THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SQUARE

*Christian Ethics
in a Technological Society*

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ACADEMIC
BRENTWOOD, TENNESSEE

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Part 3: The Church

PREFACE

Years ago, I was struck by a citation in the late Carl F. H. Henry's *Christian Personal Ethics* about the centrality of love in the Christian ethic. The esteemed evangelical titan quoted German theologian Christoph Ernst Luthardt, saying, "God first loved us is the summary of Christian doctrine. We love Him is the summary of Christian morality."[1] So often in the contemporary church, there is a wedge driven between the study of theology and ethics that hampers the church from engaging some of the most pressing issues of the day as our theology is untethered from ethics and our practice is uprooted from its foundation. Dr. Henry would summarize Luthardt by saying that "[l]ove for another is the whole sum of Christian ethics."[2] This is an apt way to begin a volume on Christian ethics, as so many of the issues we deal with today are not really about bits and bytes, but flesh-and-blood image bearers living in a technological society.

This book is the product of that vision to work toward a Christian ethic for our digital age, one that is rooted in truth and love of neighbor. The title and vision of this book are undoubtably influenced by the late public theologian Richard John Neuhaus and his influential work *The Naked Public Square*, as well as the late Protestant sociologist and theologian Jacques Ellul, who wrote the prescient volume *The Technological Society*. It has been

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[1] Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 486, quoting Christoph Ernst Luthardt, *Apologetic Lectures on the Moral Truths of Christianity*, trans. Sophia Taylor (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1876), 26.

[2] Henry, 486.

said that we are a product of those who have gone before us, and that will be apparent throughout this work.

There are countless people who made this project possible. First, I want to acknowledge the unending and undeserved support of my wife, who has sacrificed much as I pursued this project and others over the years. Her love and encouragement were key to this project's success. Second, I want to thank each of the contributors for being part of this volume, bringing their expertise to bear on these pressing ethical challenges. Third, I want to thank the entire team at the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, including our past president Dr. Russell Moore, who took a flyer on a young guy years ago, and our leadership team, led by Brent Leatherwood. This book would not have been possible without their support and that of Southern Baptists.

Seth Woodley, Alex Ward, and Cameron Hayner all played crucial roles in helping to organize and edit this volume. I am grateful for each of them, especially Seth, who spent long hours alongside me as we finalized the volume. I also want to thank Josh Wester and Daniel Darling for standing beside me and encouraging me to develop these ideas over the years. Their friendship and support are one of the great joys of my life. The entire team at B&H Academic have been a joy to work with—especially my editors Dennis Greeson, Audrey Greeson, Michael McEwen, and Renée Chavez— as well as the leadership of Madison Trammel as publisher. I am also grateful for the continued support of my literary agent, Erik Wolgemuth, and his team at Wolgemuth and Associates.

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PART I

Foundations

Simply a Tool?

Toward a Christian Philosophy of Technology and Vision for Navigating the Digital Public Square

Jason Thacker

My family lives just outside a small Tennessee town with a historic downtown district. Like many small towns throughout our nation, we have a downtown square that serves as a hub for our community. In prior generations, these public squares buzzed with energy and served as gathering places. People regularly traveled in from the outskirts of town to shop, eat, bank, gather with their church, and do business. They would also come together for community events and to freely engage with one another. With the rapid growth of suburbs beginning around the mid-twentieth century, many historic downtown public squares were abandoned or fell into disrepute. However, in recent years there has been a renewed interest in revitalizing these historic neighborhoods in many places to provide a place for communities to gather together once again—especially in a digital age that has led to increasing isolation and disconnected communities.

These public gathering places serve as an apt metaphor for a period when much of our daily communication, commerce, and community are facilitated

in the digital public square of social media and online connectivity. With the rise of the internet and various social media platforms—such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, and massive online retailers and internet companies like Amazon, Alibaba, and Google—these new digital public squares promised to bring about a vibrant era of connectivity and togetherness across distances, more diverse communities, and more access to information. Many of these initial promises were made in light of oppressive regimes throughout the world that stifled free speech, suppressed human rights, violated religious freedom, and limited access to information to maintain control over other human beings made in the image of God (Gen 1:26–28).

While technology has brought incredible benefits and conveniences into our lives, it also has led to countless unintended consequences and deep ethical challenges that push us to consider how to live out our faith in a technological society. Each day we are bombarded with fake news, misinformation, conspiracy theories, ever-growing polarization, and more information than we could ever hope to process. We regularly face challenges where wisdom and truth are needed, yet faith is not always welcome in the digital public square. In truth, technology has always been used and abused by those who seek to hold on to power and wield it to suppress free expression all around the world. But today, these threats seem more visceral and dangerous to our way of life than ever before.

One of the most challenging ethical issues of our day with technology is centered around the proper role of digital governance and the ethical boundaries of free expression in the digital public square. Many have recently begun to question the role and influence of the technology industry over our public discourse, as well as the responsibilities and roles of individuals, third-party companies, and even the government in digital governance. While much of the dangerous, illegal, and illicit content is rightly moderated, questions remain as to what kinds of ideas or speech are to be welcomed in the digital public square and how we are to maintain a moral order in our secular age as we seek to uphold free expression and religious freedom for all.

