



DISRUPTIVE WITNESS

SPEAKING TRUTH IN A DISTRACTED AGE

ALAN NOBLE

Taken from *Disruptive Witness* by Alan Noble.
Copyright © 2018 by Alan Noble. Published by InterVarsity Press,
Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com

THE BARRIER OF ENDLESS DISTRACTION

The person I'm most uncomfortable being alone with is myself. And that's okay, because I've become very good at avoiding myself. For example, if I get stuck alone on an elevator, and I start to feel that anxiety, the dread of having to examine my life—even for a minute—I just take out my phone, and poof! it's gone. Or if I sense that I need to have a heart-to-heart talk with myself about sin or doubt or fear, all of a sudden I remember that it's my night to do the dishes—and I can't do the dishes without listening to a podcast.

Self-avoidance is probably my most advanced skill set. I've developed it over the years in response to the burden of being alone, which can bring up so many unsettling truths. Of course, I have plenty of help from the rest of society. I'm always being encouraged to read something, to do something, to watch something, or to buy something new. It's an unspoken but mutually agreed upon truth for modern people that being alone with our thoughts is disturbing.

A friend once described a similar feeling of existential dread to me. He said it would hit him only when he woke up in the morning. Sometimes he'd feel like killing himself. It wasn't something he shared with friends. But he'd get this sick feeling—like there's no point to any of it—every morning. He said he needed something more to get him up in the morning. My friend could stave off this sense of hopelessness all day, except for those few moments right after he woke up. Lying in bed, he could feel the pressure of being alive constrict his breath. But once he got moving, drank his coffee, watched the news, and went to work, he was okay. He got swept up into the movement of the day, as most of us do.

A DISTRACTED AND DISENCHANTED DAY IN THE LIFE

The beauty of using my iPhone as my alarm clock is that when I reach over to turn it off I'm only a few more taps away from the rest of the world. Before I'm even fully awake I've checked my Twitter and Facebook notifications and my email and returned to Twitter to check my feed for breaking news. Before I've said "good morning" to my wife and children, I've entered a contentious argument on Twitter about Islamic terrorism and shared a video of Russell Westbrook dunking in the previous night's NBA game.

While making my coffee and breakfast I begin working through social media conversations that require more detailed responses so that by the time I sit down to eat, I can set down my phone too. Years ago I would use my early morning grouchiness as an excuse to play on my computer rather than talk with my wife and kids, but now our family tries to stay faithful to a strict

no-phones-at-the-table policy. We have drawn important boundaries for the encroachment of technology into our lives to preserve our family and attention spans, but that does not mean we've managed to save time for reflection. Instead, I tend to use this time to go over what I have to teach in my first class, or my wife and I make a list of goals for the day. It is a time of rest from screens and technology, but not from preoccupation.

As I drive the kids to school, we listen and sing along to "Re-flektor" by Arcade Fire. On my walk back to the car after dropping them off, I check my email and make a few more comments in the Twitter debate I began before breakfast. In the car again, I listen to an NBA fan podcast; it relaxes me a bit as the anxiety of the coming work day continues to creep up on me.

Sufficient to the workday are the anxieties and frustrations thereof. And so, when I need a coffee or bathroom break, I'll use my phone to skim an article or like a few posts. The distraction is a much-needed relief from the stress of work, but it also *is* a distraction. I still can't hear myself think. And most of the time I really don't want to. When I feel some guilt about spending so much time being unfocused, I tell myself it's for my own good. I deserve this break. I need this break. But there's no break from distraction.

While at work, I try not to think about social media and the news, but I really don't need additional distractions to keep my mind busy. The modern work environment is just as frenetic and unfocused as our leisure time. A constant stream of emails breaks my focus and shifts my train of thought between multiple projects. To do any seriously challenging task, I often have to get

up and take a walk to absorb myself in the problem without the immediacy of technology to throw me off.

Back at home, I'm tasked with watching the kids. They are old enough to play on their own, so I find myself standing around, waiting for one of them to tattle or get hurt or need water for the fifth time. If I planned ahead, I might read a book, but usually I use the time to check Twitter and Facebook or read a short online article. But it's not always technology that distracts me; sometimes, while the kids are briefly playing well together, I'll do some housecleaning or pay bills. Whatever the method, I'm always leaning forward to the next job, the next comment, the next goal.

