The Enduring Significance of the Incarnation for the Church in a Digital Age

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Abstract

This essay begins with a discussion of the bearing of the Incarnation of God in Jesus on contemporary Christology and communicating the Good News, and then proceeds to outline a theological anthropology that affirms the creational goodness of human finitude and offers guidance on how far we should embrace online and other technologies that seek to overcome human limitations. The author evaluates models of Anabaptist-Mennonite ecclesiology developed by J. Denny Weaver, A. James Reimer, Thomas N. Finger, and Robert J. Suderman in order to suggest an appropriate stance toward the world and technology, and concludes with a framework for reorienting the church as the embodied presence of God in today's digital milieu.

Introduction

The general consensus among church leaders and sociologists is that the church is in decline in Canada[1] and the United States.[2] While the drop in church attendance and the decreasing investment of Christian individuals and communities in a distinctly Christ-like way of living cannot be tethered only to the Enlightenment and the subsequent rise of science and technology in a simple, direct line, there is a correlation to explore. Particularly worth investigating is the relationship between our growing reliance on

[1] A recent Pew Research Center report indicates that the percentage of Canadians who report praying daily or attending a religious service weekly has dropped to 29%. See Michael Lipka, "5 Facts About Religion in Canada" July 1, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/01/5-facts-about-religion-in-canada/, accessed June 20, 2021.

[2] Membership in a church, synagogue, or mosque in the U.S. has fallen to below 50% of the population, the first time in Gallup's eight-decade history of polling. Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx, accessed June 20, 2021.

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disincarnate, digital communications with models of ecclesiology that are rooted in the Incarnation of Jesus as both medium and message of the Good News, and with a theological anthropology that embraces human finitude and embodiment. In a digital age, a church that is both theologically faithful and effective in practice will foster and maintain a strong commitment to the Incarnation, the embodied presence of God in the world. My argument in this paper is that acknowledging the enduring significance of the Incarnation will govern the process of identifying and avoiding technologies that disembody us and cultivating practices that bring bodies together.

I will begin by considering the bearing of the event of the Incarnation of God in Jesus on our contemporary Christology and on communicating the Good News today. The Incarnation of Jesus then informs a theological anthropology that affirms the creational goodness of human finitude. If human finitude is understood as a gift of creation rather than a curse of the Fall, this impacts the extent to which humans should embrace technologies that seek to overcome human limitations. Next, I will explore four contemporary models of ecclesiology to evaluate what each proposes to be the basic stance of the church in and toward the world. The term 'world' is not synonymous with 'technology,' yet technology is an indisputable aspect of civilizations and cultures. How the church understands its role in the world influences if, when, and how the church views and adopts technologies used around it. I conclude the discussion by posing questions—and offering a framework for how the church can recalibrate and reorient itself in the technological milieu of our present age.

Help and Harm from the Same Technological Hand

Writing an essay on the church and technology[3] is admittedly easier today than ten, or even five, years ago. This is not because our situation is less complex. On the contrary, it is more complex as our daily civic and religious

[3] When referring to technology, I am following Elaine Graham's broad definition: technology is not only the machines and devices humans use to achieve ends and extend human capabilities, it is also the social, political, and economic systems by which their use is possible and desirable. Technology shapes the worlds that humans inhabit and even our basic understanding of what it means to be human and to be spiritual creatures. See Elaine Graham, "'Nietzsche Gets a Modem': Transhumanism and the Technological Sublime," *Literature and Theology* 16, no. 1 (March 2002): 65-80.

lives have become increasingly enmeshed with technology—especially digital and surveillance technologies—and the times and places where we exist and interact without the presence and mediation of these technologies are fleetingly rare. The possibility of opting out of technological adaptation, including in sacred space such as a church sanctuary, requires immense intentionality and effort.

What has changed is the burgeoning acknowledgement that adopting technologies and aligning our lives to them come at a cost. The costs are exposed by mid-20th-century thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Jacques Ellul, and Marshal McLuhan, who identified the central features of a society whose relationships are intimately mediated by technology. A subsequent wave of thinkers then critiqued the logic by which this is possible. This wave includes George Grant, Ursula Franklin, Ivan Illich, Neil Postman, and Albert Borgmann. Cultural critic Alan Jacobs suggests both waves share a "Standard Critique of Technology (SCT)," a similar way of observing and critiquing how "powerful technologies come to dominate the people they are supposed to serve, and reshape us in their image."[4] Technology frames the way humans interact with the world (Heidegger), prescribing (Franklin) and manipulating (Illich) human interaction. The pervasive use of devices coalesces into a paradigm for social organization (Borgmann), aptly described as a" technopoly" (Postman).

The social cost of technopoly is obligatory submission in a culture of compliance (Franklin). Psychologically, the cost is a loss of human agency. Theologically, the cost is a loss of fidelity expressed as subservience to technological systems and idolatrous worship of technological objects. Technologies adopted to solve one problem create new problems, some foreseeable and others unforeseeable. The tradeoffs need to be more rigorously considered than they have been in the last two centuries.

