

PASTORING FOR LIFE



FOLLOWING

EMBODIED
DISCIPLESHIP IN
A DIGITAL AGE

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& ANDRIA IRWIN

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Introduction

The End Is Near

It was a really long meeting. The kind that the COVID-19 pandemic may have exiled to Zoom forever. Andria and I both had to sit and listen to a script being read about the dangers of social media. The room full of ministers our parents' and grandparents' ages nodded their heads and asked ancient questions. They hardly knew what Twitter was, and yet they were being encouraged to fear it all the more: The internet is forever. Don't embarrass yourself. Don't embarrass your church. Don't misrepresent the faith. Don't break professional boundaries and get too close to parishioners personally. Don't, don't, don't.

Chatting via Twitter DM—the very sort of social media distraction I discourage in the classroom—Andria's and my bitmojis rolled our eyes. This was the wrong way to talk about technology. It really isn't that big a deal. It's great in fact. Now we can pass notes in class without even moving! We can access all of Christian tradition and every church's sermons today with a touch of a screen. We can worship despite a global pandemic. The refrain shouldn't be “Don't, don't, don't”; it should be . . . well, *what*? How do we talk about technology hopefully? We nearly had a book proposal sketched out

in the DMs about how the church can use technology, with hope, rather than being used by it. This is that book.

I sometimes joke that I (Jason) have been pondering a book on God and technology since before Andria was born. It's not quite true. I'm a digital immigrant, with full memory of rotary phones and life before email. Andria is a digital native who has lived nearly her entire life online. I didn't start pondering this book at fifteen. But something did happen around that time, as Bill Gates's dream of a computer in every household arrived and the nascent internet started crowding out physical encyclopedias. It became mandatory to pursue digital technology. Not to do so was not just to be a Luddite. It was to do harm to your children, to slow down their "progress," to cut oneself off from the world and its economic opportunities.

To refuse technology now is to be genuinely sectarian. You can do it, but people will regard you the way many (unfairly) do the Amish or Haredi Jews: countercultural, momentarily intriguing, and ultimately irrelevant. We are not free to be without the devices that rule our lives with screens. We must plug in.

This is partly due to what Christians should see is a false eschatology. Technology has always announced itself with fanfare as though Jesus's kingdom has arrived, salvation is here, and all is well. Hence the incomprehension, even indignation, when anyone tries to absent themselves from it. This habit of speaking of a technological advance as though it were the returned Messiah is not new. Witness this 1850 quotation from a Methodist missionary reflecting on the invention of the telegraph:

This noble invention is to be the means of extending civilization, republicanism, and Christianity over the earth. It must and will be extended to nations half-civilized, and thence to those now savage and barbarous. Our government will be the grand center of this mighty influence. . . . The beneficial and harmonious operation of our institutions will be seen, and similar ones adopted. Christianity must speedily follow them, and we shall behold the grand spectacle of a whole world, civilized, republican, and Christian. . . . Wars will cease from the earth. Men "shall beat their swords into plough shares, and their spears into pruning-hooks." . . . Then shall come to pass the millennium.¹

Of course, not all responded to the telegraph with such eschatological hyperventilation. Henry David Thoreau, upon being told that the device would allow Maine and Texas to communicate with one another instantly, asked the appropriate question: What if Maine and Texas have nothing to say to one another?² Some have responded to technological advance with apocalyptic terminology that suggests not jubilation but anxiety. U. S. Grant, upon seeing a train for the first time in his life in 1839, marveled, “It annihilates space.”³ The known world was now different. Wendell Berry, regarding a tech marvel a century later—the interstate highway system—observed that it made near things far away and far things near.⁴ Communities too poor to resist the build were often divided, atomized, and left more violent. And such communities were disproportionately Black (see here Chicago’s West Side). But suburbs and city centers were made closer for commuters’ convenience.

Technology always claims to bring eschatological significance: greater prosperity, ease, and happiness. Few would go back on medical advances, fewer still among those not fortunate enough to be effortlessly healthy. Communications advances, from the telegraph to the telephone to television to the internet, are more complicated. We will deal with those the most in this book. We can access all the world’s treasures on our devices, and yet we are bored still. Transportation advances are even more complex. Advances in navigation and shipbuilding were a marvel. The same ships that first traversed the globe also brought diseases and territorial acquisition to the Americas and chattel slavery to Africa. Technology often just makes more of us. And we human beings are sinners—especially when we think we are not. Technology promises to distribute largesse and to fend off disease, discomfort, ignorance, and boredom. But it hides outrages. Do you know which minerals must be mined for that little supercomputer in your pocket, who owns the land those mines are on, and who does the labor?

I sure don’t. Ooh, a ping! Someone just posted something interesting on Twitter . . .

