REFLECTIONS OF A CHURCH PLANTER:
DIGITAL NATIVES AND THE SHAPING
OF A CHURCH TO COME

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Approximately twenty years ago, Leonard Sweet wrote a best-selling book, *Soul Tsunami*,[1] with the hope of stirring the church out of her reluctance to adapt to the influx of change that was emerging all around. It was a *tour de force* focused on emerging technological shifts and the need for new conversations to address advancements in digital learning and new tools of communication. Moreover, Sweet was inviting the church to reflect on the brewing disconnect between traditional views of hierarchical authority and the emerging postmodern and post-Christian world. That was twenty years ago!

Much has changed since then, and yet one thing remains the same: Many churches still remain perplexed about how to respond to the types of change that are continuously reshaping culture. In addition, an unfortunate popular approach is to critique everything in the culture, perceiving that change and everything different is negative. This posture misses opportunities to be the light informed by a Christ-centered theology. It is by engaging with the realities of cultural shifts that we can revisit assumptions about the role of faith in a changing world.

From its inception, Christianity has understood that gospel penetration requires rearticulating the message of Jesus in changing times. It is unfortunate that a mindset of 'us' versus 'them' seems to be on the rise and prevalent among some Christian leaders. Rather than a pessimistic outlook, the church must reaffirm, in a nuanced way, that the God revealed in Jesus enters and

1. Sweet, *Soul Tsunami*.

restores his creation by taking culture seriously. It is here that a renewed understanding of what we believe and confess about the Incarnation must inform how we respond in these changing times.

This article suggests that religious leaders must lead the way in exploring new points of view from which to learn about the present emerging cultural landscape. With a foot planted in the biblical wisdom that it is not wise to long for the 'good old days' (Eccl 7:10),[2] this article proposes that there is an urgent need to correct simplistic understandings of the truth of the gospel, the good news of Jesus' coming Kingdom, and their relation to a changing world.

With special attention to technological shifts shaped by emerging digital natives, this article will address how the church can learn and discern with seriousness and wisdom the shifts impacting the areas of communal worship, Christian discipleship, and the practice of preaching. Furthermore, my hope is to provide a larger renewed vision for how new approaches to cultural interactions and engagement can help reexamine the role of spirit-led leadership for influencing future generations.

Siri and the Call to Worship

A few months ago I was invited to be one of the keynote speakers at large Young Adults conference. The host location felt like a theatre of sorts. The comfortable chairs (fitted with cup holders) made it a welcoming place, especially for those visiting as guests. Multiple screens, providing maximum visibility, gave the space a sense of digital omnipresence. The room, almost filled to capacity, was an encouraging sight, considering some of the new research noting the continuous decline of young people in church.[3] What I did not anticipate was our call to worship.

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2.   "Do not say, 'Why were the old days better than these?' For it is not wise to ask such questions" (NIV).

3.   Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 26 state "The research shows that many youth and young adults haven't even been exposed to

Imagine with me, a countdown clock appears on the screen at the center of the stage: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 . . . lights out. With the room pitch black, excited yells come from the crowd. Then it happens—a voice, as if from the heavens, pierces through the noise and calls for calm. A woman's voice, Siri-like, begins to interact with the crowd: "Those who are here to meet with God, scream!" The crowd roars. "If you came to worship the living God," she added, "Stand to your feet." Lastly, she asks, "If you are serious about surrendering it all to Jesus, raise your hands and join us as we sing." It was beautiful, powerful, and all led by a digital avatar. Few would have realized the ease with which hundreds of young adults engaged in a three- to five-minute interaction that brought together technology and an invitation to worship. Although I can think of some people who would not have enjoyed the experience, I think it is fair to say that it will not be long until moments like these become increasingly common and natural for those raised in a digital world.

As digital natives continue to step into ecclesial leadership roles, it will be normative for them to 'rewire' and rework how the church experiences and understands the meaning of our gathered worship spaces. This should come as no surprise considering the daily impact that screens, tablets, and cell phones have infused into the sphere of human interaction. The close relationship between communal worship and interactive technology will be the standard, rather than the exception, and will be less expensive to reproduce.

