Technology: Progress and Pitfalls

Part 1 of 2: The Church and Social Media
with
Release Date: June 2015
Welcome to The Table where we discuss issues of God and culture and our topic today is technology and how we use it and in some cases how we abuse it, particularly, in talking about fellow Christians. We wanna talk a little bit about social media and etiquette and the way in which we interact with each other and what that says to people who interact over media and look at how Christians interact with one another. My guest today is Gerry Breshears, who is professor of theology, that's theology of all kinds, Systematic, Biblical, and any other category you can throw into theology, at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon, so he's with us by Skype with all the technological disadvantages that come with that. That's, I guess, where we start. Sometimes technology is great, but sometimes it can kill us. Let me start off this way and I'm going to have a little bit of fun, just to launch in and that is, is technology in the Bible? How do we talk about it? Let's talk about the, I guess, technically speaking, the hermeneutics of even addressing this topic from a Biblical angle.

Actually, technology is the Bible. In Genesis, Chapter 11, we see that the people of Babel have gotten some new technology, they've got the brick and they've got mortar of a different kind and they're able to put together the Tower of Babel and that's new technology. To update the story, all I have to do is put in an iPhone 6 or iPhone 7 and we've got it.

That was an answer I wasn't anticipating, so that's good. That means you're going to be a great conversationalist.

I read the Bible, Darrell, I read the Bible.

It's true, technology is about the way in which we put things together and the various ways we go about achieving that and, of course, part of the creation mandate is the idea that we are supposed to manage the creation that God has given us and to be creative about the means by which that comes about. I'll accept your Biblical rootage there and hopefully what we have to say turns out better than just the Tower of Babel, but you never know. Of course, technology has really revolutionized the way in which people live. I can think about, and I suspect you have similar feelings, when I started teaching, and I'm in my thirty-third year at Dallas, I don't know how long you've been at Western, but probably, about as long or longer.
Dr. Gerry Breshears

Thirty-five.

Dr. Darrell Bock

When I started teaching, the idea of being able to look up resources on your computer, didn't exist. We used telephones, which –

Dr. Gerry Breshears

With cords.

Dr. Darrell Bock

That's with cords. That's right. Everything was wired in and cordless telephones were still 15 years away. It's amazing to think about the differences that have been introduced, really even in just the last ten years. I like to tell this story about the way technology works. When I did my first trip overseas to do doctoral studies, so we talking early '80s. The way I kept up with American sports was by listening to Armed Forces Radio on a shortwave. That's step one. Seven years later I went back to Germany for my first sabbatical and I could listen to it on the radio over the internet, just barely, but could do it, and the way I could do it is I could watch a scoreboard flip the score as the game was going on if I wanted to keep up with what was going on. It wasn't even radio, it was just visual graphics. The next time I went back, I had radio over the internet, that was seven years later. Seven years later, I had audio and video, sometimes black and white, and the last time I went, of course, I had full color, in fact, even HD. I could have been in my living room as far – that is kind of the story of the progression of what we're dealing with. I suspect you have similar experience in your own working with all this.

Dr. Gerry Breshears

Yeah, it's the same thing when I was teaching in the Ukraine the first time, I went downtown and bought an internet card that would get me 2.4 kilobyte connection and the last time I was there, like you, I had full HD and I could talk to my wife as easily as I could sitting next to her in the living room almost.
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Dr. Darrell Bock  Yeah, it really is in many ways amazing how the whole technological scene has developed and how we do so much now through that. To the point now that a lot of people are able to work remotely from their work. My son does sports law from Manhattan, but he works for a firm in Munich and everything, just about, is done from a distance and without any problem and, of course, it's impacted education. Online classes, et cetera, have changed the way we think and are changing the way we think about education. It literally is omnipresent and you think about this as a theologian and theology is supposed to deal with everyday live as we need it and so what do you have to say to people who, obviously participate in technology, but are trying to think about how do I think about this in terms of what the Bible has to say?

Dr. Gerry Breshears  Scripture, of course, doesn't say anything specific about the internet and it doesn't say a whole lot about libraries for that matter, although there were libraries in the ancient world and well known ones and they're referred to occasionally in Scripture, but a big advantage of the internet has been the access to information on all kinds of different levels. I just routinely download podcasts from the best Christian preachers in the world.

Dr. Darrell Bock  We appreciate that promotion.

Dr. Gerry Breshears  Exactly. I can cyber stalk my students and I do and let them know that that wasn't very good or this is really outstanding. We have, through libraries, now we have full text access to much of the information of the world and I don't even have to walk across campus to the library.

