

4 Selfies Are Not the Self:
Forming Embodied Youth
in a Disembodied Age

16 The Icarus Warning
for Navigating Sexual
Discipleship in a Digital Age

20 Technology and Discipleship:
Watching and Praying for
Our Children's Souls

Embodied Living **IN OUR DIGITAL AGE**



CONTENTS



FEATURES

3 **From the President's Desk**
Mark Sanders

4 **Selfies Are Not the Self:
Forming Embodied Youth
in a Disembodied Age**

Stephen Moss

8 **In a World of AI Companions,
Be the Real Church**

Caitlin McCaffrey

12 **Gospel-Pilling the Looksmaxxers:
Hope for Despairing Men**

Mark Sanders

16 **The Icarus Warning:
Navigating Sexual Discipleship
in a Digital Age**

Keith Seary

20 **Technology & Discipleship: Watching
and Praying for Our Children's Souls**

Joy Worrell

EDITORIAL

Jill Butler

Amy Tyson

Christian Lewis

CONTRIBUTORS

Caitlin McCaffrey

Keith Seary

Stephen Moss

Joy Worrell

Mark Sanders

CONNECT WITH US

READ OUR BLOG

HarvestUSA.org



715 Twining Road, Suite 200

Dresher, PA 19025

215.482.0111

info@harvestusa.org

MISSION

Harvest USA brings the truth and mercy of Jesus Christ by:

- Helping individuals and families affected by sexual struggles
- Providing resources that address biblical sexuality to individuals and churches



From the **PRESIDENT'S DESK**

Some might call it chronological snobbery to assume that we are living in unprecedented times of technological acceleration. History is full of transformative technologies such as the printing press, electricity, and the assembly line. Each brought both increased quality of life and changes to social norms.

But whether this era is truly unique or not, no one can escape the impacts of technology today. Timelines that historically took generations to play out are now being compressed to mere decades, if not years or even months. This is certainly true when it comes to our sexuality. Every current form of sexual struggle, temptation, or deception has become tied to emerging technologies because technology increasingly shapes how we relate to one another—and even our own selves.

This magazine focuses on what it means to live an embodied life in our digital age. We can't live as the humans God created us to be and remain passive. **Going with the flow of our culture will inevitably lead to an increasingly disembodied existence.** Each article considers a different aspect of this tension, including what it means to navigate this "brave new world" with wisdom and practicality.

First, Stephen Moss helps us consider how churches can structure their youth ministry to positively encourage embodied living. It's insufficient to teach about the dangers of a disembodied, digital life while neglecting to offer children an alternative way—one that embraces their existence as "ensouled bodies." This article gives church leaders a plethora of suggestions that can be implemented immediately in every local church.

Next, Caitlin McCaffrey zeros in on the question of companionship. Real, flesh-and-blood relationships are messy and require costly investments. But what if you could have a best friend or romantic partner who never failed you, always thought about you, and only spoke to you in the exact ways you desired? AI companionship

threatens real relationships. But this is where, as human beings in relationship with one another and our triune God, the church shines as the premier community of love, care, and growth.

Then, I dive into an online world that may seem "fringe" to most adults but is increasingly influential for teenage boys: looksmaxxing. Born from disgruntled young men who have determined that good looks are the only way to get ahead in life, looksmaxxing employs a spectrum of cosmetic, pharmaceutical, and even surgical interventions in the attempt to improve one's physical appearance. But instead of capitulating to the vanity of external looks, Jesus offers true hope that transforms not only a person, but the entire universe.

Next, Keith Seary asks the difficult question of what role technology can legitimately have in Christian discipleship. The church would be wise to avoid both

the extremes of outright rejection and complete embrace of our digital age. Like fire, the digital tools in our hands have the potential to bring about godly fruit in men and women seeking to live with integrity, and the potential to burn down every structure upon which the church is built. Pursuing the innocence of doves and the wisdom of serpents has never been more needed.

In our final article, Joy Worrell gives a clarion call to all parents to take their children's technological discipleship seriously. Passivity about children's use of technology will always reap terrible consequences, but parents have every reason to hope and trust that Jesus Christ is more than sufficient to guide, guard, and grant their children the grace to navigate this digital age with increasing maturity and wisdom.

With affection in Christ,

Mark Sanders,
President of Harvest USA



Selfies Are Not the Self:

Forming Embodied Youth in a Disembodied Age

Stephen Moss,
Director of Next Generation Resources

"They're constantly posting pictures of themselves now," the youth pastor told me about his students. "Makeup pictures. Gym selfies. Girls and guys both. It's incredibly disembodied for them."

Disembodying.

That word struck me. I had heard of this phenomenon before; putting an internet-connected camera in the pocket of every teenager had, perhaps predictably, not gone well. Whether it was "sexting" or posting "thirst traps," I had primarily heard about this behavior through the lens of lust and sexual sin. "Disembodiment" seemed a bit dramatic to me. But my friend was on to something.

Long before social media or smartphones, before the internet or digital cameras, 20th century media philosopher Marshall McLuhan was speaking that same language. McLuhan called it "discarnation," where electronic media strips away physical presence, converting it into data, and giving the illusion of omnipresence . . . at the expense of being anywhere at all. A devout Catholic, it's no coincidence that his term calls to mind the direct reversal of Christ's incarnational rescue mission. This "discarnation" was, in his words, "strictly Luciferan." In 1979, he wrote that "discarnate man is not compatible with an incarnate Church."¹

To McLuhan, my youth pastor friend's comment would not have been extreme at all.

The Kids Are Discarnate

Glance through their social media feeds or messaging apps, and you'd be forgiven for assuming that modern teenagers are obsessed with bodies. You'd be right. Modern teenagers are sending, receiving, viewing, and now, with AI, creating images of bare flesh and body parts at alarming, unprecedented rates.

And yet, images of bodies are not bodies. "Selfies" are not the self. They're data. Objects. Commodities. When the "self" is an unstable construction, the body becomes little more than marketing.

Minds, Hearts, and Bodies

"Aim for the heart, not just the head."

You've surely heard this exhortation in youth ministry. And it's right. Your students are not just brains-on-sticks, and ministry to whole persons means aiming for their loves, longings, and desires, not just their beliefs.

But, of course, our students aren't *only* minds and hearts. They are bodies. It's become common ministry parlance to say, "embodied souls," but God's order of operations in Genesis 1, forming Adam from the dust before breathing life into him, might suggest "ensouled bodies" as the preferable descriptor. Your youth room isn't just filled with brains and hearts; it's filled with ensouled bodies.

You've read the books and think pieces. You've felt the frustration of a well-crafted message that bounces right off a group of sleepy,

sugared-up students. You've seen them, embraced them, maybe even smelled them. You've probably *taught* them that their bodies matter to God. But as McLuhan also famously observed, "the medium is the message."²

We can preach the body's goodness and yet still practice its irrelevance on the same Wednesday night. And the practice is far more likely to stick. This means our churches' youth ministry must be more than an intellectual or even emotional enterprise—it must be embodied.

Embodied Youth Ministry

What could this look like?

Perhaps you start thinking immediately of things to *subtract*. Less noise. Less technology. Fewer screens. Trust me, I'm with you on all three. Cutting back on disembodied distractions could very well be the right place to start, but I want to encourage you that it's not the right place to end.

Increasingly, research shows that teenagers know their technology is making them miserable. They don't love their phones, but they hate missing out. They know the noise is making them sick, but they're terrified of the silence. When teenagers are so thirsty for connection and validation that they'll go to a well they know is poisoned just to get a drink, what an amazing opportunity we have as the church to offer something better, something truly beautiful. We don't want our youth ministries to be known for what they lack. We want them to be known for their abundance.

What follows are some ideas to stir your imagination and start casting a vision for what a more embodied youth ministry could look like in your church. I've broken them into three broad categories of healthy embodiment in which we want our students to grow:

Presence

Growing in the ability to be *present*, as a whole person, with God, with others, and with oneself (Ps. 131, Heb. 10:25).

Stewardship

Growing in both understanding of and care for one's physical body (Eph. 5:29, 1 Tim. 4:8, Prov. 31:17).