These realities will continue to push against the traditional understanding of church community. What was once a 'high touch,' face-to-face communal experience is now becoming an emerging hybrid type of interactive space that will expose our need to rethink how our church models are being shaped by new forms of communication. While human interaction is essential to growing in Christian community, "Facebook Live," YouTube, and live-podcast learning have melded together to form a growing trans-local experience of connectivity. Moreover, one study

Christianity . . . The result is a religious landscape that we have never seen before."

has noted that "For the majority of young people their online experience seems to be generally positive—they are able to develop a sense of belonging in their online lives and improve their social well-being."[4] This reality will require a new learning curve. While personalized human interactions will always be essential, the new digital tools will force us to learn and revisit what we really mean by Christian community.

It would be naïve to ignore the fact that these new social media experiences also have a dark side. It is here that the church can begin to demonstrate God-honoring patterns to counteract such realities. Those who are lonely or those who feel disconnected may make a connection through a digital platform or an app, but that will not be enough. Perhaps it will suffice as a first step, yet a deeper call to community engagement will have to follow. For example, my son has friends he sees in person at school, but he also connects with the same friends through a gaming console at night while adding new friends to their conversation, creating a continuous sense of connection. While this new extended feeling of connectivity may produce fewer intimate moments, it does not have to be entirely negative, but it will require us to be attentive to the good and the bad habits that may emerge.

Worship, Mystery, and Connection
The new emerging world has moved us beyond the promised stability of modernity. The old argument that secularism would nullify the role of religion continues to be revised. In fact, new research continues to accentuate the role of human curiosity and need for wonder. Physicist Carlo Rovelli remarks that "new tools allow us to observe the activity of the brain in action, and to map its highly intricate networks with impressive precision."[5] This adds a new dimension of what it might mean to love God with all our mind. I want to suggest that further studies will continue to reveal our human disposition for new ideas that force us to revisit a deeper understanding of our place in the world. In this

4.   Youth Justice Board, *The Use of the Internet*.
5.   Rovelli, *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*, 69.

regard, communal worship, the place where we use words and music to emphasize Christ-centered meaning and mystery, must remain open to discovering new ways that help people access God's presence and power. Moreover, these shifts will provide new opportunities to use technology for shaping new points of intersection between future realities and sacred spaces of Christian worship.

One aspect of Christian worship is the healing presence of God's Spirit in the midst of his people. New findings show how the brain changes and rewires itself as a process of healing. Neuroplasticity, a term for how our brains rewire and stretch based on certain life experiences, is a growing field of study. Perhaps it is here that we will begin to push the boundaries of our understanding as it relates to the special context of gathered worship within a loving community. Daniel Levitin has noted "By analyzing the changes in people's brain activity when they sing together . . . feelings of belonging and mood elevation are biologically ingrained to surface with communal singing."[6] This is uncharted territory and thus will require new theological reflection. Furthermore, I want to suggest that it is these types of shifts that leaders must consider and reflect on as they seek to help people understand their place in God's mysterious, yet life-giving story.

Beyond the Music
Augustine, the fifth-century bishop of Hippo, remarked "Music . . . is likewise given by God's generosity to mortals having rational souls in order to lead them to higher things."[7] The Christian faith has from its inception celebrated the creative aspect of our human nature. The gift of music, so central to the church's identity, has undergone a major shift and digital natives are leading the charge. This is crucial for the church, since many today have never known a time without digital music platforms. YouTube, iTunes, and Spotify, to name a few, are new digital tools

6.   Claydon, "Choir Singing."
7.   As quoted in Pope Pius XII, *Musicae Sacrae*.

providing personalized and tailored music at our fingertips. We would be remiss not to reflect on how having access to millions of videos that range from music, to learning, to silly stunts might reshape peoples' sense of identity formation.

