



# REDEEM THE SCREEN

FIELD GUIDE

**SOUTHEAST**  
CHRISTIAN CHURCH

# INTRODUCTION

**F**rom the 40mm display on an Apple Watch to the 3,685-square foot ABC SuperSign in Times Square, screens of every size and shape have come to dominate our daily experience in the United States. Virtually everywhere you go, you'll find a screen: restaurants, checkout lanes, public restrooms, even the gas pump. And, as manufacturers continue to crank out high-definition screens at low prices, there's no reason to think the "screenification" of our daily lives is slowing down anytime soon.

So much for the screens out *there*. What about the screen in here—that glowing rectangle that about 8 out of every 10 Americans carry around in their pocket? According to Morgan Stanley, 91% of those smartphone owners keep their device within arm's length *at all times*—24 hours a day, 7 days a week. On average, they check their phones more than 80,000 times a year. That's once every 4 minutes.

At times, our seemingly constant need to grab a phone is hilariously absurd. Just take out your phone in a crowded elevator and time how long it takes your neighbors to pull out their own. Or, do a YouTube search for "walking and texting" and see what you find. At other times, though, our quasi-addiction to screens is downright alarming. The National Safety Council estimated that 1.5 million car accidents in 2018 were caused by cell-phone use. Nearly 400,000 people will be injured in car accidents caused by texting this year. In fact, texting is five times more likely to cause an accident than *drinking and driving*. It's no surprise that 95% of drivers support laws against texting and driving. The startling fact is that 27% of them do it anyway.



# NOT JUST A WORLDLY ISSUE

**W**hen it comes to screens, Christians are largely indistinguishable from their non-believing neighbors. Recently, Tony Reinke set out to see whether Christians fit the society-wide pattern of screen usage laid out above. After surveying 8,000 Christians, he learned that 54% of them checked their smartphones within minutes of waking. 73% checked email and social media before engaging in their spiritual disciplines for the morning. In other words, the allure of the screen is taking priority over the lure of God.

What are we to make of all this? Surely, we can't blame the screen for our upside down priorities and reject it out of hand. With a Bible in everyone's pocket, Billy Graham crusades on network TV, and video monitors to lead worshippers in song, it's hard to argue with the positive influence that screens have had in the Christian life. But does that mean we should receive and embrace the screen as our modern day version of the Roman road or the printing press? As we'll see, either approach—fearful rejection or naive embrace—won't cut it. What we need is a clear-eyed look at the screen and what it's doing to our lives and our witness so that we can find the good in this new technology and reject the bad. In other words, we need to redeem the screen.



## HOW MUCH TIME DO YOU SPEND ON SCREENS?

Stop and consider the following questions about your screen usage. The purpose of this exercise isn't to slap a moral judgment onto your screen time but to help you see just how much time you're actually spending in front of screens.

How many hours a week do you spend...

1. working at a computer (business work or “home” work)?
2. watching video entertainment (TV, Netflix, YouTube, etc.)?
3. scrolling through social media?
4. playing video games (computer, console, smartphone)?
5. reading digital books, magazines, or Bible apps?
6. shopping on the internet?
7. frittering around aimlessly online (reading BuzzFeed listicles, etc.)?



**WE NEED TO REDEEM**

**THE SCREEN**

# TAKE ‘EM OR LEAVE ‘EM?

**I**n itself, the screen is just another bit of human technology like the hammer. There’s no “right” or “wrong” to a hammer until you swing it at a nail or use it to break into a neighbor’s house.

In the same way, the screen can be used for good or for ill.

