

A GPS Faith: A Practical Theology of Technology and the Adolescent Soul

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ABSTRACT

The advancement of technology has far outpaced our theological reflection on precisely what this tech is doing to our souls and our lives. Augustine speaks of desire as always good, the same is true of our desire for technology. However, this desire needs to be rightly ordered. The church needs adequate language to address the order of tech in our lives. This research is composed of theological reflection which draws upon current psychosocial research and ancient spiritual disciplines.

Keywords: technology, adolescence, spirituality, spiritual formation, theology, religious

INTRODUCTION

Many times I have no idea where I am. What has happened to cause this? I put an address in a global positioning satellite on my dashboard and followed a disembodied voice as she gives me step-by-step directions telling me to “Turn left in 300 feet.” and “Travel 3.7 miles and exit right.” And I follow this voice, trusting her that she is leading me in the right direction. Most times I find myself at my desired location. However, I do have to ask myself, “How in the world did I get *here*?” I believe the same question needs to be asked when it comes to the invasion of technology into our lives. The barrage of smartphones, tablets, laptops, GPSs, smart bulbs, smart TVs, etc. have surrounded our lives with technology that has promised to make

our lives easier and as a result, make *us* better. But has it? Perhaps we find ourselves at the same spiritual place my GPS has landed me forcing the question, “How in the world did I get *here?*” There is no context where this is more evident than with today’s adolescent. Average screen time for a teen is 6+ hours a day as more schools have adopted mandatory laptops in the classroom coupled with teens outside use of social media and smartphones many teens self report to being connected “almost constantly.”¹

This paper proposes that the invasion of technology has forced the church to ask difficult theological questions like; What is technology doing to us? What are we doing to technology? and What are some theological concepts that helps one navigate the landmines of technology? This paper will attempt to address the topics these questions raise for those who work with adolescents.

What is the appeal? What is the why of tech? Why do teens seem to be so “addicted” to technology? What are they getting from it? Is there anything spiritual a student gains from his or her time on Facebook or Instagram? Before simply dismissing technology, we must ask, “Is there anything of value here? Does tech serve any positive needs in teens?” I propose there are three main spiritual dopamine shots adolescents get from technology.

They find COMMUNITY. If there is one thing that social media has promised is the ability to find people who know what it like to be me. They are able to connect with others who know them and who they know. This spiritual need was woven in humanity’s DNA when God created humanity and said, “It is not good for the man to be alone.”² This indicates that

¹ See Teens, Social Media & Technology Overview 2015 <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015/>

² Genesis 2:18 (NIV)

humanity was designed to live *in* community with not only God but one another. Growing up in Northwest Houston, if you were a Goth student at Klein Forest high school, you may have been one of five Goth students in a school of 2000. Community would have been extremely difficult to come by. However, if you were a Goth student with the internet in the early 1980s, you would be able to have connected with countless Goth students in virtual communities.

Technology expert, Danah Boyd puts it this way,

“The spaces may change, but the organizing principles aren’t different. Although some teens still congregate at malls and football games, the introduction of social media does alter the landscape. It enables youth to create cool space without physically transporting themselves anywhere. . . Social media has become an important public space where teens can gather and socialize broadly with peers in an informal way.”³

Technology gives students access to countless virtual communities where they can feel a connection in order to fill this need, all from the comfort of their bedroom. But, is this community sufficient to provide the necessary levels of intimacy and companionship that an analog relationship may offer?

They find MYSTERY. What is it about video games that mesmerizes students so much? What do hours spent with a pair of Italian plumbers or a giant dot eating sphere escaping ghosts do for the soul of a teen? The answer is mystery and wonder. Students engaged in gaming or chat rooms are promised the opportunity to connect with something outside of themselves. They are given a chance to travel to places beyond like celestial realms and distant battlefields or friend groups. The interactive nature of video games and the internet also prove

³ Boyd, Danah. *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. Kindle ed. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2015. Sections 215-17.

to be far more intoxicating than the movie industry as one might think.⁴ Weeks spent playing a campaign of *Halo* or building worlds in Minecraft both offer the participant offer the ability to go further, build more without an end seemingly in sight. It offers a sense of mystery. It begs the question, “What if?” and leaves it unanswered.

