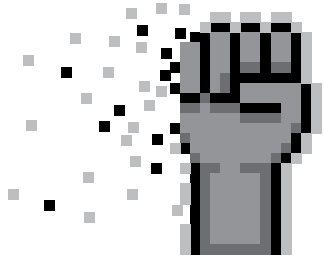
DIGITALLY REMASTERED

A BIBLICAL GUIDE TO RECLAIMING YOUR VIRTUAL SELF



GUY BRANDON

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For Jennie, Sophie and Joe

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FOREWORD

In the hours and days following the results of the UK referendum on whether we should leave or remain in the European Union, I took a 48-hour emergency retreat from social media. It had all become a little too much. I found myself obsessed with the analysis, being drawn into the online debate taking place on Twitter and Facebook. I was alarmed at how quickly we separated into two distinct camps – 'the Brexiters' and 'the Remainers'. The amount of vitriol hurled from one side to the other in the frenzied days following the vote to leave was discombobulating. Real life – hopes and dreams and political views and disappointments and despair – had broken into the world of social media. I realised that for many of us, our social media accounts are well-crafted portrayals of how we want our lives to be seen. As well as putting forward our personal brands, we surround ourselves on social media with people who are like us and follow accounts that confirm our worldview. Part of the reason for the hysteria that ensued was that for many, that well-crafted world we had created for ourselves online had all come crumbling down in those few days. Or at least it felt like it. It felt like it because for many people – particularly my generation, the millennials – our whole world can be contained in the social media cocoon. When real life and the real world contradict the cosy digital cocoon we have nestled ourselves in, we start to ask questions about who we are, who our neighbours are and what kind of world we want to live in.

But it's not all bad. My Facebook timeline is often filled with videos of cats and 'Carpool Karaoke' – the facile things of this world that just make us smile. But at times through Facebook or

Twitter, I have reconnected with long-forgotten friends when I have seen from their statuses that they are facing life's difficulties – depression, divorce, death. I have had in-depth conversations about life, love and faith using the Messenger app. I can think of countless times in which I have been so grateful for these new technologies in helping me to make a difference #IRL (in real life).

The web, our smartphones and social media have immense power on our lives. I am, sadly, one of the 80 per cent of smartphone users for whom the very first action in the day is to reach for my phone. It contains my diary, health and fitness apps, my Bible and all my conversations with friends and loved ones over the years. I consult my phone when I want to know what's happened in the world overnight, how to get somewhere, when to leave home to catch the bus or whether I need an umbrella. It provides me with podcasts and my 'pray-as-you-go' app.

Is it any wonder that these technologies have become so entwined with our lives? They have become an extension of ourselves. They can confirm our worldviews or shatter our delusions about the communities in which we live and what it is to be human. They reduce the world to 140 characters, and paint a picture – with appropriate filters and all – of a distorted reality. Can true connection with others – our husbands, wives, families, friends, neighbours and church communities – be truly authentic if it exists only in our computers and smartphones?

What is the Christian response to these technologies that very quickly have become so much a part of our daily lives that online and social media fasts are now required to gain headspace and maintain some sense of sanity? What wisdom can we gain from Scripture about how we should view our identity and human relationships in light of Instagram, Twitter and Facebook?

The following pages are the best attempt I've found to provide a holistic exploration of the issues when it comes to social media. Neither wholly welcoming nor wholly dismissive, the book looks at the issues from new perspectives and gives relevant reflections on

this modern-day phenomenon from within the biblical narrative. It's refreshing to read a Christian exploration of these issues that goes beyond the usual topics but also touches on wider issues, including consumerism, privacy, surveillance and anonymity.

Chine McDonald
Director of Communications
Evangelical Alliance

INTRODUCTION

'If you want a definition of water, don't ask a fish.'

This old Chinese proverb has come to mind repeatedly as I've been writing this book. I've been using email and the web for twenty years, a mobile phone for fifteen, social media for ten. They've become an integral part of my work, my leisure time, my everyday existence. Like the rest of us, I'm thoroughly connected – and short of some kind of disaster we're only going to become even more connected in the coming years. The web and its associated technologies are a part of almost everything I do. How do you critique something that has become so inseparable from your life that you barely even consciously register it anymore?

