

Ben Best, Co-host

Welcome to Defragmenting, a podcast of Cairn University, promoting biblical integrity and thoughtful Christianity. What could a book written about television 40 years ago possibly have to teach us about living well and wisely in our world of smartphones, social media, and high-speed connectivity? According to the editors of *Scrolling Ourselves to Death: Reclaiming Life in a Digital Age*, quite a lot! In this episode, Brett McCracken and Dr. Ivan Mesa join Dr. Keith Plummer to discuss why Neil Postman's classic volume, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, is still amazingly relevant and how they hope their project will help the body of Christ. Let's join their conversation now.

Dr. Keith Plummer

1985 marked the publication of a book by a New York University professor who couldn't have had any idea of the pervasive influence his volume would come to have in the years ahead. The author was Dr. Neil Postman. The book is *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. To coincide with the 40th anniversary of the book's publication, my guests, Brett McCracken and Dr. Ivan Mesa, have co-edited a book with Crossway titled *Scrolling Ourselves to Death: Reclaiming Life in a Digital Age*. Brett is an author and journalist who serves as a senior editor at The Gospel Coalition, where he writes on the intersection of faith and culture. His books include *The Wisdom Pyramid*, *Feeding Your Soul in a Post-Truth World*, and *Uncomfortable: The Awkward and Essential Challenge of Christian Community*. Ivan is Editorial Director for the Gospel Coalition, where he has served since 2014. He's the founder of Inkling Editing and has edited and/or contributed to several books, including *Before You Lose Your Faith: Deconstructing Doubt in the Church*, and *Faithful Exiles: Finding Hope in a Hostile World*. Brett and Ivan, welcome, and thanks for making time to join us on *Defragmenting*.

Dr. Ivan Mesa

It's a joy to be here.

Brett McCracken

Thanks so much for having us, Keith.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, why don't we start out, for those who are not familiar with the answer to this question, who was Neil Postman, and why do you think that he has something worth our consideration 40 years later?

Brett McCracken

Yeah, I can start, and Ivan, you can chime in. Neil Postman was an academic, so he was based in New York University. He started a program in media ecology at NYU. I think he's come to be viewed, and I think even in his time, he was viewed as the heir apparent to Marshall McLuhan. Some of the listeners might be familiar with McLuhan, and "the medium is the message," and this idea of critically reading technology and technological change and analyzing how every technological change was not neutral, but changed aspects of society and how we live and how discourse happens. Neil Postman really carried the torch from McLuhan. He took it specifically to the realm of media. He was a scholar of media. He was an outspoken cultural observer, cultural critic. He didn't mince words. When you write a book like *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, it's a pretty bold, bold title, and the argument is implicit in the title itself. I think the reason, from my perspective, why Postman, we're still talking about him four decades after really his heyday, is because he was so on the money in his critique of media and the way that technology was changing discourse in the media landscape.

Brett McCracken

Amusing Ourselves to Death still holds up 40 years later, as do many of his other books like *Technopoly*, especially. And so we wanted to revisit it and apply his prophetic insights from 40 years ago to the technological landscape of the scrolling world today.

Dr. Ivan Mesa

Yeah, and the only thing I would add is I mean, by all accounts, I don't think Postman was a Christian, and yet he was a very prescient prophet, looking at that cultural moment that he was living through, seeing the rise of different technologies, especially the advent of TV there in the late 20th century, and just taking a 30,000-foot level of the culture and saying, "Hey, with introducing new technologies, that is introducing any number of things in society. It's shaping how we think, how we process information." Insofar as he's a cultural critic, I think he is a significant conversation partner. And yeah, everything else that Brett said is correct, that the fact that a guy who wrote a book four decades ago is still being talked about now, I think, is a significant mark of what a mind and what a perception he had of the culture that he was living through.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Do you recall where your introduction to his work was and what has been some of his influence on your respective thinking and writing?

Brett McCracken

I was very deeply formed by Postman in college. So I went to Wheaton College, and I actually had a professor I was a communications media studies major, and I had a professor, E. J. Park, who was a student of Postman. So he did graduate work at NYU under Neil Postman. And so he was a disciple of Postman and he introduced me to Postman through the courses I took with him. I remember just devouring all of Neil Postman that I could get my hands on, starting with *Technopoly*, I think, was the first one I read, and then *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, and *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century*, and *The Disappearance of Childhood*, and others. That was my introduction. It was through a first-hand connection to Postman through one of his students.

Dr. Ivan Mesa

I definitely do not have that first-hand connection there. I think for me, I came of age in the '90s as a kid, and then in college in the early 2000s with the rise of social media. So in the early days of Facebook, I mean that was my freshman year in college. I came into college wanting to serve in ministry. I was a biblical and theological studies major at Palm Beach Atlantic University. I think I, probably in those early years in college as well, I came in contact with Neil Postman's work and thinking through what are the implications of media and ministry and that combination. It was also very personal for me. How do I, as a new Christian who wants to serve the Lord faithfully, this is, for better or worse, the ministry landscape that we find ourselves in, whether we like it or not. And so I think that probably was the 20th anniversary of Postman's book. That's the copy that I have on my shelf that I engaged with here. And so that probably was my first introduction to Postman.

