



Preacher's Pen by Gene McCoy

One of my "church mothers" chided me recently when I confessed to texting during church. Disappointing your mother is something you want to avoid. Mom is always right to call attention to anything her child does that distracts and detracts — especially in church. And there is no doubt that some of the cell phone usage in church does both. Cell phone usage can be very annoying and disrespectful. "Mom's" gentle scolding did cause me to think about this matter. So I did some analyzing.

Interestingly, that which annoys the young people most about cell phone usage is older people who do not know how to silence their phone so as to prevent disruption. And also older people who have not learned cell phone etiquette. By that I mean people who will take a call and even leave the room to actually talk. That can be more disrespectful to a speaker than texting while remaining in the room. The one who leaves the room to take a call basically announces to everyone that the spur-of-the-moment phone call is more important than the prepared comments of the speaker. Even at that, there are phone calls that are actually emergent in nature. A doctor who is on call, for example, has to be accessible to his patients. In that case, the doctor displayed honor to the speaker by at least attending the session and listening to as much of the presentation as possible, not knowing whether or not a call would come. (It is an interesting observation that people do not criticize a doctor or businessman whose pager disrupts a presentation. We have grown to accept that. I think the same will be true with cell phones in time.)

On the other hand, there are other less technological ways in which some adults in churches are equally disrespectful and distracting. Consider some of the classic ways adults were disrupting and distracting church audiences long before cell phones existed.

1) clipping nails (reportedly the most

distracting noise in an audience apart a baby crying, I assume)

2) reading the Sunday bulletin when they should be listening or singing (this is particularly distracting to the singer/speaker)

3) whispering

4) passing notes

5) snoring! (which, you have to admit, is hard to do while texting) Seriously, now.

We all know how unlikely it is that anyone could nod off during a sermon!

One of the advantages of texting is that you don't have to lean over in your seat, as do those who talk to their neighbor during church — a distraction in itself. And texting is completely silent!

Regarding my cell phone use in church, it really isn't out of disrespect to the speaker or evidence that I am not listening. Most times that I text in church, I am communicating with the people in the media center regarding the volume level, sound quality, slide content, order of worship segments, etc. In this usage, texting actually enhances the worship experience for everyone!

On many occasions, I am not actually texting anyone. There are many other applications of cell phone usage that involve keying in messages with your thumbs. Most times I am recording a message to myself on the notepad feature. It's the same thing as taking notes with a pen and paper. It could be a reminder to make an important announcement. Or it may be something someone said that I want to remember and think about later.

I also know that some of the "texting" occurring in our audience is actually the posting on Facebook some key point or truth that has just been conveyed by the speaker. Through this means, the message we are hearing in our Worship Center is being communicated via Facebook to countless numbers of people around the globe.

Sometimes people are utilizing the Internet in church to *continued on p. 3*



explore a topic or to research a point that is being discussed in the sermon. It is amazing to me how quickly the younger people can navigate the Internet to access information. That has come in handy as they are able to do this during a class so as to provide helpful information on the topic. Some have been known to look up an unfamiliar word by accessing the online dictionary or thesaurus. Or they may be accessing a map on their phone, much like looking in the back of your printed Bible.

Many times the person who appears to be texting is actually navigating the Bible app. Maybe they are comparing the many translations that are readily available on their phone app. Maybe they are utilizing the extensive concordance to dig deeper into the Bible's use of a word or to gain a better understanding of the text being discussed. All of this requires the keying in of letters and numbers on the phone keypad. Today's phones are miniature computers.

As much as I resist this next explanation, being one who has been trained to maintain eye contact with the speaker and to give visible evidence that I am listening, there actually are (apparently) people who listen better while doodling. One person claims she listens better when she is playing games on her cell phone. Another person may like to do hand work (e.g., crochet, needlepoint, etc.). Some, as I said above, are reading the bulletin or some other piece of literature. Some substitute a pen and paper for a cell phone and are writing who knows what. I would like to think they are taking copious notes on the very informative and

captivating sermon. Or maybe they are writing down the hilarious joke the preacher just told so that they can be the life of the next party they attend. I don't know what they are doing when they aren't visually locked in on the speaker. Whatever the activity, the hands and mind are engaged in something other than listening. Or, more likely, in addition to listening. Or as they are listening.

So, yes, I know there are people who are misbehaving in church. Some are using cell phones. Others are using pen and paper. Others are whispering and visiting (I don't see much evidence of that in our assemblies, thankfully).

Some misbehave by jumping to incorrect conclusions about what others are doing with their cell phones. The bottom line is that I can't know for sure what people are doing

when they are writing on a piece of paper or entering things on their cell phone keypad. Until I know otherwise, I assume they are taking notes on the sermon, doodling so as to listen better, transmitting the message to the world via Facebook, or maybe texting someone else in the room relating to the truths being discussed.

Unless their activity requires others to pay attention to them, as does the passing of notes and whispering, one's use of a cell phone (or other electronic device, such as an iPad or Kindle) in church should not raise our ire. Nor does it warrant any more criticism than those whose other activities may indicate a lack of respect or attention.