When you come down to it, technologies are really only expressions of the properties of the world that God has created. When I started writing, it was therefore tempting to suggest that communications technologies in the round are as neutral as the laws of physics and maths on which they are built. Whilst this may arguably be true in its purest, most conceptual form, it soon became clear that this kind of simplification didn't do justice to the reality.

History of technology professor Melvin Kranzberg memorably put it: 'Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral.' The ethical impact of a technology is *always* subject to the ends of those who implement it. 'By that I mean that technology's interaction with the social ecology is such that technical developments frequently have environmental, social, and human consequences that go far beyond the immediate purposes of the technical devices

and practices themselves, and the same technology can have quite different results when introduced into different contexts or under different circumstances.'[1] The same can be said of the spiritual impact. A technology – like a social media platform – is implicitly the expression of the spiritual values of its creators and users, and will have spiritual outcomes, intended and unintended. Some are great; some unexpected; some terrible. The problem is discerning which is happening at any given time. This unprecedented connectivity can and often *does* help us to relate better – more openly, more justly, even more deeply, in a way that honours our mutual humanity and our status as God's creation. Humans are social animals. Relationship is core to what we are: we are created to communicate, and communications technology (it does what it says on the tin) allows us to achieve that better than ever before. Unfortunately, though, we're also fallen beings, prone to allowing it to have the opposite effect. It's part of what Francis Spufford, in his book *Unapologetic*, calls the HPtFtU, or Human Propensity to Mess things Up.[2]

Perhaps for that reason, something I've struggled with consistently throughout the book is appearing positive about the opportunities offered by these technologies. I am immensely positive – as will become abundantly clear; I use them daily and actively both for work and leisure and my life would look very different without them. But still, I find myself focusing on their downsides. We intuitively know how to use them in a beneficial way and do so all the time with very little encouragement required. The problem comes in our habits of also using them in harmful ways, which are overlaid on everything else like a patina of verdigris on

1 Melvin Kranzberg, 'Introduction: Technological and Cultural Change – Past, Present and Future' in *New Worlds, New Technologies, New Issues*, ed. Stephen H Sutcliffe, *Research in Technology Studies*, vol. 6 (Lehigh University Press, 1992), p. 100.

2 OK, but you get the general idea. See Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, despite everything, Christianity can still make surprising emotional sense* (Faber & Faber, 2013).

an old coin. Strip away what is not supposed to be there and you are left with something beautiful – something that was there all the time, but that was hidden under unwanted and unattractive accretions of corrosion, laid down due to years of neglect. Once we, in the words of one critic,[3] 'master its demonic assumptions' – overcome the ways that we unwittingly allow technology to undermine our faith and relationships – then we're left with what's good.

Doing the right thing is often a matter of not doing the wrong thing.

It's just that we're *really* good at doing the wrong thing.

This is why the Bible is still relevant to definitively contemporary questions about the impact of social networking and instant global mass communication: human nature remains stubbornly resistant to change, and although these technologies are unique to the twenty-first century, technological development itself is not – the ancient Israelites went through epoch-defining technological changes of their own. There really is nothing new under the sun with regards to our ability to foul up what should be our closest and most meaningful relationships, let alone all the others. Intentionally or unwittingly, engaging with these new communications technologies can and does erode and undermine our faith and our relationships with each other – the way we relate to each other being an integral part of our faith, according to Jesus.[4] Like all new technologies since the dawn of time, they can be used for benign or malign purposes. In this instance, the fact that they fly under the radar because they're woven through the fabric of our lives makes it so much harder to judge their impact. Often, like the Chinese fish, it doesn't even occur to us to question them. But when you think about it, how could something so all-pervasive and powerful – something that permeates literally every waking hour and every area of our lives – *not* have spiritual consequences?

3 Andrew Fellows, personal conversation.

4 Matthew 22:37–40.

It's a difficult, complicated matter to get to the bottom of, but at the heart of this book is a very simple question. The issue of who or what we trust and obey, the authority from which we consciously or unconsciously take our cues in all the decisions we make, is fundamental to every Christian's walk with God – but until we examine our habits, we may not even know the answer.

Who's in charge?