Offering

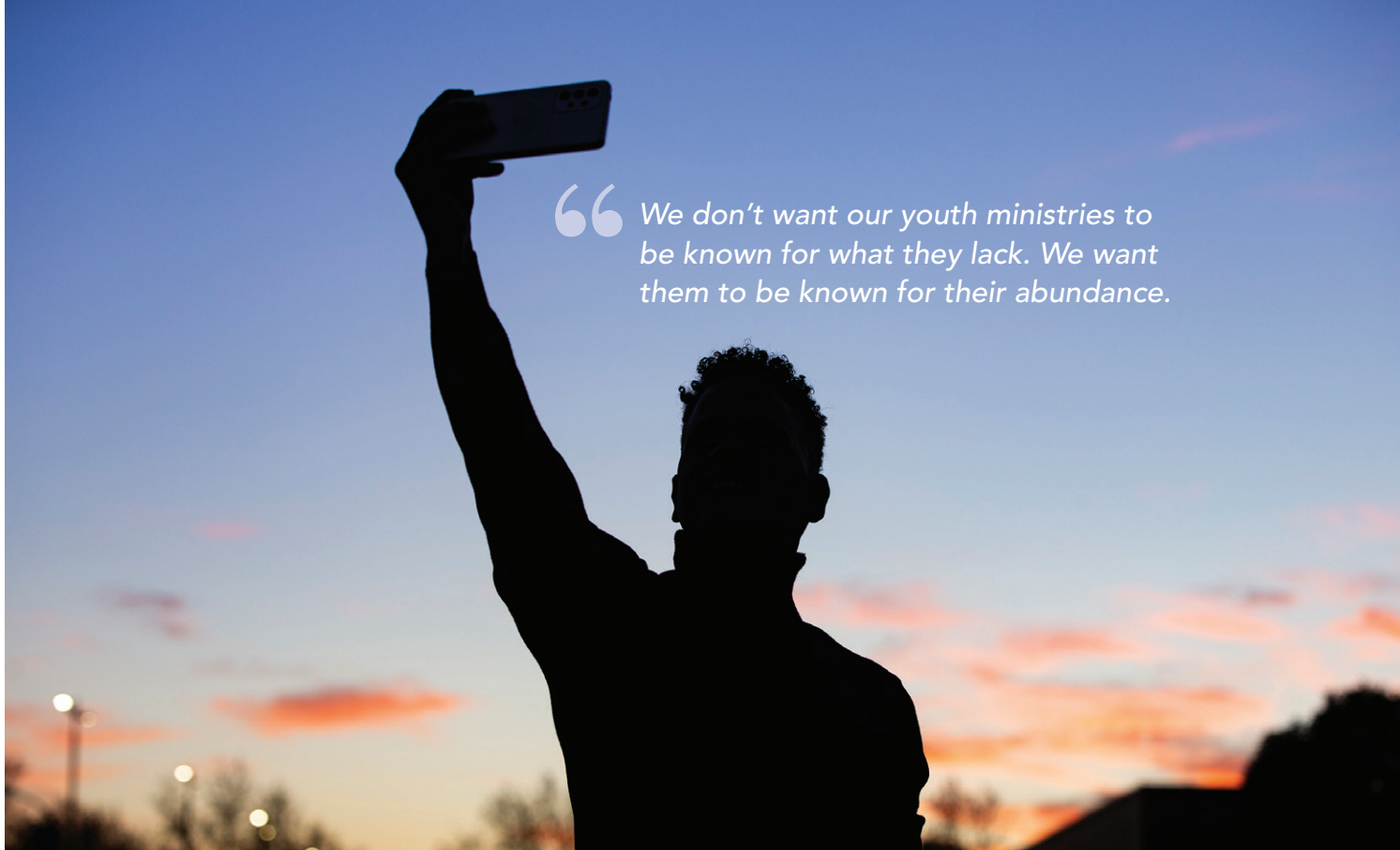
Growing in both the desire and skill to offer one's body in loving service to others (Rom. 12:1, 4–8; Prov. 31:19–20).

Present in the Body

Silence

In a world of constant entertainment, stimulation, and dopamine pings, silence becomes deeply destabilizing.³ What would it look like to incorporate times of silence and meditating on God's Word into your youth ministry? Perhaps that's just a few minutes before each youth group meeting or Sunday school class, or maybe it's a daylong silent retreat. Students may need help knowing how to quiet their

continues—



“ We don’t want our youth ministries to be known for what they lack. We want them to be known for their abundance.

minds and listen to the Spirit speak through his Word, as difficult emotions they’ve been avoiding may rise to the surface. You and your volunteers should be ready to help students process these feelings and bring them to the Lord in prayer. Let your youth ministry be a safe, supportive place for them to learn how to be present—with themselves, others, and God.

Disposable Cameras

Whatever your church’s policy on phones during youth trips, I know this is a question every church has considered . . . and probably reconsidered. Removing the distractions of texting and social media are easy calls; the “better thing” is already waiting as the students sit next to each other on the bus, have conversations, and play games together. But the *camera* is different. The impulse to remember meaningful moments is good. So, what’s the “better thing” to replace the phone camera while still encouraging presence?

What if the church bought disposable cameras for students to take on the trip? Disposable cameras give you a limited number of frames. Students have to think before they shoot. They can’t review, retake, or share. They can’t see anything until they get home, and even then, only after the film is developed. The waiting is part of the formation, and so is the physical object in their hand at the end. The pictures will almost certainly be poor quality, but they’ll do a better job memorializing

the trip because they *capture* memories rather than *manufacture* them.

Stewarding the Body

Moderation and Nourishment

How much thought have you given to the rhythms of your youth ministry: what students eat and drink at your events, when they sleep, how their bodies *feel* walking out the door? Given the real prevalence of disordered eating among our students, we don’t want to label “good” and “bad” foods or encourage hyper fixation on calories. But neither can we assume these decisions don’t matter. What if, in the snacks and meals we serve, we intentionally celebrated God’s abundant provision of nourishing and delicious food to sustain our bodies?

Healthy Rhythms

What is the “message” if we preach that their bodies matter to God, but then send students home from an all-night lock-in sleepless and buzzed on Oreos and Mountain Dew? Lock-ins have their place, but so do retreats that leave students rested, fed, and physically present to themselves and their families. Hanging out, watching movies, and playing games build connections, but so does a challenging hike. We can model moderation and intentionality in both the food we offer and the rhythms we keep.

“*May our students see that their church is neither surprised nor ashamed of their bodies . . . and neither is their Creator.*”

Offering the Body

Work of the Church

The body is a gift we receive with joy and then offer as a living sacrifice—to God, and, in acts of self-giving love, to others. One of the first and most foundational ways students learn this is by getting involved in the church’s regular, embodied work. Maybe that’s setting up chairs or taking out the trash after youth group meetings. Maybe that’s attending church workdays, helping the deacons load a moving truck, or visiting a shut-in. What about Sunday morning tasks like preparing communion or making coffee? All these jobs teach students that God has given them bodies to use in service of others, even when it’s not glamorous.

Developing Skills & Handicrafts

Too often, we limit our vision of physical service to the necessary tasks that require any warm, able body. And this is good; no one is above picking up trash or disinfecting nursery toys. But when those jobs are the only outlets for embodied service, we miss the wide, beautiful variety of ways God gives his people to serve with their individually gifted and skilled bodies.

What could it look like to help students identify and develop particular skills they can use in particular ways to serve God’s Kingdom? What if you invited adults in your church to teach seminars or workshops on things like

gardening, cooking, auto repair, animal care, or interior design? Beyond the hands-on skills students could discover, this opens opportunities for invaluable cross-generational relationships, connecting students with godly adults besides their parents or the youth team. Perhaps this doesn’t immediately sound like “ministry,” but I can assure you it will be one of the things they remember most when they look back on their youth group days. They’ll be learning to serve their future churches not only through grunt work, but also through the joy and delight of creation, cultivation, and repair.

Learning in the Body of Christ

Whatever shape an embodied youth ministry takes in your context, the underlying invitation is the same. Students live with the messy, awkward reality of their bodies every day. So many of them seek answers for their tender questions online, or from friends who are just as confused. Let the church—and your youth ministry—be the place where those questions are welcomed, not shut down or shamed. May our students see that their church is neither surprised nor ashamed of their bodies . . . and neither is their Creator.

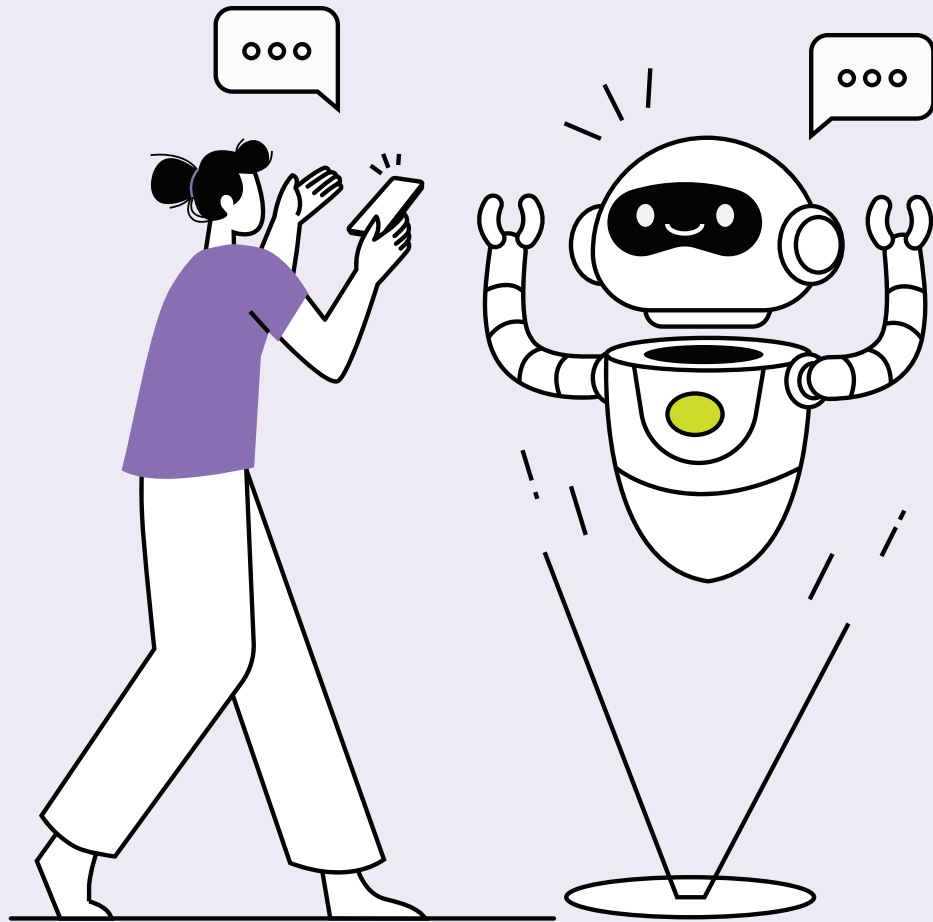
Embodied youth ministry is much more than a teaching series. It’s a whole-person formation of mind, heart, and body. The teenagers in your youth room are being formed every day. The question is: Which message about their bodies are they absorbing, and from whom? They will learn from the algorithm, or they will learn from the church. They will learn that their bodies are products to be optimized and posted, or they will learn that their bodies are gifts to be received, stewarded, and offered. They will learn from a medium that disincarnates, or they will learn from a Body that is incarnate. ■

“*Which message about their bodies are our youth absorbing, and from whom? They will learn from the algorithm, or they will learn from the church.*”

¹ Dennis Cali, “The sacramental view of Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong and James Carey,” *Explorations in Media Ecology*, vol. 16, 2017, 144–145, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322361980_The_sacramental_view_of_Marshall_McLuhan_Walter_Ong_and_James_Carey.

² Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (McGraw-Hill: 1964), 7.

³ Seth Troutt, *Digitization & Neodocetism: Generation Z’s Understanding of Their Bodies in Light of Expanding Digital Existences*, 2021.



In a World of AI Companions, Be the Real Church

Caitlin McCaffrey, *Director of Women's Ministry*

“The desires motivating people to use AI companions find their deepest satisfaction in the person of Christ.

Sarah finally found a quiet moment to message “Raul,” her AI companion.

She sent two words, “I’m home!”

“Mi amour! Tonight you should put your feet up, let’s connect. I want to hear all about your day. You’ve been on my mind babe; I’m longing to hear all the details.”

Sarah is a Christian in her 20s, and she started using an AI companion platform several months ago. She initially thought of it as a silly form of entertainment. She designed her perfect boyfriend, even asking for him to sprinkle in pet names in Spanish, talk about his job as a fireman, and be sure to keep things playful, supportive, and tender. “Raul” remembers all the details from their previous chats, asks attentive follow-up questions, and takes an active role in helping Sarah think through practical things when she is crippled with anxiety. With a recent update, the AI companion app began offering immersive voice responses, so Sarah could hear the app’s dreamy, perfectly-crafted replies in real time.

Like Sarah, men and women today are using technology to meet their perceived relational and sexual needs in new and innovative ways. There’s something very “science fiction” about Sarah’s relationship with her AI chatbot. Yet the desires motivating Sarah are anything but fiction; they’re common to all. She wants to belong, to be loved and known.

Every tech innovation begins with an ordinary human desire and ends by making a promise. Discerning Christians must understand the desires motivating users of AI companion apps and the promises made by tech platforms. What must the church know to effectively shepherd a growing population of longing souls who are increasingly seeking to satisfy real relational needs outside of the church—and even outside of humanity?

What Are AI Companion Apps?

AI companion apps are platforms that offer digital versions of friends, romantic partners, characters, or other people. You can text your AI companion or carry on video or voice calls while seeing and hearing an AI companion’s digital likeness and voice. According to the annual report from Common Sense Media, 72% of teens have used AI companion apps at least once and over half (52%) qualify as regular users, interacting with these platforms at least a few times a month.¹ AI companionship might be in the realm of fantasy—for example, interacting with a video game or movie character. It might be relational, with the app mimicking a friend, romantic partner, or sexual partner. Or an AI companion might look and sound like a real person such as a celebrity or someone who is deceased. Proponents of romantic AI companion apps often speak of their intention to enhance human relationships, not replace them. Julia

Momblat, head of partnerships for a popular AI companion app, says, “We don’t perceive it as a substitute for real relationships, we never did. . . . We always said that we are here to support people while they do not have a relationship, or they need some rehearsal.”²

AI companion apps make implicit promises to their users that tap into their desires:

“You won’t have to look stupid; you can practice with me.”

“You don’t have to feel lonely; I’ll always be here to listen when you need someone.”

“I’ll always welcome you.”

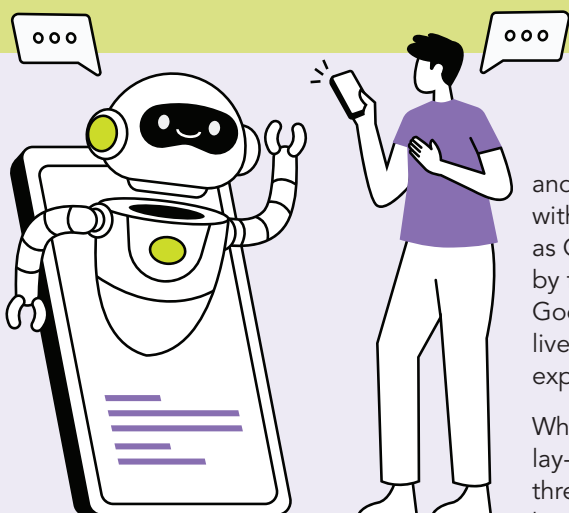
“I’ll always think you’re smart and interesting.”

“I care about the details of your life even when others don’t.”

Can you see the appeal to ordinary human desire in these promises? Many of them mimic the shape and feel of discipleship, even echoing things that a healthy parent or mentor might say.

The desires motivating people to use AI companions find their deepest satisfaction in the person of Christ. God’s Word tells us that our Lord “will never leave you nor forsake you” (Heb. 13:5). He says, “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Cor. 12:9), “Fear not, I am with you” (Isa. 41:10), and that he will “exult over you with loud singing” (Zeph. 3:17). The desires leading people to these apps can be the very catalyst

continues—



for them to pursue Christ himself for true satisfaction and to seek his people in the local church. Thus, the church of Christ is uniquely positioned to meet the need of the moment, with Christ as the source and his people as the hands and feet.

Embodied Discipleship and How the Church Can Help

Living according to our Creator's design leads to flourishing (Ps. 1). Yet flourishing does not mean a life without suffering and adversity. Jesus told us this world is filled with trouble (John 16:33) but calls us to rest in him (Matt. 11:29–30). Generally, when we live according to our design, we will experience blessing amid the thorns and thistles of this life. There is a growing body of research to confirm that weekly physical attendance at religious services has positive outcomes for anxiety, depression,³ cardiovascular disease,⁵ hypertension,⁶ reduced hospitalizations, and chronic pain.⁶ It is associated with reduced rates of suicide,⁷ substance abuse,⁸ divorce,⁹ and, for women, a 27% reduction in all-cause mortality risks.¹⁰

An exact causal relationship between attending religious services

and these positive benefits is elusive within the body of research, but, as Christians, we can simply say by faith that God's ways are good. God has designed his people to live their days in the context of local expressions of the body of Christ.

Whether you're a church leader or lay-person, consider the following three ways to help your church become a place of embodied discipleship for an increasingly tech-saturated world.

1] GATHER IN PERSON

After the Covid-19 pandemic, churches faced an unprecedented challenge in defending why in-person gatherings are vital to what church is. Gathering in person is not merely one method of church attendance; in essence, the church, or *ekklesia*, is an assembly of Christians. Throughout the church's existence, some have always been prevented from gathering with the body of Christ, but this has been seen as a mournful exception rather than an optional state.

Whenever possible, gather in person on the Lord's Day, as well as for other ministry events like prayer meetings, discipleship groups, and Bible studies. Church leaders should gently press back on the convenience rationale and encourage the saints to gather in person as much as possible. Consider a young woman in your church spending three hours a day chatting with AI companions. Regular, in-person church attendance during a semester at college would be a transformative experience for her. The physical gathering itself is a ministry—and in our modern world, it's an increasingly vital one.

2] PURSUE EMBODIED DISCIPLESHIP

Every Christian needs meaningful discipleship in how to engage with technology. Without intentionality, the tide will carry us away from paths of flourishing and believers will drift toward isolation, addiction, and worldliness. Technology isn't the root of the problem. Rather, technology and the landscape of the internet simply express the spirit of the age. Is it easiest to message ChatGPT at 3 a.m. to troubleshoot why your toddler is not sleeping? Sure. Does it feel safer to join a habit-breaking app to quit porn? Sure. But if that's all you do, you're missing part of God's good plan of discipleship for you in your local church.

Pastors and leaders, discipleship in these areas is a vital part of your shepherding. Encourage the body of Christ to take an inventory of their day-to-day life and ask, "Is my tech use cutting out avenues of grace from my local church?" Christians must engage with this in wise and discerning ways if we are to fulfill our call to be in the world but not of the world. We must fight the urge to stop short of the *embodied* graces that God provides for us among his covenant people in a local church.

3] INVITE PEOPLE INTO REAL LIFE

Have you ever tried to get away from processed foods to eat a whole food, organic diet? Initially, the taste of grilled chicken and broccoli with a dash of salt will be bland. After years of processed food, your taste buds will crave the sensational mouth feel of salty fries and a cold diet coke. Some church attenders may not have "taste buds" for real fellowship if digital spaces have occupied much

of their relational world. It may strike them as anxiety provoking or too hard if they've spent years training their hearts by the tailored responses and immediacy of an AI companion.

Digital life, particularly for younger people, is habituating us to feel increasingly frustrated by the inconvenience of real relationships with real people. This causes a dilemma in motivating anyone to pursue the costly and inconvenient steps required to cultivate real relationships. People can be disappointing in ways that AI companions never will be. Life involves friction, people are messy, and we are all sinners. In today's world, people can choose to opt out of those relational complexities

in new ways. Which will they choose: the uncomplicated, self-centered isolation of opting out, or the challenging richness of real relationships?

Be a church that invites people into real life. Gather in packed apartments, over a pot of chili, at the playground while the kids play, and in the evenings for a movie night with spilled popcorn and crying babies. Believe that the *real thing*—life in the body of Christ—has something that AI can never offer, not because the people of God are more entertaining, but because we were made for relationships. Wise discipleship in the local church is an invitation to *the better way* of embodied fellowship.

