

The Work of the Spirit in a Technological Society

Gibson Stroupe

St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Norfolk, Virginia

A report released late in 1977 offered revelation about life in our technological society. The report indicated that in 1973 the CIA had made a study of psychics and the field of parapsychology. The purpose of the study was not to discover more about this mystery but to ascertain whether people with psychic powers could use those powers to gather intelligence data. Such a study revealed an essential element of a technological society: an emphasis upon means. As the Greek roots of the word imply, "technology" is a systematic treatment of everything in the world based on the belief that every phenomenon can be analyzed, broken down into parts, and transformed to be used efficiently. Technology is more than a sum of various techniques. It is a fundamental approach to the world itself, a view of reality which has come to dominate the way we perceive ourselves and the world around us. Our society is shaped around this understanding of the world. The brevity of this article prevents adequate exploration of the sources of our technological culture. Those interested will find a full treatment in Jacques Eliul's *The Technological Society*.

Life in a technological society presents many faces. The most pleasant face is the tremendous improvement in the quality of our lives compared to the lives of our ancestors. No one can dispute the good which technology has brought to the world. In America it has made life easier, providing a level of affluence and comfort unmatched in human history. In areas such as medicine and agriculture, it has meant life rather than death, food rather than starvation. This face of technology is testimony to God's grace in relieving human suffering and in bringing a sense of security in human life.

There are also less pleasant faces that characterize life in a technological society. One face mirrors the arrogance that permeates our lives as a result of technological power. Although the 1970's have delivered some stunning blows to our confidence—blows such as the loss in Vietnam, the recalcitrance of poverty, the energy shortage, our erratic economy, Watergate—we still retain a large measure of faith in our own powers. George Will captured this faith succinctly when he mocked the reaction to the power blackout in New York City in 1977: "Why was *mere nature* allowed to disrupt technology?" (Newsweek, July 25, 1977).

There are several sources of our arrogance, but none is more fundamental than the fact that we see life only as a problem to be solved. Whether the problem is in medicine, education, economics, psychology, or even religion, we feel that the answer is available and is only just around the corner. On an individual level, the glut of "how to" books bears witness to our supposition that we can accomplish anything we desire. The title of this article reflects the same confidence in our capabilities. I readily agreed to the title, and it was only as I

began to wrestle with the article itself that I realized a potential attitude which might be associated with the title. We are so powerful in our technological society that we may even imagine we can know and predict the work of the Holy Spirit!

There is another face of life in a technological society, the face which mirrors a superficial approach to ourselves and the world around us. One only need observe any segment of our lives to verify the power of superficiality in our culture. Speed is essential, whether we are hurtling through the air in an airplane, stuck in a traffic jam on the expressway, or standing in line at a fast-food franchise. Our central source of entertainment, television, encourages us to neglect encounters with the humans near us in deference to those seen on the screen. It has become safer and more preferable to talk with our favorite TV character than with our spouse or children. Theodore Roszak exposes our approach in his description of flying in an airplane in his book *Where The Wasteland Ends*. Humanity has dreamed of flying for thousands of years, and in the last fifty years it has become a reality. Yet, unless you are a child or a novice, flying is greeted not with wonder but with boredom. During a flight, we must occupy our time with eating, sleeping, or watching a movie. It is not an experience rooted in wonder but rather an experience to be endured.

We live in an age that focuses its energy upon that which can be analyzed, described, and used efficiently. Life is seen not as a gift but as a process whose only purpose is conquest and transformation. We seek to avoid that which seems to defy order and structure. In a society committed to a mechanistic view of reality, the mysterious is anathema, the personal is intolerable. Churches have not been immune to this development. In the 1970's the interest of churches in the nasty, imprecise questions raised by the social movements of the 1960's has dwindled. Instead we have focused our attention on areas more capable of being ordered and structured: organizational development and management technique.

All of us applaud the improvements of life brought by technology, but few of us applaud the faces of arrogance and superficiality seen in our lives. Many of us will fervently hope and pray that the unpleasant faces of technological life are not connected to the pleasant faces of that life. We will pray that we be allowed to retain our comfort while we seek to correct the ills of our technological society. The unpleasant faces of arrogance and superficiality, however, reveal that life in a technological society is human-centered, not God-centered. Life in a technological society centers around faith in ourselves and in our techniques—the enormous power generated by our techniques lures us into the idolatry of self-worship. For all the good that technology brings, it corrupts us spiritually, leaving us unwilling to trust in God. We prefer to trust in ourselves and our powers.

This is a hard issue and brings us into the harsh area where there are rarely ever clear and easy choices. Proponents of technology will rightly respond here that for many in our world, the questions of the corruption of the spirit are questions of luxury. For those millions in the world who face starvation daily, food is life, and life is food. The questions of spirit are secondary to the questions of survival. Technology, not spiritual purity, holds the key to the survival of these millions of people—technology with its emphasis upon better types of grains, better methods of production, better methods of distribution. Defenders

of technology will respond that *it* is the *only* hope for feeding the hungry. To undermine the sovereignty of technology is to condemn millions to starvation and death so that we may enjoy spiritual health *and* an abundant supply of food.

Technology does provide food for survival for millions, and no one would deny its power for good in this instance. In a real sense, however, our dependence upon technology enables us to avoid the fundamental issues underlying hunger in the world. We have not even eradicated hunger in America, the most advanced technological nation in the world. The problem is that dependence upon technology as the solution to the hunger crisis enables us to avoid the root of the crisis: our unwillingness to share the wealth. The root of the crisis of hunger is not technical but *spiritual*, a crisis of will rather than of knowledge. Placing our hope in technology will help in the short run in numbers of people fed, but it will also doom future generations to the same fate because of our refusal to go to the root of the crisis.

