

What Is So Holy about
Scripture?:

Listening to Scripture in a
Technological Age

By
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TECHNOLOGISM: A WAY OF LIFE

On vacation in Britain, a married couple marveled at the sight of one of Scotland's most beautiful waterfalls, cascading through the bleak and rugged wilds of Glencoe. "Isn't that breath-taking" gasped the wife, struck with awe by this wonder of Creation. "They ought to put a turbine in there to create electricity" replied her husband, "Look at all that power going to waste."

The husband and wife had two very different ways of understanding the same scene. The wife's was an aesthetic appreciation; the husband's a technological concern. These ways of seeing - and doubtless there are many more - are equally valid, and it would seem arbitrary to suggest that one is better than another. But what if the technological view of the world came to eclipse all others? What if our technological desire to make use of the world around us dominated us so completely that we came to see God's Creation as little more than a source to be controlled?

This technological worldview presents a particular challenge to the Christian practice of reading Scripture. Scripture is never read in a vacuum. God has placed us into a specific time and place in world history, in a technological era that subscribes to a belief that technology can save us, that technology - given sufficient time and resources - can solve all our problems. The ways we relate to the people and things around us are largely shaped by this technological mindset, and it has a profound effect upon the way that we read Scripture.

Technology has, of course, been of tremendous benefit to humanity. Particularly in the industrialized world, our quality of life has improved enormously with the advent of such things as mass production of household appliances and the ability to communicate with ease on a worldwide level, not to speak of the new lease on life brought to many by medical technology. The list could go on. And having

witnessed these great technological advances, we seem justified in placing our faith in technology to provide further and greater happiness for all humanity.

There is, however, a negative side to technology and it concerns the widespread implicit belief that technology offers us *all* that is necessary for human growth, creativity, and relationship. This preoccupation with technology, or ‘technologism’, interprets everything and everyone we encounter as ‘raw material’ for potential technological manipulation and control.

TECHNOLOGISM, SCRIPTURE AND INDIVIDUALISM

Technologism is problematic because it is at odds with some basic Christian convictions. For example, it turns stewards of God’s Creation into ‘masters of the universe’, children of God into ‘human resources’, and Holy Scripture into a convenient source of ‘proof-texts’ for affirming what we already know and believe. In the hands of well-meaning technologists, Scripture becomes something to be manipulated, mastered and controlled. Treated as a resource at human disposal, Scripture loses its ‘holiness’, its ‘otherness’, its ability to answer back in unexpected and challenging ways. It becomes a puppet on the hand of a ventriloquist.

Today’s biblical ventriloquists include the Christian millionaires who portray Christ as ‘the key to my success’, Christian business leaders who describe Him as ‘the Managing Director’, and Christian marketers who promote Him as ‘the Great Salesman’. The temptation to master Scripture by drawing from it a justification for one’s own lifestyle extends through all avenues of modern life. The earth-shattering Scriptural demands of servanthood, commitment and sacrifice are re-cast in terms which, while presenting some masochistic mini-challenge to individuals, are actually no major threat to the self-centered lifestyle that

dominates the modern West. Scripture is no longer Holy Scripture because technologism has mastered the method of carefully defusing its explosive charge. One of the notorious achievements of technologism is that it has succeeded in domesticating Christ and His teaching.

Central to this domestication is a discomfort with ‘otherness’. ‘Otherness’ here refers not simply to the acknowledgement that other people see things differently. Rather it concerns the recognition that our securities, achievements and ambitions can be called into question by listening to people whose ways are profoundly different from ours. Technologism responds to this recognition by treating the other (nature, human beings, God) as a threat that must be controlled and contained. How do we protect ourselves from the dangers posed by ‘otherness’? It treats the other as something that simply gets in our way, and uses technology (and Scripture) to protect ourselves, allowing no one to threaten or challenge our personal space or point of view. It attempts to protect us from the vulnerability of human relationships. “That’s your space, this is mine. Stay over there. That is just your opinion; you cannot impose it on me.” Behold individualism. Behind technologism’s domestication of otherness is individualism.