The swelling recognition that both help and harm come from the same technological hand and the waning myth of *technotopia* provide a moment of opportunity for faithful discernment. It is also an opportunity to identify and engage in practices that reorient us to human flourishing. The church has an important role to play in identifying not only the spiritual hazards of *techno-theism* and *technolatry*, but the hazards to bodies and relationships

[4] Alan Jacobs, "From Tech Critique to Ways of Living," *The New Atlantis* 63 (Winter 2021): 25.

as well. The church will communicate he Good News with integrity if it nurtures commitments and practices that demonstrate what it is for rather than emphasizing what it is against.[5]

Although practices vary widely today among groups of Anabaptists, the impulse to critically evaluate whether to adopt a new technology is rooted in Anabaptist history and theology.[6] Historically, the question is not so much about the Christian's relationship with technology *per se*, but about the choices of behavior and lifestyle that maintain a distinction between the church and the state or the church and the world. I want to invite Anabaptists of all streams to revisit the original ethos of the Radical Reformation and to reinvest in intentional discernment about adopting new technologies. Anabaptist communities need to re-embrace some of the very ideas that have faded in memory and practices precisely because the world needs them now more than ever.[7] I do not wish to emphasize what we are *against*, but to

[5] The distinction between centered sets and bounded sets informs the strategy I am suggesting, with a clear preference for centered set approaches to Christian communication of the Good News. See Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 110-36.

[6] Numerous Anabaptist traditions are associated with cautious approaches to technology. Most notable are the Amish who, at least at the level of leadership, make intentional decisions about whether to adopt a new technology based on how it will enhance or hinder relationships and communication within the family, church, and community. The Hutterites are open to using a wide variety of technologies, including very advanced ones, for production of food and communal manufacturing industries, but restrict individual ownership of devices and use of electronics for entertainment. It is a stereotype that the Amish and Hutterites are simply against technology, but it is true that apart from the leadership many individuals in these communities are not conscious of the rationale by which technologies are disallowed or restricted. Some Mennonites, including Old Order Mennonites and Conservative Mennonites, are similarly circumspect about adopting new technologies. Progressive Mennonites, however, are almost undistinguishable in practice from the general public in their adoption of technology in personal lives, churches, and workplaces.

[7] Paul Peachey wonders whether it is possible to revisit the Radical Reformation ethos of shedding the "traditional establishment-engendered institutional and liturgical modalities." Peachey laments that modernization "disengages us from the ascriptive solidarities of kinship and place" and that "contemporary modes of 'church,'…are little suited to respond to…our detached subjectivity, [which] may well be the most acute of our personal problems today." Paul Peachey, "The 'Free Church?': A time whose idea has not come" in *Anabaptism Revisited: Essays in Anabaptist/Mennonite Studies in Honor of C. J. Dyck,* ed. Walter Klaassen (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 184, 187.

reorient our daily practices of work, worship, and rest around what we are *for*. With the radical reformers we need to turn to Jesus and the Good News of God's Kingdom, paying particular attention to how a Jesus-shaped visible church cultivates practices that embrace kinship and place.

Incarnation as God's Embodied Presence

What technologies would Jesus use? This question has intrigued some church people, especially in regard to tools for evangelism and outreach. While addressing it at face value may seem anachronistic, it is not anachronistic to ask about the commensurability of the content of the Good News and how Jesus shares that content, or to reflect on what the commensurability of medium and message means for the church's witness today. Jesus communicates almost exclusively in speech and action.[8] He teaches and heals, he prays and liberates. He recites Scripture and he models reconciliation. Jesus is the Incarnation, the embodiment, of God's Word and work. He does not use these ancient body-bound forms of communicating God's all-encompassing love simply because social media or the internet had not yet been invented. The Incarnation is God's chosen way of sharing the Good News in both Jesus' time and our time. Embodiment is not accidental to God's love; it is essential to it. The Incarnation is enduring.

One hundred and twenty-five years ago Charles Sheldon famously posed the question, "What would Jesus do?"[9] In the late 1990s and early 2000s, his question was rebooted as the WWJD movement, and in more recent years has been modified for the age of social media. For instance,

[8] John 8:3-8 describes Jesus writing in the sand but not what he wrote. Willard Swartley offers one possible motivation that Jesus had for writing in the sand: to redirect the gaze of the accusers from the woman taken in adultery to Jesus himself so she could regain her dignity. See Willard M. Swartley, *John*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2013), 212.

[9] Charles M. Sheldon, *In His Steps* (Philadelphia, Chicago: John C. Winston, 1937 [original 1896]). Sheldon urged Christians in late-19th century industrial America to embrace the social justice movement and act in a manner reflecting Jesus' love for all, especially the economically and socially maligned. Criticism of the recent WWJD movement includes how Sheldon's calling Christians to repentance, discipleship, and compassion has been sloganized and commodified, neutering it of the original call to turn from false idols of modernity. See John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 19-31.

"What would Jesus tweet?" is asked seriously by Matthew Gindin in *Sojourners* magazine.[10] Entirely overlooked in the WWJD recast is the equally intriguing but prior question of whether Jesus would use Twitter at all. Many today assume that he would indeed use Twitter or any modern technological medium at his disposal to communicate the Good News, and that his followers today should do likewise.

