

plugged in

Becoming a Screen-Savvy Family

How to Navigate a Media-Saturated World—
and Why We Should

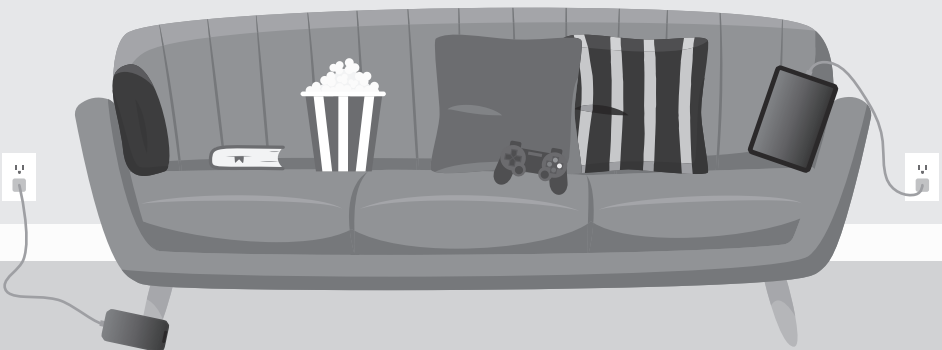


Paul Asay, General Editor

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FOCUS
ON THE FAMILY®

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Becoming a Screen-Savvy Family: How to Navigate a Media-Saturated World—and Why We Should

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The Power of Story

Paul Asay

“SO, DO YOU REALLY COUNT SWEAR WORDS?”

In my work at Focus on the Family’s *Plugged In*, I get that question a lot—especially from other movie reviewers.

My secular cohorts don’t worry about tabulating profanities. They don’t worry about excessive bathroom humor or tawdry double entendres or just how many beheadings a medieval battle scene might include. They don’t take pages upon pages of notes at movie screenings, detailing everything from worldview issues to wardrobe choices. So it’s natural they’d think me a little . . . odd, sitting way up in the back row of a theater with a light-up pen, taking notes about language and violence and sexuality.

Those other reviewers, who work for secular newspapers or websites or blogs or podcasts, are there for one primary reason: to tell their readers/listeners/users whether a given movie is any good. Sure, some write for specific audiences: horror aficionados, maybe; or sci-fi fans; or political conservatives; or those from the LGBT community. But the core questions these reviewers try to answer are, ultimately, pretty simple: *Did I like the movie? Will you?* They're fundamentally subjective questions.

Plugged In's reviewers try to answer those questions, sure. We all appreciate a well-crafted movie. We like good acting and fantastic cinematography and eye-popping special effects as much as anyone. But we don't stop with aesthetic quality—that's more or less just a starting point. After all, we have other questions to answer: *Is this movie a good fit for you? Is it right for your family? Do its messages line up with the Bible? What is it trying to teach us?*

Yes, like other reviewers, we're trying to help you tell whether a movie is "good." But for us, that word is multi-layered. It's not enough for a movie to be *good* like a bacon cheeseburger. We want to know whether it's good *for* you, like a kale salad. (And if it's kale that *tastes* like a bacon cheeseburger? All the better.) It goes beyond whether a movie works: We talk about how the movie might be working *on* you.

Our jobs go well beyond movies, of course, even though many of you reading this book are aware of *Plugged In* mainly through our movie reviews. We critique pretty much every form of media entertainment there is—from television to

books to video games to YouTube channels. We dig into social media and technology as well.

But if there's one overarching thing we cover—one word that gathers everything we do under one colorful umbrella—it's *story*. Stories told in print and song and especially on screen; the stories we share online; the stories we continually find new, creative ways to tell, and how those creative ways might change the stories themselves.

So instead of being asked *Why do you count swear words?*, we might well be asked *Why do you care so much about these stories?* Because, really, that encompasses the swear-word question and the dozens of other questions we hear. It explains why fourteen-year-old kids (whose parents make entertainment choices based on our reviews) sometimes curse the mere mention of our name. It explains why sometimes we have to spoil certain plot points in our reviews (even though we try not to do so unnecessarily). It explains why we do this strange, strange work—and why we think that watching movies and telling you about them is actually kind of important.