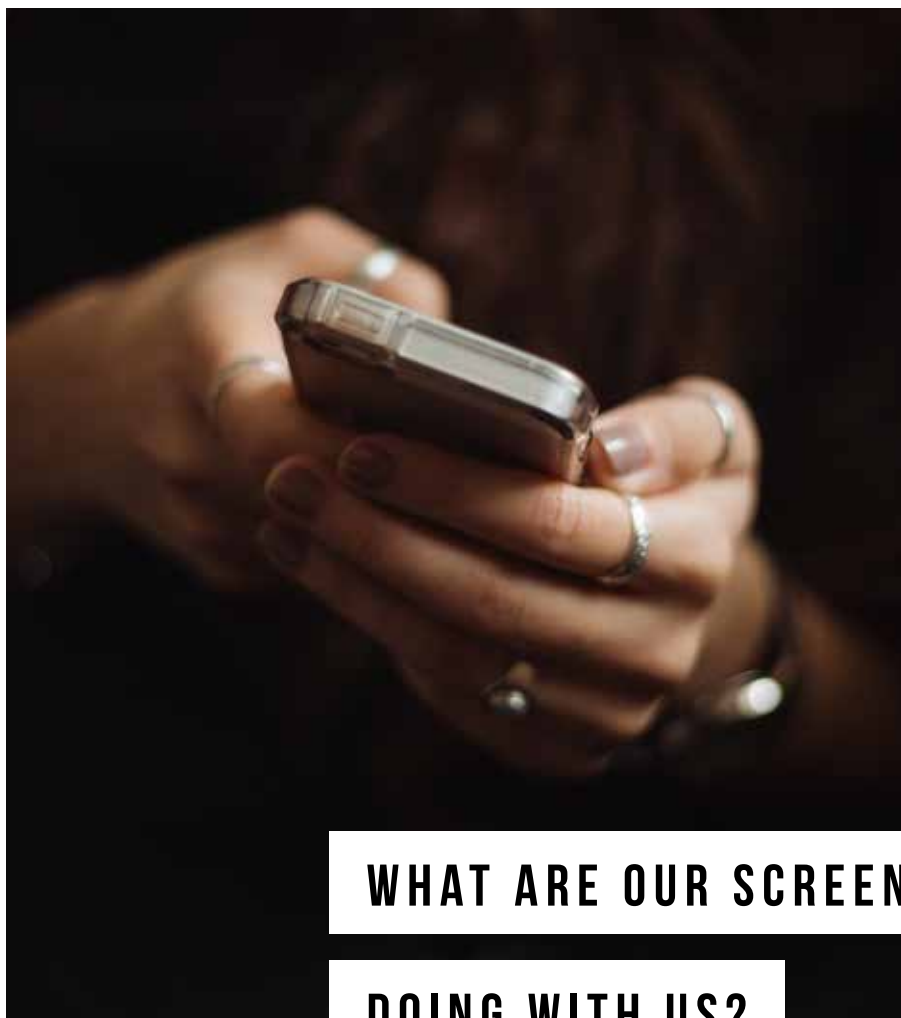
“Technology,” says Andy Crouch, “is a brilliant, praiseworthy expression of human creativity and cultivation of the world. But it is at best neutral in actually forming human beings who can create and cultivate as we were meant to.”

Put to good use, screens have become incredible tools for human flourishing. Heart monitor screens ensure a healthy labor and delivery for new moms, laptop screens enable us to study God’s Word at a deeper level, smartphone screens let us video chat with relatives on the other side of the globe. Faithful Christians from the Jesus Film Project or Third Millennium Ministries, to offer just two examples, have used screens to spread the Gospel to every tongue, tribe, nation, and people group. For all this, we should give God thanks.

Like the bricks and mortar of Babel, though, the screen can be misused. As parents know all too well, screens open our children up to a new world of explicit images, online scumbags, and digital bullies. What will our children look at when we’re not around to police their screen time? More personally, what will we do when



nobody's around to check our own temptation? These are important questions, but they miss something more fundamental about the screen's affect on our lives. For Christians, the superficial concern is what we're doing with screens. But there's a deeper question we need to ask: what are our screens doing with us?



**WHAT ARE OUR SCREENS  
DOING WITH US?**

# SCREENING OUR BODIES

In this short eBook, we're not focused so much on the what of screen use: which apps are safe for Christians, which websites should be off limits, what kind of programming should we avoid, etc. While those are all important concerns, we're swimming in deeper waters. As we'll see in more detail below, the Bible calls Christians to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, and through that sacrifice, to come together as Christ's body (Romans 12). We want to know, then, what our relationship with screens is doing to our bodies and what that means for the body of Christ and its witness in the world. Redeeming the screen is about more than installing filters and setting boundaries—as important as those things are. To truly redeem the screen for our good and that of our neighbors, we need to recognize the ways in which screens rub against the grain of our bodily reality and take steps to keep them in their proper place.

On the face of it, to say that screens are bad for our bodies is to acknowledge the heavy toll excess screen usage takes on our physical well-being:

- Vision - Too much time spent staring at screens is straining our eyes, blurring our vision, and causing headaches.
- Sleep - The soft blue light emanating from our phones, laptops, and televisions fools with our bodies' natural sense of day and night, leaving us restless at bedtime and groggy during the day—especially teenagers.

- Physical Addiction - Cleverly-designed websites and social media are all designed to play on human psychology. Every push notification and power up activates the reward circuitry in our brains, turning dopamine into our drug of choice and the smartphone or video game into our dealer.
- Weight Gain - Hours in front of screens is robbing us of precious time spent outdoors engaging in healthy physical activity.
- Stress & Anxiety - FOMO (fear of missing out), work emails at all hours of the night, cable news, and incessant alerts about how our world is falling apart—all these and more turn our screen time into a source of deep stress and anxiety.
- Musculoskeletal Pain - Achy lower backs, strained necks, and carpal tunnel are just a few of the consequences of prolonged screen exposure.

