

Information Technology: Using It or Being Used By It?

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Introduction

Biblical thinking and spirituality are not anti-technology . . .

. . . but most American Christians think superficially about the moral implications of information technology (I.T.).

- We are like most non-Christian Americans in their naïve approval of technology.
- We tend to miss the moral and spiritual implications of *the over-use of I.T.*

- See good overviews of some of the consequences of I.T. over-use, such as:
Tony Doukopol's *Newsweek* article "Is the Internet Making Us Crazy?"
(<http://www.newsweek.com/internet-making-us-crazy-what-new-research-says-65593>)
Sherry Turkle's *New York Times* article "The Flight from Conversation"
(<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/opinion/sunday/the-flight-from-conversation.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>)

THESIS: I.T. over-use inhibits and/or erodes key elements of our humanity and biblical spirituality.

The ability to follow sophisticated thought-progression

Paul wrote Romans to all Christians, expecting them to be able to follow his argument. The same is true of Hebrews, etc. This is a key part of being "accustomed to the Word" (Heb. 5:13), without which Christians will not mature.

But those habituated to the stimulation of I.T. over-use tend not to develop or value this ability; instead they tend to view it as boring and unimportant.

The value of solitude for biblical meditation & secret prayer

Scripture speaks of our need to wait for God in silence (Ps. 62:1,5). It extols the value of meditating on His Word (Ps. 1:2,3). Jesus tells us to go into the inner room and pray to the Father (Matt. 6:6), and practiced this Himself (Mk. 1:35; Matt. 14:23; Lk. 6:12). Our fallen-natures are already deeply allergic to these spiritual activities, and Satan already does a great job of distracting us from them.

But I.T. over-use promotes a restless addiction to external stimulation which makes such priorities irrelevant, implausible, undesirable - and therefore increasingly impossible.

The ability to appreciate & learn from nature

Because God created nature, He has instilled many lessons in it for our instruction. Solomon and Jesus constantly drew attention to these lessons (c.f. Prov. 6:6-11; Matt. 6:26-30). The immensity of nature helps us to cultivate humility, which includes the fact that God (not we) is the Center of the universe (Rom. 1:20,21). The beauty of nature is one of the key ways of appreciating the beauty of God (Ps. 19:1) and one of the key foretastes of the New Heavens and the New Earth.

But those who over-use I.T. tend to be bored by nature and blinded to its great lessons.

The value of memorizing Scripture

God calls His people to memorize His Word. The Psalmist models the importance of hiding God's Word in our hearts (Ps. 119:11). Extemporaneous teachings in the New Testament are studded with memorized Old Testament quotations (see Acts 2,3,7). Paul commands all Christians to be saturated with the word of Christ (Col. 3:16), which implies memorization since few could afford written scriptures.

But I.T.'s emphasis on ease of access to information undermines the importance of memorization. Scripture memorization is in eclipse, which will result in incalculable loss for Christians and the people they influence.

- SPIRITUAL NOURISHMENT AND GROWTH (Ps. 1:2,3)
- SPIRITUAL PROTECTION & WARFARE (Matt. 4:4,7,11; Eph. 6:17,18)
- ENCOURAGEMENT & COUNSEL (Isa. 50:4; Col. 3:16)

The prioritization of face-to-face relating

Paul's inspired letters tell us that his face-to-face (FTF) communication provides something that his letters alone cannot supply (see Rom. 1:10-12; 1 Thess. 2:17-3:10). John makes the same point (see 2 Jn. 1:12; 3 Jn. 1:13,14). Most of the "one another" commands that cultivate quality Christian community require face-to-face communication. This is because God has created us as *embodied persons*, flesh and spirit beings—so that fully human (and therefore fully spiritual) interaction requires bodily presence. In light of this, any suggestion that digital "connecting" can do more than supplement FTF relating is profoundly unbiblical.

