

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you

Why Technology Cannot Save Us

by Bob DeWaay

“And they said, ‘Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name; lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.’” (Genesis 11:4 concerning the tower of Babel)

“Gather yourselves and come; Draw near together, you fugitives of the nations; they have no knowledge, who carry about their wooden idol, and pray to a god who cannot save. Turn to Me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.” (Isaiah 45:20,22)

The contrast between technological progress and social regress is an enigma. Technology has made much of life easier and accomplishments in health, transportation, communication, and information storage and retrieval possible. Yet, simultaneously, our social problems have escalated, particularly in America.

I intend to show that the problem that caused God to judge Babel is the very problem that is at work in the world today — seeking to use knowledge and technique (“how to”) to solve all problems, including spiritual ones. The one thing the world refuses to do is to submit relationally to the Creator. The one problem mankind cannot solve is that of spiritual death — alienation from God.

Progress and Regress Co-exist

Paradoxically, our world goes forward and backward simultaneously. No wonder many cling to the one thing that seems to “work” — modern technology. Technological information jams the

information superhighway. Despite evidence to the contrary, many assume that technology will provide answers if answers exist.

But parallel to technology’s advance, is a horrible increase in crime. For example, last week our local paper published an article about drug dealers carrying loaded weapons as they preyed on their victims in broad daylight. Their location caught my attention — just less than two blocks from where my wife and I lived in 1974 when our first child was born. That year my wife walked ten blocks to and from doctors appointments and I walked similar distances to and from work, often returning after midnight — and it was safe to do so. The social degeneration since is visible and sorrowful.

Criminals have gone high tech. Literacy is down and poverty is up while the moral behavior of many citizens reaches new lows every year. The information economy spreads moral perversion as rapidly as it distributes positive educational material. A visible regress of civility has had its effect. Suicide, hopelessness, and widespread cynicism are a few of its expressions.

Young people tell me they doubt there are any answers. They feel betrayed by those in authority. More of them grew up in broken homes than have made it through high-school living with both biological parents. Many say that they have no purpose in life and doubt that a meaningful purpose even exists. Life is deemed cruelly absurd. Many long for death and even dress as if they have already experienced it, daily wearing a ghoulish look that mimics death. They clearly need the good news of eternal life in Christ Jesus.

What is Technology?

One dictionary definition for technology is “applied science.” The word science means “knowledge.” Technology involves taking knowledge

about the created universe and using techniques to put it to work. A technique involves an art or craft, the learned abilities that can be taught and developed to accomplish various tasks. Obviously, for people to accomplish the true potential of their knowledge and abilities, they need to work together and be able to share information. By confusing the languages of the Babylonian tower builders God stopped their enterprise (**Genesis 11:6-8**). The builders of the tower of Babel were sure that they could touch the heavens and unlock the secrets of the “gods” if they were able to work together with a common purpose. Even though God thwarted their plans, the rebellious human race has never given up this hope.

Since God’s intervention in **Genesis 11**, the human race has proceeded on a road to reverse the situation God created. The inability to share information stops people from building on what others have learned. Wars and social upheaval have historically ended promising societies such as those of the ancient Greeks and Romans. However, developments starting with the printing press have made possible unprecedented opportunities to learn from the discoveries of others.

It used to take a life time, for example, for a son to learn the craft of his father and then hopefully teach another generation. But the process was often interrupted by plagues and wars. When whole families and cultures were wiped out, the technology they had slowly developed was often lost with them. The ability to store and retrieve information on a far more massive scale during the last several hundred years has created what we call modern progress. The accomplishments of one generation are routinely built upon by the next.

For example, once airplanes were invented, the ability to create flying machines has never been lost, but built upon. Air travel gets more sophisticated and efficient as time goes on. It was not always like this. The civil engineering of the ancient Romans was not duplicated for well over a thousand years. Things got much worse technologically

during the Dark Ages. Today, information and the techniques to put it to use are rarely lost. The keys to progress are communicable facts and processes that can be improved and implemented by ensuing generations.

Computers and Video Tape

During my lifetime the ability to store and retrieve information has exploded. Most citizens are only seconds away from any imaginable human knowledge. The Internet is a prime example and most school children are becoming adept at navigating it. Information that was the domain of a few specialists can now benefit anyone interested.

