

Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age
 Available July 17, 2018
 \$16, 192 pages, paperback
 978-0-8308-4483-8

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A Distracted and Disenchanted Day in the Life

The beauty of using my iPhone as my alarm clock is that when I reach over to turn it off I'm only a few more taps away from the rest of the world. Before I'm even fully awake I've checked my Twitter and Facebook notifications and my email and returned to Twitter to check my feed for breaking news. Before I've said "good morning" to my wife and children, I've entered a contentious argument on Twitter about Islamic terrorism and shared a video of Russell Westbrook dunking in the previous night's NBA game.

While making my coffee and breakfast I begin working through social media conversations that require more detailed responses so that by the time I sit down to eat, I can set down my phone too. Years ago I would use my early morning grouchiness as an excuse to play on my computer rather than talk with my wife and kids, but now our family tries to stay faithful to a strict no-phones-at-the-table policy. We have drawn important boundaries for the encroachment of technology into our lives to preserve our family and attention spans, but that does not mean we've managed to save time for reflection. Instead, I tend to use this time to go over what I have to teach in my first class, or my wife and I make a list of goals for the day. It is a time of rest from screens and technology, but not from preoccupation.

As I drive the kids to school, we listen and sing along to "Reflektor" by Arcade Fire. On my walk back to the car after dropping them off, I check my email and make a few more comments in the Twitter debate I began before breakfast. In the car again, I listen to an NBA fan podcast; it relaxes me a bit as the anxiety of the coming work day continues to creep up on me.

Sufficient to the workday are the anxieties and frustrations thereof. And so, when I need a coffee or bathroom break, I'll use my phone to skim an article or "Like" a few posts. The distraction is a much-needed relief from the stress of work, but it also *is* a distraction. I still can't hear myself think. And most of the time I really don't want to. When I feel some guilt about spending so much time being unfocused, I tell myself it's for my own good. I deserve this break. I need this break. But there's no break from distraction.

While at work, I try not to think about social media and the news, but I really don't need additional distractions to keep my mind busy. The modern work environment is just as frenetic and unfocused as our leisure time. A constant stream of emails breaks my focus and shifts my train of thought between multiple projects. To do any seriously challenging task, I often have to get up and take a walk to absorb myself in the problem without the immediacy of technology to throw me off.

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Back at home, I'm tasked with watching the kids. They are old enough to play on their own, so I find myself standing around, waiting for one of them to tattle or get hurt or need water for the fifth time. If I planned ahead, I might read a book, but usually I use the time to check Twitter and Facebook or read a short online article. But it's not always technology that distracts me; sometimes, while the kids are briefly playing well together, I'll do some house cleaning or pay bills. Whatever the method, I'm always leaning forward to the next job, the next comment, the next goal.

I watch Netflix while I wash dishes. I follow NBA scores while I grade. I panic for a moment when I begin to go upstairs to get something. I turn around and find my phone to keep me company during the two-minute trip. When it's late enough, I collapse, reading a book or playing an iOS game. I'm never alone and it's never quiet.

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As a Christian, the spiritual disciplines of reading the Bible and praying offer me a chance to reflect, but it's too easy to turn these times into to-do list chores as well. Using my Bible app, I get caught up in the Greek meaning of a word and the contextual notes and never really meditate on the Word itself. It is an exercise, not an encounter with the sacred, divine Word of God. A moleskin prayer journal might help me remember God's faithfulness, but it also might mediate my prayer time through a self-conscious pride in being devout. There's no space in our modern lives that can't be filled up with entertainment, socializing, recording, or commentary.

This has always been the human condition. The world has always moved without us and before us and after us, and we quickly learn how to swim with the current. We make sense of our swimming by observing our fellow swimmers and hearing their stories. We conceive of these narratives based on the stories we've heard elsewhere: from our communities, the media, advertisements, or traditions.

But for the twenty-first-century person in an affluent country like the United States, the momentum of life that so often discourages us from stopping to take our bearings is magnified dramatically by the constant hum of portable electronic entertainment, personalized for our interests and desires and delivered over high-speed wireless Internet. It's not just that this technology allows us to stay "plugged in" all the time, it's that it gives us the sense that we are tapped into something greater than ourselves. The narratives of meaning that have always filled our lives with justification and wonder are multiplied endlessly and immediately for us in songs, TV shows, online communities, games, and the news.

This is the electronic buzz of the twenty-first century. And it is suffocating.

