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Evangelicals and the Digital Bible (with John Dyer)

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John Dyer is the author of the recently published 'People of the Screen: How Evangelicals Created the Digital Bible and How It Shapes Their Reading of Scripture' (<https://amzn.to/44Mu1Z3>). He joins me to discuss the book and the way that digital Bibles are changing the ways that we engage with Scripture.

I apologize for the low sound quality at points; there were issues with my recording.

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Transcript

Hello and welcome. I'm joined today by John Dyer, who's the author of the recent book, *People of the Screen, How Evangelicals Created the Digital Bible and How It Shapes Their Reading of the Scripture*. He's the VP for Enrollment and Educational Technology and Assistant Professor of Theological Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary.

Thank you so much for joining me, John. Yeah, I'm glad to be here. So, could you start off by telling us a bit about the origin of the book? How did you first start with this area of research and study? What particularly inspired you to think about the subject of digital Bible and texts? Yeah, well, I mean, the short, quick answer is that this was originally a PhD project at the University of Durham over in the UK.

So you and I share that in common, and that was a great just place to be able to explore

this at an academic level. The background to all of this is that I've always been one of those people that grew up in the world of evangelicalism and loved the Bible, and also grew up on 80s, 90s technology. And then the burgeoning internet age, the mobile phone age, social media, all that stuff.

And those two interests have often been combined in my own kind of professional life and personal life. So I've developed a Bible apps myself, used a lot of Bible apps. When I was in seminary doing my master's work and studying Greek and Hebrew, I decided to make my own tool for that.

So I've had this background interest in what all is happening there. And as we talk about the shift to digital, and we talk about the Gutenberg press and all those big, big things that are often talked about in terms of major shifts in Christianity, I wanted to spend some time putting some data around this, because there's a lot of kind of big talk about things, about the shifts, but they're more speculative. And even in my own work had been more on philosophy of technology, theology of technology.

And I love that area. I think it's great, but I really wanted to put some teeth to this and really see what was happening. And so this gave me the opportunity to look at it from both the perspective of programmers for the first half of the book, and the perspective of the users in the second half of the book, and then see what came about.

So within the first few chapters of the book, among other things, you provide a sort of methodology for thinking about the ways that technology develop in relationship to the societies that use and give input to them and provide context and frames for their usage. Could you talk a bit about that methodology and some of the principles that can be helpful when thinking about something like the development of digital Bibles and texts? Yeah, that's a great, great, great point. Because, you know, kind of at the at the pop level, there's sort of two conversations happening.

You know, one of them we often call instrumentalism, where we just say, hey, all that really matters is how we use a technology. And you don't really think about the technology itself, but just the various uses of it, right. And so here, here in the American South, you often see that with the guns don't kill people, people kill people.

So it's all about the people and not the tool itself. Then the other side, we sometimes call, you know, determinism, where technology is the only thing that shaping everything, and it's dominating society and all that sort of stuff. So there's a variety of different theories somewhere in the middle that are that are trying to take into account how individuals work, how communities work that sort of people side, but also saying that technology has some value ladenness that there is some directionality built into the tool, whether intentionally by its creators or unintentionally.

So some of these, you know, the kind of broad level, there's some called a broad field

called social shaping of technology. And then social construction of technology is a specific one that I picked out that has a couple of factors about the ways that technologies develop over time. And so they give these examples like the the development of the bike, the bicycle, you know, the two wheeled writing device that, you know, originally had kind of the big wheel in the front and the small wheel in the back, and that there's this movement back and forth between creators and users about the way that that's this technology will stabilize into a particular form.

So it has a couple of patterns for this. And we then later see this applied to software development, hardware development work. And then Heidi Campbell took that overall area of social shaping of technology, and built a framework called religious social shaping of technology.

And so in this, she's looking at the way specifically a religious community negotiates its its prior traditions, the kind of hard things like like a text, and then how they interact with a technology, depending on how their particularly how their authority structures are shaped. So, you know, say a Hasidic Jewish community in Israel might have a different view of authority than kind of a freewheeling free church, American church or something like that, where the the authority structure is much more localized, but not doesn't have any, you know, systems. So taking all those pieces together and saying, how do those help us look at the development of Bible software, and also the the kind of assumption and usage of it on the user end of things.

So when we look back at previous technologies, we can see many of the principles that you described there, helping us to understand something like the move towards the printed Bible. But then there are a lot of incremental steps along the way. And even before the printed Bible, you have a change in the way that the text was engaged with, increasingly moving from an oral context to one where you're reading silently.

And it's more, it's more approach for scholars and students of the text that are designed to have non-sequential reading and navigation of the text, you have all these navigational apparatus, you have the setting of the text, increasingly in the context of scholarly institutions, you no longer have such an emphasis upon church scriptoria, you have secular scriptoria, and all these sorts of economic and social and technological developments, that eventually you have the development of print and the movable type. And that's part of an ongoing movement which has been happening for a number of centuries by that point. And even that requires a number of centuries for its full effects to play out, with mass production really only becoming possible with something like steam printing, and the development of new forms of paper.

Now, when you're talking about digital Bibles and digital scriptural texts, you've noted a similar series of processes by which those texts came into being in the form that we currently enjoy them. And so you talk about four different eras in particular, in trying to

categorize the phases. Could you speak a bit about the phases of the development of biblical texts in digital forms, and some of the distinctive features of those phases? Yeah, that's a good question.

