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The Next Story

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*For my brothers Pat, Andrew, Rick, and Justin—  
one by birth, three by marriage, all four in the Lord.*



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## Preface

On October 30, 1961, the Soviet Union detonated the most powerful weapon ever created. Nicknamed Tsar Bomba, the king of bombs, it was a multistage thermonuclear warhead with explosive power in the range of 50 megatons—equivalent to detonating 50 million tons of TNT. This made it fourteen hundred times more powerful than the *combined* force of the nuclear bombs that the United States dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the closing days of the Second World War. In fact, the explosive force of this bomb alone was ten times greater than the total amount of explosives deployed in the entire war, *including* those two nuclear bombs.

It is hard for most of us to understand what 50 million tons of TNT would look like, so let's try this: Imagine that you had an Olympic-sized swimming pool full of it, packed from end to end, from top to bottom. Try to imagine the devastation you would bring about in igniting that quantity of one of the most powerful explosives in the world. What if you had ten of those pools full of it? Or a hundred? Or a thousand? 50 million tons is the equivalent of filling 11,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools with TNT and igniting it all simultaneously. And in Tsar Bomba all of that destructive power was contained in a single bomb that was 26 feet long and 6 feet in diameter.

Truly this was a weapon of unparalleled destruction.<sup>UN-1\*</sup>

At 11:32 a.m. the weapon detonated 13,000 feet above the surface of the Mityushikha Bay test range, on a Barents Sea island far above the Arctic Circle. The flash of light from the explosion was visible over 600 miles away, though it would take 49 minutes for the sound to reach that distance. The fireball reached from the ground to 34,000 feet in the air, and a person standing 60 miles away from the blast would have experienced third-degree burns from the heat. The mushroom cloud rose almost 40 miles into the sky, seven times higher than Mount Everest, and had a diameter of nearly 25 miles. Windows were shattered as far as 600 miles away. The shock wave, initially measuring 7.1 on the Richter Scale, was still measurable on its third passage around the circumference of the earth.

Some time after the detonation, a team was sent to ground zero, the epicenter of the explosion, to see the results. They reported, not surprisingly, that there had been utter devastation.<sup>1</sup> “The ground surface of the island has been levelled, swept and licked so that it looks like a skating rink. The same goes for rocks. The snow has melted and their sides and edges are shiny. There is not a trace of unevenness in the ground....

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Everything in this area has been swept clean, scoured, melted and blown away.”<sup>2</sup> The area of total and complete destruction was fully 44 miles in diameter.

Mityushikha Bay had been blown apart, but it had also been blown together, combined in new ways. You see, Tsar Bomba was a thermonuclear weapon, a hydrogen bomb—one that used nuclear *fusion* to cause devastation exponentially greater than anything that had previously been detonated. On a chemical level, much had been destroyed—and much had been created. Out of the chaos of destruction a strange new order had emerged. Trees, plants, and animals had been blown to bits, reduced to their component parts. Hills had been leveled and valleys filled. What remained was a smooth and unnatural landscape both terrible and haunting. The rocks had not ceased to exist but had been reshaped, smoothed, and molded into new forms.

Mityushikha Bay was not gone; it was changed, altered forever.

### Changed Forever

Ten years after Tsar Bomba was detonated over Mityushikha Bay, another explosion occurred. Though it lacked the power and spectacle of Tsar Bomba, it has had a far greater impact on the world. In 1971, scientists at Intel Corporation introduced the Intel 4004, the world’s first commercially available microprocessor. The 4004 was the first and most rudimentary of what would eventually become a long line of processors that would find their way into nearly everything we own. As they shrank in size and increased in power, microprocessors were integrated into calculators, computers, televisions, mobile phones, automobiles, and toys. The invention of the microprocessor was a spark igniting the explosive growth of digital technology. Like Tsar Bomba, this digital “explosion” has reshaped the landscape of our lives, destroying and creating, splitting things apart and bringing them together in new ways.

Over the past three decades, digital technologies have powerfully changed our lives. They are woven into the very way we understand and relate to the world around us. We are now a digital culture. We are no longer who and what we were just a few decades ago.

# The DIGITAL EXPLOSION

## The Digital Explosion

This book began with a question. Actually, it began with an uneasy feeling that begged a whole series of heartfelt questions. I live as a writer and a web editor, spending most of my life sitting before a screen surrounded by the latest and greatest high-tech devices. And I began to feel overwhelmed. I began to feel as if maybe, just maybe, all of my devices, gizmos, and gadgets owned me as much as I owned them. Even worse, I came to see that these devices were constantly demanding my time and attention. They buzzed and beeped and blinked and called me to respond to them. Worse still, they quickly grew obsolete, falling out of favor and leading me to want newer, upgraded models.

