



Technology and the Church: A Theological and Interpretive Approach from the Christian Perspective

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Abstract

The church has been greatly transformed by technology. Many churches have embraced the usage of technology in their ministerial and theological practice. This has presented a need to understand the impact of this transformation to the church. This study examines how these changes are challenging or enhancing current theological practices. This is addressed based on three proposed questions which are; What are the perceptions on the usage of technology by the church? What are the benefits of digitalization to the church? What are the challenges and implications posed by technology to the church? This qualitative study utilizes a theological and interpretive framework in trying to understand the relationship between technology and religion through the Christian perspective. Data was collected from 12 participants from the Christian faith of which 4 (33%) were pastors and 8 (67%) were disciples. The participants were between the ages of 18-52 in range. Out of the twelve participants, 5 were females, and 7 were males. Semi-structured interviews were carried out following snowballing sampling method. The results revealed that technology has positively impacted the church bringing in new beneficial strategies in spreading the gospel to the world. While technology has been helpful, it also presents unforeseen challenges the church has to deal with which include cyber related crime. There is a need to strike a balance to ensure that modern technology does not dilute the original message of the gospel.

INTRODUCTION

Technology is rapidly spreading across the globe and has brought substantial ease to life for humanity. It is a phenomenon that greatly influences the context of church believers and shapes attitudes across world. Theoretical conceptions illustrate how modern religious narratives, structures and practices are becoming more accessible, flexible and transitional as a result of technology (Joubert & Schoeman 2015). Technology refers to the mechanical interventions designed by humanity for the betterment of life and it involves all practical implementations of intelligence. It can be viewed in terms of noticeable and imperceptible belief systems, attitudes and ways of thinking (Sims 2005). Technology discovers what scientific laws rule a phenomenon and ultimately tries to control them by different lawfully governed conditions (Borgmann 2003). According to Funk (2011) technology is the coherent process of making means to transform energy, information and matter to achieve certain ends. It can be objects like devices, systems, methods and machinery. Technology has greatly enhanced communication and the access to media throughout the world. As a result, new forms of interaction models have been observed and these include the internet, mobile phones, social media and other digital platforms. These platforms have revolutionized the world and created broad networking links for humanity and the church. Networks are permanent components of social systems and considerably affect social processes, institutions and the actions of humanity including those in the church (Shevchuk et al. 2024).

The church is an assembly of the elect or chosen ones who believe in God (Hebrew 8:10). The word 'church' is derived from the Greek word 'ekklesia', which means called out. It symbolizes the body of Christ, the people of God and the bride of Christ. The church involves belief and worship of the Supernatural and Omnipotent God (Ugboh 2023). The Bible also validates the church as the body of Christ and He is the head of the church (Ephesians 1:10). Christians are people who believe in God and are part of the church of Jesus Christ. They believe in the power of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christianity then includes theological thought and represents a worldview of theological concepts (Pungilā 2024). Christians' outlooks towards technology demonstrate an unclear scenario, with some seeing technology in a favorable way and others hold a rather negative discernment of technology (Campbell and Garner 2016). Technology has created a world within a world. The virtual world has become a reality apart from the real world. Humans get lost into this virtual world spending a lot of valuable time and depleting a lot of internet data. For them, it becomes almost impossible to function without the internet. They are always online surfing the net either for music, videos, educational material and largely utilizing social media platforms. Oveh (2024) refers to this as an internet addiction factor which has been identified to have an impact on humanity including the church.

