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ANALOG CHURCH

WHY WE NEED REAL PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THINGS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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SLOW AND STEADY

WHY GO ANALOG?

Moments of more may leave us with lives of less.

SHERRY TURKLE

NOT LONG AGO, a friend was showing me a couple of the dating apps on his phone. I felt like a dinosaur watching him deftly navigate what seemed like an endless stream of potential dates. Jenny and I started dating in 2003 and have been married since 2009—just about the time when dating websites and apps were in their infancy. So I watched, bewildered, as my friend scrolled quickly through a dizzying variety of profiles, communicating his interest or lack thereof by swiping with ninja-like precision.

I have nothing against online dating. I have several friends who never would have met their spouses if it weren't for technology, and the world is a better place because they're

together. The benefits are obvious. What baffled me was my friend's nonchalance and quick trigger. I asked him, "How are you deciding so fast? What if you would've really hit it off with that person? How can you dismiss so many people so quickly?" He looked at me inquisitively and said, "Dude. It's not that serious."

This is our digital world. Even the most important decisions, like the people we choose to enter into meaningful relationships with—maybe even a lifelong commitment—are made with shocking speed. Anything less is considered archaic. And this doesn't just apply to dating: the digital age has affected, and in some cases infected, all spheres of life, including the most vital part of the Christian life: *discipleship*.

Despite our various mission statements, those of us who serve the local church share the same purpose: to introduce people to Jesus Christ and to invite them to follow him with their whole lives. Since the very beginning, this has been an invitation into a lifelong process that involves patiently journeying alongside others. This is what the Bible means when it talks about discipleship—the life of apprenticeship under Jesus, learning and living his ways, being shaped and reshaped into his likeness alongside others. There is no more important endeavor in the Christian life. As Dallas Willard wrote, "The greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heartbreaking needs, is whether those who, by profession or culture, are identified as 'Christians' will become disciples—students, apprentices, practitioners—of Jesus Christ, *steadily* learning from him how to live the life of the Kingdom of the Heavens into every corner of human existence"[1] (emphasis mine).

Willard wrote that discipleship is a process of *steadily* learning how to live the Jesus way. Steady—consistent, unwavering, focused movement in one direction.

The Greek fabulist Aesop gave us the timeless tale of "The Tortoise and the Hare" and with it, the popular idiom, "Slow and steady wins the race." Enmeshed in the speed of the digital age, we've forgotten the moral of this great story. We've forgotten the value—even necessity—of steadiness, slow as it may seem sometimes. Instead, we've given ourselves over to the technological ethos of Silicon Valley, which tells us that everything can always be faster, more efficient, more accessible. And as digital technologies continue to accelerate to lightning speeds, we revel in our dominance and prowess. But as with the hare, our distraction is lulling us to sleep in the all-important journey of *discipleship*.

WHEN VALUES TURN VICIOUS

The digital age's technological advancements boast three major contributions to the improvement of human experience, which in turn have become its undeniable values:

1. *Speed*. We have access to what we want when we want, as quickly as our fingers can type and scroll.
2. *Choices*. We have access to an endless array of options when it comes to just about anything.
3. *Individualism*. Everything, from online profiles to gadgets, is endlessly customizable, allowing us to emphasize our preferences and personalities.

While these contributions have added some comfort and convenience to parts of our lives, the added value is coming

at great cost, as our collective desire for and devotion to digital technology becomes increasingly excessive. Particularly in the ways these digital technologies have influenced the church, many of us have gone off the rails. Even good things have dark sides when taken to their extremes. When values aren't held accountable, they turn vicious. Sadly, for so many, that's exactly what's happened. These once positive contributions of the digital age have resulted in our undoing:

The *speed* of the digital age has made us *impatient*.

The *choices* of the digital age have made us *shallow*.

The *individualism* of the digital age has made us *isolated*.