All of this made me uneasy. I began to wonder: Am I giving up control of my life? Is it possible that these technologies are changing me? Am I becoming a tool of the very tools that are supposed to serve me?

I went searching for people who were asking similar questions, men and



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women who have taken time to think about what it means to live in a *digital* world, a world surrounded by gadgets, a world in which we define and understand ourselves in completely new ways. I found that there were others who have been asking these questions—doctors, sociologists, theologians, technologists, philosophers. From some of them I learned *how* and *why* our gadgets have come to figure so prominently in our lives. Others provided helpful insight on how technology functions in human society. And from a precious few I began to learn how Christians can live in a digital world with virtue and dignity.

The digital revolution is global, reaching to the farthest corners of the earth. It affects the way we see, what we hear, how we interact with the world around us, and how we communicate with others. Swimming in this digital sea, we are caught up in a torrent of media, striving to stay afloat and make some headway against the rush of sounds, images, and words that seem intent on drowning us out. Some, like Rip Van Winkle, are just now waking up to this new reality. They rub their eyes and wonder what has happened. How has the world changed so quickly and so thoroughly? Others have been born into it—they are digital natives who have never known a world apart from digital technology.

As I read, reflected, and wrote, I found myself identifying with a little poem written by Danny Hillis, a technologist responsible for creating much of the computer architecture that lives within the machines we increasingly take for granted. Even Hillis, a computer genius and digital pioneer in his own right, knew that something profound had happened. He, too, wondered just how the digital explosion would reshape our cultural story—our understanding of ourselves and the world we live in.

In some sense, we've  
run out of our story, which  
we were operating on, which  
was the story of power taking over nature—it's not  
that we've finished that, but  
we've gotten ahead of ourselves, and  
we don't know what  
the next story is after that.<sup>3</sup>

I asked myself, *Is Hillis right?* Have we “run out of our story”? And if so, what comes next? How has the digital explosion reshaped our understanding of ourselves, our world, and, most importantly, our

knowledge of God? And what is “the next story” that will inform and direct the way we live?

The Bible reveals that we are created and called to fulfill God’s mandate: that we go into all the world, faithfully stewarding the world God has created and the message he has given us. Thankfully, God has already provided a story for our lives. It is a story of subduing nature and caring for his creation. It is a story each of us has been born into and one in which we all have a part to play.

From the beginning, technology has played a vital role in this story, of course. God has gifted human beings with remarkable ability to dream, create, and invent technologies that serve us as we serve him, technologies that enable us to *better* serve him. But if technology is a good gift from God, with the potential to help us fulfill our God-given calling and purpose, why does it so often feel like we are slaves to our technology, like we are serving it instead of demanding that it serve us?

- We see a woman who walks away from her local church to become a member of a virtual church community tied together by little more than a website, and we wonder if virtual community can truly replace the physical presence of other believers.
- We sit in church and spot a young person using his mobile phone to send and receive text messages during worship, and we wonder whether he owns his phone—or it owns him.
- We see a family out for dinner and spot a dad talking on his phone while the kids play with their handheld gaming systems—every member of the family lost in his or her own little digital world—and we shake our heads and wonder, *What has gone wrong with the world?*
- We see young men immersing themselves in video games, content to spend endless hours staring at their screens, losing themselves in virtual worlds that must somehow seem so much more interesting and attractive than the real world.
- We see students dedicating vast amounts of time to social websites like Facebook, suspecting that amid all of this online socializing, they are missing out on the beauty of real-world, face-to-face friendships.

We wonder if maybe, just maybe, we *have* gotten ahead of ourselves a little bit. Maybe we *don't* know what we are doing. Maybe, just maybe, we have become slaves to our own devices. Maybe we haven't considered the

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consequences of the digital revolution, much less the way it is impacting our faith. How, then, are we to live?

We cannot run away from digital technology—mobile phones and computers and the Internet and television are likely to be with us in one form or another for some time. Nor would we necessarily want to run away from them. Certainly, not all technology is harmful or dangerous. Is there a way, then, to live virtuously, immersed in this strange new digital reality?

I'd like to invite you to join me as we think about the “next story,” a story we are living right now—life after the digital explosion. We'll explore some suggestions and ideas for how we as Christians can live in this new reality with character, virtue, and wisdom. And we'll examine how we can respond to these revolutionary changes as followers of Christ in a digital age, learning to live faithfully as the next story unfolds.

