

Theology and Technology: Biblical and Practical Aspects

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ABSTRACT

The article seeks to define technology showing that it can be a tool which can be of practical use for humanity or can be of spiritual help or hindrance to believers. Consideration is given to the use of technology in the OT and NT, including its wrongful use. Technology and ethics present opportunities to discuss its rightful or wrongful use as it provides an appropriate framework for sin i.e., the internet. The article also considers information technology and how it has advanced the gospel but also how the use of online facilities leaves believers open to the neglect of real relationships and fellowship. Technology brings unexpected benefits but also unimaginable pitfalls in the area of consumerism and materialism.

KEY WORDS: the definition of technology, internet, evangelism, consumerism, use for the glory of God.

INTRODUCTION

Technology is the application of knowledge for practical ends. It is the science of processing various materials as aids for life, human activity, and social interaction. When we talk about technology, we refer to many aspects related to the mechanical, technical, electrical, electronic, etc. Technology is a tool for human existence, but it can also be used as a tool against humans. In recent time, the development of technology has experienced an exceptional growth.

From the beginning of the Bible we find the use of technology in various forms as an integral part of human activity. Technology is a physical reality, but it also has spiritual values due to the influence it has on man. We cannot think of the use of technology void of a spiritual reality. Arthur Hunt argued that technology is not neutral, but it has the potential to change our beliefs and behaviors as our print-oriented culture is shifting to an image-oriented one.²

Recent research on the influence of technology on human life focuses mainly on the influence it has on human thinking and activity. Technology cannot be separated from spiritual reality and the way in which it influences not only the

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² Arthur W. Hunt III, *The Vanishing Word: The Veneration of Visual Imagery in the Postmodern World* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 19.

human body or thought but also the soul. This study examines the biblical aspects of technology and its impact in a practical way in the life of faith today.

Paula McNutt in her interdisciplinary study on the impact of iron technology on the material and cultural life of ancient Israel noted that technology and technological innovations have long been recognized as major contributors to the development of social and cultural systems and have tended to be closely related to crucial turning points in human history.³

Although this research emphasizes some negative aspects of technology, it is important to note that much of the technological accomplishment is beneficial for humanity, but it also has a destructive spiritual potential. Separating technology from spiritual reality means ignoring the existence of a point of intersection between theology and technology.

OLD TESTAMENT AND TECHNOLOGY: TOOL VS. TRAP

In the Bible we find from the very beginning the use of technology by people who have moved away from God (building cities Gen. 4.17; inventing musical instruments Gen. 4.21; metalworking Gen. 4.22; building a tower Gen 11) or by the people who sought to be in the will of God (building an ark Gen 6; building wells Gen 21.30-31, 26.15; building altars Gen. 12:7).

Although today we expect the technological process to finally offer extremely complex products, in ancient times the use of technology to produce simple but useful things meant a lot. One basic example of crafting something for daily use is the sandals. The use of sandals was extremely important in terms of the protection they offered. However, we find references to the use of sandals in both the Old and New Testaments not only in relation to physical activity but having a symbolic value. In the Pentateuch we find a reference to the taking off of sandals in the context of the theophany in Ex. 3 (see also Jos. 5:15), or having the sandals on in the context of deliverance from the bondage of Egypt (Ex. 12:11). Another reference is that God bears witness to how miraculously their garments and sandals were not worn out in the wilderness for forty years (Deut. 29.5). The book of Ruth mentions the use of taking off and offering sandals as a symbol of completing a transaction (Ruth 4.7).

