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Lessons from Letters to Churches in the Digital Age: Why Pentecostalism Needs a Digital Theology

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Abstract

This article introduces digital theology as a necessary and distinct field of theological reflection for Pentecostal churches navigating an increasingly technologised world. Differentiating digital theology from digital religion studies, it argues that faith communities must move beyond descriptive analyses of religious practices online towards sustained, reflexive, and theologically grounded engagement with digital media, artificial intelligence, and emerging technocultures. Drawing on Scripture, contemporary scholarship, and Pentecostal theological commitments, the article explores how digital mediation reshapes worship, authority, community, and spiritual formation, particularly in post-pandemic contexts. Through a creative theological thought experiment modelled on Revelation 1–3, the article presents three symbolic church responses to technology – Luddite-ocia, Technopolis, and Middle-Tech – each illustrating distinct postures of resistance, uncritical adoption, and discerning engagement. The article concludes by calling Pentecostal leaders and congregations to develop a robust digital theology rooted in pneumatology, ethical discernment, and biblical wisdom, asserting that thoughtful engagement with technology is not optional but essential for faithful witness and Spirit-led ministry in the digital age.

Key Words: artificial intelligence and faith, COVID-19, digital age, digital ecclesiology, digital media, digital religion, digital theology, post-pandemic worship, Pentecostal theology, technology and the church, theological discernment

What is Digital Theology?

Digital theology is an emerging area of theological studies that draws on the fields of contextual theology and the study of science and theology, considering practical, ethical, and theological responses to the growing technological society in which we live. According to Peter Phillips et al., digital theology is “the intentional, sustained, and reflexive theologically-resourced engagement with

digitality/digital culture.”¹ In other words, it is about taking seriously the need for deep and focused theological reflection on how digital media tools and platforms are shaping our world and the nature of the church in contemporary studies.

Digital theology differs from other scholarly areas of conversation around religion and technology, such as the field of digital religion studies, an area of scholarship I have helped pioneer and develop over the past three decades. As I define it, digital religion is the study of how religious practices and beliefs are performed, shaped, and influenced in and through digital media and culture.² Scholars generally take an interdisciplinary and comparative approach in their work. This means that the study of digital religion is not just about analysing the strengths and weaknesses of online worship or the strategies of religious websites – it seeks to identify broader trends in how current understandings of religious identity, authority, and community are negotiated and shaped within digital contexts.

Digital theology, on the other hand, focuses on how faith communities understand how emerging technology shapes the world we live in and respond to the opportunities and challenges offered by digital media when integrated into congregational life. As Phillips et al. suggest, digital theology requires focused, reflexive, and engaged theological evaluation of the digital and AI eras.³ This means digital theology is not incidental or passive theological reflection. It requires sustained and ongoing learning and engagement with the emerging technoculture around us, as well as critical responsiveness to the theological trajectories that technology use creates for faith communities. It means thoughtful and careful assessment, not just of digital texts and trends but of the tools of technology themselves.

This chapter draws attention to the sphere of digital theology, which calls all church leaders and members to scripturally interrogate and biblically evaluate the culture and implications of digital life, before simply embracing digital and AI tools. Pentecostalism must consider what fruits and wisdom their theological tradition and thinking have to offer their community and the world. As stewards of a tradition that treasures the immediacy of the Spirit, the power of testimony, and the transformative presence of God, believers have much to offer an age that lives somewhere between the embodied world and the dynamic realm of the Spirit’s life. However, in this digital age, our lives and the Spirit’s movement are increasingly mediated through screens, algorithms, and platforms. That is why engaging with digital theology is not optional – it is essential.

¹ Peter Phillips et al., “Defining Digital Theology: Digital Humanities, Digital Religion and the Particular Work of the CODEC Research Centre and Network,” *Open Theology* 5, no. 1 (2019): 39, <https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2019-0003>.

² Heidi Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religion in New Media Worlds* (Routledge, 2013).

³ Phillips et al., “Defining Digital Theology.”