– Taken from chapter one, "The Barrier of Endless Distraction"



Alan Noble (PhD, Baylor University) is assistant professor of English at Oklahoma Baptist University and cofounder and editor in chief of Christ and Pop Culture. He has written for *The Atlantic*, *Vox*, *Buzzfeed*, *The Gospel Coalition*, *Christianity Today*, and *First Things*.

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Distraction, Truth, and Witness

Why is your book titled "*Disruptive Witness*"?

Alan Noble: Every Christian is called to bear witness to their faith, to give a ready answer for the hope within us, but how we bear that witness is determined by the needs of our time. This book tries to evaluate the particular challenges to bearing faith in a contemporary world. Specifically, I consider the way secularism and technology of distraction create barriers to belief for most modern people. These barriers are not usually overcome with better arguments, but by offering a *disruptive* witness, one that unsettles the listener's assumptions about God and encourages them to be contemplative, rather than distracted.

Is your book antitechnology?

Noble: I wanted to give an honest account of some of the effects of technology upon our culture and how we conceive of faith and our identities. Some of that account is critical of technology, but for the most part I'm not concerned with making value judgments about technology, because whether or not our smart phones are good for us, our neighbors will continue using them. And so the question for us remains: How will this technology affect the way my neighbor receives and interprets my witness?

You draw a lot on Charles Taylor's work. Can you explain why he's so inspired you?

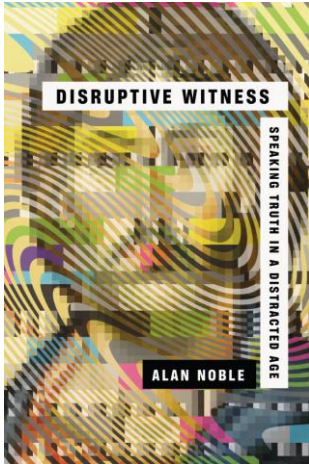
Noble: My favorite authors tend to be those who can paint a rich, colorful, detailed depiction of a scene I've only witnessed in glimpses, in shadows, or out of the corner of my eye. Taylor's *A Secular Age* articulated and explained to me the great tension between life in what feels like a closed, material universe and our sense that such a life is inadequate. To me, this tension is at the heart of my book, my scholarly writing, and my teaching.

A lot of what you write about relates to personal faith, but you also talk about it relating to the broader church. Unpack that a bit.

Noble: The concerns I have about how we represent the faith, how we engage in dialogue, and how we organize corporate worship cannot be addressed on an individual basis only. This is both a collective and personal effort. There are steps that we can personally take to offer a disruptive witness to our neighbors, in the way we deal with tragedy and beauty and art, for example. But other actions require collective effort, in the kinds of worship we participate in and the kinds of institutions we support.

One of your chapters is titled "*The Buffered Self*." What does that term mean?

Noble: Charles Taylor uses the term "buffered self" to refer to the way most people experience life in the contemporary West. The easiest way to understand this concept is to understand how people tended to experience life in the premodern world. In the Middle



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Ages, for example, people took for granted that their lives could be influenced by spirits, God could miraculously heal them, and the sacraments affected them, whether they chose the sacraments or not. For modern people, not only do we assume that our lives cannot be influenced by spiritual forces, we tend to see ourselves as buffered from all outside forces. Because of our reliance upon rationalism, our society's emphasis upon *choice*, and the sense that we live in a disenchanted world, most of us experience life as if there were a buffer between our internal self and the outside world. And this has dramatic implications for how we conceive of God and how we interpret conversations about faith.

You engage in a lot of conversations on social media: How has that played into the writing of this book?

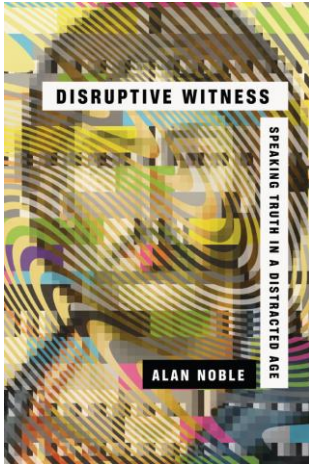
Noble: My experiences on social media definitely influenced the book, particularly in the way I have seen people share their faith. For a great many people, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are the public square. These are spaces where Christians witness to non-Christians, make arguments about the Bible, and generally promote our worldview. In my participation on social media, I've been able to consider the kinds of interactions that are profitable and the kinds that are not and the ones that *appear* profitable but may actually contribute to the trivializing of our faith.

How does your book differ from works by Os Guinness or Charles Taylor?

