

FIRST-PERSON: 7 reasons to avoid using smartphones or tablets during worship services

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Several years ago, I decided to become a real church member. Let me explain.

For over 30 years, I was the preacher each Sunday at whatever church I attended. I preached as the pastor, the interim pastor, or guest preacher. I never viewed the church on Sunday mornings from the pews or the chairs. I wrote a book called *I Am a Church Member*, but I did not have the view of the church member, at least on Sunday morning worship services.

I decided eight years ago to decline almost every invitation to preach. I wanted to be active in my local church as a church member, not away on Sundays as a preacher in another church.

It has been an incredible blessing.

And it has been eye-opening. Let me give you one example.

I noticed several people in the church using their smartphones or tablets, presumably as a digital Bible or a digital notetaker. For those I could see from my vantage point, I also noticed that many of those with digital devices would click on the notifications they received. They were obviously distracted, and they obviously distracted me. As a point of confession, I looked over the shoulder of a church member last fall as he was looking at the college football rankings for

the week. I am ashamed to say I looked longer than I should.

Recently, I went to a movie theater in my hometown. I noticed the previews stressed that everyone must turn off their phones and other digital devices.

I guess theaters have higher standards than churches in that regard.

Have I become a legalistic and grumpy old man? Maybe. But hear me out.

Frankly, I have good reasons to ask church leaders to encourage their members to turn off their electronic devices. Here are seven of the reasons.

1. **Smartphones and tablets often distract the person looking at them.** I see it every week. Rarely do I see church members looking at their smartphones without some kind of notification popping up. Of course, they can't wait to read the notification.
2. **Smartphones and tablets often distract others.** I wish I were not one of those prone to distraction, but I am. When that light on someone's phone catches my eye, I immediately turn to it.
3. **Smartphones have addictive content that is contributing to a mental health crisis among young people.** If you doubt the veracity of my claim, just do some research. For example, read *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt. Look at his research on how social media on smartphones is rewiring the minds of our children and youth. Look at the dramatic increase in anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicide among Gen Z once they begin using a smartphone with social media access and other harmful sites. Frankly, I don't want to give my tacit approval to the habitual use of smartphones by reading my own smartphone in church.
4. **Most churches have many options for reading the Bible or**

taking notes in a worship service without needing a smartphone or tablet. I encourage pastors to get pew Bibles in the translation from which they preach most frequently. The biblical text can be put on a screen. It's easy to place a sermon outline in the bulletin. Most churches have pens in their worship centers as well. You don't have to have a digital device even if you didn't bring a print Bible.

5. **Writing increases retention more than using a keyboard.** I was surprised again at the number of studies that proved this statement. When you take handwritten notes, you are more engaged in the sermon and retain the content more effectively. By the way, your pastor will be encouraged when several church members become notetakers.
6. **Smartphones create a sense of isolation.** Again, there are several good pieces of research on this topic. Gathering for worship services is meant to be a communal experience because we are involved in shared community activities like reading our Bibles, taking notes, listening to the sermon, or singing and praising God together. The smartphone sends us into isolation rather than community.
7. **Church members communicate the wrong priorities when they use their smartphones in worship services.** Even if we stay focused on the biblical text and the sermon, we could implicitly communicate to other church members that we are more focused on the phone than the God we worship.

I know we can't mandate that members turn off phones during worship services. I also know that many churches have permitted or even encouraged it so long that reversing it will be difficult. Still, I hope you hear my concerns. I think they are real and pervasive.