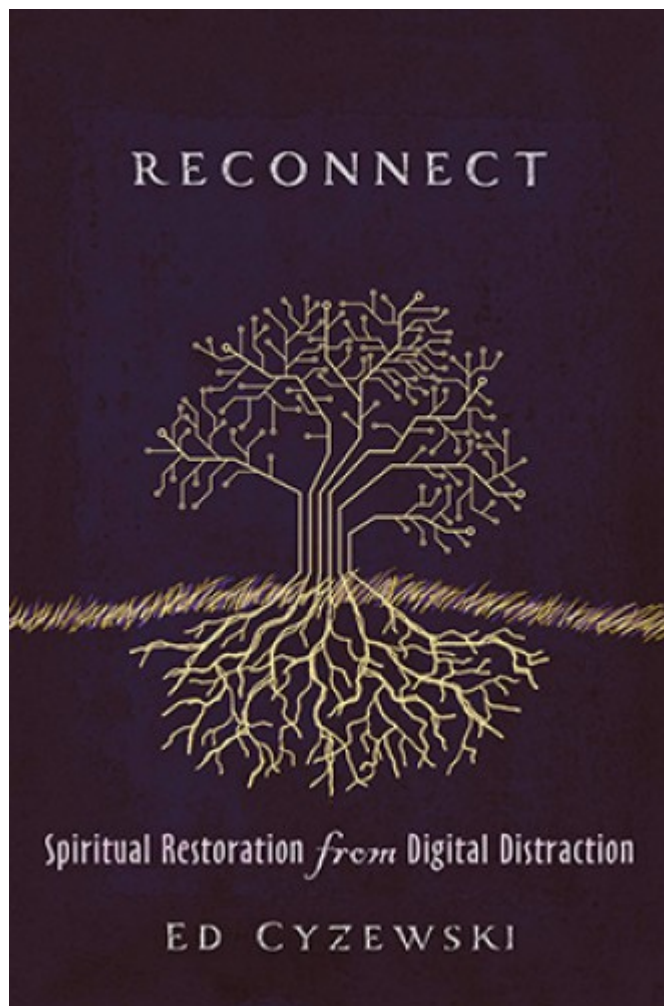


We need our screens right now. But what about later?

Ed Cyzewski's prepandemic takedown of the digital formation of Christians is still surprisingly useful.

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [July 15, 2020](#) issue

In Review



Reconnect

Spiritual Restoration from Digital Distraction

By Ed Cyzewski

Herald Press

God bless the authors of brand new books written in a prepandemic world. When Ed Cyzewski wrote *Reconnect*, the local church was largely an analog, embodied community. Many congregations had websites or Facebook pages, and some were live-streaming worship to reach homebound members—but the gathering happened in real life. The church's disinclination to dwell on the cutting edge of technology could even be seen as something of a blessing. Cyzewski writes:

If the church has one asset going for it, it's the fact that it offers a physical space where people reliably show up every week. That physical space does not need video screens, smartphones, or other forms of technology to accomplish its purpose, and if every scrap of technology were removed from most church sanctuaries, the experience on Sunday wouldn't necessarily suffer or change that much—at least it shouldn't.

I read those words in my pajamas on a Sunday morning in April, shortly after viewing on YouTube the worship service my colleagues and I had prerecorded using our smartphones.

It goes without saying that portions of a book about reducing our dependence on technology for the sake of Christian spirituality would be rendered obsolete on arrival by the vicissitudes of 2020. For instance, I cringed when I read Cyzewski's take on the deleterious effects of screen time on children and youth. If my own reliance on devices has grown during this time, my kids' has positively surged, as their e-learning kept them plastered to their school-issued Chromebooks for hours each day.

In the past few months, the church's abrupt loss of physical space and the ability to gather in groups has radically increased our dependence on technology. What can we do but turn our eyes upon our screens when, however one-dimensional they may be, they are our only means of connection with our friends, family, and church?

Despite the complications of the present context, there is much to recommend in *Reconnect*. Enough of the text is truly timeless that I suspect—or at least hope—it

will survive the unfortunate timing of its initial release.

Cyzewski begins with a critique of technology that both echoes and deepens critiques I've encountered before. Social media in particular, he believes, is distracting, divisive, and disruptive. Acknowledging that many people are ashamed of their inability to resist technology, Cyzewski cites psychologists, technologists, and industry whistleblowers to argue that such dependence is not entirely a problem at the user end. Technology is designed not for human flourishing but "to become invasive, habit-forming, and compulsive." After all, the more time we spend scrolling—and the more personal information we disclose—the more money the tech industry can make on us.

Our widespread capitulation to "digital formation" is particularly troubling to Cyzewski. Rather than be formed by notifications, followers, and hot takes, Christians should be "first and foremost concerned with our identities as beloved children of God, created in God's image and blessed by Christ becoming incarnate among humanity." Cyzewski draws on the wisdom of contemplatives such as Thomas Merton, Howard Thurman, and Cynthia Bourgeault as he describes our calling to engage in intentional spiritual formation through prayer, scripture reading, and silence.

Cyzewski is at once alarmist and empathetic; to read his book is to be convicted, but gently. He manages this in part by weaving his own story into the narrative, revealing glimpses of how a better balance of digital and spiritual formation has borne fruit in his own life.

For all its criticism of technology—and there is a lot—the book is strongest as a practical resource for living faithfully in a digital world. Cyzewski guides Christians toward habits that cultivate spiritual growth and human flourishing. These include honoring regular patterns of prayer, silence, and meaningful connections, along with systematically establishing and adhering to firm boundaries around technology use.

While Cyzewski is adamant that technology is not neutral, he advocates for intentionality, not abstinence. "If technology isn't going away, then we can choose how we use it, to pass on blessings, encouragement, assistance, condolences, and affirming words," Cyzewski writes. If this sounds to you like an unrealistic take on the internet, which so often resembles a cesspool of human depravity, you haven't met Ed Cyzewski. I have, albeit briefly; we inhabit the same network of Christian

writers. He is one of the most memorably kind and generous people I've encountered in nearly 20 years of befriending strangers online.

Out of frantic necessity, our relationships and churches have become far more entangled with technology than any of us would have imagined six months ago. But the current pandemic isn't going to last forever, and at a certain point we will reassess and reorient our relationship with technology. *Reconnect* will be a ready guidebook to help individuals and institutions navigate this reorientation.

"Digital devices and social media can have their place at times, but the body and blood of our compassionate and fully present Savior remind us each Sunday that we need flesh-and-blood connection," Cyzewski writes. "The God who is always present for us desires to reconnect with us and to help us reconnect with others because there is something better to be found in the tears, sweat, blisters, and blood of the people right around us." A quote bespattered with bodily fluids may not be ideal for the present moment. But one day, in a post-pandemic world, it will be safe for the body of Christ to rediscover that "something better."