

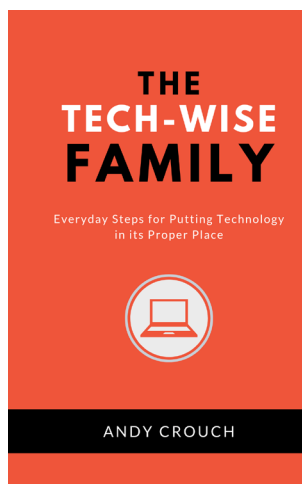
The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place.

By Andy Crouch

Baker Books, 2017. 224 pages.

Review by Stephen Strange

Stephen Strange (pseudonym) has served as a church planter for a total of eight years in East Asia, Central Asia, and currently South Asia. He has had the privilege of initiating a church-planting movement among Han Chinese, but he and his family have primarily been focused on church planting among Muslims. Stephen is married to a South Asian and has three children. Among the most influential authors in Stephen's life and ministry are Roland Allen, Dallas Willard, N. T. Wright, and Jackson Wu.



Whether we are new to the field or have been serving for a long time, cross-cultural workers have a unique relationship to technology. Media consumption has become part of our lives. Often the best way to stay connected with supporters is through various digital tools. We also find ourselves increasingly connecting with those we are ministering to through online platforms.

Yet we may also find ourselves online as an escape from the unique challenges of being cross-cultural workers. We can find ourselves caught up in the world we left and longing for the things we enjoyed back home. With responsibilities like submitting reports, updating supporters, and

tracking finances, we can easily fill up our day with administrative tasks and online meetings. Devices and entertainment also become a quick fix for our kids when we need to direct our attention to the many different hats we wear as cross-cultural ministers of the gospel.

Having trouble finishing your in-person sentences? Finding yourself regularly comparing yourself to others? Unable to rest? Is focused attention a challenge? The use of technology both for the accomplishment of our responsibilities as well as for an escape from them can easily lead to addiction. These challenges could be attributed to what Andy Crouch calls not keeping technology in its “proper place.”

A Technology Mentor

In *The Tech-Wise Family*, Andy Crouch gently guides us through principles for the wise use of technology in the context of the family. Although the world he invites us into is his own home, he certainly sparks our imagination for how we might also use the same principles in our ministries. Andy Crouch has written authoritatively on the intersection between culture and the gospel and therefore certainly deserves the attention of the missions community.

One thread that runs throughout the book is that when technology is not kept in its proper place, it overpromises and underdelivers. We are promised greater efficiency and productivity, but we actually become less productive. With notifications constantly distracting us, we have a hard time accomplishing meaningful work and being productive because there is no focused attention.¹

We find that the problems we are running from don't go away while we are on our devices. The carefully crafted, unrealistic lives of others we experience online can leave us feeling that something is missing from

1 Cal Newport captures this idea of reduced productivity by describing “the hyperactive hive mind” in his book, *A World Without Email: Reimagining Work in an Age of Information Overload* (Portfolio Penguin, 2021).

our own experience. These themes are taken up in Part One of the book: “The Three Key Decisions of a Tech-Wise Family.”

We may also see technology and entertainment as a simple means of rest. For those of us accustomed to the unique challenges of cross-cultural ministry, we feel the need for this recharge time. However, Crouch points out that we often walk away feeling more depleted than before: “Instead of work and rest, we have ended up with toil and leisure—and neither one is an improvement” (loc. 764). Crouch also points out that sleep itself is often disrupted by our use of devices.

Discovering Technology’s Proper Place

Crouch specifically sets out ten commitments that he and his family made regarding the healthy use of technology. Each commitment is a chapter in the book:

- Focus on character growth as a family.
- Use technology to create more than to consume.
- Schedule regular times with devices turned off.
- Restrict access to devices overnight.
- Prohibit screens for kids before age 10.
- Use devices together and intentionally rather than alone and aimlessly.
- Converse during car time.
- Allow spouses total access to each other’s and kids’ devices.
- Sing and make music together rather than passively listening.
- Appear in person for key events in life.

Beyond these practical commitments, there are several underlying principles from the book that have been hugely impactful to me personally, in our family, and in our ministry.

First, as Crouch lays out in the preface of the book, if we do not put technology in its proper place, it will not go there on its own. I've heard it said that social media is like water. If it is channeled and used well, it can truly be life giving. However, water that spills out of a cup or overflows the banks of a river can be at very least disruptive and at worst destructive.