Noble: Like Guinness, I am concerned about how to be persuasive in a contemporary world. In fact, I'd like to think that *Disruptive Witness* works as a helpful companion to Guinness's award-winning book, *Fool's Talk*. My book approaches this problem from a slightly different angle, using technology of distraction and Taylor's work on secularism to elucidate our challenges. Although it relies heavily upon Taylor's scholarly work, *Disruptive Witness* tries to contribute to the conversation on secularism by applying some of Taylor's insights to the particular issue of bearing witness to our faith. It is also an attempt to make Taylor's ideas accessible, much like James K. A. Smith's *How (Not) to be Secular*.

You write about how the church adds to the problem by emphasizing marketing and branding. How do you think that plays into millennials' seeming disenchantment with the church?

Noble: I do think the attraction to liturgy and more historic Christian traditions among many millennials reflects in part a hunger for a religion that transcends the flat, immanent, optional, branded, marketed, slick version of evangelicalism that they may have been raised with. But I think it's also true that there are plenty of millennials who are attracted to that kind of church because it feels like home. Churches that mimic the multimedia experience of concerts and TED talks resonate with us because they appeal to our culturally conditioned aesthetics. My hope is that this book will offer both a charitable critique of contemporary Christian culture and worship and point to a better way.



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Alan Noble's Disruptive Witness casts a new vision for the evangelical imagination, calling us away from abstraction and cliché to a more faithful embodiment of the gospel for our day.

“Real Food for Real Thought”

“Alan Noble has written a concise and timely meditation on the conditions under which Christian witness may be pursued in our age and place. This book is real food for real thought.”

— **Alan Jacobs**, Baylor University, author of *How to Think*

“If you want to know what the next generation of evangelicalism could and should look like, look to Alan Noble. Grounded, faithful, and circumspect, he is asking all the right questions and leading us to better answers.”

— **Karen Swallow Prior**, author of *Booked: Literature in the Soul of Me*

“In our current cultural moment where self is at the center, distraction is the norm, and faith is anything you want it to be, fresh formation and evangelistic strategies are sorely needed. Instead of laboring to help friends, colleagues, and neighbors to merely feel safe and comfortable with our faith, perhaps it’s time to consider a return to the New Testament way. For although the world has changed, the human need has remained the same — for grace *and* truth, for love *and* law, for a culture of kindness *and* a call to repent, for provision of comfort *and* prophetic disruption. In *Disruptive Witness*, Alan does a terrific job of painting a picture of what this can look like for us. I highly recommend his work to you.”

— **Scott Sauls**, senior pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee, author of *Jesus Outside the Lines*

“Helpfully situating the peculiar travails and challenges to belief and fidelity in the contemporary moment, Alan Noble invites us to practice a life in Christ deeper than the fragile faith-as-preference model, which our distracted, secular age constrains us to adopt. Instead, he calls us, as both individuals and as the church, to thoughtfully contemplate our walk and our witness to Christ, so that we might not be heedlessly swept away in the patterns of thought and practice of this age. It’s an appeal worth attending, not only for its clarity and urgency, but because it is one I’ve seen Alan embody for years in his own faithfully disruptive life and witness.”

— **Derek Rishmawy**, PhD student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, columnist for *Christianity Today*

“In an age of distraction and the ‘buffered self,’ perhaps this is more a time for preparing the soil than for reaping. In any case, Alan Noble displays the disruptive resources of Christ’s kingdom that are at hand. I will be recommending this book far and wide!”

— **Michael Horton**, professor of theology and apologetics at Westminster Seminary California, cohost of *White Horse Inn*

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ENDORSEMENTS

“In *Disruptive Witness*, Alan Noble examines the unique barriers to communicating a transcendent gospel in our distracted, secular age, directing his keen cultural analysis toward a most admirable end – evangelism. And yet, these insights into how our neighbors now process – or are unable to process – the claims of historic Christianity also apply to the fragmented, secularized people in our pews. In this regard, Noble’s work will have special value to ministry leaders and pastors such as myself who are called to be disrupters and disciplers of those who, in turn, must embody a witness that ‘unsettles people from their stupor.’ I felt challenged by the book as a preacher, liturgist, shepherd, evangelist, father, and neighbor. You will be richly challenged by it too.”

– **Duke Kwon**, lead pastor of Grace Meridian Hill, Washington, DC

“Building on the work of philosopher Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*, Alan Noble deftly describes unique modern barriers to life lived with and for the triune God and calls fellow Christians to a better, full-bodied witness. Noble’s teaching gives me hope for the possibility of enfleshed Christian witness in an age that is prone to mostly shrug at ultimate questions. It will also leave more than a few of us disrupted ourselves.”

– **Katelyn Beaty**, author of *A Woman’s Place*, editor at large at *Christianity Today*