This has become a novel world greatly shaped by digital revolution (Frunza 2020). It is a world highly influenced by artificial intelligence (AI). Artificial intelligence refers to a variety of disciplines that aim to emulate behaviors which are prevalent in living things like human beings. This AI has been developing in a fast speed over the years and it uses algorithms which can develop magnificent

artwork and Bach-inspired masterpieces which are both beneficial and a threat to humanity and the church (Merritt 2017). The usage of technology has increased in religious groups and is anticipated to continue to enhance and disrupt traditional methods of doing things and redefine the church, workplaces and human engagements in the job market (Jain and Ranjan 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic forced the church to explore more technological ways of preaching as churches were shut down. It was a time of pain, which also presented a learning, development and change opportunities for church. Civil societies, schools and government institutions redefined their approach to digital disruptions and the church had to join in. The pandemic caused critical transformations in the church replacing physical worship with virtual gatherings. It also led to an increase in the usage of new media including social media, cellphones, blogs and the internet (Campbell 2012). The shift from traditional technological methods was described by Castells & Cardoso (2005) as a network society. This is a society highly driven by digitalization. A lot of new digital strategies have been employed by the church post-COVID-19 pandemic (Ugboh 2023).

Digitalization has presented good progression for the church, not only enhancing communication but also fostering a sense of universal community. Through embracing modern technology standards, churches have been able to effectively reach a broader audience keeping them engaged (Yusuf 2024). Nonetheless, technology has also attracted unanticipated challenges like the increase in cyber-crime, laziness, addiction and the internet has also promoted access to pornographic material which can negate the church's doctrine (Kcris 2019). The usage of technology also brings some biblical contradictions or challenges. It has the potential to eliminate important traditions like water baptism and laying on of hands. Water baptism is a physical act of which once a person becomes a believer, the individual has to undergo such a spiritual practice. It is not a practice that can be done virtually (Shevchuk et al. 2024). Therefore there is a need to strike a balance in order to protect orthodox biblical traditions and also to prevent the alteration of the original message of the gospel. The aim of this study is to examine the paradoxical relationship between digital technology including the media and the church and also identify the challenges faced by churches as a result of digitalization. It utilizes a theological and interpretive framework in trying to understand these issues. Innovation is not necessarily new. God Himself is presented as an innovative Omnipotent Power. From the very beginning, He calls things into existence through the power of His spoken words (Genesis 1:1). After creating humanity, He gave humanity the responsibility to co-create or recreate certain things. His instruction to humanity was to multiply and subdue the earth (Genesis 1:28). This was the transference and the beginning of the human creative culture. From hence forth, humanity started exploring different techniques of doing things drawing such wisdom and innovative intelligence from God who is the greatest potter (Isaiah 64:8). Innovation or technology is the application of science in practical ways producing different kinds of machines, structures, gadgets and other things which useful for people (Micheal et al. 2017). Through that transferred creative nature of

humanity and the God given reasoning capacity, humanity has explored numerous things in the world. The creationism theory states that humanity and everything on earth were created by God and consequently God controls and owns everything (Rabie 2023).

All technological acceptance theories like the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) are designed to measure the degree of acceptance and satisfaction to users of any technology from different angles depending on the factors representing their structure. The Theory of Reasoned Action for example explains that attitude has either primary or secondary effect on behavior. This theory was designed to explain human behavior (Momani et al. 2017). The Creationist Theory explains behaviors as a product of God's creation. Consequently, the attitudes, behaviors or actions of man towards technology are influenced by the Creationism Theory and the Theory of Reasoned Action. (Hausman 2024). Application of technology is recorded throughout the Bible. In the narratives of Noah and the ark, a lot of innovative aspects were observed. God Himself instructed Noah to build an ark and gave him the specifications on how the ark should be built. There ark was built to accommodate every kind of animals on earth in pairs (male and female) and also store food for the animals and Noah's family (Genesis 6:13-22). Work of such magnitude required a lot of planning and innovative strategies. Similarly, the people at Babel started building a city and a tower of which they wanted the tower to reach heavens. The Bible narratives in Genesis specify that the people wanted to make a name for themselves. They employed a lot of innovative techniques including baking bricks instead of the usage of stones, and the usage of tar as mortar (Genesis 11:3-4). This was a huge project which required a lot of engineering and architectural skills. These examples are proofs that technological implementations are not new, but changing over time. Modern technology is more advanced compared to traditional forms. Nonetheless modern technology draws its founding roots from traditional forms and are an extension of traditional technology. This study contends that technology is necessary in the church, but a balance must be drawn when utilizing technology in the church to protect the originality of the gospel.

