

WORSHIPPING IN A DIGITAL AGE

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One Sunday while the sacrament was being passed, a ward Relief Society president I know pulled out her smartphone to read “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles.” Inspired by this apostolic testimony of the Savior, she felt renewed in her commitment to always remember Him.

However, her positive feelings melted away a few days later when, in the mail, she received an anonymous letter from a ward member. The author criticized her for setting a bad example by being on her smartphone in sacrament meeting. She was crushed.

Certainly, she hadn’t meant to offend anyone by using her mobile device. She rarely used it in the chapel, and only then when she felt it was appropriate. But after receiving the letter, she began to doubt herself.

A New Challenge

Every generation has its challenges. One study reports that by 2020 there will be more people with a mobile phone (5.4 billion) than with running water (3.5 billion).¹ Add in tablets, “phablets,” and other connected devices, and you get a world that is wrestling with the question: What is appropriate “digital etiquette”?

As parents, leaders, and teachers struggle to

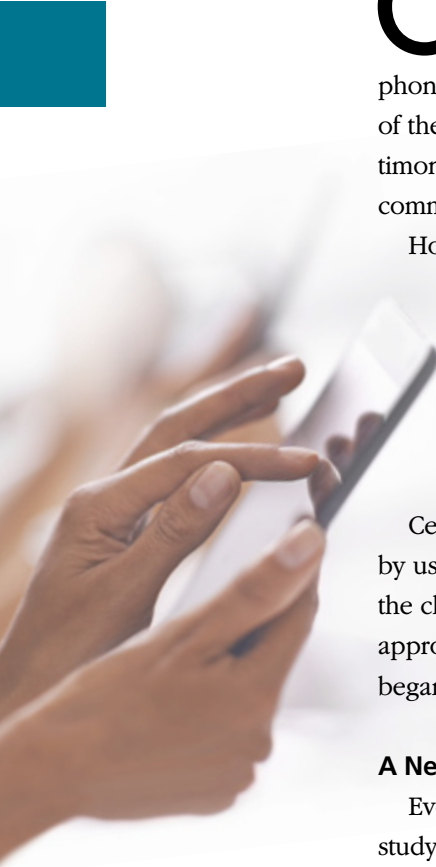
decide what is appropriate digital etiquette in Church settings, different opinions have led to sometimes conflicting ways to handle digital devices in Church meetings.

Church leaders have provided counsel on the blessings and dangers of using technology. However, Church leaders don’t always spell out all of the do’s and don’ts of gospel living (see Mosiah 4:29–30). Members are expected to study the matter for themselves and seek the guidance of the Holy Ghost in making decisions. Unfortunately, as in the situation above, sometimes we adopt not only a position but also a critical attitude toward those with a different position.

Inspired by God; Exploited by Satan

God has provided the blessings of technology for our benefit and the advancing of His work.² So while some members use their digital devices inappropriately, Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has taught that “we should not allow a fear of mistakes to hold us back from receiving the great blessings these tools can provide.”³ We need to learn to use them appropriately and teach our children to do so as well.

Mobile devices help members of the Church with gospel study, family history and





Consider these three principles for using devices appropriately in the chapel.

temple work, and sharing the gospel. For example, over three million people used the Gospel Library app in January 2018. Their combined study time equaled more than a thousand years.

Along with noting the blessings, Church leaders have warned about the potential dangers as well, including wasted time, damaged relationships, and entrapment in sin.⁴ In Church settings, inappropriate use can distract us and others from worship and learning that is crucial to developing our relationship with God.

However, these dangers aren't unique to digital devices. "Some of these tools—like any tool in an unpracticed or undisciplined hand—can be dangerous," taught President M. Russell Ballard, Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. ". . . That is no different from how people choose to use television or movies or even a library. Satan is always quick to exploit the negative power of new inventions, to spoil and degrade, and to neutralize any effect for good."⁵

Mobile Devices in Sacrament Meeting

Given the potential blessings—as well as the potential distractions—of these digital devices, how do members decide what

approach to take? Joseph Smith suggested the power of a principle-based approach when he said, “I teach them correct principles, and they govern themselves.”⁶

Here, we examine principles that may be helpful in making decisions about using mobile devices in sacrament meeting. For a discussion on appropriate use of digital devices in the classroom, see “Teaching with Tech: Engaging Youth in a Digital World,” by Brother Brian K. Ashton, Second Counselor in the Sunday School General Presidency, on page 30 of this issue.

Principle 1: My choices support worship.

Sacrament meeting is for “[paying our] devotions unto the Most High” (D&C 59:10). President Dallin H. Oaks, First Counselor in the First Presidency, taught that our focus there should be on renewing our covenants and our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His Atonement.⁷ What we choose to do in sacrament meeting should help us do those things.

