TECHNOLOGY *for* GOD'S KINGDOM: AN EVALUATION

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Summary:

This paper outlines a definition and philosophy of the use of technology, especially as it relates to Christian worship. Included is some helpful advice and an interesting appendix.

Length: 16 pages

Technology *for* God's Kingdom: An Evaluation

I. Technology: What is It and What Drives It?

Technology has been defined in many ways, and Stephen Monsma has integrated

the basic concepts from a Christian perspective to define it 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."[1] By interpreting human activity as a response to God

Monsma is reflecting the traditional view that mankind's intellectual faculties were given

by God for them to creatively rule over His creation for His glorious purposes.   This

'forming and transforming' is therefore part of visibly representing who the Creator is,

and is at this philosophical level a good activity that produces good results.

The fundamental belief that technology is an exercise of "responsibility" is what

Neil Postman describes as characterizing a 'tool-using' culture, when technology is

"subject to the jurisdiction of some binding social or religious system."[2]   Postman first

plots a historical trajectory from 'tool-using' culture to 'technocracy', described as

growing out of a separation of science from theology, and then to 'technopoly'; defined

as "the submission of all forms of cultural life to the sovereignty of technique and

technology."[3] However, though tools are no longer subordinated to the user, Graham

Ward points out that the power has shifted to the system designers, so that: "beyond the

customizing of information about the world lies the ultimate re-creation of the world

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[1] Stephen V. Monsma, ed., Responsible Technology: A Christian Perspective (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 19.

[2] Neil Postman, Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology (New York: Knopf, 1992), p. 24.

[3] Ibid., p. 52.

itself, in which acts, practices, and understandings become the effects of programmed communications."[4]

The point is that all such human activity is under girded by a set of beliefs and values, which today is a 'faith' which is rooted in the Enlightenment's "declared autonomy from God."[5] Monsma describes the result: "In presuming that technology has its own inner logic, its own wisdom independent of the hearts of human beings, society has neglected to deal with the value-ladenness of technology, and has thus granted technology a kind of autonomy."[6] Postman adds that this "Technopolist" believes that what the world needs is more information, never asking what its purpose or limitations it ought to serve.[7] This foundational shift in thinking goes to the heart of how human beings conceive of themselves because how personhood is understood is disconnected from God as a reference point.[8]

II. Criteria for Evaluation: Purposes and Effects

Technology may be driven by a particular belief system, never actually being neutral, but it must be further evaluated based on its purposes *and* effects. Even if one believes that the goals must be 'good ones', even *God's* purposes, it is possible to step

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[4] Graham Ward, "Between Virtue and Virtuality," *Theology Today*, v.59 no.1, (Ap. 2002), pp.67-8.

[5] Monsma, p. 8. 'In light of' Romans 1, it seems that pursuit of the knowledge minus God does the opposite of enlightenment; it darkens. 'More is less.' "If the *light* that is in you is *darkness*…"

[6] Ibid., p. 34.

[7] Postman, p. 61.

[8] Douglas Groothuis, *The Soul in Cyber-Space* (Grand Rapids: Hourglass Books, 1997), p. 29. In addition to the category of personhood being altered, Ward suggests alteration to the following conceptual categories: "space, time, materiality, certain cognitive operations such as memory and imagination, certain relational categories such as community, friend, contact, acquaintance, and interaction, and certain foundational categories for moral action and interaction such as fidelity, trust, and agency." Ward, p. 57.

over the activity itself as requiring critical evaluation. Furthermore, when both the activity and purposes appear to be good, the use of the technology may have effects on the human mind or body which are contrary to God's will.

Some Ends which *Some*times Justifies *Some* of the Means

All would agree that technology should accomplish good ends. Even with something as aesthetic as 'the spectacle', it is appropriate to ask Tex Sample's question, "which story, or whose story, is at work?"[9] It is not always obvious. Ward suggests that what appears to many to be an aesthetic exercise of freedom can be governed by capitalism. He states: "One participates in the illusions of freedom and infinity, but the vertigo, the free fall, and the adrenaline rushes are as premeditated as the inclines, curves, and descents on a theme-park ride."[10]

The goals of the Church should be carefully examined. Walter Wilson presents the Church as being "in the information business", such that the internet is equivalent to the tent meeting, being a vehicle to providing information.[11]   "What Peter did at Pentecost was to dispense information," he writes.[12] One wonders if that message was merely "information", and whether the tent meetings had any unique relational or spiritual dynamics.[13] This purpose for which technology is enlisted seems skewed, for as Wilson states it, "the ultimate goal is **not a church** but the discovery of a deep, personal

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[9] Tex Sample, The Spectacle Of Worship In A Wired World: Electronic Culture and the Gathered People of God (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), p. 92.

