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vehicles of entertainment have changed, so has our relationship with entertainment as an aspect of life in general. Entertainment and our relationship with it have been defined by different stages, both literally and metaphorically. When once the stage was around a tribal campfire or perhaps across town at a local theater, modern human history has seen platforms of entertainment invade our homes, our pockets, and unfortunately, even our churches.

### A STAGE IN EVERY LIVING ROOM

While the late 1940s and 1950s are often called the Golden Age of Television, TV shows and personalities didn't become the primary drivers of American culture until the 1980s. In terms of television's broader influence on American culture at large, one could say the 1980s–1990s were the true Golden Age of Television.

In the 1980s, when television began to dominate American culture unlike it ever had, Americans were being shaped by popular shows like *The A-Team*, *Cheers*, and *Dallas*. Televangelists dotted the Sunday morning television landscape. Evening news shows were among the most common ways that Americans learned the news of the day. The TV was, one could say, the primary portal of popular culture in 1980s America. This trend continued well into the 1990s, to be sure, with Oprah's dominance of the fast-growing suburbs surrounding America's major metropolitan areas, and MTV's prowess in the music landscape. Nickelodeon and Disney created TV channels that were surrogate babysitters for many millennials who still imitate Kel Mitchell's passionate pleas at any passing mention of orange soda.

The television brought the stage into the home for the first time. Entertainment that was once costly and perhaps only available on the other side of town was now relatively affordable and available in

the living room of most American homes. When the stage invaded the home in the form of television, it made entertainment so accessible and ubiquitous that it created a desire to be entertained *all the time by everything*. Not only did television bring entertainment once restricted to theaters—like movies or stage productions—to the modern home, the other content on television like news programs, commercials, and other informational forms of media *became* entertainment.

The metamorphosis of all forms of television-based communication into avenues of entertainment is especially concerning, even as we look back at that time. This concern is especially relevant when it comes to the delivery of the news by television. Before entertainment became the cornerstone value of television programming, the nightly news delivered the most relevant, important news to the public. With the dominance of the television, the reporting of the news was transformed by the prioritization of entertainment above all other values. Media scholar Neil Postman was concerned about how entertainment became the cornerstone value of TV news. The several minutes of barbarism, violence, and mayhem that were enough to fuel many sleepless nights were presented in a local newscast, Postman observed, by beautiful, smiling faces and interspersed with humorous ads for breakfast cereal such that the viewers shouldn't be concerned by the calamity they just witnessed. He wrote in his 1985 classic *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, "A news show, to put it plainly, is a format for entertainment, not for education, reflection or catharsis."<sup>1</sup>

Entertainment's immediate accessibility in the mode of the television made entertainment more desirable in all areas of life. The invasion of the television into the homes of millions of Americans not only made it the primary driving force of culture, it also made entertainment the most powerful mode of communication. As Postman wrote in 1985, "Americans no longer talk to each other, they enter-

tain each other.”<sup>2</sup> This reality only became more pronounced as the unmatched influence of the stages in our living rooms was eventually matched and surpassed by the stages that slid into our pockets.

## A STAGE IN EVERY POCKET

Toward the end of the more modern Golden Age of Television in the 1990s, dominated by Oprah, Big Bird, and Bob Barker, the internet began to invade the American home much like the television had about fifty years earlier. In the same way that television disrupted the steady flow of entertainment provided by the radio, the local theater, and other more embodied forms of entertainment, the late 1990s saw the internet begin to disrupt television’s entertainment influence as it had other forms of media earlier in the twentieth century.

But as long as the internet was bound to yet another bulky magic box, the home computer, it would take a long time to leapfrog television as the primary provider of entertainment and driver of culture in American life. Even the earliest iterations of the smartphone from companies like Blackberry could deliver the sort of entertainment that televisions could provide. Early smartphones provided a preview of what it would be like for us to carry entertainment in our pockets, but because the smartphone companies of the early 2000s were primarily concerned with appealing to businesspeople, it would take a company concerned with the broader consumer market to create a phone that would prioritize entertainment above productivity. It would require a company to “think different.”

It wasn’t until Steve Jobs introduced the iPhone to the world on January 9, 2007, that we caught a glimpse of what would supplant the television as the primary provider of entertainment in American culture. I would encourage you to put this book down right now,

go to YouTube, and watch the video of Jobs announcing the iPhone (I just did it as I write this). At one point in the demonstration he shows how the iPhone—a name that made the audience awkwardly laugh but is now an everyday term—can play TV shows like *The Office* or movies like *The Pirates of the Caribbean*. Most of the people in the auditorium watching Steve Jobs announce the iPhone were using phones with plastic keyboards and styluses. He showed them a clip of *The Office* and of the future. They had never seen a TV show or a movie playing on a screen that could fit in a pocket *and* act as a phone and email device. We take this technology for granted today, but it is still so new.