I watch Netflix while I wash dishes. I follow NBA scores while I grade. I panic for a moment when I begin to go upstairs to get something. I turn around and find my phone to keep me company during the two-minute trip. When it's late enough, I collapse, reading a book or playing an iOS game. I'm never alone and it's never quiet.

As a Christian, the spiritual disciplines of reading the Bible and praying offer me a chance to reflect, but it's too easy to turn these times into to-do list chores as well.¹ Using my Bible app, I get caught up in the Greek meaning of a word and the contextual notes and never really meditate on the Word itself. It is an exercise, not an encounter with the sacred, divine Word of God. A moleskin prayer journal might help me remember God's faithfulness, but it also might mediate my prayer time through a self-conscious pride in being devout. There's no space in our modern lives that can't be filled up with entertainment, socializing, recording, or commentary.

This has always been the human condition. The world has always moved without us and before us and after us, and we quickly learn how to swim with the current. We make sense of our swimming by observing our fellow swimmers and hearing their stories. We conceive of these narratives based on the stories we've heard elsewhere: from our communities, the media, advertisements, or traditions.

But for the twenty-first-century person in an affluent country like the United States, the momentum of life that so often discourages us from stopping to take our bearings is magnified dramatically by the constant hum of portable electronic entertainment, personalized for our interests and desires and delivered over high-speed wireless internet. It's not just that this technology allows us to stay "plugged in" all the time, it's that it gives us the sense that we are tapped into something greater than ourselves. The narratives of meaning that have always filled our lives with justification and wonder are multiplied endlessly and immediately for us in songs, TV shows, online communities, games, and the news.

This is the electronic buzz of the twenty-first century. And it is suffocating.

THE MINDFULNESS SOLUTION

Maybe your typical day doesn't resemble the perpetually distracted and frantic experience I've just described. But there's a good chance you suffer from the electronic buzz of the twenty-first century all the same, even if to a smaller extent. Aside from studies and polls where people have self-identified as busier

than ever before, one sign that this is a common experience is the sudden popularity of mindfulness techniques. There are mindfulness gurus, seminars, books, and counseling methods. In that ever-profitable marketing space where self-help, spirituality, and psychology meet, mindfulness dominates. This technique addresses a common problem for many: a sense of frenetic emptiness.

Americans have long been fascinated with Eastern meditation, but its recent manifestation as “mindfulness” is distinct from earlier interest in transcendental meditation. Whereas the latter necessarily included a deep desire for spiritual growth, the former is more concerned with efficiency and being well balanced. Mindfulness is religion for lifehackers, we might say. The central principle to mindfulness is focusing on the immediacy of the present and our experience of being in this moment. To a great extent, our society has worked to keep us from this reality. We are oriented toward the future and what still needs to be done, and when we focus on the now or the past, we do so in a disengaged way. For example, we prefer to focus on which Instagram filter looks best than on enjoying the scene we’ve just photographed. This is a basic feature of modern life, which sociologist Thomas de Zengotita refers to as “mediated” living.²

In his book *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It*, de Zengotita argues that we experience our world with a hyperawareness of representation. So, for example, when we go for a walk in the woods alone, we are never merely going for a walk in the woods alone; our experience of nature is filtered through the Instagram pictures we take and our awareness

of how our friends will experience those pictures, and how they will think about us in light of those pictures.³ Or we might mediate the walk through an outdoors hipster aesthetic that we've pieced together from indie folk band album covers. Or we might mediate the walk through an awareness of global warming and its effects on the environment. However we conceive of the walk, it is never *simply* a walk in the woods. Of course, to some extent, this has always been our human experience; we've always experienced life as an interconnected web. But with the tremendous growth of technology and the media, of life as public performance, our ability to resist mediation has declined. In our world, we have to fight harder to experience the present shorn of stultifying mediation. And that fight is for *mindfulness*.

In addition to the problem of overwhelming mediation, mindfulness seeks to silence the voices and distractions in our lives. Typically, mindfulness training involves sitting silently for a period of time or for formal meditation. There is a tremendous focus on breathing and its ability to center us. And through these practices, we hope to learn to be present in the world and aware of our existence.