Individualism retreats from ‘otherness’. Christianity, however, demands that we embrace the challenge of otherness, because no one embodies such profound otherness as God Himself: ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways’ (Isaiah 55:9). However, we cannot claim a nice, safe, direct line of openness to the otherness of God without being open to the otherness of other people. As John reminds us, ‘anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen’ (I John 4:20).

Scripture serves as a living voice that confronts the people of God with something ‘other’ than their own preconceived ideas and notions. This is what it means to say

Scripture is 'Holy' (which means 'set apart', 'different'). Scripture is not different from other books merely in that it is perhaps more religious in tone or profound in content. Its difference, its holiness, resides in the demand with which it confronts us that we are open to the (often uncomfortable) presence of 'otherness', because no one and nothing is more wholly 'other' than God Himself. Individualism, on the other hand, is the name for humanity's retreat from 'otherness'. Individualism is premised on warding off the other. Thus, individualism and Holy Scripture are totally incompatible.

This is by no means to say that we are not in some sense 'individuals'. Our personal identity is not destroyed but restored by Christ. If however, we foster a spirit of independence from others, then we are in danger of falling prey to the individualism that is at odds with the purposes of the covenant God who said "it is not good for Adam to be alone". The subtle danger of individualism is that it provides a deeply tinted lens through which one sees the world, whilst maintaining the illusion that the way one sees things is just 'the way things are'. Scripture does not touch the rugged individualist who is impregnable to the challenge of 'otherness'. And should anyone challenge the individualists' interpretation of Biblical truths, a quick retreat is made to the sanctuary of the well worn individualist creed: "that's just between you and God." Who's to say that your interpretation is better than mine?

To summarize the problem, if technologism is concerned with preserving and protecting the individualist from the otherness of the world around us, then we lose the ability to listen seriously to anything that will not be mastered, including God's Word. Unless this idolatrous worldview is seriously questioned, it will dominate our reading of Scripture, and prevent us from being exposed to the sheer and gracious otherness of God.

THE MEANING OF COMMUNITY

Technologism and individualism combine to belittle the importance of real human relationships between people. Technologism warps our relationships with others by turning them into manipulable things, while individualism distorts our relationships with others by attempting to retreat from them. Caught up in a worldview that fears the vulnerability of real friendship, God's Holy Scripture will not confront us as a people, only serve us as individuals. If we are to listen to Scripture as God's holy Word to God's people, we must be gathered not as technologically savvy individualists but as a community. Community, however, has become a trendy word, and we must make sure we know what we mean when we use it.

Holy Scripture was written by and for those living in community, and it can make no real sense to those who trust in their individual autonomy. Jesus saw the climax of Old Testament commandments in the call to love God *as well as* one's neighbor (Luke 10:27), thus linking our commitment to God with our commitment to the community in which we have been placed. The command to love our neighbor runs also throughout the New Testament, and is the foundation of a variety of commands directed towards 'one another'. Love one another (John 15:12; Rom. 13:8; I Thess. 4:9; I John 3:11; 4:7, 11, 12; 2 John 5); have concern for one another (I Cor. 12:25); bear with one another (Eph. 4:2); submit to one another (Eph. 4:21); confess your sins to one another (James 5:16); forgive one another (Col. 3:13). The context for these commands is the Christian community, the body of Christ.

Community can be a rather blunt tool if used without care or precision. A community of people is not automatically a heaven-blessed scriptural hearing-aid. After all, if my community is simply a gathering of like-minded individuals who enjoy the same brand of religious entertainment then it is better described as a religious

consumer association. Reading with such people might well buttress our pride, rebellion and idolatry, as we read alongside folk who confirm us in our prejudice, encourage us in our quest for self-fulfillment and affirm us in our desire for control. Such a community is merely an amplified form of individualism and grotesquely self-deluding.

