



Foreword by John Piper

**12 WAYS
YOUR PHONE
IS CHANGING
YOU**

Tony Reinke

“Are Christians using technology to transform the world or is technology transforming Christians in unhealthy ways? Especially since the era of Franklin and Jefferson, when inventing things and technological ways of organizing things became a way of life, Christians have needed to be alert to such questions. Tony Reinke’s reflections on the smartphone offer helpful advice as to how people today need to be vigilant regarding the impact of their favorite new technologies.”

George M. Marsden, Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History Emeritus, University of Notre Dame

“*12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* is an incredibly convicting and profoundly insightful read. Smartphones have become a part of our lives, but Tony explores the devastation to the human mind and soul due to devotion to technology. He calls us to examine not merely the use of our smartphones but the motives that inspire it. This is a necessary book for our generation, to remind us that our phone habits will either amplify or get in the way of our most important longing of all: the soul-satisfying glory of our Savior.”

Jackie Hill Perry, poet; hip-hop artist

“In contrast to the television that dominates the modern living room, the smartphone is typically far less conspicuous in its presence. Perhaps on account of this subtle unobtrusiveness, surprisingly few have devoted sustained reflection to the effect this now ubiquitous technology is having on our lives. In this book, Tony Reinke plucks these devices from the penumbra of our critical awareness and subjects them to the searching light of Christian wisdom. The result is an often sobering assessment of the effect they are having on our lives, accompanied by much prudent and practical counsel for mastering them. This is a timely and thoughtful treatment of a profoundly important issue, a book that should be prescribed to every Christian smartphone owner for the sake of our spiritual health.”

Alastair Roberts, theologian, blogger

“Tony Reinke’s *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* is one of the most important little books a twenty-first-century Christian could read. Highly recommended.”

Bruce Riley Ashford, Provost and Professor of Theology and Culture, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“For many, the phone is an object of increasing anxiety, exhaustion, and dependency. The wise Tony Reinke leads us practically to find freedom from the phone without requiring us to huddle away in a monastery somewhere in the middle of Montana. If you want to know how to steward your technology and your life for Christ and his kingdom, read this.”

Russell Moore, President, Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

“If you feel uneasy about your constant relationship with your phone (and even if you don’t, but wonder if you should), you will find Tony Reinke to be a reliable guide for how we should assess the impact of our phones on ourselves and our relationships. A marvelous book that tackles a massive subject in clear and compelling language!”

Trevin Wax, Managing Editor, The Gospel Project; author, *Counterfeit Gospels* and *Holy Subversion*

“Two things strike me about this book. First, Reinke writes with great humility, including himself in the narrative to help us see him not only as a teacher but also as a fellow struggler. Second, this is not a guilt-ridden slog through what not to do. Tony keeps pulling us up into the glories of Christ and even helps us to dream of new ways to glorify God through our digital technologies. Helpful, hopeful, humbling, and inspiring, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* is a book for this age and wisdom for generations to follow.”

Trillia Newbell, author, *Enjoy, Fear and Faith*, and *United*

“Image is everything, and for a woman who has built her identity on the sands of how she’s embraced online, the eventual letdown will come like a crash. But there’s a better way forward, a way to use our phones in selfless service, to glorify God in our connectivity, and to image Christ by our phone behaviors. For this, we must evaluate our glowing screens and train our discernment to see the difference between the sight-driven habits of our age and the Scripture-lit pathway of faith. Every chapter of this book is like the right kind of push notification in our lives. Stop, read, process, and apply with care.”

Gloria Furman, author, *Missional Motherhood*

“As a teenager and a smartphone user, I needed this book. Tony Reinke is compelling and convicting, yet continually meets us with grace. My generation needs this book, because we need to get technology right. If we don’t, the cost is great. *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* should be a must-read for every smartphone user, especially for us younger ones.”

Jaquelle Crowe, author, *This Changes Everything*

“It took more than a generation for the quaint ‘horseless carriage,’ with all its magic and horror, to become the ordinary, unexamined ‘car.’ But the device we once called a ‘smartphone’ has reached its status as ‘phone’—a common, everyday inevitability—with such breathtaking speed that it has left us little time for reflection on the true power it has in our lives. Tony offers us a distinctly Christian take on the little wonders in our pockets, seeing their goodness, beauty, and power, but also applying godly wisdom and well-researched cautions to help readers use their phones without being used by their phones.”

John Dyer, author, *From the Garden to the City: The Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology*

“Experience practical theology at its finest as Tony applies a thorough understanding of the Scriptures to a thorough understanding of our culture, resulting in a beautifully written and balanced guide to the dangers and opportunities in the palms of our hands. Yes, our phones have changed us for the worse, but this book will change us and our phone use for the better.”

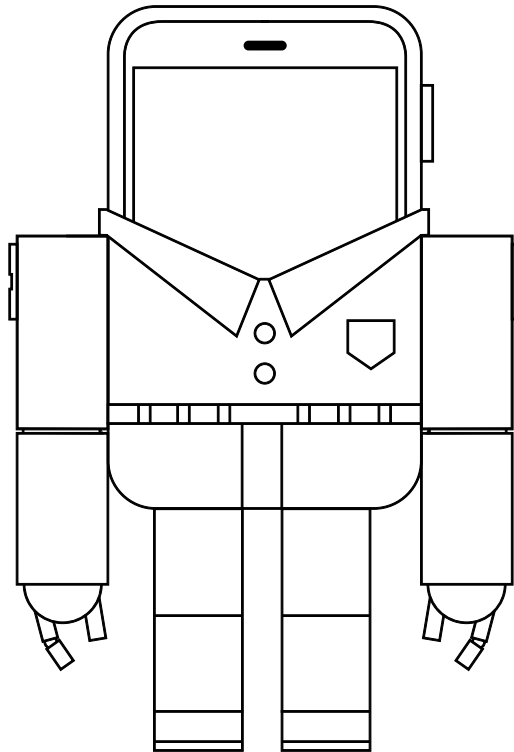
David Murray, pastor; author; Professor of Old Testament and Practical Theology, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“The more widespread and influential something is, the more Christians should think carefully about it. In this wisdom-filled book, Tony Reinke helps us do just that with the smartphone. Without descending into technophobia or paranoia, he shows the various ways in which phones are changing our lives, highlighting both the problems with this and the solutions to it. A timely and thoughtful book.”