With the invention and eventual proliferation of the iPhone and other smartphones with similar capabilities, the stages in our living rooms were supplanted by stages that could fit in our pockets. In 1947, the average American couple would have had to go to a local theater to see any sort of entertaining performance. Sixty years later, the grandchildren of such a couple would be able to slip a world of entertainment into their pockets. Such a dramatic technological development affects our understanding of entertainment and its relationship to the rest of our lives.

There is something to be said about the first features Steve Jobs demonstrated on the iPhone being its music and video capabilities. At the time, smartphones were mostly used by businesspeople for business reasons. Men like my father carried Blackberry devices or other such phones to answer email while waiting to board a flight or view a basic text document while taking a phone call. Smartphone users weren't concerned with watching their favorite television show or movie on their phones—it was something they wanted but didn't *know* they wanted until they could have it. Jobs knew what the industry and the world didn't know at that time: the smartphone would

be an entertainment device before a productivity device. But even a visionary like Steve Jobs couldn't know the full nature of the beast he created. The most entertaining aspects of the stage Steve slipped out of his pocket in 2007 wouldn't be television shows, movies, or music videos—they would be the social interactions on nascent platforms that would one day dominate our screens and our lives.

## TO SEE AND BE SEEN

This isn't a book about how screens and smartphones change us—this is a book about how social media affects your ability to disciple and lead others. If the smartphone is the stage that dominates our lives today, beyond the television or the movie screen, social media is the most popular act that reigns on the stages in our pockets. To be clear, *social media* is best understood as the culture we create with the social internet platforms that dominate our culture. Technically speaking, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and all the other social media platforms you hear about are simply the hosts, the stages, on which the *social media*, the content itself, lives. For more on the difference between *social media* and the *social internet*, see my book *Terms of Service*. For ease of reading, I will use the terms relatively interchangeably throughout this book.

Postman believed correctly that entertainment was the driving force behind all television programming. He wrote, “No matter what is depicted or from what point of view, the overarching presumption is that it is there for our amusement and pleasure.”<sup>3</sup>

The same, I believe, is true of the social internet and the media that lives on it.

Take teens, for example, the most avid users of social media. As teens have attended high school, the walk down the hallways in between

classes has acted as a sort of stage—perhaps even more like a fashion show runway. Who a teen walks with, the kind of clothing they wear, and the conversations they have are a sort of performance on a social stage that exists between first period algebra and second period chemistry. As author Derek Thompson wisely notes in *Hit Makers*:

Snapchat, Facebook, and Instagram are all high school hallways, where young people perform and see performances, judge and are judged. Many decades after another mobile device, the car, helped invent the teenager, the iPhone and its ilk offered new nimble instruments of self-expression, symbols of independence, and better ways to hook up.<sup>4</sup>

Here, in Thompson's assessment of the modern teenage stage performer, we are exposed to one of the nastiest side effects of entertainment and culture-making sliding out of our living rooms and into our pockets: *we're all entertainers now*. Is it any wonder that reports of anxiety and depression are at an all-time high, worst among teens, but not restricted to them?

Social media is revolutionary because the role of *performer*—once reserved for the classically trained and Hollywood-bound—is now available to all and avoidable by none. This is why the jump from the television in our living rooms to social media (and its ever-present accessibility in our pockets) is markedly different and more dramatic than the jump from the local theater to the television. The move from the local theater to the television simply changed the way we *consumed* entertainment. The move from the television to social media and smartphones *made us* entertainers. We used to be the audience. Now we're the audience and the act.

As I cited earlier in this chapter, Postman wrote that Americans no longer talk to each other—they *entertain* each other. It's hard to

believe he was talking about television and not social media. While, yes, social media can be used in redemptive, gospel-proclaiming ways, social media has made performers out of us (or at least those of us who create content). This is to our detriment in more ways than we realize. The temptation to perform is present with every tap and click on every social media platform. It is ever-present, and because of our sinful hearts, it is likely a temptation that we will always encounter when using social media of any kind.

The reality is that social media has warped our understanding of entertainment in two separate but related ways. It makes us want to *see* and *be seen*.

