

## The Cross and The Smartphone

### *The challenges of following Christ in the digital age*

#### **1.1 Summary**

I chose this topic as it is an issue which I know I face in my own life, and which I am going to have to engage with as a parent. I have also observed the misuse or overuse of tech devices in other families in a way that caused real concern. I believe it is a highly relevant topic for families and churches today across the globe and will be of blessing and application when we move as a family on this journey.

#### **1.2 Introduction:**

The call of discipleship as stated by the Lord Jesus is the most radical, challenging call that any person, now or ever could answer. To anyone who had the pretension of following Jesus he gave a clear and forceful command: Deny yourself daily, take up your cross and follow me<sup>1</sup>. This call was issued nearly 2000 years ago and Jesus has not lowered his standards in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, simultaneously today we find another call issuing forth into our hearts and minds, reaching us subtly, subconsciously, almost as a virtual whisper saying: ‘Indulge yourself, take up your smartphone and follow anyone you want to – especially yourself’.

The smartphone, since its launch in 2007, has made a difference to our world and anyone who has a smartphone should be able to readily admit this. Amidst all the benefits of the smartphone, which are many, there is however a growing sense that perhaps the effect they are having on us is not a good one; and that maybe we need to stop and ask ourselves just what the fruit and the fungus of smartphone use in our lives really are. While some fungi, like

pornography consumption, are very easy to spot, others such as isolation, idolatry and craving for affirmation may be more subtle and harder to identify.

The purpose of this paper is to help individuals and families explore that question and reach a better understanding of what place technology should have in our lives. Along the way we will look at the biblical view of technology, detail some of its benefits and dangers, focussing primarily on the smartphone and social media, and then consider several challenges for us as individuals and families in our use of technology.

### **1.3 A world unseen before**

The world today is changing radically, and one of the major forces driving that change is technology. The rate of change is faster than any human society has had to cope with in history and the questions asked of us as individuals and parents have not been asked of previous generations<sup>2</sup>. It is no wonder therefore that, as writer Andy Crouch puts it, ‘if there is one word that sums up how many of us feel about technology and family life, it’s *Help!*’<sup>3</sup>

Right at the centre of the technological revolution is the smartphone. This incredible little gizmo was presented to the world on June 29<sup>th</sup> 2007 in the hand of Steve Jobs as Apple launched the iPhone. Its arrival marked a before and after in the world of technology and indeed the world in general. Time magazine has since declared it to be the most influential gadget of all time<sup>4</sup>. New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman calls its release ‘a pivotal junction in the history of...the world’<sup>5</sup>, comparable only to the invention of the Guttenberg printing press which paved the way for the Reformation. Today, according to Pew Forum stats, over 2.5 billion adults across the world own smartphones, and they can be found in the hands of a majority of 18-35 year olds in countries as economically diverse as Argentina, Kenya and the Philippines<sup>6</sup>. If one considers the access that most children have to their parents’ phones, it is likely that the majority of people on Earth are now smartphone users.

The smartphone, and its sibling the tablet, are having a great influence on society. The average American adult, for example, not only owns one or two smartphones, but they check them on average every 4.3 minutes of their waking lives<sup>7</sup>. That's over 200 times a day, or 81,500 times a year. Any device that gets that much attention is clearly having some sort of effect. One survey in 2012 found that 67% of phone users suffered from nomophobia, that is, the fear of being without their smartphone<sup>8</sup>. Put simply, these devices are changing the way we relate to each other, to ourselves and most importantly the way we relate to God. Therefore it is of critical importance that we seek God's grace and guidance to understand His perspective on technology and the wisdom provided by His word for how to adapt and flourish in this new digital age.

So what does the Bible, if anything, say about technology?

## **Section 2: The Bible and the Smartphone**

### **2.1 The technological God**

First of all, here is a basic definition of technology: 'an invention, part of the natural environment manipulated to achieve a specific outcome'<sup>9</sup>.

When we look at the creation as narrated in Genesis, we see that God created the Heavens and the Earth and all that is in them. The first implication for this is that everything we use for technology was made by God. All the potential was there in the original setting that He proposed for mankind. God was well aware of the myriad possibilities of the natural elements long before man ever became aware of them. Man himself was formed with innovative talent, an ability to be creative and to manipulate the environment about him. This ability formed part of his calling to fill the Earth and subdue it. When God gave this calling He knew

already what the final fruition of it would be, as illustrated in Revelation 21. One day there would appear on Earth a glorious city, dazzling and unequalled in its splendour<sup>10</sup>. This being so, it becomes clear from the beginning that our God is not anti-tech. Technology is a means available to man to glorify the Creator, who enabled him to innovate and harness the resources at his disposal for the fulfilment of God's purposes. Indeed, many of the clearest instances of the technological innovation in the Bible are linked to God's goodness, mercy and grace to mankind.

The first successfully functioning piece of technology in the Bible appears very early on, in Genesis chapter 3 – and it was God who invented it. In gracious mercy and love towards his image bearers, God fashions clothing for them out of animal skins. God himself manipulated part of the natural environment to achieve a specific outcome – to cover Adam and Eve's nakedness. It is very striking to me that the very first technological invention ever was a means of grace from God towards his creation.