As we begin this journey of navigating the digital public square with truth and grace (Eph 4:15), Christians must seek to understand not only

the issues at stake but also what is driving them. To do this, we must first slow down enough to ask some of the fundamental questions about what technology is and what it is doing to us. Is technology merely a tool or something that is shaping us all in unique ways, often contrary to our faith? After charting a Christian philosophy of technology, I will shift toward developing a public theology for the digital age built upon the unchanging Word of God and a rich history of church engagement in the public square on the pressing issues of society. With these foundations set, the church can faithfully move forward in addressing the pressing issues of content moderation and digital governance, as the other contributors to this volume write about within a distinctly Christian ethical framework. This chapter will show that technology is much more than simply a tool we use, but something that is truly using us—shaping and forming us in particular ways often contrary to the Christian faith. While we should not uncritically embrace technology, neither should we outright reject the gifts and benefits of these developments. Christians must seek to wisely navigate the challenges of the digital public square as we seek to love God and love others as ourselves (Matt 22:37–39), which is the very core of the Christian ethic. While this chapter and volume will not address every issue in the digital public square, it nevertheless is designed to illustrate the ethical principles and wisdom needed to move forward proclaiming a message of truth and grace amidst an ever-changing technological landscape in the coming years.

A Christian Philosophy of Technology

The late French sociologist and theologian Jacques Ellul, an astute observer of the cultural and moral shifts that took place in the twentieth century due to the rise of modern technology, opened his influential work *The Technological Society* by saying, "No social, human, or spiritual fact is so important as the fact of *technique* in the modern world. And yet no subject is so little understood."[1] These words originally penned in the 1950s

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[1] Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 3.

speak directly to the current debates over technology and its proper role in our lives as well as to the complexity of these systems and how they are radically altering our society. Today, technology is often assumed and assimilated rather than examined or questioned regarding its nature and proper role in lives.[2] Ellul wrote his classic work in the midst of his own era's explosion of modern technologies, such as the spread of television to most homes, the rise of many automated systems in homes and factories, and even the earliest beginnings of artificial intelligence (AI) in the West.[3] He prophetically warned of the countless ways that technology was negatively affecting humanity in the pursuit of efficiency and progress, often without any real moral clarity or response. In one of his later works, he claimed that the pursuit of truth used to be what mattered to society, but the "technical means gradually came to dominate the search for truth" as our society sought efficiency over reality and adopted technologies without adequate scrutiny.[4] For Ellul, technology was not merely an isolated tool or instrument as commonly understood in past generations. Instead, it represented a totalizing force in modern life that shapes everything about our lives and society, often toward dehumanizing ends. In his philosophical understanding, technology was not a neutral tool but had a complete reorienting effect on every aspect of human life.

To address many of the pressing ethical questions of our day surrounding the development and use of technology, a firm grasp on the nature of technology must first be established. Without a robust and biblical understanding of the nature of technology, Christians will not be able to see through the veneer of these modern innovations—marketed

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[2] John Dyer speaks to this lack of questioning the role and nature of technology by saying, "When technology has distracted us to the point that we no longer examine it, it gains the greatest opportunity to enslave us." See John Dyer, *From the Garden to the City: The Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 28.

[3] For more on the history of AI, see Jason Thacker, *The Age of AI: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 23–26.

[4] Jacques Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, trans. Lisa Richmond (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 41.

as they are with slick slogans, accompanied with promises of a utopian future, and designed to encourage individuals to adopt these tools without adequate reflection on the influence they might exert in their lives. Jacques Ellul's study on the nature and influence of technology can serve as a helpful guide for Christians today as we navigate the contours of our present situation.

What Is Technology?

Ellul, who served as a longtime professor of history and sociology at the University of Bordeaux, was a prolific author of over sixty published works, originally written in French. Trained as a sociologist, he spent most of his life and scholarship exposing the influence of technology on modern human existence, including but not limited to social relationships, political structures, and economic phenomena. Through his study of the prevalence and the transformative nature of technology in modern times, Ellul helped to define a philosophy of technology for both the secular and religious communities of his day as well as to chart a path forward in addressing many of the unforeseen questions and dangers that come alongside the technologies of today. Ellul nevertheless provided a wealth of contributions as he warned readers of many current debates about the nature of technology through his many ethical and theological writings, including his most well-known works, *The Technological Society* and *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*.[5]

The Technological Society* was Ellul's first and primary work on the subject where he described his understanding of the ways that technology changes and shapes humanity. Originally published as *La Technique ou l'Enjeu du siècle* in 1954, Ellul sought to provide a "description of the

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[5] Ellul was not alone in his field. Interested readers can explore other works on the nature of technology such as Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); George Grant, *Technology & Justice* (Toronto: Anansi, 1991); and Langdon Winner, *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977).

way in which an autonomous technology is in the process of taking over the traditional values of every society without exception, subverting and suppressing these values to produce at last a monolithic world culture."[6] Ellul preferred the term *technique* to technology because in his view *technique* better described "the *totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency* (for a given stage of development) in *every* field of human activity."[7] To Ellul, technique is an all-encompassing concept that is not simply limited to "machines, technology, or this or that procedure for attaining an end."[8] Ellul saw technique as the integration of machines into our society and argued that technique constructs a certain type of world that the machine needs as it introduces order and drives toward efficiency.[9] But he maintained that machines or the tools themselves are "deeply symptomatic" of technique and "represents the ideal toward which technique strives."[10]

Defining technology is not an easy task, and many words have been penned over the years trying to nail down this complex concept. Some define technology as simply a tool, machine, or instrument that humanity can wield as needed to accomplish our work and shape the world around us.[11] Others, including Ellul, define technology as a totalizing social force

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[6] See the translator's introduction to the 1964 English edition. Ellul, *The Technological Society*, x.