Theological Issues Current Technology Raises for Pentecostal Leaders and Churches

The digital age raises many important theological questions for Pentecostal churches around the world. For example, Pentecostal worship has historically been an inherently embodied, spontaneous, and communal practice. However, with the rise of the global COVID-19 pandemic, many churches were compelled to experiment with and adopt new hybrid and digital forms of worship.⁴ Online church became the norm, and while the pandemic is now long over, the religious landscape of the post-pandemic world is increasingly filled with digitally mediated worship opportunities. As many ministries continue to develop new forms of religious gathering and spiritual involvement, this raises important questions about how digital mediation alters not just our worship experience, but also our ecclesiology. In my work on Religious Digital Creatives, I have argued that digital platforms create networked religious publics where authority, presence, and participation are redefined in ways that create new opportunities and freedoms for individual worshippers but can have a profound impact on the church's understanding of what it means to be a faith community and the church.⁵

Another issue raised is how technological culture has come to shape younger generations' understanding of theological concepts and imagination. Research has shown that post-pandemic individuals are increasingly invested in multiple churches and faith communities simultaneously. They no longer rely on a single church or a set of religious leaders for their religious teachings or spiritual guidance. A study conducted by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research found online worship and pandemic experiences have reshaped church engagement, including increased participation in multiple congregations.⁶ The study also suggests a more fluid, personalised approach to spiritual engagement that draws on multiple sources of knowledge and authority. As theologian Pete Ward noted in his book *Liquid Church* (2013),⁷ contemporary media can foster and encourage more fluid, consumer-driven expressions of faith. Without theological reflection, churches risk adopting digital norms uncritically, thereby diluting Pentecostal distinctives such as prophecy, healing, and spiritual warfare.

Additionally, in an era of rapid growth in artificial intelligence, we are witnessing an increased complexity in the spiritual and moral dilemmas posed by our technological landscape. Lately, I have been speaking with numerous

⁴ Heidi A. Campbell and Sophia Osteen, *When Pastors Put on the "Tech Hat": How Churches Digitized during Covid-19*, Report 1 from *Tech in Churches during COVID-19 Research Project*, Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies, OAKTrust Digital Repository, 2021, <https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/194959>.

⁵ Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority*, Media, Religion and Culture (Routledge, 2020).

⁶ Scott Thumma, "Attender Survey Report: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations Study (EPIC)," Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford International University for Religion and Peace, 2025, <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Press-Release-Attender-Survey-Report.pdf>.

⁷ Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013).

international news outlets about the rise of religious chatbots being developed to help Christians study Scriptures, offer faith-based counselling, and even serve as mentors in discerning one's spiritual vocation. Pentecostal theology, with its emphasis on spiritual discernment and gifts, is uniquely equipped to address these questions – but only if leaders engage them. As Calvin Mercer and Tracy Trothen argue, faith communities must speak into tech ethics, engage with technology designers, and offer thoughtful and theologically grounded responses to these AI innovations, rather than merely condemning them; otherwise, they risk being sidelined as out-of-date technophobes.⁸

Many other theological challenges could be highlighted. However, I would like to turn our attention to considering how churches have responded and should continue to respond to emerging technologies. Often, our natural inclination is to see a binary distinction: (1) technology is good and should be embraced by the church, or (2) technology is bad and must be resisted by the church at all costs. However, technology, like many things in our contemporary world, is neither entirely good nor entirely bad. Technologies, instead, are imprinted with the potential and affordances of their creators. Their users' practices and intentions can also shape them. This means that the use of technology and decision making requires careful evaluation and spiritual discernment.

To the Churches in the Digital Age

Imagine with me that you are reading the Book of Revelation, chapters 1 through 3. This is a well-known passage where John the Apostle, from his imprisonment on the island of Patmos, writes about the future situation of seven churches in ancient Asia, the challenges they face, their strengths, and their sins. However, what if this passage of Revelation were written today, directed towards churches living in our digital age? What might the Apostle John, inspired by the Holy Spirit and guided by prophetic insight, say to churches about their use of and views of technology?

To the churches in the Digital Age, which are in Asia:

Grace be unto you, and peace, from the one who is, and was, and is to come;
and from the spirits which are before his throne;

For those who have ears, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

I suggest that John might see three types of churches, each one representing a distinct understanding of the role and impact of contemporary technology in society.

