

Welcome

A few weeks ago, my friend Matt sent me an ad that had just come across his social media. It was for a new app called Text with Jesus.

The app uses AI - that of ChatGPT - to message you as Jesus (or, if you're willing to pay for it, other biblical figures from Adam and Eve to Moses to Jesus' mother Mary to, and I'm not kidding here, Judas).

I'm sure you won't be shocked to learn that I have strong feelings about this (as did Matt, hence the text).

But before I share my thoughts with you, I want you to consider this with me.

Is this technology good or bad? Or maybe better yet: if we were in debate class and you got assigned one side or the other to defend, what would you say?

How would you argue that Chat-JesusPT is good? How would you argue it's bad?

I bet you could defend either side. I bet if we polled the congregation, we'd have a mix of reactions already.

So... how do we know whether this new innovation is good or bad?

This is a vital question when it comes to technology, and because technology is always evolving - faster and faster!, we need a way to think faithfully about technology.

Today, we're going to explore what technology is and how we learn to evaluate it well. We'll see that we can learn to ask good questions about tech.

We're not going to suggest that technology is the enemy of God. We *are* going to suggest that technology isn't morally neutral, and we should be careful and thoughtful about the technologies we employ.

The bottom line for Jesus followers is the question of whether technology helps us love God and love our neighbors better. This is, after all, the greatest commandment.

So let's begin by celebrating the God who created us to be creators!

Message

It's been nearly a decade since we did a series called SOCIAL, where we explored what it looks like to live faithfully in online spaces. I don't have to tell you that a lot has changed in the last decade, particularly in the world of technology. TikTok didn't exist, X was still Twitter and Facebook hadn't sold us out to the Russians yet.

Smart Home devices weren't everywhere, always listening to us quite yet.

Yeah, a lot has changed in the last decade, so we thought it would be good to revisit our Social series. What does it look like to think faithfully about technology in 2023? How do we understand the forces shaping our culture, our homes, our imaginations? And how do we chart out a faith-filled course in this always-changing technological landscape?

I want to begin at 30,000 ft, by looking at what technology even *is*. Because what we often hear when pastors talk about technology is just "it's evil and you shouldn't use it."

Tik tok? Mindless distraction that takes us away from authentic community!

Which is what they've said about pretty much every social media. Oh, and smart phones.

Tablets? You can't read the Bible on them because that's not the same as reading the actual book!

But what those critics miss is that *everything* is technology.

Sure, smartphones can be distracting. But can you imagine when the first telephone came out? Someone insisting that it would be anti-community because now instead of going over to someone's house, you just call them!

Or take the Bible as a book - that didn't even exist for the first 400 years or so of Christianity, and even once it did, the vast majority of Christians didn't have their own Bible (and couldn't have read it if they did!). That didn't come until the printing press.

Can you imagine the scandal? Now instead of good Christians coming to church, sitting together and listening to the Bible read the way the original authors intended, people are going to read it silently in their own homes?! The outrage!

Of course, we who live on the other side of the printing press and the home phone think it's incredibly silly to object to that sort of technological innovation. It's almost impossible for us to imagine living in a world without the sort of widely-available knowledge the printing press made available. Or a smartphone-less world. (Seriously how did anyone find anything in Dallas before GPS?)

Science fiction author Douglas Adams wrote three laws about how humans adopt technology that, while tongue in cheek, are spot on:

1. Anything that is in the world when you're born is normal and ordinary and is just a natural part of the way the world works.
2. Anything that's invented between when you're fifteen and thirty-five is new and exciting and revolutionary and you can probably get a career in it.
3. Anything invented after you're thirty-five is against the natural order of things. — Douglas Adams, *The Salmon of Doubt*

Everything is technology, from indoor plumbing to the utensils we use to eat to the roads we drive on to the clothes we're wearing. It's *all* technology.

Demonizing new technology because it's different from what's come before isn't helpful. It also ignores the witness of the Bible, and the calling God gave to humanity.

Turn with us to Genesis 2.

I want to take you from the beginning to the end. We're going to start in the creation story in Genesis 2. There's some language about technology in this story that we miss - God's call to develop the world!

When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, neither wild plants nor grains were growing on the earth. For the LORD God had not yet sent rain to water the earth, and there were no people to cultivate the soil. Instead, springs came up from the ground and watered all the land. Then the LORD God formed the human from the dust of the ground. The LORD GOD breathed the breath of life into the human's nostrils, and the human became a living person.

Then the LORD God planted a garden in Eden in the east, and there they placed the human they had made. The LORD God made all sorts of trees grow up from the ground—trees that were beautiful and that produced delicious fruit. In the middle of the garden the LORD God placed the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...

The LORD God placed the human in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it. — Genesis 2:4-9, 15

Did you see that? God's call on the first human was to "till and keep" the earth. That's gardening language. Farming language. Domesticating and cultivating plants is some of the first technology humanity developed, along with simple tools and fire.

Part and parcel of the creation story is God's invitation to be co-creators with God. To look at our creator, watch what God does and imitate. To turn a field into a garden.

Turn with us to Revelation 21.

