

2023.01.08 - Discipleship In The Digital Age - How We Are Being Shaped

So What?

Feel What?

Now What?

VISION CASTING

The mission of Mosaic Church is to unite people in the Way of Jesus.

INTRODUCTION

A lot has happened we met last. We have new signage, new flags to represent our new name, Mosaic Church. We're in a new year—welcome to 2023. And Andrew Tate got arrested in Romania.

Who is Andrew Tate? So you don't have to Google him, I'll tell you: Andrew Tate is a former kickboxer who chalked up a 76-9 record. In the last several years, he leveraged his success to become an Internet media influencer who is often under fire for homophobic and racist tirades. He is a self-described misogynist who operates a Masterclass-style web course aimed at teaching young men how to be alphas—which, if you ask me, is the least alpha thing there is, but I digress.

He was banned from Twitter, but thanks to Elon Musk, was unbanned. And, about a week ago, bragged online about his fleet of gas-guzzling cars to Greta Thunberg, the young climate activist, who proceeded to put him in his place, to say the least.

Here's where things get interesting: Because of their Twitter interaction, the Romanian police were able to track Tate and arrest him and a small ring of comrades on human trafficking charges.

Now, I didn't even know such a person as one Andrew Tate even existed until November 2022. I was blissfully unaware of this alpha of alphas until my son invited friends to celebrate his 12th birthday a couple of the boys asked me if I knew who he was and were saying a some of his catchphrases inspired by him and due to the

adulation of their older brothers. After a cursory look online followed by an eye-roll, I put him out of my mind.

Here's why I'm telling you all this: The digital space is seeking to influence us and is actively training the next generation. The Andrew Tates of the world—or, if he's too extreme to think of, the Joe Rogans, the Jordan Petersons, name your influencer—are all putting content out there and they're finding impressionable young men to form according to their way of thinking and seeing the world.

But this isn't just about the ability to make an impression on young men and boys. Research is finding how susceptible young girls are who spend lots of time online. There was a story that came out early last year of a growing number of girls experiencing uncontrollable facial tics. The phenomenon perplexed doctors who were studying it because it didn't follow behavior that would be explained by Tourette's syndrome or epilepsy. Some of the girls were also talking in a British accent or exhibiting weird movements.

What neurologists finally realized was that these girls were watching TikTok videos featuring influencers who had facial tics and . The girls were watching the videos so often, their brains began to mimic the tics. And the effects are real—they're not faking them for attention, they're uncontrollable movements and behaviors. So serious, in fact, that cognitive behavioral therapy has been used as the main method to treat these young girls and the neurological disorder, along with limiting social media consumption.

We are in desperate need of rethinking how we interact with screens and digital devices. Are they producing the intended outcomes we desire? What are their unintended consequences? What are they doing to us that we're not aware of? What are devices doing that we're not aware of?

John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination Of Hurry*: "What you give your attention to is the person you become. Put another way: the mind is the portal to the soul, and what you fill your mind with will shape the trajectory of your character. In the end, your life is no more than the sum of what you gave your attention to. That bodes well for those apprentices of Jesus who give the bulk of their attention to him and to all that is good, beautiful, and true in his world. But not for those who give their attention to the 24-7 news cycle of outrage and anxiety and emotion-charged drama or the nonstop feed of celebrity gossip, titillation, and cultural drivel. (As if we 'give' it in the first place; much of it is stolen by a clever algorithm out to monetize our precious attention.)"

Before the end of the year, I was talking with members of our group about this upcoming teaching series, and we started talking about devices. It was as comical to us as it was disheartening as we shared story after story of what we have experienced. We talked about the loss of hope because of the increased demand for quick answers and loading times on our screens. We talked about frustrations—like, who experienced this in the early days of Alexa where a wife would have to ask their husband to ask Alexa something? We realized these things were programmed by men in Silicon Valley and so they mostly recognized men's voices—Alexa was originally a bit of a misogynist herself. And then Henry talked about his experience of getting locked out of and then kicked off Facebook and he has found habits ingrained deeply in him like his desire to keep scrolling and keep scrolling endlessly.

The more we talk about this, the more we realize how we're changed by the things we use.

Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*: "Whether I'm online or not, my mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski."

Our focus and concentration levels are at an all-time low. In 2000, it was 12 seconds. In 2015, it was 8.25 seconds. (A goldfish has an attention span of 9 seconds, by the way.)

This is mostly because:

- The average smartphone user touches his or her screen 2,600 times a day
- Heavy usage is in the area of 5,400 times per day
- Users clock in at over 2.5 hours a day
- If you're a Millennial, it goes up to 5.5 hours per day

To drive home these points, here are some words by an up-and-coming writer:

"As we become increasingly reliant on digital technology in our daily lives, it is important to recognize and address the potential dangers it can pose. The Bible, in its wisdom, offers guidance on the use of technology and the dangers of allowing it to consume us. ...One potential danger of digital technology is the way it can distract us from what is truly important in life. In Matthew 6:21, Jesus says, 'Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.' If our treasure is found in the virtual world, we may find ourselves more concerned with

likes, comments, and followers than with the relationships and responsibilities we have in the real world. ...Finally, we must be aware of the potential for technology to be used for harm, such as through cyberbullying or the spread of misinformation. In Ephesians 4:29, it says, 'Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.' We must be mindful of the words and actions we take online and strive to use technology for good. ...In conclusion, while digital technology can be a valuable tool, it is important to be mindful of its potential dangers. By following the guidance offered in the Bible and prioritizing our relationships, mental health, and the well-being of others, we can use technology in a healthy and responsible manner."