In Genesis 6 we see God commanding Noah to build an ark, giving him specific instructions on how to achieve it. The ark was a technological achievement, and it too was an initiative of mercy, a means of salvation – to save Noah, his family and the animals aboard from the waters of his judgement. In Exodus 31, after the people of Israel have left Egypt, God anoints Belazel with skill and creativity specifically for the fashioning of the tabernacle. It was a very precise, skilled and beautiful technological undertaking. When the work of the craftsmen and women is finished in Exodus 40, the glory of the Lord descends on the tent. God used technology to create a place of meeting for Him and His people. This pattern is repeated in the construction of the Temple, a building of imposing design and accoutrements, announcing the glory of the God who dwelt within, and again creating a place for God and man to fellowship. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 5 we see the priests and Levites playing a variety of instruments, all of them technological inventions, to give praise and thanks to God. As they

did so the temple was filled with the glory of the Lord. Papyrus and scrolls were an invention used to record these stories, that we might be able read them centuries and millennia later.

In contrast to this, however, we also see man using technology to either assert his rebellion against God or attempt to make do without him. The first successful invention was God's; the first unsuccessful one was man's - when Adam and Eve tried to use fig leaves to cover their shame and mitigate the consequences of their sin. In Genesis 11, man uses technology to build the tower of Babel as a declaration of his autonomy from God. Psalm 20:7 tells us that some trust in chariots – their technological means of war – other than trusting in the God of Heaven and Earth. Worst of all man uses technology for the fashioning of idols – objects of worship designed to give man what only God can provide but without submitting to God himself.

The most striking use of technology though in all the scripture is the Cross. Here we see a technological means employed as the ultimate rebellion against God. And yet God trounces man's pretensions and instead uses it to accomplish the greatest display of his glory and grace towards his fallen creation.

As we meditate on this we must ask ourselves – is technology for us a means of grace, utilised by us that we might draw closer to God, meet with Him, fulfil His purposes and reflect His glory to others? Or do we use it to assert our autonomy from Him, live life without complete dependence on Him and engage in the worship of the idols of our heart's making?

## **2.2 The good, the bad and the tech.**

If technology is something that God implanted in creation for us to discover, and it can be used for his glory then we must affirm that it is not something we must rid ourselves of

completely in order to remain uncorrupted. Clearly there are many good uses of technology. Every time we open a Bible we are benefitting from centuries of progressive technological development to make the word of God more available to all. From papyrus to paper to scrolls to codices to books – all of these were technological inventions that were employed for the spreading of the Gospel message. This research paper is being typed on a computer using resources gained from the internet, books downloaded on a Kindle and interviews carried out via Whatsapp on a smartphone, under the gaze of an LED lightbulb. On my laptop I can access amazing tools for studying the Greek and Hebrew of the Bible and be enriched by material from my favourite pastors, scholars and theologians. Through my Youtube channel I have been able to help thousands of people in a number of countries learn colloquial Arabic to assist the resettlement of Syrian refugees around the globe. Without medical technology my baby son would probably not be here<sup>11</sup>.

But together with the evident benefits, there are also the dangers and the downsides when technology is misused, especially when it comes to the smartphone. These dangers can apply to basic health and safety – a person texting while driving is 23 times more likely to have an accident for example<sup>12</sup> – but it is in the inner world of children and teenagers where the risks are becoming more and more evident. Jean Twenge, a psychologist of 25 years' experience studying generational differences in North America, observes:

‘The arrival of the smartphone has radically changed every aspect of teenagers’ lives, from the nature of their social interactions to their mental health. These changes have affected young people in every corner of the nation and in every type of household... there is compelling evidence that the devices we’ve placed in young people’s hands are having profound effects on their lives—and making them seriously unhappy’<sup>13</sup>.

The issues observed by Twenge, all of which she says spiked after 2012, roughly the same time that 50% of Americans came to own a smartphone, include loneliness, isolation, depression, suicide, sleep deprivation, anxiety and stunted social skills. It is a 'lonely, dislocated generation' she writes<sup>14</sup>.

Across the Atlantic in Great Britain, Julie Evans, a psychotherapist also of 25 years' experience, has noticed a similar phenomenon which she says began in 2010. She reports 'an explosion in numbers of mental health problems amongst youngsters... And it always has something to do with the computer, the Internet and the smartphone.' The conditions she describes include depression, self-abuse and anorexia<sup>15</sup>. Both professionals admit that technology is not the only factor, but they both point a clear finger at it in being a prominent if not the most prominent factor.

Many other issues could be mentioned such as addiction to internet gaming – a condition affecting adults of all ages, not just children – but pornography consumption is one of the biggest and most unsettling. One recent survey of 8,000 Christians by Desiring God ministries found that 50% of 18-29 year olds surveyed admitted to ongoing pornography use. Tony Reinke says this represents 'a spiritual epidemic of unprecedented gravity'<sup>16</sup>. But again the issue hits home most disturbingly amongst teenagers. One journalist of the UK's Daily Telegraph writes: 'Porn has changed the landscape of adolescence beyond all recognition'. She goes on to describe a conversation with a local doctor who reported an alarming number of teenage girls coming to see her with health problems related to coercive sex acts, mainly anal sex. The girls would tell her that 'anal sex was standard among teenagers now, even though the girls knew that it hurt'. The journalist continues: 'Recent research by the Universities of Bristol and Central Lancashire found that a fifth of girls had suffered violence or intimidation from their teenage boyfriends, a high proportion of whom regularly viewed

pornography, with one in five boys harboring “extremely negative attitudes towards women”<sup>17</sup>

So how should we react to these things? First we will look at several issues specifically concerning the individual and the call to discipleship with which we opened this paper. Then we will consider some further issues concerning specifically families. We will give primacy to the issues that concern our relationship with God, and then the issues that affect society at large.

