

God and Tech

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- [0 : 00] Are you a tech pessimist or a tech optimist? Meaning, as a Christian, do you think technological advancement in the speed that it is advancing, what we live in an age net, social scientists will now call the age of the technium, where it used to be that technological advancement meant you just farmed your field faster.
- But now the technium is this interconnected web, the internet and everything else, where any technology now must participate within the grid to be a technology that's useful.
- Right? So technology is no longer operate apart from an international network. Every single technology we now create seems to attach itself to the web, the technium as it's been called.
- And there's all sorts of questions and problems that come with that and maybe potential goods. But the question is, as a Christian, do you consider yourself to be a bit of a Luddite or are you a tech optimist?
- Do you think that a lot of what's happening is good? So Tony Rankie gives us this line to think about. He says, the agnostic technocrat, that'd be a tech optimist, agnostic tech optimist thinks he must shove God aside to let technology flourish.
- [1 : 18] The Christian agrarian, on the other hand, thinks that he must shove technology aside, sorry, must shove, did I say agnostic technocrat, must shove God aside? That's what I meant, God aside.
- The Christian agrarian thinks that he must shove technology aside in order for faith to thrive. But both the tech optimist and the tech pessimist sell God's short on technology.
- Even the most procreation material celebrating forms of Christianity struggles to know what to do with a smartphone, space exploration, and gene-based medicine.
- He says, in Christ we celebrate the material world, like freshly brewed coffee, blossoming fruit trees, hot bread, soft butter, warm honey, nature and gardens and sunshine and play and laughter, we know our gifts to be enjoyed, so too are dances, weddings.
- But should we also celebrate the smartphone, the microprocessor, and the nuclear core? Should we celebrate the smartphone, the microprocessor and the nuclear core? If it plugs into the electrical grid, can we celebrate it as a Christian?
- [2 : 29] So what I wanna do tonight is talk and think about that, about what God thinks about technology. Daniel chapter two, verse 31 to 45. This is the scene where Nebuchadnezzar shares with Daniel his dream, his vision, from God about the future.
- And do you remember that dream? That dream is where Nebuchadnezzar envisions this giant statue and it has all sorts of metallic materials from head to toe, gold and bronze and iron and clay, and God gives Nebuchadnezzar this dream.
- And it's an absolute wonder, the statue that he, Nebuchadnezzar will, of course, in a way build. And we learn there that because God gave Nebuchadnezzar this vision for Daniel to interpret, that God is telling us the story of history is a story of technology as God sees it.

Because God is the one who gives this vision and God, we remember, tells Daniel that the gold and the silver and the bronze and the iron and the iron and clay all represent kingdoms of redemptive history across the biblical timeline.

And that means God says, I am progressing human history through the medium of tech and I actually want you to interpret human history according to technology.

[3 : 53] The ability to build something that's a gold, bronze, iron, clay and iron clay statue is technology. And of course we do that too, right? We categorize our own history in the same way we talk about the stone age, the bronze age, the iron age, the nuclear age and now computer age.

That's how we think about human history. So when we get to questions, the practical things in this series like, what tech is helpful, what tech is harmful, how do we walk by faith in this issue in an age where, when an age where we may in our lifetime see it possible that humans can be largely kept alive for extensively longer periods by becoming partial machines.

That's called transhumanism and that's very real and very possible and being worked on all the time at the moment. More practically, maybe you're not so concerned about being shifted over into a machine, but more practically, what is righteousness for us when it comes to Netflix?

What is righteousness? What is good? What is righteousness when it comes to the amount of times we put our hands in our pocket to pull out the iPhone? These are the real questions that we face and the daily task of pulling the iPhone in and out of the pocket, a lot of theologians have talked about as a new form of liturgy, a way of worship.

The liturgy you come and celebrate the sacraments, weekend and week out, you hear preaching week or weekend and week out, but now the most dominant liturgical act in any human life is pulling the phone out of the pocket.

[5 : 26] It's redefined who we are as human beings. It's given so much money to the PTs of the world, right? Everybody's neck is no longer functioning correctly because of this new liturgy that we've embraced.