With this in mind, there are a number of important practical steps we need to take in order to protect our bodies from the perils of screen time:

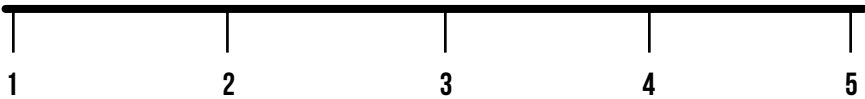
- Computer Safety Eyewear - For as little as \$10, you can go on Amazon and get a pair of glasses that filter out blue light.
- Regular Breaks - Never underestimate the power of getting up from your computer and taking a 5-minute walk.
- Occupational Therapy - A few sessions with a therapist and a whole lot of focus will help correct a lifetime of bad habits and poor posture.
- Regular Exercise - You can counteract the effects of a sedentary, screen-focused lifestyle by committing to a regular exercise regime.
- Sleep Hygiene - By setting clear boundaries and limiting screen usage at night time, you can set yourself up for a better night's sleep.

## SCREEN YOUR BODY

On a scale from 1 to 5, rate your agreement with each of the following statements:

1. I end most days with blurred vision and/or a headache.
2. I struggle to get a full night (8 hours) of uninterrupted sleep.
3. I feel physically anxious when I don't have a screen nearby.
4. I find myself constantly stressing out about politics and world events.
5. I'm experiencing muscle pain and fatigue connected with my screen use.

*1 = Disagree, 3 = Moderately Agree, 5 = Completely Agree*





# AN OUT-OF-BODY EXPERIENCE

**A** dits like the one on the previous page help us take stock of how the screen is hurting our bodies and what we can do to prevent further harm. But there's a deeper dimension we need to consider when it comes to the screen's effects on our bodies. Ever since the beginning of the Church, Christians have struggled to know what to do with the body. Influenced by certain strains of ancient philosophy, many have thought that human beings are meant to be split in two: body and mind, flesh and spirit, sacred and secular, etc. That sort of thinking plays out in contemporary Christian thinking like this: "The *real* me is my invisible, immaterial soul. When I die, I'll leave this mortal body behind and go to live a *spiritual* life in heaven for all eternity." The practical payoff of this attitude towards the body is neglect. We skip out on sleep, eat junk, and skimp on exercise, all without realizing the impact our bodily condition can have on the state of our souls. In the same way a kid might "diss" his buddy on the playground, we have "dissed" our bodies and, consequently, the God who made them.

As we'll see below, the screen is taking our dis-embodiment to a whole new level. Before we get there, though, we need to hear what God has to say about our bodies. While it's true that the Bible distinguishes between things like the flesh/body and the soul/spirit, it never draws a hard line between our physical and spiritual reality. Humans are holistic, unified beings. We don't *have* souls; we *are* souls. We don't *have* bodies; we *are* bodies. And as Paul argues extensively in 1 Corinthians 15, the Christian's ultimate hope isn't to be

separated from bodily experience, but to rise and put on a redeemed, glorified body for all time. There can be no more stunning affirmation of that unity between body and soul/spirit than the Incarnation. Jesus lived, died, rose, and ascended as *an embodied human being*. The eternal Son of God put on flesh, never to take it off again. Not even death could diss Jesus' body.



**WE DON'T HAVE SOULS; WE ARE SOULS.**

**WE DON'T HAVE BODIES; WE ARE BODIES.**

# KNOWING OURSELVES MEANS KNOWING OUR BODIES

**W**hat does all this have to do with screens? Let's answer that question with a little exercise. Imagine there's a keyboard in your lap. Now, type the word "screen." If you've had enough experience typing at a computer, then it's likely your fingers knew what to do without you having to give it much thought. Typing on a keyboard, riding a bike, using a fork—these are just a few of the virtually innumerable functions *our bodies* have learned after years of practice. You didn't learn how to type by listening to lectures or reading books. You learned from sitting at a keyboard and plucking away—hopefully under the guidance of someone with experience and an eye for technique. You learned how to use a fork by watching your parents and fumbling to get food from the plate to your mouth. Human beings are designed for this sort of "embodied" knowing—where other bodies show our bodies how to live and move in the world.