In this section, I introduce the churches of Luddite-ocia, Technopolis, and Middle-Tech. Each symbolically depicts different ways contemporary churches in Asia and beyond negotiate their relationship and ministry with digital media. This is not an attempt to rewrite the Book of Revelation. Instead, I offer this as a theologically inspired thought experiment on how God might see and react to different churches' technological choices. So, before passing judgement or

⁸ Calvin Mercer and Tracy J. Trothen, "Religion 2.0 and the Enhanced Technological Future," in *Religion and the Technological Future: An Introduction to Biohacking, Artificial Intelligence, and Transhumanism* (Springer International Publishing, 2021).

assuming your church aligns with one of these churches, listen carefully and reflect on what this reframing of the text has to teach us about being the church in a world saturated with media.

To the Angel of the Church in Luddite-ocia Write

These are the words of him who is the Alpha and the Omega, who speaks truth in every age and whose voice is not silenced by the noise of the world: I know your works, your vigilance, and your longing to remain unstained by the world. You have resisted the seductive pull of the digital age and have not bowed to the idols of convenience and spectacle.

You have held fast to the ancient paths, and your desire to be led by My Spirit, and not by algorithms, which is commendable. You have discerned rightly that technology can shape hearts and habits, and you have warned your children and neighbours of its power to distract and distort. You have spoken boldly of My truth in a world drowning in information, and you have not been ashamed of the gospel.

However, I hold this against you: your fear of digital media and artificial intelligence has become your master. In your zeal to resist the influence of technology, you have made it into a false god – declaring it too powerful, too corrupt, beyond redemption. You have preached its banishment, not its transformation.

Have you forgotten that all things were made through Me, and without Me nothing was made that has been made? Technology, though shaped by human hands, bears the imprint of My creativity. It is a tool, not a tyrant. It can be wielded for good, to proclaim My Kingdom and connect My people.

Repent, therefore, of your fear. Do not let suspicion close your eyes to opportunity. Return to Me with open hands, and I will show you how even the tools of this age can serve My purposes. To the one who overcomes, I will give the wisdom to speak truth in the digital world, and a voice that echoes in both sacred and secular spaces online and offline.

For those who have ears, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches ...

The name of the church of Luddite-ocia refers to the Luddites of nineteenth-century-England textile workers and weavers who protested the shift from hand-woven garments to those produced on automated looms.⁹ They believed this new technology threatened their jobs and livelihoods. Today, the term “Luddite” is often used to describe someone who actively resists or is sceptical of modern technology, mainly digital innovations.

The church in Luddite-ocia symbolises a community that has chosen to resist the influence of digital technology in its spiritual life and ministry. Their resistance is rooted in a sincere desire to remain faithful to the gospel and to avoid the distractions and distortions that often accompany technological immersion. In many ways, this church has rightly discerned the power of digital tools to shape human behaviour, values, and relationships. It has warned others

⁹ Kirkpatrick Sale, “The Achievements of ‘General Ludd’: A Brief History of the Luddites,” *The Ecologist* 29, no. 5 (1999): 310.
https://www.accordingtophillips.com/uploads/8/1/8/3/81833274/the_achievements_of_general_ludd_2.pdf.

of the dangers of algorithmic influence, the addictive nature of screens, and the erosion of sacred rhythms in a hyper-connected world.

However, the church's posture has shifted from discernment to fear. In its effort to remain pure, it has come to view technology not merely as a challenge but as an enemy – something inherently corrupt and irredeemable. This absolutist stance risks turning technology into a false god, ironically giving it more power than it deserves. By preaching its banishment rather than its transformation, the church has closed itself off from meaningful and mission-driven opportunities to engage with the world.

A contemporary example of this mindset can be seen in communities that seek to avoid social media or discourage digital engagement among congregants. While such caution may stem from a desire to preserve holiness, it can also isolate the church from the very people it is called to reach. The challenge for Luddite-ocia is not to abandon its convictions but to temper them with grace and openness. It must learn to see technology as a tool that, when wielded wisely, can amplify the gospel and foster community.

The verse, "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made," comes from the prologue to the Gospel of John (1:3), which introduces the reader to Jesus as the divine *Logos* – the Word through whom all creation came into being. It affirms that everything, including human inventions and technologies, ultimately originates from God's creative power. This challenges the notion that any part of creation is beyond redemption. Instead, it invites believers to see the fingerprints of divine creativity even in the tools and systems shaped by human hands.

