

Destructive Distraction

In 2010 Nicolas Carr wrote a book called, “The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brain”. Carr looked at a lot of research and found that the habits people are picking up online, were in fact changing the way they think and learn. That is, jumping from page to page, clicking on links, briefly scanning pages, checking emails, checking brief Facebook posts, jumping to another page, multi-tasking was beginning to permanently change people.

These internet habits were making it very hard for people to concentrate on longer stretches of text, listen to extended arguments, or patiently work with one book. People became restless and anxious when having to read one thing without the relief of distraction. And it was becoming permanent: even when people were away from the Internet, they kept acting as if they were still online: distracted, impatient, anxious to return to the distraction.

What some of the neuroscience suggested was something called neuro-plasticity: that our brains actually respond to and are shaped by the way we repeatedly and regularly focus or learn. If we keep using them for quick little bits of info, in an interrupted, multi-tasking kind of way, then those parts of the brain that are good at that strengthen. But correspondingly those parts of the brains that do things like deep thinking, constant attention, patient reflection, contemplation, weaken. Any thought process that requires long focus on one thing is being destroyed. And this has very serious implications for Christians.

Christians want to follow Christ in every area of life. And since the internet has become the dominant media of our times, in some ways the foundation for a lot of what happens in our lives, we must be obedient to Christ in the way we use the internet. Last time we considered how screen addiction has become a serious problem, and we saw ways for us to put off certain habits, and put on others. We said in response to growing screen addiction, we should do things like be honest about our screen time, prioritise face-to-face time, use tech to track and limit our screen times, sometimes fast altogether from it, cultivate outside focused activities that require us to discipline body and mind.

Today we want to consider how online habits can shape us to be chronically distracted.

Part of being a wise believer is understanding not only how my actions change me, but how some things passively shape me. That is, I am responsible not only for what I do, but to some degree I am also responsible for the way I am shaped by some things. I might not have intended those effects, or asked for them, but they are there, and I am being changed by them.

We are responsible not only for how we use our technologies, and what we consume on them, but we are responsible for how they may be affecting us and shaping us and changing us. Particularly, as people in pursuit of knowledge and wisdom, we should be very concerned with how we can be shaped in a way that affects our ability to concentrate, to meditate, to focus, to study. Because for Christians, that affects our ability to worship, to comprehend Scripture.

So the first thing we want to do is catalogue some dangers that the web and the technologies present to our spiritual attentiveness and concentration. Then we want to ask why attention and concentration is important for Christians. Then we want to suggest some ways to cultivate that.

I. The Dangers to Our Concentration

The dangers to our attention are three: distraction, division and dissipation.

1. Distraction of Attention

The web and its technologies provide us with endless beeps, dings, and notifications that call you to slightly, or completely change your focus or your attention from the conversation you were having, to check your phone, or your watch, or that email. The technologies were designed this way.

Cell phones were originally invented to keep businessmen in touch with the office while they were away from it. So we shouldn't be surprised that our mobile phones tend to do just that—to keep us in touch when we would rather escape. There was a time when people had a home phone and a work phone. Many of us no longer have a personal home phone and a work cell phone—we have a single device that does it all. When this is the case, we cannot be surprised when we receive work calls at home and personal calls at work. The purpose of a multifunction device like the smartphone is to stop its owner whenever and wherever he is in order to pull him from one thing to the next. As soon as he takes a call, it provides him with a reminder from his calendar; and when he responds to that reminder, he receives an e-mail; and when he replies to the e-mail, he receives a text message. And so it goes, from one distraction to the next. This is exactly what the smartphone is meant to do. And it does it well.

Many of the apps and websites we use make their money through plenty of clicks and usage, so it is in their interest to distract you from what you were doing and try to at least momentarily divert your focus to check the update, the new message, the notification. In fact, I write for a particular podcast, and one of the things they asked for was to fill the written transcript with plenty of links to back up what I say. So as people read, or listen, they should click on something, be whisked away to that site, which, in turn will have its own content plus plenty of other links to click on and whisk you away somewhere else.

This is shaping many people's minds to want and expect a distraction from the task they are on, and to even come to crave it. Nicolas Carr says, “We want to be interrupted, because each interruption brings us a valuable piece of information. To turn off these alerts is to risk feeling out of touch, or even socially isolated.”

For a growing number of people, the need to be in constant communication is so powerful that they cannot even turn off their cell phones in order to sit through a movie or a church service!

