

BREAKING THE SPELL: INVESTIGATING SCREEN-BASED MEDIA FOR GOSPEL-  
DRIVEN OUTREACH

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## ABSTRACT

We live in a world of screens. In the past, we used them mainly for entertainment. However, in today's digital age, we use screens for practical endeavors too. Their efficiency and emotional appeals create ample desire for film-based outreach. However, we do not always notice the ways screens subconsciously change us and our messages. Not only can screen-based media evoke temptations to idolatry, but they can also promote emotionalism, which appeals to American Evangelicalism. The question remains: Can the gospel-driven church use screen-based media for outreach in a digital age without undermining its theology? This thesis analyzes modern media ecology and current evangelism trends to identify the appeals and obstacles of screen-based outreach in a digital age. The reader will discover that breaking the spell of screen-based media equips the gospel-driven church to use screen-based media in moderation—supplemented with careful Bible study and personal outreach.

## INTRODUCTION

We use the term “narcissist” to refer to people who are enamored with themselves—who are self-absorbed. Usually, we know who they are and do our best to avoid them. We keep a careful watch and beware of the telltale signs: the sense of entitlement, the delusions of grandeur, the need for constant praise, the condescension toward others. We may even find narcissists easy to detect—as long as we keep our mental antenna tuned. Yet, the people themselves seem unaware of their issues. This begs the question: How quick are we to notice our blind spots? Sometimes, we need to check ourselves—to take a step back and ask what parts of our lives shape us. We must examine our outlooks, our habits, our methodologies, and even our cultures. Being mindful of our personal blind spots equips us to reach out rather than avoid—to connect others to the wellspring of God’s selfless love.

In the interest of mindful outreach, this thesis will contend that our media shape us and our messages. Specifically, screen-based media can change our theology and our outreach. If we underestimate the effects of modern media, we risk becoming self-absorbed, intellect-absorbed, or even emotion-absorbed without realizing it. We ought to be wary of the values they imbed in us and our ministry to prevent our own evil desires from dragging us away (Jas 1:14, NIV). As Christians who value gospel-driven outreach, we do not want to preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as servants for Jesus’ sake (2 Cor 4:5).

However, just as our media shape us, so does the Word of God. God tells us that his Word is not dead information, but is “alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes

of the heart” (Heb 4:12). The Word works because God inspires it to work. Therefore, since “the message is heard through the word about Christ” (Rom 10:17), this thesis will also reflect the belief that God wills gospel-driven outreach. By “gospel-driven,” I mean letting the gospel predominate and inform our practice.

This paper will answer one key question: Can the gospel-driven church use screen-based media for outreach in a digital age without undermining its theology? In the body of the paper, I will investigate the nature of screen-based media, discuss the possibility of eliminating or reforming screens, contrast the outlooks of screens and Scripture, contemplate the values of people in a digital culture, propose what gospel-driven outreach ought to look like in a digital age, address a few key obstacles to screen-based outreach, and note some positive appeals of screen-based evangelism.

In summary, this thesis will investigate two systems—media ecology and scriptural theology—and how they impact each other. This paper will equip Christians with modern insights about media ecology, current evangelism methods, and the Word of God, to “throw off everything that hinders” (Heb 12:1) gospel-driven outreach. I intend to provide an up-to-date, theological take on media ecology. I will argue that the gospel-driven church can use screen-based media for outreach in a digital age without undermining its theology.

## PART I: BREAKING THE SPELL

If we want to break the spell of screen-based media, we must be mindful of the sinful nature and its desire to worship itself.

### **Extensions of Self**

How can anyone call media inherently beneficial or harmful? One response is to say that since our technologies are inanimate objects, media such as books and television remain neutral until we use them for good or evil. In 1955, General David Sarnoff, a prominent American businessman and pioneer of American radio and television, urged people not to blame media for their own mistakes: “The products of modern science are not in themselves good or bad; it is the way they are used that determines their value.”<sup>1</sup> However, Sarnoff’s condemnation of human decisions fails to address the role media play in shaping our decisions.

In 1964, renowned twentieth-century media ecologist Marshall McLuhan disagreed with Sarnoff, asserting that our media can shape and influence just as humans do. Not only do media shape our decisions—they shape us. Thus, media communication is a two-way street. According to McLuhan, Sarnoff’s denial of the negative effects of television “ignores the nature of the medium, of any and all media, in the true Narcissus style of one hypnotized by the amputation and extension of his own being in a new technical form.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, just as the reflection of water became an image-based extension of Narcissus’ appearance, the different media we use extend various aspects of our being.

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1. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill), 11.

2. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 11.

In his 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Neil Postman, an American media theorist, echoes the thoughts of McLuhan, who coined the phrase: “the medium is the message.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the media we use to communicate alter our patterns of association. For example, books offer readers the opportunity to use their intellect to fabricate hypothetical or fanciful abstractions. They extend our intellect no matter how we read them. As a result, the book nourishes the belief that readers can understand anything they set their minds to. Meanwhile, television generates worlds of easily-accessible entertainment for its viewers. Visiting new worlds of entertainment is as easy as switching on the television or changing the channel. As a result, television nourishes the belief in viewers that their world exists to offer easily-accessible entertainment.

One might object that no book or show could force such a radical change in perspective. However, Postman notes that such alterations often occur gradually and subtly: “A person who reads a book or who watches television or who glances at his watch is not usually interested in how his mind is organized and controlled by these events, still less in what idea of the world is suggested by a book, television, or a watch.”<sup>4</sup> Not only do our media shape our decisions, but they also tend to blind us to their effects. If we fail to understand our media, we risk falling under the same spell as Narcissus: becoming enamored by our own human affections.

Andy Crouch, a partner for theology and culture at a Christian entrepreneurial organization called Praxis, explains that people have always desired to extend aspects of themselves through technology: “From the very dawn of personal existence, human beings have sought to extend their heart, soul, mind, and strength in various ways—via tools in the broadest

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3. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 7.

4. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20th anniv. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 11.

sense.”<sup>5</sup> We appeal to our affections by shaping tools in our image. For example, the construction-driven person uses a hammer as an extension of his arm for driving nails. However, our ambitious desire for self-extension inspires us to invent increasingly efficient tools, which surpass typical human limitations. Crouch calls such creations *devices*: “Devices function like tools to some extent, in that they augment human capabilities.”<sup>6</sup> What one hammer could do with one nail, one nail gun could do with multiple nails faster than any human could alone. Thus, the construction-driven person extends and validates himself by using construction-driven devices. Put a different way: To the hammer, everything becomes a nail.

Crouch warns against the effects of overextension: “But unlike tools, devices do not extend our heart-soul-mind-strength capacities as much as replace them.”<sup>7</sup> Books extend our memories by remembering our words. However, they remember our words so well that we start using them to remember *for us*. They even teach us how to think by presenting us with the memories and ideas of other people. According to Corey Anton, associate professor of communication studies at Grand Valley State University, “Atomistic, linear, and compartmentalized thought was the natural outcome of print.”<sup>8</sup> As we wrote books, books subtly rewrote us. Print-driven people became more distant, detached, intellectual, factual, precise, pronounced, and individualized. At the height of print culture, the person became the intellectual. Similarly, broadcast television culture reduces people to emotional, entertainment-driven creatures.

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5. Andy Crouch, “Putting Technology in Its Proper Place,” *Cruce* 56, no. 1 (2020): 3.

6. Crouch, “Technology,” 3.

7. Crouch, “Technology,” 3.

8. Corey Anton, “On the Roots of Media Ecology: A Micro-History and Philosophical Clarification,” *Philosophies* 1, no. 2 (July 4, 2016): 130.



In a sense, any device can be culturally reductive. Anton notes that whatever aspect of humanity a medium extends becomes the new image of humanity: “[The intent behind a medium] is also what gives media forms the ‘Midas touch,’ the sense that anything touched by a media form gets made over in its image.”<sup>9</sup> In the words of Shane Hipps, a megachurch pastor turned leadership trainer, “We become what we behold.”<sup>10</sup> So, the widespread use of efficient devices becomes widespread cultural reduction. Device-driven people start to believe that they are no more than brains on a stick, or a mess of emotions.