Dr. Darrell Bock  Yeah, I literally had this conversation last week in our department, because we were informed that the Loeb Classical Library, which of course, is the great collection of Greco-Roman works and Latin works from the classics, is now available online to us and I've got 150 volumes in my library at home in my study and I've just recently have gone about gradually building it up to the point and I said to my wife, I'm done buying those, because I can look it up. I can write and travel and if I have to look something up, most anything that I need, I can now get access to without having to go to a library. It really has changed the way academics work.
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*Dr. Gerry Breshears*  
The other thing that has not changed; however, is the ability of people to process information accurately and that's been a downside. People cite as if they know what they're doing when they don't.

*Dr. Darrell Bock*  
Yeah, that's true and the capability of misinformation to circulate through the internet is really a problem and it's even more a problem when people just post what they have heard or said and there's no attribution or anything put with it, so you don't know where it's coming from, what the sourcing is, whether it's accurate, all kinds of things. Some people think if it's on the net, it must be true, but that's not true at all.

*Dr. Gerry Breshears*  
One of the things that's been really interesting for me to watch is how now in the day of internet access and archiving of everything, it's virtually impossible to be forgiven or to change what you're doing. You've always been – memory has always been there, but in the internet age, once you're identified with a certain kind of personality, you can never change that it seems like, because somebody always goes back and looks at the old stuff and cites it as if it was done last year.

*Dr. Darrell Bock*  
Yeah, it is a different way of existing and it also means that most conversations that, many of which used to private, are no longer private. You always have someone looking over your shoulder about what it is you're saying and how you say it and what it means and I tell people when – there's this message that I do, it's the contrast between Romans 1 and Acts 17 and how Paul functions in a pluralistic world and I make the point, when he's writing in Romans 1, it's kind of insider talk. He's talking to the Church from the inside and he's telling you exactly what he thinks about the culture, because this letter is going to the Church and granted it ended up in the Bible, which means that it did have a very public sets of eyes looking at it, but basically in terms of Paul's intention, he was trying to talk to the Church about the way the culture was around them. Whereas, when we come to Acts 17, he's speaking publicly. He knows he's speaking publicly. The audience is part of the culture that he's talking about and his entire approach is different. Not that his theology is different, he still challenges them with what he believes, but the way he goes about it, is very different and the point I make when I talk about this passage today is that we can't have oftentimes clean exchanges like that where we know what the audience is that is listening to us because our audience inevitably is broad once we go on to the net.
Dr. Gerry Breshears: That's correct. Yeah, e-mails and letters that are sent via the internet, none of that is ever erased from the internet any more. Ironically, when I want to do confidential conversations now, I always do it by voice over a telephone that's much less likely to be mineable on the internet.

Dr. Darrell Bock: Yeah, and you just hope the government isn't listening.

Dr. Gerry Breshears: Today's government, what do they do with it anyway?

Dr. Darrell Bock: That's right. I won't go there. There really is a major problem in terms of how we interact with one another and that really is the gist of what we want to get to. Obviously, there are tons of benefits from being able to stay in communication with people, to stay connected over a distance in particular. I think the whole Facebook phenomena is an interesting way of interacting. I like to tell people who are my age, and when we talk about this particularly in relationship to education, that we grew up used to a certain way of relating and we had to adjust to the introduction of technology. My kids, who are now in their 30s, really grew up with technology from the very beginning. In fact, our household experimented, was picked out to be an experimentation, for the first games over the internet that you shared with a neighbor who wasn't there in your house. We were hooked up and asked to do this and my two girls and our son were part of this growing up group that played games over the internet with their friends online, back in the '80s, when it was first being developed, and they've grown up with this. This is how they've related all their life. There's no adjustment. It's the way they do it. They do it instinctively, again, just to share another story, I once was writing a book and was getting ready to look something up and I was -- my son recognized I was getting up to go to my library to look up something and he said, "Dad, you don't have to go out to your library," He was aware of what I was doing and I said, "What?" He typed into his computer and lo and behold, boom, there it -- and he instinctively knew that. It's clear we have a lot of information that we have access to, but the flip side of that is, of course, the quality and nature of that information. How do we get ourselves into trouble on the net? I guess that's kind of what I'm asking and you might share, if you will, some of your experience in this regard.
I've been watching this for a long time and one of the things that happens is what I call the Pat Robertson syndrome. Those of us are a little older remember when Pat Robertson was a national figure, 700 Club and all that, but he got a reputation for being somebody who said outrageous things, so people would just watch him and of course, he spoke a lot, and inevitably, being a powerful, polarizing speaker, he would say something really, really stupid and then that would be picked out and played everywhere and there's a, I don't know what to call it exactly, a genre, really, on the internet that is that kind of a thing. It's a celebrity gossip magazine that we see in the checkout stand at the grocery story.

That's where you get yourself. There's gotcha journalism. This is where you get yourself.

There's a group of that that does that around celebrity pastors and they just wait for 'em to say something and then they go outrage, ballistic, can you believe what's being said and it's all taken out of a context of a ministry and a life and it can be extremely, extremely damaging.