### **Section 3: The disciple and the smartphone**

#### **3.1 A word on discipleship**

As mentioned above, Jesus’ call to deny ourselves daily, take up our cross and follow Him is the most radical call in the world. It requires a complete reorienting of one’s life with Jesus enthroned at the centre and occupying an undisputed first place in the affections of the heart and mind. It is a call to renounce self-centred personal realization and recognition and to strive that, above all things, Christ be magnified in one’s life, even in the face of suffering, persecution and death<sup>18</sup>.

As individuals who respond to this call we are to seek to treasure Jesus and be satisfied in Him such that our lives are transformed and those around us might perceive His glory in us. As couples we seek to love and serve each other in such a way that our marriages are a picture of Christ and His church<sup>19</sup>. As families we seek to live together in a way that models what the Kingdom of God is really like and, by extension, what the King is really like.

We build our lives on the foundation of Colossians 1:16, understanding that we were created through Jesus and FOR Jesus. Our lives exist for the display of His splendour. To live is

Christ, to die is gain and all the world contains is as mere excrement next to the surpassing excellence of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord<sup>20</sup>.

### **3.2 Smartphones and the awareness of God**

As disciples we affirm that Jesus is before all things and in Him all things hold together<sup>21</sup>, especially our lives and families. As such, an awareness of Jesus, His Lordship over the cosmos, His greatness and His goodness is of primary importance in our daily lives. We daily deny ourselves in order that we might fix our gaze upon him and not on us.

The issue with smartphones is that they often lead us to focus on the visible and the here and now, rather than on the invisible and the eternal. Our lives are overrun by the constant distraction of pings, pokes and updates. Every ping is a cry for our attention, and a means for distraction from greater realities. In fact, many people today use their phones precisely so they *do not* have to contemplate greater realities. In her book *The Happiness Effect*, Donna Freitas recounts her conversations with university students who expressed to her their very real fear of putting their phones down and sitting still in silence. The reason why? To do so was to open themselves up to their own vulnerability, and have to face thoughts of life and what they're doing with it or not doing with it, and whether it actually means anything – thoughts they found very upsetting<sup>22</sup>.

And it is not just university students. In the same survey by *Desiring God* mentioned above, an amazing 73% of the participants said they would check email or social media before attending to spiritual disciplines in the morning<sup>23</sup>. Before praying, before opening the Bible, they are attentively checking how many likes and comments their posts received over night. This raises a big question about our priorities and what our heart treasures most. Andrew

Sherwood, a Christian who took the decision to get rid of his smartphone reflects in brutal honesty: ‘Just check my phone log of time spent on Twitter vs. my time in God’s Word and you’ll see what I really cared about’<sup>24</sup>. In addition to the distraction, smartphone and social media use also make it harder for us to concentrate. We train ourselves to be constantly moving our attention to the next thing, and thus find it hard just to stop and pause. But concentration is a key discipline for growing in our awareness of God. ‘Be still and know that I am God’ we are commanded, and *that* was in a context of wars raging on the Earth, not incessant Instagram updates<sup>25</sup>. We are encouraged to linger over God’s word, meditate on it, impress it on our hearts and minds – all of which are more difficult when we are picking up our phones on average every 4.3 minutes. This daily pausing, contemplating, breathing in the awesomeness of God and our simultaneous finitude and mortality is like basic oxygen for our walk with Jesus. Without oxygen, we cannot live.

### **3.3 Smartphones and satisfaction in Christ**

The Psalmist proclaims: ‘Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you’<sup>26</sup>. We follow Jesus, knowing (for he made it very clear) that to do so may mean persecution, being vilified by our families and communities, hated by the world and even brutally murdered – and all on account of his name<sup>27</sup>. The reason we follow him despite the cost is because we have found in Him a treasure of such great worth and such deep satisfaction that nothing the world has can compare with him. Whatever we may lose, we know that ultimately we have gained far more. The bottom line of discipleship is this: *Christ is enough for us and we are enough in Christ.*

But smartphones and social media often lead us to seek our satisfaction, our fulfilment and our validation not in Christ but in the self-promotion and subsequent affirmation we receive

from the virtual universe they permit us to inhabit. Thus writes Tony Reinke: ‘The sad truth is that many of us are addicted to our phones because we crave immediate approval and affirmation. That’s why they’re so hard to put down.’<sup>28</sup> But, he continues: ‘The praise of man is like a drug – you always have to have another fix. And it leaves you insecure – you are always needy of other people’s praises in order to be happy or feel secure. You are never satisfied.’ And there is a large risk here. The Pharisees had no social media but they are vehemently rebuked by Jesus for receiving glory from one another instead of seeking approbation from God. In John 12, the evangelist remarks that many Pharisees believed in secret, but would not confess it openly because ‘they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God’. Whatever Satan fed *them*, he is using our phones and social media to feed us. It is a very spiritual battle. John Piper notes: ‘Faith is the act of being satisfied with Christ and if you are bent on getting your satisfaction from scratching the itch of self-regard, people’s affirmation, you will turn away from Jesus, because you can’t serve two masters’<sup>29</sup>. Serving another master – that is **idolatry**.

