“The Theologies of Technologies:”
2010 Doctrinal Dialogue

Presented by Dr. G. Lee Griffith,
Professor of Psychology, Anderson University

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Theologies of Technologies

Introduction: Theologies of Technologies
If an anonymous donor were to offer you a half million dollars to improve your ministry, how would you spend your money?

[Have participants respond using clickers]

How I would use $500,000:
1. Make a major motion picture
2. Build or renovate a building
3. Buy projection and video technology
4. Start two satellite campuses
5. Buy Starbucks gift cards
6. Other:

Why focus on $500,000?
- It is a number that most of us will not see any time soon.
- It is the amount needed (I was told) to set up two satellite church campuses.
- It is roughly 10 times the budget of a successful local church here in the area.
- It is the cost of a so-called “low budget” film e.g. Fireproof.

Outline
Today we will consider together how to improve your ministry and if technology should play a part in those improvements by:
- Defining key terms.
- Describing the problems and opportunities, that technology raises for the practice of theology.
- Looking at Jesus’ use of technology in the Gospel of John.
- Suggesting a model for thinking about whether and how you might use technology in your church.
- And finally, considering a few specific ways to solve some problems for theology raised by technology

I hope then to leave time for my esteemed colleagues to respond.

Arrangements:
First some arrangements for those of you who are high-tech.
- I hope everyone has a clicker. Push a button to respond. You can change your answer as long as polling is open. Your responses are confidential. Please be sure to return the clickers when we are done—they are expensive to replace.
- Second, wireless internet service is available here in the room if you want to fact-check my talk—or my responders.
- Third, if you do not have your computer and you do have your cell phone, please put my email address (abc@anderson.edu) in as one of your contacts and you can text me a response or question and we will review these at the end.
(If you have trouble with either of these last two—they will serve as examples of the downside and distracting nature of digital technology)

If you are not using a laptop or a cell phone, you can raise your hand and ask a question—that works well too.

Let us start with a brief history of visual aids as examples of early use of technology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Visual Aid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15000 BCE</td>
<td>Cave paintings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3000 BCE</td>
<td>Egyptian Murals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500 BC</td>
<td>Greek Public Speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>950C</td>
<td>Stained Glass Windows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1350C</td>
<td>Bar Graphs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1845C</td>
<td>Comic Books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945C</td>
<td>Overhead Projector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950C</td>
<td>35mm Slide Presentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987C</td>
<td>PowerPoint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992C</td>
<td>Pervasive PC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007C</td>
<td>An Inconvenient Truth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 A Brief History of Visual Aids (modified from Duarte 2008)

Definitions
The assigned topic, Theologies of Technologies is quite broad. To address this topic in the time allowed, I have focused the discussion with the following definitions.

Theologies

1. The study of the nature of God and religious truth; rational inquiry into religious questions.
2. A system or school of opinions concerning God and religious questions: Protestant theology; Jewish theology. (“Theology,” n.d.)

Historically, theologians like Jacques Ellul (1990) and Paul Tillich (1953) have considered the relationship of theology and technology. More recently, Lawrence J. Terlizzese (2009) tackled the serious issues of nuclear war and human technology from a theological perspective.

If you want to consider the theology of:

- After your death, your children downloading on a flash drive the contents of your brain—I would recommend Waters (2006) work From Human to Posthuman: Christian Theology and Technology in a Postmodern World.
- If your concern is Christian theme parks then you will want to read Ward's (2008) “Faith-Based Theme Parks and Museums: Multidimensional Media”
- [Slide on what technology they would like me to discuss]
  - Theologically, I am going to discuss a more modest area: Jesus’ use of technology in the Gospel of John chapters 1-9.
Technology

Application of knowledge to the practical aims of human life or to changing and manipulating the human environment. Technology includes the use of materials, tools, techniques, and sources of power to make life easier or more pleasant and work more productive. Whereas science is concerned with how and why things happen, technology focuses on making things happen. Technology began to influence human endeavor as soon as people began using tools. (―Technology," n.d.)