We've seen some examples of this recently and as we get into this, the point is not to say that some of the criticism that leaders get for how they handle the net and things that they say, may well be deserved. The question is whether the beating that they take in the process is deserved and what that means for us and in thinking about what you're talking about, that there are people who stalk these kinds of opportunities, let me raise a scenario that I'm very aware of and that is there are bands of atheists out there whose goal is to undercut anything positive that happens in the Church. They oftentimes, you talk about cyber-stalking; they often keep their eyes out for any kind of opportunity like this that they can exploit and pass through the net. I know that goes on and sometimes you think that the conversation that you're having with the person on the other edge of Facebook or on the other end of the blog that you're writing, is another believer and you're kinda having an inhouse conversation, when in fact, oftentimes you're not.
That's correct. The recent episode with Louie Giglio, when he was invited initially to do a pray at President Obama's inauguration, some people went back and found this sermon that he'd done 15 years earlier, where he had spoken about homosexuality as a sin and that was trumpeted and ended up with his invitation being withdrawn because he was a person who could not be accepted in the public arena. It's crazy.

Yeah, and despite all the public ministry and service ministry that Louie had done and it was really the reason for the original invitation.

Yeah, that happened. Yeah. All torpedoed by one statement he had made way earlier in a total different context. That's the evil of the internet and it can be done by anybody. I think what Christians did to Rick Warren after his son committed suicide in the depths of his depression, the hate speech that came back to him, the public blasting that came back on them, it was just – it's an embarrassment and a shame to see what happened to that couple.

Yeah, and I think people have got to realize that they have – own some responsibility for handling their public discourse responsibly when these kinds of situations come up. The reason I wanted to discuss this topic is because I actually find it very, very disturbing in terms of where the Church is. Another incident, since we're trotting out incidents right now, is my recollection of the way World Vision was handled when they went through their decision-making process. First, initially, to allow gay people to be hired and then when they changed their decision, and just the reaction that people had about that entire sequence of events as if, as you said earlier, it's almost as if, I'll say it this way albeit vividly, it's almost as if repentance doesn't count.

That's correct.

That a person comes out and says I made a mistake, this was the wrong move, I've listened to the feedback, I've corrected the way I think, but it doesn't matter. The elephant with memory is in the room.
Dr. Gerry Breshears

Yep. Another example of that same thing was when Wycliffe was dragged out in the public for translation philosophy into a sub-Saharan African dialect that nobody in the world speaks, but it was rumored how they could translate the Son of God and drop the language Son of God and people went ballistic about that and very high quality organization, Wycliffe Bible Translators, was attacked viciously and some major groups dropped support for Wycliffe over something they really knew nothing about, but it's easy to get outraged because they don't care about the Son of God any more.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Yeah, because the thing that really makes this difficult is these kinds of moves get sound bitted, if I can coin a phrase, and in that process the one line Wycliffe isn't using the Son of God any more, has taken Son of God out of the Bible, however you wanna spin that, ends up casting a huge shadow over any of the details as to why that is or the linguistic issues that were involved and that kind of – we actually did an entire podcast on the Son of God controversy, translation controversy, in part to try and get the issues out on the table so that people would actually understand what was going on here and not succumb to the easy one liner, when, in the context, the other thing that's in the background here, is almost this, I don't know, fear or paranoia, I'm not sure what the right word is, or anger or frustration, it's probably a combination of all these things, come into play that drives the move to try and criticize in these kinds of ways.

Dr. Gerry Breshears

That's correct. A recent example, of course, is the whole thing with Mars Hill Church in Seattle and the controversy that raged up there for six, eight months very publicly. One of the things that I found just very distressing in that whole situation, of course, I'm close to it, I know many people up there and work closely with a number of them, were the public bloggers were accusing Mark Driscoll and top leadership there of bullying and mishandling funds and there was some legitimacy, of course, to their charges, but the way they were doing it, ironically, was bullying and if you look at the site ads on their blogs, they were making enormous amounts of money from groups that I would never be associated with, because of web traffic on their blog and somehow the self-criticism that says, I'm doing what I'm charging the person with and profiting from it, that's just a real problem for me. That is a huge problem for me, because I look at the text of Scripture and it talks about slander and gossip as strongly as it talks about immorality and mishandling of power.
Yeah, because you're dealing with people and their reputations and there's supposed to be a respect, I would say, for someone made in the image of God that they're handled fairly, justly, if you want to put it in a Biblical category and the way we interact with one another, the tone that we bring to the conversations that we have actually is very, very important and we have something going on tonally in our culture in which I'm afraid that sometimes the Church is mirroring what happens in the culture at large in terms of how people get treated and the Church is supposed to be different in terms of how we engage.

