

DMN 972

Models of Cultural Analysis

ACTS Seminars

Dr. Guenther

Research Paper

A Desire for Dialogue:

Podcasts and Forums as a Response to Media Polarization

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May 26, 2021

Introduction: Identifying the Trend

When I enrolled in this course, a former classmate expressed his surprise, asking “haven’t you already done that?” I responded that no, I hadn’t – I had written essays on all of the “perspectival frames” for the D.Min program except for this one – about engaging our culture. I expected it to be more demanding than the others, requiring me to perform genuine research and providing less opportunity for me to lean on my previous knowledge. In this sense, I was not disappointed – and I am glad for this, as the challenging readings and robust research has prepared me well to launch into my final project in the coming academic year.

That being said, it turns out that in a sense, I have done this before. Ten years ago, in THS 680, I also analyzed a cultural trend for a research paper. Back then, I explored the topic of Facebook’s rise, identified it as the “new Aeropagus” (Acts 17:19-21) and called the church to use it as a platform to engage its culture. As Stanley Grenz has explains, the community of Christ is called to remain in conversation with its surrounding culture. While some seek to share the gospel through correlation (answering the culture’s existential questions) and others through contextualization (letting the gospel critique and affirm aspects of the culture), Grenz insists on a dialectic approach. While sharing God’s Word, we must also listen for the Spirit’s voice in culture; while expressing the gospel, we must acknowledge the contextual nature of that expression. Therefore, to effectively communicate the gospel, we must seek to be in ongoing conversation with our culture.¹ In 2011, Facebook appeared to be the place for that to happen well.

Now, after a decade has passed, I find myself returning to this topic with quite a different perspective. In the context of increasing political polarization in the United States, the main news networks and social media platforms have followed suit. Rather than appealing to diverse

¹ Stanley J. Grenz, “Culture and Spirit: The Role of Cultural Context in Theological Reflection,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 55 No.2 (Fall 2000), 41-48.

audiences and facilitating dialogue, their narrow content and customizing algorithms have amplified the problem. To put it bluntly, Facebook is not what it once was; the Aeropagus has literally become a “marketplace”² of sponsored posts and an echo chamber of polarized ideas. Consequently, a new trend has emerged: as political polarization has increasingly affected news networks and social media platforms, their social engagement has decreased. Simultaneously, the public is increasingly turning to other forms of media where meaningful dialogue can occur, such as podcasts and forums.

The Context: Political Polarization in America

By May 5, 2021, one might expect the dust to have settled from the 2020 Presidential election in the United States. The Democrats had won, they had retained control of Congress, and now controlled the tie-breaker in the Senate. Yet, rather than graciously accepting defeat and seeking to cooperate with his rivals until the next election, Republican senate minority leader Mitch McConnell told NBC News that “one hundred percent of [his party’s] focus is on stopping this new administration.” As his party prepared to demote Liz Cheney for affirming the election results, McConnell claimed to have “total unity” within his party in opposition to the Biden administration.³ How did we get here?

This recent hostility between political parties in the United States represents a high point in what has been a growing trend. For example, a Pew Research study from 1994 to 2017 shows an increasing ideological divergence between Democrats and Republicans – especially among those who are more politically engaged.⁴ Specifically, the parties demonstrated a growing

² The name of Facebook’s online network for buyers and sellers.

³ Allan Smith, “McConnell says he’s ‘100 percent’ focused on ‘stopping’ Biden’s Administration,” *NBC NEWS*, May 5, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/joe-biden/mcconnell-says-he-s-100-percent-focused-stopping-biden-s-n1266443>

⁴ Lucas Bottcher and Hans Gersbach, “The Great Divide: Drivers of Polarization in the US Public,” *EPJ Data Science* 9, Article no. 32 (October 28, 2020). <https://epjdatascience.springeropen.com/articles/10.1140/epjds/s13688-020-00249-4>

divergence of opinion over issues such as corporate profits, environmental regulations, the use of diplomacy, racial equality, and immigration – there is now “less overlap in the political values of Republicans and Democrats than in the past.”⁵ Moreover, this trend is further illustrated when presidential approval ratings are divided by party affiliation. While four post-war Presidents averaged higher than 40% approval from members of the opposition party, this figure has steadily dropped with each successive president since the end of the Cold War. As a result, the gap between the parties has widened, and the ten most polarized years have all occurred in the last sixteen.⁶ Unfortunately, this trend has not lessened since Biden taking office, as the gap is wider than ever between people of different political affiliations, races, education levels, and gender.⁷ While America may have been able to rally behind their President and coalesce around western, democratic, capitalist, and Christian values during their common challenges of the 20th century, their population now seems to be descending into “intratribal conflict.”⁸