Dr. Keith Plummer

In the introduction, you say that Christians too often have adopted or taken a stance of a naive pragmatism when it comes to the use of media for the purpose of mission, treating it as a neutral thing. Could you say a little bit more about that? Why do you think that is, and why is it that something like the insights of Postman are really necessary for Christians to take seriously, especially today?

Brett McCracken

Yeah, I think it's generally true that throughout the, at least last couple of centuries of rapid technological change, Christians have tended to be more on the side of adopting it as quickly as they can, out of good intentions, to see how this new technology might be put to use in the gospel going forth to all the world. So think about television and the way that Billy Graham was a very early adopter in televising his crusades and even the internet. I think a lot of organizations, even like The Gospel Coalition, were pretty early to adopt digital technology. And we can talk about the irony of two Gospel Coalition editors writing critically about treading carefully with adopting technologies. But yeah, so I think the intentions are good there because I think these media forms can absolutely be used in fruitful ways for Kingdom advance. I want to make sure that we're clear as we talk about this book that we're not giving a blanket condemnation of using technology. We're saying, be careful because there's both good things, there's both opportunities, and there are risks, and there are ways that technology changes things in subtle ways that you're not always aware of.

Brett McCracken

I think that's where Postman was and is so helpful, just as Marshall McLuhan was, because both of them are trying to get us to see that a medium is not just a neutral carrier of a message. It changes the nature of the message itself. Every technological forum changes the DNA of the messages that go forward in that technological forum, the discourse that is formed by that technological form. We just need to be aware of that. It's not that that is a reason to not use it. It just is a reason to be careful in how we use it and maybe think about whether a certain format or a medium is the best way to communicate a certain message.

Brett McCracken

We can talk more about this in specific things, but when you think about X and the media format of X or any social media platform. Is that really the best place to try to have serious conversations about important matters? I don't know. I look at what goes on on X on any given day and the back and forth debates, and I wonder, is this really the best format to be having these conversations? What are the advantages and disadvantages here in the very form of this technology itself and what it gravitates toward in terms of the type of conversations it facilitates? So that's what we hope that Christians take away from this book in the biggest picture is thinking more critically about how technology changes us as individuals, our churches, and then the culture at large.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, let me ask something about what you said, because you said that there was a tendency to think of these media as neutral. I think many times when Christians hear that, they think of

neutrality that we're speaking in solely or primarily moral terms. But when you say that they're not neutral, is that what you mean, or is that what Postman meant? What neutrality was he denying?

Brett McCracken

Yeah, I don't think it's moral neutrality. It's as if a technology is inherently evil or inherently good. I think it's more. It's not neutral in the sense of being totally innocuous and having no bearing on a certain direction of forming something in a certain way. And we can talk about whether something is positively formed or malformed, and that maybe has moral dimensions to it. But the neutrality that Postman was denying, and McLuhan before him was denying, was just this idea that a media form, a technological form is just this innocuous, almost like packaging or skin to the core that is unchanged by the packaging. The packaging of something changes the core. That's the idea. The packaging is not neutral. It changes the way that a gift is received. Maybe just an example would be, if you have a present that you're giving to someone, the way that you wrap it actually matters. If you put wrapping paper on it and it's for a child and it's very adult wrapping paper with violence and cusswords or something on it. That's inappropriate. That changes the gift that is received. You wrap something appropriately for the recipient of the gift.

Brett McCracken

If you're doing a proposal to a potential spouse, you don't just throw the the ring in a water balloon to them. You put the ring in a nice box and you open the box. The packaging matters. It's part of the thing that is being communicated. I hope that gets at what we're talking about here with technological neutrality or non-neutrality. It changes the meat. It changes the message, the medium and the message. You can't just disentangle them, they influence one another.

Dr. Ivan Mesa

I think we all intuitively know that not just at the abstract level, but when you're trying to communicate, let's say, the gospel message, there's a very big difference between preaching a sermon on what is the gospel to writing a book that makes a line by line, paragraph by paragraph argument to a set of reels, and the gospel is packaged in 30 seconds amid you scrolling through endless array of how to remove a zit from your forehead to then the gospel message to then buying a house and hacks for your everyday life. The very packaging of what Brett is saying there does, whether explicitly or implicitly, it does change the way that that is being received. In the worst extreme of what I just said there, if you're communicating divine truths in a TikTok format, it is changing the gospel message, or at least the way that that person receiving is processing that. This is part of an endless array of options that I can pick and

choose what serves me. I think to that end, I think that's where we need Christians at the forefront, really engaging some of these questions to help Christians think through carefully in a way that we speak of divine truths, and then the way that church leaders, especially pastors, help their congregations think through the implications of whatever media form we're talking about.