From the technology side:

- Many authors on this topic owe a debt to Marshall McLuhan (1964) for his seminal work on Understanding Media. Several people have taken his ideas and applied these on more practical levels including:
- Shane Hipps (2005 & 2009) in Flickering Pixels and The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture,
- Len Wilson in The Wired Church 2.0. This book has a very detailed and hands-on approach to the use of video technology, for example here is his advice on how to record a testimony: As a rule of thumb, aim for about a two-minute video with three parts: Act 1, thirty to forty-five seconds of what happened prior to their faith encounter; Act 2, thirty to forty-five seconds of what transpired to make their heart become "strangely warmed" and turn to God; and Act 3, thirty seconds or so of what has happened since. Between the three parts can appear transitional elements with graphics and text describing the basic ideas in brief visual form. (Wilson & Moore, 2008 p. 66)

For the digital age, it is engaging and effective to hear a two-minute personal faith story through the medium of video with an edited first-person retelling over an appropriate soundtrack and shots of the teller’s environment interspersed throughout. This is much more compelling than the twenty minutes it would take the same person to awkwardly tell the story using nothing but a microphone and a podium. (p. 20) and

The technologies that I am going to consider are those that are being used or may potentially be used by local congregations of the Church of God to enhance their ministries.

Theological Problems Related to Technologies

Many theological issues concerning technology have been raised. We will briefly consider seven.

Concerns about Motives

If you use technology or were to use technology in your meetings, what would be your motive?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>% of Churches Surveyed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To gain contemporary relevance</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To gain youth relevance</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To evangelize</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To avoid print media</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To explore artful worship</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could use members’ gifts</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Had access to equipment | 38%
To keep pace with others | 33%

Table 2 Motivation for Using Visual Media Technologies (Schultze, 2004)

Schultze (2004) reports the preceding motivations for using visual media technologies. Most of these motives highlight problems from his view. Further he suggests, “There is no evidence I know of that presentational technologies per se are effective in attracting nonbelievers and leading them to faithful involvement in a Christian community” (Schultze, 2004, p. 81).

**Concerns about Changing Demographics of the Church**

The use of technology is often thought to be a way of attracting a younger constituency to the church. Whether or not this is true, the shrinking church attendance pattern of the younger age groups is a serious problem. If there is no change in the trend, the North American church as a whole can expect to lose (due to attrition) about 20% per year over the next 30 years. This means that the average church of about 180 will be about 60 by 2040. The pattern we have seen in the past few decades in Europe will have come to America.

![Attendance at Religious Services, by Generation](image-url)

**Figure 1 Attendance at Religious Service, by Generation (Religion, 2010)**
Concerns about Competition
One consequence of technology is increased competition between preachers. Each person in your congregation can listen to all of the finest preachers in the world. In the recent past, competition was limited to a few radio and TV preachers or those selling their media. Today your congregants can download free sermons by the best speakers in the country. Shane Hipps (2005, p.129) pointed out that the authority of the Pope was undermined by the printed word. Today the authority of the local pastor and church is undermined by many kinds of online resources from Bibles to blogs.

This competition is not just among Christians. The easy access to information about other religions and cultures has undermined young people’s confidence in the truth claims of the Christian faith (Careaga, 2001). Persons in the net generation are much more aware of other faith options and much more eclectic in their choice of beliefs and activities.

This is not to mention competition with the most popular preachers and storytellers of our time—TV and movies. (Wilson & Moore, 2008, p. 13)

Concerns about Trust
Giving people reasons why they should believe in Jesus Christ is increasingly difficult. Unlike science, we do not have an agreed upon system for establishing what is to be believed. Even belief in science has lost credibility when it is subjected to the postmodern critique. This same critique has leveled all
religious beliefs. In the chart below, you can see the rating that the clergy receive relative to other professions--below police officers and just above funeral directors and accountants.