I mean, I think overall, this question sometimes is framed, you know, what we were just talking about is in this materiality of the Bible, that sometimes when we're talking in scholarship, we're thinking so much about the text and the meaning and the words and all that sort of stuff. And we're forgetting this whole larger context of that sometimes the Bible has this iconic value that you carry it down the middle of the aisle, or the way that if you open up a Bible on an airplane, like a printed Bible, that people react to that, that it has so much more significance, and it communicates things outside of the text itself. And so then when we're moving into the digital era, what's beginning to happen is that people are going, are creating the medium to do specific things.

So, you know, in the context of a church setting, you know, the Bible is this thing that's read out loud. But then, as you mentioned, in the, you know, the print era, and particularly in the last maybe 200 years, where there's a lot of individual Bibles, not just one for the home, but one for each individual in the home. It's more about their individual reading and individual study.

So when it comes to the waves of Bible software development, you know, you have the earliest computers developed in the maybe 30s or 40s, different digital machines, you know, we have the famous, you know, scene where, where I'm forgetting his name, also, and if you want to cut this part out, I'll, the, oh, sorry, Turing, I'm sorry, Alan Turing, who is who is figuring out, you know, how to how to crack Nazi codes. And so those early, early developments are then being said, how do we use this for Bibles? And so what I what I say the first era is kind of this pre consumer academic area where really only scholars are using computers to figure out things. And they're doing things like creating indexes for the Bible, or they're doing things like trying to study the various Pauline texts and saying, Hey, how many kais are there? And does this help us know which text Paul actually wrote or not? So they're doing a lot of statistical methodology.

And so there's some early exploration in that, you know, really, 50s, 60s, and 70s. But around the 70s, when you start to have personal computers, the early apples and all those things in the very beginning of the 1980s, you start to see Bible software being developed primarily for pastors. So I kind of I kind of have this area of 1980s through about mid 90s, when the internet comes about as this desktop pastor area, where all the software being developed is usually some of the even comes with a word processor built into it, because it's it's built for sermon development.

And so the funny thing about this current context that we're in now, where we're using a lot of there's this discussion about can you use AI for sermon development, right? This was kind of one of the earliest usages of computers for people to buy or Bible software

for people to buy. And, you know, there were no, there weren't really magazines to or places to advertise this. So some of the early 80s advertisements that I find are in old computer magazines, like Byte magazine and stuff like that.

That's the first place you see Bible software ads. So it's really funny to see, you know, video games and, you know, recipe machines and kind of early versions of Excel right next to an ad for Bible software. So that's, again, you know, that goes from the academy to the pastor.

And then really, you know, 95 is when the internet becomes public. This is where I talk about the popular era. And so the early versions of things like Bible gateway that were developed out of Calvin college, there's a bunch of Bible domains out there that different people are trying to figure out how to monetize and what they would do with that.

And because, you know, the Bible publishers that held things like the NIV, the new American standard, weren't really sure what to do. You even see the development of the NET translation in this area, because the people who owned Bible.org were trying to think, how do I get a Bible that I can put online that isn't just the King James Bible. And so you even see new Bible translations developed in this area.

But most of this is just kind of like search and look up. It's just being able to access the Bible on your computer when you're at home on the internet. So you don't necessarily have to buy Bible software.

And then, you know, in the early 2000s, this is sort of the fourth era that I'd call the mobile area, the mobile app era. And, you know, this really, I mean, really kicks off in 2008 when the iPhone first has the app store. So you have the guys at Life Church developing the U-Version Bible app.

And, you know, there's this great story about how they kind of got it the night before, and they were going to call it, you know, U-Version initially, but they had this great idea that the day before the store app to just to the day before the store launched just to change the name to Bible. And that's probably what made that app so popular. But you do see a lot of Bible being developed before 2008 on earlier devices like Palm Pilots and stuff like that.

Even the fated Apple Newton that didn't go very well, even that had Bible software on it. So there was a lot of experiments out there, but the big burst of it happens when, you know, the iPhone comes out. So just in summary of all this, there's an academic area where people are developing things like indices and doing some deeper Greek and Hebrew studies statistically.

Then we get to the desktop software like Logos Bible software is kind of the last man standing in that area. And then all of the websites in the early nineties and then the

mobile era in the last probably 20 years or so. Within the earlier part of your book, you also talk about the peculiar relationship that there is between this sort of Bible software and evangelicals.

Evangelicals seem to have an especial affinity for creating and using these sorts of software. And you discuss, among other things, what you call hopeful entrepreneurial pragmatism. Can you say a bit more about what is it that attracts evangelicals to the software, creating and using it? Yeah.

And so coming back to what my original research question was, is just sort of this idea of what happens when people read the Bible on their phones, what happens to them. And because I'm a programmer too, I really wondered how intentional are programmers about this, about what kinds of changes they were going to make. So that was the initial starting point.

But as I started interviewing and looking at the different software development teams, and I picked one from each of these eras from a desktop team with Logos, the Bible Gateway folks for kind of the internet era, and then you version folks for the mobile era. As I started interviewing, I realized all these people are evangelicals. And that made me ask this next question of, why are they? But I was doing some of this research as early as 2015 and 2016.