Dr. Keith Plummer

That relationship relationship between form and content is one that, especially in terms of thinking about biblical inspiration, is at work there as well. God has communicated truths in various genres, that are part of the communication. And the goal is not simply to extract these naked propositions as though, as you said, Brett, the skin doesn't contribute at all.

Brett McCracken

Yeah, I sometimes think about the incarnation itself is an example of how the medium is the message, right? The medium of the incarnate Christ as a physical human man matters. It's not as if God chose to reveal himself only through abstract words that are dropped from heaven in some 2000-point PowerPoint presentation of propositions. He sent his son who took on flesh and dwelled among us. And that shows you that the medium really matters. And you're right, Keith. The genres of the Bible demonstrate this, too. Psalms would be a different book if the truths God wanted to communicate in the Psalms came in the form of just like, Here are the takeaways. Here are the bullet point takeaways. But instead, he did it in the form of poetry and songs and these beautiful lyrical expressions. And that matters, and that changes how we receive it and what God wants to communicate, I think.

Dr. Ivan Mesa

I think one thing I would just add to that conversation is when you think about how and when God chose to reveal himself in the various expressions of that self-revelation, I can't help but think of Galatians 4:4, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son, born of a woman, born under the law." The phrase I want to just capitalize on is that "fullness of time." And so you think of just redemptive history from Adam and Eve to God calling Abraham to Israel through its various kins and ups and downs, and then the fullness of time when God sent his son. And you think about just specifically revelation of, yes, the Word incarnate, but also the inspired and inerrant Word of God. And that came in the form of writing down in Greek and in papyrus. I can only think what it would look like for God to reveal himself in TikTok reels. The wisdom of God, I think, is seen at a very big picture perspective. He, as it says here, in the fullness of time, reveals himself. And that was very intentional in the form of words and arguments and logic. And when you think of even the letter from Paul to the Romans, it's a very

logical, sequential argument that he's driving at some point. And I think that is just an astounding thing to just ponder of of the wisdom of God and the way that he's reveals himself.

Dr. Keith Plummer

That was a big theme for Postman, looking at the differences between what you call the typographic mind and the mind that is predominantly dealing with images, and how that shapes not only what is communicated, but as you were bringing out, how it shapes how we process things and our patience or lack thereof for such things as extended arguments or seeing relationships between things, coherence as opposed to a disjointedness. You break the book up into three parts. Can you walk us through what each of those is and what you're trying to accomplish in each of those sections?

Dr. Ivan Mesa

I think the first part is just looking at what Postman said, what is the big argument that he was saying then, and then what he was saying or what we should think about today. The second part is titled Practical Challenges Facing Christian Communicators. In that section, we're really trying to think apologetics, preaching, how we think about remembering. So just really getting practical about how Christian leaders, church leaders, whether it's a pastor, a Sunday school teacher, a small group leader, how that person should be thinking about forming God's people into the image of Christ. And then the third section, if I recall correctly, we're just trying to apply that in a specific way, whether that's media, whether that's mission, or just what it looks like to live as a Christian in the digital world. Those are the three sections. We're trying to make a sequential argument about what Postman said, and then really apply that to the church today.

Brett McCracken

I think the last part, the third part is where we try to maybe tilt a little bit toward the positive because I think people will read the book, and it's front-loaded with depressing assessment of things and some of the problems that we're facing. But that third section is entitled How the Church Can be Life in a Scrolling to Death World. We're trying to give practical suggestions in different ways for how to respond and how Christians can maybe lead the way, not only in thinking critically about the dynamics of this digital age, but providing a respite and a haven and modeling a healthier way of living and being in this world.

Dr. Keith Plummer

In that third section, Brett, you have a chapter called Reconnecting Information and Action: How to Stay Sane in an Overstimulated Age. And I mentioned your book, *The Wisdom Pyramid*, in which you bring out some of these ideas there. But say a bit about how does technology influence the relationship between information and action? What did Postman have to say about it? What is the threat that we are under because of the deluge of information at our fingertips?

Brett McCracken

Yeah. So he discusses in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, this idea of the information-action ratio. And that is something that has stuck with me since I first read *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. And when we decided to do this book, I knew that that was the chapter I wanted to tackle was taking that idea of the information-action ratio and applying it to our moment now, because I think what he was saying about it is even more relevant to our situation now. The idea is essentially is . . . What he was talking about is humans are built, we are wired to have a pretty even ratio of the information that comes into our consciousness and the action that we can take. For most of human history, people were aware of information, mostly in their approximate location. The things that were going on in their family, in their local community, there was no mass communication. So you never heard any information that was super far away from you. So most of the information that you came across was actionable information. And he argues that that more even proportion is healthier for us, it's what we were created to be able to take action on information.