Paul speaks of the mystery of Christ when talking about the Christ event as something that one can know, but not really know. It points to something that is familiar as well as something that is unfamiliar. It does not answer all the questions. It leaves one with cognitive and spiritual dissonance. The metanarrative of points to something much larger than itself and offers an invitation for one to participate in this, namely, the Kingdom of God. The transcendent nature of faith begs humanity to search for that which is beyond. Faith communities ought to be able to offer adolescents an entrance to the Transcendent that contains far more mystery than a video game or a GroupMe chat. Students in our youth ministries need a space where there is room for doubt, mystery and wonder. They need a place where some of the difficulties of the Christian life are acknowledged and not addressed with simplistic proof-texting. Adolescents need to be presented with a God that is too big to be managed, one who leaves its followers with some questions unanswered. They need and want a God that they can find mystery and wonder.

They find PURPOSE. When students create an Instagram or Snapchat account, they are then able to participate in creating something bigger than themselves. They have the ability to create and participate in a larger purpose. They can say, “I am part of Twitter.” In Genesis God

⁴ Take for example the top three grossing video games (Space Invaders, Pac Man and Street Fighter II) have grossed an estimated \$37.3 Billion to date while the top three grossing films of all time (Avatar, Titanic and Jurassic World) had grossed only \$6.5 Billion. See <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-11-top-grossing-video-games-of-all-time-2015-8> and <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/>

has always given humanity something to do, giving humanity a purpose. The jobs God gives humanity from naming animals, to being fruitful and multiplying, give humanity the ability to utilize the giftedness that God infuses people with as well as allowing humanity to live life with purpose.

Christ also calls his followers to the same purpose when he calls them to participate in the Kingdom of God. It is no wonder then, that students relegated to the One-Eared Mickey Mouse of the church lack any connection with purpose in the church. Students who are tremendously gifted and talented as shown in their blog posts, video creations, and web sites they build who then are not allowed to use any of their gifts or talents as part of the larger church body because they are seen as the “church of the future.” Granted, there are many youth ministries that give students opportunities to use their gifts and talents in that youth ministry. However, it is still rare when those gifts and talents are transferred to the larger church body. The Kingdom of God gives students opportunities to find ultimate purpose as they are able to discover and utilize their gifts when they serve God and one another with those gifts.

I propose that technology cannot fully deliver on being able to entirely meet these needs in the soul of an adolescent (or a human as well). It is only in the Christian life that a person is able to find the *best* (albeit flawed) community. The Christian faith is the only place to be confronted with THE mystery to a depth that calls a believer to venture to the beyond through steps and leaps of faith. Finally, one would be hard pressed to find something greater to participate in than the Kingdom of God in order to discover one’s purpose. Perhaps youth

ministry can be better served by introducing students to purpose and wonder alongside the community that we offer.

A DISTRACTED POPULATION

One does not need to look very far into the research to find out the countless ways technology distracts us. The Pew Research Center states that a share of smartphone users say they use their phones' apps or browsers "continuously." They

cite, "Most smartphone owners say they rarely (47%) or never (36%) turn their phones off. Just 4% of smartphone owners say they turn their phones off frequently, and 14% say they turn them off occasionally."⁵ According to Figure 1, the younger a

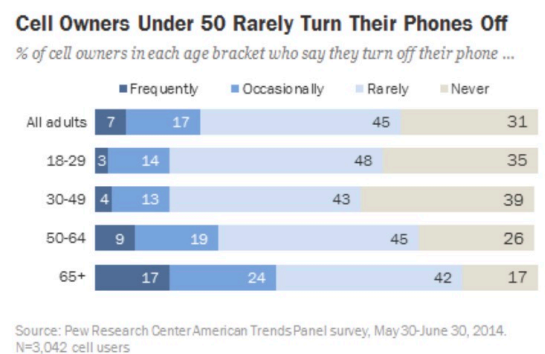
person gets, the less likely they are to even turn off their phones ever pointing to the fact that distraction is always present in the life of a student.

If this research illustrates anything it is that today's adolescent soul is more distracted than ever. If there is one main effect of the influx of technology it would be that tech has distracted today's adolescent to the point they cannot hear the voice of God.