And for me, the answer truly begins—as many stories do—in the beginning.

STUFF AND STORY

Most scientists will tell you that we are made of *stuff*: skin and bones, water and carbon, protons and electrons. A chemist would say that it's all pretty much the *same* stuff: Ninety-nine percent of the human body is made of oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, and phosphorus. A biologist

would observe that those elements are the building blocks for everything from our skin to our brains, from our livers to our lymph nodes. And we don't typically get a lot of variation there. One heart may be slightly larger than another, but it's not like any of us get, say, six of them.

Geneticists identify a few more differences: our sex, the color of our skin, the shape of our noses. Humans can look very different from one another, yet the geneticist is quick to remind us that 99.9 percent of your genes—no matter who you are—are identical to mine. From the standpoint of science, if we were LEGO pieces, we'd *all* be boring ol' two-by-four bricks—only each of us would be an ever-so-slightly different shade of green or blue.

Yet the variation we see in each other can take our collective breath away. We are so different in how we think and act, how we grieve and celebrate, how we pray and vote. Sometimes even folks from our very own gene pool can feel as though they come from a completely different planet. At Thanksgiving, we may discover very good reasons to avoid making fun of *Ancient Aliens* when Aunt Esther's within earshot.

Yes, we're made of mostly the same stuff. But dig a little deeper—underneath that stuff—and you'll find a deeper, more important truth: We're made of stories. And those stories make us who we are.

We are who we are because of what we've experienced. What happened to us at the age of four impacts how we think at age forty. These events shape how we think, how we act, how we relate to others. And they obviously impact how others relate to us.

I think it's both beautiful and illustrative that the universe itself is a story, told by the ultimate Storyteller. "Let there be light," God said, as the first book of the Bible tells us (Genesis 1:3). And it was so. *Let there be land and sea, let there be birds and beasts, let there be you and me.* And it was so. He *spoke* everything we know—perhaps everything we *can* know—into reality. Our cosmos began, essentially, with *once upon a time*—a time before anyone could count it, a time without sun or moon or stars. It was the first *once*, the first *story*. And from that first came all the stories that followed.

When God molded us from dust, He not only breathed His life into us but also blessed us with a love of story. Because it's through stories (among other things) that God shows His love for us. It's through stories that we learned to love Him. He made us, I think, uniquely attuned to learn through stories—to be influenced by them.

The Bible is, essentially, a book of stories—crisply told, full of heroes and villains, littered with both the familiar and the exotic. Some are as simple as children's fables. Others can be as multilayered and enigmatic as Russian novels. Some stories are both—with our experience of them changing (as it will with any truly great story) in depth and complexity as our understanding increases.

Even Jesus taught through stories, using everything from mustard seeds to prodigal sons in His parables. And we are storytellers too. Our stories separate us from the animals that share our space. Birds might sing. Chimpanzees use tools. Whales have some language abilities. But storytelling? As far

as we know, it is unique to us—our ability to share our stories with each other, to bond over them and even make up our own.

The Bible tells us that we're made in God's image. But perhaps the word *image* refers to something beyond mere physical likeness. I wonder whether the word reflects the reality that we, too, engage in small acts and echoes of Creation. While only God can speak the universe into being, we *can* tell stories. We can imagine worlds filled with dragons or fairies. We can weave tales filled with hard-boiled detectives or corrupt kings or brave starship captains. We can, in our own way, create something that wasn't there before.

When we tell stories, we follow the example of the Creator of everything, whether we acknowledge it or not. We don't create mountains and bushes and field mice from nothing, as God did. But we still follow humbly in His glorious footsteps.

Madeleine L'Engle, author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, wrote, "All of us who have given birth to a baby, to a story, know that it is ultimately mystery, closely knit to God's own creative activities which did not stop at the beginning of the universe. God is constantly creating, in us, through us, with us, and to co-create with God is our human calling."¹

But here's the thing: When God created the universe, before sin had a chance to do its work, He could see that it was *good*. Creation reflected Him, and Him alone. It embodied His boundless creativity, His measureless love.

But with us? It's a different story. Literally.

