

The Christian Response to Technology

or “Your 12 year old does not need a smart phone”

This article is both to individuals and parents or future parents (whatever stage or season of life) who *are in charge of the technology of the household*. We have a technology problem. While this manifests itself in many ways, I want to focus first on the issue of the smart phone, and secondly on some of the practical ways we can manage technology in the home in general.

To condemn all technology as bad gets us nowhere...so we need to deal positively with the Christian quandary: **how is a faithful Christian to rightly use God’s gift of technology?** To be specific to our topic, how do people navigate smart phones and the internet, especially if they are trying to avoid watching inappropriate content? Filters and secure web browsers are a start...but they are half measures at best. They can be easily gotten around by any third grader. We need to do better than automatically handing over technology to people who ARE NOT ABLE (through lack of maturity and formation) to handle it.¹ To make my case and show us a way forward, I use an analogy.

The Saw

While I don’t know anything about furniture building, I do like to watch You Tube videos on regular people who build these incredible, beautiful pieces of furniture.² You will see people using the best slabs of wood, the best tools, taking care to be precise in all that they do. It’s rewarding to watch the process unfold and see the finished product.

I was watching a video the other day of a husband and wife team build an 8ft. dining room table from a “live slab” of black walnut. Preparing the raw material of wood to become a finished table took hours to achieve. Through time-lapse photography, one could observe the process unfold in a matter of a half to three quarters of an hour. But still! *All of the technical mastery and care and precision that is required!* These are people who not only have the expertise but the tools. Some of the tools are pretty basic—a sander, a tool for clearing out loose sediment from a defect, a planer...but other tools are really quite...well, *dangerous*. Powerful table saws, scroll saws. Very sharp. One slip up and BAM! No fingers, for forever. And forever is a mighty long time.

The saw they used to “rip straight lines” off the ends of this piece of the black walnut was a Festool T8 75 Track Saw with a 36 inch Festool track. The track keeps the cut straight while the saw makes *very precise cuts*. It takes practice to use such a tool. One would never just hand over a powerful saw to a novice such as myself, with NO TRAINING, and say, “Have at it!” In fact, humans from time immemorial have employed a basic, strategic process for handing down

¹ This includes many adults I know!

² Yes...the irony that my analogy starts with my “watching something on You Tube” is not lost on me.

knowledge, especially when working with something dangerous. For there are two dangers in the misuse of the tool—**making an irreparable mistake to the product** or **making an irreparable mistake to the person**. So, humans for centuries have passed down ways to use things that require care and precaution.

I want you to imagine a father wants to build a farm table to be used in the dining room. The father has built many tables before, but now he wants to show his growing teenage son how to do it...the whole process...from selecting the wood, to preparing it, to cutting it, to screwing or gluing it together, to staining it, to drying it. And in this, he wants to show his son how to use a “dangerous tool” like a saw. How would he do it? “Here you go son! Go to town! Just make some cuts! Hope it turns out! Good luck!” NO. That would be absurd.

Instead, he would use the age old practice of:

I DO, YOU WATCH

I DO, YOU HELP

I HELP, YOU DO

I WATCH, YOU DO

It is so imminently “practical” that all of you recognize this process simply by intuition. But this process is necessary...because when teaching someone to use a tool that can make very precise cuts...both to the material and the finger(!), we take care to model, and train, and oversee **before simply handing over something like a saw to a child or growing teen**.

- So, the father does, the son watches the father carefully. The father explains what he’s doing and mistakes he’s made in the past.
- The father does, and this time the son helps out. He starts to get a feel for it, but the father is still in charge.
- But then there is a bit of a role-reversal. In the next stage the son starts to do, with the father helping out where needed.
- Finally, the son is able to do (say use the sharp and precise saw) on his own. The father is always there lending support if needed.³

The average age for a child to get a smart phone is twelve years old. 12 years old. “Child” is the operative word. And most often, the phone is given over with no training and little discernment. Oh sure...there’s “rules” (no texting after nine; only an hour after school)...blah, blah,

³ It did enter my mind as I wrote this section that another analogy might be one of a mother teaching her daughter to shave their legs. Seeing as how I am a father with two daughters, I thought I’d better stick with saws and sons!