Since television screens are so pervasive, we have begun to normalize these distorted outlooks. Televised content continues to target our emotions—even unintentionally. Ted Slater, senior director of product management platform as a service at Elsevier Information Technology and Services, quotes *The Interpersonal Communication Book* by Joseph A. DeVito, who defines “noise” as ““anything that distorts the message intended by the source, anything that interferes with the receiver’s receiving the message as the source intended the message to be received.””<sup>11</sup> In other words, television conveys its content with the noise of entertainment. So, we must always be mindful of the noise our media produce. Our media not only shape but limit our worldviews.

In Postman’s day, the television had established a broadcast culture in America. Screens as entertainment had fundamentally shaped his society. Everything televised was effectively trivialized to conform to the gospel of entertainment, and the people had become enamored. They didn’t seem to notice their blind spots or care about the warning signs. So, the public might

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9. Anton, “On the Roots of Media Ecology,” 130.

10. Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 42.

11. Ted Slater, “A Definition and Model for Communication,” (2005): 2.

not have had a problem if Postman had only raised his voice against “bad” television programs that were corrupting the youth or if he had advocated against “too much” television use. After all, the public would simply avoid the “bad” programs and consent that “too much” of anything is harmful.

However, to call television’s effects unavoidable, extensively harmful, and fiendishly influential—to say that we have done all this to ourselves and there is no going back—is to invite public ire. Postman recognized the social hazards of pushing against the public stream of consciousness. By his estimation, anyone who dares to speak up against something as friendly and welcomed as entertainment “must often raise their voices to a near-hysterical pitch, inviting the charge that they are everything from wimps to public nuisances to Jeremiahs.”<sup>12</sup> So, if we want to push back against the negative effects of our media, first we need to understand what does not work.

### **Inadequate Solutions**

If it is too late to do anything about the cultural impact of television, how can we push back against its negative effects? According to Postman, proposing a reformation or elimination of television would be ridiculous. To those who would purge the world of television or separate themselves from broadcast society, Postman reveals that television is here to stay: “Americans will not shut down any part of their technological apparatus, and to suggest that they do so is to make no suggestion at all.”<sup>13</sup> Individuals may swear off television, but doing so would not change the world or its cultures.

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12. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 156.

13. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 158.

Some Christians recognize the negative effects of electronic media and try to inspire cultural reform. In the interest of carrying out Christ's Great Commission, Crouch says that human beings are meant to change culture: "Culture—making something of the world, moving the horizons of possibility and impossibility—is what human beings do and are meant to do. Transformed culture is at the heart of God's mission in the world, and it is the call of God's redeemed people."<sup>14</sup> Crouch reminds Christians of the heavy responsibility Christ has given us while inspiring us to become forces of change in our communities. He also advocates a humble attitude for Christians who want to make a difference in the world.

However, his book on culture-making does little to illustrate the efficacy of the gospel itself or the role God plays in our outreach. To his credit, Crouch admits that Christians also cannot change the world in a broad sense: "the world has changed us far more than we will ever change it."<sup>15</sup> Yet it ought to follow that the gospel is our power for change. But Crouch's distinction is not to say that God changes hearts. Instead, he emphasizes that the world has fundamentally changed us and constrained our freedom to change culture.

Crouch's culture-making principles are valuable but often fall into moralism due to his pragmatic outlook. His proclivity toward moralism seems to derive from his view that human beings continue to bear the image of God, which he defines as reflecting "the creative character of their Maker."<sup>16</sup> As a result, his advice does not come across as primarily gospel-driven. God's gospel-driven goal is not to inspire creative moralism, but to proclaim sinners righteous and holy. If we desire gospel-driven outreach in a digital age, we need to let the gospel's power inform our

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14. Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2013), 189.

15. Crouch, *Culture Making*, 200.

16. Crouch, *Culture Making*, 104.

outreach—or else risk falling into moralism: “For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law” (Rom 3:28).

On the other hand, Postman would not recommend that we try to reform television by mitigating junk content or elevating educational content: “It is almost equally unrealistic to expect that nontrivial modifications in the availability of media will ever be made.”<sup>17</sup> All things televised are equalized and simplified to the lowest common denominator—in this case, entertainment factor. Thus, there can be no television reformation. Television will remain an entertainment medium because it has nourished society to expect entertaining content.

Many do not realize the extent to which television has shaped their values and influenced their outlooks. For example, people in a broadcast culture generally call content good or bad based on entertainment. Peter Horsfield was an Australian contemporary of Postman with a Ph.D. in systematic theology and mass communication from Boston University. He later became an influential staff member at RMIT University in Melbourne and a member of the International Study Commission on Media, Religion, and Culture. In his article, “Religious Dimensions of the Television’s Uses and Content,” he notes that viewers determine “good” or “bad” television programs based on entertainment: “The P.B.S. found ‘Public television in its adult programming is thought of as demanding and hard work by a good number of viewers and therefore unable to fit in with their need to relax.’”<sup>18</sup>

People typically watch television to relax rather than to exert effort. Any demand for intellectual stimulation is a call for mental work. Therefore, a film or program that downplays the entertainment factor or claims to have a message viewers should take seriously must first

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17. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 158.

18. Peter G Horsfield, “Religious Dimensions of the Television’s Uses and Content,” *Colloquium* 17, no. 2 (May 1985), 64.

pass the “Who cares?” test. On the other hand, popular television programs prioritize entertainment over education—or outreach for that matter. People may claim that their favorite programs have strong intellectual appeal. However, it is unlikely that someone’s favorite TV show is a recorded classroom lecture. More likely, they prefer a winsome show that presents intellectual content in an attention-grabbing way. They do not realize that television has already swayed them to prefer entertaining programs. In summary, successful televised content must prioritize entertainment. In turn, it inclines us to prioritize entertainment.

Just as television shapes our values, Horsfield concludes that television also shapes our rituals to maximize the entertainment experience and ensure viewer loyalty: “Television is a narcotising medium used as a substitute ritual for overcoming the profanity of everyday life.”<sup>19</sup> Any show that breaks the rules of the ritual—any show that asks more of the viewer by refusing to entertain—risks criticism and rejection by the viewer, who may change the channel or turn off the screen at any given moment. Therefore, television justifies its existence and guarantees its longevity as a medium by establishing its ritual and continuing to entertain as expected. No amount of serious content will change the unserious medium.

### **Competing Gospels**

Now that we have dismissed the possibilities of eliminating or reforming screens, we will contrast the outlooks of screens and Scripture. In truth, our faith and our media seem to promote competing gospels. Just as a broadcast culture values entertainment over truth, Horsfield adds that television does not care about any truth besides its own:

In television, however, the emphasis is not on normative content or meaning, but on accumulating people to sell to advertisers. The content of television therefore is totally subservient to this purpose. The mission of television lies, not in proposing or

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19. Horsfield, “Religious Dimensions of the Television's Uses and Content,” 63.

interpreting content but by removing anything that may exclude a significant number of people.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, television's value of inclusive entertainment opposes the Christian value of normative scriptural truth. Whereas television shares a self-driven message, God's Word shares a gospel-driven message.

According to Fredrik Portin, a Finnish post-doctoral student who received his doctorate from Åbo Akademi University in the area of Theological Ethics, the selfishness of broadcast culture which pervades our society nourishes subjective morality: "Consumerism is a moral attitude that trivializes the good."<sup>21</sup> If we decide to use screen-based media for outreach, we need to realize that people will respond as consumers—they will naturally expect our media to entertain them. How entertaining will we be? How inclusive will we be? How scriptural will we be? These are all questions the church needs to consider when reaching out to a screen-based culture.

In church, the exclusive and normative message of Scripture informs our rituals. The liturgy is often the last thing that hangs on to the truth of the gospel in a church. However, the television ritual entertains as many people as possible. Though both rituals are designed to leave behind the profane, their goals are entirely different: ritual for orthodoxy vs. ritual for escapism. If we do not prioritize an orthodox outlook, we risk undermining our theology and minimizing our gospel proclamation.

According to Eric Jacobsen, an Evangelical pastor with a Ph.D. from Fuller Theological Seminary, television as a secular liturgy shapes our behavior and thinking in ways that can be

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20. Horsfield, "Religious Dimensions of the Television's Uses and Content," 66.

