

Six Ways Your Phone Is Changing You



Steve Jobs introduced the iPhone at Macworld Expo 2007, and I got my first one a year later. I can't remember life without it.

For seven years an iPhone has always been within my reach, there to wake me in the morning, there to play my music library, there to keep my calendar, there to capture my life in pics and video, there for me to enjoy sling-shooting wingless birds into enemy swine, there as my ever-present portal to Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook.

My iPhone is such a part of my daily life, I rarely think self-reflectively about it. That's precisely what concerns David Wells, 75, a careful thinker who has watched trends in the church for many decades.

Wells asks Christians to consider the consequences of the smartphone. "What is it doing to our minds when we are living with this constant distraction?" he said recently in an interview. "We are, in fact, now living with a parallel universe, a virtual universe that can take all of the time we have. So what happens to us when we are in constant motion, when we are addicted to constant visual stimulation? What happens to us? That is the big question."

That's a huge question. What is life like now because of the smartphone? How has the iPhone changed us? These self-reflective questions may seem daunting, but we must ask them.

The Internet Age

Wells is quick to remind us we are only 20 years into this experiment called “The Internet Age” (or “The Information Age”). All of our digital communications technology is relatively new. One day we will stand back and look with more precision at what our smartphones are doing to our brains, our hearts, and our souls, but we don’t have the leisure to postpone self-reflection for the future. We need to ask ourselves questions now.

We have wise Christian fathers in the faith who are asking important questions, if we’re willing to listen. One such man is Dr. Douglas Groothuis, Professor of Philosophy at Denver Seminary. Groothuis has been tracking the impact of the Internet on the spiritual life since he published his book *The Soul in Cyberspace* in 1997.

I recently talked with Groothuis about how our iPhones are changing us. He suggested we think about six areas.

Change 1: We are becoming like what we behold.

At first that statement sounds abstract, but it’s one of the most simple (and profound) psychological realities we learn in Scripture: *We become like what we behold*. To worship an idol is to become like the idol; to worship Christ is to become like Christ. Passages in Scripture abound to this end — [Psalm 115:4–8](#), [Romans 1:18–27](#), [12:1–2](#), [Colossians 3:10](#), and [2 Corinthians 3:18](#).

What we love to behold is what we worship. What we spend our time *beholding* shapes our hearts and molds us into the people we are. This spiritual truth is frightening and useful, but it raises the questions: What happens to our soul when we spend so much time beholding the glowing screens of our phones? How are we changed? How are we conformed?

One way we become like what we behold shows up relationally, Groothuis warns. Our digital interactions with one another, which are often necessarily brief and superficial, begin to pattern all our relationships. “When you begin to become shallow in your interactions with people, you can become habituated to that.” All of our personal interactions take the same shape. The barista at the coffee counter gets a DM-like response. When we hang out with friends, we offer a series of Tweet-like responses in a superficial conversation with little spiritual meaning.

“The way we interact online becomes the norm for how we interact offline. Facebook and Twitter communications are pretty short, clipped, and very rapid. And that is not a way to have a good conversation with someone. Moreover, a good conversation involves listening and timing and that is pretty much taken away with Internet communications, because you are not there with the person. So someone could send you a message and you could ignore it, or someone could send you a message and you get to it two hours later. But if you are in real time in a real place with real bodies and a real voice, that is a

very different dynamic. You shouldn't treat another person the way you would interact with Twitter." But we do, if we're not careful.

Change 2: We are ignoring our finiteness.

Fundamentally I am a finite man, severely limited in what I can know and what I can read and what I can engage with and (perhaps most importantly) very limited in what I can really care about. Yet my phone offers me everything — new news, new outrages, new videos, new music, new pictures, and new updates from all my Facebook friends.

One reason we own smartphones is to avoid being left behind. We don't want to miss anything gone viral. We track hashtag trends mostly out of fear of being left out. And little by little we ignore our finiteness, we lose a sense of our limitations, and we begin lusting after the forbidden fruit of limitless knowledge in a subconscious desire to become infinite like God.

"A smartphone absorbs our interest because it is so alluring. It can do so many things. And in a sense it is asking us to do so many things with it," Groothuis said. "But humans are limited. We can only think through so many things at once. We can only feel properly a limited number of things. And these technologies want to stretch us out over the entire globe with Twitter feeds, Facebook messages, and photos shared on Instagram. Instead, we need to embrace our finitude. And if we really own up to our finitude and the fact that a life well lived is a life lived carefully, as Paul says ([Ephesians 5:15](#), [Colossians 4:5](#)), we simply have to say 'no' to some of these things."

Change 3: We are multitasking what should be unitasked.

Habituated to shallow friendships, distracted to limited focus, and ignorant of personal finitude, we embrace the multitasking myth. We multitask everything, trying to think in two directions at the same time, trying to be in two places at the same time, trying to live in physical space and virtual space simultaneously.

This modern temptation explains why Groothuis prohibits his students from using phones and laptops in his classes. "I think we are a very distracted culture. We are trying to multitask things that should not be multitasked — they should be unitasked. And that is what I tell my students: 'You can't multitask philosophy.'" The study of philosophy cannot be distracted by tweets. And if not philosophy, how much more should we aim to unitask our study of God and our prayer life?