Brett McCracken

That started to change, though, when communications were introduced that allowed information from all over the world to reach us in rapid fashion: radio, television, et cetera. Then especially now in the internet age, where we open our phones in the morning and throughout the day, it's just a steady stream of information stimulation, most of which, the vast majority of which, is unactionable in the sense of it's information from far corners of the world that are far removed from our immediate context. It's information about debates and outrages and goings on that we have little to do with, and we can't really do anything about it except be aware of it, except get stressed about it, get mad about it. I think for me, this disconnection of information and action, this way out-of-balance ratio, I suspect is a big part of our mental unhealth in the digital age. All these statistics are showing that we're more anxious than ever, we're more depressed than ever. I think a big part of it is because we weren't made to have so much information coming into our brains about which we can't do anything tangible except be emotionally upset and to carry those burdens that accumulate in our consciousness without any recourse to action.

Brett McCracken

And so in my chapter, I talk about why that's become an even bigger problem today than it was 40 years ago when Postman was writing about it, and then how we can, as Christians, maybe model a reconnection of information in action so that we can be healthier in our own lives and maybe model a healthier way of being for others around us.

Dr. Keith Plummer

What do you say to someone who hears that and this idea of "we weren't meant to be privy to all of this information," there are certainly technologies that take us beyond what are some of our created limitations. And what do you say to the Christian who says, "Well, but this is part of the cultural mandate. This is we are exercising dominion by creating these things" who may be even operating under the idea that, and "with time, we will adapt to the quantity and speed of our creations?"

Brett McCracken

Yeah. I mean, there's a lot there in that question. I would first say that, obviously, it's not a bad thing to be reading books and reading things that are removed from your local context in the sense of their ideas, right? But ideas can be actionable in our own lives. I can read a book by Plato from thousands of years ago, a different culture, a different context. That's far removed from me. But he's writing things that are very actionable in my own life in terms of what it means to be a human and how I can live the good life. And so what I'm critiquing in my chapter and with the action-information, disconnect, is so much of what we come across on social media, for example, is really trivial information. It's like celebrity gossip or this debate about this or this headline about some political thing going on in this part of the world. It's not that those things aren't important, but the cumulative effect of filling our minds with that constantly is not good for us. I would be curious to hear arguments for people that think that we'll one day adjust to this information overload and we'll be able to have the capacity to process it all.

Brett McCracken

Everything that I've read in terms of books that are analyzing our brains in the digital age and how our brains are literally atrophying and suffering because of the information onslaught, maybe our brains will somehow adjust to that over time. I don't know. But right now, the consequences of it not good in terms of mental unhealth in our society. And we feel it. Every one of us feels more burdened, more stressed, more anxious. And the more that you're scrolling on your phone, the more that you're letting all of this information overload into your consciousness, the worse you feel. So I think we have to be really good stewards of that in terms of our intakes and what is coming into our souls, which is what my *Wisdom Pyramid* book was really getting at a few years ago.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Anything to add, Ivan?

Dr. Ivan Mesa

I would just say, just speaking very personally, I think there have been different seasons in my life where I have been inclined to care and think about everything outside, whether happenings in Washington, DC, or in the far corners of the world, and not really caring or not doing much about the things that are right in front of me, whether that's serving a neighbor, whether that's praying for a church member who's going through a trial, a hot meal to someone who just gave birth, or just even in my own relationship with my wife or my children. I mean, how many moments have I had to confess before the Lord where I am scrolling again on social media and ignoring a three-year-old who wants to play with daddy. And by God's grace, that happens less so today than maybe a few years ago. But I think that is one of the recurring things that I think all of us, to greater or lesser degree, we just need to take stock, take inventory, because we can be like the frog in the kettle, and it just increasingly gets warmer and warmer and warmer, and then we're toast, literally in that case.

Dr. Ivan Mesa

So I think as Christians, we just need to be thoughtful, walk carefully, walk in step with the Spirit, realizing that this conversation about technology is not just some abstract thing for cultural critics like Neil Postman. It's a really practical thing that we need to be thinking about and that it affects us in our everyday lives.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. I know one of the things that first interested me on this whole topic was just thinking about how much of the Christian life requires attentiveness. God Word, as you were bringing out towards one another, and what are the consequences of those things that are designed to cast my attention away from where I am, where I am called to live and love. I continue to study this issue because I continue to struggle with it myself, as you were saying. We all know what that is like. I walk into a classroom and I see students not interacting with each other, but everyone is on their phone trying to get that last bit of time in before they have to be present mentally and attentively.