**Top-Rated Professions for Honesty and Ethics -- 2008**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>% Very high/High</th>
<th>% Average</th>
<th>% Low/Very low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nurses</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Druggists or pharmacists</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school teachers</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical doctors</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policemen</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clergy</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funeral directors</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountants</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nov. 7-9, 2008

**GALLUP POLL**

**Figure 3 Top Rated Professions for Honesty and Ethics (Saad, 2008)**

The rating of honesty and ethics of clergy is lower than at any time in the recent past.

**Ratings of Honesty and Ethics of the Clergy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>% &quot;Very high&quot;/&quot;High&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**GALLUP**

**Figure 4 Ratings of Honesty and Ethics of the Clergy (Jones, 2009)**

While it is not a direct comparison, it is enlightening by contrast to consider how the press is viewed.
While the low ratings for the press put the lack of trust in the clergy in perspective, they are not encouraging. The clergy tell us how to live and die. The press merely tells us how to vote. Seriously, the overall cynicism in our current postmodern society makes the job of convincing people of anything difficult. Fogg (2003) suggests that perceived credibility equals perceived trustworthiness plus perceived expertise. Further, he divides credibility into four types: (Fogg, 2003, p. 131)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of credibility</th>
<th>Basis for believability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presumed</td>
<td>General assumptions in the mind of the perceiver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface</td>
<td>Simple inspection or initial firsthand experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputed</td>
<td>Third-party endorsements, reports or referrals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earned</td>
<td>Firsthand experience that extends over time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Types of Credibility and Basis for Believability (Fogg, 2003)

He considers earned credibility the gold standard. If we are inviting people to believe us, not just about what car to buy but also about where they will spend eternity, our earned credibility is our most important asset. It is crucial that as we choose to use technologies that they enhance rather than damage our credibility.

**Concerns about Costs of Media**
Concerns about the costs associated with technology use are significant and ongoing. Wilson and Moore (2008) give examples of costs of church media systems in 2004 to 2005 running from $15,000 to $34,000. Because the prices of technology change rapidly, these startup costs do not include ongoing costs for software upgrades, media license fees and equipment maintenance.
Schultze (2004) suggests these seven items for those churches considering a media budget:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typical Costs of Presentational Technologies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Equipment</strong> (screen, projector, video players, wiring, hardware, installation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <strong>Training</strong> (artistic design, liturgical knowledge, technical expertise)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <strong>Software</strong> (file storage and organization, presentation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <strong>Legal</strong> (copyrights for music, lyrics, and images)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <strong>Maintenance</strong> (hardware and software upgrades, repairs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. <strong>Replacement</strong> (new hardware and software every three years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. <strong>Staff</strong> (salaries, contract help, supervising volunteers)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Typical Costs of Presentational Technologies

**Concerns about Quality**
If your church were to produce a video presentation, how would it be seen? Would viewers compare it to multimillion-dollar Hollywood productions and miss the message entirely? High-quality media is difficult and expensive to produce. Young people express that they enjoy technology. At the same time, they are sophisticated and critical consumers. They see poorly executed technology as cheesy; it is a turn off rather than an attraction. If merely using presentation technology were sufficient, we at AU would not have a problem with students rudely talking during chapel speaker's presentations.

**Concern that the Belief in Metanarrative is Undermined**
Hipps (2005) suggests that media technology has undermined a belief in any overarching story that organizes and makes sense of other truths. “As a result, authority, truth and meaning become difficult to discover and establish with clarity or certainty. Doubts trickle in, and we find the notion of a single grand story that unifies everything to be absurd and even arrogant. It hasn’t taken long for people in current cultures to see the truth claims of Scripture as no more valid than the claims of Dr. Phil” (Hipps, 2005, p. 68). In the eyes of many, they are even less valid. (Kinnanman & Lyons, 2007)

Roger Ebert (1999) in a review of “The Informer” says this:
My notion has always been that movies are not the first place you look for facts, anyway. You attend a movie for psychological truth, for emotion, for the heart of a story and not its footnotes.

