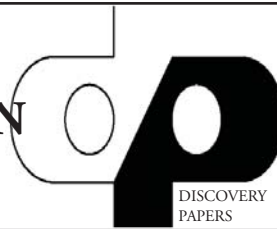


TECHNOLOGY: HOW WE KNOW AND ARE KNOWN

SERIES: THE SKIPPING STONE OF THE SPIRIT



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Last week we talked about the difference in generations. How younger people and older people sometimes have a hard time relating with one another. One of the most common things that separates younger people from older people is technology. New technology arises and younger people are more interested and available to put it to use. Older people are sometimes wary of it or don't see the purpose behind it.

But it goes deeper than that. Younger people can get really excited about technology. I mean, over-the-top excited about the newest gadget or device that's going to come out. They'll arrive at the store early in the morning to wait in line because they are so excited. I tend to be in this category a lot of the time. Sometimes older people aren't just unaware of technology: they're skeptical. They see it changing the world in harmful ways. They issue warnings of the dangers or risks of some technology.

Should we love technology or fear it? There are a lot of people in our world with opinions on this subject—everyone recognizes that something unique has been happening in the past generation over the issue of technology. What about us in the church? Does our faith in Christ make us think any differently?

Let's look into these questions and focus our discussion on communication. There are a lot of different types of technology out there: medical, travel, energy, and others. But we're going to focus on communication technology. We'll be looking specifically at technology that changes the way we communicate with each other. And because relationships are based on communicating, we're going to look at how communication technology changes our relationships. How does it change the way we relate to each other?

The God we came here to worship is a God of relationship. His two greatest calls on our lives are relational: to love Him and to love each other. So if technology changes something about the way we relate, then it's going to change something about the way we live out our faith in Christ—our relationship with God and with others. So if technology changes the way we relate,

the big questions are: "Does it help or does it hurt? Does it make it easier to relate to each other or harder? Does it foster love or impede it?"

To answer those questions, we're following the pattern that we've used for this series. We're following the Spirit like a stone skipping across a pond. Each of the three skips represents one area of how the Spirit reveals Himself. We'll start with the primary way that the Spirit reveals Himself through Scripture. We'll look at a passage from the gospel of John and observe a very unusual form of communication technology. Then we'll look at an episode from church history, in the 15th century, where this issue was significant with the invention of the Printing Press. We'll see how that technology changed the way people communicated and changed relationships. Then we'll move forward into today. What about the new technologies that we have access to? What does God think of them? How should we respond?

Jesus Makes God Known

With every sermon in this series, I've been trying to anchor it in one or two biblical passages that give us a foundation to build on. It's not too hard to find biblical passages about diversity, politics, and generations. But it's tricky to find a biblical passage about technology.

Let's think about what communication is, though. It starts with something from me: an idea, an emotion, or a concept. Communication is the process of something travelling from me to you. It is the vehicle that carries the message. Your voice is a form of communication technology. Pen and paper are also a form of communication technology and so forth.

In Shane Hipps book, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith*, he points out that "Christianity is fundamentally a communication event."¹ It's about God communicating to us. One of the most common actions of our God is how He goes to great lengths to reveal Himself to His creation. So what technology did God use?

Well, He certainly used voice and He used pen and paper. But I want to suggest that God needed a new form of communication to fully accomplish what He wanted to do. He invented something that had never been heard of before. It wasn't the iPhone, but it did start with an "i." The Incarnation. Jesus, Himself, is a kind of communication technology.

Now, I hope the only thing that you remember about this sermon is not that I compared Jesus to an iPhone. But that's essentially what I'm doing. Jesus, as God Incarnate came to earth to reveal God to His creation. He came to make God known. He came to make it possible for us to have a relationship with God. And nothing like this had ever happened before in the history of the world or since.

So we're going to start off by looking at Jesus as a new form of communication technology that entered the world about 2000 years ago. The apostle John does the best job of presenting Jesus in this way, so we're going to be reading the first several verses from his gospel.

John 1:1-5, 14, & 18:

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

²He was with God in the beginning.

³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of men. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁸No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

There are several points from this passage that I want us to notice. The overriding point is when John says that God has never been seen, but Jesus makes Him known. Jesus makes God known.

