

Neil Postman, Technological Culture, and Preaching

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Many pastors find themselves competing with phantoms of the past. For example, they frequently encounter that too well-worn phrase, “we have never done it that way before.” In addition, pastors are often called to recognize phantoms of the future.

Like it or not, they and the church will have to contend with a new phantom on the contemporary horizon: the phantomlike specter of technology. The truth is that the church has contended with technology for quite some time, but either has devalued its dominance or simply ignored it altogether, likely hoping its influence would simply evaporate. Perhaps it is fitting that the church is one of the last strongholds against technology’s imperialism which has invaded our modern intellectual landscape from Alpha Beta supermarkets to the art of contemporary “warcraft,” as Homer called it long ago.

Neil Postman has been a loving critic of culture for several decades. In one of his many high impact books, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (1979), Postman argues that television has become the educational vehicle for our culture’s children. In today’s thought, this is not surprising. Postman believes, however, that this situation relegates schools to a secondary role in educating our nation’s children. To a people who pride themselves on public education, this realization, if true, has far ranging implications. Postman does not despair this circumstance, but suggests to educators a task of teaching vital elements needed by today’s students. These elements include more linear learning components than only the images which students absorb from hours spent staring at a television screen. *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* is something of a handbook. It provides teachers means by which to contest the technology of television.

Another of Postman’s widely read books, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), insists that teaching has become more an entertainment discipline, rather than one of fostering learning. Using themes found in his earlier works, Postman asserts in light of the dominance of television and other entertainment industries, that teaching becomes more and more difficult. The rational discourse needed to truly educate people is simply not within most students’ background, and perhaps, ability. This cultural atmosphere has a profound effect, not only on politics with its sound bites, but on most forms of communication. Public discourse has come to prize form over substance. In other words, if what one has to say is not entertaining, then it is likely to not be heard nor heeded.

This observation brings us back to where we began. Today, if information is not heard or validated unless it has been dressed up in the costume of entertainment, then what of the gospel and the church’s message of salvation? At this point, Postman’s new book *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1992) can be read with profit, as well as promise.

Postman defines Technopoly as, “the submission of all forms of cultural life to the sovereignty of technique and technology” (p. 52). He then proceeds to identify four distinct reasons why Technopoly [a term Postman always capitalizes] emerged and flourished, particularly in America. These reasons appear as commonplaces. First is

the American character. Here Postman follows the sure footing of Alexis de Tocqueville who noticed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that in America newness and improvement were inextricably linked. Second, America's history is filled with persons who focused on "exploiting economic possibilities." Postman offers an abundance of examples, from Samuel Morse to Alexander Graham Bell to "the Robber Barons." Postman comments, "Their [the Robber Barons] greatest achievement was in convincing their countrymen [sic] that the future need have no connection with the past" (p. 54). The third reason Technopoly emerged and flourished in America was that technology provided Americans "with convenience, comfort, speed, hygiene, and abundance...there seemed to be no reason to look for any other sources of fulfillment or creativity or purpose" (p. 54).

The fourth reason seems more subtle and, at the same time, more powerful than the others. It was intellectual. As America was explored and expanded, older ways of thinking came under attack from such notable thinkers as Nietzsche, Darwin, Marx, and Freud. "The thrust of a century of scholarship had the effect of making us lose confidence in our belief systems and therefore in ourselves" (p. 55). Thus, an atmosphere was created that no new thought was out of bounds and that every old thought was, to one degree or another, critically suspect and in need of reevaluation. Only one steady and sure arena of knowledge evolved worthy of trust—Technopoly. "George Bernard Shaw wrote...that the average person today is about as credulous as was the average person in the Middle Ages. In the Middle Ages, people believed in the authority of their religion, no matter what. Today, we believe in the authority of our science, no matter what" (pp. 57-8). Certainly, people today are not exempt from creating the idols they deem worthy of their worship, albeit more sophisticated and upscale idols than the wilderness counterparts of Aaron and his followers, roughly thirty-eight centuries ago.