The assumption that social media is an effective and desirable way to communicate Jesus' love relies on a hard medium-message dichotomy that separates the way a message is shared (the medium) from the message itself—and makes the vehicle for sharing the Gospel unimportant.[11] This cleaving of medium and message is inconsistent with the Gospel itself, and especially with biblical and theological accounts of the Incarnation. Stated succinctly, Jesus, the Messiah, is both medium and message. He is both the bearer of Good News and the Good News itself. The Good News is not just an idea, it is God's *presence*.[12] In the Incarnation there is complete congruency between

[10] Matthew Gindin, *Sojourners,* November 6, 2017. https://sojo.net/articles/what-would-jesus-tweet, accessed June 15, 2021. Others suggest that TikTok is a great medium to reach non-Christians, done easily in a few minutes on a lunch break. Amy Noel Green, "Could Jesus go viral on TikTok?" https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/could-jesus-go-viral-on-tiktok.html, accessed June 15, 2021.

[11] Rick Warren popularized this position in his "purpose driven" series of books. Warren coaxes readers not to "confuse methods with the message. The message must never change, but methods must change with each new generation." Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 61-62. In the heritage of communications theorist Marshal McLuhan and philosophers George Grant and Jacques Ellul, contemporary Christian thinkers such as Albert Borgmann, Brad Kallenberg, Shane Hipps, and Brian Brock have traced the emergence of technology as a medium that overshadows and distorts the message itself. Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984); Brian Brock, *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010); Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2006); Brad J. Kallenberg, *Live to Tell: Evangelism in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002).

[12] John Howard Yoder, David Fassett, Beth Hagenberg, Gayle Gerber Koontz, and Andy Alexis-Baker, *Theology of Mission: A Believers Church Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 310-21. Chris Huebner clarifies and deepens Yoder's assertions that medium and message must be commensurate and that Jesus Christ is both medium and message. See Chris K. Huebner, "Globalization, theory and dialogical vulnerability: John Howard Yoder and the possibility of a pacifist epistemology," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 76, no. 1 (2002):

medium and message, between the person of Jesus—who was born, taught, healed, was crucified, and rose again—and the Good News of salvation, liberation, and reconciliation. In short, much hinges on the Incarnation.

Communication through bodies is God's chosen best practice for Christian witness and Christian formation. The implication of the Incarnation for theological anthropology, explored in the next section, is that the goodness of humanity's embodied existence is not diminished by the Fall but is in fact re-affirmed in Jesus. The implication for ecclesiology, as I will show, is that the church becomes the physical assembly of Jesus-followers who, *as a people,* continue to embody Jesus' teaching and practices of salvation, liberation, and reconciliation. Jesus did not commission an institution to continue his ministry but rather a community of people.

Embracing Human Finitude

Human beings are fashioned by the Creator in the *imago Dei*. This truth is affirmed in Genesis 1 and 2, and vigorously reaffirmed in the Incarnation. The birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus all signal the goodness of the body and the sacredness of physical existence. Humans are valued as members of God's creation, not *in spite of* their finitude and frailty but *in* their finitude and frailty. Human finitude is a gift of the garden, not a curse of the Fall.[13] It is both a prelapsarian and postlapsarian reality. The Fall neither weakens nor diverts God's profound love for all humanity, nor does it erode God's strategy of communicating through human bodies.

Many traditional theologies hold that Adam and Eve experienced perfect knowledge and complete clarity of understanding before the Fall, unimpaired by human finitude and not "vexed by the mediation of interpretation."[14] James K. A. Smith disagrees. In *The Fall of Interpretation* he espouses a creational hermeneutic that acknowledges imperfections of language and human finitude "on the basis of an affirmation of the

49-63.

[13] By locating human finitude in the Garden of Eden we are not let off the hook for addressing the ongoing implications of the Fall. The postlapsarian realities of sin have harmful implications on human relationships with God, with each other, and to creation. Humans have the ability to distort knowledge and the propensity to strive for goals that are destructive.

[14] James K. A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 18.

goodness of creation."[15] To deny human finitude, the limits of language, and the diversity of interpretation is anti-creational.[16] Moreover, human desire is formed and fostered through daily practices. In *Desiring the Kingdom* Smith winsomely depicts the human being not primarily as *homo sapiens* (discerning, reasoning) but as *homo liturgicus* (worshiping). Humans are ultimately "liturgical animals" because they are "fundamentally desiring" creatures: "We are what we love, and our love is shaped, primed, and aimed by liturgical practices that take hold of our gut and aim our heart to certain ends."[17] With his definition, Smith also uncovers "the anatomy of desire," the process by which our desires are cultivated and our loves are aimed. Habits are formed by communal practices, which in turn focus our attention on certain objects or ends.[18] Our "ultimate love [is] that to which we ultimately pledge allegiance, that which we *worship*."[19] Importantly, the anatomy of desire reveals that non-religious practices also incite desire and direct us to an ultimate love. In the age of screens and digital advertising, our attention is an incredibly valuable commodity.[20] Cultural liturgies of the mall, the stadium, the theater, and the internet are powerfully formative.[21]

[15] Ibid., 18-19; 133-84.

[16] One common "problem" identified is the combination of a hermeneutic gap and the diversity of interpretation, which purportedly lead to hermeneutic violence, violence toward the text, and/or violence toward interpreters who disagree with each other. A "solution" is to find a space of immediacy and "pure" interpretation. See Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation*, 37, 38.

[17] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 40. Smith intentionally uses the noun *animal* for human, following Alasdair MacIntyre in *Dependent, Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 5.

[18] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 47-49, 52-63.

[19] Ibid., 51.