Given that focus, if the need arises, we might appropriately use our devices to:

- *Enhance our worship.* A member might use a digital device during sacrament meeting to look up scriptures, sing hymns, or take notes on spiritual impressions.
- *Minister.* A bishop might notice someone new or less active slip into the back of the chapel during sacrament meeting and, if prompted, text the ward mission leader to welcome the individual and invite them to a Gospel Principles class after the meeting.
- *Facilitate essential connectivity.* Doctors, first-responders, and other on-call professionals can participate in worship services because they know they can be reached if necessary through their mobile devices.

As we seek to focus on the Savior, it's important to remember that our devices can facilitate our study, but they can't do our learning. They can give us something to ponder, but they can't do our thinking for us. They can even help us to remember to pray, but the praying is something we have to do for ourselves.

Elder Bednar taught that our relationship with God is real, not virtual.⁸ It can't be double-clicked or downloaded.⁹ So while the Relief Society president at the beginning of this article used her phone to help her center her thoughts on Christ, the covenant she was renewing wasn't with her phone; it was with Him. The journey her device helped her start had to be finished in her thoughts, her prayers, and her actions.

Principle 2: I minimize distractions.

We should all strive for an environment that enhances our focus on worship and learning. Minimizing distractions is important. This principle applies to many situations, from how we hold conversations or handle fussy children to how we use our digital devices.

There are so many ways to be distracted by a device that was designed to do so many things. Obviously, watching videos, listening to music, or playing games will make it difficult to pay attention to sacrament services. But so will checking email, text messages, social media, sports scores, and the many dings, buzzes, and badges that pull us into events, relationships, and conversations that exist outside of the meeting. All of this and more can distract us and others, even several rows away.

For those who want to eliminate digital distractions entirely, leaving their devices at home or turning them off may be appropriate. For those who use their devices to support their worship but want to avoid distracting others, it might be enough to silence the device, set it on do not disturb, or put it in airplane mode.¹⁰



Principle 3: I focus on my own worship.

There will always be distractions of one kind or another, and not all of them are digital. These might include a fussy infant, a buzzing insect, or the noisy traffic outside. We bear primary responsibility for what we get out of our worship. So if someone forgets to put their phone on airplane mode, we need to try to put ourselves on “ignore distractions” mode.

President Russell M. Nelson taught, “Each member of the Church bears responsibility for the spiritual enrichment that can come from a sacrament meeting.”¹¹

If we notice others around us using their devices, we need to be careful about assuming that what they’re doing

is inappropriate just because it’s on a digital device. If the individual is a child or someone we are called to have responsibility for, it may be appropriate to check on their usage as the Spirit directs. Otherwise, we try to return to our own worship.

Learning Together

In a statement that encompasses these principles, President Oaks counseled, “During sacrament meeting—and especially during the sacrament service—we should concentrate on worship and refrain from all other activities, especially from behavior that could interfere with the worship of others.”¹²

There are many other principles that could help guide our usage. As digital devices become an increasingly normal part of our culture, we will need to wrestle together with questions about what is appropriate. Because every situation is unique and technology will continue to change, we need to continually examine our own usage, consider new or different perspectives, and be willing to forgive others as we learn together. ■

NOTES

1. See “10th Annual Cisco Visual Networking Index (VNI) Mobile Forecast Projects 70 Percent of Global Population Will Be Mobile Users,” Feb. 3, 2016, newsroom.cisco.com.
2. See David A. Bednar, “Apostle Offers Counsel about Social Media,” *Ensign*, Jan. 2015, 17; *Discourses of Brigham Young*, sel. John A. Widtsoe [1954], 18–19.
3. In Sarah Jane Weaver, “Elder Bednar Tells 2016 Mission Presidents Not to Fear Technology,” July 6, 2016, news.lds.org.
4. See “Elder Bednar Tells 2016 Mission Presidents.”
5. M. Russell Ballard, “Sharing the Gospel Using the Internet,” *Ensign*, July 2008, 60; *Liahona*, June 2008, N2.
6. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith (2007)*, 284.
7. See Dallin H. Oaks, “Sacrament Meeting and the Sacrament,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2008, 17–20.
8. See David A. Bednar, “Things as They Really Are,” *Ensign*, June 2010, 16–25; *Liahona*, June 2010, 22–31.
9. See Scott D. Whiting, “Digital Detachment and Personal Revelation,” *Ensign*, Mar. 2010, 16–21.
10. See M. Russell Ballard, “Be Still, and Know That I Am God” (Church Educational System devotional, May 4, 2014), lds.org/broadcasts.
11. Russell M. Nelson, “Worshiping at Sacrament Meeting,” *Ensign*, Aug. 2004, 28; *Liahona*, Aug. 2004, 14.
12. Dallin H. Oaks, “Sacrament Meeting and the Sacrament,” 18–19.