TINNITUS OF THE SOUL

The Mayo clinic defines tinnitus as the, "...noise or ringing in the ears. A common problem, tinnitus affects about 1 in 5 people. Tinnitus isn't a condition itself — it's a symptom of an underlying condition, such as age-related hearing loss, ear injury or a circulatory system

Figure 1



⁵ See Rainie, Lee, and Kathryn Zickuhr. "Chapter 1: Always on Connectivity." [Http://www.pewinternet.org/](http://www.pewinternet.org/). Web. 12 Sept. 2015.

disorder.”⁶ That ringing, while not debilitating, has an effect on a person that can affect an individual’s ability to fully relax and concentrate. I believe technology has had a similar effect on the soul of an adolescent. When one takes away a teen’s cell phone or tablet, they suffer a similar tinnitus where there is a nervousness that they have to endure. As a result, they are not able to hear the “still small whisper of God” as did Elijah.⁷ The soul is so disrupted by the constant barrage of notifications, likes, followers, feeds, etc. that to “Be still and know that I am God” is simply not an option. Youth workers must be cognizant of this fact. It is not as simple as mandating that student turn off a cell phone for a retreat or youth group. Rather gradual steps need to be taken in order to train a student in a rhythm of life that invites the silence. We need to understand the withdrawal effects asking a student to stop cold turkey may induce.

A THEOLOGY OF TECHNOLOGY

How then does one navigate life to live intentionally and with purpose, wonder and community with technology? I propose there are several biblical principles that we can use to aid students use and implementation of technology that can help them live a less distracted life--one that is more in tune with the presence of God in their lives.

BE FULLY PRESENT-Have you ever been with a person who was there physically but not there mentally? The phone buzzing in the pocket of a friend has the power to distract and take someone far away from their present setting mentally.

There is a deep need for us to disconnect from the grid from time to time. Technology has the power of deluding us that we are better connected with those we care about when in reality it tends to separate us from those right in front of us. However, presence also requires a

⁶ Mayo Clinic Staff. "Tinnitus." Mayo Clinic. Web. 10 Sept. 2015.

⁷ See I Kings 19

great deal of effort in order to communicate with one another on an interpersonal level. Sherry Turkle shares this struggle from one teen's perspective; "An 18-year-old boy who uses texting for almost everything says to me wistfully, 'Someday, someday, but certainly not now, I'd like to learn how to have a conversation.'"⁸ She continues to state that the problem with being fully present is that we have to have conversations in real time and adolescents are used to curating their conversation via text messaging and social media asynchronously with the ability to edit on the fly. She continues and says, "Texting, email, posting, all of these things let us present the self as we want to be. We get to edit, and that means we get to delete, and that means we get to retouch, the face, the voice, the flesh, the body -- not too little, not too much, just right."⁹ Students are then sent spiraling down a void that keeps them always measuring, editing, changing and elsewhere.

In the Incarnation, we see a God that "moves into the neighborhood" as Eugene Peterson reminds us to communicate God making himself fully available and fully present to humanity.¹⁰ Perhaps we need to help our students become fully available for short moments by inviting them to put their tech away and *be* with those that are around them. Not for long stretches of time at first, but baby steps. Then we need to help train them to have face-to-face conversations by giving them prompts and opportunities to talk *with* one another.

KEEP A TECH SABBATH & MAKE IT HOLY

The writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us

"There is a time for everything,

⁸ See Turkle, Sherry. "Connected, but Alone?" Sherry Turkle: Connected, but Alone? TED Talks, Web. 1 Sept. 2015. Minute 6:18. Accessed 9/15/2015.

⁹ Turkle, 6:24

¹⁰ John 1:14, (The Message)

and a season for every activity under heaven:
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build”¹¹

I would suggest there is a time to text and make calls and a time to power down and just be.

Sabbath is a vital discipline that allows a person the ability to realize several things:

1. They are not God: The temptation to believe that I am in control is tragically near when I am controlling dozens of apps, complete with hundreds of demands on my time. If I can juggle a myriad of friends through my countless snaps or acquire hundreds, even thousands of followers on Instagram, what is to keep me from thinking I am God? (At least a god?) When students take a break from technology, they are reminded that the world can, and does continue without them.

2. I need to be re-created. When we break from the normal routine of life, we are then given the ability to be recreated. It is *from Sabbath* that we are to go through our week. Sabbath is after all the *first* day of the week, not the last. We are to live *from Sabbath*, not *for Sabbath*. When we allow ourselves a break from our regular work is when we are recreated by God. Then, and only then, we are able to live out of that recreation to bless others.