Further studies of this trend have explored its possible causes. Some have pointed to urban geography as a factor, citing issues of economic and ethnic segregation.⁹ Essentially, this would mean that people of different political persuasions tend not to live near each other and have less opportunity for interaction. Moreover, the political effect of this segregation is accentuated by persistent efforts to re-draw the nation’s congressional lines in a way that

⁵ Iman Ghosh, “Charts: America’s Political Divide, 1994-2017,” *Visual Capitalist*, September 25, 2019. <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/charts-americas-political-divide-1994-2017/>

⁶ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Trump Third Year Sets New Standard for Party Polarization” *Gallup News: Politics*, January 21, 2020. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/283910/trump-third-year-sets-new-standard-party-polarization.aspx>

⁷ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Biden Sparks Greater Party, Education Gaps Than Predecessors,” *Gallup News: Politics*, April 15, 2021. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/346622/biden-sparks-greater-party-education-gaps-predecessors.aspx>

⁸ Greg Lukainoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting up a Generation for Failure* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018) 130.

⁹ Heather Leighton, “Houston Among the Most Politically-Polarized Cities in America, Analysis Finds,” *Rice Kinder Institute for Urban Research*, June 7, 2019. <https://kinder.rice.edu/urbanedge/2019/06/07/houston-among-most-politically-polarized-cities-america-analysis-finds>

protects incumbents, resulting in less political diversity represented within each district.¹⁰ This decreases the motivation for members of congress to engage in cooperative dialogue, as a Michigan State University study so aptly illustrated in its graphic representation of conversations in the 2015-16 session of congress.¹¹ Yet, studies also reveal this issue to be particularly American. A recent Pew Research survey compared fourteen countries' opinions of their government's response to the pandemic and found that the United States was the most polarized along party lines.¹² Similarly, when economist Jesse Shapiro surveyed people's feelings toward opposition parties in nine different countries, he found that the gap was widening most quickly in the United States while it was decreasing in most other places. Noting other factors such as race and religion, he also pointed to the more partisan (and less publicly funded) cable news networks as a possible cause of this growing polarization.¹³ In addition to these factors, Lukianoff and Haidt mention how sites like Facebook and Twitter not only "make it easy to encase oneself in an echo chamber" but also actually filter the content that a user will see, "leading conservatives and progressives into disconnected moral matrices backed up by mutually contradictory informational worlds."¹⁴ Given this clear trend in American politics, it would be worth exploring its how it is reflected in or affected by the country's major media platforms.

Downward Trend: Polarization and Decline of Major Media Platforms

¹⁰ Bill Moyers, "These Two Charts Show the Incredible Disappearing Center in American Politics," *BillMoyers.com*. April 10, 2014. <https://billmoyers.com/2014/04/10/these-two-charts-show-the-incredible-disappearing-center-in-american-politics/>

¹¹ Kristen Parker, "Democrat/Republican Divide is Worst It's Ever Been," *Michigan State University*, October 1, 2018. <https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2018/democrat-republican-divide-is-worst-its-ever-been>

¹² Michael Dimock and Richard Wike, "America is Exceptional in the Nature of its Political Divide," *Fact Tank*, November 13, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/13/america-is-exceptional-in-the-nature-of-its-political-divide/>

¹³ Jill Kimball, "U.S. is Polarizing Faster than Other Democracies, Study Finds," *Brown University*, January 21, 2020. <https://www.brown.edu/news/2020-01-21/polarization>

¹⁴ Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 130-131.

In a 2012 survey of news consumption the Pew Research Center found that 64% of respondents claimed to prefer news sources that are politically neutral. Yet in reality the viewers of most TV news programs were found to be deeply divided along partisan lines – especially for specific shows. For example, Sean Hannity had eleven times as many Republican viewers as Democrats, and Rachel Maddow had virtually viewers who identified as Republican.¹⁵ Moreover, by 2019, this polarization had progressed even further, applying even to the main networks: for those who identified Fox News as their primary source for political news, 93% identified as Republican; for those who looked to MSNBC, 95% were Democrats.¹⁶ This partisan divide also shows up on the local level, where a 2020 study showed how state-wide news tends to lean to the left, while local news outlets overwhelmingly lean to the right.¹⁷

