HE VERY WORD “TECHNOLOGY” has a certain aura about it, like the glowing light of a smartphone in the dark. We associate technology with pixels and PowerPoint, with things that beep and buzz and run on batteries. After the 21st century’s revolutions in computing capacity, we tend to identify technology with information processing machines we can wear on our wrist. We’ve been trained to assume that the land of technology is a city of light.

So when churches wrestle with the question of “technology” in worship, they tend to talk about whether to use projectors and PowerPoint slides, or whether it really makes sense to invest thousands of dollars in AV equipment. Educators similarly are asking fundamental questions about how digital, computer, and web technologies could help (or hurt) the task of teaching and learning for “digital natives.”

Parents also wrestle with technology: When should we let the kids have a cell phone? Should we let them have smartphones that give them access to the Internet?

Although these are good and important conversations to have, they tend to assume a narrow definition of “technology” that is tethered to computing. But that obscures the fact that we’re never not immersed in some technology.
When a church considers whether to add a screen and projector as part of their worship “architecture,” they are not contemplating whether to “add” technology to worship. Instead they are considering whether to swap one sort of technology for another. The hymnbook, for instance, is itself the result of a remarkable technological revolution in the medieval world—the invention of the printing press. So whether you’re scrolling through this article on your iPad or reading it in print, you are using a technology.

Similarly, while I might not be excited about using digital technologies in my classroom, that doesn’t mean I’m opposed to technology. It just means I favor the technology of chalk and blackboards.

Not all that glitters is gold. Conversely, not all technology glows. If we narrowly identify technology with shiny, blinky things, we’ll miss all of the technologies right under our nose and mistakenly take them to be “natural.” The question isn’t whether to use technology, but how. While we rightly worry about the effects of being constantly hunched over our smartphones or about the potential misuse of power that comes with ever-present surveillance, that’s not synonymous with being “against” technology.

Technology is as old as humanity. Or you might say that it is as old as culture. Technology is most basically defined as the application of knowledge in order to get something done (which is why technology is often described as applied science). It is as old as the human propensity—and calling—to “make” the world. There is no human culture that is not always already technological.

**Asking Better Questions**

If technology is an expression of our creaturely vocation to create, then the question isn’t whether to employ technology, but how and which. We would do well to ask the sorts of questions along the lines of those Andy Crouch presses us to consider in *Culture Making*. Crouch emphasizes that yes/no, good/bad questions are too clunky and ham-fisted. Instead, we need to ask questions like the following:

- What does this technology assume about the way the world is?
- What does this technology assume about the way the world should be?
- What does this technology make possible?
- What does this technology make impossible (or at least very difficult)?
- What new forms of culture are created in response to this technology?

These questions enable us to evaluate technology—and our relation to it—in ways that are informed by a biblical vision for flourishing.

- What does Scripture say about the way the world is?

**WE SHOULD ALSO BE ASKING, “WHAT DOES THIS TECHNOLOGY WANT ME TO LOVE?”**

- What does God tell us about what he wants the world to be? How is this pictured and practiced in the rhythms of Christian worship? What are the outlines of *shalom* God desires for the world?
- How does that inform our evaluation of various technologies? What do they make possible? Are these possibilities that resonate with what God desires for creation? Or might some technologies functionally encourage disordered, sinful ways of being?
- What do such technologies make more difficult? How might some technologies shut down capacities for relating to God, our neighbor, and God’s creation? Do some technologies actually make it harder to be open to God’s call to love God and neighbor? Might other technologies actually make us more responsive to the gospel?

The answer to such questions isn’t a simple yes or no, good or bad. As one of my first teachers in the Reformed tradition used to put it, the answer to almost any question is either going to be “Yes, but . . .” or “No, but . . .” If the answers are going to be biblically responsible and theologically nuanced, they are always going to express that “It’s complicated.”

**Shaped by Our Own Creations**

But our enthusiasm sometimes runs ahead of us. Sometimes our haste in latching onto technologies—we sense what we can do with them—prevents us from seeing what they might do to us. Just think for a moment of Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Dr. Frankenstein’s “new creation,” you might recall, was created with the best of intentions: to help the human race overcome illness and disease. But as the novel shows, sometimes our own creations can outstrip our best intentions, and the very technologies we meant for good become monsters that mean us harm.