[7] Ellul, xxv, emphasis original.

[8] Ellul, xxv.

[9] See Ellul, 5. Ellul spoke of this drive to efficiency as *automatism*, which he described as "the one best way" and a technical movement that is "self-directing." Everything in this automatism is measured and calculated mathematically "so that the method which has been decided upon is satisfactory from the rational point of view, and when, from the practical point of view, the method is manifestly the most efficient of all those hitherto employed or those in competition with it, then the technical movement becomes self-directing." See Ellul, 80.

[10] Ellul, 4.

[11] See Mary Tiles and Hans Oberdiek, "Conflicting Visions of Technology" in Robert C. Scharff and Val Dusek, eds., *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition*, Blackwell Philosophy Anthologie 32 (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 249–53, for a thorough overview of the instrumentalist position, where they argue that these technological optimists often see "technology as fulfilling the

or culture.[12] This distinction is often defined as a narrow (internalist) or broad (externalist) understanding of technology by scholars like philosopher of technology Doug Hill, who argues that "definitions of technology sometimes carry implications hidden to those not attuned to an argument in progress."[13] Each of these concepts have certain strengths but also concerning elements that do not quite align with the real world of technology.[14]

Most often these narrow or broad approaches to technology are defined as: *technological determinism* and *technological instrumentalism*.[15] Georgetown professor Cal Newport defines technological determinism as the belief that "features and properties of a given technology can drive human behavior and culture in directions that are often unplanned and unforeseen," whereas technological instrumentalism is the belief that "tools are neutral, and what matters in understanding their impact is the cultural context and motivations of the people that develop and use them for specific

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biblical injunction to 'fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing (Gen. 1:28).'" They argue that this dominion view of technology was also promoted by Sir Francis Bacon, who is "regarded by many as the father of modern science and technology."

[12] See Albert Borgmann, *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003); Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993); and Ursula M. Franklin, *The Real World of Technology*, CBC Massey Lectures Series (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2004).

[13] Doug Hill, *Not So Fast: Thinking Twice about Technology* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2016), 48.

[14] This phrase is borrowed from Franklin, *The Real World of Technology*, 27. She describes this "real world of technology" by stating that she wanted to "discuss technology in terms of living and working in the real world and what this means to people all over the globe," as well as hearken back to C. B. Macpherson's 1965 lecture series where he examined the ideas, dreams, practices, procedures, hopes, and myths of democracy. This holistic view of technology will be examined throughout this chapter.

[15] For a more in-depth treatment of these approaches to technology, see Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 1987). Borgmann adds a third approach, which he calls a "pluralistic view," and argues for it throughout his work.

purposes."[16] Jacques Ellul argued for a more deterministic approach to technology because he saw technology more broadly than simply isolated tools or machines. To Ellul, technology was a complex system or web of relations that determined the social structure and cultural values.

Technological determinism can also be defined as a reductionistic concept because of the emphasis on the complex systems and structures that shape humanity and the world, rather than emphasizing the ways these tools can be used by humanity for good or ill. According to political theorist Langdon Winner, it was Karl Marx who first applied technological determinism to societal structures, arguing that changes in technology were the primary force behind human social relations and organizational structure, and that human society revolved around technological and economic centers of society.[17] Mary Tiles and Hans Oberdiek describe technological determinism as the "pessimistic" view of technology that is often portrayed as at odds with the "optimistic" view, which they attribute to how many Christians typically see technology as part of the cultural mandate found in Gen 1:28, where technology is simply a value-neutral tool.[18] But as experimental physicist and longtime professor Ursula M. Franklin argues, "Technology is not the sum of the artifacts, of the wheels and hears, of the rails and electronic transmitters. . . . It entails more than its individual

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[16] Cal Newport, "When Technology Goes Awry," *Communications of the ACM* 63, no. 5 (May 2020), https://cacm.acm.org/magazines/2020/5/244331-when -technology-goes-awry/fulltext.

[17] See Winner, 39. See also Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). It should also be noted that this connection between technological determinism and Karl Marx is debated amongst scholars. Winner was the first to establish this connection in his 1977 work *Autonomous Technology*. For a contrary view, see Bruce Bimber, *Three Faces of Technological Determinism* in Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx, eds., *Does Technology Drive History? The Dilemma of Technological Determinism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 80–100.

