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Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology (Book Review)

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Book Review

Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology by Albert Borgmann (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003) 144pp. Reviewed by Ethan Brue, Assistant Professor of Engineering, Dordt College

Good books are worth reading again. Some because the first read is so rich that it leaves you hungering for the same read again. Others because they are more difficult to digest all at once and require a second read to truly experience the flavor. *Power Failure* is the latter. After charging through my first read of this book, I failed to grasp a coherent theme or idea that held this collection of essays together because I was trying to consume the book as a whole. I lacked the patience to digest the unique courses as they were served by Borgmann. It is well known that people who attempt to eat BBQ ribs in the same way that they eat yogurt will find the experience less than satisfactory. This book is best read between the ribs.

There are too few authors writing seriously about technology. Authors that either use technology as the scapegoat for all contemporary problems or uncritically join the ranks of the technological utopians are a dime a dozen. But authors that dare to explore technology at its cultural and philosophical roots are relatively scarce. Rarer still are authors who dare to write on technology from a Christian perspective. Borgmann takes up both challenges, and, to his credit, he generally avoids the easy formulaic answers provided by the anti-technologists and the technological utopians. Nonetheless, the challenge he embraces is formidable. Technology is a human activity woven through all dimensions of our social, historical, and cultural fabric. To write about technology requires that a person abstract it from its integral place, severing some of the necessary roots that give definition to technology in its larger cultural/historical context (as opposed to considering technology a contemporary novelty). While Borgmann does well to acknowledge the social and cultural ramifications of technology, he does have a tendency to cast technology as a semi-autonomous (albeit culturally tethered) entity rather than an activity that has historically been central to our fundamental understanding of the nature of humanity.

The book is a compilation of eight philosophical essays relating in varying degrees to technology. Each chapter can be read independently from the others. One of the strengths of Borgmann's work is the ability he has to articulate fundamental distinctions in the fabric of our contemporary technological tapestry, while also critiquing traditional distinctions that are nothing more than superficial dichotomies. In some cases, his multiplicity of categorization and characterization begs for cohesion, and occasionally the classifications he makes

seem only loosely drawn together. Even so, I found that the distinctions presented did resonate with the texture of our contemporary experience.

In the first essay, Borgmann asserts that, contrary to our popular perception of contemporary technological progress, the reality is that the more things change, the more they stay the same. He suggests that the patterns of contemporary technological change exhibit a "numbing sameness" that offers an opaque character to our contemporary world. It renders us incapable of seeing beyond surfaces. The shallow roots of contemporary technological novelty are homogeneous in that they share a common characteristic: availability. Borgmann uses the term "commodity" to describe artifacts that find their definition in availability. Such commodities share an "absence of demands" and in our contemporary culture are frequently accompanied by "concealed machinery" (the complex set of techniques that, unknown to most of us, comprise a technological artifact). He suggests that all recent technological change can be understood and evaluated within the bounds of this "device paradigm." Borgmann uses the everyday example of Cool Whip (as a whipped cream substitute) to illustrate not only the nature of a commodity, but also the value of this "device paradigm" for exploring normative technological direction. By exploring how traditional artifacts (e.g. whipped cream) are often transformed into commodities (e.g. Cool Whip), Borgmann creatively illustrates how technological progress is always a composite of gain and loss. He puts it this way: "Human life at any one time is full and complete. It never contains empty slots that await the insertion of novel commodity. A technological novelty will take its place in our lives when we have discarded something old to make room for the new" (16). It is prudent for our contemporary society to listen carefully to Borgmann, for our temptation is always to chart a technological course that is blind to either technological gain or technological loss, and to fail to grasp the important reality of the gain/loss combination inherent in technological development.