Interestingly, as major TV news networks have grown more politically polarized, they have also experienced a decline in viewership. This downward trend (along with radio and newspapers) has been apparent since the 1990s, while a concurrent upward trend has occurred for online/mobile news.¹⁸ Significantly, by 2020, only one sixth of daily viewers of FOX, MSNBC and CNN were aged between 25 and 54,¹⁹ and in 2021, year-over year viewership on the same networks had decreased between 22% and 47%, with even higher figures for viewers aged 25-54.²⁰ Furthermore, when viewership is measured in terms of hours per day, the age-gap and

¹⁵ “Section 4: Demographics and Political Views of News Audiences,” *Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics 7 Policy*, September 27, 2012. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2012/09/27/section-4-demographics-and-political-views-of-news-audiences/>

¹⁶ Elizabeth Grieco, “Americans’ Main Sources for Political News Vary by Party and Age,” *Pew Research Center*. April 1, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/01/americans-main-sources-for-political-news-vary-by-party-and-age/>

¹⁷ Jessica Mahone and Philipp Napoli, “Hundreds of Hyperpartisan Sites are Masquerading as Local News,” *Nieman Lab*, July 13, 2020. <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/07/hundreds-of-hyperpartisan-sites-are-masquerading-as-local-news-this-map-shows-if-theres-one-near-you/>

¹⁸ “In Changing News Landscape, Even Television is Vulnerable,” *Pew Research Center*, September 27, 2012. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2012/09/27/in-changing-news-landscape-even-television-is-vulnerable/>

¹⁹ Amy Watson, “Cable News Networks: Number of Viewers in the U.S. 2020,” *Statista*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/409313/cable-news-network-total-day-viewers-usa/>

²⁰ Ted Johnson, “Cable News Network Viewership Continues to Drop in April vs. 2020,” *Deadline*, April 27, 2021. <https://deadline.com/2021/04/cable-news-viewership-drops-across-the-board-in-april-1234745199/>

overall decline is far more pronounced: in 2020, those aged 50 and over watched 6 hours of TV per day, while those under 35 averaged 1 hour (a 14% decrease from the previous year).²¹ Yet, while these networks have experienced a concurrent polarization and decline in viewership, it would be worth comparing these trends to alternate sources of news before suggesting that any causal relationships exist.

One obvious place to look would be Facebook, which now has over 2.8 billion monthly active users worldwide.²² Facebook offers people the ability to create personalized platforms where they can share, view, and comment on various forms of media. Yet, while people scan their “news feed” on the platform, certain algorithms guide their search results to find more of what they have previously “liked” or clicked on. Essentially, this is a strategy to maximize a user’s enjoyment, to encourage them to stay on the site longer – but studies have shown that such algorithms decrease one’s likelihood of finding “politically cross-cutting content.”²³ So, with 52% of Americans using Facebook to view news (as of 2019; up from 1/8 of Americans in 2008), this has become a major concern. A study in 2018 revealed that while users are “quite willing to subscribe to news outlets with political leanings opposite to their own,” the posts that show up in their Facebook news feed are more influenced by the algorithm than any other factor – resulting in 70% of them being classified as “pro-attitudinal.” Essentially, as Ro’ee Levy puts it, Facebook’s algorithm has taken a role of influence similar to that of the editor of the New York Times – it filters the content that people see.²⁴

²¹ “US Adults’ Traditional TV Viewing Figures and Trends, by Age, in Q1 2020,” *Marketing Charts*, September 4, 2020. <https://www.marketingcharts.com/charts/us-traditional-tv-viewing-in-q1-2020>

²² H. Tankovska, “Facebook: Number of Monthly Active Users Worldwide 2008-2021,” *Statista*, May 21, 2021. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/#:~:text=How%20many%20users%20does%20Facebook, network%20ever%20to%20do%20so.>

²³ Joshua Bleiberg and Darrel M. West, “Political Polarization on Facebook,” *Brookings: Techtank*, May 13, 2015. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2015/05/13/political-polarization-on-facebook/>

²⁴ Tyler Smith, “The Facebook Filter Bubble: Is Social Media Making America More Polarized?” *American Economic Association*, March 26, 2021. <https://www.aeaweb.org/research/social-media-news%20consumption-polarization-facebook>

