

The Effect of Technology on Christianity: Blessing or Curse?

By
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Last Sunday I worshipped with approximately 4000 other Christians at my church. My wife and I parked about a quarter of a mile from the building. A shuttle bus picked us up and drove us to the doors of the church. We entered the large, well-lit building and walked into the sanctuary. From the back of the room I saw row upon row of stadium seats filled with people. Everyone was conversing with their neighbor, a happy buzz of words filling the air. We found two empty seats and sat down. In front of us was a stage. Seated on the stage was a fifty-piece orchestra. Next to the stage, on either side and up high on the walls, were two very large projection screens, about 20 feet by 20 feet. Messages and pictures continuously flashed across the screens providing information concerning upcoming events at the church. Soon the orchestra launched into a rendition of a familiar hymn. That signaled the start of a service that followed the same format familiar to most evangelical congregations. There was a time of welcome. Some more announcements were made by one of the ministers. Suddenly the lights dimmed in the sanctuary and the huge screens on the walls showed a video of a young woman who gave us her testimony to the saving grace of Christ in her life. The video stopped and a live camera feed showed her being baptized by our pastor. The worshippers clapped, some cried, and loud exclamations could be heard throughout the congregation. The screens went dark, the lights came back up, and hymns and praise songs were sung. The Minister of Music was backed by the orchestra and a 200-person choir as he led us in the singing. The choir stood on risers behind the stage. The words to the songs were projected on the

screens. After the congregational singing a small group of singers provided some special music. We could see each of them projected on the huge screens as they sang. The sound system delivered crisp, digital quality so that each voice was clearly distinguishable from the others. Once again the congregation broke into applause and sounds of admiration when they finished. The pastor then stepped forward and delivered the message from God's Word. The pastor's image was projected fifteen feet tall from several different angles as he spoke to us. At the end of the sermon was an invitation to all those in the congregation who wished to join the church or make a decision for Christ. After the sermon my wife and I made our way through the crowd of worshippers filling the hallways. We retraced our steps to where we entered the building, finding the shuttle bus waiting for us at the door. Some friends happened to sit next to us on the shuttle ride back to the parking lot. The husband leaned over and said, with a large smile on his face and satisfaction in his voice, "That was quite a production this morning, wasn't it?" We all agreed.

On the drive home we turned on the radio and listened to a Christian station. My wife used her cell phone to call our son and ask him to take the roast out of the oven and set the table for lunch.

Later, when we were finishing the meal, I looked around the table at my family and it gave me pause for reflection. Before I left for church I had logged into the DBU online course I was teaching. I had responded to some of my students who requested pray through their journals or by email. Later I had worshipped with many brothers and sisters in Christ. I had seen and heard a testimony by video of one who decided to give Christ lordship of her life. I had been blessed with songs and preaching. On the trip to church

and again on the road back I had heard songs of praise over the radio. God was indeed good and technology was a tool that He used to prove His goodness!

Definitions of Technology

Technology can be defined a number of different ways. Most of us think of technology as synonymous with electronics. Yet electronic devices are only a part of the family of technology. A number of thoughts and definitions need to be examined.

Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary defines technology as 1: technical language, 2 **a**: applied science **b**: a scientific method of achieving a practical purpose, 3: the totality of the means employed to provide objects necessary for human sustenance and comfort (pg. 1211).

Frederick Ferre believes that technology stands for all practical implementations of intelligence. He talks about technology as matter and activities, beliefs, and attitudes. In other words, technology can be discussed in terms of tangible things as well as intangible belief systems, attitudes and ways of thinking (Ferre 1991; 1995).

Jacques Ellul makes a distinction between technology and technique. Technology is the mechanical inventions of man to better his lot in life. Technique refers to the various phenomenon of advertising, propaganda, psychological coercion, and the design of organizational structures which intend efficiency, economic and social control (Ellul 1970).

Richard Kriegbaum makes a distinction between less sophisticated technology and high technology. The key distinguishing element is the dependence of high technology on information or communication systems, those systems that create, capture, move, organize, and retrieve information. High technology is characterized by high volume,

high speed, high expectations, high dollar payoff, a high degree of accuracy, high power, high demand, and high efficiency. “Knowledge is power“ is the maxim of the high technology information society, and knowledge is directly proportional to the speed and accuracy of our information (Kriegbaum 1983).

