

Spirituality of Communication as Foundation for a Missional Approach to Digital Culture

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ABSTRACT

The article seeks to make the case for a Christian spirituality of communication, one that especially addresses the communicative and interpersonal dynamics in digital culture and strives to elevate these toward a disposition of authentic relationality. From this foundation in a Christian spirituality of communication, the article proposes several key theological characteristics as fundamental for a missional approach to digital culture, including revelation, incarnation, communion, truth in context, and announcing hope. The article concludes by proposing a framework for a lived, missional spirituality expressing each of these in the digital context. Living out of this framework offers digital culture greater potential toward human flourishing as a whole.

Keywords: *Christian spirituality, digital culture, theology of communication, relationality, mission and evangelization*

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1. Introduction

I really used to love it here.

It felt like a place where I could learn anything, where I could meet anybody. As a kid who hid from bullies and teachers by reading paperbacks all day, the internet felt like an infinite book. Except electric. And so, more exciting. And then, later, even on the social media internet, I was sure I was in a place where I could learn. Provided I was smart, if I was discerning, if I knew how to read it.

This is a conversation about what you do if you're not convinced that's true anymore.²

The internet as a cultural context is evolving once again. Though never a context that was set in stone, present social commentary, such as that of podcaster PJ Vogt above suggests that we are entering an era of critical caution, disillusionment, and even techlash, or backlash against the perceived ethical corruption in the technology industry.³ Once celebrated as a context of global connectivity, this techno-optimism has now subsided and given way to a resistance and refusal of “tech’s dominance of everyday life, particularly the godlike algorithms – their true calculus still proprietary – that rule all digital existence.”⁴ Social commentators like Ezra Klein

² PJ Vogt, “How Do I Use the Internet Now,” The Search Engine with PJ Vogt, October 20, 2023, <https://pjavogt.substack.com/p/how-do-i-use-the-internet-now>.

³ Emma Goldberg, “The Campus ‘Techlash’: [Style Desk],” *New York Times*, Jan 12, 2020, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/campus-techlash/docview/2335780291/se-2>.

⁴ Ross Barkan, “The Zeitgeist is Changing: A Strange Romantic Backlash to the Tech Era Looms,” *The Guardian*, Dec 28, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/dec/28/new-romanticism-technology-backlash>

increasingly point to the need for the retrieval of our sense of agency and intentionality when navigating the digital medium.⁵

In the context of this emerging cultural resistance, Ross Barkan points to a growth in spirituality, loosely termed, and inclusive of interest in astrology, witchcraft, magic, and manifestation. According to Barkan, “online life has catalyzed this spirituality more, with teenage TikTok occultists and ‘manifesting’ influencers racking up even more followers.”⁶ While losing optimism and the trust that once was in the possibility of digital spaces, such influencers are exhibiting a turn toward the spiritual, to transcendence as resistance to the power of the algorithms. Here we see a kind of regard for transcendence, but deeply infused with desire for power and control, implicitly reclaimed from the power of the algorithm.

Tara Isabella Burton cements the connection between the growth of such online esoteric practices and tech culture even more firmly when she explores the origins of digital culture in Silicon Valley tech industry. Burton describes the origins of Silicon Valley culture as follows:

Steeped in mid-20th-century counterculture, the futurists, technologists and inventors who would come to shape Silicon Valley culture shared with their Hermetic forebears an optimistic vision of human self-transcendence through technology. Freed of our biological and geographic constraints, and of repressive social expectations, we could make of cyberspace a new libertarian Jerusalem... Freed of bodily constraints and geographic limitations, the internet could help us at last achieve the magical dream of transcendence.⁷

⁵ Ezra Klein, “The Medium really is the Message,” *New York Times*, Aug 14, 2022, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/medium-really-is-message/docview/2701646322/se-2>.

⁶ Barkan, “The Zeitgeist is Changing.”

⁷ Tara Isabella Burton, “Of Memes and Magick,” *Aeon*, December 14, 2023, https://aeon.co/essays/how-the-internet-became-the-modern-purveyor-of-ancient-magic?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

Burton connects the ethos of Silicon Valley culture to transcendence, becoming as close to the divine as possible, though through increasingly evolving technological progress.⁸ Here too, there is an element of control as integral to technology, and its power to transcend human limitations. For broader culture, inclusive of those not necessarily espousing such transhumanist ideals, the digital experience has still thrust us into such a space where we continually experience the reach beyond our human limitations. Our ability to communicate instantaneously across physical, temporal, and linguistic barriers is one such experience. Our immediate access to unfathomable amounts of information is another. Whether consciously or not, we are living in moments of transcendence where we are experiencing connectivity beyond our natural human limitations. Faced with transcendence, how might we make meaning, and do so in a way that is generative, creative, life-giving, and in the spirit of neighborliness, living well with others in digital spaces? This becomes a timely and relevant question especially from the perspective of faith.