Malcolm Muggeridge (1977) suggested that the fourth temptation of Jesus would have been to go on national TV. If your goal is to tell the truth and have it believed, you may want to consider if some types of media are inconsistent with your message.

**A Theology of Technology from the Gospel of John**
While the Bible has much to say about the use of technology, I have limited my exposition of the Biblical text to five incidents from the Gospel of John. Given the time allotted, the comments on even this limited section must be brief. We will consider in turn: the prologue, the wedding at Cana, the feeding of the 5000 and the woman caught in adultery to see how Jesus used or chose not to use technology in each of these situations.
**The Theologies of Technologies:**

**The Prologue**

John begins his gospel equating “the Word” with God (vs.1). The “Word” is a “message” or force according to some commentators (Barclay, 1975; Tenny, 1981) rather than a group of written letters as we are more likely to think of it at this point in time.

This “Word” is the source of all things (vs. 3). In one view, everything is a technology to help us understand God--specifically light and interestingly not sound or taste in this context. This way of thinking about God gives special meaning to McLuhan’s (1964) observation that the medium is the message. Jesus is the medium and the message.

After this rather spectacular prologue, Jesus begins his ministry in a rather low-tech and unremarkable way. John the Baptizer points out Jesus to his disciples who follow Jesus and find others to follow as well. This introduces one of my themes: technology is useful for a variety of church-related functions, but the developing of disciples will ultimately be primarily relational. Jesus does not recruit Andrew, John, Peter and Nathanael by performing some great miracle but they join him based on their relationship with John the Baptist and with each other. Miracles will follow and have their place, but belief begins in relationship (vs. 50). Quality relationships trump quality technology!

**The Wedding at Cana**

Next, let us consider the wedding at Cana. One might consider discussing this passage (especially considering today’s particular audience) a recipe for controversy. Happily, my assignment does not require me to comment on the chemical composition of the beverage.

In this context I must ask, “If you had the ultimate technology—the ability to perform miracles—how would you use it?”

Our Lord’s mother recruits a reluctant Jesus to miraculously create wine. I would hesitate to consider “turning water into wine” a use of technology. John though notes in verse 11 that this is the first of Jesus’ miraculous signs and in it He reveals His glory and His disciples put their faith in Him and so it fits our definition.

There are several things to notice here. First, the primary purpose of the miracle was to enable the family to entertain the guests. Technology can be entertaining. Second, when Jesus uses or in this case, creates technology, it is well done. Jesus created “the best” wine. Third, I would note that while this sign resulted in his disciples putting their faith in him, they were his disciples first and there is no mention of the response of others even those who were the direct beneficiaries of his vintner’s talents.

**The Feeding of the 5000**

I would note that with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman Jesus does not directly use any technology. In his conversations, he relates spiritual truth to birth and the drinking of water but performs no miracles. In fact, at the end of chapter 4 where he heals the Royal Official’s son, he disparages the people in Cana for needing miraculous signs and wonders to believe. He heals anyway, but only at distance. The official and his household do believe.
In John 5, the man healed at the pool of Bethesda remains without faith. He did not even know who Jesus was. Later after Jesus rebukes him, he report Jesus to the authorities.

In John 6 Jesus feeds the five thousand. This is the first use in the Gospel of John of Jesus’ power of technology for a mass audience. The text tells us this is a test for the disciples. After the event, Jesus withdraws from the crowd to keep them from making him king by force. The next day he chides the crowd because the miracle has not produced faith but an appetite for more of the media. Later when Jesus explains the point of the miracle, many turn away. However, those with whom he has a relationship—the twelve, remain and affirm their belief.

There is much to be learned here:

- Technology can be used to solve some problems of communicating to many people at once.
- Even when Jesus used technology, some people did not get the point.
- Technology is a means, not an end. Jesus used the technology as long as it served his purpose. The minute the technology got in the way, he abandoned it. He even corrected those who became more interested in the technology than in the message it was designed to convey.
- Technology without relationship did not produce faith but at best, fascination with the media--or even worse, criticism of the method itself.

