



# The Theology of Attention

*How Algorithmic Media Can Shape Christian Formation Before We Notice*

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## ABSTRACT

Digital media does more than distribute Christian teaching; it can cultivate habits of attention that influence how Christians read Scripture, pray, remember, desire, and understand discipleship. Drawing on Scripture, scholarship on cultural formation, and practical experience in large-scale Christian digital publishing, this theological reflection argues that attention is a matter of discipleship because repeated patterns of attention can become repeated patterns of love. Algorithmic platforms can serve genuine ministry, but their incentives toward speed, novelty, fragmentation, and measurable engagement can conflict with biblical practices of abiding, meditation, contextual reading, embodied fellowship, and patient obedience. The Christian response is therefore neither technological rejection nor uncritical adoption. It is intentional stewardship: using digital media as a doorway into deeper engagement with Christ, Scripture, the church, and faithful life.

Keywords: digital Christianity; attention; discipleship; algorithms; biblical interpretation; spiritual formation; social media; Scripture

Christian ministry has always used available media. The apostolic letters traveled along Roman roads. The codex made collections of Christian texts easier to consult. Printing multiplied access to Scripture. Radio and television carried preaching beyond the walls of a congregation. Digital media has extended that pattern with extraordinary reach. A Christian teacher can now speak to someone across the world within seconds, and a person who would never enter a church building can encounter Scripture privately on a phone.

I work inside that reality. My Christian publishing reaches a large digital audience, and I have built an extensive online library intended to move readers from brief encounters with Christian ideas toward sustained engagement with Scripture. That experience has convinced me that the central theological question is not whether Christians should use digital technology. We already do. The more searching question is what our technologies are training us to do with our attention, and therefore what kinds of disciples they may be helping us become.

Attention is not spiritually neutral. Jesus repeatedly joins hearing with responding. In the parable of the soils, the same word is heard under different conditions and produces radically different outcomes (Mark 4:1–20). In the Sermon on the Mount, the decisive distinction is not between those who encounter Jesus' words and those who never hear them, but between hearing that culminates in obedience and hearing that does not (Matt. 7:24–27). James makes the same movement when he warns against being hearers who do not become doers (Jas. 1:22–25). Christian formation therefore concerns not only exposure to truth but the manner in which truth is received, retained, loved, and embodied.

That matters in an environment built around interruption. Algorithmic platforms are designed to select and order material according to signals such as predicted interest and engagement. Their usefulness is obvious: discovery becomes easier, niche teaching can find an audience, and ministries without large institutional structures can reach people directly. Yet the form of the environment also exerts pressure on the message. Material that creates an immediate response is easier to measure than material whose fruit appears after months of patient reading, prayer, repentance, and obedience.

Neil Postman's older argument about electronic media remains useful here. His concern was not simply that television contained bad material, but that a medium can favor particular forms of discourse and thereby shape what a culture finds natural or credible. Nicholas Carr later raised related concerns about the internet and habits of deep reading and sustained thought. Their arguments should not be converted into simplistic technological determinism, but they help name an important reality: media are not merely transparent pipes through which unchanged content passes. They create habits, expectations, tempos, and forms of attention.

Christian theology has additional reasons to take those habits seriously. James K. A. Smith has emphasized that human beings are formed not only by the ideas they consciously affirm but also by practices that train desire. His account of cultural formation is especially relevant to digital life. If repeated practices can tutor our loves, then the repeated gesture of checking, swiping, reacting, comparing, and moving on is not merely a set of neutral motions. It can become a liturgy of restlessness.

This does not mean that every short video is spiritually shallow or that every long article is spiritually deep. Jesus could say something in a sentence that continues to confront the church two thousand years later. Brevity is not the enemy. Fragmentation is the greater concern: the habit of receiving pieces without contexts, conclusions without arguments, promises without covenants, and verses without the biblical narratives and theological claims that give them meaning.

Scripture itself resists that fragmentation. Paul's letters develop arguments. The Gospels present narratives in which the identity and mission of Jesus unfold through actions, conflicts, teachings, death, and resurrection. Revelation addresses concrete churches before it opens its visions toward the final renewal of creation. Even familiar verses change in depth when they are returned to the paragraphs, books, and canonical story in which they belong.