For the church in Luddite-ocia, John 1:3 serves as both a rebuke and an invitation. It rebukes the tendency to view technology as irredeemable, reminding the church that nothing exists outside the scope of Christ's creative and redemptive work. It also invites the church to repent of its fear and to reimagine technology as a tool that can be used for God's purposes. Rather than preaching its banishment, the church is called to preach its transformation – to see digital tools as potential vessels for truth, connection, and compassion.

This verse affirms that the digital age is not outside God's sovereignty. It encourages the church to move from suspicion to discernment, from rejection to engagement. By embracing a theology of redemption, Luddite-ocia can begin to speak truth in the digital wilderness and cultivate a voice that echoes in both sacred and virtual spaces. In doing so, it will fulfil its calling to be a light in the world, even in the pixelated places where many now dwell.

To the Angel of the Church in Technopolis Write

These are the words of him who walks among the lampstands, and whose glory is not diminished by the glow of digital pixels or computer screens. I see your heart and your passion to reach those far from Me. You have embraced the tools of this age with creativity and love. You have built bridges through online networks and turned social media spaces into doors of hope. You have used media to teach, to gather, and to make My presence known in new ways. Your innovation has brought many to Me, and your desire to make My name known in every corner of the digital world is pleasing in My sight. You have not hidden your light under a bushel but have let it shine through fiber optics and Wi-Fi signals.

However, I hold this against you: in your embrace of technology, you have sometimes lost sight of Me. You have let the glow of the screen dim the light of my presence. The tools you use have come to shape your worship, rather than serve it. You have allowed the medium to become the message, and in this, my message to be diluted.

Ask yourself: do you serve Me, or the systems you have built? Has the Spirit led your ministry, or are you driven by metrics such as likes, rankings, and shares? Do you seek transformation, or multi-media engagement? Return to your first love. Let technology be your servant, not your master. Use it wisely, and let My Spirit guide your innovation. To the one who overcomes, I will grant the ability to create digital spaces where My truth is not only heard, but My words touch the deep places of humans and their brokenness. I desire that the digital media you use does not simply reflect my presence, but makes it manifest in hearts and minds.

For those who have ears, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches ...

The church in Technopolis takes its name from the book *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (1993), written by media scholar and critic Neil Postman; he argues that our infatuation with technology has insidiously eroded our culture.¹⁰ While technology offers us new opportunities, it also comes with a high price, as Postman describes it as the “submission of all forms of cultural life to the sovereignty of technique and technology.”¹¹

The church in Technopolis represents a community that has enthusiastically embraced digital technology as a means of expanding its ministry and outreach. This church has used livestreams, social media, apps, and other digital platforms to share the gospel, build community, and engage with seekers in innovative ways. Its creativity and missional zeal are commendable, and its efforts have brought many into contact with the message of Christ. In a world increasingly shaped by digital interaction, Technopolis has refused to hide its light and instead has let it shine through fiber optics and wireless signals.

However, the church’s embrace of technology has come with spiritual risks. In its pursuit of relevance and reach, Technopolis has sometimes allowed the “medium” to shape “the message.” Worship services may begin to resemble performances, and discipleship can be reduced to content consumption. The metrics of success – likes, shares, views, and engagement – can subtly replace spiritual fruit as the measure of ministry effectiveness. The glow of the screen can dim the light of Christ’s presence, and the pursuit of innovation can eclipse the call to intimacy with God.

A contemporary example of this dynamic is the rise of influencer pastors and digital ministries that prioritise branding and visibility over spiritual depth and substance. While these platforms may reach millions, they can also foster a culture of celebrity and consumerism. Technopolis is thus called to re-evaluate its motivations and methods. The church is invited to return to its first love – to centre its mission on Christ rather than on systems – and to let technology serve the gospel rather than shape it.

¹⁰ Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (Vintage Books, 1993).

¹¹ Postman, *Technopoly*, 48.

The following passage from 1 John offers a deeply relevant warning to the church in Technopolis: “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – comes not from the Father but from the world” (2:15-16). This passage speaks directly to the spiritual dangers of becoming overly attached to worldly systems and values – especially those that appeal to vanity, pride, and superficiality. In the context of the digital age, these verses resonate with urgency. The “lust of the eyes” and “pride of life” are not abstract concepts; they manifest daily in the metrics-driven culture of social media, influencer branding, and digital engagement. Likes, shares, followers, and views can become idols, subtly shaping identity and ministry goals in ways that drift from the Spirit’s leading.

