

# **Technology as a Modern-Day Tower of Babel: The Garden of Eden as an Alternative Vision for Missionally Engaging a Media-Saturated Culture**

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## **Abstract**

This article highlights some of the limitations of using digital media in the context of ministry and missions. Tech companies like Google and Facebook lead to the concentration of wealth and power and as such can be compared to the Tower of Babel described in Genesis 11. Rather than simply contributing to these powerful systems in an uncritical way, Christians should look for an alternative system based on the Garden of Eden—one that emphasizes shalomic relationships with God, the environment, and other people.

**Key Words:** concentration of wealth, monopolization of information, shalomic relationships, technology companies

## **Introduction**

The opportunities modern information technology (IT) offers for spreading the gospel message and for promoting missions seem virtually limitless. Personally, I benefit from using digital media in my work as a regional representative and mobilizer for the global sending agency World Team. Applications like Skype, Zoom, and WhatsApp enable me to interact with missionaries, colleagues, and applicants all over the world. Being able to connect with people without having to drive or fly to their locations makes my ministry easier, and in times of COVID-19 these communication tools have even become a necessity as international travel has become increasingly difficult.

These introductory lines should be understood provisorily, insofar as this article is not intended to be an unhealthy and unhelpful expression of technophobia. There are many benefits that digital media can bring about. Nonetheless, this article develops a theological and missiological argument highlighting the limitations of digital media by contrasting the accounts of the Tower of Babel and the Garden of Eden. Today's tech companies operate within the former model as they strive to concentrate the data of all humankind within their (profit-driven) systems. Rather than simply contributing to these structures in an uncritical manner, this analysis proposes that believers ought to offer a prophetic alternative to the media-saturated culture of our time by highlighting concepts found in the Garden of Eden—such as an embodied existence in which people enjoy unmediated relationships with God, each other, and the environment.

The article first describes three ways in which modern technologies resemble the Tower of Babel. (1) Digital technologies have led to the concentration of vast amounts of wealth, considering that tech companies are among the most valuable corporations in the world today. (2) These same companies are also advancing the monopolization of information, as they control tools like search engines and social media platforms. (3) While IT is bringing people closer together, it also divides humanity into new subgroups, as people retreat into echo chambers they create for themselves within cyberspace. After critiquing technology as a modern-day Tower of Babel in this manner, the article's constructive, fourth and final section draws on the Garden of Eden as a

counter-cultural model that engages the world missionally by encouraging a tangible encounter with the living God.

### **Digital Technologies and the Concentration of Wealth**

The first way that digital technologies resemble a modern-day Tower of Babel is because they accumulate vast amounts of wealth in the hands of a few corporations and individuals. Companies like Amazon, Apple, and Alphabet (the parent company of Google) are now among the largest companies in the United States in terms of revenue. Globally, some of the largest corporations continue to be in the energy sector, such as Sinopec Group (from China), Royal Dutch Shell (from the Netherlands/United Kingdom), and Saudi Aramco (from Saudi-Arabia). Nonetheless, the influence of the technology sector is growing worldwide, a trend that is especially visible in China where tech companies like Alibaba, Tencent, and Baidu are increasingly making headlines (Fortune Global 500 n.d.).

This growth of tech companies is even more remarkable when put into historical perspective. As the overview below (Table 1) demonstrates, the largest US company by revenue in 1960 was the car manufacturer General Motors (GM), followed by the oil multinational Exxon Mobil (Fortune 500 Archive n.d.). Thirty years later, in 1990, the ranking was still dominated by automobile and oil companies (notably GM, Ford, and Exxon Mobil). However, by 1990 a significant change had occurred. While GM was still occupying the first spot, an IT company appeared in the top five as well: the computer manufacturer International Business Machines (IBM). The situation has dramatically changed since then. By 2020, no car manufacturer was in the top ten of Fortune 500 companies anymore (Ford was #12 and GM #18), and the online retailer Amazon (#2) created more revenue than the oil giant Exxon Mobil (#3).