Andrew Wilson, author; speaker; Teaching Pastor, King’s Church London

“Rarely is a book as practically impactful as it is theologically rich. In an age in which daily we are drawn into a digital vortex, Tony Reinke warns of the implications and challenges us to examine whether our phones have displaced our spiritual priorities in Christ. With unflinching honesty, Reinke shares his own technological struggles, and in so doing, moves us to a posture of reflection, prayer, and even repentance. Thoroughly engaging and immediately applicable, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* is a must-read for our time.”

Kim Cash Tate, author, *Cling: Choosing a Lifestyle of Intimacy with God*



12 WAYS YOUR PHONE IS CHANGING YOU

Tony Reinke

12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You

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To Karalee

“All things are lawful for me,”
but not all things are helpful.
“All things are lawful for me,”
but I will not be dominated by anything. . . .
“All things are lawful,”
but not all things build up.
—Apostle Paul

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FOREWORD

By John Piper

Smartphones are dangerous, like marriage and music and fine cuisine—or anything else that can become an idol. They are also very useful, like guns and razor blades and medicinal cannabis—or lots of other things that can ruin your life. I personally like marriage very much, and use a razor blade every day. So I am with Tony Reinke in his chastened enthusiasm about the ever-changing world of modern technology.

But I could never have written this book. I don't have the patience, and I don't read fast enough or widely enough. Tony has done more research for this book than for anything else he has written. And those other books were *not* thrown together. His commitment to being informed, and being fair, demanded remarkable attentiveness to subtleties and persistent commitment to ever-clearer reedits. Add to this the gift of theological insightfulness, and this book becomes something very few people could have written. I surely couldn't.

But I do have one small advantage in pondering smartphones. I'm seventy years old. This is an advantage for two reasons. One is that I've been an adult during the entire computer revolution—from the beginning. The other is that I can feel the onrush of eternity just over the horizon.

I got my first real job as a teacher in 1974. I was twenty-eight. The first personal computer was introduced in 1975. It was a kit. I don't do kits. I wait. In 1980, I left academia and became a pastor. Virtually no churches used computers in 1980. They were more like expensive toys and fancy calculators.

But things soon began to get serious. IBM produced its first personal computer in 1981, and *Time* magazine called 1982 "The Year of the Computer." Pricing was prohibitive. But I wanted in for one main reason: word processing. Writing. The price was right in 1984, and my journal entry for June 16 reads: "I bought a computer yesterday. IBM PC, 256K of RAM, double disc for \$1,995.00." The monitor was extra. The disk operating system (DOS 2.1) was \$60.

Twenty-three years later the iPhone was created. Computer and phone were now one. I was on board within a year. Calling. Texting. Keeping up with the news. Playing Scrabble with my wife. And reading my Bible, saving verses, memorizing on the go. For all the abuses and all the devastation of distraction, wasted hours, narcissistic self-promotion, and pornographic degradation, I see the computer and the smartphone as gifts of God—like papyrus and the codex and paper and the printing press and the organs of mass distribution.

If you live long enough, pray earnestly, and keep your focus on the imperishable Word of God, you can be spared the slavery to newness. Over time, you can watch something wonderful happen. You can see overweening fascination give way to sober usage. You can watch a toy become a tool; a craze become a coworker; a sovereign become a servant. To cite Tony's words—and his aim—you can watch the triumph of useful efficiency over meaningless habit.

I wish I could give every young adult the taste of eternity that grows more intense as you enter your eighth decade. A happy consciousness of the reality of death and the afterlife is a wonderful liberator from faddishness and empty-headed screen-tapping. I say "happy consciousness" because, if all you have is fear, your smartphone almost certainly becomes one of the ways you escape the thought of death.

But if you rejoice in the hope of the glory of God because your sins are forgiven through Jesus, then your smartphone becomes a kind of friendly pack mule on the way to heaven. Mules are not kept for their good looks. They just get the job done.

The job is not to impress anybody. The job is to make much of Christ and love people. That is why we were created. So don't waste your life grooming your mule. Make him bear the weight of a thousand works of love. Make him tread the heights with you in the mountains of worship.

If that sounds strange to you, but perhaps attractive, 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.

PREFACE

This blasted smartphone! Pesk of productivity. Tenfold plague of beeps and buzzing. Soulless gadget with unquenchable power hunger. Conjuror of digital tricks. Surveillance bracelet. Money pit. Inescapable tether to work. Dictator, distractor, foe!

Yet it is also my untiring personal assistant, my irreplaceable travel companion, and my lightning-fast connection to friends and family. VR screen. Gaming device. Ballast for daily life. My intelligent friend, my alert wingman, and my ever-ready collaborator. This blessed smartphone!

My phone is a window into the worthless and the worthy, the artificial and the authentic. Some days I feel as if my phone is a digital vampire, sucking away my time and my life. Other days, I feel like a cybernetic centaur—part human, part digital—as my phone and I blend seamlessly into a complex tandem of rhythms and routines.

IPHONE 1.0

Tech wiz Steve Jobs introduced the iPhone at Macworld Expo on January 9, 2007, as a “giant” 3.5-inch high-res screen requiring no physical keyboard or stylus. Unlike the clunky smartphones to date, he announced: “We’re going to use the best pointing device in the world. We’re going to use a pointing device that we’re all born with—born with ten of them. We’re going to use our fingers.” From that moment, the magic of multitouch technology would introduce highly accurate fingertip gestures to a pocket device, bringing humans into

more intimate proximity to their computing technology than ever before. When Jobs later announced, as an aside, “You can now *touch* your music,” the magnitude of the statement was too mystical to grasp in the moment.¹

Apple officially released the first iPhone on June 29, 2007, and I bought one that fall. I marveled at the technology stuffed inside this glossy handheld phone: a legitimate computer operating system, a newly engineered iPod for my music, a rapid new mechanism to text friends, super-sharp video combined with a new mobile browser to preserve the full look of the web, an accelerometer to sense how I tip and twist and rotate my phone—all on a screen with intuitive tactile controls guided by fingertip taps, swipes, and pinches.

On a road trip a few days after the sacred unboxing, I stood outside a snowy Iowa rest stop, unlocked my new iPhone, and replied to my first rural email. Wirelessly. Effortlessly. I was hooked, and so were millions of others. In ten years, nearly one billion iPhones have been sold.

