

Faithful
Christian
Living
in the
Internet
Age

TGC

digital discipleship

With contributions from
Jen Wilkin, Brett McCracken,
Gavin Ortlund, Sarah Zylstra,
Jackie Hill Perry, Sam Allberry,
Ray Ortlund, Jasmine Holmes,
Melissa Kruger, and more.

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About this eBook

In this eBook you'll find a collection of resources, published by The Gospel Coalition, to help believers practice healthy habits and live wisely (and Christianly) in a digital world with immense power to form us. Including articles, videos, and podcasts, this collection of resources will help prepare you to grow in your faith even as you grapple with new discipleship challenges in the digital age.

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Don't Fill Every Open Moment with Content

BY BRETT MCCRACKEN

When I'm waiting in line to order my drink at a coffee shop, my automatic instinct is to grab for my phone. Not to do anything necessary, of course; just to scroll aimlessly for the minute or two before it's my turn to order. Maybe I can catch a few tweets, headlines, or Instagram stories.

It's the same impulse that leads me to grab my phone first thing in the morning, right before I go to sleep at night, and throughout the day as I'm in between tasks. Sometimes I find myself checking an app in the roughly 20 seconds it takes for me to walk from one side of my house to the other. In none of these cases do I have a clear reason or defined goal. It's just a habit I've gradually been conditioned into, as have most of us in the smartphone age: a disturbing Pavlovian impulse to fill every open moment of life with some form of mediated "content."

The more I've become aware of this often unconscious habit, the more it disturbs me. The main problem isn't that what I find in those snippets of scrolling is largely foolish (though that's certainly a problem). It's that the elimination of every last shred of unmediated space in our lives makes us foolish. To become wise, we need emptiness in our days; time to think; space to synthesize; moments to be still; mental breaks. Yet the smartphone era is quickly obliterating these things, beckoning us to fill every spare second of life with *something*. Click this! Watch this next!

Listen to this podcast!
The algorithms are designed to commandeer our attention not just partially, but *totally*. And it's making us fools.

Here's one small thing we can all do to [become a bit more wise](#), then: carve out some space—*any* space—to be silent, still, and unmediated rather than letting every inch of your attention be colonized by content.

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We're Scared of Stillness

The internet's algorithms are just tapping into a dynamic of our fallenness that has plagued humanity for time immemorial: we hate stillness. We're restless and fidgety, never fully at home in the present. There's always something productive we should be *doing*, right?

Blaise Pascal, in [Pensées](#), ponders why we fill our minds with the past and future but rarely take time to be still in the moment:

We are so unwise that we wander about in times that do not belong to us, and do not think of the only one that does; so vain that we dream of times that are not and blindly flee the only one that is. The fact is that the present usually hurts. We thrust it out of sight because it distresses us, and if we find it enjoyable, we are sorry to see it slip away.

Why is present-tense stillness so stressful? Maybe silence unsettles because the constant hum of noise distracts us from realities (e.g., death) we'd rather not confront. Whatever the reason, our aversion to stillness is not good for our spiritual growth and the development of wisdom.

I return to [Psalm 46](#) often to ground me in God's changeless sovereignty in unsteady times. Verse 10 contains one of my favorite phrases in Scripture: "Be still, and know that I am God." Being still—the stoppage of constant striving, frenetic noise, and distraction—is fundamentally connected to *knowing*. Be still. And then what? *Know God*. Only in stillness can we begin to apprehend the bracing power and holiness of God. And this awestruck, stunned-into-silence awareness is the beginning of wisdom ([Prov. 9:10](#)).

Foolishness is rampant today in part because we're rarely stationary enough to experience stillness. And stillness is a prerequisite for wisdom.

Staring at Walls

In his helpful book [The Common Rule](#), Justin Earley suggests our spare moments should not be filled with aimless online wandering, but rather "reserved for staring at walls, which is infinitely more useful."

Staring at walls is hard, but try it. Unmediated space and quiet stillness are hugely rewarding. But both require discipline. We have to be intentional about choosing silence and stillness in a noisy, fidgety age. There's always another video to watch, article to read, podcast to listen to, book to read. Can these things be valuable for our wisdom? Of course! But not when we're relentlessly going from one piece of content to the next, without giving

our souls pauses to let inputs percolate and be absorbed as nutrition. Eating fast food constantly throughout the day would make you sick. So it is with consuming information.

It's not that our motives are always bad. The Protestant evangelical tendency to want to "redeem the time" by optimizing every minute is understandable. There are only so many hours in a day, but so much still to learn. We can thus justify content gluttony in the name of noble desires to be grown, equipped, resourced, and informed. But there *is* such a thing as too much of a good thing. A buffet of the healthiest organic food in the world would still make you sick if you went back to fill up your plate too many times. So it is with the unfathomably large "content buffet" that is the internet. It's making us sick, as I observe in chapter one ("Information Gluttony") of my new book, [*The Wisdom Pyramid*](#).

