

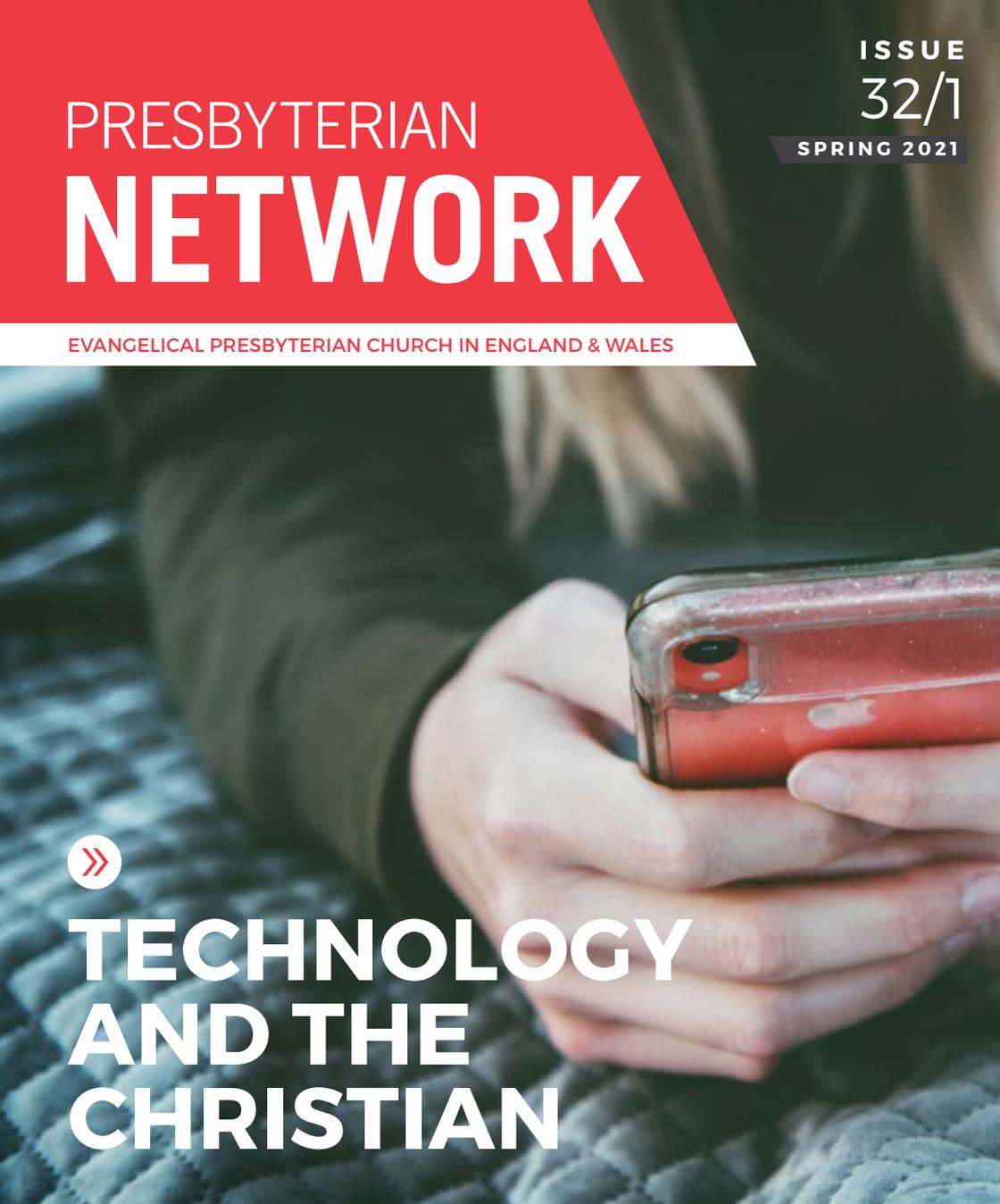
PRESBYTERIAN NETWORK

ISSUE

32/1

SPRING 2021

EVANGELICAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN ENGLAND & WALES



»
**TECHNOLOGY
AND THE
CHRISTIAN**



**BLESSING
INSTEAD OF CURSE**



**AUGUSTINE: HIS SIGNIFICANCE
FOR THE CHURCH**



INSIDE this issue



20 » **Augustine:
His Significance
for the Church**

13 » **Book Commendation**

14 » **A Challenge from the past**
The call of duty in the face of danger

15 » **If only they knew...**

16 » **Blessing instead of Curse**

20 » **Augustine:**
His Significance for the Church

26 » **Technology and the Christian (I)**



16 »
**Blessing
instead of Curse**



26 »
**Technology and
the Christian (I)**



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EDITOR'S NOTE

In 1980, I sat in a lecture on auditing. The speaker enthusiastically informed us that, 'Soon every home will have a computer.' I laughed. Within a few years, computers, mobile phones, the internet, satnavs, had become part of everyday life. In the year 2020, this has accelerated to new levels and people speak about the 'new normal'.

In 1971, Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote: It is therefore most important that people should come together and listen in companies in the realm of the church...The very presence of a body of people in itself is a part of the preaching. . . [T]he man who thinks that all this can be done... looking at a television set, is missing the mysterious element in the life of the Church. What is this? It is what our Lord was suggesting, I think, when he said, 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst.' It is not a mere gathering of people; Christ is present. This is the great mystery of the Church. There is something in the very atmosphere of Christian people meeting together to worship God and to listen to the preaching of the Gospel...It is the presence of the Spirit in the heart of God's children, God's people...and that is why preaching can never be replaced... by watching television. (*Preachers and Preaching.*)

In these days, not a few pastors are cautioning their flocks not to accept current developments uncritically. This issue of the Presbyterian Network includes part 1 of a carefully researched study of the effects of technology upon us. o



SPOTLIGHT on the Churches

BARRY - CHRIST CHURCH

The situation at Barry remains close to critical. The Rev. Drew Goodman's absence in the United States combined with lockdown restrictions means that pastoral and outreach work have been all but impossible. We maintained public worship on Sunday mornings until February 2021, when for reasons of ill-health and practical considerations we decided to do Zoom services. This will be reviewed at the end of the month. Our desire is to return to public worship in March.

The congregation is tiny and raises questions about critical mass. Without Drew and his family the maximum possible attendance is nine but for a number of reasons this is rarely achieved. A serious aggravating factor is the ill-health of elder Russell Young, who at least for the time being is on leave of absence from normal duties. Without the contribution of Russell and his wife Janet, the work would have folded. Richard Holst is the assessor elder and he will take on what extra duties age and other engagements permit. The need is for support on the ground to strengthen the congregation from within and to help with outreach, when that becomes possible. Brethren, pray for us!

 Richard Holst

BERLIN

Coronavirus regulations make life more complicated than it was before, but it has made us creative. We started a women's meeting and a men's meeting, once a month. Last year over the summer we were able and allowed to meet in person. At the moment we have to meet online. Nonetheless everyone experiences these as a blessing and we hope, as it is getting warmer, that we will be able to meet in real life again.

The regular ministry of the church is able to continue. Due to the regulations, we are only able to have our catechism class and one service on Sundays. In the catechism class we are looking at questions 98 to 107 of the Shorter Catechism, the exposition of the Lord's Prayer. In our services I am preaching through Luke's Gospel and in the midweek meetings we are studying 2 Samuel. The prayer meeting is an encouragement, as we see many answered prayers and more people joining us.

 Johannes Müller



SPOTLIGHT on the Churches

BLACKBURN

After the difficulties and disruption of the past year, we are praying that the Lord will bring his people back to worship, and that there will be unity and no dissension among us. We need the Lord's help above all things in these days; his unction on the ministry of his Word, so that it may go out with power and effect. We are praying that, in his providence, the Lord will draw people into the church and that they will know his presence among us. The children of the Sunday school are much in our prayers, that they may know God's grace in their hearts. We are shortly to baptize a child, and that is our prayer, for the Holy Spirit to bless them with everlasting life.

 Norman Green

BURY ST EDMUNDS

The church is thankful we have been sustained by the Lord through the difficulties of the past year. We are encouraged the congregation has grown through a mix of believers moving to the area and others visiting while their own congregations remain closed. A dear brother, Ian Pape, has gone to the Lord but we are comforted by the knowledge his suffering from cancer has passed and he is with the Saviour. We continue to press on, looking forward to the restrictions ending and to being able to share fellowship and hospitality together which has been sorely missed.