1. WHO'S IN CHARGE?

'WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY'[1]

I'd picked up on various articles in the national press about the curious phenomenon that is bitcoin – at once a currency, a piece of software, a decentralised movement and a paradigm for a radical redistribution of power – for a couple of years before I finally dipped my toes in the water at the beginning of 2014. The more I learnt, the more it became clear that this represented a once-in-a-generation technological shift that would have implications greater than any of us could see at the time, similar to the popularisation of personal computers or the rise of the internet.

Bitcoin was the first and is still the best-known and most-used of the literally hundreds of digital currencies that have sprung up since it was launched in 2009. But the implications of its development are far broader than for money alone. Cryptographic currencies, or cryptocurrencies, use blockchains – ledgers that record ownership and that are shared by everyone rather than held by a single, trusted party like a bank. Bitcoin and many other cryptocurrencies use a vast amount of processing power, pooled by all the computers in the network, to secure the ledger – meaning that no single computer or organisation would have the resources necessary to create a fraudulent transaction.

1 Uncle Ben, *Spider-Man* (Marvel Enterprises, 2002).

Computers are rewarded for delivering the calculations that validate each batch of transactions with new bitcoins.[2] It's a brilliant solution to the problem of transferring money online. The issue is that digital information can be copied easily, so without the blockchain, it would be impossible to know who owned what without a single ledger maintained by a central authority.

These networks therefore allow people to exchange information directly with each other, without any intermediaries. They operate outside of the existing financial system and without banks, governments, payment processors and any other third party to facilitate or control them. Anyone with an internet connection can send money – and potentially register property ownership, buy and sell shares in a company, record contracts, establish identity, crowdfund a project, and far more – without relying on anyone else.

Fascinated by the technology and the opportunities it offered, I learned as much as I could and quickly found there was a niche for someone who could communicate the complex ideas involved. It wasn't long before I was earning a significant proportion of my income in several different digital currencies by writing articles, white papers and film scripts, working as a communicator and consultant for businesses, communities and individuals scattered around the world.

Regulation always lags behind the technology it aims to police, and governments were only just starting to catch on to both the opportunities and risks posed by these new forms of money. Things have changed a lot now, but at the time it still had the reputation of being the Wild West.

2 This briefly describes the 'proof-of-work' approach used by bitcoin. See further in the bitcoin white paper, https://bitcoin.org/bitcoin.pdf. An increasing number of cryptocurrencies employ proof-of-stake and other related means of securing their blockchains.

It was like capitalism on steroids: an environment where anything went and there were few consequences in the real world. Unfettered by regulation and bureaucracy, innovation happened blindingly fast – but there were plenty of hacks and scams, too. On several occasions I witnessed millions of dollars' worth of digital cash being stolen due to poor security practices (even at the time of writing, one major exchange has just fallen victim to a $60 million hack), and new Ponzi schemes seemed to appear on a near-weekly basis.

I met and worked with some great people, many of whom were and are involved with the technology because they want to change the world and create a more just financial system. Many of those I knew were fiercely private, preserving their anonymity at all costs – some because they lived in hostile jurisdictions like Iran, China and Russia, some because they were paranoid, others because they wanted to avoid conflicts of interest with their day jobs, and others still because they were hiding criminal activity.

The blockchain is a hugely disruptive technology with far-reaching implications and the potential to shift the balance of power away from existing authorities and towards ordinary citizens, just as the web itself began to democratise access to information in the late 1990s and enabled people to circumvent the previous gatekeepers – such as news editors and media presenters – who controlled our access to information. My experiences were the perfect illustration of how technology is inherently about power. It enables you to do things that you couldn't do before, things that people who don't use it still can't do, things that maybe some people are keen you shouldn't do. That power can bring freedom – if nothing else, cryptocurrency is about freedom from the current structures of financial and administrative power. But it's an ideal that cuts both ways. The same technology that allows us to move funds cheaply

and quickly around the globe for the first time in history, this technology that offers enormous benefits to the unbanked and to migrant workers, also opens up a whole new set of less benign opportunities.

