

You Can't Be a Christian in Silicon Valley, Right?

In a recent episode of HBO's *Silicon Valley*, the joke was made that you cannot be a Christian in Silicon Valley. It's something my dear friend Sue Warnke of Salesforce and I have discussed, and I find it hilariously clever. Sue has written about this in sharing her testimony, and I'd be remiss if I didn't direct you to her powerful story of being radically transformed by the love of Christ nearly two years ago after a lifetime of being a proud agnostic.

Sue reminds me a lot of the apostle Paul: passionate about what she thought was true, convicted of righteousness through an encounter with Jesus, and then boldly proclaiming the love of Christ, spreading the good news to everyone and transforming cultures and cities and nations—even the unreached group of technologists in Silicon Valley. She lives the “Freely you have received, freely give” message of Matthew 10:8, and is now the president and co-founder of the global Christians at Salesforce group, which has ballooned from five employees to over 250 in the last year.

Mind you, Sue is a senior director at one of the most influential tech companies in the heart of the most influential space in the world.

As I've talked to Sue and other Christian executives and influencers at some of the leading tech companies, I'm convinced there is a heightened curiosity about spirituality in the Tech space right now. *The New York Times* published an article last December about Silicon Valley facing a “crisis of the soul” and how tech employees are bunking away to spiritual retreats to unplug from the fast-paced demands and ethical dilemmas of their companies' latest technological innovations.

To give you an example of the ethical magnitude of their decisions, I submit to you: autonomous vehicle technology. What happens when a driverless car transporting a family of five is heading for a collision with a bus full of people? How does the car respond for the best possible outcome? Who wins and who loses? Who lives and who dies? Think of it as “Trolley Problem 2.0”, and it’s causing a lot of sleepless nights for some of the brightest scientists in the world.

Christianity was not mentioned in the *New York Times* article. But, just as Paul recognized the statue to the “unknown god” when he spoke to the Areopagus in Athens, the epicenter of human intellect of his day, we now have our statue to the unknown god in the epicenter of human intellect and innovation of our day.

Earlier this year, our school, Bethel School of Technology, hosted a panel discussion at Google’s headquarters on Faith in the Tech space. The idea was to bring in prominent Christian leaders in Tech to share how their relationship with Christ has impacted their careers and what the intersection of faith of technology looks like. The answer was clear in our discussion: we are the intersection. As God’s beloved children, we are called to manifest His will on earth as it is in heaven—yes, even in Silicon Valley.

This is why Bethel School of Technology exists. We believe God is calling noble believers into the tech space who have a spirit of excellence, are highly skilled and carry the presence of God into their environments, creating a profound impact on the organizations that they serve. We teach some of the most in-demand programming languages and tech skills in the world, including JavaScript, Ruby, .NET and Java (with data science and cybersecurity launching later this year).

And the need is great. From a talent perspective, so much of the future of work is in technology. The U.S. Department of Labor projects there will be over one million unfilled

computing jobs in the next two years, and areas such as software development, data science and cybersecurity top the list in terms of starting pay and career growth. According to Course Report, the average starting salary for a software development bootcamp graduate is \$70k per year, and it's not uncommon for seasoned developers to make six-figure salaries. I had one CTO at a major media company, who grew up in extreme poverty, tell me two experiences saved his life: accepting Jesus as his Lord and Savior and learning to be a computer programmer. I've seen firsthand single moms and homeless persons go from barely making minimum wage or nothing at all to making \$75k per year as a junior developer within a few weeks of completing a software development bootcamp.

But, as big a need there is for skilled tech talent in the labor market, there is an equal need for technologists who bring integrity into the workplace. When I speak to companies about our school, the conversations inevitably lead to the kingdom core values we instill in our students. Building a culture of honor, establishing healthy relationships, servant leadership, humility, above-reproach integrity, brave communication—these kingdom values are many of the same values companies are investing billions of dollars a year collectively to improve workplace culture. In fact, I've had a number of CTOs and CIOs tell me that if they were forced to choose between a candidate who was an A+ in skill, but was a C in integrity, or vice versa, they would pick the candidate who displayed high character over high skill.

We aim for our students to display excellence in skill and character, and many of the companies I talk to view us as a values-based tech school, which I absolutely love. Kingdom values should be attractive to everyone and provide practical solutions to real-world problems.

My pastor, Bill Johnson, recently told our staff, "Breakthrough takes place when hunger meets humility." And, there is a hunger and humility brewing in the tech space, as

some of the leading innovators and influencers are climbing the mountain of human advancement only to realize there has to be a higher calling that connects to their souls.

I believe we're nearing a tipping point of revival in tech where the combination of hunger and humility has prepared an environment fertile for an encounter with the love of Christ. Just as my friend Sue from Salesforce was transformed by an encounter with Jesus, I believe others in the space are on the cusp of a fresh revelation that God is love, and their crisis of the soul is actually a deep cry for connection to their identity in Him. And, I'm convinced the current spiritual climate of Silicon Valley is less about a hardline rejection of Christianity, as HBO's Silicon Valley implies, and more about shifting an atmosphere in which the authentic message of "love as a person" is revealed through the lives of kingdom-minded believers who speak the language of the technologist and are passionate about carrying the presence of God into the most influential space in the world.

Ryan Collins is the CEO of Bethel School of Technology and an influential leader in connecting corporations with higher education to attract, develop and retain talent. He has helped lead the charge in partnering enterprise with coding bootcamps to bridge the skills gap for in-demand IT roles and create pathways for underserved and at-risk communities to attain higher-paying jobs. Ryan is a gifted communicator and speaker, and has been heavily involved in ministry leadership. He is a graduate of the University of Missouri School of Journalism and has written for a number publications, including American Way and SB Nation.