So let's let the Bible show us what tech tonight, just for a few minutes, what is technology to get us started and how does God view it, okay?

So first, what is tech? One of the things that we're gonna do just to show you where we're going from the beginning is we're gonna try to dispose ourselves of the churchly myth, one of the many churchly myths.

And the myth is that human innovation, human creativity, human development of tech is something that we do against God's will.

And that's a churchly myth, that's not the case at all. Or another one that our use of technology is always an abuse of creation. That's another myth or God is unrelated to the advancements of technology throughout history.

[6 : 29] That's not true either. And the myth that tech is mostly a problem from the Christian perspective. And that's just not really where the Bible takes us with it. That's not what the Bible says.

So let me ask you, what do you, how would you, let me ask this first. What do you think of when we say the word technology? What kind of images, objects, things, does that bring to your mind?

Just one or two people to shout. What tech, the word technology brings to their mind. Elon Musk, yeah.

Computers, yeah. Okay, any kind of crafted tool. Medical devices. Medical devices, yeah.

Yeah, so all good answers. All right, Tony Rankin gives us a definition of tech. And it comes from the original word for tech, techne, it's a Greek word.

[7 : 25] It's right there in the Bible. We have the word, you know, we have the word technology in the Bible a number of times. And techne, the original word just means craft or craftsmanship.

It is a word that just means the ability to take something and make something out of it. So it's just the human capacity for inventive power or taking raw material and using technique and skill to produce something.

And so he defines it like this. He says tech is applied science in order to amplify power. Applied science, which is just skill, learning to do something and trying to figure out the skills you need to do it.

So it's applying science to make something in order to amplify your power, the ability to do that thing. All right, so it's a simple definition. It's to take raw things, use skill, make something out of them.

So we think largely Elon Musk, iPhones, computers, medical devices, Genesis chapter six to eight, God was going to judge the world by way of a flood and at God's command, he told Noah to be the Elon Musk of his time.

[8 : 41] He said, create something that's never been done before, a boat, a ship that's large enough to hold an immense amount of animal life. And he tells him in that passage to use tar to waterproof it.

Now this we presume in the time is a technological innovation that was spoken by the mouth of God and delivered to Noah and said, this is exactly what I've made you for Noah, to be this technological innovator, this technocrat of your own day in order to redeem the human race.

And this was something that God pronounced. And so you can look throughout the Bible and see that there are many, many, many, many moments where God not only says yes to tech, to technology, but he actually commands it.

And that takes us all the way back to Genesis one, 26 to 28. So Genesis one, 26 to 28 is the commission of humanity to produce technology.

It's at least, it's many things, but it includes that. 26 to 28, God blessed Adam and Eve, the man and the woman, after making them in his own image. Sorry, let me back up.

[9 : 51] Then God said, let us make man in our image after our likeness, let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and every creeping thing.

And so God created man in his own image and his own likeness. He created him male and female, he created them. And God blessed them and God said to them, be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, have dominion over it, the fish of the sea, the birds, the heavens and everything else.

All right, so the language there of dominion and subduing is the language of applied human capability through skill for the sake of organization in order to amplify power.

That's exactly what God means there. We know that even in the very next passage when Adam is put into the garden of Eden in order to work and keep, what's the difference between a garden and a forest?

Oh, I actually asked the question, what is the difference? What's the difference between a garden and a forest? A garden is cultivated, it's a technology. It is the use of human skill and applied science in order to amplify a power.

[11 : 03] And that power is to cultivate, organize, arrange, unto beauty instead of chaos. And we see immediately technology starting to take shape in the earliest portions of the Bible.

And the big idea here is that it is God who not only sanctions it but creates us for it. He creates us to do it. He creates us to be technological inventive people.

And so very famously, this is called the cultural mandate. This title got picked up in the 20th century that technology is simply the command of God to make cultures and cultures come by using skills to produce things and craft things.