2. Division of Attention

The technologies and the web itself calls for us to keep multiple tasks going. But actually the term multitasking is not really accurate. While we think we are multitasking, we are actually task switching, doing a little bit of one thing and then doing a little bit of another.

One study has found that “people who switch back and forth between two tasks, like exchanging e-mail and writing a report, may spend 50 percent more time on those tasks than if they work on them separately, completing one before starting the other.”

Meanwhile, if we surround ourselves by too many stimuli, we force our brains into a state of continuous partial attention, a state in which we keep tabs on everything without giving focused attention to anything.

The digital explosion has even changed the way the adult brain functions. “It has placed many of us into what has been described as a state of continuous partial attention While we sit at our desks working on a report [or sermon] we are also monitoring our mobile phones and our instant messaging accounts, giving partial attention to a host of different media. As we do so, we keep our brains in a constant state of heightened stress, damaging our ability to devote ourselves to extended periods of thoughtful reflection and contemplation. After some time, our brains begin to crave this

constant communication, finding peace in little else.”. Once people get used to this state, they tend to thrive on the perpetual connectivity. It feeds their egos and sense of self-worth, and it becomes irresistible.” (Challies, 125) In fact, it is not unusual today to find people sitting in front of the TV, where they're streaming something, have their laptops open and their phones. Three screens, which they're looking at each of them intermittently.

This division of attention often causes us to work less effectively, the exact opposite of what we expect. Consider: do you work shorter hours than you did before computers and smart phones? Not likely. Where has all the time you saved gone? In most cases, right back to your gadgets.

3. Dissipation of Attention.

When something dissipates, it spreads, thins out and often weakens. Dividing and distracting our attention has led to a dissipation of attention.

Again, our brains actually change in response to new technologies. The brain of a person raised in the age of print, a person who learned from books and who read books in time of leisure or study, has a brain that is markedly different from a person who has learned primarily from images or who has watched videos in times of leisure or study.

That shows up in a few ways. One is skimming versus reading.

At best, Internet users skim text rather than read it. In fact, “skimming” is now the dominant metaphor for reading. Consider, how do you read an email? You glance quickly through it to find the main point. If it is more than a few paragraphs, you quickly scroll down, skimming to find the main points. Men who receive a lot of emails oftentimes simply ignore any email that is longer than three paragraphs.

I know this is a fact because I've often had the experience of someone asking something or saying something that was specifically mentioned in paragraph three of the sent email. But people are not reading till paragraph three. The web is teaching people to scan over an email, think they've got the gist of it, and delete.

Reading on a screen allows for faster reading, especially when you can adjust the size of the font. That's good for devouring a book rapidly, bad for thoughtful digestion of its content. My suspicion is that people who do their quiet times on their cell phones don't read their cell phone screens the same way they read a printed Bible. Reading on a screen is almost invariably done by means of skimming. Again, Carr says, “What is different, and troubling, is that skimming is becoming our dominant mode of reading. Once a means to an end, a way to identify information for deeper study, scanning is becoming an end in itself—our preferred way of gathering and making sense of information of all sorts.”

Spurgeon: Little learning and much pride comes of hasty reading. (Lectures to My Students, 177)

A second sign of dissipating attention is the preference for visual over the verbal.

In the early days of the internet, Internet speeds were low, connection costs were high, data was expensive and the Internet was more text-heavy. In fact, in the early days, some people rejoiced because the web seemed to be taking people away from their televisions and back to reading. But with higher and higher speeds and cheaper and cheaper data, it wasn't long before videos became the centre of the web. First the Youtube video, then the short, then the endless scrolling on Instagram, X, Tiktok or some other platform. If people have to choose between a carefully argued, 2000-word essay explaining some cultural or political issue, or a video of an interview or an influencer or some podcast, they'll pick the video 99 times out of a 100. This preference shows up as impatience. We start reading, scroll, and if it looks like it'll take more than two minutes to read, we click out. Notice now how often websites actually have a little “reading time: 5 minutes” note

next to an article, to tell us how long it will take our lazy brains to read.

It's a sign of something wrong. What would you think of the state of eating and food if you went into restaurants and saw that on the menus: eating time: 12 minutes. "What's wrong with these people?", you'd say. "Are their lives so busy, or their food so bland, or their schedule so harried, that they need to know whether it's worth chewing and swallowing based on how long it will take? Not the content, the time?"