 Matthew Jolley

CAMBRIDGE

All the years we've been in Cambridge, we've been in rented accommodation. We have looked for properties over this time but never found anything we felt to be suitable for our needs or indeed anything we could afford! There is little that comes up near the centre, as so much of the land is either owned by the university or the private schools and there is always fierce competition for anything that does become available. Even further from the centre, sites are very expensive, as residential land is at such a premium. We are convinced however that a suitable building would be of great advantage to the work of the gospel in Cambridge and would ask you to pray with us for our fund-raising and our search efforts.

For some time we have felt the burden to reach out to others with the gospel both at a personal level and corporately as a church. We are hoping to have an evangelistic training evening in March with Jeremy Marshall, as a means of helping us improve what we already do, and to find different ways of reaching out to people. Do please remember us in this..

 Peter Leverton

CARDIFF - BETHEL

We thank God that services have resumed in the church building following the strict Covid-19 restrictions, whilst also allowing those who are unable to attend to join online via Zoom.



SPOTLIGHT on the Churches



Micah and Christina Flores, baby Micah Isaac and big sister Claire

In spite of this, the church at Bethel is growing, with 12 new members joining the church over the last few months and women's ministry resuming on line, enabling more women to join the study of Philippians. A surprise baby shower was also held via Zoom enabling the expectant mum's family from America to join the church women for a short study and prayer. Micah Isaac Flores was born sooner than expected, bringing much joy to his parents, Micah and Christina and big sister Claire.

We have also been able to hold regular communion services during this time, again following strict guidelines.

Above all, we were sad to see the departure of our beloved pastor, Mark Johnston, to take up a new calling in County Armagh, together with his wife, Fiona, and dear daughter Lindsay. Our elders are now left with the task of seeking out the next man, chosen by God, to lead Bethel to continue His work in Cardiff west.

 Patricia Stowell

CARDIFF - IMMANUEL

Does civil government have authority, from Scripture or in Law, to order churches to close, or to direct how we worship God? The elders here did not believe so. In October, when a second closure was ordered, we were unable to comply and we addressed the matter by letters, in the newspapers, on the radio, and in an appeal for a judicial review. On singing hymns, according to our Confession an essential element of worship, we kept on singing praise to God. No virus transmission resulted, and in January the government did not order a third closure, for which we give thanks to our heavenly Father.

We have suffered some hard blows. In December, a beloved brother, Jim Corney, was called home to the Lord. Several members have left the church. However, the Lord has comforted us by visits of faithful brothers and sisters from other (closed) churches, and by giving us gospel opportunities. At the prayer meeting one evening, a man in great need walked in off the street and, thanks be to God, he continues with us. We are praying that the Lord will awaken many to everlasting life in Jesus Christ.

We are currently considering calling a brother to join Peter in the pastoral ministry. Four men of the church have been giving some Bible Studies; two others are assisting the deacons.

 Peter J. Naylor



SPOTLIGHT on the Churches

CHELTENHAM - NAUNTON LANE

On 13 January 2021, all eligible church members voted unanimously in favour of calling Matt Faux as our next minister. The election was confirmed also by representatives of Presbytery, conforming to the Book of Church Order, and Matt has accepted the call. We give thanks to the Lord. The congregation recognizes Matt's gifts in the ministry and pray that his work will bear lasting fruit. We also give thanks to God for the elders who have carried out ably and faithfully the preaching and pastoral duties so much needed in a rather challenging past two and a half years.

We have been going through the Gospel of Mark in the Sunday morning services, the Epistle to the Philippians in the evening, and the Lord's Prayer in the midweek Bible Studies.

Mrs Pauline Yiend was called home to be with the Lord on 27 November 2020. She was 101 years old and had lived a full life. A funeral service at the crematorium followed by a service of thanksgiving at Naunton Lane were held at the end of December.

 Tai-tuck Yu

CHELTENHAM - WHADDON ROAD

Since our last news, Rev. Larry Wilkes was voted to become a minister alongside Rev. David Pfeiffer at Whaddon Road. We praise the Lord for his provision!

We have been feeding on God's Word from John's Gospel in the mornings and the letter to the Galatians in the evenings, while enjoying the book of Ruth during our midweeks. It has been encouraging to have a healthy participation at our midweek meetings.

Our deacon, David Price, and his wife, Claire, have moved to Cornwall in retirement. David is helping as the treasurer of a small evangelical church there and we pray the Lord would richly bless them.

We were able to baptize baby Hazel Clark in December which was a real joy!

We pray the Lord would raise up office bearers among us. We believe there are some men who meet the biblical criteria and hope, in due course, that we will train them for this vital work.

There are always pastoral struggles, but we are so thankful to the Lord's sustaining hand. We have a great desire to reach more people with the gospel.

 David Pfeiffer



Faux Family



SPOTLIGHT on the Churches

CHELMSFORD

In a period of much uncertainty and change at this time, it has been a great encouragement to remember that, whatever our circumstances, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and for ever.

In spite of periods of being unable to meet together in person, we have continued to hold Sunday services both morning and evening online, and have seen a number of visitors 'attend.' We are praying that when the church is fully open again some of these will come and worship with us. We have just started meeting back in church on Sunday mornings as well as streaming the service. It is encouraging to see one another but we are looking forward to not having our numbers limited, to be able to sing and – eventually – not to wear masks.

We have continued our midweek meetings on Zoom, and through this platform we have also been able to host other events. In January, we held an evangelistic event in which Jeremy Marshall talked about his faith and living with terminal cancer, followed by a time of question and answer. His talk was challenging and a great blessing to many. Over 150 people watched it, either live or later, and we continue to pray that it will have caused many to consider more closely what it means to know Jesus. We have two more such events planned. On 20 March, Ro Mody, from India, will talk about why he changed religions to follow Jesus Christ and, at a later date, Carl Peet will talk about how God rescues even the people who appear most unlikely

to respond to Him. We also watched a presentation by London City Mission about their work amongst the least reached people of London.

As a congregation we have been relatively unscathed by the virus, and we thank God for that. However, we mourn with a member who lost her mother to it very recently. Some members of the fellowship are finding this time lonely and stressful as they work from home, and we pray for them, as well as for opportunities to support and encourage each other in spite of restrictions.

We were delighted that Nelson Taylor and Millie Chapman were married recently and we pray that they will be richly blessed in their plans for their new life together.

 Ruth Ferguson

DURHAM

DPC is experiencing much change. Our comfort is that the Lord does not change; therefore, we are not consumed. We rejoice that the Lord has provided for his church through the election, subject to Presbytery approval, of two new elders. Please pray for Martin and Jonathan as they prepare for examination and ordination. We are thankful for the service of our deacon who has now transferred his membership to the All Saints congregation. Please pray that the Lord would raise up men to serve in this office.



SPOTLIGHT on the Churches

We are grateful also that new members have been added to the congregation, including five on one Sabbath. We pray that they continue to find our congregation a family in which they can grow and serve. Our oldest member has entered his eternal reward. We remember, with thanksgiving, Mr Arthur Medley's decades of faithfulness, including the last two in Durham. Whilst we mourn our loss, we rejoice that Mr Medley is gazing on his King of grace. 'God is our refuge and our strength, in straits a present aid; therefore, although the earth remove, we will not be afraid.'

 Jonathan Johnson

GLOUCESTER

We are thankful for the venue that the Lord has provided for us, the Farmers Club. Even during this recent lockdown we've been able to meet in person in the morning. We rejoice also in the Lord bringing to us the Rev. Tim Dalton to labour alongside Michael Cochran in the ministry. Soon we will be bringing people into membership and, Lord willing, celebrating communion. God is good.

 Michael Cochran

HEXHAM

The Lord is faithful. The last eight months have been a challenging time for Hexham Presbyterian Church, but our gracious God has upheld his people and his work. Despite Josh and his family needing to return to the States for Gina to receive treatment for breast cancer, worship services have continued. These have been largely led by the men from All Saints, Newcastle (ministers, elders and ministerial students) along with a few local retired ministers. Josh has been able to continue leading most of the midweeks via Zoom, and members of the congregation have stepped up to serve in various ways.