[20] Tim Wu exposes how human attention itself becomes an incredibly valuable commodity in the world of screens and digital media advertising. Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), 5-6, 85-181.

[21] In *Desiring the Kingdom* and the next two books in the series, *Imagining the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013) and *Awaiting the King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), Smith pays almost no attention to technology. This is particularly surprising because Smith draws heavily on Heidegger, for whom technology features prominently in the framing of human modes of engagement with the world. His critique of the modern conception of humans as autonomous reasoners primarily addresses the notion of humans as reasoners, not the equally modern focus on autonomy. It is in *Awaiting the King* where Smith develops his ecclesiology. Riffing off Oliver O'Donovan's *The Desire of the Nations*

In order to develop the intersections of Smith's theological anthropology with technology and ecclesiology, Nolan Gertz and Brad Kallenberg offer instructive perspectives. Gertz asks, "Why do we see so much of life as a problem?"[22] Why do we seek to avoid anything that requires effort, makes us uncomfortable, or entails some suffering? He responds to his own question by positing that the malady of our time is a "life-denying" technological nihilism that "leads us to prefer being exploited to being free, to being responsible, to being human."[23] The antidote to it is to embrace—rather than to deem problematic—what reminds us of human finitude. Gertz deepens the theological anthropology laid out above by identifying how the tools we use to enhance our lives may actually erode the very meaning of what it means to be alive.

For his part, Kallenberg provides a model for how individuals and the church can be the people of God, proclaiming the Gospel in a way that is consistent with both an Incarnational Christology and a creational hermeneutic. The Good News is best communicated through bodies and in daily lives of Christian communities. Conversion to the way of Jesus is not simply a decision one individual makes about what they believe; it is the ongoing formation of daily habits, practices, and identity within a collective body. "In attempting to show the gospel to nonbelievers by tracing the character of our believing communities, we are adopting a very ancient strategy," Kallenberg observes, the very "robust character of the early church that was the bottom line. . . ."[24] The church is not immune to being "bewitched by technology" and regularly confuses the efficiency of mass media methods for the Good News itself.[25]

Communicating the Good News entails three conditions, according to Kallenberg. These conditions endure through all eras: time, location,

(Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), he accentuates public theology and the church's political role to such a degree that there is little space for the collective identity of Christians in community or the notion of a peoplehood. See Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 53-90.

[22] Nolan Gertz, *Nihilism and Technology* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), viii.

[23] Ibid., 5.

[24] Kallenberg, *Live to Tell*, 53.

[25] Brad J. Kallenberg, *Following Jesus in a Technological Age* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 1-21.

and bodies.[26] A fourth condition, we might add, is Christian community, the church, which binds these three together. Communication of the Good News requires the church and the convergence of time, place, and bodies that together coalesce into the living Word. These conditions are not problems to be overcome or to be remedied by the latest technological solutions. Rather, they are means of communication that are faithful and effective throughout all the ages; that is, before Pentecost as well as after Pentecost, before modern tools for communication were invented and after these tools become obsolete.

The Church as Peoplehood

Lydia Neufeld Harder suggests that theology is like a game: it is dynamic and plays out differently each time because conditions and players' strategies differ. But games also have consistent rules and a basic structure that set general parameters.[27] If we accept her metaphor, then the church is the setting where the game is played out, where theology is interpreted and applied by communities of players. Harder identifies one of the consistent dynamics of the Anabaptist game of theology as a tension between twin hermeneutical approaches: suspicion of the world and obedience to God.[28] This tension is sometimes framed as the separation of church and state or the separation of church and world. Technology is not usually the chief concern in such framings, except that the use of tools and technological developments are inseparable from the practices of the state (especially technologies of warfare) and of the world (especially in dress, communication, transportation, agriculture, and business).

Four contemporary Anabaptist theologians provide examples that shed further light on how Anabaptists take seriously these twin hermeneutic approaches and develop strategies for relating with the world, including the world of technology. I characterize these strategies as discontinuity (J. Denny Weaver), continuity (A. James Reimer), soft dualism (Thomas N. Finger),

[26] Ibid., 28-43.

[27] Lydia Neufeld Harder, "Power and Authority in Mennonite Theological Development," in *Power, Authority, and the Anabaptist Tradition*, Benjamin W. Redekop and Calvin Redekop, eds. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001), 73-74.

[28] Ibid., 92.

and peoplehood (Robert J. Suderman). Each has strengths and weaknesses, but I will argue that the strategy that emphasizes the peoplehood of God is the most consistent with the Christology and Anabaptist theological anthropology that I have outlined above.

Weaver: Discontinuity with Tradition

Weaver's ecclesiology follows his unwavering commitment to the Gospel of peace and nonviolence. The ability of the church to communicate the Gospel through word and deed is dependent on its distinctiveness from society and the world. The church's peace witness is compromised if it is "fused with the social order," and therefore the church must develop a theology that clearly distinguishes it from that order."[29] The church distinct from the world is a visible church, conspicuously independent of the social and political structures that would ultimately compromise its ability to model the peace and nonviolence of Jesus' life. If the church is going to be a "visible outpost of God's justice on earth,"[30] Weaver asserts it must embody more than the four traditional marks (one, holy, catholic, apostolic).

Weaver's ecclesiology highlights distinctiveness and difference. The church that is faithful to Jesus will *de facto* be distinct, especially in its practices, structures, and allegiances. A strength of his approach is that it provides a simple and clear motivation for distinctive living, including the use of technologies that directly and indirectly cause harm. Drawbacks are that it undervalues commonalities among other Christian traditions, is more reactional than invitational, and does not provide explicit guidance for practices that are not overtly violent, such as the use of technologies where the violence is subtle or removed from the user.

Reimer: Continuity with Tradition

In sharp contrast to Weaver, Reimer's ecclesiology recognizes persistent connections with, and dependence on, Catholic and Protestant theological traditions. The doctrine of the church must be developed in relation to the entire canon but especially in relation to the creedal statements on the

[29] J. Denny Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in the Face of Postmodernity* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000), 28.
[30] Ibid., 134-35.

Trinity and Jesus Christ.[31] Peace theology is not an organizing principle for Reimer. Because God is not a pacifist, to overemphasize Jesus' nonviolence flirts with the heresy of Marcionism. Reimer acknowledges that Mennonites do possess distinct theological emphases (such as free will, conversion, foot washing, non-conformity, nonresistance, avoiding oathtaking, the Christian and the state) but it is actually in ecclesiology that they have the most continuity with other denominations.[32] Reimer values ecumenical dialogue with a shared theological language. However, by bracketing distinctiveness and particularity, his strategy risks weakening the church's position to critique harmful and unfaithful cultural practices—including technological practices—slipping into becoming an invisible church and fostering an inward-spiritual versus outward-effective dichotomy.

Finger: Soft Dualism

With Reimer, Finger draws on the larger scope of Christian theological tradition. His *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*[33] is one of the few examples of an Anabaptist systematic theology.[34] Here, ecclesiology

[31] A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 230. Both Weaver and Reimer situate their contemporary ecclesiology and theology in developments in the Reformation era. Weaver stresses differences between the radical reformers and Protestant reformers, while Reimer stresses similarities. For example, Reimer highlights Balthasar Hubmaier's "organic understanding of the universal church as mother and the local church as daughter, both concretely existing communities, but one a part of the whole." Weaver, conversely, emphasizes Hubmaier's attempts to establish local religious autonomy. See J. Denny Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987), 42-46; Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 549.

[32] Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 241-44. Reimer follows Howard Loewen in this observation about close ecclesiological conformity between Mennonites and other Christian denominations. See Howard Loewen, *One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1983). Reimer is drawn toward the "congregational catholicity" model of Miroslav Volf, which corrects a Free Church ecclesiology by weaving in Trinitarian commitments. Ultimately, Reimer faults Volf for being "too congregationalist" and not concrete enough in his understanding of the church universal. Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 548.

[33] Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987).

[34] James McLendon's *Systematic Theology* is another example. See James William McClendon, *Systematic Theology*, rev. ed., vols. 1-3 (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2012).

is the outworking and result of other theological considerations, such as eschatology, Christology, anthropology, and soteriology, but is not the culmination of them.[35] The church is not God's great work; creation and Christ are. In comparison with Weaver and Reimer, Finger sees the church as less normative, maintaining Scripture alone as the "propositional norm."[36]

Finger espouses a soft dualism whereby the church-world distinction is more muted than Weaver's but more pronounced than Reimer's. Finger consciously "excludes the extreme dualism of Schleitheim and the Hutterites,"[37] but he does not want to lose sight of some important distinctions between church and world.[38] He embraces the world as "a common stage on which humankind's movement toward God's purpose is acted out,"[39] but does not want to forfeit the eschatological significance of the new creation with its markedly different social, political, and economic structures. The role of the church, then, is twofold: to expose how the "nonchurch world" stymies the actualization of the new creation, and to embody a "church world" alternative.[40] The church functions as an "eschatological sacrament."[41]

This soft dualism allows us to acknowledge positive and negative characteristics of both church and world. Finger's eschatological approach is not dependent primarily on socio-political realities and the way things are (Reimer) or the way things ought to be (Weaver) but on God's work inside and outside the church. However, what is lost is clarity about the church's role in social eschatological fulfilment. Further, Finger's use of "standard theological categories" (trinity, Christology, atonement, etc.) is susceptible

[35] Finger, *Christian Theology,* vol. 2, 245.
[36] Finger, *Christian Theology,* vol. 1, 238-43.
[37] Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 321.
[38] For example, Finger notes that the New Testament and early Anabaptists use the term *kosmos* (world) in two ways. Positively, the *kosmos* is "the total of physical and social environments humans live in" and constitutes "the basic structures and processes that shape human life", "God's good creation" and "the object of God's love." Negatively, the *kosmos* is also "the dynamic collective momentum of many forces or a way of being" and "the collectivity of behaviors, values, and institutions that oppose God." Finger, *Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, 310.
[39] Finger, *Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, 315.
[40] Ibid., 309, 319-21.
[41] Ibid., 321.

to losing distinct Anabaptist understandings and being subsumed into traditional, standard understandings.[42]

Suderman: A People in the World

The approach to ecclesiology and the relationship of the church to the world by Suderman[43] diverges from the above models in three significant ways. First, he writes as a practical theologian and church leader, reflexive in theory and practice. Second, his theologizing is born out of global experience and testing, not just the experience of the European and North American church. Third, Suderman emphasizes the *peoplehood* of the church. It is to this third distinction that I will pay special attention.

The central question for Suderman is, What is the vocation of the church? In *Re-Imagining the Church* he asks it this way: "Do we really believe that the paradigm-busting, all-encompassing, alternative-generating, Incarnation, reconciling/saving vocation of people (the church) is the foundational strategy of God for the transformation of the world . . . ?"[44] This is a rhetorical question theologically, but a live and provocative question psychologically and formationally. If the church is first and foremost a peoplehood—rather than an institution—this "specially vocationed peoplehood" is commissioned to live "outside the norm," that is, to be an *ek-klesia,* in "communities that serve as signs that the kingdom of God as taught and lived by Jesus of Nazareth is among us."[45] The agenda of the *ekklesia* derives directly from the agenda of God's kingdom; thus "its interests are . . . broadly inclusive of all things that impact the welfare of society as well as creation."[46] The church, an alternative community, supplants the values

[42] J. Denny Weaver, "Parsing Anabaptist Theology: A Review Essay of Thomas N. Finger's A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology," *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 34:2 (2005): 241-63.

[43] Robert J. Suderman and Ray Dirks, *The Baby and the Bathwater: Aspiration and Reality in the Life of the Church* (Victoria, BC: Tellwell Talent, 2021).

[44] Robert J. Suderman, *Re-Imagining the Church: Implications of Being a People in the World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 24.

[45] Ibid., 10. Suderman observes with Paul Minear that the New Testament uses 96 "word pictures" to describe what it means to be a "kingdom community," many of which are descriptions that originate with Jesus. *Ekklesia* is just one of these 96, but it has become "a shorthand way of talking about all of them." Suderman, *Re-Imagining the Church*, 9-10, 12-17.

[46] Ibid., 11.

of society with the priorities of the Kingdom of God. This peoplehood is "radical, counter-cultural, and prophetic,"[47] "cultivat[ing] the good news so that it is not forgotten, but is accessible and can be lived and experienced over and over again."[48]

Suderman accepts the counter-cultural calling of the church without overemphasizing its *against-ness.* He acknowledges continuity with earlier traditions but locates the arc of continuity in the Bible and biblical depictions of the people of God rather than in the history and traditions of institutions. The church is for the kingdom of God and "the new shape of things revealed in the coming, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ,"[49] which suffices to set the agenda and priority of the people of God. Discernment of God's logic and how to enact God's politics[50] is central to the church's vocation. This people-centered and context-sensitive approach allows for some diversity of practice based on cultural and geographic differences. A limiting factor is that it may not be the best at navigating or adjudicating between particular practices of groups when these practices conflict. It is easy to say that our unity is in Christ, but when particular groups discern the will of God in Christ differently, they still need to navigate between those practices. Nevertheless, the strength of Suderman's strategy is that it provides a tangible way to understand the continuity between the historic embodiment of God in Jesus and the enduring role of the church as the physical sign of and witness to the Kingdom of God.

Practices of (Re)Orientation and Resilience

Suderman's peoplehood approach is especially relevant for my purposes here. First, it warrants a robust analysis of the effects and implications of the adoption of technologies on individuals and communities. Second, it helps us resist reducing individuals to consumers or producers in a technological culture or objects of evangelism. Explicit in the ecclesiology of peoplehood is the conviction that the Good News is for humanity, and thus how the Good News is presented must not harm humanity in the process of being presented.

[47] Ibid., 10.
[48] Ibid., 11.
[49] Ibid., 81.
[50] Ibid., 88.

This ecclesiology is not institutionally self-serving and self-preserving. Rather, it serves its Lord and master Jesus by serving all. It communicates through bodies and humbly acknowledges the limits of human existence to time and place.

In the preceding sections I presented a Christological basis for continuing to prioritize embodied communication of the Good News, a theological anthropology that rejects the notion that human finitude is a problem to be overcome, and an ecclesiology that recognizes that neither as individuals nor as institutions but as a people that we are most faithful. In this final section I explore ways to resist technology-inspired rebellion to these theological commitments.

A crucial aspect of an Anabaptist understanding of embodiment—both the embodiment of God in Jesus and our acceptance of the limits of bodies as humans—is that we are not only embodied to ourselves but also to others. Through the body and its senses of sight, sound, touch, and smell, we perceive the world around us. Yet our existence is not solipsistic. Through these same bodies we create shared understandings of our environments. A community is not simply an accidental collection of human objects out there in the world to be perceived; it is a physical gathering of individuals who create shared, collective experiences in the world. Thus, the whole is greater than the individual parts that comprise it. A peoplehood is greater than the individual persons who compose it.

If a peoplehood is indeed more than the sum of individual persons comprising it, it is imperative that we consider what technology gives the peoplehood and what it takes away. Both discernment and practice need to occur within the context of community. Collective discernment and collective practice are already counter-cultural in societies that value autonomy and individual freedom. But it is precisely collective discernment and shared practices that constitute the church's basic existence and mark its flourishing. In "From Tech Critique to Ways of Living," Alan Jacobs asks, "If Neil Postman was right, so what?" Since the Standard Critique of Technology (SCT) that Jacobs outlines is broadly assumed in this present essay, I contend that we must respond to Jacobs's question and to his observation that "for all its cogency, the SCT is utterly powerless to slow

our technosocial momentum, much less alter its direction."[51] The presumed problem is that SCT is intellectually compelling but behaviorally impotent. Jacobs may be right that it has failed to significantly change the practices of persons. However, I think it is because those who have sought to name and resist technopoly have done so primarily as individuals and in an *ad hoc* manner.

