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The Sacred in The Digital Age: A Theological and Ethical Inquiry into Technology's Influence on Christian Spiritual Well-Being

Stanley Osemudiamen OJIEABU
Department of Religious Studies, Babcock University, Ogun State, Nigeria
ojieabus@babcock.edu.ng, +2348112765586, https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9828-5873

Muyiwa Adepitan OYINLOYE
Department of Religious Studies, Babcock University, Ogun State, Nigeria
oyinloyem@babcock.edu.ng, +2349061700437, https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8871-3051

Abstract
The rapid expansion of digital technologies, ranging from social media platforms and live-streamed worship to algorithmic recommendation systems and artificial intelligence, has profoundly transformed the ways Christians worship, learn, and experience community. As churches increasingly integrate these tools into spiritual practices, questions arise about their impact on authentic faith formation and spiritual well-being. Drawing from a qualitative theological-ethical research approach, this study analyzes scriptural texts, contemporary theological reflections, and selected case studies of digital faith practices. The methodology includes thematic review of relevant literature, and ethical reflection rooted in Christian moral theology, to investigates how online worship, virtual fellowship, and digital discipleship have shaped believers' sense of sacred presence and communal identity. It argues that while technology offers opportunities for connection and outreach, it also risks reducing the sacred to spectacle and faith to content consumption. The study proposes a twofold theological-ethical framework: first, a constructive theology that recognizes the potential of digital tools for pastoral and liturgical enrichment; and second, a moral stance that emphasizes human dignity, embodied presence, and the protection of sacred authenticity in digital spaces. By drawing on insights from digital theology and Christian ethics, this article contributes to the growing discourse on the intersection of faith and technology, providing pastors, theologians, and Christian educators with practical guidance for nurturing spiritual well-being in the digital age.

Keywords: Algorithm, Christian spirituality, Digital theology and Christian ethics, Moral Discernment, Theological-ethical Inquiry.

Introduction
Over the past decade, digital technology has evolved from being a convenience in Christian practice to becoming deeply integrated into the rhythms of faith. Social media, livestreamed worship, mobile devotional apps, virtual gatherings, and increasingly, Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools are shaping how believers pray, reflect, connect, and understand community. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated many of these shifts: churches turned to livestreams when in-person services were impossible, mobile devotionals grew in usage, and new digital tools were adopted for pastoral care and discipleship (Campbell, 2021; Hutchings, 2022).

Yet with these changes comes a concern: how does the mediation of faith through screens, networks, and algorithms affect what is sacred? Christianity has long affirmed that certain times, places, and acts such as worship, sacraments, and prayer are consecrated. However, these qualities face transformation when the "sacred" is experienced through digital means (Detweiler, 2023; Gorrell, 2021). Hence, the study aims to critically investigate the theological and ethical implications of digital technologies on Christian spiritual well-being and to formulate a framework for preserving sacred authenticity in the digital age.

This study explored three research questions:

a. How does technology shape Christian spiritual well-being?
b. What theological and ethical issues arise from digital faith practices?
c. How can Christians engage technology responsibly?

The study contributes significantly to two intersecting fields, digital theology and Christian ethics by synthesizing recent empirical research with normative theological reflection and practical ethical guidance:

First, the advancement of digital theology by offering a conceptual vocabulary that treats digital mediation as a theological problem not merely a technological or sociological one. By connecting doctrines of incarnation, sacramentality, and ecclesiology to empirical findings about online worship and spiritual well-being, the study provides theologians and practitioners with an integrated framework for discerning faithful uses of technology (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021; Hess, 2020). This approach moves the conversation beyond reactive critiques or uncritical enthusiasm toward a discerning posture that welcomes innovation while guarding core commitments (Nagy, 2024).

Second, the strengthening of Christian ethics by centering human dignity, pastoral responsibility, and justice in the evaluation of digital practices. As AI and algorithmic systems enter pastoral settings, ethical frameworks tailored to ministry contexts are urgently needed (Clough, 2021; Noble, 2022). This study supplies practical principles such as incarnational mediation, human-centered design, formation over metrics, and justice and access that can inform denominational guidelines, seminary curricula, and congregational policies. By doing so, it ensures that technological adoption does not outpace moral reflection (Olivier, 2023; Pavlovic, 2024).

Finally, by synthesizing empirical evidence about spiritual well-being with normative theological claims, the study equips pastors, Christian educators, and policymakers to craft contextually sensitive approaches that maximize spiritual flourishing while minimizing potential harms (Gleason, 2020; Jenkins, 2022).