**Table 1. The Largest Fortune 500 Companies in 1960, 1990, and 2020**

Ranking	1960	1990	2020
1	General Motors	General Motors	Walmart
2	Exxon Mobil	Ford Motor	Amazon
3	Ford Motor	Exxon Mobil	Exxon Mobil
4	General Electric	IBM	Apple
5	US Steel	General Electric	CVS Health

When looking at market capitalization (rather than revenue) the dominance of tech giants is even more obvious. In previous decades, there was a wide variety of US companies that the stock market determined were the most valuable. Among these were car manufacturers and oil companies but also telecommunication and pharmaceutical firms (like AT&T and Pfizer). However, in recent years tech companies have begun to dominate the scene so much that, in 2020, all the top five corporations by market capitalization in the United States (Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, Alphabet, and Facebook) belonged to the same industry (Dogs of the Dow 2020).

That a company like Alphabet creates more revenue (and is much more profitable) than the largest car manufacturer in the US seems counterintuitive—after all, are not many of the services that Google, for example, provides free of charge? From an economist’s point of view there is, of course, no such thing as a “free” service or product; in fact, one of the fundamental principles of economics is that “there is no such thing as a free lunch” (Smith 2008, 137). Many tech companies

create revenues through their advertising, and consumers using Google or Facebook give these corporations something that is arguably more valuable (and certainly more sensitive) than their money: their personal data (Carr 2020, 160). Given this business model, it is worth highlighting that “data is the new oil of the digital economy” (Toonders 2014; Bridle 2019, 245–47). Some 200 years ago, oil was a largely underutilized resource that seemed of little worth. However, oil soon became a highly valued commodity, creating unimaginable wealth for individuals like John D. Rockefeller (1839–1937), as oil became the lifeline of modern economies, reshaping the socio-economic and geo-strategic realities of entire societies.

Oil brought many benefits to the nations that were industrializing: new modes of transport (like the automobile) became available, convenient chemical products (such as plastic) were developed, and houses could be heated without having to rely on burning wood or coal. Christians in the West benefited from these developments just like the rest of their surrounding populations did; moreover, those Christians interested in global missions were especially excited that novel technologies (like airplanes) could now be used to reach even the remotest parts of the globe relatively quickly. However, like all technological progress, these developments brought about new challenges, such as an unprecedented pollution of the environment (Slimbach 2010, 186). By and large, Christians participated in these polluting activities without giving much thought to themes like creation care and the sustainable use of limited resources.

In fact, particularly in the United States, many Evangelicals aligned themselves with the oil industry. As Darren Dochuk, the author of *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (2019), explains in an interview:

Many oil executives were outspoken evangelicals who saw their business and service to the church as one vocation. Meanwhile, countless geologists, drillers, and roughnecks worked the oil fields with strong adherence to the Bible and a conviction that Christian principles informed their labors. So yes, I’d claim that there has always been a special affinity for the oil business among evangelicals (Kidd 2019).

As it turns out, some of the most beloved names and institutions within evangelicalism were closely connected to the US oil industry, including Billy Graham (1918–2018), who received financial and political support from the Rockefeller family for his famous revival meetings in New York City; the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (Biola), which was built with money from Lyman Stewart (1840–1923), the cofounder of Union Oil; and the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), which received substantial funds for its campaigns from J. Howard Pew (1882–1971), the president of Sun Oil Company (Dochuk 2019, 246, 336, 364, 367).

Given that data is the new oil in the twenty-first century, US Evangelicals aligning themselves with big data companies resembles their alignment with big oil in the 1960s. Can believers then, with a clear conscience, use the digital media applications that are so seductively convenient and popular? Perhaps so, but engaging these technologies should not be done in a careless manner. Rather, Christians need to think through the theological and missiological implications of all they do, examining their use of technology within the metanarrative of Scripture that tells of creation, fall, and redemption.

It is essential that Christ-followers begin by recognizing the sinful dimensions of big tech and big data, using discernment and critical distance rather than merely contributing to the growth of this behemoth (Heidebrecht 2014, xviii, 69–71, 114). Since God is sovereign, none of the

technological innovations of our time are a surprise to Him, and the Lord can certainly use these tools to advance the cause of the gospel. Nonetheless, “acknowledging that technological developments ... are within God’s providence does not mean that we are excused from exercising judgment in weighing both the benefits and costs of such developments. Nor are missionaries and other mission participants exempt from responsibly using—or rejecting—such developments” (Jennings 2020). The recent advances in transportation and telecommunication have created “all kinds of related missions opportunities and challenges,” and this ambiguity therefore necessitates “the responsibility to act wisely, ethically, zealously, effectively, efficiently, and carefully” with regards to these technological developments (Jennings 2020).

