

Blessed technology

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [Jan 09, 2013](#) issue

I work remotely, out of my home office. As such I am dependent on the smooth and ready operation of computer equipment. Recently I encountered some hitches. My VPN (virtual private network) signal was being easily interrupted, bumping me off my connection to the headquarters office in Eugene, Oregon.

Various fixes were tried. A new router was installed. My Internet service provider diagnosed signal connection and strength. None of these maneuvers worked. Eventually, and thankfully, the techies in Oregon devised some workarounds that allow me to download material onto my desktop and avoid the need for long and steady connections. With this arrangement, my work is no longer interrupted or lost.

But for a week or two I worked in terror of an alert of doom telling me that the connection had been lost and with it an hour or two of labor. I read and typed hurriedly, under a sense of apprehension. When the signal indeed was dropped, I found myself blurting out, "Oh, no, Lord!" or "God, help me!" These interjections were not curses or curse words so much as they were prayers of desperation. Once I settled down from an episode (and had finished redoing the work lost), the comic side of my situation struck me. And I began to wonder about the propriety of praying for help with high technology.

I remembered a situation from early in my journalism career. I was acquainted with a printer who ran a small press out of his home. Occasionally he would encounter intractable mechanical problems, and he was prone to complaining, with all seriousness, about "demons" that occupied his press. Only after the demons were exorcised would his machinery again operate properly.

I don't think demons commandeered my computer or VPN connection. I have wondered about my computer prayers in light of biblical technology. Perhaps the single most famous use of technology in the Bible occurs in Genesis 11. There we find the "whole earth" speaking the same language. The earth's inhabitants decide to build a tower on the plains of Shinar. They make bricks and bitumen mortar. They intend to build a tower "with its top in the heavens" and break into the very realm of

God. We know how the story ends. God interrupts the building of the Tower of Babel, scatters the people and confuses their one language into many.

This story stands as a warning about using technology to attempt godlike control of human circumstances and destiny. Indeed, something like it seems to be mimicked with computer technology. Binary computer language is universal, promising a single human tongue of a sort, but in practice this one language has been “confused,” and rather than unifying humanity it has brought a welter of different perspectives and competing ideas. On the Internet, people hole up in isolated silos of their favored blogs, websites and news providers.

The Bible has more favorable nods to technology. Auspicious meetings repeatedly occur at water wells—it’s where men meet their future brides and where Jesus talks with a woman about the “water of life.” In these circumstances a site of technology is life-giving and promising. It’s not hard to imagine such locations as sites of hope and prayer.

Biblical people were steeped in the livelihood of agricultural technology and the processing of food, a technological background that inspired and situated so many of Jesus’ parables. The prophets hoped for a peaceful and life-giving technology—the beating of swords into plowshares (Isa. 2:4, Mic. 4:3). In all these cases, prayer is a natural accompaniment.

What then to make of my prayers in front of my (beleaguered) computer? I think proper prayer is a recognition that we are never ultimately in control but always finally dependent on God. Computer technology is complicated and vulnerable enough to sometimes evade all technological fixes. This hardly means that prayer is a simple replacement for technicians and their work. The use of computers is analogous to our resort to technological medicine. Prayer does not replace physicians, but it rightly accompanies their work.

The larger point is that prayer for our livelihoods is good and necessary. The biblical people depended on agriculture, and now many of us rely on computers and their accompanying technologies. It makes sense that we pray for the right use (and decent operation) of computing technology. Sometimes these may be prayers of anxiety and desperation, just as farmers pray for rain the midst of a drought. More often, these should be prayers of thanksgiving and for ongoing divine guidance for our deployment of our culture’s dominant technology. Let the primary prayer in front of my computer be not “Oh no, God” but “Thank you, Lord,” and “Guide me in using

computing technology in ways that are ultimately life-giving and just and good.”