Dr. Ivan Mesa

Well, and I think just on that point, the reality is not just that the technologies are not neutral, but I think we live in a capitalist environment in which there are companies that have profit incentives to capture that attention. One of my favorite books in the last decade on this topic is literally called *The Attention Merchants* by Tim Wu. I think he was at Columbia University, if I recall correctly. And so he's basically just cataloging the ways that these social media companies or whoever have a profit incentive to capture that limited, scarce attention that we have. There's more to say about Christian discipleship in terms of prayer and engagement with the church and studying God's Word. But I think one angle to think about Christian discipleship is, what is capturing your attention? Is it the Lord, the things of God, or are you letting some other company, some other metric, really capture that scarce limited resource, you have that one day, you will give an account to the Lord of how you used it.

Brett McCracken

Just to piggyback off of that, I really think this attention idea, and it's tied to spiritual formation, is so critical. Spiritual formation, it's a battle. There's a battle going on right now for our attention. I think the devil delights in the algorithm in the way that it so easily co-ops our attention constantly and fills every moment of our attention increasingly. We struggle to not look at our phones when we have a five-minute gap in our day, when you're waiting in line for your coffee and you have 90 seconds of a gap. I struggle, we all struggle to not pull out our phone and start scrolling. I recently gave a talk at a Christian college that was all about this idea of if we can't withhold grabbing for our phone in a 90 second gap in our day, if we can't walk across campus from one building to another building without pulling out our phone and doing something to fill our consciousness with content, our spiritual life is going to totally die on the vine, because one of the key ingredients for a vital relationship with God is just attention. Every human relationship requires time. You're not going to have a good relationship with your spouse if you never see them, if you never have time.

Brett McCracken

The same is true with our relationship with God. If we're so busy, if we're so frenetic with our fingers always going for our phone and filling every gap in our day with media, then we're never going to have time to be with God, to pray to him, to be still and know that he is God, and that's going to have horrible consequences for our spiritual health. We're already seeing it, I think, in our own lives. I'm preaching to the choir here. I struggle with finding time to have a quiet time because of the ubiquitous temptation of grabbing from my phone and doing something, push notifications that are beckoning to me, like Lady Folly calling out to the person in Proverbs who's on the path. Come over here, come click on what I have you. Come watch this video. Come read this tweet. So I think it's this topic. We could have a whole book on the spiritual battle of attention, the spiritual warfare of attention, because I think this is where the rubber meets the

road for the church and for Christianity in the digital age. It really does come down to attention, where we are giving our hearts and our minds. It matters so much.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Let's take a break here. On the other side, I want to continue with some of the ideas that both of you just brought out, and we'll do that in a bit.

Ben Best, Co-host

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Dr. Keith Plummer

I'm talking with Brett McCracken and Ivan Mesa about the book that they have co-edited, amusing, *Scrolling Ourselves to Death*, excuse me. The book that is in recognition of the 40th anniversary of Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Before the break, we were talking about this issue of attention, and something that Brett brought up earlier in the conversation is a question that I have, and it's this. We are living in what is called an attention economy. We are talking about how it is that the media that we use to communicate are shaping of us in various ways. Since Brett brought this up, I wanted to ask you both, with Christian ministry that is making use of internet media, is there a sense in which there is also a competing for the attention of people? And how do you work through some of these considerations about these concerns when it comes to doing the ministry that you're doing?

Dr. Ivan Mesa

Brett mentioned this earlier, but in terms of the two of us, we work for a Christian content producing organization, TGC. And so we're not unaware of the irony in having this conversation. And neither Brett or I are Luddites. We're not ostrages the heads in the sand, trying to just retreat to a cabin in the woods with no technological footprint. So I think we are all in this world for better or for worse. So the reality is people live oftentimes in the Internet, they're looking up Google for answers to their questions. They are scrolling themselves to death sometimes on social media. And so we want to help point people toward that which is good, true, and beautiful. We want to help point people ultimately to the Lord, but also to the church, point them

toward that embodied analog reality that we were created for. And so some might see that as a paradox or a contradiction. I think we're just realistic that this is the world that we inhabit, and we want to steward that in a way that's most glorifying to the Lord and aware that ultimately we need to point people to Jesus.

Brett McCracken

I would just add to that to go back to my wisdom pyramid idea, which I put a hierarchy of where we should be getting our intakes. At the bottom, the most important thing is Scripture. God's word should occupy the biggest source of our nutrition. Then the church is the next most important thing. The phone and social media is at the top of the Wisdom Pyramid in the dessert category. Use it sparingly. With what we do at The Gospel Coalition, we're using that internet medium, that forum. But what we're trying to do is push people off their phones to those foundational layers of wisdom, God's Word, the Bible, and the local church. The vast majority of our articles are helping people with aspects of local church, helping pastors and various challenges of local church life and ministry, helping people understand the Bible more, giving them supplemental resources to go deeper in a particular biblical topic or apply the Bible to some aspect of life. I think we're trying to point people to those better things that should be occupying their diet, but using this form that, yes, it's an imperfect forum. People discovering TGC's content by scrolling. It is what it is. We're meeting people where they're at, but we're trying to point them to a better place, to offline health.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And part of what you were talking about with respect to pushing people to embodied community is worked into the book. Because the book isn't written primarily for it to be used in isolation. I know that there are discussion questions at the end of every chapter. I would imagine that's because you hope that people will talk about this together.

