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Summary: In an age defined by speed and digital mediation, discipleship faces new and invisible challenges. Dr. Joshua Smith explores how our technological environment subtly reshapes the conditions necessary for spiritual formation. Importantly, how our technological age diminishes our receptivity to grace. In order to cultivate our receptivity to grace we must recover *inconvenient* practices like shared meals and intentional presence so discipleship can flourish.

CULTIVATING HABITATS FOR DISCIPLESHIP IN A TECHNOLOGICAL AGE

Last year at this SES conference, we discussed the issue *discipleship drought*, the fact that while there continue to be church attenders (that are falling) those who do attend rarely multiply in their Christian-walk. This is a big problem, since deep discipleship multiplication is the mission of the church. In this talk, I want to explore one the causes of this draught that deals with the way technology shapes our habits and hearts.

I'll begin with a story. I want to share with you a story of one of my friends, let's call him Ronnie, that is representative of the waning of discipleship. I have known this friend for almost 20 years. He is a good man. He's an incredibly hard worker in his profession, has enjoyed success and promotion and is at a great company. But he will be the first to tell that it is not his occupation that he cherishes the most but his faith and his family. He's a father four children, loves his wife deeply, and attends a solid, gospel-oriented church regularly. He and his wife serve regularly in adult and children's ministry, pray together with their children, and have open conversations about the life of Christ, his work, and significance with those in and outside his family.

He shared with me in the past several years how he felt "stuck" in his faith. When I ask him what he meant he sensed that while he was around other Christians and involved in worship and a small group, he did not sense the reality of Christ's love, the urgency of the gospel, or how God wanted to use his family and profession for his kingdom. I listened and gave the typical and

vague responses that one does in ministry, asking the questions about his prayer life, confession of sin, church attendance, reading the Bible, and so on. All important questions and while there's always the opportunity to improve in these areas, he was doing a good job.

Upon listening to him more, I realized two things. First, the actual focus of his questions revolve around the questions of *discipleship*, how one lives in response to, practices, and shares the gospel. Second, that the difficulty of discipleship he's experiencing goes far deeper than a lack of knowledge or technique. Rather, it is a unique challenge of living in a *technological age*.

In this talk, I want to make two connected claims. First, that the waning of discipleship is partly a result of the unique age that we live in, namely a technological age. Second, because of this causing a lack of discipleship, we must seek to redeem the practices we inherit from technology in order to successfully disciple.

The Challenge of Discipleship in an Age of Technology

My friend's story is not isolated. Institutional religion has been waning for some time in America. Ryan Burge and Tom Rainer note a record number of Americans are identifying as religiously unaffiliated (29%) with only 62% identifying as Christian, down from 78% in 2007. By one estimation a record 15,000 churches will close this year, with another 100,000 churches to close over the next several years.¹

Many churches that are considered "healthy," are not reproducing disciples who make other disciples. Dr. Will Browning, a friend of mine, and Lead Pastor and Director of Send California oversees anywhere from 100-200 church planters in CA. He began asking hard questions about whether their churches were fulfilling the primary commission of making

¹ <https://www.axios.com/2025/10/03/us-churches-close-religious-shift-christians>. See associated links for Rainer's and Burge's reports.

disciples who make disciples.² My own church had this realization this year, our small groups, which are excellent, aren't bringing unbelievers to Christ. In both cases, discipleship groups were operating according to another commission of assimilation, that Dr. Stephen Cuthins puts like this: "Go into all the world and make worship attenders, baptize them into small groups, and teach them how to serve a few hours a month."²

What I want to suggest is one partial cause of this waning of discipleship which connects Ronnie's story to more general currents in American culture. The waning of discipleship is partly a result of the unique age that we live in, namely a technological age. What do I mean by technological age? I mean the age we're living in right now in the 21st century that has been with us at least since the industrial revolution of the mid-19th century that has witnessed unprecedented technological advancement. What do I mean by technology? Technology extends far deeper than simply gizmos and gadgets that occupy us. It includes our collective effort to address practical problems. Derek Schuurman brought this definition to my attention:

"Technology is a distinct cultural activity in which human beings exercise freedom and responsibility in response to God by forming and transforming the natural creation with the aid of tools and procedures for practical ends or purposes."³

Technology is a distinctly *cultural activity* that includes us transforming creation for certain ends and requires both freedom and responsibility. To live in the technological age is to live in an era that is shaped and directed by the inherent ends of technology.

Technology is not neutral. Technology, as with any piece of creation, have ends *that are already baked in*. Our technology is not neutral, as a cultural artifact and cultural practice, it is

² Stephen Cuthins, 2024 SES Conference.