A third sign of dissipating attention is decline in memory. We can now know less than ever before. We don't have to know everything; we just need to know where and how to find it. It is no longer necessary to remember where key passages are. You don't have to memorise the order of the books of the Bible if your app gets you to it nearly instantly.

Memorisation requires concentration, focus and repetition. Granted you don't need to memorise some things which are now available to you, that's a blessing. But when some things are not part of your memory, it depletes all your thinking. For example, you can use an online search to find words to use for something you want to say. But it is a lot better if those words are part of your remembered vocabulary and you can call on them yourself. That's true not only of words but of ideas, of concepts, of historical facts, of names and places and events, of sayings, phrases, idioms, metaphors, fables. It's one thing to have all of human knowledge available to search. It's another to have furnished your own mind with enough truth and knowledge to think well and search intelligently.

Attention that is distracted, divided, and dissipated. Again, this is not just happening when we do this. Over times, this is changing our ability to focus in times when we're not on the web.

Now why is this a concern for Christians?

II. The Importance of Christian Concentration

First, Christians are a people who must admire and adore through intense and sustained attention. The Christian life is one in which God is revealed for our admiring attention. But He is revealed to us in ways that require concentration, focus, and the prolonged gaze of the soul. A worshipper understands he presents a sacrifice of praise to God: his costly attention, admiration, focus, and desire. God is not revealed in fleeting, second-long flashes of eye-candy, or amusing action. People who are used to multi-tasking, aimless scrolling and divided attention will find worship very difficult. You need to be able to look, and look for a long time to take in truth in its brilliance.

Consider Psalm 1.

² But his delight *is* in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. ³ He shall be like a tree Planted by the rivers of water, That brings forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper. (Psalm 1:2–3)

To be a tree planted by the waters is an image of drinking deeply of knowledge: a steady, continual, sometimes slow intake of knowledge. Meditating has the idea of chewing on truth, slowly digesting it.

It is to give yourself enough time to take a truth from the Word of God and think it through. That means you need time, and the discipline to not allow anything to intrude on your time. Whether it is morning before work, or on the way to work, with no radio playing, or at night, you need to take time to do nothing except think about what God has said to you in His Word. It might help you to take time to write.

Second, Christians are a people who must understand truth through words, not primarily through visual stimuli. God is revealed through the inspired Word, and therefore people who cannot understand not just language but how language is used through metaphor, simile, analogy, or other literary devices will be hamstrung when it comes to seeking to know God. Skimming text rapidly is the opposite of those skills needed to carefully discern meaning in a text. When I prepare a sermon looking into a text, one of the things I do that forces me to slow down is to look at the text in the original language, and then put it into a block diagram which visually separates the words into subject, verb, direct object, modifiers, prepositional phrases, subordinate clauses. Studying the grammar and syntax is like a speed bump that forces the car of my mind to slow down and take in the meaning carefully. Skimming the Bible is like driving a car at 220 kilometres an hour in the Kruger Park. You'll see a lot, but you won't see much.

Third, Christians are a people who must follow arguments, reason well. Have you ever noticed how many times the Bible uses words like therefore, wherefore, in order that. These are all logical arguments, and the full truth of what God says won't come home to you unless you patiently uncover the logic of the argument. This is the list I use when studying a text and seeing connectors. I ask, is it this stating, purpose, result, causal, explanatory, contrast, conditional, comparison, temporal. Good reasoning requires strong attention, good focus, and the ability to control distractions and interruptions. To be discerning and to exercise sound judgement is a skill, but one that is developed through the right kind of exercise.

Fourth, Christians are a people who must embrace spiritual disciplines such as daily Bible reading, Bible memorisation, daily prayer, regular church attendance, and fasting. None of those will take off in your life if your attention is perpetually distracted, divided, and dissipated.

Adoration and meditation, careful attention to language and logic, disciplines that require concentration are at the core of our faithfulness to Christ. So how can we recover?

