

A man named Jake Knapp felt that his iPhone always absorbed his attention. For him, it was an occupational hazard, since he worked as a design partner with Google Ventures. But, apparently way back in 2012, when his smartphone addiction started to encroach on the time he spent with his kids, he decided he had to do something about it. So, he deleted every app that distracted him: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. “It was a huge relief,” he says. Although he thought it would be a short-term experiment, those apps remained off his phone for the next six years.

Sarah Lawrence, a graphic designer, decided to make her phone experience unpleasant. “For two weeks I used my iPhone screen in color,” she says, “and for two weeks I used it in gray scale mode, which is designed to be irritating.” She found that looking at a colorless screen reduced her usage, and it eliminated aimless scrolling.

Jake and Sarah are examples of tech addicts who have tried to break their smartphone addictions. They dumped a lot of phone usage to take back their minds. And you could even say that we still hear a lot about tech addiction today. People often rant about their need to unplug and unwind in order to regain their sanity. And such an approach would seem to match the message of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, where he challenges them to eliminate distractions and focus their attention. “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ,” says Paul, “and him crucified.”

As is our passion for smartphones, so was Paul’s passion for Christ and his cross — a smart cross, you might say, because in it is enshrined the very wisdom of God! Now, at first glance, it would appear that living a cross-shaped life means that we need to unplug from technology and place our focus entirely on Jesus. But that is a false dichotomy. Yes, smartphones can be distracting, but they can also be tools to deepen and expand our Christian faith.

So, its ok if you want to sigh with relief, because it isn’t like I’m advocating for a Luddite or Amish type approach to our faith. After all, the apostle Paul himself was a master communicator, spreading the message of Jesus in whatever ways he could. And it probably isn’t all that hard for us to believe that if Paul could be dropped into our world today, that more than likely he would have a smartphone in his hip pocket. But, that isn’t the point. The point, rather, is that it was the cross in all its wisdom that captivated Paul.

And yet, Paul, however, did, in a way, distance himself from the way in which the world pursued wisdom. He didn’t come preaching in the lofty, elegant, rhythmic style that was popular

among the wordsmiths or orators of his day. Instead, he spoke simply and plainly. And most importantly, although what he said was folly to the Greeks, it was actually the wisdom of God.

The Corinthians were sophisticated people, and the apostle Paul knew it. They were residents of a Roman city in Greece that was cosmopolitan, intellectual, and prosperous. If iPhones had been available, they would have had the latest versions. If Twitter had been invented, you can only imagine the tweet-storms involving Chloe, Crispus, Gaius and Stephanas. But Paul did not insist that the Corinthians abandon their cosmopolitan lifestyle. Instead, he begins in a self-deprecating way, saying, “When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom.” In other words, he is saying that he could have blown them away with a TED Talk, but he chose not to, he decided against it.

Instead, Paul says, “I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.” Another way to put this is that he came in humility, and without boasting. The Apostle then goes on to declare that “My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom but on the power of God.” That’s the heart of Paul’s approach to his message about Jesus — he keeps it plain and simple, so that Christian faith might rest entirely on the power of God.

It’s almost as if Paul knows that the message about Jesus will never be as flashy as something that pops up on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram or YouTube. It won’t go viral based on a clever TED Talk or a terse tweet. Paul intentionally avoids the sophisticated language of Corinth, speaking instead only about “Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” And it’s a message and a method we need to hear and employ today, if we want to demonstrate the wisdom of what we might call the smart cross. The message is clear: Christ crucified and risen. And although it is a message that may appear dumb and stupid to many, “to us ... it is the power of God.”

Our take home for today than would be that we are to live as though the message is true. Which it is! Christ on the cross is in fact “God’s wisdom,” according to Paul, “secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages.” None of the sophisticated rulers of the world who lived during Paul’s time understood this, he says, “for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” But we, as members of the Christian community, can understand it, because “these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit.”

Because the Spirit of God has graciously been given to us, we have the ability to understand what Paul is saying to us about Jesus Christ and the crucifixion. We no longer have to be distracted by all of the flashes, and bings, and buzzes of our devices. We can, according to Paul, “speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.”

Don’t worry though, we can keep our smartphones, of course, but let’s embrace the One who can help us gain control of those devices or anything else that would try to bind us, preoccupy us, divert us, diminish us or enslave us. After all, with the Spirit of God in us, we can understand the wisdom of what Jesus accomplished on the cross.

- He “bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness.” (1 Peter 2:24).
- He gave himself for our sins to set us free (Galatians 1:4).
- God reconciled all things to himself through Jesus, “by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Colossians 1:20).
- Looking toward his own death, Jesus said, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32).
- And he did it to show us how much he loves us, saying, “No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13).

That’s the wisdom of God — in the cross, a cross that brings us forgiveness, sets us free, reconciles us to God, draws us to Jesus, and shows us how much he loves us. And this wisdom comes to us through the Holy Spirit of God.

Eugene Cho, a pastor in Seattle, is convinced that technology and social media are making significant impacts around the world, and that there is a place for them in ministry. In particular, he believes that they should be used to:

- Communicate the message of the gospel in various ways: print, blogs, video, Twitter, Facebook.
- Mobilize the faith community for awareness, action, causes and convictions.
- Connect with church members, so that communication is a “two-way” street in the church community.
- Build relationships with neighbors.

“In our world today,” writes Cho, “where ‘walls’ are constantly being built, technology and social media can help us to create ‘windows’ by which neighbors, the city, and the larger world can look into our lives and the life of our faith community.

Cho is keenly aware that a smartphone is not a savior, and it never will be. Sure, technology and social media can enable us to connect to our context, culture, and community. But “they are **not** the most important aspects of our leadership, or our church ministry,” he says. At the center will be the message that Paul proclaimed, and that we need to be spreading today: “Jesus Christ, and him crucified” ... a faith that rests “not on human wisdom but on the power of God” ... and things “not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit.” As scholar Charles Cousar says in a commentary on this passage, “God is to be known primarily in the preaching of the crucified Christ.”

The good news for us today is that the message of Jesus never needs an upgrade. We’ll never need to wait in line for the latest version. Instead, the sacrificial death of Jesus is part of the eternal wisdom of God, and his gifts of forgiveness and eternal life are available to everyone who believes.

In a world of smartphones that need to be replaced regularly, God gives us the smart cross which is the hinge-point of history. It points us to Jesus Christ, crucified and raised. It reminds us that forgiveness is in the blood of Christ, and it is an unmistakable symbol of God’s incredible sacrificial love for us. So, go ahead and delete those unwanted apps, if you need to. But hang on to Jesus Christ, the eternal wisdom of God, revealed to us through the Holy Spirit. Amen.