As a quick trip to any kindergarten classroom will teach you, people learn best when their *entire* bodies are engaged. That doesn't stop as we grow older; we've just convinced ourselves that it does. Screens can show us much, but when it comes to engaging the range of our bodily senses, they're wholly inadequate. Tapping, pinching, and swiping aren't the same as grasping, holding, and exploring the world with our hands. Listening to even the sweetest pair of Bose headphones pales in comparison to the natural symphony you'd



hear on a walk through the woods. The filtered pop of an Instagram selfie can't possibly rival the joyful glimpse of a baby's first smile. The buzz of a text message could never replace the grasp of a loved one's hand. For all the creative and imaginative benefits that come from a game like Minecraft, a virtual block can never replicate the tactile pleasure of a real Lego.



# PRESENT YOUR BODY

In his letter to the Romans, Paul urges his readers to offer their bodies as “a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God” (Rom 12:1). This, he says, is the Christian’s “true and proper worship.”

He goes on to warn them against conformity to the dominant patterns of society and, instead, to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (v. 2a). The goal of all that is gloriously simple, yet practically complex: “Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (v. 2b). What Paul is after here is a whole-bodied abandonment of our lives to God. It’s not just that we would *think* rightly about Him, but that we would be *transformed* through our thinking and pour ourselves out *bodily* for Christ’s sake. God wants all of us—heart, mind, soul, and strength (Deut 6:4-7; Matt 22:37-40).

As New Testament scholar Douglas Moo says, “Paul is making a special point to emphasize that the sacrifice we are called on to make requires a dedication to the service of God in the harsh and often ambiguous life of this world.” Screens, to the extent that they disconnect us from our bodies—let alone the body of Christ—disengage our efforts to serve God in the world. We can stock up on Bible passages about how to love one another and send a few encouraging text messages, but until we’ve actually sat and *looked* square into the eyes of a brother in his grief or *felt* the weight of an elderly sister as we’ve escorted her to her pew, we will never really know what those verses are all about or how to follow them—regardless of whatever

color we used to highlight them in YouVersion. We can watch videos about the plight of Christians in Syria and be moved to tears, but we will never *know* their pain unless and until we live out our own unique form of sacrifice—for American Christians, that often looks like sacrifice of reputation and status as opposed to life and limb. In sum, we can focus so much on renewing our minds by passively consuming information on our screens that we never really get to the personal transformation and whole-body sacrifice that Paul is after.

So, how do we get there? How do we receive the good that screens have to offer and reject the bad? How do allow screens to play an instrumental role in edifying our minds our transforming our lives, but keep them from disconnecting us from the bodily reality of our everyday Christian lives? Those are big questions that demand even bigger answers, but the road to liberation begins with a first step. Breaking the screen's grip on our lives means training our hearts, minds, and hands to put down our devices and pick up God's promises. As with any good training program, that work begins at dawn.

# REDEEM THE MORNING

**E**specially in the Psalms, Scripture teaches that the morning is a sweet and significant time for believers. The morning is a time to pray to God and wait on Him to answer (Psalm 5:3; 55:17; 88:13; 130:6; 143:8). It's a time to rejoice in the Lord (30:5; 65:8; 90:14), receive His help (46:5), and sing His praises (59:16; 92:2). It's also a time for judgment—to reflect on His righteous character and what His justice means for us and the world around us (49:14; 73:14; 101:8).

The morning is when believers are called to meditate on the character of God and lean into the covenant relationship He has brought them into through the finished work of Christ. Every morning is a new invitation to confess our sins, own our status as forgiven sons and daughters of the King, ask Him to send His Spirit to conform us to the image of His Son, plead with Him to order our days, and trust Him to supply our every need. If Reinke's numbers represent the reality in the church (54% check their smartphone within minutes of waking; 73% do it before they spend time with God), then we are trading our spiritual birthright for a mess of pixelated stew. Each and every morning, we're turning our faces from the sovereign God and peering into a glowing rectangle in hopes that it'll give us what only He can.

Strong words, to be sure. While it's highly unlikely that a believer would grab his or her phone in an open, intentional act of defiance, this is the reality most Christians face every morning. But why? What's driving us to transform our screens into functional

idols? John Piper has perceptively offered 6 heart-motives that explain why we're so quick to grab our phones first thing in the morning:

1. Novelty Candy - We're infatuated with the new. More than that, we want to be the first to be in the know so that we can then turn around and inform others.
2. Ego Candy - We want to know what the world is saying about us, who wants our attention, and how many people have engaged with our posts in the past 8 hours.
3. Entertainment Candy - We're addicted to the glitz and glam of online entertainment and we're looking for a quick fix before we go about our day.
4. Boredom Avoidance - We look at the humdrum day before us and escape for a moment into the exciting world of social media or TV.
5. Responsibility Avoidance - Life is full of challenges, and we use screens to defer the burden of our various roles as husbands, wives, parents, employers, etc.
6. Hardship Avoidance - In seasons of emotional or physical suffering, we use our screens as a way to cope and protect ourselves from our painful reality.