1.1. Seeking a Missional Approach

As “Towards Full Presence,” the 2023 document from the Vatican’s Dicastery for Communication asserts, we are living at a time when “many Christians are asking for inspiration and guidance since [the advent of] social media, which is one expression of digital culture.”⁹ Many people are driven by a missional intent behind this desire, seeking guidance on how to be present and how to encounter others as persons of faith in these public fora. Especially among those in ministerial leadership, there is a persistent question around how to engage in digital culture in a missional way. The desire for a sort of spirituality and transcendence discernible in digital culture offers a concrete opportunity for Christians with a missional intent to engage more intentionally with digital culture around these questions. In this way, interest in spiritual and transcendent realities in digital culture is a convergence point and an opportunity for sharing faith. At the same

⁸ Burton, “Of Memes and Magick.”

⁹ Dicastery for Communication, “Towards Full Presence: A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with SocialMedia,” May 27, 2023, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/dpc/documents/20230528_dpc-verso-piena-presenza_en.html, no. 2.

time, exploring the interest in spirituality and transcendence as a convergence point also calls Christians to discern their aims and methods for missional engagement.

Identifying spiritual or transcendent realities at the core of the profound questions of digital culture is not new. Nearly a decade ago, Sherry Turkle grappled with these deeper questions in *Reclaiming Conversation* (2015), noting the value of authentic self-reflection as essential for meaning making, and how digital culture might compromise or constrain this:

So now consider David, forty-seven, a television producer. “Putting on my earbuds and getting into my iPhone world is my Zen. That’s my retreat.” David says that cycling through his apps is his time for self-reflection: “You flip between your music, your news, your entertainment, your people. You control it. You own it. That’s my zone.” Here the definition of self-reflection has narrowed: it means control over your connections. We’ve seen this before, solitude defined as time with a managed crowd.¹⁰

David’s use of spiritual language for his iPhone experience (i.e., retreat and Zen), along with his desire for control, resonates with the more recent TikTok trend in esoteric practices, magic, and manifestation highlighted by Barkan and Burton. In both cases, we observe a desire to gain control through the transcendent potential of the online or digital experience. Ultimately, both phenomena find their roots in the transhumanist vision of Silicon Valley, as recalled by Burton: transcendence of human limitations through technological progress.

Spiritual practices as connected with online life are likewise not new. Though the digital space affords great access for seekers to spirituality resources, Heidi Campbell and Wendi Bellar also note the impact of convergent practice and the pursuit of self-directed spiritua-

¹⁰ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), 85-86.

lity as typical of digital culture.¹¹ Self-directed spirituality emerges out of a multisite experience of “bridging, blending and blurring” embodied and technological experiences, and pursuing meaning making through this in a way apart from the traditional frameworks of religious institutions.¹² Digital culture’s low barriers enable broad access to a vast array of resources and practices, while also offering a space in which to engage and experiment with this as motivated by one’s own interests. Self-directed spirituality, following from the broader historical movement of the twentieth century away from traditional institutional religion toward individualized, lived religion, has found a fertile context in digital culture.¹³ In digital spaces, seekers claim creative freedom and great flexibility to piece together for themselves a personally meaningful devotional reservoir, as well as a space and platform for unique spiritual self-expression.

Self-directed spirituality, self-transcendence, and interest in power and control through magic and manifestation are well beyond the framework of a Christian approach to spirituality. Yet, the current instinct to turn to the transcendent as a critical response to digital culture is at the same time notable. From the perspective of shaping a Christian missional engagement with digital culture, this turn to the transcendent might present a *semen Verbi*, an opportunity from within culture to find convergence points with the Gospel.¹⁴ More broadly than missional practice, the focus on transcendence and spirituality underscores anew the crucial work for theology to continue to engage with digital culture. In this vein, theologian Philip Sheldrake has raised critical questions regarding spirituality and cyberspace. From a spiritual perspective, he notes the transcendence of physical limits as

¹¹ Heidi Campbell and Wendi Bellar, *Digital Religion: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 60-61.