Why I'm Not a Big Podcast Listener

This is why I don't really listen to podcasts. I have nothing against podcasts as a form—like anything, they can be great and they can be terrible. It's just that, in between other forms of content I've prioritized (mostly books, movies, and music), I usually only have a few "in between" moments left in my day when I might squeeze in a podcast. Driving is one of them. But for me, driving is one of my only chances to *think*. I could listen to a podcast while I do the dishes or some other household chore—or I could use that precious time to *process* or *pray* through everything already swimming around in my mind. As I garden or go on walks outside, I could listen to a podcast that fills my head with stimulating content. Or I could simply feed my soul with the sensory stimulation of God's creation—the air blowing, the birdsong, the Southern California smells of citrus, sea salt, and jasmine.

I'm not saying you should give up podcasts. I'm suggesting you should give up *something* to free up a bit more empty space in your life. Recognize that stillness is vital for your spiritual health in an over-stimulated age, even if it means missing out on some quality content.

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How Social Media Use Can Rival God

BY JEN WILKIN

We might attempt to build a framework for how to use social media by making a study of negative patterns to avoid. But the Bible reminds us that wisdom begins in a very specific place: with the fear of the Lord ([Ps. 111:10](#)).

It was the fear of the Lord that Adam and Eve lost sight of in the garden. When the serpent suggested to Eve that she eat the forbidden fruit, he promised her a benefit that was exceedingly strange: “You will be like God” ([Gen. 3:5](#)). Be like God? She already was! God had formed humankind in his image, after his likeness. If they were already God’s reflectors, what did the fruit stand to gain them?

What the serpent offered was knowledge that would cause the humans not to reflect God, but to rival him. He offered them a kind of knowing that was not meant to be known by limited creatures, but only by God himself. They weren’t built for it. It would certainly crush them. Yet the draw to surpass their God-given limits overcame the desire to bear his image as they were made to do. And the rest, as they say, is history.

There’s a way to [use social media that reflects God](#). And there’s a way to use it that rivals him. Wisdom seeks the first way. But how, specifically, does social media draw us into rivalry instead of reflection? Let me suggest three truths we deny when we use it unwisely.

1. We are changeable; God is not.

Consider [how unlike us God is when it comes to mutability](#). God is unchanging. He is un-influenceable. He never reads a social media post and alters what he thinks or how he acts. He has never once redecorated or changed his fashion sense. The Rock of Ages is eternally the same. He transcends our changing times, governing them with the steady hand of his immutable rule.

We, on the other hand, are open to influence, able to be swayed. Think about your daily life for a minute. How has social media affected it? What did you see there that shaped what's in your pantry, your medicine cabinet, your workout routine, your wardrobe, or your home decor? Now think about your thought life. What current events or faith discussions have been shaped by what you've seen on social media? We cannot help but be shaped by what we look at.

Social media forms malleable humans into an image. How Christians use it determines whether it yields us well-formed or mal-

formed. Where we cast our gaze, and for how long, influences not just how we live but who we are. We dare not tell ourselves that we are unaffected by what we fix our eyes upon. Instead, we must steward the fact of our imitative design to yield the fruit of righteousness.

What current events or faith discussions have been shaped by what you've seen on social media? We cannot help but be shaped by what we look at.

2. We are time-bound; God is not.

Time-wasting has always been a temptation for humans, and an addictive one at that. A desire to lose our sense of the passage

of time is evidence that we want to be like God in an unhealthy way. We subconsciously covet his eternality. We tell ourselves that there's plenty of time and we can spend it without thought.

But only God is capable of existing outside the bounds of time. Only God can dispense of his duties without the tyranny of the clock. He sets no reminders or alarms, and he acts at just the right time all the time, with no forgetfulness or sloth. He created us to live according to a timeline and to number our days with accuracy so that we would use them wisely ([Ps. 90:12](#)).

For time-bound humans, all time spent on social media is time that will not be spent elsewhere. We dare not tell ourselves that we can afford an unlimited or unbudgeted use of social media, even if we use it in profitable ways. And we dare not ignore its addictive nature. As with all things that promise us we can be like God, its pull will be strong. Those who think soberly about social media use will lash themselves to the masthead of godly wisdom so that their [limited time is spent well](#).

3. We have bodies; God does not.

God is spirit, and because this is true, he's able to be present everywhere. The implications of this are many, but for the purpose of our present discussion, consider the relational significance of God's omnipresence. He's able to create and sustain an unlimited number of personal relationships with others. But what is relationally possible for God is relationally impossible for his image-bearers.

When God made us, he joined our spirits to physical bodies. A body is a set of limits. It's the reason we can only be in one place at one time. Because we're not omnipresent, we can only create and sustain a limited number of relationships. We know this

intuitively. It's why we prioritize time with some people over time with others. We categorize people according to depth of relationship: family, friend, acquaintance. We speak of [work-life balance](#) as a means to ensure we're physically present with those we hold closest, recognizing that we can either be present at work or present at home, but not both.

Social media offers us a sense that we're not limited to one place at a time. It suggests that we, like God, can create and sustain a virtually unlimited number of relationships. If we fail to recognize that a friend on Facebook is not the same as a friend face-to-face, we'll allocate precious proximity to screens instead of to actual, embodied humans.

Reshaping Our Habits

If we want to be wise about social media use, and if the fear of the Lord truly is the beginning of wisdom, we'll begin to reshape our habits by reminding ourselves that only God is immutable, eternal, and omnipresent—and by reminding ourselves that we are not.