Literature Review

The emergence of digital technologies has profoundly transformed the way Christians worship, communicate, and engage in spiritual formation. This transformation has raised theological and ethical questions about how technology mediates the sacred, influences faith practices, and shapes communal identity in an increasingly digitalized world.

Hutchings (2020) provides a foundational analysis of how online church communities construct rituals and foster belonging within digital spaces. His ethnographic research demonstrates that while online worship can extend spiritual participation beyond physical boundaries, it often redefines sacred experience through mediated presence rather than embodied encounter. This raises an ethical tension between accessibility and authenticity, suggesting that digital worship, though inclusive, can risk diminishing the incarnational nature of Christian community.

Similarly, Campbell and Garner (2023) explore the theological dynamics of "networked theology," emphasizing how faith must adapt to an interconnected digital culture. They argue that digital platforms challenge traditional understandings of ecclesiology, liturgy, and authority by decentralizing religious participation. Their work calls for a theological framework that balances technological innovation with the Christian call to relational and embodied community. This aligns with ethical concerns about maintaining human dignity and accountability in virtual interactions.

Expanding the discussion, Huygens (2021) investigates religious practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, when physical gatherings were replaced by digital rituals. The study highlights how believers reinterpreted embodiment and performativity in digital worship contexts. While technology provided continuity of faith practice, it also reconfigured the perception of sacred space, making the home or personal screen a locus of worship. The study concludes that although digital mediation sustains spirituality during crisis, it necessitates new theological reflection on presence, ritual, and the nature of sacred community.

Munibi, Hakim, and Iskandar (2025) add an ethical dimension by examining how artificial intelligence and language technologies reshape religious experience. Their research identifies both opportunities and risks AI can enhance accessibility to religious content and education, yet it also threatens to commodify spirituality and weaken the moral agency of believers. The authors advocate for ethical discernment in integrating digital technologies into religious practice, emphasizing that faith formation must remain grounded in authentic human relationships and theological reflection.

Collectively, these studies reveal a consistent theme: digital technology serves as both a bridge and a barrier to spiritual well-being. It enables global connection and innovation in ministry but simultaneously challenges the traditional, embodied dimensions of Christian spirituality. The literature underscores the need for a theological-ethical framework that embraces digital tools for pastoral enrichment while safeguarding the sacredness, authenticity, and incarnational essence of Christian faith (Ojieabu & Abodunrin, 2025).

Digital Theology and Religion

Digital theology, often used interchangeably with digital religion, explores how faith, community, and ecclesial life are reshaped by digital technologies such as social media, livestreaming, and virtual reality (Ojieabu & Izilein, 2024). Scholars in this field argue that digital platforms are not merely tools for replicating physical worship but are creating new modes of spiritual expression and belonging. Virtual small groups, hybrid services, and asynchronous prayer communities are examples of how faith practices are being reimagined in the digital realm (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021; Hutchings, 2020).

The concept of digital ecclesiology raises important theological questions about the church's nature and function within digital spaces. Can the church remain authentic when mediated through screens?

Scholars debate whether sacraments like communion or baptism can maintain their sacredness when performed online. While some affirm that God's presence transcends physical boundaries, others warn that virtual practices risk diminishing the embodied nature of worship central to Christian theology (Spadaro, 2022; Geraci, 2023).

Furthermore, digital theology highlights both inclusivity and inequality. Technology has expanded access to worship for marginalized and geographically distant believers. However, issues of affordability, digital literacy, and infrastructure have deepened existing divides. Scholars thus urge churches to approach digital transformation not only as innovation but also as a matter of justice and accessibility (Campbell, 2020; Cheong, 2023).

Spiritual well-being encompasses one's sense of connection with God, purpose, inner peace, and faith-based flourishing. In Christian contexts, research increasingly links spiritual well-being with mental health outcomes in digitally mediated religious practices.