FALLEN FAIRY TALES

As we know, it didn't take long for sin to take Creation and twist it. We lost Eden when we lost our way. Our own stories—in other words, our lives—are filled with strife and pain and so much failure. We may begin our stories with “Once upon a time,” but rarely do we find that our endings are, without blemish, “happily ever after.” Even the best of us can't manage that outcome.

When I was a kid, I loved reading about David. What Christian kid wouldn't? David was one of the few biblical youngsters who did much of anything, it seemed to me back then. And, man, did he do something pretty cool and wildly violent (always a perk in Bible stories for me as a kid). In 1 Samuel 17, we read about his most famous exploit.

A Philistine named Goliath—a literal giant—was trash-talking the entire Israelite army. And even though King Saul promised a mountain of treasure and his daughter's hand in marriage to anyone who'd kill the guy, not one of his men dared face Goliath in single combat. (Who could blame them?) David volunteered to take on this, ahem, *giant* task. But the Israelite armor was too heavy for him, and the sword's sheath dragged along the ground when he put it on (or so I extrapolated from the text when I was a kid). So he tossed it all aside and instead fought Goliath with a sling and five smooth stones.

He just needed one of those stones to take down the towering Philistine.

David was brave and courageous—a real hero in that story. And even at my young age, I got the point: If you place

your faith in God, nothing—not even giants—can stand in your way. Nice and tidy, that. It was a happily-ever-after sort of story.

Or so it was if you didn't continue reading.

David's story is inherently tied to King Saul's, and all the political and palace intrigue that followed. It's tied to the story of Bathsheba, the woman David lusted after, and Uriah, her husband, whom David sent to his death. It's tied to that of David's rebellious son, Absalom, who was done in by his much-admired hair (2 Samuel 18:9). King David's last words to his successor, Solomon, were to kill an old enemy of his. "Bring his gray head down to the grave in blood" (1 Kings 2:9). And with that, the Bible says, David rested with his ancestors.

David was a man after God's own heart, as the Bible often reminds us. And yet he was a sinner surrounded by sinners, prone to tears and anger and something close to despair. David's story reminds us, in the end, that we are all fallen creatures in a fallen world. Whatever happiness we taste is salted with tears—often tears of our own making.

Our stories are fallen things too. Most storytellers don't see their work as a sacred act. Many don't acknowledge the Creator, much less recognize the echo of Him in their own faulty creations. And even when they do, their stories are often little more than warped reflections of God's own beautiful stories—the equivalent of a child's crayon drawing of a tree when one compares it with the awesome complexity of a live oak.

No writer, no matter how gifted or devout, can craft a *perfect* story. No movie director, no matter how talented and

God-honoring, can make a perfect movie. Whatever good we try to make falls short when measured against God's good artistry. That's just the way things are.

Genesis 1 and 2 give us the story of our creation and the story of our fall, and that leaves us with two important truths when it comes to the stories we, in turn, create.

First, few stories are wholly worthless. They are, after all, a mimicry of God's creative impulse, made by God's crowning creations. Just as our own worst sins are corruptions of God's gifts to us, a glimmer of God's goodness can be found in the folds of most of our stories if we look for them. I've called them God's fingerprints—hints, echoes of the glorious story He's been telling us throughout time.

Second, all stories are inevitably twisted creations too—made by sinners and tainted with sin. The stories we watch or read or play through are, in short, a lot like us: complex contradictions of good and bad. Sometimes lofty ideals mingle with tawdry inclinations; the better angels of our nature rubbing elbows with our inner demons.

And that's where *Plugged In* comes in.

FAILED TALES?

When I started working at *Plugged In*, one of my editors was Bob Smithouser. He ran the *Plugged In* podcast at the time, and he always signed off each episode with this snappy little tag: "It's not just entertainment."

Bob was absolutely right. It isn't.

Yes, we turn to movies to escape and relax. Many of us mindlessly watch television to decompress after a day at work

or school. Entertainment is supposed to be, well, *entertaining*. We're not supposed to think too deeply about it, are we?

But think about what we've just gone over. We learn from the stories we're told—be they on paper or screen. We're programmed, by our very own creator, to not just learn from them but to love them as well. And while most every human story has a hint of God's creative impulse, it is also a product of our fallen world and its broken storytellers.