- From ChatGPT
- Type 200 words on the dangers of digital technology referencing the Bible and modern culture

This is the new frontier that has both Google, because of their ad revenue, and school teachers and professors, because of the implication on learning, both nervous.

But with these kinds of abilities who isn't curious and a bit nervous: **Give me 30 words about eating donuts on a Sunday: "Eating donuts on a Sunday can be a delicious and indulgent way to start the week. It can also be a fun activity to enjoy with friends or family. However, it is important to remember to consume sugary treats in moderation as part of a well-balanced diet."**

Now, when we hear about these things, we rush to think, What do we think this will do for us? But we often miss the question, What do we think this will do to us?

What's going to happen as more people turn to AI to ask about advice for their lives? It's one thing to ask ChatGPT to give you a book review on *Pride and Prejudice*, but what happens when people turn to it for spiritual advice? Can AI preach the gospel?

Instead of asking, "Is this good or bad?" the question we should be asking is, "Who are we becoming?" What kind of person is this shaping me to be? When I watch this screen, when I use this app, when I pick up this device, who am I being formed into?

The changes digital technology have brought to our world have changed everything. And it still keeps coming year after year. So, it's important we attune ourselves both to our original design and to the directions we're pulled, particularly away from our design.

For the Christian, this means being attuned to Jesus. Time and again, we come back to Jesus because in him we find our source and our means for flourishing. We agree with the Apostle Paul:

Colossians 2:2-3, NIV: My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Transition: So what does Jesus have to say about our use of digital devices today?

SOLUTION

Literally, nothing—Jesus doesn't address anything about screens, devices, cars, or airplanes. But, also, he says just what we need to know at the same time.

There's a story in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John.

John 4:4-26, NIV: Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans. Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?" Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus first establishes that there are deeper desires the Samaritan woman is experiencing. She is thirsty for water, but he is there to offer living water that will fulfill her and bring her into the flourishing she was designed to live in. Our desires are meant to point us to the greater reality of God.

C.S. Lewis: “If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.”

Desires are not mean to be ignored, but to be heeded as they point us to a greater reality of their fulfillment in Jesus himself. Yes, often they are mean to be harnessed and redirected. Jesus has answers to our deepest longings for truth, goodness, beauty, and meaning in this life.

Jesus, then, shifts the conversation to address what her underlying desires are.

He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.” “I have no husband,” she replied. Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.” “Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

We don't know anything beyond this narrative about the Samaritan woman. But it appears that she's been involved in a series of relationships, perhaps four husbands have left or divorced her leaving her desperate and ashamed. Jesus touches on this and opens a dialogue using her own words as a breadcrumb trail, pointing to the deeper reality of her soul's desire: worship.

Worship is not just the five songs we sing on a Sunday. Worship is the mystical connection between God and his people. Worship is about God's glory, and it's for our good. He doesn't need our worship—he's not sycophant or tyrant demanding homage. But as Creator, Sustainer, and Savior, Jesus deserves honor—he deserves our ascription of worth to him.

And when we're in a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ, there is an interplay through God's Spirit where we not only give of ourselves, but we receive from him in his presence enjoyment, peace, hope, and sustenance, among. We receive wisdom and insight into our everyday lives. We have been invited into friendship with

the community of the trinity, and he walks with us as a friend through the ups and downs of this world.

But, often, we rob ourselves of the ability to swim in these living waters as our time and attention is drawn away to inferior things.

There are no easy steps here. There's no 1, 2, 3 and you've arrived at digital equilibrium where life in God and life online perfectly balance. And there's no good/bad binary to offer. What we need is real discernment into how digital citizenry is forming us, and how this is either pushing closer to God or pulling us further from him. And, as a result, making us more or less like Jesus—more or less into a people of love, kindness, patience, and peace.

Transition: So, as we seek to live freely and lightly, let's talk a bit about how to intentionally live our lives in God with devices.

APPLICATION

First, we can't ignore or understand what good technology has done in our world. If we remain in a binary of good vs. bad and we ask the question, Is Facebook good or not? or, Are smartphones good or not? we're forced into a box and can't quite adequately answer. We should be able to acknowledge that it's of benefit that we have the Bible app on our phone in numerous translations, languages, and reading plans. That's a good thing. And, with Facebook, do you remember in 2020 when the world locked down and churches streamed their worship services for everyone at home to watch? Facebook became the new Romans Road, and the message of Jesus went out to all kinds of people, some for the first time.