IMPATIENT

According to a research study funded by Microsoft, between 2000 and 2015 the average attention span decreased from twelve seconds to eight seconds.[2] Twelve seconds doesn't seem like a very long attention span to begin with, and to think that, parallel to the rise of the internet, it dropped so significantly in just fifteen years is staggering. The scientific validity of the study has been disputed by some, claiming that attention spans can't be quantified this way because they vary so broadly depending on the specific task at hand.[3] This seems reasonable enough, but what neuroscience is beginning to make clear is that the digital age is indeed rewiring and reshaping us into increasingly *impatient* people.[4]

In his book *The Tech-Wise Family*, Andy Crouch defines digital technology as an "easy everywhere" medium, meaning it's easy to access and it's accessible almost everywhere.[5] Naturally, we've adjusted quickly. Imagine yourself walking

into a coffee shop to do some work and discovering that there's no Wi-Fi. Then, imagine you order a drink and sit down to do some internet-less work, only to discover that your MacBook is displaying the spinning pinwheel of death. Now, imagine the overwhelming onset of annoyance you feel. Maybe it's more than annoyance; maybe it's anger. Now, step back for a moment. We're talking about instant access to an ever-expanding world of information (in a place that was once solely reserved for drinking coffee, having conversations, reading a book or the paper, etc.), using a device with so much computing power that just a few decades ago it would've required tens of thousands of square feet of space. And now that you've got to go back to simply enjoying a cup of coffee and sitting alone with your thoughts for a while, a borderline emotional breakdown ensues.

The digital age has made our lives better in some ways, but it certainly has not made us better. It can't. As Crouch puts it, "Technology is a brilliant expression of human capacity. But anything that offers easy everywhere does nothing (well, almost nothing) to actually form human capacities."[6]

Our growing impatience is a prime example of this. The speed of the digital age is damaging, even destroying, our ability to wait patiently and to live with a long-term perspective. We admire the hare's speed and we mock the tortoise's slowness, forgetting that in the end, steadiness wins the race.

SHALLOW

Because we lack steadiness, patience, and long-term perspective, we're dangerously susceptible to the allure of quick-fix,

dopamine-inducing digital experiences. Coupled with the plethora of available choices, we live in constant risk of spiraling into the abyss of our devices. According to professor and author Adam Alter, the average phone usage among adults rose from eighteen minutes per day in 2008 to two hours and forty-eight minutes per day in 2015.[7] This isn't because we're talking to each other more. On the contrary, we're talking to each other less. The dramatic increase is due to emails, internet use, and, in large part, social media. Recent estimates are that there are over three hundred million active users on Snapchat, three hundred thirty-five million on Twitter, one billion on Instagram, and more than two billion on Facebook.[8] (Almost) everyone everywhere is on social media—especially millennials and Generation Z.

All our toggling back and forth on our various social media platforms isn't just making us impatient. It's also making us *shallow*. The fast-paced (the scrolling prowess of our thumbs is at an all-time high), easy-access (our phones are within reach just about anywhere we go), and endlessly customizable (we follow and unfollow who we want, when we want) world of social media is stunting our ability for the sort of depth that Christian discipleship requires.

In his book *Deep Work*, Cal Newport gives this sobering warning: "Spend enough time in a state of frenetic shallowness and you permanently reduce your capacity to perform deep work."[9] The digital age entices and invites us into this never-ending stream of "frenetic shallowness." Scroll, look, like, comment, judge, envy, repeat. It's fast, it's quick, it's easy, and it's often thoughtless and careless. It's shallow and directly counterintuitive to the deep work of discipleship.

Its most insidious effect on us, however, may be the way its constant presence in our lives actually rewires our desires. Based on significant research, Newport concludes that "once you're wired for distraction, you crave it."[10] If we're not careful, social media will change not only our ability but also our appetite. We begin to crave shallow experiences. As the writer James K. A. Smith reminds us, what we crave, what we desire, shapes our identity.[11]

C. S. Lewis's words ring truer than ever: "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."[12] The shallowing effect of the digital age isn't just about how we behave; it's about who we're becoming. And who we're becoming in the digital age are shallow shells of the fully alive human beings God designed us to be.