But I.T. over-use assumes a Gnostic denial of this priority, and wrongly values transcending physical limitations over FTF communication. Consider what I.T. over-use costs us in this crucial area:

- It *seduces* us from spending precious time and energy that should go into FTF relating.
- It makes us *aversive* to FTF relating.
- It *distracts* us when we are relating FTF, thus encouraging rudeness, poor listening, and loss of opportunity in our conversations.
- It encourages *narcissism*. Instead of being forced out of our self-focus to focus on truth and other people, IT over-use encourages and facilitates making ourselves the center of our universe.

- It encourages *incivility*. There is something about the “safety” of IT relating that erodes respect for how our words are affecting others.
- It *deceives* us into believing that we are relationally healthy when we may actually be profoundly hollow and alienated.

A constructive response to I.T. over-use

First, we need to affirm from the heart that, although technology in general and I.T. in particular are not in themselves evil, they are nevertheless enmeshed in and used by Satan’s world-system (1 Jn. 5:19). Just as the over-desire for good things like physical pleasure and material goods and personal accomplishment is worldly (1 Jn. 2:15,16), so also is the over-use of I.T. We need to reclaim this theological conviction and affirm that relating counter-culturally to I.T. is a key aspect of Christian faithfulness.

Second, we need to appropriately point out the negative consequences of I.T. over-use to one another (see above), and to challenge one another to cooperate with God’s transformation of this area of life (Rom. 12:2). Suggested steps include:

- Make this an ongoing application point in Bible teachings on Christian community, the world-system, etc.
- Challenge one another with questions like: “Do I *prefer* face-to-face relating over communication via information technology? If not, why not?” and “Do I *contain* my usage of information technology and *resist* its encroachment? If not, why not?”
- Paul’s principles in 1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23 can help us to move in this direction without becoming legalistic. The issue is not whether I.T. usage is “lawful”/“permissible,” but rather whether this usage is “edifying,” whether it is “profitable,” and whether it will “master” you. If our honest answers to these questions indicates that we have a problem, we should change and/or reduce our usage of I.T.

Third, in addition to “fleeing” I.T. over-use (see 1 Tim. 6:11a; 2 Tim. 2:22a), we should actively “pursue” (see 1 Tim. 6:11b; 2 Tim. 2:22b) the good way of life that I.T. over-use counterfeits. Unless we “pursue,” we will ultimately be unable to “flee.” Likewise,

experiencing the goodness of God's way strengthens us to resist the counterfeit. Suggested steps include:

- Ask yourself and one another questions like:
 - “Do I schedule regular face-to-face time with family, Christian brothers and sisters, and non-Christians? If not, why not?”
 - “Am I growing in my enjoyment of and effectiveness in personal conversation (e.g., listening; full attention; etc.)?”
 - “Am I cultivating an ability to be alone before God, and to enjoy nature? If not, why not?”
 - “Am I growing in my ability to memorize and meditate on scripture, and to read longer and more sophisticated texts—or do I rationalize these areas as unimportant?”
- Set concrete goals in the above areas, and seek progress (vs. perfection).

Fourth, we need to create cultures (or sub-cultures) within our churches which pursue the above “pursuing” measures *together*. Such cultures are more powerfully transforming than individual disciplines, and they tend to find their way to the proper use of I.T. Healthy cultures will include:

- Making personal discipleship (mentor and peer) the practical “engine” that drives Christian community.
- Urging Christians to live together to practice real Christian community.
- Using small group and personal discipleship meetings to periodically practice and share Bible memorization and meditation.
- Taking periodic retreats for concentrated teaching, fellowship and prayer in a nature setting.

Fifth, parents should encourage healthy I.T. habits in their children. Suggested steps in this direction include:

- Prioritize regular, quality face-to-face relating with our children from earliest ages.
- Model enjoyment of face-to-face relating, reading, nature, etc.
- Make personal sacrifices so our children can get quality Christian fellowship.
- Monitor and set appropriate limits on what, where, and how much I.T. your children access.
- Consider how to use I.T. access as a creative discipline and/or reward.