Empirical studies reveal that contemplative practices such as Centering Prayer, when facilitated online, can enhance stress reduction and spiritual flourishing among Christians. Such findings suggest that digital platforms can successfully support faith-based well-being when grounded in sound theological frameworks (Johnson & Jones, 2021). Similarly, surveys among Church of England clergy and laity post–COVID-19 indicate that while psychological well-being initially declined during lockdowns, spiritual well-being often remained stable or even improved through digital worship participation (Bryson et al., 2022). Among younger Christians, the interaction between social media, spirituality, and mental health is particularly complex. Social platforms offer opportunities for faith formation, identity expression, and community engagement but also expose users to comparison, anxiety, and superficiality. Research among Catholic youth in Denpasar Diocese found that social media use directly influenced mental health, which in turn shaped their sense of spiritual well-being (Sardiana & Adnyani, 2021). Thus, digital engagement can both enhance and threaten the spiritual life of believers depending on context and moderation.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative theological-ethical research design to explore how digital technologies influence Christian spiritual well-being, communal identity, and the experience of sacred presence. It integrates theological reflection, ethical analysis, and documentary review to interpret how digital media reshape worship, fellowship, and discipleship in the contemporary church. The research draws from scriptural interpretation, contemporary theological writings, and select case studies of Christian communities that have adopted live-streamed services, virtual fellowship, and digital discipleship platforms especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through thematic analysis of these sources, the study identifies recurring theological and ethical motifs that shed light on how faith and technology interact in digital spaces (Campbell, 2021; Geraci, 2022; Hutchings, 2020; Hoover & Echchaibi, 2023). The analytical process combines theological reflection on doctrines such as incarnation, communion, and sacred presence with ethical evaluation of issues related to human dignity, authenticity, and moral responsibility in online environments (Noble, 2018). This method enables a nuanced understanding of how digital practices can both enhance and distort spiritual formation. The study also recognizes certain limitations, including interpretive subjectivity, theological bias, and the rapidly evolving nature of digital technologies. Furthermore, perceptions of sacredness and embodiment are understood to vary across age groups, cultural contexts, and denominational backgrounds, reflecting both nostalgia for traditional worship and enthusiasm for technological innovation (Geraci, 2022; Hutchings, 2020).

Ethical-Theological Reflection

To evaluate whether technology enhances or diminishes Christian spiritual well-being, theological ethics provides a vital interpretive framework. Christian moral theology, grounded in the principles of love, justice, truth, and stewardship, guides believers in discerning faithful use versus misuse of digital and AI tools (Campbell & Delashmutt, 2024; Noble, 2021).

Every Christian moral framework can be understood through four key categories (Love, Justice, Truth, and Stewardship):

1. The commandment to love God and neighbor implies that technologies must foster compassion, care, and authentic connection rather than isolation, manipulation, or exploitation (Turkle, 2023; Ward, 2022). Digital tools should strengthen empathy and fellowship, especially in online worship and virtual communities, rather than promote self-centeredness or consumerism.
2. Justice demands reflection on access, equity, and bias. Digital technologies often favor certain groups while marginalizing others due to language, culture, or denominational traditions (Cox &

Campbell, 2021). Christian ethics asks: are vulnerable users such as youths, the elderly, or marginalized communities protected in digital spaces? Do online ministries reinforce inclusivity or deepen inequality?

3. Christian faith claims that truth is grounded in Scripture, doctrine, and divine revelation (Barrett, 2020). Therefore, AI-generated content and digital ministry tools must uphold standards of doctrinal integrity, transparency, and honesty. Theological distortions, misinformation, and algorithmic bias pose moral risks when left unchecked. Truthful digital engagement should reflect both theological accuracy and spiritual authenticity (Watson, 2022).
4. Stewardship involves wise management of all creation, including time, attention, and digital resources. Technology is a resource that demands discernment, boundaries, and responsible governance (Campbell, 2021). Christians are called to ensure that digital engagement nurtures rather than diminishes prayer, rest, and community belonging (Pavlovich, 2023).

A central ethical concern is the authenticity of worship and spiritual disciplines. What constitutes "authentic" worship when mediated through screens or automated spiritual guidance? Can sermons generated by AI embody the same spiritual depth as those crafted through human prayer and study? Scholars caution that while digital mediation can broaden participation, it may also erode the incarnational presence central to Christian faith (Campbell & Garner, 2023; Noble, 2022). Authentic worship must retain personal encounter, communal accountability, and spiritual discernment.

Digital platforms also raise issues of data ethics and confidentiality. When believers' searches, testimonies, or prayer requests become "content," spiritual life risks being shaped by algorithms prioritizing engagement metrics over faith formation (Smith, 2023). The rise of a "surveillance spirituality" where believers are watched, categorized, or influenced by profit-driven systems poses serious challenges to pastoral trust and freedom of conscience (Vasquez, 2024).

