

A New Kind of Church by Pastor Marty

I recently saw a news segment in which a reporter had gone to Silicon Valley to look into the schools where the “tech giants” send their own children. This included the leading executives of Apple, Facebook, and others. The reporter was remarking on the fact that those specific schools do not allow computers, tablets, or even smartphones in the classrooms; students do everything on paper just as it was done before the internet revolution. The segment then interviewed specialists who have done the research and seen the statistics on how social media and technology have impacted student learning. It seems people at these companies, who know the most about the products they are making, usually do not allow their own children to have any of the latest gadgets because of the way it negatively affects brain development, intelligence, and social skills. Of course, it is not surprising to anyone that social media and technology *can* be a problem; however, it is a bit eye-opening to learn that the same people who push tablets and computers into schools across our country do not allow their own children to go to schools that use them. Nevertheless, expounding on the “evils of technology” is a useless endeavor because unless we move to Amish country, technology is here to stay. We have to make a choice: we can be like the author of Ecclesiastes, proclaiming everything is useless, or we can find ways to adapt.

We either proclaim, “Vanity of vanities—everything is Vanity!”, or we learn to adapt.

Science has too many positive aspects in our world to dismiss it all as detrimental. However, there is no doubt concerning drawbacks—including abuse, addiction, and apathy. Still, we have to leave denial behind us and accept that things are different now than they were in biblical times—or even two decades ago. The biblical writers could not comprehend a world where we walk around with a small box that allows us to see and speak with someone on another continent, access warehouses of information without leaving our couch, or handle almost every aspect of personal life without having to interact with actual people. There are plenty of woes that can be applied to any scientific invention, but there are also profound benefits—even for serious Christians: telephones enable us to be in instant contact with people thousands of miles away so we can counsel, pray for, or encourage those in need; computers provide avenues of research and information that can improve our understanding in just about every area of life; and social media gives us the ability to interact and stay informed with friends and family long distance. These are all very positive things. The main question is whether these are all worth what we may have lost in the process: the personal connections we can find in social interaction.

We have to consider if what we have gained is worth the trade for what we have lost.

Depending on personal experience and worldview, we may have significantly different answers to that question. Some believers embrace social media and technology whole-heartedly, finding ways to incorporate it into their life and ministry; they largely embrace the positive aspects while attempting to avoid the negative. Others have chosen to stay away to various degrees; they find that the negative outweighs the positive in many areas. A third position involves those who go through recurring cycles of embracing and abstaining; they avoid potential addiction and overload by going through a periodic cleansing fast when needed. Although these are valid positions, they all have weaknesses. Those who embrace social media or technology tend to underestimate or ignore the very real potential downsides while those who avoid it gradually become more and more out of touch with a majority of our society. If we are going to make an informed decision, we need to evaluate technology more comprehensively.

We must find a way to comprehensively evaluate social media and technology in faith.

History actually provides us with a good way to evaluate our options more comprehensively in the form of a movement dating back to the early Church: Monasticism. Historically speaking, this is a lifestyle rooted in the time when Christianity was accepted within the Roman government. Although death was usually not optimal, believers considered martyrdom to be the most radical way they could show their love for God: giving up their lives for Him. When martyrdom was not imminent, those who desired radical devotion looked for some other way to follow the command to “lay down” their life and take up His. In the place of martyrdom, some decided to give up their social life instead: they isolated themselves from the rest of society and lived a life of seclusion for God. As expected, there are positive and negative aspects of this lifestyle: on the one hand, they were able to avoid the temptations and the evils that were prevalent in society and could focus entirely on their relationship with God; on the other hand, they left the world without their direct influence and neglected the great commission. I do not doubt that some were called to this lifestyle, and for those who were, they were following the Holy Spirit; however, there were almost certainly some who could have better served God by staying in the world and letting their light and life have a sanctifying and preserving effect on those around them.

Our presence is often the only thing keeping the world from becoming a whole lot worse.

When I first became a Christian, I often heard a debate over whether Christians should go into the fields of Hollywood, Education, or Government without a clear calling from God to do so. The basis of the argument was as follows: there is so much corruption in those fields that it is impossible to be in them without being affected by it; the Bible commands us to flee temptation; and our relationship with God has to be valued more than potential success in business. The problem is that it is precisely due to our absence in those areas that things have gotten profoundly worse than it was before. There are now active attempts by many Christians to break through those gates and change things from the inside, but it is an uphill battle, and entire generations have been indoctrinated into ungodly thought while the Church protected itself. The way the debate was often framed was in itself a sign of failure, for it revealed a lack of understanding when it came to Jesus’ command to “be in the world but not of it.” Instead of the question being *whether* a Christian *could* be in any of those fields, the question needed to be *how* a Christian *should* be in those fields. In other words, the debate needed to be focused on how believers could actively be involved in the world while not becoming worldly or corrupted by it.

