

Analog Church
Church in the Digital Age
Acts 2:42-47 & John 1:1-14
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L2 & Evan representing analog and digital generations...

- I was born in the mid-1960's.
- I was born in the mid-1990's

- I grew up watching TV with 4 channels and getting up to change channels manually.
- I grew up with hundreds of channels to choose from, and could record anything I missed.

- In my home as a child we had a rotary phone, and if I wanted to have a private conversation I used a payphone...
- I grew up walking around with a phone in my pocket.

- When I started in ministry in the early 1990s I wrote my sermons out in long hand, and sometimes would have my mom type them for me on her word processor.
- My elementary school had a computer lab with dozens of computers where we'd play typing games against each other.

- I rarely listen to or watch podcasts. I much prefer reading a magazine article or buying the book...
- It's not uncommon that my sermon prep includes podcast interviews and YouTube videos.

- I listen to music on my car radio or on CD's I buy...
- I subscribe to a streaming service that gives me unlimited access to millions of songs for a monthly fee.
- I read some articles online, but I still buy a newspaper 3-4 days a week...
- I subscribe to online news updates that are delivered to my email daily. I do some of my reading on a digital reader that can store thousands of books at a time.

Evan

If you did some fast math as Layne and I were going back and forth, you might have picked up that Layne is about 30 years older than me ... and while that number might serve as an easy target for some joking and prodding, the reality is that 30 years isn't *that much time*. In the grand scheme of human history, 30 years is really just a drop in the ocean...

But the amount of technological advancement that's happened in the last 50-100 has really magnified some of the changes you heard. There have been very few moments in history where two people, separated in age by just 30 years, experienced such different childhoods. But the "technological/digital revolution" has done just that ...

And the even crazier thing is that ... this revolution wasn't a one-time event ... technology continues to advance at an exponential rate ... I could probably do a similar back-and-forth exercise with someone *only 15 years* younger than me and the differences would also be glaring.

If all of that wasn't enough, the world was turned upside down by the COVID-19 pandemic. We're now a few years removed from the start of the pandemic ... and many sociologists and historians agree that the pandemic didn't necessarily create only *new* trends in society, but instead greatly *accelerated* cultural trends that were *already beginning to take shape*. Take, for example, working from home: it was a growing reality prior to COVID, but now ... it's commonplace.

We saw a similar trend at play in our church ... and this is really what drove us to plan this sermon series. As we moved through the pandemic and were able to meet regularly in-person again, a significant amount of people continued to watch our services online. Our staff started asking questions like:

- How do we engage this group of people who we can't actually see or be with? Should we adjust our in-person experience to meet the needs of our online audience? Is our online service a temporary offering or a long-term part of our approach to ministry?

As we wrestled with those questions, we read a book written by Silicon Valley author and pastor Jay Kim, called Analog Church, where the name of this series comes from. The book's subtitle is a helpful starting place for what we mean when we talk about the differences between "digital" and "analog:" "*Why We Need Real People, Places, And Things In The Digital Age.*"

There's a lot complexity to the differences between digital and analog, but for our purposes ... digital refers to what happens electronically or virtually and analog refers to what happens in the real, material, physical world. And so our goal in this series is to reexamine some of our church's values and – in a very digital world – reinforce what we believe about important aspects of church like Scripture, worship, community and discipleship ... spoiler alert: things we think happen best in an analog world.

Layne

Every local church needs to reach emerging generations to survive. A couple of years after McBIC planted Mechanicsburg Community Church in 2014 I noticed our church was getting older. We launched MCC in 2014 by sending out 75 people—many of whom were married

couples, single adults or young families in their mid-20s to late-30s. After several years we still hadn't recouped that age population at McBIC. Our staff and I were getting older, and I was aware of the rule of thumb that the primary audience a preacher connects with is people who are 10 years younger and 10 years older than him or her. As a 50 year old at the time, my "sweet spot" was connecting with 40-60 year olds, and new people who were coming to our church were primarily 50 years of age and up.