Now, I actually have a few relationships in my life with people that I've never seen. Not many, but some. I've actually never met my insurance agent in person. We have all of our insurance through him: cars, house, and personal property. He lives down in Capitola and I've never met him in person. So how do I have a relationship with this person? Through communication technology: I've spoken to him on the phone. I've emailed with him. He's mailed me documents written on paper. And I've returned them.

This is what Jesus does for God. He makes God known. He is the vehicle that carries the person of God to us. John says He comes from the Father's side, but makes His dwelling among us. Jesus is the technology that makes God known to us. Verse 14 says that we have seen Jesus. We may not have seen God the Father, but we've seen the glory of Christ.

In John 14:7, he records Jesus saying this, "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." So God can't be seen, but Jesus says that we see God through Him. To know Jesus is to see God. Wow! That's incredible. Even though you and I have never seen Jesus, we know Him and by knowing Jesus, we have seen the Father.

Apparently, Jesus as a form of communication technology works. That's not always the case, right? We know all about technology that is supposed to work a certain way, but doesn't. But Jesus works. For us at least, but our passage points out that that's not actually true for everyone. Verse 5 says "that the light"—that's Jesus in John lingo—"shines in the darkness"—that's the world. But the world hasn't understood Jesus. Jesus makes God known, but not everyone sees God. The darkness has not understood the light. Some don't get the message. If Jesus is the vehicle that carries the person of God to us, then some people miss the train.

Have you ever had this experience where you call someone's phone and they don't answer? So then some nice woman's voice lets you know that the person at 6-5-0-etc. isn't available. But that's OK because you can leave a message. But the problem is that you don't know whether you have the right number because that person didn't record their own voicemail message and there's not even their name identifying them. If that's you out there, then go home and record a voicemail message. But it's incredibly disorienting because you leave a message, but you're not really sure that they are going to get it. You're

not sure your message will get through.

That's what happens here. Jesus faithfully reveals God. But some people didn't get it. It's strange to think of it this way, but in a sense, the Incarnation failed. The email was lost, the call was dropped, the letter was sent to the wrong address. The world didn't understand Jesus. This time, it's not the fault of the technology. Jesus perfectly revealed the Father. But perfect technology doesn't guarantee perfect communication. Even a clear message can be misunderstood. It's not that Jesus failed to reveal the Father. But the message doesn't get through.

So we've said that Jesus makes God known and that through Jesus, some people know the Father. But not everyone. There's one more important observation I want to make about this passage. John starts out by saying that the "Word was with God" (v. 1). Verse 2 says that the "Word was with God in the beginning." In the verses we read, there are five references to Jesus being in the presence of God. Jesus has been with God. Then there are two different references to Jesus being with us. The point seems to be that Jesus can make God known because He's been with Him. He can make God known to us because He's been with us. So we might conclude that there's something important about presence. About being there.

Think about online dating for a minute. That's not really what it is. You don't date online. It's online matchmaking so you can date for real. There are a few purely virtual relationships out there. But people want to meet someone online so that they can have a face-to-face relationship with them. The eventual goal is to be present with them.

John actually said something very similar to this towards the end of one of his letters. Listen to 2 John 1:12, "I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete."

So John wrote a letter to people, as he had done several times before. He used technology. Clearly that was an acceptable way to communicate within this relationship. And yet he also acknowledged that he'd rather be with them. He didn't refuse to use technology because he preferred to be with them in person. He went ahead and wrote them a letter because that's the technology he had available. If he had it, he might have emailed, facebooked, or texted them instead. But as he used the technology available to him, he was aware of its limitations and stated

his preference to be there with them in person. Technology could help them know him, but it couldn't replace his presence.

Let's summarize this; Jesus is a form of communication technology. He was sent to make God known: to allow us to have a relationship with God. And it worked, but not for everyone. So technology can allow us to communicate with each other. It can even allow us to communicate in a unique way: the Incarnation was a powerful event in the history of the world. We know God through Jesus in a different way than we know Him in other ways. So technology can allow a unique kind of relationship. But there's still something about presence: being there in person. Technology doesn't seem to remove the need for presence.

