

Technology and Theology

Lesson 3: Evaluating Technology

Summarizing Biblical Theology of Technology – 1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17, 23

1. Creation is good

- a. We are not Gnostics: we don't need to reject creation
- b. We are Image Bearers: creating, organizing, building reflect the Creator (Isaiah 28)
- c. We are Royal Priests: we need to learn how to master creation, but we can't do that without grace

2. Creation is fallen

- a. Creation entices us to worship it: we are wired to worship it
 - i. Creation has replaced the Creator as our object of worship – Rom 1:21–23
 - ii. Without grace, our hearts distort any information we receive – Eph 4:17-18
- b. No technology is morally neutral.
 - i. Either it becomes a servant or a master.
 - ii. Depending on how the technology reflects or distorts the Creator, it will have different effects.
- c. In a Fallen world, various creations have different effects on us.
 - i. Some amplify the effects of the Fall—heroine, pornography, abortion
 - ii. Some mitigate the effects of the Fall—medicine, HVAC, orthopedic shoes
 - iii. But in correcting one problem, they also create another:

Sigmund Freud (*Civilization and Its Discontents*, 38): "If there had been no railway to conquer distance, my child would never have left town and I should need no telephone to hear his voice."—the solution of conquering distance caused the problem of children leaving home; the solution of the telephone to conquer distance again would cause the problem of . . . children who don't call.

- d. Think with me about how this works: Technology, in our fallen world, creates new solutions, but it also creates new problems. Our mind probably jump to the most recent technology—television, Internet, iPhone, iWatch. But let's go further back.
- i. Writing – Socrates never wrote anything and he opposed the use of written word (see his [dialogue with Phaedrus](#)). Why?
1. **It hinders memory:** He tells a tale of ancient Egypt where the inventor of letters thinks they will increase memory; he says the opposite: "The parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them"
 2. **Writing can be misunderstood or misused.** He likens writing to a man who sows seeds for amusement, not sustenance. Writing, in Socrates mind, is not to be taken seriously.
 3. Is he right?
 - a. Who needs to remember what he has written down.
 - b. Postmodern hermeneutics tries to prove this point: Authority and meaning is found in reader, not in the original author.

ii. Telegraph – What effect did the telegraph have? (Postman, *Amusing*, 65–71)

1. It increased the speed of communication

- a. Until the telegraph, the speed of information kept pace with the fastest horse. Think Paul Revere.
- b. In fact, GEICO caught this in their commercial starring Paul Revere—How happy are people that switch to GEICO? Happier than Paul Revere with a Cell Phone.

2. It annihilated space.

- a. Consider: the first reported telegraph message in a newspaper came one day after Samuel Morse used the telegraph (1840). The *Baltimore Patriot* reported how Congress had addressed the Oregon issue. The news report (in the paper) concluded, “we are thus enabled to give our readers information from Washington up to two o’clock. *This is indeed the annihilation of space.*”
- b. What effect does this have?
 - i. It started the homogenization of our country and the world. It brought far lands into contact with one another.
 - ii. And though we are used to living in a global world today, it is vital to realize, it wasn’t always that way.
 - iii. Being “in the know” may not be as good as we think!

3. It increased the meaninglessness of news:

- a. Consider the concern of Henry David Thoreau: We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas it may be, have nothing important to communicate... We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world some weeks near to the new; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad flapping American ear will be the princess Adelaide has the whooping cough. (65)
- b. Neil Postman, ‘It was not long until the fortunes of newspapers came to depend not on the quality or utility of the news they provided, but on how much, from what distances, and at what speed. James Bennett of the *New York Herald* posted that in the first week of 1848, his paper contained 79,000 words of telegraphic content—of what relevance to his readers, he didn’t say. Only four years after Morse opened the nation’s first telegraph line on May 24, 1844, The Associated Press was founded, and news from nowhere, addressed to no one in particular, began to criss-cross the nation. Wars, crimes, crashes, fires, floods—much of it the social and political equivalent of Adelaide’s whooping cough—became the content of what people called the ‘news of the day.’ (67)

4. Now let me *telegraph*, where I am going: In a world filled with bits and pieces of news that bombard us—as I was preparing this I got an email about an old friend who updated his FB status to “in a relationship”—what effect does it have on our ability to relate to God?

- a. Boredom: Antiquated technology—the book—is uninteresting.
- b. Bombarded: News is treated as amusing and dispensable
- c. Busyness: Cogitation is interrupted by 100 different distractions.

iii. Radio – What could be wrong with radio? (It's not TV). How did it change culture?

1. **It eliminated silence.** From shopping malls to study halls, radio has eliminated quietude.

- a. Addressing this in 1948, when radio was high-tech, Max Picard observed that “silence belongs to the basic structure of man.”
- b. For most of human history, men had large amounts of silence. In this silence, men like David composed psalms and others contemplated high thoughts of God. Jonathan Edwards would ride through the country contemplating things of God; he would pin them to his coat and collect them when he got home. Sure he listened to talk radio or the Top 5 at 5, but he did become the most respected theologian in American history.
- c. We have lost the ability to cogitate, in part, because we've lost any space for silence. And by losing the ability to cogitate, we greatly diminished our ability to know God and love God.