[18] See Tiles and Oberdiek, "Conflicting Visions of Technology," in Scharff and Dusek, *Philosophy of Technology*, 253.

material components. Technology involves organization, procedures, symbols, new words, equations, and, most of all, a mindset."[19]

Ellul argued for a view of technology best described as *technological determinism*, which views technology as not merely an instrument or value neutral tool, but rather a movement that captures humanity in its grip and transforms everything in the name of efficiency.[20] Matthew T. Prior summarizes Ellul's position by saying that "technology simply *is.* It is neither good nor bad but nor it is neutral."[21] James Fowler argues that Ellul viewed technology as "but an expression and by-product of the underlying reliance on technique, on the proceduralization whereby everything is organized and managed to function most efficiently, and directed toward the most expedient end of the highest productivity."[22] And to Craig M. Gay, Ellul's view is "hardly surprising" because of the way that technology figures so centrally into the modern project. He states that for Ellul, rationality governs technique because "ours is a society in which taking control of our secular circumstances by means of rational-technical means, methods, procedures, and techniques has become supremely important."[23] This can be seen in our society's ill-fated pursuit of treating every inconvenience as a technical problem to be solved or issue to be mitigated, as illustrated by many modern thinkers like Yuval Noah Harari in his work *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*.[24]

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[19] Franklin, *The Real World of Technology*, 2–3.

[20] See Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973); Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, Daniel Cérézuelle, and Lisa Richmond (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018); Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

[21] Matthew T Prior, *Confronting Technology: The Theology of Jacques Ellul* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020), 6, emphasis original.

[22] James A. Fowler, "A Synopsis and Analysis of the Thought and Writings of Jacques Ellul," Archives of Wheaton College, 2000, https://archives.wheaton.edu/repositories/2/archival_objects/155101.

[23] Craig M. Gay, *Modern Technology and the Human Future: A Christian Appraisal* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 90.

[24] Harari states that "every technical problem has a technical solution" as he argues for a naturalistic understanding of reality and the human condition. See

Technique in Ellul's mind is autonomous, meaning that it seems to take on a kind of agency and fashions a world designed to primarily allow technology itself to thrive, a world that renounced all prior traditions of meaning and understanding.[25] He argued that "technique transforms everything it touches into a machine."[26] Media theorist and cultural critic Neil Postman describes a similar idea saying that "once a technology is admitted, it plays out its hand; it does what is it designed to do."[27] Postman goes on to say that "our task is to understand what that design is—that is to say, when we admit a new technology to the culture, we must do so with our eyes wide open."[28] The totalizing effect of technique on society is the foundation of Ellul's philosophy of technology and provides a salient understanding of our modern world of technology. For Ellul, technique presents a host of ethical and philosophical issues that must be dealt with at the societal level rather than merely at the personal or individual level. Ellul stated, "The ethical problem, that is human behavior, can only be considered in relation to this system, not in relation to some particular technical object or other [because] if technique is a milieu and a system, the ethical problem can only be posed in terms of this global operation. Behavior and particular choices no longer have much significance. What is required is thus a global change in our habits or values, the rediscovery of either an existential ethics or a new ontology."[29]

Postman expands on this idea by stating that this technique "is without a moral center." Postman's technopoly and Ellul's technological society place "efficiency, interest, and economic advance" at the center of society.

Yuval Noaḥ Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, Vintage Popular Science (London: Harvill Secker, 2016), 22–23.

[25] See Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 14. This renunciation of all prior traditions of thought and information organization is a line of thought picked up on by Neil Postman in his work *Technopoly*, as well. See chs. 3–4 of Postman, *Technopoly*.

[26] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 4.

[27] Postman, *Technopoly*, 7.

[28] Postman, 7.

[29] Jacques Ellul, "The Search for Ethics in a Technicist Society," trans. Dominique Gillot and Carl Mitcham, *Morale et Enseignement*, 1983, 7–20.

Humanity is promised "heaven on earth through the conveniences of technological progress."[30]

As a Protestant theologian and a philosopher, Ellul uniquely addressed many of these technological issues facing our society through the lens of his faith as well. He saw that Christianity in particular added an additional layer to the moral evaluation of technical activity by asking the question "is this righteous?" of each attempt to change the modes of production in a given society. In line with the Christian moral tradition, Ellul states "that [just because] something might be useful or profitable to men did not make it right or good," and that these type of shifts in technical activity must also "fit a precise conception of justice before God."[31] Drawing upon the history of thought and technical progress, Ellul pointed out that "technical innovations have always had the same surprising and unwelcome character for men."[32] Here Ellul brought forth an element in the power of technology to shape humanity in ways that are similar to the Christian conception of discipleship—meaning someone who follows Jesus and seeks to align their life with him in every way.[33] Over a long period of time, exposure to these expanded moral horizons of what is possible and the nature of how technology encourages humanity to engage with it will have a transformative effect and shape humanity toward the ends of the technique, by whatever means available. Technologist and theologian John Dyer states that both Ellul and Postman saw that "the more we use technology, the more it mediates to us the value of addressing problems with technological solutions."[34] This meditation of value is an aspect of how technology is constantly shaping individuals and the larger society with each subsequent innovation.

Today, many spaces in our homes are centered around televisions or computer technologies like living areas and personal bedrooms. Even

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[30] Postman, *Technopoly*, 179.

[31] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 37.

[32] Ellul, 61.

[33] For more on technology and contemporary issues in discipleship, see chapter 12 of this work by Jacob Shatzer.

