



## **session one** **our digital world**

### **INTRODUCTION: LOVING PILGRIMS**

One of the major discussions for all Christians concerns the relationship between the church and culture. How should we interact with the world? The Bible tells us that the church lives in a tension: in one sense, the church's true citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20), and we are therefore labeled as pilgrims, wanderers, or strangers in the world (1 Peter 2:11-12); and in another sense, Jesus prayed to the Father that we would not be taken out of the world (John 17:15), and that His followers would be children of light (John 17:16-19; Ephesians 5:8), seen by the world as they illuminate the glory of the Father through their love for one another (John 13:34-35; 17:22-23). This is the struggle of the Christian life: seeking the wisdom and virtue to live as loving pilgrims that testify to Jesus Christ.

A necessary step in endeavoring to be loving pilgrims in this world concerns our ability to see the world through a lens of godly wisdom. We need to understand the world in which we live. More specifically, we should seek to identify this world's values and its vehicles - and by vehicles we mean those things the world utilizes to teach and mobilize its values. In other words, what gospel is the world throwing at us and how does it preach it to us? Whether we realize it or not, the world is preaching a gospel to us contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is preaching it vehemently with all its might. If we do not live "as wise as serpents" (Matthew 10:16) in our world, we will be swept away into valuing what the world has conditioned us to value.

All of this serves as a foundation for the current study. In seeking to understand our world, one glaring characteristic bursts forth: we live in a digital world. Our lives are flooded with digital technology and social media. Therefore, in pursuit of living as loving pilgrims who testify to Jesus Christ, we must address this topic of digital technology and social media. We cannot live wisely in our world if we do not wisely approach digital technology and social media.



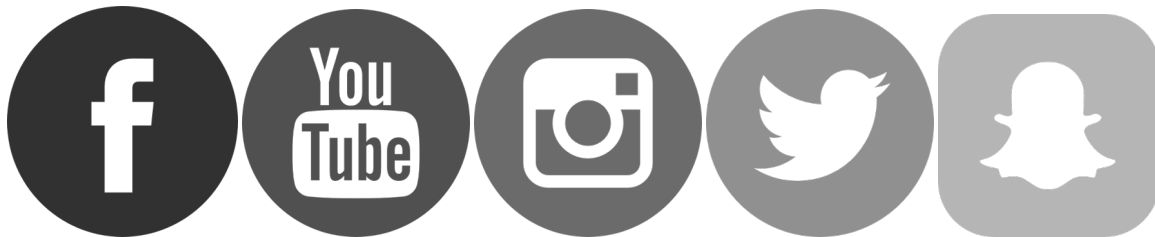
## OUR DIGITAL WORLD

The first email was sent in 1971, which was only forty years ago. One of the most remarkable things about our digital world is how *new* it is. It was not too long ago that the digital world we are now so accustomed to was completely foreign to people's everyday lives. In speaking with my parents - only one generation older - they were able to vividly remember a world in which digital technology was almost completely absent. I personally spent almost all of my middle school and high school life without a smartphone. I did not have a Facebook account until my junior year of high school. I did not have an Instagram or Twitter account until college, and I only signed up for a Snapchat account two years ago once I entered into full-time student ministry. Nonetheless, the smartphone and these social media platforms have so consumed our lives that it is difficult to imagine our lives without them.

For many of us, it is no surprise to observe the prevalence of digital technology and social media in our world. It is not an assertion that must be proved to us. However, in observing just how prevalent it is, I hope to demonstrate why it is so important that we approach it with wisdom and intentionality.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA**