Ken Funk of Oregon State University uses the term “technology” in five different senses. First, technology is the rational process of creating means to order and transform matter, energy, and information to realize certain valued ends. Second, technology is the objects (devices, systems, and methods) resulting from this process. Third, technology is the knowledge that is created by and drives the technological process. Fourth, a technology is a subset of related technological objects and knowledge (for example, computer technology). Fifth, technology is all of the above plus the developers and users of technological objects and the worldview that has emerged from and drives the technological process (Funk 1999).

I believe that almost all technologies can be placed in one of three categories:

Ideas/writing – examples would be patents, copyrights, movies, publications.

Mechanical/physical - examples would be construction, travel, communication.

Chemical/biological – examples would be medicine, synthetic materials, genetics.

Albert Borgmann, in his book *Power Failure* (Brazos Press, 2003), states that most people consider the terms “technology” and “science” as synonymous and science is one of the major defining factors in our culture. Borgmann sees the pervasiveness of high technology as the defining characteristic of our culture. It is invisible and opaque and is cleanly integrated into every aspect of life in industrialized nations. He states that “nearly everything that surrounds a citizen of such a society rests on a sophisticated and

unintelligible machinery”. He also describes the goals or aims of technology as safety, convenience, efficiency, prosperity, liberty, productivity, and control. Modern society uses technology to attack the basic problems of life – food, shelter, clothing, public health, education, and information. Technology tries to discover what scientific laws govern a phenomenon and then tries to control it by varying some of the lawfully governed conditions. (Borgmann 2003).

Technology is typically viewed through one of three lenses: optimistically, pessimistically, and a more central location between the two. The optimistic view embraces technology and sees great hope and promise in it. The pessimistic view rejects technology and brings about a sense of hopeless despair toward it. The central view is somewhere between these views and advocates the proper and cautious use of technology.

Obviously, the definition of technology is just as complex as the thing itself.

The Blessings of Technology

Technology has given Christianity a voice to reach a world-wide audience. Historically there have been advances for Christianity when there have been advances in technology. Not all Christian groups have reacted to it as have the Amish. In many cases the Church has been one of the first entities to adopt or profit from technologies.

The Pax Romana that existed at the time of Christ played a large role in the spread of the gospel. Technology that created good roads for transportation, that bolstered the strongest army in the world to enforce relatively peaceful times, and stabilized

governments for common laws, common language, and common culture allowed a small group of Christians to become a large following in a single generation.

In the mid 1400's Gutenberg set up the printing press and published the first mechanically printed Bible. This was, to a large part, a factor in the start of the Reformation. The printing press enabled ideas to flow rapidly and in large quantities to very large audiences. William Tyndale translated the Bible into English and had it printed and distributed in the early 1500's. During the same time period Martin Luther was printing pamphlet after pamphlet in order to explain his views to an interested Europe. He also translated and had printed the Bible into German. It remains the standard German work to this day. In 1644 the English Parliament sought to censor printing because they felt it was necessary to repress certain dangerous ideas, especially regarding religion. John Milton argued passionately that ideas, even heretical ones, needed to be exchanged. Even 600 years ago the effect of technology on Christianity was a topic for discussion and debate!

Blaise Pascal, Isaac Newton, and Samuel Morse were scientists who held Christianity and the Bible in the highest regard. What motivated them was a confidence in the "rationality" behind the universe and the "goodness" of the material world. In 1844 Samuel Morse sent the first telegraph message which contained the sentence "What hath God wrought?"

In 1939 Theodore Epp started the radio program "Back to the Bible". Although this was not the first radio broadcast of an evangelical nature it was one of the most successful and is still heard today (with Woodrow Kroll). Around 1957 Billy Graham started World Wide Pictures as a complement to his Billy Graham Crusade organization.

The Billy Graham Crusades, reaching millions of people via television, would not have been possible without the aid of technology. Earlier evangelists (think Billy Sunday and Dwight L. Moody) were more restricted in their outreach during their crusades because of the lack of technology in their time.