While we need to ask difficult questions about how to use technology, we also need to consider how we can end up being used by technology. In other words, it’s not just a question of what we can and should do with technology; it’s also a question of what various technologies do to us.

We simplistically imagine that these technologies are neutral tools we can use for good or ill. But then we fail to recognize that technologies come pre-loaded with ways of seeing and construing and “making” the world. For example, instead of just worrying about the messages or content delivered to our
smartphones, we should be aware that the way we use them unconsciously trains us to inhabit the world with a certain posture. The smartphone invites me to inhabit the world differently—not just because it gives me access to global Internet resources in a pocket-sized device, but precisely in how I interact with the device itself. The habit of using a smartphone implicitly teaches me to treat the world as “available” to me and at my disposal—to constitute the world as “at-hand” for me, to be selected, scaled, scanned, tapped, and enjoyed.

I once saw this way of life pictured, of all places, in a Michelob Ultra beer commercial. The advertisement portrayed a world that responds to my whims and wants the same way a smartphone does. Don’t like that car? Swipe for a different one. Wish the scenery was different? Swipe for an alternative. Wish you could be somewhere else? Just touch the place. Wish you could see her [sic] just a little better? Zoomoom with the slide of a couple of fingers.

A way of relating to a phone becomes a way of relating to the world. The practices for manipulating a small device are expanded to show how we’d really like to manipulate our environment to serve our needs and be subject to our whims. And while we don’t go around swiping our hands in front of us to change the scenery, perhaps we unconsciously begin to expect the world to conform to our wishes, just as our smartphone does. In short, my relation to my smartphone—which may seem insignificant—actually shapes my relation to the world.

It’s important to realize that technologies are not just tools that we can put in our hands and thus are subject to us. Technologies generate forms of life and cultural practices to which we become subject. They are not just instruments we work with; they become systems that work on us, surreptitiously forming our loves and longing and desires—indeed, shaping our character. So not only should we ask, “What sort of world does this technology want?”; we should also be asking, “What does this technology want me to love?”

The New Magic

In a secular age, it’s tempting to let the allure and power of technology become our source of hope. A society that has given up belief in God is prone to believe in other gods, especially when they are shiny and new and (seem to) demand so little of us. I regularly spend time in the Bay Area around San Francisco, serving as a mentor to a fascinating group of young entrepreneurs and innovators. Many are steeped in the utopian visions of Silicon Valley, where the gospel of “startup-ism” heralds the unlimited human capacity to solve all of our problems.

On my most recent trip there, I discovered an intriguing book by Massachusetts Institute of Technology innovation guru David Rose: Enchanted Objects: Design, Human Desire, and the Internet of Things. These are a few of my favorite things. How could I resist?

What Rose wants is magic. More specifically, Rose argues that we all want magic, enchantment—that this is a fundamental human desire. He sees this attested in ancient myths and our most enduring fairy tales, in the worlds of Tolkien and Harry Potter. “It seems as if we have always longed for a world of enchantment,” he observes. The “enchanted objects” he’s talking about “will be ones that carry on the traditions and promises of the objects of our age-old fantasies, the ones that connect with and satisfy our fundamental human desires.” The experiences that enchant us, he continues, “reach into our hearts and souls.”

But what Rose ultimately offers is just a false, fabricated enchantment that is a technological achievement. Indeed, what Rose offers as enchanted objects are, well, quite a let-down. He starts describing Dorothy’s magical teleporting shoes and then tells you that Nike has created “enchanted” shoes that can count how many steps you’ve taken. He describes Frodo’s sword and then compares it to a pill bottle that reminds you to take your blood pressure medication. You’ll forgive me, but all of this makes me feel like we’re still in Kansas, if you know what I mean. The technology Rose celebrates can’t deliver transcendence.

But Rose is exactly right to recognize what we desire. And that in itself might be a backhanded testimony to an enduring longing that persists even in a disenchanted world—a signal that we still desire something beyond the ordinary, flat world we live in—something transcendent.

The perennial wisdom of the psalms—whether I’m reading in my leather-bound Bible or the app on my phone—is more relevant than ever. While the power of technology might tempt us to look toward the (Silicon) Valley—our help comes from the Maker of heaven and earth who has made us to be makers. Our calling is to make technologies that channel us toward the flourishing of shalom while we wait for salvation from the One in whom all things hold together. ■

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