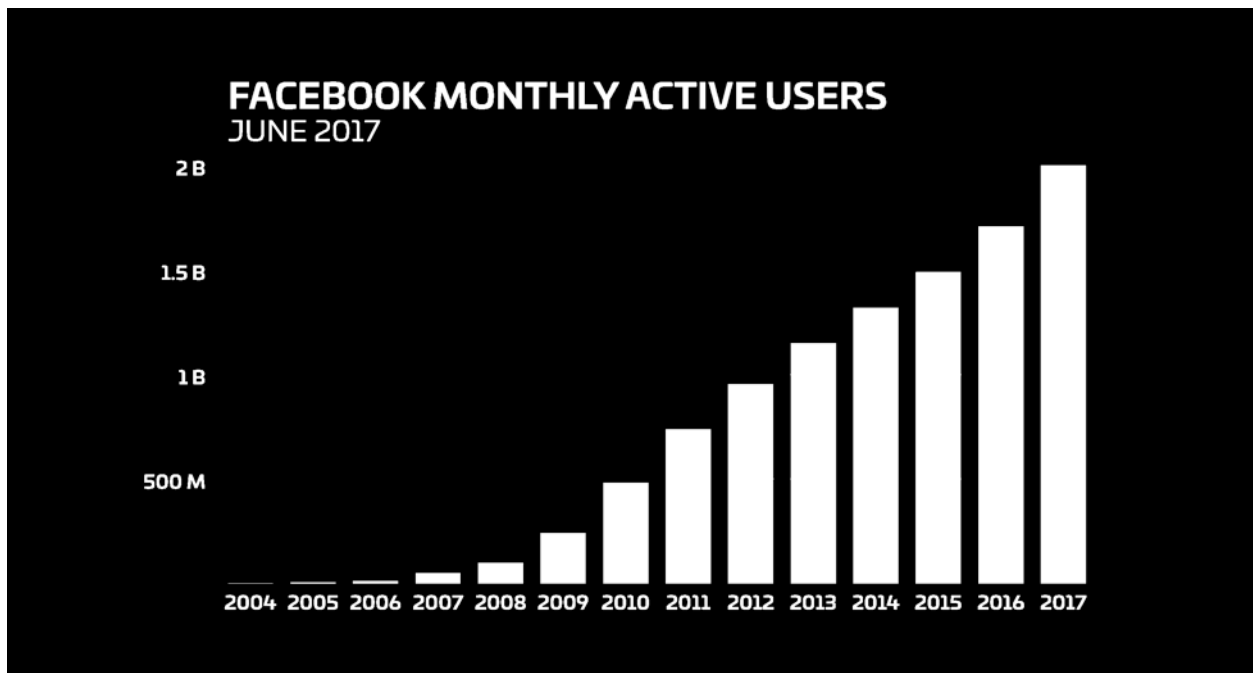
Social media has exploded. Over 25% of the population now uses social media sites, including almost half of the world's adult population. When we look specifically at the United States, 81% of American citizens have a social media profile. The Global Web index found that an average of 2 hours and 15 minutes per day is spent on social networks and messaging. It is undeniable: social media is woven into the very fabric of our everyday life. So let's look specifically at the five-headed beast of contemporary social media: Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat.





Facebook remains the most-used social media site. It alone has over 2 billion monthly active users (MAUs) and 66% of those Facebook users sign on daily.<sup>1</sup> If Facebook were a country, it would be the most populated country on the planet. One statistic claimed that the average user spends more than thirty minutes per day on Facebook.<sup>2</sup> On average, 8 billion videos are viewed on Facebook every day, which is about 100 million hours of video watched every day (85% of which are watched without sound on, which might point to the fact that most Facebook use occurs when other people are actually in the room).<sup>3</sup>