When we engage with the stories that our culture gives us, we're just following the design God gave us. God's design makes these stories incredibly influential—even when we don't think we're being influenced at all.

And the younger we are, the more likely it is that those stories will influence us. Kids may always worry about the monsters under their beds, but show them a horror movie featuring such a monster? Well, they just might be sleeping in *your* bed till they're twenty-seven!

Kids will always have some interest in sex. Expose a fourteen-year-old to an R-rated sex comedy, and what he sees on that screen may impact his relationships well into adulthood.

Studies show that kids who see smoking in movies are more likely to smoke. Kids who watch movies with a lot of swearing are more likely to swear themselves.

But that influence can go in a more positive direction too. What we see and hear and even play can move us in profound ways. We can learn. We can look at issues through a different set of eyes, feel compassion for people we've never met. Our

stories can help us think and feel and grow. They can even help us think about God.

And often, we see those positives and negatives walk together, hand in hand, in our entertainment. Crass comedies can have a surprisingly tender heart. Profound dramas can be profane.

At *Plugged In*, we shuffle through it all—the good and the bad—to help you decide what’s a good fit for you and your family. To decide, for yourselves, whether the gold you might find in the mud is worth digging out of that mud. So it’s not for *us* to say whether a movie is worth seeing. It’s for *you* to say. We just try to give you the information you need to make that decision on your own.

And so, yes, we count swear words. For some, one misuse of Jesus’ name is enough to bar a movie from their family’s watch list, whereas their Christian neighbor might choose to see the same movie, believing that the story has value overall and that the unfortunate language is an opportunity to discuss the issue of respecting God’s name. Other families may be more sensitive to other words. For some mature viewers, two f-bombs might be navigable. But two hundred? Not so much.

If you haven’t thought about entertainment like this before—or you haven’t thought quite so deeply about it—well, you’re in for a ride. A *fun* ride, I hope. For all its oddities, we love our job, and we hope you’ll get a hint of that love as the book rolls on. But we feel it’s an important job too—one that’ll take you to a destination you and your family *need* to find: to understand why stories are so important and how you can sift them with care and wisdom. We’ll teach you how

to think about entertainment the way a *Plugged In* reviewer does. And we'll help you take those lessons and apply them to you and your children.

After all, it's not just entertainment.

PAW PRINTS

I was eight years old. The dentist told me I had a small mouth and too many teeth. So he pulled four of them—and gave me nine shots of Novocain to make sure I wouldn't feel a thing.

Until I got home. The numbness was wearing off, but I was still drooling all over myself. And slowly, the pain began to seep into my brain. I was miserable. Worse yet, I knew this was just the beginning. It was going to be a long night.

But when my dad came home from work, he was carrying an extravagant gift for our budget-conscious family: a box set of C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* books.

It took me about five days to read all seven of them. And for the next several years, I read through the series again and again. I laughed at Uncle Andrew in *The Magician's Nephew*. I literally cried during *The Last Battle*. One day I went outside and pushed aside the bushes in our backyard hoping to find a secret door or hole or train that might whisk me away to this imaginary place where I might meet Aslan, the Great Lion, the son of the Emperor-over-the-Sea, the King above all kings.

My favorite Aslan-related passage came from *The Horse and His Boy*. In it, Shasta—the boy from the title—has gotten separated from his party, and he's riding his horse alone in the mist. Only he's not really alone: Slowly he becomes aware

of a *thing* walking next to him. And when he learns that it's a lion, he's naturally terrified. But as he and the lion talk (for the lion does talk), Shasta begins to understand that this is no ordinary lion; this lion is beyond comprehension, the source of all love and wisdom and light. And then—shortly after Shasta sees and understands fully the power that has been with him not just while walking in the mist but throughout his life as well—Aslan vanishes.

“Was it all a dream?” wondered Shasta. But it couldn't have been a dream for there in the grass before him he saw the deep, large print of the Lion's front right paw. It took one's breath away to think of the weight that could make a footprint like that. But there was something more remarkable than the size about it. As he looked at it, water had already filled the bottom of it. Soon it was full to the brim, and then overflowing, and a little stream was running downhill, past him, over the grass.²

I set those books aside eventually. Indeed, I stopped reading altogether. The sixteen-year-old me had other interests, other things to do. And over the next several years, my faith started slipping too. It, like Narnia, seemed so important in my childhood. In college, it seemed less so.

