

A PHILOSOPHY OF THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN MINISTRY

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Summary:

This paper outlines a definition and philosophy of the use of technology, especially as it relates to Christian worship.

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Introduction

Technology is everywhere in our society. Not only do we find it throughout our schools and businesses, but in homes and churches too. In fact, everywhere we look we see technology. We live in a technological age, with a constantly increasing rate of technological change. “Since the development and mass production of the personal computer, technological change has accelerated at an unprecedented rate.”¹ Technological change is a reality.² As Christians it is our responsibility to face up to this reality and deal with it appropriately. As Stephen Monsma observes, technology is so much a part of our culture that we often fail to question it and its effects go unnoticed.³ It is my aim in this paper to look at *why* it needs to be questioned by Christians and how we can appropriately take responsibility for our use of technology.

A Definition of Technology

There are many different understandings of what the word *technology* actually means. Many people today think that a technology is anything electronic. But is technology limited to electronics? Was technology a new invention in modernity, or has it existed throughout history? These are some of the questions I hope to answer by looking at a number of definitions of what a *technology* is.

The word *technology* comes from the Greek words *techne*, meaning “an art or craft” and *logia* which means “the systematic treatment of.”⁴ Therefore, the meaning of the Greek word *technologia* is “the systematic treatment of an art.”⁵ Over the years it came to refer

¹ Douglas Groothuis, *The Soul in Cyberspace* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1997), 12.

² Paul R. Dekar, “Asking Questions about Technology, with Specific Reference to Computers,” *Evangelical Review of Theology*, vol. 26 (no3, July 2002), 221.

³ Stephen V. Monsma, (ed.), *Responsible Technology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 1.

⁴ Paul R. Dekar, “Asking Questions about Technology, with Specific Reference to Computers,” *Evangelical Review of Theology*, vol. 26 (no3, July 2002), 212.

⁵ Stephen V. Monsma, (ed.), *Responsible Technology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 11.

more specifically to mechanical and industrial arts (rather than fine arts or crafts).⁶ In the nineteenth century it acquired another meaning: “a systematic or scientific study of the mechanical and industrial arts.” Then in the twentieth century it took on an even wider range of meanings. “Increasingly, *technology* is used to refer to a complete range of techniques, organizations, and knowledge in addition to tools, machines, and utensils.”⁷ Momsma defines *technology* today as “a distinct human cultural activity in which human beings exercise freedom and responsibility in response to God by forming and transforming the natural creation, with the aid of tools and procedures, for practical ends or purposes.”⁸

Webster’s third New International Dictionary defines *technology* as, “the science of the application of knowledge to practical purposes: applied science; a technical method of achieving a practical purpose; the totality of the means employed by a people to provide itself with the objects of material culture.”⁹

Paul Dekar defines *technology* as “the application of organized knowledge to practical tasks by ordered systems of people and machines.”¹⁰

According to Susan White, a technology is “anything that by its existence extends the range of human capabilities beyond its natural limitations.”¹¹ Therefore *technology* includes items such as clothes, books, pens, tables and paper as well as electronic, electrical and mechanical technologies such as computers, stereos, televisions, cars, etc. In this paper I will focus particularly on the use of some more recent technologies which have infiltrated our society today, such as computers (and cyberspace), televisions, and powerpoint.

⁶ Ibid, 11.

⁷ Ibid, 11.

⁸ Ibid, 19.

⁹ Noah Webster, *Webster’s third New International Dictionary*, (Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Company Publishers, 1971).

¹⁰ Paul R. Dekar, “Asking Questions about Technology, with Specific Reference to Computers,” *Evangelical Review of Theology*, vol. 26 (no3, July 2002), 212.

¹¹ Susan J. White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 16.

So is our current age the *first* age of technology, or have technologies been prevalent throughout history? If we agree with White's definition of technology, then we would also agree with her belief that *every* age is an "Age of Technology", so technology itself is not new, but the "ideological pervasiveness of patterns of technical production, technological devices, and ways of thinking" is what is new.¹²

Theologian Paul Tillich believes that technology is fundamental to our humanity. He says that "technology, along with language, is a fundamental dimension of the human person in every age, one of the essential preconditions for our self-actualization."¹³ So, technology is not only a dominant part of our society (and every society throughout history), but it is also a part of our essence of humanity.

The Use of Technology Today

Whether we like it or not, we are all living in a technological society. Every day we encounter numerous technologies, some of them old and some new. Electronic technology is continuing to be produced at a faster and faster rate, and often we find it difficult to keep up with 'the latest'. Susan White describes it like this: "We have a sense of being moved forward at ever-accelerating pace and in directions that seem to be out of control."¹⁴ Ruth Conway echoes this feeling of being out of control. She writes, "It feels like we are in the grip of a technological power that is out of control."¹⁵ I believe that if more people recognized this immense power that is controlling our society, more people would take a much more critical approach to technology and perhaps would not be so hasty to accept every new fad without questioning.

