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Abstract

"In a world full of noise, TLDR is emblematic of our society's short attention span."

Posting about the book *Disruptive Witness* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/bearing-witness-in-a-tldr-world-a-review-of-disruptive-witness/>

Keywords

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Comments

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July 13, 2018

Bearing Witness in a TLDR World: A Review of “Disruptive Witness”

Justin Bailey

Title: ***Disruptive Witness: Speaking the Truth in a Distracted Age***

Author: Alan Noble

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There is an acronym that originated on the internet sometime in the early aughts: “TLDR.” It stands for “too long; didn’t read,” itself an abbreviation of the longer “This was too long; I didn’t take the time to read it.” Originally a way to dismiss the overly long comments, it now introduces a shorthand summary of a longer and more complicated explanation.

In a world full of noise, TLDR is emblematic of our society’s short attention span. We are busy, anxious, and stressed, awash in content streams that constantly compete for our time. We gravitate towards clips, sound bites, and bullet points; when presented with an extended argument, we have to fight the urge to skim—if not to click away.

What does it mean to bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ in a world allergic to length and depth? This is the question pursued by Alan Noble in *Disruptive Witness: Speaking the Truth in a Distracted Age*. Noble, an English professor at Baylor University, opens his book with a provocation:

“What if the vast majority of our conversations about Christianity are not really about faith at all? What if we are so accustomed to thinking about our beliefs in terms of our

personal preferences, like sports teams or our favorite brands, that when we try to share the gospel with someone, neither of us are actually thinking about the existence and lordship of a loving God who died on the cross for our sins? Even if, by some chance, one of us does manage to envision the idea of a transcendent God, it is only for a moment, because we just got a text message from our spouse about what to have for dinner tonight. Then we check Twitter, and then we read an article, and then – it's gone.” (1)

Noble wants to show how Christian witness in contemporary times is always and already framed by two realities: secularity, which cuts faith off from a transcendent referent, reducing it to a lifestyle preference; and distraction, which proliferates immediately gratifying activities, preventing deep reflection. In a society that offers seemingly endless possibilities, there are too many options, too many little stories, and we are stuck in a permanent identity crisis. We spend our lives “feeding” on media, “snapping” and “surfing” on disconnected impressions and interactions, stuck in moments without a larger story to bind the pieces together.

The result is that it is difficult to step outside the superficial stream to consider the invitation of deep faith in a transcendent God. In place of such a faith is the shallow substitute of personal branding. Christian faith becomes just one more lifestyle option, and arguments about faith are less about reality than about sociological acceptance. Conversion is more like joining a particular team or declaring loyalty to a particular brand than having ultimate reality break through and reorient every part of life.

The first three chapters are Noble’s diagnosis, in which he stands on the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor’s venerable shoulders to unpack our secular age. Others have done this as well, but Noble’s unique contribution is to show how our technologies of distraction are fueled by secularity and continue to perpetuate it. The second half of the book moves towards prescription, calling for “disruptive” personal habits (ch. 4), church practices (ch. 5), and cultural participation (ch. 6) that refuse the reduction of faith to mere lifestyle preference. Here he does not offer anything particularly novel, rather he is reframing old practices (like praying before meals) to show how small acts of faithfulness can push back against the forces that threaten to thin transcendence.

Indeed, if there is one drawback to Noble’s project, it is that he majors on his critique of our contemporary context and minors on his constructive proposals for Christian witness. This is because Noble’s book is less a handbook for evangelism than an exploration of how Christian truth claims are processed in a distracted, secular setting. He excels at demonstrating how contemporary faith has been co-opted by secular society, but I found myself looking for counsel on how to translate the gospel for the same society.

By all means, we should lament distracted secularity. But *this* is the setting in which we have been called to bear witness. And our great hope will not be found in a return to an earlier, less distracted, less secular setting, but in remembering that our world still belongs to God and that God's Spirit is still at work, rupturing and renewing. This means that we must ask whether there are ways that the gospel may actually be *more resonant* because of our distracted secularity and not just in spite of it.

Noble's project is not without resources in this regard, and I would have loved to see them developed more fully. One resource I have in mind relates to his wonderful discussion of the "burden of existence":

"The burden of existence calls for a commensurate justification of our being. The fact that we are alive, that we have agency, that we are capable of such tremendous heights and depths emotionally, that our minds have such a capacity for love and creation and reason, that our subjective experiences appear to have irreducible meaning and value despite the fact that they are subjective – all these things burden us. The beauty and goodness of our particular being demands some justification: What right do I have to such a life? Without a justification, we feel like phonies, frauds, failures, or at best, lost." (64)

In other words, despite our best efforts to create a buffer between ourselves and the "burden of existence," *being* keeps breaking through. It breaks through in moments of great joy and great loss. It breaks through in great art and great storytelling. It breaks through even though we have arranged the world in order to suppress it.

In a secular age, this is where witness must begin, with the profoundly felt goodness of being and the gravity of existence, rather than a critique of contemporary narcissism. We must tell our story in a way that makes sense of the human longing for fullness, our failure to achieve it, and hopes that the longing could somehow be fulfilled.

Of course, it takes time to craft better stories; it takes energy to cultivate more just communities; it takes attention to cultivate a beautiful life. Understanding—much less embracing—the Christian faith requires a significant amount of length and depth. The way of Jesus entails a comprehensive imaginative vision, a new way of seeing everything. It is too subversive to explain in a tweet or on a bumper sticker. Scripture cannot be skimmed; when we read it carefully we find that it questions our answers just as often as it answers our questions. It disrupts us.

Such a faith may not seem to sell in a TLDR world. But reality has a way of breaking through whatever frames we try to place around it. Bearing witness means having

words to name the beauty and the brokenness that surround us, as well as having the God who comes in beauty and brokenness to make all things new.