2. **It disembodied and depersonalizes the voice.**

- a. Yes, the information is broadcast to larger numbers, but the personal effect of the language is lost.
 - i. **How important is body language?** While we can hear in a phone call or radio the pitch and tone of a voice, does not the body language inform the words meaning?
 - ii. **As a result, the radio can just become noise.** While Christians worried about the beat of the devil's music, how many lamented getting a song stuck in your head?
- b. Preaching
 - i. Sermons made for the radio ceased to be personal words to the local congregation; they became skilled orations for the broader audience. A few years ago, I had lunch with a man who was on staff at famous radio preacher's church. His Sunday Sermons became fodder for sermonic commentaries. What do you think his concern was?
 - ii. Who are you preaching for?
- c. Church Attendance
 - i. What do you think radio preaching (now iPod) preaching does to those who listen to online?
 - ii. Discontent with local preacher. It tempts them to think that all that matters is content. But is hearing a sermon on the radio the same as being in church?
 - iii. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was against it!

3. It amplified consumerism, marketing, and advertising. (See Dyer, 151)

- a. How were you going to pay for radio? Advertising. ILL: Sensuous dramas became the Trojan Horse for advertising bars of soap.
- b. Even the best content is compromised by ads. (ILL: RAM Radio)

3. Improving a Fallen World with Technology is Tricky: Technology that solves one problem creates new ones—we need to think more about this as it relates to digital technology. But first let's map out what technology does.
 - a. In 1964 Marshall McLuhan wrote a book called *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. It was hated and loved; it created a whole new realm of study called media ecology.
 - i. The Medium is the Message – how someone communicates shapes the content; in other words: the same message but different medium is a lie.
 1. Radio depersonalizes communications
 2. Television cannot communicate seriously
 - a. It is designed to amuse, not inform
 - b. Presidential Debate is about presentation, not proposals
 - c. News Broadcast is meant to entertain, not explain, not analyze
 3. So, the first point is that the medium distorts the message
 - ii. New Technology changes the environment
 1. Technology is never inert; it always pushes back against those who use it, and it does so in various but repeated ways.
 - a. Each person has a different threshold, a different orientation
 - b. ILL: the 50 year old scholar who uses Wikipedia will use it differently than the 14 year old student who has never learned to research.
 2. Remember the two extremes?
 - a. Instrumentalism – It's not guns who kill people; people kill people.
 - b. Determinism – Television is ruining society;
 - c. It's more complex than that: "Instrumentalism is partially true in the sense that individuals are free to use phones however they please, but determinism also has an element of truth in that society at large tends to use the technology in a certain way [i.e., tendencies]" (87)
 - d. How do we navigate this?
 - iii. McLuhan's Tetrad: Technology . . . (Mobile Phones = MPs)
 1. Amplifies – MPs extend our ability to communicate.
 2. Amputates – MPs eliminate need for landlines and our ability to be alone.
 3. Retrieves – MPs retrieve the close connection once had in local villages
 4. Risks – MPs tempt us to have shallow conversations and relationships
 5. Questions
 - a. Is a regular phone call the same as daily face-to-face conversation?
 - b. Is it better or worse to be "connected" all the time?
 - c. Why take time to think about this?
Dyer, *From the Garden*, 96: "When we are aware of the tendencies and values inherent in our technology, we have the best chance of avoiding the negative trade-offs it brings and instead using the technology to serve God [and know God]."

b. John Dyer's Technology Tetrad

	Positive	Negative
Unintentional	1. Reflection [Creation]	4. Restoration [New Creation]
Intentional	3. Redemption	2. Rebellion [Fall]

i. Positive

1. Reflection

- a. We can praise God when he confirms the work of our hands
- b. We can praise God for good inventions, even for non-Christian inventors
- c. Common grace is an important part of the world
 - i. By it we can make connections with sectors of people
 - ii. By it we can praise God
 - iii. By it we can improve culture
 - iv. By it we can create technology

2. Redemption

- a. We should labor to find ways to reflect God
 - i. Engineer at Valeo – study the “light of God”
 - ii. Doctor – what does it mean that God is healer?
 - iii. Teacher – how did Jesus teach, what is the best tool to use?
- b. We should see problems in our work and our world as ways to serve our neighbor.

ii. Negative

1. Rebellion

- a. Beware of how technology / creation presses on you
- b. Beware of how technology invites idolatry
- c. Beware of tendencies in your tools that make you less like Jesus

2. Restoration

- a. When technology lets you down, confess your dependence on that “thing” instead of God.
- b. When technology comes to an end, confess your need for God.

c. Questions (derived from Dyer, *From the Garden to the City*, 180–82)

- i. Reflection: How does this tool reflect God? How does it help me serve God, or cultivate/keep the earth?
- ii. Rebellion: What tendencies does this tool produce in me? How could I misuse this tool? What safeguards do I need to put in place?
- iii. Redemption: What areas of the fall can this tool help me overcome? How can I use this to relieve misery? Proclaim true, goodness, and beauty?
- iv. Restoration: In what ways am I trusting in this device that I should be trusting in God?