METHOD

This descriptive study was approached from a subjective Christian perspective utilizing an interpretive and theological framework. The theological framework supports the development of modern technology while also mastering the role of Christians through involvement in a technological society (Pungila 2024). Data was collected from 12 participants from the Christian faith of which 4 (33%) were pastors and 8 (67%) were disciples. The participants were between the ages of 18-52 in range. Out of the twelve participants, 5 were females, and 7 were males. Semi structured interviews were carried out following snowballing sampling method of people who were professing Christians. Using descriptive analysis following the interpretive and theological framework, the data was processed and three main themes emerged.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study examined the relationship between technology and the church in trying to ascertain benefits, threats and perceptions. A total of twelve participants were selected from the Christian faith. Using descriptive analysis following the interpretive and theological framework, the data was processed and three main themes emerged and the results are presented in this section.

Perceptions and benefits of the usage of technology in the church

Most participants viewed the usage of technology as necessary in the church. It was perceived as helpful in the development of the church, in learning, interacting with the world, in analyzing material from other theologians and therefore very helpful in the advancement of the gospel. Musical instruments are some of the innovative tools participants saw as important in the church. According to participants musical instruments enhance worship and induce the presence of the Holy Spirit. Participants alluded to the fact that God instructed believers to make a joyful noise unto the Lord using different forms of instruments. Bible verses like Psalm 33:2-4; Psalm 150:4; 2 Chronicles 5:13 and Psalm 98:6 were quoted to support the usage of musical instruments in the church. Music is one way of encouraging people who are down or facing challenges in their lives. Participants acknowledged the power of music and worship in inducing healing to the broken hearted. Microphones were also mentioned as necessary technological tools useful in the church. Microphones were deemed to enhance human voices and reach a boarder audience. The cordless microphones in particular, seemed to be what pastors aspire to use as they give them freedom to move around the church as the Spirit directs. In big churches with large attendees, microphones and sound speakers were portrayed to be very critical.

Participants noted that technology is constantly changing and requires continuous learning and change management skills. It has positively enhanced functionality of the church. The Bible App which is mostly used in smart phones was also praised. Participants noted that this App allows believers to access the word of God wherever they are without raising eyebrows of carrying the physical Bible. Technology has created jobs for many and more are still anticipated in the future. Even in the church settings, paying jobs and digital giving platforms have been created. One pastor from a fairly big church strongly supported the job creation aspect presented by technology. He said;

Yes, technology is very important and necessary for the advancement of God's work. In my church musicians and sound engineers are paid for their service. We have employed them on a full time basis. Of course we advertised for the job internally to ensure that the people we hire are believers themselves. The music ministry is very critical in the church, therefore it is important to have musicians who know the Lord. We also employ the camera people and a video editor. We normally place our sermons online, particularly Facebook and YouTube. So we need for our videos to be edited to ensure quality. The people in administration are also on our payroll and we plan to employ more people as the need arises

particularly in the information and communication technology department as our church continues to grow (Pastor, B).

Drawing from the above statement, technology in the church is surely availing jobs in the church. There is a need for church members to learn how to use modern technology to be able handle the relevant jobs. Change in mindset is necessary in order to embrace technology and be open minded to employ people to do the work instead of only doing the job on a voluntary basis. Participants revealed that if believers are compensated for their skills, they are likely to stay in the job and also more likely to polish up their skills than those who do the job for free. Factors considered important in hiring for the church were belief and the skill set necessary to handle the job. This has also necessitated the need for education in technology, mentoring and coaching from relevant experts in order to apply technology appropriately for the glory of the Lord. Some participants were however concerned with this technological transformation alluding to the fact that usage of technology bares some financial implications of which some churches cannot afford. The results also show that media is a good platform for the church. It is becoming common for preachers to preach and broadcast sermons through television, social media, radio and through print media to reach a broader audience. The technology associated with these platforms was praised. The usage of iPads by pastors is on the rise and iPads and the internet are said to be user friendly compared to the traditional Bibles. The internet enables pastors to search scripture quick rather than taking ages opening the pages of the Bible.

