

A NEW IDOL, A NEW TOY

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We are now in the age of Information Technology (IT). Technology is no more confined to raw bulk and machines. It is now harnessed to the spread of information - the raw material from which knowledge is built up. This has been made possible by the personal computer, which has been around for some time, and the Internet, which is a recent introduction.

A New Wonder

The Internet connects personal computers around the world so that communication between individuals is just a few strokes of the keyboard away (or, just a few clicks of the mouse away). The connection is made via the local telephone network, which in turn is linked to the rest of the world via underwater cables and satellite. In the quiet of the bedroom or the study, and in the noisy office or airport, one can get linked as long as there is a computer terminal. The facilities on the Internet include the world-wide-web from which one can get information on virtually any subject, the electronic mail by which letters are delivered instantaneously (so much so that the traditional mail is now dubbed "snail mail") and the chat-boards over which messages may be exchanged interactively. The combination of these make other powerful applications possible - e.g. electronic commerce, electronic banking, telemedicine, and video conferencing.

In this age of Information Technology, it will be unwise of any political regime to hinder access to information by imposing restrictive laws. The only way to effectively prevent the free flow of information is by not getting connected to the world. It is one thing to be unable to get connected because of general backwardness in the literacy and the economy of the country. It is another thing to refuse to get connected for fear of external influence upon the populace. This is what a few countries in the world have chosen to do, to their own great loss. They will lag farther and farther behind with time. We pity the people who are deprived in that way.

New Problems

With the free exchange of information has come new problems. Any useful tool can be turned into a dangerous weapon. A child has access to pornographic material. A teenager has access to information on how to make a bomb at home. An adult has access to the same information as the child and the teenager. No amount of censorship can effectively prevent the individual from getting the information he wants. The individual has to practise self-censorship and self-control. It is here that the

power of the gospel comes into its own. Only one who is born again of the Spirit of God will desire to live a holy life. Only the regenerate will have power within himself to resist temptations. Only the disciple of Christ will unselfishly seek the good of others instead of harm.

This is not to say that the non-Christians are devoid of virtues. Neither are we saying that true Christians are perfect in their public or private lives. Indeed, Christians are the ones most acutely aware of their own sinfulness, and therefore their need for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to live a holy life. And we know of many Christians who have fallen into grievous sins. However, what we are saying is that the gospel alone can transform people in their nature so that they desire higher and better things, and at the same time give them the Spirit's power "to will and to do for His good pleasure." It is only then that they will have the desire and the capability to exercise self-censorship and self-control. Of course, parents have to supervise the younger children in the use of the computer, and exercise unobtrusive oversight over their teenage children in this. But no amount of policing will prevent them from doing the undesirable with their computers. If they have no opportunity to access certain sites on the Internet while at home, they can still do it in their friends' homes or in the cyber cafes. And it is not only the misuse of the computer that we are concerned about, but also their ability to cope with other areas of life in this hostile world. Ultimately, our only hope for them lies in their conversion to Christ.

A New Idol

Are Christians immune to the temptations that come from the computer? There are two subtle dangers that we must watch against. The first is to treat the computer as our idol. The computer can do wonders. Every home ought to have one. The good that we can gain out of its use is simply tremendous. We can keep in touch with friends and relatives scattered across the globe, shop from the home, search for information on any subject, write and edit our essays and books, propagate the gospel, save time and money in many of these chores, etc ... The advantages appear limitless. Herein lies the danger. We may begin to think that the computer is the beginning and end of everything. We upgrade our computer to the latest model. We harness it for the advancement of the gospel. We create our own website, and spend many man-hours making it better. We upload printed sermons onto the website. Not satisfied with this, we upgrade this to video preaching.

But what is wrong with harnessing modern technology to the propagation of the gospel? Nothing is wrong with this. In fact, we would encourage it, but with a qualification. Do not allow the use of modern technology to detract from the direct propagation of the gospel to people, through personal witness and public preaching. The gospel proclaimed, and heard, is the chief means ordained by God for the salvation of souls (Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 10:17). The manner of accomplishing this is also ordained by God, namely that of humans ministering directly to humans, souls meeting with souls. The use of the printed page, the radio, the television, and the Internet, can be powerful supplements. And in some situations, they are the only means of reaching the people. But God has seen fit to save souls by His word, proclaimed by saved souls. In the incarnation, the Son of God took on perfect human nature to identify Himself with the fallen race He came to save. No other way was good enough, except the way of the Son of Man dying as a grain of wheat falling to the ground. The incarnation is unique to the office of Christ as Mediator and Saviour, but

the abiding principle is that His disciples must have the incarnation¹ life in order to produce much grain. Practically, that means getting to know people, living with the people, and identifying with them in their lives, with the aim of bringing the gospel to them - by word and by life.

Furthermore, not everything posted on the Internet is true and infallible. The Internet is used by friends and foes of the gospel alike. It is also used by mistaken, untaught, and immature believers. With the apostle Paul, we would rejoice whenever the gospel is preached - regardless of the motive of the preachers (Philippians 1:18). But our hearts wince when truths are handled badly. There are those who have a zeal that far exceeds their knowledge. They are well-meaning, but they cause much harm. We have to be reminded that those who handle God's word will be judged more strictly (James 3:1). If we have to be careful in preaching, we have to be more careful in writing. What is written is more permanent, and carries with it the imprint of authority not found in what is spoken. A slip of the tongue can occur in speech, whereas writing involves at least some deliberation. We would wish that some Christians not write, but we are not the Lord of others' conscience, nor are we the master of cyberspace. Do not accept everything gleaned from the Internet as true and infallible.

A New Toy

The next danger of the computer to the Christian is that it might become a toy. In the privacy of the home, the study, or the office, the tired Christian may turn to one of the many game packages that often come together with the purchase of any computer. When man is pitted against machine, an exciting match ensues. Time flies past without the engrossed Christian knowing it. One round of the match follows another, one level of difficulty progresses to the next, and ... behold, two hours or more have flown past. As with anything in life that gives pleasure, playing computer games is addictive. This may repeat itself from day to day (or night to night), so that school homework is not done, the dishes are not washed, the children are neglected, church meetings are passed by ... And it is not just playing games that gives pleasure. Chatting on the computer is also pleasurable, and so is surfing the Internet. Precious time is wasted on all these. Spiritual decline sets in. Relationship problems arise in the home, the church, and the place of work - all because the respectable computer has been treated as a modern toy.

Christian friends, let us beware of treating the computer as an idol, or a toy.