This list isn't meant to be exhaustive, nor is it absolute. You may find that one or more of these motives underlies your impulsive drive toward early morning screen time. Or, your motives may be entirely different. Whatever the reason, the screen is robbing us of precious time with God, offering us a cheap substitute of the mercy and grace He promises to make new every morning. The 3 following steps offer a minimal strategy for beginning to fight back:

1. Receive God's Call to Value the Morning - Look up the Psalms referenced above and take some time to attune yourself to the value Scripture puts on the morning. Let the Word convince you of the great opportunity for communion with God that He offers with every sunrise.

2. Leave Your Screens Outside the Bedroom - The easiest way to keep yourself from grabbing your phone first thing is to put it somewhere else. Considering how most of us keep our phones within arm's reach at all times (see above), this will seem like radical advice. The very fact that we'd struggle to leave our phones in the connection, however, tells us just how hooked we really are.

3. Spit out the Candy - Looking up Psalms may train your head and keeping your phone downstairs may train your hands, but we also need to do business with the heart motives that drive you to grab your phone in the morning. As you find yourself drawn to the screen ask yourself what you're looking for. Whatever it is, stop right there and ask God to give it you instead.

Does this mean you need to become an early riser? Not even a little bit. Whenever your morning hits—whether that's 6 AM or noon—fight the urge to roll over and hit your Twitter feed. By God's grace, slay whatever dragon is forcing you to flip on the news during breakfast. Choose instead to spend a few minutes with the God of the universe. When you're done, spend a couple more minutes with the people He's given you. Don't let the cheap allure of a glowing screen draw your gaze from the friends and family God has called you to love.

The following questions are offered in order to help guide reflection on your personal relationship to screen:

1. Am I experiencing any of the adverse physical effects of excess screen usage?
2. Do my screens connect me to the world around me or drive me away from it?
3. Is there ever a moment in my day when my phone is outside my reach?
4. Do I experience anxiety when I find myself separated from my phone?
5. Would I book a vacation hotel if it didn't have Wi-Fi?
6. How often do I find myself looking at my phone in the car?
7. Has anyone ever had to take my phone out of my hand to get my attention?

# BE PRESENT IN THE BODY

**I**n Rom 12:3-8, Paul puts our individual bodily sacrifice (vv. 1-2) in context. Believers are called to think rightly about themselves (v. 3) for the sake of their relationships with others in the Church. In the same way we each have a body with different appendages—head, shoulders, knees, and toes (v. 5)—so too does the body of Christ feature a diverse mix of variously gifted members—prophets, teachers, encouragers, and so on (vv. 6-7). Just as “the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you’” (1 Cor 12:21), the leader can’t slough off the server as a non-essential member of the church.

According to Paul, “each member belongs to all the others” (Rom 12:5). That may sound relationally hip, but does it really apply to the old lady who can’t stop telling you about her cats? Does the strange dude who always smells like soup get to claim some kind of ownership right over you? Yes, he does! As far as your union with Christ is concerned, you and Mr. Campbell have been woven together into the beautiful tapestry that is redeemed humanity. The body of Christ is a gloriously awkward hodge-podge of wanderers who never would’ve crossed paths if it wasn’t for the unifying power of the Holy Spirit. We’re a bunch of rough hands and flat feet mixing it up with jangly ears and knobby toes. That kind of diversity all but guarantees that life with other believers in the church will be anything but comfortable. But it’s that relational discomfort we feel on a Sunday morning that God uses for our growth and the church’s good.



The trouble is, screens provide a ready escape route for whenever relationships and conversations go awry. If moments get awkward, tense, or boring, we've always got a screen in our back pocket to give us a quick hit of relational safety via Facebook, Instagram, or Snapchat. On social media, we can moderate our interactions with others in a way we could never pull off in the church foyer. It's much easier to scroll past a picture of a kitten on Facebook than to cut and run when Cat Lady starts dishing about Mittens' latest trip to the vet. For some, this provides ample enough motivation to opt out of the Sunday morning experience altogether, choosing instead to "attend" church online. While online church experiences have their rightful place, they can never truly replicate the embodied awkwardness that God has planned for every believer's good.