The Printing Press: Technology Changes Us

So we've seen a few things about how people are known and how communication technology can help that process, but not make it completely perfect. Now we're going to move forward to the second skip of our stone and look at a time in church history where this issue was particularly significant. We're skipping over to the middle of the 15th century in Germany. In 1436, a man worked on an invention that ended up being the single most important piece of technology in the second millennium. That man's name was Johannes Gutenberg. He worked and put together a machine that printed books.

Up to this point in history, almost all the books in existence were hand-written which was a very time consuming process. The Bible was the most commonly produced book, so it was a good starting point. It took an average monk about one full year to copy an entire Bible. Several times I've used the read-through-the-Bible-in-a-year programs and found them really helpful. But can you imagine doing a write-out-the-entire-Bible-for-a-year program? Working every day on that one project?

Gutenberg changed all that. He did what most good inventors do. He combined a bunch of existing technology, he used the press that was used to crush olives and grapes for 1500 years, added a few of his own bells and whistles, and put it together and made something very useful. His invention was of course, the printing press. He printed his first books in the 1440's. His technology caught on very

quickly. By 1480, there were over 100 people who operated printing presses all across Europe. By 1500, over twenty million books had been produced. That's like 400,000 monks working hard every day for those 50 years. Instead, 100 printers did it as they oiled their machines.

The printing press changed the way that ideas were communicated. It made an entirely new vehicle available for people. Ideas used to move slowly, like the speed of a bicycle. Then all of a sudden ideas were carried by jet planes. They moved fast and went far. Fast because you could create multiple copies of something so that everyone could read it at once. As soon as something new was written, it could be printed and everyone in town could read it. Ideas also went far because with all these copies, you could send them in all directions at once. Ideas could spread out over a huge territory and take root quickly. You didn't mind if you had to send a copy far away because you had plenty of copies back home.

As an example of this: in a two year period during the early 16th century, Martin Luther distributed over 300,000 copies of his pamphlets all over Europe. A generation earlier, it would never have been possible for his ideas to have such a far-reaching impact so quickly. After the printing press, ideas moved fast and went far.

In terms of culture, the printing press changed everything. Religion scholars credit the printing press with allowing the Protestant Reformation to happen. Apart from the ability to get ideas out quickly and far, nothing like the Reformation could have happened. Political scholars credit the printing press with allowing democracy to be invented. It gave everyone access to the same ideas and spread those ideas quickly and persuasively. Scientists say that the printing press created the Scientific Revolution. Now many scientists across large areas could collaborate, build on each other's work, and find new discoveries. Economists say that the printing press created capitalism.

Marshall McLuhan is one of the foremost authors on issues of media and communication. He wrote a book called *The Gutenberg Galaxy*² where he credits the printing press with giving birth to virtually every aspect of modern culture. His point is one that many have made: technology changes us. The way you communicate something is not neutral to what is being communicated. Taking a train to New York City to watch a play on Broadway is a very different trip than flying on the red-eye. The

vehicle changes everything. Technology itself plays a part in what is being said and that ends up changing the ones communicating. New technology changes us.

Jesus, as a form of communication technology, wasn't just a better book. The fact that God, Himself, came down and revealed Himself through Jesus is an essential part of the power of the Incarnation. God simply could not have revealed Himself in the same way through a different form of communication technology. The way God revealed Himself says a lot about who God is. The vehicle matters.

And we recognize this as well in our own lives. There are probably some things you wouldn't send in an email. There are some things more suited to convey in person or over the phone. I remember thinking about this after I got married and we had to send out a bunch of thank-you cards in the physical mail. I had to actually buy stamps for the first time in a long time. But I was assured that you can't just thank someone; you have to send them something in the mail and thank them.

So how did the printing press change things? How did the abundant availability of quickly printed material change the world, and particularly, the way we relate to each other? Well, the printing press made the world bigger and smaller. For most people, the world expanded, but it also shrank.

First of all, the world got bigger. Before the printing press, unless I was part of an elite upper class culture, I wouldn't have been able read. Why would I want to since I didn't have any books? So any information I received was received into the small community that I was a part of: my family and my village. When Paul wrote his letters to the churches, they would all come together and listen to the letters being read. Before the printing press, I only heard the Bible when I went to church. My entire life was lived in the context of a small community.