But, we also know too much of a good thing, or a good thing twisted in an unhealthy way, can become bad for us. And this is where it gets tricky because we can't prescribe for you how much is too much. That is where you have to press into the question for yourselves and ask instead of, Is it altogether good or bad?, Who am I becoming?

When I look at this screen, pick up this device, use this app, who am I becoming? Who is it shaping me to be?

What I want to posit to us today is a kind of digital asceticism, or minimalism if you'd like. It's a foreign concept in our age of overindulgence where the message is buy, use, and consume as much as you'd like.

Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism*: “Almost everyone I spoke to believed in the power of the internet, and recognized that it can and should be a force that improves their lives. They didn’t necessarily want to give up Google Maps, or abandon Instagram, but they also felt as though their current relationship with technology was unsustainable—to the point that if something didn’t change soon, they’d break, too. A common term I heard in these conversations about modern digital life was exhaustion. It’s not that any one app or website was particularly bad when considered in isolation. As many people clarified, the issue was the overall impact of having so many different shiny baubles pulling so insistently at their attention and manipulating their mood. Their problem with this frenzied activity is less about its details than the fact that it’s increasingly beyond their control. Few want to spend so much time online, but these tools have a way of cultivating behavioral addictions. The urge to check Twitter or refresh Reddit becomes a nervous twitch that shatters uninterrupted time into shards too small to support the presence necessary for an intentional life.”

This reminds me of something Jesus said:

Matthew 11:28-30, MSG: “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

We get caught in an ever-whirring spiral of exhaustion and the need for rest. A real chance to catch our breath and recharge. But what we reach for determines that quality of rest. What’s easiest is a device or a screen. We binge-watch and we scroll—and sometimes we scroll while we binge-watch, but this leaves us more tired, less relaxed, more on edge, and dumped right back into the rat race of barely surviving our work week. Only to repeat the cycle of work, scroll, work, scroll, and so on.

In pursuit of digital asceticism, instead of giving three steps to happiness, let’s simply ask ourselves some questions:

- **When do I first pick up a device in the day?** How is this shaping me?
- **When do I last put down a device for the day?** How is this shaping me?

- **How long can I go in a day without looking at a screen? How is this shaping me?**
- **How many consecutive hours in a week do I go without a screen? How is this shaping me?**
- **How many devices grab my attention for work? How is this shaping me?**
- **On my days off, how much time is spent on a screen or device? How is this shaping me?**
- **How many tabs or windows do I have open on my device? How is this shaping me?**
- **From what sources do I receive news about the world? How is this shaping me?**
- **From what sources do I receive information about life? How is this shaping me?**
- **How many social media accounts do I have and how much time per day do I spend interacting with them? How is this shaping me?**
- **On what devices or screens do I read Scripture? How is this shaping me?**
- **On what devices or screens do I participate in worship? How is this shaping me?**
- **What access do my children have to screens and devices? How is this shaping them?**
- **What information do I review about my children's online activity? How is this shaping them?**
- **What activities do I enjoy with friends and loved ones which don't involve a screen or device? How is this shaping us?**

My hope for us is not that we would experience shame or condemnation—because I'd be the first to admit defeat in these areas. But, instead, it's to get us thinking about how

these things are shaping us. And whether it's getting us closer or further than becoming like Jesus.

OBJECTIONS

You may say, "Sure, but every generation has had to deal with some kind of evolving technology. It's just overblown." I think the mistake in thinking this way is that we don't consider the effects of digital technology and we just get swept along with the change without thoughtful engagement. We don't want to blend in, we want to stand apart.

But, equally, there is a mistake where we pine for the good ole days before everyone had a phone or a screen. Pandora's Box is already open, and there's no going back, unless you plan to buy a plot of land and become a homesteader. But I like flat whites and the pumpkin bread from Arrow Coffee a bit too much to follow you there. Instead of living in a bubble, we want to find ways to meaningfully interact and throw a lifeline to anyone else exhausted and looking for a different way to live.

Andy Crouch talks about this very tension when addressing the advancing technology of the early church's day. The Roman Road was a marvel in the ancient world. Paved roads mean safety and efficiency in travel. So the writers of the New Testament were able to use this Roman technology to their advantage to get out the message of Jesus to a much larger audience. But even when they did so, these authors still sent a human representation to the churches and individuals to carry their letters. Letter carriers, such as Phoebe who delivered the letter to the Romans, personally knew people like Paul, the letter sender, and would read the letter and answer questions of those present. An Image bearer was present for relational connection to these young, frail communities of faith to bring comfort and encouragement and to maintain correspondence with the wider church.

INSPIRATION

Can you imagine if we insisted on a relational, communal element to finding our way forward? Instead of outsourcing our greatest questions to online influencers, to the Google algorithm, or ChatGPT, we pressed into each other for the best practices to becoming fully human and fully devoted disciples to Jesus?

Transition: That's the dream that I believe God has for us. And here's a question we can ask that will help us take a step in that direction.

CONCLUSION

Next Step:

- What are some sustainable rhythms I can implement in pursuit of digital equilibrium?

Prayer

Invitation