Hold that thought and turn with me to the very end of the Bible - Revelation 21. As you might expect from the very end of the very end, what we're about to read is a vision of the culmination of history, when God has put an end to evil and death, banished injustice forever. What I want you to watch for as we read is some language that will sound very familiar having just read Genesis 2:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God illuminates the city, and the Lamb is its light. The nations will walk in its light, and the kings of the world will enter the city in all their glory. Its gates will never be closed at the end of day because there is no night there. And all the nations will bring their glory and honor into the city. Nothing evil will be allowed to enter, nor anyone who practices shameful idolatry and dishonesty—but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. It flowed down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations. — Revelation 21:1-2, 22-2:2

The Garden is back! Well, not exactly. The Tree of Life is back, and the river. It's Eden, but it's not a garden anymore... it's a city.

A city is another marker of human technology - where we figured out how to live together and sustain a community that's larger than a single family.

The story of the Bible is a story of God working with humanity as we learn to be co-creators with God.

It's the story of a garden becoming a city.

Technology isn't evil. Progress isn't the enemy. There's nothing inherently sacred about 'the good ole days'.

Of course, that doesn't mean technology is automatically good, either. After all, there's a whole lot of evil and injustice between Genesis 2 and Revelation 22.

But before we go further, can we celebrate that we worship a God who calls us to be creative? A God who created us to create?

Song

Technology isn't inherently evil. Progress is not somehow the enemy of God's work in the world.

But that doesn't mean that technology is morally neutral. It's hard to see this in Scripture - in part because we're asking a question ancient peoples didn't consider. But even so, there are places that show us the dark side of technological progress.

Turn with us to 1 Samuel 13.

1 Samuel is the story of how God's people transitioned from a tribal confederation to a monarchy (we might call these governing technologies). One of the major impetuses for this transition was the arrival on the shores of the Mediterranean of the Philistines. We're not sure exactly who the Philistines are, but our best guess is that they fled some sort of massive calamity in Greece at the end of the Bronze Age. They brought with them a technology that Israel hadn't discovered yet:

Iron.

That's right - Israel was still forging weapons and tools out of bronze - stronger and more versatile than stone, to be sure. But compared to iron, bronze is soft and malleable. A bronze sword against a bronze shield is a battle. An iron sword against a bronze shield is a massacre.

Their superior technology allowed the Philistines to sweep across Israel, conquering tribe after tribe. And they maintained their military superiority by ensuring the Israelites couldn't learn how to forge iron. Take a look:

There were no blacksmiths in the land of Israel in those days. The Philistines wouldn't allow them for fear they would make swords and spears for the Hebrews. So whenever the Israelites needed to sharpen their plowshares, picks, axes, or sickles, they had to take them to a Philistine blacksmith. — 1 Samuel 13:19-20

That seemingly throw-away verse tells us all we need to know about the dangers of technology. Yes, it can be transformative and liberating and connective. But it can also make it easier to oppress, to destroy, to separate and isolate.

Technology can do both of these things. Progress can move us further toward justice *or* oppression.

So we can't just ask, "Is technology holy or unholy?" That's the wrong way to frame the question.

Rather, we have to ask, "How does this technology help me love God, love my neighbor, love myself better?" Or, "How might this technology make it easier for me to ignore or exploit my neighbor? How might this technology alienate me from God?"

Let's go back to that Jesus chat app. AI Chatbots like Chat GPT or Bard are essentially souped up versions of your phone's predictive text algorithm. So the makers fed a whole bunch of Bible translations into the bot and it's (presumably) going to spit out remixed Bible verses that sound a little more conversational.

That's not the worst idea I've ever heard. We could argue it's an extension of the sort of logic behind translations like the New Living Translation (which we use) or the Message - making the words of Scripture more accessible. I'm always a fan of that idea.

But my friend Matt, who told me about the app in the first place, wrote in his newsletter about a big red flag: this app seems to think that, as Christians, we don't have access to Jesus. But that's not true! Matt writes:

If you're a Christian, your own theology tells you that you can talk to Jesus. You don't need an app or a guide or a priest or a book... You can pray and God hears you. And you can hear from Jesus through the Word, through the Holy Spirit speaking to you, through so many things: nature, the words of your faith community, talking donkeys, etc. – Matt Mikalatos

I think the biggest danger of this technology is that it replaces spiritual formation - which teaches us how to forge a genuine connection with Jesus, with a facsimile. An easier, but ultimately false connection with Jesus. Connecting, in fact, with a programmer's idea of Jesus.

I get the impulse here. But this is a case where the convenience of the technology short-circuits the real work of spiritual formation. It actually isolates us from Jesus by connecting us to a false Jesus!

Any good use of technology should help us love God with our whole selves and to love our neighbors the same way we love ourselves. *That's* the criterion we should use when we're evaluating technology. Because, in the end, we have to remember that God created us to be co-creators, to partner with God in creating a world where we can all flourish together!

Communion + Examen

Jesus invites us to the table

What technologies in the last week have helped me to connect better with God and others?

What technologies in the last week have alienated me from God or others?

What technologies in the next week have the potential to alienate me from God or others?

How can I choose to connect more deeply with God and others this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Spend some time with a technology. How can it connect you? How can it alienate you?