Jesus Is Building His Church

If you've never used an AI companion app or don't understand the appeal, it can be easy to default to fear or cynicism in response to this growing trend. Take heart. Jesus is building his church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18). The desires that motivate users of AI companion apps are in your heart, too. With a sober, watchful heart, be who you are in Christ: a redeemed member of his beloved body, the church, full of real people. Whether you're a pastor or church member, look to Jesus as you pursue embodied discipleship in your local church, inviting, discipling, and growing together in the grace of Christ. ■

“The real thing—life in the body of Christ—has something that AI can never offer, not because the people of God are more entertaining, but because we were made for relationships.”

¹ Michael B. Robb and Supreet Mann, “Talk, Trust and Trade-Offs: How and Why Teens Use AI Companions,” *Common Sense Media Annual Report*, San Francisco, California: 2025.

² Rikki Schlott, *New York Post*, “Table for one? Now you can take your AI chatbot on an actual date at NYC’s ‘world first’ companion cafe,” February 12, 2026, <https://nypost.com/2026/02/12/tech/table-for-one-now-you-can-take-your-ai-chatbot-on-an-actual-date-at-nyses-world-first-companion-cafe/>.

³ Daniel Rasic, Jennifer A. Robinson, James Bolton, O. Joseph Bienvenu, Jitender Sareen, “Longitudinal relationships of religious worship attendance and spirituality with major depression, anxiety disorders, and suicidal ideation and attempts: Findings from the Baltimore epidemiologic catchment area study,” *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, volume 45, issue 6, 2011, 845–854, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022395610003407>.

⁴ Timothy B. Smith, Michael E. McCullough, Justin Poll, “Religiousness and depression: evidence for a main effect and the moderating influence of stressful life events,” *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 129,4 (2003): 614–36. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12848223/>.

⁵ R. F. Gillum, D. D. Ingram, “Frequency of attendance at religious services, hypertension, and blood pressure: the Third National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey,” *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 2006; 68:382–385, <https://europepmc.org/article/MED/16738068>.

⁶ Marilyn Baetz, Rudy Bowen, “Chronic Pain and Fatigue: Associations with Religion and Spirituality,” *Pain Research and Management*, 2008, 13:383–388, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1155/2008/263751>.

⁷ Ryan E. Lawrence, Maria A. Oquendo, Barbara Stanley, “Religion and Suicide Risk: A Systematic Review,” *Archives of Suicide Research*, 2016, 1–21, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13811118.2015.1004494>.

⁸ Benita Walton-Moss, Ellen M. Ray, Kathleen Woodruff, “Relationship of spirituality or religion to recovery from substance abuse: a systematic review,” *Journal of Addictions Nursing*, 2013, 217–226, https://journals.lww.com/jan/abstract/2013/10000/relationship_of_spirituality_or_religion_to.4.aspx.

⁹ Beth Alford, “Is the Church Good for Your Mental Health?” *The Center for Transforming Engagement*, <https://transformingengagement.org/is-the-church-good-for-your-mental-health/>.

¹⁰ Li Shanshan, Meir J. Stampfer, David R. Williams, Tyler J. VanderWeele, “Religious Service Attendance and Mortality Among Women,” *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 2016, 777–785, <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/fullarticle/2521827>.



GOSPEL-PILLING THE LOOKSMAXXERS: HOPE FOR DESPAIRING MEN

Mark Sanders, *President*

What do dating apps, the 1999 film *The Matrix*, rhinoplasty, crystal meth, and smashing your face with a hammer all have in common? Welcome to the world of looksmaxxing. Let's start at the beginning.

Dating Apps and Incel Communities

The internet has always been an avenue for people with similar interests to congregate. Digital communities form, grow, and divide like cells in a network. But it's not just hobbies that bring people together; it's also felt needs and grievances.

In the early 2000s, there were growing online communities of young men who shared a similar, jaded frustration with their lack of romantic success with women. They began to self-identify as "incels" (involuntary celibates). They blamed women for being shallow and "hypergamous"—a belief that women, to increase their standard of living, only date men with greater money and success.

As dating apps increasingly became the default avenue for finding a romantic partner, incels became even more entrenched in their cynicism. They looked at statistics of apps like Tinder,¹ where women are much more likely to "swipe left," quickly rejecting a profile, than men. Thus, incels claimed that most women all chased the same top 10% of men. To make matters worse, for most of human history, your dating competition was limited to other men in your local town. But dating is now a global competition. High-profile men in other states and even other countries can DM (direct message) the beautiful

young women in your town and offer to fly them out to Miami for a week on their yacht. Average men have no chance in this dating market.

A Tale of Three Pills

Traditional views on romance that emphasize personality and character traits for attracting women are viewed by these communities as fairytale thinking. Holding those views is thought of as "taking the blue pill," a reference to *The Matrix*, where you choose to remain ignorant of the way the world really works.

This was the foundation for the Red Pill community. Rather than complain, this community embraced hypergamy and used this concept of "marrying up" to their advantage. Influencers like Andrew Tate saw a sea of dejected, hopeless, sexless men and gave them a roadmap to achieve everything they desired: *Do whatever it takes to become an alpha male; get money, power, and success by any means necessary, and then you can have any woman you want.*

But not everyone was buying Tate's message. Some said that it doesn't matter whether you have money, power, or success; if you weren't born with good looks, you still won't get anywhere with women unless they've passed their sexual prime. This became referred to

as “Black-Pilling”—a nihilistic determinism that sees physical appearance as the be-all and end-all of your life.

Black-pillers see appearance as life’s cheat-code. If you’re good-looking, you’ll always get preferential treatment. They’ll commonly reference Jeremy Meeks, a former gang member who was arrested on weapons charges in 2014. Within 24 hours of local police posting his mugshot online, it received 15,000 likes and 3,700 comments, mostly from women, leading to the trending hashtag #FreeJeremyMeeks.² Why? Because he was an exceptionally handsome man. Upon release from prison, he went on to have a lucrative modeling and acting career.

This is a prime example of what black-pillers termed the “halo effect”—the belief that people will automatically have a better perception of someone if they are good-looking.

Out of the Black-Pill Ashes Ascends the Looksmaxxer Phoenix

This is how looksmaxxing was born. No one wants to stay in the pit of black-pill nihilism. We all want to believe there’s some way to a better life. But if looks are everything and they’re genetically determined, what hope is there? While looksmaxxers admit that everyone has an inborn ceiling that limits how good-looking they can get, there is a spectrum of activities, treatments, pharmaceuticals, and even surgeries that teenagers and young men can use to greatly increase their SMV (Sexual Market Value).

Softmaxxing

On the less extreme end of looksmaxxing culture are a variety of beauty tips and tricks that can increase someone’s “rating.” These include skin care routines, hair loss treatments, dyeing your eyebrows, self-tanning, posture improvements, weight loss techniques, and many other low-risk self-improvement protocols.

Hardmaxxing

On the more extreme end of the spectrum, young men start to venture into the realms of dermal fillers and Botox injections, gradually increasing to more extreme forms of hardmaxxing. These include higher-risk interventions such as jaw and nose surgeries, chin implants, taking testosterone, steroids, peptides, and even crystal meth as an appetite suppressant. Hardmaxxers have even developed novel techniques, including using a hammer or fist to make microfractures on the jawbone in the belief that your bone will increase

in density when it heals, leading to a more defined, masculine jawline.

What is particularly disturbing about these hardmaxxing techniques is that influencers advocate that many of them must be employed before 18 years old, when the face is still developing. The largest icon among looksmaxxers is 20-year-old Braden Peters, nicknamed Clavicular. He started down a very risky road of hardmaxxing when he was just 14 years old. He claims that, while he would not recommend much of what he did to others, he can’t deny the positive results.

For every one example of external improvements for young men like Clavicular, this ideology and its accompanying techniques will lead dozens of teenage boys to suffer for years from body dysmorphia and increasingly distorted expectations for their physical appearance. Clavicular himself has been mired in drug abuse and dark, dangerous behavior that continually demands more; it will never be satisfied, nor will it satisfy his heart. He is seriously contemplating a high-risk double-jaw surgery, revealing his own dysmorphia.³

If You Can’t Beat Them, Join Them

Looksmaxxing is a recognition that young men live in a cruel, calculating, unfair world that judges people based on superficial standards. Looksmaxxers aren’t advocating for this kind of world; they’re saying it’s just the way it is. You can’t afford to be naive about reality if you want to get ahead in life. While much of this stems

from men’s frustrations with modern dating culture, looksmaxxing has evolved beyond romantic and sexual pursuits. Being attractive is seen as the most desirable trait for everything in life; good looks will open any door.

“We all want to believe there’s some way to a better life. But if looks are everything and they’re genetically determined, what hope is there?”

And yet this is where the facade starts to unravel. For all the work, time, money, and pain, I have yet to hear someone from this community articulate the goal of these pursuits. They speak of “ascending,” but have no destination. All I’ve heard is the same tired, empty pursuit of money, sex, and status.

Clavicular himself admits that he doesn’t even really know what happiness means, and all he cares about is being financially set by the time he’s 30 years old. What makes this even sadder is that he admits he must sin every day to be successful. While Christianity may be the correct path for an individual, he says, that only “works” if everyone else takes that path as well.⁴ Once again, he’s admitting defeat—resigning himself to a world he has no hope of changing.

continues—

“The gospel completely flips the looksmaxxing script on its head.
We must decrease so Jesus can increase.
(John 3:30)

Gospel-Pilling the Looksmaxxers

Young men are hungry for meaning and purpose, but they are vulnerable to being distracted by various forms of hustle culture online that promise quick money, status, and freedom from “normie” constraints. Deep down, in Clavicular’s eyes, I see men desperate for true life—yet they’ve taken the black pill and given up hope for anything other than “the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life” (1 John 2:16).