While this was preferred by some participants, others still preferred the traditional Bible particularly because they are able to highlight verses for future reference. The results asserted that the usage of smartphones for Biblical references is promoting shallow Christianity. People no longer want to be seen carrying the Bible and yet they believe in God. It has resulted in believers living a double life and hiding the light of which the Bible says the light should be shone. This hiding of one's belief in God was seen as contradicting scripture which instructs believers to shine their light for the world to see the good works of God (Matthew 5:15-16). Print media was another technological invention that participants saw as beneficial to the church. The church supposedly uses a lot of printed material to advance the gospel. Some pastors mentioned that they write booklets which are distributed to believers at a fee. The Bible was seen as a result of the development of printing machines which are a product of technological development. The development of computers was also regarded as a huge benefit to the church. There is a lot of information that has to be typed using computers and stored for future reference. Participants also highlighted that through the usage of computers they are able to edit sermon videos, record music and also access the internet. Additionally, they are very helpful in virtual preaching and record keeping. As a result of computers participants mentioned that they are able to access online courses and sermons at the comfort of their homes. According to participants, there is an increase in the usage of PowerPoint presentations and projectors in the church. These presentations would not be

possible without laptops. The laptops aid in the preparation, presenting and also posting of this material online for the benefit of the whole world. In agreement with this finding, one pastor said;

I thank God for technology because I am now able to present my sermon using my laptop and such material can also be posted online. My laptop allows me to store information for future use. Through the usage of video cameras we are able to capture our sermons and edit them using software on the laptop. Computers have really made my life easier (Pastor, D).

In light of the above statement, it is evident that laptops have influenced efficiency in the church. This resonates well with the need to acquire technological skills amongst believers. Participants were of the view that God is not necessarily against the usage of technology. Based on the fact that humanity was given the brain to reason and the fact that God instructed humanity to multiply and fill the earth, He was ultimate allowing people to come up with innovative ways to live on earth. This finding aligns with Anderson (2020) who states that, the intellect is deemed as the prime aspect of the human being which was designed by God to oversee or control the man. The inhabitants of humanity are their organs, limbs and other parts of their body. So intelligence is generated in the brain which is in head and is highly influenced by God as the creator. Participants were concerned with extremes in the technological developments like the development of deadly weapons and engineered diseases causing a threat to life. They advocated for policies to control extremes and ethical considerations in technological developments. The increase in the production of film Christian centered movies was commended. Participants highlighted that people like to watch movies when they are off work.

There has been an increase in movies which promote the gospel and presented in a way to show real life encounters of believers. Such films are likely to increase winning souls to Christ or induce the desire to attend church. Above everything else, electricity is one technological innovation that participants thought was very important both in their lives and the church. They proposed that most of the things in homes, places of business, schools and churches require electricity. Electricity drives or aids in the usage of most of the technological gadgets and tools. This made participants surmise that electricity has made life easier in many varying ways and is very necessary for sustaining human activities.

Undesirable effects of technology

Most participants revealed that they have experienced cyber bullying either direct or indirect. It was not ascertained whether the bullies were believers or unbelievers. This is probably because some people use fake names an aspect which is pretty common in social media like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The levels of bullying vary and include sexual harassment, defamatory comments and belittling. Participants mentioned that they either ignore such comments, delete them or unfriend the bully. In Whatsapp platforms where techno-preaching has increased, some people comment negatively or send

inappropriate pictures, videos and fake advertisements. Pastors revealed that they constantly monitor their Whatsaap techno-preaching groups for ease of identifying inappropriate material for the platforms. They also stated that some members leave the group because of irrelevant material posted in the group. This negates their character and integrity. According to participants other risks associated with cyber-crimes include identity theft, scammers who rip off congregates their money, and stealing of personal data including bank details. There were also suggestions that due to poverty and unemployment, people try any dubious scams availed online promising them jobs and quick financial gains. These include Bitcoin investments and fake promises of auditions for acting or musical roles. Some are said to unknowingly register in fake schools hoping to attain qualifications.