**Social media makes us want to see what is going on in the world and be ever entertained.** To be “in the know”—gluttonously consuming information about world events—may seem like a noble pursuit, but it is often a form of amusement and entertainment. I am guilty of this particular social media sin, I admit. What does this look like? It is spending hours watching Twitter to see what news is coming out of the president’s recent meeting with a world leader, reading articles about what effects the Federal Reserve’s impending interest rate increase will have on inflation, or whether or not the Chicago Cubs should call up their star pitcher from the minor league squad. To be informed is responsible, but to constantly consume information about whatever fits our fancy is often just another form of entertainment.

Why do we always want to be overly informed or otherwise entertained? To be entertained is to be made to feel good. This ability to feel good via entertainment is always in our pockets. Imagine if we could, somehow, have never-ending supplies of our favorite sweets in our pockets. I love Twizzlers. If I could somehow magically have a Twizzler in my pocket at any given moment, I would easily eat twenty Twizzlers a day, if not twice that amount. We love to be entertained



because we love to feel good. It is incredibly difficult to resist the ever-present opportunity for entertainment when we have access to it at any moment.

On top of that, we have come to idolize that which goes viral. The phenomenon of *virality* (which will be addressed in a later chapter) has become virtuous. “Going viral = good” is a subtle but present belief among many social media users—perhaps even *most* social media users (but there isn’t a way for me to prove that)—and this value spills over into the offline world. The final boss of the “going viral” video game is going on an afternoon talk show like Oprah or Ellen or a morning “news” program like *Good Morning America* or the *Today Show*, two kinds of popular television programs that regularly fill their shows with viral internet sensations like goofy dog videos and interviews with couples who are reunited after military deployment. A sort of validation comes with virality and making it onto a popular television program, a confirmation that you “made it,” even if just for a moment. That which is most entertaining tends to be that which goes viral, so, naturally, because we value virality we value entertainment. That is, at least when it’s something that’s gone viral for a *good reason*, which seems to be a dwindling portion of the viral pie. More and more it feels like people go viral for *bad* reasons rather than heartwarming ones.

**Social media makes us want to *be seen*, and it makes *being seen* easier than ever.** A longing for popularity and recognition is not new. But the opportunity to attain popularity and receive recognition has never been so ripe for the picking. Thirty years ago, short of appearing on a nationally televised game show or other television program, a mom with a goofy sense of humor would have had great difficulty becoming rich or famous for her antics. Today, all she has to do is record a video of herself laughing hysterically behind a Chewbacca mask in a Kohl’s parking lot, post it to Facebook, and get a bit lucky,

and she can become a global celebrity even if just for a moment.

A lottery ticket is a long shot at fortune and freedom, and it's available at your local gas station for a couple of bucks. A goofy Facebook video is a shot at fame and celebrity and self-sufficiency, and it's available for free in your pocket.

Deep in our hearts, we long to be seen, even if we often fear being truly known. At the same time, we long to see others and experience the fullness of life through their curated content because our own lives are marked by discontent and drudgery. This twin longing, to be seen and to see, seeps into how we do ministry and lead the local church as well as into our homes. We should take great care in crafting our community and leading our families to resist the temptation to prioritize entertainment and attention in an attempt to reforge our identities. Doing this takes intentionality and accountability.

### A STAGE WITH A STEEPLE

When William Shakespeare wrote “All the world's a stage” hundreds of years ago, I'm not sure he would have ever imagined how literal such a metaphor would eventually become. As the center of visual entertainment has moved from the theater in town to the living room in our homes to the screen in our pockets, the obvious temptation is that the local church would itself become a stage for man-centered performance to the detriment of God-centered worship.

When considering how a local church, or *your* local church, may be a “stage” constructed for the entertainment of congregants, it is important to note that this has little to do with whether or not your church has a literal stage or any of the accoutrements that accompany a rock concert. A Baptist church in rural Alabama armed with nothing but a doily-clad piano and an off-beat pastor's wife can be a stage

constructed for man-centered performance instead of God-centered worship as much as a hip, urban non-denominational church clad in shiplap and smoke machines. But the purpose of the local church has nothing to do with entertainment.

The purpose of the local church is to equip the people of God for Great Commission work and send them out into the world in order to do that work. We serve a God who is wholly uninterested in our amusement. This is a mercy to us, not a cruelty. But the reality that God is uninterested in our comfort and entertainment has become, for many Christians, a touchy subject. Why? *Because we have come to prioritize entertainment above all.*

Practically, what does this mean for the local church? How can the local church push back against the invasiveness of entertainment? I think we need to be reminded of three basic truths.