This passage distinguishes between the created world, which God made and called good, and “the world” as a system of values opposed to God. The latter includes anything that tempts believers to prioritise self over service, appearance over substance, and popularity over truth. In digital ministry, this temptation is amplified by the constant pressure to be visible, relevant, and engaging. Churches may begin to measure success by analytics rather than by spiritual fruit, and worship may be designed to attract rather than to transform.

For Technopolis, this passage serves as both a mirror and a compass. It reflects the church’s vulnerability to digital idolatry and offers a path back to spiritual integrity. The letter to Technopolis praises the church’s creativity and outreach but warns that its embrace of technology has sometimes led to spiritual compromise. The glow of the screen has dimmed the light of Christ’s presence. First John 2:15-16 calls Technopolis to re-evaluate its motivations and methods. It urges the church to ask whether its ministry is led by the Spirit or by systems, whether it seeks transformation or mere visibility. The verse reinforces the letter’s call to return to its first love – to centre its mission on Christ and allow the Spirit to guide its innovation. When used wisely and prayerfully, digital tools can amplify the gospel. However, when they become ends in themselves, they risk leading the church away from its true purpose.

This reflection can be further deepened by noting a connection to Revelation 2:4-5, which echoes the call to the church at Ephesus to return to its foundational love. Just as the church in Ephesus was urged to rekindle its passion for Christ, the church at Technopolis is invited to re-centre its ministry on spiritual intimacy rather than digital influence.

To the Angel of the Church in Middle-Tech Write

These are the words of him who is the Word made flesh, who dwells among His people in every age and medium: I know how you wrestle with technology, seek my wisdom in this, and pursue humility and holiness in a digital age. You have neither rejected technology nor worshipped it. You have walked the narrow path, seeing both its dangers and its possibilities. You understand that technology is not neutral, that it reflects the desires of its makers. However, you also know that I redeem all things and have sought to redeem these tools for My glory. You have cultivated digital spaces with care and used them to foster connection, community, and compassion.

You have taught others how to reflect and discern the best ways to implement and leverage emerging media. You have not rushed into innovation but have tested every spirit. You have demonstrated that technology can be harnessed and shaped in ways that can reflect my character when used with wisdom. Continue in these good works. Do not grow weary in the continual process of discerning the spirits behind technology. Let prayer be your compass and My Word your foundation.

Remember always that technology should serve the house of God, not rule it. Let your ministry be shaped by My Spirit, not by tech trends and gadgets. To the one who overcomes, I will grant the ability to speak truth in every medium, and to build communities that reflect My Kingdom – online and in person, in code and in compassion.

For those who have ears, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches ...

The church of Middle-Tech embodies a thoughtful and spiritually mature approach to technology. Unlike Luddite-ocia, which rejects digital tools out of fear, and Technopolis, which risks letting the technology form their liturgy, Middle-Tech seeks a balanced path. This church recognises that technology is not neutral – it carries the values and intentions of its creators – but it also affirms that God can redeem all things. Rather than fleeing from innovation or rushing into it, Middle-Tech seeks discernment, prayer, and theological reflection before embracing innovations, thoughtfully using them.

It takes its name from the idea of the “middle way,” an approach to spirituality that seeks to combine biblical wisdom, embodied spiritual experience, and contemplative prayer in its pursuit of holiness.¹² The middle way creates balance between action and stillness, between doing and being. It links to the concept of the “third space,” a sociological term that refers to a neutral public space, situated between home and work, where people gather to build relationships and find meaning.¹³ It is what the church, in essence, is called to be: a place that offers a sense of belonging and hope and helps make sense of how to live in a world wrapped in media.

Middle-Tech is a church that regularly seeks wise counsel on how to cultivate digital spaces that foster genuine community and spiritual depth. It uses technology not to entertain or impress, but to connect, teach, and serve. It encourages its members to reflect before posting on social media, to pray before streaming new content, and to consider the impact before adopting new platforms. In doing so, Middle-Tech models a posture of wisdom and humility – one that acknowledges both the potential and the limitations of digital media.