### **The Monopolization of Information**

Whenever vast amounts of wealth are accumulated in one place or person, there are negative side effects, such as political corruption and the creation of (de facto) monopolies. In the United States, for example, the lobbying industry is a major factor in the political decision-making process. Pharmaceuticals, electronics manufacturing, and insurance are among the largest industries that try to influence Congress by channeling hundreds of millions of dollars toward lobbying efforts (Table 2). In 2009, the oil and gas industry was the second-largest contributor, spending over 175 million US dollars (OpenSecrets.org 2020). However, ten years later (in 2019) this number had substantially decreased (to around 125 million US dollars). In contrast, contributions by internet companies had increased sharply, so much so that in 2019 this industry spent more money on lobbying than did the automotive industry (74 million versus 70 million US dollars).

**Table 2. Lobbying Spending Expenditures in 2009 and 2019**

	<i>Industry</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>Change in %</i>
1	Pharmaceuticals/Health	\$270.8 million	\$298.8 million	+ 10.3%
2	Electronics Manufacturing	\$130.5 million	\$157.0 million	+ 20.3%
3	Insurance	\$167.3 million	\$155.7 million	- 6.9%
4	Oil & Gas	\$175.5 million	\$125.8 million	- 28.3%
(...)	(...)	(...)	(...)	(...)
18	Internet	\$15.9 million	\$74.3 million	+ 367.3%
19	Automotive	\$60.2 million	\$70.0 million	+ 16.3%

Crony capitalism is always a problem, no matter what industry—but it is especially problematic in the technology sector. After all, tech companies deal with information, and the free flow of information is vital for the functioning of democracy and the curbing of political power. Companies like Facebook, YouTube (a Google subsidiary), and Twitter are platforms through which everyday people can share their content with millions of users. These platforms are largely committed to free speech, but occasionally they also engage in self-censorship, thereby creating their own set of controversies (Briefing 2020).

In addition, tech giants and billionaires have also begun to control traditional media, such as newspapers. Arguably, two of the most prominent and respected newspapers in the United States are *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. For example, *The New York Times* “has won 130 Pulitzer Prizes, far more than any other news organization,” and *The Washington Post* made history in 1972 when it uncovered the Watergate scandal, which ultimately led to the resignation of Richard Nixon as the 37<sup>th</sup> president of the United States (1969–1974) (*The New York Times*

2020). However, *The Washington Post* is now owned by Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon and (at the time of writing) reportedly the world's wealthiest individual, who bought the newspaper in 2013. *The New York Times*, on the other hand, is a publicly listed company and in that sense has many owners. However, its largest shareholder is Carlos Slim, a Mexican investor in telecommunications, who in 2008 was ranked by *Forbes* magazine as the second-richest person in the world—the same year that Slim also began purchasing shares of *The New York Times* (Duncan and Goddard 2018, 128).

Clearly a massive concentration of power and wealth is taking place within a relatively small number of tech corporations. Not only are the companies of Silicon Valley among the richest organizations in the world, but they are also increasingly buying political influence and monopolizing the availability of information (Carr 2020, 226). Furthermore, the influence of these companies reaches far beyond their home countries. Facebook, for instance, had over 2.7 billion users in 2020; since there are only around 330 million Americans, this means that the vast majority of Facebook users are located outside the United States. In exercising this kind of global influence, these tech giants resemble the Tower of Babel described in Genesis 11, which was an attempt by ambitious humans to create a unifying center within their society. Since, in Scripture, Babel is an expression of a worldly system that opposes the purposes of God, Christians have to ask themselves to what extent they want to contribute to this system by consuming the products and services it so enticingly offers (Hauerwas 2007, 71).