**The church-as-a-stage problem is about the posture of the heart.** A rural church equipped with few fancy features or production values can be caught up in entertainment as much as the decked-out mega-church. Whether or not a local church sees entertainment as one of its core values has little to do with how *good* it is at being entertaining. Seeing a local church as yet another stage is a matter of the heart.

Practically speaking, you shouldn't dismantle your church stages and sell your fancy equipment after reading this chapter. Please do not read me saying "Any attention you give to the quality of your Sunday service is sinful!" That is definitely *not* what I am saying. If your church's budget has room for great production value, praise God! But if those fancy features are coming at the expense of a children's ministry that lacks adequate resources, you may have a prioritization problem. Perhaps your church leaders should evaluate what you value and how you organize your budget. Ask questions like:

- What does success look like for a Sunday church service?
- What do we hope to accomplish with our midweek programming?
- Are we willing to lose attendees because our services aren't as entertaining as they could be?
- Are we spending money on elements that provide entertainment value to the detriment of actual ministry? How can we rearrange funds to correct this?

**The purpose of the local church has nothing to do with entertainment.** The local church is the body of Christ (Eph. 1:22–23) and is the headquarters of Christian formation and equipping so that we may do the good works that have been set before us (Eph. 4:11–14). Entertainment isn't inherently wrong, but to prioritize entertainment in the life of the local church is to inject a man-made value into a God-ordained mission. When we do this we set ourselves up for failure as leaders in the local church.

God is not against laughter or fun—to enjoy God's creation is a way to worship God Himself—but He has established His church to be much more than a venue for stand-up comedy and beautiful music. If local church leaders have any hope in protecting the local church from the invasiveness of an entertainment-above-all culture, we have to remember *why the church exists*. Otherwise we may adopt a mission defined by amusement rather than one defined by gospel advancement.

**God is honored by faithfulness, not attendance numbers.** This is the most difficult truth to remember, especially for those of us who find ourselves convicted by the realization that we have focused too much on entertainment and not enough on more biblical local church priorities. It is likely that the invasion of entertainment into every facet of our lives has led people who attend your church to prioritize entertainment above other more legitimate purposes of the local church. As

church leader or disciple maker, this puts you in a difficult position. If your church people are interested in being entertained by you instead of being discipled by you, you face a strong temptation to jettison faithful church leadership in favor of entertaining church leadership.

When a church leader chooses faithful, God-centered church leadership, the church leader is choosing God's favor over man's approval—a choice worth making. Because the purpose of the church is to equip the people of God for the work of God, God will be honored by faithful leadership regardless of how many attendees or members decide to leave in favor of a more entertaining gathering.

More than anywhere else, pastors and church leaders feel the pressure to entertain in the pulpit, which is, ironically, often atop a stage.

## PREACHING IS NOT A PERFORMANCE

The local church is not a stage and the pastor is not a performer. At the end of his book *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, John Piper includes the philosophy of music and worship document from the church he pastored. Principle number six in the list of nine principles that make up this worship philosophy focuses on authentic communication: "Avoid the atmosphere of artistic or oratorical performance, but cultivate the atmosphere of a radically personal encounter with God and truth."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, whether leading worship through song, through the hearing of the Word preached, through giving, or worship of any other sort, the pastor and church leader should direct attention away from themselves and toward the God they are leading others to worship and follow.

Toward the end of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman dedicates a chapter to televangelism, which was in its heyday in the 1980s. Though a non-Christian, he writes, "I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered

as easy and amusing, it is another kind of religion altogether.”<sup>6</sup>

Whether or not you preach on television, you will regularly fight the temptation to perform at the cost of your integrity. Tickling ears and performing for the sake of church attendees’ approval may attract crowds and funds, but at what cost? The pastorate is a post of humble service to God in leadership of His people, not the lead part in a Broadway musical. The Sunday worship gathering of the local church is not to be *consumed* by parishioners, but *completed* by them. This is why those who lead a Sunday service are wise to encourage the active participation of church attendees in any number of ways: adopting various bodily postures, greeting one another, saying amen when the preacher makes a cogent point, and others. These practices are important not because they’re somehow holy or righteous, but because they discourage consumption and encourage participation.

Entertainment has been invading our daily lives since the television began shaping culture in the middle of the twentieth century. Social media has made entertainment an ever-present force in the lives of Christians, which has led them to want even their local church experiences to be centered around amusement. Pastors and church leaders must resist the temptation to give in to this latent demand, even at the risk of losing church members to other, more entertaining church experiences.