For example, from ages 9 to 17 I played on baseball teams. In those days, local volunteer coaches merely got us together and facilitated baseball. I played shortstop for years and not once did anyone teach me the proper techniques for the position — the coaches didn't know them. Only the higher level college and professional teams had coaches with the information and ability to teach baseball at its best. The difference today is profound. For the last seven years I have coached youth baseball and have learned many times more than I could ever have hoped to know when I was playing. The finest coaches have books, videos, training camps, etc. available to anyone. The various nuances of baseball are broken down into incredible detail and the best training techniques help young players become the best they can be. Its not fair! — we had to watch the major leaguers on TV and try (usually unsuccessfully) to figure out what they were doing that worked.

Multiply this into thousands of arenas of human activity and we start to see the impact of human communication. We are harnessing the materials of the created universe and putting them to amazing usage. Many problems have been solved and many activities made more pleasant — like writing done on a word processor rather than a typewriter. Technology works. I think that is why the unregenerate have largely staked their hopes on it.

Computers and videos make the world's store of knowledge and technique (the "stuff" of technology) available to almost everyone. If "how to" is our need, it can soon be met. If knowledge can solve our problems, we probably have nothing to worry about. There is little reason for the motivated person to lack knowledge of anything.

What is the Problem?

Why are things getting worse when we have all this knowledge and power? The Bible teaches that mankind's problem is sin (**Romans 3:23**). It teaches that since Adam and Eve's first act of rebellion against God, sin is a universal human problem. Sin causes separation from God which is spiritual death. If not dealt with, it will ultimately cause eternal death.

Sin is not a lack of knowledge nor a lack of proper technique. "*Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness*" (**1John 3:4**). By using "lawlessness" to define sin, John shows that sin is a condition of being autonomous in respect to God and His law.¹ Sin is a **relational** issue. Are we properly related to God through bowing our knees to Jesus the Messiah or are we independent from God, doing things our own way? How we are related to God is the most critical issue. Understanding this will help us see why technology cannot save mankind.

In building the tower of Babel, people who were not concerned about God's will in the matter were making progress through human unity and ability to communicate. There were eventually other such towers built in Babylon. They were called "ziggurats" and used by the Babylonians to make contact with the "gods." The tower builders wanted to make a name for themselves, showing the motivation of pride and lack of dependence on God. God destroyed their technology by confusing their languages. Ironically, one of the by-products of modern technology is the possibility of one day using computer technology to cross the world's language barriers nearly instantly and undoing what God did at Babel.

If the world succeeds in effectively

having one usable language and manages to agree on a single purpose, will it become true that ". . . now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them" (**Genesis 11:6b**)? That is the hope of those who tout "unlimited human potential." This hope is a false hope in that humans are finite, created beings and are by nature "limited." God can stop any human enterprise at any time as He did at Babel. This will not stop the world from trying. The "Harlot Babylon" of the book of Revelation shows the future situation when the next and final attempt at one, unified world in rebellion to God is brought forth. It is easy to see that forces now at work are pushing things in that direction.

Technology and Spirituality

The Babylonian dream was to use their technology to access the powers of the spirit world and enter the domain of the "gods." In Daniel chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar the king was troubled by his dreams (**Daniel 2:1**) and sought answers from the spiritual technicians of Babylon: "*Then the king gave orders to call in the magicians, the conjurers, the sorcerers and the Chaldeans, to tell the king his dreams. So they came in and stood before the king*" (**Daniel 2:2**). These individuals were trained in the "craft" of divination. They were supposed to have the best training and abilities to access the secrets of the unseen, spiritual realm. They hoped to be able to influence the "gods" and predict the future using astrology. Their hope was that the mysterious realm of the gods that they thought held the key to human destiny could be manipulated to one's benefit given the proper knowledge and technique (i.e. spiritual technology).

Nebuchadnezzar made things very difficult for them by demanding that they tell him both the dream and the interpretation. They had no chance to fake it: "*The king answered and said to the Chaldeans, 'The command from me is firm: if you do not make known to me the dream and its interpretation, you will be torn limb from limb, and your houses will be made a rubbish heap*" (**Daniel 2:5**).