Through this period one of the church's biggest requests has been for Gina. We praise God that her treatment - while difficult - has also been very successful. She is nearing the end of her chemotherapy and will undergo surgery in the next couple of months. Please continue to pray for Gina and the Riegers through the next stage of her treatment and recovery. Pray also that the Lord would continue to uphold his work in Hexham and give thanks with us for his faithfulness thus far.

 Benjamin Wontrop





SPOTLIGHT on the Churches

HULL

The church has remained closed since January and we are hoping to reopen soon after some members have had the vaccine. The current plan is to use the church building for one service only on the Lord's Day and for the Wednesday prayer meeting. The seating arrangements in the church are finally adjusted and we have opened the back room with a speaker system so we can accommodate an increase of numbers or if anybody comes without first booking a seat.

During the lockdown, many of us benefitted from the online ministry of All Saints Presbyterian Church. It is great that we can keep in contact with each other by telephone, texts or email but to meet in person, especially in the church, is far better.

After a long battle with cancer, Idris passed away in November 2020. He served the church for many years and we miss him greatly.

 Christopher Lawson

LINCOLN

Despite the restrictions of the pandemic, the church planting work in Lincoln continues to push forward. We have not been able to meet for in-person worship since the first lockdown in March 2020. However, the Lord has continued to add families and individuals to our regular, weekly times of online worship and our midweek meetings. Evangelism is difficult when public

interaction is forbidden; but it has not proven impossible. We are thankful to see growing interest in the church plant. There is a real eagerness to meet for in-person worship. A primary prayer for us is that the Lord provide a place for us to meet for worship and for our midweek meetings soon. We have enjoyed many unexpected blessings over the past year, but we feel the weight of separation and look forward to joining together in fellowship and worship. Please pray for a place where we may meet, and that God would continue to draw his sheep to himself through the church in Lincoln.

 Ben Thomas

NEWCASTLE - ALL SAINTS

We anticipate with great sadness the departure of Bill Schweitzer and his family in the summer as they relocate to America. Bill has pastored the congregation since the church was planted 12 years ago. We would appreciate prayers for wisdom as plans are made for the future of the church.

As the weather warms up and Newcastle starts a slow return to normality, we've been thankful that there have been a few visitors to All Saints over recent weeks. One of these has been an international student who had been listening to the sermons online and joined us in person for the first time recently. We pray that she would be the first of many other students from the local Universities of Newcastle and Northumbria to worship with us this year.

 Peter Winch



SPOTLIGHT on the Churches

OXFORD

We are thankful to God that during the third lockdown we have been able to meet in person each Sunday evening for worship services. These services have been bitter-sweet. 'Bitter' in that our usual worship and fellowship has been curtailed by various Covid restrictions; 'sweet' in that being able simply to meet together, have a semblance of worship, and be encouraged from God's Word, has been a real joy. We have continued to meet online via Zoom and YouTube for our 10:30 am services and we thank God that over the last year we have seen new families and individuals join us, as well as non-Christians hear the gospel and some profess faith in Christ.

Please pray for:

1. Daily strength, especially for those who are finding this lockdown hard.
2. Conversions – that many would hear and respond to the gospel in these unusual times.
3. For the Lord to provide a larger location for our services as we are fast outgrowing the buildings we currently use.

 Andrew Young

SALFORD

We are thankful to have been able to continue meeting Lord's Day morning and evening, with ministry from Acts and Hebrews 11. In March, our minister Rev. Chris Statter became unwell. We continue to look to our Lord Jesus Christ to shepherd his flock and give thanks for his care shown through elders from elsewhere in the church.

 Rosemary Statter

SHEFFIELD

Hill Top Chapel reached its highest attendance for the morning and evening in-person worship services at the end of February 2021, since the lockdown began in March 2020. In March 2021, we will administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper to the joy of the people of God. Kevin is preaching in both Sabbath services and a new sermon series on Isaiah has begun. It is challenging to pastor many hungry sheep, while many sheep are also scattered. The reception of new members recently was a joy, but the challenges faced weekly on the pastoral front continue to be stretching. Psalm 93 constantly reminds us that 'the Lord reigns.' The covenant Lord's reigning and ruling in all matters is a shelter and canopy of peace for us all in this testing and trying time.

 The Sheffield session



SPOTLIGHT on the Churches

SOLIHULL

The Lord has blessed our open-air worship services in the park, which have continued until we went into full lockdown again. About 25 to 30 attended these services. The park is very busy; many people passed by and some stopped and listened, and all have seen that we are as committed as those playing football, about 100m from where we worship. It's been a great blessing for many of our members to be able to worship in person. The Lord has been good in providing good weather. We have had lots of visitors, many of whom have joined us from other churches which are not currently meeting in person at all. Pray that the Lord would provide for hungry souls.

The Lord has also blessed our online ministry with people from outside the church listening in. A friend of one church member has reportedly come to faith through this means, for which we praise the Lord. We have had the opportunity to use a church building on a temporary basis, for our afternoon services since October. We still need a permanent place to meet for worship.

One family has welcomed a new baby girl (in November), and we hope to be able to baptize her soon. We have also welcomed one of our regular visitors as a new member this year. We thank the Lord for growing His Church!

One of our elders has recently started Deacon training with some of the men in our church. Please pray that the Lord will raise up men in our church as deacons. Our mid-week prayer meetings and monthly men's and women's Bible studies continue

via Zoom. Our minister Stephen Dancer has just had a long overdue, well deserved break, and we pray the Lord will bless him as he takes up his task again.

 Rachel Morgan

SUNDERLAND

2021 began with a mixture of excitement over new opportunities, and discouragement to find ourselves again in lockdown with many members unable to join in person. We have also had to navigate a temporary change of accommodation. However, we rejoice in the Lord's lovingkindness in that we have been permitted to continue worshipping throughout. Our flock has been preserved from sickness, and we have enjoyed a remarkable degree of unity. Thankfully, we are about to make another temporary move to a new building very near our original meeting place. We look forward to being back on home turf, and to seeing familiar faces return in person as lockdown eases.

Like all churches, we have had to be more inventive with our outreach recently. High-definition videos of our sermons and studies are being uploaded onto YouTube, and we have begun a Facebook series on prayers in the Psalms. We are also hoping to hold evangelistic services over the Easter period. It is hard to attract a physical presence from the community at the moment, so we pray that this would be a blessed follow-on from our Christmas Eve Carol Service. The fields are white for harvest!

 Anna Hilton

SPOTLIGHT on the Churches

TRANÅS, SWEDEN - IMMANUEL

Last year was a sad year for our church in Tranås. Three families moved away from Tranås and one family left the church. The coronavirus restrictions made it impossible to have services at church: only eight people were allowed to come together. But in December a couple from Scotland moved to Sweden. They were looking for a place to live and found Immanuel Church in Tranås on the internet. Now, Ray Kelly and his wife Julia have settled down in Tranås and want to worship in our church. This is very encouraging for all of us and we thank the Lord for his blessing.

Now we are looking forward to a new year and hopefully it will be possible to have services again soon. Our church building is quite big, so if everybody has 10 square metres per person (the minimum distance for customers in shops), there will be enough space for all of us. At our Annual Church Meeting in February, we decided to start meetings for prayer and Bible studies with a maximum of eight persons every Sunday afternoon.

 Trygve Lundblad

ZÜRICH

We give thanks that we could have our first Lord's Day service on 7 February with a total of 27 in attendance. In Switzerland, whereas private gatherings were limited to five people, religious gatherings of up to 50 people can take place. Currently, we are only meeting for evening services due to the delay in moving into a more permanent venue for morning and evening worship.

On 28 February, we celebrated our first Lord's Supper after having been taught about it in the previous midweek meeting. Some of those attending told me that they really appreciated the deliberate teaching and actions of taking the Lord's Supper, which was so different from what they have experienced in other churches. We are still waiting to finalize a tenancy agreement for a church building and are hoping to start using this longer-term location from April. In the meantime, two evangelical churches have been so kind as to let us have temporary use of their venues for Sunday and Wednesday evenings. ○

 Florian Weicken

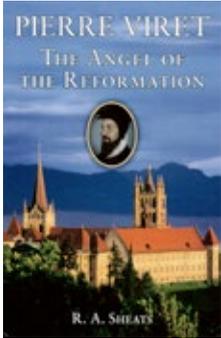




BOOK COMMENDATION



JOHN HOOPER



Two small publishers in the United States have teamed up to produce this, the first full-length biography in English of Pierre Viret (1511-1571). The result is both beautifully written and attractively

produced. The publishers' desire is to make the Swiss Reformation more widely known and they could hardly have done better than by making available this fine work. The hardback edition has four large sections of colour illustrations and photographs that are not present in the paperback, presumably omitted to reduce costs, but a regrettable loss.