Reinke is right to point out that "the frictionlessness of our smartphone touch screens" masks "our need for the rough edges of face-to-face interactions" with others in the body of Christ. The formative encounters we need with other believers "are full of friction, and we simply cannot have them on our frictionless phones." We can't love our brothers and sisters—at least, not in the holistic and sacrificial sense of the word—with pixelated words alone. A 'like' is not an adequate expression of joy. Peace isn't the same as turning off the screen. If we're going to become the people God has called us to become, we need to enter into the mess that is life in community.

# REDEEM TRUE COMMUNITY

**W**hen John wrote to his fellow believers, he acknowledged the inadequacy of the paper and ink he held in his hands (2 John 12). “Instead,” he told them, “I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.” It wasn’t enough for John to communicate from a distance; he needed to come and see his friends. Joy is in the face-to-face encounter, not the peer-to-peer network. None of that is meant to disparage paper and ink (for us, screen and keyboard) but to put it in its place. We are embodied creatures made for bodily interaction in time and space. Unless and until we stand face to face with our brothers and sisters, our joy will never be complete.

Today, we rely on screens to connect us with others. To the extent that this creates true connection, we should receive it as a gift from God. Unfortunately, we often treat our screens as a substitute for connection. Paradoxically, this seems to be plunging us all into loneliness and isolation. On average, Facebook’s 2.4 billion users spend more than 30 minutes a day on the network. Multiplied out, that means each will spend 1 year and 7 months of their life wading through the billions of posts shared every day on Facebook alone. For all that connection, though, former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy says we’re stuck in the middle of an epidemic in which “rates of loneliness have doubled since the 1980s.” It’s too soon to lay all the blame on screens, but research suggests that increased social media usage may be responsible.

It's not hard to see how screens and social media contribute to our isolation. With streaming platforms like Netflix and Disney+ on the rise, we spend more time on our couches than we do with other people in the movie theater (or out in the park, for that matter). We then turn to Facebook or Instagram to restore some sense of connection with others. But what we find there is a virtual community in which everyone—including us—carefully moderates the image they present to the world. As a result, the people out there never see the real us, and we never see the real them. Thanks to social networks, we're becoming more like images projected on a screen than real, embodied human beings.

For Christians, the body of Christ offers a unique invitation to every man, woman, and child to come and be known—warts and all. The hope we offer to the world is a crucified and risen Savior who accepts people as they are, not as they project themselves to be. The gift of life in Christian community is radical authenticity—an opportunity to know even as we are known. Of all the places in the world, the Church should be a place where we can be who we are and give other people the freedom to be who they are as well as, together, we all press on toward our heavenward goal (Phil 3:14).

To the extent that we ignore real-world fellowship and treat our screens as a substitute for genuine human connection, we once again sacrifice our embodied birthright for a bowl of pixelated stew. We encourage the epidemic of loneliness continue to spiral out of control instead of inviting our friends and neighbors to come see what true human connection looks like. As we'll see in this next connection, the negative implications for our witness here are huge. Before we look at evangelism in the age of the screen, though, we need to look at our own lives and ask how we can reclaim our embodied fellowship with other Christians. To that end, here are 5 practical steps you can take this week to keep your screen from getting between you and others:

1. Don't Netflix Alone - Next time you queue up an episode of The

Crown, invite a few friends over to join you. Take some time before or after the show to turn off the screen and catch up with one another.

2. Grab Lunch with a Friend - Take out your calendar and intentionally schedule moments for person-to-person connection. Don't settle for text messages and emails; sit your friends down and connect in person.

3. Take a Break from Social Media - Sites like Facebook allow you to deactivate your profile without deleting your account. This is a great way to detox when you find yourself spending more time in your digital neighborhood than your real one.

4. Meet Together and Encourage One Another - As the writer of Hebrews encouraged his readers, go to church and be with God's people, encouraging one another face to face as we all look forward to the day when Jesus shows up in all His glory (Heb 10:24-25).

5. Join a Small Group - Small groups dial the social intensity of life in the body of Christ up to 11. As awkward and difficult as it might be in this kind of intentional community, joining a small group is one of the most powerful ways in which you can resist the urge to mediate all your relationships through the screen.

1. At mealtime with others, do you leave your phone out on the table?
2. Have you ever faked a call to escape an awkward or tense social environment?
3. Do you spend more time talking to friends online than you do in person?
4. How often do you interrupt conversations to check or answer your phone?
5. Do you use online church as an excuse to stay home on Sunday mornings?
6. How many of your 'online friends' would take a call from you at 2 AM?
7. Do you feel *more* connected or less after an hour spent on social media?