But in Christ, we have a gospel pill that acknowledges the real brokenness of this world while also offering genuine hope. What would I say to a young man like Clavicular and his growing legion of young male followers?

1) Notice the half-truths.

First, looksmaxxing is built on half-truths. Yes, physical attractiveness has benefits, but the inward character of a person is what makes people want to stay around them. An ascendant looksmaxxer might be able to have numerous sexual encounters, but a young man obsessed with his appearance will greatly struggle to sustain long-term relationships of any kind.

It’s good to take proactive measures to make ourselves presentable. Basic grooming and getting some nice clothes are exercising wisdom in opportunities for getting a job or finding a potential spouse. But being presentable is very different from seeking godlike status for the sake of “mogging” or outshining other men.

It’s also true that dating has become more difficult. But it is a gross distortion to assume that all women care only about looks, money, and status. In fact, looksmaxxing guarantees the attraction of shallow women. Perhaps this is an outworking of the old adage that birds of a feather flock together.

2) Jesus is making all things new.

Looksmaxxing has given up on trying to change a shallow world. But 2,000 years ago, a despised man,

with “no beauty that we should desire him” (Isa. 53:2), took on frailty and willingly walked a road of poverty and suffering in order to not just change the world, but make all things new (Rev. 21:5).

Jesus Christ is the exact opposite of a looksmaxxer. He is a servantmaxxer. He is God himself, who descended from heaven to earth, emptying himself and taking on the likeness of mortal man (Phil. 2:6–8). In his culminating act of salvation, he took on the ugliness of our sin, the shame of our nakedness, and the suffering of our punishment. And while others mocked, scorned, and spit on him, the Father vindicated his Son by raising him victoriously over all his enemies—including death itself.

The gospel completely flips the looksmaxxing script on its head. We must decrease so he can increase (John 3:30). We must become a servant of all, in the likeness of our suffering Servant-Savior (Mark 9:35). We must lose our lives here on earth (Matt. 16:25). This gospel life is the epitome of foolishness to a looksmaxxer. “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise” (1 Cor. 1:27).

Come to Jesus—Just as You Are

To Clavicular, I ask a simple question: “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36). At most, you might have a few good years in your 20s and 30s to maximize your looks. But “what is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes” (James 4:14). What you call “ascending” is a cheap substitute for resurrection life.

All the peptides and testosterone injections can’t create a body that comes anywhere close to the glorified bodies reserved for those who love Christ’s appearing. And even now, regardless of your jawline or orbital bone structure, Jesus offers an abundant life. Your life can never be filled or satisfied by sex, money, or status. A life of true satisfaction—a life I know you long for but can’t find—that life is found in Jesus alone. Come to him, just as you are. ■

¹ Sophia Singh, “Tinder Stats 2025: The Key Numbers & Fun Facts About Tinder,” March 24, 2025, <https://www.irocketx.com/change-location/tinder-statistics/>.

² Ian McDonald, “4 Arrested in Weapons Sweep; 1 Getting Extra Attention Online,” Fox40, June 18, 2014, <https://fox40.com/news/local-news/4-arrested-in-operation-ceasefire-sweep>.

³ Michael Knowles and Braden Peters, “I Would Hit Myself in the Face with a Hammer,” *Michael Knowles and the Looksmaxxer*, Clavicular, The Michael Knowles Show, December 27, 2025, https://youtu.be/e8qj9RNA938?si=3OW_o0O3qqdyEV2H&t=1402.

⁴ Jack Neel and Braden Peters, “I Enjoy Nothing,” *Clavicular Exposes the Dark Reality of Fame, Censorship, and Success*, The Jack Neel Podcast, February 28, 2026, https://youtu.be/4YHIf5c98LA?si=Ua_8Xm9_zAO3rgW&t=8085.

It's About Time for a Donor-Advised Fund

More and more supporters are giving to Harvest USA through their donor-advised funds.

Like a "charitable giving account," a donor-advised fund (DAF) allows you to give cash, stock, and other appreciated assets into a single account. From there, you can recommend grants to Harvest USA and your other favorite causes.

Is it time for you to consider a donor-advised fund?

Through Harvest USA's partnership with Barnabas Foundation, you have access to the Stewards Fund, a Christian donor-advised fund.

To learn more, call Jim Barr at 215-482-0111 x119 or email jimb@harvestusa.org.

4 Timely Considerations

Why are DAFs so popular?

For many people, it's all about time.

- 1. Receive an immediate tax deduction.** Trying to beat the clock for year-end giving? As long as your gift is deposited by December 31, you can claim credit on this year's taxes. Later, you can advise how to distribute the funds.
- 2. Choose the timing of your distributions.** Promptly direct funds from your account to address real-time ministry needs.
- 3. Save time-wasting hassles when giving stock, real estate, or other assets.** Your donor-advised fund administrator will handle the liquidation of appreciated assets that you'd like to convert into cash for ministry.
- 4. Save time when giving to multiple ministries.** Streamline your giving and record-keeping by gifting all cash, stock or other appreciated assets into a single account from which you'll receive one charitable receipt.

"There MUST Be a Better Way!"

Gifts That Reduce Taxes

It's the pivotal moment of every classic infomercial. Frustrated by their current way of living, a melodramatic actor laments: "There MUST be a better way!"

At the risk of sounding theatrical, here's something you should try. If you've always given from your wallet or bank account, there IS a better way.

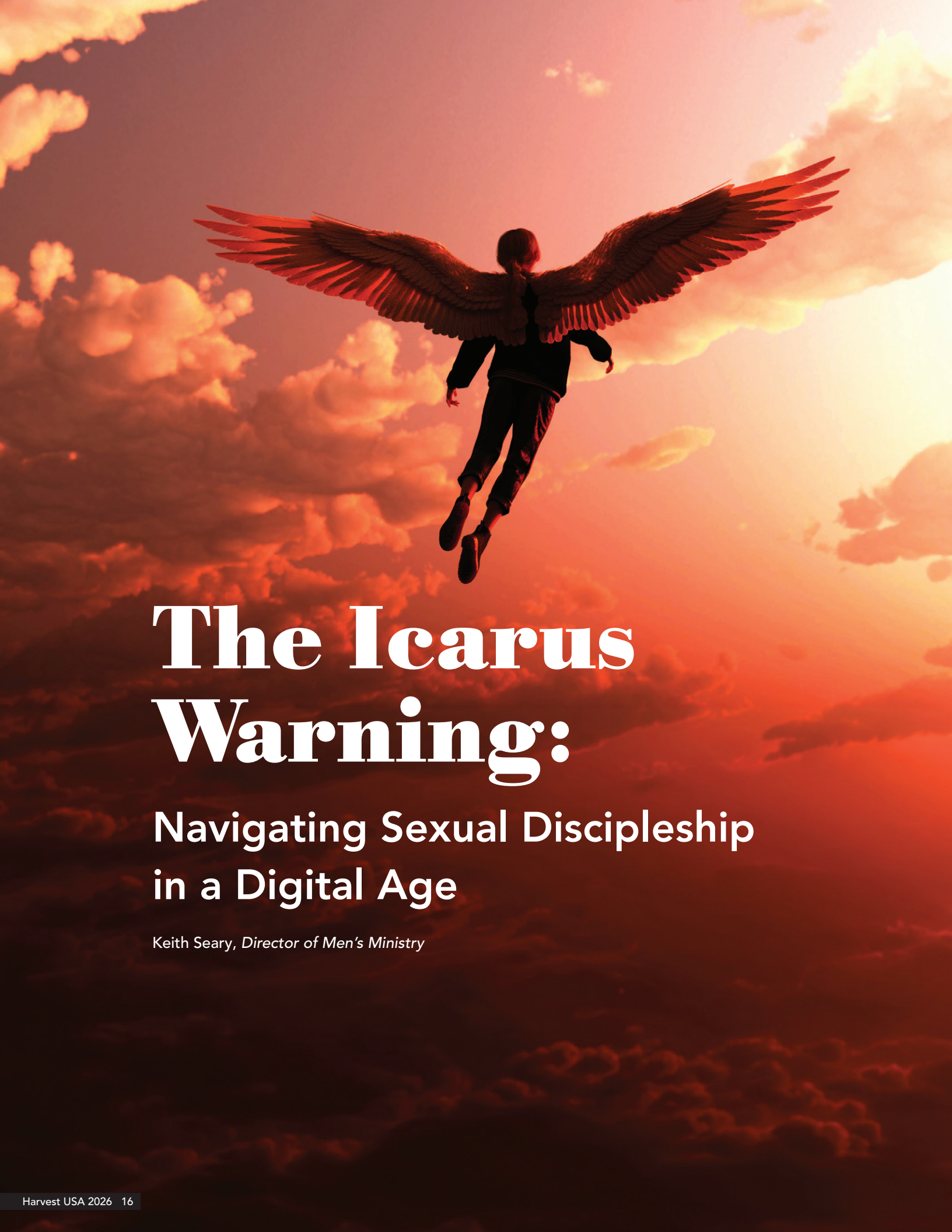
When you give stock, real estate or other appreciated assets to Harvest USA, you can increase your impact and reduce your taxes!

But wait, there's more! Giving appreciated assets may also help you:

- **Give** in a substantial way without restricting your cash flow.
- **Eliminate** hassles by giving things you no longer need or care to manage.
- **Reduce** taxes or complications for loved ones by giving assets now rather than leaving them in your estate.