Pierre Viret played a crucial role under God in reforming the churches of the French cantons of Switzerland, centred on Lausanne. There was hardly a man whom Calvin esteemed more highly, and none whom he desired more to have as his fellow-worker in Geneva, than Viret. Yet today he is largely unheard of outside French speaking circles. R. A. Sheats has done the Reformed churches of our day a valuable service in opening up Viret's life and work. Her book is a work of scholarship, with many extracts from primary and other sources translated from the original French, yet written in a style that makes it difficult

to put down. Reading it is made all the easier as one is attracted to the delightful Christian character of the book's subject. William Farel, John Calvin, and Pierre Viret were known as the Triumvirate. Calvin wrote, 'I think there has never been in ordinary life a circle of friends so heartily bound to each other as we have been in our ministry' (p. 105). Each possessed their own God-given attributes, in Viret's case a humble, winsome personality, earning him the epithet of the Angel of the Reformation. He was a man of true Christian grace who, though suffering two attempts on his life during his early ministry, bore no animosity toward his enemies. Repeatedly called on to mediate in the frequent religious disagreements that flared up in those days, there is much we can learn from this mild-mannered man who possessed the rare gift of being uncompromising in his convictions, and yet able to carry the profound respect of friend and foe alike.

Viret died in exile as leader of the Huguenots in the south of France. He was buried in an unmarked grave, but his legacy is a massive printed output of around 50 volumes averaging 500 pages each. He wrote in French rather than the usual Latin because he wrote for the believer in the pew. The author of this biography, Rebekah Sheats, has embarked on the translation of some of these works so I am sure we will hear more of Viret in coming years. In the meantime, this biography is an excellent place to start. o

Note: This book can be obtained in paperback in the UK from Amazon. The hardback is available in the USA from Zurich Publishing, Psalm 78 Ministries Home, and Reformation Heritage Books.

A Challenge from the past



THE CALL OF DUTY IN THE FACE OF DANGER

An extract from

Pierre Viret: *The Angel of the Reformation* (page 201)

Martin Luther's letter, 'Whether One May Flee From A Deadly Plague,' has helped many in the past year. When we see how the pastors of the Reformation conducted themselves, we are challenged indeed.

The year was marked by intense upheaval and severe tragedy. In April of 1564 a new terror filled the city; the plague had entered Lyon, and its horrors soon ravaged every soul of the frightened populace. During this outbreak of the plague it is recorded that 60,000 of the city's inhabitants perished in the space of a few months, approximately two-thirds of the population. Throughout the course of the scourge's deadly reign, Viret and the other pastors of Lyon, in a selfless attempt to bring solace to their flock, ministered daily to the dead and dying. Friend and foe alike received the comfort and aid of the gentle Reformers who strove to bring the hope of the Gospel to their horror-filled surroundings. o

IF ONLY THEY KNEW...

Public policy in the UK is being formed in a vacuum created by ignorance of the Bible. If only they would read Genesis, the nation's well-being and liberty, now so greatly in jeopardy, would be protected. Consider the following.



Genesis 1:1 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' The world and all in it was brought into existence by God and all men owe him everything, their lives, their love for the goodness he bestows, obedience, and worship. **Genesis 2:3** 'And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it.'

Genesis 1:27 'So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.' There are two sexes, male and female. God has designed it so, and he assigns to each person their gender. Gender is not fluid; it is not possible to switch; no one is 'trapped in the wrong body'. Bible truth about this is a shield that will protect youngsters, surrounded by the confusion of these days.

Genesis 8:22 'While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease.' Is there a climate emergency? Has God not promised that the seasons will continue? Remember King Canute? He could not stop the sea from coming in, and neither can all the nations of the earth control the climate of this world. This Word of God teaches us that the earth is not to be for ever. It needs to last

only until the appointed day when Christ will return – he says, 'Behold, I am coming quickly.' There will be new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

Genesis 9:3 'Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs.' God has granted to men the cattle for food. The 'war on meat' will rob us of this provision of an all-wise God for us.

Genesis 11:9 'Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.' To this we may add **Deuteronomy 32:8**: 'When the Most High divided their inheritance to the nations, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel.' The drive towards globalization is a rejection of this divine ordering of history. The Westminster Larger Catechism regards honouring our native country (patria) as obedience to the fifth commandment (Q. 124).

We must think biblically. Only in that way can we evaluate the ideas of the present day. ○



Blessing

INSTEAD OF CURSE

2 KINGS 4:38-44

The book 2 Kings contains some thrilling stories. Elisha raised from the dead the Shunammite woman's son (4:8-37) and he healed Naaman's leprosy (5:1-27). And then in between those two events is a short section which you might be tempted to jump over.

There was a famine, and the sons of the prophets almost poisoned themselves. But Elisha removed the 'death' from the pot of stew and after that multiplied the loaves and fed them (4:38-44). Just seven verses. Is there much to say about those events?

FAMINE

'The famine was in the land' (38). Famine was certainly something to dread. There was not enough to eat. That spelled disaster. People would grow weaker and some would die as a result of malnutrition. There was nothing they could do. The land had not produced a harvest.

Was this simply a natural event? No. Famine was a judgment of God upon the disobedience of his people. Covenant breaking was met with the curses of the covenant. In Leviticus we read: 'If you walk in my statutes...I will give you rain in its season, the land shall yield its produce...you shall eat your bread to the full' (Lev. 26:3-5). But 'if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God...your land shall not yield its produce...and you shall eat and not be satisfied' (Lev. 26:15, 20, 26). In Deuteronomy we read: 'If you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God...all these blessings shall overtake you...blessed shall be...the fruit of your ground' (Deut. 28:1-4); but 'if you do not obey...cursed shall be the produce of your land...you shall carry much seed out to the field but gather little in' (28:17f, 38-40). When we read that the famine was in the land, we are to understand that God had withheld his blessing and imposed his curse, because they had not obeyed his voice.

When we consider the sons of the prophets who were with Elisha – there were 100 of them – we see that they too were suffering in the famine. But these men were among the faithful remnant. They were not disobedient, but they were still suffering because they were part of a disobedient nation. We often see this, that the faithful suffer as a consequence of the judgment of God visited on the people. It was true of Jeremiah, and of Daniel, for example. Daniel

was an outstanding man of faith from his childhood, and yet he was among the very first to be carried away to Babylon when Judah's sins brought them into captivity. The same is happening today in Britain. Faithful Christians are suffering in the plague that God has sent on our country. Strong believers have died. Many of Christ's sheep are enduring suffering in a time of judgment.

The suffering of the sons of the prophets is highlighted by what happened at their meal (38-40). They were preparing a stew made of herbs, and so poor was their food supply that someone went to gather wild herbs. It got worse. He accidentally poisoned them. 'There is death in the pot.' It seemed as if God's judgment had homed in on the faithful and they could find no way out.

THE LORD TURNS CURSE TO BLESSING

But the Lord does not leave his children in distress. When we suffer in a time of trouble, the Lord does not overlook us. Notice four things.

They were at Gilgal (verse 38). We think that this was the Gilgal near Jericho, by the Jordan just above the Dead Sea. Now, places often have great significance for us. What do you associate with Fort Knox? What about Geneva? Well Gilgal was a significant place for Israel. When Joshua led them into the land, they camped at Gilgal and the Lord 'rolled away the reproach of Egypt' (Jos. 5:9). They had come from Egypt and the desert and were uncircumcised. The sign of the covenant had not been applied (see Gen. 17:14). At Gilgal that whole generation was circumcised and they kept the Passover for the first time in the land of Canaan. The failure to keep covenant was remedied. Gilgal was a place that signified the recovery of covenant obedience.

The LORD removed the death from the stew (verse 41). Elisha was an instrument in the hand of God. The flour cast in was perhaps instrumental, but it was the LORD who healed them. They were brought to the edge of death; the LORD spared their lives.