In the middle section of *Technopoly*, Postman illustrates his musings about technology and technique drawing deep draughts from medicine, law, bureaucracy, intelligence testing, and computers. Postman has a knack for choosing quirky illustrations to reveal the absurdity of conclusions drawn from "pure scientific research." For instance, he cites Daniel Goleman, covering the social-science beat for the *New York Times*, who reported that, "recent research findings [...give] the fear of death a central and often unsuspected role in psychological life" (p. 144). In another amusing illustration of scientific research, Postman describes a seriously conceived psychological study by Stanley Milgram:

In this notorious study, Milgram sought to entice people to give electric shocks to "innocent victims" who were in fact conspirators in the experiment and did not actually receive the shocks. Nonetheless, most of Milgram's subjects believed that the victims were receiving the shocks, and many of them, under psychological pressure, gave shocks that, had they been real, might have killed the victims. Milgram took great care in designing the environment in which all this took place, and his book is filled with statistics that indicate how many did or did not do what the experimenters told them to do. Somewhere in the neighborhood of 65 percent of his subjects were rather more compliant than would have been good for the health of their victims. Milgram drew the following conclusion from his research: In the face of what they construe to be legitimate authority, most people will do what they are told (p. 151).

Postman wryly comments that, “this conclusion is merely a commonplace of human experience, known by just about everyone from Maimonides to your aunt and uncle” (p. 151). The point Postman continues to hammer away at is that not everything which parades itself as science is actually science. Still, whenever one wishes to get a favorable public hearing, “findings” should be asserted as scientific facts. Science is the new altar of credibility in today’s society. Postman quickly points out, however, that such claims are not necessarily science.

This attitude, which he calls “scientism,” is exposed and evaluated by Postman. He observes that scientism (1) takes the scientific method and applies it to social sciences (so called), (2) claims that these “social science” principles can organize society on a rational basis, and (3) asserts that science itself can serve as a “comprehensive belief system that gives meaning to life” (p. 147). Postman’s mission clearly is not to provide a bushel-basket-full of vignettes with which to lampoon these “scientific” ways of thinking. Rather it is to provide alternatives to combat the pervasive scientific ideology of our day.

Postman’s last chapter, “The Loving Resistance Fighter,” spells out ways which characterize the fight against Technopoly:

Those who resist the American Technopoly are people

- who pay no attention to a poll unless they know what questions were asked, and why;
- who refuse to accept efficiency as the preeminent goal of human relations;
- who have freed themselves from the belief in the magical powers of numbers, do not regard calculation as an adequate substitute for judgment, or precision as synonymous for truth;
- who refuse to allow psychology or any “social science” to preempt the language and thought of common sense;
- who are, at least, suspicious of the idea of progress, and do not confuse information with understanding;
- who do not regard the aged as irrelevant;
- who take seriously the meaning of family loyalty and honor, and who, when they “reach out and touch someone,” expect that person to be in the same room;
- who take the great narratives of religion seriously and who do not believe that science is the only system of thought capable of producing truth;
- who know the difference between the sacred and the profane, and who do not wink at tradition for modernity’s sake;
- who admire technological ingenuity but do not think it represents the highest possible form of human achievement (pp. 183-4).

Why should this book be one for the preacher, any preacher? For one thing, *Technopoly* does what good theology should do; it examines premises most people take for granted. From the beginning of *Technopoly*, Postman explores the ramifications of technological advances which many people never consider. He points out that the mechanical clock was co-opted from a way to measure the time for religious devotion and observance into a means furthering the institutionalization of commerce. Another prominent example observes that movable type robbed the oral tradition of its power, because from that point onward, nothing “needed” to be memorized.

For preachers, *Technopoly* will provide dozens of illustrations about how we as

a society take technological advances for granted. Postman also challenges us to recognize cultural mind-traps despoiling our power to think. *Technopoly* should also make us aware that we may have lost something of great value in the exchange.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for preachers and everyone else in the church, for that matter, to read this book is because Neil Postman does not shrink from assaulting modernity where it is most vulnerable—at the level of common humanity. In nontheological, academic circles, the charge is often made that the church is either naive, humorless, timid, or all three. One thing to be said about Postman's point of view is that it is none of these. He stares modernity down. He gives it its due when merited. Still, he is neither fearful nor lacking humor when he takes our modern world to task for selling its soul for the sake of utility and convenience.

I suspect that if my approach to the pulpit could convey some of Postman's ironic humor and sapient mirth, my congregation would be better served. Although Postman's critique of modern technology is devastating, it is not insulting. He always leaves room for discussion and for additional meaning-making. One might honestly claim that the primary function of preaching is to get the gospel into the lives and conversations of Christians today. Postman's explicit propositions and examples can assist our shared purposes. Also, the indirect and ancillary learnings from *Technopoly* will benefit those of us who preach the gospel in today's world—a world converted by technology's idols. After all, pastors who preach the good news faithfully to a modern world may regularly be called on to recognize the phantoms of the past and anticipate those of the future. We are also called upon to preach about the troubling phantoms we live with every day.