Apple’s mobile phone was followed by Android, and smartphones spread over the globe and over every corner of our lives. We now check our smartphones every 4.3 minutes of our waking lives.² Since I got my first iPhone, a smartphone has been within my reach 24/7: to wake me in the morning, to deejay my music library, to entertain me with videos, movies, and live television, to capture my life in digital pictures and video, to allow me to play the latest video game, to guide me down foreign streets, to broadcast my social media, and to reassure me every night that it will wake me again (as long as I feed it electricity). I use my phone to keep our always-changing family schedule in real-time sync. I used my phone to research, edit, and even write sections of this book. I use my phone for just about everything (except phone calls, it seems). And my phone goes with

1. Mic Wright, “The Original iPhone Announcement Annotated: Steve Jobs’ Genius Meets Genius,” *The Next Web*, thenextweb.com (Sept. 6, 2015).

2. Jacob Weisberg, “We Are Hopelessly Hooked,” *The New York Review of Books* (Feb. 25, 2016).

me wherever I go: the bedroom, the office, vacation, and, yes, the bathroom.

The smartphone combined several budding technologies³ into the most powerful handheld tool of social connection ever invented. With our phones, all of life is immediately capturable and shareable. So I was not surprised when the editors of *Time* named the iPhone the single most influential gadget of all time, saying that it “fundamentally changed our relationship to computing and information—a change likely to have repercussions for decades to come.”⁴

Oh, yes, the repercussions. What is the price of all this digital magic? I have since discovered that my omnipresent iPhone is also corroding my life with distractions—something Apple execs unwittingly admitted on the eve of the launch of the Apple Watch, marketed as a newer and less-invasive techno-fix to all the techno-noise brought into our lives by the iPhone.⁵

Unknown to me at the time I was unboxing my first iPhone, Jobs was actively shielding his children from his digital machines.⁶

Should I be shielding myself?

THE BIG QUESTION

The makers and marketers of the smartphone wield great power over us, and I want to know what effect this technology has on my spiritual life. As in every area of the Christian life, I want to learn from the history of the church and from older Christians. My first interview of many in the path of producing this book was a phone

3. This book is far too short to retell the riveting history of the smartphone. For that, see Majeed Ahmad, *Smartphone: Mobile Revolution at the Crossroads of Communications, Computing and Consumer Electronics* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2011).

4. Lisa Eadicicco et al., “The 50 Most Influential Gadgets of All Time,” *Time* magazine (May 3, 2016).

5. David Pierce, “iPhone Killer: The Secret History of the Apple Watch,” *Wired* (April 2015).

6. In 2010, just after Apple launched its innovative tablet (the iPad), a reporter asked Jobs, “So, your kids must love the iPad?” He responded: “They haven’t used it. We limit how much technology our kids use at home.” Nick Bilton, “Steve Jobs Was a Low-Tech Parent,” *The New York Times* (Sept. 10, 2014). Later, Apple’s vice president of design, Jonathan Ive, admitted to setting “strict rules about screen time” for his ten-year-old twin boys. Ian Parker, “The Shape of Things to Come,” *The New Yorker* (March 2, 2015).

call to seventy-five-year-old theologian David Wells (1939–). His most recent book on God’s holiness was surprisingly filled with talk about technology (a relevant subtopic now in any conversation).⁷

“It is only since the mid 1990s that the web has been widely used in our society, so we are talking here about two decades,” Wells told me. “And so we—all of us—are trying to figure out what is useful to us and what damages us. We can’t escape it, and probably none of us *wants* to escape it. We cannot become digital monks.” To my surprise, Wells seemed personally familiar with the temptations: “There is no doubt that life is more highly distracted, because we get pings and beeps and text messages. We are, in fact, living with a parallel, virtual universe, a universe that can take all of the time that we have. What happens to us when we are in constant motion—when we are almost addicted to constant visual stimulation? What is this doing to us? That is the big question.”⁸

Wells is exactly right—our phones are constant variables, always changing and morphing new behaviors in us. Many years ago, Jacques Ellul (1912–1994) prophetically warned of this danger of the technological age, writing that “unpredictability is one of the general features of technological progress.”⁹ The unpredictability of the tech age carries with it a certain level of unabated insecurity that pushes us far from an answer to Wells’s question. We don’t know what our smartphones are doing to us, but we are being changed, that much is clear.

I later emailed seventy-one-year-old Oliver O’Donovan (1945–), an accomplished Christian ethicist in Scotland, to ask him if Christians should feel uneasy about the rise of digital communications technology. “Electronic communications are a question for the younger generation more than for mine,” he admitted. “It is they who have really to learn to understand the powers and threats that they embody, partly through trial and error, but also, and very importantly,

7. David Wells, *God in the Whirlwind: How the Holy-love of God Reorients Our World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

8. David Wells, interview with the author via phone (July 9, 2014).

9. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 60.

through remembering what was of greatest importance *before* the communications revolution kicked in.

“Nobody has ever had to learn this before,” he said of the questions we now face. “Nobody can teach the rising generation how to learn it. It is a massive challenge to conscientious intelligence, handed uniquely to *them*. The danger they face, of course, is that the tools set the agenda. A tool of communication is a tool *for communicating something*.” He then echoed the question from Wells: “Media don’t just lie around passively, waiting for us to come along and find them useful for some project we have in mind. They tell us what to do and, more significantly, what to *want* to do. There is a current in the stream, and if we don’t know how to swim, we shall be carried by it. I see someone doing something and I want to do it, too. Then I forget whatever it was that I thought I wanted to do.”

O’Donovan concluded the interview with a striking warning: “This generation has the unique task assigned it of discerning what the new media are *really good for*, and that means, also, what they are *not good for*. If they fluff it, generations after them will pay the price.”¹⁰

MY TENSIONS

I wanted to write this book in conversation with elders in the church, but my questions for Wells and O’Donovan boomeranged a question back at me: How can we who are most familiar with our smartphones do our best to flesh out the consequences?

I also find myself in a tricky place—asking critical questions about how my phone is changing me while also working full time online and trying to leverage my skills and experiences to grab the attention of a virtual audience. As the online world is growing global, and growing mobile, new gospel opportunities are opening, too.

Broadly speaking, the power of the digital age to pool human intelligence and factual data is unprecedented (Wikipedia is only one

10. Oliver O’Donovan, interview with the author via email (Feb. 10, 2016).

example of what's to come). Every Christian is now given unmatched opportunities for online ministry. Our prominent preachers today can reach hundreds of thousands of people through social media. Even the most average Christian can speak to an immediate audience of two hundred or three hundred friends on Facebook, a reach unparalleled in human history.

So I feel the squeeze of this catch-22. I want to become skilled at winning attention online (for Christ), but I also want to ask critical questions about my own phone impulses, habits, and assumptions.