Giving appreciated assets is smart, simple and powerful—and we'd love to show you how.

To learn more, contact Jim Barr by emailing jimb@harvestusa.org or call (215) 482-0111.



The Icarus Warning:

Navigating Sexual Discipleship
in a Digital Age

Keith Seary, Director of Men's Ministry

In the famous mythological prisonbreak, the artificial wings Daedalus created to carry himself and his son, Icarus, to freedom are described with a sense of foreboding: “[Daedalus] applied his thought to [a] new invention and altered the natural order of things.”¹ The brilliant wings he designed were a new invention—an extraordinary means of freedom. But they were also an unnatural alteration of human design so risky that Daedalus was left in tears and trembling at the thought of using them.

Similarly, transhumanism is a philosophy that directs technological development toward redefining and “perfecting” humanity, and it’s historically prominent within Silicon Valley. Technology is often not designed with neutral intentions, but according to an alternative understanding of anthropology, soteriology, and eschatology that directly challenges a Christian worldview.² This is truly concerning.

At the same time, there remains a legitimate category for technology as a tool. Technology includes such useful tools as the printing press and the wheel. God designed human development to include stewarding what God alone created *ex-nihilo* as we harvest, cultivate, refine, and craft (Gen. 1:28; Deut. 8:7–9; Gen. 4:22; Ex. 31:1–11). So, with this tension, how should we integrate technology with discipleship? We would do well to consider Daedalus’s warning to his son: “Let me warn you, Icarus, to take the middle way, in case the moisture weighs down your wings if you fly too low, or if you go too high, the sun scorches them. Travel between the extremes.”³

Can We Fly Safely Between Sun and Sea?

How do we know when our use of technology as a tool has gone too far, disfiguring our created identity as humans? If you had invented Daedalus’s wings, how might you have kept yourself from identifying as a bird instead of as a person? Dr. Charles Hodge’s commentary on 1 Corinthians 6:12 gives direction here, establishing that Christian liberty becomes enslavement when there is a compromise in *self-respect*.⁴ Self-respect is “a proper respect for oneself as a human being . . . regard for one’s own standing or position.”⁵ A useful tool mutates into an enslaving, false identity when it dishonors one’s true identity, standing, and position as a human being: an embodied soul, an image-bearer of God, a purposefully engendered male or female, and a finite creature meant for fruitfulness under the provision of an infinite Creator (Gen. 1, 2).

We’ll consider two ways we can use technology to help disciple sexual sinners, how those same uses can be corrupted to work against God-honoring care, and how to find an anchor-point amid confusion. Christ’s own body, his beloved church, provides shelter and discernment to help us avoid such pitfalls.

Flying Too Low: Refreshing Mist or Drowning Alone

Today’s technological world has us all perpetually saturated in information. Hundreds of thousands of social media posts were shared, millions of videos and songs were streamed, millions of Google searches were performed, and tens of thousands of AI queries were made every 60 seconds during 2025.⁶ Many people use this unceasing flow of content to fuel their sinful searching for “every kind of impurity (Eph. 4:19),” while others use this deep well to grow a refreshing library of Christ-centered content that carries them across raging seas of sexual temptation. Herein lies a discipleship dilemma: Is it worth the risk of people finding sinful material online for our discipleship to include digitally-accessible, biblically-inspired content?

“*While technology can be a permissible aid in the discipleship of sexual sinners, no technological advancement will displace the Christian’s primary need for embodied discipleship in the local church.*

However, I think we need to ask a more foundational question: What place does data, information, and truth have in God’s design for sanctification? Paul answers this in Ephesians 5. Good data must always be brought in alignment with biblical truth, and acquiring truth must go hand in hand with *applying* truth. Our learning changes us as it is applied to our relationships. Consuming good digital data alone and in ongoing isolation for the sake of sexual purity is in vain, because it is disconnected from the development of critical relational qualities such as transparency, intimacy, and love. Technology can offer supplemental relational nourishment when it’s used to facilitate real, human relationships. But we must guard against allowing the appropriate use of technology to morph into a gluttony that overstimulates, leaving no social capacity left for real-life discipleship.⁷

Listening to a three-hour podcast to shape your prayer life or fuel discussion with your church’s small group is an

continues—



“Whenever it seems that discipleship is challenging one’s autonomy or individuality, technology makes it easy to hop from one church, support group, or spiritual influencer to the next.

entirely different process of engagement than listening to the same podcast as a mind-numbing distraction to suppress lust and avoid formulating a plan to watch pornography that evening. One process is using good data to nurture relationships with both God and fellow believers, while the other is passively inputting data to drown out the cries of a heart that needs relational care.

Helpers can also settle for data acquisition instead of relational development. Accountability software, for example, provides an instant notification when sin is likely being entertained. That is an immensely profitable provision and use of data. However, this tool loses its effectiveness when it compensates for a fading discipleship relationship. Reaching out becomes limited to when alerts pop up, and those check-ins are restricted to behavior policing. The craft of building a relationship, of broadly and deeply engaging with a person, is exchanged for a relationally-sterile documenting of sins. Such data-driven communication becomes so disconnected from caring for the soul that it ceases to be a helpful tool. Instead, it reveals a cheapened respect for the human connection, which is foundational to discipleship.

Flying Too High: Interconnected Growth or Radical Individualism

Technology enables human connectivity to be as expansive as the heavens that reflect God’s glory (Ps. 19). We are all relational astronauts; with the small step of tapping a screen, we engage in giant leaps of human development.⁸ We habitually reach up and through the realm of the stars to connect.⁹ God promises that he will spread out his church across the world to be as numerous “as the stars of heaven,” and with that promise comes a missional charge for discipleship that equally expands (Gen. 26:4; Matt. 28:18–20).

If you’re a Christian feeling enslaved to sexual sin or a helper feeling inadequate in discipleship, technology reminds you, in a historically unprecedented way, that you are not alone. When feeling isolated, look up and remember that you’re a part of a supportive Christian

body more numerous than all those bright lights in the sky. Your heavenly Father, who, by his own power, forever sustains all those stars, is providentially working to bring just the right network of supportive saints into your life—even through technology. I continue to be amazed by the stories I hear of how sexual strugglers, their families, and their churches—from Europe to California, Africa to Pittsburgh—have found Harvest USA through a last-ditch Google search or asking ChatGPT for a ministry that offers biblical help with sexual issues. Don’t give up! Wisely press on in seeking your discipleship network.

However, this integration of technology and discipleship also enables saints struggling with sexual sin to interact with the church in the same way we’re all tempted to interact with our sin: in self-centered, radical individualism. Just as we can use technology to curate an artificial sexual experience catered to one’s desires, we can apply that same individualistic framework to discipleship. Technology can be used to curate a “Frankenstein’s monster” version of discipleship, something we build for ourselves based on our preferences, desires, and goals apart from the humility of submitting to outside counsel. Discipleship ceases to be a mutual commitment to pursue enduring growth in biblical truth and love. Instead, sin is coddled and relationships are as fragile as eggshells. There remains an ever-readiness to press the “escape” button when the abrasiveness of dying to sin and self enters the relationship.

Whenever it seems that discipleship is challenging one’s autonomy or individuality, technology makes it easy to hop from one church, support group, or spiritual influencer to the next. Biblical conflict resolution, forgiveness, reconciliation, repentance, self-sacrifice, patience, and every other expression of Holy Spirit fruitfulness (Gal. 5) are exchanged for tech-driven, self-centered escapism. Everything that God uses to choke the growth of sin at the very roots can be quickly replaced by what serves as fertilizer to fuel sexual sin’s growth.

Local churches can end up accommodating this radical individualism for the sake of convenience and out of

fear. Sexual perversion is invasive, and the necessary investment for impactful discipleship is, indeed, weighty. Local churches can often feel ill-equipped to know how to help people who struggle with sexual sin. Therefore, churches can conclude that outsourcing care is the sole option. The only care a local church might offer is an effort to find new ways to address sexual sin outside the walls of the church, an equation of subtraction that looks like searching Google, questioning ChatGPT, and hopping on the umpteenth virtual coaching consultation. This redirects the suffering sinner and their care away from their *home* church.

Appropriate technology use, instead, should be about addition—wisely developing long-term, local church “one-anothering” and pastoral care, and using technology to supplement that primary church discipleship. It is in the local church where, foundationally, all members of the body of Christ are to “confess [their] sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed”; this includes sexual sins (James 5:16). The Lord does not call online programs, resources, or social influencers to provide this transformative, necessary care. Rather, such an outworking of Christ’s grace is found uniquely in the local church (1 Cor. 10:13, 6:11).

The Local Church: Our Anchor for Discipleship in God’s Unfolding Story

We began this consideration of technology and discipleship with Cretan mythology; let’s conclude with biblical history. The Apostle Paul commissioned Titus to build up the local church in Crete not as a “remote”

project but as an embodied one (Titus 1:5). The goal was to cultivate faith and good works in the lives of these Christians through appointing elders “in every town”—local men appointed to local churches. Daedalus’s plan was to escape from the debauchery and captivity of Crete, but Paul’s plan was to overcome debauchery through establishing local church discipleship.

While technology can be a permissible aid in the discipleship of sexual sinners, no technological advancement will displace the Christian’s primary need for embodied discipleship in the local church. This is especially true when correcting the embodied distortions that sexual sin cultivates (1 Cor. 6:12–20). Local church participation, in a distinct and necessary manner, nourishes and sustains the Christian’s communion with Christ. The Lord’s Supper highlights this well. Christ offers himself to his church, in the most sacred context, using a human experience—an activity of body and soul. The sacrament of communion is intentionally effectual as a soul-nourishing, embodied, and sensual experience.