Then, a man from Baal Shalishah arrived (verse 42). We do not even know his name. And we do not know where Baal Shalishah was. But we know from the Talmud that nowhere else in Canaan saw the produce of the earth ripen as soon as at Baal Shalishah. It must have had a micro-climate that quickly ripened the grain. So he brought 20 little loaves and a little bag of grain. Now this was not enough to feed 100 men. Imagine being given one fifth of a Welsh cake and a few grains of barley! As small as this gift was, what is so important is that it was of the firstfruits of the land. In Exodus 23:19 and Leviticus 23:10, Israel was commanded to bring from the firstfruits an offering to the LORD. This man decided to do that by giving it to the Man of God and his disciples – as we today support the ministers of Christ and students for the ministry. This gift may have been small but it was an act of obedience. And it was an act of faith. How difficult it must have been to gather the first sheaves of the new harvest after a long famine, and, although feeling hungry, to bring that precious food to give it away, to the LORD. That was costly, and it spoke of his faith. This man, whose name we do not know, was one of that faithful remnant – the 7000 in Israel.

Finally, Elisha instructs his servant to feed the 100 men with those little loaves (verses 43f). He objects of course, because it is far

from enough to satisfy their hunger. But Elisha's order is an act of faith. He believes that the LORD can and will use this little offering to feed his children. And, yes, the LORD miraculously multiplies those loaves so that the men are full and there is food left over. See how the LORD is pouring out his blessing on his little faithful remnant.

THE MESSIAH

“

Jesus our Lord is the Source of blessing. And the way in which he is that is the cross. Bearing our sins, suffering the penalty of the broken law, he removed the curse, and obtained the blessing for us.

In the four Gospels we read that Jesus fed 5000 with five loaves and two small fish. On another occasion he fed 4000 in a similarly miraculous way. He had compassion on those who had sought him. He saw their need and he met it. But when we consider 2 Kings 4:38-44, we realize that Jesus was bringing to his disciples the blessings of the covenant. Jesus our Lord is the Source of blessing. And the way in which he is that is the cross. Bearing our sins, suffering the penalty of the broken law, he removed the curse, and obtained the blessing for us. The gospel is that there is blessing, life, joy, and favour, and it is to be obtained only in Jesus, once crucified, and now risen from the dead. We can go to no one other than our Lord Jesus Christ.

We may also learn from these examples of faith and obedience. The man from Baal Shalishah rendered to the Lord the obedience of faith. Elisha took that obedience and he by faith obtained the multiplying of heaven's blessing. That obedience was in face of difficulty. But we can see that the LORD does respond to our obedience, which he has created in us. The LORD honours those who honour him. Amen. ○



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Athanasius





Augustine:

HIS SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE CHURCH



REV. DR IAN HAMILTON

In the first paragraph of *The Confessions*, Augustine wrote, 'You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.'

Also, in his great work *The City of God*, 'Mankind is divided into two sorts: such as live according to man, and such as live according to God. These we call the two cities... The Heavenly City outshines Rome. There, instead of victory, is truth.' These striking words provide us with a revealing

entrée into the life of Aurelius Augustinus of Hippo.

John Calvin refers to Augustine 403 times in the *Institutes*. He did so because he recognized Augustine to be one of the Church's towering intellects, but also because he wanted to affirm that 'Scripture alone' did not mean 'bare Scripture'. The Church must always take account of, but not be shaped by, its history and heritage.

AUGUSTINE'S LIFE

He was born in 354 in Thagaste (present day Algeria) and died in 430. His mother Monica was a Christian, but his father was only baptized on his deathbed. For nine years Augustine followed Manichaeism. (This philosophy was a dualist corruption of Christianity. It taught that the world of light and the world of darkness were constantly at war with each other, catching most of humanity in the struggle). When his formal studies were completed, Augustine returned to his home-town of Thagaste to teach rhetoric. Augustine tried to hide his views from his mother, Monica, but when she found out, she threw him out of the house. In the year 386 Augustine was converted to Christ. Almost immediately he returned to North Africa, to the city of Hippo (Algeria). He was ordained a priest and in 396 elected bishop. During the rest of his life, Augustine engaged in theological controversies with Manichees, Donatists (rigourists) and Pelagians. He wrote extensively and widely. Some of his works are Christian classics. Augustine, like the proverbial curate's egg, is 'good in parts', though the parts are many!

AUGUSTINE THE CONVERT

For the first 30 or so years of his life, Augustine lived a deeply immoral life. How did this change?

1. The prayers of a godly mother.
2. An increasing realization of the emptiness of the philosophies of the world (Jer. 2:13).
3. The 'kindness' of Bishop Ambrose

(read Augustine's own account in *The Confessions*. Henry Chadwick's translation is excellent).

4. The power of the Word of God. *Tolle lege*, 'Pick up and read' (Again, read Augustine's own account in *The Confessions*).

DEFENDER OF THE GRACE OF GOD

B. B. Warfield, the late 19th/early 20th century Princeton theologian, claims 'it is Augustine who gave us the Reformation' since the Reformation is 'the triumph of Augustine's doctrine of grace over Augustine's doctrine of the Church.' How can Warfield make this claim? First, he distinguishes the ecclesiastical Augustine from what he calls the 'real' Augustine. The real Augustine was the Augustine of the doctrine of grace.

In the course of time, had time been allowed, it was inevitable, thought Warfield, that his inherited doctrine of the Church (principally its sacerdotalism) would have gone down before his understanding of grace, and he would have bequeathed to the Church not 'problems' but a thoroughly worked-out system of purely evangelical religion. In other words, if Augustine had lived longer, his 'doctrine of grace' would have collided with his doctrine of the church. And triumphed over it. (I think this is more Reformed wishful thinking than a sustainable critique.) Warfield insists that Augustine's assertions about grace were 'fundamentally inconsistent' with and 'limited' by his 'doctrine of the Church and Sacraments.' For example, Augustine states that post-baptismal sins are 'cured by penitence'. Therefore, Augustine's understanding of penitence is 'misleading

at best' because it 'create[s] a two-phase dealing with sin that contradicts the way the death of Christ works.'

Augustine's understanding of grace came to public attention in his controversy with Pelagius, a British monk, who, said Jerome, was 'befuddled by too much porridge'. When Pelagius read Augustine's words, *Da quod iubes et iube quod vis*, 'Lord give what you command, and then command what you will', he was furious. He considered the words an offence to God. It referred back to God, in fact what, according to Pelagius, is a task of man: God commands and man must deliver. *Da quod iubes?* No, says Pelagius, it is not God who must give, because otherwise the fault, in the case that man does not accomplish what God commands, would fall on God Himself.

In this all the distance between Augustine and Pelagius comes to light. It is a matter of two opposing concepts of the Christian life. While Augustine makes all good works derive from the gift that God himself makes of the Holy Spirit, for Pelagius it is man, instructed by Christ through teaching, example, and grace, understood only as a light for intelligence, who then decides for himself whether to do good or evil. There is no other help from God. Pelagius taught 'auto-soterism', self-salvation.

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My love for you, Lord, is not an uncertain feeling but a matter of conscious certainty...But when I love you, what do I love... Yet there is a light I love, and a food, and a kind of embrace when I love my God – a light, voice, odour, food, embrace of the inner man, where my soul is floodlit by light which space cannot contain, where there is sound that time cannot seize, where there is a perfume which no breeze disperses, where there is a taste for food no amount of eating can lessen, and where there is a bond of union that no satiety can part. That is what I love when I love my God.

THE CONFESSIONS

The Confessions is usually classified as an autobiography. It is autobiographical, but it is not an autobiography. In its structure, it resembles entries in a personal journal more than an autobiography. It is a memoir of significant events in relation to God:

Augustine records his own experience, as a heathen sensualist, a Manichean heretic, an anxious inquirer, a sincere penitent, and a grateful convert. He finds a response in every human soul that struggles through the temptations of nature and the labyrinth of error to the knowledge of truth and the beauty of holiness, and after many sighs and tears finds rest and peace in the arms of a merciful Saviour (Philip Schaff).