The purpose of the local church is to equip the people of God for the work of God. And much to the dismay of popular culture, faithful obedience to God often seems quite boring. God Himself is exciting and full of wonder, but the daily grind of faithfully following Jesus isn’t usually exciting. We should lead and guide our churches to find contentment in quiet lives of humility in paths of righteousness instead of reinforcing the primacy of entertainment in the hearts of our people.



TWO

# RECOVER PURPOSE

It is criminal that we put so much pressure on young people to make such dramatic, life-altering decisions around the age of eighteen—a time of such social and hormonal tumult. Of course, what age *is* a good, practical age for one to decide what the rest of life is supposed to look like? Brain scientists say the brain is still growing and developing until the age of twenty-five, but should people wander around aimlessly until then to make big life decisions? Surely not.

I've served in student ministries since I was a high school student myself. I started leading a student ministry early in college and have continued to do so at every church we've attended—sometimes in

a volunteer capacity, and sometimes in a staff capacity. In fact, I am stepping down from working in student ministry at the end of the school year, and I will *not* be a part of a youth group for pretty much the first time since I was a fifth grader. In all my years of student ministry, one of the great joys has been talking with seventeen- and eighteen-year-old students who are preparing for college and trying to discern how God has gifted them and what that means for their lives. I love ministering among students at this stage because I so clearly remember this stage of my own life. I remember how difficult it was. I remember how promising it was. It is a joy to walk through the anticipation and anxiety of late adolescence with students, especially now that I'm far on the other side of it!

Students grapple with their purpose in life around the end of their time in high school, but this is only the first of many times they likely will struggle with understanding their purpose in life and how to find their place in the world. A couple of decades after high school, someone may experience a mid-life crisis and have an extramarital affair or purchase an expensive sports car. This is another manifestation of our concern with our purpose and place in the world. We set out on a particular path around the age of eighteen and then about eighteen to twenty years later we wonder if we made the right decision about work, family, and any number of other facets of our lives.

Struggling with our purpose in life and our place in the world may first be an adolescent experience, but the mid-life crisis and other instances of grappling with purpose and place will creep into life long after we've received diplomas and maybe made some vows. The good news for Christians is that we don't have to wander aimlessly around life wondering why we were made and what it is we are alive to do. God gives us a clear purpose in our lives, even if our specific *place* in the world may sometimes be mysterious.



## GOD GIVES US OUR PURPOSE

God is our Father, and He cares about what we do with our lives. He doesn't care because He wants to constantly police us and slap us on the wrist when we step out of line. God cares about what we do with our lives because He wants us to flourish, and we flourish when we live out the purposes He has for us. Proverbs 19:21 tells us: "Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand." Indeed, our plans and purposes for our lives are not invalid, but they are subservient to the plans God has for our lives. We also know that everything will work out in the end for those who are called by God according to His purpose, as Paul writes in Romans 8:28.

All who are children of God have a mission and a purpose for their lives. The mission of God's children is quite clear, given by Jesus Christ before His ascension back to the Father's side. Jesus tells His disciples in Matthew 28:19–20, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." This is the Great Commission. This is the mission we have been given as followers of Jesus Christ and adopted children of God the Father. We are to go out into all the world—from the familiar cul-de-sacs of our neighborhoods to the farthest corners of the earth—sharing the good news of Jesus Christ and baptizing people, welcoming them into their new family.

Fulfilling the Great Commission that Jesus gives in Matthew 28 can take many different forms, of course. Not every Christian is called to drop everything and be a full-time missionary in a remote part of the world—but some are! Some of us will fulfill the Great Commission in our homes and neighborhoods. Others of us will fulfill the Great Commission by leading our churches to live on mission in all areas

of their lives. Yet others of us will share the gospel in our offices or classrooms or otherwise within the careers in which God has us. The point is that wherever we are, whatever we do, and however we spend the days we have been blessed with, we attempt to share the good news of Jesus Christ with the world and lead people into the next steps that follow belief—like baptism and participating with the new family into which they have been adopted.

So the people of God have a mission, the Great Commission, but we also have a purpose that flows under and through that mission. The Great Commission, one could say, is a way we accomplish the purpose that we have been given by God. Of course, all of us may have different personal purposes and plans for our lives, but as we saw in Proverbs 19:21, our plans and purposes must yield to God's plans and purposes for us.

Our purpose is summarized by the first question and answer in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. The question is, "What is the chief end of man?" And the answer is, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever." Former pastor and theologian John Piper is famous for changing this to say, "The chief end of man is to glorify God *by* enjoying Him forever,"<sup>1</sup> and I think that is a helpful way to think about it too. Where do we see this purpose in Scripture? Here are a few passages that support the purpose of man as given by the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Cor. 10:31)

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:36)

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the

excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9)

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. (Col. 1:16)

Those are just a few of the many verses of Scripture that make it quite clear: we are meant to bring glory to God and to enjoy Him. Of course, one of the primary ways we bring glory to God is through our charge in the Great Commission, by sharing the gospel with others and welcoming them into the family of God so that as many as possible can enjoy and glorify God with us.

We live amid a carnival of distractions, and we have to daily wage war on the sin in our hearts that wants to yank us away from the kingdom purposes we find in our faith and lead us to be more interested in ourselves than our God. This is the life of a follower of Jesus. This is why the call to follow Christ is a call to come and die to ourselves. This is why we need the community of brothers and sisters in Christ, to help us walk the narrow path when we'd rather just go our own way. Unfortunately, the advent of social media and the perpetual siren song of nonstop notifications that emanates from our pockets only makes walking the narrow road more difficult.

## SOCIAL MEDIA CAN DISTORT OUR UNDERSTANDING OF PURPOSE

Our relationship with social media is a powerful factor in distorting our understanding of purpose. We were pretty good at misunderstanding our purpose before social media came around, but our relationship

with social media has made it even more appealing to look to someplace other than God for our purpose. Why? For a couple of reasons.

**Social media makes it feel like we can be anyone we want to be at any time.** One of the earliest appeals of the social internet, all the way back in the late 1990s, was the sort of *second life* that the internet offered, bolstered by the anonymity that characterized so much of the early online experience. Still today, though online anonymity is not quite as pervasive as it once was, the appeal of being someone else on the internet is still alluring, even while wearing our real names. Someone who is an accountant at a local technology company during the day could be a world-famous YouTuber in their free time. A lawyer at a local law firm can study the weather for fun and start a hyper-localized weather forecasting Twitter account to serve their community. The social internet affords us the opportunity to morph into whoever it is we want to be. This can be healthy and can afford us a means to explore interests and giftings outside of how we spend the majority of our days, but it can also be burdensome and disorienting.

Bo Burnham is a comedian, director, and songwriter. Bo and I are about the same age, and I remember watching his earliest YouTube videos when we were in high school around 2007. Back then, he was just a high school kid making vulgar comedy songs in his parents' house after school. Today he's a famous director and comedian with multiple Netflix specials. In 2018, Burnham made his directorial debut with a movie called *Eighth Grade*, which is an awkwardly hilarious, crass, and realistic look at what it is like to be in the eighth grade in the twenty-first century. The movie is rated R, which is ironic and, frankly, kind of appropriate if you know anything about what eighth grade is like these days. It's just sort of funny that eighth graders, who are typically about thirteen years old, would not be allowed into a movie theater to watch a movie that accurately depicts the eighth grade experience.

Anyway, in the movie *Eighth Grade*, Burnham, who also wrote the script, explores a wide range of themes, including how the social internet plays into the experiences of eighth graders. In an interview around the release of the movie, Burnham talks about how our relationship with the social internet is warping our understanding of reality. He says:

What is the feeling of walking through your life and not just living your life—which is already [difficult] and impossible—but also taking inventory of your life, being a viewer of your own life, living an experience and at the same time hovering behind yourself and watching yourself live that experience? Being nostalgic for moments that haven't happened yet. Planning your future to look back on it. This is the disorienting power of the opportunity we feel we have to constantly be reshaping ourselves on the internet.<sup>2</sup>

When you can be anyone at any time, who are you? When you try to be anyone at any time, are you anyone, really? Our relationship with the social internet distorts our understanding of purpose because when we reshape our identity at will, we lose track of what we're here to do. This doesn't always, or even often, look like people living shady double-lives on the internet and in their communities. Some people simply see offline life and online life as two different planes of reality.

In my many conversations with pastors and church leaders while writing this book, one pastor told me a particularly relevant but sad story about an interaction he had with a woman in his church.

The woman had posted on one of her social media accounts that she was having a rough week, explaining in some ambiguous details what was going on. The pastor told me that someone from the church saw the social media post, recognized it as a possible call for help, and suggested church leadership reach out to the woman, just to check in

on her and see if there was anything the church could do to love her and come alongside her in whatever it was she was enduring.

When a church leader who knows the woman reached out to her to offer help, the woman responded in a rather shocking way: *she was offended* that a church leader reached out to her and tried to help, seemingly embarrassed that they saw what she posted on social media. Why was the woman offended? In short, though her social media profile is public and available for the world to see, she told the church leaders, “I posted asking for encouragement from my *online* community, not my *offline* community.” The woman also expressed, “My online life is private,” and she said it should not be of concern to anyone at the church. Again, this woman shared about her discouragement on a public social media account and explicitly asked for encouragement. She was not being called out by her church leaders for some sort of rampant sin they saw her committing online. They saw someone in their care in distress, and they reached out to see how they could help. The church member clearly saw her online and offline identities and lives as separate.

The feeling of unreality that comes with social media, that it feels like a totally separate existence from offline life, can make us wonder if the same God-given purpose we have offline applies to the virtual space. When we assume other identities and maybe act totally different online than we do offline, it is understandable that we wonder if the most foundational aspects of our lives apply in both places. It is easy to slip into the misguided idea that our online lives are not our real lives. But our online lives *are* our real lives. Who we are online is who we really are. Beyond the disorientation that comes with being different people in different places, social media distorts value.

**Social media makes certain lifestyles appear more valuable than others.** “What do you want to be when you grow up?” is a common

question asked of children, and it has a new most common answer: a YouTuber. A 2018 Harris Poll that surveyed three thousand kids ages eight to twelve found that 30 percent of kids in the United Kingdom and 29 percent of kids in the United States would like to be a “Vlogger/YouTuber” when they grow up—the most common answer, followed by teacher, athlete, musician, and astronaut.<sup>3</sup> A similar study conducted by Morning Consult in 2019 found that 54 percent of thirteen- to thirty-eight-year-olds would be an influencer if given the opportunity.<sup>4</sup> Why do so many kids and young adults want to be some kind of influencer? Because our intimate relationship with social media and the complex algorithms that serve us our delicious content has presented the possibility that we could be paid to simply share pictures and videos of our beautiful, lavish lifestyles. The influencer lifestyle is more appealing than the plumber lifestyle or the accountant lifestyle for a handful of reasons, but one of the primary ones is found in recommendation engines, which are commonly known as *algorithms*. Algorithms are designed to deliver us optimally interesting content so that we stay on platform for as long as possible. This creates a snowball effect, often distorting our understanding of value and purpose.

Imagine a sixteen-year-old girl hears that someone from her school is becoming a swimsuit model, so she looks up YouTube videos about what it’s like to be a swimsuit model. After she watches one, she is likely to be recommended other, similar videos by YouTube’s recommendation engine. The user may watch a video titled, “A Day in the Life of a Swimsuit Model,” then be recommended, “How to Become a Swimsuit Model,” then “The Underrated Perks of Being a Swimsuit Model,” then “What I Eat in a Day (Swimsuit Model Edition),” then “How to Lose Weight Fast for Summer,” then, perhaps, “How Skinny Is Skinny Enough?” You can see how a sixteen-year-old girl

who is at first maybe vaguely interested in what it would be like to be a swimsuit model could easily fall into a rabbit hole of videos around dieting and body image that may be unhealthy for her. This isn't just a problem for girls or women, of course—boys and men find their own rabbit holes to fall into—but it's one example of how recommendation engines create a sort of snowball effect.

The snowball effect of the algorithms that govern our social media feeds is designed to float to the top the kinds of content we find most interesting. This means that, depending on our internet activity, we likely see versions of life that are appealing to us and may be wildly different from our own. When we scroll on Instagram or Facebook and constantly see lives that we find appealing but unattainable, we may come to believe that our lives are lame and our God-given purpose is insufficient. The sixteen-year-old girl who was interested in the life of a swimsuit model may eventually realize, for one reason or another, that she just doesn't really have what it takes for that kind of lifestyle and work, but she may still long for that kind of life as related content peppers her feeds, leading her to wonder if her life trajectory is really worth it if she can't do what she truly wants to do.

“Keeping up with the Joneses” may seem like a dated cliché and a phenomenon of the past, but it really isn't. Today we have *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, after all! Social media has provided us with an unlimited supply of Joneses with whom we may want to keep up. It gives us endless peeks into how others live their lives, which may make us wonder if the God-given purpose we have is worth the call to come and die. The joy of following Christ can easily become a burden when we are so frequently faced with others' versions of the good life on our feeds. How might we lead others to cultivate a biblical understanding of purpose, and actually *enjoy* our God-given purpose, when there are so many distractions and calls to care for ourselves instead of others?



