

Discipleship in the Digital Age

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by David Schrock

From Abraham to Abraham Lincoln, the speed of the world didn't change all that much. From the agrarian lifestyle of the Patriarch to the rural farms of North America, among which Lincoln grew up, the speed of news typically traveled at the pace of a horse. In this historical setting, the famed presidential debates between Lincoln and Douglas lasted for hours at a time, with people taking a break for dinner, only to come back for more.

What a difference 150 years makes, only its not time that has changed the world, its technology. In the three millennia between Abraham Lincoln and his namesake, the world didn't change that much because communication didn't change that much. To be sure, the printing press in the fifteenth century changed the world and powered the Protestant Reformation. But nothing has changed the world like the technological advances of the telegraph, radio, television, Internet, and now the iPhone.

Through each of these advances the world became smaller, communications faster, and information easier—easier to accumulate, easier to disseminate, and easier to manipulate. And significantly, the pace of life and speech has increased in exponential fashion.

It's not like the move from industry to information to digital preoccupation has increased gradually over the last 150 years. Far from it! With the Internet and the iPhone, in particular, digital information chases us, [hacks into our brains](#), and produces within us [data smog](#). All told, unless we learn to walk wisely in this age, we are at risk not only of becoming servants to our digital masters, but to lose our Master altogether.

Walking Wisely in a World Full of Pings, Pixels, and Panic ([FoMO](#))

David Wells said two decades ago "the fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is that God rests too inconsequentially upon the church" ([God in the Wasteland](#), 30). In his [corpus of theological studies into evaluating evangelicalism at the turn of the twenty-first century](#), he identified the effects of modernity on the church. By modernity, he was not speaking of modernism—the Enlightenment-derived elevation of man and his autonomous rationality—but the effects of our hyper-transient, ultra-consumeristic, technologically-dependent, and information over-saturated modern world. This materialistic cocktail has wreaked havoc on the soul of the Western Church and has brought about a loosening of doctrine and lightening of God himself.

Add to this the digital advances of the last two decades and we can see why wisdom is called for as we update devices every two years. What began as black and gray screen for phone calls in 2002 has become a portable movie theater in 2017. And unless we learn to handle the pings and pixels and [panic that sets in when we don't keep up](#), we simply will not be able to maintain a thriving relationship with God or one another.

And I don't say that as an unaffected victor over my devices, but a child of God who is deeply aware of the spiritual affects of our digital age—distance from God and distance from one another. While Facebook is marketed as a way to create and maintain friendships, it has also resulted catalyzing [depression](#). Likewise, the virtual infinitude of the Internet invites its users to keep coming back for more, when what our souls crave (read: need) is communion with the infinite God. And this doesn't even get to the vilest uses of the Internet.

[Eleven](#) is the now typical age children are exposed to pornography. And 61% of them view it on a [mobile phone](#). As Samuel Morse chose Numbers 23:23 as his first telegraph message, so we might all be saying today, "[What hath God wrought](#)?" Only it is not God who has created these things, but man. We who were made to glorify God him by subduing and ruling the earth, have found with increasing regularity how easily our flesh becomes ensnared in the virtual world. And all this before VR technology and digital implants are a few years away.

God, Grant Your People Wisdom

All this to say, we need God's wisdom to know how to walk in this fast-paced world. As anyone studying digital technology will tell you, these devices are not inert. "Balance" is the oft-quoted method to avoid perceived dangers, but what does that mean? How does that work? Has balance ever been an effective method for hungry hearts? And what if "balance" is not part of the endless data package?

For all of us who consider a personal relationship with Jesus Christ the highest priority, we must come to grips with how to use these tools to glorify God. It is not enough to castigate them as intrinsically evil and banish them from our homes. Rather, we must learn how to positively, proactively use them to magnify the glory of God and the message of the gospel.

But this will require something more than band-aid approach to digital technology. As much as these devices are rewiring our brains, we need to renew our minds with a biblical theology of technology. From there we need to see how these devices can be used for God's glory, how to proactively resist temptations to destroy our lives with them, and perhaps most importantly how to use them to advance the purposes and plans of God.

Enter 'Discipleship in a Digital Age'

To help us renew our minds and recalibrate our digital usage, we are beginning an eight-week Sunday School class on discipleship in our digital age. In the weeks, we will consider what discipleship in our modern world looks like. If you are near Woodbridge, Virginia I would encourage all of you to join us. If you are not, I would encourage you to consider teaching a similar class in your church.

For those interested, we intend to record these sessions, to be put online later — Oh, the irony! In preparation for those studies, here are five book recommendations.

- Neil Postman, [Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business](#) (1985)
- Tim Challies, [The Next Story: Life and Faith after the Digital Explosion](#) (2011)
- John Dyer, [From the Garden to the City: The Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology](#) (2011)
- Tony Reinke, [Twelve Ways Your Phone is Changing You](#) (2017)
- Andy Crouch, [The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place](#) (2017)

Wherever you are, do not be naive to the powerful effects of digital technology. Unlike anything in the history of the world—literally—our digital devices grant us incredible opportunities for good and evil. May God grant us wisdom to use them to his glory and the building up of the church.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds