

YOUTH AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Act 17:21: (For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.)

We have become accustomed to the sight of people glued to screens through which they communicate by speech or text. We seem to live our lives increasingly on such platforms rather than the real world. One writer says this about the phenomenon: ‘Over 60% of the world’s more than 7 billion people will, therefore, be online by 2018’², and, furthermore, ‘more people had cell phones (6 billion) than had access to a flushing toilet (4.5 billion)’. Of particular concern is the way in which children have become a part of this borderless, unregulated world – increasingly recruited at ever-younger ages.

The question is: what does God think about this? I am afraid this new artificial world bears many similarities to Athens, Greece, in the day of the apostle Paul - they ‘spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing’ (Acts 17:21). Luke, who wrote this, would no doubt have said the same thing today after observing our compulsive use of smartphones, tablets, laptops and video game consoles, to name gadgets. What are people mostly talking about? How edifying, from a Christian perspective, are all those texts, blogs, videos, chats etc.? The Lord Jesus actually has something to say about all of this, as he did through his apostles:

Eph 5:4 Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks.
James 3:8 But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

If James were present in the world today, he would have much more reason to be concerned because the tongue has received a competent assistant – 10 fingers that type away furiously on the keyboard whatever the tongue commands. So next time your tongue starts sending invisible messages to your fingers, which begin to feel the itch to text, let Ephesians 5:4 be the ethical framework guiding your cyber interactions. I am afraid that much of the interactions on the internet are vacuous – a global avalanche of nothingness. A culture of self-indulgence. This of itself is a spiritual problem! Paul was concerned about Christians who were idle and talebearers:

1Timothy 5:13 And withal they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house; and not only idle, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not.

Today, in the internet age, there are greater opportunities for spreading rumors without physically going from house to house. The entire world lives in the same big house – the internet, a house with no walls. While there are a myriad of reasons as to why social media and the internet in general pose new, serious dangers to vulnerable children, space constraints allow me to outline just a few:

² Keen, A. (2015). *The Internet is not the answer*. Open Road+ Grove/Atlantic.
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- Don't be fooled into thinking that no one can trace your messages and speech. What you put out there is stored somewhere forever³. Identity theft is ubiquitous.
- Research⁴ suggests that the part of the brains responsible for sensible decision-making is not developed before the age of 25 in boys in particular. While adults think with the prefrontal cortex (rational part), teens often use the amygdala (emotional part). This means a greater tendency to behave impulsively and irrationally.
- Given children's immaturity, there is the ever-present danger of falling prey to pedophiles and other seasoned criminals who specialize in luring children through social media.

Finally, it is hard to ignore the fact that the current worldwide constant exchange of information bears parallels with the building of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. It was a common language which united the world. Today, English is fast becoming the new language of today's Babel. The internet, World Wide Web, Google, Facebook etc. have all been pioneered by people whose native tongues are English, which cements the dominance of an already globally unassailable language. Never in the history of the world has one language had such dominance. What is the purpose of the internet? Ultimately, the aim is to keep everyone in the entire world in a

³ Harding, L. (2014). *The Snowden files: The inside story of the world's most wanted man*. Guardian Faber Publishing.

⁴<https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/encyclopedia/content.aspx?ContentTypeID=1&ContentID=3051> University of Rochester Medical Center. Understanding the Teen Brain.

perpetual conversation. Google is actually a misspelling of the mathematical term *googol*, which basically is 1.0×10^{100} denoting an unusually large number (Keen, 2015, p. 53). Their aim was to find and index of every website available – one website that links us to all other websites on the internet.

Let us consider this through the prism of the philosophers of Athens and the Tower of Babel. The fatal mistake of Athens and Babel was to glorify the conversations of humans with humans – intrahuman exchange of information, if you will. Humans are fallen creatures who, if in constant conversation with each other alone, will infect one another with rebellion against God – precisely what happened at Babel. What is needed is a conversation between God and his creation, humans – a conversation such as the one found in the pages of the Bible. A conversation with Jesus leads to repentance, baptism in Jesus name and the infilling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38), while an intrahuman conversation leads to envy, bitterness, hate, self-glorification and, finally, Babel. God and Magog are terms often used in the Bible to refer to a world hostile to Christ. If so, one can wonder to what degree the present technological marvel of the internet will aid the nations in rebelling against Jesus at the end of the Millennium when they gather to dethrone the Lord.

***Rev 20:8** And shall go out to deceive the nations which are in the four quarters of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle: the number of whom is as the sand of the sea.*

Young people, do not be addicted to the internet/social media, but be addicted to the Lord Jesus Christ! Use the internet only when necessary and for good, wholesome reasons. Whatever you write or say, remember the Lord is weighing your spirit. Be holy, even online!