We must be more than alert to this subtle seductive influence over our lives. Jesus tells us that ‘where I am, my servant will also be. If anyone serves me Father will honour Him.’<sup>30</sup> To be with Jesus – that is satisfaction far greater than our phones can give us. To be honoured by the Father – that is validation far greater than social media could ever assign to us.

### **3.4 Smartphones and the incarnation**

It is the wonder of the Gospel that the eternal Word who was with the Father took on flesh and made His dwelling amongst us. Jesus does not bring us a revelation from the Father, He *is* revelation from the Father. He reveals to us the glory of the Father and he did so by becoming fully human. His incarnation was marked by three qualities: wholeness, presence

and reality<sup>31</sup>. Jesus was whole, he was not fragmented. He was fully present with us, not semi-present with us. And he was real; there was nothing virtual in Him. Thus was the glory of God revealed to us. Now the Holy Spirit has come to rest on us and we have been sent as Christ's representatives into the world. Our lives are to be a reflection of his – we also are to be whole, present and real.

However when it comes to technology, artist and communications professional Jessica Friedrichs writes: 'most of what we have created has served not to bring us further into wholeness but to fragment us spiritually and relationally. Our technology encourages isolation and distance instead of presence, and it creates worlds of unreality instead of drawing us further into our true reality in Jesus... Smart phones create a new environment that is characterized by fragmented attention, individualism, and a lack of true presence.'<sup>32</sup>

In other words our smartphones are more often than not hindering us from reflecting the glory of God as mediated to us by Jesus. Our fragmented attention is evident every time we sit round a table to eat with friends or family and find how little conversation flows because of people refusing to put away their phones. Our headphones and lowered vision are the equivalent of a sign saying 'Don't speak to me, my phone is more important than you'. And instead of noticing, let alone properly loving our neighbour, we are drawn into a virtual world that isolates us from those around us, sometimes even those who are closest to us.

This is not an abstract issue. This is about *the reason* we as disciples, and collectively as a church are here. We are to be an extension of Christ's incarnation. So we must ask ourselves what the effect of our phones on us really is. Are we able to be present and whole with others? Do we have online profiles which paint a perfect picture of our lives, but are at stark variance with the actual picture of lingering brokenness that comes from living in a fallen world? The primary way in which people are to recognise us as Christ's disciples is that we

love one another the way he loved us. To the extent that our phones fragment us, erode our presence and remove us from reality they inhibit us fulfilling this basic element of our calling in him.

### **3.5 Smartphones and fruitfulness**

For all the time we spend on our phones – are they actually making our lives more fruitful? For all the things we can use our phones to do, how much of that will actually matter in eternity? Jesus told his disciples: ‘By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples’<sup>33</sup>. Fruit and much of it, is a sign of whether we truly are disciples or not. The New Testament writers speak of fruit as obedience to the Lord’s commands, specifically the command to love one another, personal righteousness and conformity to the character of Christ, good works, effective prayer and making disciples (evangelism)<sup>34</sup>.

As we think of our phone use, does it help or hinder us to produce these sorts of fruits? I truly believe our phones can help us bear this kind of fruit if we use them well. The problem is that many of us aren’t. Our phones provide all day everywhere access to many temptations, pornography being probably the most destructive of them, which as we’ve seen is having a huge effect on the body of Christ. And on this point we must be willing to make radical decisions. Jesus himself taught: ‘If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell’<sup>35</sup>. If your phone is putting your soul in danger – ditch it and fast. Thankfully it is far less painful to change a smartphone for a dumbphone than it is to cut off your hand<sup>36</sup>.

And what about our capacity to love each other? The first characteristic of love mentioned in 1 Corinthians 13 is that it is patient. Does my phone help produce patience in me, or am I

more impatient with others? Andrew Sherwood again offers this personal insight: ‘After getting the kids down to bed, I would sit down on the couch and immediately light up my phone, checking emails and social media. I was getting my fix (though my desires were never satiated). My wife might interject a kind comment like “Hey, how was your day?” and my immediate emotional response was one of annoyance or worse, anger’<sup>37</sup>. One of the most striking features of social media is how unpleasant and unkind people can be to each other in the cyber world, in a way that they would probably never be if they were talking face to face and without the cloak of anonymity. I have heard many a Christian in England lament how brothers and sisters in Christ are excoriating each other online during the current Brexit crisis, as if Brexit *really will* matter in eternity but the way we treat our brethren in Christ won’t. We must remember that we are called to reflect Christ online, just as much offline.