³ Stephen V. Monsma, *Responsible Technology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans-Lightning Source, 1986). Quoted in *Derek Schuurman: Technology and the Biblical Story*, directed by Center for Faith & Work, *The Fear and Wonder of Technology*, New York, 2017, 25:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_u6jdFKkWKs.

value-laden. Take the example of the television. The technology (I'm not talking about the content of TV) is *not neutral*. TV by design subtly changes our perception of anything we watch on as *entertainment*. News, political debates, TV shows, and movies all feel the need to be entertaining in some way, have some theatrical appeal, since the mode in which they're consumed is an *entertainment medium*. As Marshall McLuhan aptly notes, "the medium is the message." When you see an advertisement for dish soap next to an atrocious murder in your city—you obviously know the difference, but the associative link diminishes the gravity of the latter. Social media has only exacerbated this tendency.⁴ Schumann says, "We shape our tools and our tools, in turn, shape us."⁵ We could repeat this same story with the automobile, the internet, or penicillin. These are all good but we deeply miss their nature if we think that they're not deeply effecting us.

Living in a technological age affects how we interact with others and also with God himself. Here's a typical American household weekday.

You come home from work, frazzled and spent. You walk into the kitchen and are not surprised that the children have left already and your spouse is not yet home. You find yourself walking into the refrigerator; you take what you like most then put it in the microwave. You stare at the paper on the kitchen table; it's Wednesday, your favorite TV show is on, followed by a game of the home team. Your pulse quickens a little. The show is good, your spouse comes home, you exchange a few words, the game is boring, you move to the den to end overdue memo on the computer. But first, you check your email, the latest news, you happen on the ESPN website. They offer you a video game, you play it for a while, your spouse is going to bed. You decide to call it a day.⁶

Nothing overt or heinous has occurred in such a scenario. And yet, there is something subtle about the ways in which this parent has come home and relates to his world. His world, mediated

⁴ Others have highlighted this, as highlighted by Schumann who mentions *iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind*. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* and her *Reclaiming Conversations: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* and Neil Postman's *Technopoly*.

⁵ Derek Schuurman.

⁶ Albert Borgmann, *Power Failure* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Publishing Group, 2003), 114.

by technology, affects him deeply into a sort of *malaise* or numbness. When people in this malaise walk into church, it is little wonder that they only inhabit the commission of assimilation, instead of the great commission center on discipleship.

One reason that the practices of our technology so directly shape our discipleship is a mundane one: there is less time and space for the kinds of relationships and mentorship that characterizes biblical discipleship. As technology fragments communities, increases our distractions, and occupies our time, we simply find that there isn't enough time for the other stuff. We all feel this, your smartphone is one of your top competitors to engaging in spiritually formative activities. And many of us have skipped Bible reading or prayer to browse our phone. The struggle is real.

But there are more subtle and deeper ways that technology shapes us and presents unique challenges to the discipleship that Jesus calls us to. Technology presents us with profound benefits and unique challenges. In particular, the discipleship of the age of technology makes us less receptive to the grace of God which will point a way forward of how we might practice biblical discipleship. What do I mean by receptivity of grace? I mean the sense of the presence of God in both heart and mind, to grow in the love and truth of Christ. The age of technology has made us *less receptive to this grace* and if we are to reinvigorate our discipleship, we will have to find ways to cultivate the receptivity suitable to our technological age.

To see how technology affects our receptivity to God's grace, we have to go to the dawn of the scientific revolution of the 16th century. In the scientific revolution, Francis Bacon introduces a new goal of science, the goal of *mastery* of nature, to use nature to improve material human life. The only valuable knowledge, for Bacon, is *useful knowledge*. This sort of knowledge becomes increasingly the chief end of science and western culture.

The emphasis on useful knowledge gains momentum as it addresses the very real vulnerability of human life. Technology has granted us life extension, wealth, convenience, mobility, clarity, and numerous other benefits. And these, none can doubt, are *good*. The elimination of small pox is a good thing. Automobiles are a good thing. Our modern technological culture does not stop here, however. It morphs into a promise from technology to remove *all vulnerabilities from human life*. Take the titles of some books in the past ten years on the of technology's ultimate aims and promises: *Infinite Progress: How Technology Will Ultimately Solve Ignorance, Disease, Poverty, Hunger, and War* or *Abundance: The Future is Better Than You Think*.⁷ These are the promises of technology that the modern mind has latched onto and its promises are *religious* and part of an ultimate hope that verges on salvific, not simply *practical*.

It is a godly and biblical use of technology to eliminate medical, social, and economic ills. However, this elimination of vulnerability begins, especially in our day, to morphs into eliminating *any discomfort or misery whatsoever*.⁸ And the subtle goal to eliminate all discomfort has profound effects on us, shaping our moral, spiritual, and relational lives.