Brett McCracken

Yeah, I think it's a great book for churches to consider doing book groups, small group discussion, even church staff, leadership teams, reading it through, talking about it, because there's so many practical implications I think, for how to do church and how to be that counterculture of positive formation in a digital world full of malformation. So we hope that it's not a book that people read in isolation, but they talk about and read together.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I was talking with a friend who was saying, "You know what? I think that kind of, we've reached maybe", he said, "a saturation point with respect to dealing with this issue of technology" in the life of Christians, even some of the non-Christian stuff that is coming out in terms of, I think of Nicholas Carr's new book *Superbloom*, or before that, Jonathan Haidt, Christine Rosen. I mean, just a number of thinkers, secular and Christian, who are saying this is a problem. Now, I took issue with my friend who said, he was treating this as though this was fadish. My view is that I think that this is only going to accelerate and there's going to be increasing need for church leaders and Christians to be giving more thought, especially as new technologies arise. Would you agree with that, or do you think that this is the peak, or are we just maybe seeing the front end of this?

Dr. Ivan Mesa

I would say we're probably both living in the best and worst of times. And so I think you're right that some of the bright spots are there have been reports from the government saying isolation is smoking six cigarettes a day. And Jonathan Haidt's book on *The Anxious Generation* and former President Obama recommending that. And then there's a significant change in the culture, whether here in the US or even Australia, banning social media for those who are 16 and under. And so I think there is a cultural recognition that maybe the laissez-faire approach that we had over the past decade plus has not been working in particular for our children, especially for our young girls. And so that's a bright spot. I don't want to not appreciate that. But at the end of the day, I also think there are, to your point, Keith, there are troubling clouds always imminent. The nature of technology, especially in our day and age, is the acceleration. There's always a new thing. There's always a new social media app, a new profit incentive, a new attention merchant. And we, as a church, collectively, are not always at the vanguard, at the forefront of helping the church think through these issues. So I think, yeah, it's probably the best and worst of times. And I think we should be grateful for the common grace in our culture when it comes to these conversations. At the same time, what we're trying to do with this book is try to help spark more conversations, in particular for Christians, to really think soberly about some of these ways that affect the church.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You mentioned a collective approach, and this idea of collective action is one that Haidt and others have talked about, that because of the sociological factors that are involved in our technological usage and the convention socially and so forth that arise, so many have said there's a need for this to be dealt with on more than just an individualistic basis. What kinds of suggestions, and you offer a number in the book and the contributors do, what comes to mind when you think about at the level of the local church, what collective action can we be taking to help one another through this?

Dr. Ivan Mesa

I think at the church level, I think there are ways to probably explicitly do this, but also implicitly. So let me just talk about the implicit ways. I think the very fact that in most of our churches, we are opening a literal Bible with pages, I think often communicates the primacy of God's Word. It is probably one of the few places that Christians can come to in a given week that is not using their phones. I think some churches use technology and encourage, open up your apps. But it's hard when you're listening to a sermon and you're getting all a matter of notifications about emails and this than that. And so, practically speaking, I mean, one thing that I try to do whenever possible is leave my phone either at home or in the car and just have an analog experience at church. One practical thing, if there's a pastor or church leader listening to this conversation, think creatively or just take stock of what are the decisions your church is making that either help or hinder some of these dynamics. So, for example, if you have a child care service, are you requiring parents to have a cell phone to get alerted? Are there other analog ways? I know in one church in particular, there was an analog number in the front right of the church, and if that number came up, that was a way to pick up your child. And so you don't have to be glued to your phone. So I think there's a number of things there that both individually as a church member, you could think through that. But also, I think church staffs should help think the way that you've ordered a service, how you thought about the structure, and what are ways to basically be a digital oasis for the Christians who gather basically for an hour, two hours each Sunday morning to hear from the Lord?

Brett McCracken

I would just add that phrase, a digital oasis. I love that. I think the word the church should be a haven for digital refugees. I think that the simplest way that the church can respond in a fruitful way to the digital age is by being a non-digital space that leans into the analog embodied beauty of the body of Christ. Lean into your churchiness as a church, the physicality of gathering together, singing, which is a physical act, shaking hands, greeting one another, hugging, taking communion. All of these are embodied things. I think in a digital age, they become revolutionary acts, acts of resistance, acts that we claim are embodied, God-given embodiment as people. Even things like having physical embodied small groups midweek, where we encourage people to get together in homes and have this... That is an That's a disruptive moment in people's digital lives, where throughout the week, they're on their phones, they're in these weary digital spaces. But if they can have a moment of human connection with a small group of people who know them, who are not hiding behind avatars, who are not cropping themselves to look perfect, but are just being real as embodied people together.

