

Review: Twelve Ways Your Phone is Changing You

Tony Reinke, *Crossway*, 2017, 224 pages

This book presents a comprehensive outline of the challenges faced by present-day smartphone users. In 2015 Ofcom reported that in the UK 'two thirds of people now own a smartphone, using it for nearly two hours every day to browse the internet, access social media, bank and shop online'.¹

In 2016, Deloitte reported on a survey of 4000 adults and claimed 'the UK public has never been more addicted to smartphones'.² The survey reported that 81% of the UK population now owns a smartphone and 1 in 3 check their phones in the middle of the night.

In May 2017, The Guardian quoted a study that claims our society's addiction to smartphones has damaged many children.³ When parents allow technology to regularly interfere with interaction with their children ('technoference'), this leads to poor behaviour.

A Swansea University study of students with high levels of smartphones usage found that when they stopped using their devices there was a spike in heart rate, blood pressure and feelings of anxiety.⁴

The smartphone has also created ample opportunity for easy access to pornography. In previous decades access to such material would require buying a magazine from a newsagents. Now similar fare and far more graphic and extreme pornography are freely available with just a few taps on a screen. In 2012, 1 in 5 children admitted to viewing inappropriate content online.⁵

Smartphone addiction is also in your church! Relationships are harmed by it and face-to-face fellowship is often affected by interruptions such as Facebook interactions. Making Instagram photos replaces creating actual substantive memories. Constantly checking a phone highlights people's FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) but actually, as Reinke points out, such behaviour actually increases isolation and loneliness as it separates the user from flesh and blood contact in exchange for a virtual world. Instant messaging and the need to respond immediately affects literacy and vocabulary. The desire to stay relevant and receive approval can provoke relentless posting on social media platforms in an attempt to hold other people's interest. People have even died attempting stunts to gain attention and popularity on sites such as YouTube.⁶

At the same time, the smartphone is a wonderful tool: Maps, clocks, emails on the go, contact with family and friends far removed from your geographical location, pocket-sized libraries of books, music and movies, easy contact in emergencies, personal training and activity logs, calendars, planners, and organisers – the list of useful features is endless. It is no wonder that so much time is spent on smartphones doing things that were so much slower before.

Reinke, an early adopter of the smartphone, acknowledges the value of these devices but challenges the reader to make better, more discerning use of them. Far from demonising them and similar technologies, Reinke seeks to show how smartphones are a part of an historical development of technology that is part of God's divine plan – his introduction is essentially a 'biblical theology of technology'. Reinke's book is honest, balanced and well-researched, showing how the smartphone can be both an aid and an interruption to productivity.

The author lists twelve ways in which our phones are changing us:

¹ Ofcom, 'The UK is now a Smartphone Society', 6 August 2015.

² George Parrett, 'Smartphone ownership peaks as one in three check their phones in the middle of the night', Deloitte, 26 September, 2016.

³ Rowan Davies, 'Is our smartphone addiction damaging our children?', *The Guardian*, 31 May 2017.

⁴ Rob Waugh, 'Here's what smartphone addiction actually does to your body (and yes, it's real)', Metro.co.uk, 7 June 2017.

⁵ Katie Silver, 'Smartphones exposing children to pornography and violence as one-in-five admit to viewing inappropriate material', *The Daily Mail*, 30 January 2012.

⁶ Tom Powell, 'US woman shot boyfriend dead in YouTube stunt gone wrong', *London Evening Standard*, 29 June 2017.

We Are Addicted to Distraction
We Ignore Our Flesh and Blood
We Crave Immediate Approval
We Lose Our Literacy
We Feed on the Produced
We Become Like What We “Like”
We Get Lonely
We Get Comfortable in Secret Vices
We Lose Meaning
We Fear Missing Out
We Become Harsh to One Another
We Lose Our Place in Time

In his foreword to the book, John Piper likens the smartphone to a work mule that can be used in a very useful way, but that can also be wasted in its value. He writes:

Tony will serve you well in the pages ahead. Where else will you find the iPhone linked to the New Jerusalem? Where else will someone be wise enough to say that ‘our greatest need in the digital age is to behold the glory of the unseen Christ in the faint blue glow of our pixelated Bibles’? Where else will we hear fitting praise of Bible apps along with the honest confession that ‘no app can breathe life into my communion with God’? Who else is writing about the smartphone with the conviction that ‘the Christian imagination is starving to death for solid theological nourishment’? And who else is going to confront the presumed hiddenness of our private sins with the truth: ‘There is no such thing as anonymity. It is only a matter of time’? Yes. And the time is short. Don’t waste it parading your mule. Make him work. His Maker will be pleased.⁷

I cannot think of a more appropriate summary or commendation. *12 Ways Your Phone is Changing You*, will challenge you personally and will help you pastorally as you seek to navigate the social impact smartphone technology is having on your church.

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⁷ *12 Ways Your Phone is Changing You*, 13.