21. Fredrik Portin, "Consumerism as a Moral Attitude: Defining Consumerism through the Works of Pope Francis, Cornel West, and William T. Cavanaugh," *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology* 74, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 18.

directly antithetical to the gospel. However, he considers that “all secular liturgies might not be equally antithetical to the gospel.”<sup>22</sup> Though television seems more antithetical to the gospel than not, watching, enjoying, or utilizing film for outreach is not inherently sinful. Nevertheless, prioritizing entertainment-factor over gospel-driven outreach would be ministerially irresponsible and spiritually harmful. Our use of film for outreach must be gospel-driven.

Yet in Postman’s day, few church bodies actively used film for outreach. Christian-themed television programs often looked like televangelism—the attempt to make worship services more entertaining. Broadcast churches were the focus of Postman’s religious points. According to Steve Zambo, president and CEO of Salty Earth Pictures, the possibilities for Christian film outreach were limited by the technologies and budgets of the time.<sup>23</sup> Zambo also notes that the churches which wanted to use film made the mistake of building big studios and pumping thousands of dollars into beta tech equipment, which would soon become obsolete. Even though early church efforts at broadcast outreach seemed to be working, digital technology quickly outdated broadcast technology. Thus, early attempts at electronic evangelism were a bad investment.

Now that our broadcast culture has shifted to a digital culture, screen-based outreach has become more feasible and more popular. M. Rex Miller is a modern businessman with degrees in theology and communications theory. In his book, *The Millenium Matrix*, he assembles an information matrix that compares and contrasts the characteristics of oral, print, broadcast, and digital cultures. Miller says that digital technology provides a direct, unmediated, hands-on

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22. Eric O. Jacobsen, *Three Pieces of Glass: Why We Feel Lonely in a World Mediated by Screens* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2020), 193.

23. Steve Zambo, interview by Eric Zabell, November 5, 2021.

experience to replace television's passive gestalt.<sup>24</sup> Now, open-source technology has put electronic media in the hands of the people. Zambo notes how much of a paradigm shift this is for humanity. He says that throughout history politics, organizations, and businesses all tended to have a gatekeeper. For the church, the pastor is that gatekeeper. But the Internet got rid of the gate. As a result, for the first time people could access whatever they wanted from home.<sup>25</sup>

However, without a gate, that is, without an objective source of wisdom, people will have nothing to limit their exploration of self or protect themselves from the effects of media. According to Hipps, the digital age offers a sea of information that does little to encourage the development of wisdom: "We are left instead with 'the conceit of wisdom rather than real wisdom' and become a burden to society rather than a boon. If we are not alert, the Information Age may stunt our growth and create a permanent puberty of the mind."<sup>26</sup> Whereas television was controlled by corporations, the Internet is free for public use. Just as efficient technologies arise, so does the temptation to overextend oneself.

Left to their own devices, the common people become the arbiters of truth in society. Whereas television told them to ignore anything that did not entertain—to ignore academic matters, history, or religious truth—digital media tells them to cherry-pick significant data from the digital forest to mix their favorite jam. Horsfield would later write concerning digital culture: "The interactivity of digital media means that intended meanings as produced are subject or prone to radical deconstruction and reconstruction ... blurring the boundaries between author and

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24. M. Rex Miller, *The Millennium Matrix: Reclaiming the Past, Reframing the Future of the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 78.

25. Zambo interview.

26. Hipps, *Flickering Pixels*, 71–2.



reader and undermining traditional concepts of religious authority that were based on controlling the production and interpretation of religious information.”<sup>27</sup>

Context is no longer ignored but modified. Likewise, the Word of God is not as often censored as reinterpreted—diluted. Digital media reflect a cultural shift in which the collective determines truth, rather than the individual or God. Rather than valuing objective truth as prescriptive, each person gets to collaborate toward a definition of truth that fits their specific context. This collaborative merging of insights produces an alternative paradigm, which challenges conventional wisdom or truth. Miller calls this “smart truth.”<sup>28</sup>

However, giving people open access to their media does not change the message of their media. In a way, digital media preaches the same gospel message as television—but with a key distinction. In a broadcast culture, television tempted people to value entertainment over the truth of Scripture. Today, digital media tempts people to value entertainment *with* Scripture—and to add anything else they value to the mix. Horsfield’s prediction over 30 years ago was shockingly accurate: “Unless [the Christian faith] is careful, the danger, I would suggest, is that it loses its distinctive characteristics as an incarnational, inter-personal and corporate religious faith and is transmogrified into one indistinguishable element of the subsumptive religion of television itself.”<sup>29</sup> Digital media’s promotion of collective-indulgence smoothly follows television’s promotion of self-indulgence.

However, as was the case with Crouch, Horsfield fails to emphasize the need to let the gospel inform our practice in a digital age. Horsfield believes that theology needs to change with

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27. Peter Horsfield, “Theology as a Virtualising Enterprise,” *Colloquium* 37, no. 2 (November 2005), 132.

28. Miller, *The Millennium Matrix*, 87.

29. Horsfield, “Religious Dimensions of the Television’s Uses and Content,” 67.

the times: “Theology, if it is to have a place, must reinvent itself in a way that addresses some of the key characteristics of this cultural context.”<sup>30</sup> While it is true that our practices will change with the times, the same ought not to be said of our theology, which is unchanging. The gospel itself is transformative. We can present it in different ways, but we must not let our presentations undermine its message.

Similarly, Miller believes that adhering to a specific set of theological dogmatics is equivalent to narcissism. He believes that churches must allow their theology to change with the times: “Liturgical, Reformation, and celebration institutions represent separations based on ideas, forms, and eras. These separations no longer fit. They cannot hold what digital communications represents: the ability to permeate and penetrate all of the old boundaries, linking what was formerly separate.”<sup>31</sup> We would maintain that nothing about claiming the authority of Scripture is narcissistic, since the claim comes from God. However, telling Christians to repent and embrace the gospel of the dominant media is narcissism since it bids deference to people rather than God. Instead, “we must obey God rather than human beings” (Acts 5:29).

Likewise, Hipps describes systematic theology as reminiscent of the print age and advises a new methodology: “Under the force of image culture and our growing interest of practice, a new academic discipline is emerging known as Practical Theology. This discipline is convinced that practice should inform theology, and theology should inform practice. It sees them as inseparable.”<sup>32</sup> Throughout his book, Hipps seems to encourage the idea that practice informs theology. Whenever he describes practical theology, he does not warn against it. We can

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30. Horsfield, “Theology as a Virtualising Enterprise,” 142.

31. Miller, *The Millennium Matrix*, 119–20.

32. Hipps, *Flickering Pixels*, 83.

see that he does not oppose practical theology by his use of the phrase “*our* growing interest of practice.” In summary, Crouch, Horsfield, Miller, and Hipps all seem to encourage a spirit of religious pragmatism, which either weakens or eliminates gospel emphasis.

Nevertheless, leaning on the experience of the past, the church moves forward confidently into the future. We do not reject or recontextualize Scripture; for it is inspired and inerrant. God’s authority and love are objective and independent of any human collective. Whether human pride manifests in the self or the collective, it remains insular since it lacks the gospel. However, since no human culture or extension can alter God and his Word, the church *can* embrace digital media in matters of practice. Jacobsen cites James K.A. Smith’s *Desiring the Kingdom* when he says, “The best way to oppose the false teaching of secular liturgies, Smith maintains, is not just to teach truth to minds but also to employ Christian liturgies.”<sup>33</sup>

Though the risks remain, so does our resolve. Since God uses his unchanging Word alone to create faith, we cling to it with white knuckles. Breaking the spell of screen-based media means countering their negative effects with perspective and understanding. For the church, the gospel is the key to breaking such a spell. Driven by the gospel, we desire to boldly go out into the world and shine God’s light in the darkness. We know that light remains light and darkness remains darkness. Therefore, we strive to let the gospel predominate in our motives, speech, and conduct. We continue to pray. We go out and evangelize.

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33. Jacobsen, *Three Pieces of Glass*, 192.

## PART II. REACHING OUT TO A DIGITAL CULTURE

If we want to use screens to evangelize in a digital culture, we must strive to understand the wants and needs of the people.

### **The Cultural Search for Significance**

The digital age has fostered a cultural longing for significance. Just as the intellectual print culture values “right” and “wrong” thinking, the collective digital culture values significance amidst a sea of superficiality. The Internet offers such an array of information, social opportunities, and entertainment options that it creates “a search for intimate connection and lasting value.”<sup>34</sup> As a result, people naturally turn to the Internet in pursuit of meaningful relationships.