¹² Ibid, 15-16.

¹³ Ibid, 15.

¹⁴ Ibid, 14.

¹⁵ Ruth Conway, *Choices at the Heart of Technology: A Christian Perspective*, (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1999), 4.

Our culture is continually being shaped and reshaped by the technologies we use. “Technology and technological thinking is today the basis and the mark of nearly every cultural activity or field.”¹⁶ Not only our culture, but every person living within this culture is being influenced and formed by the technology in which we are emerged. It is important that we recognize that our society has been saturated by a technological worldview.¹⁷ This presents each Christian with the very real, but difficult, challenge of maintaining a Christian worldview in the midst of a society that is bombarding us with a technological worldview. (I will talk in more depth about this in the next section).

Most of today’s Western population appear to have accepted the myth that our world as a whole, as well as our individual lives, will continually improve as we develop more and more new technologies. “This sense that nature can be perfected by the intervention of technology spills over into the idea that the human person is itself also perfectible by the same means.”¹⁸ However, we need only look at the devastation caused by bombs and weapons, or the damage caused to the ozone layer to see how technological developments also have the potential to devastate human lives and the world in which we live.

Susan White claims that technology does a very good job of satisfying human needs, which is its aim.¹⁹ But does it satisfy all our human needs? Far from it, I believe. In fact, one of our greatest needs as humans is the need for community. “Overwhelmed by images on television, computer screens and videos, people withdraw to a private world and refuse to accept responsibility, to acknowledge that doing things face to face and doing things in cyberspace are not the same things.”²⁰ Western society’s approach to technology is

¹⁶ Egbert Schuurman, “A Confrontation with Technicism as the Spiritual Climate of the West,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 58 (no. 1, Spring 1996): 63.

¹⁷ Susan J. White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 93.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 10.

²⁰ Paul R. Dekar, “Asking Questions about Technology, with Specific Reference to Computers,” *Evangelical Review of Theology*, vol. 26 (no3, July 2002), 211.

dominated by the concept of individual autonomy.²¹ People are increasingly choosing to be entertained in their own homes by technologies such as television, video, internet, computer, and as a result are becoming more and more isolated from communities. Because of our humanity, we crave community.²² Is there community to be found in media or in cyberspace? I do not believe that we can find the true community that we all need there. I believe that the only community (if we can call it that) to be found in technology is false, artificial and insincere. It can in no way replace the community provided through ongoing interaction with other human beings, face-to-face.

We also have to recognize that all these new technologies, as good and helpful as they may initially appear, are destroying not only our relationships and our sense of community, but also our environment and our earth. Conway says that, “With the help of state-of-the-art technology, human beings are cutting off the branch of the tree of life on which all living things sit.”²³ This is indeed a very serious problem that many people do not recognize.

So although we can easily see the many benefits of technology in our society today, we must also recognize that not every new technology is necessarily all good. How each technology is used has the potential to affect us negatively as well as positively.

Christians and Technology

The question we need to look at now is what role Christians have with regards to technology. For many years now the majority of Christians have accepted technology, at home, in the workplace, and in churches, without questioning. We have failed to examine each new technology and how it affects our lives and the lives of those around us. Is it our

²¹ Douglas Groothuis, *The Soul in Cyberspace* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1997), 224.

²² *Ibid*, 124.

²³ Ruth Conway, *Choices at the Heart of Technology: A Christian Perspective*, (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1999), 3.

responsibility as Christians to examine this aspect of culture more intentionally? I believe so, but we need to begin by looking at what the Bible has to teach us about embracing our technological culture so readily.

In Genesis 1:16-18 we are told that we were made in God's image to rule over the earth. This is our cultural mandate. Monsma writes, "Since the Fall, humankind fulfils the cultural mandate in an imperfect, fractured manner. Yet the cultural mandate as given in the Bible still stands as an expression of God's will for his image bearers on earth."²⁴ Psalm 8:6-8 also tells us that God made us rulers over creation. I believe this means that as Christians we have an important part to play in our present-day culture. In John 1:14 we read that Jesus was incarnated into humanity. Therefore, not *all* culture could be bad and inappropriate for Christians.

However, the Bible also warns us not to be conformed to the world (Romans 12:2) and not to love the world or anything in it because these things will all pass away (1 John 2:15-17). In 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22 Paul writes: "Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil." Our responsibility, therefore, as Christians is to test everything that surrounds us in our culture, whether it be technology or something else. If we find something evil (or that produces evil consequences/effects) then we are not to hold on to it. However, if we find something that is good, then we are to hold on to it. We must not embrace cultural practices that violate our faith.