I believe that each of us as Christians has a specific calling – good works which Christ has prepared in advance for us to perform<sup>38</sup>. Our phones, tablets and laptops can be wonderful tools for pursuing and fulfilling those callings. But how much Satan would use those same instruments to distract us from our callings! I wonder sometimes how many opportunities I miss because I am paying more attention to trivial nonsense on my phone than to the person sitting next to me on the bus or a park bench. During my life, some of my most treasured memories of evangelism have been moments that were spontaneous and unplanned. I recall one time on an escalator at Holborn tube station in London, noticing a young man further down the escalator slumped over the handrail. Although in a rush, I decided to stop and ask him if he was alright. This one simple act led to a wonderful opportunity to spend several hours sharing the Gospel with him over two or three encounters. That was before I had a smartphone. I wonder today if I would have noticed...if I would have acted? Or would it have been one more missed opportunity, one more piece of fruit lost by the digital wayside.

Each of the four instances above is meant for personal reflection, but each has implications for our families. If we are unaware of God, if He is less important to us than our Twitter feeds and we seek satisfaction and validation in social media rather than Christ; that is precisely what our children will learn to do as well. If we are not whole, real and present in our daily lives, our family relationships will be the first to suffer. What does it do to a child's sense of worth when the message they receive from their parent is that their phone is more deserving of their attention than they are? With what authority can we tell them to put the phone or tablet down, if they often observe us inextricably glued to ours? How we handle this issue as individuals will have a big influence on our family lives. Now we will turn and look at family life more specifically.

#### **Section 4: The family and the smartphone**

##### **4.1 Love, empathy and mission**

The family is the primary place where children learn how relationships work and how to interact with others. As they observe their parents' relationship with each other and with outsiders they learn the principles of healthy relationships. They learn how to love and feel empathy with others. The Bible teaches us that they will see Jesus reflected in us as we love one another and that our marriages can paint a living portrait for them of Christ's love for his people.

One of the issues that is being noticed by psychologists today is the negative effect that phones are having precisely on the development of love and empathy. Author Sherry Turkle, upon referring to a study that observed a 40% decrease in empathy amongst college students since the year 2000 writes: 'Across generations, technology is implicated in this assault on empathy. We've gotten used to being connected all the time, but we have found ways around

conversation — at least from conversation that is open-ended and spontaneous, in which we play with ideas and allow ourselves to be fully present and vulnerable. But it is in this type of conversation — where we learn to make eye contact, to become aware of another person’s posture and tone, to comfort one another and respectfully challenge one another — that empathy and intimacy flourish. In these conversations, we learn who we are.’<sup>39</sup>

Sue Palmer, author of the book *Toxic Childhood* agrees: “Learning to read people’s faces and expressions and body language is absolutely essential in order to develop empathy... children are simply not getting enough experience of them”. She then recounts a conversation with a midwife who railed against mums using their phones to post updates in the delivery room. “They are not even really present at their children’s births anymore,”<sup>40</sup>

Being present, giving our full attention, making eye contact, giving time for real and deep conversation to develop, where we go beyond superficialities and really listen to what’s important to each other – that is one of our children’s greatest needs. This is also surely the picture of Jesus that we want them to have – a Jesus who fixes his gaze on us and listens intently to our voices as we listen intently to His. This is surely the primary place we want them to be learning about healthy sexuality, the deception of pornography, and what it means to respect and demand respect in this area of their lives. As parents we must be building an environment in our homes where this sort of meaningful conversation (as in ‘full of meaning’) is the norm not the exception. That means putting limits on screen time, for *ourselves* first of all, and then also for our children. It means creating tech-free moments in our daily routines where we simply talk to each other. It means creating opportunities for our children to open up and be vulnerable about their inner life – knowing that if they don’t do it with us in person, they will do it in the seclusion of their room with their peers, where the

chances of receiving life-changing love and understanding are far less and the risk of confusion and loneliness is far greater.

Love and empathy are also key factors when it comes to reaching others with the Gospel. As families we should be helping our children develop these skills so they can be fruitful in gaining souls for Christ. Francis Chan notes: ‘I am meeting more and more kids that don’t know how to talk to people. They don’t know how to interact. It is like they don’t even want to look up from their screen. And we have to remember that it hurts the kingdom when we raise socially awkward children. We need to raise kids who know how to interact, how to have conversations with believers and unbelievers. I mean, we are raising soldiers. We are raising missionaries. Our job is to get these kids to where they can get into the world and start conversations with people and bring the light of Jesus and the message of the gospel to them.’<sup>41</sup>

Are we preparing our children for missions, or letting technology numb both their compassion for others and their desire, even their ability to talk to them?

## **4.2 The school of character**

As one FMI leader has noted: family is the real Discipleship Training School<sup>42</sup>. Family is the most fruitful context in the world for children to develop the character of Jesus in their lives, to learn true wisdom and acquire the courage necessary to face the storms of life.

Author Andy Crouch observes how the technologies that have become ubiquitous in our homes are ‘easy-everywhere’ technologies. They don’t just help us do things; they do the things for us. They require very little learning to be used; in fact the whole point is that they avoid challenging us in almost any way. He then notes: ‘We are in the midst of the greatest revolution of easy-everywhere the world has even known. And it may just be getting started. That may be fine – It’s just not the best thing for our families. Family is about the forming of persons. It helps form us into persons of wisdom and courage.’<sup>43</sup>

And that wisdom comes precisely from our interacting with one another – for it is in the challenges of relating to each other under one roof that we grow and mature. We see our own foolishness exposed and we learn to be gracious with the foolishness of others. We learn to express our thoughts and deal with them being challenged. We learn to forgive and ask forgiveness. A family where each person spends most of their time in their own virtual world will not achieve this.

