

The Gospel of Science and Tech

In 2016, the popular physicist Neil deGrasse Tyson tweeted, “**Earth needs a virtual country: #Rationalia, with a one-line Constitution: All policy shall be based on the weight of evidence.**” The implication of it was that if we could get rid of religion, dogma and traditional morality, we could create a better society based on reason and science.

Of course, this sounds good on the surface. But the more you think about it, the more naïve it becomes. The first problem is that there *have* been societies that considered themselves to be based on science and reason and they were disastrous—take Nazi Germany as one example. The practice of Eugenics, where people considered less valuable to society would be eliminated was based on the Evolutionary ideas.

The second problem is that philosophers and scientists have been trying to come up with an explanation for morality based solely on scientific data for the last 500 years and have come up empty. And finally, it ignores the reality that even facts need interpretation. There’s no such thing as a simple fact. Rationalia won’t solve anything.

I while back I watched at Ted Talk by a scientist named Paul Zak (which has been watched 1.4 million times), who gushed about the scientific findings on the brain chemical called Oxytocin. People called it the Moral Molecule because studies purported to show that a shot of oxytocin through a nasal spray increased trust and bonding in humans and led to pro-social behavior. In his talk, he said this,

“Am I actually saying that a single molecule—and, by the way, a chemical substance that scientists like me can manipulate in the lab—accounts for why some people give freely of themselves and others are coldhearted...why some people cheat and steal and others you can trust with your life, why some husbands are more faithful than others, and by the way, why women tend to be more generous—and nicer—than men? In a word, yes.” In other words, morality is all determined by our biology.

Scientists were so excited about their findings that they shouted them to the public and the media. Oxytocin was going to make a better society. But these studies have recently fallen on hard times. The scientists who conducted the research went back and re-examined their studies and found them to be faulty. They did more new studies and failed to replicate them. Now, this is a good thing because this is the way science is supposed to work. You need to be meticulous and careful, but the original studies were not. And yet there’s still this idea that Oxytocin is the Moral Molecule.

These are just two examples of what I like to call The Gospel of Science and Technology. We’re starting a new series called Where’s the Good News? In which we’ll be talking about the things our society considers to be good news. Now, the reason we’re talking about this is that at the heart of Jesus’ teachings and the Christian faith is what we call, the Gospel—the good news.

There are a lot of ways you can articulate the good news of Jesus, but at its heart is the basic story that God created humans as creatures made in his image, but because of

our sin, we are compromised—not what God intended us to be. But also, despite our sin, God pursued us by become human in the person of Jesus to redeem and restore creation back to what God intended it to be. The good news is that God is saving the world and putting creation right.

As Christians, this is our overarching story. But every day our society presents us with alternative gospels that promise to fulfill us and even save the world. Many people have set the Gospel of Jesus by the wayside and latched on to these other gospels. Over the course of this series, we'll examine things like the Gospel According to Hugh Hefner, The Prosperity Gospel, and the Gospel of Marriage and Family. As you may have guessed, this week we're talking about the Gospel of Science and Technology.

Now, what I don't want you to think is that I'm anti-science—or a “science-denier” as they say. For instance, I'm fascinated by the studies of Oxytocin and I have a great deal of admiration for the scientist who went back and rechecked his work and in the end was willing to say he was wrong. Even though it's not a very exciting finding, it's good science. The problem only came, when the scientists were so eager to find something that they didn't do *good* science.

And actually, science and technology have done a huge amount of good in the world. Going back very early—the wheel is a technology that has made life better. Modern medical advancements have alleviated suffering and raised both the standard of living and life-expectancy. Because of the science of flight, I was able to get to Arizona in

less than three-hours to visit my parents a couple of weeks ago. Science has been an incredible help to humanity. I'm thankful for that and so are you.

In a sense, you could even say that science and technology are good news. So, I want to make sure you hear this—I'm not denying the good that science has done or denigrating science in any way. As a way to understand the natural world, it's pretty amazing. But as a way to try to explain everything that exists, it's inadequate. It's a great tool, but it's not our savior because there are ways it can go wrong.