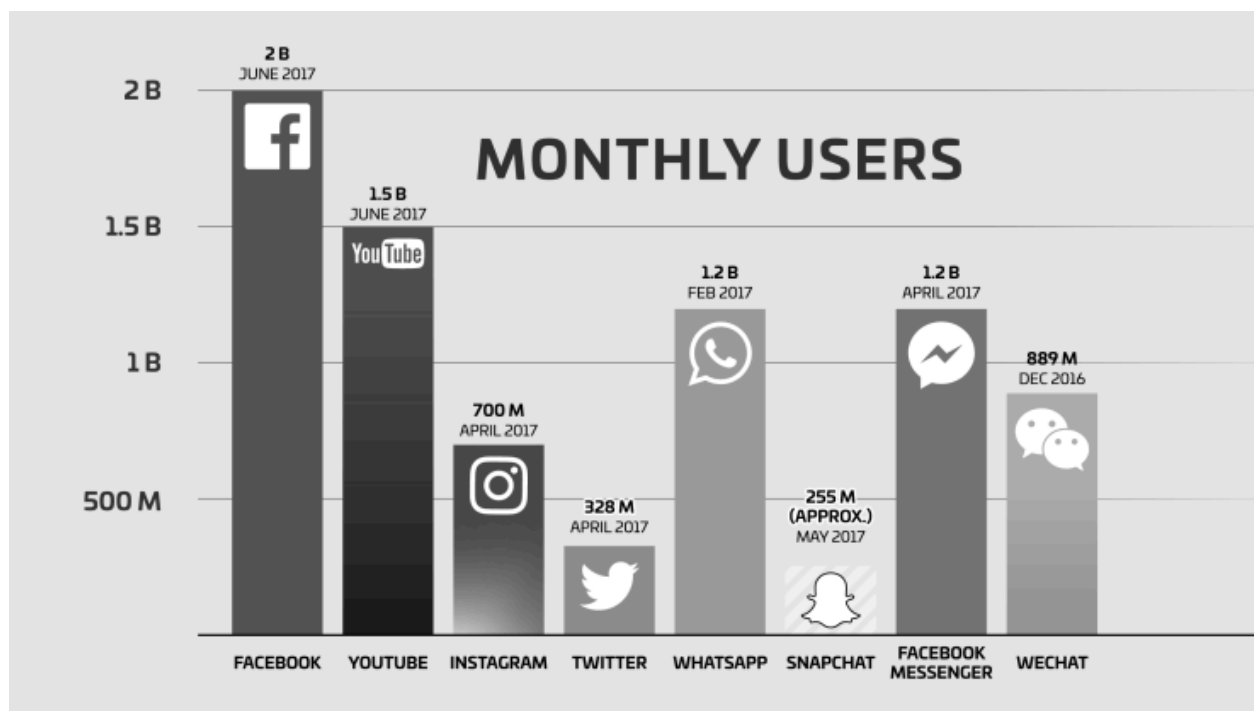
Unlike Instagram and Snapchat, Facebook integrates more people of all ages. 82% of 18 to 29-year-olds online in the U.S. use Facebook, and 79% of 30 to 49 year olds online in the U.S. use Facebook - not a huge difference there.<sup>4</sup> Also, over half of U.S. online users ages 65 and up use Facebook.<sup>5</sup> This became very apparent to my wife and I when we first entered student ministry. When we first introduced ourselves to the students, we encouraged them to friend us on Facebook. Their reply was somewhat comical: "Facebook? Our grandmas are on Facebook. We use Instagram and Snapchat."

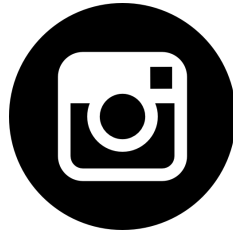




Although YouTube is not often considered a social media platform similar to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or Snapchat, in my personal interactions with teenagers, YouTube is one of the many ways they interact with one another on the Internet. If we were to break down YouTube usage by demographic in the United States, the statistics show that YouTube is most popular among teenagers: 91% of teens, 81% of millennials, 58% of Gen X, and 43% of Baby Boomers use YouTube.<sup>6</sup> According to one research center, 85% of teenage boys and 70% of teenage girls access YouTube daily.<sup>7</sup>

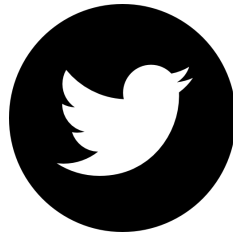
YouTube has about 1.5 billion monthly users.<sup>8</sup> According to YouTube's official blog, over 1 billion hours of video is watched on YouTube every single day, which means if you wanted to watch the equivalent of what is watched on YouTube everyday, it would take you over 100,000 years.<sup>9</sup> Over half a million hours' worth of video is uploaded everyday to the site, which constantly entices users with new content.<sup>10</sup> The average user spends 40 minutes on YouTube per session, and most of that use will be through a mobile device.<sup>11</sup>