As I discussed this with our church board and staff we made a concerted effort to hire some younger staff members, realizing that as we all naturally grow older we need to be intentional about connecting with younger generations. Over a 2-year span 6 years ago we hired 4 pastors who were at the time 32 years of age and younger.

Our new hires significantly lowered the age of our staff and brought new ideas and fresh perspectives to our church. One of things I've come to greatly appreciate about our younger staff members is that while they are from a different generation than I am, they have great appreciation for McBIC's history, DNA and values. Whenever we talk about "making changes" to reach younger people they've been very clear about not wanting to lose the core of who McBIC is. That has given me confidence that while we need to stay fresh and keep making changes, we're not going to sacrifice depth by attempting to be more culturally relevant.

Evan

"Relevant." I think we'd all agree that it's generally a positive word ... and even as we think about it in relation to the church, we'd probably say, "Yeah, relevance is a good thing." If we had a choice as a church between being relevant and being *irrelevant* ... we'd pick relevant, right?

But Jay Kim tells the story of his friend, Jake, which paints a different picture. Jake is someone who works a very "digital" job as an electronic dance music artist and DJ. If I already lost you with that job title, imagine this:

- A crowded club with loud, driving music
- All sorts of lights shining through the fog of a smoke machine
- Large projector screens with all different sorts of busy visuals
- And Jake ... orchestrating the whole thing. Jake's job is to create that experience.

Jake grew up actively engaged in the church but, like a lot of young adults, stopped attending once he moved away from home and was on his own. While Jake had a lot of skepticism about church, he was still looking for a sense of purpose and hope ... and so he attended a church service with his parents. Afterwards, he reflected on his experience, noting some of the elements of the worship service:

- The worship music was loud and energetic
- The lights in the room highlighted different elements on the stage

- The projector screens displayed the song's lyrics on top of bright images

Sounds like a familiar environment that might draw Jake – and other wanderers like him – back to the church, right? Well, not quite. Instead of being drawn to the church and its “relevance” ... Jake was actually put off by the noise, light, and busyness. Jay Kim says it this way:

“When Jake steps foot in the church, he isn't hoping that it will look, sound, and feel like everything else he's a part of. He isn't searching for *relevance*. Jake is searching for *transcendence*. He's reluctantly stepping foot in a church in the hope that there might be something that he can't find anywhere else ... Jake is looking for something timeless.”

Jake was looking for something that he *couldn't* find in the world ... and what he found was a church service that looked *just like the* world.

My sense is that my generation and the ones surrounding it just want the church to be *real*. We've been burnt too many times by churches who try to present a polished product that is initially attractive and “relevant” ... only to find that behind those nice presentations and displays are toxic cultures. We don't want the church to be a mirror image of the world around it. We want it to be a set apart place that will *transcend* the constant cultural fads and trends.

We talk about this concept in youth ministry all of the time when we ask our volunteer leaders to simply *be themselves*. The worst thing a youth leader can do is show up to youth group dressed like an 8th grader, using the slang of a teenager, and talking about all the gossip the middle schoolers are talking about. Students don't need someone who looks and acts just like them ... all students are looking for is someone who is going to listen to them, encourage them, and genuinely care for them.

The same goes for the church. Generally, the young people of today don't need all of the production – the lights, the sound, the activity ... they just want a place with real *depth* and a real *concern* for the needs of people ... they want the church to be *genuine*, not *impressive*.

Layne

Reading [Analog Church](#) confirmed a number of things I'd been feeling and wrestling with related to online church. Before I flesh that out a bit more, let me be clear that our goal in this series isn't to denigrate online church or to be critical of people who worship on line. Online church serves an important role and I can't foresee McBIC not providing an online option.