Perhaps even childish.

But as I walked further from God, Aslan stayed with me. I recalled snippets from those books I'd read so often and loved so much. Like Shasta, I was lost in the mist of my own

sorrows and cynicism. And eventually I, like Shasta, knew that despite it all, God was with me still—in the fog, listening and loving.

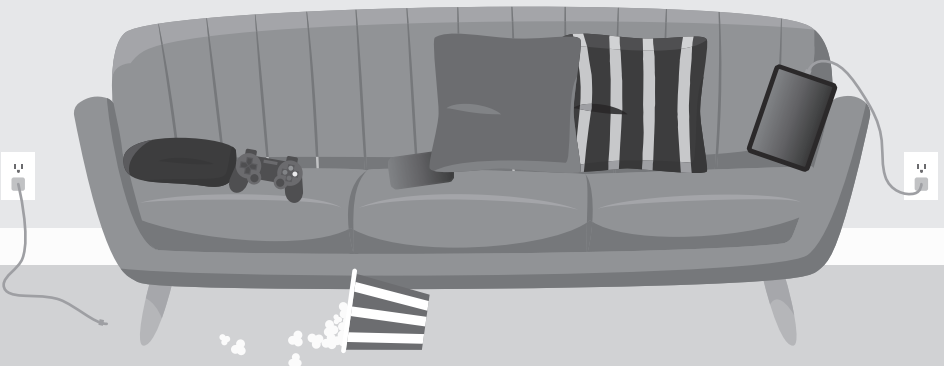
How powerful are stories? How can they change us?

Just ask me—the guy who has a map of Narnia on his bedroom wall. The guy who looks for God's fingerprints in this clouded, shrouded culture, including in our own fractured stories.

Let my colleagues and I at *Plugged In* show you what we see in the mist. Let's take a walk.

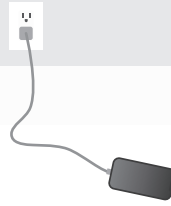
PART 1

Why It Matters



Remote

Adam R. Holz



MY WIFE AND I ARE WATCHING the Denver Broncos on television. They're losing. Of course.

Still, they have plenty of time to make a comeback. The offense could get in a groove. The defense could force a turnover. The coach could fire his staff and—

Blip.

The TV switches to the Hallmark Channel, blissfully airing *Holiday Homecoming in Maple County*. Or something.

Has the television itself decided that the game is a lost cause? Has it detected my rising blood pressure and decided that I can stand to watch something a bit more . . . calming?

No. Televisions are getting more technologically savvy all the time, but they're not quite *that* advanced. (Yet.)

The real culprit is my wife, now holding the remote and gently smiling at the screen.

“What are you doing?” I ask her—not exactly matching the tranquility of the Hallmark Channel.

“Relax,” she says. “It’s a commercial. Just let me watch this a minute.”

This is not the first time my wife has done this during a Broncos game. It is not even the first time she’s done it during *this* Broncos game. But the contest is now hanging in the balance. And after thirty-nine seconds of watching it snow in Maple County, I snatch the remote, flip the channel back, and see . . . a car commercial.

“Argh,” I growl. My wife looks at me.

“I just don’t want to miss any of the game!” I desperately say.

She’s still looking at me. It’s the look a Jedi Master might give a foolish Padawan. It’s a look that says, *I know when the game will be back on. We have another 94.6 seconds.*

She grabs the remote. Flicks back to an image of a pretty girl standing in the snow, looking at her hometown, wondering if perhaps life here is better than in the big city after all.

I start to sweat. The seconds tick by, agonizingly, interminably. I wonder if perhaps we’ve scored again. Or, more likely, thrown another interception.

She looks at me. *Calm down*, her eyes say. And in a few more moments, she clicks back to the game—a miraculous-but-maddening *two seconds* before the game resumes.

How does she do that? I wonder. It feels as if she must have made some Faustian bargain with the TV commercial deities,

that she knows intuitively, almost magically, when the game will be back on.

We've been married nearly seventeen years now. This little scene has been repeated more times than I care to count. Yet still our little battle over the TV's remote control continues.