Christian theology affirms that human beings are made in the image of God *(Imago Dei)* and called into relationship with God and others (Genesis 1:27; Barth, 2021). Digital technologies can enhance this relationality through video fellowship, global worship, and virtual ministry. However, they also risk reducing persons to data points or followers, undermining relational accountability and empathy (Turkle, 2023). AI tools may simulate presence or counsel, but without genuine emotional reciprocity or pastoral risk-taking, they can erode the dignity and depth of human interaction (Ward, 2022).

Particularly vulnerable are individuals seeking spiritual comfort online those facing loneliness, grief, or moral uncertainty. A theology of digital care must therefore safeguard human dignity, uphold pastoral confidentiality, and resist technological reductionism (Campbell, 2021; Pavlovich, 2023). Moving forward, Christian communities must adopt discernment criteria that help determine whether a digital or AI practice enhances or diminishes spiritual well-being. Such tools and technologies should:

a. Foster deeper relationship with God, not merely provide access to spiritual content.
b. Encourage authentic community, emphasizing mutual vulnerability, compassion, and accountability.
c. Promote justice and inclusivity, ensuring equitable access and ethical design.
d. Sustain integrity and stewardship, maintaining moral transparency and responsible use of digital time and data.

The ultimate goal is not technological rejection but faithful adaptation ensuring that digital and AI innovations serve human flourishing, communal faithfulness, and divine purpose (Cox & Campbell, 2021; Vasquez, 2024).

Case Studies/Practical Examples

The emergence of digital technology has redefined how Christian's experience faith, worship, and community in the 21st century. One of the most visible examples occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, when live stream worship became the lifeline of global Christianity. Churches that had previously hesitated to integrate digital platforms suddenly depended on them for spiritual continuity. According to Campbell and Garner (2021), online worship during lockdown not only sustained congregational life but also expanded the reach of the Church beyond physical boundaries. Yet, while live stream services provided accessibility, they also raised questions about the depth of participation and the authenticity of communal worship. Many believers expressed a sense of "spiritual disconnection" even as they remained digitally present (Kim, 2022).

Similarly, mobile devotional applications have transformed personal spirituality by offering daily Scripture readings, prayers, and reflections at one's fingertips. Apps such as YouVersion or Lectio 365 have democratized access to biblical content, making spiritual nourishment constant and mobile. However, as Bailey (2023) cautions, the immediacy of digital devotion risks turning spiritual discipline

into a "scrolling habit" rather than a contemplative encounter with the divine. The convenience of mobile spirituality must therefore be balanced with intentional reflection to preserve the sacred rhythm of devotion.

Online Christian communities and counseling services represent another dimension of this digital transformation. Virtual fellowships on platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, or Discord have become spaces for prayer support, theological discussions, and even pastoral counseling. These communities provide belonging, especially for individuals isolated by geography, disability, or social stigma (Johnson & Smith, 2024). Yet, the lack of embodied fellowship can diminish accountability and sacramental participation, leading some to experience what theologians describe as "disembodied spirituality" (Okafor, 2022).

Another emerging frontier involves artificial intelligence in religious expression in AI-generated sermons and prayers. In 2023, several experiments using ChatGPT and similar tools to compose sermons sparked ethical debate among theologians and clergy. While some saw these innovations as aids for sermon preparation, others condemned them as a threat to the authenticity of divine inspiration (Ngugi, 2024). The use of AI in spiritual contexts forces the Church to confront a profound question: Can algorithms mediate the sacred? From these cases, key lessons emerge. Technology offers innovation that can nurture spiritual well-being, but it must be handled with theological discernment. The challenge for contemporary Christianity is to maintain a balance between innovation and sacredness ensuring that digital engagement complements, rather than replaces, the embodied experience of God's presence.

Nigeria offers a significant case study of digital faith adaptation within the African context. During the COVID-19 lockdown, major Nigerian churches rapidly transitioned to online platforms to sustain worship and congregational life Megwas, et al., 2025). Empirical studies indicate that Pentecostal churches in Nigeria intensified their use of social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook Live, Zoom, and WhatsApp to maintain liturgical continuity and pastoral engagement (Afolabi & Babatunde, 2021; Oderinde, 2023). For instance, The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and Living Faith Church Worldwide (Winners' Chapel) leveraged digital broadcasting technologies to conduct weekly worship services, midweek fellowships, and prayer meetings, thereby extending participation beyond local congregations to diasporic audiences.