However, overextending ourselves through digital immersion diminishes our ability to enjoy fulfilling relationships. Unlike television, which impersonally reforms our outlooks, digital media encourage us to personally recontextualize our outlooks. Rather than go through all the effort and exertion of creating and sustaining real friendships, digital media encourage people to pursue the pleasurable aspects of human relationships. According to Jacobsen, using digital media for emotional gratification only makes us ache more: “Our relationships with other people are already difficult because of the corrosive effect of sin. But our [screen-based media] are exacerbating rather than helping the problem.”<sup>35</sup> Digital media can nourish harmful outlooks

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34. Miller, *The Millenium Matrix*, 112.

35. Jacobsen, *Three Pieces of Glass*, 147.

because they encourage the constant pursuit of relationships. The Internet does not nourish a spirit of moderation, commitment, or contentment.

Even though Scripture teaches sinners about their relationship with Christ, the digital community does not recognize the Bible as God's only source of revelation. According to Miller, print culture seeks God's revelation through Scripture, broadcast culture through an emotional experience, and digital culture through immersion, i.e., "more intimate encounters with truth and individuals."<sup>36</sup> In the digital age, the digital collective absorbs and reinterprets various resources to synthesize a truth that appeals to the group's culture and setting. No single source, not even Scripture, receives special attention. Rather, Scripture is weighed against other sacred sources and judged by the collective. In a sense, the digital majority assumes the authority of God by deciding what is significant and what is not.

Digital culture does not directly reject the gospel but rather dilutes it. We know that even "a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (Gal 5:9). However, as a theologian, Miller embraces the digital environment and the collective "search" for truth: "Print provided a conceptually cohesive foundation for truth. Broadcast provided an appealing package for it. The digital world, however, provides a swirl of truth for collective reassembly."<sup>37</sup> Whereas television strives to be inclusive for individuals, digital media encourage the collaboration of individuals. Whereas the former medium silenced God, the current medium lowers the volume of God's voice. Whereas the gospel of film directly opposes the gospel of Christ's selfless love, the Internet gospel would synergize God's Word with worldly ideas and limit basic gospel proclamation.

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36. Miller, *The Millenium Matrix*, 102.

37. Miller, *The Millenium Matrix*, 87.

The digital age, like the broadcast age, produces self-driven media. Just as broadcast culture cultivates emotional appeals to self, so too digital culture cultivates relational appeals to self. Tony Reinke, a pastor with Baptist roots, says that the digital search for validation is self-love through conformity: “In other words, what we think others think of us profoundly shapes our sense of identity and our search for belonging.... we don’t find our identity in ourselves.”<sup>38</sup> Digital culture encourages echo chambers to form—groups of self-validating individuals become self-validating groups. Doves of individuals seeking conformity from collectives. Thus, digital media raise the volume of their voices. The noise of the unsupervised few becomes the sound of collective approval. Now, more than ever is it difficult to hear the Shepherd’s voice over the chorus of lost sheep. For the first time in history, Scripture has fallen under the criticism of a global, uninformed collective.

Remarkably, digital culture is both immersive and superficial. Miller emphasizes digital culture’s preoccupation with immersive collaboration. Conversely, Reinke says that, unlike print culture, digital culture does not preoccupy itself with deliberate, immersive reading: “We’ve been trained to not linger over digital texts.”<sup>39</sup> The idea of slowing down is seen as a bad thing in digital culture; no one wants a slow signal or a long loading time. However, no one gains a healthy relationship from rushing or learns much from skimming. Likewise, the Bible was not made for speed-reading, but for careful study “so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:17). Yet digital culture values immediate, immersive exchange at the cost of real depth.

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38. Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 110.

39. Reinke, *12 Ways*, 84.

The digital tendency to skim text encourages distortion, dilution, and recontextualization of Scripture. Yet we want to encourage and demonstrate meaningful Bible reading among fellow Christians and new prospects. Gospel-driven Christians find truth not through a human collective, but through those who proclaim the Word: “We are from God. The one who knows God listens to us; the one who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (1 John 4:6). Our faith allows us to cling to what we cannot see or grasp (Heb 11:1). Therefore, we encourage the intimate study of God’s Word over the pursuit of significance through digital intimacy.

### **A Proposal for Digital Outreach**

How, then, should we reach people in a digital age? A screen-based cultural emphasis on emotions and practical theology seems to closely reflect the values of American Christianity. If we are not careful, our use of screen-based media for outreach in a digital age may diminish our proclamation of the gospel. If we let our culture shape our beliefs, we lose our beliefs. Yet Miller asserts that digital culture spiritually hungers for new prophetic voices, for making a real difference, for authenticity, for mystery, for depth, and for deep relational support.<sup>40</sup> He warns that churches that fail to change with the times will become obsolete.

We can address the world’s hunger in our practice without compromising our beliefs. We can equip new voices to share the unchanging gospel. The gospel can make an impact through social endeavors without becoming a social gospel. It is the light we use to shine through the darkness of unbelief. We have the opportunity to joyfully unfold, study, and share it. To dilute it or compromise it would be to perpetuate the “mystery” that so appeals to the sinful nature. We

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40. Miller, *The Millennium Matrix*, 128–32.

can achieve intellectual depth via good preaching, and we can provide others with deep support by learning about them and listening to them.

In their book, *Reviving Evangelism*, the Barna Group encourages both relational ministry *and* scriptural integrity: “By anchoring to the unchanging truths of scripture and the reality of God, and patiently cultivating relationships of welcome and generosity, we can lean together into realities that *do* change.”<sup>41</sup> Whereas Miller considers adherence to doctrine captivity to rigidity,<sup>42</sup> we call it faithful trust in God’s promises. Even though the pragmatism of digital culture strongly appeals to evangelical media theorists who promote practical theology, gospel-driven churches seek to practice creative outreach.

One of the obstacles the Church faces in a digital age is a lack of creative, active, personal outreach. Miller bemoans modern church inactivity: “Many churches are so fragmented and activity-driven that they have little opportunity to develop strong relational bonds.”<sup>43</sup> Likewise, Pastor Eric Roecker, director of the WELS Commission on Evangelism, emphasizes the need for more personal outreach. He notes that WELS historically has been intimidated by personal witnessing: “Sometimes, when we provide other ways of doing evangelism, it lets members of our congregations off the hook.”<sup>44</sup> In his lecture at the Colorado Pastor’s Institute, he lists a few reasons as to our church’s preference for corporate outreach over personal

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41. Craig Springer, ed., *Reviving Evangelism: Current Realities That Demand a New Vision for Sharing Faith*, A Barna Report (Ventura: Barna Group, 2019), 95.

42. Miller, *The Millennium Matrix*, 122.

43. Miller, *The Millennium Matrix*, xii.

44. Eric Roecker, phone conversation with Eric Zabell, October 4, 2021.



witnessing. He says that corporate outreach is less risky and less time consuming; furthermore, it provides less chance of rejection and requires less personal responsibility.<sup>45</sup>

Roecker notes that corporate outreach methods are not the most effective methods for reaching the lost. By his reckoning, many megachurch corporate outreach programs in the 1990s succeeded in drawing in other Christians and shuffling them around. However, these efforts did not attract as many non-church goers.<sup>46</sup> In his presentation, Roecker expresses concern about impersonal church outreach methods: “No matter how friendly we are or entertaining we are, many unaffiliated are simply not interested and won’t come.”<sup>47</sup> So, the goals of corporate outreach programs ought to differ from those of personal outreach. Roecker says that corporate programs are useful for getting the church’s name or “brand” out in the community.<sup>48</sup>

The Barna Group says that impersonal appeals to come to church do not consciously hook the unchurched: “A sense of spiritual need—sometimes called the ‘God-shaped-hole’—is simply not a conscious part of most non-Christians’ experience.”<sup>49</sup> Miller believes that the youths of digital culture do not feel a hole in their hearts, but rather possess a deep hunger for anything spiritually significant: “They are profoundly spiritual yet profoundly disillusioned with traditional religion—the so-called authorized source for their faith.”<sup>50</sup>

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45. Eric Roecker, “Let’s Go! Reaching the Lost in Twenty-First Century America,” Lecture, Colorado Pastor’s Institute, Breckenridge, July 19, 2021, Slide 17.