Who controls the remote? It's a marriage cliché, of course, the never-ending quest to wield the "one remote of power," thus controlling which images and stories flicker on our flat-screen TV. We're hardly the first couple to fight this battle. And, in truth, it's hardly a battle in my house anymore. I realized years ago that I wasn't likely to change my wife's predilection for channel surfing. But I do sometimes whine, "Can't we just leave it on one channel?" And every now and then, when I just can't stand it anymore, I grab the remote. I want the controller. I want *control*.

If at times there is conflict between spouses over this issue, however, it's nothing compared to the conflicts and concerns connected to our kids' use of screens and how they engage with all manner of entertainment through these pixilated windows. Trying to guide our children's relationships with screens is a potential minefield that's grown ever more complex in the advent of the information age, and especially since the proliferation of smartphones began around the year 2010 or so.

So what we're left with is, in a sense, a much *bigger* metaphorical battle about who controls the remote when it comes to our families' entertainment choices. And it's a battle with much bigger consequences than potentially missing a play or two of the big game if your spouse lingers a bit too long for comfort on the Hallmark Channel.

IT'S A SCREEN, SCREEN, SCREENED WORLD

Experts in the areas of pediatrics and child development usually suggest a two-hour-per-day screen-time limit for children—a subject we'll return to later in the book. Now, in the abstract, that might actually seem like a fairly generous allotment of time. But the reality is that too many kids spend much more than two hours a day in front of a screen. The 2019 Common Sense Census tells us that eight-to-twelve-year-old kids engage with screens an average of four hours and forty-four minutes a day, while the average teen is on for seven hours and twenty-two minutes. And that's not including homework or school-related screen usage.¹ (Common Sense Media updates this survey every few years, and the trends in screen time, not surprisingly, have gone only one direction in the past fifteen years: up.)

Obviously, there's a huge gap between what experts recommend and what our kids are actually doing with screens. And during the coronavirus pandemic, researchers suggested that screen-time usage (particularly among older kids with access to personal devices) was 52 percent higher than in pre-pandemic times.² One study went so far as saying that adults spent a whopping *seventeen hours a day* on their screens during the coronavirus—which, if extrapolated to a full lifetime, would translate to *forty-four years*.³ Clearly this isn't just a problem for tweens and teens.

Our instinctive response as parents when we feel that our kids' screen engagement is out of whack is to (figuratively) grab the remote and change the channel. Certainly, established boundaries for what our kids see on-screen and how

much time they spend there are an important part of the equation, and we'll talk about those, too.

But given the proliferation of screens in our lives and the lives of our kids, we as parents need more than just drill-sergeant commands to limit how our children interact with entertainment. And our kids need more than that too. We must understand more deeply *how* the ideas they're interacting with are shaping them. We also need to cultivate an *active, engaged, and intentional* stance in how we relate to our devices—instead of a passive, consumeristic one.

Perhaps most importantly, we need a vision of what we want the outcome for our children to be as they mature and eventually launch into young adulthood themselves.

WHEN OUR KIDS ARE “REMOTE”

As our children move through the teen years, they'll increasingly be asking for more control. How do we respond? How do we help shape their hearts and souls for the quickly approaching season when we as parents no longer have our hands on that proverbial remote control?

Just as every couple has likely argued over who gets to operate the remote control, every one of us as parents has also had to navigate the first experience of learning that our son or daughter has been exposed to something we wish they hadn't—thus facing the sobering realization that parental control is more limited than we had hoped. And despite our best intentions to protect our kids, at some point that will happen to all of us—whether our children tell us about it or not.

When my son was around six or seven years old, he went to a friend's house for the afternoon. When he got back, he was raving about a video game they'd played with his friend's dad, who was in the armed services. The game? One of the *Call of Duty* series titles.

Now, if you know anything about video games, you probably understand why alarm bells went off in my head. "You played *what?!*" I was tempted to say. After all, this franchise is rated M (for "mature" audiences, seventeen years old or older) for brutally realistic combat and harsh profanity.

But the fact of the matter was that it had already happened, and there was nothing I could do to undo it. What I *could* do, however, was ask him about the game, listen to his responses, and try to help him understand why we wouldn't be playing that game in our house (which he definitely wanted to do).

