

Columns

Technically Speaking

Derek Schuurman



Several decades ago I began my career as a freshly-minted engineering graduate, eager and confident in my technical abilities. I took a job at a small high-tech company in Waterloo. I recall the satisfaction of seeing my first designs transformed into real products that powered various real-world applications. However, as I sat at my desk, I distinctly recall beginning to wonder what my faith had to do with my technical work. This was something they didn't teach at engineering school.

Almost exactly 25 years later I found myself in front of a room of almost 60 computer scientists and engineers working in and around the Waterloo region,



Faith and tech combine in Waterloo

Canada's "silicon valley." This group, which calls itself "FaithTech," eagerly listened as I sketched a biblical view of technology and why their work matters to God. I discussed how technology is part of the latent potential in creation, how sin distorts technology, and how Christ, in whom all things are being reconciled to God, calls us to participate as agents of reconciliation. I shared with them a quote from Gordon Spykman: "Nothing matters but the kingdom, but because of the kingdom everything matters" – and that includes our work in technology!

The FaithTech group in Waterloo formed gradually over the past year, founded by a young man named James Kelly. Prior to my talk, James and I got acquainted over dinner, where he shared his journey and his vision for the group. Besides equipping folks with a biblical perspective of technology, the group aims to launch FaithTech LABS for volunteer coders and creative thinkers to collaborate on not-for-profit and for-profit tech ventures. One example is the "Text to Tithe" project which provides a way for churches to receive donations from donors through the sending of a quick text message. He also shared another project idea to help

ensure that the top results for a web search about suicide bring up resources for help and counseling. The group also hopes to host several "hackathon" events and innovation talks. I found myself wishing there had been a group like this when I was a young engineer. They have already drawn interest from others in New York City and Toronto, as well as Japan.

God in Silicon Valley

During my visit I toured a sprawling tech incubator built in an old tannery building which served as a home for a range of high-tech startups. I was impressed by the creative energy displayed and encouraged by the fact that God was at work here too. I was delighted to discover a former student of mine from Redeemer who was now working in the tech incubator. Waterloo is home to one of the most vibrant tech hubs in the world, with the second highest startup density in the world. Just like Daniel in Babylon, God has placed Christians in this cultural center.

Indeed, God has been at work in other high tech centers as well. A recent book titled *Finding God in Silicon Valley* highlights testimonies about how God has worked in the lives of various people in

Silicon Valley. The book was written by Skip Vaccarello, an executive with decades of experience in a variety of high tech firms, including a pioneering company that developed the first spreadsheet program. In the book he shares the faith stories of over a dozen venture capitalists, entrepreneurs and leaders of high tech companies in Silicon Valley. Skip also helps lead an annual Silicon Valley prayer breakfast where Christian leaders offer testimonies of faith and prayer in their lives.

After spending well over a decade teaching in a Christian college, coming back to Kitchener-Waterloo felt like coming home to my roots. I wished I could have channeled the words I shared with this group back to my younger self – that young engineer sitting alone at his desk, wondering about the connection between faith and technology. It is exciting to see God at work in the high-tech centres of our world, changing hearts and moving Christians to share the gospel not only through words, but also through efforts to develop responsible technology.

Nothing matters but the kingdom, but because of the kingdom, technology also matters. ➤

Derek Schuurman is a former professor at Redeemer University College where he taught computer science for 13 years. To learn more about FaithTech, visit www.faithtech.ca