[10] Ward, p. 65.

[11] Walter P. Wilson, *The Internet Church* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), pp. xiii, 22-3.

[12] Ibid., p. 76.

[13] In 1Thes. 2:1-13 Paul explains that **how** he lived among (while teaching) them communicated that his message was really God's message.

relationship with God" (boldface mine).[14] But the goal *is* a Church, one which is growing to reflect God's glory as His Son Jesus does.[15]

The Church needs to examine its goals with regard to technology, but also be willing to evaluate which *means* it chooses. Are the means the right ones to achieve the goal? If one believes that the medium *is not* the message, then it is possible to be blind to faulty methods.[16] Michael Slaughter believes that all mediums are "the wineskin", and therefore *any* medium which connects with felt needs is sufficient.[17] The problem with this approach is that in designing a worship *experience*, the medium is designed to create an awareness of God's presence. Worship is said to happen when, "God's Spirit touches human spirit", because Jesus said that true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth (John 4:23-4).[18] Yet that story teaches how the Samaritans believed "because of <u>the word</u> of the woman who testified" and "because of <u>His own word</u>", in contrast to the Jews who would not believe even when they *saw* miracles. The question must be asked whether a particular means *is* a wineskin, or an empty glass.[19]

The Effects of Usage

Only relatively late in the industrial era have occupational standards for health and safety been developed and enforced, so it should not be surprising that the

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[14] Wilson, p. 137.

[15] Cf. Eph. 4:4-5, 13; 1Pet. 2:4-10.

[16] Wilson, p. 59; he states, "our doctrine, of course, won't change."

[17] Michael Slaughter, Out on the Edge: A Wake-up Call for Church Leaders on the Edge of The Media Reformation (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), p. 58.

[18] Ibid., p. 73.

[19] One ought to wonder if animated 'cartoon' characters, such as talking objects, vegetables, or animals, can <u>both</u> communicate that 'this is fantasy' <u>and</u> 'this is true'; 'this is trivial' <u>and</u> 'this is important'.

information age has yet to appreciate the hazards of its own means of operation. As Monsma states: "the question then is not merely what objects will be produced, but what will be the consequences of the process by which they are produced. What effects will technology have on the whole of life?"[20] The following section will examine how technology may affect cognition and community.

Effects on cognition

Tex Sample asked his son why he wanted to jump out of an airplane, to which he replied, "It's not a 'why' question, it's a 'rush' question."[21] Sample suggests that the "ratio of the senses is changing", resulting in a search for meaning in experience.[22] Hugh McDonald philosophically analyzes the problem as each technology's basic requirement for attention, such that our activity becomes "a reverse process, whereby man becomes dependent on technology and is shaped by it."[23] He further states that the senses become "habituated to a certain level of sensation," leading to addiction.[24] It has been discovered that many people are actually addicted to being online, and psychiatrists are suggesting that it is because dopamine is being released in the brain.[25]

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[20] Monsma, p. 4. Suggests asking about effects on aesthetics, economics, social impact, justice, and resource use (p.26).

[21] Sample, p. 80.

[22] Ibid., pp. 44, 81.

[23] Hugh McDonald, "Asceticism and the Electronic Media: Technophilia and Technophobia in the Perspective of Christian Philosophy," *McLuhan Studies*, Issue 4 (par. 9) [on-line]; www.chass.utoronto.ca/mcluhan-studies/v1_iss4/1_4art3.htm, accessed Jan. 10, 2004.

[24] Ibid., par. 40.

[25] Andrew Careaga, *Hooked on the Net: How to Say "Goodnight" when the Party Never Ends* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2002), p. 26. Careaga surveys the research that has been done, pp. 8-10. Healy quotes a neuropsychologist as saying, "You raise kids on alpha, they get addicted to alpha, just like any hypnotic state." Jane M. Healy, *Endangered Minds: Why Our Children Don't Think* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 204.