And so my British advisors very wisely said that with the 2016 election and all that's happening there, you can't just assume what an evangelical is anymore. You need to kind of re-interrogate what that is, which is a notoriously difficult thing to do, of course, to say, is there some actual theological part to this or is it just political? And so what I ended up doing was really looking at, are there these sort of theological characteristics that can be said broadly of evangelicals, but also their way of reacting to cultural change and trying to put those two things together in a way that I felt like was fair and helpful, and it's particularly for this project. So of all the things in the Bebbington Quadrilateral that I'm pulling out really is this unique emphasis on the Bible of really caring for the words of scripture, but almost holding it up as this deeply iconic thing where to hold a Bible, to have a Bible with notes in it or highlights in it, all these things really matter to evangelicals.

So there's just this deep, deep, deep relationship with the Bible. But the other side is this adaptability to cultural change. So going all the way back to the 1700s in the way that we think about earliest forms of evangelicalism, there always seems to be this somewhat of a distancing when something new is happening.

There's a reaction to it, but then there's also a group that's going to try to figure out how to appropriate it and use it in their context. So this can be in a missions movement, let's use the ships, let's get on them, let's go out and let's kind of break down the barriers between our denominations, let's just get stuff done. And so this emphasis on the Bible

and emphasis on being able to go and take sort of the best of what's happening out in the world and try to use that for the gospel are the two things I'm putting together.

So when it comes to technological development, I call it hopeful entrepreneurial pragmatism. Part of this is that any good work of sociology needs a three-word term. That's just how it is.

That's the unspoken rule of what you must do. And so that's part of why I came up with that. But to be serious, the reason for that was that the hopeful is like we talked about before that spectrum of determinism to instrumentalism.

Evangelicals tend to lean, I think in that instrumentalist way, they tend to say kind of like, well, let's just use it for good and not for bad. And let's not think too deeply about the effects of it. Now, I think they're aware of the effects of it.

And most of the time that's moralized. So it's saying let's avoid the evil bad stuff that's on the internet. And I think there is an awareness of the changes.

So that's why I call it hopeful, because I think that the overall attitude is saying there's going to be some bad here, both formatively and content wise. But let's go ahead and put it in a hopeful direction saying, I think that there's more good that can come out of this than bad. So that's this kind of initial direction.

The entrepreneurial part, I think, is really specific to American evangelicalism in that because there was never really a church and state connection here in the US, American Christians have always had to be somewhat entrepreneurial. And so they've always had to figure out how do we make church work here and wherever we're going to be out on the frontier or in big cities. There's a lot of experimentation, a lot of trying to figure things out a lot of new models of both the church formally, but also the parachurch organizations that we saw over the 20th century being developed, all that very experimental.

And then the P, the pragmatism on the end, is this part of it that's saying, what really matters is the outcome. So if people are getting saved or whatever criteria that we're using, or there's numbers or there's activity, there's usage, that means we're in the right direction. And so that obviously can be of all the three terms can be the one that can be most coded negatively, where sometimes that pragmatism can override even one's own theological priorities.

I think we see that in American politics a lot in the way that we are sometimes aligning ourselves with different organizations and different ideas that may not always be as connected to the core of the gospel as we'd like. But I think those three things together really framed the way that people who are in the world of evangelical technology, particularly Bible technology, tend to approach things. They're just trying to figure things

out.

They're going to experiment. They're going to say, man, did this work? Did that work? Let's try a new feature. And this deep love for the Bible connected is what drew, I think, so many evangelicals to Bible software.

I wonder whether there's also a certain sort of almost evangelical epistemology that really emphasizes individual experience, distrust of intermediating authority, and there's a sort of democratic impulse to biblical software that really plays into that. Yeah, I mean, I think that even one of Mark Noll's definitions of evangelicalism, this really, really nice and tight one, is culturally adaptive biblical experientialism. So it's always changing to whatever the form of music is or the lighting in the room or whatever, trying to create some type of experience that does have a corporate element to it for sure.

But I think you're right. It is very focused on the individual. And if Bevington is somewhat right in that conversionism is a deep part of evangelicalism, that not just me joining a community, but it's my individual conversion, that that's one of the foundational pillars of what it means to be an evangelical, you would think creating these individual experiences would be really important.

And so you have all these parts of evangelical culture, like the Bible study, that is a small group often, but usually is part of what you're doing is showing that you as an individual have done something with the Bible as well. And so Bible software often really helps that whether that's reminders or streaks or whatever it is, it's helping that individual keep that daily connection with the Bible that I think we would all say is positive. But of course, there is an individualism that comes with that.

So I think you're right. Could you say a bit more about the diversity of things that you would include under the category of digital Bibles? It seems to me that there are a number of things from audio Bibles to some of the more typical software that people would think of under that name. Yeah, exactly.

So I mean, there are even those three areas that we talked about, usually desktop Bible software is much more study oriented. So you're not really going to read a large text usually on your desktop screen. You're going to maybe take a piece of text and do a lot of things with it, trying to do some original language study, maybe try to research what the church father said and various commentaries said and all that sort of stuff.

Whereas what's happening online is much usually kind of a quick look up. Even the folks at Bible Gateway would talk about people that do a daily devotion, people that are looking really for a search. And it's all about even searching on Google and getting to a website.

And then I think the mobile apps, that's where you start to see much more diversity in

terms of this is not just a textual practice that like you mentioned, that there's audio Bibles. There's also all kinds of memorization apps. So there's all this kind of Bible adjacent things that are helping people connect.

Then I think the whole world of then sharing scripture on social media and public platforms that can fit under this banner. That's not so much what my study is about. Pete Phillips and others have done a great job of exploring the Bible in that social media context.