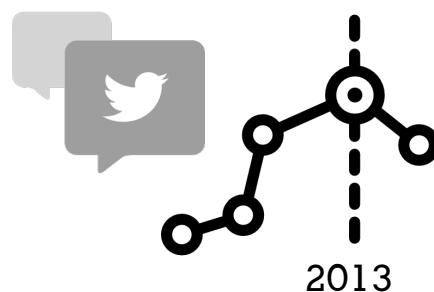


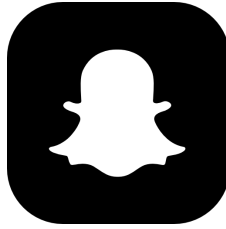
Instagram has fewer users than Facebook and YouTube, but it still has over 800 million monthly users, 60% of which are between the ages of 18 to 29 years old.<sup>12</sup> Just a few years ago 90% of Instagram users were below the age 35, but they must have reached an older demographic now that Facebook has bought them and more brands have utilized the platform.<sup>13</sup> Over 40 billion photos have been shared over Instagram, and on average about 95 million photos and videos shared every day; but that will likely increase dramatically considering Instagram usage has doubled over the past two years.<sup>14</sup>

Fun trivia: who has the most followers on Instagram? It is Selena Gomez with almost 132 million followers, which is almost the same amount of people that voted in the 2016 election.<sup>15</sup> What post has received the most likes? It was Beyonce's pregnancy announcement, which got almost 11 million likes.



Twitter has only 330 million active users, but about 500 million tweets are shared every day.<sup>16</sup> To put that into perspective, if a day's worth of tweets were put into a book, it would be 10 million pages long. Twitter was more popular with teenagers back in 2013, with almost 30% of the demographic marking it as their preferred social platform, but it has been on steady decline ever since - now less than 10%.<sup>17</sup> Given that the platform is more a word-based social network, it is no surprise that the younger generations are slowly abandoning it, favoring the more image-based platforms like Instagram and Snapchat.

