

Following Jesus in the Modern World Between the Cross and the Selfie

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Abstrak

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This title raises the tension between the call to discipleship, which demands self-denial and the willingness to take up the cross, and the reality of contemporary culture, which emphasizes self-image and popularity through social media. This article presents a theological-critical study on the meaning of discipleship in light of digital culture, which affects how individuals shape their identities, form communities, and understand spirituality. Using a qualitative reflective approach based on literature, this paper examines the literature on the theology of the cross, digital spirituality, and the phenomenon of modern narcissism in light of the Gospel. The author highlights how the selfie culture can harm the understanding of faith but also opens opportunities for contextual and creative spiritual reflection. The study's findings show that discipleship in the digital age requires the formation of an identity rooted in the cross of Christ, not in digital validation. This article encourages the church to establish an authentic, radical, and contextual pattern of discipleship in response to today's popular culture..

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INTRODUCTION

The modern world is currently undergoing a significant acceleration in technology, popular culture, and the dominance of social media, which are drastically affecting the way individuals form their identities, establish relationships, and understand spirituality. In this context, the development of information and communication technology has paved the way for faster and broader interactions but has also brought complex impacts on individual psychology and social behavior. The selfie culture, initially seen as a personal visual expression, has now transformed into a symbol of an era obsessed with self-image and social validation.

In an age where images and videos can easily be shared and viewed by thousands, even millions of people, the pressure to present a perfect and appealing self-image has intensified. It is not uncommon for individuals to feel trapped in a cycle of seeking attention and recognition through social media, which in turn shapes the way they view themselves and others. In this vast digital realm, a person's identity is often evaluated not based on authentic character and relationships but on the number of "likes," "followers," and curated visual existence. In other words, a person's worth in society is often measured through shallow metrics that tend to focus on appearance. This contributes to the emergence of digital narcissism, a condition where the need for external recognition takes precedence over internal spiritual growth.

In this situation, human relationships have shifted from deep and meaningful interactions to more superficial ones, with a focus on appearance and public perception. Many individuals have become alienated from themselves, trapped in an insatiable search for recognition, often forgetting the important aspects of life that should bring meaning, such as deep emotional connections, spiritual pursuits, and ongoing personal development. Meanwhile, the dominance of social media also plays a role in shaping new norms and standards in society. These platforms have become not only a means of sharing personal moments but also an arena for fierce competition, where individuals strive to stand out in the crowd.

This leads to the emergence of various challenges, such as the pressure to appear perfect, jealousy, and even mental health issues related to body image. In facing this phenomenon, it is important for individuals to understand that, although social media can be a tool for self-expression and building relationships, balance must be maintained. Awareness of authentic values and deeper connections with oneself and others is key to navigating the complex reality of the modern world. Through personal reflection and spiritual development, individuals can rediscover the true meaning of identity and relationships, move away from the pressures of digital narcissism, and shift towards a more authentic and fulfilling pursuit in their lives (Hunt, 2019).

In this context, Christian discipleship faces serious and complex challenges amid the rapid advancement of modern times. Discipleship, which is essentially a calling to deny oneself, take up the cross, and follow Christ, as summarized in Luke 9:23, is often reduced to a form of spirituality that is shallow, individualistic, and performative. This means that many people focus more on outward appearances and public recognition of their faith rather than undergoing a deep and authentic spiritual journey. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die"—not to be praised, followed, or liked. This statement reflects the essence of true discipleship: an invitation to overcome the ego, leave comfort behind, and sacrifice oneself in order to follow in Christ's footsteps, including through suffering and the challenges that may arise.

However, in today's digital reality, where social media and online platforms dominate many aspects of daily life, there is an increasingly strong temptation to turn faith into a performance rather than a sacrifice. In an era where self-image and popularity are often valued more than authenticity and commitment to spiritual values, many are drawn to create an idealized image of themselves in the eyes of the public. This creates a gap between what others see and what is truly happening in an individual's personal life.