An example of this approach would be a congregation that utilises online platforms to host prayer groups, provide pastoral care, and share thought-provoking theological content, while also fostering strong in-person relationships and maintaining a rhythm of spiritual formation. This church does

¹² Kerry Dearborn, “The Crucified Christ as the Motherly God: The Theology of Julian of Norwich,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55, no. 3 (2022): 283-302, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930602000327>.

¹³ Kathy Jordan and Jennifer Elsdon-Clifton, “Through the Lens of Third Space Theory,” *CSEU 2014: Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Computer Supported Education 1* (April 2014): 220-24, <https://doi.org/10.5220/0004792402200224>.

not chase trends or metrics; instead, it seeks to be led by the Spirit in every medium. It understands that technology must serve the mission of God, not define it.

Middle-Tech's commitment to testing every spirit and grounding its ministry in Scripture and prayer is a powerful witness in a time when many are overwhelmed by digital noise. Its example shows that technology can be tamed and used to reflect God's character – when wielded with wisdom, humility, and love. This church is a model for others seeking to navigate the digital age faithfully, demonstrating that it is possible to be both innovative and rooted, both connected and contemplative.

Romans 12:2 offers a theological foundation for the church in Middle-Tech's approach to technology: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing, and perfect will." This verse is a call to spiritual discernment and transformation, urging believers not to be shaped by the world's values and systems but to undergo a renewal of their minds. In the context of the digital age, this renewal is especially critical. Technology is not neutral – it reflects the priorities, desires, and ideologies of its creators and users. Therefore, engaging with it requires intentional reflection and spiritual maturity.

The verse's opening phrase speaks to the subtle and pervasive influence of cultural norms, including those embedded in digital platforms. Algorithms often reward speed, spectacle, and superficiality, encouraging users to chase trends, seek validation through metrics, and prioritise visibility over depth and substance. For churches, this can translate into ministries shaped more by engagement statistics than by spiritual fruit. Romans 12:2 challenges this conformity, calling believers to resist the pull of worldly systems and instead pursue transformation.

The transformation Paul describes is not merely behavioural – it is cognitive and spiritual in nature. It involves the "renewing of your mind," a process that aligns one's thinking with God's truth. This renewal enables believers to "test and approve what God's will is," equipping them to make wise, Spirit-led decisions in every area of life – including their use of technology. For Middle-Tech, this verse affirms the importance of discernment, reflection, and prayerful engagement. The church's commitment to testing every spirit and grounding its digital practices in Scripture is a direct embodiment of this call to renewal.

For Middle-Tech, Romans 12:2 serves as both affirmation and encouragement. The church is praised for its balanced and discerning approach to technology – neither rejecting it out of fear nor idolising it out of enthusiasm. Instead, it seeks to use digital tools wisely and prayerfully, cultivating spaces that reflect God's character. This verse reinforces the church's posture, reminding it to remain vigilant and rooted in the Spirit. Ultimately, Middle-Tech is called to walk a narrow path; let prayer be its compass and God's Word its foundation. In doing so, it becomes a model of faithful engagement in the digital age, demonstrating that transformation, not conformity, is the hallmark of true discipleship.

Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this chapter is to suggest that Pentecostal churches should not only develop a digital ministry strategy, but also a well-grounded digital theology that informs and guides their use and, at times, non-use of established and emerging technologies. Pentecostal churches and leaders are called to engage technology with discernment, grounding their decisions in Scripture, pneumatology, and ethical responsibility. By doing so, they can lead their communities into a digital future where the Spirit continues to speak, heal, and transform.

It is essential to remember that the digital world is not a separate space, but rather an integral and connected part of our world and lived reality as humans in the twenty-first century. Digital platforms and spaces should not be viewed as a threat but as an opportunity and a mission field. However, like any field, it requires preparation, discernment, and theological engagement. Global Pentecostalism is called to be a witness and proclaim the gospel in all corners of the world, including digitally mediated and technologically hybridised spaces. Pentecostal churches and their members are exhorted to carefully consider their corporate and personal engagement with technology to determine to what extent their tech use enables them to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. Doing digital theology is essential for the church in the digital age, as it will provide it with the necessary clarity and wisdom to live as those who understand the times in which we live and spiritual attunement to listen to the still, small voice to know how we should respond to our technological world. Let us not outsource our theology to technologists and ethicists. May the church lead and model a technology-balanced life that brings healing to our broken world.