ISOLATED

As the speed and choices of the digital age send us hurling toward impatience and shallowness, they culminate in its most damaging consequence: *isolation*. Social media in particular lures us in under the guise of connection, but beneath this mask is the reality that social media, and digital spaces as a whole, are for the most part lonely places.

This is because social media is fueled by voyeurism—that broken inclination within each of us to peek behind the curtain of other people's lives. Rather than connecting us, the

voyeuristic nature of social media actually detaches and distances us from one another, as we find ourselves running aimlessly on the treadmill of comparison and contempt. We feel like we can see one another's lives, but none of us ever feel truly seen. Digital connections often act as poor disguises for our real-life isolation. Sherry Turkle says it this way: "Networked, we are together, but so lessened are our expectations of each other that we can feel utterly alone."[13]

True human connection is fueled by empathy—the God-given ability to step into another's shoes and open ourselves up to another's story, not to compare and contrast, but to be overwhelmed by compassion, to "rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15). This requires patience, depth, and the risk of stepping into real community with real people and their real lives in real time and in real space.

At their best, social media and other digital spaces can be wonderful initiating spaces that lead to true human connection, but they can never become home for those connections; they'll always fall short and leave us wanting. When I FaceTime with my wife and kids (our digital gathering space when I'm away), it's a wonderful benefit of technology—but ultimately it only makes me eager to get home and give them real hugs. That's digital at its best—increasing our appetite for the real, analog thing.

At their worst, social media and digital spaces create a false sense of connection and a façade of community. And they are very skilled at their ruse. (More on these specific ideas in chapters 5 and 6). We must never forget that they are what

Dallas Willard called "dreary substitutes in the form of pleasures."[14] We must never lose our appetite for the real analog thing—true human connection and community, driven by empathy. Without it, discipleship to Jesus just isn't possible.

THE CHURCH IS NOT IMMUNE

In the fifteenth century, when Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press, the shifting culture began to change the church in surprising ways. As Bibles were placed in the hands of everyday people, the print age reshaped the nature of Christian experience around the book. The life of the mind was more greatly emphasized and biblical scholarship became increasingly important. It is not mere coincidence that some of the most influential early works of systematic theology (e.g. Philipp Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* and John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*) were first produced during the print age. While Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologia*, another key work of systematics, was written earlier in the thirteenth century, its widespread impact wasn't felt until Gutenberg's press gave it the necessary medium for distribution to the masses.

As the print age shifted the emphasis to the intellectual mind, the sermon began to take on a more centralized place in the worshiping life of the church. This in turn led to the addition of regular seating areas in church sanctuaries, as people were required to sit for longer periods of time. Most often, the seating areas comprised linear rows of pews and an aisle down the middle. Previously, seating had typically been limited to benches around the outside of the room,

reserved for the elderly and the sick. It's worth considering if even this physical change that occurred in church buildings—with the pews resembling lines of text on a page and the aisle reflecting a book's spine—were not somehow, at least on a subconscious level, influenced by the emergence of books brought on by the print age. What is clear is that the print age's heightened emphasis on the intellect, which led to the elevation of the sermon as a central element of Christian worship, quite literally changed the way Christians gathered. As *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* notes, "For a thousand years or more they had been on their feet; now their attention was fixed in a single direction. The nave, which had been entirely movement space, now was mostly seating, with movement limited to the aisles."[15] The technological influence of any given age has an undeniable impact on the church.

This becomes even more evident when we fast forward to the mid-to-late twentieth century. Television sets began to dominate American homes and gave rise to the broadcast age. Right around this time, church buildings and sanctuaries began to resemble television studios—big stage, bright lights, multiple screens, and seating arranged for audiences rather than a community of congregants. As thirty- and sixty-minute television broadcasts filled the airwaves, we began to see similar segmentation methods influence the way churches programmed their gatherings together—an opening fifteen-minute segment of songs, a five-minute segment of announcements (akin to commercial breaks in television), and so on.