Christian believers may feel compelled to share grand spiritual moments, but at the same time, they might overlook the more intimate and touching aspects of their discipleship—such as vulnerability, repentance, and the process of spiritual growth that is not always glamorous. Furthermore, this phenomenon creates a unique challenge for the church and Christian communities. When discipleship begins to be viewed as a competition for attention or recognition, the

core values of sacrifice, repentance, and service to others can be overlooked. As a result, there is a risk that discipleship will lose its profound meaning, and many may turn away from the true calling to follow Christ.

In response to this challenge, it is essential for Christians to reflect once again on the true meaning of discipleship. This requires the courage to go against the tide, leave behind shallow narratives, and choose to engage in sincere relationships with God and others.

In this process, we are reminded that discipleship is a journey that demands perseverance, sacrifice, and commitment in the face of various challenges, both internal and external. Therefore, with all humility, let us strive to return to the essence of true discipleship—a spiritual journey that leads to deep personal transformation and more authentic relationships with Christ.

This writing emerges from a deep concern about the spiritual identity crisis faced by the current generation. In a world increasingly dominated by the pressures of algorithms and self-presentation that often fail to reflect reality, many individuals find themselves trapped in the search for true identity. This reality has led many people, especially the younger generation, to experience confusion about who they truly are and how they should relate to themselves, others, and the deeper aspects of spirituality. This identity crisis is exacerbated by the rise of social media platforms that often push individuals to showcase the best versions of themselves. In an attempt to be accepted and recognized, many are willing to sacrifice their authenticity in order to meet the standards set by the digital society. This creates a significant gap between who they are in the virtual world and who they truly are, which in turn can lead to dissatisfaction, anxiety, and even a sense of directionlessness in daily life.

Amidst this phenomenon, there is a deep yearning to return to an authentic spirituality of the cross, which offers a deeper understanding and experience of our true selves and our relationship with the transcendent. This spirituality calls us to reflect on the true meaning of sacrifice, service, and unconditional love—core tenets of the cross teachings. By embracing authentic spirituality, we are invited to rediscover the spiritual strength that can guide us toward a deeper understanding of our existence and strengthen our true identity.

Thus, this writing is not just a reflection, but also a call to introspection and a journey back to the essence of our spirituality. In the quest to find and rediscover the true spirituality of the cross, we can build a stronger and truer identity that does not depend on external judgments, but is rooted in a profound understanding of ourselves and our calling in this world. As noted in Sigmon's (2023) research, the church today is faced with the challenge of developing discipleship patterns that not only "exist" in the digital space but also have a prophetic voice against a culture that erodes the depth of faith. In this context, discipleship needs to be reshaped—not by rejecting technology, but by deconstructing the ideology behind it and filtering it through the lens of the cross of Christ.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a reflective qualitative approach based on literature review. Data was collected from international theological journals, books on digital spirituality, the theology of the cross, and contemporary writings addressing popular culture and social media. The analysis was conducted thematically, linking theoretical data with theological reflection based on the Bible and Christian tradition. This approach was chosen because it allows for a contextual and in-depth examination of the issue of discipleship in the reality of contemporary culture.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The intersection between Christian discipleship and digital culture creates a complex dynamic. The modern world is no longer just a physical space, but also a virtual arena that shapes identity, values, and spiritual relationships. In this context, following Jesus is not merely a religious practice, but also an existential stance that requires the courage to reject popular logic in favor of loyalty to the cross. Based on the literature review conducted, this section will outline four key findings that reflect the challenges and opportunities of discipleship in the midst of selfie culture and social media. Each point will be critically analyzed through a contemporary theological approach.

Selfie Culture as a Spiritual Identity Crisis

The selfie culture has shaped a new paradigm in the formation of modern human identity, where self-validation increasingly depends on public feedback rather than a deep relationship with God. In a world filled with digital interactions, individuals feel pressured to constantly present themselves in ways that are appealing and acceptable to the wider society. Jodi G. Hunt (2019), in his in-depth study of digital discipleship, explains that today's younger generation is increasingly building their spiritual identity through what he calls the "mediatized self" — a concept referring to the self that is shaped within the context of digital interactions, rather than in a strong and substantial faith community. Within this framework, the selfie culture not only serves as a tool for self-promotion but also functions as a mirror of shallow and fragmented spirituality, where everything is influenced by algorithms and competitive visual aesthetics.