Boundaries Breached

When my son was fourteen, someone sent him an unsolicited, inappropriate picture via his Google Hangouts account. My two daughters found it first, since they were using our laptop for a school assignment.

"Um, Dad, you'd better come look at this," they said.

Now, my daughters have a penchant for drama and never miss a chance to get their older brother in trouble. But I wasn't prepared for the image I saw when I walked over to the computer. I wasn't prepared for feeling like my children's innocence had all been sullied in that moment.

My wife and I spent the next three hours talking through what we'd seen with all three of our children. It was an unwanted, unasked-for image, to be sure—but *there it was*. And now it was important that we talked about it.

“Why would anyone send a picture like that?” one of them asked in tears, genuinely bewildered.

It was a good question. And despite my anger and frustration in that moment, it proved to be an excellent opportunity to talk about some hard-but-important issues that almost all families today will have to deal with at some point. (Later in the book, we'll be talking more about the reality of sexting, as this phenomenon is called.)

Remote . . . but Controlled

As parents, we're tempted to try to create a hermetically sealed environment that we can control completely, monitoring everything that comes in and out of our children's lives. As you've seen in my own story, that doesn't always work.

But even as we work diligently to protect our kids from threats that we can and should minimize, we must keep the end goal in mind: gradually granting them increasing freedom to make their own decisions as they move through adolescence but modeling discernment, communication, and wisdom as we go.

When our children spread their wings and leave our homes as young adults, what do we want for them in the areas of entertainment, technology, and discernment? We want them to be able to think critically and biblically about their entertainment choices and technology usage. Achieving

that goal requires a strategy that both shields them from destructive content and gradually moves them into dialoguing about content and worldview as they grow into their middle-teen years.

The result? By the time our children are remote from us physically and relationally, they'll have learned what it looks like to exercise control in their media, entertainment, and technology choices. Leaving the nest won't be as much an opportunity to go crazy trying all the stuff Mom and Dad wouldn't let them do as it will be the next step in their development. At that point, they will already have practiced making entertainment and technology choices on their own—with our guidance and active engagement.

ENGAGED, BUT NOT PERFECT

Our hope is that this book will provide you, as parents, with a practical, relational, and theologically grounded road map to help you and your children wisely navigate the screen-saturated world in which we live.

As you've probably noticed by now, our *Plugged In* team isn't writing about this topic from an ivory tower. We're sharing our own experiences and hard-learned lessons from the perspectives of sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, and media users ourselves. We're all navigating the very things we discuss in this book. Sometimes we get things right and our kids make great decisions. Other times, maybe not. You'll see both successes and failures in the pages that follow.

Our desire is not to paint an unrealistically rosy or overly formulaic portrait of parenting in a screen-saturated culture.

Rather, we hope to come alongside you and offer specific, concrete, and hard-won wisdom about what may be the most influential issue families face today: dealing with the proliferation of screens and the content that can come with them.

Rather than advocating perfection, we'd like to lay before you this goal as fellow parents: consistent, intentional engagement with our kids and with the reality of how screens influence their lives today. As we set limits, ask questions, and thoughtfully discuss choices and the areas where we've set limits, we'll model an ongoing and critical conversation about entertainment and media, not just saying "Because I said so" to our children and shutting them down.

As a dad of three, I'm deeply aware of my own failings and inconsistencies. I don't always get it right—a fact I'm sure my children would agree with if I invited them to chime in here. That said, my wife and I *are* seeking to raise our three kids by the principles and ideas, goals and desires you'll read about in this book.

GROWING IN BIBLICAL MEDIA DISCERNMENT

One of the ideas we'll be talking about a lot in this book is *media discernment*. You may already know exactly what I mean by that phrase. But if not, I want to flesh it out a bit before we move into the meat of this book.

In a nutshell, exercising biblical media discernment involves comparing the on-screen content we encounter with what we find in Scripture. Over and over in the Bible, we read about how our faith compels and propels us to live differently from the world in terms of our perspectives and behaviors.