### Rich and Poor

Author Malcolm Gladwell generalizes that today we are experience rich and *theory* poor. And so he has taken to writing books, he says, to find new ways of making sense of the world and uncovering connections between things that would otherwise appear to be disconnected. Through his books he wants to say, “Here is where history meets culture or where culture meets history.”<sup>14</sup>

To Gladwell's aphorism I might dare to add that we are also experience rich and *theology* poor. Each of us has had plenty of experience with technology, but few of us have the theoretical or theological tools to make sense of the consequences of our use of technology. And so we find a tension between how we *use* technology, how we *know* technology operates, and how *God* expects us to use technology.

Maybe we can best illustrate all of this with a diagram:

Here we have technology in theory, theology, and experience, but there is no overlap between them; each exists in its own separate sphere. Many of us live in the experience circle, where we have never invested any significant effort in understanding the theory of technology and have never paused to even consider the theological dimension of technology. We *use* technology without thinking deeply about it, without really understanding what it is or how it impacts our lives and our hearts.

Perhaps you have read *Amusing Ourselves to Death* or *Technopoly* by Neil Postman or *The Medium is the Massage*<sup>UN-2\*</sup> by Marshall McLuhan. Or maybe you've had moments, as I have, when you've begun to think about the way technology operates in your life. If so, you've already begun to integrate the theoretical and the experiential. You aren't just blindly using technology; you are thinking about it, asking questions. Hopefully, if you were interested enough to pick up this book, you're already living in that overlap, the place where theory intersects experience so that the way you use technology is informed by what you know to be true about it. You are a "thoughtful" user of technology, unwilling to blindly accept it without critically considering the impact it will have on your life.

I've said that a "thoughtful" user of technology lives in that space where theory and experience intersect. Now, because we are interested in living in a *distinctly Christian* way, let's add another dimension: theology.

What does theology have to do with technology? More than you might think! In fact, one of the aims of this book is to take us to that point in the middle, that point where all three circles converge. We are looking for that sweet spot where our use of technology is not just thoughtful and informed, but it is informed by the Bible, by an understanding of God's purpose for technology. In that place of thoughtful, technological discernment, we live in light of what we know to be true about technology, what we know to be true about ourselves, and what we know to be true about the God who made us.

There are many books we could choose to read on any one of these topics. Quite a few manage to draw two of the circles together. But as I have read and studied, I have found very few that have succeeded in focusing on the confluence of the three. As this book progresses, we will look at each of the circles, but our focus will be on living where the three converge. It does us no good to know how to use technology if we haven't critically questioned our use of it. And it does us no good to use technology, even with critical insight, if we don't understand the God-given reason and purpose for technology.

There are several different ways in which Christians can respond to the digital world. Some are tempted to embrace the latest technological discoveries enthusiastically and unthinkingly. They will argue that cell phones and video games and computers are an inevitable part of life in the twenty-first century. They will suggest that we must simply embrace these new technologies or the church will risk becoming irrelevant to a

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world shaped and influenced by digital technology. But such an unqualified embrace lacks appropriate discernment and is unwise. God calls us to use our minds, to use our Spirit-filled hearts, to distinguish between good and evil, between right and wrong, even in our use of technology.

If the first response is enthusiastic embrace, a second possibility for some Christians is strict separation, keeping themselves from these technologies and seeing everything digital as a dangerous enemy. Such persons will necessarily withdraw from the world and seek to keep themselves free from digital defilement. While there is something to commend in this approach, it is not at all realistic. Digital technologies are an unavoidable part of today's world and there is no biblical reason to utterly separate ourselves from them. As we will see, digital technology is not inherently evil. It can and must be used in ways that honor and glorify God.

The third response, and the response that most readers of this book will likely take, is that of the discerning Christian. While there is a range of possible responses—from enthusiastic embrace to strict separation—the response of the thinking Christian should be *disciplined discernment*. In this approach, a Christian looks carefully at the new realities, weighs and evaluates them, and educates himself, thinking deeply about the potential consequences and effects of using a particular technology. Through it all, even as he is using a specific technology, he disciplines himself to be discerning, to embrace what can be embraced and to reject what needs to be rejected. He moves beyond the broad strokes of utter rejection and complete acceptance. Instead, he relies on the Holy Spirit, who speaks his wisdom through the Bible, to learn how he can live with virtue in this new digital world.<sup>5</sup>

### The Unfolding of the Next Story

In part 1 of this book, we will look to theology, theory, and experience. We will begin at the beginning, so to speak, as we see how God intended technology to function in the world he created. We will then turn to the theoretical, seeking to understand what is always true about the relationship between humans and their technologies. And finally we will pause to gain a historical perspective that will allow us to see how we came to live in this strange new digital world.

