MARK SAYERS

PLATFORMS TO PILLARS
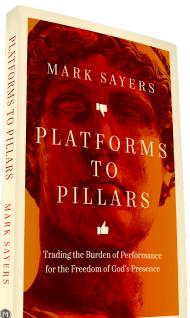
Trading the Burden of Performance for the Freedom of God's Presence

Exploring the influence and allure of digital platforms, this book exposes the flaws of a platform society. Sayers invites readers to envision a legacy that lives beyond themselves. Human pillars provide support and strength. They fortify and protect. *Platforms to Pillars* offers a better way for Christians to live.

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PLATFORMS VS. PILLARS

THE PLATFORM MENTALITY

The woman to my right angrily fiddles with her iPad, gives up, and begins waving at the cabin crew. We are well into our transcontinental journey across Australia, from Perth on the West Coast to my home in Melbourne in the East, and my fellow passenger has already lodged several complaints. The flight crew appears tired and harried. The post-pandemic reality of domestic travel seems to heighten the stress. Despite these challenges, my fellow traveller expresses her discontent to the flight steward, insisting that malfunctioning entertainment systems and lack of Wi-Fi have ruined her flight experience. She emphasizes that it is the cabin crew's duty to ensure passengers' positive emotions and mental peace—an assertion that strikes me as unusual.

When flying, I'm content if I arrive safely on time and perhaps grab a coffee along the way. Yet for my neighbor, three and a half hours of flying time being disconnected from the internet and the distraction of in-flight entertainment appears to be too much for her to cope with.

However, something deeper seems to be in my neighbor's distress; the lack of entertainment facilities on the aircraft reveal her inflated expectations. The gap between what she expected and the reality of

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what is occurring generates significant frustration within her, with the flight crew becoming the target of these frustrations.

Over the next three hours, I lose track of how many times my fellow passenger complains to the flight crew. As we near the end of our flight, I assume she must have exhausted her objections. But I am mistaken. This time, she requests to speak with the cabin manager, who promptly offers her a full refund. Despite this resolution, it is not sufficient for her. In a measured tone, the passenger suggests that a conspiracy is underway, alleging that the cabin crew is targeting her. She demands immediate action from the flight crew and the airline to address the situation.

As we descend into Melbourne, I reflect on the attitude of the woman beside me. She doesn't appear unwell, intoxicated, or distressed. Her professional demeanor and attire suggest she may hold a managerial position of some kind. I don't know her story, but it's clear she perceives this flight and the role of the flight crew in a particular way. For her, this flight isn't about the other passengers on board; it's about her. She seems unaware that others are also experiencing issues with their entertainment systems.

Additionally, her constant demands on the flight crew prevent them from attending to other passengers. In her view, the cabin crew's sole purpose is to ensure her positive mental state rather than the safety and comfort of everyone on the plane. As we break through the clouds, it dawns on me that this woman embodies an approach to life that can be summed up in one word: platform.

KEY IDEA: *Platform is a mentality, a way of approaching life, that promises to reinforce our uniqueness, deliver on our desires, and offer validation and visibility.*

In this chapter, we will learn how our approach to life has been reshaped by a "platform mentality"—a way of thinking about and approaching the world through platforming ourselves, focusing on our desires, wants, and visibility.

THE RISE OF
THE PLATFORM MENTALITY

Over the last several decades, the platform mentality has become the dominant script for living our lives. We're told we're special and unique from our earliest school days. The millions of advertising messages we are exposed to throughout our lives reinforce this idea, each promising to pander to our desires and wants. Contemporary institutions bend over backwards with promises that they can respond to our needs. We've transitioned from a society emphasizing communal well-being to one where we're told we each deserve to sit atop our platforms. A platform is a device that ensures we will be seen and thus validated. The platform mentality is based on the concept that the highest good is for our inner self to be platformed and for our needs, wants, and desires to be met.

FROM THE AGE OF ANXIETY
TO THE AGE OF ANGER

Yet the platform mentality is mutating and responding in new ways to changes in our world. Individualism led to a culture of assertiveness, in which people became bolder in platforming their needs and wants. Assertiveness, however, is shifting into anxiety as the flaws of the platform mentality become more apparent. It's more complicated to be seen in a society where everyone can platform themselves through digital platforms and smartphones. The platform mentality considers the world as created to suit our needs. However, the cracks in this

vision have begun to appear in the form of supply-chain disruption, cultural tumult, bureaucratic gridlock, rebounding inflation, and the cost-of-living crisis.

To make things worse, the digital platforms reshaping society seem to exploit our needs, desires, and wants while veering our culture in an unpredictable and worrisome direction. The age of anxiety seemed to be morphing into an age of anger as the platform mentality began running aground, flailing, and failing as a reliable framework for living. The result is that many people are hitting the platform pain point.

KEY IDEA: *The platform pain point is felt when digital platforms and other institutions within our platform society fail to deliver our wants, desires, and needs in the face of real-world challenges. Such moments reveal how our platform society has inflated our expectations.*

This anger was on display in the flight cabin. My fellow passenger had hit the platform pain point. You could sense the crew and the passengers pulling away from this woman, repelled by her overdemanding attitude. One could write her off as a stereotype, reminiscent of viral videos in which we see a middle-aged, entitled woman loudly proclaiming her displeasure. Yet was she the only one? Or was her loud expression of the platform mentality a less subtle version of what most of us believe about ourselves?