I believe that if we want to connect with non-churched people today (which, of course, we are commanded to do), we must have an understanding of their surrounding culture. However, we must also be careful not to let the culture take control of our churches or our lives. Our worship needs to use cultural forms that connect with people in a technological society. God is sovereign over *all* things, including the culture. Therefore, Christians may

²⁴ Stephen V. Monsma, (ed.), *Responsible Technology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 40.

participate in it, but the church (and every individual Christian) must also be set apart from and distinct from culture. We must carefully evaluate the culture in which we live, and that involves close examination of the technology that has powerfully taken over our culture. We must be careful not to let the power of technology dictate to our churches. We must be careful not to let our churches be ruled by technology, but we also have to be careful not to go to the opposite extreme and alienate ourselves and our churches from the average non-churched person who is immersed in it on a daily basis. Tex Sample writes, “The church must always engage the culture of which it is a part. As important as it is for the church to be a culture in its own life, it is also inevitably a participant in a wider culture.”²⁵

Colossians 3:17 tells us that, as Christians, we are to do everything in Jesus’ name. Stephen Monsma believes that we must therefore *understand* technology which means being aware of it, comprehending its nature and recognizing its role in our culture.²⁶ He suggests four important reasons that we need to understand technology: 1-the pervasiveness and power of it; 2-the value-ladenness of it (it is not neutral); 3-conflicting opinions regarding it; 4- the divergent nature of today’s technologies (the potential to be positive and/or negative).²⁷ Postman points out that we must “admire technological ingenuity” but not “think it represents the highest possible form of human achievement.”²⁸

Christians must begin to recognize how powerful technology is and how strong a hold it has on many of us. We are accountable to God and must accept responsibility for technology. We need to approach technology with more caution than we have been doing in the past. So, then, what are our options? Two options are to fully accept everything technology has to offer or completely reject it all. The “dance between delight and dread,

²⁵ Tex Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World: Electronic Culture and the Gathered People of God*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 86.

²⁶ Stephen V. Monsma, (ed.), *Responsible Technology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 1.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 2-5.

²⁸ Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 184.

which is manifested in the medieval iconographic record, has marked religion's attitude to technology from the very beginning, and certainly describes the contemporary discussion as well."²⁹ Jacques Ellul believes that technology is out of control and therefore our moral decision making (of which technology is the absolute condition) is also out of control. Therefore, he says that to live as faithful Christians we must completely reject the world made by technology.³⁰ Perhaps a more appropriate way to deal with technology is to find a path somewhere between complete acceptance and complete rejection—a path that recognizes the potential for both good and bad outcomes of technology.

In our current society we find that many people are worshipping technology rather than God. It has taken the very place of God. Susan White suggests that what is at stake is not only our religion and our religious concepts, but our very humanity.³¹ “The communication of information has become a modern idol, rendering the God of the Bible irrelevant.”³² Monsma also believes that people are replacing God with technology, trying to find their salvation in it. He writes, “We live in a secularized scientific-technological society. Men and women worship at the feet of their own technical prowess, believing that they can achieve their own salvation by building more and better technological objects, that they can find peace and contentment in a self-indulgent plethora of material goods.”³³ Therefore, I would agree with White who says that it is not only the different types of technology that Christians have to deal with, but also the social and psychological “world” and values they create.³⁴

We must examine the widely held belief that technology is neutral. I do not believe that technology is neutral, nor that it is good or evil. However, how it is used most certainly results in either good or evil, and it is the resulting effects that we need to examine if we are

²⁹ Susan J. White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 18.

³⁰ Ellul in *Ibid*, 21.

³¹ *Ibid*, 112.

³² Douglas Groothuis, *The Soul in Cyberspace* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1997), 161.

³³ Stephen V. Monsma, (ed.), *Responsible Technology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 51.

³⁴ Susan J. White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 14.

to deal with technology in an appropriate manner. Groothuis writes, “Technologies...are not neutral tools. They affect our lives in countless and often invisible ways.”³⁵

One negative way that we can see technology affecting our society is the strong sense of autonomy and individuality that is so prevalent today. Televisions, radios, computers, and other such technologies, are not only impersonal but they encourage an immensely impersonal society. God did not create us to be impersonal, but to interact with one another. Groothuis warns that it is only a matter of time before “being digital will replace being there, being personal.”³⁶

What about the use of computer Bible programmes? Although Bible programmes are extremely helpful and supportive in many ways, we must also recognize that they also have negative effects. Through the use of Bible programmes we run the risk of not hiding God’s Word in our hearts (Psalm 119) because of our reliance on computer programmes to do the memory work for us.³⁷ “Computers are becoming ‘smarter’ while humans are dumbing down.”³⁸

As Christians we need to recognize the potential of good outcomes of technology, as well as acknowledging the negative that can result. Being *in* but not *of* the world requires us to embrace the appropriate areas of technology, after we have challenged and examined them. “If new technological artefacts and systems are to be challenged creatively, they must be subjected to sustained scrutiny at the early stages of their incorporation into everyday life—before they become inextricably enmeshed with other technologies and cultural practices.”³⁹

³⁵ Douglas Groothuis, *The Soul in Cyberspace* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1997), 75.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 138.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 147.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 148.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 16.

