

Christian Parenting in the Social Media Age

When thinking about the internet, social media in particular, the Roman road analogy is useful. Built with the nefarious intent to move Roman armies to conquer the known world, the infrastructure nevertheless enabled much good, especially the spread of the Gospel.

Roman armies designed and built roads primarily to move their armies throughout the ancient world to conquer and subjugate people and nations. The road system was a remarkable feat of engineering, using concrete made with volcanic ash and with an elevated surface of tightly packed cut stones, cambered for drainage. Markers - milestones - placed every 1,000 steps allowed army commanders to keep track of their progress. These paved roads stretched more than 80,000 kilometres, crisscrossing Europe, the Middle East and North Africa.

Many of those roads survive to this day, having long outlasted the empire whose imperialism prompted their construction.

The roads built for armies also expanded commerce and travel. More significantly, Christian missionaries used the roads to carry the Good News of salvation to the lost. The apostle Paul and fellow missionaries travelled countless miles on those roads in their missionary journeys. The Roman Empire is long gone, but the church thrives two millennia after the empire that built the roads.

In our day, another extraordinary feat of engineering, the internet, connects people around the world, with an estimated 4.5 billion users worldwide, most through social media.

Facebook is the most popular platform, with 2.7 billion active users, including 1.6 billion daily users. YouTube has 2 billion active users, followed by WhatsApp (owned by Facebook), Facebook Messenger, WeChat (Chinese mobile app) and Instagram (also owned by Facebook). Each of these six platforms has more than 1 billion active users. Other platforms - TikTok, Snapchat, Reddit, Twitter and Pinterest - have hundreds of millions of active users.

Unlike the Roman roads, which were built over hundreds of years, social media has reached every corner of the globe in less than a generation. But like the Roman roads, social media can be a useful means for carrying out the Great Commission - provided users are informed of the pitfalls.

Social media is an insidious thief, stealing from Christian families barely aware it is happening. It robs families of the time and attention that belong to one another. The theft is intentional; social media deliberately breaks down our intellectual filters, making us susceptible to advertising pitches and ideological manipulation, and drawing us ever deeper into its clutches.

That may be a tough pill to swallow for adults who enjoy the blessings of social media. Christians use social media for mutual encouragement and admonition, sharing Scriptures and devotions, and celebrating milestones in the lives of loved ones. During the pandemic, churches have taken advantage of social media - Facebook and YouTube in particular - for online worship services, proclaiming God's Law and Gospel directly into the homes of parishioners when in-person worship is not feasible.

But social media's stealth means followers of Christ must be discerning.

Attentive parents have long been aware of the dangers of social media to their children, thanks in part to studies that came out a decade ago revealing the risks: online predators, peer pressure, bullying and pornography. But adults may be less conscious of ways in which they are personally being manipulated by social media. Parents have a responsibility to monitor and limit not only their children's access to social media but their own.

Christian parents in particular should remember their high calling as parents, which is above all other vocations in their lives. Martin Luther wrote: "To the position of fatherhood and motherhood God has given special distinction above all positions that are beneath it" (LC I 105). The emerging phenomenon of social media has created a new obstacle to parents living out that vocation, one of intrusion and manipulation.

The intrusion is more subtle than other forms of advertising. The more time someone spends on social media, the more tailored the platforms evolve to match a user's interests and opinions, reinforcing their confirmation biases and stroking their egos, pulling them back more frequently and holding their attention longer.

Social media engineers design highly sophisticated algorithms to track every "like," every emoji, every click, every scroll, every comment to determine what content to feed users - in the appropriately named "news feed." The algorithms even track whether one scrolls past certain content or pauses a moment to look.

The problem accelerated in 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic forced many to work from home. Schools too, moved to virtual classrooms, giving children more opportunities to engage in social media platforms, with less awareness of the peril than their parents. The pandemic has been a boon to social media companies and their advertisers.

Recognising the dangers, many Christian parents have chosen to eliminate screens altogether from their households. Others allow but monitor their children's use. But too many adults fail to monitor their own habits, spending an inordinate amount of time on social media, scrolling through posts for hours, feeding the platform more data to make the experience even more addictive.

God's Word instructs us: "*Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith*" (1 Peter 5:8-9).

The vocations of marriage and parenting require Christian adults to beware of all threats to their households. That must include awareness of the subtle hazards inherent in social media, and to strictly monitor their children's use. It also means Christians should make an honest assessment of their own online habits. For most, that means curtailing their time in front of the screen for the sake of their families. And all Christians on social media must use it to serve and build up others (Eph. 4:29).