The Confessions is a 300-page prose prayer, punctuated with theological and personal reflections. It is a stunning piece of spiritual literature. There is barely a page that does not contain a sentence, phrase or paragraph that immediately compels attention. Most Christians know perhaps the section where he recounts his conversion in the garden in Milan. In prayer he recounts the story of his conversion to God, overjoyed with wondering thankfulness. But this note

of wondering thankfulness pervades almost the whole book, especially the latter half where he reflects prayerfully on the grace of God's love to him in Christ. Writing about the pear stealing of his youth, he reflected, 'Our real pleasure consisted in doing something that was forbidden. The evil in me was foul, but I loved it.' There is one passage that especially stands out both for its lyrical beauty and its affectional spirituality:

My love for you, Lord, is not an uncertain feeling but a matter of conscious certainty...But when I love you, what do I love? It is not physical beauty nor temporal glory nor the brightness of light dear to earthly eyes, nor the sweet melodies of all kinds of songs, nor the gentle odour of flowers and ointments and perfumes, nor manna or honey, nor limbs welcoming the embraces of the flesh; it is not these I love when I love my God. Yet there is a light I love, and a food, and a kind of embrace when I love my God – a light, voice, odour, food, embrace of the inner man, where my soul is floodlit by light which space cannot contain, where there is sound that time cannot seize, where there is a perfume which no breeze disperses, where there is a taste for food no amount of eating can

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True religion, that is the religion revealed in the Bible, the religion that originates in the Holy Trinity and finds its centre point and omega point in Jesus Christ, is natively experiential and affectional.

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Most of our life will be a steady, sure, unspectacular walk of faith. But there will be moments when 'Heaven comes down and glory fills my soul'.

lessen, and where there is a bond of union that no satiety can part. That is what I love when I love my God.

I am not sure what my response should be to such Samuel Rutherford-like spiritual ecstasy. Perhaps the best response is one of awed silence and internal reflection. Jonathan Edwards never wearied of telling his congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts, that 'true religion consists in spiritual affections.' Edwards, and before him Rutherford and Augustine, was simply echoing the teaching of God's word. True religion, that is the religion revealed in the Bible, the religion that originates in the Holy Trinity and finds its centre point and omega point in Jesus Christ, is natively experiential and affectional. It could hardly be otherwise. If the gospel, by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, unites us to Christ, we become, in some measure, partakers of his life. He is the vine and we are the branches (John 15:1-4). His life is our life; indeed he is our life (Col. 3:4).

It is because the Lord Jesus Christ is our life, that the Christian life cannot be affectionless, or mundane, or always even. There will necessarily be times of heightened outgoings of love to, and delight in, the Saviour. As it was with the Master, so it will be, must be, with the Master's servants. There were times in

Jesus' earthly life when his humanity was punctuated with moments of heightened spirituality: think of his baptism and his transfiguration. So it will be, or should be, with Christians. Most of our life will be a steady, sure, unspectacular walk of faith. But there will be moments when 'Heaven comes down and glory fills my soul', as the hymn-writer puts it.

AUGUSTINE THE THEOLOGIAN

The Trinity (De Trinitate)

Like the Greek church fathers, Augustine wrestled with how to make some sense of God's self-revelation as the One who is Three, the Three who is One. There was a confusion of theological terms between the Greek and Latin, but both were essentially saying the same thing but from different perspectives, both trying to express the inexpressible (read Robert Letham's outstanding work on *The Trinity*, a must read for serious Christians).

The City of God (De Civitate Dei)

written c. AD 413–426

This was a massive response to pagan claims that the sack of Rome by barbarians in 410 was one of the consequences of the abolition of pagan worship by Christian emperors. Augustine responded by asserting, to the contrary, that Christianity

saved the city from complete destruction and that Rome's fall was the result of internal moral decay. He further outlined his vision of two societies, that of the elect (The City of God) and that of the damned (The City of Man). These cities are symbolic embodiments of the two spiritual powers—faith and unbelief—that have contended with each other since the fall of the angels. They are inextricably intermingled on this earth and will remain so until time's end – Kingdom against kingdom.

AUGUSTINE THE EXPOSITOR

Augustine wrote voluminously. His biblical expositions cover 44 volumes. I have space only to mention one outstanding comment that has been etched on my memory. In his exposition of John 8:10-11, Jesus and the woman caught in the act of adultery, when all the woman's accusers have been shamed into walking away, Augustine writes, *Relicti sunt duo, misera et misericordia* - 'There remained but two, misery and mercy'. Is that not stunning?

Augustine must be read first with deep appreciation, so thought *all* our Reformation forebears, but always with a healthy, biblically informed caution. He got some things badly wrong. But my, O my, did he get many things right! ○



Augustine must be read first with deep appreciation, so thought *all* our Reformation forebears, but always with a healthy, biblically informed caution. He got some things badly wrong. But my, O my, did he get many things right!



TECHNOLOGY AND THE CHRISTIAN



KEVIN McGRANE

PART 1

'Electric Telegraphs...are not progress...I have my very serious doubts whether they are likely to be blessings to the whole human race, for many an age to come... I can conceive...some future world-ruler... at the centre of all telegraph-wires—a world-spider in the omphalos of his world-wide web; and smiting from thence everything that dared to lift its head, or utter a cry of pain.' — Charles Kingsley, 1867.¹

The word 'technology' has come a long way and is used in a wide and varied sense.² We may define technology as a

cultural activity in which man methodically transforms the natural world for practical ends. This transformation is ecological in the sense that technology is not additive: it introduces new habits and culture but destroys others; it may bring certain advantages to some people, but it will rob others. On the one hand technology 'plays so central a role in modern society that it is impossible to live responsibly without understanding it and its role in human affairs'.³ On the other, 'technology and its results are so much with us that, like the air we breathe, their presence and effects often go unnoticed and unanalysed. As a result, modern technology and all it entails



are often accepted by default'.⁴ Indeed, many consider technology itself to be value free, with only the uses to which it is put worthy of ethical consideration. But for the Christian, technology cannot be considered neutral or value free or unimportant because such a pervasive, powerful and transformative cultural activity must be normed against God's revealed will, and 'When...we no longer examine it, it gains the greatest opportunity to enslave us.'⁵ To understand technology, and thus act responsibly before God, Christians 'need to be aware of it, to comprehend its nature, and to recognize the role it plays in culture'.⁶

EFFECTS OF TECHNOLOGY

We learn what technology can do for us through the promises of advertising, reviews, operating manuals, and demonstrations. We may be induced to use it by relentless advertising and propaganda, and political, corporate, and peer pressure, often appealing to instant gratification, emotions, and baser motives, and at times legislative imperative. But the popular notion that technology does only what we choose for it is demonstrably false. We may certainly

control what it does for us, some intended purpose. But technology also has far-reaching unintended consequences, which profoundly change us in ways beyond our control: it does something to us personally, and to others, quite apart from what we intend, and 'the transformation technology brings happens regardless of why a person uses [it]'.⁷

Many Christians, for example, consider that they need only weigh what their choice of content might do to them. But this fails to appreciate that content is mediated by technology, and that 'the effect[s] of technology on the brain and body happen irrespective of the content'.⁸ And what technology does to us—to our bodies, our minds, our consciousness, our culture, our spirituality, our perceptions, our memories, our judgment, our understanding and cognition, our sense of knowledge, value, identity, and reality itself—is not always readily apparent, since its 'advantages'—what it does for us—are concrete but the 'disadvantages'—what it does to us—are usually abstract.⁹

To our perceptions, technology's promotion according to its alleged benefits entirely overshadows the evidence (which requires effort to discover, though it is abundant) that technology is potentially dangerous, and usually harmful in its actual implementation when considered in its overall effects.¹⁰ This should be a matter of concern for the life of the church, since

[W]e are all consumers of the fruits of technology and live in a society suffused with modes of thought shaped by technology...The sheer pervasiveness of technology implies that its effects have penetrated deeply into the fabric of society—into its political, economic, and social

processes and institutions, and into its cultural attitudes and values...the way societies look at and think about themselves and their world.¹¹

CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Given that technology is something in which we are immersed all our lives, and is one of the most formative influences on our personal and societal development, and on our perceptions, values and worldview, it is remarkable that a Christian perspective on technology has been so under-represented in the literature and is largely absent in church teaching.