MY INTENTION

This book about phones could easily grow thicker than a phone book, so to keep it short, I must address only the essentials and navigate with care and brevity. While some writers claim our phones are making us cognitively sharper and relationally deeper,¹¹ others warn that our phones are making us shallow, dumb, and less competent in the real world.¹² Both arguments ring true at times, but “social media are largely what we make of them—escapist or transforming depending on what we expect from them and how we use them.”¹³ The question of this book is simple: What is the best use of my smartphone in the flourishing of my life?

To that end, my aim is to avoid both extremes: the utopian optimism of the technophile and the dystopian pessimism of the technophobe. O'Donovan is exactly right when he says that our temptation is to watch someone doing something and then merely to copy the behavior and lose sight of our personal callings and life goals. In other words, we must ask ourselves: What technologies serve my aims? And what are my goals in the first place? Without

11. Clive Thompson, *Smarter Than You Think: How Technology Is Changing Our Minds for the Better* (New York: Penguin, 2013) and Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006).

12. Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011) and Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30)* (New York: TarcherPerigee, 2009).

13. Andy Crouch, *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk & True Flourishing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 87.

clear answers here, we can make no progress in thinking through the pros and cons of smartphones *as Christians*.

And yet, if you own a smartphone, you have likely abused it. Such abuse is the target of countless magazine features, books of lament, and powerful videos that reveal just how foolishly our smartphone overuse influences our lives. A moment of guilt can be a powerful motivator, but it won't last. As time wears on and guilt subsides, we revert to old behaviors. This is because our fundamental convictions are too flimsy to sustain new patterns of behavior, and so what seems immediately "right" (turning off our phones) is really nothing more than the product of a moment's worth of shame. What we need are new life disciplines birthed from a new set of life priorities and empowered by our new life freedom in Jesus Christ. So I cannot tell you to put your phone away, to give it up, or to take it up again after a season of burnout. My aim is to explore why you would consider such actions in the first place.

SMALL PRINT

Here are a handful of notes to keep in mind as we begin.

First, this book is written to *me* as much as it is written *by me*. Not only do I need this message, I bear its greatest burden. If the title seems to imply that I'm preaching at you, I'm not. I'm preaching at me. Not many of you should become authors, for we who write books of ethics are held to our words more strictly than anyone.

Second, to keep this book's title short, I have implied that everything in this book is relevant for every individual reader. In truth, I have never been more aware of the variety of smartphone behaviors. We grab our phones as content creators or content consumers, and we focus on timeless content or timely content. Likewise, our smartphone relationships trend in certain directions: as part of virtual communities or as complements to our face-to-face relationships. And those conversations constantly drift toward edification or chitchat (see Figure 1, p. 22). All of us are sliding around these grids constantly, and each trend has its own strengths and pitfalls to address in the pages

ahead. But none of us can plot ourselves exactly in the same spot. I mention this at the front of the book as a way to ask for patience when we discuss behaviors that may not immediately apply to you.

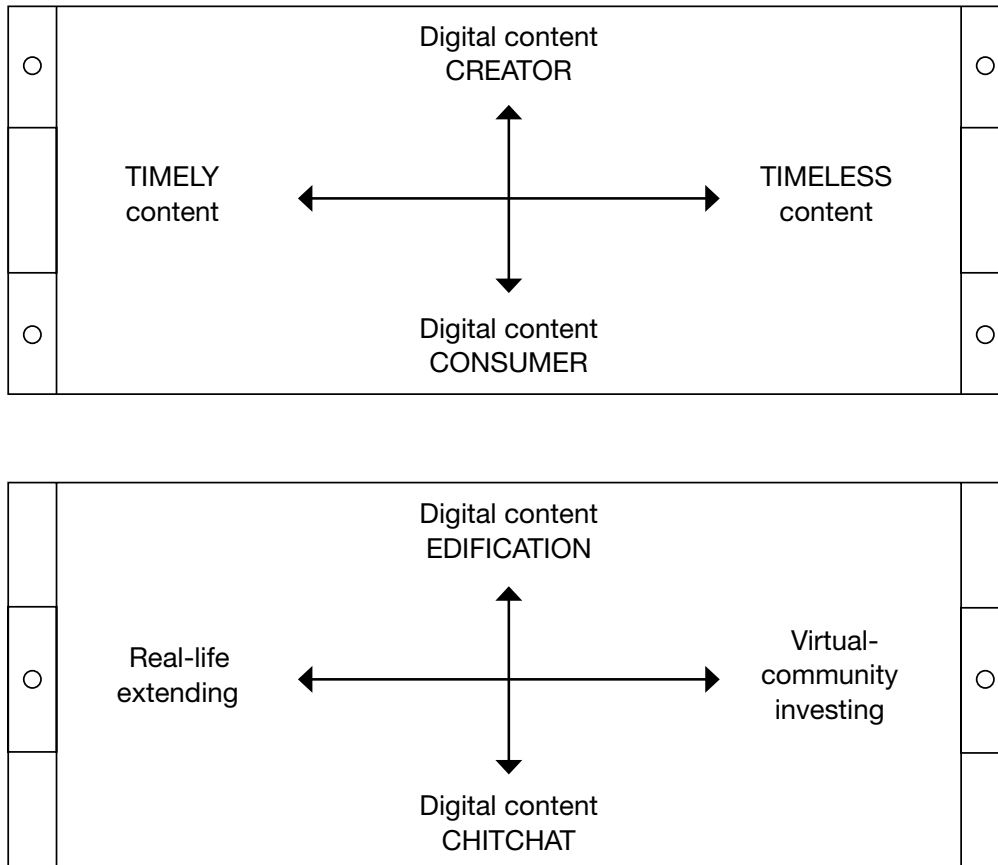


Figure 1. Smartphone behaviors and relationships

Third, this book is not antismartphone; it was written for people who, like me, benefit from the smartphone and use it daily. You will probably hear about this book on your phone in social media, and some of you will read this book on your phones, maybe even quote from it on Facebook—that’s not oxymoronic, ironic, or paradoxical; it’s the fulfillment of why I wrote it and how I intend to get the message out.

Fourth, this book is not prosmartphone, either. I want this book to be balanced, but balance is not my driving concern. Whether or not I strike the prophone/antiphone balance throughout (or even

section by section) is of little concern because I know that, in the end, readers will be split. I concede this point up front in order to speak more directly to my readers who intend to rethink life patterns (and to avoid bloating this book with a million conditions, caveats, and qualifications). I proceed under the assumption that we all need to stop and reflect on our impulsive smartphone habits because, in an age when our eyes and hearts are captured by the latest polished gadget, we need more self-criticism, not less.