Thus is resolved our first and most vital social dilemma: that God is ours to reflect but not to rival. With our identity as image-bearers firmly in view, we're free to partake of social media in ways that don't define who we are or why we're here. We are made in God's image for his glory.

Editors' note: This is adapted from *Social Sanity in an Insta World* edited by Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra (TGC, July 2022). Purchase through the [TGC Bookstore](#) or [Amazon](#).

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The Insidious, Fake Intimacy of Algorithms

BY CHRIS MARTIN

The social internet is like a bustling marketplace of opinions and entertainment. Like shops in a mall, various apps—such as Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok—promise to fulfill our insatiable hunger for more information, inspiration, or entertainment. Each app has its own flavor, but all share a core component that makes them work: [“the algorithm.”](#)

No matter the social-media platform, the algorithms that determine what you see on your feeds are designed to deliver you content that keeps your attention and [keeps you scrolling](#) on that platform, as opposed to tapping over to another app or platform. The reasons the algorithms are engineered to keep your attention are many, but ultimately, the longer a social-media app keeps the attention of users, the more engagement it creates, the more it learns about its users, and the more valuable its advertising opportunities become.

Why Do Algorithms Feel Creepy?

The *Wall Street Journal* recently [published a video](#) investigating how TikTok, a social-media platform with one of the most advanced algorithms, is able to detect our deepest desires. The *Journal* set up a number of “fake” accounts run by artificial intelligence, programmed to have certain interests.

In one example of an account that was designed to be interested in sad and depressing content, it only took TikTok 36 minutes of watch time to recognize the interests of the account. By observing engaging actions taken by the fake account—every video watched and liked—it didn't take long for 93 percent of the content TikTok served to the account to be related to depression or sadness.

In this (unfortunately quite common) example, a depressed user could be driven further into depression because the algorithm is more concerned with keeping the user interested than in alleviating depressive thoughts. Algorithms aren't interested in helping us heal or become better. They're more than happy to figure out exactly how we are broken, and what content our broken selves might find irresistible.

The main reason it feels creepy when algorithms know us too well is that we don't like how it functions as a mirror into our souls. When we're disturbed by what we see in our feeds, it may be because we're confronted with the darkest depths of our desires, which we attempt to hide from even ourselves.

Algorithms Reveal and Rule Our Hearts

Algorithms make idolatrous inroads into our hearts because we spend more time scrolling social media than we do savoring Scripture. It isn't too outrageous to say that, in some sense, we worship social-media algorithms. We may not sing songs of praise to Instagram, but do we give it twice as much time as we give to God? Do we let the insights of a YouTuber trump the truth of God's Word?

One reason we can come to “worship” algorithms is that they seem to know our deepest fears and desires as God might. God searches and knows our hearts ([Ps. 139:23](#); [Jer. 12:3](#); [Acts 15:8](#); [Rev. 2:23](#)), but so do the algorithms. In our beloved algorithms we find a perverse intimacy—one that uses our deepest fears and vulnerabilities for itself. But in God we find true intimacy—one that fulfills our greatest longings.

Still, algorithms can deceive us into believing they care for us. Algorithms appear to serve us. They make us feel good, or bad, whichever we prefer. They ask nothing of us, we think, but our time and attention. They make us the hero of our story—allowing all reality to be bent to our desires.

An algorithm promises to serve us, but in reality, it exists to serve itself. God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to save us from our sin and restore our relationship with him for eternity. Our algorithm may know us intimately, but it doesn’t love us like that. It will never sacrifice for us.

The algorithm seizes
our hearts for its good,
but God seeks our

*An algorithm promises to
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hearts for our good. When we realize the outsized insight and influence algorithms have on our hearts and minds, we should flee these mathematical mediators of reality and pursue intimacy with people who point us to life in Christ.

Flee the Algorithms, Find People

How open are you with the people around you? Do you tell your small group that you’re always irrationally afraid that you’re going to lose your job, or do you just smile and talk about how everything at work is fine? When you go to coffee with a friend, do

you share your struggles with parenting teenagers, or do you just chitchat about the start of a new school year? Does your spouse know you struggle with lust? Instagram's algorithm does.

Many of us have deeper relationships with the algorithms than with the people in our churches. This is not surprising. When we spend more time tapping on our screens than we do talking with our friends, our algorithms will know us better than our loved ones do.

But through the secure setting of friendship, founded on the sacrificial love of Jesus, we can gain much more than being known. We can grow. The algorithms want us to believe the lie that wholeness is found by diving *into* our desires rather than being delivered *from* them. The algorithms want us to believe that what we need most is to be known. The truth is we need to be known *and* grown.

Don't be deceived by the fake intimacy and false promises of algorithms. Seek out real intimacy with in-the-flesh friends and family. Don't let algorithms shape your heart and steal your worship. Spend less time aimlessly scrolling and clicking, susceptible to whatever the algorithm wants to show you, and more time intentionally seeking God in prayer, Bible study, and worship.

Recognize this truth about online life today: while you might think you are the one consuming content, in reality, content is consuming you.