If the print and broadcast ages each had such sweeping effects on the church, we'd be either foolish or in denial to think that the digital age isn't affecting us in similar ways. This has always been the case. The particular age we find ourselves in always shapes the church. This isn't all bad. The print age and the broadcast age both added tremendous benefits to the church and her effectiveness for mission in the world, both in their time and today. But one of the uniquely dangerous threats of the digital age is that, unlike the print and broadcast ages, it is a non-spatial reality. The internet isn't in any fixed location and it isn't embodied in any set physical medium. The print age was about books, which you could hold in your hands and read aloud for others to hear. The broadcast age was about television sets in the living room, where you'd gather together at set times during the week to watch specific programs.

But the digital age is about speed, choices, and individuality. Fixed locations and physical mediums are seen as impediments to such values. We don't hold it in our hands, we don't read it aloud to one another, we rarely even gather at set times to watch things together anymore. The digital age is about getting what we want, when we want, how we want, and as much (or as little) as we want. And its ill effects are either going unnoticed or are being intentionally ignored by the church, and this is catalyzing a dangerous shift in our ecclesiology.

I was recently listening to a popular church leadership podcast. The host was interviewing a pastor at one of the largest, most influential churches in America. The main

point of the discussion was that if churches do not lean into the "digital revolution," they're missing out on one of the greatest gospel opportunities before us and will eventually be left behind in the dust. As I listened, I was struck by the onslaught of parallels between digitally savvy churches and digitally savvy businesses. Multiple times, the pastor mentioned companies like Amazon and Uber. I found myself responding out loud in my car: "Amazon and Uber are products- and services-based organizations. You log on, purchase a book or schedule a ride, and then you log off. You get in, get what you need, and get out. Is that what the church is?"

Almost every argument I've ever heard in support of churches leaning more heavily into the digital age makes this point: the fastest growing, most profitable companies in the business world are the ones leveraging digital platforms. This argument would make all the sense in the world if the church had the same goals as companies like Amazon and Uber.

In the podcast interview, the pastor declared that "digital presence actually drives up in-person engagement." Because we're still in the early stages of the intersection of the church and the digital age, there aren't strong metrics to support or refute this claim on a national level. I assume this is accurate at least in his context and, along those lines, I agree that digital presence is indeed helpful as a front door, so to speak. But at my house, while our front door is important, we place exponentially more emphasis on our kitchen and our living room. Why? Because that's where the truly meaningful connections happen. That's where we create and experience

community as a family and with friends who visit us. Our front door is for kindly saying no to solicitors and waving hello to the delivery guy when he drops off a package. But for family and friends, our front door is simply the quick entry point to much more important spaces, like the kitchen table where we share a meal or the living room sofa where we unwind and reconnect.

Leading our churches headlong into digital spaces in hopes of creating an easy-to-consume Christian product severely diminishes our ability to meaningfully impact the culture around us and invite them into more meaningful spaces. The church was never meant to be a *derivative* of the cultural moment but, rather, a *disruption* of it. Amid today's onslaught of digital distractions, the analog church is exactly the sort of disruption we need most to be effective in our cultural moment. As Alan Noble writes, "The greatest witness to the world will always be the body of Christ *gathered* to worship, which means that churches and denominations need to consider well what it means to bear witness in a distracted, secular age"[16] (emphasis mine). The greatest disruption that every church, small or large, can offer is an uncompromising invitation to the kitchen table, the living room sofa, the warmth of the sanctuary, the conversations in the courtyard—the spaces people are truly longing for in the midst of their speedy and impatient, choices-laden and shallow, individualistic and isolated lives.

GOING ANALOG

The Christian church has always been marked by her ability to create and invite people into *transcendent* spaces and

experiences. The church has always been most dynamic and effective when she has stood in stark contrast to the dominant culture of the day—zigging when the world is zagging. This sort of creative resistance and prophetic posture is what we need most in the digital age. And the most creative, prophetic way to stand in opposition to the digital age is to lean into analog opportunities.