We should bear in mind that research in the UK showed that the average seven-year old today will have spent a year of their life looking at a screen. It is estimated that teenagers now spend up to six hours a day in front of some form of small screen, and children as young as 10 now have access to as many as five different screens at home, often watching two or more at a time.<sup>44</sup>

One of Crouch’s strongest recommendations in this regard is to make sure the central space in our houses, the place where we spend most time as a family, is as tech free as possible. He writes: ‘Find the room where your family spends most time and ruthlessly eliminate the things that ask little of you and develop little in you. Move the TV to a less central location – and ideally a less comfortable one. And fill the space that is left over with opportunities for creativity and skill, beauty and risk... Make the place where we spend the most time the

place where easy everywhere is hardest to find. This... all by itself is a powerful antidote to consumer culture...It's an invitation to creating culture – finding joy in shaping something useful or beautiful out of the raw material of the world.<sup>745</sup>

In the nerve centre of our families, technology should be, as far as is possible, a visitor but not a permanent resident.

### **4.3 Access restricted**

As parents we are responsible for what our children can and cannot do at home. We have the authority to place guidelines and restrictions on their use of devices and we must make the best use of that authority. We have already seen evidence of the terrible influence hard-core pornography is having on teenagers who can freely access it on their phones.

This point has been left until last, because we understand that the most powerful ways to protect our children from porn is not just to put filters on phones, but rather to create a family culture where Jesus is seen to be all satisfying, children learn to be vulnerable and acquire wisdom from their parents; and technology does not have a significant hold over their lives. That, more than any restrictions, will help them avoid porn by being able to see it for the deception and sinful folly that it really is.

We will each have to reach our own decisions on this matter. Dr. Aric Sigman, a researcher in the area of screen addictions, recommends children under three to have no screen time at all, and no more than an hour a day outside school for those under seven. Andy Crouch recommends no screens at all for children until they reach double digits. Julie Evans would not allow her children to have smartphones until they were 14. Francis Chan limits his kids screen time to 45 minutes or an hour a day. Whatever the decision, the point is that decisions we *must* make.

Also parents should have complete access to their children's devices. Here Evans recommends: "I think children should have privacy within their own rooms and in their diaries, and I think they should have the Internet, but I don't think they should have both, certainly not until they have proved they are completely safe and reliable. So, check their browser history, look at their Facebook, Instagram, and then discuss it with them."<sup>46</sup>

In addition to this, the place where children use electronic devices should be a place where others can see what they are looking at. Phones and tablets should not be used when they are on their own in their rooms. In relation to this, Crouch recommends that devices should go to sleep before we do, get up after we do and their bedroom should be as far from our rooms as possible.<sup>47</sup> This will protect our rest and sleep time, avoid pointless scrolling in bed and help us strengthen our spiritual disciplines in the morning. It will also mean our days begin and end giving attention to our spouse and our children rather than our social networks.

Finally, we should apply the concept of Sabbath to our use of technology, and here again we will follow Crouch's recommendation – one hour a day, one day a week and one week a year we should attempt as a family to go tech-free. Devices all have a silver-lining – they can be easily switched off. As we set aside time to be without our devices we will mitigate any unhealthy dependency on them, learn that we really can live without them, and discover more of this beautiful world that God put us in to steward and cultivate.

## **Section 5: Conclusion**

In this paper we have considered the challenges we face as disciples of Christ in the smartphone era. We have considered that technology was created by God and can be used to glorify him. We have also seen that man can use technology for evil purposes and devise technologies whose very purpose is evil. Thus we are not only to consider how we use technology but to also consider what the purpose of any given technology really is, and

whether it will help us be whole, present and real in this world. Just as there is a spiritual battle behind money, so there is one behind technology. Both can be used for the glory of God, both can be used to destroy our souls.

The mature disciple will keep technology in its proper place, exercising dominion over it and not being dominated by it. He will seek ways to use it that enhance our awareness of God, deepen our satisfaction in Christ, give expression to our love for our neighbour and increase our fruitfulness as followers of Jesus. As parents we must consider what the goals of our family really are and then adapt our use of technology accordingly.

In many ways we have only scratched the surface in this paper and perhaps asked more questions than provided answers. But we hope the questions will provide stimuli for meaningful reflection and wisdom seeking on the matters covered. Should we get rid of our smartphones? There is no blanket answer to that question and it is for each person to consider whether their smartphone use is helping or hindering their walk with the Lord Jesus. If you're married or have children it is highly recommended to ask them what they think with regard to your smartphone use. They may have a far more accurate perspective on the matter than yours! Also this is an area where very few believers are seeking to be accountable<sup>49</sup>. We would recommend definitely talking this matter over with your pastor or church leader.

With God's grace and the support of family and the body of Christ, we hope that we can truly adapt and flourish in this new and challenging digital world.

## **5.2 Recommendation**

This paper is recommended to all Christians, especially those who are sensing unease about the influence of technology over their lives and families. We hope it will be useful for those working in family ministry or discipleship, whether in a local church or missions setting.