But a lot of the Bible apps are designed to have a sharing component. And so when we're thinking about the digital Bible more broadly, we even want to be thinking about what types of sort of visual background verses that get shared on Instagram versus the textual verses that get shared on Twitter and how those things operate. So this can even also include the, you know, in the printed Bible world, we've often had, you know, visual Bibles for kids that were kind of cartoon Bibles.

There's all the Bible apps for kids that are interactive, that there's where that term Bible becomes more of a category that we apply to things than really an explicit statement about the these books of a canon. It's much more about kind of a kind of a direction that we're going in a category under which lots of different things can fit. So I think this also goes back to a framing that you often see, which is that when we think about previous Bible technologies, there's often this talk about shifting from scrolls to a codex, right, to that early form of a handwritten book.

And then that when the printing press came along, that we stopped using codices, and then we started using printed books. And I think that some of the thought was that the digital Bible would then be the next great replacement. And I mean, it's worth noting that codices were around for a long time after the printing press that they were around for hundreds of years and kept going, they did eventually get replaced.

But I think that we're either in an era like that, where there's a lot of overlap, where we have both print and digital at the same time. Or I think that we are more likely to see those both continuing that even the whole printed book industry as a whole, not just the religious one, seems to still be vibrant. There was that initial thought that Kindles and all that sort of stuff would take over.

And now it seems like we're in this multimedia environment, that when it comes to broadly culturally with books, there's digital books, there's printed books, and there's audio books, those kind of three categories that people are moving in and out of. And then when it comes to internet engagement with the Bible, those three big categories also exist with a lot of little subcategories in between. So I hope that it generally gets at that the digital world is much more multimedia and much more multifaceted than just a linear shift.

When you talk about earlier on the development process of technology, you mentioned toward the end a degree of stabilization of the technology that begins to take a more settled form. And in many respects, that was the character of the Bible prior to the rise of the digital text. And it seems to me that there's been a sort of, in the multimodal form of engagement with the scripture that you mentioned, there's been a sort of co-evolution of the digital and the physical text that has reinvigorated the field of the physical text.

Think of the New English, the NET Bible. Or I think also J. Mark Bertrand has remarked upon the way that it was after the development of digital Bibles, that something like the Reader's Bible could really arise, because the old form of Bible needed to be the sort of Swiss army knife of biblical engagement, something that served all uses. And now you've got these digital texts, you can have specialized biblical texts, texts that are designed for very specific forms of reading.

Could you speak a bit to this multimodal form of engagement with the text, co-evolution of physical and digital texts, and how both of them fit into evangelical engagement with the scriptures? Yeah, and I think the examples you gave were really excellent. I mean, I think early on in the print era, you see things like the Geneva Bible, where there's a lot of notes added to it. And you know, the long history of adding notes around codexes and where there's so much added to that in each era.

And there's new experimentation with how do we augment this? What else do we do? What are ways that help the reader, you know, from breathing marks and things like that to the studier to say, hey, here's some things you should be aware of, to even helping the next copyist remember certain things. So there's always various kinds of augments that happen as we go along. I think what sometimes can happen is that you sort of forget that they're augments.

So I think one of the classic examples is that most people forget that the verse numbers weren't there. To begin with, right? So from Moses to Martin Luther, there were no verse numbers for three or 4000 years. So I think that once you get in digital and you have all this customization, so you're able to change the font color and change the font and the font color.

And, you know, I remember one of the first things I ended up making was I thought it'd be really cool to be able to turn off verse numbers and just look at the text and have this clean on screen thing. And I think once you see that feature, you think, oh, that would be really neat to go backwards and do and print at the same time. And so I don't know exactly the first one.

I think that the NIV folks did the Books of the Bible. That was a verseless one. And the ESV team did a lot of very beautiful work out there.

There's that whole Bibliotheca project that was doing it independent and outside of the

formal publishing. That was the big one that was a Kickstarter project. So the fun thing about that Kickstarter project is that that's that individual experimentation part of things where it's not necessarily a distrust of big media or big e-v-a publishing or something like that.

But it's a saying, hey, now I have all these tools where I could experiment and I could try things. And so the experimentation that you see on the digital world, that HEP, entrepreneurial, pragmatic thing, starts to then bleed back into the printed world. And I think the printed world has been doing experiments for a long time.

There's the teen study Bible and there's all kinds of different from the Geneva Bible, the teen study Bible. There's been so much where the notes have really had big cultural effects. We think about the Schofield reference Bible and what that all did to American beliefs within evangelicalism.

But that experimentation was happening at a certain level of like what can sell a certain number of units. Whereas when it comes to software development, the cost is not as high to try those types of things in terms of the physical cost of you don't have to print 10,000 books in order to get scale. You just make the app once and scale can happen pretty fast.

And so when you see those things happen in the digital world, that enables experimentation to go back in the much more costly world of print. And I think, like you said, all the books of the Bible had to kind of all be in one. There really wasn't much opportunity other than maybe it was sometimes allowed to do New Testament and Psalms.

You know, that was the one canon change that was allowed to happen. You couldn't do much else. And I think now there's much more acceptability.

And so there's always that reversal back into when the New Testament speakers, they often talk about the law and the prophets. There's kind of these groupings of scrolls. Right.

And you start to see that be popular in the printed era where we're printing multi-volume Bibles and all those things. But again, I think the experimentation that digital allows then kind of gives some freedom for the publishing world to say, hey, we could try some things. And the technology of print continuing to evolve that, like you mentioned, that that there was some developments in the first several centuries of print that even the last 20 years or so with things like on demand printing that allows for new forms of experimentation that are digital at their core, but then come back into the printed world.