What soon became clear to me was that the power and responsibility to carry out all kinds of activities that had previously been the preserve of governments and banks – to print money; to collect tax at source; to track, approve, block or reverse transactions; to audit accounts and demand information based on their content, to name a few – was now mine. If I'd wanted to, it would have been easy to hide a chunk of my earnings from the taxman.[3] To launder money and buy drugs without detection. To fund accounts on gambling sites anonymously. To purchase illegal weapons and pornography. Even to donate money to terrorist organisations or procure murder for hire. (The recent trial of Ross Ulbricht, the mastermind who ran the illegal online drugs marketplace the Silk Road, suggests that it's actually quite hard to find a reliable murderer for hire on the web.[4] Even so, the web is only 25 years old and already we're talking about paying for a hitman like it's ordering pizza. And googling almost any information you could ever need. And Gangnam Style.[5] We are *not* in Kansas any more.)

One of the critical things I learned is that you simply cannot give people that power – power offered not just by this specific set of technologies but by the web itself and communications technology more generally – without also giving them the ability to misuse it. The only way to prevent someone from abusing a particular power is for an authority to remove it from them, thereby disempowering them and

3 For the record, I never did.
4 http://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2015/02/the-hitman-scam-dread-pirate-roberts-bizarre-murder-for-hire-attempts/
5 https://youtu.be/9bZkp7q19f0 or google it.

giving that authority the opportunity to abuse it instead. We just can't have it both ways.

The question we have to ask, as individuals and collectively, is: Who do we want wielding the power?

The information revolution is unquestionably the most far-reaching advance of the twenty-first century: the development of fast, global, mass communication through the internet, smartphones and mobile devices. It is beyond any doubt that these technologies have already changed the way we work, communicate, shop, socialise, spend our leisure time and almost everything else. But disruptive new technologies have arisen periodically over the course of history and have always challenged existing social norms and the power structures surrounding them. The printing press, the radio, the automobile. Far enough in our past, the shift from nomadic hunter-gatherer groups to settled agricultural ones brought about fundamental changes.[6] In the ancient Near East in the second millennium BC, the development of the alphabet over more complex systems brought the possibility of widespread literacy.[7] For the early Israelites, there is also an obvious example in the material after which we have named that whole Age in history: Iron.

Most Christian approaches to the internet and communications technology focus on a small number of problem issues that arise

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6 For an intriguing and detailed overview of why this happened the way it did on different continents, take a look at Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel: A short history of everybody for the last 13,000 years* (Vintage, 1998).

7 Former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has argued that the simplified Hebrew alphabet posed an existential threat to bureaucratic and hierarchical societies like Egypt's. 'In ancient times – indeed in Europe until the invention of printing – the only class that was literate was the priesthood. "A kingdom of priests" thus meant, among other things, "a society of universal literacy".' See http://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5768-yitro-a-holy-nation/ and *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (Bloomsbury, 2003), pp. 125–41.

from the online world, as well as the opportunities for spreading the gospel. Whilst these are important, they are only the tip of the iceberg in terms of how these technologies affect our faith, and we need a broader approach to assess them. There is a far more profound and far-reaching issue at stake.

Technology is about power.
Technology is always about power.
And how that power is used has enormous consequences.

This is a book that aims to unpack some of those consequences, including the spiritual, with the hope of helping us use the vast array of communications technologies that saturate our existences in a way that aligns with our faith and, hopefully, makes us more faithful, more human, better at relating to one another. Many of the insights have been gathered by actively and enthusiastically – and sometimes deliberately – making mistakes, and wherever possible I've tried to give meaningful suggestions for application. No doubt you'll be able to think of plenty more, but I hope the ones included will provide a useful starting point.

Ultimately, then, this isn't a book about the internet or technology. It is about power and how it impacts our freedom as Christians. Freedom comes in different forms: physical, emotional/psychological, spiritual and financial. These often go together. The way we use and apply any technology has spiritual significance, in the same way that how we spend our money and use our time also has spiritual significance. The choices we make affect other people and they affect us, whether or not we recognise it. As well as the danger of allowing others to use technology to enslave us in one way or another, there is a risk that we allow ourselves to be involuntarily enslaved through our *own* use of it in a broad variety of ways we will be exploring. Engaging or choosing not to engage with technology is a moral and spiritual issue, because any technology applied in the real world necessarily embodies a set of values.

The comparison with ironworking in the Old Testament highlights this point well. The Philistines used their knowledge of ironworking to oppress the Israelites. They actively prevented the Israelites from acquiring the ability to smelt iron and create tools and weapons. Iron gave too great a military advantage for them to allow just anyone to use it.[8] In the hands of the Israelites, though, iron meant freedom.[9] Technology is power, information is power: power that we either take up for ourselves and others, or give away, with the risk that another party uses it against us.