Is technology the culprit in our society or are the abuses associated with technology only manifestations of human sinfulness? There is no satisfactory answer to this question, but it is clear that we are willing to be corrupted, whether the source is technology's great power, or whether the source is our great weakness. The problem remains that our technological powers lull us into thinking that we can solve our crises without ever confronting the spiritual corruption that lies at the heart of our technological society.

I suspect that the prayers for preservation of our comfort will not be answered. Rather than praying that we be granted our comfort while we find solutions, we should be praying that the Holy Spirit give us hearts which are not thoroughly polluted with worship of our technological powers. God may burst our comfortable scene with a smashing judgment—let us pray that the Holy Spirit can cleanse our hearts before that time.

The work of the Holy Spirit in our age is not confined to cleansing and judgment, for a strange malady plagues us in our technological society. Despite all our power, despite all of the knowledge that we have about the world around us, we feel alienated and separated from our surroundings, perhaps more than ever before in human history. We do not trust the present, and we especially distrust the future. Rather than feeling liberated by our technological powers—as the drum-beaters fifteen years ago told us that we would—we feel lost and powerless, unable to change our fate as individuals and as communities. Rather than feeling as if we have life under control, as our arrogance and superficiality would suggest, we feel dissatisfied and frustrated that life is so complex and overwhelming. While there is irony in this situation, it is not as surprising as it might seem. We have given technology control of our spirits, and we are convinced that it is king and savior and we the lowly peasants.

The Holy Spirit reminds us that even in a technological society, human life has not been left to its own destructive devices. The Holy Spirit speaks to us as individuals and as communities. As individuals, the Holy Spirit reminds us that no matter how small and insignificant each of us might seem in a world of complexity, each one of us is still God's creature, offered grace and caring through God's love. The gift of the Holy Spirit in our time is the discovery that a person cannot finally be analyzed and ordered, for each of us in a mysterious synthesis of flesh and spirit, created in God's image. This is a gift of sustenance

which seeks to repair the brokenness of life that dominates our technological society.

The Holy Spirit also brings us the gift of renewal, chiding us for taking ourselves and others for granted, for becoming oblivious to the mysteries of God's creation, for being unwilling to confront the spiritual crises of our time. As individuals, the Holy Spirit reminds us that we are *not* powerless, that we are not hopelessly lost in a maze of affluence and comfort. The Holy Spirit reminds us that we are not slaves to the arrogance and superficiality of technological life. The Holy Spirit can empower us to confront our sinfulness, to begin to seek ways of change, to open ourselves to others who are on the same journey. We are reminded of our need to be in community with others, finding that we are not alone, that our efforts are not useless.

The Holy Spirit is speaking *now* in the life of communities. It is no coincidence that the charismatic movement has gathered force as many of the churches have turned to technology for solutions in organizational problems. While the charismatic movement obviously has excesses and needs to be more aware of its limitations, it is testimony to the power of the Holy Spirit to bring renewal and to speak in ways that are surprising. On the communal level, an increasing number of people are being moved to join together in various types of groups and communities, discovering that they are in spiritual crisis, discovering that answers are found not in better methods of self-examination but in following the lead of the Holy Spirit in seeking to make God the center of their lives. These people are being led to worship God rather than their own powers, to share resources and talents rather than clinging to them in fear, and to hope for renewal and change in a world crouched in death and sterility.

The Holy Spirit is at work in our technological society. As usual, that work is often surprising and disturbing. The Holy Spirit confronts us with our idolatry, our self-worship, our willingness to succumb to the death of our spirits which technology seeks. The Holy Spirit reminds us that God is ruler of the world, not the technological society in which we live. Even the massive conglomerates, the multinational corporations which seem to have so much power, even they are subject to God's grace and judgment! The Holy Spirit reminds us that we are not doomed to slavery, that the determinism of technological life does not have complete control of our hearts. The Holy Spirit reminds us that there are alternatives to life as we now live it, alternatives which can bring life rather than death, alternatives that offer discoveries of joy and renewal in our time of despair and apathy.

We can respond in different ways to the calling of the Holy Spirit. Some of us will harden our hearts and reject the working of the Holy Spirit. We will continue to walk in the way of the wicked, worshipping our power and continuing to crush other people and the earth in our drive for comfort. Yet, some of us will be led to join with others to share our talents, burdens, and resources. Some of us will begin to slow down and to see that there is, indeed, a world of mystery around us, a world filled with problems, but a world that is God's and not ours. Some of us will begin to discover different values concerning our affluence, concerning our sisters and brothers who are hungry, whose lives are being destroyed so that we might be comfortable. Some of us, perhaps all of us in America, will suffer the judgment of having placed too much faith in our technological powers.

For all of our power, for all of our faith in ourselves, the final answers to the problems of life in a technological society are not ours. We can do much in our world to relieve suffering and to bring joy, but the roots of such actions lie not in the realm of technology, but in the realm of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is working in our time to cleanse our hearts, to call us out to join with one another in sharing and caring, to center our hearts on God rather than on ourselves, and to give life to our spirits which seem so near death. Such gifts of renewal will not preclude judgment in our time. But in the upheavals surely to come in this generation or the next, let us pray that the Holy Spirit will bind up our wounds and bring us courage and joy, that like Isaiah, we shall run and not be weary, we shall walk and not faint.