In part 2, we will look to areas of application specific to the Christian life,

showing how we can live with wisdom and virtue in this digital world, using our technologies without being used by them:

- We will see that digital living offers particular challenges and opportunities for Christians.
- We will see that we now live a mediated reality, one in which some kind of media constantly stands between us and the rest of the world.
- We will see that we are increasingly distracted, pulled from one task to the next, from one media to the next.
- We will see that information is a compelling new kind of idol that calls us to invest our trust in it.
- We will see that we are now a hypersocial people and why we must intentionally submit our need for constant communication to the lordship of God.
- We will see that the digital explosion has resulted in significant changes in authority structures that affect us, our families, and our churches.
- We will see that this digital world brings with it entirely new conceptions of privacy and visibility.

Through it all we will let God's Word, the Bible, guide, inform, and convict us. It may seem counterintuitive that in our quest to seek how we can live with virtue in a digital age, we will rely on a book that is thousands of years old—a book that was first recorded not on a computer or even paper, but on old, dusty scrolls. Before that, it lived only in human memory, passed from one person to the next through oral transmission. Our first impulse may be to scoff at such a thing, wondering how we could possibly learn from those who thought bronze spears were a near-miraculous invention. Yet it is exactly the Bible's long track record that gives it credence on this topic. It has survived and thrived through every technological change and every technological era. The wisdom that has steered humans since the earliest days can surely direct us as well. And so we begin, trusting God to guide us, as we look at life and faith after the digital explosion.



# PART 1







# DISCERNING TECHNOLOGY

My son has a rather odd habit when he talks on the telephone. When a friend calls him, he takes the phone and immediately begins to pace, walking in circles around the house. He starts in the kitchen, walks down the hall to the front door, turns left into the living room, walks through the dining room, and then heads back into the kitchen, completing a full circuit of our home. And as he talks, he paces, going around and around, again and again.

Recently, I was rather surprised to find myself doing the very same thing. Talking on the telephone with a friend, I noticed that I, too, was pacing around and around our house as I talked. You are probably familiar with the old expression “he’s a chip off the old block.” It’s a phrase we use to describe a person who bears a resemblance to his father. It can be a physical resemblance, but more often than not, it’s a similarity we notice in personality or habits. We see certain traits in a person and recognize that he shares something in common with his father. My son walks while he talks on the phone because I walk while I talk on the phone. Like father, like son.

## THE NEXT STORY: PART 1

In the first chapter of the Bible, we read that God created man in his own image. “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,” said God. “And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (Genesis 1:26). These words are so well-known to us that they have undoubtedly lost much of their power. They tell us that we have been made to resemble the Creator of the universe; we are, to put it lightly, “chips off the old block.” God, the Creator of all that exists, saw fit to share with us many of his divine attributes. Like God, we, too, are spiritual beings. We are able to love. We have a kind of moral freedom.

And we are able to create.

Just as God created, we create. God has given human beings the ability to think, to come up with remarkable ideas, to be innovative. Technology is simply the practical result of the creative process. Birds may instinctually use spiderwebs to build nests. A monkey may somehow discover how to use a rock to crack open a nut. But these aren't creative activities leading to new technologies. Animals don't act out of a desire to do something unique or distinct. They simply respond to their hard-wired instincts and do what they were made to do. But human beings create because of a God-given ability to be creative. And the practical result of our creative activity is something we call *technology*.

Our creative abilities have led us to craft all sorts of different technologies, from the most basic to the most advanced. We dream; we imagine new possibilities; we think of creative solutions. And in all of these activities we resemble our Creator. Ultimately, then, God himself is the author of all technology.

### The Mandate of Technology

If bearing the image of God is what gives us our *ability* to create, God's mandate—his commanded purpose for human beings—is what drives our *desire* to create. When God created man in his image, he did it with a purpose in mind. He created man to have dominion over the world that he had created, to act as his appointed representative to the creation. No sooner had God formed man than he assigned a job to him. “And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the

birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Genesis 1:28). Man was to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth with more people. And he was also to subdue the earth, to rule over it for God’s sake, to be a reflector of God’s glory. Theologians sometimes call this God-given purpose the *creation mandate*. Author Nancy Pearcey writes,

In Genesis, God gives what we might call the first job description: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.” The first phrase, “be fruitful and multiply” means to develop the social world: build families, churches, schools, cities, governments, laws. The second phrase, “subdue the earth,” means to harness the natural world: plant crops, build bridges, design computers, compose music.<sup>6</sup>