Chris Martin is a content marketing editor at Moody Publishers and a social media, marketing, and communications consultant. He writes regularly in his Substack newsletter, [Terms of Service](#), and is the author of [Terms of Service: The Real Cost of Social Media](#) (B&H, 2022). Chris lives outside Nashville with his wife, Susie, their daughter, Magnolia, and their dog, Rizzo.

The Scrolling Soul

BY JEFF MINGEE

Neil Postman warned us, in his final chapter of [*Amusing Ourselves to Death*](#): “There are two ways by which the spirit of a culture may be shriveled. In the first—the Orwellian—culture becomes a prison. In the second—the Huxleyan—culture becomes a burlesque.”

Our digital age seduces us into the burlesque. The red-light district beckons us from our blue-light screens. Notifications, pop-up ads, and the endless possibilities of life online welcome you in.

We can shop for whatever we want. We can study any subject we desire. We can gaze at any object accessible through a search bar. And yet U2’s song still rings true: we [still haven’t found what we’re looking for](#).

Bunyan’s Vanity Fair in Our Phones

Consider the digital circus in the palm of your hand. From this jumping-off point, you can go anywhere. You’re a few clicks away from respected academic journals, grotesque pornography, the tweets of world leaders, or calling a loved one. Which way will you go?

In *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, John Bunyan [describes the ancient Vanity Fair](#):

Therefore at this fair are all such merchandise sold: as houses, lands, trades, places, honours, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms; lusts, pleasures, and delights of all sorts—as whores, bawds, wives, husbands, children,

masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not.

And moreover, at this fair there is at all times to be deceivers, cheats, games, plays, fools, apes, knaves, and rogues and that of every kind.

Here are to be seen, too—and that for nothing—thefts, murders, adulteries, false-swearers, and that of a blood red colour.

Vanity Fair sounds a lot like our internet. Merchandise is sold. All types of people are found.

Where Bunyan's Christian walked through the streets and alleys of Vanity Fair, we scroll through them with the flick of our thumbs. And what is the effect on our souls?

Beware the Folly of Scrolling

Your scrolling is not neutral. [You are becoming something](#). Your search history tells a story about your soul.

Careless scrolling often exposes our folly. And it breeds discontentment. The parade of spectacles never ends. We can fast-forward, skip ahead, or go back and examine specifics. You can rewatch in hi-def what you were never meant to see in the first place.

The restless scrolling soul constantly asks, *Am I entertained? Am I liked? Am I amused? The heaven-bound soul asks, Am I holy? Am I loved by God? Am I satisfied in him?*

Scrolling discourages deep delight. Scrolling, by nature, keeps us on the surface, [always consuming tasty treats](#) but rarely nourished by anything satisfying. The scrolling soul spends countless

hours searching what the sort of satisfaction that can only be found in Christ.

Stop Scrolling. Start Beholding.

The scrolling soul will only find satisfaction in Christ. Bunyan [writes of the pilgrims who avoid Vanity Fair's appeal](#): “They would put their fingers in their ears, and cry, ‘Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity’; and look upwards, signifying that their trade and traffic was in heaven.”

Christian, turn your eyes to the glory of Christ. See him as more beautiful than the endless spectacles on your phone. “Look to me and be saved” ([Isa. 45:22](#)). Jesus alone will satisfy your soul ([John 6:35](#)). Are you looking to Christ? Are you delighting in him? And are you turning your ears to Scripture more than the voices crying out, “Click on me”? The voice of God in Scripture cries out with more urgency and authority than any pop-up ad. Will you listen?

John Owen [warns](#) those who would rather behold the spectacles on screens than the glory of Christ: “He that has no sight of Christ’s glory here shall never see it hereafter.”

Stop scrolling through the digital vanity fair and feast on Christ.

Henry Scrougal [pierces our scrolling souls](#): “The worth and excellency of a soul is to be measured by the object of its love.”

Scrolling shrivels your soul as it pulls it in a thousand different directions. It distracts you from the greatest object your soul could ever love, and the most glorious truths your eyes and ears could ever behold. Don’t let your soul get sucked into the vanity of an aimless scrolling wasteland—where paths lead everywhere

but never to a place of rest and joy. Instead, lead your soul along the “path of life” that leads to ultimate satisfaction: “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” ([Ps. 16:11](#)).

Jeff Minge (DMin, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary) is the pastor of Catalyst Church in Newport News, Virginia. He also serves as a church planting strategist with the SBC of Virginia and helps lead the Hampton Roads regional chapter of The Gospel Coalition. He is the author of several books, including most recently, [Digital Dominion: Five Questions Christians Should Ask to Take Control of their Digital Devices](#) (10Publishing, 2022).

3 Ways to Keep Social Media from Stealing Your Joy

BY GAVIN ORTLUND

Social media often seems to reflect the opposite values of God's kingdom.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." Social media often seems to bless the outraged. Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek." Social media often seems to bless the narcissistic.

I'm grateful for many godly Christian leaders who model an edifying use of social media. At the same time, I worry that we as the church are often shaped by the unhealthy dynamics of social-media culture more than we are shaping it. Too often, we get pulled into the yuck, the noise, the sneering.

I don't think the answer is necessarily to avoid social media altogether, though it may be for some, and all of us should consider our limitations. But I do think that in the current state of our culture, godliness in social-media use will require extra intentionality and ballast. We will not likely drift into an edifying use of Twitter or Instagram. Things like self-promotion and meanness are too powerful a current.