Brett McCracken

Then if they can have an experience on Sunday morning where they're rubbing shoulders physically and shaking hands with awkward, sweaty people next to them and singing the

doxology. Those are beautiful things. If the church can just be the church, you don't have to do anything radically new. Just be the church, and I think it's increasingly going to become appealing for Gen Z and Gen Alpha who have grown up so immersed in digital life that they're hungry for an alternative. They don't want to go to a church where they're encouraged to keep scrolling and where the interfaces of screens are coming at them, they want to be in something different for at least a few hours every week.

Dr. Keith Plummer

There's obviously an appreciation for Postman's analysis and critique on both of your parts and the parts of all of those who contributed to the volume. But are there any points at which either of you would say that Postman himself is in need of some critique or revision, correction, and so forth?

Dr. Ivan Mesa

I think one thing that Brett and I share in common is often in the various books that Postman wrote, there is a romanticization of the 18th century. *One of his books is titled Building a Bridge to the 18th Century: How the Past Can Improve Our Future.* And hey, I'm an 18th century man. I'm probably better at home in the 18th century than the 21st century. But I think in his various writings, he tends to glamorize that as if going back in some ways to the past is basically a silver bullet that can fix a lot of our issues. Now, there's a lot of good in that, but I think sometimes he did that a little bit to the extreme. And that's to be expected when it comes to a cultural critic like Neil Postman. He did his job well, which is critique the cultural moment that he was living in. But in doing that, I think there's some areas there that he overlooked.

Brett McCracken

Yeah. And with that, I think his elevation of the typographic mind as the pinnacle of human consciousness and discourse. Keith, you were mentioning how he's not fond of the more image-based way of interfacing with ideas. I think he goes a little bit too strong there, especially 40 years further along in the movement into a more image-based world where people aren't reading less and they aren't as literate as they once were. It feels depressing to think that, well, I guess there's no hope because we can't go back to the 18th century. We can't go back to the typographic mind. I would like to think that it's different, and there's different advantages and disadvantages, but I think we can still work with a more image-based discourse, and it can still be redeemed. It can still be something that God uses to advance good discussions and ideas and whatnot. We just have to be aware of what's changed and what's been lost. That's a lot of what we talk about in the book, even your chapter, Keith, in terms of the changes of logic and

how we're moving beyond that rational, logical apologetics, which was characteristic of the typographic age.

Brett McCracken

I tend to be more optimistic that whatever age we're in, and we have to remember that to go back to the fullness of time God sent his Son, the fullness of time wasn't the 18th century for him. God didn't think that the enlightenment form of discourse was the time to reveal himself. He entered into more of an oral culture. The printing press was still 1,500 years away. God can work in whatever the communication format of the day is, whatever the technological moment is. And we've seen that throughout history. The church has been unstoppable in its advance. The mission of God carries on whatever the technology is. And so we don't want to get so biased in one medium or another that we can't see the opportunities as well as the risks of any given technological moment that we're in.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I just want to say in my chapter on dealing with apologetics and postman's insights. When we talk about a post-logic world, I take that to me in the same thing as when we talk about a post-truth world in the sense of we're not denying that truth is no more, but there is maybe a greater resistance to the idea of truth. I would say it's a post-logic world in the sense that people may be more willing to embrace incoherence and illogic. But logics, they can't help but to think in some terms, logically.

Brett McCracken

Yeah, but it's an awareness for apologists and for Christian teachers. It's an awareness that you might not be able to win on logic alone. For this generation, they care about affect and emotion and lived experience. And if something feels icky to them, even if it's the most logical argument in the world, it's not going to resonate with them. That's a change from the typographic age where everything could be laid out and you could clearly diagnose whether something was valid or invalid or logical or illogical. In today's meta-modern world, to coin, to use a current term that is being discussed, which we don't have to get into, but it's this idea that there's a mix of modern logic, but also postmodern emphasis on feelings and lived experience and just a subjective vibe, if you will. And that's where we're at. And so we have to reckon with that as Christian communicators, we believe in absolute truth, and we believe that there are right answers and wrong answers, but we can't communicate biblical truth as simplistically as just saying, Don't you see? Don't you see how logical it is? Don't you see that this is what the Bible says on this topic? We have to think about how people's brains just approach reality slightly differently today.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I think we could have a whole other discussion about this, but I think the best of Christian apologetics, even prior to some of these considerations, historically has always been more than just logic.

Brett McCracken

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I think about someone like Pascal. Pascal said that people fear that religion might be true, and that what you need to do is to make them want it or wish it to be true, and then show them that it is. And so I think someone like the Keller Center fellow, Joshua Chatraw, what he says about whole person apologetics, I think that that has always been what should have been. But there was, in certain circles, a reductionism that led to a solely, if not exclusively rational approach.