This type of collaborative sharing was unimaginable 40 years ago. In addition, this new inventive dynamic has changed what the next generation expects and understands as the role of music and community. For example, almost every popular song has a video on YouTube as part of the larger marketing platform of the music industry. Moreover, it is increasingly common to see the latest *Christian* worship bands use professionally produced music videos that rival secular music pop stars. A generation immersed in this milieu will likely expect their church communities to incorporate video technology and music in other aspects of worship. Videos captured by drone shots depicting people with hands raised have so easily taken something that was once sacred and practiced solely in community, and instead pushed it to the web, ready to be viewed by all. This is one of the new shifts about which we are still only learning.

Whether these shifts are bad or good is not always clear, yet the sheer influx of change brings to the forefront questions that require revisiting aspects of communal worship and the liturgical practices that shape it. The root meaning of the word 'liturgy' implies communal actions *of* the people and not just the performance of sacred acts *for* the people. In some ways, our new technologies have unlocked new spheres of interaction, allowing everyone to feel like they can participate in something sacred and transcendent. This is at the heart of our theological understanding of Pentecost, the Spirit of God available to all people. Nevertheless, these changes have the potential to create division within faith communities, requiring a new focus on a biblical theology of change accentuating a need for theological discussion with renewed sensitivity to God's leading in a post-Christendom ethos.

Discipleship in an Age of Algorithms

Worship and discipleship are two sides of a single coin. In the Christian tradition, one always informs the other. Jesus' command in the Great Commission to "Go and make disciples" (Matt 28:19) flowed from an inner transformation that gave witness to the uniqueness of his good news, which would eventually expand beyond the particular Jewish context. Hence, a central feature of sharing the good news of Jesus requires *embodied* worshipers as examples of a transformative way of life we call discipleship. Consequently, the Great Commission assumes that the flourishing of Jesus' future kingdom required an approach to discipleship that could adapt and embrace change in order to engage with an emerging new world.[8] These clear biblical commands, shaped by a vision of a changing world, have not always made their way into our present understanding of discipleship. For that reason, denominational leaders and pastors continue to debate and bemoan the lack of discipleship effectiveness in most churches. If discipleship means, as in the biblical sense, to be a 'learner' who is being transformed by the Spirit as modeled in the life of Jesus, we have a lot of work to do. Yet, this is good news for those staring into the landscape of change before us.

Presently, in my role as a church planter, I have seen numerous examples of how limited understandings of discipleship inhibit peoples' ability to think about change in deeper ways that are aligned with the Scriptures and the larger story of Christian faith. For the few that do recognize this important present reality, there is still a temptation to relegate discipleship to a simplistic emphasis on salvation with an added focus on intentional Bible reading[9] and prayer. While this is important, a biblical paradigm of discipleship is so much more than that and it is my hope that the future will force us to rethink these simplistic definitions.

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8. It is a foundational reminder that Jesus calls his followers to go into the whole world, which they do not yet know exists.

9. Considering that most people in the first century could not read or have access to books, it is still shocking that our primarily paradigm for discipleship is textually-centric, missing the rich spiritual dynamics that the early Christians understood and experienced

Presently, the developing shifts brought about by a changing culture will awaken us to have a new and urgent discussion about discipleship that takes more seriously the way habits and patterns shape our cultural contexts and the new trends of our post-modern culture.

The pace of change has led to significant fragmentation in which authentic and trusted communities will become more important than ever. Here the need for a robust understanding of discipleship may be a gift we offer to our world. Furthermore, because disciples are formed by their habits and learning practices, new tools of measurement found in our innovative age make it possible to no longer have to guess about the things that are shaping our inner worlds. For the first time in history, it is possible to pinpoint and measure everyone's habitual patterns and practices, which may inform our discipleship categories. Every action done on our devices can be analyzed and reflected upon for the sake of discipleship, meaning that discipleship can now be experienced internally and also measured externally with a new sense of awareness.[10] Perhaps the biblical mandate that "out of the overflow of the heart that mouth speaks" can be expanded to included that "out of the endless scrolling of your phone your life's true focus will flow." Our daily practices, which form into habits—whether movie watching, reading, web searches, or others—provide data on many ways to explore new and unprecedented lenses into the world of discipleship making and formation.