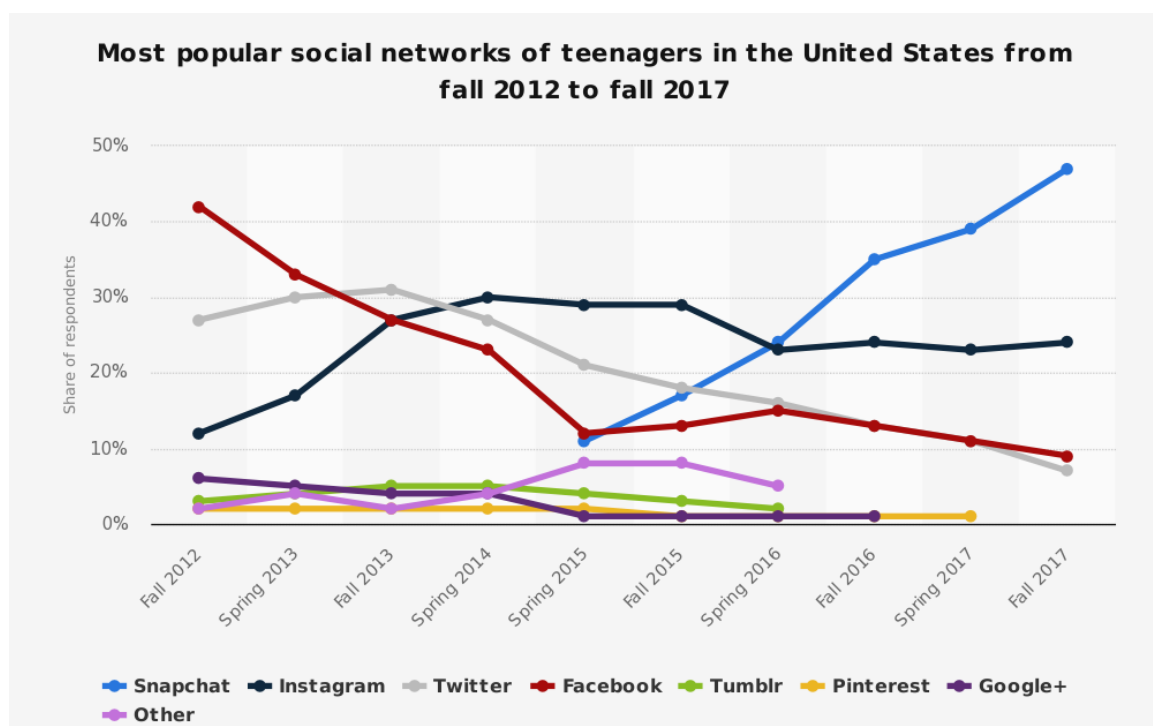




Although Snapchat has less active users than Twitter, Snapchat has grown more over the past year than Twitter has in four years combined.<sup>18</sup> Snapchat has 300 million active monthly users, half of which are daily users.<sup>19</sup> Over 10 billion snaps are viewed every day, and there are over 9,000 snaps shared every second.<sup>20</sup> A Snapchat user averages almost 30 minutes per day of in-app time.<sup>21</sup>

Now, while Snapchat is fourth in use among the whole population, this is not the case in regards to people aged 12-24. In 2016, Facebook was still the most popular in this age group with 32% of the population as users, Snapchat was second with 26%, and Instagram was third at 17%. This statistic is especially interesting given the rankings in 2015. In 2015, Facebook was at 43%, Instagram was at 18%, and Snapchat was at 15%. Basically, in 2016, 10% of world's 12-24 year olds moved from Facebook to Snapchat as their social media platform of choice.

Statista put out a report in Fall 2017 that actually showed that Snapchat was the number one preferred social media network for teenagers in the US.<sup>22</sup> In this study, they found that 47% of US teens clearly preferred Snapchat. Around 24% preferred Instagram, 9% preferred Facebook, and 7% preferred Twitter. What is so crazy about this is that things looked very differently just five years ago. Five years ago, Snapchat wasn't even on the radar, and Facebook was leading the way with 42% of teens preferring it as their social media platform. Twitter was second with 27%, and Instagram was third at 12%. Over the next three years, Facebook and Twitter began to drop, Instagram began to rise, and then Snapchat began its rise in the Spring of 2015 (10% of teens preferring it at that time). Ever since the Spring of 2015, Snapchat has excelled with the teens and there doesn't seem to be any indication of slowing down. Snapchat is the king of social media for teenagers in the US right now.



## **CELL PHONES**

It is not too difficult to understand the rise of social media given its easy and constant accessibility. Whereas media was previously reserved for newspapers, radios, televisions, desktop computers, and laptops - all centralized and mostly immobile locations - handheld technology has transformed the social world by granting immediate and relentless access to social media. The Global Web Index found that the smartphone is the number one way users engage in social media - not desktops, laptops, or tablets; smartphones are the primary social device.<sup>23</sup>

The first iPhone was first released in 2007. Since its release, nearly one billion iPhones have been sold.<sup>24</sup> Now, there are over 2 billion smartphone users in the world - about 223 million in the United States.<sup>25</sup> Pew Research found that 96% of young people live in a household with a smartphone.<sup>26</sup> Quickly, our smartphones have gone from being an extravagant convenience to a numbing addiction. Sarah Cassidy of *the Independent* concluded that 4 in 10 children - not simply adults - children are addicted to the Internet.<sup>27</sup> One study concluded that we check our smartphones about every 4.3 minutes.<sup>28</sup>

The smartphone has become one of the most influential devices of all time, which means that we cannot afford to treat this device lightly. If we do not thoughtfully and wisely use this device, this device will influence us in deeply profound and almost irreversible ways. As Tony Reinke, the author of *12 Ways Your Phone is Changing You*, states, "There is a current in the stream, and if we don't know how to swim, we shall be carried by it."<sup>29</sup> Whether you realize it or not, your smartphone is changing you - training your heart to love things that you would not choose to love, shaping your relationships in ways that you would not choose to relate, and leading you down a path that you would not choose to travel. Reinke comments, "We don't know what our smartphones are doing to us, but we are being changed, that much is clear."<sup>30</sup> For teens specifically, the studies show that unwise smartphone use leads to serious mental health issues, greater impatience, not enough sleep, entitlement issues, quick boredom, diminished attention spans, etc.