In Britain two men, Simon Jenkins and Steve Goddard, have started an online church called the “Church of Fools”. It is sponsored by Britain’s Methodist Church. Both men were concerned about friends who were physically disabled and found it difficult to attend church services. Visitors create avatars to represent themselves. They enter a virtual church in which they can walk around, pray, socialize, and listen to sermons—or just sit and watch. They can kneel, bless each other, or raise their hands in a hallelujah gesture. Regularly scheduled sermons are delivered by ordained preachers. (Information Week - May 14, 2004)

In the U.S. today there are over 800 megachurches. These are churches that regularly have over 2000 people attending services. It is predicted that one church, First Baptist of Houston, will soon have over 35,000 worshippers every Sunday. Some churches in South Korea have reported over 250,000 attendees every Sunday. The Potter’s House, right next door to DBU, can accommodate almost 12,000 people every Sunday. Within the sanctuary 200 pews provide power and data terminals so worshippers can download sermon notes, PowerPoint presentations, and Bible passages. Alter attendants armed with Palm Pilots and Pocket PC’s collect prayer needs and new-member data to download into the church server. The sermon is translated via wireless headphones into one of six languages. None of the above would be possible without supporting technologies.

The Church has arms that reach out beyond the walls of buildings built strictly for worship. Health and education institutions in particular provide outreach to communities. These institutions are bastions of knowledge creation and technological innovation and application. Many hospitals are affiliated with a particular denomination and organizations such as Doctors Without Borders are manned by the staff from those hospitals. Some of the greatest colleges and universities, or at least some with high name recognition, started as church-affiliated institutions. Oxford University is divided into 39 colleges. Some of them have names such as Christ Church, Corpus Christi, Wycliffe, Linacre, Trinity, and St. Johns. Yale University, founded in 1701 by the Reverend Abraham Pierson, has as its motto “Lux et veritas”, or “Light and truth”. DBU has created an Online Education Department that provides courses over the Internet to thousands of students. Each course developed for Online Education has a faith integration element, ensuring that we spread the Gospel as we teach our disciplines.

Broadman Publishing and Word Publishing houses continue to publish Christian educational and evangelic works that are distributed around the globe.

Wycliffe, the Bible translation people, believe that it is possible to translate the scripture into every known tongue within the next 50 years or less, largely because of the use and aid of technology.

Technology has been good for Christianity in a number of ways. First, It has greatly magnified the voice of those preaching the gospel. Instead of reaching hundreds or even thousands when preaching a sermon, a pastor now has a possible audience in the millions. Second, it has enriched the message of the Cross by providing more information to more people in a shorter amount of time. Third, it has increased the number of channels of

distribution of the gospel. Fourth, it has provided helps for the encouragement, the strengthening, and edification of the saints through technology tools and discipleship material. Fifth, it allows Christians to administer grace to a world that is distracted and burdened, by using tools that people are familiar with and expect to see in everyday contexts.

The Curse of Technology

Jacques Ellul, who was mentioned earlier in this paper, claims that technology always has bad as well as good effects. He also asserts that technology develops a dynamic of its own. Neil Postman observes that technology has displaced traditional culture, to our great harm. It is quite possible to see how technology has displaced the traditional culture of Christianity, especially in the way that worship and church work is conducted. Thomas Corts, writing in an article in the most recent Southern Baptist Educator Journal of 2005, says “I had hoped that the billions we have spent on Sunday Schools, day schools, and Vacation Bible Schools would produce a generation that has its values correct. I would have thought the vast sums spent on television preaching might have turned the tide. I wish all the church buildings and church going had made a consistent and measurable difference. But we are left to admit: the divorce rate is about the same among those who attend church, and those who do not. The 70 percent of men between the ages of 18 and 34 who visit a pornography web site at least once a month, includes believers and church goers. The ranks of the high-and-mighty, white collar elite who have bilked us for billions includes those Bible-carrying, church-going, God-talking criminals who will escape jail only by legal slight-of-hand, if they do escape. As the Barna organization has concluded, “Peoples’ faith does not make as much of a difference as might be expected.”

John MacArthur says, “Traditional methodology—most noticeably preaching – is being discarded or downplayed in favor of newer means, such as drama, dance, comedy, variety, side-show histrionics, pop-psychology, and other entertainment forms...In the past half decade, some of America’s largest evangelical churches have employed worldly gimmicks like slapstick, vaudeville, wrestling exhibitions, and even mock striptease to spice up their Sunday meetings. No brand of horseplay, it seems, is too outrageous to be brought into the sanctuary. Burlesque is fast becoming the liturgy of the pragmatic church.” (*Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World*, 2001). He goes on to lay the blame on pervasive technology which has compromised Christians’ sense of what is appropriate behavior according to God’s Word. He also points out that the Church believes it is in direct competition, not simply opposition, to the world and must, therefore, use the world’s own methods (technologies) to attract the attention of the lost and, in many cases, the membership of the church. I have heard a pastor state that his church “will do anything to bring people to the church in order to hear the Gospel”. Obviously his statement is hyperbole. He would not do “anything”. He would not put in a bar or have dancing girls lead the choir into the sanctuary. But the “anything” approach might employ some of the same things that John MacArthur railed against.