In the New Testament we find references to sandals with reference to an act of spiritual significance. John the Baptist is not worthy to untie the Messiah's shoes (e.g. Matt. 3:11; Mk. 1:7; Lk. 3:16; Jn. 1:27). We also find the mention of sandals

³ Paula McNutt, *The Forging of Israel: Iron Technology, Symbolism and Tradition in Ancient Society* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2009), 13.

with reference to the commission for the ministry (Lk. 10:1-16; Lk. 22:36), thus their usage is essential for fulfilling the responsibility of delivering the Gospel message.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE TABERNACLE

Technology was used not only for creating simple object for daily use, but also for special elements related to worship. The construction of the Tabernacle required a special skill in processing materials of gold, silver, bronze, stones, and wood. God endowed Bezaleel and Oholiab in a special way for work that included sculpting and processing various materials (Ex. 31:2-11). The most valuable object was the Ark of the Covenant – a sacred object that symbolized God’s presence among His people and was used as a storehouse for the tablets of the law, Aaron’s staff, and the manna vessel (Heb. 9:4). Later, we find the use of technology in building the Temple of Solomon (1 Kings 6). Hiram is described as a skilled worker in bronze (1 Kings 7:13-14). Throughout the history of the people of Israel we find the use of technology in processing various materials.

THE WRONG USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology has often been used against God. The Tower of Babel is a symbol of the use of technology in a way God is not honored (Gen. 11: 3-9). Idolatry is another example of the use of technology for wrong worship. The defining element regarding idolatry is the production of a physical object in various forms and materials for worshiping a deity that the object represents.

If in Exodus 31 the craftsmen use their skills to worship God, one chapter later we find technology in the service of idolatrous worship as they fashioned the golden calf (Ex. 32:2-4). The crafting of idols occurs many times in the Bible not only among pagan people, but also in the people of God (*e.g.* the worship of the bronze serpent that Moses crafted in Numbers 21:9 as Nehushtan 2 Kgs. 18:4; the crafting and worshiping of a piece of wood Is. 44:10-20; etc.).

Another example of the misuse of technology in worship is the pride caused by great technological achievements (*e.g.* the pride of king Nebuchadnezzar for building great Babylon, Dan. 4:30) or confidence in technological achievements. Psalm 20:7 presents the tendency of man to trust military technological development as an asset in time of war. Wisdom literature reflects this reality in which some trust in chariots and horses. This reference does not imply that military technology has a negative connotation, but the fact that trust in technology has replaced trust in God.

King Uzziah ordered the construction of war machines placed on towers and in strategic corners serving as a defence against the Philistines in the event of a siege by throwing arrows and large stones (2 Chronicles 26:14-15). The spiritual fall of Uzziah comes at a time when he was strong from a military point of view and his accomplishments led him to pride (2 Chron. 26:16).

A similar example is found in 2 Chronicles 16:12 where Asa did not seek God during his illness but sought help from doctors. This passage is not a prohibition on appealing to doctors in case of illness, but an unwanted description of Asa's independence from God.

John Calvin argued that "the human heart is a perpetual idol factory."⁴ With the help of technology, this tendency toward idolatry becomes more practical since idols give a visible form to an invisible reality.

NEW TESTAMENT AND TECHNOLOGY: BIBLICAL ASPECTS

In the New Testament we often find references to elements that require the use of technology. In his preaching, Jesus often illustrates spiritual truths of the Kingdom of Heaven using various tools or objects (cities Matt. 5:14; oil lamps Matt. 5:14-16; 25:1-13; gates Matt. 7:13-14; nets Matt. 13:47- 50; coins Lk. 15:8-10; tower Lk. 13:4; etc.). The Acts of the Apostles gives us examples of several technological elements (gate 3:2; dungeon 4:3, 5:23; builders 4:11; chariot 8:28; books 1:1, 19:19; ships 13:4, 13; basket 9:25; altars 17:23; tents 18:3; idols 19:24-25; whips 22:24; etc.).

Paul uses elements of spiritual armor to communicate truths about the spiritual battle in which the Christian is involved (cf. 6:11-17). In the book of Revelation, we find many elements that involve the use of technology from the candlesticks that represent the churches to the Holy City which is built of gold and jasper (Rev. 21:18).

The letters represent the element by which the New Testament has been preserved over time through writing, copying, and distribution. Technology is therefore used not only to explain and exemplify the message of Scripture, but also to preserve it.

⁴ John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 2, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 108.