Could you say a bit about the way that, for instance, you remarked upon the relatively late development of verses only in the 1550s? And there are various paratextual

features of biblical texts that we've been familiar with from childhood. Things like chapters and verses, things like concordances and things like the glossaries, the table of contents, the cross references, etc. Those paratextual features do continue in the age of the digital text, but often they can function very differently.

They can be hardened or they can be weakened. Think of, for instance, searching online for a particular text and you'll have that particular text by itself on many of the soft on many of the websites with comparative versions. But you don't find it easy to find the context of the text.

You just see the verse taken by itself. And could you speak a bit to the ways that these paratextual features can be shifted by the development and the design of these new technologies? Yeah, I think that there's a number of different directions that you could go with this particular one. I think you mentioned, for example, probably one of the dark horse websites has come up in the last five years is Bible Hub.

And they've done a great job of putting multiple versions next to each other so that when if you were to go into Google and search for kind of a phrase from a scripture passage that you remember, oftentimes they're going to beat out Bible Gateway. And some of that is by putting them all next to each other on pages. And like you mentioned, there is a view full chapter button there, but the but the default view is one of individual verses.

And I think you see this going back to even the new American Standard version that that was one of the first ones where they they printed every verse on a line. So it's very much like the verse is the primary unit that we sort of believe in even more than the paragraph or the pericope. So we see that coming from the print era for sure.

And then and then various ways in which that's like reinforced or strengthened in the digital era, even with the sharing. So, you know, there was there was a lot of the last 15 years kind of hating on Twitter for, you know, reducing everything to 140 or 280 characters. But this, of course, in the biblical context is happening long, long before there ever was a Twitter or Instagram threads app and all that kind of stuff.

So, yeah, I think you're you're right to start to say that the way that these that the websites in particular are structured sometimes pushes that that versification. I mean, I think in general, they do make it fairly easy to get to the next place. And they're they're representing the way that search worked all the way back to the way that that Strong put together his numbers and the way that early concordances worked.

And even in this this first era of Bible software that we talked about, the first digital concordances were were doing that verse snippet idea where you would see part of a word there. And in theory, you're going to go then immediately to the context where it comes from. I think some of the probably more interesting developments post that have

been the way that search has been augmented by a set of additional words that aren't in tech and the text.

So, you know, the word pornography, for example, is not in the Bible. The word suicide is not in the Bible. But these are the terms that people search very often for.

And because culturally we're used to search working in particular way and the kinds of responses that it gives when someone goes to a Bible search box, they're expecting something similar in this era. So, you know, scholars, when they're when they're doing a search, they're probably thinking more about the actual words of the text and what's going to be returned and how various translations treat theological terminology and all that sort of stuff is is Sark's flesh or not, or is it something else? But the the average reader is really looking more for not not that kind of level of precision. They're wanting to find out about a topic.

And so, you know, teams like like you, Virgin, really try to figure out if you search for one of those terms, what should return? Like if you search for depression, is it just is it going to return things about Jeremiah or what should it do in there? So there is in that in that place, a lot of choices that are not so much that the old paratext where it's things around or beside, but it's sort of underneath. And and what am I going to expose? And also the order in that in that case, because, you know, the old order might just be either the canonical order or how many times the term shows up. But when you're searching for more conceptually, then you really are returning something that that sounds authoritative because it's the Bible.

But really, the software itself and the algorithms and the paratext that's underneath, meaning that all the search connections, those are doing a lot. The flip side, I think, to from a user engagement standpoint is there are kind of broadly speaking, maybe two forms of apps. There are more reader and kind of regular daily reading apps where I would put you version in that category of some that's meant to get you in the text regularly and in a social context.

And then the other ones would be more of the study oriented apps that are mimicking what the desktop era did. So they're providing a lot of additional commentary. They are often providing the ability for you to tap on an English word and see the underlying Greek or Hebrew and the parsing and all that sort of stuff.

Those those apps have what's interesting on the digital areas. They have a kind of serendipity to them, a sort of engagement fluidity that feels kind of like clicking through Wikipedia 10 years ago did where there's a discovery feeling to it that I think can be really fun. And I like making these things for myself.

And I like looking at them and seeing common words that you might not that might be translated differently in English. But for the reader, there is a new sense that I think this

may be jumping ahead in our conversation a little bit, but something that I often call secondary perspicuity in that the idea of perspicuity, that most of the obvious things in scripture are obvious, right? That you don't need any specialized training, that a good Protestant can open a Bible and get most of the major things right. What I started to see in users that really liked these study oriented apps is they seem to be saying that you can know the meaning of the Bible as long as you have the right things installed, the right add-ons, the right Greek and Hebrew definitions and all that sort of stuff that you can get to the answer.

And so I think that all of this does reinforce a little bit of the Bible as answerism, I think, that you're primarily trying to get the right conclusion about everything. And sometimes that takes you out of the Bible as a sort of place of encounter of the divine. And so those two app types, I think, push on that, whereas I think that the reader apps are trying to push you in that direction of having some type of encounter with God or the scriptures.

And then the study ones are trying to get more at meaning. I think both are important, but they're both pushing us in particular directions. And part of what this project was about was trying to figure out how much are the programmers thinking about that? Are they thinking about what direction they're trying to take you and the implications of all that? So in discussing that, you remark, among other things, about the more particular forms of engagement that have been habitual among evangelicals and scripture.