### **Concentration or Dispersion?**

Since tech companies are amassing so much wealth and information, one might think that they could become a new cultural center that provides a sense of unity for humanity. A tower is something that people can look up to and in doing so they all gaze in one direction—which today means gazing downward at hand-held devices. However, just as the people who built the Tower of Babel were also dispersed and divided into different languages (Gen. 11:6–9), so the modern-day Babylonic towers of digital media are becoming symbols of both concentration and dispersion. As highlighted above, they are tools of concentration in terms of economic and political power. However, because digital media offers such a vast array of niche opinions, a dispersion is taking place at the same time.

In the now almost foregone age of newspapers and television, people living within a particular country could still largely agree on what credible journalism was and what the main news stories and opinions of the day were. Today, anyone with a smartphone can become a journalist and broadcast his or her point of view on YouTube, potentially reaching an audience of millions without ever having to go through an editorial process. Increasingly, people are receiving their news through their Facebook feed, which, powered by artificially intelligent algorithms, quite literally feeds them only what they want to see and hear, thereby reinforcing what they already believe.

Ironically, in a time when information is abundant as never before, misinformation abounds. News media that formerly were considered reliable now get labeled by some as "fake news," and for many it has become simply a matter of political preference to distinguish between trustworthy and misleading media. Elections are sabotaged through misinformation campaigns, some foreign and some domestic, thereby putting one of the most essential elements of a functioning democracy at risk. While all this is happening, people are talking less and less to each other; enough entertainment is being provided through the echo chambers people can carve out for themselves

within the vast array of digital media that is available to them. In such an environment, without a unifying center societies are dividing into various subgroups—a development that has become particularly obvious in the United States, where many of the world’s most influential tech companies’ headquarters are located (Pontifical Council for Social Communication 2020, 182–84).

Granted, there are also advantages to having such large numbers of channels through which information can be dispersed in the digital age. Minority opinions that had no platform before can now be heard and discussed. Christians have the opportunity to communicate the gospel on a global platform; much was achieved in this regard in the twentieth century through radio and television, and it looks like even more will be accomplished in this century through the internet. In some ways, people who have access to the internet are now closer together than ever, since they are (at least potentially) just one click away from interacting with each other. However, believers eager to use these tools would do well to remember this wise insight by a Christian author who writes: “Technology, which does so much to close the distance, also enables much of the distance in our lives” (Crouch 2017, 198).

As the subtitle of Andy Crouch’s book explains, his goal is to suggest *everyday steps for putting technology in its proper place*. Such an intentional and discerning handling of technology is vital because digital media like Skype and Zoom have benefits as well as limitations. As Crouch reminds us, “even the highest quality Skype connection is not enough for the really important moments in human life” (Crouch 2017, 198). As many have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, the limitations of technology become especially obvious during the most significant occasions in a person’s lifecycle, for example: “Although many couples cherish the video recording of their wedding, no one should aspire to be married by video” (Crouch 2017, 200). For funerals as well, under normal circumstances it would be unthinkable simply to witness the funeral of a good friend or family member via Zoom.

Ministers and missionaries should be pastors to people, and this task requires having personal interactions with them and showing up for important events in their lives. A minister is a shepherd who spends day and night with the sheep entrusted to them, not a delivery driver that simply drops a package of information in somebody’s mailbox (figuratively speaking) and then moves on to the next assignment. After going through a process of discernment, Christians may be able to use digital tools for the mission of God and to the glory of God. However, simply sending out mass emails or pointing people to a particular website is no substitute for ministry. Both shepherding people and fishing for people are hands-on kinds of work. Rather than succumbing to the anonymous accumulation of data that the Tower of Babel provides, believers should look for an alternative biblical image that more accurately reflects what ministry and missions are all about—such as turning to the Garden of Eden as an ideal that demonstrates the kind of life God intended all humans to have in the first place.

### **The Garden of Eden as an Alternative to the Tower of Babel**

At least initially, structures that resemble the Tower of Babel seem highly attractive as they represent power, wealth, and human ingenuity. However, these human structures and inventions ultimately fall short, and this will also be the case for technological innovations in the realm of IT and digital media. As Derek C. Schuurman reminds us:

The disciplines of computer science and engineering do offer wisdom, which provides one type of knowing about the world, one that can be incredibly powerful. But this wisdom becomes folly when it is used to explain and control all of reality. Eventually this can lead to a ‘tower-of-Babel’ culture where people replace their need for God with a reliance on the possibilities of modern technology. This results in *technicism*, a trust in technology as savior of the human condition. This is essentially idolatry: exchanging the creator for something in creation. But idols do not deliver on their promises (Schuurman 2019, 218).