## HOW TO CULTIVATE A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF PURPOSE

It is difficult to push back against the influence of social media on the lives of the people we lead. There is no silver bullet, which you will gather as you read this book. I don't even want to claim that the practical steps I give you in the final section of each chapter will always work—they won't! So I apologize if the following practical steps seem overly simple or even redundant, but as I thought about how we lead the people we love to establish and cultivate a biblical understanding of their purpose in life, it really comes down to reminding them often and loving them in community.

**Remind people of the others-focused, God-glorifying purpose for which they were created.** We all need to be reminded of foundational truths. We have become so obsessed with the new, accentuated by rapid technological advancement. Many of us believe that newer is better. Sometimes this is true, but not always. New technologies or medical advances are often better than their predecessors, for example. But when it comes to our purpose, newer is not better.

The reason we exist—to glorify God and enjoy Him forever—is as old as humanity itself, or perhaps older depending on how you think about it. Our mission, the Great Commission, the primary charge we have regarding living out our purpose, is roughly two thousand years old. These are old truths that lie at the root of a world obsessed with the new. If we hope to lead the people we love in our churches, community groups, workplaces, or homes to stay focused on the truths of old, we cannot and must not *presume upon them*. How easy it is to take for granted the foundational truths of our lives when we can barely keep pace with how quickly everything seems to move! Like a race car driver may take for granted properly inflated tires and functioning brakes because his mission relies on going fast, so also

we can forget God's eternal purpose for us when we fail to see its relevance for the hustle and bustle of our everyday lives.

In our sin, it is easy to forget why we are here. The parade of distractions that marches before our eyes and vibrates in our pockets every day doesn't help either. If we want to cultivate a biblical understanding among the people we lead and love, we must revisit the old truths, reminding people of our purpose and our mission. The moment we assume we are all on the same page regarding why we are here and what we do about it, we take it for granted. Other counterfeit purposes and missions can seep in and lead us down paths away from the path Christ walked first for us.

To remind others of our call to glorify God and enjoy Him forever can take a wide variety of forms depending on your role and your context. It looks like catechizing children. It looks like preaching about purpose from the pulpit on a regular basis. It looks like talking about purpose and mission in a community group regularly. Our purpose in life determines how we organize our calendars, what jobs we take, and with whom we associate. We should always be evaluating the purposes we have set for ourselves, ensuring that our self-assigned purposes align with our God-given purpose to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

**Create a loving, purpose-driven culture of community.** Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* makes a compelling scriptural case for a sense of community:

If you are a member of a small group or class, I urge you to make a group covenant that includes the nine characteristics of biblical fellowship: We will share our true feelings (authenticity), encourage each other (mutuality), support each other (sympathy), forgive each other (mercy), speak the truth in love

(honesty), admit our weaknesses (humility), respect our differences (courtesy), not gossip (confidentiality), and make group a priority (frequency).<sup>5</sup>

Warren calls us to create or be a part of a community defined by authenticity, mutuality, sympathy, mercy, honesty, humility, courtesy, confidentiality, and frequency. That sounds like a dynamite culture of community!

What would it look like for us to create communities like this among the people we lead? What would it look like to parent in a home that is governed by those values? What would it look like to lead a church whose leaders make those values central to their equipping of the saints for ministry? When we create Christian communities defined by values like mercy, humility, and authenticity, it makes it easier to live on mission together as we consider the purpose for which we have been created. In the same way that it is important for soldiers to have common values as they embark on a mission within the larger context of a war, so is it important for us as Christians to have common values as we embark on the Great Commission in the greater context of glorifying God and enjoying Him forever.

But here's the thing—and this is the hard part—this kind of purpose-driven, common-values community doesn't happen on its own, or by accident. Whether because of our sin, the busyness of life, perpetual distraction—or some combination of the three—healthy Christian community requires a tremendous amount of effort. This is the core of the Christian life, is it not? By God's *grace* we are saved, not by our church attendance or community group consistency. But once we have come to faith in Christ because of God's gracious working in our hearts, we do have to *try* to follow Jesus. Salvation does not require our effort, but sanctification does.

If we hope to help people keep God's purpose for their lives in the first place—rather than frivolous purposes on social media or otherwise—our healthy Christian community should be characterized by values similar to what Warren lays out in *The Purpose Driven Life*. It is cliché to say it, but the Christian life is not a solo sport. And perhaps we as Christian leaders need to be reminded of this truth the most! The people we lead need each other, not just us their leaders, to bear their burdens, encourage their hearts, and carry them along the narrow path that Christ has forged in faithfulness. And it is our job as leaders, in whatever capacity, to create spaces for Christian community that keeps the glory and enjoyment of God at the forefront.