If you're not already there, open your Bible to Genesis, chapter 11. What we find in Genesis 11 is the famous story of the Tower of Babel. Most people view this story as the explanation for the variation in languages and people groups—and it is that. But as with many Old Testament stories, there are some other profound truths hidden here.

At the beginning of the chapter, it says people migrated east to a plain in Shinar—which many associate with Sumer, the first known civilization in history. It's located in modern day Iraq or Iran down by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Now, let's go to verse 3 and it'll become clear why we're looking at this passage. It says, **"They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."**

Now, what I want you to see is that right away in this story, they're using new technology. Do you see it? **"Let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly."** You say, "That's technology?" You bet it is. People weren't created with the knowledge and skills to do this. They had to figure it out. In fact, archaeologists consider kiln-fired brick to be one of the earliest human technologies. It may seem primitive to us, but to them, it was cutting-edge technology that allowed them to expand what they could do. So, they said, "now that we have this technology, let's use it!"

Now, notice what they do with the bricks and their motivation. Verse 4, **"Come let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens..."** So, we say, good for them—they're building a city. We like cities. We live in a city. But not only do they want a city, but they want a skyscraper—a tower that reaches to the heavens.

The tower they built with their new technology was what we call a Ziggurat. [ziggurat pic] They're stepped buildings and similar to the pyramids except they weren't tombs. They weren't hollow inside. The people considered them man-made "holy mountains" where earth and heaven met. In other words, through their own effort, they were trying to reach God. But their quest was even more ambitious.

So, what was their motivation? Well, there are two. The first is, **"so that we may make a name for ourselves..."** They wanted to be the first to reach heaven. The largest ziggurat found in Mesopotamia was 7 stories and about three-hundred feet high. That's about the height of a modern 30-story building. So, that's an impressive feat for ancient

people. But it didn't quite do what they intended. There's a bit of humor in verse 7 that shows the absurdity of their project. They built this impressive tower to reach heaven, but God says, "I can't see it from here, so let's go down and get a better view."

But there's a second motivation for building at the end of verse 4, "**otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.**" Why don't they want to be scattered throughout the face of the earth? Where's their adventurous spirit?

The reason is that there was chaos beyond the known world. They had never seen the rest of the world. They didn't know what was out there. And what we don't know, we fear. So, they wanted to build a city where civilization could be self-contained and they could be protected from whatever is out there.

Now, this seems like a pretty natural human instinct. They wanted to be safe. How could God fault them for that? Well, to see the problem with both of these motivations—"to make a name for themselves" and to "not be scattered throughout the earth", we have to go back a few chapters to the creation account.

The ancient world had many different creation accounts, but the Genesis account is unique among them. All the creation accounts start with chaos—usually it's darkness or a sea. Genesis describes it as "formless and empty." In the Mesopotamian account, the chaos never ends because there are numerous gods and each of them has their own will, so the gods war with each other. Because of this, the world is a threatening and scary place. There was no meaning to any of it. This is typical of other creation stories.

But the Biblical story is different. The Biblical story describes God bringing order out of chaos. There aren't numerous gods with wills that war against each other, but there's one God with one will. Genesis describes God's creative process as separating one thing from another. He separates the day and night, water from land, land from sky. Seed-bearing plants are according to their kind—God is differentiating things. And finally, God separates male from female. This is how God orders the universe.

But isn't this is how anyone brings order out of chaos. You separate things by kind. If you're cleaning a room, everything has a place. You separate the toys from the clothes and the same types of toys go together. You have shirts in one place and pants in another. You create order out of chaos by naming and creating boundaries.

The ultimate separation is the separation between heaven and earth. The separation between the transcendent creator and his creation. The pagan stories didn't have that separation. So, the first problem with building the tower is the failure to recognize the distinction between heaven and earth.