Jacobs's response to the impotence of SCT is to adopt *cosmotechnics*, a "technological Daoism" that "provides a comprehensive and positive account of the world and one's place in it that makes a different approach to technology more plausible and compelling." While SCT only gestures in the direction of human flourishing, says Jacobs, cosmotechnics is an explicit and assessible way for everyday life.[52] An example of technological Daoism is the "Californian ideology," a unique "combination of capitalist drive and countercultural social preference."[53] But if the Californian ideology is a satisfactory example, it is unfortunately still a very individualistic and scatter-shot approach.

A viable alternative to technological Daoism that takes communal bodies into account is the pedagogical theology of Kosuke Koyama. In *Water Buffalo Theology* and *Three Mile an Hour God*,[54] Koyama observes that God teaches, and humans learn, at the scale of what is perceivable by the human senses and at the speed of walking—the realm and pace of human bodies tending to community. God spent forty years, while the Israelites walked the desert together, teaching their community one lesson: "'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matt. 4:4, NRSV).[55] Jesus did much of his teaching – and the disciples did much of their learning while walking together. "God goes slowly in the educational process" of humans, Koyama observes, asserting that "'forty years in the wilderness' points to [God's] basic educational philosophy." God's way,

[51] Jacobs, "From Tech Critique to Ways of Living," 26.
[52] Ibid., 33-37. Similarly, Jacobs suggests that the Daoist way is concordant with, even if latent in, Christianity. Franciscan spirituality is the vein of Christianity that most closely approaches the wisdom of Daoism. Jacobs, "From Tech Critique to Ways of Living," 41.
[53] Ibid., 42.
[54] Kosuke Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God: Biblical Reflections* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980); *Water Buffalo Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1974).
[55] Ibid., 3-5.

affirmed in the life and death of Jesus, is a "slow and costly" way for God to remind the people of God's covenant relationship with humanity.[56] Slow, costly, communal, and effective is the patient velocity of love.

Jay Y. Kim similarly suggests that "slow and steady" is the way to go. In *Analog Church*[57] he asserts that worship, community, and reading Scripture must occur with others who are physically present in actual places and interacting with concrete things. In the contemporary hybrid world of digital and analog interactions, Kim contends that experiencing the transcendent God, experiencing the richness of diversity in Christian community, and reading the Bible transformationally require doing so in embodied ways. Christian flourishing and Christian witness depend on the church's ability to "help people lift their collective gaze away from the abyss of their digital devices" and step out in faith onto the water with Jesus.[58]

But re-scaling to miles and hours alone is not enough. Even at this scale we can still give our attention to causes that are inconsistent with the Good News. Thus, reorientation is also crucial. Despite Jacobs's complaint that the SCT has no real impact on human behavior, Postman and Borgmann provide helpful, practical steps towards reorienting human behavior, especially when widely employed by communities and not just by individuals in isolated cases.

Postman's six questions concerning technology can inspire thoughtfulness and intentionality precisely because they empower individuals and communities to pause and consider the consequences of adopting a technology *before* adopting it. In the shadow of Michel Foucault and Jacques Ellul, Postman's questions remind us that although we are irreversibly part of a social and technological systems, we have agency to resist manipulation. Our gaze and our desires are not simply at the whimsy of those with power and influence. By seriously considering the six questions we are empowered to make competent decisions and take consequential actions.

1. What is the problem to which this technology is the solution?

[56] Ibid., 6-7.
[57] Jay Y. Kim, *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places, and Things in a Digital Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020).
[58] Ibid., 29.

2. Whose problem is it?
3. Which people and what institutions might be most seriously harmed by a technological solution?
4. What new problems might be created because we have solved this problem?
5. What sort of people and institutions might acquire special economic and political power because of technological change?
6. What changes in language are being enforced by new technologies, and what is being gained and lost by such changes?[59]

Particularly valuable are questions about consequences of our technological choices for ourselves and for persons and communities not in our immediate realm of time and place.

Borgmann provides further guidance for reorienting our lives. Changing the direction of our gaze and desires by definition entails changing them *from* something. In *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, he encourages us to make three turns to reorient our gaze and priorities: from "Baconian realism" to honesty, integrity, and wholeness; from "Cartesian universalism" to particularity and patience; and from "Lockean individualism" to peoplehood and community.[60] He is particularly hopeful about the reorienting power of Christian practices and rituals such as communion and fellowship meals, weekly worship and devotion to Jesus Christ, retreat to the wilderness, and practicing patience in relationships and community life.[61]

The COVID-19 global pandemic disrupted and radically altered work, education, social relationships, and religious life from late in 2019 and into 2022. During this long period when social distancing and isolation have been encouraged by health and government officials in most countries,

[59] Neil Postman, *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century* (Vintage Books, 2000), 42-53.
[60] Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992), 20-47, 110-47. The modern orientations Borgmann encourages us to turn from were themselves intentionally developed and woven into our political, social, economic, and religious lives over centuries.
[61] Ibid., 116-30.

digital communications and social media have become the primary means for many by which to maintain a modicum of normality in work, relationships, and worship. This recent deep dive into the world of online digital communications provides an opportunity to evaluate online worship and fellowship in light of the Incarnational Christology, the theological anthropology that embraces human finitude, and the ecclesiology of peoplehood that I have set forth here. In order to do this, let me employ some of Postman's questions and Borgmann's framework of focal realism, patient vigor, and communal engagement. The digital technologies employed to address the challenges of social distancing instigated by the pandemic provide some immediate solutions, but they also introduce and amplify potentially harmful long-term and concealed consequences.