OPPRESSIVE REGIMES

Egypt has a long history of the misuse of power, as the Bible shows. The Israelites spent many years in slavery under Pharaoh before the Exodus. What is interesting is that Egypt was originally the Israelites' salvation, the country that welcomed the starving family of Jacob and allowed them to settle and thrive. But over time, that situation changed, and the descendants of the refugees from Canaan became first resented and feared, and ultimately enslaved by their hosts.

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8 'Sisera, the commander of [Jabin king of Canaan's] army … had nine hundred chariots fitted with iron and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years' (Judges 4:2–3). Judges 1:19 states that the Israelites were not successful in battle on the plains, implying that this is at least in part because their opponents had iron chariots. There are few mentions of the Israelites using swords in battle in the early history books; instead they use makeshift weapons and farming implements. This is probably because 'Not a blacksmith could be found in the whole land of Israel, because the Philistines had said, "Otherwise the Hebrews will make swords or spears!"' (1 Samuel 13:19).

9 See 1 Samuel 13:19–22. There are differing theories as to why iron replaced bronze (e.g. because it was more abundant, better suited to weaponry, or due to disruption of the supply of tin that was required for bronze). Either way, these verses show that the Philistines deliberately restricted ironworking in Israel to maintain their control over the population.

By the time of Moses, Egypt had become a brutal dictatorship in which Pharaoh held ultimate power. The king was considered a deity, the intermediary between the pantheon of Egyptian gods and the ordinary people. He was also supreme military commander and the head of government. There was a cadre of elite priests who enjoyed privileged positions, and they were the only ones aside from Pharaoh who owned any land (Genesis 47:22). As well as running the temples and conducting sacrifices, the priests were the nation's bureaucrats, since unlike the majority of the population they had the time and training to master the complex writing system of hieroglyphics.

Power was centralised around these leaders by controlling information (few people could read or write), maintaining a large standing army, through bureaucracy, land management, tax collection and labour, and through religious beliefs and practice. Land was said to belong ultimately to the gods, for example, who needed placating with regular sacrifices through the extensive temple system. The vast majority of the population were farmers who worked land owned by the state or the priests. Artisans had higher social status, but still essentially worked for the state.

In this way, every form of power was concentrated around Pharaoh and the group of priests and scribes who ruled the kingdom: religious, financial, military and judicial power. The injustices allowed by this system culminated in the deaths of Israelite baby boys when the growing Israelite population seemed to Pharaoh and the Egyptians to represent a threat to their existing way of life (Exodus 1). Centralised power didn't mean this was inevitable, of course – it just meant that there was no way to stop that abuse of power. Centralised power is unaccountable. The extent of the people's submission to Pharaoh is evident from the effectiveness of his decree: 'Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every boy that is born [to the Hebrews] you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live!"' (Exodus 1:22)

NOT LIKE EGYPT: PHYSICAL AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The Israelites experienced a certain kind of government and structure of society many times over throughout their history, though particularly so during their formative years in Egypt. So perhaps it is not surprising that the rules given to them by God by which they would govern their own political and economic systems were very different. These rules have enduring significance because they embodied principles such as justice and faithfulness that we see throughout the Bible – and they have continuing application for our approach to communications technologies today.

The Exodus account acknowledges that the misuse of power the Israelites experienced in Egypt was more than just physical slavery. Harsh manual labour was one aspect of it, but they were denied other freedoms too. They did not have financial independence, as had been the case for most of Egypt for centuries.[10] They certainly did not have the freedom to worship God – Pharaoh explicitly refused them the right to make sacrifices in the desert (Exodus 5), and his tactic of working them harder was meant to dampen their enthusiasm for worship (Exodus 5:6–9). Fill their days with work, seems to be his logic, and you remove the opportunity to think about such things. This has clear resonance with the way our Always-On culture squeezes out the time and inclination for faith.