¹² Campbell and Bellar, *Digital Religion*, 61.

¹³ Campbell and Bellar, *Digital Religion*, 80.

¹⁴ Pontifical Council for Culture. “Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture,” June 3, 1999. “The proclamation of Christ «who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of the Revelation» (Ibid.), highlights the *semina Verbi* hidden and sometimes buried in the heart of cultures, and opens them to the infinite capacity He creates and which He fills gradually with the marvelous condescension of eternal wisdom (cf. Dei Verbum, 13), transforming their search for meaning into a quest for transcendence, and these stepping-stones into moorings for the acceptance of the Gospel.” (4)

one of the most challenging limits of the digital experience, especially as this bypasses the essential embodied human experience.¹⁵ Pastoral scholar Kirk Bingaman has likewise called for an even deeper engagement with questions of spirituality as a necessary way to navigate digital culture: “we are learning from contemplative neuroscience that it is spiritual practice more than anything else that has the potential to keep the human brain focused in the midst of the digital tsunami.”¹⁶

This essay aims to elevate this turn to the transcendent in contemporary digital culture and frame it as a missional opportunity for the Christian. Eschewing a proclamatory approach, this missional opportunity is instead built on identifying common digital experiences, and envisioning ways forward that yield a culture of neighborliness inclusive of fostering peaceful, meaningful, and caring relationships through the Christian’s presence in digital environments.¹⁷ Toward this, it is helpful to articulate a specifically Christian spirituality for digital culture, one that responds to the quest for transcendence through emphasis on communication as relational act. “Who is my neighbor?” is a guiding question for this approach.¹⁸ In this vein, while drawing from the Christian spiritual tradition, this approach is also intentional about presenting a spirituality of communication that resists the self-focused desire inherent both to tech’s transhumanist roots and esoteric trends we now observe. Instead, a Christian spirituality of communication for digital culture is a turn to the transcendent toward more authentic human connection and development.

1.2. An Approach Built on the Spirituality of Communication

From a Christian missional perspective, there exists a fundamental connection between spirituality, relationship, and

¹⁵ Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Brief History*. 2nd Edition (Newark: Wiley and Sons, 2013), 111-112.

¹⁶ Kirk Bingaman. *Pastoral and Spiritual Care in a Digital Age: The Future is Now* (New York, Lexington, 2018), 94.

¹⁷ “Towards Full Presence,” no. 5.

¹⁸ “Towards Full Presence,” no.5

communication.¹⁹ While other areas of theology continue to offer valuable reflection especially on the moral, ethical, and even pastoral challenges of the digital context, Christian spirituality offers another entry point that is de-facto relational, and thus offers invaluable wisdom toward the practice of communication. This relational focus resonates especially well with the act of communication, as well as the potential to form authentic relationships and communities. These elements are integral to human flourishing, especially in the digital context.

Spirituality in the Christian tradition is the human capacity toward transcendence and ultimate value, coupled with a deliberate way of living.²⁰ Transcendence and ultimate value is relationship with God, more specifically God's self-gift to us and our human response to that of faith. Already, spirituality is thus an experience of communication: that of encountering, receiving, and listening to the Divine Word, and offering one's own word of faith in response. From this, an intimate, life-giving relationship grows and expands onto one's experience of relating with self and others as well. Spirituality in this sense infuses one's ability to relate: to offer hospitality to the Word, to listen, to express authenticity and truth, and to be able to make a gift of oneself to others in the image of God's self-gift offered to us. Significantly, these expressions of spirituality and of relating well are also communicative acts. And these communicative acts, rooted in a relational spirituality, could shape the ethos of digital culture toward greater flourishing therein for all.

¹⁹ Kathleen D. Clark, "Communicating as Though Connected: Conceptualizing Christian Contemplative Conversation." *Journal of Communication & Religion* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 40–54; H.L. Goodall Jr., "Mysteries of the Future Told: Communication as the Material Manifestation of Spirituality," *World Communication* 22, no. 2 (December 1993): 40; John Hochheimer, "Imagination and the Life Force: Toward a Theoretical Foundation for Spirituality and Communication." *Conference Papers -- National Communication Association*, January 2009, 1; East Asian Pastoral Institute (EAPI), "Theological Foundations of a Christian Spirituality for Communicators," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 18, no. 1 (January 1981): 72-79.