While once primarily popular among those in Silicon Valley, the mindfulness movement has now grown into a major method of psychological treatment and a multimillion-dollar industry. An article in the *Telegraph* dubbed it the saddest trend of 2015.⁴ And perhaps there is something sad about devoting such time and money in order to hear ourselves think once in awhile. But this trend is not a Luddite reaction to technology. The mindfulness movement is not an antitechnology movement but an

attempt to find healthier ways to live with the technology we can't seem to live without.

Although I think there's much to be said for this strategy of addressing our perpetually distracted and mediated lives, my concern in this book is with how the church can speak more prophetically in such a world. Because whether modern technology is on the whole harming society, and whether mindfulness practices will have any significant mitigating effect on this harm, for the vast majority of Americans, this overly integrated and frantic world is the culture we live in. Mindfulness training requires more time and money than most of us can afford.

In this rise of the mindfulness industry, we can see a tension between technological changes and our deep desire for a more immediate and integrated world. No question, these practices are addressing a serious problem in society, but they are also a symptom of a society driven by technological innovation, where how we *ought* to live follows far behind how we *can* live. And we have every reason to believe that technology will continue to drive our world.

TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGES

Modern media technology focuses largely on two goals: capturing our attention and gathering our data. While the latter has troubling implications for our privacy, the former has a direct effect on our ability to encounter and contemplate the holy.

Innumerable gadgets, websites, channels, streaming services, songs, films, and biometric wristbands vie for our attention. Without our attention, their existence is unjustified. So, each

piece of technology we own does what it can to make us pay attention to it, like an overly eager child tugging on our sleeve, begging, “Look what I can do, Dad!” It is not just that every spare moment is fought for; our technology covets every glance. Flashing lights, vibrations, bells ringing, little red dots, email alerts, notifications, pop-up windows, commercials, news tickers, browser tabs—everything is designed to capture our attention.

And there is good reason to believe that technology will only continue to progress in this direction. Unless you are a mindfulness guru, you don’t have much incentive to encourage your customers to slow down, declutter, and unplug. The momentum in the technology industries is toward more opportunities for engagement and entertainment. For example, self-driving cars will prevent millions of deaths and reduce traffic, but they will also enable us to use commute time to surf the web—safely.

A reactionary stance argues that these changes are inherently harmful to the human mind and culture, and the uncritical embrace of these technologies has led to a widespread decline in human flourishing. This is an argument that discerning Christians would do well to consider. It is important for us as Christians and as consumers to question the unintended consequences of changes in technology. But we should not naively believe that we can suddenly reverse the flow of innovation. Barring a catastrophic event or a dramatic shift in the structure and goals of modern technology, we can expect that for the foreseeable future our society will be in part defined by technology designed to continually distract us. Wise Christians will discern how to appropriately use new media and technology, not withdraw and rail against it.

To live well in a modern world requires constant reassessment of how our society and technology are shaping us. We should be open to taking drastic steps to reject practices and habits that we believe are destructive or evil. But the vast majority of innovations will not be so clear-cut, and we will have to weigh benefits, purposes, and damaging effects individually and in community.⁵ But as with mindfulness training, whatever efforts we personally take to resist getting sucked into the electronic buzz of the twenty-first century, the vast majority of our neighbors will be caught in the stream.

If we assume that for the most part society will continue down the path of adopting invasive and distracting technologies, the question facing Christians becomes not only how can we resist these changes but also how can we speak the truth in a culture where this is the norm? But before we may answer this, we must consider how truth is interpreted in this kind of world. What effect does this technology have on our minds? And how does that affect our ability to interpret spiritual truths, to conceive of a God who transcends our material world?

MENTALLY SPENT

Living a distracted lifestyle does more than waste our time, it forms our minds, often in ways that are harmful for deep, sustained thought—the kind of thought so important to religious discourse. Armed with these concerns, neurologists have been looking closely at the effects of distraction and constant connection to the internet. The American cognitive scientist Daniel J. Levitin has surveyed these findings in *The Organized Mind*.

Levitin explains that multitasking, which we are increasingly pressured to do by our technology and society, has serious physiological effects on our brains.