Despite Facebook's global reach of 2.7 billion monthly active users, 66% of whom log in daily,²⁵ it is experiencing decline in some key areas. For one thing, the proportion of Americans who use it has remained essentially level since 2015,²⁶ while its monthly traffic has decreased sharply since October 2020. Moreover, while 62% of those under 35 used it as their primary app in 2016, only 21% do so in 2021.²⁷ Similarly, though its number of users remain high, Facebook has rapidly decreased its share of online social media visits in the UK since 2017 – decreasing from over 80% to below 40%.²⁸ Likewise, in the U.S., the average time that Facebook users spent on the platform per day decreased between 2017-2021, while it increased for alternatives such as Instagram and Snapchat.²⁹ At the same time, businesses have also experienced a sharp decrease of engagement with their posts³⁰ on Facebook, as sponsored ads and algorithm-guided content have increasingly taken priority in the news feed.³¹ So, herein lies the problem – though Facebook formerly offered a place where ideas were freely exchanged, it has increasingly become a monetized marketplace and an echo chamber of ideas.

Similar trends seem to be occurring among Twitter 340 million worldwide users – 71% of whom claim to use the social media platform to access news.³² For example, because its users freely decide who to “follow,” they will tend to only hear the opinion of others who have similar

²⁵ Brian Dean, “How Many People Use Facebook in 2021?” *BlackLink*, April 5, 2021.

<https://backlinko.com/facebook-users>

²⁶ Christina Newberry, “47 Facebook Stats that Matter to Marketers in 2021,” *Hoosuite*, January 11, 2021.

<https://blog.hootsuite.com/facebook-statistics/>

²⁷ Mansoor Iqbal, “Facebook Revenue and Usage Statistics,” *Business of Apps*, May 24, 2021.

<https://www.businessofapps.com/data/facebook-statistics/>

²⁸ H. Tankovska, “Facebook: Share of Social Network Website Visits in the UK 2015-2020,” *Statista*, January 25, 2021. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/280301/market-share-held-by-facebook-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>

²⁹ Karissa Bell, “Facebook’s Engagement is Sinking with No End in Sight,” *Mashable*, May 28, 2019.

<https://mashable.com/article/facebook-use-declining-emarketer/>

³⁰ Also known as “organic reach.”

³¹ Ryan Erskine, “Facebook Engagement Sharply Drops 50% Over Last 18 Months,” *Forbes*, August 13, 2018.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/ryanerskine/2018/08/13/study-facebook-engagement-sharply-drops-50-over-last-18-months/?sh=7529a57994e8>

³² “Twitter by the Numbers: Stats, Demographics & fun Facts,” *Omnicores*, January 6, 2021.

<https://www.omnicoreagency.com/twitter-statistics/>

opinions. Consequently, Twitter conversations can often produce “polarized crowds,” where people who hold differing views of a topic do not argue because they are neither communicating with each other nor accessing the same sources of information.³³ Furthermore, studies show that users with politically extreme views tend to have more followers,³⁴ and that Twitter’s algorithms are directly responsible for their promotion, “amplifying inflammatory political rhetoric.”³⁵

Like Facebook, Twitter has responded to these issues with limited success. Though its executives banned political ads in 2019 in an effort to protect democracy³⁶ and suspended 925,700 accounts in the first half of 2020 for “hateful conduct,” the results have been uneven. Twitter is now a place where users are predominantly male, affluent millennials, and where most of its main contributors are democrats.³⁷ Moreover, its number of active users essentially levelled off in 2015, declined in 2018, and were no longer measured after 2019. Now, Twitter keeps track of “monetizable daily active users” to which it can advertise.³⁸ Interestingly, despite this new focus on monetization, Twitter posted a net loss of \$1.1 billion in 2020.³⁹

Overall, like the main TV News networks, Twitter and Facebook have joined the trend of polarization and decline. As psychological studies have shown, they have “ceased to be happy

³³ Marc A. Smith et al, “Mapping Twitter Topic Networks: From Polarized Crowds to Community Clusters.” *Pew Research Center*, February 20, 2014. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2014/02/20/mapping-twitter-topic-networks-from-polarized-crowds-to-community-clusters/>

³⁴ Sounman Hong and Sun Hyoung Kim, “Political Polarization on Twitter: Implications for the Use of Social Media in Digital Governments,” *Science Direct: Government Information Quarterly*, Vol 33, Issue 4, October 2016. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0740624X16300375>