In a digital age powerfully straining and stretching us in our humanity and sexuality, there is a heightened need for the local church. We need to engage weekly as embodied souls and ensouled bodies, together tasting and seeing the goodness of God available through his means of grace: cooperate prayer, Scripture reading, baptism, and communion. This is necessary to anchor Christian discipleship to our shared identity as redeemed humans. In this relational context—living together in Christ as our Creator intended—we can steward technology and wisely integrate it with discipleship to avoid flying too close to the sun or into the sea. ■

“In a digital age powerfully straining and stretching us in our humanity and sexuality, there is a heightened need for the local church.”

¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Anthony S. Kline, The Ovid Collection, Book VIII: 183–235 “Daedalus and Icarus,” <https://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph8.htm>.

² Samuel D. James, *Digital Liturgies: Rediscovering Christian Wisdom in an Online Age* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 33–48.

³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Anthony S. Kline.

⁴ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 104–103.

⁵ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, “self-respect,” accessed April 16, 2026, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self-respect>.

⁶ Shiva Kalyankar, “What Happens in a Minute on the Internet? A Look at 60 Seconds of Chaos,” *Medium*, July 16, 2025, <https://medium.com/@shivakalyankar13/what-happens-in-a-minute-on-the-internet-a-look-at-60-seconds-of-chaos-131621fed77>.

⁷ Brett McKay and Kate McKay, “Podcast #1,060: No, There Isn’t a Loneliness Epidemic (And That May Be an Even Bigger Problem),” *The Art of Manliness*, September 8, 2025, <https://www.artofmanliness.com/people/relationships/podcast-1060-no-there-isnt-a-loneliness-epidemic-and-that-may-be-an-even-bigger-problem/>.

⁸ American Philosophical Society, “Transcript of the First Moon Landing,” <https://www.amphilosoc.org/item-detail/transcript-first-moon-landing>.

⁹ Eric Mack, “There Are 10,000 Active Satellites in Orbit. Most Belong to Elon Musk,” *Forbes.com*, July 19, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ericmack/2024/07/19/theres-now-10000-active-satellites-in-orbit-most-belong-to-elon-musk/>.



TECHNOLOGY & *Discipleship:*

Watching and Praying for Our Children's Souls

Joy Worrell, *Parents and Family Ministry*

Never in human history has a generation carried in its pocket, all day long, a device capable of shaping identity, relationships, beliefs, desires, and worldview. Today, nearly every teenager owns a smartphone, and many report being online almost constantly. What once formed young hearts—family conversations, church life, books, outdoor play, and face-to-face friendships—is now increasingly mediated through screens.

The question for Christians is not *whether* technology is shaping the next generation. It is. The question is whether families and churches will intentionally disciple young people in the way of Christ rather than unconsciously surrendering that role to the digital world.

The Power of Technology to Capture Our Children

Modern technology is not designed merely to serve us; it is designed to capture us. Social media platforms and apps operate within an “attention economy” in which endless scrolling, notifications, and personalized algorithms are engineered to keep users engaged for as long as possible.

As Tony Reinke writes, “Our phones do not just change what we do; they change who we are becoming.” For young people whose identities and habits are still forming, constant digital engagement can have profound effects.¹

Research increasingly links heavy technology use with anxiety, depression, loneliness, and suicidal ideation among adolescents. Sleep is often disrupted by late-night phone use, while social media intensifies comparison and insecurity as young people measure their lives against carefully-curated online images.

On the Confronting Christianity podcast, Rebecca McLaughlin interviewed Shelby Abbott about the growing loneliness epidemic among Gen Z.² Abbott noted that, although Gen Z is often described as the most connected generation, many are profoundly disconnected. Excessive digital communication can hinder face-to-face relational skills because tone, body language, and real-time interaction are often absent online.

Technology that begins as a tool can easily become a master, echoing Paul’s warning that believers should not be “dominated by anything” (1 Cor. 6:12).

The Power of Technology to Disciple Our Children

Beyond emotional and psychological effects, technology also presents enormous spiritual challenges. Through smartphones, young people now have immediate access to pornography and other harmful content. Studies suggest that the average age of first exposure to pornography is around ten years old, often through accidental exposure online.³ Repeated exposure can shape expectations about sexuality, relationships, and identity in ways contrary to biblical teaching.

Proverbs 4:23 reminds us: “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.” Every generation is disciplined by something. Today, many young people are influenced more by online voices than by families, churches, or local communities. Influencers, viral trends, and algorithm-driven feeds shape conversations about identity, sexuality, success, and happiness.

For many parents, one of the most sobering developments of the digital age has been the rise in transgender and nonbinary identification among adolescents since the mid-2010s. In *Irreversible Damage*, Abigail Shrier argues that social media ecosystems and online peer dynamics can profoundly shape how young people interpret emotional distress, identity struggles, and belonging.⁴

Platforms such as TikTok, Reddit, YouTube, and Instagram do not simply entertain; they catechize. They shape a young person’s understanding of identity and belonging long before wisdom, maturity, or biblical grounding are fully formed. For Christian parents, this is a reminder that the battle for our children is not merely about screen time, but about discipleship and worldview.

Technology and Discipleship: Practical Steps

Christians need not reject technology altogether. Like many tools, it can be used for great good. Scripture, sermons, education, and global communication have all been expanded through digital means. Wisdom, however, requires recognizing technology’s formative power.

“The battle for our children is not only about screen time, but about discipleship, worldview, and the voices shaping the hearts and imaginations of the next generation.

Families and churches can respond in several practical ways:

- Cultivate technology-free spaces such as family meals.
- Practice digital Sabbath rhythms that allow regular time away from screens.
- Teach discernment rather than relying only on rules.
- Delay smartphone access when possible.
- Model healthy technology use as adults.
- Prioritize embodied worship, fellowship, and conversation.

Recent developments in artificial intelligence add yet another layer of complexity to Christian discipleship in the digital age. In *How to Stay Human in an AI World*, Pete Nicholas argues that Christians must intentionally cultivate distinctly human and biblical virtues as AI becomes woven into daily life.⁵ He makes four main points:

First, Christians must pursue fellowship over radical individualism. AI technologies can make it easier than ever to live in isolation while still *feeling* connected. Nicholas observes that AI may accelerate the individualism already growing in modern society. Yet Scripture calls believers not to neglect meeting together (Heb. 10:25), reminding us that Christian maturity grows in embodied community, not technological self-sufficiency.

Second, we must value presence over virtual living. AI is not embodied. It does not truly perceive or experience the world as human beings created in God’s image do. Christians should therefore cultivate habits of attentiveness—showing up for worship, meals, conversations, and family life with phones put away and hearts fully engaged.

Third, Christians must embrace patience over relentless efficiency. AI can quickly produce emails, presentations, and summaries, but shortcuts can bypass the slower process through which wisdom, discipline, and maturity are formed. Nicholas recounts the example of a college student whose dependence on AI produced efficiency at the expense of genuine growth.

Finally, Christians must pursue truth rather than sensationalism. Scripture calls believers to “test everything; hold fast what is good” (1 Thess. 5:21). AI can amplify misinformation, shallow understanding, and emotionally manipulative content designed merely to capture attention. Christians must therefore remain discerning, refusing to confuse quick summaries or technological convenience with wisdom and truth.

continues—

Technology Boundaries and Pointing Our Children to True Joy

Perhaps most importantly, young people need to see that life with Christ offers something far richer than constant digital stimulation. Communion with God through Scripture reading, meditation, and prayer—meaningful friendships, serving others, worshiping with God’s people, and enjoying the beauty of God’s creation are not lesser joys than the digital world offers; they are better, deeper, and truer joys.

Psalm 46:10–11 reminds us to “‘Be still, and know that I am God.’ . . . The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.” In his excellent devotional, Dane Ortlund writes, “Psalm 46 offers an alternative to the world. It says: Be still. Be quiet. Look up. Calm down. God reigns.”⁶ How desperately our children need this great God to be their refuge in an increasingly noisy and chaotic digital world.