[34] Dyer, *From the Garden to the City*, 63.

beds themselves often have some form of technology often incorporated into them with plugs to charge devices within inches of the pillows so that devices are always within an arm's reach. As well, many popular digital assistants such as Amazon's Alexa or Apple's Siri are always at our beck and call. Tristan Harris and other technologists point out many of these transformative effects in the Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma*, where one expert interviewee states that the question is not if one checks Twitter in the morning after waking, but whether it is before or while you use the bathroom each morning. This concept of technological progress and ubiquity as argued in the 1950s by Ellul was rightfully seen by many as fatalistic or deterministic, often without any hope of renewal. But given the continued transformation of humanity in this technological society up to the present day, many of Ellul's concerns over the power of technology in society are prophetic rather than overreactions to perceived dangers. Many of his predictions have come true and the deleterious effects of technology that he foreshadowed are beginning to show themselves in the daily lives of everyday people and throughout society as a whole. While Ellul's philosophy of technology contains some troubling aspects, including the autonomy of technique and a fatalistic determinism without any real hope of the future, Ellul nevertheless continues to rightfully challenge all of us to think deeper and more broadly about the nature and role of technology today.

A Biblical Vision of Technology

A Christian philosophy of technology is best described as the understanding that technology is not simply an inert tool, and that we interact with it in complex ways. As Dyer puts it, "Both determinism and instrumentalism have elements of truth to them, but we cannot reduce all discussions about technology in either direction." He goes on to say that "People are culpable for their choices, but technology still plays a role in influencing the decisions they make."[35] Verbeek, critiquing a pure instrumentalist view, argues that "Technology has drastically altered culture and human life—and insofar as it

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[35] Dyer, 86.

can indeed be understood as a neutral means, instrumentalism glosses over the implications of this far too quickly."[36] Computer scientist Derek Schuurman describes this Christian approach to technology as a "value-laden cultural activity in response to God that shapes the natural creation."[37] He states that this view considers that creation itself has not only a structure but also a direction and that "technology is not neutral" because "technological objects are biased toward certain uses, which in turn bias the user in particular ways."[38] But Schuurman also notes that technology is not autonomous—contra Ellul—because "it is an area in which we exercise freedom and responsibility."[39] This value-laden approach to technology recognizes that the designers of these tools embed their personal or corporate values and even worldviews in the structure of these technological artifacts.[40] This view argues that technology has a certain design and use that shapes how one interacts with the world around them, and forms certain structures and systems in our society.

One of the main strengths of Ellul's vision of technique was that he saw past the overly simplistic understandings of technology as an isolated and value-neutral tool. Certain aspects of technological determinism allow us to see through some of the more individualistic understanding in the modern West to the immense societal impact of these monumental technological changes. It can be tempting in this technologically rich society to take a specific technology and isolate it from its context when evaluating its effects, both for good and for ill. Take the popular doorbell cameras like

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[36] Peter-Paul Verbeek, *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 174–75.

[37] Derek C. Schuurman, *Shaping a Digital World: Faith, Culture and Computer Technology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 22. For more on the value-laden approach, see Stephen V. Monsma and Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship, eds., *Responsible Technology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 24–36.

[38] Schuurman, *Shaping a Digital World*. 15. See also Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 49.

[39] Schuurman, *Shaping a Digital World*, 22.

[40] Schuurman, 15. See also Charles C. Adams, "Formation or Deformation: Modern Technology and the Cultural Mandate," *Pro Rege* 25, no. 4 (June 1997): 3.

Ring, for example. It would not be accurate to examine these tools as merely isolated camera technology allowing users to monitor their front porches. There are countless uses of these innovations. A homeowner can see when packages arrive and when they are picked up, which is especially beneficial when online shopping is at all-time highs and many basic needs can be fulfilled through online ordering. One can also see who is at the door before answering, which can be especially useful when someone is home alone or when one simply does not want to speak to the salesman who conveniently overlooked the No Soliciting sign. Homeowners can also check in on their homes when traveling or at work.

Stepping back to view these common technologies through a larger Ellulian perspective can allow one to see that these innovations were developed to meet a need brought about by another modern innovation, that of online shopping.[41] As more and more of a household's needs were being delivered to the front door, innovators sought to accommodate for previous innovations in home goods delivery. These same doorbell technologies also met a growing concern over home safety and neighborhood watch groups. As packages were being delivered, the increased risk of porch thieves rose. These doorbell technologies helped to address the symptomatic issues caused by the original innovation as well as address the fear of homeowners even if they live in relatively safe areas.

Even though he held to a more instrumentalist view of technology, famed philosopher Martin Heidegger observed that tools are tied up within a web of relations.[42] An expanded view of technology in a web of relations

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[41] It should be noted that Amazon purchased Ring for $1 billion in February 2018 as a way to gain access to the lucrative doorbell technology business that neatly aligns with their primary business of online shopping. See Ali Montag and Sarah Berger, "Amazon Bought 'Shark Tank' Reject Ring Last Year—Here's What the Founder Says about Jeff Bezos," CNBC, February 22, 2019, https://www.cnbc.com/2018/02/27/amazon-buys-ring-a-former-shark-tank-reject.html.

[42] See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward S. Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial/Modern Thought, 2008), 67–71. Heidegger argued that the instrumentalist view still held true, even in light of modern technologies like that of a radar station, sawmill, and power plant. Though, he did acknowledge the complex of our relations with technology as stated above.

also fits the Ellulian vision by showing the numerous connections and shifts that occur in a society when a new technology is developed and deployed like that of online shopping, which naturally arose through the advent of the modern internet.

One might question if this movement of technological innovation necessitates a deterministic philosophy of technology or if one could rather see these innovations in light of the biblical mandate to take dominion over the earth as God's image bearers, which Tiles and Oberdiek argue supports an optimistic or instrumentalist view of technology.[43] While Tiles and Oberdiek correctly state that a Christian philosophy of technology is optimistic rather than pessimistic—contra Ellul—the biblical account of technology is much deeper than simply a tool-oriented philosophy. In Genesis 1–2, as God creates everything, it is humanity alone that is created in his likeness and image (Gen 1:26–31). The *imago Dei* serves as the main distinction between humanity and the rest of creation because no other creature or creation is given this status, illustrated in the authority, responsibilities, and abilities that God has given to humanity. Genesis 2:15 speaks of humanity as put in the garden to "work it and watch over it," indicating that God gave his people a job to do and gave them creative abilities to make various tools and technologies like those used to initially maintain the garden itself. Furthermore, humanity is also able to invent new tools for building as seen in God's command to Noah to build an ark to rescue God's people from the flood (Genesis 6–7). Alongside these creative abilities, humanity was kept accountable for how they used these tools to care for and uphold the dignity of all image bearers.

But God's people—affected by the fall and in rebellion against God's design for humanity—began to misuse their image-bearing abilities to create tools and technologies that exacerbated their rebellion and to take advantage of others as seen in the stories of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4) and the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11). Humanity's rebellion is seen in the fact that "nearly

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See Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: From "Being and Time" (1927) to "The Task of Thinking" (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 312–13.

[43] See Tiles and Oberdiek in Scharff and Dusek, *Philosophy of Technology*, 249.

every tool available to us enables us to perpetuate the myth that we can live apart from dependence upon God."[44] God's people choose to reject his call to ultimately love him and to love their neighbor (Matt 22:37–39), refusing to uphold the dignity and worth of a fellow image bearer. As Dyer explains, "In our sin we attempt to live independent of our need for God and others, but God originally designed humans to function in a deeply interdependent way that reflects the tri-personhood of God."[45] While after the fall we see humanity still able to make tools and technologies, it is clear that humanity ultimately seeks to love themselves first and exploit their neighbors for their own glory rather than use these tools to love God and love others (Genesis 4). Through the examples of Cain in Genesis 4 and of the entire world, save for Noah, in Genesis 6–7, one can see how the nature of innovation and toolmaking coupled with a rebellious humanity and broken society can lead to widespread shifts in culture and begin to build out the web of relations that is far more complex than that of a singular instrument.

It is naïve, then, to look at technology as a mere tool, rather than to the widespread influence that comes alongside its use, including the push toward certain inherent goals set in the design of the tools themselves. Theologian and ethicist Jacob Shatzer summarizes the influence and disciple-making aspect of technology by reframing the popular adage, "When you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail," as, "When you've got a smartphone with a camera, everything looks like a status update."[46] Through this riff, Shatzer illustrates that technology is more than simply a useful tool but something that expands our moral horizons and something that shapes how we see the world around us, including our fellow image bearers. He states that "each tool pushes us toward the goal that the tool is best made for" and that we must be "aware of this, unless we think that our goals in life will always align with the goals that tools were made for."[47]

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[44] Dyer, *From the Garden to the City*, 71.

[45] Dyer, 45.

[46] Jacob Shatzer, *Transhumanism and the Image of God: Today's Technology and the Future of Christian Discipleship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 7.

[47] Shatzer, 7.

But while technological determinism has its merits and reveals the fuller impact of technology on individuals and the society at large, it fails to address the biblical understanding of the creator and creature distinction, including the moral accountability and agency we maintain as creature before our Creator. It also misses that technology is no more autonomous than other non-image-bearing parts of creation. A Christian philosophy of technology displays the riches of humanity as the sole bearer of God's image and also a creature with full moral accountability and agency before God for how we love God and love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt 22:37–39). It can be easily overlooked with concepts of autonomous technology and the technological imperative that humanity is responsible and accountable to God not only for how we use these instruments in creation, but also for the systems and structures these instruments contribute to in the formation of society. As God's sole image bearers, humanity plays a unique role not only in how we create technologies but also in how we love and care for those around us as we seek to structure society in a way that honors the value of every human being, no matter their position, status, race, sex, religion, or background.

In the translator's note to the first English edition of *The Technological Society* in 1964, John Wilkinson quotes Ernst Jünger saying that "technology is the real metaphysic of the twentieth century."[48] To some, this overarching conception of technology might seem at odds with the way many people approach technology today as merely a tool that can be used for good or ill. It is far too easy to isolate particular technologies and allow a myopic view of technology to drive the moral and social questions posed by technology today, especially in the digital public square. This new stage of history has led some to become so intoxicated with the promises of technology that they miss the negative effects on human development and culture

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[48] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, ix. A similar sentiment has been echoed in recent years by theologian and ethicist Brent Waters as he describes the role of technology in society. He states that "technology is ontology of late modernity," meaning that "we cannot define who we are or express what we aspire to become in the absence of technology." See Waters, *This Mortal Flesh*, 15–17.

making. On the opposite side of the spectrum, others focus so much on the negative effects that they miss that God gave his children the abilities to create and use technology in ways that honor him and love our fellow image bearers.