The response of the Chaldean wise men reveals the major flaw in their spirituality: *“The Chaldeans answered the king and said, ‘There is not a man on earth who could declare the matter for the king, inasmuch as no great king or ruler has ever asked anything like this of any magician, conjurer or Chaldean. Moreover, the thing which the king demands is difficult, and there is no one else who could declare it to the king except gods, whose dwelling place is not with mortal flesh’”* (Daniel 2:10,11). Their approach was based on dimly understood secret knowledge (the meaning of “occult” is hidden or secret knowledge) and techniques to manipulate forces and powers they had no real control over. Their “gods” were not disposed to relate to humans and were deemed to mostly not have people’s best interests in mind. They were the high priests of their pagan religion and had to admit they had no one to turn to.

Technology is as limited as the knowledge it is based upon. The magicians and conjurers had no relationship with the “gods,” nor could they. They did not even realize that these gods were non-existent! Those who suppose that they can access the spirit world and manipulate it to their own benefit are only fooling themselves. They better hope they never get into a situation like these ancient experts of “the craft,” in which their lives depend on their own spiritual technology. They will be hopelessly lost.

The story in **Daniel 2** turns to Daniel and his associates who were going to be killed along with the pagan wise men (Daniel 2:13). The narrative reveals an essential difference between Daniel’s understanding of spirituality and that of the pagans: *“Then Daniel went to his house and informed his friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, about the matter, in order that they might request compassion from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his friends might not be destroyed with the rest of the wise*

men of Babylon. Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a night vision. Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven” (Daniel 2:17-19). The pagans based their hope on secret knowledge and techniques, Daniel based his hope on his relationship with Almighty God! The Babylonian wise men knew immediately that in this situation, they had no hope. Daniel asked for compassion from the true God, something the “gods” were notoriously lacking.

It turns out that the vision concerned four world empires, having prophetic significance for generations to come. Only God can accurately reveal the future, because all knowledge and power dwell with Him. Daniel knew that and exclaimed, *“Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever, For wisdom and power belong to Him. And it is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and estab-*

*l i s h e s
kings; He gives wisdom to wise men, And knowledge to men of u n d e r -*

standing” (Daniel 2:20,21). God sovereignly rules over history, bringing all things to pass according to His eternal purpose. David said, *“For the kingdom is the Lord’s, and He rules over the nations”* (Psalm 22:28). Knowing this allowed Daniel to be used powerfully in his day even though he was a captive in a kingdom that stood for everything that is ungodly.

The message for us is that as we face the perils of the last days before Christ returns, the key to being the witnesses of God’s truth is our dependent relationship with Him, not our knowledge and abilities. We are living in a society that, as it becomes more pagan, it is becoming more like the one in which Daniel lived. Technology offers hope of manipulating our surroundings to our own benefit. It is also being applied to the spiritual world as it was in Daniel’s day. As hope fades that technology applied to the material realm can solve all human problems, many are

turning to mystical religion. What we need to see is that the man-centeredness of the whole venture has not changed. It still involves human beings trying to use knowledge, power and their own ingenuity to save themselves without submitting to God.

Autonomous Knowledge and Despair

The conjurers of Babylon knew they were doomed, because the knowledge they needed was only in the realm of “gods” who did not dwell with men. What they did not know is that dependency on knowledge, even of the type which is beyond the normal realm of human inquiry, will always fail us. We are finite and doomed to death. The greatest human problems have never yielded to human genius.

I remember a couple of years ago hearing a news release by a scientist who hoped his research would unlock the key to aging. In a video clip on the evening news the scientist exclaimed, “we hope to extend the healthy and vigorous lifespan to one hundred and fifty years, and then we will no longer need religion.” I am amazed at what straws fallen man will grasp in order to avoid depending on God. Whatever process the man thought would make us live to 150 certainly would not help a person hit by a train! Also, what good is a longer life when compared with eternity, either in heaven or hell? Eighty more years before heading to eternal damnation does not solve the problem!

It will not work. Knowledge divorced from the Creator is autonomous knowledge. Separated from God, the most brilliant minds are sadly lacking. We are finite and often confused. The latest work in the arena of the philosophy of science has undermined the various approaches to science over the last centuries that once seemed promising. Relativism and a social construct of reality now get the most play. That is to say that modern man is starting to doubt whether valid knowledge even of the physical universe is within our grasp. We merely agree to a certain “paradigm” that seems to work for now, knowing it will be overturned and seriously doubting how well it describes

things as they really are.