³⁵ Oliver Darcy, “How Twitter’s Algorithm is Amplifying Extreme Political Rhetoric,” *CNN Business*, March 22, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/22/tech/twitter-algorithm-political-rhetoric/index.html>

³⁶ Stephanie Condon, “Twitter Bans Political Ads, Creating Stark Contrast to Facebook’s Policy,” *ZDNet: Between the Lines*, October 30, 2019. <https://www.zdnet.com/article/twitter-bans-political-ads-creating-stark-contrast-to-facebooks-policy/>

³⁷ Christina Newberry, “36 Twitter Stats All Marketers Need to Know in 2021,” *Hootsuite*. <https://blog.hootsuite.com/twitter-statistics/>

³⁸ H. Tankovska, “Twitter: Number of Monthly Active Users 2010-2019,” *Statista*, January 27, 2021. [https://www.statista.com/statistics/282087/number-of-monthly-active-twitter-users/#:~:text=As%20of%20the%20first%20quarter,daily%20active%20users%20\(mDAU\).](https://www.statista.com/statistics/282087/number-of-monthly-active-twitter-users/#:~:text=As%20of%20the%20first%20quarter,daily%20active%20users%20(mDAU).)

³⁹ Mansoor Iqbal, “Twitter Revenue and Usage Statistics (2021),” *Business of Apps*, May 14, 2021. <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/twitter-statistics/>

places.” Due to algorithmic manipulation of search results and monetization of users (through advertising), these platforms have transitioned from being “the fabric of the ongoing global conversation” to become “the stock exchange for public opinion.”⁴⁰ Moreover, their attempts to forge meaningful connections and match users with favorable content have in fact created echo chambers, further dividing the public. Though they hold steady in their number of nominal users, many people are turning elsewhere in search of genuine connection and conversation.

Upward Trend: Growth of Podcasts and Forums which Facilitate Dialogue

Podcasts are one alternative form of media that is experiencing rapid growth. As of April 2021, it is estimated that 48 million episodes from 2 million shows are available online. In the United States, 37% of people have listened to one in the last month, and 24% listen to podcasts weekly. While these numbers are nowhere near those of Facebook, they are still growing.⁴¹ But, more importantly, the intensity of podcast usage stands out: 82% of users spend more than seven hours per week listening, while 22% listen for more than 22 hours per week. Needless to say, this is more time than they spend on social media and TV, and the trend is increasing. Interestingly, podcast users also seek a variety of views, as the average listener is subscribed to six different shows and listens primarily to learn new things.⁴²

Podcasts may have gained popularity partially due to their accessibility and mobility (people can multitask and travel while listening), but they are also recognized as sources of intimacy and community. Podcasts typically communicate in a conversational style by including a

⁴⁰ Scott Fulton III, “The Decline of Social media: Facebook and Twitter leave us Wanting,” *ZDNet*, January 21, 2020. <https://www.zdnet.com/article/the-decline-of-social-media-in-the-2010s-a-status-report/>

⁴¹ Ross Winn, “2021 Podcast Stats & Facts,” *Podcast Insights*, April 10, 2021. <https://www.podcastinsights.com/podcast-statistics/>

⁴² Ying Lin, “10 Powerful Podcast Statistics You Need to Know in 2021 (Infographic),” *Oblero*, January 4, 2021. <https://www.oberlo.com/blog/podcast-statistics>

co-host and a variety of guest speakers about particular topics of interest.⁴³ Essentially, they promote open dialogue in a way that news networks and main social media platforms are failing to offer. For example, the *Pro-Grace* podcast facilitates “conversations about abortion,” between people of differing views in order to equip Christians “with a new way to think, talk and act about the abortion issue, based on how Jesus interacted with people...a way to engage in this discussion that is positive, compassionate, and solution-based.”⁴⁴ Certainly, this offers a stark contrast to the tendency of major news networks to cater to one side or the other. Given the cultural context of polarization, perhaps it should be no wonder that podcasts like this are growing among people who want objectivity and dialogue.

