Reading the Bible in a technopoly

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"Please get out your Bible, if you have one," said my professor. Obediently reaching for my Greek New Testament, I was surprised to notice two students near me reaching for their phones. At some point the word of God written had become electronic.

This is not an isolated case. Most of us in the Western world engage life through screens. We live digitally mediated lives. We increasingly get our news, entertainment, education, and even our spouses on screens. The ubiquity of the screen is difficult to exaggerate. Neil Postman suggests that Western culture is best described as a *technopoly*, a culture that "seeks its authorization in technology, finds its satisfactions in technology, and takes its orders from technology."[1]

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Like Johannes Gutenberg's introduction of the printing press in the middle of the fifteenth century, the proliferation of digital technology in the last twenty years has effected a profound cultural transformation. But to be what Postman calls "two-eyed prophets" who can see both the good and the bad in a given situation, we must be courageous enough to ask difficult questions of our technological situation, to wonder about the implications of our cultural submission to the power of technology. This is especially true for the church, because our location in a technopoly has unexamined and perhaps adverse consequences for the life and mission of the church, particularly for the way we read the Bible and incarnate its story—that is, the way we imagine our very humanity.

The Bible can give us the eyes and the imagination to be two-eyed prophets. The first step is to acknowledge the degree to which technology has severely limited and altered the ways we

engage with the Bible and its world. When we read the Bible as a *device*, it ceases to be a *focal* power and a *focal* presence in our lives.[2]

The problem of technopoly

The human being in a technopoly is an individual who is condemned by limits. But in this picture, technology offers the solution, our salvation: the promise that we can become "unlimited," just as we deserve.[3] New technologies continually enhance our ability to overcome our limits. The seemingly small changes that occur each time we adopt a new technology add up—surprisingly quickly and silently—to major changes in culture and to our world, for better or for worse.[4]

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As a student and teacher of the Bible, I have observed that a culture heavily shaped by digital technology looks on the rural, agrarian, enchanted (think demons, angels, spirits) world of the Bible as naive and primitive, and even as a lower form of human evolution. Technologically mediated life leads to "the rapid dissolution of much that is associated with traditional beliefs" and instead "requires the development of a new kind of social order."[5]

The key to understanding technology's effect on a culture is to recognize with Postman that "it is a mistake to suppose that any technological innovation has a one-sided effect."[6] In other words, the notion that a certain new technology might make life "better"—by making us smarter, more efficient, more attractive, healthier—is only one side of the cultural equation. The other side is that new technologies also displace old ones by competing for our time, attention, money, and worship, as well as for the very way we view and experience the world.[7]

The Bible is an immensely valuable tool in a technopoly, however, because it can reshape our understanding of human well-being. In a culture in which we are formed to trust technology to overcome our limits, immersing ourselves in the biblical narrative, like digging our hands into a garden or tending livestock, reminds us that we are limited and irrevocably embodied.

And our human limits are gifts of God, not curses to be overcome with the newest device.

When Christians read scripture, we are offered an "invitation to enter into the world" of the Bible, "to adopt a perspective from within the narrative." Accepting this invitation requires us "to de-center our own self-interests so as to be addressed by the text as 'other,' to allow it to engage us in creative discourse, to take the risk of being shaped, indeed transformed in the encounter."[8] Reading the Bible, allowing it to form us, we reimagine the world and our place in it. In fact, a central reason why we read scripture is "so that we may not settle easily for any other notion of life, forgetting who we are and the understanding of life that we have confessed and embraced. Informed by the Bible, we are invited to live in faithful response to this faithful covenant partner."[9] Reading the Bible in an interpretive community is a counter-formational practice in a culture that would have us settle for a life lived and mediated by screens.