In *Endangered Minds*, Jane Healy has reviewed the research relevant to a discussion of the effects of electronic media on the neurological development of children. There has not been enough consistent research to be definitive about their effects, but the findings do point towards the blocking of active mental processing and a difficulty paying attention.[26]   There needs to be more research in this area, but there has been enough to warrant a serious reconsideration of whether these effects are acceptable to the one who created our minds to function with the full integration of senses and conceptual processes.[27]

Effects on Community

"Technology does not separate people but brings them closer together. It has created community," writes Wilson, a businessman from Silicon Valley.[28] Maybe so, but 'what *kind* of community?', asks Daniel Griswold. The Internet can at the same time undermine community, he writes, "because it subtly convinces people that fellowship and community can be had with only as much commitment as a click of a button….It erodes trust, and renders impossible the collective building of a shared history and a shared set of ideals."[29] He bases his assessment on the belief that the Church as a community transcends volunteerism and requires living a "constancy and patience that will not "log

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[26] Jane M. Healy, *Endangered Minds: Why Our Children Don't Think* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 199. Furthermore it may: (1) reduce the function of left-hemisphere systems; (2) diminish mental traffic between hemispheres; or (3) hinder development of 'executive systems', "that regulate attention, organization, and motivation" (p. 209).

[27] Healy writes, "Children must learn to use—and thus help develop—both sides and the connections between them. Higher-order reasoning and putting *language meaning* together with the visual input are particularly important" (p. 213).   It would seem that the fantasy of being 'present only in the present' does hinder the ability to think with 'language meaning', a meaning which involves the memory and imagination. As Ward put it: "The Internet has technical memory but no remembrance" (Ward, p. 63).

[28] Wilson, p. 141.

[29] Daniel M. Griswold, "Beyond The Hype: The Internet And The Church," *Perspectives* v.18, no.1 (Jan 2003), p. 9. Similarly, Groothuis suggests that the Net requires constant suspicion, which can not build trusting communities (p.133).

off" when times are difficult and relationships are strained."[30]   In other words, there is more to *Christian* community than sharing a few thoughts via email or bulletin board.

In describing what virtual communities ought to strive for, Andrew M. Lord portrays the missional community as characterized by praise, hope, forgiveness, and affirmation.[31] Lord is attempting to affirm these as possible, yet admits, "it is difficult to see how virtual communities can be committed to the poor."[32] Without offering any means to accomplish it, Lord holds up the obvious need: "Ways need to be found of linking virtual communities with real-life communities, especially those of the poor and oppressed. They also need to be linked with an experience of the Trinitarian God through worship and Scripture."[33] How can that which is a 'disembodied' word again become flesh?

Tex Sample suggests that human bonding is still taking place, but with different dynamics.[34] The media, he explains, has so 'encoded' the human makeup such that "human "nature" is not the same in all times and places," and concludes that Christ's incarnation today needs to match those culture-bound identities.[35] This essentially fractures the 'Body of Christ' into as many subcultures as exist, requiring a downbeat church, an upbeat church, an internet church, and someday a cyborg church.[36]

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[30] Groothuis, p. 9.

[31] Andrew M. Lord, "Virtual Communities and Mission," *Evangelical Review of Theology,* v.26 no.3, (2002), pp. 197-8.

[32] Ibid., p. 203.

[33] Ibid., p. 206

[34] Sample, p. 75.

[35] Ibid., pp. 78, 105.

[36] What has happened to the language of the Spirit? At Pentecost many cultures heard the same message, corporately becoming a new creation with a common faith. 1 Corinthians and Ephesians witness to how crucial it is for us to put aside what is of our 'human nature' that hinders the Spirit's unity.

III. The Bi-directional Response of the Church

This discussion has often been framed as a false dichotomy, but does not need to be. This section will explore how the Church might sail the sea without remaining adrift, traveling both the apostolic highway and Christ's rocky path. Technologies will need to be evaluated by the above-mentioned criteria, giving particular attention to *which* purpose the technology is being applied.

Go! But don't remain there.

Whether it is technologies' purposes, means, effects, or values, the approach of a Christian must be that of an exile, "living by the inspiration of another cultural dynamic…(entailing) the absolute rejection of the pretentious aim…to establish a counter-creation."[37] Our approach requires movement both towards and away from the culture outside the Church.[38]

Finding ways to communicate Christ (as more than information) can involve "finding solutions that meet felt needs and effectively communicating those solutions to persons who perceive the needs."[39] But we can not stay there. Marva Dawn points out that people do not really know what their true needs are, requiring us to give them "more than they think they want in the fullness of Christ's answer to their unfelt and deeper needs." [40] There needs to be a plan to move people in the direction of wholeness and maturity.