A Christian philosophy of technology seeks to balance these two views by providing a framework of agency and accountability, alongside expanding our view of technology to see the larger social effects of these tools. Often technology's influence on our society and the march toward progress has led some to believe that through technology, humanity will ultimately usher in a new era of a society. This striving is often encapsulated in the dreams of a technological utopia, where the ills and brokenness of this world are solvable if we had the right technology at hand.[49] These dreams in some ways are understandable given the immense progress over the last seventy years in computer technology and how nearly every aspect of our lives is tied in some way to modern marvels of human creativity and ingenuity. But often beneath the surface of the utopian dreams of technological progress is the reality that technology is constantly shaping and molding us and society—both for good and for ill. The power and disciple-making aspects of technology have naturally led to a growing interest and study of technology by both secular and Christian communities. But given the ubiquity of technology, the reality is that everyone in our communities is being shaped in this technological society. The question is, How are we being formed, and to what end? Christians must ask then whether these technologies are transforming us to be more like Christ or if we are ultimately being conformed to the likeness of this world instead (Rom 12:2).

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[49] Futurist Yuval Noah Harari claims that humanity has already overcome the main three issues of the world: war, famine, and plague. Now that humanity has overcome these perennial issues, we may set our sights on overcoming death itself and ultimately become gods in our own right. See Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, Vintage Popular Science (London: Harvill Secker, 2016); Yuval N. Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2018).

Toward a Public Theology for a Digital Age

Recently, I read an insightful article by Shira Ovide of the *New York Times* on the splintering of the internet and the complexities surrounding digital governance around the world.[50] She writes about how most countries around the world have their own car safety regulations and tax codes, but currently there is widespread debate over how online expression should be governed. She highlights how technology companies—many based in the Western world—are essentially governing speech and free expression online, which leads to major controversies and dissension as many countries want to retain that power for themselves.

One of the most salient points she makes in the piece concerns the promises of how technology was going to usher in a new world order. She writes, "The utopian idea of the internet was that it would help tear down national boundaries, but technology watchers have been warning for decades that it could instead build those barriers even higher." Not only are those barriers being built higher around the world, but technological power is also being exerted by powerful governments and leaders to control and manipulate people created in God's very image.[51] Over the last few years, we have even seen numerous companies shut down the internet to quell protests and dissension among their own people, like that in Iran, Belarus, China, and Cuba. These stories represent a much larger question that is being debated about how technology companies like Meta, Twitter, and many others should do business around the world, especially in areas where there is significant disagreement over the basic freedoms we enjoy in America. But even in the United States, we have significant differences and major disagreements on the role of the government and third-party technology companies concerning issues like content moderation, free expression, and online governance. These complexities and differences are present even

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[50] Shira Ovide, "The Internet Is Splintering," *New York Times*, February 17, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/17/technology/the-internet-is-splintering.html.

[51] For more on the widespread use of technology to suppress human rights and free expression around the world, see chapter 11 by Olivia Enos in this work.

though we have some level of a shared culture and agreement on many basic human freedoms—even though that agreement seems to be fraying with each passing day.

Technology policy expert Klon Kitchen, who serves at the American Enterprise Institute as a Resident Fellow, wrote a brilliant essay at *National Affairs* about the realities we face in this technological age. He states that "all governments must [now] acknowledge and adapt to the fact that they no longer wield exclusive power and influence on the global stage."[52] The rise of a technology industry operating transnationally with enormous power over public discourse presents a unique challenge to our society but also an opportunity for Christians to engage with these companies as we have historically done with governments, standing for human dignity and religious freedom around the world. The Christian church has a rich heritage of public theology and navigating church/state relations, drawn in large part directly from the scriptural calling to honor the leaders God has placed in charge, hold the government accountable to their calling to stand for justice, and honor the God-given freedoms of all as created in God's image (Rom 13:1–6). While the rise of these transnational entities in the digital age may present unique challenges on issues like online governance, it also presents a unique opportunity for Christians to engage the technology industry with a robust public theology built upon an unchanging understanding of human dignity and freedom derived from Scripture. It is far too easy in our technological society to see other human beings as simply problems to be solved or as pawns in the pursuit of power. But a Christian understanding of humanity and the nature of society is rooted in the dignity of all people that transcends our national allegiances and even the technological order itself we spoke of earlier.

As Christians engage on these important ethical issues, we must do so from a position of principled pluralism—recognizing the inherent dignity

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[52] Klon Kitchen, "The New Superpowers: How and Why the Tech Industry Is Shaping the International System," *National Affairs*, no. 49 (Fall 2021), https://nationalaffairs.com/the-new-superpowers-how-and-why-the-tech-industry-is-shaping-the-international-system.

of all people and with a clear moral vision of a common good grounded in God's Word.[53] Grounded in these two truths, we can model for our society how to have these debates from a convictional, yet grace-filled perspective. In a society that prizes efficiency, speed, and at times public contempt for our political and social "enemies," we should seek to prioritize the dignity of all, including those who disagree with us on these important issues. We can do so by recognizing that our battle is not against flesh and blood but against the cosmic powers of darkness (Eph 6:12). That means that we engage from a position of hope and grace, knowing that we are to seek the right changes in the right way (Rom 3:8).