Netflix knows, and is happy to share with you, what movies you have watched and possible preferences based on algorithmic patterns of previous movies you have watched. All one has to do is login to their account and see and select a list of movies to be watched that match previous viewing habits. One can know exactly the kinds of themes and ideas that have regularly informed their thinking. What might it mean for one's discipleship if every

10.   Another example that may come close this type of 'measuring' spirituality is the eighteenth-century Evangelical practice of devotional and journal writing to track spiritual growth. See Hindmarsh, *The Spirit of Early Evangelicalism*, 15–21.

movie is shaped by violence and vulgarity? No need to guess who or what is shaping your thoughts, we now can know.

If that is not enough, iTunes suggests music you might enjoy based on the trends revealed by the analysis of your favorites. Behaviors that shape who we become are an essential aspect of discipleship; this is not new, but the ability to measure with precision and have this information at our fingertips is novel territory. James K. A. Smith has described this practice with the term "cultural liturgies." It is the power in our practices that shapes desires and informs who we become.[11] Jesus' prayer habits awoke in his own followers a hunger to learn to pray in a new way, stirring a deeper desire. Thus, how might a world shaped by new and recognizable patterns help the church rethink the importance of discipleship and the need for more Christ-centered desires to inform how we engage with this changing world? It is now possible to envision how increased accuracy, fueled by a world of algorithms, can assist us in paying attention to what is forming who we are becoming on the inside and what we display for others to see externally.

Yuval Noah Harari, historian and bestselling author, is correct when stating "New technologies kill old gods and give birth to new gods."[12] In the case of discipleship, we are seeing, perhaps for the very first time, the ability of new advancements in learning to reveal new ways in which forms of idolatry are shaping life-altering habits. Discipleship is about the awareness that God has wired us with desires that need to be ordered in the right way. This is intricately connected to discipleship, as new habits form and reform us into *new* creations. This happens both individually and communally. With the change brought about by new algorithms, we are now able to pinpoint how repeated practices form the kinds of people we are becoming. This is good news. This is unprecedented for the church and may be a helpful lens into aspects of discipleship that, in the past, have remained elusive.

11.   Smith, *You are What You Love*, 83–110.
12.   Harari, *Homo Deus*, 314.

These shifts will also require discipleship to include a more robust vision of leadership. The first disciples were leaders, the ones who went first and who shaped how others would learn and grow in the way of Jesus. More than ever, we who have influence in shaping new approaches to faith must pay closer attention to the ways in which the people we are called to shepherd are affected by our changing world. For example, issues like 'ghosting' (the feeling of being abandoned or ignored, especially when someone stops texting or emailing you) will have a dramatic effect on our new discipleship approaches. It is a common form of digital rejection. This is a habit that forms us and informs how we think about relationship and discipleship.

For our purposes, it seems just as urgent to consider the spiritual formation ramifications of this new approach to personal relationship. We would be fooling ourselves if we did not pause to consider how these emerging trends will weaken the trust fabric of our relationships. With all the positive habits that will emerge, there are also negative ramifications brought about by smart phones that will have to be addressed in our growing post-Christian contexts. God cares about the health and flourishing of our relationships, so this is something we cannot leave unattended. It is not difficult to imagine how this trend may already be changing how we think about grief, rejection, and one's ability to commit to a long-term relationship in mature ways.

Preaching and the Power of God's Story

It is clear that the next generation is not buying into the definition that something being virtual means that it is fake. While enhanced pictures or videos can blur the line between what is real and fake, digital natives are highly aware of doctored photos and fake videos. In some sense, having been raised in a highly digital culture has allowed them to grow discernment perspectives for how to assess online information.[13] In fact, some may argue that

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13.   See Guess et al., "Less than you Think," 1–8. Research like this is showing how younger people are less likely to share fake news on social

new tech will redefine 'real' in a much more complicated way. This is most clear when reflecting on the issues of teaching and preaching. The viral culture of online videos and its overflow into sermons and conference talks is big business. From online classrooms to faith healers and inspirational gurus, we have yet to scratch the surface of this shift and its impact on the practice of preaching. Ready or not, these new modes of learning will continue to have an unparalleled impact on the passing of the Christian faith that traditionally happened primarily in the context of communal worship.