Some discomfort is good in our life. Borgmann makes a helpful distinction between discomfort that we reject in principle but nonetheless must *endure* and those discomforts that which should actually *cultivate*.⁹ The discomfort we reject in principle are those tragedies of human life, the inexplicable loss of a loved one, a seemingly random car crash, epidemics, and

⁷ Byron Reese, *Infinite Progress: How the Internet and Technology Will End Ignorance, Disease, Poverty, Hunger, and War* (Austin, Tex: Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2013); Peter H. Diamandis and Steven Kotler, *Abundance: The Future Is Better Than You Think* (New York: Free Press, 2014). *Infinite Progress* cited by Schumann.

⁸ This elimination is not a two-part process where the negative effects are only felt when the practical problems are eliminated in luxuries ensue. The elimination of even the *legitimate ills* have this effect of concealing grace. Borgman talks about how we are now incapable of receiving the grace that those who lost children in childbirth would have received.

⁹ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 79.

the like. We have and should continue to work for improved safety, health care, and so on that can eliminate these. We reject these in principle. Yet they must be endured. What the Bible tells us is that these miseries, objectionable as they are, are actually conduits of God's grace. "Count it all joy, brothers, when you face trials of many kinds" (James 1:2ff) and that through enduring these trials, God graciously can and does complete us. They are birth pangs of the grace of God.

There is a more interesting discomfort that is relevant to our topic: discomfort that should not be rejected outright but in fact, should be *cultivated*. Borgmann gives the example of home prepared dinners and dining together around a table as an inconvenience that is ripe with grace of God in fellowship. Technological culture works against this inconvenience. To the technological ethos, dinner is a problem of nutritional intake, not an art ripe with grace. Microwaves, processed foods, and grazing on the go have replaced the laborious discomfort in preparing a meal and enjoying it together. But in so doing, we have allowed our technological culture to mal form us and become less receptive to the grace God grants to us in these situations. Authors have noted the importance of family meals around a table for various metrics of social and emotional health. But my point is deeper than this. The practice and even liturgy, if you will, around the table forms our heart, minds, and bodies in ways to open us up to deep fellowship with one another and celebratory communion with God. And the increasing tendency to eliminate the art of table from American life, obscures our receptivity to God's work of grace he wants to grant us.

So, our technologies and the culture around them disciplines us. The tendency toward eliminating all discomfort and immediacy has in a general sort of way, made us less receptive to the grace of God. I want to now talk about how our technologies in particular impact our discipleship and some ways forward. Before I do, though, I want to make a quick theological

note. God is sovereign. God can absolutely *break through* any sort of culture, circumstance, or heart. God is not bound by the conditions of his creation, he is Lord of all. When I say that there are tendencies in our technological age that make us less receptive to God's grace, I do not mean that these *prevent* God from breaking through whatsoever. The God of the Bible can break through any culture and any heart. Yet, I think that tendencies in a culture (liturgies, if you will¹⁰) make us less receptive and open to the working of God. And we can take steps to cultivate a receptivity so that we might receive it.

Responding to the Challenge with Habitats of Grace

So as ironic as it sounds, in order to cultivate the sort of habitat in order for grace to change us in our discipleship, we have to lean into the discomforts of our life. There are plenty of discomforts that surround discipleship. Deep honesty, reflection, challenge, rebuke, shows us that our life is not as put together as we thought it was. In order to experience the grace available to us as we grow with other followers of Christ and share his good news with others, we have troubles and difficulties that, like the meal, need not *elimination* but *cultivation*. This drought of grace has made us thirsty, and both Christian and non-Christian voices are sounding the alarm. Only by cultivation of these habitats of grace can our thirst be satiated and grow again. The discomfort is a little death, a little pain, and we serve a Savior that brings life out of death. Indeed, he will eventually renew all things and gives us the hope to enter the little deaths of our life.

Eliminating these difficulties in general is the appeal of a church experience that is as frictionless as possible where people hear an inspiration message, perhaps go to a small gathering is a mix of minimal participation and passive listening, and then go home. Discipleship

¹⁰ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Baker Academic, 2009).

is costly, in time, effort, and resources. But God is ready and willing to give us his grace, experiencing him, abiding in him, and sharing this with others.

And now we have a fuller picture to explain one of the causes of why church attenders are not making other disciples. It not a failure of a program, a church leader, evangelism model, but something that is so subtle and pervasive given that we live in a technological age that seeks to eliminate all discomfort—even those that are means of grace. This culture has formed us toward the ends of immediacy and convenience and thus obscured means of grace which is the fuel of discipleship.

We've traded out the difficulties and troubles of preparing the meal and heading to the trailhead with microwave dinners and postcard pictures. This makes us less receptive to God's grace in discipleship and thus, stymies the growth of the disciple. To have a homecooked meal that is both nutritious and made and eaten with love is costly and time consuming, it is a trouble in this sense, but it is beautiful and good. We have to create a *habitat* of life on life, training, and connection that is costly, time consuming, and difficult, in order to make us recipients and sensitive to the grace that God offers. Digital discipleship is mostly passive, individual, and quick whereas biblical discipleship is involved, communal, and slow. But it is worth it.