²⁰ Sandra Schneiders, "Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality," *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder (John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2005), 15-33, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/csbsju/detail.action?docID=4041994>. 16.

Toward articulating a spirituality of communication for digital culture, this essay builds on the fundamental connection between spirituality, relationship, and communication. In digital culture, intentional communication practices that are spiritually rooted can express transcendent meaning and make significant impact in and through the basics of human relationships. How we encounter and engage one another in digital spaces, through for example listening or truthfulness, can express our ultimate values. Along these lines, the essay proposes a framework for a lived spirituality for digital culture that expresses core Christian themes of revelation, incarnation, communion, truthful context, and commitment to announcing hope. The potential for lived spirituality around these themes aims toward self-gift, authentic human connection, and a broader sense of flourishing for all. This approach ultimately guides the Christian missional impetus in digital culture toward building with others a more human and relational space.²¹

2. Spirituality and Communication: What is the Connection?

Spirituality is a large and ambiguous concept, especially when approached from a secular perspective. Broadly, it is a pursuit of meaning beyond oneself, a capacity toward transcendence and ultimate value.²² When the quest involves explicit reference to God, then spirituality takes on an intentionally religious expression. In this same vein, Christian spirituality is ultimate values perceived and pursued in the God disclosed in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit active and present in the community of the church.²³

According to Michael Downey, spirituality carries four strands or levels of meaning within it: 1) the spiritual dimension of any human being, 2) the human capacity to be in relation with another, others, and God, 3) formulation of insight about lived reality, and 4) the scholarly discipline that studies the experience of the spiritual life.²⁴ Among

²¹ “Towards Full Presence,” no. 50.

²² Schneiders, “Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality,” 16

²³ Michael Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 32.

²⁴ Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, 42

these, the first two strands or levels offer the implication that spirituality invites a person beyond themselves, opens a person up to more than what is inherent. While in secular approaches to spirituality, this beyond oneself or more is called ultimate meaning, in Christian spirituality, ultimate meaning is about encounter with the *person* of Jesus Christ, and thus takes on a relational dynamic. In our human capacity to seek ultimate meaning, the Christian encounters the divine through a call to relationship. This divine-human relationship then becomes both edifying for and transformative of the way we experience relating as a whole.

Christian spirituality explores the interior life but does not stop there. It encompasses lived experience – personal, interpersonal, and communal, and brings this lived experience into deep dialogue with ultimate meaning and value found in God. There is an integral relationality at the heart of Christian spirituality. In the pursuit of ultimate meaning and value, the human person enters a “relationship and communion” with God.²⁵ This sense of relationship and communion with God stems from the very being of God as Trinity. As noted by Philip Sheldrake, “Christian spirituality is intimately related to a specific understanding of God and God’s relationship to the world and to humanity. God is understood to be Trinity, a dynamic inter-relationship of ‘persons in communion.’”²⁶ In light of this, the Christian God is one who relates, whose “divine life overflows into an eternal dynamism of creativity.”²⁷ Building on a Trinitarian foundation, Downey asserts that Christian spirituality is fundamentally relational: “A Christian spirituality rooted in the mystery of the Trinity emphasizes community rather than individuality. The goal of the spiritual life entails perfection of one’s relationships with others, rather than an ever more pure gaze of the mind’s eye on some eternal truth ‘out there’ or in one’s interior life.”²⁸

²⁵ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 1992, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031992_pastores-dabo-vobis.html, no. 45.

²⁶ Philip Sheldrake. *Explorations in Spirituality: History, Theology and Social Practice* (New York: Paulist, 2010), 11.

²⁷ Sheldrake, *Explorations in Spirituality*, 11.

²⁸ Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, 45.

3. Communication and Spirituality

Sandra Schneiders defines Christian spirituality as having “the horizon of ultimate value as the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ to whom Scripture normatively witnesses and whose life is communicated to the believer by the Holy Spirit making her or him a child of God.”²⁹ God communicating is integral to Christian spirituality, and this divine communication is both universal and personal. On a universal scale, divine communication is the fundamental theological thesis of divine revelation – the idea that God communicates Godself to humankind. God’s communication is self-communication; in revelation, “God chose to show forth and communicate Himself and the eternal decisions of His will regarding the salvation of men.”³⁰ In other words, the Christian understanding of divine revelation is that it is a *relational act* of God, a gift of Godself to humankind, which also generates the *content or deposit of faith* out of this relational gesture.