How do we do this? I'm still wrestling with what this looks like, but here are three strategies we might consider starting with.

1. Fight Envy with Gratitude

Social media invites constant comparison, making envy a constant danger. There will always be someone with more followers, and some new crisis you feel you must weigh in on (or joke you want to be a part of). It's easy for the fear of being overlooked to become a tyrant, or the need to maintain your platform to become a burden.

I've discovered that the fight against envy is helped by cultivating gratitude for what I have. It helps to focus more on *using* our platform for actual good than *growing* it for potential good. Rejoice in whatever influence you've been given, however small. Be grateful for it. Cultivate it like a precious garden in a desert.

It's also healthy and freeing to regularly offer our influence back to the Lord. Lay it down before him, and seek to be genuinely okay with him taking it away, if only you can have more of him.

As we do so, it helps to remember that pride is always the path to barrenness and humility the path to joy. Jesus came with a manger, not a parade. Our social-media presence should reflect this fact in some way. Oh, the happiness and freedom of simply serving others, and not minding obscurity!

2. Make Extra Efforts at Kindness

I've often thought that social media is one of our culture's mechanisms for public shaming. What we used to do with stocks, we now do with Twitter.

The scary thing is that people who engage in this kind of activity often get *more* attention as a result. It's a sobering indication of

our fallenness that in certain contexts we not only tolerate meanness and outrage, we actually *reward* them.

In light of the state of our cultural dialogue, and the nature of the medium, we must work all the harder to display kindness. Take extra steps to say

We will not likely drift into an edifying use of Twitter or Instagram. Things like self-promotion and meanness are too powerful a current.

something positive whenever you can. Avoid sarcasm more than you normally would. Be extra eager for opportunities to honor someone else ([Rom. 12:10](#)).

I know this isn't simple, and I don't want to take away from the value of open disagreement and debate. And certainly, there is a time for rebuke and indignation. Some attacks or misrepresentations require a forceful response.

Still, it's worth asking, with any tweet or post: does this feel more like the flesh or the Spirit? What culture am I contributing to?

3. Take Breaks

Regular disengagement is helpful for a healthy life on social media. In addition to taking sabbath breaks away from social media altogether, you might also consider:

Delete the app on your phone—just use it on your computer (either do this always, or for certain seasons, like weekends or family days).

Have certain places in your home where you never bring your devices (e.g., a den or study).

Use “do not disturb” function as default practice (so it stops buzzing at you—the constant distraction is not healthy for us).

Another helpful practice is, quite simply, to mute or unfollow people who consistently drag you down. Don’t hesitate to do this. You’re not required to follow anyone (or interact with any comments) when doing so is detrimental to your soul. When I’m struggling with envy or loneliness while scrolling through social media, I know it’s probably time to disengage for a while.

Or, if you never argue with people in real life, but you do on Facebook, it’s time to balance the two out more. Social media should complement, not compensate for, face-to-face interaction.

Final Appeal

Those of us who go by the name of Christ must be especially mindful of how we talk to one another. Our interactions on social media play out before a watching world. Even amid our disagreements, we should be distinguished by love ([John 13:35](#)), lest we discredit the gospel of grace.

I realize there are some people with whom it is next to impossible to have an edifying interaction. Truly, I think we often need to give greater thought to [Titus 3:10](#) in such instances: “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him.” It might sound harsh, but wisdom will at times require total avoidance. Paul understood this, and so should we.

So much is out of our control. We cannot stop the incessant screaming and scrambling that is the internet. But we can try to reduce our own involvement in the problems, and do whatever we can to contribute to a healthier culture.

Here's a happy goal to pray for: that more Christians would be recognizable on social media by the wisdom that James describes: "peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere" ([James 3:17](#)).

Gavin Ortlund (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) is a husband, father, pastor, and writer. He serves as senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Ojai in Ojai, California. He is the author of [Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals: Why We Need Our Past to Have a Future](#) (Crossway, 2019) and [Finding the Right Hills to Die on: The Case for Theological Triage](#) (Crossway/TGC, 2020).

Are Churches Losing the Battle to Form Christians?

BY BRETT MCCRACKEN

The digital age, and more broadly [our secular age](#), has greatly expanded the horizon of ideas shaping Christians. The church is increasingly just one voice among many speaking into a Christian's life. A church's worship habits may occupy two hours of a Christian's week. But podcasts, radio shows, cable news, social media, streaming entertainment, and other forms of media account for [upwards of 90 hours of their week](#).

How can a few hours of Christian formation (and during COVID, maybe zero hours) compete with the tidal wave of media rushing over people? Even the most pastorally effective shepherds will struggle to guard flocks against the many voices influencing them. Pastors feel the weight of this ongoing challenge, which the [divisive COVID-19 climate](#) only further exposed. It's enough to cause [some to predict](#) a mass exodus from the pastorate in coming years.

Be Alarmed, Not Alarmist

We should be alarmed at the pressures facing pastors, but not alarmist. Pastors fighting for the hearts and minds of their sheep is nothing new. Jesus warned that wolves would snatch and scatter the sheep ([John 10:12](#)). Paul cautioned the Ephesian elders to "be alert" to the "fierce wolves" who would not spare the flock ([Acts 20:29–31](#)). For pastors, the "wolf" threat is not new.

