

There's No App for That

Uncovering the fallacy of efficient ministry | JAMES AMADON

Last year, having been hooked by the marketing geniuses, I found myself infatuated with one of the new touch-screen tablet computers that was “changing the way the world works.” I was feeling stressed at church, pulled in many directions by an expanding list of tasks and appointments, losing sleep, and beginning to forget daily details in the fog of fatigue. I needed something to help me overcome my weakness, make up for my lack of capacity, enable me to stay up with the ministry production schedule, and, most important, make sure I stayed connected to God in the midst of all the chaos. This new device looked to me like manna from heaven, sent to sustain me in my weary wilderness.

As my birthday approached I hinted without subtlety of my heart's desire. With characteristic generosity, my wife came through, and, as I unwrapped the technological marvel, I discovered that whenever I wanted or needed this sleek silver miracle to do something, all I had to do was remember its advertising tagline: “There's an app for that.” I was saved!

From the start, my device performed its job perfectly. The user-friendly calendar app kept my schedule neat and even reminded me when I was running late. The stylish communication apps kept me in touch with all the people who needed my attention, often connecting me with

multiple people in different places at the same time. The groundbreaking software linked all my devices automatically, even updating and organizing while I slept. A powerful Bible app even gave me instant access to more than twenty translations, multiple reading plans, and links to study materials. When I heard there would be a new version of my machine on the market in a few months, with even more apps available, I found myself counting the days until my next birthday (yes, there's an app for that).

In all the excitement, it didn't occur to me that the apple stamped on its backside might be more like forbidden fruit than miraculous manna. The more I used the technology, the more I came to depend on it. Increasingly I could not remember appointments on my own, often going back to the screen within minutes of having checked it. I found myself constantly checking the communication apps to make sure I hadn't missed the latest message or news report. I started looking into apps that would help me manage all the apps I was using. When I traveled, the most important item in my suitcase was a battery charger to make sure I wouldn't find myself disconnected.

Simply due to the fact that the technology did what I asked it to do, I found myself in a spiral of efficiency. The more efficient I became, the more work I needed to manage. Time became even more truncated as

I raced between appointments, blitzed through emails, and pieced together sermons on the run.

With all that haste it didn't take long to notice that the increase in quantity had led to a decrease in quality. I was doing more, but not doing it well. There seemed to be no time to think, plan, or pray. My miraculous apps were supposed to serve me, but it seemed that in becoming dependent on them, I was interacting with the world on their terms, adopting the technological virtues of speed, efficiency, novelty, and ceaseless production.

Most troubling of all was the subtle effect this was having on my relationships. It was hard to linger in conversation with a friend or member of the congregation when the communication app kept beeping with new messages. It was a challenge to stay constant in prayer when the appointment app kept alerting me to what was next and the Bible app kept reminding me that I was behind in my reading plan.

It began to dawn on me that I had misdiagnosed my problem. In the midst of a complex set of increasing demands, what I needed was not technological solutions that would make me a better pastor but spiritual maturity that would make me a better Christian. I didn't need more capacity or management skills, I needed wisdom. I didn't need more sophisticated communication programs, I needed to



see people face-to-face, to hear them laugh and sigh and weep. I didn't need to manage my time better, I needed Sabbath. I didn't need instant access to twenty Bible translations, I needed the word to be written on my heart.

As I thought of each of these things, one phrase ran through my mind: "There's no app for that." There is no shortcut, technological or otherwise, to the deep life of discipleship needed to understand how it is we are called to live as citizens of God's kingdom in the modern world. It takes sustained, focused attention to notice the presence of God in ordinary life, the kind of focus that more often than not can only come when the whirl of technology is quieted. It requires relationships of support and accountability grounded in human contact and shared space, unhurried and unmediated. It necessitates submission to the typically slow,

inefficient, and mundane work of the Holy Spirit, who helps us see that the technological virtues of speed, efficiency, novelty, and ceaseless production do not typically produce the kind of soil in which love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control can grow. It calls for the kind of discipline that resists technological solutions for problems that ultimately lie in the human heart.

These insights have helped me to draw some boundaries around technology. I continue to use my device and some of its apps, albeit more sparingly and cautiously. When I feel overwhelmed or overworked by tasks and responsibilities, I try to cut back and take time to rest rather than find a way to manage more. When I need to connect with someone, I try to do so in the most direct and present way I can. When I need help, I try to turn to other people.

I recently sat down with a small group of leaders from my church to share how frustrated and stressed I was feeling. They listened, they prayed, and they committed to helping me become a better Christian (and by extension a better pastor). It was an example to me of God's 2,000-year-old app, the church, which has continued in a mostly unspectacular fashion to be the community through which God's good news is revealed in the world. And at the heart of this community is Jesus, the God-made-flesh miracle whose life, death, and resurrection truly "changed the way the world works." I am trying to depend more and more on God's transforming love in Christ, because no matter what amazing new tools technology may provide, there is no app for that. ■

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