INFRASTRUCTURE: “ALL ROADS LEAD TO ROME”

Phillip Schaff mentions that all roads pointed towards the Imperial City, and started from its *Milliarium Aureum*,⁵ the Golden Milestone that was considered to be the place from which all the distances were measured in the Roman Empire. Although the expression “mille viae ducunt homines per saecula Romam” (a thousand roads lead men forever to Rome) was penned in 1175 by Alain de Lille in one of his works, *Liber Parabolarum*, the reality of a unique system of roads in the Roman Empire of the first century is undisputed.

One clear reference is the swift movement of two hundred soldiers with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to Caesarea at night to bring Paul to safety (Acts. 23:23-25). Road infrastructure was, among other things, one of the advantages for the spreading of the Gospel.

NEW TESTAMENT TERMINOLOGY FOR TECHNOLOGY

Technology is a broad term. The etymology of the term *technology* indicates a construction of two terms τέχνη (*technē*) and λόγία. The term τέχνη (*technē*) means skill, art, craft, method, system, methodology while λόγία is a derivate of λόγος (*logos*) which means word, narration, explanation, constructed with the suffix -ία (-ia).

In the New Testament, the term τέχνη (*technē*) appears three times (Acts 17:29; 18:3 and Rev. 18:22), while the related term τεχνίτης (*technitēs*) appears four times (Acts 19:24, 38; Heb. 11:10 and Rev. 18:22). Thus, we have five chapters in the New Testament where we can find the terms τέχνη and τεχνίτης from where we can emphasize five important theological aspects.

First, in Acts 17:29 the apostle Paul speaks to the Athenian philosophers proclaiming that God is not a God created by man’s craft and skill – the term used is τέχνη. The second passage is in Acts 18:3 where apostle Paul meets Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth and because they had the same craft, they worked together to make tents – the term τέχνη appears. In the next chapter we find the term τεχνίτης twice in v.24 and 38 with reference to Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis gaining with his craftsmen from their occupation.

⁵ Philip Schaff, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325 Volume I - The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Reverend Alexander Roberts (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 1.

The fourth passage is Heb. 11:10 where the term τεχνίτης is used about God who is the designer and builder of the heavenly city. The last passage is Revelation 18:22 where we find both terms τέχνη and τεχνίτης. In this passage John presents the destruction of Babylon and the fact that there will no longer be heard in this city the sound of harpists and musicians, of flute players and trumpeters, and also a craftsman of any craft will be found in this city no more, neither the sound of the mill, because Babylon will be destroyed.

An analysis of these passages in which we find the terms denoting technology reflects the following fundamental principles. We first understand that God is not a created God, created through a technological process like the idols and representations found in Athens. God is the one who creates man and gives him the ability to use technology. Thus, technology is ultimately from God and for God.

In the second passage where we see the apostle Paul working technologically, we understand that technology can be used and must be used for God's work. In the next chapter, however, we understand that technology can be used to craft statuettes for idolatrous worship. Thus, technology is a tool that can be used both as a blessing and as a curse.

In the fourth passage we discover that God is described as a technical builder who builds the heavenly city on a solid foundation. This technical ability is a nuance of God's creative power.

In Revelation 18 we see that technology can be used in a negative way for Babylon. From a theological point of view, Babylon symbolizes the city that opposes God, but which will eventually be destroyed. From an eschatological point of view, any technological process in opposition to what God is will be destroyed.

Concluding all these aspects related to the way in which the New Testament presents the use of technology, we emphasize that technology has been used simultaneously for the advancement of the work of the Gospel and against it.

TECHNOLOGY AND THEOLOGY: PRACTICAL ASPECTS

Studying the history of the Church and the way the technological development has impacted it, the examples are innumerable. When Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1436, no one anticipated the huge effect this invention would have on the Church starting with the 15th Century. Later, as the Industrial Revolution took place starting with the 18th Century, the transition

from an agrarian to industrial society was just the beginning of a much rapid technological development.