To gather when the world scatters.

To slow down when the world speeds up.

To commune when the world critiques.

As we serve and lead in the local church, we must remember that the goal isn't selling a product or service but discipling our people. And discipleship requires patience, depth, and community—the very things that stand in contradiction to the values of the digital age. Dallas Willard reminds us that "character is formed through action, and it is transformed through action, including carefully planned and grace-sustained disciplines."[17] Carefully planned and grace-sustained disciplines. This is intentional, methodical, slow and steady work. It's why Jesus used metaphors like vines and branches to describe the life of discipleship:

> I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is

> to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15:5-8)

No matter the fruit, it takes a while for branches to produce it. It requires constant care, regularly scheduled watering and pruning, and daily upkeep. The invitation to remain in Jesus is an invitation into this sort of work, distancing ourselves from the frenetic shallowness of our digital distractions in order to learn and practice the way of Jesus in the big, little, and everything-in-between aspects of life.

I believe there is tremendous opportunity for this, especially with younger generations. Despite the grim news of declining church attendance and engagement among young people, we are also beginning to see these same young people intuitively recognizing and responding to the digital tensions of our day.

David Sax's fascinating book *The Revenge of Analog* presents a variety of ways younger generations are growing more interested in non-digital stuff. Things like Polaroid cameras and moleskin journals are experiencing a renaissance. One of the clearest examples of the analog comeback may be the resurrection of vinyl records. Vinyl record sales have grown from less than one million in 2007 to more than twelve million in 2015, with an annual growth rate of more than 20 percent.[18] In the book, Sax quotes Jay Millar, the former director of marketing at United Record Pressing, as saying, "Digitization is the peak of convenience, but vinyl is the peak of experience."[19]

According to many tech industry experts, the meteoric rise of Amazon signaled the end of bookstores. But this has not

been the case. Amazon recently announced plans to open three thousand brick-and-mortar bookstores by the year 2021.[20] Why? Because, as Millar suggests, while buying a book online is *convenient*, it cannot offer the *experience*. Younger generations, having grown up in an over-digitized world, feel this on an intrinsic level and are seeking out experiences they can see, hear, feel, and touch. They realize that ordering a book online and walking through a bookstore are two palpably different things. They're longing for analog. And this offers the church a never-before-seen missional opportunity, to provide these sorts of transcendent spaces that are so few and far between in the digital age.

SEEING THE UNFILTERED SEA

Several years ago, Jenny and I took an anniversary trip to a sleepy little town up the coast of California called Mendocino. We booked ourselves a room at a bed and breakfast that overlooked the Pacific Ocean. When we arrived at the front desk to check in, I asked the customary question, "What's the Wi-Fi password?" The lady gave me a knowing, *oh-you're-one-of-those* smirks. I was confused. She replied, "There's no internet here. Honestly, you're probably not going to have very good cell service either." At first, I thought she was kidding. Then, she pointed to the table in the corner of the room and said, "We do have some great board games right under that table. Feel free to take a few."

I felt the withdrawal symptoms immediately. We were going to be in Mendocino for several days. How would I possibly make it that long without checking email? How would

I survive without knowing what was trending on Twitter? How would anyone know what a great time we were having if I didn't post dramatically filtered photos on Instagram?

Jenny and I got to our room, set down our bags, opened a bottle of wine, and stepped out onto the small balcony. The view was breathtaking. Nothing but the big blue ocean for as far as our eyes could see. We sat in stunned silence for a while, then began to talk. No phones, no laptops, no Wi-Fi, no social media. Just us and the endless sea, seen clearly with our very own unfiltered eyes. Slowly but surely the anxiety of digital disconnection began to fade, and I started to feel an aliveness I hadn't felt in a long while.

This is the opportunity and the challenge before us today as we serve and lead our church communities—to help people lift their collective gaze away from the abyss of their digital devices and spaces, to see Jesus out on the water, inviting them to step out in faith, one small step at a time, to go about the patient and deep work of following him, together.