Those familiar with the rise of the Protestant Reformation recall that a shift in communication was a hallmark of that important period of reform for the Church.[14] Some have gone as far as to say that without the printing press, the Reformation would never have flourished like it did.[15] Furthermore, print technology pushed against the most preferred methods of 'trusted' learning during the early-Reformation era. Andrew Pettegree remarks that in 1570 the Geneva Consistory felt it urgent to interrogate the son of a pastor because he "had been reading books" that had not been approved by moral leaders of the community.[16] Historical reminders like this are a helpful guide to correct alarmist approaches without realizing how easily we embrace one form of innovation and change that may ensue while convincing ourselves that others are bad. Having said that, it is just as important to understand that previous seasons of change do not compare to the *pace* of innovation common today.

While preaching solely as a lecture will not necessarily go out of style, it will increasingly have to compete with new and changing models of learning. While some are exploring new interactive pedagogies, some seem adamant that the dictation style shaped by one pastoral voice is the only way to expound

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platforms: "Our most robust and consistent finding is that older Americans were more likely to share articles from fake news domains" (2).

14.   For a recent look at how this concept relates to a post-Christendom context, see Walker, "Ninety-Five Tweets," 67–86.

15.   Eisenstein, *Printing Press*, 303.

16.   Pettegree, *Book in the Renaissance*, xiii.

Scripture. While this is not the place to discuss the theological assumptions in that position, it is clear that the rise of new interactive tools are going to become more important than ever. While we will still need specialists who provide important clarity on difficult topics, the biblical narrative will have to come alive in new ways.

Speaking into the Preaching
I recently visited an Artificial Intelligence (AI) lab where guests were invited to journey through the story of a man who had gone blind. If you can imagine, the room was designed for a fully immersive sensory experience of the painful process of losing one's eyesight. This was possible due to the fact that this individual had journaled through the process. We are not far removed from a time when churches will be able to incorporate AI experiences like this as part of their preaching practice. Instead of just reading a powerful biblical narrative, I believe people will expect to hear while being plugged into AI fitted device available in church pews. Could this not be a richer way to awaken a generation to the fact the Scriptures are living words still relevant today?

A popular Netflix show called *Black Mirror* weaves together the complicated ways that new technology will require new ethical guidelines as we move into the future. Each episode pushes the boundaries by highlighting both positive and negative uses of new digital tools of the future. Recently, they released a full movie episode called *Bandersnatch* with an interactive feature letting viewers choose their own adventure by giving options throughout the movie. Imagine a generation who feels the power to interpret and revisit a story through multiple lenses. What would this mean for preaching? How might this instill an expectation for people listening to a preacher? Might our sermons have to have multiple endings, giving the online viewer some different options based on what the Holy Spirit is calling them to? While we have always believed that God uses the preaching of Scripture in a personal way, could new technology allow us to hear and incorporate this in live settings? How might we follow along with a character, a bad decision, a regret, and follow through on

all the possible outcomes? For example, while watching *Bandersnatch*, I found myself going back to a point after regretting my choice about the character—a choice that I made while watching. Might grace, God's loving forgiveness of second chances, find a deeper meaning in this new emerging world? In a world needing a fresh outlook on a diversity of perspectives, might these tools highlight the catholicity of the church in new ways? The global realities have never been so immense and yet so promising.

With a slightly different approach, the popular organization TED is just one of many platforms offering the most advanced video teaching, spurring people to learn and think beyond their own context.[17] Approaches to distance learning are part of secularism's crowning achievement—the pursuit of learning shaped by an individualistic emphasis. Here, the essential skill of hermeneutics has been thrust into new global arena, providing both a diversity of perspectives for understanding the Bible in fresh ways and at the same time a reminder that a modern view of certainty is no longer a standard of trust. These tools allow people to stop, pause, rewind, replay, and rethink through major concepts along the way. What this means for theological training and the process of ordination is yet to be seen, but methods of discerning the meaning of preaching and changes based on how these new modes of learning will impact the future of the church are inevitable.