# PRESENT THE BODY

**S**o far, our look at screens has focused on what they do to us and our fellowship. First, we learned how they complicate our ability to present our bodies as a living sacrifice (Rom 12:1-2). Next, we considered how screens isolate us from the formative awkwardness that is life in the body of Christ (vv. 3-8). In this final section, we're going to look again at life in the body and the message that mode of living is meant to broadcast to the outside world (vv. 9-21). Here, we'll see that redeeming the screen is about more than spreading the Gospel through digital technology using Bible apps, Christian media platforms, and social networking. Make no mistake; those uses of technology are wonderful and necessary in our screen-happy age. But, unless we tend to the roots, the fruit of our digital witness will never lead others to full, authentic life in Christ.

After calling his readers to unity in the body, Paul spends the bulk of Romans 12 describing what life in Christ should look like. Love, goodness, devotion, honor, zeal, joy, hope, patience, prayer, hospitality, blessing, harmony, humility, peace—these are the words Paul uses in vv. 9-21 to describe how Christians are to live in relation to one another. To be sure, the downbeat of this passage isn't evangelism; it's fellowship. But does that mean Paul doesn't care about the church's witness to the lost? Not at all! In v. 17, we get the distinct hint that Paul is deeply concerned with what the outside world thinks of the church. "Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of

everyone,” he says. “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (v. 18).

In a way, Paul is simply applying Jesus’ words: “[L]et your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:16). Elsewhere, Paul doesn’t mince words about the need for Christians to preach the Word to unbelievers (Rom 10:10-21). Here, however, the focus is on the silent message every church preaches in the way its people love one another. We might call this ‘evangelism by example.’ It’s not so much about getting people as it is giving them something to come and see. Even in the face of evil and persecution, believers are called to “win people over” not by trading blow for blow, but by trusting the Lord to dole out the punishment (Rom 12:19-20). In all, this is how we overcome evil with good (v. 21)—not by slaying our opponents (literally or online) or coming up with an elaborate strategy but by being who God has called us to be in community with one another.

This raises the stakes on everything we’ve said about the screen and the body thus far. To the extent that screens lead us to diss our bodies and divorce ourselves from the body of Christ, they prevent us from being the church Paul describes in Romans 12. In the process, they prevent us from projecting out into the world the glorious image of new humanity that every congregation is called to represent. We can tweet with the fingers of men and angels, use our YouTube channels to preach with all the prophetic power of John the Baptist, develop blogs and articles that detail the deep mysteries of the faith, and use our online platforms to give away tremendous amounts of resources to people in need. But if our churches don’t embody the love Scripture lays out for us, our tweets will be nothing but a noisy gong and our videos a clanging cymbal. Our content will amount to nothing, and the money we give away will leave us feeling hollow.

# REDEEMING HOSPITALITY

**F**rom practical tips for sharing your faith to full-fledged programs in “online evangelism,” you’ll have no trouble finding plenty of articles, books, and podcasts dedicated to teaching believers how to use their screens as an effective tool in their witness to the Gospel. These resources are generally very helpful. Too often, though, they reduce the screen to just another way to spread information. In a way, they assume that people online are looking to be persuaded to abandon their unbelief and join a church. In the extreme, these approaches turn the screen into a sandwich board and its user into another street corner prophet, throwing up the virtual equivalent of “The End is Nigh!” every time a friend posts a shot of a martini.

To be sure, there is a time and place to defend the faith online and to engage in respectful dialogue with our unbelieving neighbors. Still, we could win every argument on Facebook and still fail to win souls to Christ. Why? Because our neighbors aren’t looking to evaluate Christianity online. Odds are, their minds are already made up. Rather, they’re looking for what we discussed above: connection. Sure, they’ll argue about the faith, but the dynamic in that online argument is often more about the dialogue itself than its rational outcome. People don’t fight online because they want to convince or be convinced; they do it because they want to feel as though they’ve been heard and understood by another human being. They want to be validated, if not by us then at least by the throng of nameless, faceless commenters who happen to be standing by.



In a word, our friends and foes alike want to be seen online, but the disembodied force of the screen cuts them off from the authentic community for which every human being has been made. They long to see the face of another person, but all they catch is a dim reflection of themselves in the screen's blue glow. What do we have to offer that can truly satisfy that deep longing? Is it just another counter-argument, or might it be the counter-cultural embrace of a Gospel-centered community?

Our friends online are lonely, and the cure for their loneliness isn't another photo of the ocean with Psalm 139 slapped on top of it. Instead, we need to both display the beauty of life in Christ ("let your light shine") and invite others to come and see it with their own two eyes. So long as we use screens to facilitate or life in the body rather than impede it, they can be a wonderful tool for orchestrating church life (newsletters, calendars, Facebook groups, etc.), putting it on display (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), and inviting others to come and take part (Minted, Evite, Punchbowl).