But after the printing press, more people learned to read. Books were everywhere so now I could go sit by myself and read something. I could sit anywhere and read a tract written by Martin Luther, a book written by Erasmus, or any other number of things. The information that I used to receive was all given to me in the context of a community, but now I was an individual. I could read my own books and come up with my own thoughts. I was an individual in a huge world, full of thinkers with different opinions and ideas.

In a lot of ways, this was a good development. Literacy skyrocketed, people owned their own copies of the Bible in their language, more people achieved political power, and the list goes on and on. But not all the changes were good. Something was lost. That little community that I used to belong to wasn't so important to me anymore. Memorizing Scripture wasn't so useful anymore. I didn't need to listen to stories told and books read aloud anymore. When my world got bigger, something was lost.

We realize that every change is actually a trade. Something is gained and something is lost. Nothing new comes without a cost.

So my world got bigger, but it also got smaller. It used to be that all my relationships were with people around me. The rest of the world was too big to even think about. But now I read Erasmus. One of the things the printing press did was to create the category of best-seller. Desiderius Erasmus sold over 750,000 copies of his books during his lifetime. That's a lot of books for the turn of the 16th century. He was a favorite author. This invented a whole new type of relationship. Now, I have a relationship with Erasmus. And it was a real relationship—his ideas changed the way I thought about the world.

But it was a new kind of relationship. It was a relationship of ideas and thoughts, not presence and companionship. If you've ever read several books by the same author, you know what I mean. I really enjoy Eugene Peterson's books. After reading several of his books, I have a kind of relationship with Eugene Peterson. But it's a different kind of relationship. It's a relationship of ideas without presence. This kind of relationship would not have been possible a generation before.

So just as I became an individual because of the printing press, I also started having a different kind of relationship with people. Erasmus was brought into my living room. That changed things. Something new was gained; something I never had access to before. But something was lost as well. What about the people who used to be in my living room; my parents, grandparents, and siblings. Now those relationships compete with my favorite author. This change is a kind of trade. Something has been gained, but something has been lost as well.

Use Technology To Be With People

That brings us to today. We live in a world of quickly changing technology. Our world is getting bigger every day as we are aware of everything happening, all over the world, within a moment's notice. But it is also getting smaller as distances shrink; I can travel faster and communicate longer distances. What does God think about all of this? How is the Spirit leading us today?

First, I want us to consider the question of why we're so excited about communication technology. What makes us obsess over it? Why does the latest release of the iPhone get as much news press as peace talks in Israel?

I think it's because deep down in all of us, one of the things we want most is to be known. I want people to know me. I want real, deep, intimate relationships. To be known and loved. I'm convinced that I'm a decent guy to know and if people just had more of an opportunity to know me, they'd think that too. So this new phone, or this new device, makes my heart jump a little bit. Because I think, "maybe now I'll finally be known." Every time my computer beeps with a new email or my phone rings with a text message, I wonder if finally someone knows me and loves me. I think the boom in technology reveals our deep need to be known.

See, we live in a technical culture. We have deep longings in our hearts to be connected to people. So we think that maybe the right technology can solve our problems. Maybe an iPhone can really connect me to other people. Maybe Facebook will allow me to finally have intimate relationships. Maybe technology can address the longings that lie deep within my soul. Of course, when you put it that way, it sounds ridiculous. But that's what we think without realizing it.

We know, however, that our problem is not a technical one. Our problem is a spiritual one. Our problem is one of sin, rebellion, brokenness, and self-centeredness. No amount of technology can fix that. We need God in our lives. We need to connect with God and then we can connect with each other. We need to recognize that some of our longings won't be met in this world. That our longings point us toward what is coming. And not just to the iPhone 5.0, but to the Messiah 2.0. Jesus is coming back. He will fill our longings.

This is what leads to polarized responses of technology. Some border on worshipping technology: they think it will save them. Others border on fearing technology: they consider it a false god. But once we realize that technology is no god at all, we're prepared to be led by the one who is God. Once we see technology as a tool, designed to enable relationships, we can use it as such. We can navigate the benefits and the dangers of it, just as any tool can cause good or evil. We can use it according to God's purposes: to know and be known. We can use technology to be with people.