Brett McCracken

Yeah. I think that whole person apologetics idea is also connected to what we've been saying about the importance of embodiment and getting people offline, where so many of these debates happen on Twitter and in this very disembodied space, where it is the ideas and the logic that win the day or lose the day. But I think about someone like Francis Schaeffer, who's an apologist that I look up to, and he was very rational, and in many ways, he was a modern thinker, but he did his apologetics at L'Abri in this very relational, embodied place where people would come and sit around a table, and it was done in a relationship. It was this whole person engagement, which I think is so important is to recognize that people are more than brains on sticks, and we have to win them over with the ordering of their loves and the way that a relationship with each other can help break down defenses that might keep us from Christ.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, let's end with a note of encouragement and perhaps exhortation, particularly to those who find themselves in positions of pastoral leadership, church leadership in various capacities, maybe not on staff, but their ministry leaders, speak to them with respect to how it is that they

can be part of helping brothers and sisters navigate with wisdom and with grace our scrolling age.

Dr. Ivan Mesa

I think one thing I would say, and I don't critique any pastor who is on social media, but I would say I have been refreshed by various pastors in different seasons of my life who have not really been engaged on social media. And for someone who lives a lot in the digital world, it is refreshing to have a pastor who gives himself to studying God's Word week in, week out, stands in a pulpit each Sunday to just say, Thus sayeth the Lord. And there is more to being a pastor than obviously studying and preaching. But that a key thing that a pastor does. And I just find it really refreshing that my pastors are not preaching to Twitter accounts or that are living full-time in the TikTok reels that are happening every day, every week. I would just say, if I'm talking to a pastor, I would say, take stock of your life. We spoke a lot about attention. A key part of a pastor's job description is to attend to the things of the Lord. When you look at the early chapters of Acts, the Apostles gave themselves to prayer and to study of God's Word.

Dr. Ivan Mesa

And so I would just encourage pastors, take stock of your life. Maybe take one week, take inventory of that week. What are you giving attention to? There's more to ministry than study and prayer, obviously engaging with the sheep, engaging with God's people, caring for the poor, evangelizing. There's a lot more that we can say. But I think at the very basic level is take stock of your life and with the goal of preaching to God's people, like we talked about earlier in terms of being a digital oasis, that 30-minute segment, that hour long time is a moment for the sheep to hear from the great shepherd, the chief shepherd. And so the under shepherd, under Christ Lordship, should be diligent to give themselves to God's Word so that they could feed God's people. So that would be one quick encouragement.

Brett McCracken

Yeah, I think all of what Ivan said, I agree with. And I think that the importance of attention for spiritual formation is an area that I think pastors can really focus in on and just elevate the importance in people's minds of this connection between where they are giving their attention and how critical that is for how they're being formed, either in the direction of Jesus or in the direction of wherever the algorithms we are wanting to form them. Then the other thing that I think is an opportunity for pastors is just to make tangible participation in life and God's mission attractive in a world where we are digital spectators. So much of our lives is just scrolling and being passively observing of all these things. One of the chapters in the book written by Read Mercer Schuchardt, who was also a student of Neil Postman at NYU, and now he's a professor

at Wheaton College. In his chapter, I think it's called something like embrace tangible participation, not digital spectating. I think that's just a great concise summary of what all of us need to do more is just be active in God's mission, be tangibly participating and not just digitally spectating.

Brett McCracken

Pastors need to model that in their own lives. Hopefully, they're spending more time tangibly meeting with people over coffee and having pastoral conversations, life-on-life conversations, visiting hospital beds, going to weddings, funerals, all of that classic pastor stuff. Hopefully, they're doing more of that tangible participation than they are social media trolling and engaging in these insipid debates that happen every five minutes on X. Pastors need to lead by example, but just show the beauty of God created us as embodied creatures. He created us with a mission. Sometimes that involved, putting down your phone long enough to actually go do things, be tangibly involved in the local church, go serve in the kids' ministry for a few hours on a Sunday morning without your phone anywhere near you, sing in the choir, go pick up trash to clean up part of your neighborhood, whatever the case may be. There's a million expressions of it, but I just love that idea of embrace tangible mission, don't just be a digital spectator. If we can all do that a little bit better I think that's a huge step in the right direction.

Dr. Keith Plummer

A good word. So the name of the book is *Scrolling Ourselves to Death: Reclaiming Life in a Digital Age*. And I've been speaking with its editors, Brett McCracken and Ivan Mesa. Grateful to you guys for putting this project together, and really looking forward to seeing it. And also, I want to say thank you for the invitation to be a participant in the book. And also very grateful to the two of you for taking the time out to talk with me about it today. Thank you very, very much.

Dr. Ivan Mesa

Our joy.

Brett McCracken

Thank you so much.

Dr. Ivan Mesa

Thank you.

Ben Best, Co-host

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