The internet’s designers and its wealthiest investors hail their work in religious categories. What other category could they use? The internet claims to be everywhere, knowing all things, not quite

omnipotent, but not far off. Confident futurists imagine a day when our memories can be uploaded and our individual consciousnesses preserved after death. Democracy advocates hope that the web will keep pressure on despots, alleviate harassment of activists, and make the world a more open place. It will democratize access to education as billions more can tap into Harvard from their smartphones. Perhaps such advocates have been unaware that totalitarians can use the web just as effectively or more so to surveil those same activists, spread disinformation, and infect democracy with mistrust. Thoreau was sanguine about eschatological claims for his day's various gizmos—lamenting “improved means to unimproved ends.”⁵ He was wrong about Maine and Texas though. They wanted to sell each other stuff. But he was right about technology's inability to say *what* we should want to want or why.

The web can give you all the information in the world, but it can't make you wise.

And this is precisely our greatest worry with technology: its omnivorous pretension. Technology claims to be able to fix all that ails us. Those who exempt themselves from it are backward barbarians. Those who lead the way in this industry are deserved billionaires—we should hang on their every word (hmm—who exactly designed the systems by which we listen to them?).

In the Bible, Jesus promises several times to give believers whatever they want (e.g., Matt. 7:7; 18:19; Luke 11:9). This is confusing. Anyone who has prayed has had the experience of not receiving an answer or at least not the answer they want. Jesus also commands us to take up our cross and follow him, to love our enemies, to be part of a kingdom with the rich thrown down and the poor exalted. One preacher squared the circle this way: God gives us what we want, *after God changes our wants around*.⁶ Christianity is about reorienting and healing our desire. Rather than desiring wealth and the cruel death of our enemies, we come to desire what God longs for: creation healed, our enemies blessed, life with the poor, love of God and neighbor.

Pray for that, and God will grant it. Eventually.

The web also claims to give us whatever we want whenever we want it. If we have the cash. From the way we all go about staring at our screens, a visitor from Mars might think we worship these

little gods in our pockets that glow in our hands and draw our eyes. Critics of the web point out that the world's best engineers have designed these systems to addict us. Those push notifications, those "likes" on social media, all of it gives us a dopamine hit. Trying to turn away is like an addict turning down the pipe. It's really, really hard. The devices make us, in Sherry Turkle's matchless phrase, live "alone together."⁷ We pay attention to some contextless module of information instead of the flesh-and-blood human being in front of us. We get jittery if we haven't checked email in ten or twenty seconds. In her recent acknowledgments Zadie Smith, the great British writer, thanked an app that disabled her internet for allowing her to get her book done.⁸ That's about our best hope: using technology to subvert technology's hold on us.

One Twitter handle will tweet you a daily reminder that you are going to die. Not a bad start. And this is the trick with technology—to use it to remind us of our creatureliness.

Christianity is the sort of faith best understood by saying what it's *not* than what it *is*. Heresies come from *somewhere*—some strand in Scripture or tradition or some practice yanked out of context and magnified out of proportion. Heresies are usually simplifying movements—one part of Christian tradition yanked out and made the whole in an effort to simplify matters, when that one part should instead be kept as part of the paradoxical mess of an irreducibly complex entirety.⁹ Is God one or three? Heretics choose one at the expense of the other; the Orthodox, confusingly, insist on both. Is Christ human or divine? Ditto. Holding fast to one piece of Christian tradition and eschewing the rest, we've learned, is to tear the thing apart.

One particular heresy that keeps coming back around is called Gnosticism—a heresy that says salvation is a rescue from the space-time world of bodies, creation, and bread and wine and water. Watch *The Matrix* or *The Truman Show* and you've got Gnosticism: the world we experience is a lie; we must escape to the real one. Our digital age threatens to be a new Gnostic heresy—a false claim of salvation that the church should resist. Even Hollywood knows Gnosticism has Christianesque appeal: Who is Neo's love interest in *The Matrix*? Trinity. Who is the keeper of Truman's world? Christof.

Gnostics can find Scripture to support their escapism easily enough. In John's Gospel, Jesus fulminates against "the world"; the Gospels contain suggestions that extra *secret* knowledge might have been imparted to only a few of the disciples (e.g., John 21:25: "There are also many other things that Jesus did"). The way Christians often speak of heaven as a sort of escape route for individual souls sounds not a little gnostic too. The church has stood at this precipice before, and it has fallen right in.