The Industrial Revolution significantly affected society and Church life, directly or indirectly. Today we are living in a time of digital revolution – the development of the media and the Internet. Today’s society has shifted from Gutenberg era to Zuckerberg era.⁶

The generation before our own was the first generation of Christians who had to learn how to live and deal with a television in the house. This generation of Christians is the first generation who must learn how to live holy in a world of information technology. There are many studies performed today on the extent the modern technology, especially information technology, is affecting our life, health, behavior, brain, social life, etc. Inevitably all these aspects relate to our spiritual life in many ways.

Technology and Ethics

Technology is not good or bad *per se*. The technology is neutral from a moral point of view. However, each technological element has a certain moral dimension. The fact that technology can be morally neutral does not mean that it is neutral in terms of destructive potential. A knife, although is a tool in the kitchen, can also be used in a dangerous way comparing to a stuffed animal toy.

Our life is marked by useful technological things; however, from a spiritual point of view technology becomes part of a spiritual reality depending upon how it is used.

Wrong use of technology provides an appropriate framework for sin. The internet is just an example in which ethics is relativized and sin is trivialized. Thus, the technological development has led to the potential growth of sin. The development of technology tends to make us less dependent on God. John Piper noted that one of the great uses of Twitter and Facebook will be to prove at the Last Day that prayerlessness was not from lack of time.⁷ A wrong use of technology is that in which the life of faith becomes more superficial, and the resulting behavior is inclined to violence, immorality, rebellion, etc. Studying the epidemic of boredom in our culture, Richard Winter argued that technology

⁶ John Naughton, *From Gutenberg to Zuckerberg: Disruptive Innovation in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Quercus, 2014).

⁷ “John Piper on Twitter: ‘One of the Great Uses of Twitter and Facebook Will Be to Prove at the Last Day That Prayerlessness Was Not from Lack of Time.’ / Twitter,” Twitter, accessed July 21, 2020, <https://twitter.com/JohnPiper/status/5027319857>.

acts as a giant amplifier of both aspects of the world – all that is wonderful and good *and* all that is terrible and evil. He refers to Aldous Huxley’s vision of the future (*Brave New World*) in which the advancing of technology, spiritual devastation is more likely to come from an enemy with a smiling face, since people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.⁸

Tim Challies is correct in affirming that the long history of human innovation proves that every technology has inevitable consequences. Thus “when we create and develop new technologies, we must also understand that technology is like everything else in this sinful world: it is subject to the curse.”⁹ The virtual world is simultaneously a spiritual world, a platform in which the Gospel is proclaimed but also where the power of darkness is advancing.

Nomophobia is another example of a type of fear of being without a mobile device. As any other addiction, nomophobia represents a modern form of idolatry in which technology is used for sinful purposes.

Technology and Epistemology

Recent technology also provides an appropriate framework for relativism. The truth was always under siege. The Bible presents the absolute nature of God’s truth; however, beginning with the fall, God’s absolute truth was always questioned or attacked (e.g. Gen. 3:1; 1 Kings 22:22-23; Ps. 62:4; Is. 28:15; Jer. 9:3-5; Dan. 8:12; Rom. 1:25).

The world today is marked by information technology which has the potential of producing informational obesity, a state in which it becomes harder and harder to sift through the ocean of information to find true and relevant information.

The book of Daniel is an example of the limitation of technology and education. When it comes to spiritual reality, the only viable source of information is revelation. Daniel was able to explain the dream of the king only because of divine intervention (Dan. 2:19-28). When it comes to knowledge, science, education, and technology are helpful, but also limited.

Although we would expect technological development to produce unprecedented opportunities for knowledge, the reality of all research studies

⁸ Richard Winter, *Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment: Rediscovering Passion Wonder* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2002), 52.

⁹ Tim Challies, *The Next Story: Life and Faith after the Digital Explosion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 16.

reveals that the huge flow of information to which modern man is subjected leads to lack of concentration, lack of analytical thinking, superficiality in thinking, incapability of memorization, limitation of creativity, emotional instability, lack of peace of mind and other negative aspects.