The truly Christian community, on the other hand, encompasses otherness in ways that expose us to other perspectives while challenging our own prejudices. Christian community functions at various levels. There is the worshipping community that assembles each Lord's Day for worship. It may belong to a larger denomination or network, and it is certainly part of the church catholic. It may include smaller groups that meet to pray and encourage one another (see Mt. 18:20), or for group Bible study. Congregations or congregants may also find themselves involved in ecumenical endeavors that engage Scripture. At each of these levels, the community that embodies Christ knows how to listen in two important ways.

Firstly, community members know how to listen to other folk within the community. By listening of course, is not meant the ability to keep your mouth shut for long enough for the other person to finish their sentence before you wade in with what you already know you were going to say anyway. Rather, listening is the readiness to be transformed by encounter with another person. This listening is a no-go area for individualists who want to remain safe from otherness. However, if we refrain from ever upsetting anyone or being upset, avoid conflict at all costs, and retreat from all uncomfortable conversations then we are not living holy lives. That is, we are shying away from the challenge and redemptive promise that holy 'otherness' brings. We cannot be disciples without self-denial, and a community of disciples will be one that places a question mark over the self-confidence of the individual. After all, disciples of Christ will need to confide not just in

themselves (the literal meaning of self-confidence) but in others. For example, when my Christian friends lovingly challenge me about my own behavior my first reaction is usually defensive. However, I thank God for those with the courage and care to confront me and the readiness to cope with my defensiveness, because in a most profound way, they have been Christ to me. And as a result, I am graciously enabled to grow in holiness. Such loving confrontation makes me better than I otherwise would be. The courage to confide in others, the grace to confront them and the humility to listen all are characteristic of the community in which Holy Scripture is heard.

Secondly, the community as a whole needs to learn how to listen to people from beyond the boundaries of that community. No specific Christian community has a monopoly on the truth. Instead, it is ready to listen fully to Christians and others who might bring a totally different worldview. The divine otherness with which Holy Scripture confronts the reading community is not likely to be heard by a community that cannot listen to people who are 'other'. This means that we 'do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained *messengers* without knowing it' (Heb. 13:2). 'Strangers' are not just unfamiliar folk who nevertheless share our mindset, but who, by simply representing another way of living, question the supremacy of our own.

Such questioning is experienced by congregations that offer genuine hospitality to the homeless, immigrant families, or refugees. Or by more affluent congregations that form partnerships with churches from poorer regions or countries. The mutual exchange of care and visitation between such congregations can reveal to us the nature of our own community in new ways. We might also consider shared Bible studies with those from other ethnic and social backgrounds, or take part in Jewish-Christian discussion groups.

Sometimes the best way to learn about our own church culture is to listen to those who don't belong to it. Listening to people from beyond our own community does not mean that we allow them to determine how we read Scripture. It simply means that we are ready to be impacted by their questions and critique, in the knowledge that they might just be the unwitting bearers of a divine word. What is more, by listening the Christian community may well be bearers of a divine word.

SUMMARY AND APPLICATION

If we belong to a Christ-centred community of listening, our hearing might be restored, as our lives are characterised by a desire for radical listening. To listen is to demonstrate one's readiness to be transformed, and a community of listening will be one where brothers and sisters in Christ are transformed by their encounter with one another. How then would members of this listening community relate in practical ways?

The seven practical guidelines offered below are not to be read as a method, but rather as descriptions of how members of the Christian community engage in communication. Holy Scripture takes its place within this context of gracious communication. Encompassing all these Scriptural guidelines is the one overriding command to love both God and our neighbor (Luke 10:27). Holy Scripture cannot be lifted out of this context of loving relationships and analyzed as a historical artifact, plundered for spiritual gems or wielded as an oppressive tool without losing its holiness. Holy Scripture plays its proper and dynamic role only in the life of the community that hears these several exhortations, each of which highlights an important aspect of what it means to listen.