During the pandemic Zoom has helped many of us see the faces and hear the voices of persons with whom we should not have otherwise been physically close. Thus, in response to Postman's first question—What is the problem to which this technology is the solution?—it is presumably the problem of being required to social distance and not worship in enclosed spaces. Zoom is the alleged technological solution: we can worship from the safety of our own homes. While worshiping over screens appears to have provided a solution, other possible solutions were not deemed as desirable or viable and were not fully explored, such as worshiping as family units or in small groups outdoors. Another way of answering this question is from the perspective of theological anthropology. The problem is then human finitude, the fact that humans are fettered in time, place, and bodies. Online worship "overcomes" these natural human limitations by virtual surrogate of faces and voices on screens. However, although online worship temporarily assuages the desire to be together, this putative overcoming of finitude perpetuates Baconian realism by virtually alleviating bodily interaction and by severing the human person into independent components of body, mind, and soul.

Postman's third question, Which people and what institutions might be most seriously harmed by a technological solution?, requires that we take seriously the impact of our consumption of digital media on those who are not in our daily realm of awareness and are vulnerable to harm stemming from changing patterns of work, education, and socializing. This question can

also be asked with Christology in mind, considering whether the medium of Zoom and digital communication is consistent with gospel message. Does the use of Zoom assume that access to the internet is universal, or that everyone has the cognitive ability to navigate graphical user interfaces? Moreover, gauging the commensurability of medium and message must consider the environmental cost of extracting metals and minerals necessary to manufacture digital devices and the health and safety conditions of those who work in mining and manufacturing. It must also include how electronic waste is processed, and the well-being of those in desperately poor neighborhoods in Africa and Asia where metals are reclaimed from discarded electronics. The question of what harm may be associated with the adoption of technologies is fundamentally pertinent when positing a Christology in which Jesus' earthly life signals that the bodily well-being and dignity of all people is central to the Good News.

While the third question prompts us to be mindful of the impact of the adoption of digital technology across social and geographic places, the fourth question—What new problems might be created because we have solved this problem?—prompts us to consider the impact across time and deleterious longer-term implications. Many contemporary human-induced environmental crises began as technological solutions to problems identified by previous ages and generations. What problems are we creating for the future by moving work, education, and worship online? The long-term consequences of sourcing, producing, and disposing of electronics are enormous. As well, there are crucial social and mental health considerations. Despite the claims that social media and web-based communications enhance "community" and "connection," there is a growing recognition that the opposite occurs over time and that there is a correlation between the amount of time spent on social media and feelings of isolation, dissatisfaction with one's life, and mental health problems.[62] The increase in digitally-mediated worship and communication during the pandemic further acclimatizes us to disembodiment, making synchronous time, common place, and bodies

[62] See Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood (and What This Means for the Rest of Us)* (New York, NY: Atria Books, 2017); Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

optional or unessential. None of these concerns originate with the pandemic or online worship, but the pandemic has hastened trends already in motion and intensified our awareness of change.

Who acquires increased economic and political power from technological change? Postman's fifth question has been widely covered in the media. Owners and stockholders of digital communications companies such as Zoom Video Communications, e-commerce and digital streaming companies such as Amazon, computer companies such as Apple, and social media companies such as Meta (Facebook) and Twitter have all benefited from massive rises in the worth of these companies during the pandemic as profits soar. But the question is vitally relevant if we adopt an ecclesiology of peoplehood. If profits are more important than people, and if the already affluent gain increased power relative to the whole, this maintains Lockean individualism, exacerbates social division, and weakens community. All of these undermine Christian peoplehood, flourishing, and witness.

Conclusion

We must not lose sight of Alan Jacobs's warning that the critique of technology alone is not sufficient to alter techno-social momentum and direction. Jacobs insightfully observes that a clear and compelling analysis of a situation may hint at a simple solution that may be overwhelmingly difficult to actually implement. At the same time, we should note that Jacobs underestimates the transformative potential of the practices of a Christian community that foster patience and contentment in the gift of human limit and finitude, practices that include both critical questioning and counter-cultural living. Practices of (re)orientation and resilience do not eradicate our temptation as *homo liturgicus* to avert our gaze from Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God. We will still be drawn to the easy solutions of techno-messiahs. However, practices of orientation and resilience do continuously invite our gaze and nudge the desires of the people of God toward the patient, persistent way of Jesus.

This way includes the way of the cross, which indeed has its own weightiness but is hardly futile. The cross is a sign that God's Incarnational strategy works, not that it has failed. The cross proclaims that God's strategy of Incarnation is simultaneously hard but life-affirming, and acknowledges

that human finitude is not a curse of the Fall but a gift of the garden. God's embodied presence, initiated in the garden, affirmed and fully manifest in Jesus, extends to the church as the peoplehood of God. I hope that this essay will help us all to be boldly confident in God's enduring and effective strategy of Incarnation, as manifested in Jeus and continued in the church.*

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