We can easily dismiss such behavior as an individual failing. Indeed, selfishness is a moral failure and rightfully carries a socially repellent stench. Yet how do we view such behavior in a culture that structurally reinforces a platform mentality? There was something shockingly self-centered about this woman's behavior, but what if that pointed toward a clandestine truth beneath? A way of viewing the world, rooted in a powerful yet rarely examined social order that warps

our spiritual and communal lives. The evolution of the platform society in our lifetimes has ushered in a new social order.

NEW PHARAOH, NEW ORDER

"Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt" (Ex. 1:8). Throughout history, the arrival of new kings, emperors, presidents, and prime ministers has signaled the appearance of a new order. It is a repeating fact of history that new leaders enter office wishing to make their mark upon culture. The ascension of a new pharaoh in ancient Egypt was a sign that change was afoot. Interestingly, this pharaoh remains unnamed, signifying a broader symbolism. He represents an order in opposition to God. Pharaoh's order, misaligned with God's ways, risks creating the chaos it aims to control; they would become subject to a painful and devastating order of oppression.

The arrival of such new orders is often not fully grasped until later when historians with the vantage point of hindsight can chart their impact. When you are in the middle of the emergence of such an order, it is harder to make out its contours. This is where we find ourselves, amid the emergence of a new order, which is misshaping us and our societies so profoundly that we do not have the luxury to wait decades to make out its shape. Thus, the task of this book is to look under the cover of the emerging order of the platform society and approach it from a biblical perspective.

The term *platform society* is increasingly used to describe the new structural reality of our culture. The term captures the rise of large digital platforms such as Uber, Amazon, Instagram, TikTok, and Weibo, which have become corporate giants and significant parts of our everyday lives. Only in recent history have these large companies had such entry into our private world. Thus, it is inevitable that they will reshape our personal lives and affect our view of the world.

We will examine the rise of the platform society; however, the place I wish to start is to explore the rise of our platform mentality. To do this, we must track how individualism, the great ideology of the West (and increasingly the world), has morphed over the last few years. The platform mentality is a response to these changes. As a result of these changes, a very different type of human being arises.

HOW THE LAST THIRTY YEARS
REDEFINED INDIVIDUALISM

Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, a professor of Pastoral Theology at Vanderbilt Divinity School, reflected that the approximately 30,000 counselling sessions he had conducted during his career had enabled him "to observe bewildering changes that have been occurring between and within human beings in my part of the world during these 30 years." Regarding these changes, Rogers-Vaughn notes, "The average individual I encounter in the clinical situation today is not the same as the person who sat with me 30 years ago."[1] A cohort of these individuals described by Rogers-Vaughn displayed the negative social traits of the woman on my flight: shallow, overly assertive, entitled, and ego-driven. We all know people such as these, evidence of the triumph of the "culture of narcissism" heralded by the late cultural critic Christopher Lasch.[2]

Rogers-Vaughn recorded, however, that the assertive narcissistic types were a minority in a larger cohort of people who sought his counsel. The majority were individuals who found themselves weighed down by a constant sense of worry and unease. Detached from the thick connective tissues of community and deep connections, their relationships were short-lived, transactional, and fragile. Poor mental health and addictions were normative. These ills were not blamed upon an external cause but were turned inward back on the self. They felt that something was off with themselves and that everything would

improve if they could change something about themselves.

Rogers-Vaughn's observations illuminate an uncomfortable truth. While we may wince at the antics of people such as the woman on my flight, recoil at the videos of selfish behavior that go viral on social media, and decry the excesses of selfish celebrities and toxic leaders, something has changed in all of us in the last thirty years. A new kind of individual has emerged—an individual who is more self-centered but also in more pain. These indicators show us how the platform mentality is changing individualism itself. When we imagine the radical individual, we think of someone who sets themselves apart from the crowd, a person who marches to the beat of their own drum. Someone unswayed by the opinions of companions and culture. Yet the platform self, as it is emerging, is more herd-like and obsessed with what others think—lacking in autonomy. Digital algorithms shape its behavior and worldview. As we will discover, the platform society is eating individualism itself.

KEY IDEA: *The platform mentality creates a new kind of self that lacks independence and is more prone to influence and groupthink.*

So how did we get here? What happened in the last thirty years that has changed us so drastically? What social forces have been at play? There are many answers to that question. However, the scope of this book focuses on one factor. That is how the idea of "platform" has come to dominate how we view our lives. A kind of platform mentality is found everywhere. From the beginning of the 1990s, the phrase "platform" began to be increasingly used in magazine articles, books, and published works. This trend has continued to our day.[3] The platform mentality drives an ever-intensifying individualism, which platforms our needs, desires, and wants.

Additionally, the platform mentality captures a vision of human flourishing in which our desires are met, and we receive validation by being affirmed and seen by others. The platform society is the deliverer and amplifier of this way of viewing the self. These questions will be addressed as we proceed; however, first, we must contrast the platform mentality with another, more biblical approach to life: the pillar.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Platform is a mentality, a way of approaching life, that promises to reinforce our uniqueness, deliver on our desires, and offer validation and visibility.

- The platform pain point is felt when digital platforms and other institutions within our platform society fail to deliver our wants, desires, and needs in the face of real-world challenges. Such moments reveal how our platform society has inflated our expectations.

- The platform mentality creates a new kind of self that lacks independence and is more prone to influence and groupthink.

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