## APPENDIX 1

### *Andrew Sherwood - The Sweet Freedom of Ditching My Smartphone*

“You want a phone that *doesn't* get the internet? You mean you *have* an iPhone but want to go back to a flip-phone? Can I ask why?” You could tell the wireless salesman thought I was pranking him.

“I’m addicted to my iPhone,” I replied.

I pitched my iPhone for a basic no-internet flip phone a few months ago. First, let me say plainly: **I believe getting rid of my iPhone is one of the best decisions I’ve made in my adult life.** That’s not because I believe it is wrong, sinful, or always unwise to have a smartphone, but because I discovered I was too immature and too undisciplined to use it well. Perhaps you’re wrestling with some vague sense of dissatisfaction from a technology addiction and hopefully the below is helpful to you as you think about what to do next. Personally, I overestimated what my iPhone would give to me and I underestimated what it would take from me.

Here is some of fruit I’ve seen since pitching it:

#### **Purity**

“*Can a man embrace fire and his clothes not be burned*” (**Proverbs 6:27**). Praise God if you don’t struggle with sensual temptations on your smartphone. But if you do, why carry constant temptations around with you 16 hours a day? For years, I made lame and unwise excuses about keeping my phone rather than pitching it. But the flame from these things is real and the burns run deep. You can lose your soul to an iPhone. *Your soul. For a phone.* Deepak Reju’s [article](#) on this aspect of temptation is <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>fantastic.

#### **Increased Focus on Things that Matter**

Do you ever get a nagging sense of conviction when you’re supposed to be paying attention to your wife, kids, discipleship companion, pastor, sermon, etc. and you ever-so- quietly click on the power button to check your phone? I did. Thousands of times, actually. My daughter would happily run over from the playground and find me nose down, buried in some sports equivalent to People magazine. Truthfully, I’m sickened over the memories I should have made with my family that were instead empty moments spent with my <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>iPhone.

In **Psalm 90:12**, Moses prays, “Teach us to number our days carefully, so that we may develop wisdom in our hearts.” The sands of time are sinking – and I will give an account on

That Day of the grains of sand wrongly given to frivolity instead of stewarding the good gifts God has graciously provided me through the people in my life.

### **Increased Prayer**

I used to check my iPhone at stoplights, carpool lines, walking someplace — anywhere I had even a moment's downtime. Without my smartphone, there are new opportunities to pray throughout the day. The ant principle seems to apply here (**Proverbs 6:6**) – over time, the small windows to pray pile up into storehouses full of brief prayers to my heavenly Father.

### **Living Without the Low-Pitched Hum of Anticipation**

Being plugged in to a broader world of Twitter, e-mail, and instant news made for a precarious idol in my life. Even when physically putting my phone away for a few hours during family time, my heart was often going through the motions when eating a family meal, putting my kids to bed, or talking to my wife. It wasn't just distraction I was dealing with: it was a problem of dissatisfaction that *nothing* but “plugging back in” would satisfy.

After getting the kids down to bed, I would sit down on the couch and immediately light up my phone, checking emails and social media. I was getting my fix (though my desires were never satiated). My wife might interject a kind comment like “Hey, how was your day?” and my immediate emotional response was one of annoyance or worse, anger. I noticed that I was frantic for updates when being without my phone for even a few hours. Have I ever honestly yearned for God's Word or His presence as much as my phone? Just check my phone log of time spent on Twitter vs. my time in God's Word and you'll see what I really cared about.

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (**Matthew 6:21**)

### **Reading More (Actual) Books**

I underestimated the time I would spend reading junk on my phone. Every night in bed, every morning when I woke up and the countless slivers of stolen time in between. There has been such refreshment in keeping my Bible and a few library books near me to read whenever I have free time. I'm sure there's some way to usually read really good stuff on your smartphone that feeds and waters the mind and soul but I'm far from disciplined enough to do that.

### **“This is the greatest gift you've ever given me”**

“When you had your smartphone, you were a walking vending machine of whatever you'd ingested that day. It was difficult to talk about deeper things that mattered because you were constantly distracted by internet litter. You're now able to focus and give necessary attention to deeper issues. More of what we talk about comes from your heart rather than your Twitter feed.” – My Wife

## Healthy Connection to My Humanness

I'm not anti-technology (I'm writing this post on a computer). I'm a graduate student and use technology for a lot of what I work on—and I'm thankful for it. But I also feel like I'm sort of an idiot. If Google Maps doesn't tell me how to get somewhere, I'm lost even if I've driven to the place ten times before. And remembering something? Forget it—I have to put it into my phone.

There's something about that neuro-rewiring that leaves me puzzled (read "[The Shallows](#)" for more on this) and unsure about what it's ultimately doing to my ability to think. These days, I'm actually looking around at the streets I drive on, figuring out how to get places and forcing myself to remember things people tell me. There's nothing inherently virtuous about these changes but there is a palpable sense of freedom when I do them.

I was taking a walk with my daughter a few weeks ago when she looked up and said "Daddy, I like having conversations with you. You're good to talk to." The irony. Sad thing is, I'm *not* that great to talk to. I've trained myself to zone out and to communicate to others "My phone and whatever it has on it is more important than you." I don't want that to be true another second of my life.

The Puritan preacher Thomas Watson once wrote "Sin hangs weights upon us so that we move but slowly to Heaven." Those weights are often placed upon us slowly, over time, so that we get used to the pressure of them before sin adds more. And then the slower ...and slower.....and slower we move.