In a similar fashion, Reddit represents another alternative platform for online connection that is experiencing steady growth. With more than 430 million monthly active users, 30 billion monthly views, 300 million posts uploaded in 2020, and two billion comments in 2020, Reddit is the seventh most popular social media site in the U.S. Significantly, monthly active users are growing at 30% per year, and have barely tapped into the international market.⁴⁵ In contrast to the one-way broadcasting facilitated by personal and business Facebook pages, Reddit is composed of millions of “subreddit” communities and conversations based on topics of interest. On average, 60,000 new subreddits are added each month, with over 100,000 communities considered active at any given time. Finally, while users average ten minutes per session, half of them access it daily and 43% use it to access news.⁴⁶ While Reddit’s upward trend currently looks

⁴³ Tae Haahr, “Why are Podcasts So Popular? 5 Reasons Why People Love Pods,” *The Podcast Host*, <https://www.thepodcasthost.com/mindset/why-are-podcasts-so-popular/>

⁴⁴ “About the Podcast.” *ProGrace*. <https://prograce.org/the-prograce-podcast/>

⁴⁵ David Curry, “Reddit Revenue and Usage Statistics (2021),” *Business of Apps*, May 7, 2021. <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/reddit-statistics/>

⁴⁶ Brian Dean, “Reddit Usage and Growth Statistics: How Many People Use Reddit in 2021?” *Backlinko*, February 25, 2021. <https://backlinko.com/reddit-users>

hopeful, it remains to be seen whether it will avoid the pitfalls of polarization and monetization that have negatively affected social engagement on Facebook and Twitter.

Overall, it appears that as news networks and social media platforms have gradually succumbed to (and increasingly contributed to) the political polarization present in American culture, they have also experienced a decline in engagement from viewers and users. In contrast, podcasts and forums that more effectively promote dialogue are experiencing steady growth. Consequently, these trends seem to indicate that a good number of people are looking for sources of objective information and places for genuine conversation. Perhaps if our news networks and social media platforms were able to offer this, they would not need to work so hard at fact-checking, debunking, cancelling, censoring, shaming, and accusing their opponents.

Assessment of the Trend for the Self, the Church, and the World

Paul Tillich once said that “religion is the substance of culture, culture is the form of religion...he who can read the style of a culture can discover its ultimate concern, its religious substance.”⁴⁷ In other words, the practice of religion is shaped by the concerns of its culture; religion seeks to address its culture’s deepest needs and answer its ultimate questions. In response, Kevin Vanhoozer calls Christians to be “cultural agents [which] involves, first, interpreting culture in light of a biblical-theological framework and, second, interpreting Scripture by embodying gospel values and truths in concrete cultural forms.”⁴⁸ So, in order to formulate a Christian response to the trend discussed above, one should first evaluate what it means for the individual, one’s community, and one’s place in the world.

⁴⁷ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The World Well Staged? Theology, Culture and Hermeneutics,” In *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of C.F. Henry*, eds., D.A. Carson, and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 20.

⁴⁸ Vanhoozer, Kevin J., Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Sleasman, eds., *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 55.

According to Jesus, the greatest command is to love God with our whole selves.⁴⁹ It covers the first four of the Ten Commandments and includes a prohibition against worshiping idols. Yet, while idol worship may sound antiquated, Craig Detweiler draws parallels between it and our current reliance on technology. Not only do we give it our attention and wealth, but we might even use it to seek a sense of transcendence or to build an idolatrous image of ourselves.⁵⁰ Therefore, Christians should not uncritically consume every latest technology that the culture offers. Reflecting on the past effects of radio and television, Douglas Groothuis calls on Christians to “resist the spirit of the world...in the form it takes in their own generation” and to “stand still” while the culture “moves toward depravity.”⁵¹ Certainly, there is a long Scriptural tradition of resistance to culture. From Hebrew midwives to Daniel and his friends, from Mordecai to Peter, from the ancient faithful to the church of Smyrna,⁵² God’s people have been called to not conform to the world, but to be transformed; they are called to be in the world, but not of it.⁵³ So, in these days of political polarization that is reflected in and amplified by various forms of media,⁵⁴ Christians would be wise to consider how to stand apart from this trend. As Paul further elaborates in Romans 12, non-conformity can look like humility, service, generosity, forgiveness, peacemaking and love for one’s enemies.⁵⁵ Perhaps most simply, Christian conduct in this world should involve listening before speaking.⁵⁶

Yet, these cultural trends affect more than the individual. Even in the early years of Facebook’s rise, Jesse Rice recognized how its “power of connection” addressed people’s deepest

⁴⁹ Matthew 22:37.

⁵⁰ Craig Detweiler, *iGods: How Technology Shapes Our Spiritual and Social Lives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2013), 1-3.

⁵¹ Douglas Groothuis, *The Soul In Cyberspace* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 19-20.
Quoting Francis Schaeffer and Blaise Pascal, respectively.