Fifth, since you are reading a book titled *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You*, I assume you are likely the type of reader who bravely welcomes such self-critique. I applaud you for it. The old philosopher Seneca was exactly right when he said, “Be harsh with yourself at times.”¹⁴ Sometimes. Not always. At certain key moments in life, lean into the bathroom mirror, squint your eyes, and project pessimism at the person you see. We all need healthy critique. But if you are *only* harsh with yourself, let me speak a word of caution. This book fails if, having read it, you only hate yourself more; it succeeds only if you enjoy Christ more. So if you are easily weighed down with conviction and self-doubt, I pray that this book educates and equips you to enjoy freedom in life to taste deeper the infinite joy we have in Christ, leaving mediocre indulgences behind for deeper and more satisfying pleasures ahead.

Sixth, I’ll be quoting theologians, philosophers, professors, pastors, popes, perceptive non-Christians, and public atheists—which means that inclusion in this book is not a full endorsement of someone’s theology or a wholesale endorsement of the links, apps, books, or mobster movies mentioned ahead.

Finally, as the title suggests, this book centers on diagnostics and worldview more than application. We won’t ignore important practices, but the application will be implied generically throughout and addressed specifically at the end.

14. Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic: Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, trans. Robin Campbell (New York: Penguin, 2015), 67.

CALL FOR HUMILITY

Self-doubt is a hallmark of wise creatures.¹⁵ And self-critical conversations about our personal behaviors require a big dose of humility. Conversations about our smartphones often do not raise new questions; they return us to perennial questions every generation has been forced to ask.

Take Snapchat, the latest phenomenon in “instant expression.” In one of my interviews, a theologian suggested to me that it is difficult to let your “yes” be yes when your words disappear in a few seconds.¹⁶ But defensive techies immediately negate this claim with a simple fact: while ephemeral words shared on Snapchat disappear in seconds, our vocalized words disappear from the air in *hundredths of a second*. Technology does not make our words more temporary—if anything, it makes them more durable. If we must give an account of every idle word, we are probably the first generation that can truly appreciate the volume of our idle words, since we have published more of them than any group in human history.

So although we can examine our authenticity when we speak through intentionally self-destructing messages (such as Snapchat), our phones do not make our words more transient or empty; they merely raise questions asked in every generation. Only when we acknowledge these questions can we then get back to examining Snapchat.

That is often how conversations on digital media work. So I begin the book by asking for a truce. Can we agree that some of the most important smartphone questions will also apply to nondigital conversations? Just because a struggle we face in our digital lives also relates to nondigital contexts does not mean that the conversation with digital communication is averted—it means that Scripture proves its ongoing relevance in the digital age.

15. Prov. 3:5–8; 12:15; 26:12.

16. James 5:12.

WHO AM I?

As you can see, this journey to untangle my relationship with my phone is very personal (i.e., self-critical of *me*), so you need to know who I am from the outset.

I'm "an early adopter"—a nice way of saying "self-professed iPhone addict and techno-junkie." I am also a Christian of nearly two decades who holds the Bible as the ultimate and final authority over my life. Educated in business, journalism, and liberal arts, I now work as an investigative reporter of the complex dynamics of the Christian life in tension with the current pressures of cultural conformity. I research and write in concert with many other voices in the church, both living and dead.

Married for nearly two decades, my wife and I have three kids, and we are trying to raise them to be technologically competent and digitally self-controlled.¹⁷ In our home, we currently run one desktop computer, three laptops, three tablets, three smartphones, and one iPod.

At the time this book was published, I had compiled 32.6 years of experience in four platforms: blogging, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.¹⁸ I have worked online for nonprofit ministries for a decade, and never without an iPhone. And those labors have not insulated me from the pressing questions of the digital age—rather, they have amplified them. At the same time, my work has put me in contact with several of the most thoughtful Christian philosophers, theologians, pastors, and artists who are thinking carefully about helping the church respond wisely to the digital age, and here I will share some of the best insights from my many conversations with them.

Simultaneously, I wrote this book in dialogue with a variety of Christians: students, singles, married couples, parents, homemakers, business professionals, and ministry leaders. Each of us faces

17. Tony Reinke, "Walk the Worldwide Garden: Protecting Your Home in the Digital Age," *Desiring God*, desiringGod.org (May 14, 2016).

18. I have been blogging for 565 weeks, posting on Twitter and Facebook each for 441 weeks, and using Instagram for 248 weeks.

similar questions about how to live healthy and balanced lives in the digital age.

BACKWARD DESIRES

Media ecologist Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980) reminded his generation that technology is always an extension of the self. A fork is simply an extension of my hand. My car is an extension of my arms and my feet, and no less so than Fred Flintstone’s footmobile.

Likewise, my smartphone extends my cognitive functions.¹⁹ The active neurons in my brain are a crackling tangle of skull lightning, and my thought life resembles a thunderstorm over Kansas.²⁰ This tiny electrical storm in the microscopic space of my nervous system quite naturally extends out to my thumbs to create tiny digital sparks of electricity inside my phone that beam out to the world by radio waves.

This all means that my phone marks a place in time and space—outside of me—where I can project my relationships, my longings, and the full scope of my conscious existence. In fact, hold up the word “desire” in a mirror and it will read “erised,” the name of the magic mirror in the Harry Potter books.²¹ In the ancient Mirror of Erised, you see the deepest longings of your heart revealed in vivid color. Our shiny smartphone screens do the same.

Too often what my phone exposes in me is not the holy desires of what *I know I should want*, not even what *I think I want*, and especially not what *I want you to think I want*. My phone screen divulges in razor-

19. “If the wheel is an extension of feet, and tools of hands, backs, and arms, then electromagnetism seems to be in its technological manifestations an extension of our nerves, and becomes mainly an information system.” Marshall McLuhan, video interview, “The Future of Man in the Electric Age,” marshallmcluhanspeaks.com (BBC, 1965). Throughout the book, I will distinguish between our lives as *embodied* and *disembodied*, not as precise terms but as useful terms of contrast. Of course, on our phones, we always use our bodies—our eyes, thumbs, ears, brains, and even our nerves to sense the phantom vibrations. The usefulness of the terms will become clear later in the book when we address the influence of our phones on our physical health, something we often ignore. They will also serve as a good contrast to the *embodied* life, a term I use in reference to scenarios in which all of our personhood—mind, body, soul, emotion—is displayed and used simultaneously (as in a face-to-face conversation).

