

A Bible Study

David Masters

What is technology?

Matthew 7: 24-27

A wise man [...] built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. [...] A foolish man [...] built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell – and great was its fall!

Computer Scientist Alan Kay has cynically claimed: “Technology is anything that was invented after you were born”. Kay’s point is that we see technology as being about new inventions. In truth, technology existed thousands of years before we were born. Examples of technology include paper, shoes, keys, refrigerators and cars. Humans began inventing and using technology when they first started converting natural resources into simple tools. New technologies begin to be developed every day.

Wikipedia defines technology as “the making, usage and knowledge of tools, techniques, crafts, systems or methods of organization in order to solve a problem or serve some purpose”.

- What technology is in the room around you right now?

Who has access to technology?

1 Samuel 13: 16-22

Saul, his son Jonathan, and the people who were present with them stayed in Geba of Benjamin; but the Philistines encamped at Michmash. And raiders came out of the camp of the Philistines in three companies; one company turned towards Ophrah, to the land of Shual, another company turned towards Beth-horon, and another company turned towards the mountain that looks down upon the valley of Zeboim towards the wilderness.

Now there was no blacksmith to be found throughout all the land of Israel; for the Philistines said, “The Hebrews must not make swords or spears for themselves”; so all the Israelites went down to the Philistines to sharpen their ploughshares, mattocks, axes, or sickles; The charge was two-thirds of a shekel for the ploughshares and for the mattocks, and one-third of a shekel for sharpening the axes and for setting the goads. So on the day of the battle neither sword nor spear was to be found in the possession of any of the people with Saul and Jonathan; but Saul and his son Jonathan had them.

In this passage, the Philistines have control over who has access to the technology of blacksmithery. This puts the Israelite army at a big disadvantage. It also affects Israel's farmers, as they must pay a high price to have their tools sharpened.

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- What technology do you have access to that other people in the world don't have access to?
- What powers or forces restrict access to technology in today's world?
- How might it be possible to challenge those powers and forces?

What values does technology serve?

Isaiah 2: 1-4

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In days to come
the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths".
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

Technology can be used to create life or destroy life. Blacksmithery can be used to forge swords or ploughshares. Fire can be used to keep warm, to cook food, or as a weapon. The pen can be used to write poetry or slander others. Much technological research at universities is funded by the military or multi-national corporations.

The purpose of technology can also be transformed. Swords can be turned into ploughshares. The Internet, invented for military use, has become a tool of learning and dialogue.

The Amish, a Christian community living in Pennsylvania, USA, take a critical stance towards technology. They carefully evaluate new technology as a community before deciding whether or not they should use it. One example is the telephone: the Amish only have telephones outside their homes, in a wooden hut. As one Amish man explains:

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We don't want to be the kind of people who will interrupt a conversation at home to answer a telephone. It's not just how you use the technology that concerns us. We're also concerned about what kind of person you become when you use it.

The primary question Amish people ask when evaluating a new technology is "Does it bring us together, or draw us apart?"

- What kind of person would you like to be? What technologies can help you become this person, and what technologies might prevent you from becoming this person?
- What do you think would be good questions for evaluating whether or not to use a new technology?
- What values do you think technology should serve?

Further readings:

Wikipedia article on Technology, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technology>.

"Look who's talking," WIRED (magazine article on the Amish),
http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/7.01/amish_pr.html.

Biblical references to technology,
http://wikichristian.org/index.php/Biblical_references_to_technology.