Multitasking has been found to increase the production of the stress hormone cortisol as well as the fight-or-flight hormone adrenaline, which can overstimulate your brain and cause mental fog or scrambled thinking. Multitasking creates a dopamine-addiction feedback loop, effectively rewarding the brain for losing focus and for constantly searching for external stimulation. To make matters worse, the prefrontal cortex has a novelty bias, meaning that its attention can be easily hijacked by something new—the proverbial shiny objects we use to entice infants, puppies, and kittens. The irony here for those of us who are trying to focus amid competing activities is clear: the very brain region we need to rely on for staying on task is easily distracted. We answer the phone, look up something on the internet, check our email, send an SMS, and each of these things tweaks the novelty-seeking, reward-seeking centers of the brain, causing a burst of endogenous opioids (no wonder it feels so good!), all to the detriment of our staying on task.⁶

We are addicted to novelty, and as with most addictions, it takes a toll on our bodies: we become mentally fatigued, “scrambled,” as Levitin describes it. In this way, the modern mind is often not prepared to engage in dialogue about personally challenging ideas, particularly ones with deep implications. The fatigued mind would rather categorize a conversation about God as another superficial

distraction, requiring little cognitive attention, than a serious conversation that ought to cost us, at least cognitively.

The shape of our engagement with ideas forms how we interpret and categorize these ideas. Both the kind of technology we use and the way we use it can lead us to mislabel information. Levitin notes that multitasking is one cause of improperly categorizing information.

Russ Poldrack, a neuroscientist at Stanford, found that learning information while multitasking causes the new information to go to the wrong part of the brain. If students study and watch TV at the same time, for example, the information from their schoolwork goes into the striatum, a region specialized for storing new procedures and skills, not facts and ideas. Without the distraction of TV, the information goes into the hippocampus, where it is organized and categorized in a variety of ways, making it easier to retrieve.⁷

Presumably this kind of confusion happens regularly for most people, since so much of our engagement with Christianity takes place in a multitasking space. You might see a billboard promoting biblical morality while driving and listening to an audiobook. Or your grandmother shares a YouTube clip of her pastor's sermon on Facebook, which you watch while you are texting a friend. You may even find yourself multitasking while reading this book, but probably not, because the form of a book works against a distracted mind. Aside from endnotes, a book is a fairly linear form. It does not invite you to jump around cognitively, but to follow a carefully crafted argument, sentence by sentence, paragraph by

paragraph, page by page. But of course, much of modern technology isn't this way. If you are reading this on a digital device, your brain is quite aware of how easy it would be to shift over to your email or text messages. And if you have your notifications turned on, you may be fighting a losing battle. An effect of your multitasking may be that the information you take in ends up in the wrong place, a kind of seed falling on rocky cognitive soil.

In addition, Levitin notes that there has been a general flattening of methods of communication. Most of our communication has shifted toward one or two methods: email and texting.

Emails are used for all of life's messages. We compulsively check our email in part because we don't know whether the next message will be for leisure/amusement, an overdue bill, a "to do," a query . . . something you can do now, later, something life-changing, something irrelevant.

This uncertainty wreaks havoc with our rapid perceptual categorization system, causes stress, and leads to decision overload. Every email requires a decision! Do I respond to it? If so, now or later? How important is it? What will be the social, economic, or job-related consequences if I don't answer, or if I don't answer right now?⁸

The space between the trivial and the crucial has shrunk. Everything is important all of the time, and you are obligated to keep up. Just as it is harder for us to sort all our correspondence when it comes in the same medium, it can be difficult for us to communicate the gospel if we primarily use mediums that are traditionally devoted to triviality.

Levitin describes how the flattening of distinctions “leads to decision overload.” Multitasking forces us to make millions of tiny decisions (What song should I listen to? Should I share this article? Should I check that text message? How should I reply to this email?), and this wears us out cognitively. The result is that when it comes time for us to make important decisions, we are too exhausted and are more likely to make mistakes. Alternatively, we may avoid making a decision all together. When there are an almost infinite number of options, it is hard to choose one.

Decision overload is as much a problem for spirituality as it is for digital multitasking. A good friend of mine once explained that although he believed there is a God, he didn’t know which religious account of God is true because there are so many different religions. When I asked him why he didn’t try to discover the truth, he replied that it was just too overwhelming. A distracted and secular age does this to us: we are cognitively overwhelmed by the expanding horizon of possible beliefs.