Sometimes despite ourselves, we remember that Christian redemption has always been full-blooded, a new creation, a coming heaven and earth. Our Gnostic tendencies are undone by our connection to our Jewish forebears. Judaism is good ballast against floating off into the ether. The internet cuts the chain entirely. Thinkers of this kind insist they will never teach "embodied" or "sacramental" theology online.¹⁰ For all the wonders of the internet, it is not a place where you can eat a meal or baptize someone—not yet anyway. Online church communities seek ways around it. One community says they mail elements to parishioners or fly to baptize them or ask folks to go to the cupboard and come back to eat together. But however much of our lives are possible online, our bodies have a stubborn . . . bodiliness about them. At one gathering of academics, John Milbank, the leading Radical Orthodox light in the UK, and Cornel West, the philosopher-activist from the US, "met" in the Q&A. West asked Milbank an intriguing question: What are you so afraid of? (Not a bad question to take the temperature of any human being or community.) Milbank responded: a world where people want online sex more than the embodied kind.¹¹ That is, a Gnostic world of purported escape from bodies, creation, food and drink, and love.

If Christian theologians have sounded apocalyptic in their rejection of technology at times, nonreligious scholars can sound even worse—they have to *borrow* Christian terminology to have a big enough stick to beat the devil with. Witness Sven Birkerts thundering away like any apocalyptic preacher, despite seeming to have no actual religious commitments of his own:

The devil no longer moves about on cloven hooves, reeking of brimstone. He is an affable, efficient fellow. He claims to help us all along

to a brighter, easier future, and his sales pitch is very smooth. . . . Fingers tap keys, oceans of fact and sensation get downloaded, are dissolved through the nervous system. Bottomless wells of data are accessed and manipulated, everything flowing at circuit speed. Gone the rock in the field, the broken hoe, the grueling distances. . . . From deep in the heart I hear the voice that says, “Refuse it.”¹²

This is not unlike the language of the Hebrew prophets or John the Baptist or the desert monks and nuns who imitated them by fleeing from the world and giving birth to monasticism. We need that. One refrain in this book will be that we need some people to refuse technology as entirely as they can, just as we need some Christians to forswear money, sex, and power for a deeper embrace with Jesus. Protestantism is a five-hundred-year experiment to see whether we can have Christianity without anybody becoming monks or nuns. The early returns aren’t good. Birkerts has no monastics, and so he has to demand a thing for which he sees little evidence—a hopeless apocalypticism, that.

We see in these various rhetorical rejections of technology a revival of the ancient Christian heresy of Manicheism. This was a view (appealing to many in the ancient Mediterranean) that the world is made up of some things that are essentially good (us!) and others that are essentially bad (our enemies!). An elaborate cosmology followed in its own time and place, but for followers the result was that believers had to flee from this world and all its materiality. Creation was a sort of cosmic accident. Any continuity of it furthers a mistake. Procreation is bad—it entraps more souls in bodies. So too such bodily lamentables as eating and drinking—the sorts of things Jesus spent his time on (there is a reason he is accused of being a drunkard and a glutton!). Cosmologically, light is trapped in darkness and needs to get free but cannot. In more colloquial terms, Manicheism makes the mistake of thinking of some things as essentially good and others as essentially evil. There is no essential evil in Christian thought. All of creation is good but fallen and is being redeemed by Christ. You can’t go pick up a handful of evil. Everything that is, by virtue of its existence, is good. It also tends toward decay. The world is good, beautiful even, but mortal. We might even say it is wounded but being healed by Christ.

Too categorical a denunciation of technology risks Manicheism. It overlooks the goods born into our lives by technology—goods like medicine and transport and communication and alleviated toil. Who would give up an aged photo of a long-lost beloved? It almost participates in the person's memory. Categorical denunciations risk hypocrisy when these screeds are published in books, written on computers, tweeted about. They ignore the fact that human beings are tool-making animals. Israel's Scripture speaks with beauty of the skill of those who beautify the temple with their technology in Exodus, of those who mine the treasures of the earth in Job, of those who play music to the Lord in the Psalms. The first maker of things may be the Lord himself, sewing together animal skins to replace Adam and Eve's pitiful fig leaves when they are expelled from the garden. Intellectuals have always feared technology. Plato worried about writing since it would cause folks' memories to decay. He was absolutely right, of course. The medieval Catholic Church feared the printing press would corrode their authority, again, full props for prophetic insight. Martin Marty points out that every technological revolution in American history has brought a new outbreak of fundamentalism.¹³ People who were formerly isolated can find one another, and are horrified, or they can collaborate. The progress narrative of American optimism assumes this makes the world better—kill bad speech with more free speech. The internet itself may be undoing this optimism—more “free speech” just leads to hate radio, cable news, internet trolling, and Russian bots. Critics of technology are usually more right than wrong, but they forget the simple reality that people embrace the alphabet, the printed book, and the radio because they make our lives better. The church longs to communicate the gospel—how can we not use these gifts?