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

(Ephesians 4:21)

Throughout the pages of Scripture, there is one prominent sin which quietly simmers below the surface of all others. Ironically, it is regarded by many as a virtue. That sin is pride (e.g. Pr. 8:13, Dan. 4:7, James 4:6), that is humanity living as though it has no need of God’s grace. Such pride may surface in all sorts of different ways among different people. But it is certainly fostered and exacerbated by the successes of technology. As technologically enabled self-sufficiency increases, so does our pride. Ultimately, we come to believe that we have no need of God.

Conversely, if there is such a thing as *the* Biblical virtue, it is humility (e.g., II Chron. 7:14, Pr. 3:4, Luke 18:17). Our true capacity to hear the Word of God arises out of our willingness to practice humility. Hearing the gracious voice of God is not a skill that we must learn to master, but a gift we must learn to receive. The humble attitude that enables radical listening is demonstrated by John the Baptist’s response to having witnessed Christ: ‘he must become greater, I must become less’ (John 3:30). Humility is learned only through the relationships in which God has placed us. It was demonstrated in a worship service in which the first half was led by the senior citizens’ group and the second by the young people’s fellowship. The old folk used music and readings which they knew would be appreciated by the young people. The young people similarly chose hymns and a manner that would be appreciated by their elders. Both groups put the needs of the other above their own and the worship service itself bore the fruit of humility.

If we always want our own way and are unable to submit to one another we will be unable to submit to Scripture. Humility is crucial to true listening and requires that we willingly allow ourselves to be both helped and challenged by one another.

“Confess your sins to one another.” (James 5:16)

Pride can remain firmly intact if we restrict the confession of our sins to the safety of our private prayer time. However, if we can make a habit of confessing our sins to a trusted brother or sister in Christ, then we encounter the seriousness of our sin in a disturbing yet ultimately liberating way. This both requires and results in practical humility. Such confession helps us to recognize that the constant gravity of sin calls our interpretive pride into question. As we practice self examination, the assistance of another person, helps us to accept and confront the self-delusion that sometimes marks our reading of Scripture. Such confession is demonstrated through the habit of forming “accountability partnerships” where two friends might spend some time perhaps at a Christian retreat centre on a regular basis, simply to pray with one another about how they are or are not growing in Christ. These partnerships have to be fostered carefully, but often bear much fruit, where both friends come with a readiness to hear and speak confession – a relationship of listening. Listening to one another makes us better able to listen in all the aspects of our lives that are addressed by Scripture. In short, while technologism serves to make us feel secure, confessing our sins is the abandonment of such security.

“Be holy because I am holy.” (Leviticus 11:44)

In modern times, we have largely come to accept that religion is a *private* affair that has little to do with *public* life in the everyday world. This has led us to believe that holiness affects mainly our minor choices of private moral behavior (the way we use our spare time, the way we relate to our family, our personal habits and so on). It is for this reason that we often forget that holiness is something that also should affect our public life (our choice of career, vacation, home and car, the way that we invest our money and so on).

Holiness surfaces in the sort of lifestyle that sharply contradicts the entire value system of secular society. For instance, if I work all the hours God sends so that I can afford to buy my family a luxurious ‘four-by-four’ off-road vehicle because most folk in our neighborhood now own one, I might announce this as a God-given opportunity and be regarded as an honest hard-working Christian. However, in pursuing this one ambition I will be breaking eight of the Ten Commandments (the possible exceptions being murder and adultery). As long as I live to fulfil this little ambition, then when I read about Sabbath commands, about the dangers of wealth, about false idols, covetousness and greed, I will find myself having to invent or discover ways of reading Scripture that pose no threat to my ambition. Scripture would then become my servant rather than my guide, and I would no longer be able to hear it. The modern world may see me as a fine God-fearing moral man, because I will have conformed to its model of morality, but that will not make me holy. My *private* morality may appear faultless, but the *public* morality to which I would conform is godless. As the great Swiss Theologian Karl Barth once said, ‘one may be a non-smoker, abstainer and vegetarian and yet be called Adolf Hitler.’ It is all too easy to find a way of reading Scripture that justifies the lifestyle we have chosen. It is much harder to allow Scripture to challenge that lifestyle with something entirely ‘different’, which after all is what ‘holy’ means.