Providing the tools in order to lean into this discomfort is one of the aims behind the Virtual Faith Link that the team I'm a part of are rolling out. In it, we begin to provide some of the tools needed to train and grow in discipleship that makes more disciples. It is what we're called to and our age provides unique challenges to us but God is faithful and is ready and willing to aid us.

Conclusion

This presentation has been one of mostly critique of technology. I am not a pessimist of technology nor am I a Luddite. I have not discussed the positive appraisal or how to use technology in general to the glory of God. This would require another talk but here me say this: God wants us to create technologies for his glory but humanity has the tendency to either idolatry it, as I have critiqued, or demonize it. He calls us to neither but something else more beautiful entirely that points us to the ultimate Restoration of all things and our hope in the Redeemer.

I want to end with a note on the courage or more appropriately, the fortitude it will require in order to develop this habitat for fruitful discipleship in our technological age. Remember the story of the typical American weekday? Coming home, spent from work, getting mildly entertained before trailing off to bed? This calls for fortitude in the small things and the need for it in order to create, not only in the home, but also in society, a set of rhythms and practices (much more than content) that form us.¹¹ The retreat to our own private lives and our own private autonomous cocoon is not a life filled with grace. This life devoid of grace is not in this particular failing or in that deficient technique, but in *a way of living* and relating to the world and others.

If we are not simply going to resist these ways of living and acting but cultivate alternatives that makes us anew and reopen ourselves to grace that God wants to bestow on us,

¹¹ Other authors like Andy Crouch **Techwise Family** Sandy Clarkson **The Life Giving Home**, and John Mark Homer **Practicing the Way** in the Christian sphere as well as authors like Sherry Turkle in **Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other** and Neil Postman in **Technopoly** and **Amusing Ourselves to Death**, Robert Putnam **Bowling Alone** note the same need for alternative rhythms for our flourishing.

we will need the sort of fortitude to dare and endure over the thresholds of our technological culture.

Courage is in many ways is a forgotten virtue. Why? Because our current culture has never known war and courage is best and most clearly displayed in a state of war. Given the lack of war, the cardinal virtue outlined by Aristotle seems to have lost its luster or even relevance. Christ himself mentions courage but he mentions in direct connection to the persecution and death of a martyr when he says, "In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world." (Jn. 16:33b). Again, we in a technological culture aren't often persecuted, rarely to death, if at all. So yet again, there seems to be no need for courage.¹²

But this is a premature evaluation for although fear of death in battle is less of an issue in our current technological culture, there is something more general that we need in order to remain and become open to grace. When Aquinas adopts Aristotle's view on courage, he actually transforms it.¹³ There are many ways that the medieval scholastic philosopher Thomas Aquinas differs from us and our own context given that he is writing in medieval Europe and we are living in 21st century America. But what surprisingly joins us together is our relative rest from war and our need of courage in this context. Aquinas thinks that courage, or something very much akin to it, is important to the human condition even in his state of peace but it is something broader than Aristotelian courage. He calls it "fortitude." And while this is most poignantly displayed in the fear of battle and martyrdom, he also identifies the essence of fortitude in *endurance* of evil for the sake of some good. What is the good we endure for? We endure the

¹² It's my suspicion that one of the reasons why there is such a sports glut and lust in our own day is precisely because courage in most forms has disappeared. On the court of field, humans get a glimpse of the daringness and courage that would have been more familiar to previous generations. Yet, as I'll say shortly, there is plenty need for fortitude, even in mundane life.

¹³ Aquinas, *ST II.II*, Q123, esp. a6. Borgmann mentions the transformation of courage by Aquinas in ch. 8.

discomfort, as a little death, because from it, God brings life. He is the resurrected God, bringing death from life. This is helpful for us because there is a battle to fought but it is not one on the battlefield but in our own homes.

What are some ways that churches could encourage habitats of grace?

1. The glory, majesty, and beauty of Christ must be continually proclaimed if this discipleship is going to be anything other than a beat down on your people. The human heart is stirred to fortitude for the sake of something noble and beautiful. The more Christ is exalted in the ministry of the Word, the more direct link between your people's discipleship and fortitude.
2. Discipleship has to break free from mere knowledge of the Bible. It must be life on life, people meeting regularly together outside of classrooms and using the Scriptures to challenge one another in areas of where technology disciple them.
3. Sabbath in general, as well as specifically digital sabbaths take immense fortitude, but creates a rhythm that begins to step into the order of redemption instead of malforming of our technological age.

It takes fortitude to choose formation over convenience and that's where disciples multiply. We need fortitude because the threat and risk of discomfort and missing out are real, which is why we need fortitude to endure it. But it is worth it for what lies in offer to us is nothing less than God's grace for our discipleship.