What's new is that, in the internet age, any given sheep is vulnerable to literally millions of wolves, whose overt or subtle dangers are only ever a few clicks away. It's impossible for any pastor to be aware of all the wolves. It's impossible for pastors to track the online activities of any one of their sheep, let alone hundreds of them. [The search bar is the spiritual battleground of our day](#), and yet it's a largely hidden battleground where the fight for hearts and minds is waged in one-on-one combat. Even if a pastor wanted to take up arms in this war, the reality is a congregation of 100 would mean 100 fronts, with each person's online experience different from the next. No wonder pastors are exhausted.

It's not that pastors should demand exclusive influence over the hearts and minds of their flock. That dangerous approach leads to a whole host of other problems. The issue is that in the internet age, sheep have more opportunities than ever before to wander in all sorts of directions, after shepherds they don't know, who don't know them, can't take care of them, and in many cases turn out to be wolves.

Pastors are trying to corral sheep being lured in various dangerous ideological directions; some to the extreme left, some to the far right. On one day a pastor might receive a strongly worded email from a conservative member threatening to leave because the church has bought into mask-wearing protocols of the Bill Gates-orchestrated "scandemic." An hour later, the pastor might need to talk a progressive member off the brink of leaving because they claim the church is insufficiently outraged by whatever President Trump said that week.

This whiplash leaves many pastors feeling defeated. Can anything be done to bring coherent Christian formation to a flock so disparately formed?

What Can Pastors Do?

This is a massive issue—perhaps the biggest meta threat facing the church in the 21st century—and it can't be sufficiently addressed in one article. But in terms of tactical things pastors can do to make headway in Christian discipleship in the age of Google, here are a few ideas to spark further conversation.

1. Media habits should be a discipleship focus.

Pastors, help Christians see the formational power of what they consume online. Show them how toxic a media diet can be when it's heavy on partisan sources, cable news, and Twitter. Teach media literacy. Suggest

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digital fasts. Encourage them toward more reliable sources of wisdom (this is what my book, [The Wisdom Pyramid](#), is all about). Point them to trustworthy online resources. Help them see the emptiness of [newsfeed-style, remixed spirituality](#). Treat media gluttony and excessive internet time as serious pastoral issues on par with other addictions. Lovingly speak into the online habits forming your church members.

2. Prioritize formation beyond Sundays.

While the Sunday worship gathering [is essential and should never be neglected or deemphasized](#), it's vital to provide other opportunities for Christian formation. This does *not* mean churches must compete in the crowded media marketplace, creating

Christian versions of things like Netflix and TikTok. It does not mean gimmicks or chasing technological fads. I'm talking about encouraging creative rhythms during the week to facilitate God-centered community, education, beauty, work, and leisure throughout the week. The burden for this doesn't fall entirely on pastors, but we urgently need fresh vision for what holistic Christian formation looks like in the 21st century.

3. Church is about more than getting “content.”

Any church that conceives of itself *primarily* as a deliverer of content—giving people great sermons, top-notch worship music experiences—will eventually be a dead church. In the age of Google, there will always be better preaching and better worship music just a click away. But such online “content”—yes, even from TGC—can never replace church, and pastors must think carefully about why. [What can a local church provide that a Google search cannot?](#) Offering compelling, attractive answers to this question is one of the most urgent questions for the church.

Pastors and church leaders, don't lose heart. This is an incredibly difficult moment, but it's just the latest challenge Christ's bride has faced. She will survive. Yes, be alert and concerned for your internet-scattered flock. But remember we are the flock's stewards, not its owners or creators. We feeble shepherds have nothing to give that we didn't also receive from the Great Shepherd. He's in charge. He's building his church, and nothing—no pandemic, no divisive political issue, not even the gates of hell ([Matt. 16:18](#))—will prevail against it.

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Christian Community, Gray Matters: Navigating the Space Between Legalism and Liberty, and Hipster Christianity: When Church and Cool Collide. Brett and his wife, Kira, live in Santa Ana, California, with their three children. They belong to Southlands Church, and Brett serves as an elder.

What Social Media Users Need Most

BY MELISSA KRUGER

I love to cook. Well, perhaps it's more truthful to say that I love to eat, therefore I've learned to cook. When I first began, I followed recipes precisely. I didn't deviate because I had no idea what I was doing.

Over time, I realized that some types of recipes need to be followed precisely, while there's a lot of wiggle room in others. If I'm baking a cake, accuracy matters. Without the correct combination of flour, butter, and sugar, I'm going to have a cake failure on my hands. However, if I'm creating a pasta sauce, I can add a few extra garlic cloves, sprinkle in some red pepper flakes, and use sausage instead of ground beef because it makes the sauce taste so much better (well, to me at least).

When it comes to social media, we'd probably like for someone to offer up a precise recipe to follow—here's how much time to spend on each platform and a list of people to follow. It would also tell us what types of posts to share and let us know which posts to like.