Since idols like big tech cannot deliver on their promises, it is essential for mission-minded Christians to offer an alternative to a world that thirsts to have life, and to have it abundantly.

Instead of succumbing to the concentration of wealth, information, and power that characterizes the modern-day Tower of Babel, this article proposes the Garden of Eden as an alternative model for life: one in which tangible relationships with God, people, and nature come first. In the Garden of Eden, humans (as represented by Adam and Eve) had unmediated access to the Creator of heaven and earth. As recorded in Genesis 2 and 3, God was walking in the garden, in the cool of the evening, and Adam and Eve were able to talk directly with their Creator.

As God is in the process of restoring all things through Christ, it is the task of the Church to invite people to have such a direct connection with their Creator once more, to recover what was lost in Eden. Simply pointing people to watch a Christian video or to click through a website with theological content will not suffice. As Bill Johnson, the senior pastor of the influential Bethel Church in Redding, California, emphasizes: “We owe people an encounter with God” (Johnson 2015, 192). Rather than using digital media to create narratives about God, the essential missionary work consists of leading people toward an encounter with the living God that becomes tangible through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Besides being able to walk and talk with God in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were also able to relate to each other in love. Before the fall they lived sinless lives, without fear or shame, thereby experiencing a depth and purity in their relationship that no other human has known since then. Considering the creation mandate given in Genesis 1:27–28 to multiply and fill the earth, this relationship included the joys of marital intimacy and having children. In contrast, in this current age of digital media countless people experience sex through the various offers made through internet pornography, rather than through an actual physical encounter. In the years ahead, this flight into technology-mediated experiences may become even more prevalent and problematic due to the increasing usage of sex robots (Herzfeld 2017, 91–102).

In such a milieu of virtual lifestyles, Christians need to propose a prophetic alternative that promotes the value of traditional marriage, raising children, and other committed relationships based on face-to-face interactions. Sexual intercourse between husband and wife, a mother breastfeeding her infant, a group of friends hugging each other—these kinds of embodied practices are profound expressions of what it means to be human and must not be replaced by digital experiences, no matter how fascinating they might seem at first. After all, “any sort of mediated presence is the palest shadow of what it is like to be with another person in person—that is, present in the fullness of what our bodies make possible” (Crouch 2017, 199).

Besides providing tangible relationships with God and other people, the Garden of Eden also invites humans to interact with their environment, with the soil, the plants, and the animals that God has created. Digital experiences are no substitute for planting a garden or taking care of

animals, and caring for creation should be part of the gospel message that we proclaim as Christians. Given the increasing urbanization throughout the world today, it may become more and more difficult for people to live in an environment that resembles the Garden of Eden. However, the biblical narrative provides hope in this respect as well, considering that the New Jerusalem portrayed in Revelation is a gigantic city—but one that has a river at its center, as well as trees (specifically, a double portion of the tree of life, Rev. 22:1–2). Inspired by this vision, missional expressions in the twenty-first century may include initiatives to clean up the air and water that is available in our cities and to create an abundance of green spaces, whether in the form of parks, rooftops gardens, or green areas that are integrated on every floor of newly developed skyscrapers.

To summarize, the Garden of Eden represents God’s original intention for creation to flourish within the holistic concept of *shalom*, thereby standing in contrast to the false hopes people placed in the Tower of Babel. “In the Old Testament poetic and prophetic literature, shalom is used to indicate an earthly order where justice and delight mark all of one’s relationships: with God, with self, with others, with nature” (Slimbach 2010, 197). Digital media can play a role in achieving these rich relationships, but only as people intentionally place technological tools under God’s sanctifying and redemptive rule. Ministers and missionaries need to remember that humans are embodied creatures who long for tangible and restored relationships with God, others, and creation. To facilitate this kind of shalomic environment is therefore the crucial missionary task of the twenty-first century.

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