redefinition of our existence really as modern people that the notification in our pocket so that we can be out doing something with someone at a restaurant or at a party, or maybe on a remote island anywhere. And that our work, our leisure, our hobbies can actually like go off in our pocket. And that this can actually create this sense of dislocation that I talk about later on in the book.

I'm here, I'm with this person, but I can have in the palm of my hand a completely parallel experience that is millions of miles from here. That is a revolutionary thing in the development of societies, in the development of technology. And not for any small reason have sociologists like Gene Twenge and Brad Wilcox and Jonathan Haidt have shown, I think, very compelling evidence that the rise of the smartphone and the smartphone becomes, I think, ascendant in American culture around 2012.

The iPhone releases in 2008. It takes a few years to kind of disseminate in culture. But by 2012, your typical kind of older teenager has a smartphone.

And to look at the research showing reports of anxiety, depression, loneliness, difficulty focusing, severe mental struggles, to look at the reported incidence of those things, and the share of the market share for the smartphone is absolutely astonishing. I mean, the two charts essentially overlap. And I think we have to take that seriously, that the smartphone especially is a very powerful, very formative device.

So in terms of how we kind of step outside of that, I think, honestly, Alistair, one of the things that people, I think, are going to do is they're going to reevaluate their relationship with their phones first. They're going to reevaluate their relationship to mobile technology. And I actually think this has potential to become a public policy issue.

It would not surprise me at all, given some of the current conversations that Josh Hawley and others in Congress have had on these issues, that there was an attempt to kind of restrict the sale of these devices, even to parents of younger children. We've definitely

seen a movement against these in school. So just this week, I was seeing that, I think it was maybe even in the UK, that there's been a lot of momentum for banning these from school entirely.

That, I think, is a movement that's going to simply ascend in strength as people realize just how disruptive these technologies are to everyday living. So that's maybe one way, you know, it's one thing for the web to be opt-in and for the web to kind of be this thing that we can go to. It's a completely different thing for it to be ambient, for it to be in our pockets, for it to be everywhere we go.

So to step outside of that reality, I think, requires to reevaluate technology that lets us go everywhere with it. But then also, I think we have to kind of listen to people like Andy Crouch, who are so helpful in thinking about how is your life arranged? So is your life arranged in such a way so that these digital technologies are kind of the center of your home life? And this is convicting to me as a parent of young children. It's convicting to me at personal and individual level.

Like, is the computer, is the smartphone, is the smart television, are these structured, are these embedded into our ordinary lives in such a way that if someone were to come into our home for a couple days, like, they would be able to tell, like, this is what unifies our family. This is what our family has in common. This is what we do.

This is what our household does. And so I think part of stepping outside of that, of the digital liturgies, of stepping outside of this virtual reality, is to take a hard look at how deeply embedded these are into our everyday life. You know, is there, I mean, the first thing you do in the morning for a lot of people, you reach over to your phone that's going off with the alarm, you turn off the alarm and you scroll.

I mean, that's so fundamental to so many of our days. And that right there is an example of kind of how this immersiveness into the digital habitat begins first thing and is so assumed. So I think it really starts there with reevaluating kind of the structure of our lives to say, hey, are we valuing efficiency and convenience above everything else? And is that giving a foothold to virtual unreality to kind of set the agenda for how we live our lives? You mentioned the experience of raising kids and thinking about the way that your phone and other devices play a role within your family life.

It seems to me that for many people, that moment when they start to reassess their own practice is often when they're actually having to form others. And that experience of raising children will be for many that moment when they start to reconsider their own relationship with their phones and their computers and other devices. It seems to me also that for our generation, we have had some sort of experience prior to the Internet, certainly in its current iterations.

And so we are not digital natives in quite the same way as our children and other

generations that are rising up at the moment are. They've experienced only life within the Internet age. Many of them have only been within the age of social media after the 2005 or something like that.

Their experience of social media will be a lot less tempered by the ability to imaginatively stand outside of it and see it with the eyes of those who have experienced a different sort of world. Do you feel that there's a narrowing window of opportunity to address some of these questions of formation, to establish structures of resistance? Do you think that there's a generation arising that does not know the age before the Internet, as it were, and is no longer going to be able to develop the sort of resistance that maybe our generation has the ability to? Yes, I absolutely do fear that. And I fear perhaps even more that there's going to be a very significant divide between the families and the individuals who have the resources to practically resist these ways of immersion into digital technology and the families and individuals that, for whatever reason, are simply going along with it partially because they don't have the resources ready to take up an alternative.