20. A metaphor from N. D. Wilson’s address, “Words Made Flesh: Stories Telling Stories and the Russian Dolls of Divine Creativity,” Vimeo, vimeo.com (April 25, 2015).

21. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (New York: Scholastic, 1998), 207–8.

sharp pixels what my heart *really wants*.²² The glowing screen on my phone projects into my eyes the desires and loves that live in the most abstract corners of my heart and soul, finding visible expression in pixels of images, video, and text for me to see and consume and type and share. This means that whatever happens on my smartphone, especially under the guise of anonymity, is the true exposé of my heart, reflected in full-color pixels back into my eyes.

Honestly, this may explain the passcodes. To get into a phone is to peek into the interior of another's soul, and we may be too ashamed for others to see what we clicked and opened and chased around online.

What could be more unsettling?

If we are honest enough to face our smartphone habits, and use the pages ahead as an invitation to commune with God, we can expect to find grace for our digital failures and for our digital futures. God loves us deeply, and he is eager to give us everything we need in the digital age. The spilled blood of his Son proves it.²³ We need his grace as we evaluate the place of smartphones—the pros and the cons—in the trajectory of our eternal lives. If we fluff it, not only will we suffer now, but generations after us will pay the price.

22. A haunting heart reality vividly described in James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 27–38.

23. Rom. 8:32.

Introduction

A LITTLE THEOLOGY OF TECHNOLOGY

The moment when my first smartphone caught a wireless email outside that blustery rest stop in the Iowa cornfields is not where the story of this book begins. The launch of the iPhone at Macworld Expo 2007 is not far back enough either. Neither is the beginning of Apple or the birth of Steve Jobs. To see the timeline of the smartphone, we need a quick glance at the history of technology as it stretches back over the centuries. Our digital age is no cosmic accident.

THE STORY OF TECHNOLOGY

In the beginning, God created Adam out of mud and Eve out of a rib. Yahweh bent down and exhaled breath into their lungs, and they awoke into a strange world of oceans and sunshine and mountains and fruit and unnamed animals, untilled soil, and untapped materials, such as diamonds, gold, silver, and iron.¹ God first commanded his creatures to make babies, to collect food, and to govern the animals. But in those early commands, God already had drawn his endgame into his blueprints. The garden was only a beginning. The goal was a globe of technological advancement, leading to a creation so refined that the city streets will be paved thick with crystal gold, a creation

1. Gen. 2:10–14.

so radiant and luminescent that we can hardly imagine what it will look like in the end.² So when Adam and Eve awoke and walked into the garden, an unseen, much larger plan was also set in motion. The untilled garden would become a glorious city.

We find ourselves in the middle of this garden-to-city unfolding of history, and God is governing the entire process in several ways. Between the guardrails of natural law, as well as the guardrails of the abundance and scarcity of certain raw materials in the earth, and carried forward through his image bearers, each wired for innovation, 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.³

But between the muddy rural beginning of the garden and the gleaming urban finale, we must fill in the story, because that's where we find ourselves: east of Eden, west of the Great City, journeying now in God's sovereignly guided history, holding smartphones. As the broader history of technology unfolds, the Bible teaches us nine key realities we must rehearse to ourselves in the digital age.

1. Technology modifies creation

God's commission to the first couple, to garden the globe and to raise animals, implied a series of technological advances that would make all of this work possible through stone tools, then copper tools, and then iron tools.

Unlike his other creatures, God's image bearers would grow food strategically. By design, agricultural advances began rather quickly—a trajectory of shovels, sickles, and horse-drawn plows, and then tractors, irrigation systems, and now GPS-guided (and GPS-driven!) equipment. Technology is used to subdue creation for human good, but also to increase efficiency. Today's agriculture is not perfect, and

2. Rev. 21:18–21.

3. This inevitability explains what historians call the phenomenon of “multiple discovery” or “simultaneous inventions.” See Clive Thompson, *Smarter Than You Think: How Technology Is Changing Our Minds for the Better* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 58–66.

it raises moral questions, but the long train of technological advances here is especially illuminating and stunning.

Farming also is one example of technology built from the Creator's intelligence (given to mankind) and creation's abundance (supplied in the earth). Technology is the reordering of raw materials for human purposes. Adam and Eve reordered the raw materials of soil in order to make plants and flowers flourish. Today, chefs and cooks reorder the raw materials of foods into delicious meals. Framing carpenters reorder raw materials of lumber and nails to form homes. Pharmaceutical chemists reorder organic and synthetic elements into healing drugs. Musicians reorder notes and sounds into music. Novelists reorder the raw material of human experience into stories. As a writer of nonfiction, I reorder the raw materials of words and ideas for a publisher, which then reorders wood pulp, black ink, and binding glue into a book for you to hold and read. All of this is technology.

2. Technology pushes back the results of the fall

Not long into the story of the world, Adam and Eve made the tragic mistake—committing the inexplicable sin—of ignoring God's only prohibition. Satan tempted them, and Eve and Adam took a bite at becoming godlike. In that moment, God brought down his curse on creation, and the immediate result was a breakdown in man's relationships with everyone and everything.⁴

That breakdown still affects us today—weeds in the crops, pain in the delivery room, and embarrassment in nakedness. Farmers use weed-killing technology to minimize thorns and thistles on the farm. Women use pain-suppressing technology in childbirth. Fashion designers use fabric to cover our bodies. The sweep of technological advance is a gracious gift from God to help us live in a fallen creation. But all of this technology also reminds us of our fundamental problem—we are sinfully alienated from God.

4. Gen. 3:1-24.

3. Technology establishes human power

Unhitched from fear and obedience to God, technology quickly becomes a pawn in human power plays. The discovery of copper and the invention of stronger and harder carburized iron brought easier farming, but it also brought new equipment for warfare.⁵ To own iron mines and employ blacksmiths was to control an endless supply of new weaponry, and to control an endless supply of new weaponry was to flex military superiority, and to flex military superiority was to wield power over rival nations. Bows, arrows, iron, and gunpowder all give power to defend and conquer. The same holds true today. Power and superiority rest on technology: atomic weapons, warships, drones, fighter jets, and missiles. The larger a nation's military, the more power it can wield in the world. Such a quantifiable and scalable power is possible only through technological innovation.

4. Technology helps to edify souls

In the biblical storyline, innovations also serve worshipers.

Musical instruments were invented in order for God's people to express their joy in beautiful songs.⁶ Later, the temple of Israel exhibited years of advances in building technology, metallurgy, and artistic craftsmanship. The greatness and the majestic scale of the temple proclaimed to the nations the glory, greatness, and splendor of Israel's God.