However, rather than viewing online church as a substitute for in person worship, I view our online services as a bridge that help people initially connect or stay connected with our in person community. I see a couple of important audiences our online worship serves for our church

family. First, online church can be a great blessing to people who are part of our church and aren't physically able to get to our services. I think of Howard Featherman who has been part of McBIC for nearly 40 years, but due to his age—Howard is 96—and health concerns, he isn't able to worship with us in person. I also think of the growing number of people who spend time each year avoiding our cold PA weather in Florida—people like Dave and Jill Yinger who have been in Florida for several months. (Dave and Jill, don't get too comfortable down there resting by the pool. Our grass is beginning to grow up and here and we'll need you soon to resume your place on our mowing team.) Online service can also be a blessing when we have inclement weather that makes it difficult for people to drive to church, or when people are sick or on vacation and can't attend. Another audience our online services are important for is people who haven't been to McBIC and want to get a feel for who we are as a church. People are increasingly leery of showing up in person at a church they've never visited. Recently I talked with someone who told me that prior to coming to McBIC in person they watched online to get a feel for who we were.

We welcome those who aren't able to worship with us in person or who are checking out our church online, but it's important for all of us to understand that worshiping online is a poor substitute for worshiping with our church family in person. We'll never discourage anyone from worshiping with us virtually, but online worship can't take the place of face to face contact with our church family and experiencing God's presence as we meet.

I'd like to share a quote with you from Scot McKnight who wrote the forward to [Analog Church](#). McKnight writes,

“For some people Christianity is digital: God sent a message to us and we either believe it or not. But God didn't just send a message. He sent his Son, born of a real woman. Jesus grew up and became a real man and found real humans to follow him in extending his kingdom to the broken and wounded in his part of the world. If Jesus is God incarnate, then God chose to reveal himself in analog, not digital. You can communicate a message in words, but you can't see the revelation of God except in the person of Jesus. Church is the same way. We can communicate conveniently and quickly in digital formats, but we can't get to know one another apart from embodied realities. One can't “do” church digitally; the important things about church life are all embodied: knowing one another, loving one another, sitting and standing and praying with one another, listening to the sermon and watching the tone of the words and the movement of the body when we sing and walk forward to take communion. These are the things that make a church a church.” McKnight, Pp. 2 & 3

Evan

“The important things about church life are all embodied...” I don’t think there’s a more clear picture of that reality than in the books of Acts where we get a glimpse of one of the very first iterations of “church.”

To set the stage a bit: Jesus died, rose from the dead, and has just ascended into heaven. As promised, Jesus’ departure meant the sending of the Holy Spirit, so many were filled with God’s Spirit and Peter, one of Jesus’ disciples preaches this message, to which thousands respond and are baptized, becoming Christians. And this is the description of that very first community of believers, what we might call “church:”

“**42** They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. **43** Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. **44** All the believers were together and had everything in common. **45** They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. **46** Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, **47** praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” Acts 2:42-47

Notice the words and phrases that point to just how embodied and physical ... *analog* ... this expression of church was:

- They devoted themselves to *fellowship*
- The believers were *together* and *had everything in common*
- They *broke bread*
- They met *in their homes* and *in the Temple*

Now, of course, “digitally” meeting wasn’t an option for the early church, but I think the values behind these practices point to the importance of our physical, embodied presence with each other. This very early gathering of believers shows that there is something about *being together* – sharing meals, sharing meeting and living places, face-to-face fellowship – that is an *expression* of the filling of the Holy Spirit. Remember, these people have just been filled with the Holy Spirit, and their first response is to *gather together*. There is something about God’s presence dwelling in us that should cause people to gather together, not scatter into their own individual devices.

Layne

The words *embodied* and *physical* describe what was happening in the early church. An important word that summarizes those words is *incarnational*. Incarnational describes Jesus’ coming to earth as a human being, as well as Jesus’ plan for his followers to demonstrate Him to their world after his ascension. A Scripture passage that oozes with the idea of incarnation is found in John’s Gospel chapter 1 verses 1-5 & 14...

John 1:1-5 & 14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

I want to highlight several ideas that I believe are critical to what Evan and I have been saying about the transcendence and relevance. First, I find it fascinating that #1 John describes Jesus as the Word. There's a oneness between the person of Jesus Christ and the spoken, written Word of God. God's Word, his message, Jesus was one with God in the beginning. Jesus was with God and He is the Creator of all that is.