The Bible and the device paradigm

In order to enter the world of the Bible and experience its formational and transformational community-shaping power, we need to disengage from what Albert Borgmann calls the "device paradigm." The notion of the device paradigm makes clear that when our lives are saturated with devices that mediate our everyday experiences, these technologies are not simply neutral tools we do things with; they rule our everyday lives by shaping our patterns of behavior and our social and moral orientation.[10] Borgmann suggests that "technology may be thought of as a force or an approach to reality that is all-pervasive."[11] Within the device paradigm, as in technopoly, the highest good is the consumption of products and commodities—technological ones. The dominant narrative within technopoly is one of "progress without limits, rights without responsibilities, and technology without cost."[12] In this narrative, technology is the thought-world that we assume; it dictates the ways people perceive reality.[13]

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Whether we use the language of device paradigm or technopoly, it is clear that technology changes how we think, what we care about, what we perceive as good and moral, how we eat, how we entertain ourselves, and how we learn. The world saturated and mediated by technology is a different world than the world of the Bible. But what is most striking for those of us in the church is that technology has fundamentally altered the ways we worship, conceive of God, engage the world around us, and understand who we are as human beings. Most to the point of this essay, though: this paradigm has changed the way we read the Bible. As L. Gregory Jones puts it, "American Christians have largely lost a rich familiarity with ruled patterns for reading and embodying Scripture, the kind of familiarity that shapes people's lives and, at its best, enlivens a scriptural imagination."[14]

In a technological culture it is common to treat the Bible as one of many devices that we use. When the Bible is treated as a device, it makes no demand "on our skill, strength, or attention, and it is less demanding the less it makes its presence felt."[15] Rather than immersing ourselves in the Bible as sourcebook for our lives and our imaginations, letting the narrative of God's life with God's people form us, we unskillfully treat the Bible as a means to an end. This is especially evident in the way we use the Bible as a means to the end of winning whatever ideological war we wish to fight, about the age of the earth, the historicity of the flood or the creation story, homosexuality, and oddly enough, even biblical authority. Of course, this is not to say that the Bible does not speak to these issues but only to say that when we use it as a device within the device paradigm, although we may talk about the Bible frequently, it is from a disengaged, attention-deficient standpoint. In other words, the Bible ceases to be a living text that demands our dedicated attention, determined skill, engaged faithfulness, and sustained patience.

Disengaging from the device paradigm

The good news is that with intention, focus, and care, we can disengage from this technological mindset and rediscover the Bible as a focal, socially and morally orienting presence in our lives. There are three key steps in disengaging from the device paradigm in order to reclaim the Bible as a world-shaping reality

in our lives: distinguishing between things and devices, using focal things more and devices less, and making focal practices central in our daily lives.

Foundational to Borgmann's theory of technology is the distinction between *things* and *devices*. A device makes no demand on the skill, strength, or attention of its user.[16] A "good" device is easy to use, fast, safe, and portable. A thing, on the other hand, "has an intelligible and accessible character and calls forth skilled and active human engagement."[17] A violin and a piano are things; an iPod is a device. Both can be used to procure music, but playing a musical instrument demands our skill, strength, and attention, while playing an mp3 player requires almost nothing of us. For Borgmann, "things constitute commanding reality," while "devices procure disposable reality."[18] In other words, things ground us in real, limited reality while devices distance us from the created order. For Borgmann, devices breed consumption by means of disinterested disengagement; things breed contentment by means of engagement.

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To counteract the consumption that devices breed, Borgmann calls us to remember and engage in "focal practices" that reorient us to the demands and the limits of our human existence, removing the hold that technology has on our imaginations. Focal practices are those that demand our allegiance, skill, patience, and dedication. They are the rituals, practices, and techniques through which we engage with what Borgmann calls "focal things." Borgmann explores the contrast between devices and the focal things that call forth our focal practices. While devices disperse, uproot, and invite disengagement and the loss of skill, focal things unite, ground, and demand skill and engagement.