No Recipe for Social Media

Unfortunately, there's no recipe for social media. Each person has different reasons for being online and different reactions to what she encounters. An online article that sends one person into a fit of rage might be hardly noticed by someone else. A beautiful living room may invoke feelings of jealousy in one woman's heart,

while another woman might feel joy and inspiration at the same picture.

As we engage on social media, we desperately need discernment.

I like to define discernment as *wisdom making a choice*. Some women may choose to not use social media at all. Some women may take breaks. Some women may put limits on their phones to monitor their usage. We need a combination of knowledge, wisdom, and experience to grow in our ability to choose what's best for our own lives, while not expecting everyone else to come to the same conclusions.

If we don't take the time to think wisely about our boundaries, we can be sure that social media will continually clamor for our time and attention. As we do, here are a few things to consider.

Positives

[Proverbs 9](#) is a fascinating image of two very different women: wisdom and folly. Lady Wisdom sends out her young women to the highest places in the town with an invitation, "Come . . . leave your simple ways, and live, and walk in the way of insight" ([Prov. 9:5–6](#)).

Wisdom is not hidden. She's crying out for you to listen, with the hope that you will live! She's there on social media, inviting you to walk in the way of insight. In the midst of the social media marketplace, look for women of wisdom. They love Jesus. They share truth from his Word. They post beneficial articles and talks. They speak with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on their tongues. Some days, a verse or a quote someone shares online may be just the encouragement you need.

Social media can also help us connect with local friends. I love seeing posts about graduations, vacations, new babies, and recent events. What I read online often helps me to ask better questions of my friends when we're in person. Many churches use private Facebook groups as an opportunity to connect women. It's been an immensely helpful way for me to put a new face with a name. I've seen these groups used as an opportunity to share about upcoming events, ask advice (from parenting resources to dentist recommendations), and connect with one another during the week. It doesn't replace the benefits of being together in person, but it can enhance it.

Take a moment to consider: Whom do you follow on social media who regularly encourages your faith? How has social media given you the opportunity to connect with friends? In what ways does social media allow you to connect with your church?

Pitfalls

We can be thankful for the presence of Lady Wisdom on social media while being cautiously aware that Folly is also crying out for our attention. As we seek to discern what's best, it's helpful to consider three social media pitfalls: time, thoughts, and temptations.

Time is a limited resource. Once it's lost, it never returns. Unfortunately, social media dulls us to the world around us. We may sign on to quickly check one notification and end up still staring at our phone 30 minutes later. Discernment helps us wisely choose how to spend our time because we recognize that small moments over time accumulate into large portions of our lives.

What we spend our time looking at greatly affects what we're thinking about. Everyone knows what it's like to have negative

thoughts while online. *What we spend our time looking at greatly affects what we're thinking about.* One woman might be anxious and worried after reading a friend's update on her sick family member. A different woman may feel lonely after seeing a group photo of a social gathering posted online. Another woman might doubt the validity of God's Word on a particular subject because a popular influencer has a new view and everyone seems to agree.

What we see on social media affects how we think. It also affects how we view others. It's important for each of us to consider—in what ways am I negatively affected by social media? Who invites me toward folly? So often, our thoughts lead us to temptation. Spending time on social media can tempt us toward discontentment, unkind judgments, bitterness, or envy of someone's possessions or accomplishments.

As you think about your own areas of temptation, consider how social media influences your struggle. Discernment is not avoidance of the world; it's the ability to go into the world and embrace the good while avoiding the bad.

Editors' note: This is adapted from *Social Sanity in an Insta World* edited by Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra (TGC, July 2022). Purchase through the [TGC Bookstore](#) or [Amazon](#).

Melissa Kruger serves as director of women's content at The Gospel Coalition. She is the author of [*The Envy of Eve: Finding Contentment in a Covetous World*](#), [*Walking with God in the Season of Motherhood*](#), [*In All Things: A Nine Week Devotional Bible Study on Unshakeable Joy*](#), [*Growing Together: Taking Mentoring Beyond Small Talk and Prayer Requests*](#), and [*Wherever You Go, I Want You to Know*](#). Her husband, Mike, is the president of Reformed Theological Seminary, and they have three children.

Gospel Culture and Social Media

BY SAM ALLBERRY AND RAY ORTLUND

In this [You're Not Crazy](#) podcast episode, Ray Ortlund and Sam Allberry discuss pastors, social media, and gospel culture.



Sam Allberry is a pastor, apologist, and speaker. He is the author of [7 Myths About Singleness](#), [Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With?](#), and, most recently, [What God Has to Say About Our Bodies](#).

Ray Ortlund (ThM, Dallas Theological Seminary; MA, The University of California, Berkeley; PhD, University of Aberdeen, Scotland) is president of Renewal Ministries, and an Emeritus Council member of The Gospel Coalition. He founded Immanuel Church in Nashville, Tennessee, and now serves from Immanuel as Pastor to Pastors.

Let's Talk: Taming the Tongue...and the Thumb

BY JASMINE HOLMES, MELISSA KRUGER,
AND JACKIE HILL PERRY

In this *Let's Talk* podcast episode, Jasmine Holmes, Jackie Hill Perry, and Melissa Kruger talk about taming the tongue, both in face-to-face life and also online. We may dismiss sins of speech—from gossip to complaining to tearing someone down—as minor. But James compares the damage our words can do to a blazing forest fire lit by just a spark (3:5).