And so I think one thing that is positive on that front is public schools kind of re-evaluating these technologies is going to be very important because there's for millions of people, particularly in the United States and England and other places, they're going to be downstream from what the public schools are doing. So if the public schools are giving students an iPad and sending them home and saying this is yours to use in your room, that's just what they're going to do. They're going to take that for granted.

And so I think it matters tremendously what public education is saying about these technologies. And that's why it's a positive thing that there does seem to be some kind of re-evaluation. I do fear that for Gen Z in particular, or I should say for the, I'm blanking on the generation that comes after Gen Z, Jean Twenge names them, but I can't remember what she calls them.

So the generation that comes after Gen Z, I fear that because there's not going to be a category for doing school, for doing research, for relating to friends, there's not going to be any kind of existential category for that pre-internet in the way that there was for me and even for parts of Gen Z probably. For them, it's just not going to be a category that exists. And particularly with the rise of generative AI and things like chat GPT and tools that are likely to be used in an academic context, first, the fear there is that this is all going to appear just so intuitive and so fundamental to what it means to be a modern person that there's not going to be any kind of critical evaluation of, hey, what's the alternative here? Is it normal? Is it good that a machine has written all this music that we enjoy and that we're not listening to people who write music anymore? Is it okay that awards are going to AI systems that create art rather than human artists? And the more this becomes just fundamental and assumed, the more it's going to be almost impossible for most people to formulate a reason for this.

And even I worry a little bit, this is slightly off topic, but I worry a little bit about pastors who are being approached by people who are not really wanting to be a part of the Sunday service and they would rather watch the live stream. And when the person asks the pastor, pastor, I don't understand, what's the difference? If I can get the singing and the sermon from the live stream, why should I even show up? I'm burdened for pastors who aren't able to answer that question, who will maybe kind of try to say, well, you know, equestria means assembly. And that's just, this is not going to resonate at the same level.

And so there's a lot of, I think a lot of pastors who I would really love to see understand not just the meaning of church, but the meaning of technology, the meaning of these digital technologies, and to be able to point their people to the reality that, hey, look, these technologies mediate the message in such a way so that you're not actually participating in the life of the church in the way you think you might be by not being here. So I think that's, those are the thoughts that are foremost on my mind now. It's a hope in the, you know, the resiliency of the word and the power of the Lord to sanctify his people.

But it's also a deep concern about as these technologies just become automatically intuitive for a lot of people, can we as Christians formulate the reasons that are necessary for people to take those active steps of resistance, many of which are going to be very counterintuitive and inconvenient. The example you give of a pastor who has to persuade congregants to attend an actual service makes me think of the way that the internet does not have a Sabbath. There's no natural passage of time online.

It's a global technology. We're all on there together, and there are many people who are active well past normal waking hours. And so there's no sense of the gradual rhythm of a day, let alone the rhythm of a week with the final, with a movement towards rest and a movement from rest that gives you an orientation to some transcendent reality that's beyond the stifling immediacy and imminence of the internet as a realm.

Can you speak to some of the practices that help us to maybe redeem the time, not in the sense of just filling our time with activity, but with orienting our time towards something meaningful and true and good? Mm-hmm. Yeah, as you were saying that, I was thinking of just the way that we've read articles now in places like The Atlantic and The New York Times about the decline of time off and the decline of vacation and why people are not using their vacation days and things like that. And when you interview modern people, like, why aren't you taking your vacation days? And they say, well, I can go on vacation, but I'm just going to get 100 emails while I'm on vacation and I'm going to end up working.

That is tragic. That is just a, again, we're losing our ability to be shocked by that, which is truly shocking because we assume this hyper-connectivity that simply links us. And I

think you're exactly right.

And it's extremely insightful point that the ethos of the internet is endless connectivity, but also endless work. We're constantly formulating our identity. We're constantly trying to get our opinion out there.

We're trying to build our brand. We're trying to be more efficient or more productive. And that's exactly what internet culture really is.

So in terms of actual practices and redeeming our time, I think one thing that can really help, particularly churches and Christians seek resistance in this age is just reaching out to one another and to say, Hey, like, you know, I know I could send you an Instagram DM right now. I know I could text you. I'm going to call you.

And instead of just like texting each other through the week, Hey, let's get coffee. Let's sit down for an hour. I think particularly post COVID, I think going into COVID, I was optimistic that this would make a lot of people so sick of being alone that they would just kind of throw off these technologies.

I actually don't think that happened. I think what instead happened was for a lot of people, the social awkwardness of just being with another person was intensified. And so there's a sense of fear and a sense of anxiety.

I just know so many people who will text me very personal things, very things that they're struggling with, things that they need prayer for, and will be very open up in text. And when I see these person in church or in a social setting, it's like those conversations never happened. It's a completely different relational dynamic there.

So I think Christians can redeem their time by filling their time with people, with other people. And this sounds cliché, and it sounds like, duh, of course you do that. But we don't do it.

We know we're supposed to, and we nod our head and we say, yeah, I should reach out more. But everything in our kind of modern culture says, hey, protect your time, sit at your desk, eat your lunch at your desk, be more efficient so you can go home 30 minutes early and watch Netflix all the sooner. It takes actual resistance.

It takes actual fight to do these types of things. But I think one of the points I make late in the book is that the kind of despair-fueled, addictive reaction that many people have through the internet is often the result of just isolation, of just not feeling a significance to their daily lives, not feeling like anyone knows them. And so what they do is they scroll.

Many of us just scroll to kind of numb the anxiety and the pain of not really having anything in our life that's giving us meaning and joy and energy. And I think that this is

going to be a powerful, this is going to be in a separate podcast, but I think in terms of mental health, the conversation around mental health today is often concentrated around, are you surrounding yourself with positive people who kind of affirm you when it should probably be more about, are you surrounding yourself with people at all? Are you, is your concept of self-care so digital that you're actually kind of driving deeper into the very despair that you're trying to escape? So I think reaching out for one another is kind of the place to start and also to build rhythms and to be okay with missing things. If I'm not logged on, gosh, I might miss somebody, somebody might compliment me or somebody might actually send me an important message or something like that.

I think being okay to not occupy multiple spaces at the same time and say, look, I'm here, I'm with my spouse, I'm with my friend, we are here and I'm okay to not get the dopamine hit from the notification. I think just that recovery of a sense of gratitude to be wherever you are, to be an embodied person in a particular place and to not feel like you need kind of that novelty and that new hit of discovering what else is out there to function. So maybe two kind of broad answers to that question, to how we can start to actively redeem our time.

One term that you use on several occasions within the book that is getting at something really crucial is the idea of social media, particularly as an epistemological environment, something that shapes the way that we think. And you talk about the way that technologies that have to do with the word, with speech, with writing and communication are particularly powerful in reshaping human beings and how we think because we are speaking beings and as a result, social media and the internet being technologies that have to do a lot with speech and the manner in which we communicate have a great potential to change the way that we think, the manner in which we coordinate in our thinking and the patterns and habits of thought that tend to dominate. Can you speak a bit more about that and maybe some of the things that people should, specific things that people need to be aware of in how the internet might be shaping them as an epistemological environment? Yes, so Nicholas Carr is the one who kind of for me introduced the concept of an intellectual technology.

So an intellectual technology is a technology that directly impacts language, kind of thought patterns, as opposed to, you know, a screwdriver or wrench. The internet actually talks to you. So the internet actually has this kind of output, this language output, and in its language output, it supplies you with new language.

It kind of interacts with you at a human cognitive level that is different from, you know, just kind of hand tools, that type of technology, which are a type of technology but a much different one. So I think the primary example that I kind of weigh in on with the book, or I put weight on in the book, is disembodiment. So the idea that in the internet space, talking about gender issues, talking about sexual issues, whether you're talking about gender roles in the church, or talking about gender identity, transgenders in the

larger culture, there's often a massive kind of plausibility problem with talking about that online.

And the reason is that everyone in an online space exists as a mental projection. So when I'm talking to three people on Twitter about gender roles in the church, and why I believe that only men should be ordained elders, it's not simply an issue of making the right argument from the right text of scripture. There's an intrinsic plausibility problem with making that position in an online space where we're not actually relating to each other as men and women.

We're relating to each other as avatars with usernames. And some of those avatars may have feminine sounding names, and some of those usernames might have feminine sounding names. Some might have masculine sounding names.

Some might have feminine looking avatars. Some might have masculine looking avatars. But there's a radical sense of disembodiment when we meet online.