The Bible as focal thing

The community that is grounded in the biblical text is a community that lives in what Borgmann calls the "culture of the word," where the word is "the traditional medium of world appropriation."[19] Within this culture, people orient themselves by means of

the appropriation of stories, myths, and narratives. But it takes practice to appropriate such things, because "the things that used to center these practices" do not have the tangibility that we might expect from focal things. Still, "they were things just the same, commanding and illuminating realities, tales, plays, and texts."[20] As members of these communities, we are grounded in and by these focal things that literally form the world.

The Bible is one such focal thing. It demands patience, endurance, skill, and the resoluteness of regular practice—a *focal practice*. The Bible provides the very "conceptual language" that Christians require to conceive of and live in the world as God made it. This language is foreign to us and is not readily translated. Instead, one must en-flesh the foreign language of Christianity.[21] In other words, one must be vigorously engaged in the focal practice of learning the language of Christianity by communally engaging with the Bible.

Churches cannot know this language without an intimate knowledge of the world and language of the Bible, which is precisely the world and the language into which individuals are invited to participate when the church evangelizes or "gospelizes." And this is the world and the language that the church has the responsibility to embody, to incarnate before a watching world. Brad Kallenberg summarizes this position beautifully:

> *In order for those being gospelized to master the Christian conceptual language, they must be immersed into a community of believers (and their practices) for whom this conceptual language is the first conceptual language. Members of this community become trainers rather than translators of the Gospel. In other words, instead of translating the Gospel into modernese, the gospelizing community seeks to raise the fluency of potential converts to such a level that they can hear the Gospel on its own terms. Thus the gospelizer is at heart a language coach.*[22]

As modern people fully formed by the device paradigm, Christians must take care to be trained by the Bible. Knowing the Bible, and thus the conceptual language of Christianity, takes patience with the ambiguities of the text and with oneself as one

inherits the text, courage to immerse oneself in a dangerous and life-changing narrative, skill to learn to read it faithfully and with humble conviction, and dedication to engage the text regularly—that is, to refuse to lose heart when it becomes difficult. Unlike a device, the Bible, as a thing, is an end that cannot be separated from its means, and it is never merely a means to the procurement of something else. Reading the Bible with dedication forms us to be good readers of the Bible; it "gospelizes" us. The Bible is a demanding book, and the church must learn to affirm this fact again, lest we continue to treat it as if it were less than a focal thing, less than *the* focal thing of our ecclesial life.

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Conclusion

In a technological world, the proper use of the Bible amounts to a rejection of the mindset of technopoly and the device paradigm simply because it brings into being for its adherents, if they will let it, a "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17); it attests to the gospel of Jesus Christ, the "Author of life, whom God raised from the dead" (Acts 3:15). As Jones writes: the church must develop "habits of effective and faithful reading and embodiment of Scripture."[23] One important step toward the development of habits of effective and faithful reading and embodiment of scripture is understanding deep engagement of the Bible as a focal practice, as *the* focal practice at the center of our ecclesial life.

Notes

[1] Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 71.

[2] "Device" and "focal" are terms and concepts used by Albert Borgmann in *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[3] For an example, see the recent Virgin Mobile commercial "Retrain Your Brain" Advertisement: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjZ0rXSXeBA.

[4] See Postman, *Technopoly*, 8.

[5] Ibid., 71.

[6] Ibid., 4.

[7] Ibid., 16.

[8] Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, New Testament Theology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 130.

[9] Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2003), 15.

[10] Borgmann, *Technology*, 105.

[11] Ibid., 13.

[12] Postman, *Technopoly*, 179.

[13] Borgmann, *Technology*, 21.

[14] L. Gregory Jones, "Embodying Scripture in the Community of Faith," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen Davis and Richard Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 145. My italics.

[15] Borgmann, *Technology*, 42.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Borgmann, *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), 90.

[18] Ibid., 90.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Brad Kallenberg, *God and Gadgets: Following Jesus in a Technological Age* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 57.

[22] Ibid., 61.

[23] Jones, "Embodying Scripture," 146.

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