

The Bible and Technology: Navigating Change in the Digital Age

“We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us,” wrote media analyst and Christian Marshall McLuhan at the dawn of the digital age. Twenty-five hundred years earlier, Socrates reflected on the shift from an oral to a written culture, noting how the technology of writing led to a loss of individual memory. The technology of printing similarly transformed human thought, providing a necessary precondition for the Reformation, encouraging rational and logical argument, and favoring propositional truth over narratives and stories. We are now living through a similar age of technologically-driven change, as digital tools transform our lives. What will be the impact of digital technology on biblical Christianity? Are our thoughts the same when we read a manuscript roll, a printed book, or a digital screen? What about when we listen to an audio “book”? This talk will compare several transformative periods of technological revolution, seeking to discern patterns of change and assess strategies of response. How should we shape our message in this new digital age?

Fred W. Beuttler is an administrator at the Graham School of Continuing Liberal and Professional Studies at the University of Chicago. He received his PhD in history from the University of Chicago in 1995 and an MA in the History of Christianity from Trinity International University. Prior to coming to Graham in June 2015, he was director of general education and taught history at Carroll University in Wisconsin. From 2005 to 2010, he was the deputy historian of the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington, D.C., and from 1998 to 2005 he was the associate university historian of the University of Illinois at Chicago.

I. Introduction: The Nature of Technology

A. Premise: Our Digital Age as analogous to the Print Revolution

B. The Bible as “technology”

1. Writing/reading, texts, transmission, dissemination, memory
“why are there ten commandments?”
2. Stories and parables
3. Bible as “library”

C. Technological Change

[from Postman]

1. All Technological Change is a trade-off
Culture always pays a price for technology (eg. From Latin to Bible in common languages)
2. Advantages and disadvantages of tech are not evenly distributed
Who benefits from tech, and who is harmed? Winners and losers
3. The Medium is the Message
 - a. Technology embodies ideas, an epistemology
 - b. Tools shape ourselves

- i. Before writing, proverbs and poetry; writing – logical org
 - ii. Telegraphy – speed not introspection; TV – immediacy
 - iii. Computers – information, not knowledge – “to a person with a computer, everything is data”
- 4. Technological change is not additive; it is ecological
A new medium does not add something; it changes everything (eg. TV and politics)
- 5. Media becomes Mythic – it becomes part of “natural order”
Tendency to make tech an idol, a false absolute

II. Words: From Oral to Written

A. Writing: Pictographs and the Alphabet

B. From Homer to Socrates to Plato to Aristotle

1. Socrates in *Phaedrus*, on the invention of writing

“it will create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories”; it gives “not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; ... having the show of wisdom without the reality.”

2. Plato and the Dialogue form

The Republic, on the education of the Guardians

C. Oral Tradition in the OT

1. Prophets

Nathan as prophet and historian

2. Kings

2 Kings 22: King Josiah finds the “book of the law”

D. Oral Tradition in the NT

1. Jesus as preacher/teacher – Road to Emmaus

2. Paul and process of dictation

E. What were some effects of the shift from Oral to Written?

III. Scribal Traditions

A. Process of Textual Transmission

B. The Authority of the Scribe

C. The Material Medium

1. Papyrus and Parchment

2. Costs of texts: Time and materials

D. Priests and Interpreters

1. Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch.

“Do you understand what you are reading? Philip asked.

“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” Acts 8:26-40

IV. Print Culture

A. Gutenberg and the Bible, 1450s

B. The Press: Folios and “Aldines”

C. Martin Luther

1. 95 Theses – Latin and Greek 1517

2. Pamphlets and Luther as “Best Selling Author”

3. Print and Authority: “Here I Stand”

4. The German Bible

D. Pulpit and Preacher

E. Printing and the Protestant Reformation

F. What were some effects of Print culture?

V. Industrial Culture: Electricity and Steam Power

A. Railroads and Telegraphs

1. Technology and changes in space and time

B. Technologies of Communication

1. Newspaper and rotating press

2. Camera

3. Telephone

4. Phonograph

5. Motion-Pictures / Newsreels

6. Radio

7. Television

What do so many of these have in common?

“Freedom of the Press belongs to those who own one.” AJ Liebling

C. Religious effects

1. Telegraph and Revival: 1857-58 Laymen’s Prayer Revival in USA

2. Missionaries and Spread of Word

Literacy rates

3. Radio Preachers

4. TV Preachers –

Did Billy Graham’s preaching change from radio to television?

5. The Jesus Film

VI. Digital Culture

- A. Binary – a new alphabet? Or language?
Cf. Gen. 11 “The Tower of Babel”
- B. From Centers to Networks: History of the Internet
- C. World Wide Web and the Public
- D. Personal Computers
- E. Smart “Phone”
- F. Internet of Things and the Surveillance State
- G. “Big Data” and Predictive Analytics
- H. What are some effects so far of Digital culture?

VII. Christianity and the Bible in a Digital Age: Strategies for the Future

Suggested Readings:

Neil Postman, “Five Things to Know About Technological Change,” 1998

Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 1964

Tom Wheeler, *From Gutenberg to Google: A History of Our Future*, Brookings, 2019