Second, we can use social media to bond with people that God has given us to love and care for rather than using it to bond with people we will never meet such as celebrities, social media influencers, or that Facebook friend that we haven't seen in twenty years. Crouch says that "social media like all media, substitutes distant relationships for close ones" (loc. 1087). Rather than letting the algorithms determine who we are keeping up with, we can be intentional and take back control over what we are using technology for, why, and who we are using it to connect with.

Third, we can use technology as creators rather than consumers. It is easy to find ourselves passively scrolling to our news feed or going from one YouTube video to the next. At the same time, there is incredible content out there that we can use to do things like learn to play the guitar, grow in our language ability, or become more effective in ministry.

Several things stand out about the way the author presents the material. First, there is a heavy dose of infographics sprinkled throughout the book. The use of statistics from the Barna Group and the engaging way the information is presented offer a bird's-eye view of key issues.

Second, Crouch does not speak to the reader in a judgmental way. Each chapter includes a "reality check" section, which highlights the ways in which his family has imperfectly implemented the principle he outlines in that chapter.

Third, although not judgmental, Crouch does manage to slip in some jabs here and there that can leave the reader thinking, "I probably needed to hear that." Some examples include "We most often give our children screens not to make their lives easier but to make our lives

easier” (loc. 1218) and “At the playground, with phones left behind, parents may have to actually play too, rather than just hover at the edge tending to their devices while their children enjoy the fleeting years of physical engagement with dirt and grass and sky” (loc. 886).

Implementation in our Family

In our family, we have implemented a few policies inspired by this book. In addition to no devices being allowed during meal times, our kids must earn screen time by developing a skill such as practicing music, reading a book and writing a book report, and cooking.

I have also begun to discover how God is working in the lives of people on our field through the wise use of technology. One young local believer is practicing boundaries with technology by fasting from technology for a week every two months. For those she is discipling, she encourages them to do the same. On the other days, she posts on social media an invitation for people to share how she can pray for them. They open up quite a bit, and she is able to speak Christ into their lives.

The set of Bible stories we use with seekers begins with Luke 6:12–16, where Jesus draws away from the crowds to spend all night in prayer. This becomes a starting point for us to talk about turning down the volume of social media and technology in order to tune our hearts to the voice of God. Without this crucial step of developing focused attention among those we are ministering to, we run the risk of becoming just another message among the hundreds that are coming at them every day.

We also draw out from Luke 6:12–16 the implications of Jesus’ calling of the twelve disciples. He intentionally focuses his attention on a small group rather than merely interacting with the crowds. We encourage people to unfollow people on social media while still remaining “Facebook friends.” We help people to narrow their focus onto meaningful relationships that will lead them closer to God or in which they can lead others to draw closer to God. We help them to consider the content

they create and how it will impact others rather than just being a tool to build their own image. If we set up our social-media accounts in an intentional way, Crouch says that then “when we do scroll through social media, it will be to have a chance to give thanks for our friends, enjoy their creative gifts, and pray for their needs, rather than just something to take our mind off our tedium” (loc. 1419).

One criticism of the book is that it could have gone further to tease out some of the practical implications of the wise use of technology in ministry. Crouch’s passion for music shines through the book as this often becomes a point of reference for using technology wisely. However, relatively few examples, stories, statistics, and little overall attention is given to the intentional use of technology as a platform for gospel proclamation and discipleship.

Overall, I would highly recommend this book to any followers of Christ who finds themselves struggling to use technology in a God-honoring way in their personal lives, in the family, or in ministry. More specifically, cross-cultural practitioners who are trying to lead their families in a godly way during the global pandemic face unique challenges. This book provides a foundation for how to think about technology in a healthy way that can then lead to setting reasonable boundaries. At the same time, the book can powerfully initiate new patterns of thinking and innovation about leveraging technology for the sake of the gospel—first within the family and then in the broader cultures we are trying to reach. As we say in our initial Bible study with seekers, “Use social media. Don’t let social media use you.”² The world is asking significant questions about the proper place of media in our lives, and as witnesses of a kingdom way of life, we can provide answers.

2 Quote from Sean Cannell, “Ten YouTube and Business Lessons Learned in 2020 with Sean Cannell,” *Think Marketing Podcast*, December 9, 2020, Video, 24:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIWHazIU-yc>

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