Book Review

Felicia Wu Song, *Restless Devices: Recovering Personhood, Presence, and Place in the Digital Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), xii + 216 pp. $25.99

Reviewed by Nils Borquist

Desiring Communion over Connections: *Restless Devices*

In *Restless Devices*, Felicia Wu Song conveys multiple reservations concerning society's rise, use, and reliance on rapid technological applications, particularly those devices used by the masses. Fortunately, she also provides useful and achievable solutions to reduce the dependence on digital preoccupations.

The various issues Song raises may sound quite familiar to anyone who questions contemporary society's dependence on—and even faith in—technology. Song delves deeply into the dangerous potential of people replacing their relationships with God with relationships with digital partners. She highlights the increasing infusion of technology in all aspects of life, the possible legal and ethical concerns, the generational divide driving technology, and the impact overuse can have on the human body and mind. However, her ultimate concern lies in the detrimental effects on children and their growing connections with God and Christianity.

Specific questions must be asked and answered in order to biblically engage a digital version of what Jurgen Habermas deemed the "colonization of the life-world" (2). This may refer to any system seeking to replicate and replace the existing environment. Above all else, what needs to be addressed is the simple question, "What is the point of technology?" Perhaps greater ease and efficiency come to mind as the primary values, but while these benefits may be initially correct responses, what often becomes the norm is the use of technology as a virtual butler to take care of numerous needs and desires. With simplicity of use and societal pressure to incorporate computers into all aspects of life, a "soft tyranny" of digitization creeps into life (22). As the mobility of technology erupted with cell phones, multiple problems arose. One issue is that perpetual access to professional emails has brought about the feeling that work never ends. Additional anxieties come with the numerous social media news feeds, all delivering varying agendas, as well as the ever-present love of "likes."

While good intentions may have propelled digital advancements, various social media sites also realized unbelievable revenue could be produced by distracting users and diverting their attention to social media. Much effort began to be put into

exploiting human fragility. Rapid developments aimed at the constant entertainment of the masses brought about "hyperrealism," a term coined by philosopher Jean Baudrillard that refers to the "glamorous, alluring," and addictive world of virtual living, resulting in a "doom that comes with anonymity and lack of accountability" (114).

Devastating effects understandably arise from such cultural changes. Initially, the generation behind accelerated technological innovation created it primarily to invent valuable tools to aid humanity. Yet, along with this technological boom, a subtle and steady "gamification" of life emerged, wherein an influx of entertaining pastimes wrested control away from utility (74). Unfortunately, over the history of progressive ideas coming to fruition, humankind has proven incapable of wholly staying on the path of ethical faithfulness. Instead, the course has often veered from ethical faithfulness to attaining wealth, power, and prestige. Human frailty is exploited by getting people to believe that "boredom is a sin" that must be remedied (157). With access to almost unlimited information, desires, and social interactions, the most recent generation often views time solely as a commodity and relationships as fleeting and "upgradeable" (79, 119). This is done all while being devoted entirely to believing the digital social experience to be the portal to the ultimate good life. The results of hollow pursuits eventually lead to divisiveness between people and various social groups and, even worse, damage to the individual's physical, emotional, social, and spiritual life.

The negatives associated with the overuse of, and infatuation with, technological tools are commonly known today. This is especially true when it comes to physical and emotional well-being. Song clearly relays the detrimental effects of such outcomes as a reminder for readers. The most problematic are the physiological and mental issues and neurological damage. If asked how much time one spends staring daily at a screen, most people will give a vastly underestimated amount of time. Many digital users believe the time they spend is only an hour or so rather than the reality of six hours or more. By spending more and more hours every day staring at screens, other life issues are left behind. People end up rarely reading complex texts, getting little exercise, and allowing disruptive lights to hinder the ability to sleep productively. The outcome of such a life is an undernourished body, an essentially illiterate and unchallenged mind, and a spiral into irreparable neurological disorders. Emotionally, gluttonous digital consumers find themselves "constantly irritable," stressed, afraid of missing something "important" (FOMO, or "fear of missing out"), disconnected from reality, and suicidal (155). Also, when blending the emotional, physical, and mental carnage, the outcome is often an individual who feels sick, isolated, lonely, and lost, all of which defies the promises of a fruitful social existence, one of hope and enduring happiness.

For Song, beyond the more obvious bodily-related problems is the potential decline and even complete eradication of people's spiritual lives, the most harmful

side effect of overwhelming technological stimulation. Song considers God the solution to many pressing concerns and questions regarding how to live one's life in a righteous and empathetic manner. Today, many people define themselves almost totally by their externalities rather than who [they] are internally, which refers to one's senses of Self and spirituality as connected. This focus conflicts with faith in Christ and undermines the saving power of giving up the "selfish Self." Song provides a convincing commentary about the positive impact of reciprocal divine love developed through Christianity and its story as a "theological anthropology" wherein the "journey" of faith is long, complex, and fulfilling (105). Rather than a simple superficial connection with the Lord, Song advocates an intimate communion with God through Jesus via liturgical lessons and learning. For Song, the appropriate use of technology, along with self-control, is acceptable and can even bring a deeper and more profound relationship with the Heavenly Father. It takes time (observing the holiness of the Sabbath), effort, and "spiritual discipline" (13).

Throughout the text, Song provides advice and plans—deemed the Freedom Project—that may be applied to create a more stable and long-term relationship with God. The plans describe conversations with the self about quality needs, the concerted effort to forge lists of goals that must be met, and how to engage in discourse with loved ones and respected spiritual leaders. Ultimately, Song reveals the devastating direction humanity is heading toward by giving over ourselves to technology. Still, she also gives salient advice for redirecting our lives into a more God-centered existence, one of love for ourselves, our neighbors, and our Savior.

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