So, for instance, a more devotional reading of the text in daily Bible study or the personal prayer time, you might think about promised texts and the way in which single texts become nuggets of inspiration. Or there is the more therapeutic and moral approach to the text. And it seems that many of the forms of software are privileging or maybe nudging you into certain forms of engagement with the text that predominate among evangelicals.

They may be more exclusive to evangelicals, whereas other forms of engagement that have been historic in the church or very dominant in other contexts are less privileged or less accessible and supported by these sorts of apps and software. Could you talk a bit about the ways in which the software might nudge us towards certain forms of engagement? Some of the new forms of engagement that have opened up and some of the ones that maybe are falling away or being underprivileged. Yeah, that's a great question.

I mean, I think that when I part of the work that I did was to go into several different churches, mostly that were in the evangelical world, and to just list out maybe 10 or 15 forms of engagement and then ask different users what which forms of engagement they did and then what mediums they prefer to do. Those things. And so I'd ask them if they preferred print or phone or tablet or computer to do those things.

So it's interesting to see what kinds of things came out. And one of those was Lectio

Divina. And among the 200-ish evangelicals that I surveyed, they didn't really ever check that one.

So you could kind of sense that broadly that's not a practice that many evangelicals are aware of, although several are. But these particular churches, that just wasn't as big of a thing. So that's already underneath for evangelicals.

I think at the same time, some of the folks like the Bible Gateway team, they're working with a group called the Center for Bible Engagement and trying to figure out how do we enable, how do we teach the user about these forms of engagement they might not be getting from their own spiritual community and then embed those into the software and try to make it do more than one thing. So I think when, say, the person that developed the first version of Bible Gateway is just thinking, how can I make something that's cool? How can I put the Bible on? How do I do it? And so sometimes a developer isn't always thinking through all those things. They're just going like, how can I make it work? And so it's not until later that you start thinking about, OK, what is working and how do I do more on that? So again, in that desktop era, there really was a concerted effort to say, how do I make things for the pastor? And so if you talk with the folks at Logos Bible Software, they're going to say, we see our software as a time machine, because what we're trying to do is to say we want that pastor not just to do a short sermon.

The goal isn't to make something simple there, but to say you only have 40 or 50 hours per week of things you can do. If you're spending more than half of that on your sermon, that's less time that you're in the hospital or that you're in someone's home. And so if you can shorten the time that's needed to find all of these books and find all these commentaries and get you right into them, then we've given you time to be relational.

So I mean, those are not necessarily the ways that we initially think about the way that software works. We're thinking about it as like cheapening something, but they're often thinking about it as enabling something else. Then on the other hand, when it comes to something like YouVersion, they're looking at it saying, we start from this fundamental belief that the more times you encounter God's work, that the Spirit of God is going to do something in you.

No matter how badly you're doing it or how incorrectly you're doing it, the more times you're in scripture, the better. And so they're thinking, man, how do I get people in this more often? And so they're aware of all the research that's being done on how to keep eyeballs on screens. And most of that is to sell advertising.

They're saying, how do I sort of turn that and use it in a way that will keep people encountering scripture because we believe that God's Spirit will be present and do something in that moment. And even pointing to research that's saying that if you are in the Bible three or more times per week, that your rates of depression and adultery and all these other kind of moral factors or life kind of overall joy factors go up and other

moral factors go down. They're looking at saying, how do we do that? And so their, again, instinct is to say that the Bible should be social and communal.

And so they're going to build social and communal factors and privilege those things over study tools. So if you ask you ever, hey, why don't you have commentary and why can't you click on the word and get a Greek definition or something like that? They're going to go, that's not what we're trying to do. We're trying to get people to read this and then read it with other people.

And so their data would say that if you have one friend in the app, your amount of times you read goes way up. And then at seven friends, there's another big jump. So they're looking at all that data trying to say, how do we get you to engage the Bible? And for them, the way you engage is less important than that you're doing it over and over again.

And so that's what's going to sort of privilege on that side. Whereas the study oriented tools are going to say, our goal is to figure out how to get you to be able to do the thing that you wanted to do, whether that's academic study or pastoral study or reading a Bible study. Now for the average user, what comes out? Well, I think, you know, U-Version has also really pushed the audio Bible stuff.

So audio Bibles have been available for a long time, but the threshold to use them was pretty high because it required a purchase. It required that you carry around physical media, that you have the physical media that can play it. Now that it's all in that one device, that just availability and ease become, you know, that all the barriers are down.

And so people are listening to scripture a lot more. You see all the research that's done by Pew and others, you know, showing in Barna that there's an increased use of audio Bibles over the last decade, just because of that ease of use. But when it comes to really being able to sort of be slow and reflective and the kind of like meditation on scripture, those are the things that seem harder to do in most of the kind of all-in-one apps, like the study apps and then things like U-Version.

There are a variety of kind of secondary specialized apps that probably do a better job of that, or even podcasts that are helpful for that reflective style of reading or kind of Ignatian style imaginative things. Those don't seem like they're as able to be prioritized in those apps. And I think part of that is just the slowness and the volume that happens.

Screens aren't very good at just staying static for a while. You tend to interact and move with them and need to switch to a different version. So all in all, all in one, we do see users having some sense of understanding that, hey, my desktop is probably the place I should study.