God’s basic instruction to mankind is to develop the resources of the natural world and use God-given abilities to bring glory to him. To put it in more practical terms, God is glorified in our creativity, whether that leads us to craft a painting that moves our hearts to praise or to design a plow that will better allow us to plant and harvest a crop. To do these things—building cities and schools and families, planting crops and composing music—we must rely on the practical fruit of our creative abilities: technology. Technology is *the creative activity of using tools to shape God’s creation for practical purposes*.<sup>7</sup>

God made us creative beings in his image and assigned to us a task that would require us to plumb the depths of that creativity. He knew that to fulfill our created purpose we would need to be innovative, developing new tools and means of utilizing the resources and abilities that he had given to us. In other words, obedience to God *requires* that we create technology. This tells us that there is some inherent good in the technology we create. Whenever we express our God-given creativity by coming up with something that will help us be more fruitful, that will multiply and promote human flourishing in a way that honors God, we act out of the *imago Dei*, the “image of God” in which we were created. This is true whether or not a person is a Christian or knowingly fulfilling God’s design. God’s common grace, the grace that he extends to all people, whether they love and obey him or despise and abhor him, empowers us to express our creative impulses.

#### ▪ The Fall and the Curse

Yet the relationship between human beings and the technology they create is not as simple as we would like to think. We know from the Bible that

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soon after man was formed, he disobeyed God, altering the relationship between Creator and creation. Man was alienated from God, an enemy now, no longer a friend. Though man's relationship with God was disrupted by sin, and the world changed by God's curse, the mandate and the desire to create and multiply remained.

But it would no longer be easy.

The earth was no longer a friendly place for human beings. To the contrary, the natural world was now hostile and actively opposed to man. They would now have to fight for survival, utilizing every gift and ability that God had given them. In such a world—a world cursed by sin—technology becomes increasingly important, enabling human beings to regain some control over their lives and to fulfill their God-given dreams and desires. A sinless world had no need of medicine, but a fallen world required the development of medical and health *technologies* to enable human survival and flourishing. A sinless world had no need of weapons, but a fallen world required the development of weapons *technologies* for defense against animals and other human beings. A sinless world provided for their basic needs, enabling human beings to live in relative comfort and ease, but a fallen world required the development of *technologies* that would keep them warm and cool in hostile climates and herbicides that would prevent their crops from being choked by weeds. In a fallen world, technology enables human survival. It is all that stands between us and abject misery.

### The Morality of Technology

So while it is true that we please and honor God when we create and develop new technologies, we must also understand that technology is like everything else in this sinful world: it is subject to the curse. The things we create can—and will—try to become idols in our hearts. Though they enable us to survive and thrive in a fallen world, the very aid they provide can deceive us with a false sense of comfort and security, hiding our need for God and his grace. Though the devices and tools we create are inherently amoral, at the same time we would be foolish to believe that they are morally neutral. The things we create to assist us in overcoming the consequences of the curse also seek to dominate us, drawing our hearts away from God rather than drawing us toward him in dependence and faith. That iPhone in your pocket is not an “evil” device. Yet it is prone to draw your heart away from God, to distract you and enable you to rely on your own abilities rather than trusting God.

It is difficult to try assigning any sort of inherent morality to individual technologies like the plow, the printing press, or the iPod. Even when we consider something like the technology behind nuclear fusion that created Tsar Bomba, we must recognize that the same technology that can level a city and kill hundreds of thousands can also provide power to that city—to its people, to its hospitals, enhancing the quality of life for its inhabitants. The same technology that allows doctors to operate on an unborn child, repairing its body within the womb, allows those doctors to also tear the baby from the womb. In other words, *it is not the technology itself that is good or evil; it is the human application of that technology.*

Thinking about technology in a distinctly Christian way means that we consider these three key ideas:

1. Technology is a good, God-given gift. Created in God's image, we have a mandate and a desire to create technology. Technology is the creative activity of using tools to shape God's creation for practical purposes.
2. Like everything else in creation, technology is subject to the curse. Though intended as a means of honoring God, our technologies often become idols and compound our sinful rebellion against our Creator.
3. It is the human application of technology that helps us determine if it is being used to honor God or further human sin. Discerning the intended use of a technology, examining our own use of it, and reflecting on these purposes in light of Scripture disciplines our technological discernment.

When we hold these together—when we understand our mandate, remember the consequences of the fall, and recognize the power of our own sinful desires in our use of technology—we are able to think about our technologies in a distinctly Christian way. We understand that Christians have the freedom and even the responsibility to engage in the development of technology and find creative applications for it in ways that further God's purposes. And yet we must still regard all technologies with a measure of suspicion, considering them with discernment, knowing that they easily prove to be a snare to our hearts. Christian philosopher Albert Borgmann strikes a helpful balance when he writes, "We should neither try to demolish technology nor run away from it. We can restrain it and must redeem it."<sup>8</sup> There is inherent good in creating technology. And yet there is inherent evil in abusing it or assigning it to a godlike prominence in our lives.

## The Heart and Technology

We live with the harsh but undeniable reality that we are sinful people living in a world marked by God's curse. Technology presents us with a unique spiritual challenge. Because it is meant to serve us in fulfilling our created purpose, because it makes our lives easier, longer, and more comfortable, we are prone to assign to it something of a godlike status. We easily rely on technology to give our lives meaning, and we trust technology to provide an ultimate answer to the frustration of life in a fallen world. Because of this, technology is uniquely susceptible to becoming an idol, raising itself to the place of God in our lives.

Neil Postman, the late cultural critic and media theorist, pointed out that over time certain technologies come to be considered *mythic*, not in the sense of being fictional or legendary, but in the sense that they seem to have always existed in their current form. They have become part of the natural order of life. They become assumed, and we forget that they have not always been a part of our lives. Postman writes, "I have on occasion asked my students if they know when the alphabet was invented. The question astonishes them. It is as if I asked them when clouds and trees were invented. The alphabet, they believe, was not something that was invented. It just is."<sup>9</sup> We are all prone to the same error. We easily begin to think that the technologies that surround us—the devices, gadgets, and processes we take for granted—are a part of the natural world. "Cars, planes, TV, movies, newspapers—they have achieved mythic status because they are perceived as gifts of nature, not as artifacts produced in a specific political and historical context."<sup>10</sup>

As Postman points out, the alphabet has achieved mythic status in our culture, but what about the automobile and the telephone? Or the fact that television *always* has commercials and websites *always* have banner ads? Whenever we begin to assume "that's just the way things are and that's the way they've always been" we have stumbled on something of mythic power. For teenagers today, those who have been born and raised in a digital world, the television and the Internet are now mythic. A new generation is now unable to conceive of a reality in which instant worldwide communication does not exist. Yet just a few generations ago, having a real-time conversation with someone half a world away was only possible in the realm of science fiction.

When a technology has become mythic, we no longer view it as a strange outsider to our lives. We forget that it was invented by humans, that it

was introduced into society by humans—humans who are just as limited, sinful, and shortsighted as we are. In fact, mythic technologies seem impossible to change. It seems easier to change ourselves and adapt to the new technology than to change it. Often, we assume that we *must* or *should* change to accommodate the new technology. We doubt that the technology could itself be the cause of a problem. We give technology the power to shape and change and fashion us, remaking ourselves in its image.

Consider the mobile phone. How easily we forgot that the cell phone and the pervasive communication it allows is a modern invention (or, as some would argue, a modern intruder into our lives). In the early 1990s, relatively few people owned a mobile phone, yet somehow those people survived! Today, the majority of us have a phone that we carry with us every waking hour, and we can barely imagine life without it. Already we are forgetting what life was like before the mobile phone, and we find ourselves thinking that it is a normal, natural thing to be able to contact one another at any time and in any place.

I was recently in the Dominican Republic, visiting some of the poorest homes in the poorest neighborhoods of Santo Domingo. And there, in a home without running water, a home that contained only the barest essentials, I saw two or three mobile phones. The mobile phone is a normal part of life as we know it today. And as a normal part of life it has begun to achieve mythic status in our culture. This means it falls outside of our normal social controls and our normal ways of thinking about technology. For instance, we may no longer consider it outrageous when a phone rings in the middle of a church service or when a person sends a text message from a funeral home. We are no longer outraged when someone interrupts a face-to-face conversation to accept a phone call or when a person spends an entire bus ride talking on his phone. Rather than changing the technology to fit our understanding of what is right and wrong, we change ourselves and our society's rules and mores, and we reshape ourselves in the image of the mobile phone.

What becomes mythic is only one step removed from becoming idolatrous.

#### ▪ **Idol Factories**

I won't deny that I love gadgets. I've always had a soft spot for them in my heart, though by now I probably should have learned my lesson. At least half of the time when I buy a new gadget I quickly discover that I've wasted my money on something that serves no clear purpose in my life (the first



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laptop I owned, the first PDA, the first smartphone, the first ...). I know that the Thursday newspaper brings with it the Best Buy catalog, and I always look forward to flipping through the ads to see what is new and what is on sale. As I look at that catalog, I find myself drawn to want gadgets and gizmos that just a few minutes ago I did not even know existed. I also find that many of the gadgets I purchase are adding noise and distraction to my life, and so I look for a new gadget or a new piece of software to solve the problems caused by my other devices.

This is something of a vicious circle. And I probably should have learned to resist the temptation by now. Yet when the latest and greatest device explodes into the national consciousness, when it is heralded as the wave of the future, the device to solve all of my problems, I still find my heart drawn to it. The allure of a new technology isn't simply the appeal of something shiny and bright, with buttons and lights. It's a desire that arises within my heart. And it can be incredibly powerful. It can be an idol.

Our idols like to hide from us, staying at a place in our hearts where we barely notice their existence. And yet, when we pause to consider their place in our lives, we simply cannot imagine life without them. Like the alcoholic who is surprised to find a bottle in his hand and yet who has no ability to throw that bottle away, we may find ourselves drawn and even addicted to technology, unable to imagine life without it. Not too long ago, in the dead of a frigid winter, I spoke at a youth retreat in northern Michigan. Before we left for the retreat, the pastor asked all the teens to leave behind their mobile phones, telling them that in order to properly "retreat" from the world for a time of spiritual reflection, they would need to forgo these devices. Very few of the students were able to give up their phones. Even as I spoke to them I could see several sitting in the audience with their heads down, quietly typing text messages to one another. It was clear that these students didn't really own their phones; they were "owned" by their devices, slaves to their desires and the satisfaction provided by this digital technology.

There is an unmistakable connection between technology and idolatry. John Calvin once remarked that the human heart is an idol factory. The heart is the seat of our emotions, our will, and our desire, and because of human sin and rebellion, it lies in direct opposition to God. The heart is eager to raise up new gods, putting other things and people in the place reserved for the one true God. Most of our idols are not simple objects of wood and stone, the kinds of images the ancient pagans used to bow

before, believing these objects controlled weather patterns and enabled a good harvest. Instead, our modern idols reflect our inner desires for comfort, security, significance, and ultimately salvation. Tim Keller notes rightly that “anything can be an idol, and everything has been an idol.”<sup>11</sup> Anything and everything, including that iPod in your pocket, your mobile phone, and your Wii.

So what exactly is an idol? Keller defines an idol as “anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.” It is “anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living.”<sup>12</sup> For some of us, power is an attractive idol. This was true for the first human beings, Adam and Eve, who chose to put themselves in the place of God, obeying their own impulses rather than the clear command of the Creator. And in that moment when they obeyed Satan rather than God, they made power into their personal deity. They elevated the power to know what God had wisely kept from them to a place of prominence in their hearts.

Our idols may be the craving of popularity or the lusting after illicit sex or the love of money or the power to control other people. We may even make an idol of technology in general, believing that innovation and human creativity hold the cure for humanity’s ills. Or we may turn a specific type of technology into an idol in our lives—that mobile phone we simply cannot live without or a video game that consumes countless hours of our time.

When we give our lives over to idols, we hand them the keys to our heart. We become “possessed” by them, driven to use them, please them, and find our satisfaction in them. We become tools of our tools; rather than owning our gadgets we become owned by them. We begin to structure our lives around them, and our actions and choices are motivated by our need and desire for the blessings and benefits that idol provides for us.

Idols hide from us to avoid direct confrontation. And one of the ways they hide is by convincing us that they are actually good things in our lives. What makes this such an effective strategy is that many of the things that become idols in our hearts really are good gifts from God. But somehow they have become twisted and perverted into something evil. Money is a good gift from God that can be used to provide blessing and resources for those in need. Sexual intimacy is a gift from a loving Creator, given to draw a husband to his wife and a wife to her husband and increase their covenantal love for one another. Even power is a gift from God, given to

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maintain his moral rule through his servants. The trouble with each of these is not in the things themselves, but *in the position we give to them in our lives*. Each of these becomes an idol when we take something good and make it into something ultimate.

### ■ Technology as an Idol

Because technology allows us to do what God created and called us to do, it can easily convince us that it is a good thing, something we should embrace and accept in our lives. And it certainly delivers on its promise, allowing us to live longer and cleaner and healthier and more comfortable lives. But because it is so effective in meeting our needs, it can easily begin to replace the one true God. We begin to think that it is the doctor or surgeon who heals us rather than the God who gives men wisdom to understand the inner workings of the human body. We begin to think that it is the mobile phone company that provides us with the blessing of communication rather than God's grace enabling families to stay in touch over long distances. We easily assume that technology has the power to grant us the benefits we desire, and we forget the Author of technology and the true purpose of our technologies—bringing glory to him.

Technology becomes an idol when we start to believe that humanity's hope, humanity's future, will be found in more and better technology. It becomes an idol when we place greater hope in technology than in God and when we measure human progress, not by the state of our hearts, but by new innovations in technology. Today we hear frequent claims about the amazing power of the Internet, that it will somehow bring all of humanity together in a global village where we will finally understand and love one another and stop fighting our petty wars. We often hear people promise that technology will solve all of humanity's ills, that somehow the latest innovation will right every wrong. In 2002, the National Science Foundation combined forces with the Department of Commerce to create a report that attempts to peer two decades into the future. They describe a wonderful world of technological utopia, free from the problems that plague our lives:

Understanding the mind and brain will enable the creation of a new species of intelligent machine systems that can generate economic wealth on a scale hitherto unimaginable. Within a half-century, intelligent machines might create the wealth needed to provide food, clothing, shelter, education, medical care, a clean environment, and physical and financial security for the entire world population. Intelligent machines may eventually generate the production capacity to support

universal prosperity and financial security for all human beings. Thus, the engineering of mind is much more than the pursuit of scientific curiosity. It is more even than a monumental technological challenge. It is an opportunity to eradicate poverty and usher in a golden age for all humankind.<sup>13</sup>

How exciting to know that we are a mere two decades from accomplishing this grand vision: a human golden age that will be ushered in by the creation of amazing new machines! Here we have a heavenly vision of humanity—*but one devoid of God*. Technology has become our savior.

For technology to become a god in our lives, it does not require such a comprehensive commitment. We can make an idol of technology as we flip through the weekly advertisements, looking for something, anything, that will make our lives just a little bit better and fill the void in our hearts. The fact that technology is so effective is part of what makes it such an alluring idol. It delivers what it promises. For a while, at least.

#### ▪ Technology as an Enabler of Idols

While technology can be an idol in and of itself, far more commonly it serves as an *enabler* of other idols. In this sense, technology has a secondary function, enhancing the power of an existing idol by strengthening its grip on our heart. Technology becomes a tool of our existing idols.

The man who makes sex into an idol, who is consumed by lust and who has no greater loyalty than following his sexual impulses, will use technology to enable and enhance his idolatry. His computer can certainly be used for many good and godly purposes, but instead it becomes a tool in the service of the idol that controls him, furthering his bondage, increasing the power of that idol through the viewing of pornography or the pursuit of illicit relationships. His cell phone, useful for communicating with loved ones, now becomes another conduit for a furtive glimpse at the pornography that fuels his lustful desire. His television, a possible means of education and relaxation, now becomes just another platform for perversion to enter his eyes and his soul. It is no coincidence that the explosive availability of pornography has happened alongside—and, more accurately, *through*—the digital explosion.

The woman who makes an idol of the love of money can now use her computer and her connection to the Internet to engage in online gambling, winning hundreds but losing thousands. She will use it to spend the money

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she makes and to fritter away the money she can't afford to be without. A few years ago, I met a woman, a psychologist by training, who lived in a home that was stacked from floor to ceiling with boxes, bags, clothes, furniture, books and just about anything else you could imagine. A recluse who had given herself over to the idol of *stuff*, she spent her days using her computer to order more things over the Internet. She lived in squalor, her home crawling with rodents, narrow paths carved through her mountains of possessions. She spent her days and nights sitting and sleeping on a dirty old couch, surrounded by all of her stuff, miserable—a slave to her idol. Digital technology aided and abetted her idolatrous desire for possessions by giving her an easy, new way of buying things, objects that she hoped would give her the life she wanted.

This woman was a clear picture of the truth that our hearts are idol factories, constantly seeking new ways to usurp God's place in our lives. Yes, technology can be an idol in our hearts, one of the ways we replace God. But far more commonly, digital technology is a means to further the power of other idols. Technology, a good gift of God, is a gift that gets perverted and used to satisfy our selfish and evil desires.

If technology is so easily twisted and abused, our gut response may be to avoid it. We can try to carefully avoid using any form of digital technology, fleeing the temptation and the opportunities for evil they encourage. And yet for most of us, avoidance is not an option, nor is it necessarily the most biblical, God-honoring response, as we will see. Our task, then, is not to avoid technology but to carefully evaluate it, redeem it, and ensure that we are using it with the right motives and for the right goals. This is what we will seek to do in the second half of this book. We will look at a series of societal shifts that have come about through the digital explosion, uncovering the unique way in which these shifts feed the idol factory of the heart.

Before we get there, though, we need to take a small step—from the theological to the theoretical. We want to stop and reflect on what is always true about human beings and the technologies they create.