Research further demonstrates that digital engagement significantly shaped youth participation in Nigerian Pentecostal settings. Folarin et al. (2024) found that youth provinces within RCCG actively integrated social media platforms into worship engagement strategies, reporting increased connectivity and scriptural interaction among digitally active members. Similarly, Afolabi and Oderinde (2023) observe that the expansion of "digital Christianity" in Southeast Nigeria broadened evangelistic outreach but also revealed disparities in digital literacy and access. The adaptation was not limited to large denominations. Daystar Christian Centre expanded its online discipleship programmes, leadership webinars, and virtual small groups, reflecting broader patterns of institutional innovation noted in Nigerian church adaptation studies (Adeoye, 2022). These developments illustrate technology's capacity to sustain ecclesial vitality, preserve communal identity, and extend missionary presence during crisis conditions.

Nevertheless, the Nigerian experience also revealed structural and theological challenges. Unequal internet access, high data costs, and unstable electricity supply restricted participation for many rural and economically disadvantaged believers (Afolabi & Babatunde, 2021). Moreover, scholars caution that the rise of "internet churches" and digitally mediated congregations raises questions about embodiment, sacramental theology, and communal accountability (Oderinde, 2023). Concerns regarding reverence, spiritual depth, and authenticity persist within highly mediated worship environments.

The Nigerian case therefore underscores a broader ethical tension central to this study: while digital tools expand mission, outreach, and accessibility, their implementation must be evaluated within local socio-economic conditions and theological commitments. Responsible integration requires balancing innovation with doctrinal integrity, communal embodiment, and attentiveness to digital inequality.

Towards A Theology of Technology in The Digital Age

A theology of technology must begin with the biblical conviction that all human creativity, including technological innovation, is to glorify God. The apostle Paul reminds believers, "Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31) and "Do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col. 3:17). These texts affirm the legitimacy of using technology as a tool for divine service, a process some theologians describe as the "redeeming of technology" (Hutchings, 2020). This redemptive approach

does not idolize technology but it within God's purpose for human flourishing and communal well-being. However, the sacred remains non-negotiable. God's presence cannot be replicated or replaced by any digital algorithm. As

Volf (2021) argues, the holy encounter with God transcends technological mediation, existing within the mystery of divine revelation and human response. Digital tools may facilitate access to religious content, but they cannot generate spiritual intimacy or replace sacramental experience. The sacred retains its transcendence even in a digitized world.

To cultivate a faithful and ethical relationship with technology, Christians must adopt practical spiritual disciplines. First, there must be intentional use of digital tools for spiritual growth choosing quality over quantity and seeking encounters that nurture faith rather than distract from it. Second, the practice of digital Sabbath is vital. As noted by Turkle (2022), constant connectivity erodes reflective depth and spiritual rest. Setting boundaries for digital engagement allows believers to reclaim silence, stillness, and communion with God. Third, embodied fellowship must be prioritized wherever possible. Physical worship and interpersonal relationships remain central to the Christian understanding of community (Heb. 10:25). Technology can supplement fellowship but not substitute it. Thus, a theology of technology recognizes the tension between innovation and sanctity. It affirms that while technology is part of human cultural mandate, its ethical and spiritual use must always be evaluated under the lordship of Christ.

Conclusion

This study highlights the transformative potential of digital technologies for Christian spiritual well-being. Platforms such as live-streamed worship, devotional apps, online fellowships, and emerging AI tools have expanded access to faith, fostered learning, and strengthened global spiritual connections, supporting the church's mission to reach "to the ends of the earth." Yet, these same technologies pose ethical and spiritual risks, including commodification of the sacred, superficial devotion, and detachment from authentic, embodied worship. It raises the question; can technology replace the work of the holy spirit in worship? Responsible discernment is therefore essential: technology must serve, not replace, genuine spiritual encounter, ensuring that digital engagement enhances rather than diminishes God's presence in believers' lives.

Recommendations

1. ***Theological and Ethical Guidance:*** Church leaders should provide ongoing instruction on the faithful use of digital tools to support discipleship, evangelism, and authentic community.
2. ***Integration into Christian Education:*** Christian institutions should incorporate digital theology and ethics into curricula to equip believers for responsible digital engagement.
3. ***Cultivation of Spiritual Practices:*** Believers should develop digital practices that preserve reverence, authenticity, and embodied fellowship alongside online participation.
4. ***Redemptive Use of Technology:*** Churches should leverage technology to advance Christ's mission, promote spiritual formation, and enhance communal life.
5. **Continuous Monitoring:** Digital initiatives should be regularly evaluated to mitigate spiritual risks and ensure alignment with ethical and theological principles.

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