They pay registrations fees only to discover later on that these were not real. Such scams were portrayed as leading to further stress and anger issues amongst believers. The results further show that some people even borrow money to invest in these skirmish initiatives and become stuck with a debt they cannot afford to repay in the process creating unnecessary enemies. Seemingly there is an increase in cyber related crime which is a risk for the church. Cyber policing tools and personnel were recommended. Pastors also highlighted that technology has led to an increase in sermon copying and mimicking. While the word of God should be freely accessed and used for the glory of the Lord, pastors felt that some people neglect reading the Word of God and advancing their hermeneutical skills and rely only on stealing other pastors sermons. This was seen as appalling to God and brings the question of the authenticity of the calling of the pastors who steal material. Participants highlighted that a man who is called by God must read the word of God, study and rely on the Holy Spirit for guidance with sermon preparations.

The other participants who were not pastors (disciples) also supported the pastors' disposition. Some of the disciples publicized that they can tell if a pastor had not prepared the sermon himself. The Holy Spirit was labeled as a guarding factor in discerning sermons and the calling of pastors. The disciples validated their position by the word of God which states that the spirits from pastors must be tested (1 John 4:3). The Bible in 1 John 4:3 clearly states that not all spirits are from God. Believers are warned not to believe every spirit. Testing of spirits is apparently critical in the church because the Bible submits that there will be many false prophets disguising themselves in the name of the Lord (Matthew 24:11). Pastors mentioned that it is mostly these false prophets who steal other pastors' sermons. There was strong emphasis on pastors studying the word of God and studying theology to get themselves approved by God. Seemingly angered by the action of some questionable pastors found on social media, one disciple said;

Social media presents a lot of negative spells and tarnish the reputation of pastors and destroy the image of the church. I see a lot of prophets on social media advertising their ability to prophecy, but little is mentioned about their affiliation with the Lord. You can tell if a pastor is a true man of God if he

promotes the concept of repentance and walking right with the Lord than just presenting a quick fix to problems. We don't know the source of their powers. For some reason these questionable prophets on Facebook have a large following and people are willing to pay huge sums of money to receive prophecy. I am not judging anyone, but I think social media has polluted the church in some way (Participant, A).

Participants also suggested that a number of congregates particularly the youth is no longer giving much attention to the reading of the word of God because they are busy chatting on social media. Social media was regarded as bringing false hope and fake friends. One might have a thousand friends on social media, but only interact with them online. This was understood as false hope and a deceiving spirit. There was also a concern associated with affordability to procure and utilize technology. The church is predominantly reliant on contributions from congregates. In smaller churches with small congregates, technology cannot be afforded. The results suggest that the young generation prefer to be in modernized churches. This brings concerns of losing members due to the lack of affordability to purchase relevant technological gadgets including musical instruments and others. Similarly, the results posed concerns with the elderly not being able to use technology and their preference to the traditional methods of preaching. The elderly were portrayed as not so keen on being on social media or following virtual sermons. The affordability factor also featured in the elderly evading usage of technology. The internet is not for free, and the elderly and the unemployed cannot afford the usage of internet unless they access such sermons on television. All participants revealed that technology has altered some critical traditional forms of worship and affected some important spiritual practices like baptism and the physical laying on of hands. The Bible states that people must be baptized both in water and in the Holy Spirit. The virtual church was deemed as not able to provide such essential spiritual practices. One participant saw this as giving the people the gospel in part and not in its fullness. He said:

The danger with virtual preaching is that once the people accept Christ, we are unable to get them to be baptized in water. Additionally, God instructed us as elders of the church to lay hands on the sick. Praying for people virtually is good, but sometimes physical laying of hands is necessary. How then do we do that if things are done only virtually? It is important to always embrace the traditional forms of worship while learning this technological virtual reality (Participant, G).