And I think that right there is a plausibility structure. And when we think about the rise of transgender ideology, and how the notion that a person could actually be trapped in the wrong body, could have one set of sexual anatomy, but identify as a completely different gender, we have to take seriously the possibility that the internet has mediated our experience of the world to such a degree that gender itself no longer feels germane to what it means to be a person. We've become so accustomed to learning, to communicating, to relating, to living in a disembodied space like the internet, that we no longer feel the reality of our bodies.

We simply don't feel like embodied individuals anymore. So that's a really profound way that I think the internet can operate as an epistemological habitat, even when it's not actively giving us arguments and particular ideas in an explicit way. But simply by virtue of what it is, it's pushing our intuitions in a certain direction.

Beyond that, I'd also say that things like transgenderism are impacted by the fact that the internet is huge. The internet is the city multiplied by a million. The city was the internet before the internet.

It was the place where you could go if you had a niche identity and connect with other people who shared that. The internet is that on a much grander scale, and enables you to connect with people who have very niche understandings of the world. And for many of us, it's been a form of being able to move into ever more elaborate understandings of particular theologies, ways of viewing the world.

For others, it's been a means by which you can get into ever more bespoke forms of identity, and not have the normal processes of a smaller society that would tend to pull you back towards something more normal. And without those processes of an ordinary

society, the internet is really a great location for radicalizing people, for increasing movements into unhealthy or extreme identities of all types. And beyond just the process that I've just described, the disembodied aspect, there's also the way in which, as it goes through different phases, the internet privileges certain sorts of social strategies.

And so increasingly, the internet ceased with the rise of social media to be a context of detached, impersonal argument, which could be very combative and privileging of a certain sort of male mode of discourse, to one that was a lot more about approval and inclusion and social values, which are more typically female. And so the sorts of ideologies that thrive within those different environments are very different. And it seems to me that as these sorts of things develop, we are being brought into novel and very weird social conditions that would not usually arise within human society.

But now we're being placed into them on a society-wide, international scale. And so the question of how to adapt to these seems to break down the processes of wisdom that are usually related to very fairly stable forms of life and practice. And so I'd be curious to hear your thoughts on how the internet, as a context that collapses all these contexts together, as a context that's constantly and very rapidly evolving, can be a context within which wisdom can have a place.

Wisdom which tends to require an older generation that has understood and wisely related to a fairly stable environment, passing on a way of life to those after them. How can that operate in the context of the internet? Or wisdom as a form of speech that is addressing things in their appropriate contexts, a word in season, and when you're having to be all things to all men simultaneously or speak to all these different contexts, it seems that wisdom just does not have a home in such a world. How can we be wise people and continue traditions of wisdom in a realm that seems to be inherently hostile to wisdom? That's a very good question.

And as you were talking about the more wild and woolly borders of the internet, the point emerges that culture has always had a fringe. There's always been a fringe in society. The difference now is that the borders around the fringe have become much more porous.

So it's much easier for the fringe to move toward the middle because of the dissemination of these quote unquote democratic technologies, which I actually don't think are that democratic actually. But I think that's exactly right. Wisdom is deeply implausible online.

And I think part of the reason for that is that, as Nicholas Carr points out, the internet embodies a certain set of intellectual ethics. So the internet values multitasking and kind of shallow reactive thought because shallow reactive thought empowers more consumption and it empowers more kind of efficient skimming. So the internet, and you

see this, anyone who's written online or tried to get writing jobs online knows that the internet privileges a certain kind of writing that is very short, very punchy, has a kind of click baity type appeal.

And if you try to write something that kind of pushes against that and says, hey, like, actually, this issue is complicated. Let's sit with this for a minute. Let's kind of parse out individual topics.

Well, people will become bored of that very quickly and will say, I'm not going to read all that or that's, you're equivocating. And so the question of what wisdom looks like in these particular environments will probably mean identifying the intellectual ethics of the internet, particularly of the algorithm. I think the algorithm itself is a major source of the incentive to be foolish.

So if I say this, if I put people on blast or if I use this type of irresponsible language, it's kind of a dog whistle to certain tribes, but I can kind of weasel my way out of it if I'm called on it. If I do this, I will ascend to the top of the algorithm. I will be the first thing that people see when they get on their feet.