As God's plan moved from a come-and-see religion (Old Testament) to a go-and-tell focus (New Testament), chisel and stone gave way to primitive advances in paper and ink, making it possible for written communications technology to advance. God's words, first scratched in stone, then on processed animal skins, and then on products of trees, would become the Creator's centerpiece for drawing together his people separated by continents, languages, and millennia. Over time, the many scrolls of the Old Testament and the many books and letters of the New Testament were gathered into a codex,

5. Gen. 49:5; Judg. 1:19; 4:3.

6. 1 Chron. 15:16; 23:5.

translated, and mass-published as a single book of unified authority that we now conveniently carry in one hand. Every time we open our Bibles, our souls are being fed through centuries of technological advancement.

From trumpets and temples to gold-edged Bibles, God intended technology to play an essential role for us to know and worship him.

5. Technology upholds and empowers our bodies

Technological advances change and refine our bodies in very dramatic ways, too. Eyeglasses and hearing aids boost our senses of seeing and hearing. Musical technology, such as the violin, fine-tunes human motor skills and gives us new purposes for the microrefined movements of our bodies. Industrial technology connects our hands to the hydraulic arms of digging machines. Medical technology starts stopped hearts and sustains dying bodies. Advances in medicine cure diseases and slow terminal illnesses. And advances in clothing make it possible for us to adorn our bodies in ways that define and shape the identities we project to one another.⁷

Technology enhances our bodies, refines our movements, amplifies our actions, and shapes how we present ourselves to the world.

6. Technology gives voice to human autonomy

The good-bad-ugly mix of technology came to a particularly obnoxious expression at the Tower of Babel, an attempt to consolidate all known building innovation to build a rebel city.⁸ More than a simple skyscraper, Babel was a new empire with a central city unified around a temple (the tower), all dedicated to the worship of human progress. Suppressing God's ingenuity in all human advances, Babel was man's attempt to hijack technology and to fabricate an entire society and religious life in rebellion to the Creator.

As such, Babel marked man's collective rejection of the idea that technology is a gift from God. Before they built a tower into the sky,

7. 1 Pet. 3:3-4; 1 Tim. 2:9; Rev. 17:4-5.

8. Gen. 11:1-9.

the people of Babel drew a line in the sand that said to the Creator, “Human autonomy will take credit for technological innovation from here on, *thankyouverymuch*.” The mockery of this treasonous act is also partially comic—man builds his temple *up* as high as possible, and then the living God of the universe stoops *down* to his knees and puts his cheek on the ground in order to evaluate the progress.⁹ This is always what happens when technology is misused in unbelief. God is the genesis of all knowledge and technological advance, and he is the author and finisher of a glorified city to come. Why would a mud skyscraper impress him?

Technology is not inherently evil, but it tends to become the platform of choice to express the fantasy of human autonomy.

7. God governs every human technology

The Tower of Babel was really the Tower of Ignorance. This skyscraper of pride was assembled with earth’s raw materials and shaped by human ingenuity—and all of these gifts came from God. To build a godless skyscraper, using God’s resources put in the ground and God’s inventiveness put in his image bearers, was the height of human arrogance and (as we will see later) the total distortion of human purpose.

So God scattered the builders across the globe by a variety of languages (and drew all those languages back together at Pentecost when the gospel was ready for worldwide distribution¹⁰). God was not absent at Babel. He was the cosmic foreman on site, overruling human technology to serve his ultimate gospel purpose.

But God’s sovereign reign over the most horrific evils of technology is nowhere clearer than in the Roman cross. An upright wooden post with a transverse beam, the cross was a showcase for a criminal: nailed down by three iron spikes, he was then lifted up for all to see as the cross was planted in the ground. The cross was designed to kill criminals, insurrectionists, and disobedient slaves, and to do so

9. Gen. 11:5.

10. Acts 2:1–13.

slowly by exhaustion and asphyxiation. The slow death was public torture, a billboard of intimidation: Behold the fate of any fool who defies Roman rule and threatens social stability.¹¹

But this awful tool of torture doubled as the hinge on which all of God's redemptive plan turned. God created trees to serve man, but man invented crosses to destroy man. In the darkness of this most evil moment, God's entire plan for the glorious new city took a decisive step forward. Through an evil misuse of technology, man killed the Author of life, yet God was sovereign over the entire process.¹² By a cosmic paradox that will never be eclipsed, in the naked torture of shame before the eyes of man, Christ exposed all the forces of evil to the shame of stripped-naked defeat.¹³

Evil was defeated by technology, all by God's sovereign design. Technology, even in the hands of the most evil intention of man, is never outside the overruling plan of God. In this case, Calvary was *hacked*. God broke into the technology of the cross "and with a little twist reversed its function."¹⁴ God does this: he makes a mockery of our evil technologies through his sovereign hackery.

8. Technology shapes every relationship

The lineage of technological advance is long—bows and arrows, wheels and axles, iron tools and weapons, movable type and printing presses, clocks and watches, steam engines and railroads, cars and jets, computers and smartphones. Every new technology opens humanity to new hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Every technology changes the fundamental social dynamics of how we relate to the world, to one another, and to God.

First, technology changes how we relate to the earth. With a GPS app, I can see my exact place on the earth in a way that was almost impossible twenty years ago and unfathomable to my ancestors.

11. Martin Hengle, *Crucifixion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977).

12. Acts 3:15; 2:23.

13. Col. 2:15.

14. Martin M. Olmos, "God, the Hacker: Technology, Mockery, and the Cross," *Second Nature*, secondnaturejournal.com (July 29, 2013).

Second, technology changes the way we relate to one another. If I approach you on the street and begin chatting, our relationship is fundamentally open. But if I approach you for a chat and my video recorder app is open and I am holding my phone out in front of me, our interaction is fundamentally changed as you try to decide if you will make eye contact with me or with the invisible audience watching on the other side of my mini camera lens.

Third, technology can become a metaphor that God uses to reveal his work in the world. Once we had made primitive advancements in metallurgy, for example, God could reveal his work in humanity as a consuming fire who smelts mankind—to judge the dross of rebellion and to purify his handiwork, his nation, of false alloys. The unveiling of new technology creates new metaphors for God to reveal how he engages with us mortals.¹⁵

9. Technology shapes our theology

Finally, we use technology to manifest metaphors of God (for good or ill). Take the more recent technology of the pocket watch—miniature hairsprings, winding wheels, and precise gears, all wound up into rhythmic clicking. With the invention of the watch, we could keep time with accuracy and choreograph our schedules. The technological advance in timepieces also birthed two new metaphors to explain God’s relationship to us—one perceptive, the other deceptive.