#2 John emphasizes incarnation in this passage. God became human—one of us—in the person of Jesus Christ. God spoke through prophets and priests; He gave his words to Moses in the form of the law that included the 10 Commandments; and, at times he spoke audibly to Abraham to and Moses and others. But when God wanted to fully and clearly reveal his identity to us, He became one of us by sending Jesus to live among us. The Gospels tell us that Jesus' incarnational ministry is carried on through you and me, by the fact that the Spirit of Jesus—the Holy Spirit—lives inside of those of us who have placed our faith in Jesus. Incarnational ministry happens face to face, person to person, as Jesus' presence connects with people through our conversation, our touch, our prayers, our human connection. Incarnational ministry loses something significant if it's limited to digital rather than in person or analog connection.

#3 Verse 11 tells us Jesus came from the Father full of grace and truth. John used the words grace and truth to summarize Jesus' nature, and as Jesus' followers you and I are called to embody both the grace and the truth of Jesus as we interact with others in a broken world. I would contend that truth can be shared in written form or it can be spoken across the airwaves, but grace loses something significant when it is attempted to be conveyed digitally. Grace can only fully be received in person.

Concluding Thoughts

Evan

To this point we've talked about the relationship between technology and faith from a sort of big picture perspective ... but we want to end by taking a bit more zoomed in look at technology's impact on our personal, everyday lives ... and what we might do about it.

In Analog Church, it's pointed out that technology offers us three primary things:

- *Speed* ... we can know and get things done much quicker with technology
- It offers us *choices* ... we have access to basically an endless array of options (to watch, read, to play, etc.)
- And it “offers” us *individualism* ... where we can customize everything to be exactly the way we want it to be

Some of those things aren't inherently bad ... I like getting things done efficiently. But as those things are offered to us ... and as we embrace them more regularly ... they actually begin to *form* us and make us into certain types of people ... whether we realize it or not:

- The speed we grow accustomed to will start to make us *impatient* ... we'll get frustrated when we don't get things at the exact time we want them.
- The choices we're offered will make us *shallow* ... as we bounce between so many options offered to us, we avoid diving deeply into any one thing.
- The individualism we're offered will make us *isolated* ... we'll start to care only about what's easiest and convenient for me ... and lose connection with other people.

All of this of course sounds like a bit of a bummer ... sounds like it would be hard to avoid those consequences given that our world is so saturated with technology ... but the good news is that the church – the family of God ... our community here at McBIC – is perhaps better positioned than anyone to resist those ways that technology forms us.

Layne—Listen to what Jay Kim says in what I believe is his premise in [Analog Church](#),

“I believe the answer is going analog. People are hungry for human experiences and the church is perfectly positioned to offer exactly that. In fact, the church is fundamentally designed and intended to create spaces and opportunities for people from all walks of life to experience true human flourishing, in real time and real space. Unlike anything else in our culture today, the church can invite people to gather in the flesh and to experience the hope Jesus Christ offers.”
Jay Kim, p. 11

Face to face community, personal interaction is foundational to what it means to be part of a church family. To those who are worshiping with us online this morning, we're glad to have you tune in with us, and we hope you're being ministered to by our services. If you're able, I want to encourage you to take the risk of joining with us in person. There's an amazing group of people here who will welcome and love you and assist you in connecting with Jesus. And if you're here in person this morning, I also have a challenge for you. I'm asking you to do a quick assessment. Are you deeply connected in relationship with others at McBIC? Is the Holy Spirit stirring a desire in your heart for you to more deeply know and love others, and to be known and loved by others? If your answer to either of those questions is, “yes,” I also want to encourage you to take a risk today by connecting with one of our Adult Bible Fellowship Groups that meet on Sunday

morning; or, by talking with one of our pastors about serving with one of our ministry teams like First Impressions, Children's Ministry, or Youth Ministry, ;or, by joining one of our missional communities that cares for people in need in our community. God designed each of us to need community, and his church is a great place to connect with people, and ultimately with Him.

We'll continue this series next week as Pastor Jen Souter and I preach on the theme, "Knowing God's Word and Incorporating It Into Our Lives in a Digital Age."