Borgmann has described our culture quite well in his book *Power Failure* (Brazos Press, 2003). He believes that technology is the defining element of our society. It has produced a culture of self-orientation that is designed to procure a comfortable and individualistic lifestyle. Science and technology are the standards against which all claims are evaluated. Technology, by its very nature, is value neutral or indifferent toward Christianity. Therefore, many people feel free to dismiss Christianity. Isaac

Newton claimed that any unexplained or unexplainable force sprang from an Intelligent Agent, meaning God. Where explanation ends, God appears. But scientists today claim that everything has a logical and reasonable physical, not metaphysical, answer. Just because we don't have an answer now doesn't mean that we won't have one in the future. Current thinking in our culture is that when scientific explanation appears, God is dissolved. And scientists claim that if you stop explaining simply by saying that it was "done by God", then you are exhibiting lazy thinking. This what is being taught in public schools, not simply in the U.S. but around the world. This is a way of trivializing Christianity and many have adopted that way of thinking.

Technology also provides a medium for observing and modeling different forms of behavior and a plethora of viewpoints and value systems. In the past a young person modeled their behavior on those people who were close to them in proximity, such as parents, teachers, pastors, and leaders in the community. Today they are being given - through the technologies of music, movies, and television - many different options for behavior to model. Another aspect of this is that all the world is now at one's beck and call. The Internet, the telephone, television, movies, radio, etc., all have made it possible to interact with the world without actually confronting the world face-to-face. Actually venturing out into the world begins to feel like a pain and a waste of time. I choose to call this a state of cultural obesity brought on by the isolation of self-indulgence. Because most of us choose to live in and be part of our culture, we cannot help but be affected by these things. The options that are offered to us are really too many to process adequately. In that kind of situation most people will choose the easiest option, the "path of least resistance" approach. For our culture that path would be the one of pop culture, a

technology driven culture that values style over substance and lives for the constant excitement of the latest fad. Someone has stated that “all the world is watching the U.S., and all the U.S. is watching television”.

The Church has been greatly affected by these cultural mores. Most churches evaluate themselves by the same standards as those used by the culture of technology. Because technology provides immediate information and feedback, churches have begun to operate on a fad or poll basis. Whatever the latest fad is or whatever the latest trend predicted by the polls happens to be, that is where the church is going. Because our technical driven culture requires efficiency, convenience, and entertainment, then the Church must provide that. Because the Church has tried to meet the standards of technology in order to remain relevant to society and culture, it has given technology the right to declare it irrelevant. The Church, desperate to succeed by the standards of technology, has become more and more acculturated. There is even a term now to describe it, “cultural Christianity”. This Cultural Christianity is a belief system that demands that its adherents be kind, affable, pleasant and agreeable. Its disciples are not allowed to be judgmental, critical or divisive. This religious philosophy might better be called "Nice Christianity". The entertainment media, probably the most visible and vocal of the technologies today, has redefined the public image of a Christian into the mold of cultural Christianity. Because the majority of people involved in the industries spawned by the technology do not have first-hand knowledge of Christianity, their portrayal of Christians is a caricature of the real thing. Christians are either portrayed as cultural Christians or as maniacal, brain-dead, and fanatical Bible thumpers. Of course, most people would try to stay away from being considered the latter and would strive to fit into

the mold of the former. This is simply one way that Christians allow technologies to set the standards by which they live and operate.

Recently, a computer programmer named Ralph Bagley has created a computer video game called *Catachumen*, which has a Christian focus. The game allows the player to battle with various types of swords. The player fights against demons, hellhounds, fallen angels, minotaurs, and the Devil himself. Although the game is drawing praise from some quarters, it illustrates another curse of technology, the curse of distraction. In the last Friday Symposium, Dr. David Seel pointed out that self-distraction promotes diversion rather than reflection. He defined distraction as speed vs. rhythm, noise vs. silence, solitude vs. people, and entertainment vs. study. Technology makes distraction possible and, in this culture, an every day expected occurrence. One criticism of the game is that young players are drawing their conclusions about Christianity based on the game, not study of the Bible or discipleship mentoring from mature Christians.