Is your phone a weight slowing your path to Heaven? A coal you're heaping in your lap? A thief you paid \$500 to steal things that matter?

Prayerfully ask God and those around you.

What is your phone for you?

## FOOTNOTES

1. Luke 9:23
2. See Friedman, 35-43. Eric Teller, the CEO of Google X Research, explains this rate of change in the following way: A thousand years ago science and technology advanced so gradually that it could take 100 years for the world to look and feel dramatically different. Thus the human community had a more than adequate amount of time to adapt to those new changes. By 1900, however, this advance started to speed up and it was only taking twenty to thirty years for the world to feel noticeably different to all its inhabitants, e.g. with the advent of the car and aeroplane. It was much faster but it still took a generation to feel and notice the effect of change in everyday life. But now in 2019 that timespan has been reduced to only five or seven years for a new invention to appear and spread throughout the world thus changing it in a recognisable and uncomfortable way. One striking example of the speed with which high-tech inventions are designed and then become cheaper to make and more readily available to the general public is the example of RED, a supercomputer designed in 1996 by the US government. It was the size of a tennis court, cost 55 million dollars and could do 1.8 trillion calculations a second. It was so advanced only the most powerful country on Earth had one – and only one. By 2006 millions of people across the world were daily using a RED in their own homes. Like its forefather it could also do 1.8 trillion calculations a second. It was called the PS3, was small enough to fit under a television, and cost little enough that a paperboy could buy one if he saved his earnings for just a couple of months. This is the age we are living in, where the most powerful tech on Earth can become a Christmas present in the space of ten years. It is a world of accelerated change, change which according to Teller is beyond the normal human capacity to adapt
3. Crouch, Kindle location 190.
4. Time Magazine, The 50 Most Influential Gadgets of All Time, May 2016
5. Friedman, 26
6. Taylor, Kyle, Smartphone Ownership Is Growing Rapidly Around the World, but Not Always Equally, *Pew Research Center*, February 2019
7. Reinke, 16
8. Lesonsky Rieva, Nomophobia, Fear Of Being Without A Mobile Phone, On The Rise: Survey Says, *The Huffington Post*, March 2012
9. Friedrichs, Jessica, The Technological Church, *Second Nature Journal*, Feb 2018
10. Reinke affirms that right from Eden ‘the trajectory of technological progress – from the garden to the city – was set in motion. This process is entirely initiated, intended, and guided by God.’ See Reinke, 30
11. Further instances could be how technology can enhance communication - this Easter day I was able to speak to my parents on the other side of the world with a sound quality as if we were standing next to each other. It can enhance mission – much of the impact of the Gospel in the Muslim world is happening through satellite television and the internet. It can enhance our knowledge – never before have so many had so much access to knowledge of events and discourse taking place around the world. It can enhance our productivity – email is quicker and more convenient than snail mail, a car is faster than a horse.
12. Reinke, 55
13. Twenge, Jean, Have smartphones destroyed a generation? *The Atlantic*, September 2017.
14. Ibid.

15. Quoted in Stanford, Peter, Are smartphones making our children mentally ill?, *The Daily Telegraph*, March 2015
16. Reinke, 135
17. Pearson, Allison, Pornography has changed the landscape of adolescence beyond all recognition, *The Daily Telegraph*, April 2015
18. Philippians 1:20
19. Ephesians 5:32
20. Philippians 3:8
21. Colossians 1:17
22. Freitas, Introduction, Kindle Location 134
23. Reinke, 42
24. Sherwood, Andrew, The sweet freedom of ditching my smartphone, *garrettkell.com*, January 2016 See Appendix 1
25. Psalm 46:10
26. Psalm 63:3
27. See for example, John 15:18-21, 16:2, Matthew 10:16-39
28. Reinke, 75
29. Ibid., 74
30. John 12:26
31. For this section I am indebted to Jessica Friedrichs' excellent and deeply thought-provoking article, 'The Technological Church', *Second Nature Journal*, Feb 2018
32. Ibid.
33. John 15:8
34. John 15:8-16, Colossians 1:10, Philippians 1:11, Galatians 5:22ff
35. Matthew 5:30
36. Sinclair Ferguson gives a useful paraphrase of this verse: 'It is better to enter heaven having decided to never use the internet again rather than going to hell clicking on everything you desire'. See Reinke, 137
37. See Appendix 1
38. Ephesians 2:10
39. Turkle, Sherry, Stop Googling. Let's Talk, *The New York Times*, September 2015
40. Quoted in Bingham, John, Mobile addict parents guilty of child 'neglect' warns psychologist, *The Daily Telegraph*, May 2012
41. Frances Chan, Dads and Family Leadership, *Desiring God Ministries*, January 2015
42. Angela Fresz, FMS lecture, Fortaleza, 2019
43. Crouch, Kindle Location 447
44. See Bingham, Mobile addict parents
45. Crouch, Kindle Location 723
46. Quoted in Stanford, Are smartphones making...
47. Crouch, Kindle Location 1095
48. Ibid., Kindle Location 752
49. Reinke notes regarding the survey of 8,000 Christians that more than 70% admitted that no one else knew how much time they really spent online. See Reinke, 200

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