God’s self-communication is also personal. Divine revelation addresses the human person dialogically; it is engagement that invites forth a response. The theological tradition calls the human person’s unique response to divine revelation *faith*. Claiming and expressing faith therefore is another communicative act, viewed through the dialogical lens of divine and human communication within the context of revelation.

In addition to recognizing revelation and faith as inherently communicative, communication also finds expression in the practice of prayer. Kathleen Clark proposes prayer as human-divine communication that has implications for faith but also for interpersonal communication.³¹ Casting prayer, an expression of spirituality, in communicative terms, Clarke proposes that expanding our model of communication can also broaden our spiritual attentiveness and

²⁹ Schneiders, “Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality,” 3.

³⁰ Pope Paul VI, *Dei Verbum*, 1965,

https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html, no. 6.

³¹ Clark, “Communicating as Though Connected,” 41.

deepen our spiritual experience.³² Clark reflects on spirituality as an experience of connectedness:

A wider angle of vision about communication with and by the connectivity of interbeing suggests that intentional practices can awaken our ability to communicate as though connected, understand that there is an invitation from that mystery, and we have the capacity to participate dialogically with it.³³

Along these lines, experiencing and expressing connectedness with nature, with others, and with the Divine is the basis of spirituality, and it is thoroughly communicative, both in how we enter into the mystery beckoning us, and how we engage and express our experience of the same mystery. Communication is integral to our life of spirit according to this vision.

Clark draws her observations especially from the context of spiritual direction as her ministerial practice. Diane Millis, another practitioner of spiritual direction, likewise assesses the spiritual life in communicative terms:

I believe that God is continually revealing God's self to us. This gift of God's communication occurs through every dimension of our lives. Therefore, it is possible for human communication with God to occur in and through the whole array of words, actions, objects, events and relationship in our daily life. Each and every moment of our lives invites us to appreciate and pay attention to this gift of revelation. This sacred Presence infuses all aspects of our lives and all of our conversations.³⁴

Millis labels conversation as a "sacred art" and encourages an attentiveness to mystery as a basic disposition to bring to everyday conversations. Conversation, a communicative activity, becomes a

³² Clark, "Communicating as Though Connected," 48.

³³ Clark, "Communicating as Though Connected," 49.

³⁴ Diane M. Millis, *Conversation, the Sacred Art: Practicing Presence in an Age of Distraction* (Woodstock, Vermont: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2013), xviii.

ground for spirituality, for connecting beyond oneself with greater meaning. Simply, “our conversations have the potential to nourish our souls.”³⁵

The dialogue between the study of communication and the study of spirituality can yield a number of salient directions, including exploring *communication about spirituality* as well as the *spiritual impact of communication*.³⁶ *Communication about spirituality* brings these two concepts into dialogue around the message or content. Spirituality emerges in the content of communication that is shared or expressed; the content of the message, in other words, is spiritual in theme. In the digital context, this kind of communication about spirituality finds expression in a myriad of ways – in the sharing of postings, videos, images, memes, audios, or the accompanying comment feed.

The intersection of communication and spirituality as content also raises some salient questions: What symbols, metaphors, and language forms make up spiritual self-expression in the digital context? Are any of these unique to the digital context? What do these language forms reveal about digital culture, ultimate meaning, and value? What kinds of communicative ways have spiritual or religious traditions exhorted others to adopt their goals?³⁷ Questions like these reveal that simply focusing on the question of spirituality conveyed in the content of communication already presents a rich reservoir of further exploration. Returning, however, to the current transcendent turn in question, exploring the *spiritual impact of communication* has even greater potential for clarifying a missional approach for digital culture.

³⁵ Millis, *Conversation, the Sacred Art*, xix.

³⁶ William G. Kirkwood, “Studying Communication about Spirituality and the Spiritual Consequences of Communication,” *Journal of Communication & Religion* 17, no. 1 (March 1994): 18.

³⁷ Kirkwood, “Studying Communication about Spirituality,” 19.

4. Spiritual Impact of Communication Practice

This connection explores the spiritual impact of communication practices, whether negative or positive. As Diane Millis proposes, “great conversations lift the veil, inviting us to discover more about ourselves, one another, and the sacred in our midst.”³⁸ In other words, the *experience* of communication can both reveal and at the same time deepen the spiritual sensibility of the human person.