I find intriguing Borgmann's distinction between what he terms "disposable reality" and "commanding reality." For Borgmann, commanding reality is manifest in "things" while disposable reality is manifest in "devices." Initially, the reader gets the feeling that Borgmann is engaging in nothing more than lingual gymnastics, but if the reader perseveres, the elusive distinction begins to solidify via example. He compares the technology of the violin (a "thing") to a stereo (a

“device”). The inherent character of these technological artifacts determines a relationship between the listener, the player, and the artifact, a relationship that in the end results in distinctly different human experiences, one demanding, the other disposable. The importance of this distinction for Borgmann is that “material culture in the advanced industrial democracies spans a spectrum from commanding to disposable reality. The former reality calls forth a life of engagement that is oriented within the physical and social world. The latter induces a life of distraction that is isolated from the environment and other people” (33). This distinction leads me to believe that we often ask the wrong questions. Instead of asking whether to do or not do technology, we should be asking questions regarding the nature of our technological artifacts. Do they engage or disengage our normative relationships between each other and the world around us?

I appreciated much of Borgmann’s analysis, but I felt that several of his many distinctions begged for a more thorough treatment. I expect readers will share a common experience. I found myself initially experiencing agreement followed by a question of “How does this distinction serve us?” Borgmann’s answers to such questions in the book will likely leave the reader unsatisfied. Perhaps that is not all bad. A book that makes us look at our world from a different Christian angle may be just what we need. It drives us to answer the hanging questions for ourselves.

I found it ironic that in a book that is saturated with distinction and definition, the only thing that the author fails to define clearly is technology itself. Is technology an activity? Is technology an entity? Is technology a concept? The author seems content to work with a vague development of this main character in his book,

assuming that people know from experience what technology is. I am not sure that this is a good assumption.

If any one section from this book jumped out and grabbed me, it was Borgmann’s essay entitled “Contingency and Grace.” It probably has something to do with my growing up a Lutheran, but I still suffer from a chronic grace addiction. So when Borgmann threw out a hypothesis as to why grace seems to be a rather rare experience in our technological world, he had my attention. He puts it this way: “Many of us share the intuition that contemporary life is uniquely inhospitable to Christianity. What makes this unreceptive atmosphere unique is the general lack of apparent opposition. Our culture seems indifferent to the real message of Christianity and at the same time is eroding the ground that Christianity needs to prosper” (65). The fertile soil that is required for Christianity to prosper is a “receptivity to grace.” And as Borgmann notes, “Grace is always undeserved and often unforethinkable, and a culture of transparency and control systematically reduces, if it does not occlude, the precinct of grace...The kind of approach to reality that aims at transparency and control is but another definition of modern technology” (65).

While I personally found the first four of the eight essays in this book more valuable and interesting than the last four, I think the book deserves a reading by Christians wrestling with how to respond to technological change. It is not an easy read, but it is a book that provides the reader a view of technology from a Christian vantage point. I would hope that what we see from this perspective will inspire us to continually reform our technological decisions. Maybe we should start by asking of our technology, does it fortify or erode our receptivity to grace?

Saving America? Faith-Based Services and the Future of Civil Society by Robert Wuthnow (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 354 pages. Reviewed by Jim Vanderwoerd, Associate Professor of Social Work, Dordt College.

My first social services job in the early 1980s was as a child and youth counselor in a group home for pre-adolescents with behavioral and emotional difficulties. I was given responsibility for the FLARE program—Family Life and Religious Education. You might guess from this description that I was working not for a public or government agency but, rather, for a Christian (Catholic) social services organization. As the FLARE coordinator, I took the children to church services on my weekend shifts, enrolled them in youth programs with a local congregation, and planned celebrations of Christian holidays at the home. Since this agency received most of its funding from government contracts and grants, how could I, and the agency, get away with such explicit religious programming? That’s a good question; it didn’t

occur to me then, but I’ve thought a lot about it since.

The debate about whether religious social service organizations should be publicly funded, and if so, whether such funding should come with strings attached that limit explicit religious practices, has been going on at least since 1996 in the U.S., when President Clinton “ended welfare as we know it” by signing into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Included in this legislation, known as welfare reform, was a section referred to as “Charitable Choice,” which removed restrictions for religious organizations, including churches, from receiving government funding to provide welfare programs. Fueling this debate are strong opinions for and against increased funding partnerships between government and