The Church and Technology

The question we now need to ask is whether there is a place in our churches for modern technology. Is technology opposed to Christian worship, or does it have the potential to enhance it? We also need to look at how our technological society has influenced Christian worship. Until recently there has been little attention given to the impact that technology has on worship. One of the difficulties in assessing technology in worship services is that we cannot stand outside of it and give an objective opinion because technology permeates all of life.⁴⁰ Susan White suggests that we need to look at what kind of culture we are embedded in and how this shapes the average person.⁴¹

White says that one of the problems introduced to the church as a result of our technological society is that our technological society offers quick fixes to short-term needs. This affects Christian worship because people come seeking quick, professional answers to their spiritual needs, unwilling to input much personal effort. She writes, “For most participants, worship is judged by its ability to uplift, inspire, and console.”⁴²

Another problem caused by our society’s addiction to the television screen is that people are looking for the same fast-paced entertainment in churches as they find on their televisions. Attention spans are becoming shorter and the demand to be entertained in a make-believe world is increasing. Young people today are also much more visually oriented, so is the best way to reach them through a 40 minute sermon? If they are much more responsive to the visual, then why not incorporate more visually stimulating elements into our church services?

“It seems likely that the gap between the technologized, media saturated, quick-fix world that most worshippers inhabit in their daily lives and the structures of traditional Christian worship, which demand deeper and more sustained attention and engagement, will

⁴⁰ Susan J. White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 14.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 38.

⁴² *Ibid*, 118.

continue to grow.”⁴³ If this happens, then perhaps Christian worship will become less and less relevant to people’s lives and will cease to connect with them. Tex Sample says:

It is no secret that those most influenced by electronic culture participate in church at far lower levels than those of previous generations. I believe that the failure of the church, as of yet, to deal with the changes brought on by an electronic culture is a basic factor in the lower levels of participation of post-World War II electronic generations.⁴⁴

Sample goes on to suggest that the church may indeed even “lose a key opportunity for ministry and missions” if it does not become culturally relevant in the area of technology.⁴⁵ The church needs to become culturally relevant in a technological culture. This does not mean it should embrace every new technology, but after careful examination those technologies appropriate for worship should become a part of it. We must remember that the medium we use to present a message will affect the message itself. We need to decide how it affects the message and whether this effect is positive or negative before deciding if the particular technology is appropriate for worship. Groothuis suggests that, “Christians...can appreciate the good gifts of creation without becoming materialists...We need not refuse earth in order to serve heaven.”⁴⁶

I believe that integrating technology into our churches is part of our responsibility as Christians who want to connect with the world for the sake of the kingdom (which, of course, is our duty). Sample highlights the importance of being culturally relevant as well as faithful to our Christianity: “I know of no range of practices where it is more crucial to be culturally tented and faithfully Christian than in worship.”⁴⁷

⁴³ Susan J. White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 119.

⁴⁴ Tex Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World: Electronic Culture and the Gathered People of God*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 15.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 16.

⁴⁶ Douglas Groothuis, *The Soul in Cyberspace* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1997), 47.

⁴⁷ Tex Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World: Electronic Culture and the Gathered People of God*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 104.

In this age of technology our culture needs renewal. But so, too, do many of our churches. White suggests that there is potential for mutual renewal if there is mutual critique between the two. She writes, “If technology and worship can enter into a relationship of mutual critique, there is a possibility that both may undergo genuine renewal.”⁴⁸

Conclusion

I believe that most Christians today have approached new technologies from one of two extremes: either completely embracing them without question, or totally rejecting them because they are ‘new’. I think that a different approach to technology is essential if we want to be *in* but not *of* the world—if we want to be relevant enough in a technological society to reach people for Christ, but also be distinct and not conformed to the ways of the world. This approach involves examining each technology carefully in light of its positive or negative effects, and on this basis deciding whether it is appropriate for our church, and each individual Christian, to embrace. It is time that we took responsibility for how we use technology. Sample writes,

The call here is for a church that will “imitate” Christ to pitch tent, to embody itself, to take form in the indigenous practices of our time, not for the purpose of accommodation to the world, but rather to be God’s people. It is a twofold effort: to join the practices of an electronic culture, on the one hand, and to keep faith with the story of Christ, on the other.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Susan J. White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 122.

⁴⁹ Tex Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World: Electronic Culture and the Gathered People of God*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 122.

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