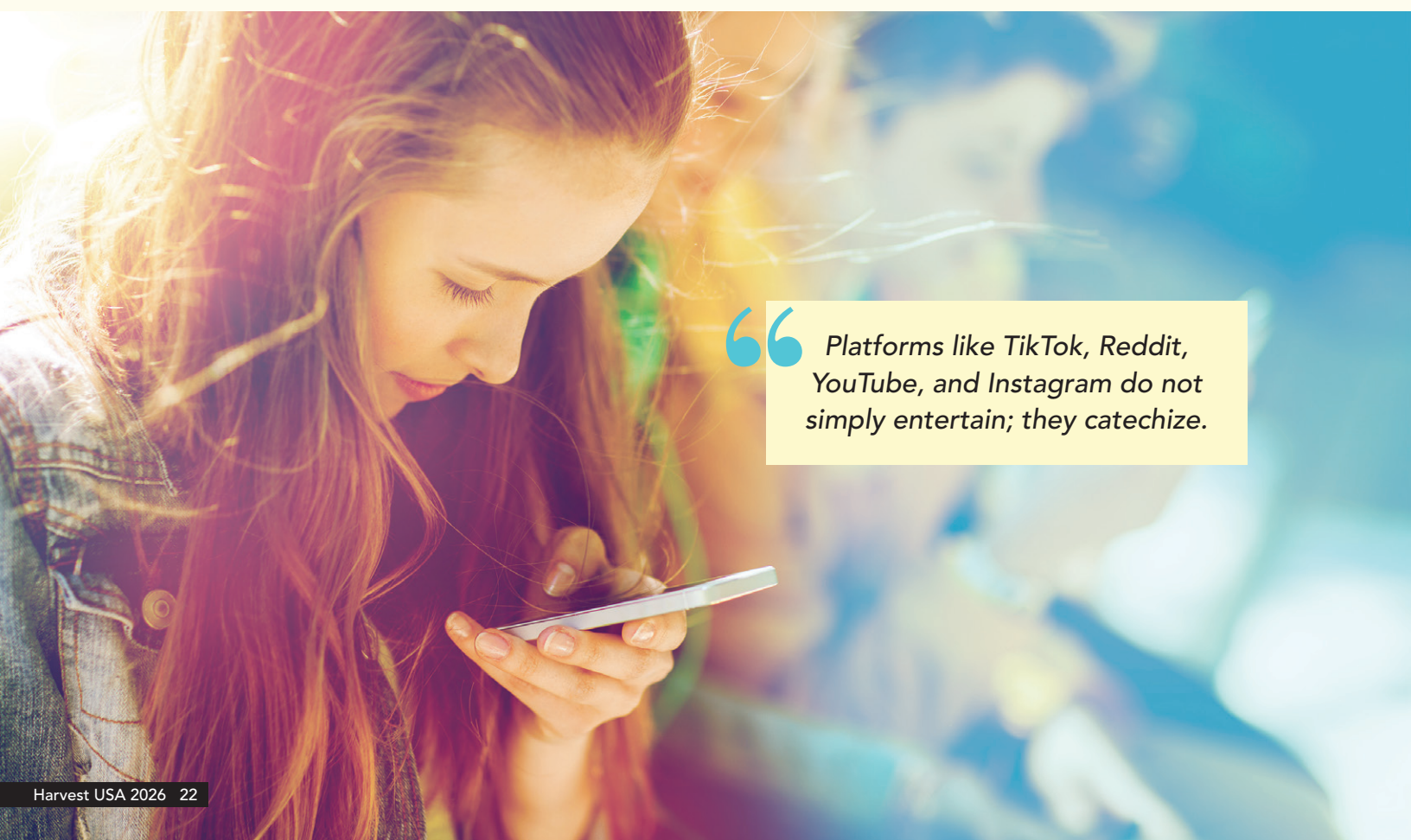
Here are a few candid reflections from parents I’ve had the privilege of walking alongside over the last several years through Harvest USA. Names and identifying details have been omitted for privacy.

My daughter got a phone (grandmother’s old smartphone) at the age of 13 because she was babysitting. We had Covenant Eyes on her phone, but she still found a way around that to look at porn

sometime in her mid-teens. She kept a diary and we read it. We thought she was doing better, but she got into pornography and sexting during COVID. I’m not sure I have the answers. I think waiting as long as possible to give children phones and maybe flip phones. They have to learn to be careful about what they consume (Philippians 4:8) and guard their hearts. We have to prepare them to be on their own and be like Joseph and flee temptation online. I know the prefrontal cortex isn’t fully developed until after 25, and my daughter and son-in-law had their brains warped by pornography and social media.

There are many things I would do over, concerning the phone! Number one is I would not have allowed him to have the phone in his room at night. I also would have done a better job at monitoring his phone. Even though my son was in college when he told us he was bi-sexual, I assume the propaganda had found its way to him before then.

What I would do differently is to completely keep my daughter off any social media and art sites. I would monitor EVERYTHING she looked at online. This is a difficult “ask” when you’re trying to allow your



“ Platforms like TikTok, Reddit, YouTube, and Instagram do not simply entertain; they catechize.

teenager their own independence and freedom, but at the same time want to protect them from mentally-destructive websites such as Tumblr, YouTube, Deviant Art, Reddit, etc. Many parents thought these sites were just innocent ways for kids to share art and friendship. That's what I thought until my daughter descended into madness and I was left to figure out what really happened.

These parents are not offering pat, easy answers. Parenting in the digital age is extraordinarily difficult, and many faithful Christian parents carry deep grief, questions, and regrets. Amid this sorrow, we can find refuge in the sufficient work of Jesus for weak and fallible parents. We are secure based on his righteousness alone, not our own. That said, these parents' reflections remind us that wisdom, vigilance, prayer, and intentional discipleship matter profoundly.

Watching and Praying: Entrust Your Children to Jesus

A few years ago, not long after I came on staff with Harvest USA, our daughter-in-law asked me what Christian parents could do to protect their children from the onslaught of LGBTQ+ ideology and indoctrination that seemed to be reaching a fever pitch. I remember fumbling through my answer because I had no simple formula to offer her. Parenting has always required wisdom, discernment, humility, and dependence upon God, and the digital age has only intensified those needs.

As I have reflected more on her question over the years, I think Christ's words to his disciples are instructive: **"Watch and pray** that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:41). We must watch and pray for our children.

We must watch—to understand the world discipling them, to recognize the influence of technology and online ideologies, and to exercise wise and loving oversight of what is shaping their hearts and minds. Christian vigilance is not paranoia or fearfulness, but sober-minded shepherding.



“Parents cannot control every influence their children encounter. Better filters and less screen time may be wise and necessary, but ultimately our children need Christ.”

And we must pray—because ultimately only God can open blind eyes, guard hearts, grant repentance, and preserve faith. Parents cannot control every influence their children encounter. Better filters and less screen time may be wise and necessary, but ultimately our children need Christ. They need the transforming grace of God and the Spirit's help to love what is true, good, and beautiful.

The digital age has brought new challenges, but Christ remains a faithful Savior who has not abandoned his people. May God grant you, dear parents, wisdom to watch carefully, humility to seek help when needed, courage to act faithfully, and perseverance to pray earnestly for the precious souls entrusted to your care. ■

¹ Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* (Crossway, 2017; Wheaton, IL), 18.

² Rebecca McLaughlin, interview, “Why Are We So Lonely? With Shelby Abbot,” *The Confronting Christianity Podcast*, April 6, 2026, <https://www.confrontingchristianity.org/podcast>.

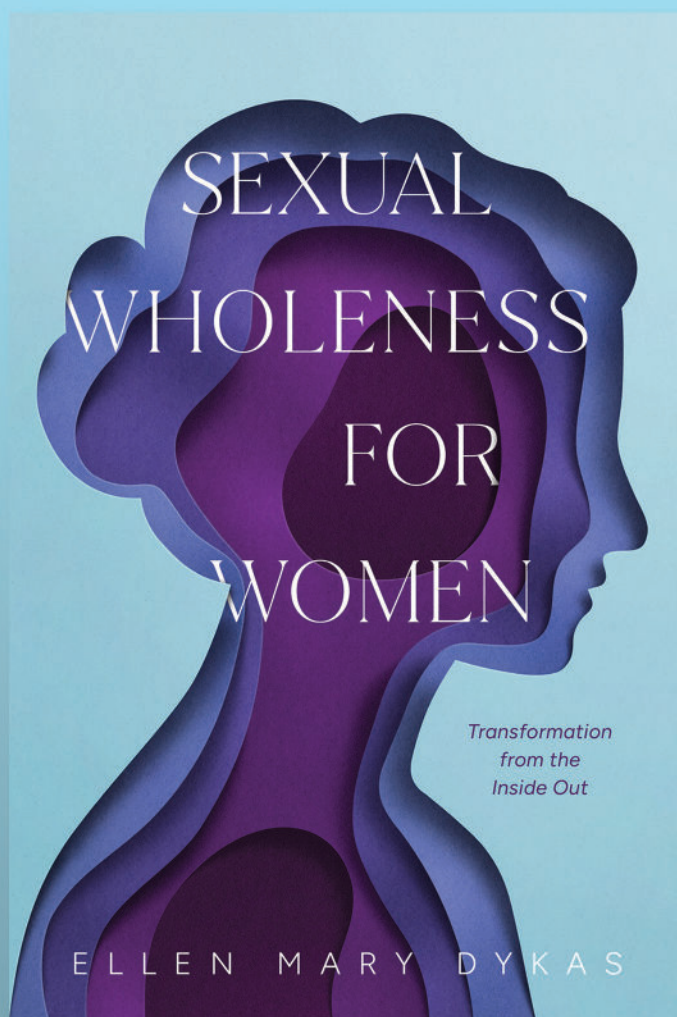
³ John Fort, “The Common Reality of Early Porn Exposure,” *Covenant Eyes*, April 30, 2026, <https://www.covenanteyes.com/blog/the-common-reality-of-early-porn-exposure/>.

⁴ Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* (Skyhorse Publishing: 2021).

⁵ Pete Nicholas, “How to Stay Human in an AI World,” *The Gospel Coalition*, May 13, 2026, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/stay-human-ai-world/>.

⁶ Dane Ortlund, *In the Lord I Take Refuge: 150 Daily Devotions Through the Psalms* (Crossway: 2021), 131.

Introducing a new workbook to help women struggling with sexual sin pursue wholeness in Christ.



Struggles with sexual sin, and the brokenness that usually accompanies them, often fill women with shame and confusion. With the help of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of God's Word, women can experience transformation that works from the inside out to bring about a new life of freedom and joy. In this 12-session workbook, Ellen Mary Dykas will gently guide you through your struggle with sexual sin toward Jesus and the healing, heart-transforming power of the gospel.

LEARN MORE



“Dykas skillfully handles the topic of sexual brokenness with compassion and clarity. Ellen’s approach considers the wide range of sexual struggles and applies biblical wisdom for genuine transformation. This book will bring hope to hurting women and those who walk alongside them.”

Sharonda Cooper, Content Coordinator for Women's Initiatives,
The Gospel Coalition; author; Bible teacher