Technology provides great tools for studying the Bible;¹⁰ however, in the process of knowing God, technology can be an epistemological asset, but it cannot replace a personal knowledge, just as the simple information about a person does not produce a real relationship.

Technology and Ecclesiology

The development of technology had inevitably impacted the Church. There are many positive aspects for the ministry and life of the Church today. The proclamation of the Gospel has a potential to reach across the globe much more widely and relationships can be developed much easier. With the help of technology, the Word is proclaimed in the countries that are closed to the Gospel message. One of the most effective methods of Evangelism today in the persecuted countries is through the use of technology.

However, technology has also unwanted side effects. The internet can easily become a replacement for fellowship. It is true that the Internet can replace the fellowship of those unable to come to fellowship, but live streaming cannot replace the true and deep fellowship of the saints.

Technology is essential for the development of human activities and relationships. But it can also be a trap as the believer's use of technology can be reversed so that they become subjugated by technology. Technology helps us communicate easily but it can also isolate us from one another as we are predisposed to focus on technology itself instead of relationships.

We are social beings, created to relate to each other since we are created by a Triune God. The relationships within the Godhead are a paradigm for our existence within community.

Technology and Eschatology

One prophetic aspect that Isaiah emphasizes from the beginning of his book is that in the messianic age people will beat their swords into plowshares and their

¹⁰ Luis Vegas Montaner, Guadalupe Seijas De Los Rios-Zarzosa, and Del Barco Javier, eds., *Computer Assisted Research on the Bible in the 21st Century* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010).

spears into pruning hooks (Isa. 2:4). The messianic age will be one in which technology will no longer be used in a destructive way.

Another eschatological aspect is found in Daniel 12:4, where the prophetic message mentions that at the time of the end, many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase. Although the commentators do not agree on the meaning of this verse considering the prophetic message of the book,¹¹ the aspect of increasing knowledge is generally acknowledged by the scholars since those living in the end times will have far greater knowledge than those in the sixth century B.C.

In 1982, R. Buckminster Fuller a renowned inventor, architect, philosopher and mathematician published the book *Critical Path – A Study of Knowledge*. He analyzed the amount of knowledge gained over time and estimated that the speed at which information gets doubled is getting faster and faster. The latter is now between one and two years.¹²

The exponential development of technology comes with a legitimate question about the limits of technology. The development of technology seems to be focusing on helping and entertaining humanity; however at the eschatological level technology is only a tool within a meta-narrative of God's eternal purpose.

CONCLUSION

In the Bible we do not find specific rules about how a Christian should use modern technology. But we do find the guiding principles needed to navigate an increasingly technological world. The fundamental biblical premises in relation to technology are the following: First, God is not the creation of technology, but technology is God's creation. God has created us in His image, so our ability to create technology is a God given gift that reflects His character. Second, man's fall into sin has inevitably affected our use of technology. Technology is a tool that was intended to be used for God, but it can be also a tool used by and for the Devil. Third, because of this, the use of technology has been and will be either a tool or an obstacle to the message of the Gospel. Fourth, from an eschatological point of view, every technology that is not used to glorify God will ultimately be destroyed (Rev. 18:22).

Today's technology can help or affect our spiritual development. Technology brings unexpected benefits but also unimaginable pitfalls. Consumerism,

¹¹ John Walvoord, *Daniel*, ed. Charles H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 210.

¹² R. Buckminster Fuller and Kiyoshi Kuromiya, *Critical Path*, 2nd edition (New York, N.Y.: St. Martin's Griffin, 1982).

materialism are just the few elements that come with the technological development of society. Technology must be used as a tool for spiritual life, not as a prison. The essential aspect in relation to technology is not the technology itself, but the dependence on technology.

In conclusion, the good fight of faith in the technological age is not against technology but against dependence of technology. A correct approach to technology from a biblical point of view implies neither demonizing nor idolizing it but using it for the glory of God.

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