Matthias Scharer and Mary Hess (2013) also argue that the digitization of self in modern society leads to the emergence of performative spirituality, where faith practices and beliefs become spectacles for display, rather than genuine and profound encounters with the Creator. This creates a distance between the individual and the true spiritual experience, which should be based on self-surrender and a deeper reflection on the teachings of faith. This approach clearly contradicts the theological principles taught in Luke 9:23, which demands that every follower of Christ deny themselves and take up their cross as a form of ego emptying in order to establish an authentic and true relationship with Christ.

Therefore, it can be said that the selfie culture is not only a social phenomenon resulting from technological and social media developments but also a significant theological challenge for the contemporary church. This challenge lies in how the church can guide and support its members in building a strong, grace-rooted identity that can resist the temptation of seeking digital validation. Amidst a culture that encourages individuals to seek validation from the outside, the church must play an active role in helping people understand the true meaning of their devotion and relationship with God, so they can find greater satisfaction and meaning in life that is not based merely on "likes" and comments in the digital world. This is a call to return to authentic spiritual essence, where our relationship with God and others becomes the center of our identity as believers.

Following Jesus, Discipleship, and the Theology of the Cross

Christian discipleship is rooted in the theology of the cross, which radically rejects self-glorification. This theology teaches that the journey of faith is not about self-promotion or achieving admiration from others. Instead, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously stated in his 1937 work, *The Cost of Discipleship*, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." This statement encapsulates the essence of discipleship, where the call to follow Christ involves self-sacrifice and putting aside one's ego for a greater purpose.

The theology of the cross, as explained in *Themelios* journal published by The Gospel Coalition, is a subversive theology. It serves as a voice that opposes the prevailing currents of an age often focused on self-achievement, comfort, and personal pride. In a world surrounded by advertisements that trumpet individual success and self-promotion, the theology of the cross offers an alternative, deeper, and more meaningful perspective. Isaac Boaheng (2023) underscores that even in the African cultural context, the cross remains a symbol of strength that arises from weakness and self-denial. While many strive to prove their worth through accomplishments, the cross reminds us that there is power in surrender and in relying on God's grace.

In a digital culture that increasingly elevates the importance of appearances and public recognition, the theology of the cross stands as a counter-narrative that shapes the character of Christ's disciples. These disciples are expected not only to be seen but, more importantly, to be willing to sacrifice for others and for divine purposes. This is supported by Casey T. Sigmon (2023), who urges preachers to boldly speak messages that contradict popular narratives in loyalty to the Gospel. The readiness to speak about sacrifice, humility, and genuine love becomes crucial in a culture that often undermines these values.

Therefore, true discipleship cannot be separated from the spirituality of the cross, which touches the core of human existence. At its heart, this spirituality speaks about a deep relationship with God, genuine sacrifice for others, and unconditional love. Each of these aspects contributes to spiritual growth and the understanding that life in Christ is not about seeking self-glory but about following His path of love and sacrifice.

Social Media: Challenge or Tool?

Social media is often regarded as a threat to many aspects of human life, from social interaction to personal development. However, when viewed from a theological perspective, social media can actually be a highly effective tool in forming faith communities, especially when used reflectively and wisely. According to Hunt (2019), digital media has the potential to be understood as a new space for catechesis, enabling young generations to connect, learn, and grow together in faith. However, to realize this potential, a strong ethical framework is required, as proposed by David Pastor-Escuredo and Ricardo Vinuesa (2020). Without such a framework, interactions in the digital world can easily become trapped in cycles of misinformation and narcissism, which in turn can undermine the essence of the faith community that should be built.