46. Roecker, phone conversation.

47. Roecker, “Reaching the Lost,” Slide 53.

48. Roecker, phone conversation.

49. Springer, *Reviving Evangelism*, 31.

50. Miller, *The Millennium Matrix*, 88.

One explanation for this apathy toward organized religion is the rise of religious pluralism in the postmodern age. Roecker explains that if truth becomes perceived as subjective and personal, any given person or group will adopt a live-and-let-live outlook toward religion; but if one church claims to have the exclusive monopoly on truth, the digital culture will resent that church. He cites a Reformed theologian named Lesslie Newbigin, who predicted in 1989 that “as religious pluralism spread, churches that had an exclusivity claiming ... would be viewed negatively.”<sup>51</sup>

If modern disillusionment is a key obstacle between the church and the lost, then we need to take creative measures to pass their “Who cares?” test. Televised content is attractive and grabs people’s attention. Yet it operates like corporate outreach when no personal outreach methods accompany it. Roecker observes that people are more inclined to try new things if the person inviting them has a relationship with them: “If I have a relationship with that person and invite them, they might just come out of respect for the relationship.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, the promise of screens does not motivate the unchurched person nearly as well as a personal invitation.

Personal outreach still has a strong appeal in a digital culture. In a world once ruled by the immediate yet superficial pleasure of broadcast television, digital people are starting to appreciate and explore the values of deliberate and meaningful relationships. Yet, many still fail and give in to immediate pleasure. According to Postman, we need to consider ways to free the young from the pulls of instant gratification: “Cicero remarked that the purpose of education is to free the student from the tyranny of the present, which can not be pleasurable for those, like the

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51. Roecker, “Reaching the Lost,” Slide 39.

52. Roecker, “Reaching the Lost,” Slide 52.

young, who are struggling hard to do the opposite—that is, accommodate themselves to the present.”<sup>53</sup> Personal, gospel-driven outreach can give the people what they truly need.

Roecker lists some pros of personal outreach: It does not depend upon a budget; it can be cross-cultural without any training; it works during pandemics; it never ends because it’s not a “program.” Finally, personal outreach allows more Christians to experience the joy of witnessing.<sup>54</sup> Thus, personal outreach appeals to the digital culture’s desire for depth, spirituality, and significant relationships. Whereas corporate outreach has a broad cultural reach, personal outreach has a broad cultural appeal.

One key obstacle that limits personal outreach in a digital age is the intergenerational gap. According to Josh Chen, a missions director for Cru, the U.S. division of Campus Crusade for Christ International ministry, the digital developments in media and culture have separated generations: “How older Christians explain the gospel often attempts to answer questions Millennials and teens just aren’t asking. Previous generations asked questions like ‘How do I get to heaven?’ or ‘What do I do with my guilt?’ while younger generations ask entirely different questions, like, ‘What does it mean for me to thrive as a human being?’”<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Brian Wolfmueller, an LCMS pastor, says that the cross of Christ remains the universal cure for those who search in vain: “The cross is God’s answer, but American Christianity is not asking the right questions.”<sup>56</sup>

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53. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 147.

54. Roecker, “Reaching the Lost,” Slides 65–9.

55. Springer, *Reviving Evangelism*, 50.

56. Bryan Wolfmueller, *Has American Christianity Failed?* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2016), 84.

How, then, can we give people the answers people seek in a digital culture while personally applying the gospel of Christ to them? One factor we need to address is youth anxiety. According to Josh Chen, “Millennials and Gen Z have higher levels of anxiety than any other generation.... and as a result, young people have a hard time thinking too far in the future.... for many young people questions like ‘What happens after I die?’ simply aren’t relevant.”<sup>57</sup> So, what kinds of significant questions *are* young people asking? Chen continues, “Teens and young adults are asking where they belong, how they are significant, how to deal with anxiety, what to do with their loneliness.”<sup>58</sup> Whereas older generations promoted outreach methods that addressed sinful mistakes and “wrong” thinking, current generations require outreach methods that consider their questions of self-value and belonging.

Chen explains that these generational differences are signs that Western culture is shifting away from a guilt-and-innocence culture to a shame-and-honor culture: “If you make a mistake in a guilt culture, it’s just that: a mistake. If you make a mistake in a shame culture, you are the mistake.”<sup>59</sup> Digital culture nourishes and accommodates shame culture. Social media noticeably operates on a *like-dislike* paradigm rather than a *right-wrong* paradigm. Yet the gospel is dynamic enough to address both guilt and shame. The gospel-driven church’s message does not need to change, but rather our personal outreach methods and gospel applications do. We need to consider how to address modern anxiety and shame—to show people that forgiveness is theirs even now. *That* is significant.

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57. Springer, *Reviving Evangelism*, 51.

58. Springer, *Reviving Evangelism*, 51.

59. Springer, *Reviving Evangelism*, 51.

Modern, well-intentioned Christians may have a low view of screen-based media and their usefulness for outreach. However, such caution may risk throwing away a means for reaching the lost. We know that God works through people. Personal, gospel-driven outreach remains powerfully effective. On the other hand, we recognize that screens inherently undermine the gospel message with their own gospel message. Zambo notes that a key challenge of using screen-based media for outreach is being heard above all the secular noise.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, we can remove these obstacles by establishing channels for our hearers that will reach them. We can use the gospel to cultivate personal relationships.

Personal gospel-driven outreach requires discipline and character—a balance of healthy doctrine and godly practice—which flows from an attitude of servant love and leadership. Otherwise, according to Fred B. Craddock, a former professor of preaching and New Testament at the Candler School of Theology, we would be “allowing healthy convictions to replace healthy work habits.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, we need to avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of error and laziness. Successful outreach in a digital age requires both faith and action. Likewise, when we understand digital media and the people who use them, we equip ourselves for successful evangelism. So, the solution I propose is to get to know people through personal, gospel-driven outreach.

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60. Zambo interview.

61. Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 154.

### PART III. ADDRESSING OBSTACLES OF DIGITAL MEDIA

If we want to prevent screens from undermining the gospel in our outreach, we need to consider the obstacles our digital media produce while maintaining a gospel-driven outlook.

#### **Obstacle #1: Media as Idols**

One of the obstacles our screens present to outreach in digital culture is the intrinsic idolatry of digital media. Not only are media extensions of ourselves, Hipps argues that failure to recognize this invites our media to become false gods: “When we fail to perceive that the things we create are extensions of ourselves, the created things take on god-like characteristics and we become their servants.”<sup>62</sup> Likewise, Crouch notes that the more our devices surpass our human capabilities, the greater their influence over us becomes: “Now, as technology ‘progresses’ (as we say), these devices ‘improve’ (as we say), which means they become more and more autonomous and more and more capable of operating on their own, and they ask less and less of us.”<sup>63</sup> Digital media so far surpass human capabilities that they can accomplish massive algorithmic functions with the push of a button.

Our empowerment of media causes us to lose aspects of our humanity. According to Nicholas Carr, a writer whose work focuses on the intersection of technology, economics, and culture: “One of the greatest dangers we face as we automate the work of our minds, as we cede control over the flow of our thoughts and memories to a powerful electronic system, is ... a slow

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62. Hipps, *Flickering Pixels*, 35.

63. Crouch, “Technology,” 3.

erosion of our humanness and our humanity.”<sup>64</sup> In other words, media so shape us that they limit our scope of self. They turn us into caricatures of ourselves. Just as books make us believe that we are no more than brains on a stick, and television convinces us that we are comprised solely of emotions, digital media convinces us that our physical bodies and health do not matter. The more power we give to digital media, the more vulnerable we become to their harmful effects.

The idolatry of ancient times may seem a distant and unrelatable temptation for modern Christians. However, though our idols take on a different form, the motives of the sinful nature have not changed. The thrill of overextending self, the lust for efficiency, and the desire for easy, comfortable living all result in the creation of media idols. These are key motives behind inventions like television and the Internet, which is why we need to be particularly cautious about screen-based media. Paul warns about the consequences of self-absorbed idolatry: “Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done.... Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them” (Rom 1:28, 32).