⁵² Exodus 1; Daniel 1, 3, 6; Esther 3; Acts 5; Hebrews 11; Revelation 2.

⁵³ Romans 12:2; John 17:15-18.

⁵⁴ As the nations conspire (Psalm 2:1) and false teachers multiply (2 Timothy 4:3).

⁵⁵ Romans 12:3-21.

⁵⁶ James 1:19.

psychological needs and made it a “force capable of synchronizing a large population in very little time, thereby creating [a] spontaneous order” to which we must adapt.⁵⁷ However, before Christians excitedly seek to harness the power of Facebook to connect people, they should ask how these new forms affect their practice of faith. Reflecting on how the use of a projector screen in a worship service affected people’s posture, attention, and interaction with others, Shane Hipps calls for Christians to similarly reflect on every new technology they choose to adopt. He argues that, regardless of their “content,” the “forms” of media and technology will cause profound changes in both culture and church. Though cultural forms may only be seen in our peripheral view, they are the “architect” that shapes Christian community and our expression of the gospel.⁵⁸ So, with this in mind, Christians must proactively seek to create a Biblically formed culture in their church communities. As Vanhoozer puts it, Christians can use hermeneutics as a means of constructing culture: “as the church successfully performs Scripture, it will produce a culture that, far from being easy complicity with the world, will rather be a permanent revolution...an evangelical eucharistic culture in which Christian freedom would be expressed in obedience to God and oriented toward God’s glory.”⁵⁹ Fortunately, Scripture is full of instructions for and visions of God’s community: they are called to be lovingly submissive, to be tolerant of weakness and diversity, accepting towards one another, a united body of many parts, a family of many nations.⁶⁰ Not only should such genuine community provide a contrast to our polarized culture and address a deep need that people feel, but it should result in God’s glory, as people discover its source.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Jesse Rice, *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected are Redefining Community*, (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 45, 20.

⁵⁸ Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel and Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 22-23.

⁵⁹ Vanhoozer, “The World Well Staged?” 27-30.

⁶⁰ Ephesians 5:21-6:4; Romans 14:1-15:7; 1 Corinthians 12; Galatians 3:26-29.

⁶¹ John 17:20-23.

Finally, in response to this cultural trend, Christians must remember their calling to bring the gospel to the world. In a time when views are so polarized and communication is so dysfunctional, Christians would be wise to approach their culture with “critical realism,” as Paul Hiebert would put it. Rather than flowing with the currents of mainstream news and social media by taking an antagonistic stance toward differing opinions, we need to allow for differing views of reality to exist in conversation. Only once we understand the context of our audience will we be able to properly translate and communicate the gospel.⁶² Certainly, Paul modeled the same approach in his missionary work as he adapted to both Jewish and Gentile customs for the sake of the gospel and also adapting his messages for each context.⁶³ Just as Jesus was sent into the world, taking the form of a servant in order to save us, He sent His followers into the world with His Spirit – to go and be witnesses of what He has said and done.⁶⁴

Response: Called to Listen, to Connection, and to Mission

In light of this cultural trend and in response to God’s enduring word to His people, Christians have opportunities to participate in what God is doing in this world today through listening, forging connection, and engaging in mission.

As cultural attention shifts from one source of media to another, it seems likely that they are fleeing polarization and in search of meaningful dialogue. As new media platforms are constructed to address this need for connection, they are helpful only until they become politicized and monetized. So, how can Christians help? Perhaps the greatest gift that we can offer our neighbor is a listening ear. Luke Bretherton calls this the “most basic act” of Christians, pointing out that everything began with God’s Word, that the Shema begins with “hear,” and faith

⁶² Paul G. Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts: Affirming Truth in a Modern/Postmodern World* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1991), 15-17.

⁶³ 1 Corinthians 9:19-23; Acts 21:26; 13:14-43; 17:22-23.

⁶⁴ John 20:21-23; Philippians 2:1-11; Acts 1:6-8.

comes by hearing.”⁶⁵ If Christians can begin by serving their neighbors in this simple way, Bretherton hopes that American democracy can actually be salvaged from its polarized state.⁶⁶ Whether we practice listening through conversational podcasts, by thoughtfully engaging in online forums, or in face-to-face dialogue with our neighbor, we can work against the dehumanizing, polarizing forces of our political and media milieu, and create meaningful community.