There are times when technology makes it possible for me to be with people in a way that I never could have before. I can have a video conference call with a missionary in India to plan our next mission trip there. I can send my wife a quick text message to let her know in a non-intrusive way that I'm thinking about her. I can find out that a friend has a job interview tomorrow because of his Facebook status update. Technology has an amazing potential to bring me closer to people. There are reasons to be optimistic about the new technologies that are available.

But it also has the potential to push me farther away from people. One comedian said that there's a new application available for the iPhone that translates babies crying for you. You can turn it on and it will tell you what a baby is trying to say when it's crying. And most of the time, what it translates is something like, "Put your iPhone down and pay attention to me!"

Technology can help us to be with each other, but it also provides all sorts of false versions of being with each other. Technology can allow you to be known or hide. My wife and I recently read a book about raising girls in our culture that talked about the effect that cyber-culture is having on young girls establishing their identity. The author pointed out that young people are responsible for creating their online persona. They decide which pictures to post, what status updates to share, what image to create. And there can be this strong temptation to create an image of who you want to be rather than who you actually are. I think we can all be susceptible to this. Are we using technology to know other people and be known? Or do we use technology to hide or create a false sense of identity?

It's also possible to be so excited about technology that you forget its purpose. It's like buying a new wrench and marveling at how beautiful it is. You hang this wrench on your wall because it's so cool. But you never use it to turn a bolt. We can get this way about technology sometimes.

Being amazed with this new piece of technology and how easy it is to use, but never actually using it to connect with someone. Don't forget that communication technology is a tool. The purpose is relationship.

My hope for us is that we would recognize what's going on in our world with technology. A few weeks ago we thought of poverty as a mighty river, carrying people away. You might also think of technology as a river. Some people are just being swept away by its current without realizing what is going on. Because we are people of the truth that needs to be communicated, we can't be ignorant of what is happening in our culture and the effects that it has on people. We can't simply be swept away.

But we also can't stop it. Once the printing press was invented, a bunch of things were set into motion that could never be reversed. The same is true today. If we try to build a dam and stop this river, we will be fighting a battle that will sap all our energy and ultimately prove to be pointless.

But we can be wise. We can remember the purpose of technology. We can build rafts to navigate this crazy river carefully. We can throw lifejackets to those who have gotten trapped in its currents. We can be wise with technology without getting carried away.

Most of all, I want to encourage us to look for how God is working. Look for evidence of His Spirit. Look for ways that God is using technology to connect people together. Today, there are entire communities of worshipping people who gather for internet church. What do we think of that? Is it a good thing? I'd say that something has been gained there. People are finding connection in a unique way: perhaps they find it harder to connect in a different way. Has something been lost? For sure: we talked about the importance of physical presence.

But think about our church. We come from all over the Bay Area. It used to be the case where you just went to the church in your town. You didn't pick a church; you just went to your local church. We live in a commuter culture. Have we lost something because we don't live within a few miles from our church? Definitely. So we try to think of programs and opportunities to recapture some of what was lost. The same can be true of virtually any use of technology: being wise about it means recognizing what has been lost and doing your best to recapture some of it.

Conclusion

Technology will not ruin our world. It will not destroy our families, our communities, or our souls. Neither will it save us. It won't finally allow people to know me. It won't take away the insecurities I carry around. It won't ultimately provide the answers that I'm looking for. But we live in a culture where a lot of people think that's the case. They're excited about technology because they want what we all want: deep intimate relationships.

We, as followers of Christ, recognize where that is to be found. We know God and are known by Him. We know an intimacy beyond compare: an almighty God who knows everything about us and still wants to be more than just Facebook friends. Because we know God, we can know others with grace, sensitivity, and trust. All of this gives us the freedom to see technology for what it is: a very powerful tool.

We can recognize that this tool changes us. We realize that sometimes it helps and sometimes it hurts. But we must resist the temptation to respond with worship or with fear. It's just a phone. It's just a computer. Nothing more, nothing less. God calls us to respond to technology with wisdom. Remembering to be with people. That's what God does and it's what His people do in turn.

NOTES

¹Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* (Zondervan, 2009) 13.

²Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (University of Toronto Press, 1962).