Instead of avoiding this world’s corrupt systems, we need to infiltrate and change them.

Getting back to our main topic, social media and technology are very similar to the occupation of Israel by the Roman Empire: things have changed, and they will never be like they were. However, unlike earthly empires, which have a beginning and an end, the technological revolution is not going away. Barring some “War of the Worlds” scenario, we are not returning to a life where we live without computers, cellphones, tablets, or social media. In all likelihood, we will become more technological, not less. Granted, none of those things will be needed after Jesus returns, but living that way now may be like those who joined monasteries in 999 AD or gave away everything they had in 1999 AD because they expected His return: all they really did was temporarily remove themselves from the world. I do not doubt there will always be some who completely avoid those things, but they are more and more going to be the exceptions instead of the rule. There will always be times when taking a retreat to fast from technology will be necessary—just as we have to periodically get away from everyday life and be alone with God—but if we decide to live unplugged, we are going to find ourselves not just unplugged from technology but largely unplugged from the same world that we are called to be in and transform.

Unplugging from technology may be unplugging from the same world that needs us.

Considering that technology is here to stay and that we need to learn how to use it—at least as long as we plan on having any positive influence in this world—the question needs to be not *whether* we should be involved in those things but *how* should we be involved. This is a very different question than *if* we should be involved, and it lets us evaluate positives and negatives without being in denial. As we do that, we recognize that there are good or evil aspects to anything. For example, Christians can be involved in Hollywood and media without having to participate in pornography; Christians can be in the government without supporting the murder of a child; and Christians can be in the education field without giving in to the progressive agenda. Again, we have to remember that this world is very much reflective of human nature: just as the sinful nature leads us to death except to whatever extent we follow the Spirit, the advancement of depravity in our culture is a tidal wave that is only prevented by God’s grace and Presence operating through His Children. In other words, evil is only overcome by our actively getting involved to stop it. God has largely decided that His Presence is primarily available in the world through His Church. If we are not called to separate ourselves from the world, then we must evaluate how much we are called to separate ourselves from those things that connect us to the world.

If we are called to be in the world, we need to know how to be connected to the world.

Of course, this does not mean everyone has to actively embrace technology and social media as much as it means we have to evaluate our response to it. Returning to the discovery that many of the leaders in these fields avoid the same technologies they promote, we have to recognize that there are downsides that need to be addressed: not only abuse, addiction, and apathy but also disconnection, depression, and deterioration. The Church is called to reach those who need God, which is everyone. In order to fulfill the great commission within a technological culture, we must take advantage of its positives or heal the wounds of its negatives; we cannot simply choose to ignore it without risking that we become unavailable to the very same people we want to reach. However, this does not negate our responsibility to our own wellbeing; those in the Church are just as susceptible to the negative effects of technology as those in the world. In many ways, we are the first generations under occupation, and the real issues are just beginning to reveal themselves. There is nothing wrong in speaking out against the problems we identify, and there is certainly a need for that, but if we do not actually offer people a solution that fits where our culture is headed, we may leave them worse than they were before.

If we do not offer a solution that fits, we only leave people worse than they were before.

As our world becomes more technological, we have to find ways to use technology and media to make real connections. In a time when connections have become largely 2-dimensional on a screen, we have to find a way to go deeper. In churches today, “connection” is often understood as simply a reflection of how many people attend a service, join a small group, or support a ministry. The need is much more basic and fundamental than that. We are a society in which whole generations do not even know how to connect with others; they have often never experienced it enough to even know what it is they are missing. We have become so busy that we have forgotten how to live; instead, we simply exist from one day to the next. The prolific increase in immoral lifestyles and identity confusion in our culture is a clear sign that we are becoming increasingly disconnected from God, from our own selves, and from each other. We are in an excellent position to offer the Ultimate Real of God’s Presence to a hurting world, but we need to provide more than just a description and information; we need to be His body. Similar to the way each person has a love language, we have to learn how to communicate with others in a way they can understand; otherwise, similar to the noise described by Paul, everything we say will be static. We cannot solve society’s problems without a tangible solution that we can offer.