In reality, Scripture calls us to a life of single-minded self-reflection that often gets thwarted by the hum of multitasking. If it's important, it's worth being unitasked. Which means there must be priorities that trump our iPhone push notifications.

Change 4: We are forgetting the joy of embodiment.

The Apostle John closes one of his ancient handwritten letters with a line of enduring relevance for those of us who now write with our thumbs: “Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink [modern technology for John]. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete” (2 John 12).

As Neil Postman suggested, communications technology, like email, is ghost-to-ghost more than person-to-person. There is something of us in an email, but there’s more to our personhood that doesn’t get sent. In an email we send our ghost. The same is true of this blog post. These inescapable limitations of digital communication are rooted in God’s design in creation, said Groothuis.

“Christianity differs from every other religion except Judaism in claiming that the universe is created good. And God puts his blessing on it and God wants fellowship with human beings using the medium of matter. And we have the doctrine of Incarnation. It is something like Jesus turning water into wine — and the best wine — in [John 2:1–12](#). That is embodied, that is people-fellowship, that is enjoying the fruit of the vine, and Jesus blesses that.”

But, I press, why is the Apostle’s own *joy* bound up with embodied fellowship?

“I think it has to do with the engaging of personalities,” Groothuis replied. “Our personality will come through to some extent in an email message or a tweet. But we are holistic beings. We have feelings. We have thoughts. We have imagination. We have bodies. We look different. We express ourselves differently, for example in our tone of voice. How many times have we miscommunicated with someone online because there is no tone of voice? We were joking and someone took it seriously and got offended. Or we say something serious and people think we were joking. So I think the fullness of joy comes with one personality interacting with other personalities in terms of voice, touch, appearance, and timing. Sometimes it is time just to be quiet with people, or to cry with people, or to laugh with people.”

So social media and email (disembodied communication) can be a very useful extension of our embodied relationships, but not a replacement for them. So I ask my introvert self: Are the conveniences of disembodied communication undermining the joy of embodied communication? Do I truly value the personal, face-to-face relationships in my life over the disembodied relationships I maintain online? Are my face-to-face relationships — with my neighbor, my wife, and my kids — suffering because I neglect the priority and joy of embodiment?

Change 5: We are losing interest in the gathered church.

Inevitably, this lost joy of embodiment manifests itself as empty pews on Sunday morning.

Christianity is rooted in Christ's incarnation and this profound face-to-face reality shapes our fellowship (2 John 12; 3 John 14), our ultimate hopes (1 John 3:2), and our lives before the face of God, *coram Deo*. The iPhone offers few advantages here.

“We have the whole dynamic of collective worship, which is very significant biblically because God inhabits the praises of his people (Psalm 22:3). When people come and worship in spirit and in truth there is the presence and dynamic of the Holy Spirit that can't be repeated though a group Skype call. That will be second best, certainly. The Church, the body of Christ is to meet. We are to be with each other and we are to worship together and confess our sins and have communion and embrace people and show our love for people and weep with those who weep and laugh with those who laugh.”

If we prioritize *disembodied* relationships we overlook the profound embodied realities happening in baptism, in the Lord's Supper, in corporate musical worship, in the laying on of hands, and even in sermons. As Pastor John has explained in the past, a recorded sermon in the earbuds cannot replace embodied sermons in the pew because preaching is “expository exaltation,” an integral part of the gathered corporate worship experience, embedded in the gathered people. There among the gathered people of God “preaching comes into its own as an encounter with the living God” (APJ 297).

So do we truly value the embodied reality of the local church? And even if we show up on Sunday, are we checking out, fiddling on our phones, and looking for something more promising, more entertaining, more disembodied, than the joy of God offered in embodied fellowship?

Change 6: We are growing careless with our words.

Compounded from all these online issues, we grow careless with words.

Why are we so quick to judge the motives of people online, and why are we so bold to criticize others? Why do we say things online we would never say in person? Why does digital communication draw our scorn so easily?

I was eager to ask Groothuis this question, and he responded by returning again to disembodiment. At a profound level, when we interact with people online, we are quick to forget these are souls, quick to forget “we are interacting with eternal beings,” he said. Disembodiment — distracted minds trying to multitask — makes our language especially flippant and potentially over-critical.

“We need to have integrity when we are online. We should do it prayerfully. We need to resist impulses. And I don't always successfully do this. I have deleted not a few Facebook posts,” he said. “But remember that we are doing this before the face of God and we are interacting with eternal beings. We are having an effect on people's destinies, even through a Twitter message. I think if we take that kind of approach it

gives us a sense of gravitas and we are less likely to become flippant. Glibness and flippancy are terrible vices in our age. So many times in Scripture we are told to be careful with our words. Proverbs says this over and over again. We are told to be careful how we speak and let our words be few ([Proverbs 10:19–21; 17:27](#)). These technologies allow us to talk endlessly. It may not be the physical voice, but it is some kind of message.”

“I think we need to edit ourselves more,” he said, “and realize that mediated communication has tremendous benefits, but detriments as well.”