

Following Jesus In a Digital Age



Jason Thacker

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To Hollis, words will never express how much I love you and how proud I am to be your dad. May you one day by God's grace discover the beauty of the risen Christ.

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[INTRODUCTION]

We Are All Being Disciplined but Not How You Might Expect

RECENTLY, I WAS TELLING my wife about a crazy news story that I saw on Twitter. But after a few minutes passed, I quickly realized that I had been duped by fake news, and honestly it was a bit embarrassing. Ever since that happened, I have been constantly asking myself if the things I see on social media are true as I have a hard time trusting what I see online.

Perhaps you've noticed in your own life and home, as I have, that technology often raises more questions than it answers. For all of the real benefits of our email, social media, and smart devices, they are causing us to ask some really important questions about life in the digital age. Maybe, like

me, when you take time to disconnect and slow down, you wonder why social media seems to bring out the worst in people, or you even ask why we seem to be so addicted to our devices these days—kids and adults alike. Or you wonder how being constantly connected may be altering how you interact with your spouse, neighbors, friends, and even your church because you are constantly reaching for your device. Or like me, you may even be wondering if the things you see online are actually true in a society that is given over at times to so much misinformation, advertising, conspiracy theories, and fake or altered videos that are nearly indistinguishable from the real thing.

What current debates over ethics and technology surround you these days? Chances are, even if you and I sat down and attempted to list out such perplexing questions right now—whether about social media or even recent news coverage about new innovations that challenge how we think about being human—about as soon as we listed them and tried to rush them off to print, they would likely be outdated given how fast technology changes and how quickly it shapes how we perceive the world around us. We live in a world of incredibly advanced technologies that are challenging our perceptions of what is real and what we know to be true. Each and every day it seems these digital innovations present us with new challenges, which affect not only how we interact with our neighbors but also how we follow Jesus. Whatever our

questions about life in the digital age, it is becoming clear that technology is deeply shaping each of us—and those around us—in unique and at times concerning ways.

But you might be thinking that it seems a little over the top to speak of technology *shaping us* as human beings. Isn't technology just a tool? You may think you *use* these tools each day, but is it possible that you are the one being used? Throughout this book, we will seek to answer that very question as well as address a few of the most pressing issues of Christian ethics and discipleship in the digital age. The overall goal of this book is for us to better understand that we are each being disciplined every day by the technologies that we use, whether we realize it or not.

You probably have heard of the adage, “When you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” Well, my wife and I have two young boys who can easily illustrate that point. We used to have a set of play tools in their toy box, and there was a yellow wooden hammer that was often the subject of many fights between them. Each time they would play with this wooden hammer, I noticed that it changed something about them, namely that everything became a nail including their brother's head, the wall, my foot, our appliances, the floor . . . and that was just the beginning of it. This toy was something they used, but it also altered how they saw the world around them. That wooden hammer was designed to encourage them to use it in a particular way, and it shaped them in very

particular ways as they played with it. The more they played, the more they learned to see things around them as something to be hammered on. This is true of all technologies, even the digital ones of today as well. Professor Jacob Shatzer updates that adage to our day by saying, “When you’ve got a smart-phone with a camera, everything looks like a status update.”¹ The truth is that technology is shaping us in ways that we may not even notice and that should concern us all.

So what is technology really? Chapter 1 sets the stage by opening our eyes to the true nature of technology itself and how it is forming us each and every day. Wisdom shows us that the question before us in this digital age is not *if* technology is discipling and shaping us but how and to what extent?

Are you ever suspicious about what you’re seeing online, wondering if it is actually *true*? In chapter 2, we will focus on the pursuit of truth in a digital society filled with fake news, misinformation, conspiracy theories, and countless ways that truth is being reinterpreted or even completely abandoned. By seeing how misinformation and fake news are actually age-old social problems exacerbated by technology, we can learn how to move forward wisely in our digital age.

Have you noticed how your online world is incredibly personalized? Later in chapter 3, we will discover this experience of a custom-fit online world is not a coincidence in your life, for we are all living in an increasingly personalized digital society. And as it turns out, the content, ads, and information

we see are often curated using sophisticated algorithms based on various forms of digital surveillance and data collection. All of this is built to show you what you already like to look at and nothing of what doesn't naturally align with your preferences. As you can imagine, all of this can create a false sense of reality, which forms us in unique and concerning ways not always aligned with our faith. And following Jesus in such a false reality proves quite challenging, but as we will see, it is not impossible. As we consider our own responsibility in such a curated world, we will find a faithful way forward.

Do you at times feel that everyone online is arguing from completely opposite positions driven by the team or group they identify with? In chapter 4, we will address some of the challenges of living in an increasingly polarized society that is fracturing into political and social tribes at every turn. We will consider how our identities and loyalties to such tribes are being formed more by digital messages we see rather than being shaped primarily by Christ. We will also learn how to pursue our true identity in Christ amid all this division.

Do you lead people in your church or community, and wonder how to lead them forward faithfully in such challenging digital times? If you do, I encourage you to read the appendix written specifically for you as you lead people to follow Jesus in our digital age. Leading in a technological society can be extremely difficult and complex as you vie for attention in a world of such distraction. But God calls his leaders to be

steadfast in their pursuit of truth, above reproach in every way, and to disciple people in the ways of the Lord with steadfast love, especially as they are constantly bombarded with information meant to shape and form them in ways often contrary to the Scriptures. All of this requires asking the right questions of the tools that increasingly drive our society.

Overall, this book is not really designed to help you craft better technology habits, or a book about tips and tricks to *use* technology better. Rather, it is (1) an attempt to open your eyes to all the ways technology is profoundly shaping you toward efficiency, falsehood, self-absorption, and division, and (2) a call to a moral, holistic, and deeply biblical way of navigating such a shaping force by *walking* (not just believing in) a more Christlike direction of wisdom, truth, responsibility, and our true identity in Christ. I hope that you will join me as we seek to peel back the layers of a digital age and chart a path forward in the footsteps of our Savior who told us that he is the way, the truth, and the life, regardless of how chaotic our society might feel at times or how powerful technology may become in our lives. On one end of the spectrum, we aren't called to totally withdraw from our digital age, running in fear and throwing rocks at it from afar. On the other end, we are also not called to uncritically accept all that the digital age has to offer, embracing its every whim. We are called to engage it with eyes wide open, grounded in the Word of God and being formed into the image of our Savior.

To that end, you'll find that each chapter carries within it some concerning news. And as it normally goes with bad news, you might naturally want to hang your head in despair or run away in denial, numbing yourself to the realities at play in our digital society. Let me encourage you to receive the bad news for what it is but then push past the concerning information and move forward to the subsequent sections, where I hope to give you a vision of how God can mold you into the type of person who can navigate—and even be a light amid—such a complicated, digital world.

The fact of the matter is that technology is powerfully shaping you. In this book, I hope to help you not only look that fact square in the eye but also remind you of God's transforming power as you walk with wisdom and follow him in a digital age.



We were told technology would make our lives easier and more convenient,

but technology just seems to have made them more complicated and confusing. As Christians, what does our faith have to do with these pressing issues of life in a digital age?

In *Following Jesus in a Digital Age*, you will not only be challenged on how technology is shaping your walk with Christ, but you will also be equipped with biblical wisdom to navigate the most difficult aspects of our digital culture—including the rise of misinformation, conspiracy theories, social media, digital privacy, and polarization.

God calls his people to step into the challenges of the digital age from a place of hope and discernment, grounded in his Word. How will you follow Jesus in the digital age?



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