First, the watch provided a helpful metaphor for God. Since the watch’s various pieces all come together to serve one function in the end, it bears all the marks of “intelligent design,” the handiwork of one designer. Such is also true of our bodies. Together, the various parts and pieces and chemicals of our existence join in harmony to sustain our cohesive existence. This is “the watchmaker analogy.” God is not only close; his fingerprints are on us.

15. Isa. 1:22–25; Jer. 6:27–30; Ps. 119:119. See also Paula McNutt, *The Forging of Israel: Iron Technology, Symbolism and Tradition in Ancient Society* (Sheffield, England: Bloomsbury T&T Clark: 2009). It should be said that God coined new metaphors of technology for himself until the closing of the canon.

But the watch also provided a faulty metaphor for God. Some began to imagine a God who assembled the universe, wound it up, set it in motion, and walked away. This is a form of deism, the idea that God is generally withdrawn and remote from the world apart from preserving natural laws.

For better or worse, technology fundamentally changes how we talk about God. And technology shapes the way God communicates himself to us. God makes himself clear to us through metaphors of technology, and we find it possible to define him, and also to distort him, by projecting metaphors of technology onto him.

TECHNOLOGY THEOLOGY

I've only skimmed the depths here. My point is that every technological innovation is a new theological invitation for renewed biblical contemplation by God's people. That means several things.

First, life in the digital age is an open invitation for clear, biblical thinking about the impact of our phones on ourselves, on our creation, on our neighbors, and on our relationships to God. Thoughtlessly adopting new technology is worldliness.

Second, technology is technology, whether tethered to an outlet or to a horse. For this project, I will not make a hard-and-fast distinction between *tools* and *technology*, disconnecting primitive tools off the electrical grid from newer technologies we plug in. Partly this is because household gods of carved stone or wood and handheld idols of silver and gold, common in the ancient world, were not tools. These idols were more like our technologies, divine oracles of knowledge and prosperity, used by worshipers in an attempt to control and manipulate the events of life for personal benefit. The figurine and the iPhone appeal to the same fetish.

Third, whatever my smartphone is doing to me, it is also pointing me toward a glorious city to come. We do not trust in handheld things. We do not trust in handmade things. Instead, we long to be in the presence of our triune God in a new creation, built not by human ingenuity and sinful hands, but by the very design and innovation

of God—the sinless and deathless and tearless creation God has always intended.¹⁶

OUR PLACE IN HISTORY

So here we are, in “the digital age,” an age so thick with innovation that we grow blind to it. And we are adopting and adapting to new technologies faster than any generation in world history. As of 2015, among American adults eighteen to twenty-nine years old, 86 percent own a smartphone, up from 52 percent four years earlier. In the same demographic, 50 percent own a tablet, up from just 13 percent four years earlier. Concurrently, among the same demographic, ownership of computers, MP3 players, game consoles, and ebook readers declined.¹⁷ Our phones are gobbling up these functions.

Perhaps we adapt so readily because we are a gifted generation, easily trainable and moldable. Or perhaps we adapt so readily because, as Jacques Ellul suggested, our technology exerts a sort of terrorism over us.¹⁸ We live under the threat that if we fail to embrace new technologies, we will be pushed aside into cultural obsolescence, left without key skills we need to get a job, disconnected from cultural conversations, and separated from our friends.

Whatever our motives, the fact remains—we are adopting, we are going online, and we are going mobile. Smartphone cases double as wallets because we wouldn’t dare leave the house without them. In fact, 36 percent of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds in America admit they are online “almost constantly”—a phenomenon made possible by the smartphone. The most likely adult to live online makes more than \$75,000 per year, is a college graduate, lives in a nonrural setting, and is in the eighteen-to-twenty-nine age range.¹⁹ Our mobile web addiction may be new, but it’s here to stay. We are never offline.

16. John 14:1-7; Acts 7:49-50; Heb. 9:11-28.

17. Monica Anderson, “Technology Device Ownership: 2015,” Pew Research Center, pewinternet.org (Oct. 29, 2015).

18. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 384-400.

19. Andrew Perrin, “One-Fifth of Americans Report Going Online ‘Almost Constantly,’” Pew Research Center, pewinternet.org (Dec. 8, 2015).

So is my smartphone a hostile enemy? Is it a cultural trinket? Is it a legitimate tool? Those are a few of the questions we will examine in the pages ahead. Our phones have concentrated powerful technology into a little device we control with our thumbs. We have full access to this technology, and by some kind of digital and electrical magic, we are potentially connected at all times with every other phone on the planet.

All of these realities *are* changing us; there's no debate on that. The bigger questions remain: *How* are our smartphones changing us? And should we be concerned?

Do You Control Your Phone— Or Does Your Phone Control You?

Within a few years of its unveiling, the smartphone had become part of us, fully integrated into the daily patterns of our lives. Never offline, always within reach, we now wield in our hands a magic wand of technological power we have only begun to grasp. But it raises new enigmas, too. Never more connected, we seem to be growing more distant. Never more efficient, we have never been more distracted.

Drawing from the insights of numerous thinkers, published studies, and his own research, writer Tony Reinke identifies twelve potent ways our smartphones have changed us—for good and bad. Reinke calls us to cultivate wise thinking and healthy habits in the digital age, encouraging us to maximize the many blessings, avoid the various pitfalls, and wisely wield the most powerful gadget of human connection ever unleashed.

“This is a necessary book for our generation, to remind us that our phone habits will either amplify or get in the way of our most important longing of all: the soul-satisfying glory of our Savior.”

JACKIE HILL PERRY, poet; hip-hop artist

“Informed. Fair. Attentive to subtleties. Theologically insightful. This is a book very few people could have written.”

JOHN PIPER, Founder, desiringGod.org;
Chancellor, Bethlehem College & Seminary

“One of the most important little books a twenty-first-century Christian could read.”

BRUCE RILEY ASHFORD, Provost and
Associate Professor of Theology and Culture,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Helpful, hopeful, humbling, and inspiring, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* is a book for this age and wisdom for generations to follow.”

TRILLIA NEWBELL, author, *Enjoy*

TONY REINKE is a journalist and serves as senior writer for desiringGod.org. He hosts the popular *Ask Pastor John* podcast and is the author of *Lit!: A Christian Guide to Reading Books* and *Newton on the Christian Life*.

CHRISTIAN LIVING / TECHNOLOGY