My phone is probably a good place for, you know, searching and quicker reading. And

then my print is still going to be the place where I'm going to be able to kind of stop and slow down and be distraction-free. They seem to be aware of that different media are good for different forms of engagement.

So it seems to me that for want of a better way of talking about it, the place of the Bible, the location of the Bible can change depending upon different media. And sometimes it's just the place of a particular form of the biblical text. And sometimes it's the more imaginative sense of where the Bible fits in more generally.

And so we can think about one of the things you mentioned, for instance, in the book, is the way that physical Bibles are often embedded within relational contexts. The first Bible that you were given or a Bible that has a particular family significance that was given to you by your grandparents or something like that. Also, a physical Bible is located in physical space.

It's something that is not a replicable text in the same way. It may be mass produced, but even then, since it's been used over many years, and maybe you've had notes and other things in it, it starts to take on a very particular quality in maybe a respect that a digital text, just because of the mode of its production or replication, cannot. And could you maybe talk about some of the different ways in which the location of the text shifts, for instance, in relationship to the church and its authority or in relationship to the individual reader? Is there a sense in which it's less of an internalized thing or maybe more of an internalized thing, something intimate and close in a way that the physical text is not necessarily as physically close as your phone to your body? The social context of it, the way in which it plays a part in families, it seems also institutionally.

You don't have the same institutional purchase with digital text than you do with physical text where you have a church Bible, for instance, or a Bible that everyone is supposed to... the Bible that a church will buy for its pews. Or politically as well, the sense of the Bible is something that, like the King James Version, is authorized. It comes with a particular sense of authority.

And then there's also the academic functions where you have notes and other resources. You do your own research, and the maybe academic work that brings you the text and the authority structures that that's embedded in can become less obvious than when you've got your own scopial reference Bible or your own text that you can research for yourself. And there's a greater sense of ownership there, but also a sense of distance from the structures and institutions that formerly located the text.

That's a very broad question, but I'd be interested. No, no. I mean, I think you've done a great job of teeing it up and framing a lot of what is important there.

Just to give a really practical example, I mean, the first time I saw this was well before I was doing any academic work. I, in college, worked as a youth guy, youth pastor at a

church. And we did kind of a typical thing where we had those pew Bibles that we'd give out in youth group settings, because half the kids had their own Bibles and the other half didn't, so we'd hand them out.

And this is late 90s, early 2000s when projectors were becoming more common. And so I thought, man, it would be great if I could get a projector because we could do really spiritual things like play Xbox together and we could also watch movies and I could and then I could also teach and show the text on the screen. And so I started doing that.

And what I noticed pretty quickly, almost immediately, was that those half of the kids that did bring, you know, printed Bibles to church, they stopped bringing them. And that, you know, that the projector was the thing. And so it's this really, really interesting thing, because I was in that context of what was called a Bible church, right? And so it felt like, oh, no, I'm devaluing the Bible.

And, you know, these kids won't know the physicality of the Bible, they won't know that, you know, the Psalms are in the middle, and that little spicy section is just to the right of that, you know, they won't know those little details that we know about the physicality of a printed Bible. And yet, you know, there was this other side where I realized that so many of them, you know, they were using different translations, right? There was no authoritative translation. Some, you know, had NIV, and some had the teen study Bible.

And some had, you know, all these other different ones that were more formal or less formal. And of course, the kids that were largely unchurched that didn't have Bibles. And now with the projector, we were sort of recalling that era where there's an authoritative text on screen, that this is the one that we are all as a community.

Now, we're not hearing it, we are hearing it, but we're hearing it and seeing it at the same time. So we're recalling that one Bible thing, but it's in a context of multimedia. And it's also though, in that oftentimes snippeted version, though, because I might only be showing one at a time.

And so the person isn't seeing it in a larger context, unless maybe we do a public reading of scripture where we're reading the full thing before we, you know, sort of go individually into particular verses. So there is that continual, you know, recalling something in the past and moving forward, you know, kind of using McLuhan-esque language that there's a restoration of something and an amputation of something else. So there is a lot of those things happening.

And yet, I think you see another wave of that with some of the things that U-Version is doing now, where there's a lot of, you know, sort of geo-coded things, where you can open up the app, and it'll show, you know, your church, and you can read the scripture on your screen with everybody else. But of course, the whole idea of everybody then moving from the big screen of a projector down to the small screen in front of them sort

of re-individualizes again. And so now we're moving in that era where my example of the projector is now very, very dated.

It's more than 20 years old. So the individual screen thing is shifting. And so you even hear, you know, oftentimes, various speakers or preachers or pastors or vicars saying something like, you know, open your Bible to or move in your device to.

And I think that that move of talking about your device then brings in the whole world and all the assumptions of device culture, that that has now been brought into the church. So there's a lot of things that we often bring into the building or the gathering by bringing the phone in. And part of that, we are saying our whole person is here and present and all of our connections to the world around us.

So, you know, our banking app and our social media apps and all those things are in that same context. So early on, you know, there was some discussion about, you know, people would talk about how on their phone, you know, that wherever they had kind of their, the app that they least wanted to use, whatever that social media thing that was pulling them, they would rearrange and put the Bible there. So their little habit would reform and hopefully they would tap it and maybe they would relearn that habit later on.