From the perspective of Christian missional practice, communication as an activity of faith is rooted deeply in spirituality. Exploring the spiritual impact of communication in a missional context, the East Asian Pastoral Institute (EAPI) reflects along these lines:

The Christian communicator is not one who can fulfill his function using media from outside. He must belong to a group, participating fully in its life. He has first of all to discover God in his life-situation, environment and community and interpret for himself God’s designs. Only then can he share with others from within what he has discovered by observation and involvement, by listening to God’s Word and meditating on it, by his discernment and interpretation. Without this self-evangelization, without this personal meditation, assimilation and interiorization, without personal discovery of God, a Christian communicator cannot fulfill his prophetic mission.³⁹

In other words, the communication of faith is fundamentally a spiritually rooted process, one that emerges from the interior life and finds expression from the discernment of God’s presence and engagement in one’s life and context. When one communicates faith, they do so out of their interior sense of relating to God, self, and others. Franz-Josef Eilers specifies this necessary interiority even further as he emphasizes the essential connection between the Christian communicator and the Holy Spirit: “Whoever wants to talk about Spirituality

³⁸ Millis, *Conversation, the Sacred Art*, 4.

³⁹ East Asian Pastoral Institute (EAPI), “Theological Foundations,” 75-76.

has to start with the Holy Spirit himself.”⁴⁰ It is the Spirit that binds one to the Word and give one the ability to speak the faith in a way that it is truthful, invitatory, and oriented toward communion. Spirit-led communication also bears the fruits enumerated in Scripture (Galatians 5:22-23), which become discernable ways to witness communication’s spiritual impact. The fruits of the Spirit are also inherently relational: love, kindness, generosity, self-control and more presuppose that a person stands in relationship with God and with others in the context and expression of these virtues.

Building on these spiritual foundations raises the question of what a distinctive spirituality of communication may look like, particularly from the Christian perspective. The East Asian Pastoral Institute (EAPI) proposes along these lines that a Christian spirituality of communication is one that is built on five pillars: the theology of revelation (God’s self-communication to humankind, and humankind’s response of faith), Jesus Christ as the Word Incarnate, the aim to build communion, awareness of context, and commitment to announcing a message of hope.⁴¹ A Christian spirituality of communication builds on these pillars to draw and interpret meaning about the divine-human relationship, and live this out in the way the human person relates with self, others, and creation. These five pillars help give shape to “ultimate meaning” in the Christian sense and orient the Christian in a particular way toward forming relationships. As the essay explores below, these pillars also present a transcendent approach to digital culture that is open, life giving, and oriented toward communion.

5. Framing a Lived Spirituality and Digital Culture

Christian spirituality encompasses lived experience. A statement like this, according to Downey, reveals a more holistic understanding of spirituality, one that emphasizes the importance of human experience as the “very stuff” of spirituality.⁴² In this vein, all

⁴⁰ Franz-Josef Eilers. *Communicating in Ministry and Mission*. Third Edition (Manila: Logos/Divine Word Publications, 2009), 33.

⁴¹ EAPI, “Theological Foundations,” 77-79

⁴² Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, 91.

that enters our lives, all that shapes our daily response to and engagement with what comes our way touches our spirituality.⁴³ This means that lived experience is integral to our spiritual meaning making, and it also implies that particular experiences or social locations may in fact generate alternative and newly insightful avenues into Christian spirituality itself.⁴⁴

As we have explored in this essay, few experiences may be more impactful on our lives than the present reality of digital culture. Reflecting on the spiritual life vis-à-vis this pervasive socio-cultural reality, it is also helpful to recall Sandra Schneiders' insight that "spirituality is not simply spontaneous experience, however, elevating or illuminating, but *a conscious and deliberate way of living*"⁴⁵ (emph. mine). Considering digital culture as context for a lived spirituality, people of faith are facing then a commitment to a conscious and deliberate way of living in this cultural context. Especially when considering the role of those in ministerial leadership, this conscious and deliberate way also becomes missional. Taking seriously the present critical cultural turn in digital culture as coupled with rising interest in the transcendent, people of faith have the prophetic opportunity to enter this conversation in a radically different way. This radically different way offers a self-giving, relational approach to digital communication, rooted deeply in one's spirituality. Such an approach is countercultural and prophetic, and formative not only for persons but for culture as a whole.⁴⁶

Recalling the EAPI's five pillars for a spirituality of Christian communication, composed in the electronic media era, this essay wishes to bring each of these in dialogue specifically with digital culture. The aim here is to envision how these pillars may generate a pattern for living faith consciously and deliberately in our present context, guiding those with missional impetus toward authentic engagement. This faithful and missional living is characteristically open to transcendence through encounter, presence, and communion, considering as "neighbor" those in the digital context.