I believe we are entering a new era of a 'shared economy of hermeneutics,'[18] where what gets the most views, and thus higher financial payback, will become the most trusted and shared aspect of biblical teaching. It is possible that the Reformation's most compelling achievement of a Bible that is accessible to all has pushed us to the new heights of personalized Bible study that no longer even requires a preacher or pastor who journeys with others within the larger context of Christian community. How might this be remedied in our fast-changing technological landscape? It is here again that a new kind of leader who is learning,

17.   https://www.ted.com/
18.   A term I have invented that aligns with the nomenclature of the shared economy and the new realities of economics.

listening, and taking seriously the use and abuses of technological shifts like this must emerge and provide wisdom.

The Leaders of Tomorrow

While no one knows what tomorrow holds, all indicators show a new world of change pushing the boundaries of what it means to be human, even beyond human. Mark Shiffman, writing in *First Things*, has noted "It's easy to write transhumanism off as a fringe phenomenon of science fantasy. But this is a mistake, for elements of it are already engulfing us."[19] In a similar fashion, I have attempted to stir the hearts and minds of leaders concerned about a new emerging world and its impact on the church. The goal has been to celebrate with discernment the new intersection points shaped by digital natives and the next wave of possibilities that will inform our understanding of communal worship, discipleship, and preaching. While the traditional models will not be eradicated, those who care to engage with the new shifts in technology will feel it most urgently in how we define and reflect on worship spaces.

No doubt this will be messy, but new points of interaction are inviting people to see the church as something more than just a Sunday morning time slot to be filled. If Jesus is our model, then life with attentiveness to the Spirit's power and presence can be explored in new ways with the use of many new technologies.

The world I envision will see the rise of a new kind of missionary. It has already been astutely observed by others that,

> The missionary encounter does not mean a polemical or anti-cultural stance. There is much good about North American culture, and so a missionary encounter will mean a loving involvement and dialogical engagement that appreciates and embraces the creational good while rejecting the idolatrous distortion.[20]

In this light, I would argue that what we will see emerge are new daily liturgies shaped by courageous communities learning

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19. Shiffman, "Humanity 4.5."
20. Sheridan and Goheen, "Missional Spirituality," 107.

on the frontlines. From preaching to praying, our most sacred communal interactions have been already altered by the changes we see all around inviting us to trust God in new ways.

As noted by Leonard Hjalmarson, "our old fixed, terrestrial ideas and the language to describe those ideas do not seem terribly well adapted to the fluidly of our new ocean world."[21] While we will have to get comfortable with swimming upstream, only when we get honest about exploring these changing realities will we discover the *necessary* tension from which new paradigms for developing influential leaders can emerge. The suggestions above are not solely concerned with questions about the relevance and nature of the church for post-modern times. Moreover, leadership dynamics impacted by a changing world are part of larger global pattern of transitions that must be acknowledged. Those who refuse to do so will abdicate their responsibility to serve the cause of the gospel and they will miss the bigger picture of how God is at work in the world today.

The present world shaped by digital natives is changing how people hear and apply the truth of the gospel to their lives. This ever-growing reality should stir leaders to grapple, learn, and listen anew for cues of God's leading that may ground us with a deeper biblical appreciation for worship, discipleship, and the role of the church in these times. As new technologies continue to alter how people craft their own narratives of belief and their place in the world, alternative spiritualties will continue to grow, yet we must be more acutely aware to tell new stories of God's grace, power, and work in times of change.

While espousing change may not always be a good thing, to ignore major shifts that are rewiring how we think, lead, and live is to neglect the God-given duty of those committed to be disciples of Jesus who are called to lead in times of transition. Only when we get honest about discerning these types of issues can we create space for new conversations taking place in numerous fields of learning. To shun all change has always been the fastest way to miss an opportunity to learn, adapt, and explore the beauty of the gospel message for such a time as this.

21. Hjalmarson, *Broken Futures*, 105.

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