

Absent Presence

During a committee meeting, the chairman asks if anyone has other items that should be discussed. John is present, but is texting one of his employees about a work-related question. He has an item that should be discussed but misses the chairman's question and the meeting goes on. John is a "present absentee."

Samuel smiles as he sits down beside his friend George from a distant congregation. Today they are riding a bus to New York City to do street evangelism. Samuel hopes to catch up on news from the past half year. But after some small talk, George receives a text message. He laughs a bit and sends a reply. Text messages come and go while Samuel waits, wondering if he is George's friend anymore. Samuel is experiencing the "absent presence" of George.

Technology has brought us a host of new forms of communication, many of which we find very useful. But does new technology annul courtesy, politeness, and responsibility? Are we masters of our tools, or have these gadgets become our masters? As Christians, we must be careful not to misuse or abuse technology.

Cell phones have a way of invading our privacy, interrupting our visits, and distracting us from important things. Texting is especially challenging since it can be done quietly while involved in other activities.

A young person can sit by the fireplace with the family but be texting friends across the continent. While the family visits and shares the day's experiences, he is present but absent. Father's advice, direction, and counsel go unheeded; his mind is many miles away. A rebellious youth may even sit texting his rebellious friends about his father's funny ideas and the chiding he's getting right now.

Texting can be used to avoid people and to run away from the social challenge of making new friends and reaching out to others. A young man

once told me he starts texting his friends when he feels “out of place” at a gathering or service. It is his way of “zoning out” when he feels uncomfortable. He admitted he feels popular to have people see him connecting with friends via texting.

Fathers must give direction to their young people about these things. Do not allow youth to play the “absent presence” game during important family times. When visiting or attending family gatherings or other social functions, make sure youth are blending with others and learning face-to-face social skills. Teach them to make new friends, play games, or tell stories. Sad it is when youth relate better via text than they do in normal visiting.

Build and maintain good friendships. Show honor and appreciation for friends by not allowing too many distractions as we relate to them. Turn off cell phones during important events or conversations. Or, if a call or text message truly is urgent, politely ask to be excused for a minute to respond to it. Then, giving a simple explanation of why the call was urgent helps to show honor to the person we interrupted.

Do not use cell phones in a church service. Leave them at home or in the car. In the case of real emergencies, go out of the church building to respond to a call or a text. Some farm situations involve an automatic phone dialer to call and alert the owner of a problem. Sometimes others may listen to a service by phone. Even in these legitimate cases, make sure not to detract from the worship service. Do not send or receive text messages while sitting in church. The person who begins that practice will find himself being a “present absentee” in God’s house—and God will not smile on him!

Carefully evaluate your level of responsibility when part of a committee meeting. How much is it acceptable to be “out on the phone”? Is it respectful of others’ time to hold up the meeting while you respond to a call or text? Is it no longer possible for people to actually wait until the meeting is over to receive a response from us?

Imagine a salesman coming to your door to sell a product and using his phone as he makes his sales pitch to you. Picture yourself waiting while he texts another client to answer a question.

Sure, he is a busy man and has lots of people to see. But you expect a level of commitment to you if you are to commit to buying from him. In much the same way, we expect something from each other as we work together.

We need God's help to obey the Golden Rule in relationships. We need His wisdom to control our technologies and use them as servants and not let them become our masters. Consider this fact, and ponder it well: there will be no "present absentees" on the Day of Judgment or in the group praising God in eternity.

The Intoxication of Speed and Immediacy

Until about 1900, the fastest travel was by horse. For thousands of years, cargo, mail, and man travelled on horseback or by horse-drawn vehicles. Until the mid-1800s, nearly all communication was either verbal or written. Letters could travel no faster than a horse could run. Since the 1900s, speed has dramatically changed our lifestyle. Computer technology has spectacularly increased the speed not only of