

FROM THE

GARDEN

TO THE

CITY

THE REDEEMING AND CORRUPTING
POWER OF TECHNOLOGY

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Foreword by Dr. T. David Gordon

 **Kregel**
Publications

CONTENTS

Foreword by T. David Gordon | 9

Acknowledgments | 11

Introduction | 13

1. Perspective | 19
2. Imagination | 32
3. **Reflection** | 43
4. Definition | 55
5. **Rebellion** | 69
6. Approach | 81
7. **Redemption** | 98
8. Mediums | 115
9. **Restoration** | 132
10. Technicism | 144

11. Virtualization		159
<i>Recommendations</i>		175
<i>Appendix: Technology Tetrad</i>		180
<i>Notes</i>		183
<i>Index</i>		190

INTRODUCTION

One day, a guest speaker brought an interesting contraption to our church. As our pastor introduced him, he pulled an old reel-to-reel movie projector out of its case and began to set it up. Some of the audience seemed to wonder why he'd bring something so technologically backward, but I was mesmerized as he attached the reels and weaved the celluloid film through a half dozen channels and pulleys. After working with it for some time, he finally connected the film to the second reel, plugged it in, and flipped the switch, but then . . . click, click, click, click . . .

Nothing happened. Something was obviously wrong.

As the clicking sound continued, the room started to grow a little tense. People shifted awkwardly in their seats, letting our guest know he was wasting their time.

But not me. I wasn't bored at all, because I could see exactly what had gone wrong.

So I got up from my chair and marched straight down the aisle of the church, past the guest speaker, and up to the ancient, malfunctioning

device. Without saying a word, I began to dismantle what he had done and started to carefully rethread the film back through the correct channels.

The audience watched with some surprise, apparently aware that I had never used this device before. Some shook their heads in disbelief, while others shot knowing grins at each other. I continued to work, slowly threading the film, then reattaching it to the second reel. I checked the plug, flipped a few switches, and then pressed the power button . . . whiiiiirrr . . . it worked!

Now, this story probably seems fairly ordinary. Tech people like me are always fixing things in churches. However, you might be interested to know that I have absolutely no memory of the events I've just described. The only reason I know it happened is that while I was growing up, whenever my mom met someone new, she liked to tell the story of how her three-year-old son had fixed a film projector he had never seen before.

And so began my love and fascination with all things technological, from mechanical projectors to radio control cars and planes to computers and mobile devices. I was the kind of kid who asked for a chemistry set for Christmas so I could do experiments in the garage, and who saved up money for an electronics kit from Radio Shack so I could wire up an alarm for my bedroom. Of course, like most children of the '80s, I played countless hours of video games, but when I finally bought an Xbox, it was not so much because I wanted to play Xbox games but because I wanted to solder in a modchip and play around with home-brew software.

Fast-forward a few decades. As a young adult, I found that I loved doing two things. The first was teaching the Bible, which led me to attend seminary. The second was computer programming, which led me to work in the web development world. God graciously provided me a web design job at the seminary I was attending, allowing me to combine my love for God and his church with my love for technology.

As exciting as it was to do technology work for a ministry, I soon found that working for a ministry does not always pay all the bills. So I took on a few side projects that allowed me to build tools for companies like Apple, Microsoft, Harley Davidson, Anheuser-Busch, the Department of Defense, and Dallas's NPR affiliate.

Throughout my years in seminary, I continued to study and work hard in both theological studies and programming. I spent as much time learning Greek and Hebrew as I did learning languages like PHP, C#, Python, HTML, and JavaScript.

But in my final semester of seminary, a professor, who was known both for his brilliance and shocking, out-of-nowhere statements, said something that changed everything for me. In the middle of addressing a variety of current issues in society and culture, he looked straight at all of us and said, “One of the most dangerous things you can believe in this world is that technology is neutral.”

Wait, what? I thought. Surely, he must have misspoken.

After all, nothing could be more obvious than the fact that technology is neutral. What matters is that we *use* technology for good, right?

As he kept talking, I started arguing with the professor in my head. I could not think of a single tool, device, or technology that was morally good or evil in and of itself. Yes, a tool like the nuclear bomb has been used to kill hundreds of thousands of people; but it is based on technology that can also be used to generate inexpensive electricity for millions of people.

Sure, people can choose to abuse computers and the Internet, using them for all kinds of illicit purposes, from identity theft to the distribution of pornography. But the reason I chose web development for an occupation was that I also know the Internet can be used for incredible good. Outside work hours, I built websites to help church leaders find good biblical resources. My entire goal was to use the latest and greatest technology for the good of Christ and his Church.

What could be so dangerous about that?

I returned to class the next day prepared to ask the professor about his statement, armed with the best arguments I could muster about why technology is, in fact, neutral. However, when I arrived that day, the professor was not there. He had fallen ill and would not be able to return to class that semester.

What was I to do? How could I be sure if I was right? And what if the professor was right after all? What if there was some problem with technology

that I had never considered? Does the Bible actually say anything about technology? Can we say anything more profound or helpful about our technological world than simply, “Don’t be evil” (Google’s informal corporate motto)?

So I headed straight for my computer and started scouring the Internet for resources. Strangely though, when I attempted to find specifically Christian reflection on technology, I found very little. A quick search on the Internet for “theology and technology” turned up dozens of results on how to *use* technology. But beyond calls to “redeem technology,” I found very little on a biblical position for technology or anything about how technology fits into the redemptive story told in the Scriptures.

Just as I was about to give up in frustration, a dear friend who works two floors up from my office gave me a book on Marshall McLuhan’s thought, and another friend who lives halfway around the world gave me a book by Neil Postman, a student of McLuhan. I later found out that McLuhan and Postman founded an academic discipline called media ecology, which studies how technology operates within cultures and how it changes them over time. Media ecologists look at what happens when a technology enters a culture the same way that a biologist examines what happens when a new animal species enters an ecological environment.

Digging a bit more, I found a subdiscipline of philosophy called—obviously enough—“philosophy of technology,” which asks questions about how technology relates to what it means to be human. These questions include “Does technology have an independent nature?” and “Should humans be classified as ‘tool-making animals?’”

As I continued reading anything I could find on the nature of technology and communication media, I began to find some troubling ideas that made me wonder if technology was not all that it seemed. Very little of what I found considered these issues from a biblical or theological viewpoint, so I began to filter what I was reading through a biblical lens, documenting it in a blog entitled, “Don’t Eat the Fruit.”¹ This blog became the impetus for the book you hold in your hand today.

The blog’s title is a reference to the Garden of Eden and the Jim Jones

cult of the 1970s. In both cases, people consumed something they didn't fully understand, resulting in terrible consequences. In our modern world, we—like Adam, Eve, and Jim Jones's followers—often consume technology without being fully aware of the changes it can bring. This book is my attempt to grapple with those changes and understand how we can fulfill our role as God's image-bearers in a world very far removed from the garden.

As I did with the film projector so many years ago, I will use the following pages to dismantle the concept of technology, examine it carefully, and then put it back together again. I hope you enjoy this retelling of the story of technology in a way that honors God and the reason he put us here on earth.