3. I cannot be available to others 24/7. Constant access presents a myriad of problems from sleep disorders, to delusional pride. When one makes themselves available to others 24/7, they are not able to hear the voice of God as clearly. When students unplug, they are given the relational margin to reconnect with who they are in Christ. When students unplug they are set

¹¹ Ecclesiastes 3:1-3 (NIV)

free from the demands of others and rest in the presence of their Father.¹² When they disconnect from the net, they are welcomed into the peace of Christ that is so often not experienced.

DEVELOP SACRED SPACES FOR COMMUNITY

Growing up in my home, the family dinner table was a sacred space. If the telephone rang as we were eating dinner, my mother would constantly pronounce, "Let it ring." For my mother time together as family was a special time, the table was a holy place. She guarded it vigilantly. The constant connection to the internet has convinced many adolescents that one must stay connected every day, all day, to everyone. We need to recognize there is a deep spiritual need to develop spaces that tells technology, "No, you cannot come here, turn off your phone for where you are standing is holy ground." Rabbi Kushner gives a unique perspective on Moses' encounter with the burning bush and sacred space when he says,

Perhaps the burning bush wasn't a miracle but a test. God wanted to find out if Moses could see mystery in something as ordinary as a bush on fire. In order to see it as a miracle, Moses had to watch the flames long enough to realize that the branches were not being consumed and that something awesome was happening. Once God saw that Moses could pay attention, God spoke to him.

Judaism has a unique way of remembering to pay attention. It is called a *berachah*, or a blessing. It begins, *Baruch atah Adonai*, "Holy One of blessing," *Eloheinu melech ha'olam*, "Your presence fills creation." Then we add words appropriate for the occasion, like "who brings forth bread from the earth," or "who removes sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eyelids," or "who spreads the shelter of peace over us."

Each time Jews recite a blessing, they are effectively saying, "Pay attention. Something awesome is happening all around us." In this way, they realize again and again that our everyday world conceals wonders and mysteries.¹³

¹² I wonder if the way many social media apps and sites track the number of likes and followers has build a system where a student can now measure his or her popularity numerically?

¹³ Kushner, Lawrence. *Jewish Spirituality: A Brief Introduction for Christians*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub., 2001. 24-25. Print.

By creating these sacred spaces we declare, “Our dinner table is a sacred space where no phones are allowed, your bedroom at night is a sacred space free of electronics so that you can receive the grace of sleep from your Father uninterrupted by a notification buzz.”¹⁴ These spaces we create give our students the margin in their lives to not have to deal with the stressors of social media and the quantification of their social status based on the number of likes their most recent post acquired. These sacred spaces also give a student the ability to be fully present without interruption.

The people of God are called to be a Holy Nation. By definition, we live a life that is set apart. We are commanded to do things differently. This is how we live into being light of the world and salt of the earth. This is how we are distinctive to those around us. The challenge for students is that distinction and standing out are liabilities, not assets in many adolescent circles. When asking students to stand out, we risk asking a student to sacrifice invaluable social capital that they have arduously accrued. Therefore, we need to offer experiences that show them the inherent spiritual value that Sabbath provides a teenage soul.

LEARN HOW TO BE ALONE

In his classic text on spiritual disciplines, Richard Foster speaking on solitude says, “Jesus calls us from loneliness to solitude. The fear of being left alone petrifies people.”¹⁵ The same is true for students who are desperately seeking relationships and belonging. Solitude seems to present the opposite promise—solitude seems to present loneliness. However, it is through

¹⁴ See Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009. 33-35. Print and his discussion of the “Discipline of Sleep.”

¹⁵ Foster, Richard J. *Celebration of Discipline*. Hodder & Stoughton, 1989. 96. Print.

the discipline of solitude and being alone that we are able to then present our best to others. We live out of that solitude.