⁴³ Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, 91.

⁴⁴ Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*, 91-93.

⁴⁵ Schneiders, "Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality," 2.

⁴⁶ "Towards Full Presence," no. 37.

5.1. Revelation and Faith

A spirituality of Christian communication is built on the theological premise that God communicates Godself to humankind and evokes a faith response. God's self-communication, an outpouring of the Trinitarian life, is a gift of the divine self, offered in love, which both engages and transforms the human person in its image.

A conscious and deliberate way of living this out in digital culture considers deeply the interpersonal dynamics of communication and seeks to shape these through the mold of loving self-gift, offered with the aim of forging relationships.

This is a distinctively different assumption about communication than networked individualism, or the transactional and reductive business model of social media platforms. It also resists the inherent distrust and the pursuit of control we observe in the current turn to transcendence. Building on revelation and faith, the Christian is instead called into relationship, willing to experience vulnerability, self-gift, and sacrifice along the way.

One concrete way this pillar finds expression is being attentive to not only the accuracy of Christian content but also the manner of one's communication in digital spaces. How we say something is just as important as what we say.⁴⁷ From a missional and ministerial perspective, whether and how one interacts with comments in a public way is one salient example here. To enter conversation with commenters, to receive critical comments and treat these with respect even if in disagreement, these are all measures of vulnerability and self-gift, and actions that speak loudly and in a missional way.

5.2. Christ the Incarnate Word

A spirituality of Christian communication reveres the incarnation of the Word as the fullness of divine revelation. It looks to Christ as "the Perfect Communicator" who both embodied and articulated the

⁴⁷ "Towards Full Presence," no. 65.

message of divine love for humankind, and did so in intimate and familiar ways, in the mode of the hearer.⁴⁸

A conscious and deliberate way of living this out in digital culture is taking seriously the unique modality of the digital context and discerning the mode of the hearer therein. What is the mode of the hearer in digital culture is an essential question for this incarnational aim. A generous response to this question offers a disposition of accompaniment, presence, listening to and treating with integrity the digital experience, and looking for the *semina Verbi*, seeds of the Word within. It also seeks to avoid the temptation to reduce one's expression of spirituality to the mere sharing of religious content, sidestepping or ignoring the interactive and participatory dynamics of digitality as spiritual ground. As a deep commitment to context, this incarnational aim also seeks to avoid the reduction of spirituality to an exclusively inward, closed, and self-focused experience.

One concrete way this pillar finds expression is through fostering listening and attentiveness when interacting in digital spaces. One cannot discern the mode of the hearer and understand where another person is coming from without the ability to pause, become silent, and bring one's attention fully to that encounter. Practicing the skill of pausing, embracing silence, and listening in a deep way is already a significant spiritual practice, and one that gains even greater value in the constant information flow of digital spaces. From this space of deep listening, asking questions is another essential practice of this pillar. Asking the type of questions that invite one along as opposed to making statements that shut conversation down is an essential incarnational skill.

5.3. Communion

A spirituality of Christian communication aims to build relationships, edify communities, and orient interpersonal and relational dynamics toward communion. It takes seriously the theological

⁴⁸ *Communio et Progressio*, 1971, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pc_cs_doc_23051971_communio_en.html, no. 11.

connection between communication as a gift of self in love that both emerges from and is drawn back toward the eternal communion found in the Trinitarian life of God as Father, Son, and Spirit.

A conscious and deliberate way of living this out in digital culture is through a commitment to authentic encounter with others, and resistance to reifying the dynamic and complex presence of other people into words and images to which we react. A commitment to communion entails resisting reductive assumptions about others, embracing the practice of asking genuine questions, and respecting complexity and mystery in others.

One concrete way that this pillar finds expression is through practices of inclusion. In digital culture where one gains social influence through “likes, follows, and shares” and where one loses influence by being “cancelled,” it is both prophetic and missional to be attentive to who is on the margins of this cultural context. Likewise, social divisions continue to exist along the digital divide. Attentiveness to individuals whose voices are left out, and working to amplify these voices is likewise a prophetic and missional act toward communion.