blah...we're not doing a good job of training our children with a dangerous piece of technology that introduces pornography and so much more. While I am not proscribing a certain age for smartphones, it sure ain't 12.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the smart phone is not a "neutral" tool! It is a potential window into every manner of debauchery. It just is. Oh, it's a tool...but a tool carefully designed to illicit more and more usage by the user. It is a tool to draw people in. Into what? Another world. Unlike other forms of technology (like a paint brush), smart phones and tablets are portals. It's not just like flipping through the pages of a magazine...it's like flipping through the pages of every magazine in every store in every country in the world! This is part of the pull and why pornography has exploded in the last 15 years. Phones give people instant access to another universe. Very often, that universe is dark and dangerous. Like a dangerous saw. We must be vigilant when and how much we allow our children to use them without the proper training.

Maybe *we should be a bit more intentional* with our own use of technology around our children. For they learn from what we are doing. So, we are to be prudent with our usage and model the behaviors we'd like to see from them. We are also to be the gatekeeper. We are to protect our children from evil. Nothing comes to our children's eyes unless it gets through us. An example. During my time at *Barnes and Noble*, I became very familiar with both our children's and teen sections. There is a lot of garbage in there! But I would meet parent after parent who would buy the child anything, with the self-rationalization of, "As long as they're reading!" NO! Don't let them read things that are not truly excellent, that are not edifying, that are not glorifying God's truth and beauty. And there are such excellent books out there. But "whatever" doesn't work. There are many books in the teen section that I would blush to read. Just because something is on a "reading list" doesn't mean it passes your gate. In fact, being the gatekeeper means is that *you have to read things first*. That's right, you have to read as a parent. Nothing gets past your gate without your examination.

Positively, however, this means you have a wonderful privilege to introduce your children and family to beauty. There are some great resources out there for books. There is great literature that the whole family can enjoy (again and again). But being gatekeeper also means that you can be the one to introduce beauty into the home, into the car, into the orbit of the child. Artwork that depicts biblical narrative in a realistic and imaginative way. Music that lifts and soars and inspires. You can shape the standard and set the tone. But as gatekeeper, it also means that your standards have to be high.

High standards also apply to social media. This is a hard one for some people. Do our children have to be on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok? Do they really? And if so, what age? Do we even ask questions like, "What is an appropriate age to allow my child to go onto social media sites?"⁴ And if we ask, do we listen to the advice? I don't know...honestly as a pastor, as a

⁴ The question behind this question is, "Should I be on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc.?"

father, as someone who thinks and cares deeply about these things, *I have never been consulted once on this question*. My observation is that parents don't consider at all, *but just permit...and then try to restrict*. That way, they can feel they are not depriving and still parenting. But part of parenting by its very definition is to restrict. Instead many allow children access to social media and then try to govern it with guidelines. This seems problematic (consider the analogy of the saw)...because once they have access, how do you limit their exposure? Perhaps we might WAIT until there are fully matured before we allow our children to set up accounts online. Perhaps we should be better stewards of our children's online access and presence. For there are some very dangerous predators out there. I am not claiming to have the ironclad answers. I am claiming that we are not doing it well. We are not being discerning. With our own habits and our children's.

Technology for Good: Accountability Measures

The good news is that technology can be used for good. God is the creator of all things. Technology is a creation of God. Some things are used for honorable use, others...not so much. So, there are some technological measures that families can take to protect themselves and loved ones from either a) stumbling upon something or b) avoid temptation.

I am writing for a family context, but what is below works for individuals as well. I by no means offer here exhaustive research on what works best. There are too many factors to consider; finding what fits your situation takes time, research and customization.⁵ But there are several ways you can go to block content and limit exposure to pornography.

Website Blocking Software, Filters, and Other Technology

There are dozens of website blocking software packages and systems available. Some are free, and others cost. The cost depends on how many devices, and how extensive the blocking or limitation you desire. For instance, you can get a basic package for five devices and then pay more as you add on. Or you can get a basic filtering/blocking, and then pay to block or limit social media platforms. What is it *generally* that these software packages can do?

- There is usually some kind of parental controls
- There is usually an internet “filter”
- There is usually a “explicit content blocking” feature
- There is usually some kind of “screen time management” feature
- There is usually some kind of time management tracking and reporting feature
- There is usually some specific app blocking feature

⁵ It is ironic—we must spend more time on the internet to find out ways to spend less time on it!