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[37] Monsma, pp. 55-6.

[38] See Appendix A for a word-picture of these two movements.

[39] Slaughter, p. 37. This is a definition for "marketing".

[40] Marva J. Dawn, Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 286

It may be recognized that in an internet society, "any response must be fast."[41] At the same time we recognize that we can not remain there. "If our worship practices create the sense that the things of God must be tightly timed, this efficiency increasingly destroys our relationships with each other within the Body of Christ."[42] Strategies for engaging an internet society will clearly need to be differentiated from those which represent the goals of mature Christian faith. This is the way to steer clear of technophilia or technophobia. The wise course for the Church will be bi-directional, with a faithful human-divine community going where it can intersect with those caught in the rip-tide of a godless society.

There ought to be caution. A wise church will not choose to meet at the pub, nor send its missionaries to the adult-only theatre to find a place of intersection. There needs to be developed a means of accountability so that we are not traveling the cyber world alone. What is the modern equivalent of being sent out in pairs?   It furthermore ought to be considered how the principle in Romans 14:21—not to do anything by which another Christian stumbles—can be applied to this discussion. Recent surveys are nauseating with the number of Christian men who are tempted while online and visit pornographic sites, yet we do not ask ourselves how we, by our own actions, might be encouraging them to be online.[43]

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[41] Wilson, p. 72.

[42] Dawn, p. 43.

[43] It is good shepherding to counsel some men to go off-line. How, then, can a Christian institution expect or require members to be online, or in some way isolate members who are not by using it as a primary means of participation?

Specific Technologies, Issues, and Solutions

It has been suggested that it is crucial for church leadership to discriminate between the application of technologies for connecting with the world and their use for connecting with God and one another. It is widely known that tradeoffs exist in attempting to travel both of these directions at once, such as when a 'service' attempts to meet the felt-needs of unbelievers and to give opportunity for worship of God. It would seem that the crucial idea is to separate as much as possible the activities which are 'out' from those which are 'in'.[44] Websites, for example, make it possible to intersect the lives of thousands who are outside the Church, but they appear not to serve well as a substitute for a physical gathering. Of course for a shut-in it is 'better than nothing', but would they not rather want someone to visit *in person*?

Wilson tells of a young adults' pastor whose "reach and access" has dramatically expanded through the use of email messages, answering up to a hundred per day.[45] This is good, unless it is thought to provide the kind of intimate shepherding that can take place through commitment and involvement in each-other's lives. Similarly, Wilson reports that his pastor feels more connected with his congregation with the use of emails, saying, "I have more interaction with people."[46] More than what? More than when he sat in his office, behind the walls built by a society in pursuit of progress, out of which people are now searching for a way out? Surely emails are not the best way for a pastor to relate to people, yet as long as the systemic issues exist and priorities are askew, email

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[44] This presumes a high-commitment model, with a system to identify that commitment; Saddleback Community Church is an extreme example, and illustrates how difficult this can be to accomplish.

[45] Wilson, p. 84.

[46] Ibid., p. 85.

will be a less-than-ideal communication form. With that said, it seems we ought to think 'long-term' about how the Church as a community could develop less.

This differentiation of purposes gets extremely fuzzy when we consider that within the congregation are people of all maturity levels, and many if not most of whom will find searching the net (or e-bible) more exciting than meditation.[47] If it is conceded that the media of electronic culture has shaped the way we think and what we pay attention to, then each church has to acknowledge this and work with this reality even as they move towards a mature faith. Technologies such as PowerPoint may be needed to keep congregations engaged with some specific goals in mind.

One goal should be to unite the verbal and visual in the participant's mind such that their imagination can be stimulated. The imagination is a gift of God by which "we are able to see through sense impressions to the reality that lies behind things."[48]   By speaking in the language of experience—where words derive their meaning--we can invite their imaginations to form a new picture, reversing the apparent cognitive dysfunction.

"The normal common ground for a whole audience is the concrete."[49] The 'concrete' is simply the world of creation, where God is still speaking in spite of people's attempts to extinguish it. Oswald Chambers presented the value of inviting our senses to see through our imagination:

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[47] Groothuis, p. 147.