But the story gives a not-so-subtle nod to another part of the creation story—the sin of Adam and Eve. God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But don't we believe it's a good thing to know the difference between good and evil? Well, it *is*, but that's not what this tree was about. The tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil could be better translated the "Tree of I'll Decide for Myself what's Right and Wrong." In other words, the temptation of Adam and Eve was to

try to blur the boundary between God and humans. This was the same sin of the Tower of Babel—*We can make a name for ourselves. We can be our own gods!*

This is an attitude we see from the Gospel of Science and Tech crowd. This isn't the case for most scientists, but many popularizers like Steven Pinker, Richard Dawkins to Neil deGrasse Tyson and others preach that science and technology will be the salvation of humankind and that science has made God obsolete. *We can save ourselves.* When God is gone, we'll be there to take his place. That's the gospel of science and tech. This was as much a temptation for us today as it was back then.

But what about the other motivation? Why was it a bad thing to want to stay in one place and not be scattered throughout the world. Well, again, if we go back to the creation story, it was in direct disobedience to another command of God. In fact, the very first command God gave to humanity was this **“Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.” (1:28)** Now, look carefully, because this is subtle.

God's intent was for humans to “fill the earth and subdue it.” It means go out into the chaos and bring order that promotes flourishing. We are to do that in nature, in society. As creatures made in the image of God, our calling and purpose is to organize the world to bring about its flourishing, because when we do that, we bring glory to God.

What we see is that it's not the technology that was the problem, it was their motivation. Building a city can be a good thing, but they were shirking their God-given calling, and used their technology to make their own plans rather than follow God's.

What did God do? Vs 6, **“The Lord said, ‘If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.’”**

Now, this seems weird because it sounds to us like God is afraid or jealous. But what does God have to be afraid of? Well, it’s not that God was afraid that people would actually replace him as God. It’s that he knew the state of their heart and he knew that if their power was unchecked, the evil they could do would be endless.

You see, this story is a nod to human potential. When we put our minds to it, we can accomplish great things. And when that potential is harnessed for God’s purposes, it’s good. But the story also recognizes our fallenness. And in the hands of fallen creatures with no regard for God’s purposes, our potential for evil is virtually endless.

So, when God confused their language, he wasn’t punishing, he was limiting the damage they could do. And notice that they were scattered throughout the world, which is what God intended in the first place. So, it’s not just a punishment, but it’s an action that propelled them to fulfill their calling.

Now, I suspect you’re already seeing why we’re looking at this, but let’s talk about what this story taught us about the Gospel of Science and Technology. How should Christians view science?

First, science and technology are God-given tools to help us understand the natural world. Christians don't need to feel threatened by science or new technology. Faith and science are not opposites, but they inform each other.

One way we can think about the interplay between faith and science is that faith can tell us the "why" and science can tell us the "how." The Oxford mathematician John Lennox uses this analogy:

Aunt Matilda has made a cake. And she has made it for a particular purpose. Now, there are lots of things scientists could tell us about the cake. Nutrition scientists can tell us about the number of calories in the cake and its nutritional effect; biochemists can tell us about the structure of the proteins and the fats; chemists can tell us about the elements involved and their bonding; physicists can analyze the cake in terms of fundamental particles; mathematicians can give us a beautiful set of equations to describe the behavior of those particles.

We know how the cake is put together. We know all about its constituent parts and the way they relate to each other. No higher power told us any of that; science did. But our scientists can't tell us why the cake was made. Only the creator knows why.

Christianity tells us that there's meaning and purpose beyond the material world is real. Some scientists agree and some don't. Some say we just can't know. Science might give us hints as to whether there is or isn't meaning beyond what we can sense, but it can't tell us what that purpose is.

For instance, philosophers and scientists have tried for hundreds of years to give us an empirical basis for morality. Like Neil deGrasse Tyson's Rationalia, they've tried to discover a morality that can be measured empirically, but have been come up empty. That's because morality is about the why. Science can't give us the "why" and if you don't have the "why" you can't answer the "how."

