

Gain Confidence
Colossians 1:1-14
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This spring Eric Schmidt, the former CEO of Google, and Jared Cohen, who previously served as an advisor to Secretaries of State Condoleezza Rice and Hilary Clinton and now is an Adjunct Senior Fellow for the Council on Foreign Relations, published a book entitled *The New Digital Age*. We are living through a digital revolution which is impacting and often changing almost every aspect of our lives. This book was their description of that revolution and their predictions for the next few years.

Now, I am not a digital native. I often find that I have to remind folks older than I am of this fact, folks who think I'm up-to-date on technology. I'm at least a decade too old to be a digital native. My use of computers, the internet, mobile phones, social networking, and other digital technologies has been a learned behaviour. I've been compelled into the digital age because of its practical benefits, the pleasures it affords, and a desire to remain relevant. Sometimes I've been dragged late to things. For example, as recently as 2004 I wrote a blog post denouncing cell phones and embracing a curmudgeonly Luddite view about them. By 2005 I had one and was using it regularly. I'm still not sure whether I hate the thing.

These days I do read article and books about new technologies and the latest designs, often because the most interesting and creative ideas currently generated in our culture come from these sectors. So, I read *The New Digital Age* and it both excited and frightened me.

The opening chapter is entitled "Our Future Selves" and contains their predictions for how digital technologies will transform everyone's lives. They imagine: employees spread around the globe (something which is already happening); people living in African slums, who because of their mobile phone connections, will be able to innovate businesses that will take off globally; and devices that will analyze our health and send the data to our physicians. They think having microscopic robots in our circulatory system monitoring our health will one day be "as uncontroversial as artificial pacemakers." They also predict it will be impossible for kids to forget to return their homework to school, because it will all be saved on the cloud, not done on paper. They imagine a future child confused by the old excuse, "The dog ate my homework." The child will say, "How could a dog eat my cloud storage drive? And, how could I forget my homework at home, that doesn't even make sense?"

The book goes far beyond the changes to personal lives and explores the global political, economic, and military ramifications. They are optimistic that greater transparency and openness could lead to a better society and make it more difficult for authoritarian states to perpetuate myths or control populations with falsehoods. But all of this transparency and openness will be used and abused by those with power and greed, and even well-intentioned people will cause harm. The loss of privacy is the clearest example, and one we've seen debated in public conversation this summer. Schmidt and Cohen write, "The communication

technologies we use today are invasive by design."

The book is full of ideas both interesting and scary. I blogged about the book as I read it, so, if you desire, you can read my thoughts on each of their chapters. One point they make is that we have "barely left the starting blocks" of this new digital age, meaning that its future course is still open for humanity to determine. We will get the future we create. They write, "Most of all, this is a book about the importance of a guiding human hand in the new digital age." At the time I thought a good slogan for the church could be "A spiritual guide in the new digital age."

As a spiritual family with open hearts, rich traditions, and curious minds, it is incumbent upon us to engage the great issues of our time, to explore every angle, and to respond with how our faith can guide us and empower us to remain faithful, confident, and free.

For the next six weeks we'll be looking at the Letter to the Colossians. This is one of those New Testament letters which claims to have been written by the apostle Paul to one of the early churches. These particular churches are in the city of Colossae, which was located in what is present-day Turkey. It was written by Paul or one of his followers claiming to be him; there is great scholarly debate over this matter, but it won't attract too much of our attention.

We will focus on personal spiritual growth, as part of a spiritual family in conversation with one another. I believe this letter will help us to raise some questions and consider some options. Much like us, those early Christians in Colossae were concerned with big questions – What is truth? What are knowledge, wisdom, and understanding? What can I hope for? What are the right and wrong things to do? These questions impacted their spiritual practices, their friendships, their economic activity, and how their households operated.

The dominant narrative of their day was provided by the Roman Empire. According to this narrative, Rome brought peace and salvation. The "good news" was the security and prosperity wrought by Roman armies, Roman laws, and the divine Roman Caesar. If you wanted to be successful and "bear fruit" in your personal life, then you should fulfill your duties to the empire and live the Roman way.