The Woman Caught in Adultery

(I am aware of the manuscript issue associated with this passage. Since I am not building a major theological doctrine here but only citing it as an example of Jesus’ practice, I trust you will allow me to use it).

Here Jesus uses technology, but his choice is decidedly low-tech. He writes in the sand. (I am tempted to say that this is the beginning of the silicon revolution). He uses technology to distance himself from the woman’s accusers. (O’Day, 1995, p. 629) In fact, as he writes, they leave. When he wants to influence the woman, he abandons the technology and speaks to her directly, and he speaks with the power of acceptance and correction.

So, from these nine chapters, I observe:

- Jesus uses both low-tech (introductions by others; writing in the sand) and high-tech (miracles) approaches.
- Technology can be used to bring people together or drive them away.
- When Jesus wants to deliver his most important messages, he stands up, looks the person directly in the eye, and speaks face to face.

Overall, I would conclude based on these five incidents in the Gospel of John that:

- Jesus uses technology
- When He uses it, the technology He uses is well done.
- Jesus sometimes uses high-tech methods and sometimes low-tech methods.
- Jesus varies his method according to what he is trying to accomplish.
- Technology can be used to grow faith, but this is most likely to happen after there is a strong preexisting discipleship relationship.
A Model of Appropriate Use

The different types of churches are at the ends of the axes: Churches who emphasize worship, teaching, service and relationships.

Corresponding to these different types of churches are different goals: adoration, information, motivation and persuasion.

Each of these purposes suggests different technologies: sound and image, presentation software, video and low-tech high-touch, face to face.

Please regard this model as only one way to think about such differences.

North to south is internal to external: contemplation vs. activism.

East to west is content to person. Truth shared without a relationship has little impact. Relationship without truth presents no reason for change or basis for faith.
Possible Solutions:

Choose technology that supports the mission and emphasis of your local church. Different churches have different emphases. As a result, they will appeal to different groups of people. Suppose you are the program director for a network other than CBS. During the Superbowl, you will have to run some show. You feel caught in a hopeless task. What can you offer? (ABC ran America’s Funniest Home Videos and NBC ran The Biggest Loser [Television Listings, 2010]). The solution is to zig when the other church zags. If the megachurch down the street is into major video productions, you train your people how to meet, greet, and treat your visitors to personal hospitality.

The contrasting term to “high-tech” is “high-touch”. It means personal contact. It puts a Biblical command such as "greeting one another with a holy kiss" in a new perspective even if it is contextualized as a "hug" in our culture. I knew someone who attended a slightly cult-like church even though she did not subscribe to its beliefs because there was a couple there who she could count on for one non-sexual hug each week. This was the only time she would receive that kind of personal touch all week.

So, if you have a talented staff of technicians and actors, you could produce Fireproof 2.

Caveat: If you are going to attract anyone from the net-generation, you MUST have a website. I asked one of the college students working as an assistant in our department to look something up in the phone book. She looked at me bewildered. She had never used a phone book and was not sure how to do so. So, while you let your fingers do the walking, they all have Web feet. (Careaga, 2001, p. 7)

Choose technology that can be well executed by the gifted people you have and within the budget that is available.

Poorly executed technology is worse than no technology at all. It will drive away media-sophisticated people and distract from your message. Using media occasionally when you have the personnel, time and concept to pull it off with grace and beauty is much better than trying to use it every week when the quality may suffer.

Choose technology that is consistent message with your message.

Perhaps the most important criteria for choosing when to use technology is the nature of the message you wish to send. If you want to be believed, you must first be a credible source. Build your credibility with relationships, and then you can use technology to inform, motivate or encourage adoration. If your media choice makes you appear as just one option among many or worse--actually make your message seem to be mere entertainment, then the media may actually undermine the trust you are trying to create and the truth you want to convey.

Choice Slide: What are you likely to do having heard today’s presentation?

a. Make no change
b. Get the latest technology
c. Evaluate the type of technology that best fits the needs and goals of my congregation
d. Give up and minister to the cattle in Montana
References