A second and vital requirement is understanding the basic tenets of the debates at hand, rather than simply dropping into these complex debates or speaking to issues without a full understanding of the gravity of the situation. Just as we seek to gain insight and expertise in other areas of life—especially engagement with government—to honestly engage, we must do the same with the technology industry and the complex issues they face doing business around the world. This is one of the many reasons this volume consists of two corresponding chapters speaking to the domestic and international issues of technology policy as well as a host of important issues in the digital public square. It does not serve well the message of the gospel, much less our society, to engage on issues without knowledge or awareness of the issues at stake, even if our society seems to reward hot-takes on social media over true action oriented toward lasting change. Even with the immense complexity of these debates, one thing is clear: the dignity of our neighbor is at stake around the world, especially under repressive authoritarian regimes. We must keep that truth central in this debate over digital governance. Even though these issues may at times seem to be simply about tweets, posts, and even the contours of content moderation, these are simply expressions of how human beings, created in God's image, are able to communicate, express themselves, and do life in an ever-increasing digital society.

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[53] For an expanded discussion of this approach, see chapter 10 where this model is applied to the rise of conspiracy theories and misinformation in the digital public square.

Charting a Path Forward

This volume is designed to speak to the complexities of these various issues from the richness of the Christian theological and ethical traditions. While there are many ways for Christians to think about the issues presented here, each author helps us see the complexities of these issues, while also pointing out where Christians may disagree on the best approach. Part 1 focuses on a foundational understanding of technology, the public square, and the technology policy landscape. First, Bryan Baise helps us see some of the contemporary shifts in how we think about the public square today and how technology is altering how we organize our society. Next, Nathan Leamer and Patricia Shaw offer readers a snapshot of the landscape of technology policy from both an American perspective and a global perspective—namely highlighting the European, British, and Australian approaches to these pressing issues in the digital public square, ranging from telecom law and government agencies to calls for AI ethics and digital privacy. Lastly, David French helps set the stage for the remaining chapters by speaking to the various legal and policy debates over online governance that transcend many of the partisan talking points of the day.

In part 2, each contributor takes on a major facet of digital governance and content moderation. Attentive readers will see that this section mirrors many of the community guidelines of major technology companies that function as the governing documents of content moderation on these platforms. The goal here is to tease out how Christians might engage these major aspects of moderation and raise concerns about how these policies may be ill-defined or dangerously applied in the digital public square. First, Joshua Wester casts a compelling vision for religious freedom and free expression in the digital age, which is often missing from many of the conversations surrounding digital governance today.

Two complementary chapters follow focused on the meteoric rise of hate speech and hate crimes online—often focused on the socially contentious issues of sexuality and gender. Brooke Medina addresses the confusion over defining hate speech today while modeling an ethic of dignity for all, especially with the concerning trends of hate crimes orchestrated in and

through digital means. Christiana Kiefer and Jeremy Tedesco write about how we are increasingly seeing the historic understandings of sexuality and gender labeled as hate speech under overly broad content moderation policies. They argue that these policies need to transcend the mores of the day and be tethered to a robust application of First Amendment doctrine while recognizing that this same doctrine is also routinely extended to these companies themselves in how they set their moderation and content policies for their platforms. Next, Bonnie Kristian helps readers understand the complexities of banning pornography online and offers a vision for Christian engagement in combatting this dehumanizing industry's grip on our society. I then write on the concerning rise of conspiracy theories, fake news, and misinformation in the age of social media and how these issues transcend the digital technologies of the day before offering a vision for public policy grounding in standing for truth in an increasingly pluralistic society. Lastly in this section, Olivia Enos writes about how authoritarian regimes around the world are utilizing these powerful tools and suppressing human rights in the pursuit of power and control over their people. She highlights the oppressive nature of surveillance technologies, especially in countries like China, North Korea, and others.

In part 3, Keith Plummer and Jacob Shatzer offer complementary chapters on how the church goes about ministry in the digital age. Plummer focuses on how the church communicates with the outside world and the ways that our digital witness reflects the truths we proclaim as believers in Jesus Christ. Shatzer highlights the need for rich discipleship in the digital age, where we are often tempted to segment our lives into the real and the digital. He challenges readers to see how technology is shaping us in specific and deleterious ways before challenging the church to take a more holistic view of discipleship in the twenty-first century.

The overall goal of this volume is to contribute to the ongoing conversations about the role of technology in our society while casting a vision for a holistic Christian engagement on these pressing issues in the digital public square. While there are common threads amongst the various contributions, readers will notice that there are wide-ranging views on how best to navigate these complex challenges in light of the Christian ethic. This is by design, as

to model an epistemic humility that should mark the Christian life as well as our engagement with all in the digital public square. The church and the broader society are facing what at times seems to be daunting challenges that are endlessly complex, but it is our prayer and hope that the following chapters model a rich engagement on these issues—one grounded in hope and truth, not driven by the polemics of the day but a peace that surpasses all understanding (Phil 4:7).