The key here is that our communities would not exist for the sake of the screen, but that the screen would exist for the sake of us. We cannot be overcome by the worldly patterns that turn a neutral tool like the screen into a force for evil in our midst. Instead, we need to redeem the screen as a way to reinvigorate our communal life together and put that life on display for all to see. Here are a few practical steps to begin exploring how you and your church can use screens to do just that:

1. Put Your Life On Display - If possible, use screens in your church's foyer or reception area to cycle images of life in the community. Photos of holiday gatherings, community outreach events, and the annual picnic will give visitors a quick glimpse at what it looks like to live together in your church.
2. Meet Your Community Where It Is - Visit local restaurants, shop at local stores, and play in local parks. As you do, engage your neigh-

bors in conversation online and off. Local groups on Facebook and apps like Nextdoor make it easy to bridge the gap between physical and digital life in the community.

3. Connect Before You Invite - When interacting with friends and neighbors online, look for ways to connect these people with others in your network. Find out what they're passionate about and connect them with organizations in your area that serve those interests. Use online tools to create offline community, and you'll earn the opportunity to invite these people to your church.



**CONNECT BEFORE**

**YOU INVITE**

## REFLECT

1. How often do you find yourself arguing with others about the faith online?
2. Have faith-based posts taken the place of Gospel conversations in your life?
3. How are you using digital technology to invite others to your church?
4. If your church has an online presence, does it use that platform primarily for sharing information (sermons, Bible studies, etc.) or highlighting church life?
5. What are some practical ways you, as an individual, can “present the body” online this week?

# CONCLUSION

**P**archment Scrolls, Roman Roads, Moveable Type—each of these technologies were innovative in their own day. And, by God’s grace, each became the means by which He’d have the Gospel preached to the ends of the Earth. Today, we are living through technological disruption unlike anything our world has ever seen. Where scrolls allowed spoken words to endure in black and white, screens transmit entire sermons in living color. Where roads bound together geographical regions, the information superhighway connects people all over the globe. Where movable type enabled the mass production of works like the Bible, social media has turned everyone with a screen into their own publisher.

There is no doubt that this technology has given the Church a missionary edge. As Dr. Dale B. Sims says, they have “enriched the message of the Cross” by allowing “Christians to administer grace to a world that is distracted and burdened.” But, if we’re going to use the screen as a tool for spreading the Gospel to the ends of the earth, we have to keep our eyes open. By its very nature, the screen threatens to disconnect us from our individual bodies as well as the body of Christ. The answer to that reality isn’t to reject the screen as something wicked in itself but to overcome evil through our good and godly use of technology. When it comes to the screen, we need to learn how to be “shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” (Matt 10:16). Screens are everywhere. That isn’t changing anytime soon. But, by God’s grace, the light of the Gospel will shine all the more brilliantly as we redeem the comparatively dull glow of our screens for His glory and our good.

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## Books

Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family*

Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone is Changing You*

Quentin J. Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart*

Daniel Strange, *Plugged In*

Adam Thomas, *Digital Disciple: Real Christianity in a Virtual World*

Brian D. Wassom, *What Would Jesus Post?*

## Articles

Chad Meeks, “Screen Time Is Changing the Way We Think, Focus, and Memorize” <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/november-web-only/how-screen-time-is-changing-way-we-think.html>

Tony Reinke, “Six Wrong Reasons to Check Your Phone in the Morning” <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/six-wrong-reasons-to-check-your-phone-in-the-morning>

David Roark, “Embracing Liturgy in a Digital Age” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/embracing-liturgy-in-a-digital-age/>

Ed Stetzer, “Expanding the Digital Footprint of Our Churches” <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2019/august/expanding-digital-footprint-of-our-churches.html>

## Podcasts

The Digital Missions Podcast - <https://www.centerforonlineevangelism.org/podcast/>

# SOURCES

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<https://www.nsc.org/road-safety/safety-topics/fatality-estimates>

<https://newsroom.aaa.com/tag/texting-while-driving/>

Reinke, Tony. *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You*. Crossway.

Crouch, Andy. *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place*. Baker Publishing Group.

All Scripture quotations come from the New International Version (NIV).

Douglas J. Moo, *Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, 751.

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Vivek Murthy, “Work and the Loneliness Epidemic,” *Harvard Business Review*, September 26, 2017, <https://hbr.org/2017/09/work-and-the-loneliness-epidemic>.

Brian A. Primack et al., “Social Media Use and Perceived Social Isolation Among Young Adults in the U.S.,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 53, no. 1 (July 1, 2017): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2017.01.010>.