And so this is commissioned by God. Now we have to say this, you can't talk about this subject without talking about Tolkien, of course. And in the Lord of the Rings, this is actually one of the big ideas that Tolkien had in creating the Lord of the Rings universe.

One of the things he wanted to do was talk about the story through the lens of technology. And the reason that he wanted to do this is because he was especially horrified in his fight in World War I by the way technology was being used.

[12 : 19] And he talked about, in one of his essays, about the land that gets cleared in the time of the first World War II in order to fight trench warfare style.

So what they'll do is they'll go through and they'll clear the trees and dig the trenches. And it gives you a free line to fight and to shoot at one another.

And there was a real impetus in that in the development of the Lord of the Rings, if maybe you're a person who's watching, the Rings of Power right now. And you can see this if you are because the way he fleshed this out in the Lord of the Rings is that Sauron's evil character is one who goes into all the places where there are forests.

And what does he do? He clears them, he cuts down all the trees, and then he digs trenches deep down into the mud. And what comes up out of the trenches?

Who knows? Somebody knows orcs, yes orcs, right? Orcs are the product. And his pronouncement there, and he spells this out in one of his essays on this, he says that the pronouncement there is that there is an evil side of tech.

[13 : 28] There's an evil side of tech, but there's also simultaneously a good side of tech. And he says in his essay on fairy stories that God, the reason he made the Lord of the Rings is because God made every single one of us to be quote, sub-creators.

And that a sub-creator is merely an agent of technology. It's using the very thing we were called to do by God in a way that's in proportion to our creational calling and towards righteousness.

And so there's all sorts of good tech all throughout the Lord of the Rings, and he called that the power, the ability to be a sub-creator, sub-creation. His language for that, his synonym was that we're all little makers.

We're all little makers underneath God, the big maker. Now, Tolkien is getting at something there, and that's that God sanctions technology to be used in human capacity by human skill because of exactly what we are, the image of God, creators like the creator, but that that can be done in incredibly evil ways, even though, even though the actual concept of tech is good.

So we can say that the structure that God has made, technology, be a technological person, meaning be a creator, make something, whether that's photographs or you work for SpaceX and you're trying to figure out how to get to Mars or you're building iPhones or you're an artist, all of it is technological technically.

[14 : 58] And God says do that and be that, but there's also very clearly a way to do that poorly. There's a structure that is good, but you can manipulate the direction in terrible, terrible ways, right?

So the structure, what it is, righteous, basically righteous, but you can take it and use it in really damaging and harmful ways. Now we see that very early in the Bible.

We see that very early in the Bible in one of the ways as soon as you get from the flood story where Noah uses tar to waterproof the ark, you move on and tar makes a surprising central appearance in another narrative just shortly after.

The Bible usually calls it bitumen, right? And it's Genesis 11 at the tower of Babel. So the same word that gets used when God says, Moses build the ark and save the world and use tar to waterproof it, a technological innovation.

We learn when we flip to Genesis 11 that humanity comes together and says, let us make bricks, new bricks, it's an innovation, it's a brick that's been better than all the other bricks.

[16 : 11] And to bind those bricks together, they use tar. And now immediately the same possibilities, human craftsmanship, human skill, applied science, amplification of power are being used in two totally different ways.

One to save the world and in the next one to try to get to heaven so that you can cast God down. And so the structure we learn of tech is good, but the direction of it can always go bad.

That God says yes, but oftentimes God says no, depending on the direction. And so what does God do at the tower of Babel story? He squashes it, right? He destroys the innovation and he uses that for his meta-purpose throughout human history.

All right, let me give you one more surprising definition of technology, I think, or example. Technology, remember, is applying skill for a purpose and that God gave us that power and that calling.

Luke chapter 10, Luke chapter 10 is the famous story that Jesus tells of the Good Samaritan. And in the Good Samaritan parable, the only man that will help the poor, broken stranger that's been beaten up and left to die on the side of the road is of course this Samaritan.

[17 : 35] And when you read the Samaritan story, one of the things that you'll notice if you look at the details carefully is that when he approaches the bleeding victim, it says that he wrapped him in certain cloths, he gave him certain medicinal comforts, we don't know exactly what, and then he took him to help.