Reinke warns us that if we worship idols, which are extensions of ourselves, we become more like idols and less like ourselves: “Our idols dehumanize us; they petrify our souls, and dumb and dull and deaden all of our spiritual senses. Idols can only distort us.”<sup>65</sup> Since digital media are particularly efficient extensions of self, they make exceptionally selfish demands of us. The major allure of idols is the false promise of a self-fulfilling life. According to Jacobsen:

For some, an idol is preferred to the real God because it initially seems to offer us more control over our devotional practices and more permission to do what we want while

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64. Nicholas G. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 220.

65. Reinke, *12 Ways*, 112.

promising similar benefits offered from the real God. In reality, however, the idol offers no real benefits to the idolater and makes increasing demands on its devotee.<sup>66</sup>

Nevertheless, their promises are false because they are projections of the sinful nature's will.

Unlike God, "our idols do not love us back."<sup>67</sup> Yet even self-absorbed people love themselves.

Digitally-driven people are those who search for deeper spiritual significance apart from Scripture. According to Wolfmüller, "To be 'spiritual, not religious' is to have a god that doesn't talk."<sup>68</sup> Since our media tend to numb us to their effects, many people today are unaware that they are stuck in digital idolatry. Reinke concludes that our natural desire for overextension leads to idol-making, followed by idol-worshiping, resulting in the alteration of self: "What we want to become, we worship. And what we worship shapes our becoming. This is Anthropology 101."<sup>69</sup>

On the other hand, if we worship Christ, we become like Christ. We remember our Christian faith and cling to the means of grace to oppose the temptation of media idolatry. We "have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Col 3:10). Our confidence remains that, in Christ, we can resist the temptations our media present and use them for godly purposes. We can resist digital idolatry through the means of grace.

However, the digital outlooks and rituals of our media pose different obstacles. In a digital culture, people look to their media for spiritual significance. This is the secular liturgy of the age. According to James K.A. Smith, a Reformed professor of philosophy: "Our idolatries,

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66. Jacobsen, *Three Pieces of Glass*, 28–9.

67. Reinke, *12 Ways*, 113.

68. Wolfmüller, *American Christianity*, 38.

69. Reinke, *12 Ways*, 113.



then, are more liturgical than theological. Our most alluring idols are less intellectual inventions and more affective projections—they are the fruit of disordered wants, not just misunderstanding or ignorance.”<sup>70</sup> If we are not careful, our secular liturgies may inform our religious liturgies and affect our theology.

For these reasons, we must remain on guard as we reach out to a digital culture. Jacobsen admits that though a Christian who lives in the world will likely remain a Christian, the values of the digital age—such as digital idolatry—“will have a persistently corrosive effect on the disciple’s Christ-formed self-understanding. The extent of the corrosive effect depends on how much the disciple wholeheartedly participates in this liturgy.”<sup>71</sup> In the same way, when we use screens for outreach, we risk distorting our Christian outlooks and rituals and becoming more like those who search for significance online. In order to break the spell of digital liturgies, next we will consider the main liturgical obstacle Christians encounter in digital America: emotionalism.

### **Obstacle #2: Emotionalism**

While positive emotions may be a natural response for the Christian who hears the gospel, emotionalism emphasizes the Christian’s emotional reaction rather than the Word. Emotionalism inherently undermines the gospel. According to Jared Wilson, a professor of pastoral ministry at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, “In many evangelical communities today, we see a downplay of theology and doctrinal truth in order to make way for personal feelings and

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70. James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 23.

71. Jacobsen, *Three Pieces of Glass*, 197.

individual preferences.”<sup>72</sup> He borrows his definition of emotionalism from Pastor Bob Kauflin: “Emotionalism pursues feelings as an end in themselves. It’s wanting to feel something with no regard for how that feeling is produced or its ultimate purpose. Emotionalism can also view heightened emotions as the infallible sign that God is present.”<sup>73</sup>

Such emotionalism remains prevalent among American Evangelicals. The cultural embrace of broadcast culture only served to nourish their tendency toward emotionalism. Positive emotional reactions become the sign of successful worship just as they are the sign of a successful television program. In this way, many Evangelicals end up worshiping emotions over the truth of Christ’s resurrection. Wolfmueller affirms that Evangelicals place their confidence anywhere but the gospel: “American Christianity seeks certainty in the Christian.... through the Law.... in my heart, my inner experience.... without the Gospel.”<sup>74</sup>

The Evangelical desire for emotional, entertaining worship over sound doctrine reflects the broadcast-driven desire for entertaining television. According to Wilson, this puts unbelieving prospects at a disadvantage: “Feelings about God detached from knowledge of God indicates we are more worshipers of feelings—of ourselves. Just as serious, perhaps, is expecting lost people to sing songs about their feelings about a God they don’t believe in. Too much of our Sunday morning worship sets the cart of affections before the horse of belief.”<sup>75</sup>

As a result of these raw emotions, Evangelicals make urgent and moralistic appeals for change rather than use the power of the law and the gospel. Miller attributes this to broadcast

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72. Jared C. Wilson, *The Gospel-Driven Church: Uniting Church-Growth Dreams with the Metrics of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 112.

73. Wilson, *The Gospel-Driven Church*, 113.

74. Wolfmueller, *American Christianity*, 37.

75. Wilson, *The Gospel-Driven Church*, 112–3.

culture: “Logic, reason, and the ethical imperative of print take a secondary seat to persuasion, emotional connection, and the specifics of one’s current circumstances. Broadcast’s goal is to stimulate action—now or soon—in response to a change of heart.”<sup>76</sup> Emotionalism and moralism are both reactionary rituals meant to ease the pain of hardship. Similarly, the reactionary ritual of turning on the television aims to provide viewers with an escape from the ardors of life.

Emotionalism bypasses rational thought in favor of immediate emotions. Such thinking also results from the flashing imagery of television. According to Hipps, television trains our brains to prioritize emotional stimulation via entertainment rather than intellectual stimulation:

The television itself shapes us. When we watch television, we are oblivious to the medium itself. The flickering mosaic of pixelated light washes over us, bypassing our conscious awareness. Instead, we sit hypnotized by the program—the content—which has gripped our attention, unaware of the ways in which the television, regardless of its content, is repatterning the neural pathways in our brain and reducing our capacity for abstract thought. The screen itself is part of the message.<sup>77</sup>

Unsurprisingly, people reared on television prefer entertaining forms of worship. American Christianity has attracted large crowds with the same kinds of attractational methods used by television. Since emotionalism bypasses reason, it also discourages careful study of Scripture in favor of raw emotional experiences.

Furthermore, the broadcast tendency of de-emphasizing theology in favor of gripping entertainment persists in the digital age. Digital media enables screen-based entertainment to reach widespread audiences. According to Zambo, the Mormon church was one of the first church bodies to use film to reach new audiences back in the 1980s.<sup>78</sup> The films they made about Jesus were used to tell stories with moral lessons. Whereas the limits of broadcast technology

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76. Miller, *The Millenium Matrix*, 74.

77. Hipps, *Flickering Pixels*, 26.

78. Zambo interview.

prevented much use of screen-based entertainment for outreach, the open-source technology of the digital age enables anyone with a phone or computer to create digital outreach content. However, the emotionalism and moralizing of the broadcast era still lend themselves to digital entertainment today.

Emotionalism promotes moralizing. For example, broadcast culture shifts the Christian's focus away from doctrine as the invisible source of faith and toward visible sources such as emotions and godly behavior. Dallas Jenkins' show, *The Chosen*, retells key stories about Jesus' life. Yet the title emphasizes Jesus' followers. In this way he also invites viewers to follow Jesus, to become *The Chosen*. Hipps notes that American Christianity's preoccupation with emotionalism emphasizes following Christ over believing in Christ:

Much of evangelical Christianity is witnessing a subtle shift from its heritage of abstract doctrine to concrete ethics. That means we are more focused today on how we behave rather than how we believe.... This approach to Christianity finds expression increasingly through the language of "following" rather than "believing." Many are learning to prefer the designation of "Christ-follower" rather than Christian."<sup>79</sup>

On the one hand, Scripture informs Christians that what they believe and how they behave go together: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). On the other hand, Evangelicals seem to have a fascination with Christian ethics. For American Christianity, the ethic of love becomes the rule rather than the doctrine of love. As a result of emotionalism and moralizing, Christian entertainment teaches Christians to focus less on outreach and more on looking inward at their own faith.