We are reminded that Jesus had a habit of being alone. “Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often went to lonely places and prayed.”¹⁶ This was part of his character. Solitude was part of Jesus’ rhythm of life. Bonhoeffer reminds us that we must engage in solitude for the sake of others. “Let him who cannot be alone beware of community...Let him who is not in community beware of being alone...Each by itself has profound pitfalls and perils. One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair.”¹⁷ Nouwen echoes this when he speaks of our ability to hear the voice of the Father call us beloved in times of solitude.¹⁸

It is interesting to see how the discipline of solitude is finding its way into this discussion in circles outside of faith communities, MIT Researcher, Sherry Turkle states,

You end up isolated if you don't cultivate the capacity for solitude, the ability to be separate, to gather yourself. Solitude is where you find yourself so that you can reach out to other people and form real attachments. When we don't have the capacity for solitude, we turn to other people in order to feel less anxious or in order to feel alive. When this happens, we're not able to appreciate who they are. It's as though we're using them as spare parts to support our fragile sense of self. We slip into thinking that always being connected is going to make us feel less alone. But we're at risk, because actually it's the opposite that's true. If we're not able to be alone, we're going to be

¹⁶ Luke 5:15-16 (NIV)

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. New York: Harper & Row, 1954. 77-78. Print.

¹⁸ Nouwen, Henri J. M. *Life of the Beloved Spiritual Living in a Secular World*. Crossroad, 2002. Print.

more lonely. And if we don't teach our children to be alone, they're only going to know how to be lonely.¹⁹

We need to help our student cultivate the ability to be alone so that they can be better friends, sons, daughters and Christians. Williams, the Montreal [blogger](#), admits as much,

One thing that unfortunately I do miss out on is that sort of quiet time where I can think about something I want to write ... where, if I'm bored, I'm flipping open Word and punching something out," he said. "Instead, out comes '[Infinity Blade II](#)' and I'm killing titans. Before smartphones came out, you had that down time where you sit on the bus and your mind just kind of wanders and you think of these amazing things. You get out that old thing called pen and paper and you jot it down."²⁰

An interesting side note is that when God wanted to get Moses' attention he actually used a new technology to do so. Solitude, time without technology, needs to be a practice we take our student to in order to show them how to create margin in their lives to hear the voice of God. Take moments in youth group to be silent and listen. Schedule solitude time on retreat and camp for students to experience longer periods to allow the tinnitus to wane. The contrast those solitude moments with relational time to illustrate how we can be better with one another after we have had solitude time.

CREATE DON'T JUST CONSUME

Genesis 1 presents a grand picture of God as Creator from the cosmos to the crickets and everything in between. We learn that God created humanity in its own image. Therefore, fundamental to the nature of humanity is one who is a creator as well. This is echoed through Adam's first job of naming the animals or Adam and Eve's command to be fruitful and multiply. We were created to be creative and create. The nature of much of technology and especially

¹⁹ Turkle, Minute 14:29.

²⁰ Gross, Doug. "Have Smartphones Killed Boredom (and Is That Good)?" CNN. Cable News Network, 26 Sept. 2012. Web. 15 July 2015. <<http://www.cnn.com/2012/09/25/tech/mobile/oms-smartphones-boredom/>>.

social media is consumption. Students scroll endlessly through twitter feeds spying on what everyone else is saying. It is a basal form of voyeurism.

However, technology allows us to be tremendously creative, whether that be through a student's photography skills illuminating a daisy on a spring morning through her Instagram feed or another's blog displaying his gift for writing short stories to even another's YouTube video of his latest composition of a song in process. Let us encourage students to reclaim their creative nature through technology. Let one another be encouraged through those creative gifts and recognize God's nature in those creations.

We should train students *how* to use their devices to create something that is beautiful. Encourage students to use their Instagram feed to point towards their Creator through photos of fall foliage, friends they have spent time with and their cats that feed their souls. Give students opportunities to encourage one another through Twitter feeds and Facebook posts.²¹ When students take out their phones or fire up their laptops, let us encourage them to engage in the creative process that is evident in their DNA rather than just consuming.

CONCLUSION

Technology is nothing new nor is it going away. From the first days when mankind picked up a stick and used it to dig a hole, technology has been part of the human experience. Yes there will be new technologies that come from Cupertino and Redmond that will draw students attention for hours on end. However, the spiritual needs that lay deep in the soul of our students will also remain. They will always desire community, mystery and purpose. It is

²¹ To clarify, I envision something far more substantive than posting a favorite Bible verse. Perhaps it is creating a back channel Twitter hash tag that asks students to Tweet about the topic of the week and carry on discussions.

the church's responsibility to continually evaluate and ask not only, "How did we get *here*?" but to hopefully ask the question, "Where are we going *to*?" and anticipate how to incorporate any new technologies into a readjusted rhythm of life.

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