And one of the things that we see immediately, if you think about it and you look through the details, one of the things you have to notice is that he used human technique and skill in medicinal science of the time, as far as it had come and as far as he could use it to amplify his power to love his neighbor.

And that means that if you're a technological pessimist, you've got to all realize that it's very difficult to love anybody without God's gift of techne, of technology, of craftsmanship, that we use it all the time.

And that it's a blessing to the world that love requires tech, it requires human skill applied in the right circumstance, according to science, to amplify power.

And sometimes that just means putting a bandaid on a little kid's finger, and it can be so much more, the greatest medical device in gene therapy, right? These are actually all blessings in ways that God loves us and we love other people.

[18 : 59] Augustine in his city of God, great text, city of God, he has this little section where he praises God for technology and prayer. Just wanted to read it to you, it's pretty great.

He says, he praises, he says, he gives thanks to God for quote, textiles, architecture, agriculture, navigation, sculptors, painters, composers, theater production, humans, capturing, domesticating, training, wild animals, medical drugs, weapons of war, use for purposes of justice, praise development of, and this is where it gets great, he has a whole section giving thanks to God for condiments, sauces, the new sauces of his day, Chick-fil-A sauce, that's not relevant here, other sauces.

He says condiments and sauces used to give joy to the palate, eloquence in speaking and writing of novels, poems, musicians, lyric songs, mathematicians, astronomers, and he keeps going.

And he has this wonderful moment where he just gives thanks to God for this endless amount of technological advancement in his own day. I once was in a class with a theologian who's from here, well he's English but he married a Scott and he's teaching in the States.

And we were talking about some of these things from Genesis 1 Ford and he just asked the question, would any of you wanna live in any other age? You know, I don't think I would.

[20 : 33] Can you imagine living in pre-modernity? After what we've seen, what we can do, gene therapies that are coming out, would we wanna live, no we actually give thanks to God for the beauty and the grandeur of what he has done in technological advancement.

And at the same time we recognize that it can be used in incredibly evil ways, right? So let me draw us to a close here. The problem becomes clear as I said when you turn from Genesis 6 or Genesis 9, from the tar and the wood used for salvation, the story of Noah's Ark is not just about saving Noah, of course not.

It is the early picture of the redemption of the entirety of creation that the only way to be saved is to pass through the waters of judgment in an Ark. And Jesus Christ is that Ark.

And God was using technology to preach to us the ultimate hope of new creation in their early days. The Ark is the agent of salvation and it's a product of innovation. Beautiful, God says.

You get to Genesis 11 and the same beauty of innovation becomes something that is not wrong in itself but wrong in the way that it gets used.

[21 : 46] And so God squashes it and he squabbles it and he says no to it, even though it's the same exact category and structure. All right, let me give you some applications, some things that we can learn and say and take home from this tonight.

Number one, God created technology because he intended his image to be technological.

Technology exists because humans exist. And we are technological beings because we're creators. We're like God in that.

Because that's the first thing we learn. The second thing, from Genesis 6 to Genesis 9 and so many other places, God is not threatened by human innovations, even when they're used in the most evil of ways, not at all.

God's plans and purposes do not change, no matter the wildest imaginations of the transhumanist that's trying to turn humanity into a machine. God is not threatened by that.

[22 : 51] God's plans haven't changed. God will squash everything that he needs to squash to make his plan work out. God clearly sanctions it and he's not threatened by it.

God is not deterred by sinful technological use. Now we can say something even bigger than that, can't we? Even beyond that. Now to do that as we close, I want to draw you over.

If you do have a Bible, this is one passage I do want you to look at with me and that's Isaiah, just two verses, Isaiah 54, 16 and 17.

And I love that Isaiah 54 comes after Isaiah 53 because in Isaiah 53 we have, of course, the great prophecies that the man of sorrows, the holy servant of God, is coming to be crushed for our iniquities.

And then in 54 we've got this line, 16 and 17. Behold, I have created the Smith.