Scharer and Hess (2013) also highlight that social media helps shape a new liturgical logic that demands a reflective approach. This is important so that the faith held by individuals is not just superficial, but touches a deeper spiritual dimension. Furthermore, a publication from the *Church Life Journal* by the University of Notre Dame states that digital media has a unique capacity to bring the presence of Christ symbolically into digital communities. However, this ability can only be realized if the interactions and content produced in social media are framed with deep theological thought. This becomes essential so that the positive influence of social media can be seen and felt by its users.

Thus, it can be concluded that social media is not just a communication platform, but also a mission field and spiritual ground with great potential. However, in order for it to be used effectively, social media must be utilized in the spirit of redemption, with a higher purpose, and not simply for exhibitionism. In this context, every individual needs to be reminded to use social media wisely, placing faith-based values as the foundation for digital interactions, so that we can create communities that are not only spiritually strong but also mutually supportive and strengthening in our faith journey.

Opportunities for the Church in the Digital Era

The digital era today is not only a crisis faced by many institutions, including the church, but also offers valuable opportunities to renew and enrich approaches to discipleship. In this context, Isaac Boaheng (2023) suggests that the concept of digital ecclesiology can offer a more inclusive and globally connected model of church, allowing more people to engage, regardless of geographical boundaries. This presents an opportunity for the church to embrace diversity and address gaps that have existed for so long. Through his reflection, Boaheng emphasizes the importance of forming a community that remains rooted in the cross and classical spirituality, even when their presence is online. This underscores that while the church enters the digital realm, the core values of faith and spiritual tradition should not be overlooked or forgotten. Instead, discipleship systems must reflect a balance between principles that have existed for centuries and the contemporary needs and challenges faced by today's youth.

This view is supported by Hunt (2019), who states that success in youth ministry depends on the ability to frame technology within a profound spiritual

framework. This means that the use of digital tools is not merely about following trends, but about creating experiences that carry deeper meaning and can guide them toward true faith growth. This also requires a deeper understanding of how the younger generation interacts with technology and how they can be guided to see technology as a means of expanding their relationship with God and each other. Furthermore, Sigmon (2023) suggests that liturgy and homiletics be developed in a dialogical and interactive form that aligns with current digital communication patterns. This opens doors for new ways of delivering the message of faith that can engage the congregation more actively. These interactions are expected to enrich the spiritual experience of the congregation without sacrificing theological depth.

By adopting this approach, the church has the opportunity to create discipleship spaces that not only follow trends but also form significant transformation in faith and daily practice. However, to achieve this, the church must demonstrate courage, creativity, and resilience. In a world that continues to change, it is crucial for the church to keep the cross as a steady pivot, while adhering to Christian teachings and values. In this context, the church can serve as an agent of transformation, not only for its members but also for the wider society, offering hope and inspiring positive change. By recognizing and seizing the opportunities available in the digital era, the church can grow and adapt without losing its identity and core mission.

CONCLUSION

Following Jesus in the digital era is not just about adapting the Gospel to new media, but about maintaining the essence of discipleship in a culture that is increasingly narcissistic and visually driven. The selfie culture, which emphasizes self-image and social achievements, has created a crisis of spiritual identity. In this context, discipleship requires a radical self-denial, as affirmed in Bonhoeffer's theology of the cross: Christ's call is a call to die to the ego. Social media, while having the potential to shape a shallow and performative spirituality, is not entirely antagonistic to the Christian faith. If used reflectively and theologically, digital media can become a space for testimony, the formation of faith communities, and contextual evangelism. Therefore, the church must not merely critique the digital world, but must engage it as a new field of ministry deeply rooted in the spirituality of the cross.

The church is called to respond to this age by creating contextual models of discipleship, deep online communities, and digital liturgies that remain faithful to the Gospel. By framing technology in the spirit of the cross, believers are invited not only to be present in the digital world but to be present as disciples who carry the light of Christ, even amidst the shadows of algorithms and self-image. This is where the challenge and hope lie: to be faithful disciples of Christ in a constantly changing world, between the cross and the selfie.

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