- There is usually some kind of location tracking feature

Several companies will do the above (or a combination at a price)—either for a monthly fee or a yearly amount.

Website Blockers

There are also some basic website blockers that can be installed. Again, some are “free” (and then upgradable) and others cost. While these blockers aren’t foolproof, most can limit things from popping up unexpectedly. Most blockers, thought, won’t provide tracking and data on usage.

VPNs

VPNs or virtual private networks are another way people can go. These are mini-networks that run through your internet connection. This gives you a fair amount of control over everything you (and your family watches), but they cost, usually around a \$100 a year.

The Bottom Line with Technology

All of the above can (and should be) used as tools to help manage internet and site usage. They can protect individuals and the family from encountering unwelcome intrusions into your home. There is an old saying in Alcoholics Anonymous—if you don’t want a haircut, don’t hang out in a barber shop. If you don’t want you or your child to encounter unwanted content, limit the time you spend online! So, while completely staying off the internet may not be feasible, if you don’t want to be tempted or have your family exposed, then this technology is necessary.

However, these are not foolproof methods. Technology restrictors in no way takes the place of good parenting practices. All of these things can be “gotten around” by a savvy internet user. This technology is a good *first line of defense*. It is like installing a security system in your house—it gives a measure of protection and some peace of mind. But it can also give people a false sense of security. The technology cannot take the place of side-by-side parenting, friendship, and pastoral care.

Home Life and Relationships Instead of Screens

Positively, while implementing filtering and blocking technology (that good solid mortar lock on the front door), *the important thing is that a home is filled with beauty*. It should be a place of conversation. A beautiful home *limits* access to technology. Instead, what we can promote and inculcate is **face-to-face, in person relationships** and interactions. Face to face. Starting at home, we have to have spaces (say the dinner table) where any form of technology is forbidden. Instead, there are activities and interactions done by looking at another human being (whom you presumably love). No screens in sight, no ballgame on in the background. Whether it’s playing

cards or games or just (gasp) talking to one another...this simple *fix* is powerful. We have to reclaim the ability to have an in-person conversation...and spend time together.

Does this mean no “family movie night”? Does this mean no Spotify or Pandora playing through the family speaker system? Does this mean no internet in the home? Does this mean you give up all technology? No...but it does mean that we don’t simply fight “technology with technology”. Instead *we create common family spaces*. Places in the home where everyone can gather. We limit our screens to just a few visible places in the house. No bedrooms! It means that phones are put away more than out when the family is gathered together. We are conscious about our time together. Let’s give our technology a sabbatical.

One of my favorite things to do is listen to podcasts. But the wireless headphone innovation is a trap I fall into. Because I can be at home with my family and be completely absorbed *into my own world*. “Did daddy hear us...or did he have his ear buds in?” So, personal changes in habit are necessary **for all of us**. But we must treasure the “home life” and time God gives us to spend together. Modeling this for our children is powerful. They will do what you do...if not sooner, definitely later! We must make our homes places for quality time together, building relationships, and fellowship. It sounds so easy, doesn’t it? But it is hard to do. It must be an intentional goal and lifestyle. It will not happen unless we intentionally make it so.

We can also encourage our children to develop friendships with other children within the context of other families. This sounds hopelessly old-fashioned, and I realize that children are around other children all day in school...but what about encouraging good old “play dates” and family interactions over common interests? I am specifically talking to those in the Church. Do we seek out *other church families* for our children to learn to be sociable with and around? I recently heard of a group of families that get together every year to watch the movie *The Princess Bride* and drink root beer. Could it be this simple, a movie and a beverage?

Creating opportunities to interact and socialize with people who *share your same world view* is just one way to protect our children and promote friendship and community. Technology cannot be the replacement for every single thing. It can do a lot of tasks, but it does a poor job of keeping us “connected”. In fact, the research suggest it actually drives us apart! So, we must be intentional about forming friends and social groups so that our children learn how to appropriately interact with each other. In the end, this takes thoughtfulness, preparedness and a willingness to make some needed changes and then hold everyone accountable. But what a better world might we live in if we stop letting technology suck away our time (and our souls)? Instead, make our homes a place of honey:

My son, eat honey, for it is good, and the drippings of the honeycomb are sweet to your taste. Know that wisdom is such to your soul; if you find it, there will be a future, and your hope will not be cut off. (Proverbs 24:13-14)