Studies are yelling that our habits with our smartphones and social media are more than just habits; it is an addiction. And just like any other addiction, smartphone addiction and social media addiction "can lead to other negatives like fatigue, depression, anxiety, and loneliness."<sup>31</sup> This is why we must be aware of these realities, especially for the sake of our students. The teenager years are extremely formidable years. Neurologically speaking, the brain is being soft-wired at a greater speed during the teen years. So the habits that a teenager engages in are extremely important to their brain development and their future. It sounds very ominous and alarming, but as Christians who are to live wisely in God's world, we must be awake to the things that are changing us

## HOW THEN SHOULD WE LIVE?

It becomes overwhelmingly apparent: we now live in a digital culture, and we cannot run away from digital technology or social media. This is a critical component of contemporary life, and the church must be intentional in approaching this new reality with wisdom. So how should we approach digital technology and social media? In his book *The Next Story*, Tim Challies provides us with three clarifying options:

1. Enthusiastic Embrace
2. Strict Separation
3. Disciplined Discernment

Those who approach digital technology and social media with enthusiastic embrace “argue that cell phones and video games and computers are an inevitable part of life in the twenty-first century.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the church ought to almost unthinkingly embrace it as to remain relevant in our culture.

A second possibility is that of strict separation. If you are in this category, you believe that these technologies and social networks are intrinsically bad and dangerous. Therefore, you “will necessarily withdraw from the world and seek to keep [yourself] free from digital defilement.”<sup>33</sup> As we have noted, however, this is seemingly impossible in our culture where digital technology is unavoidable. Although parents may wisely and lovingly withhold digital technology and social media access until a certain age, it remains true that teenagers will eventually have to interact with the digital world once they become adults.

So that leaves us with a third option of disciplined discernment. Challies notes, “In this approach, a Christian looks carefully at the new realities, weighs and evaluates them, and educates himself, thinking deeply about the potential consequences and effects of using a particular technology...He relies on the Holy Spirit, who speaks His wisdom through the Bible, to learn how he can live with virtue in this new digital world.”<sup>34</sup>

We need to move ourselves into this third approach. Most of us currently undertake the first approach, embracing technology with little thoughtfulness or theology. Some of us may completely withdraw from social media, but this is most likely an impossible or unrealistic approach for our young people's future. As Christians, we must engage in digital technology and social media as a thoughtful theological user.



## CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, many parents, student ministers, pastors, and teachers have observed the data on social media use and the consequences of the smartphone and sought to limit their teens' use by means of guilt. While the data does generate an intense moment of guilt for some, a moment of guilt can never be a sustainable motivator for life-change. We must dive deeper than mere behavioral modification. At the essence of this conversation is a concern for our life's priorities, our time, and our basic understanding of relationships. All of these concerns must be addressed with thoughtful and compassionate conviction centered on the gospel. As Reinke stated, "What we need are new life disciplines birthed from a new set of life priorities and empowered by our new life freedom in Jesus Christ."<sup>35</sup>

So how might we go about that endeavor? That is the topic of our next session.

## ENDNOTES

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever thought about the tension that we live in as Christians in the world? Do you consider yourself a pilgrim?
2. Of the two extremes, do you tend to strive to be different from the world or be an influence to the world? How do we live in such a way where we accomplish both?
3. Are you able to imagine the world without digital technology? How must the world seem to someone who is above the age of 50?
4. When you read of the prevalence of digital technology and social media, do you think it is possible for the church to influence the world without thinking wisely about these topics?



# session one our digital world

## STUDENT RESPONSE

Would you say that digital technology and social media are prevalent in your day-to-day life? Could you live without it?

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When you consider your use of digital technology and social media, does the gospel inform how you engage? Why or why not?

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Of the major social media platforms, which ones do you spend the most time on? Would you say that these benefit you and give you an opportunity to benefit others?

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Would you say that your smartphone is more of a convenience or a necessity to your daily life? Why?

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Of the three ways we can interact with digital technology - enthusiastic embrace, strict separation, or disciplined discernment - which category would you fall into?

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### ***PRAYER***

Take a moment to write out a prayer to God, praising him for the world that he has placed you in. Thank God that he has called you and equipped you in Christ to be different from the world and an influence to the world. Ask for wisdom how you can better engage in the digital world in which we live.

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