I think that Francis Schaeffer has been proven right in his assertion that rejecting the possibility of revealed truth from God will always push us over the “line of despair.”² This is no more than the ancient Chaldean magicians realized — if the “gods” do not dwell with men there is no hope for an answer. There is a huge difference between autonomous knowledge and the knowledge of God. This is not to say that our perceptions of the world are not valid, or that we cannot

know facts about the created universe. On the contrary, a Biblical view of man and nature serves as a basis for a rational understanding of the world. It is the rejection of the possibility of knowing God and

the embracing of rebellious human autonomy that causes despair.

Our deepest problems lie beyond the realm of purely human inquiry. We need help from God who knows all things. Sadly, modern man has ruled Him out of the picture (or so they think). Even many who claim to believe the Bible often miss the mark on this point. For example, many Christian writers and speakers have quoted **Hosea 4:6** out of context. They quote, “*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. . .*” to introduce the notion that lack of information is the root problem. Of course, whatever the speaker or writer in question has to peddle is the solution to the problem. This approach gains an audience in America because the culture is geared to the hope for a technological solution. If we can just figure out how to do it, we will solve our own problems. Even if the information touted as the latest solution to whatever problem is of a spiritual nature (like the popular “spiritual warfare” material) it will not work if the real problem is the one addressed by Hosea.

Knowing God or Knowing “How To”?

Hosea was clear about the knowledge the people were lacking: “*Listen to*

the word of the Lord, O sons of Israel, For the Lord has a case against the inhabitants of the land, Because there is no faithfulness or kindness Or knowledge of God in the land” (**Hosea 4:1**). They did not know God and consequently were lacking the spiritual virtues that go with knowing God. They were not lacking facts, they were lacking a relationship. If we lack a believing, trusting, dependent relationship with God based on His grace no amount of knowledge, whether about the spiritual or material

aspects of the creation, will save us. We are being destroyed because so many have no relationship with God. Yet the presses churn out “how to” books for both the Christian and secular market as if the

demand could never be satisfied.

What this shows is the power that the lust for autonomy has over the human race. To know God one must submit to Him and learn of Him on His terms. People have forgotten God’s word — the usually unquoted part of **Hosea 4:6** contains the phrase, “*you have forgotten the law of your God.*” Many misuses of **Hosea 4:6** have been like the assertion that God has placed certain “spiritual laws” in the universe that govern the outcome of all things. If we can learn the secrets of these laws we can use them to solve our own problems. Some have suggested that Jesus knew these laws and that is how He did miracles and if we learn them we can be just like Jesus. Whether they know it our not, those who teach this way have bought into the lie that technology can save us.

The scientific approach that previously was mostly materialistic and the more current religious approach that includes secret, spiritual information in the mix are both based on the same faulty premise. That is that man can solve his own problems without humble, dependent submission to the Creator. This remains true no matter how convoluted things become. Francis Schaeffer asserted, “Man will keep his rationalism

and his rebellion, his insistence on total autonomy or partially autonomous areas, even if it means he must give up his rationality.”³ How prophetic that statement from 1968 has become.

The two approaches today are well illustrated by **Daniel 2**. Some like the conjurers of Babylon try every bit of wisdom and art known to man but do not believe that the Almighty Creator, the God of the Bible, speaks to man nor can dwell with men. Others like Daniel believe in God and His word and submit their lives to Him. They find answers to the most crucial questions and issues of life because of their relationship to God, not because they have a better technology.

Jesus the Messiah dwelt among us and spoke finally and authoritatively (**Hebrews 1:1,2**) giving hope where paganism offered none. Through Him we can come to the knowledge of God. This knowledge can serve as a unifying basis for understanding all other knowledge. Without the knowledge of God we shall be, “*Always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth*” (**2Timothy 3:7**). Technology divorced from God cannot save us, it can only make the road toward judgment seem less bumpy!

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End Notes

1. See “Lawlessness, Legalism and Sanctification,” Critical Issues Commentary, Issue #28 (May/June 1995) where I examine the issue of lawlessness more comprehensively.

2. See Francis A. Schaeffer, Escape from Reason, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1968) 42-45.

3. *ibid.* 42