When I look at Galatians, Chapter 5, and it talked about the acts of the flesh and we begin with pornea and impurity and debauchery, adultery, witchcraft, we get all that, but it goes on to talk about hatred and discord and jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissension, factions. Those things are in there just as much. Ephesians, Chapter 4, it says, "In your anger, do not sin, because you give the Devil a foothold."

In Romans I, you got gossip right there on the list.

Yep, absolutely. Ephesians 4, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, every form of malice, be kind and compassionate, forgiving one another." Boy does that describe the blogosphere these days? I don't think so.

Dr. Darrell Bock: Yeah, it is a disturbing trend, I think, and it undercuts not just the benefits of technology in such a way, but it really injects a, I don't know what other word to use, it's just stuck in my head, a poison into the relationships that people have about the Church, the way they think about the Church, et cetera. This is not to say that there isn't a place for legitimate criticism and engagement when the Church fails and it be a –

Absolutely.

Be a complete misread of what we're talking about to say, no, the Church gets a pass on all this. Absolutely not.
Dr. Gerry Breshears

There's all kinds of stuff in Scripture about entertaining accusations against the elders in 1 Corinthians, 1 Timothy, Chapter 5, one of the telling passages is 1 Corinthians, Chapter 6, where it says, "Don't take your disputes to the public court for judgment." Now at that point, it's talking about the law court, but today we take them to the court of the internet and the public arena and it becomes slander and gossip it seems many times, when those kinds of controversies should be dealt within the elders structures of the Church and perhaps within the denominational structures, instead of taking it out on the internet.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Yes, I think that what we see here is, and this is important, to distinguish between the right to criticize and the way to criticize and even the way to criticize well and appropriately and Biblically, if I can say it that way, and the way in which sometimes this gets done in which the right thing maybe challenged, but in a very wrong way and it's a very, very dangerous kind of precedence when our goal is to absolutely try and pull someone down without the appropriate processes in place.

Dr. Gerry Breshears

It's very true. When I look at what happened, for example, the Mars Hill thing, which is very recent, I see what the eventual resignation of Mark Driscoll and all that was involved there and now the dissolving of the entire corporation and handing everything off to individual churches. Ironically, the thing that accomplished that was not the blogosphere, was not the gossip out on the public arena, it was actually done by elders of the Church who did it according to Biblical standards, but the environment of the internet made that a very toxic environment and a very dishonoring environment, though there's the opportunity there to show the Grace of God in what's coming out of that. That toxic environment where anger was a virtue is a very un-Christian atmosphere it seems to me.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Interesting. Your premise would be that the way in which this eventually happened was through the appropriate elder oversight that took place. What would you say to the person who would say, yeah, but the only reason the elders really eventually took a hard look at that was because of the immense pressure that came on Mars Hill as a result of all the blogging and everything else that was going on?
Being very close to many people involved in the Mars Hill episode, I'd say that's a statement of ignorance. The public arena actually make it more difficult to do what was being done by the former and current elders, and by a couple of outside involved people, like Paul Tripp. It was actually done as an internal thing. The blogosphere actually made it more difficult, because people became very defensive relating to each other.

Dr. Darrell Bock
Okay, in other words, it so damaged the atmosphere that getting at actually what was going on became more difficult.

Dr. Gerry Breshears
That's correct and reconciliation was much more difficult because every statement was exported. There was actually an inside source that was intentionally and deliberately removing privacy statements and feeding it out into sources in the public arena.

Dr. Darrell Bock
Interesting. This raises a whole 'nother issue and that is the way in which the internet can become a megaphone, if you will, for what's going on internally and where things are being sorted out sensitively, et cetera. It's not that different, if I can make an analogy, it's not that different than the way governments try and work sometimes in particularly sensitive areas where they use what's sometimes called back channels to try and get communication back and forth, so that they don't have to deal with all the static that comes from being in a much more public setting and environment.

Dr. Gerry Breshears
Yep, one of the areas you've done some great work in, Darrell, is speech act theory and anytime somebody speaks in this kind of arrangement, whether it's a government source or a church source, there's always an intention behind that revelation and a lot of times that's hidden. Statements are made for public effect or to put pressure on somebody else and that is all manipulative, it's contrary to the let's go straight to the person and talk with Grace with the Christian environment.

Dr. Darrell Bock
A lot of people end up expressing opinions and they're engaging in what I would call speculation about what's going on when they, in many cases, don't actually know what's going on. They've dealt with this snippet or that snippet, but they don't have the whole picture.
Dr. Gerry Breshears: Yeah, maybe 120 factors in a particular decision, 2 or 3 are brought out and then it seems so simple, because all you're dealing with is those and there's no responsibility that's involved in that either. That picture of being a person who's actually making a difference in the context of Grace, when you engage in what's going on, I think is a Biblical picture. The disengaged person from a distance who is making these kind of statements about churches and then repeating them, I can see nothing other than gossip as a category for that.