5.4. Truth in Context

Closely related to both the incarnation and to communion, awareness of context is another distinctive aim of a Christian spirituality of communication. In addition to awareness of the complex situational realities that infuse communication, context is also ultimately a commitment to truth and authenticity. When we reduce or collapse context to a widely share-able bit of data, it radically redefines the narrative or the story that held the original content-piece. Without context, we shift the story and therefore compromise its truthfulness and authenticity. A conscious and deliberate way of living this out in digital culture is resisting conclusions until a full picture emerges, and not sharing false, incomplete, or misleading information. Commitment to context is a deep resistance against the erosion of trust that we observe in digital culture. It also resists the rapid pace of digital culture and insists on silence and space for discernment as integral to digital communication.

One concrete way this pillar finds expression is through embracing a narrative approach in digital communication. Good stories invite us into them, and they also reveal and extend greater hospitality to the truth.⁴⁹ Stories are contextual, and hard to reduce without loss of meaning. Stories also create spaces that can be gathering points for shared meaning making. Especially when it comes to the method of communication toward a missional aim, narrating the truth through a story is often more authentic and relational than a series of propositional statements.

5.6. Announcing Hope

A spirituality of Christian communication is committed to the Good News. This means that although the Christian recognizes the sorrow, brokenness, and despair that pervades the human condition, he or she remains committed to hope, possibility, and life. Announcing hope is speaking in and through the context of brokenness with a message of possibility, healing, and wholeness.

A conscious and deliberate way of living this out in digital culture is through the habit of discerning whether and to what degree one's communication is ultimately edifying, healing, and life-giving to both self and others. This aim is clearly embraced, for example, in the 2023 pastoral reflection on digital culture from the Dicastery for Communication, "Towards Full Presence," which offers the parable of the Good Samaritan as a cipher for bringing a faithful presence to digital contexts.⁵⁰ Along these lines, self-promotion, narcissism, and verbal violence give way to encouragement and building the community up (Rom. 15:2.). This has the potential to shift the tone of vitriolic comment feeds toward civility, *ad hominem* attacks toward respectful, reasoned dialogue.⁵¹ More profoundly, a commitment to announcing hope resists the deep disillusionment emerging in digital culture and its power-laden dynamics. Instead of fighting power with power, a commitment to announcing hope follows Christ's example of self-emptying and self-gift as core spiritual dispositions.

⁴⁹ "Towards Full Presence," no. 69.

⁵⁰ "Towards Full Presence," no. 6.

⁵¹ "Towards Full Presence," no. 16.

One concrete practice emerging from this pillar is the promotion of genuinely life-giving content from others, especially as a curation practice. While much of social media is driven by self-promotion, being an influencer that deliberately lifts the goodness of others can become a digital discipline that radically exemplifies self-gift in this space.

Critical reflection on digital culture highlights the question of how we relate with others through acts of communication and brings to the forefront the need for reflection on what our ultimate values are that shape these interactions. Reflecting critically on digital culture, social commentator Ezra Klein opines:

Attention is contagious. What forms of it, as individuals and as a society, do we want to cultivate? What kinds of mediums would that cultivation require? This is anything but an argument against technology, were such a thing even coherent. It's an argument for taking technology as seriously as it deserves to be taken, for recognizing, as McLuhan's friend and colleague John M. Culkin put it, "we shape our tools, and thereafter, they shape us." There is an optimism in that, a reminder of our own agency. And there are questions posed, ones we should spend much more time and energy trying to answer: How do we want to be shaped? Who do we want to become?⁵²

6. Concluding Remarks

This essay's proposal of a Christian spirituality of communication for digital culture perceives a seed of the Word in astute social commentary like that of Ezra Klein. Christian spirituality has deep resonance with Klein's questions and might consider these a prophetic opening for more intentional and missional engagement with digital culture.

⁵² Ezra Klein, "The Medium Really is the Message."

As an expression of ultimate values that manifests through the way we live and relate with others, these questions are rooted in our spirituality. Christian spirituality has the potential to shape the relational ethos of digital culture, especially as drawing from the theological foundations of revelation, incarnation, communion, truthful context, and commitment to hope. These theological foundations envision a manner of relating that is loving, self-giving, unifying, accompanying, truthful, hopeful, and life-giving. For digital culture, this manner of relating has the potential to re-capture the human element, lived in communion, toward wholeness.

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