Our frenetic and flattened culture is not conducive to wrestling with thick ideas, ideas with depth, complexity, and personal implications. It is a culture of immediacy, simple emotions, snap judgments, optics, and identity formation. In such a world, is it any wonder that Christians so often speak past their listeners?

I am not making an argument against the use of modern technology. People who use email and text messaging regularly are not less likely to convert to Christianity—so far as I know. Nor is conversion dependent on proper psychological conditions; the Holy Spirit’s call is not constrained by such things. The point is that our past models of discussing faith have almost all assumed a listener

who is active, attentive, and aware of the costs of believing—a listener who conceives of a thick world. But as we have moved to a distracted age, we can no longer make this assumption.

WHERE IS MY MIND?

A lifestyle of distraction will shape the way we interpret and respond to questions about basic beliefs—how we conceive of human worth, what transcendent hopes we have, what we believe about goodness and beauty. The distracted age has three major effects on our ability to communicate about matters of faith and ultimate meaning: (1) it is easier to ignore contradictions and flaws in our basic beliefs, (2) we are less likely to devote time to introspection, and (3) conversations about faith can be easily perceived as just another exercise in superficial identity formation.

A natural consequence of being mentally engaged all the time is, first, that it is easy for us to live with internal conflicts and contradictions with little cognitive dissonance. When confronted with a deficiency in our ethical code, it takes no real effort to ignore it. Imagine, for example, someone who believes that people who rely on government assistance are freeloaders, but then this same person cheats on her taxes in little ways. Her hypocrisy should cause her a pang of guilt, but guilt requires attention in order to grow into reflection and repentance. And the structure of our day and our bodily habits are so oriented toward the next thing that she soon finds herself onto some other concern. We are certainly still capable of reflection and meditation, but our default response to cognitive dissonance is to simply do something else. The rhythms and practices of our modern world militate against reflection. There

are so many immediate incentives for going with the flow; meanwhile, the recognition that we are not living up to the moral standards we identify with is costly. It certainly requires time, but it may also require changes to our lifestyle or to our moral standards. When we think of cognitive dissonance as the problem, rather than a symptom of an incoherent belief system, there are a number of effective and less costly ways of fixing things by moving on.

So, a belief in the essential goodness of humanity can live quite comfortably alongside a racist suspicion that certain people are inherently more prone to criminality. We are not interested in sorting through the validity of our convictions. We are about the next thing.

A superficial but constant engagement with media also invites us to unreflectively adopt ethical and political positions, creating a hodgepodge worldview. From a film on the treatment of animals in amusement parks we develop a fleeting concern for animal rights. A documentary on modern farming practices makes us see shopping local and organic as a moral issue. A hashtag campaign draws our attention to the evils of human trafficking, perhaps even while we look at porn on another browser tab. *Causes* are as easy to pick up as they are to put down. Or, more accurately, we don't put causes down so much as we forget them. Putting them down would require some intentional meditation on the validity of the cause. Instead, we simply move on to something else. Humans are tremendously gifted at hypocrisy and inconsistency, but a ubiquitous, powerful stream of information and interaction driven by technology enables these gifts to flourish. And that is precisely the problem.

Second, the distracted age discourages us from spending time on rich introspection. Deep questions require deep reflection. That is not to say that a fulfilling and coherent vision of life depends on being wealthy enough to sit around contemplating existence. The Christian faith has always been accessible to people without leisure time and with little educational attainment. Reflection can take place while you are doing manual labor, making a meal, falling asleep, or walking to work. Some of my best thinking has happened while washing dishes or sweeping the floor. (This does not mean that material conditions have no negative effects on reflection and belief. It's hard to think on an empty stomach.) And in some sense, being more prosperous has allowed Americans to more effectively hide from their own thoughts. The problem occurs when antipathy toward sustained introspection and soul searching, cultivated through habitual distraction, becomes a barrier for hearing the gospel. Reflection invites us to consider the contrary commitments we have in life, but it requires time and attention—our scarcest resources.

Why does our avoidance of slow, careful introspection matter? The gospel is cognitively costly. It upsets our innate and cultivated assumptions about power and guilt and existential validation. It presses down on our values and hopes. It decenters our perception of the world. Life ceases to be our story and is revealed to be his redemptive story of glory and love. It convicts us of our sins. It reveals our disordered desires and reforms them into Christ's image. Paul urges his readers to "be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Romans 12:2), and that renewal is the proper work of the Spirit through the gospel. The kind of

work the gospel does in our lives tasks our minds with unsettling assumptions and habits.