And people might realize that I'm talking about Twitter in a very coded way. Twitter is the chief offender here, but Facebook and TikTok have the same logic to that. The algorithm rewards that which is best at captivating people's negative emotional attention.

This is something that former engineers at Facebook and Google have given interviews about, about how they design the algorithm to be able to capture people's outrage because outrage is the most reliable predictor of engagement. So what wisdom will look like, I think, for people who do have an online presence is being able to identify these algorithmic effects and being ready to be a little bit less relevant because we don't follow them, to be okay with being a little bit more obscure because we're not going to do it. This is easier said than done because if you're, for example, a Christian media organization and someone says, hey, look, if we put out content that says this, I can guarantee 60% more engagement than if we put out content.

That is an ethical dilemma. That is a moment of moral choice to say, well, should we go with what's going to potentially boost our ministry more or should we go with what is actually more defensible from a truth telling, from a wise perspective? In the book, I kind of outline different characteristics of genuinely Christian thinking. So genuinely Christian thinking is careful.

We don't rush to judgment. We don't assume that we're right and nobody else can talk us off that ledge. I was meditating recently on James and how James kind of indicts the believers that he's addressing for not being reasonable.

He says the wisdom that comes from above is pure and reasonable and open to reason. That's not the kind of intellectual ethic that is exemplified by the algorithm, but that is what's committed to us in scripture. So we simply have to decide in a moment of choice what we're going to do.

And what that might look like, frankly, is being okay to be stepped on, being okay to be ignored, being okay to be lied about. And I'm not saying there's never a time to defend oneself, but we're simply not going to win with wisdom in the moments of the algorithm. Instead, what we'll have to do, I think, Alistair, is we're going to have to keep a certain type of person clearly in mind.

In addition to our own souls, we need to keep in mind that people are actually very burdened with a sense of anxiety, a sense of exhaustion, a sense of this world is not intelligible to them, and they feel like they have no place. And rather than trying to kind of contort ourselves into online weapons or online juggernauts, I think the way we wisely handle truth will appeal to people who need to hear something that is refreshing to their souls. It may not win the content wars.

It may not win the algorithm wars, but it will do the work that the Lord sends out for it, right? The Lord sends his word, and it will not return to him void. So I think we need to claim that. And I think we need to think carefully.

We need to think communally. We need to be able to be open to correction from other people, to be able to say, hey, I got this wrong. And we also need to be able to say things that are truthful, even when they might implicate the people we associate with, or they might implicate ourselves.

In conclusion, could you give just some very brief thoughts about how to address the message of the gospel to people who are struggling to inhabit the world of the internet, who feel malformed by it, who feel that they don't know how to maybe break with their digital habits to form a healthy identity, or maybe even just to imagine what it is to be a Christian in the digital age? What are some, maybe the key aspects of the gospel that are most salient within our digital age? I love that question. I think I would encourage someone like that to reflect on the reality that God is their creator, that God made them. He did not make them.

If you're listening, if you're a human being, God did not make you to be simply a mental projection. You are a person with a body. You are a person who was born in a particular place.

You are where you are for a particular reason. And none of that is sheer accident. None of that is just by pure chance.

And so for a person who feels exhausted or unsure how to kind of reconnect with reality,

I think the message is one of hope. The reality that you may be struggling to inhabit right now is a good reality because it comes from a good creator. So there's a wisdom.

There is a overarching wisdom to your life, to who you are, to the kind of people that you know, to the kind of people that you are with, to the kind of circumstances that you find yourself in, even if they are extremely painful. There is a design for it. And what people have to realize is that the Lord is good.

He's good. Taste and see that the Lord is good. And what he makes is good.

And I think what we're looking for when we give ourselves over to digital technologies is we're looking for a promise of a life that's a little bit better than the one we have. Friends that are a little bit more attentive than the ones we have. A platform that's a little bit bigger than the one we have.

An image of ourselves that's a little bit prettier than the one we have. And I think the message of the gospel comes in and says, even if you could achieve all of those things, that wouldn't satisfy you. That's not what you're created for.

You're created not to have this kind of perfect projection of yourself. You're created to actually know the God who made you body and spirit and whom you belong to by right. So I would hold that forth to them as an invitation really to know the true God, know the God of reality and the promise that he will save and will love everyone who comes to him.

Thank you so much for joining me Samuel. Thank you Alistair. Samuel's book is Digital Liturgies.

I'll put the link to it in the show notes. Thank you very much for listening.