In the book of Ephesians, for instance, the apostle Paul spends the first three chapters of his letter helping us understand how our relationship with Jesus transforms us from the inside out, giving us a new identity and a new sense of purpose and calling in our lives. In fact, it's hard to pull out just one passage to illustrate that point, since one gets the sense that Paul was barely able to take a breath as he wrote this letter to the church at Ephesus:

[God] chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

EPHESIANS 1:4-10

EMBRACING OUR CALLING AND IDENTITY IN CHRIST

For Paul, the conversation about our calling and identity begins and ends with a profound sense of how Jesus' sacrifice

changes us from the inside out. Our identity and calling are shaped and defined by Jesus' death on our behalf and our embrace of what His gift graciously offers us.

That calling and identity utterly revolutionize the way we see the world, such that we no longer passively or mindlessly accept ideas or ways of life that the world wouldn't give a second thought to. Instead, Paul urges us to "live a life worthy of the calling you have received" (Ephesians 4:1), to make choices in keeping with our identity as children of God whom Jesus paid the ultimate price to save.

To exercise biblical media discernment, then, is to compare our entertainment choices with what Scripture says is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8). When we engage with entertainment and technology through this grid, it changes our perspective on both *what* movies and TV shows we watch and *how* we watch them, on how we interact with online content, and on what entertainment choices we're willing to make.

This kind of media discernment is something we should practice as parents, even as we model it and teach our children how to do the same. And *that* requires one more important step: critiquing the seductive notion that the entertainment we choose doesn't really matter.

MOVING BEYOND "NEUTRAL-ZONE" THINKING

It's tempting—very tempting, actually—to indulge the notion that we can dabble in stories and entertainment with big content and worldview issues and not be influenced or

shaped by them. Sure, we might stay away from the “really bad” stuff. But like the proverbial frog in the kettle, we can easily minimize entertainment’s potentially problematic influence because we just don’t realize how hot the water has gotten.

I call this *neutral-zone thinking*.

History is filled with plenty of neutral zones. But when I think of *the* Neutral Zone, I think of the universe of *Star Trek*. According to StarTrek.com, the Neutral Zone is “an area of space between the United Federation of Planets and the Romulan Star Empire that measures approximately one light year and serves as a ‘buffer’ zone. Any incursion into the Romulan Neutral Zone is considered a hostile act.”⁴ And anyone who has watched *Star Trek* knows just how hostile that act could get.

If you prefer to think in more real-world terms, the neutral zone is a lot like the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea. It’s a place where two warring powers agree not to go, a “safe space” of sorts between them.

Now, you might be thinking, *What on earth (or in space!) does this have to do with technology and the entertainment media that flows through it?* Great question! I’m glad you asked.

As Christians and even as parents, we can drift passively, almost unconsciously, into neutral-zone thinking when it comes to the bombardment of media and technology we face today.

We know the “big” things we want to help our kids avoid, such as pornography, graphic violence, and sexual entertainment. We recognize that these things are at war with the

convictions we hold as Christ followers. But when it comes to the “little” things, well, we can almost unconsciously treat them as if they’re *neutral*, when in fact they might very well be communicating subtle messages and worldviews that are very much at odds with our Christian faith.

The apostle Paul repeatedly challenged the mentality of neutral-zone thinking in the book of Ephesians (though, of course, he didn’t actually have Romulans in mind!): “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is” (Ephesians 5:15-17).

Paul understood that the culture influences how we live. So he tells us to “pay attention,” a phrase that the King James Version translates “walk circumspectly” (verse 15). In other words, don’t just mindlessly absorb and consume what you’re walking through. Instead, look up, look around, and be aware of the influences that seek to shape your heart and mind in ways that are at odds with a biblical faith and worldview.

This is not a casual suggestion from Paul, who went on to say that “the days are evil” (verse 16). If we’re not paying attention and seeking to “understand what the Lord’s will is,” he tells us, we risk being sucked into the gravitational pull of a worldly way of life that’s opposed to the gospel (see verse 18). He reiterates the same idea in Romans 12:2: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and

perfect will.” The contrast here is clear: being shaped by the world or being transformed by truth as we walk with God.

It’s critical, obviously, to understand what’s happening in the world of technology and media influence if we hope to limit and counterbalance potentially harmful influences in those arenas—which is exactly what my *Plugged In* colleagues and I hope to accomplish in the chapters that follow.