Although it is nowhere explicitly stated in the Bible that the Old Testament Law and organisation of society constituted a deliberate policy to be comprehensively Not Like Egypt, this was essentially their effect. In many different regards, Israel was the anti-Egypt: a place of political, financial and religious freedom, rather than slavery. Given Pharaoh's near-absolute control over the population, it's not hard to see why this was important for

10 See Genesis 47:20–26.

the Israelites. Religious freedom goes hand-in-hand with other freedoms.[11]

Moreover, from the other side of the coin, taking away another person's freedoms without just reason is incompatible with a meaningful faith, since faith is a matter of right relationship with God and with other people. When Jesus is asked what the most important law is, he answers not in terms of sacrifice or giving or prayer, but in the language and framework of relationships: '"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.' (Matthew 22:37–40) In other words, every law in the Bible, from obscure regulations about beards and shellfish to rules concerning adultery and murder, is designed to address some aspect of some relationship. The whole narrative of the Bible is about God's relationship with us – created, fractured, patched up, repeatedly tested to breaking point and finally restored, across the span of thousands of years.

This emphasis on right relationships is one of the key reasons there were to be no unnecessary concentrations of power in Israel. For example, legal cases were heard by local courts, with only the hardest cases being passed up to higher authorities (see Deuteronomy 17:8–13 and Exodus 18:18–26). In Egypt, there was no separate judicial system. The 'judges' were government officials – and they did not appear to have a developed legal code to which to turn for guidance. Pharaoh was the head of the legal system – there was no 'separation of powers' here. Instead of a god-king like Egypt's Pharaoh, Israel was not supposed to have a king at all (1 Samuel 8). The laws laid out about the king, which God would

11 This is emphatically not to say that those caught in one or other form of slavery cannot have a real and vibrant faith, as was the case with many African slaves in America. However, the loss of personal autonomy inevitably reduces the ability to express your faith fully.

eventually give to the Israelites as a concession, stated that he was to be subject to the Law, not above it. He was also limited in the wealth, possessions and military capability he was personally able to accumulate:

> *The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the* LORD *has told you, 'You are not to go back that way again.' He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.*
>
> *When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the* LORD *his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.*
>
> DEUTERONOMY 17:16–20

The priests had responsibilities and power that could be abused, of course (1 Samuel 2:12–17), but there *was* a separation of powers between priesthood and kingship, and the Levites were dispersed all over the country to serve in different capacities – in public health, law and finance as well as religious matters, playing the role of something like public servants. They were also reliant on donations and funded by the Temple, rather than possessing an allocation of land – alone among the Israelites and in stark contrast to the wealthy and land-owning Egyptian priests. This helped to prevent a centralisation of land and wealth around the priesthood.

The only events that typically required a response on the national level were wars and threats of invasion. Between the state and the individual were a series of intermediary groups who were entrusted with different responsibilities. These groups included the extended family, the community (village or town) and the tribe. The principle of Subsidiarity in Catholic Social Teaching[12] reflects this idea of decentralised power – or rather, of appropriate decentralisation. No decision or action is taken by a higher, more centralised authority if a lower, more local one can deal with it better. The more centralised an authority, the more distant it is from its citizens, the less it understands their needs and the more likely it is to neglect or even harm them. Needlessly centralised authority takes initiative and control away from its people, doing for them tasks that they can better carry out themselves because they understand their circumstances better – and they have a direct interest in the outcome.

As well as limiting the concentration of political power, Israel's laws limited the concentration of financial power. In Egypt, a wealthy elite owned all the land and farmers paid them to be allowed to work it and grow crops. In Israel, everyone had access to a plot of land that belonged to their family forever. Even if they were forced to sell it due to temporary hardship, it was to be returned to them every fiftieth year, in the Jubilee (Leviticus 25 – though it is unclear to what degree this was carried out in practice).

Not only that, but the laws around money lending were designed to prevent cases of long-term poverty, which would lead to loss of land. No one was allowed to charge interest to a fellow Israelite. The reason for this was because taking a loan was supposed to be a last-ditch solution to poverty. Charging interest was seen as a way of extracting money from people who were already poor, enriching the wealthy at the expense of the vulnerable. (Poverty

12 Catholic Social Teaching is an extensive and detailed body of thought on issues of social justice, developed from biblical principles and the teachings of early Christian thinkers.

was, additionally, one of the principle routes into slavery – as happened to the people of Egypt in Genesis 47:15–24.) Interest was seen as a form of injustice, locking the borrower further into his poverty rather than relieving it and giving him and his family a chance of economic independence again. This is reflected by the idea in Proverbs,

> *Whoever increases wealth by taking interest or profit from the poor amasses it for another, who will be kind to the poor.*
>
> PROVERBS 28:8

Whereas we see credit as a form of freedom – a way of bringing forward future earnings to today – the Bible sees it as a form of oppression. 'The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is slave to the lender' (Proverbs 22:7). It's an incidental point, but we buy so much on credit nowadays that acquiring consumer electronic goods or anything else can have this side effect of putting us in a kind of modern-day debt slavery.