Yet, as we gather as God’s people, we must carefully consider what kind of culture we are creating among ourselves. As we offer others a listening ear, we must carefully discern what we hear and how it affects us. In terms of content, cultural lies must be identified and resisted, as Solzhenitsyn wisely warned.⁶⁷ But, more subtly, cultural forms must be interpreted and evaluated as well. So, when seeking to build community, is it even worth using platforms like Facebook and Twitter? If so, to what extent? When searching for information, which sources are worth listening to, or watching? However Christians deal with these questions, they will certainly arrive at wiser conclusions if they are part of a supportive, discerning community. In his book *Live not By Lies*, Rod Dreher argues that in the context of an anti-Christian culture, one needs a supportive community in order to preserve cultural memory and identity, to preserve family as the bedrock of civilization, and to organize small groups in which truth can be lived out together.⁶⁸

However, churches should also be careful to not become an echo chamber, themselves. While the church needs to be on guard against negative cultural trends, it can also make a positive difference. While carefully discerning what they listen to, Christians can also create spaces where listening can happen well. Dwight Friesen, seeking to learn from online social networks, calls on

⁶⁵ John 1:1; Deuteronomy 6:4; Romans 10:17.

⁶⁶ Luke Bretherton, “Recovering Democratic Politics,” *Breaking Ground*, May 7, 2021.

<https://breakingground.us/recovering-christian-faithfulness-through-recovering-democratic-politics/>

⁶⁷ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Live Not By Lies,” *The Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn Center*, February 12, 1974.

<https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/live-not-by-lies>

⁶⁸ Rod Dreher, *Live Not By Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* (New York: Sentinel, 2020), 114, 130, 179.

churches to use their structures to create connective spaces, or “Christ commons...created with the hope that the structure will provide an environment where people are more likely to experience life in connection with God and one another.” He adds that church forms should always serve this function, and that connectivity of fellowship should be valued more than numbers.⁶⁹ In light of this, church programs, gatherings, buildings, and leadership structures should always be set up to facilitate connection with God and each other. This should lead us to question the value of recorded services, the usefulness of sermons, and the ideal size of congregational gathering. While one-way communication to large crowds has its place (along with Paul’s letters to the churches), each church should consider where and how its resources can make the greatest impact (in terms of genuine connection). To put it another way, we should be asking, “when, where, and how do discipleship and evangelism happen?” How can we intentionally facilitate them? In a world of biased information and polarized opinions, how can we create space for people to struggle together through issues, in search of truth?

Then, once we have a listening ear and a loving community to offer the world, we must consider how we can communicate the gospel in our culture. Looking at the trends discussed above, we see that mainstream news broadcasting is waning while podcasts are growing. If this truly reveals a “desire for dialogue” in our culture, especially among the younger generations, then how should a sermon be structured? Would back-and-forth conversation engage the audience better? If so, then gatherings must be smaller. If co-hosts and guest speakers keep podcasts fresh and display unity with diversity, then should pastors share the pulpit more? Rather than creating a cult of personality, or an unhealthy dependency on clergy, what if sermons were actually modeled after Jesus’s (conversational, even Socratic) method of discipleship?

⁶⁹ Dwight J. Friesen, *Thy Kingdom Connected: What the Church Can Learn from Facebook, the Internet, and Other Networks* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 107-109.

Likewise, we see that Twitter and Facebook are waning in their ability to forge genuine connections while alternatives like Reddit are growing. If people are disengaging from places where they are being sold something, or where their connections are guided rather than organic, then Christians must take heed. Rather than seeking to win converts and gain members, we must show sincere love, with a genuine concern for others. Rather than advertising and offering sales pitches, we must let the gospel sell itself to others as it truly works in us. Rather than manipulating conversations towards our desired end (e.g. algorithms), we can invite people to join conversations of interest, and join their topics of interest with a desire to learn (e.g. Reddit).

Though offering a listening ear and fostering genuine community may sound passive and not particularly missional, if Christians can accomplish these two things, they will be well-positioned to reach and welcome the world. As Bonhoeffer insists, listening with the “ears of God” is the necessary precursor to being able to proclaim the Word of God.⁷⁰ This is what I will seek to do with my Doctoral Project, as I interview recent adult converts to hear their testimonies. Like a podcast, I will invite various speakers to share their perspective about a common topic: Christian conversion. My hope is that as I listen, I can gain insight into the language and mindset of the culture – and that as I create space for dialogue about this important topic, I and others will be equipped to translate and communicate the gospel with fluency.

⁷⁰ Bretherton, “Recovering Democratic Politics.”

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