Yet the ethic of love remains an important Christian concern. After all, Jesus encourages us: "In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:16). Likewise, Peter says, "Live such good lives among

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79. Hipps, *Flickering Pixels*, 82.

the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Pet 2:12). We must consider both our doctrine and our ethic in our outreach. We believe in Jesus *and* follow him.

Some Evangelicals do not care about this distinction. For example, Hipps believes that whether one gets emphasized over the other depends on which medium dominates a culture.<sup>80</sup> He would say that letting theology inform practice is merely a remnant of print culture. However, since both outlooks are interchangeable, it is better to stay with the times. Likewise, Miller adds that in today’s culture, something about our faith needs to feel more personal than seemingly detached writings: “Print asks us to accept the truth as written. But in broadcast cultures, truth has to ring true for us. We have to be able to feel a visceral connection to it.”<sup>81</sup> In print culture, faith is believing in doctrinal truth. In screen-based culture, faith feels like emotional conviction and belonging. Thus, Hipps and Miller beg the question: are both print and screen outlooks equally viable for Christians? If we let our doctrine inform our outreach, are we better informed than the Christians who let their practice inform their theology?

In short, yes. The reason we prioritize doctrine is that, unlike our human affections, it lasts: “The grass withers and the flowers fall but the word of our God endures forever” (Isa 40:8). Our confidence lies in the fact that the Bible always retains its authority over us, not by virtue of the print-based medium, but because the Bible is the inspired Word of God. It so happens that the medium God has directly inspired for us is printed. Yet emotionalism promotes the subjective faith experience, which downplays scriptural inspiration and elevates human action. As a result, Christians who let their practice inform their theology lose their theology and

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80. Hipps, *Flickering Pixels*, 82.

81. Miller, *The Millenium Matrix*, 70.

their confidence in Scripture. Therefore, we are content to confine ourselves to Scripture as the sole divine authority in our lives and our practices. This is how we glorify Christ rather than self. We do not search for truth—for God has already revealed it to us in his Word.

The printed Word strengthens our faith and produces the fruit of good works. Therefore, it is important for the sake of Christian wisdom to know how to balance our theology and our practice. Outreach requires wisdom in both doctrine and Christian living. Wilson concludes, “what you win people with is what you win them *to*.”<sup>82</sup> The best motives in the world cannot sanctify unbiblical methods. Even if Evangelicals have godly intent, their practice is not rooted in Scripture. God encourages us to use the promises of his Word to shape our intent, or else we will start building houses on sand (Matt 7:26–7).

Not only does emotionalism shift the Christian’s focus away from Christ, but it also makes for terrible outreach. Wilson says that urging new prospects to look inside themselves for an emotional connection to Christ is backward and absurd: “In seeker-oriented worship, we direct a steady diet of ‘how to’ at people who have yet to receive a heart full of ‘*want to*.’”<sup>83</sup> This makes Christians come across as spiritually tone-deaf. Telling Christians to look inward is false doctrine and telling unbelievers to look inward is pointless. Wolfmueller concludes, “Every kind of religious experience seeks to deliver certainty to its believers. They cannot. Any theology that isolates spirituality to our insides is doomed to uncertainty.”<sup>84</sup>

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82. Wilson, *The Gospel-Driven Church*, 109.

83. Wilson, *The Gospel-Driven Church*, 114.

84. Wolfmueller, *American Christianity*, 119.

### The Appeal of Storytelling

However, our reservations about idolatry and emotionalism ought not to discourage us from taking advantage of screens as tools for outreach. Since emotionalism is anti-gospel, some may call the use of attention-grabbing stories concession to sin. However, when asked what he would say to someone skeptical about using film for outreach, Zambo did not emphasize the importance of making the best Christian films possible. Rather, he stressed that using film for outreach is a part of our freedom as Christians to save souls “by all possible means” (1 Cor 9:22). He urges not to use film as the “end-all-be-all,” but as a useful tool for telling stories.<sup>85</sup> Film must remain a tool for ministry rather than the point of ministry—rather than a device that efficiently accomplishes outreach. If we learn to use film correctly—in moderation and conjunction with other tools for outreach—we can push back against the harmful effects of screens in our practice.

Films with strong narratives are powerful enough tools to make an impact on people in a digital culture. If we use films to reach out to those searching for significance, we will gain some emotional footing. However, if we do not follow these films up with personal outreach, the oceans of digital noise will engulf them. We will make little more lasting impact than a single billboard advertisement on an endless freeway. In a world where Christians find themselves dealing with people who reject “the tyranny of fixed categories”<sup>86</sup> and objective “theological assumptions,”<sup>87</sup> we as gospel-driven Christians must supplement outreach films with personal appeals to Scripture. If our mission is to entertain rather than evangelize, personal, gospel-driven outreach will not happen.

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85. Zambo interview.

86. Crouch, *Culture Makers*, 91.

87. Hipps, *Flickering Pixels*, 58.

The continuing appeal of entertainment in ministry reflects a public preference for compelling storytelling. According to Hipps, “In an image-saturated culture, the concrete life-stories of Jesus gain traction once again. The age of image restores a right-brain preference for parable and story over theology and doctrine.”<sup>88</sup> Film better lends itself to the stories of Scripture than the teachings, just as entertaining programs have a stronger appeal than educational programs.

In order to create an effective film for outreach, we need to understand the rules of storytelling. According to Zambo, film storytelling operates on two premises that appeal to people in their search for deeper meaning:

A good movie needs a premise question. What’s the question that’s going to be in the audience’s mind from the very beginning and it’s going to keep the audience interested for two hours? Will the boy eventually get the girl? Will the team win the game? Will he be able to find the buried treasure? That’s a lot of times called the “outer premise,” the one that I could very quickly explain to you.<sup>89</sup>

The outer premise of a film attracts people by catching their attention. For example, a film used for outreach may attract viewers solely because it has an inclusive outer premise. Since American Christianity has a wide appeal, films or series about the life of Jesus, such as *The Chosen*, gain a lot of traction on the Internet. An outer premise that emotionally resonates with a large group successfully attracts attention.

However, Zambo warns that we need to be careful about the most important part of the movie—the inner premise:

What’s motivating the heart? Does the character change? If the character changes, is it for the good or the bad? What makes the character change? What makes the people

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88. Hipps, *Flickering Pixels*, 82.

89. Zambo interview.



around the character change? What are the objects in the way? Who is the villain? There's got to be something that they're fighting against.<sup>90</sup>

The inner premise is the objective of the film itself—its moral center. This is the lesson the filmmaker embeds into the movie. However, we need to be careful about the inner premise, because the film itself also shapes the lesson. Both filmmaker and film generate the message. Whereas a filmmaker can be consumer-driven or gospel-driven, film is always consumer-driven. When both are consumer-driven, the film's message defers to emotionalism. In turn, emotionalism results in moralizing if the outer premise is religious. This is the veneer of American Christian entertainment.

However, when the filmmaker's motives are gospel-driven, the film's message will remain conflicted, yet predominantly gospel. We do not need to avoid eliciting emotions in our ministry. However, we must be careful that our goal is sharing the truths of Scripture rather than emotionalism or entertainment. Television as a medium appeals to people's emotions with selfish intent. However, even though the gospel remains foreign to broadcast values, we can still use screen-based media for outreach—provided we understand the obstacles and limitations modern media present.

Yet just as film can have a gospel-driven premise, so also can Christian ministry have a self-driven purpose. According to the Barna Group, "The vast majority of adults believe you find 'truth' by looking inside yourself. In other words, people are shifting from the external sources of authority—such as the Bible, the truth claims of Jesus and so on—to internal sources of authority."<sup>91</sup> In Wolfmüller's words, "Much of American Christianity is focused on the

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90. Zambo interview.

91. Springer, *Reviving Evangelism*, 88.

Christian and not on Christ.”<sup>92</sup> Telling people to focus on themselves makes them self-absorbed. When people spend time pondering their feelings, they do not take time to ponder the message of God’s Word. When practice and ethics inform our doctrine, our use of narratives does not differentiate our message from that of the Evangelicals.