[23 : 53] The Smith, the one who works with metal, I've created the Smith who blows the fires of coals and produces a weapon for its purpose.

I've also created the ravager to destroy. No weapon that is fashioned against you, that's my people, will succeed. And you shall refute every tongue that rises against you in judgment.

This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord. God says, I created the Smith and I tell the black Smith to blow onto the coals, to burn the fire hotter so he can melt his metals and create weapons.

And he says, I send forth the weapons even. And I control the ravager, the one who goes to war. And he says, and the one who goes to war with evil intentions will not succeed against my people and against my purposes.

And he's saying there that no matter how poorly humans misuse tech, Christians have to be a tech optimist. We have to be because God is using human innovation, he says, to bring about his ultimate purposes and plans, even in the most evil moments.

[25 : 04] And so the big claim that we can make here, well, let me say it like this. It wasn't very long before Isaiah writes this that the Persians would, for the first time in all of human history, create a unique torture device called the cross.

The Persians will make it. In the time of Isaiah, they'll invent something that we now will later enrollment times call the cross. It at first was a T bar. Well, actually, at first it was thought to be just an X.

And they called it the cross. It was the great torture device of the Persian kingdom. And right now, as Isaiah writes this, and God says, I send the blacksmith. And I even send the ravager with his sword, but nothing will ever stop the good of my people coming to fruition at the very same moment.

Not many miles away as Persia tries to seek dominance over the land, they're using a cross. And oh boy, did God not know. Did God not know? And when he says this, that he's going to take the man of Isaiah 53 and hang him on it, the greatest of evils, this technology, this innovation, and he's going to use it to squash evil itself.

And so God saves us by tech. He saves us by the most evil of tech, by the most evil of this technology in human history.

[26 : 29] And that means that we can be confident. We can be tech-optimist because God is using tech exactly the way he wants it, exactly the way he wants it. You can't thwart his purposes with it.

So to preview next time, and the next couple of times, I'll say this as the last word, God sends you out to actually out into the world tonight to be technological.

Now, maybe that for you means putting band-aids on the fingers of little children. It means painting something across your night times when they're free.

It means, for some of you, I think of Ben Kennedy, who's making medicine. Isn't that his job, Ben's job? He makes medicine.

That's a wonderful technology. Others of you using medical technologies to care for people constantly. This is God's commission to you. God says go and do.

[27 : 27] And I'm pleased, and it glorifies me, as long as you're wielding it in love and for the good. But the question still remains, how do we then approach certain technologies that naturally bend us towards evil things?

And what are those technologies? Is Netflix a neutral medium that can be used for good or ill? Is the iPhone a neutral medium that can be used for good or ill?

Is social media a neutral technology that can be used for good or ill? These are huge questions. And they're ones that, as Christians, we've got to face. We've got to ask, am I?

And here's at least the initial thing you can ask yourself for anything that you're wielding. Before we get into the details of it later, it's this. Am I using this piece of technology, the iPhone, whatever it may be, which is made up of Tony Rankey says, 60 different natural elements exactly.

60 different natural elements go into this thing we call the iPhone. I have one in my pocket. I'm holding up my pretend one. I actually have one. I could have just pulled it out. But are you using it, wielding it for the glory of God?

[28 : 40] We're not. In what ways are you using it poorly? In what ways are you using it like a Tower of Babel moment? That's the question for Christians.

And we ask that question only knowing that God took the greatest evil technology of history, the cross, the ultimate torture device. And he saved us with it through his son.

All right. So let's pray together. Father, we ask that you would give us wisdom as we think about tech. And we just ask for help, Lord. And we give thanks to you that you've made us innovators and creators.

Oh, the beauty of the city because of technology, the beauty of craftsmanship exercised. And we just ask, Father, that you would give us a renewed heart to care about the way we wield these things that have been made by humans, that it would be for your glory, and that we would run away from unrighteousness with respect to Netflix or iPhones or whatever it may be.

But actually see and figure out how to use these things well, Lord. And we ask for this in Christ's name. Amen.