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Response to Heidi Campbell’s “Lessons from Letters to Churches in the Digital Age: Why Pentecostalism Needs a Digital Theology”

Wayne Choong

Heidi Campbell’s work has long helped the church read the signs of the times. Like the sons of Issachar, her scholarship equips faith communities to discern the cultural moment in which they are called to be faithful. Yet today, the “signs of the times” no longer arrive primarily through geopolitical shifts or cultural movements alone. They increasingly come mediated through algorithms, influencers, metrics, artificial intelligence, and platform logics that quietly shape attention, desire, and belonging.

At the heart of Campbell’s paper – and indeed the wider body of her work – is a question that confronts nearly every contemporary faith community: how can spiritual depth be sustained when worship, formation, and community are increasingly filtered through screens, managed by algorithms, and mediated by artificial intelligence?

Her diagnosis of our digital condition is marked by both analytical clarity and pastoral attentiveness. This is a gift to Pentecostal scholars and practitioners in Asia and beyond, particularly as we discern what it means to be the church in a world shaped not only by globalisation and secularisation, but by digitalisation. The digital is no longer an optional extension of ministry; it has become the thick cultural atmosphere in which we now live, move, and have our being.

One of Campbell’s most important reminders is that the central challenge before us is not merely how to *use* technology, but how to *theologise* it. For Pentecostals especially, this requires discerning the spiritual, ethical, and ecclesial implications of digital life. Discernment, after all, is not foreign to Pentecostal spirituality but one of its native languages.

What follows is not simply a summary of Campbell’s argument but a dialogical response: an affirmation of her key contributions, followed by three gentle provocations offered in the spirit of communal theological discernment.

Digital Strategy, Digital Religion, and Digital Theology

At the theological core of Campbell’s argument is a vital distinction between digital strategy, digital religion studies, and digital theology (see below).

| | Digital Strategy | Digital Religion Studies | Digital Theology |
|------------------------|--|---|--|
| Core Question | <i>How can we use technology for ministry?</i> | <i>How are religious beliefs and practices performed and shaped in digital culture?</i> | <i>How should theology, faith, and ecclesial life respond to and engage digital culture?</i> |
| Focus | Optimising platforms, tools, communication | Observation, analysis, patterns | Theological reflection, meaning, formation |
| Goal | Effective outreach and engagement | Understanding and critique of digital religion | Spirit-led discernment and theological wisdom |
| Activity | <i>Deploy</i> | <i>Deliberate</i> | <i>Discern</i> |
| Typical Concern | “How do we grow our online audience?” | “How does digital media shape religious identity?” | “What does it mean to be the church and to follow Christ in a digitally mediated world?” |

Many churches today operate with a digital strategy. Livestreams, social media outreach, and online engagement initiatives are common, all driven by a pragmatic question: how can we use technology for ministry? Digital religion studies, a field Campbell herself helped pioneer, asks a different question: how are religious beliefs and practices performed and shaped within digital culture? This approach is descriptive and analytical, mapping how faith, identity, authority, and community are reconfigured online. Digital theology, however, presses further. It asks: how should theology, faith, and ecclesial life respond to and engage digital culture? It moves beyond deployment and description towards theological discernment and formation.

As Sherry Turkle has famously observed, technology is not merely a set of tools that do things *for* us; it increasingly does things *to* us – shaping our imaginations of self, God, and community.¹ Put simply: digital strategy deploys, digital religion deliberates, and digital theology discerns. This distinction matters deeply. Many Pentecostal churches, eager to innovate, move too quickly into strategy while bypassing sustained study and theological reflection. We learned how to broadcast online before asking what kind of spirituality such practices were forming in us. Production was optimised before formation was examined. Campbell’s work insists, rightly, that theology and spiritual discernment must sit at the centre of digital engagement rather than at its periphery. This emphasis resonates profoundly with Pentecostal sensibilities.

¹ Sherry Turkle, “The Tethered Self: Technology Reinvents Intimacy and Solitude,” *Continuing Higher Education Review* 75 (2011): 28, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ967807.pdf>.