There are a number of ways in which technology has hurt Christianity. First, it has not delivered on its promise of helping create stronger generations of committed Christians. The results of studies by the Barna Organization and the remarks of Dr. Corts bring that point home.

Second, technology has created a worship experience of isolation and entertainment rather than one of reverence and participation. Remember my story of my worship experience at my church that I mentioned at the beginning of this paper? While I was sitting in the theatre style seats I noticed that it was much different from the pews. There was a physical divider between myself and the next person, whereas with pews that divider didn't exist. I also noticed that I spent a lot of time perusing the crowd during the

service to see if I could pick out anyone I knew. I also caught the eye of many other worshippers doing the same thing. We felt lost and isolated in a huge sea of humanity. The remark of the man on the bus after the service, “That was quite a production this morning, wasn’t it?”, was quite accurate. I sometimes feel that I have attended a production rather than a worship service. The huge screens were distracting. I felt disconnected from the proceedings and the other worshippers, almost as if I were watching a movie or a play in which I had no stake in the outcome.

Third, technology has been allowed to redefine and reshape Christianity to fit into the mold of our culture. Granted, we have allowed it to happen, but we cannot deny the overwhelming influence of the standards of technology on Christianity.

Fourth, we have become a culturally obese society because of the availability, ease of use, convenience, and affordability of technology. The goals of technology are safety, convenience, efficiency, prosperity, liberty, productivity, and control. If people can use technology to ease an inconvenience in their life, they will not hesitate to do so. It is inconvenient to get dressed for church, fight the traffic on the way to church, board a bus to get to the building, and interact with others in a “nice, Sunday manner”. It is more convenient, comfortable, safe, and efficient to attend an Internet church or watch church on TV or listen to it on the radio, even when we have the physical ability to attend in person.

Fifth, technology provides distractions that draw us away from the main message of Christianity, the idea of those two immortal things, the Word of God and the souls of men, coming together to make a difference in this world. Technology brings consensus, coherence, and conformity to cultures. Christianity requires conformity to God’s

standards, not technology standards. Christianity is not a religion of rule by the anonymous consensus of the group's will or philosophy. Rather, it is people who, as free moral agents, give themselves over to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Christians cohere to the salient tenets of the faith as expressed in Scripture, not as expressed on blogs or television shows.

How Then Shall We Live (With This Technology)? {My apologies to Francis Shaeffer}

I believe that one of the reasons for the recent interest in the Amish is their supposed rejection of technology. Not only does their lifestyle seem quaint, it is slower paced and quieter than our own mad and rushing culture. But anybody who spends time among the Amish quickly finds that they do use technology. They have simply adopted a stricter set of measures than the rest of us for when, how, and why to adopt technology. In one sense that is the answer to the above question. Let me conclude with a few suggestions to fellow Christians who do not believe in simply rejecting technology but want a reasoned approach to the issue.

My great-grandmother had a saying: "Love people and use things. Don't use people and love things." Somehow I think we Christians have gotten that message mixed up in the rush toward technology. Keep the welfare of the souls of people at the forefront of what we do, recognizing that they don't always need technology but they do need redemption provided by a loving Savior, Jesus Christ.

Christians need to quit letting technology define them or set the standards for the Church. Christianity has never been about convenience or safety. God calls us to leave

our comfort zone, interact face-to-face with people, and go out as “sheep among wolves”.

We cannot hope to win the approval of the world by adopting the ways of the world.

Jesus said that if the world hated him, it will hate his followers as well. Christianity calls us to be vigorous and not stationary, transformed by Christ and not conforming to the mold of the world, true light and real salt not artificial light and substitute salt.

Christians need to unplug from high technology periodically. What would it hurt to have a couple of days without television or cell phones or computers or radio? Why not spend that time in soul refreshment by fellowship with other believers and our God? Reconnect to the natural world around us in a way that allows us to “be still” and know that He is God.

Finally, we need a continuing dialogue among ourselves concerning this topic. The Bible states that “there is safety in the midst of many counselors”. Voices from different levels of ministry and laity, voices from different Christian organizations, voices from different parts of the world need to have part in this great discussion. Occasionally we need to hold the mirror up to ourselves and ask “What does the Bible say about this?” or “Given everything we know of His nature, would this be pleasing to God?”.