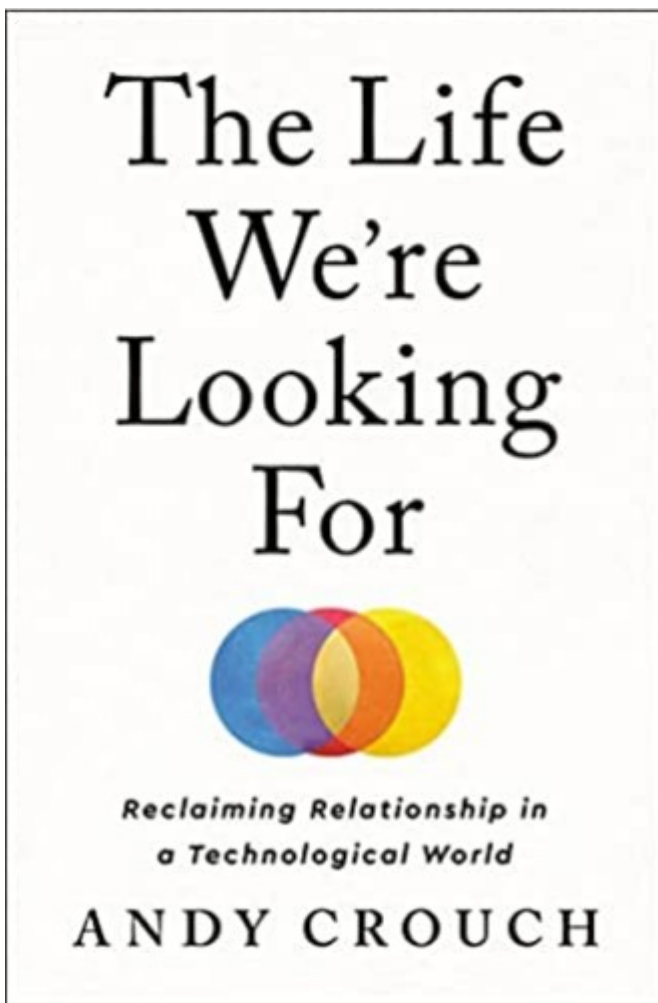


Personhood beyond personalization

Technology can't give us what we really want, says Andy Crouch.

by [Ragan Sutterfield](#) in the [October 2022](#) issue

In Review



The Life We're Looking For

Reclaiming Relationship in a Technological World

by Andy Crouch
Convergent Books

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The best parenting advice I ever received was: “When a child is acting up, give her your undivided attention.” For my daughters, an off-kilter moment can be turned by going on a walk around the neighborhood, listening for a few undistracted blocks about whatever is on their mind. Something about that focused “being with” addresses what they need most. It is, in fact, what we all need most: relationship and recognition.

In his new book, Andy Crouch writes that “recognition is the first human quest.” From the moment we are born, we begin to search the room for faces, looking for the eyes that are looking back at us. From that seeing and being seen, Crouch argues, personhood begins. But we also soon learn that such recognition is not always forthcoming. The world often resists our hunger for recognition.

This is where the danger begins, for we increasingly have an alternative to recognition, a smooth substitute for authentic relationships. When the infant looking for a face cries, it is now all too tempting to quiet her with a screen, a personalized device that reflects back her every want. “But all that will come at the expense of what she was looking for the day she was born, what we were all looking for,” writes Crouch, “because before we knew to look for a mirror, we were looking for another person’s face.”

The Life We’re Looking For is a wise and important contribution to the ongoing discernment of the role of technology in our lives. Its strength lies in its deeply humane emphasis on personhood and the consequences of our substitutes. While he has much critique to offer of our current technologies, Crouch argues, we need to reconsider the “roots of the modern technological mindset” and give a “far more serious reckoning than we have generally allowed to the ancient, primal and spiritual forces that still animate our technological dreams.”

Drawing on the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4–5 and Jesus’ expansion of it in Mark 12:29–31, Crouch describes fully flourishing human persons as “heart-soul-mind-strength complexes designed for love.” To live into our fullness, we bring each of these capacities toward loving God and our neighbor.

But from Babel to the latest iPhone, we have sought to expand our capacities and take on superpowers, opting for magical solutions wherever we can. The problem with this, writes Crouch, is that “you cannot take advantage of a superpower and fully remain a person, in the sense of a heart-soul-mind-strength complex designed for love.”

To explain what he means, Crouch offers the example of air travel. It’s a superpower to fly in the sky; it almost seems like magic. But to do so, we must give up our essential human strength, diminishing our own capacity for movement. This is far different from other modes of travel that would extend or engage our full powers of soul, mind, and body.

If you were to make the same journey of hundreds or thousands of miles by horse, bicycle, or sailboat—all of them nonsuperpower modes of transport—those senses would be alive like few other times in your life, calling forth emotional, intellectual, and even spiritual response at the sight of mountains, the sharp snap of cold air, the bite of the wind, the brilliance of the stars.

Even driving a car, as the philosopher Matthew Crawford argues in *Why We Drive*, requires something more of us than the passive acquiescence of air travel. And yet our technological impulses are pushing us ever more toward things like self-driving cars (which borrow from the autopilot technology of airplanes) that diminish our engagement of soul and body.

Where does the logic of this impulse lie? Tech futurist Kevin Kelly once wrote a book titled *What Technology Wants*. That’s rhetoric, Crouch says, “but a book called *What Mammon Wants* would have an enormous and terrifying plausibility.” Mammon is the real power behind our technological impulses, according to Crouch. “Mammon,” he writes, “is ultimately not at all just a thing, nor even a system, but a will at work in history. And what it wants, above all, is to separate power from relationship, abundance from dependence, and being from personhood.”

To counter this will and its desires, Crouch appeals to “the greatest resistance movement in history to the way of Mammon and magic,” the Christian way that called forth a whole rearrangement of society, upending ancient conceptions of who counted as persons and who did not.

In a wonderful interlude, Crouch explores the radical rearrangement of society in Paul’s letters—a society in which slaves who were considered nonpersons are given

the dignity of participation in Christ's body. Crouch believes that through this revolution of personhood we can find some hope for our own way forward in this new time of empire.

Crouch offers only broad principles as possible paths forward. You won't find any particular guidance on how to ditch commercial social media or keep your kid off their tablet. (Crouch offered that kind of advice in his 2017 book *The Tech-Wise Family*). Instead, *The Life We're Looking For* ends with several movements—from devices to instruments, from family to household, from charmed to blessed—that spark a broader imagination for how we might resist Mammon's dehumanizing effects in our own lives and communities. In each of these movements, people are centered over and against the instrumental logic of empire.

We are on the cusp of a new technological revolution, in which our lives will be molded by the accelerating forces of artificial intelligence and the "internet of things." All are part of Mammon's wants, a desire whose ends are not in the least concerned with the flourishing of human persons. Crouch provides an invitation into a different way, a more humane future, carved out in the midst of empire and rooted in the original revolution of personhood brought on by the incarnation, "where for once in our lives," as W. H. Auden put it, "Everything became a You and nothing was an It."

For several years, I've been looking for a book to help me explore technology with my congregation. There are many good critiques of varied aspects of our tech malaise, but they haven't offered the balance of accessibility and insight I've been hoping for in a single volume. *The Life We're Looking For* is just the book I've needed, offering a spiritually rich and insightful guide for thinking through the challenges of our age.