So I think this is a very interesting shift in that the Bible has moved from this very kind of one place thing that you hear in the church and that maybe you hear, and because you don't have access to it again, because you don't own a printed Bible, that it kind of locks in your mind and it gives you something to meditate on, right? Now the Bible has shifted to, from something that you access in the context of church that then becomes part of your mind, to the individual printed Bible that is a thing that I own. And I think it's stopped being a thing that you own and it's a thing that you access, right? So my general orientation is that this is one of the many things that I get to, but I don't necessarily own or kind of internalize as much, but I get to when I need it. And so I do think that that's one of the things that is potentially very, very negative on the digital side, or even on the printed side of things, is that when we look in Scripture itself about what it asks us to do with Scripture, there are a few places where it asks us to study it, and a few places where it says, you know, take and read, but for the most part, it's saying meditate and do.

And so I think that if we are only accessing, then that may, you know, inhibit our own spiritual growth. And so I think just like all of the machines that we have that drive us around, that can move us, we still need to physically move our own body to maintain our physical body to be healthy. I think there is a sense in that with our minds as well, that there are exercises that we need to do with our own minds and our soul and our whole immaterial self, including our encounter with Scripture and our ability to think and be able to think outside of the frenetic pace of the digital world.

As much as I think it is, you know, good that those contexts are merging, that you talked

about earlier, the authoritative context of the church has kind of been blown up by Protestantism in negative ways, but also sometimes in positive ways. And sometimes that radical separation of, you know, the church and the world, that there's more of a recognition of the integration, and the integration not just on a Sunday worship context, but also throughout the week that digital apps enable us to kind of stay immersed in Scripture in some way, and to be sharing throughout the week. But that does really kind of devalue any sort of authoritative look that we're all choosing which authorities to submit to.

So all this is happening, that the Bible and the digital Bible apps are one part of it, but as you mentioned, it's happening in a larger huge cultural context that we could talk about forever. In conclusion, you mentioned the youth group context, and it seems to me that there are significant changes in the way that digital contexts and software function for younger generations as opposed to older generations. And it seems that the ways that Gen Z and beyond will relate to the text will be very different from those of us who have grown up primarily with physical text in our youth.

Can you speak a bit to those sorts of generational developments, and also to some of the other developments that you might see on the horizon with new technologies? Yeah, so a lot of the people that I ask, we do a lot of interviews with them, and ask them questions about, you know, do you remember your first digital Bible app, and what changed when you moved from print to digital, and you know, kind of ask those types of questions to explore what they were seeing, what they were observing. But you know, anyone who is say under 20, you know, when I would ask that question, they would almost have a blank stare, because they would just say, well, I've never known a world where this wasn't part of my religious experience. And even someone who maybe came to faith at a later point in life, this was just this is just the way things are.

So you and I that may have been in the Christian community for a long time, we remember this shift. But like you said, this is just the native environment. So I think that there's, you know, digital Bible natives, digital Bible immigrants to use that language, can insert Bible in there.

And they're going to see it somewhat differently. I think, again, they're like we talked about earlier, their expectation for search, for example, is a little bit different than I think the way that a person who's been using the Bible for a long time, and is thinking about the search as a concordance, versus as a topical way of looking at things, they're more thinking in that topical index. Now, I think just the overall, you know, interpretive way that people look at Scripture, you know, I'll give just a brief exploration of some of what the data said, where I would have groups read Jude, because it was something something a little bit unfamiliar, but somewhat familiar, and just ask them some objective questions to look at that side of it.

But really, it was the interpretive questions that to me were more interesting. And here, when I asked these groups something, you know, the printed readers would say, Hey, I think Jude is about God's judgment. Whereas the phone readers tend to see a little bit more of God's faithfulness.

But when I asked them how they felt, like, what was the spiritual experience of reading that the print readers would talk about how they felt encouraged by it, and the phone readers would talk about how they felt, you know, somewhat discouraged and confused. So the, the, you know, faithful God makes you somewhat discouraged, and the judgmental God makes you encouraged. I do think that this is probably somewhat of the associations that we bring to these mediums.

So when we talk about, you know, print, we're thinking about something that is authoritative and trustworthy, and maybe a little bit strict, but something that we ultimately feel good about. Whereas, whereas phone kind of has all of our anxieties of this era, you know, all the things that we see on the news, all the FOMO, and all that stuff, we associate with that. So but but the passages that we tend to see are those that are more positive.

So you mentioned that moralistic, therapeutic, deistic thing that the types of verses that we see on social media tend to be more positive. And there's even some data that would say, you know, early internet searches were things like John 316. And now there are a lot more, you know, I can do all things through Christ that they tend in that direction.

I think the question is just going to be, is that how much of that is, you know, you're in my era, foot people, that we are seeing that, that big difference, and how much different will that be for someone who's much younger, that is that has grown up with this, where the phone is just something that exists. It's not the center of our anxieties. It's just the way the world works.

And so I think it will be interesting to see how that how those kind of interpretive differences play out over the next 20 or 30 years. And again, is the Bible something that I own? Or is the Bible something that I access? And then is the Bible a set of verses? Or is it pericopes? Is it books? Is it kind of individual things on a shelf where the Bible has gotten kind of cut up again, and the readers editions? I think that that conception of that category of the Bible, how many things fit into that category, and which ones are primary and which ones are secondary will be the types of questions that will be interesting to ask over the next, say, couple decades. John Dyer is the author of *People of the Screen*, how evangelicals created the digital Bible and how it shapes their reading of the scripture.

I'll post a link in the show notes to the book. And thank you so much for joining me, John. Absolutely.

This has been a blast. Thank you. God bless and thank you for listening.