This participant's viewpoint aligns with what the Bible states in James 5:14-16. The verse states that if anyone is sick he must go to the elders of the church and they must lay hands on him repelling the infirmity and anoint him with oil. The virtual church was seen as missing this spiritual instruction and has a potential to dilute the original message of the gospel. Praying over the media was seen as not similar to the physical benefit and participants argued

that it is not feasible to anoint anyone with oil virtually. Technology then is seen has a contributor to the destabilization of the traditional directives documented in scripture and it reduces the physical church attendance.

Striking a balance between technology and the church

As highlighted a bit in the above section, there tends to be extremes in technological developments and applications which don't fit well with theological beliefs. Seemingly critical views on extreme innovation have emerged particularly on the proposed neuro-robotics which emulates human function through reasoning. Additionally, technology which seeks to replace humanity or clone humanity is viewed as against theological concepts. While robots were seen as helpful in enhancing production and efficiency in the workplace, particularly in manufacturing factories, development of robots that reason pose a danger to society. Technology designed without proper ethical considerations was viewed as a danger to the world. Humanity was portrayed as sinful in nurture and bound to make mistakes or cause problems for the world through creating technology which appears beneficial at the present moment but might results in numerous challenges in the future. Participants suggested that in the process of developing technology, spirituality must be factored in. Additionally, participants mentioned that they have faith in the Sovereign God to bring balance between technology and the church. While God allows for the development of technology, it is not His intention that such technology should replace Him or His creation. The book of Genesis 11 reflects on the Babel scenario showing the consequences of trying to equate humanity to God.

Genesis 11:1-9 highlights that the people came together and started building a tower of which they hoped it would reach heaven and wanted to make a name for themselves. This angered God and He scattered the people all over the world and he confused the language of the people (Genesis 11:1-12). The Babel encounter was viewed by participants as clear example of self-sufficiency attitudes which yields negative outcomes. From a theological perspective, obedience to God leads to the granting of helpful technology emanating from Him. But self-sufficiency attitudes and rebellion leads to disaster. Through trusting and obeying God Noah was given an innovative idea of building the ark and clear specifications to follow. This innovation was allowed by God and everything done was in line with instructions from the Supreme God (Genesis 6:13-22). On the contrary the Babel innovation was from people's ideas and selfish ambitions. To keep a balance then requires reliance on God's directives and not self-reliance. The extremes in genetic engineering were associated with the self-sufficiency attitudes of which might result in unwarranted consequences. Therefore, while using technology, it is important to strike a balance between augment technological reality from virtual reality to ensure that worshippers are grounded in the truth of the gospel which aligns with the teachings of the Bible (Yusuf 2024).

CONCLUSIONS

The reality of technology usage in the church is unavoidable. Technology usage has increased in the church and the church has embraced such a transformation. A diverse framework is presented by Christianity for addressing the challenges from the usage of technology. Different perceptions are observed with some seeing technology as a blessing and others are skeptical fearing that technology has the potential to eliminate critical traditional spiritual practices. A need to adapt, learn, mentor and educate has risen. The increase in technological implementation also poses a threat of increased cyber-crime. Cyber security must be explored and implemented in the church to protect the integrity and character of pastors and the church as whole. Technology has availed a lot of positivity and opportunities in the church. An increase in technological usage is envisioned in the future which is the reason why paradigm shifts are eminent. The results revealed that while exploring technological models, the traditional elements like physical water baptism, baptism in the Holy Ghost, oil anointing and laying on of hands are still necessary to bring a balance in the church. Technology should not eliminate the original message of the gospel, but rather be infused to enhance in spreading the original the gospel.

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