“Be still and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10)

Technology has allowed us to make great breakthroughs in our control of physical *space*, but we remain largely helpless before the unstoppable march of *time*. All that we can do is hurry through our days, trying to cram our time so full of useful achievements that we think we have made the most of our lives. Even our supposed relaxation remains plugged into our hyperactive non-stop culture. Via TV, radio and

internet the consumerist demands of the market place consume our every moment. The danger is that we will pass from this world without ever really stopping to consider why we came into it.

C.S. Lewis once said that in this world, every split second and every square inch is claimed by God and counter-claimed by Satan. In a world that is in such a hurry, in which we find it a constant struggle to keep up with ourselves, God commands us simply to ‘stop’. This is the original meaning of the Hebrew verb for Sabbath. For many today, it will mean making a diary entry to spend time in quiet with God and preferably with another person. This may mean that for half an hour a week or maybe a day each month, we will go for a walk, or visit a library, college or monastery with the sole purpose of prayerfully considering where we are in our walk with God.

To observe Sabbath is to ‘unplug’ from the intrusive reach of a world that tries to squeeze us into its busy schedule, as we seek our God-given place within the Creation. Only by celebrating Sabbath do we find our true identity as we enter the time God has for us. One Rabbi called the Sabbath celebration ‘a palace in time’. It is a palace we must enter often if we expect to become attuned to the voice of God which addresses us through Holy Scripture.

“Pray without ceasing.” (I Thessalonians 5:17)

Reading Scripture and praying are not two alternative ways of communicating with God. We pray in a scriptural way, and we read Scripture in a prayerful way. Reading Scripture is one aspect of God’s gracious invitation to communion with Him, and as such is meaningless if it is not anchored to a life of prayer.

But like Bible reading, so prayer can be distorted by technologism and individualism. Many Christians turn prayer into the search for a proper technique by which to

transform reality or even manipulate God. It becomes a lever by which we pry open the future, or a wrench to repair our present. Worse, the scope of much Christian intercession is no wider than self or the community of those similar to me.

Roberta Bondi has suggested one way in which prayer can begin to deliver us from such distortions. She notes the importance of exploring, through prayer and meditation, the full scope of the “our” at the beginning of the Lord’s Prayer. As we begin to see just who is included there—not just family and friend, but neighbour and stranger and enemy—we are confronted with the holy otherness of God. A God whom no technology can manipulate and no technique can manage. Ceaseless prayer along these lines opens us to hear the startling and strange voice of God, both in prayer and in Scripture.

“Search the Scriptures for they bear witness to me.”

(John 5:39)

We read Scripture in order to know Christ. Though chapter and verse help us to find our way around Scripture, we seek primarily to understand Bible passages as part of the overarching story of how God deals with His people. This means that we treat each individual book with the respect it deserves. Flicking through its pages and beginning to read at a random verse is no way to hear Scripture. Apart from the fact that we would rarely treat any other book with such lack of respect, the Bible is full of unpleasant things happening to people. The story of the woman who tried this method and first read ‘Judas hangs himself’, before trying again only to read, ‘go thou and do likewise’, should warn us against this practice.

The books of the Bible should be read as books, and understood as pointing ultimately to Christ. Each one unfolds a sequence of the cosmic drama of God’s covenant commitment to His people. For instance, we read books like Leviticus with an awareness of how God’s faithfulness and

human lawlessness reach their climax in the death and resurrection of Jesus. We read books like I & II Chronicles remembering how God fulfills in Jesus the promises he made to Israel. A radically Christ-centered reading of Holy Scripture constantly offers, at the very least, a glimpse that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself” (II Corinthians 5:19).