However, an evangelist with feet planted firmly in Scripture can be confident that he handles films for outreach in an effective and godly way. According to Paul Wendland, a homiletics professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary:

Biblical interpreters are steeped in doctrine and know that Scripture must be its own interpreter, with clear passages shedding light on those less clear. That gives us confidence when we interpret narratives. As long as we have our feet planted firmly within the circle of Scripture, we know we will handle narrative in a way that reflects the Author’s own divine intentions.<sup>93</sup>

Therefore, if we intend to use screen-based entertainment for outreach at all, our goal should not be to entertain according to some attention-grabbing outer premise, but rather according to a gospel-driven inner premise. In all matters, we desire to reflect sound doctrine. We need to emphasize that there is such a thing as truth—especially in a digital age. Therefore, we do not use Jesus’ good works to attract unbelievers, but rather his death on the cross and resurrection for their sake. In the words of Wolfmueller, “The saving work of Jesus is His death. He is our Savior in His death. He is our Savior on His cross.”<sup>94</sup> This is the appeal of the church’s inner premise.

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92. Wolfmueller, *American Christianity*, 73.

93. Paul Wendland, “Lecture three: PREACHING TODAY,” 52nd Annual Bjarne Wollan Teigan Reformation Lectures, Lecture, Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato, October 31 and November 1, 2019, 18.

94. Wolfmueller, *American Christianity*, 75.

### **The Appeal of Gospel Proclamation**

Not only does our message stand out as unusual in a digital age, but our gospel proclamation also makes dynamic appeals to our listeners. Whereas films make emotional appeals and books make intellectual appeals, basic gospel preaching makes intellectual, emotional, and divinely authoritative appeals. Conversely, plain broadcast television bypasses the human intellect, nourishes human emotion, and claims authority of itself. Hipps contrasts the authoritative appeals of abstract intellectual thoughts and abstract flickering images: “Images don’t invite you to argue; they give you an experience. In contrast, the printed word makes us think and question.”<sup>95</sup>

Moreover, the ethos of film naturally appeals against the scriptural subtext of God’s authority. Yet preaching the gospel presents and conveys an earnest and authoritative appeal to human affections and the will of the New Man, rather than merely submitting a statement of fact to the judgment of the intellect or invoking an emotional appeal to the relationship with God to inspire moralism.

Whereas God’s Word communicates its divine message in a way that appeals to our human logos, ethos, and pathos, the medium we use to communicate God’s Word may be better suited to an appeal to one of these three. Well-crafted sermons can appeal to all three. Film appeals to pathos. Overemphasis on pathos yields emotionalism. Emotionalism appeals to self. In summary, the medium of film does not give us anything we don’t already have. Rather, it makes our emotional appeals more efficient. That doesn’t make film evil, but it is inherently limited as a tool for personal, dynamic, gospel-driven outreach.

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95. Hipps, *Flickering Pixels*, 76.

We have Christian freedom to use film for outreach. We do not sin by presenting the gospel in such a way as to pique people's interests. According to Francis C. Rossow, former professor of practical theology at Concordia Seminary in Missouri, "The Gospel is God's gift, wholly His gift, nothing but His gift. But we do create the package in which God's gift comes to people. We wrap it attractively and tie a ribbon around it so as to whet the viewer's curiosity, to entice him to open the package wondering, 'What's in it for me?'"<sup>96</sup> Our message remains God's. Therefore, our outreach must be creative yet rooted in Scripture. Likewise, we must use efficient outreach tools in moderation. Otherwise, we risk changing the nature of our ministry.

In summary, God uses his Word to fully appeal to us. Therefore, we prioritize sharing the gospel. Whereas human media distort our identities, the gospel makes our identities clear. Whereas film's strengths lie in its efficiency and emotional resonance, its limitations as a medium require moderate or supplemental usage for outreach. Ultimately, we aim to let the gospel predominate in our messages and to let Scripture inform our practices. Therefore, we remain mindful of our media. Likewise, we maintain that careful study of Scripture shapes our minds to pursue what is God-pleasing and avoid conforming to the pattern of this world (Rom 12:2).

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96. Francis C. Rossow, *Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1983), 9.

## CONCLUSION

The main appeals of screen-based media for outreach in a digital age are their efficiency and their emotional resonance. In order to reach people today, churches may seriously consider using film for outreach.

On the one hand, the gospel-driven church strives to maintain sound doctrine and cling to the gospel with white knuckles—something not many modern churches value. Moreover, our desire for gospel-driven outreach motivates us to use every possible means for evangelism in a digital age—including screen-based media.

On the other hand, screens are not only limited but also potentially harmful. If the gospel-driven church intends to use them, we must consider their limitations and negative effects. We must avoid the pitfalls of media idolatry, which makes us self-absorbed when we are not mindful of our media's harmful effects. Likewise, we must avoid the pitfalls of American Christianity, which appeals to emotionalism rather than Scripture. Unlike Hipps, Crouch, and Miller, who encourage the church to abandon its doctrinal focus to reach people, we must aim for outreach that is personal *and* gospel-driven.

If the church is determined to use screen-based media for outreach, it should strive to supplant their negative effects with the gospel, to supplement film with careful Bible study and personal outreach, and to use film in moderation for doctrinally-sound storytelling. Even though screen-based entertainment is not evil, it lends itself better to the self than the gospel. Likewise, even though emotions are not emotionalism, they lend themselves to emotionalism if they become the point of focus.

If we desire to break the spell of screen-based media, we must be mindful of the sinful nature and its desire to overextend and worship itself. If we desire to use screens for evangelism in a digital age, we must strive to understand the personal wants and needs of the people. If we desire to prevent screens from undermining the gospel in our outreach, we must be wary of digital media idolatry and emotionalism while encouraging careful Bible study and personal outreach. In summary, we must consider how to evangelize shrewdly as people of the light (Luke 16:8–9).

We are the light of the world, who reflect the glory of God’s light. We are the ministerial means, the divine extensions which God uses to shed light in the world with the gospel in Word and sacrament. When Jesus prayed for his disciples in the upper room, he said, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15). Likewise, the church should not forsake the world and its screen-based media, but equip Christians to defend themselves against their harmful effects and promote gospel-driven outreach. This is how we shine the gospel’s light in a world of pixelated light.

Successful outreach neither requires us to use screens nor to reject them. Therefore, we are free to pursue the lost as we see fit while remaining willingly bound to Scripture. We ought to ask ourselves which evangelism methods keep us honest about ourselves and spiritually benefit other people. Paul warned the Corinthians to use their Christian freedom wisely: “‘I have the right to do anything,’ you say—but not everything is beneficial. ‘I have the right to do anything’—but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others” (1 Cor 10:23–4).

So, equipped with the Word and mindful of the effects of media, we evangelize. We do not want to get so caught up in indecision that outreach does not happen at all. Rather, we make

every effort to ensure the gospel reaches the lost. We break the spell of media, using outreach tools as nothing more than tools—like “those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them” (1 Cor 7:31). We let the gospel predominate in our hearts, speech, and conduct. We pray. We go out and evangelize. Even though our media naturally nourish the self, Christians can cultivate their knowledge of Scripture, media, and outreach to nourish a gospel-driven life.

“Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart” (2 Cor 4:1). We make every effort not to distort the gospel, but to set it forth plainly (2 Cor 4:2). The reason people do not know God is not because they use digital media, but because the gospel is veiled to those who are perishing (2 Cor 4:3). Unbelief—not media—veils the gospel (2 Cor 4:4). The gospel of Jesus Christ as Lord sets us apart from a world that proclaims a gospel of self. Though the gospel of self is vain and hollow—resulting in a neverending pursuit of validation—the gospel of Christ is a priceless treasure that gives our lives real significance (2 Cor 4:5–7).

We realize that gospel-driven ministry will not always conform to worldly culture. Rather, gospel-driven outreach—regardless of media use—invites the persecution of the world (2 Cor 4:8–9). Yet we do not lose heart, for we know that our gospel-driven efforts give life to those we reach (2 Cor 4:12). Therefore, we are determined not to preach a message about worldly living, but death to this sinful world—since we were buried with Christ “through baptism into death” (Rom 6:4a)—to point others to spiritual life (2 Cor 4:10)—and so that “we too may live a new life” (Rom 6:4b). We are determined to live or die by the gospel. The media we use are temporary, but the gospel message we echo through them is eternal: “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Cor 4:18).

S.D.G.

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