[48]A. W. Tozer, "Born After Midnight," in *The Best of A. W. Tozer: Book One*, ed. Warren W. Wiersbe (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1978), 49. The imagination powerfully incorporates language, as Eugene Peterson describes: "The word is creative: it brings into being what was not there before--perception, relationship, belief....Out of the blank abyss a picture is formed by means of metaphor: people see what they did not see before and are changed."

[49] Mark S. Wheeler, "Serving Appetizing Meals: The Use of Word Pictures in Preaching and Teaching the Bible," *Christian Education Journal*, vol.12 (Wint. 1992): p. 63.

"The people of God in Isaiah's day had starved their imagination by looking on the face of idols, and Isaiah made them look up at the heavens, that is, he made them begin to use their imagination aright....In every wind that blows, in every night and day of the year, in every sign of the sky, in every blossoming and in every withering of the earth, there is a real coming of God to us if we will simply use our starved imagination to realize it."[50]

Just as the images can be formed by words, so the meaning of words are formed by images. While depending on the Holy Spirit, the comprehension of truth therefore in part depends on our minds being able to put together the Word of God and this world. Tozer could see the challenge:

"The Bible will never be a living Book to us until we are convinced that God is articulate in His universe. To jump from a dead, impersonal world to a dogmatic Bible is too much for most people....He tries to think of God as mute everywhere else and vocal only in a book....With notions like that in our heads how can we believe?"[51]

Unless God is in the world that people live, "how can we believe?" Tozer asks. The place to begin in communication has to be the high-imagery language that invites the imagination to look beyond creation at the truth of God.[52] This approach is dependent on shared experience and an awareness of what the world of the receiver looks like; to know what language describes it, and what language can therefore describe the way they ought to see. It depends on there being common ground between us.

It is always easier to state a simple idea in complicated terms than to put it into practice. In addition to poetic metaphors, image-literate Bible exposition, stories, drama, and word pictures, there are also visual and participatory assists. There is an exciting potential to use PowerPoint to stimulate our imaginations by speaking the language of

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[50]Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest* (Westwood, NJ: Barbour and Company, 1935), 41.

[51]A. W. Tozer, "The Pursuit of God," in *The Best of A. W. Tozer: Book One*, ed. Warren W. Wiersbe (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1978), 25-6.

[52] Jesus <u>often</u> called on the experiences of his audience to define words that would then be used to call them to see something new. He asked them to consider the actions of fathers towards their children as instructive of how God was towards them, and to consider the actions of a Samaritan as instructive of whom God was asking them to love.

experience, juxtaposing images with the Word of God. In the final analysis, however, nothing will substitute for intentionally sharing 'real-life' experiences. This shared meaning will always intersect with God's creation, and therefore will always find *some* intersection with the lives of the 'partially-disembodied'.

Conclusion

With a bi-directional orientation, the Church should consider each technology which is being considered or in use, evaluating what beliefs support it, or what purposes, means, and effects are supported by it. How will we live in faith as one family when technologies have often sought to fix deeper problems? How will we comprehend and communicate what is transcultural in a society of subcultures? What will we do when people accept computers under their skin?[53] Our direction must come from God's revelation of His message, embodied in His Son and His Family. The questions will not leave us, but it is certain that our God will give us wisdom if we sincerely seek it.[54]

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[53] Wilson, p. 49. He states without critique: "We will have computers under the skin that will link us to machine intelligence." "The world of the born and the world of the made are merging into a neobiological civilization" (p. 51).

[54] James 1:5-6.

Appendix A: a word-picture

One morning on the coast of Maine, a dozen wet bikes can be heard buzzing around, riding the waves; jumping the wakes of boats. By 11 o'clock you notice that fog has been moving in so that you can no longer see anyone out there. With GPS and map, you get in your boat and head out of the waterway, slowly making your way through the fog, and a few hundred yards out it lifts; the wet-bikes quickly come to jump your wake. Cutting the engine, you wave them over and ask if anyone wants help getting to shore. One weary young man agrees to follow, while the others seem not to care that in less than an hour they will not even be able to see each other.

The sea is a cyber world, on which many ride their electronic devices, for play--for the rush--unaware that they are losing sight of land. The land is what is real, what is true; the world in which our bodies live, mediated by our senses, governed by God. It is needful that we both know where we were made to live and to leave there in pursuit of the few who desire to return.

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