It takes little genius to create an idolatrous God in our own image, and then go looking for him in Scripture. Scripture can be used to justify all manner of selfish, greedy or warlike pursuits. There are plenty of manuals available that offer sure-fire techniques for discovering the Jesus we have always wanted, a Jesus who exists solely to boost our self-esteem, to grant our quest for self-fulfilment or to ensure the success of our business. Such techniques are happy to talk about a convenience-store Christ who is there at our disposal, but fail to point to the Christ who places a question mark over our highest ambitions, our moral achievements and even our Christian accomplishments when he calls us to take up our cross and follow Him. No technology can make this convenient! We do not read Scripture so that we can get Christ to follow our lead; we read in order that we might be faithful followers of Christ.

“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” (James 1:22)

New Testament Scholar Tom Wright compares Scripture to a newly discovered Shakespeare play with most of the fifth and final act being lost. The first four acts represent Creation, Fall, Israel and Jesus, while the New Testament forms the first part of the fifth act, the unfinished story of the church. If the play were to be performed, it may be best to invite some sensitive, experienced Shakespearian actors to immerse themselves in the first four acts, so that they could improvise for their performance of the final act – and complete the story for themselves. To do so would require a

recognition of the authority of the text, and would highlight the importance of living out our understanding of Scripture, that ‘hearers’ of the word are inevitably also ‘doers’ of the word.

This illustration may best be understood alongside the old illustration of how the Holy Spirit equips us for mission: If I were asked to write a Shakespeare play, it would be impossible because I am not a sixteenth century English literary genius. But if the spirit of Shakespeare were to enter me, I would then have the tools for the task.

Taken together, these pictures show how Scripture invites us into the story of how God loves, saves and guides his people. It is in living Scripture out, that we truly understand it. A fine example is found in the story of a Christian woman who learned that she had only weeks to live, and found herself thrust into extreme fear. Into her husband’s head one night came the words ‘perfect love casts out fear’ (I John 4:18). Rather than simply try to cheer her up with a Bible verse however, he decided to make this verse true for her, by striving to show perfect love to her. His wife lived for another year, during which time his presence was a channel of God’s peace and comfort. Before she died she discovered for herself, through her husband’s action, that perfect love casts out fear. To interpret Scripture is to perform it.

CONCLUSION

Technologism and individualism can seriously damage the sense of hearing that is central to the Christian life. But if Christians are unable to listen to others, they will finally be unable to listen to the voice of Scripture.

Technologism impairs our hearing as it encourages us to treat ‘things’ as though they were people and people as though they were ‘things’. For the technologist, Scripture is a source of proof-texts to be mined, rather than a source of otherness to be heard (part 1). Individualism, on the other

hand, sacrifices our inter-dependence with other people for the sake of our independence from them. If individualists seek security in isolation from the toughness of real personal relationships, then they will never be able to listen fully, either to others or to Scripture (part 2). However, Christians are active members of the body of Christ, immersed in transforming friendships with one another and with God. To be a part of this Christian community is necessarily to engage in true listening at every level, to outsiders, to brothers and sisters in Christ, to Scripture and to God (part 3). Scripture suggests ways that the Christian community can shape itself and its members for readiness to hear both the comfort and the challenge carried by the voice of Holy Scripture (part 4).

Scripture is not the record of what God once said when he was taken by the mood to speak. Rather, Holy Scripture takes its place within the economy of God's ongoing, gracious, transforming, self-communication with His people. To understand Scripture is to 'stand under' the cascading waterfall of God's ever-flowing grace, as it falls on us from above, challenges us from beyond and transforms us from within.

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Suggestions for Further Reading

Stephen Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading In Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Wipf and Stock, 1998).

Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Abingdon, 1993).

Philip Kenneson, *Life On the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community* (InterVarsity Press, 1999).