III. The Pursuit of Christian Concentration

1. Aim for times of uninterrupted reading or study. To do this, turn off all notifications. Silence the beeps, the dings, the pop-ups, the bright red numbers, everything that is designed to distract, divide and dissipate your attention. Maybe switch off wi-fi altogether. It may be uncomfortable at first, and you will be restless. Cal Newport teaches in his book *Deep Work* Embrace boredom. Deliberately resist the urge to fill every moment with distractions like your phone. Instead, train your brain to tolerate boredom by allowing it to be still, which makes it easier to focus when you need to. Scripture exhorts us to be still and know that God is God. Psalm 4:4 says, "Meditate within your heart on your bed, and be still. Selah. Maybe set yourself a timer to tell you when you've been reading for twenty minutes. Put away all the devices that will tempt you to check updates and look for notifications while reading or studying. Reading a paper book or on an e-reader with no links or notifications is a good way to help you to do this. Remember, your brain was trained one way by technologies; it is possible to train it in the other direction.
2. Transfer this to work, wherever possible. Perhaps some, or even most of our hours require being connected, receiving messages, notifications. But at least at some point in your day or week, practice what Cal Newport calls "Deep Work." "Stop switching between programs, apps, and tabs repeatedly. You're training yourself to have divided, dissipated attention. Learn to work carefully on one task at a time. Go deep, not wide.
3. Curate your digital media ahead of time. The idea here is to take some time, perhaps on the

weekend, on your free day, to decide what you are going to watch or listen to in the coming week when you have free time, or leisure, or when travelling, or when waiting somewhere. Decide what sites, podcasts, interviews, sermons, lectures, documentaries, or shows you're going to watch. This helps you keep track of the time you'll spend. But it also delivers you from going on the web and using it randomly for entertainment. That will just pull you back and forth, the algorithms just feeding you whatever will keep you clicking and keep you scrolling. Avoid using the internet for pure entertainment or to alleviate boredom. Don't use Youtube's recommended as a way to fill your time. Curate your media: what will I watch, and read, and listen to during this week when I am not working, serving in church, pursuing a hobby, and so on.

4. Protect and cultivate your spiritual concentration. What this means is the sense of settled, directed abiding in Christ without that scattered, anxious, fractured feeling that our technologies are giving us. Tozer wrote this in the late 1950s, when the level of distraction was fractional compared to today. But in this quote, he says several things which might seem unrelated, but they are all connected. He is saying, Don't be a permanently distracted person, become someone who practices spiritual concentration.

“Retire from the world each day to some private spot, even if it be only the bedroom (for a while I retreated to the furnace room for want of a better place). Stay in the secret place till the surrounding noises begin to fade out of your heart and a sense of God's presence envelops you. Deliberately tune out the unpleasant sounds and come out of your closet determined not to hear them. Listen for the inward Voice till you learn to recognize it. Stop trying to compete with others. Give yourself to God and then be what and who you are without regard to what others think. Reduce your interests to a few. Don't try to know what will be of no service to you. Avoid the digest type of mind—short bits of unrelated facts, cute stories and bright sayings. Learn to pray inwardly every moment. After a while you can do this even while you work. Practice candour, childlike honesty, humility. Pray for a single eye. Read less, but read more of what is important to your inner life. Never let your mind remain scattered for very long. Call home your roving thoughts. Gaze on Christ with the eyes of your soul. Practice spiritual concentration.”

When you feel you are being divided, dissipated, distracted, work against that tendency.

5. Practice and strengthen your focus with some serious art. This will sound strange to some of you. First, by art, I don't just mean paintings, the visual art. I mean all those human creations that work with the imagination. Poetry, literature, music, painting and sculpture, theatre. By serious, I mean it is demanding because it aims to be meaningful and beautiful, not just entertaining and popular. When we read serious literature or poetry, or listen to some music by a serious composer, look at a drawing, painting, sculpture by a serious artist, it makes demands on our attention and focus. And in many ways, the kind of focus you have to give is very similar to the kind of meditation you have to have with the Word of God. They both require you to stop thinking about yourself. Focus on what is being said or played or done. Look for the shape, how is this said or made? What is being communicated? What should I think or feel? And I guarantee you, the same restlessness you feel when studying, is going to be there. The boredom and the crying out for the relief of distraction will be there. If you can endure it, you'll be re-shaping your brain to be able to admire beauty, which is at the core of worshipping God. You'll be re-learning those abilities of meditation, contemplation, admiration.

We must fight for spiritual focus. We cannot learn or mature as disciples without it. We cannot deeply admire and adore our God without it. We cannot pray and study in any serious or concerted way without it. We cannot be greatly used of God if we are a chronically distracted people. Hear

again the last sentences of Tozer's word: "Never let your mind remain scattered for very long. Call home your roving thoughts. Gaze on Christ with the eyes of your soul. Practice spiritual concentration."