The Exodus was God's act of liberation for the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt. Everything about the nation they were to create was to be different from the harshness and injustice that they had experienced under Pharaoh. Their ideals for their politics and their economy were the opposite of those in Egypt's centralised and abusive dictatorship, even if those ideals were not always worked out in practice. Even the form of 'slavery' they practised was more like bonded servitude, part of the welfare system, rather than the brutal and dehumanising ownership that occurred in Egypt.

The reason for the Bible's limits on the concentration of human power can be summed up in the words of the nineteenth century politician and historian, Lord Acton: 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.' God, not Pharaoh or any other human agency, was

supposed to be Israel's final authority. Ultimate power belonged to him alone. This is why the Israelites working on the Sabbath and asking for a king of their own were seen in such a dim light: they represented a voluntary return to the conditions of slavery from which God had rescued them, trivialising his work of redemption and displaying ingratitude at his grace.

The biblical scepticism around the concentration of power is keenly relevant to aspects of the information revolution, including issues of privacy and surveillance. This access to new capabilities is also why we must be careful with the way we use communications technologies and allow them into our lives. They offer amazing benefits and freedoms, but that power is a double-edged blade. They give us unprecedented control over many aspects of our lives, but at the same time there is the very real risk that we give up control at the same time. The three areas explored in the next three chapters of this book – headspace, time and integrity – suggest that it is very easy to give away elements of our autonomy when we uncritically adopt communications technologies, and thereby implicitly allow them to undermine our faith.

THE CHALLENGE FOR US: WHO IS IN CHARGE?

In Egypt the Israelites were kept in slavery, losing their physical, financial and spiritual freedoms under Pharaoh. And yet, for all the hardships of slavery, the Bible notes that there were compensations – ones that the Israelites remembered all too quickly after the Exodus.

> *The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The*

> *Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.'*
>
> EXODUS 16:1–3

God gives them manna, but they later complain that this is not enough:

> *The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost – also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!'*
>
> NUMBERS 11:4–6

We might have a picture of the Israelites as underfed slaves in Egypt, but their vivid memories of their diet in captivity suggest otherwise. Presumably, the Egyptians were investing in their workforce, knowing that starving prisoners are both dangerous and unproductive. Just six weeks into their newly-found freedom from a lifetime of harsh slavery and the systematic extermination of their sons, the Israelites realised that being on their own meant taking responsibility for their own wellbeing and futures, and concluded: Life wasn't so bad in Egypt.

Why is submitting unquestioningly to the loss of autonomy wrong? There are probably a few reasons, but somewhere at the top of the list is that being a slave necessarily reduces your freedoms, meaning that you may not always be able to act according to your conscience. The Israelites were denied the freedom to worship God in the way they wanted, and the opportunity to rest on the Sabbath. Their complaints and longing for the lives they had left behind in Egypt were indicative of their attitude to the God who had redeemed them.

We have been freed from the slavery of sin by Christ's sacrifice (Romans 6:17–18). We have also been freed in an earthly way from the tyranny of constant work. Communications technologies are time-saving and labour-saving. Used wisely, they can bring a high degree of freedom. Used indiscriminately and unquestioningly, they create and facilitate a never-ending stream of work, paid and unpaid, that distracts us and drains our time. This, of course, is just another form of slavery. It shows that we are not really in charge of the technology we use. And that suggests that we are, tacitly or explicitly, willing to allow it to take a piece of the allegiance we otherwise reserve for God. In biblical terms, we allow our smartphones and online habits to become idols.

This presents a challenge to every Christian, whether as an individual or organisation. We may have made mistakes that set us on a particular trajectory. Will we continue to follow it? In Genesis, Cain brought an offering that God found unfavourable.