Jasmine Holmes is a wife, mom, and speaker, and the author of *[Mother to Son: Letters to a Black Boy on Identity and Hope](#)* and *[Carved in Ebony](#)*. She and her husband, Phillip, have three sons, and they are members of Redeemer Church in Jackson, Mississippi.

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Jackie Hill Perry is a spoken word poet and hip-hop artist, and the author of *Gay Girl, Good God: The Story of Who I Was, and Who God Has Always Been*. She and her husband, Preston, have three daughters.

Social Media Should Come with a Warning Label

BY SARAH ZYLSTRA AND PAUL POTEAT

Paul Poteat's 13-year-old daughter is the only one in her class without a smartphone.

"They give the students 10 minutes at the end of the day when they can be on their phones, and she is sitting there looking around as every other person is on their phone," said Poteat, who is the Midwest network director for Campus Outreach.

Poteat and his wife aren't withholding a smartphone from their daughter because they want her to be lonely and bored at the end of the school day. They're doing it because they've done their homework. They've thought and talked about how to handle their phones. And they think social media should come with a warning label.

TGC talked with Poteat about what social media is selling, why it seems like the Matrix, and how to get out.

How do you talk to college students about their use of social media?

Philip Morris, which is the largest producer of cigarettes, is worth about \$165 billion. The brewing company Anheuser-Busch is worth about \$110 billion. Retail giant Target is worth \$75 billion.

Facebook platforms—which include Instagram, WhatsApp, and Oculus—are worth \$538 billion.

I ask my students, “How much money have you given to social media?” And, of course, they haven’t. Then I tell them, “What is social media selling? They’re selling you. You are the product. And they’re selling you to companies that will solicit your interest and your consumption. That’s where Facebook makes its money.”

Social media can be used for good or for bad, but it isn’t amoral. It’s being controlled by someone, and that person—or corporation, or algorithm—is seeking to control you. What I’m trying to help students understand is that they’re in the Matrix. They have to be aware of what’s happening to them.

How do you know if you’re stuck in the Matrix—if you’re addicted to social media?

If you’re a recovering alcoholic, then you’d work hard not to go to a bar. If you were trying to kick nicotine, you’d pay at the pump rather than going inside the gas station. But it’s harder when you’re addicted to your phone, because it’s always on you, and you use it as a phone, clock, calendar, calculator, and more. And every notification is tapping you on the shoulder.

I ask students to go into their phones to check their screen time. These are Christian students who are looking to pursue God in their lives. And they’re on their phones five to six hours a day. They’re getting 300 notifications a day, picking it up 120 times a day. I don’t think people are aware of this. Even if you take away the time spent on phone calls or listening to an audiobook, they’re still on there, on social media, for two to three hours a day.

What I want for them is awareness. And once they're aware, we can ask, "How do we walk forward?" It's not just about what you're doing on social media, but it's what you could be doing with the time it's taking up.

I try to help them understand how powerful the technology rule is in their life—in my life too. We can't begin to take steps away until we realize it's a problem.

Social media can be used for good or for bad, but it isn't amoral. It's being controlled by someone, and that person—or corporation, or algorithm—is seeking to control you.

But even after we realize it's a problem, we're still in trouble, aren't we? There isn't a Social Media Users Anonymous. What can we do?

The students will say about their time spent or pickups, "Oh, man, that's embarrassing. But is it really harming my life? How bad is it?"

Occasionally, they'll be up for the challenge of taking a week without social media. In [*The Tech-Wise Family*](#), Andy Crouch recommends going screen-free for an hour a day, a day a week, and a week a year, which I've really appreciated and tried to implement.

After a week or so, the students go back, and it isn't long before they're back to their original habits. Unless you cut it off completely, it's hard to do more than white-knuckle it for a season.

In Matthew, Jesus talks about a demon who is removed from a person and wanders around, but when he comes back, he brings

seven more demons with him ([Matt. 12:44–45](#)). The way I take that is, if all you do is get the demon out of the house, and you don't fill the house with something, it'll come back worse than it was before. It's not good enough just to get rid of social media addiction—what are you replacing it with?

For example, while the other kids get their smartphone time at school, my daughter finishes her homework. After she gets home, when the other kids are working, she's playing outside. We're replacing screen time with outside play.

Paul also talks about [putting on and putting off](#)—putting off sin, vice, the old self; putting on Christ, the armor of God, the new self.

In [Colossians 3](#), we're told to put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Honestly, those sound like the opposite of what social media creates—apathy, meanness, pride, self-promotion, and hurry. So the putting on that's necessary is actually something that social media is somewhat antithetical to.

Could you use social media and the internet to put on virtue? If you could do that, you'd be using it well.

Paul Poteat is the Midwest network director for Campus Outreach. He lives with his wife Samm and their two daughters in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra is senior writer and faith-and-work editor for The Gospel Coalition. She is also the coauthor of [Gospelbound: Living with Resolute Hope in an Anxious Age](#) and editor of [Social Sanity in an Insta World](#). She lives with her husband and two sons in the suburbs of Chicago, where they are active members of [Orland Park Christian Reformed Church](#).