Categorical denunciation of digital technology misunderstands the very nature of the church. Christianity has always been a virtual body. Saint Paul wrote letters to Christians he would never meet in the flesh assuming a sort of authority in a community that includes them. The church is universal in time and space, using the best technology then available (letters, carried over Roman roads and on ships over the Mediterranean) to tie congregations together. The Bible often laments that virtual communication is inferior to embodied presence.

Yet these consolation prizes, second-best letters, are canonized and called *Scripture*—the very word of God. Many of our greatest texts from the patristic era started as letters from one bishop to another congregation—perhaps one he would never meet in person but to whom he would be united in mutual prayer.¹⁴ Christianity is an epistolary faith, based on writings to and from friends who know one another in the flesh and others who do not—yet are not for that reason any less part of the body of Christ.

Throughout this book we will catalogue ways that the church’s ministry becomes possible in cyberspace that would have been impossible beforehand. We have to be alert to new corruptions in that newly possible space, of course. Yet to forswear it entirely is unwise. To wit: some of the best websites on the planet are run by monks and nuns. These fleers of imperial money, sex, and power know their form of life appeals still. They want people to know about it, so they use the web. We can hardly accuse them of disembodied, Gnostic escapism—at least not any more than we can accuse the church fathers and mothers of that.

The goal of this book is a middle way between the heresies of Gnosticism and Manicheism. A practical, hope-filled approach to our online tools that keeps them squarely in their place—as tools—rather than as our masters. Tools that come from and serve the fleshly body of Christ on its way to redeeming the world.

Note the objection here is not to the harm technology can do. We need people who say “no” altogether. They will devote their lives entirely to prayer, service, and holiness. All of us need to do that at times, for a time. Just as everyone must pray and fast and abstain from sex for a time, all of us must abstain from technology at times. In prayer, for example. Yes, the Bible can be accessed online, but so too can all our digital communication—it’s just too tempting to break communion with God to commune with Insta. Teenagers often go without sleep so they can text in the middle of the night. Over meals. In class. There are places that call for our undivided attention. These devices dilute it, divide it, inviting commercial advertisements and diversion into every formerly sacred space. Refuse that, please. Nicholas Carr has helpfully written of the way web grazing has cost him the ability to concentrate on demanding texts for hours at a time.¹⁵

Birkerts worries that the loss of the ability to be bored deprives us of the sort of deep attention necessary for genuine creativity. They are both right. We must turn off the devices to read Tolstoy or to create the next Tolstoy.

And then we have to use them to do the things Jesus commanded: to love God and neighbor. To go into all the world baptizing. To witness to the repair of creation through a resurrected rabbi. To be Jesus's own body in the world, working alongside as the Holy Spirit knits back together everything we've ruined. That's the right eschatology—over against Gnostic escape (the internet is saving us!) or Manichean rejection (the internet is damning us!). Jesus is saving us. Now, having taken a deep breath, how can we use these devices in his agenda of redeeming the world?

This book will explore the goods that digital technology makes possible in our lives, and it will also attend to technology's profound dangers. We will do so in conversation, occasionally breaking with the predominant voice in a chapter to disagree in a separate section. In chapter 1 Andria will argue that Christian discipleship is always a matter of putting on a new and unfamiliar self. In chapter 2 she will show how some pastors have navigated having a pastoral persona and also a social media one. In chapter 3 I (Jason) will offer some categories for how to think about church and technology—and how not to. In chapter 4 I will suggest some ways for how to think through online technology's effect on our families. In chapter 5 Andria will think through friendship in light of technology. In chapter 6 Andria, as a full-fledged internet pastor, will attend to the Great Commission and mission in this new day. In chapter 7 I will issue a halting “no” to the question of whether we can commune online, and in a separate section Andria will respond with a “but of course.” In chapter 8 I will address preaching online, and in our conclusion we will circle back around to God (who, we hope, we have never left in the first place), for the God of the gospel never appears unmediated. Throughout, we seek to ask how these potentially disembodied media can be turned for good use in an embodied, incarnational faith.

As a digital immigrant and a digital native, respectively, we will write in our own voices, with space for the other to interject on particular points of disagreement. We will draw on learned essays,

interviews we've conducted with faithful practitioners, and our own intuition (challenged by one another and the churches we've served). Forgive us if we repeat ourselves occasionally. Karl Barth said we can only repeat ourselves (and then showed what he meant with ten thousand pages of *Church Dogmatics!*). We hope our way of writing will imitate and then inspire the sort of dialogue necessary in the church to discern how to receive the jarring gift of technology. We will close each chapter with a question or two meant to ignite small group conversation. For example . . .

- How might we use technology, perhaps despite its intentions, to trick ourselves into a more embodied life of discipleship?