WE NEED TO THINK ABOUT TECHNOLOGY

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Printing has brought a huge amount of good to the church, but there is another side to the story.
Category: Observations

In the fifteenth century, Johannes Gutenberg invented a press allowed multiple copies of the same book to be printed. We take printing for granted today and most of us have systems in our homes which are far more complex and versatile than Gutenberg's original. However, at the time, moveable type was an incredible leap forward. Up till that point, books could only be reproduced by hand. Just try copying one page of a book by hand and then imagine how long it would take to write out the whole thing. Each individual copy of a book took ages to produce and, of course, was prone to copier's errors and there was no way of producing multiple copies. As a result, books were relatively rare and extremely expensive. Printing changed all of that. Within a few years, books and pamphlets were circulating freely and people who would have had no opportunity to own books were able to buy and read them.

The fact that the printing revolution occurred at more or less the same time as the Protestant Reformation, with its stress on reading the Bible and the translation of the Scriptures into European vernacular languages is extremely important. The ideas put forward by the Reformers were able to spread rapidly and people were able to have access to the Bible, allowing them to verify what was being taught in their churches. Reading the Bible has been a central feature of Protestant Christianity ever since. Over the last five centuries, the availability of Bibles and other literature, ushered in by Gutenberg's revolution has been incredibly important for the spread of Christianity.

However, there is another side to this.

In the Western world at least, the last few hundred years have seen the rise of a very individual form of Christianity; an expression of the faith which emphasises "me and my personal saviour", but which downplays the role of the wider community. The New Testament places a great emphasis on the corporate nature of the Christian faith (something which is often hidden in English translations because we use the same "you" pronoun for singular and plural), but we are far more likely to stress individual responsibility. One of the first songs I ever learned to sing had these words:

> *Jesus bids us shine with a pure clear light,*
> *Like a little candle burning in the night,*
> *In this world of darkness, so we must shine,*
> *You in your small corner and I in mine.*

The image of the church as isolated people, each shining a little bit of light in a small corner, rather than a united group blazing with the glory of Christ is a very persuasive one.

There are many causes for the growth of individualism in the church. However, and somewhat controversially, I would suggest that the stress on individual Bible reading and quiet times is one of them. Of course, personal devotions are important and I wouldn't wish to suggest otherwise. However, there is also a need for a corporate response to the Scriptures, something that came more

naturally when people were forced, through scarcity, to read the Bible in groups. Today when we meet for Bible studies or to listen to sermons we tend to be focused on "what God is saying to me", rather than "what God is saying to us". Individualism is our default setting and the easy availability of Bibles and the stress on personal rather than corporate reading of Scripture plays into this.

Printing is an amazing technology, it revolutionised the world and it has shaped my whole life. However, like all human inventions, it is not an unmitigated positive. It was also part of a wave which has pushed Western Christianity into an unbiblical individualism. Like any technology, it needs to be reflected upon and we need to take steps to accentuate the good that it brings while taking steps to address the negative impacts.

When I see Christians saying that we have to embrace the internet, get on board with digital Bibles, and so on, I have a slight concern. I'm far from a Luddite; you don't run a blog for 13 years if you are a technophobe, but I do think we need to reflect carefully about the impact of new technologies as we embrace them. What impact will having fifty translations of the Bible instantly available on a smartphone app have on Christianity over the next few decades. Will it bring deeper engagement with the Bible or simply breed confusion or will the Bible be reduced to yet another thing to check alongside Instagram and WattsApp? I don't know, but questions like these are ones that people leading youth groups and helping the next generation of disciples need to engage with.