But when you have the "why," then working out our purpose becomes possible. Even the Bible doesn't tell us *everything* there is to know about the why, but it gives us purpose and meaning to life.

Second, science and technology are not unqualified goods. This is where our purpose makes all the difference. Think back to the story of Babel. The issue in the story was not the new technology. The technology was neutral. The issue was their motivation. If they had taken their brick technology and said, "*Now we can make houses that are stronger and more weather-resistant,*" then great. But they used that technology to make themselves great, even trying to subvert God himself.

It's easy to see this in our world today. Science has done an incredible amount of good for human flourishing. In fact, many scientists view their knowledge as a way to obey God and serve humanity. Modern medicine has alleviated a great amount of suffering and agricultural technologies have developed more effective ways to produce food. Air travel and digital technologies have allowed us to stay connected over long

distances. Those same things are even tools we use to share Jesus with the world. There are so many great things that have come as a result of science and technology.

But there's also been a great deal of evil done through science and sometimes in the name of science. Think about things like the nuclear bomb and other mass weapons. I think of the practice of Eugenics. Reports in the last year tell us that Denmark has almost completely eliminated Down Syndrome, but not through a genetic cure, but by aborting 98% of unborn babies with Down Syndrome. That's hard to stomach.

For all the good things the internet and smart phones have allowed us to do there are downsides there, too. Maybe the biggest evil is the proliferation of pornography that exploits women and addicts men at staggering rates and more and more women, too. While social media connects us, the algorithms created by these companies are adding to societal distrust and the divisiveness.

And we're always dealing with new technologies that show great promise for good, but people will always find a way to exploit them for personal gain or even evil. Cloning technology shows promise in being able to clone organs that can replace failing organs without danger of rejection, yet it raises all kinds of ethical questions.

The mapping of the human genome has led to CRISPR gene editing that could eliminate deadly genetic defects, but also lead to designer babies or eugenics. The history of science and technology hasn't been the story of continual progress. It's been a mixed

bag that has done great good, but also some of the greatest evils in history. Science and technology without the wisdom and restraint of God becomes destructive.

Finally, science shouldn't lead to arrogance, but humility and worship. The great downfall of the people of Sumer was their arrogance. It wasn't their thirst for knowledge, but their thirst for power. When we're doing science to see what we can accomplish—we end up worshipping creation or worshipping ourselves.

This is exactly what the Apostle Paul wrote about the Gentiles in Romans 1.

“²⁰Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

²¹For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

²²Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.” While many today will acknowledge the beauty of creation, they don't acknowledge the one who created it. Instead, they laud what humans can do.

But Psalm 19:1 says, **“The heavens declare the glory of God.”** Proverbs 9:10 says, **“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”** *If we start with the fear of the Lord, when we study nature we come away in awe of the creator.*

As we close today, I want you to close your eyes and imagine this for a moment. See yourself traveling through space. If you wanted to get from one end of the universe to the other it would take you 14 billions years—if you were travelling at the speed of light. As you travel, there are more stars in the universe than there are grains of sand on the earth. There are more than 180 billion galaxies in our universe.

One Galaxy called M87 has 1 trillion stars. It would take you 31,000 years to count to a trillion. The closest galaxy to us, Andromeda is 200 million lights years away.

Even within our own galaxy, if you hitched a ride on the fastest rocket we've ever launched that travels 36,000 miles per hour, it would take you 50,000 years to get to the nearest star to our sun. Can you wrap your mind around any of that? God created that.

Now imagine yourself in that picture and listen to the Psalmist from Psalm 8, **“³When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, ⁴what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?”** David didn't have telescopes and science that could measure the universe and yet just the thought of it inspired worship. When you consider the scope of the universe, how could we possibly believe that anything we do could amount to anything? But the good news is that we have a God who stands outside of that universe, but knows us by name. He knows everything about us and loves us and come to us to show it.