Her threefold typology – Luddite-ocia (the fearful resister), Technopolis (the uncritical adopter), and Middle-Tech (the balanced discerner) – functions as a contemporary reimagining of the “letters to the churches” in Revelation. These are not merely practical stances towards technology; they are spiritual postures. Together, they call the church to reject both technophobia and technophilia in favour of a discerning middle way. It is from within this affirmation that my first provocation emerges.

Provocation One: The Risk of Domesticated Balance

The Middle-Tech posture is arguably the healthiest of the three responses Campbell identifies, yet I wonder whether its emphasis on balance might risk what could be called a *domesticated balance*. Balance often sounds safe. Pentecostal spirituality, however, has rarely been safe. It has historically been ecstatic, disruptive, boundary-crossing, and at times unruly. A domesticated balance may inadvertently tame the wild creativity of the Spirit, transforming prophetic imagination into managerial prudence. The Spirit does not merely discern; the Spirit disrupts.

In a digital world where algorithms discipline attention and normalise desire, the church may be called not only to balance technological engagement but to practice holy subversion. As Walter Brueggemann argues, prophetic communities are those that “evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the dominant culture.”² This raises a question for Pentecostal digital theology: what might a theology of Spirit-led disruption look like in digital contexts? One that does not simply manage technology wisely, but prophetically reimagines its use, limits, and possibilities.

Provocation Two: From Discernment to Design

Campbell’s emphasis on discernment is indispensable, yet Pentecostals may be called not only to be users and critics of technology, but also to become its designers. Discernment is reactive; design is generative. In technologically advanced societies such as Singapore, digital systems are not abstract forces but concrete infrastructures built daily by engineers, coders, and designers. Yet theological reflection rarely extends to the design process itself. What might it mean to view technological creativity as participation in the Spirit’s ongoing work of renewal?

A Pentecostal digital theology of the future may need to imagine Spirit-led design – a pneumatological vision in which the Spirit inspires not only sermons and worship, but also software and systems. This could involve cultivating technologies that nurture silence rather than noise, empathy rather than outrage, reflection rather than distraction.

Campbell rightly centres the redemption of users, calling believers towards wisdom and repentance in their digital practices. Yet if digital theology stops there, it risks leaving the architectures of technology untouched. A fuller vision

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Fortress Press, 2001), 3.

might also pursue the redemption of technologies themselves; engaging platform ethics, supporting alternative systems, and bringing prophetic critique into the design of digital infrastructures.

Provocation Three: From Technologies to Ideologies

A final challenge concerns the assumption, sometimes implicit in digital theology, that the church can stand at some critical, objective distance from digital culture. From many Asian contexts, this distance is increasingly illusory.

In hyper-digital, technocratic cities, digitalisation functions not merely as a tool, but as an ideology. It is bound up with national narratives of progress, efficiency, and respectability. To be digital is to be modern, productive, even responsible. Productivity becomes a virtue; performance becomes a form of piety.

The church is often baptised into this same ideological imagination, where innovation is equated with good stewardship and excellence with faithfulness.

Campbell's "letters to the churches" rightly call for repentance, yet the deeper redemption required may not be of users and from technology alone, but from a technocratic "gospel" of optimisation that quietly shapes Christian imagination.

From this perspective, digital theology must be both theological and sociological – discerning not only technologies, but the ideologies and spirits that animate them. True digital redemption involves not only sanctifying users or redeeming tools but also confronting the cultural logics that precede belief and practice.

Conclusion and Benediction

I offer these provocations not simply as critiques, but as invitations: to move from balance towards holy disruption, from discernment towards Spirit-led design, and from a concern just for technologies towards its ideologies. In that spirit, and in the spirit of Campbell's letters to the churches, I conclude with a brief benediction for the Spirit-led church in a digital world.

A Benediction for Spirit and Screen

May you walk into your digital worlds,
not to chase relevance, but to cultivate presence.

Turn off what numbs;
tune in to what nurtures.
Choose substance over appearance
and formation over performance.

Redeem the user – become people who can log off and pray.
Reconstruct the tools – design spaces that make room for encounter.
Renew the imagination – resist the gospel of efficiency; embrace the pace of grace.

Just as the Spirit hovered over the deep,
the Spirit still hovers over the digital –
to redeem, redesign, and renew.

May we go in that same Spirit –
wise in discernment,
bold in design,
and prophetic in imagination.

Amen.

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