But these early Christians had rejected that way of life, that worldview, and, instead, embraced their identity as followers of Jesus of Nazareth and members of the church. These first generation Christians were still working many things out, but they knew some basics. The good news was what Jesus preached, not what Caesar did. Salvation came from God not from Rome. And if you wanted to bear fruit in your personal life, then you should try to live as Jesus did. The author of this letter was trying to address these issues for this group of faithful people in order to awaken within them the confidence to continue living faithfully. I believe we can draw wisdom from this letter which will guide us in the complexities of our own time.

The authors Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat have a great commentary on this letter entitled *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire*. They are convinced of an idea of the philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre who wrote, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" In their commentary, Keesmaat and Walsh rewrite the Letter of Colossians as if it was addressing a contemporary audience. Hear this interpretation of the opening verses of chapter one:

At the dawn of a new millennium, and in the face of a world of terror, may you experience the all-encompassing shalom and wholeness that is received as a wonderful gift from God our Father.

We want you to know that thankfulness permeates our prayers for you. We continue to give thanks to God, the Father of our sovereign Messiah Jesus, as we hear the stories of struggling and daring discipleship that continue to characterize his followers. We have heard that your faith and trust in Jesus is proved true because it takes on the real flesh of love in your midst—a love that is manifest in your care for the poor, providing shelter to the homeless, food for the hungry and hospitality to the stranger. Such faith and love are inseparable: one cannot exist without the other. But neither is possible without hope. And here at the end of a century of such bloodshed, betrayal and broken promises, it is an amazing thing to be a community animated by hope. May that hope sustain you in a world addicted to violence.

But your hope is not the cheap buoyant optimism of global capitalism with its cybernetic computer gods and self-confident scientific discovery, all serving the predatory idolatry of economism. You know that these are gods with an insatiable desire for child sacrifice. That is why your hope is not the shallow optimism of the “Long Boom” of increased prosperity. Such optimism is but a cheap imitation of hope. Real hope—the kind of hope that gives you the audacity to resist the commodification of your lives and engenders the possibility of an alternative imagination—is no human achievement; it is a divine gift. This hope isn’t extinguished by living in “the future of a shattered past,” precisely because it is a hope rooted in a story of kept promises, even at the cost of death.

You didn’t get this hope from cable television, and you didn’t find it on the Net. This hope walked into your life, hollering itself hoarse out in the streets, in the classroom, down at the pub and in the public square, when you first heard the good news of whole life restoration in Christ. This gospel is the Word of truth—it is the life-giving, creation-calling, covenant-making, always faithful servant Word that takes flesh in Jesus . . . this Word of truth is active, bearing fruit throughout the cultural wilderness of this terribly scorched earth.

If you find yourself a part of the story of Jesus and the Christian church, then you find yourself part of a story of kept promises. A story about God’s grace--the free gift of God’s love, which draws us into a relationship of wholeness. It is a holy love which saves all people from aimlessness and sin, which reconciles and renews, and binds in covenant all people.

And in this particular congregation and in our United Church of Christ tradition, it is a progressive, dynamic, visionary story which calls us to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of others, and to resist the powers of evil. Attending the General Synod of the United Church of Christ in Long Beach earlier this month, I was inspired once again by the particular features of this group of people. At our gathering we celebrated victories in the struggle for racial justice, labor rights, access to health care, and marriage equality. Same-sex marriage became legal again in California in the midst of our meeting. We recommitted

ourselves to stop bullying, to reform the immigration system, and to heal the injustices committed against Native Americans. And we took bold prophetic action in response to global climate change. I left the meeting with renewed confidence in our church and in the God who is still working through us.

If you need a spiritual guide in this revolutionary age, I offer up the God who came to us in Jesus and filled us with the Holy Spirit. The God who promises to all of us “forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace,” to be present in our trials and our joys, and finally eternal life in the realm which has no end.

This hope sets us free and gives us the confidence to live with authenticity and audacity, no matter what changes may come. This hope is the free gift of God.

Be open this summer so that you may lead worthy lives, bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God.