Consider: can we name one Christian philosopher or theologian in our lifetime who has devoted significant attention to this most pervasive and influential aspect of modern existence? Many have written about *science*, and societies and committees exist to address such matters of faith and science and the ethics thereof. But what of technology? Little is heard from within the visible church of French Reformed philosopher and theologian Jacques Ellul (1912-94) and his seminal works on *La Technique* from the 1940s onwards;¹² or of Reformed philosopher Egbert Shuurman (b. 1937), whose PhD thesis fifty years ago extensively analysed Heidegger, Jünger, Ellul, Meyer, Wiener, Turing and other twentieth century philosophical writers on technology.¹³ Schuurman went on to write further useful monographs on technology and contributed to the valuable work *Responsible Technology: A Christian Perspective* (1986) edited by Stephen V. Monsma, which, being one of the few good and comprehensive English language works on the subject from a Reformed perspective, we quote extensively here.

As the IT (Information Technology) revolution dawned, the decade of the 1980s produced some of the best studies addressing the need to grapple with ethical and social issues around technology: the need was urgent otherwise all would be lost. Thus David Lyon in his London Lectures in Contemporary Christianity in 1985 warned that

Technology is fast outstripping the pace of political and social adjustment. Having accepted that IT is the only way forward we are now in danger of letting it slip beyond our control.¹⁴

But all really was lost with the arrival of the internet on a wide scale, which swept everything in its wake, including necessary Christian reflection on technology. And all the while that IT and new forms of media have been transforming the world and the church for over a generation, there has been a continual silence and absence of commentary and teaching from the Reformed community in respect of their ethical and theological implications. The resultant void was inevitably filled by the ingress of godless views and practices. Every man did what seemed right in his own eyes, and there has been a deadly seepage of idolatry into the church. Exceptions are rare. One such is John Fesko's slim book on the subject, *The Christian and Technology*

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(2020), which does not shrink from calling out this idolatry. Aimed at a popular level, it barely scratches the surface, but is nevertheless to be welcomed as an entry-level introduction in this present dearth.¹⁵

Our aim is to address issues concerning technology in general and will return to that enterprise in the next part in the series. But for the remainder of this article we look specifically at IT as a current exemplar of the myopic focus on perceived advantages to the exclusion of potential harms, both personal and societal.

— THE IT AND MEDIA REVOLUTION

Some draw a parallel between the IT revolution and the printing revolution 500+ years ago, and ask, What's the problem, since the disruptive technology of printing was a blessing to the spread of the gospel? This, as usual, frames the issue principally in relation to what printing did for us: it enabled books to be disseminated in higher volumes, in shorter time, at lower cost than manuscripts; it made books readily available and accessible, and, through evolution to more legible standardized fonts, it enhanced literacy. If not a catalyst, then it was at least an indispensable component of the Protestant Reformation, enabling wide

access to Bibles in the vernacular. All well and good. Less desirable was that the same medium equally facilitated wide dissemination of propaganda and inflammatory, pornographic, occultist, and blasphemous material that provoked revolutions, rebellions and infidelity. Roger L'Estrange, scourge of the Dissenters and himself a pamphleteer and newspaper publisher, reflected in 1660 that 'It has been made a question long ago, whether more mischief than advantage were not occasioned to the Christian world by the invention of typography. But never was any question more fully determined than this has been of late years' as a result of the evils that had been 'brought into the world and propagated by the assistance of the press', and by the 'influence they had' on those who presumed that 'all must needs be true that is in print.'¹⁶ When we today weigh up the overall impact of printing, we are prone to focus on the balance of what it did for us, rather than what it did to us in respect of our patterns of thought, our consciousness and psyche. However, '[t]echnologies are not mere external aids but also interior transformations of consciousness, and never more than when they affect the word.'¹⁷ What printing and typography did to us was to alter our cultural conception of time and space, and moved us away from our oral roots to a more visual domain. Ultimately it laid down an easy path to rationalism and technicism.¹⁸

PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Clinical psychologists like Professor Sherry Turkle have been at work for decades studying the impact of IT and media on perception, learning, cognition, memory, sense of identity, loneliness, despair, and addiction.¹⁹ Turkle reports that

We construct our technologies, and our technologies construct us and our times.

Computers don't just do things for us, they do things to us, including to our ways of thinking about ourselves and other people.²⁰

Psychologists have long identified that many of the effects of IT are psychologically harmful, even though our perceptions deceive us into thinking otherwise. We continually 'fell in love with what technology made easy. Our bodies colluded', notes Turkle. For example, multitasking 'feels good because the body rewards it with neurochemicals', and, like drug addicts, multitaskers merely deceive themselves since they 'don't perform as well on any of the tasks they are attempting'.²¹ Accordingly, psychological research should not be overlooked by Christians studying the ethics of technology, and due consideration should be given to the 'addiction...to the habits of mind that technology allows us to practise'.²²

NEUROPHYSIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Clinicians in neurotherapy and neurophysiology have also been investigating the effects of IT for decades, and their observations corroborate the findings of psychology. Neurotherapist Dr Mari Swingle similarly reports that we are in denial and are deceiving ourselves:

My last eighteen years working in a clinical environment...are telling me... [that] unlike excessive consumption or abuse of other substances such as alcohol, food, or drugs...digital media are rarely perceived as contributing to, never mind as causing, a specific ailment, condition, or conflict.²³

But the serious ailments, conditions, and conflicts are real enough, and now well documented:

Today the effects are confirmed, notably in the realms of sexuality, socialization, education and failure to launch. For children, adolescents, and youth, excessive use of digital media is now highly associated with learning disabilities, emotional dysregulation, as well as conduct or behavioural disorders. For adults, it is highly correlated with anxiety, depression, sexual dysfunction and sexual deviation, insomnia, social isolation, disaffected pair bonding, marital conflict, and compromised work performance. In clinical practice, I am also starting to note some rather frightening connections with thwarted emotional and cognitive development in the very young.²⁴

And what is the mechanism behind this from a neurophysiological perspective?

Our neurophysiological reaction, or functional adaptation, to the age of digital media is a higher state of arousal and...decreased abilities to self-quiet... coupled with a reduced ability...to observe, integrate information, and to be creative.

The neurophysiological processes that regulate mood and behaviour are deregulating. What we are left with is a massive behavioural-biological and, hence, cultural shifting...a concrete relationship to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, and mood regulation including anxiety, depression, anger management, other forms of addiction, and all behaviours on the obsessive-compulsive spectrum.²⁵

Having studied the evidence, John Fesko states, for devices with electronic screens:

They can be mind-numbing, medically harmful, and highly addictive, so much so that their creators keep them at arm's length and away from their children...From one vantage point, our use of screens looks mundane – virtually everyone uses them, so what's the harm? On the other hand, screens are a hotbed of addiction, or what the Bible calls idolatry.²⁶

Aside from the significant moral issues, on a purely practical level where the Word of God read and preached is concerned, we cannot afford to ignore the findings of studies that have repeatedly shown that taking notes or reading text using an electronic screen impairs both comprehension and memory compared to handwriting on paper, or reading from a printed page. Psychologists and neurologists have long been pointing this out,²⁷ and Fesko is right to summarize some of their findings in respect to comprehension:

Research has determined that digital reading...has a detrimental effect on reading comprehension.

We are inadvertently training ourselves to have shorter attention spans. Reading material on the internet also contributes to the diminishing ability to read sustained passages in books. When reading a web page an individual uses a different part of the brain in comparison to reading a physical book...[R]eading the internet or too many texts on your phone can re-wire your brain to the point where you are unable to comprehend a book. There is a lot of research that

proves conclusively that reading comprehension dramatically improves with the use of a physical book in contrast to e-versions.

Recent research has demonstrated that students who take notes by hand outperform their typing peers.²⁸

This exemplifies the age-old problem that we too readily adopt technologies for their perceived benefits without consideration of their long-term harms. As Turkle and Swingle point out in relation to information technology and internet connectivity:

We transgress not because we build new but because we don't allow ourselves to consider what it disrupts or diminishes.²⁹

The questions we now need to start asking ourselves are not what the technologies are positively contributing, as these contributions are rather evident, but rather what the technologies are replacing or taking away: an older technology, a behaviour, a skill, a relationship, our compassion, values...intelligence?³⁰

EMISSARIES OF POSTMODERNISM

As Christians, we should also be vitally concerned about matters of truth, knowledge and epistemology. We should be thankful that we have access to truth and knowledge through the word of God, which is to be disseminated to the world. But what if what is regarded as truth and knowledge is *changed* by being mediated by technology, so that we are moving (perhaps unknowingly) into the postmodern realm of 'subjective truth'? Is that a danger for the Reformed church? According to media ecologists,

psychologists, and theologians it is. Media ecologist Neil Postman advised in 1992 that

New technologies change what we mean by "knowing" and "truth"; they alter those deeply embedded habits of thought which gave to a culture its sense of what the world is like – a sense of what is the natural order of things, of what is reasonable, of what is necessary, of what is inevitable, of what is real.

New technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think about. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think with. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop.³⁵

The greatest danger in all of this is to be comfortable being swept along with it all. Sherry Turkle noted in 1995 that

[T]he Internet...[is] changing the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities, our very identities...We have come to see ourselves differently as we catch sight of our images in the mirror of the machine...A nascent culture of simulation is affecting our ideas about mind, body, self, and machine.

We are using life on computer screens to become comfortable with new ways of thinking about evolution, relationships, sexuality, politics, and identity.³²

All such matters are meant to be shaped by the word of God. Our bodies and minds are to be devoted to God, and we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, and not conformed to the world by adopting with alacrity its own mind-transforming technology. If the internet competes so powerfully for mastery against

a Christian worldview in us, how dreadful is its effect on those who do not know or submit to the word of God!

The psychological effects of technologies that immerse us in a virtual world are profound, with *epistemic consequences* shaping our sense of reality and our identity, as Turkle noted in 1995:

[C]omputers have become the postmodern era's primary objects-to-think-with, not simply part of larger cultural movements but carriers of new ways of knowing.

I see the Macintosh as a concrete emissary for significant elements of postmodern thought...the Macintosh style of simulated desktop has been our most widely disseminated cultural introduction to virtual reality.

The Internet...has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life. In its virtual reality, we self-fashion and self-create.³³

A potent example comes from Turkle's observations on children. Turkle had noted in the mid-1980s that the children she studied increasingly defined themselves 'not with respect to their difference from animals, but how they differ from computers.' Though in 1993 'media theorist Brenda Laurel noted that media such as film, radio, and television advertised the idea that sex and gender were identical, and the universe was bi-gendered', Turkle's research by 1995 was indicating that 'the ability of the Internet to change popular understandings of identity' was leading to the concept of gender fluidity, especially as many younger people experimented with virtual personas online:

One of the things that has come out of virtual experiences as different genders is that many have acquired a new sense of gender as a continuum.³⁴

MAN-MACHINE FUSION

In 1985 self-styled 'post-humanist' Donna Haraway drafted a manifesto for a new world of 'technologically mediated societies' under 'the necessary dominance of technics'. Christian ethics was to be outlawed in this world of 'transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore' to produce chimeric fusions of humans and machines ('cyborgs').³⁵

Turkle reported that by 1995 'The traditional distance between people and machines has become harder to maintain':

As human beings become increasingly intertwined with the technology and with each other via technology, old distinctions between what is specifically human and specifically technological become more complex. Are we living life on the screen or life in the screen? Our new technologically enmeshed relationships oblige us to ask to what extent we ourselves have become cyborgs, transgressive mixtures of biology, technology, and code.³⁶

But by 2011 it was no longer necessary to wonder about it:

Within a decade, what seemed alien was close to becoming everyone's way of life, as compact smartphones replaced the cyborg's more elaborate accoutrements. This is the experience of living full-time on the net, newly free in some ways, newly yoked in others. We are all cyborgs now.³⁷

A decade later still, smartphones and other internet-connected devices have become so intertwined with our brain functions, and Big Tech have so interpenetrated our minds along Haraway's vision of cyborg fusions of humans and machines that Tristan Harris, former manager and 'ethicist' at Google, speaking in 2020 could make the very apt observation:

Three billion people have a brain implant that's a remotely controlled brain, because—especially in the

coronavirus times—we are relying on these things to make sense of what's reality out there in the world. They have become the fabric for our sense-making and the fabric of our choice-making, the fabric of how children develop.³⁸

The next part in this series will address principal errors that have given rise to the mistaken notion that technology is neutral, thereby facilitating the drift to an idolatrous technological society. ○

¹ In his lecture 'The Explosive Force' at the Royal Institution, January 19, 1867.

² In the ancient world 'technology' (Greek τεχνολογία) meant the systematic treatment of an art. The word was transliterated into English (via Latin *technologia*) in the sixteenth century. The useful English cognate 'technics', meaning the 'theory, principles, or systematic study of an art or process, its technical details, rules, or methods', retains much of the original meaning of 'technology', but is now rarely used. Increasingly, the word 'technology' subsumed the meaning of 'technics', i.e. *principles*, as well as the *practice* of technics itself (increasingly in terms of the mechanical and industrial arts) and the *products* thereof, i.e. specific technical embodiments.

³ *Responsible Technology: A Christian Perspective* (1986) by the Fellows of the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship, edited by Stephen V. Monsma.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ J. Dyer, *From the Garden to the City: The Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology* (2011).

⁶ Monsma, *op cit.*

⁷ Dyer, *op cit.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ J. Ellul, *Le bluff technologique* (1988), translated by Bromiley in 1990.

¹⁰ We are not here referring to the mainly spurious environmental impacts imagined by climate alarmists and the like, but harms to the human psyche and the fabric of society.

¹¹ Monsma, *op cit.*

¹² Especially aspects of *Présence au monde moderne: Problèmes de la civilisation post-chrétienne* (1948), and in more detail *La Technique: L'enjeu du siècle* (1954), *Le système technicien* (1977) and a string of other works, mainly from a sociological aspect, some translated by theologian Geoffrey W. Bromiley.

¹³ *Techniek en toekomst: Confrontatie met wijsgerige beschouwingen* (1972).

¹⁴ Published as *The Silicon Society: How will Information Technology Change our Lives?* (1986)

¹⁵ Others that delve deeper are John Dyer, *From the Garden to the City: The Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology* (2011), and Derek C. Schuurman, *Shaping a Digital World: Faith, Culture and Computer Technology* (2013).

¹⁶ R. L'Estrange, *A Rope for Pol* (1660).

¹⁷ W.J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982).

¹⁸ Many researchers have noted that print represented

an abstraction of thought that gave precedence to the modes of thinking prevalent in rationalist philosophy, realistic fiction, and scientific materialism.

¹⁹ Popular works include *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (1984), *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995), *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (2011), *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (2015).

²⁰ S. Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995).

²¹ S. Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (2011).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ M. K. Swingle, *i-Minds: How and why constant connectivity is rewiring our brains and what to do about it* (2019).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ J. Fesko, *The Christian and Technology* (2020). Rather famously, Steve Job's (Apple CEO) biographer lived in with his family and noted that devices with electronic screens—the very devices Jobs was promoting—were never once in evidence.

²⁷ As shown by fMRI scans, the hippocampus, associated with memory formation and retrieval, the parahippocampal region, strongly associated with processing of contextual information, and the ventral striatum, involved in estimation of value, exhibit much greater activation with physical media compared to digital.

²⁸ Fesko, *op cit.* The outperformance is especially marked in comprehension and memory retention.

²⁹ Turkle, *Life on the Screen* (1995).

³⁰ Swingle, *i-Minds: How and why constant connectivity is rewiring our brains* (2019).

³¹ N. Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (1992).

³² Turkle, *Life on the Screen* (1995).

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ 'Manifesto for Cyborgs', *Socialist Review*, 80 (1985) 65–108.

³⁶ Turkle, *Life on the Screen* (1995).

³⁷ Turkle, *Alone Together* (2011).

³⁸ Harris recounts from his own experience at Google how the fabulously rich media barons make their offerings more penetrative, addictive, and mind controlling by engaging 'a thousand people on the other side of the screen whose job it is to break down the self-regulation you have.'



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Westminster Presbyterian Theological Seminary

ΑΝΤΕΧΟΜΕΝΟΝ ΤΟΥ ΠΙΣΤΟΥ ΛΟΓΟΥ

Holding fast the faithful word

A photograph of a Black man with a shaved head, wearing a red sweater over a collared shirt, smiling and looking to his left. He is in a library or study, with bookshelves filled with books in the background. The lighting is warm and focused on him.

*“We can preach the Gospel no further than we have
experienced the power of it in our own hearts.”*
George Whitfield

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