> *So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the* Lord *said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.*
>
> GENESIS 4:5–7

God gave Cain the opportunity to change, to master the sin that threatened to consume him. When confronted, though, he deliberately chose a different course.

The ability to communicate online is so much a part of the world around us that we often do not question the place it

has in our lives. We simply absorb these facilities into our lives without asking what their true impacts might be. If we *do* recognise their effects, we are often reactive in our response, rather than deliberately setting out to use them for a particular reason.

The challenge, then, is to be deliberate in our use of communications technologies, knowing that either we will master them or they will master us. The impact of technology is not merely technological: it is relational and spiritual. The way we engage with it reflects the answer to the question that is so key for our faith: who is really in charge?

Throughout this book, many of the suggestions for application are aimed at the individual level – things we can each do as part of our personal engagement with the issues raised by communications technology and the way we exercise the power it gives us. However, we live in community and our decisions and actions affect other people. If you have the opportunity, discuss the points raised here and throughout this book as part of a community of faith, recognising that a joint exploration will enable a fuller engagement with the issues and greater accountability for any decisions you make.

1. *Start with an online audit.* Take a sheet of paper and divide it into 168 boxes, 24 for each day of the week. Fill in each box with your typical activity for that hour – sleep, work, meals, exercise, recreation, and so on. Now, mark the times you use digital media in various different ways, whether that is searching/surfing the web, email, instant messaging, social media, TV/video, and so on. (This may be easier to do as you go along, rather than in retrospect.) You may find that one slot is occupied by more than one category – e.g. you may use social media on your smartphone at the same time as watching TV.

Total your results. Is the time you spend in different activities online more or less than you expected? Does this result prompt a response?

2. *Tally the number of times you are interrupted* or distracted from another conversation or activity over the course of a day by your smartphone, social media and other messaging. What is the effect of this?

3. *Ask that fundamental question: Who is in charge?* Who holds the power in this instance? Does technology genuinely serve ends in line with your faith, or are there times when it undermines your relationship with God and other people? If so, there may be clear areas to address.

4. *Consider the effect* of how using the web, computers and mobile devices is changing and shaping your behaviour, across many different aspects of life – both good and bad. Compare how you act now with how you might act without access to it. In what ways do they give you greater freedom? In what ways do they reduce your freedom?

5. *What positive qualities* does communications technology bring to your life, both in the conveniences it allows and in the changes you see in the way you relate to people? Conversely, how does it damage your life and relationships? Think of the ways you can redeem these technologies by deliberately using them to further your faith and relationships, rather than using them uncritically.

6. For organisations, including churches:

   - *What does it mean for technology to serve you?* Christians have often been slow to adopt new

technologies, and churches can be behind the times (frequently down to a lack of funding) – although there are, equally, churches that have leveraged communications technology to great effect. Are there ways in which technology could be used to carry out a more effective ministry – opportunities you are missing to engage with people? That might include anything from having a website that is fit for purpose and enabling people to donate money and set up standing orders online to recording or videoing talks for download, keeping people informed via social media as well as email lists, and so on.

- *Are there areas in which technology works against your goals?* Do you need to adopt new ways of working? It could be that emails have unnecessarily replaced face-to-face communication in the office or with your congregation, perhaps because of the convenience this offers but at the expense of deeper and more meaningful communication. It could be that use of technology alienates some people, because they are not as tech-savvy. Is technology used to strengthen relationships, or does it tend to make them 'thinner', less real and meaningful?

What's the first thing you do when you wake up in the morning? Grab a shower? Put the coffee on? Say a prayer? Read the Bible?

Or perhaps, like 80 per cent of smartphone owners, one of your very first actions is to reach for your mobile and check for email and updates. Odds on it will also be the last thing you do at night, too, and an average of every 5 to 10 minutes in between.

We live in an Always-On culture: we spend our lives online, connected to the web and to each other through our phones, tablets, laptops and desktop computers, and plenty of other devices besides. Most of us are so immersed in our online world that we barely question the impact it has on our faith – or even whether it has an effect at all (back to the Chinese fish's myopic definition of water).

The amount of time we spend online and how unquestioningly we do so doesn't necessarily make it wrong, but it does highlight something of the power this technology can hold over us – and of our implicit priorities.