The third challenge for evangelism is that our tendency to adopt the latest media trends often adds to the buzz instead of effectively penetrating sinners' hearts. Even evangelicals who spurn seeker-friendly church outreach and "relevant" evangelism heed Paul's example of being "all things to all people" in other ways (1 Corinthians 9:22), and in a culture of sound bites, viral videos, and hashtags, this regularly involves adopting the media-rich practices that so deeply shape our culture. But in developing our own viral images and mobile apps to reach connected readers, we risk contributing to the clutter and distraction of modern life rather than helping to lift our neighbors out of it. Even more concerning, by adopting these ephemeral cultural expressions, we may signal to our neighbors that Christianity is merely another consumer preference in the endless sea of preferences we use to define ourselves as individuals.

This point was driven home to me when I received an email promoting a Christian mobile video game. The developer wanted to give me early access to this game that they hoped would be played in churches across the nation and would lead to countless souls saved. The game play was very familiar—a matching game in the vein of massive hits like *Bejeweled* and *Candy Crush Saga*—except Christian. The logic behind the game made a certain kind of sense: millions of people play mobile games, and matching puzzle games are among the most popular kinds of games; therefore, a Christian mobile matching puzzle game could be used to share the gospel with millions.

What the marketing email did not acknowledge is the mental state people are in when they play mobile games. For many, playing a game on your phone is the ultimate modern distraction. We do it while walking, using the bathroom, or cooking. Mobile games even challenge the iconic modern distraction: TV. We need distractions from our distractions, and at the bottom of all those distractions we find mobile games. No matter how articulate the gospel voice-overs are in the game, if its function is to take us further from mindfulness, it's not going to be an effective witnessing tool.

We also see this trivializing of the Christian faith in some attempts at online evangelism. Take, for example, “Jesus Daily,” the “inspirational” Facebook page with over 32 million followers, the self-proclaimed “#1 most active Facebook Faith Page in history.” “Jesus Daily” is active, very active. Tapping into all of the most sensational and like-able pictures and videos and stories, “Jesus Daily” is a constant stream of inspiration in its thinnest and most vapid forms. In one image an eerily drawn Jesus stretches out his hand toward you, asking, “Will you except my gift?” On the bottom of the image a watermark reads “INVITE SOMEONE TO JESUS DAILY (R).” The line between proclaiming Christ online and trying to “go viral” is obliterated, as is the distinction between proclaiming Christ and promoting “Jesus Daily.” For fans of “Jesus Daily,” sharing these inspirational images may be a way of declaring their faith or witnessing to the world or signaling to friends what they believe. But to their friends the images are indistinguishable from all the other random content we quickly share and forget on social media. The gospel appears thin, superficial, and inconsequential—just another image vying for our time.

Like the producers of the Christian mobile game, the church is often tempted to look at popular communication in culture and mimic it with a Christian message. And while mimicking the methods of communication in wider culture can sometimes be valuable, it can also unintentionally signal to readers that Christianity is just like all these other ideas. Rather than the disruptive force of revelation that the gospel truly is, our witness makes it just another personal preference, like our favorite bands, pet peeves, political parties, and shopping organic. The challenge for Christians in our time is to speak of the gospel in a way that unsettles listeners, that conveys the transcendence of God, that provokes contemplation and reflection, and that reveals the stark givenness of reality.

Evangelism is not only about creating space for contemplation, as if our faith was merely an act of intellectual assent. But, taking the model offered by James K. A. Smith in *Desiring the Kingdom*, I contend that our cultural practices are also a major part of how we come to believe.⁹ The habits we adopt form our desires, which drive our beliefs. When those habits form desires for immediacy, superficiality, continual engagement, and instant gratification, we should expect our beliefs to reflect these desires. The content of our beliefs will be formed by our habits, but so will the nature of our beliefs. Specifically, a distracted age presents beliefs as fragile, fragmented, internal, changing, individual preferences. This conception of belief is supported by the effects of our secular age, and together these trends create a barrier to belief in the transcendent, exclusive gospel of Jesus Christ.

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/disruptive-witness