Consider Philippians 4:13, frequently detached from its immediate setting. Paul's claim that he can do all things through the one who strengthens him appears in a discussion of learning contentment in abundance and need (Phil. 4:10–13). Context does not weaken the verse. It gives it sharper Christian meaning. The promise is not an unlimited guarantee of personal achievement; it is testimony to Christ's sufficiency amid changing circumstances. A digital environment that rewards the instantly quotable can unintentionally reward the removal of precisely the context that protects the text from misuse.

The biblical alternative is not information scarcity but faithful attention. Psalm 1 describes the blessed person as one who meditates on the instruction of the Lord day and night. The Hebrew poetic image is not of hurried exposure but of sustained orientation. Jesus tells his disciples to abide in him (John 15:1–11). Paul urges believers to let the word of Christ dwell richly among them (Col. 3:16). These verbs imply duration. Christian formation requires remaining.

Remaining is difficult in a system whose economic and cultural logic often depends on moving us to the next item. The feed asks, What else? Scripture often asks, What now? What must be believed, confessed, forgiven, changed, endured, or obeyed because this is true? Those are slower questions. They cannot always be answered within the tempo of the scroll.

This creates a responsibility for Christian creators. The temptation is not only to communicate truth badly. It is to let performance metrics silently determine which truths deserve emphasis. Views, watch time, clicks, comments, shares, and subscriber growth provide real information about distribution. Reach matters because people matter. But a metric can measure attention without measuring discipleship. It can tell a creator that a message traveled widely without telling us whether anyone became more patient, more truthful, more forgiving, more prayerful, more biblically literate, or more faithful to Christ.

John the Baptist offers a needed ministerial posture: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). The immediate context concerns John’s relationship to Jesus, not social-media strategy, yet the principle exposes a perennial danger in public ministry. Christian communication becomes distorted when the creator’s visibility becomes the final good. The proper end of Christian media is not dependence on the Christian communicator. It is deeper dependence on Christ.

That conviction has practical consequences for how I think about digital publishing. A short piece should be able to function as a doorway. It may answer one question, offer one biblical insight, or speak one word of encouragement, but it should also make deeper movement possible. A viewer should be able to move from a short video to a fuller teaching, from a quotation to its chapter, from a topical reflection to a whole-book study, and from online learning toward prayer, embodied Christian community, and concrete obedience.

This is one reason long-form Christian libraries still matter. Search and social discovery often begin with a narrow question: Who was Mark? What does forgiveness require? How should Christians understand suffering? A responsible digital library can meet the reader at that point without leaving the reader there. It can connect the immediate question to broader biblical contexts and allow curiosity to become study.

Digital abundance, however, can create a second problem: more resources do not automatically produce more formation. A person can save hundreds of articles and read none of them. A playlist can become another form of accumulation. Christian publishers therefore need architecture, not merely volume. Material should be organized so that readers can understand where they are, what belongs together, and where to go next. Good digital ministry is partly an act of hospitality: it reduces unnecessary friction between curiosity and sustained learning.

The church also needs to preserve the distinction between digital access and embodied fellowship. The New Testament’s commands to bear burdens, forgive one another, share material resources, practice hospitality, gather, serve, correct, encourage, and break bread assume relationships in which other people can make claims upon our time and comfort. A subscriber can become a number in an analytics panel. A brother or sister in Christ cannot be reduced so easily.

Hebrews connects perseverance to gathered encouragement: believers are to consider how to provoke one another toward love and good works and not abandon meeting together (Heb. 10:24–25). Whatever digital ministry can accomplish, it should not teach Christians that consuming religious content is equivalent to belonging to the body of Christ. Online resources can support discipleship. They cannot exhaust its meaning.

The same distinction applies to prayer. Digital media excels at filling silence. Christian prayer often requires entering it. Jesus repeatedly withdrew to pray (Luke 5:16), and Gethsemane shows prayer as sustained communion and surrender rather than content production (Matt. 26:36–46). If our attention has been trained to experience every unfilled moment as a problem, prayer may begin to feel intolerably slow. That discomfort is itself spiritually revealing.

Andy Crouch's approach to technology is helpful because it refuses the false choice between enthusiasm and rejection. The central question is not whether a tool is modern but whether its place in human life supports wisdom, character, relationship, and flourishing. Applied to Christian media, the task is to put technology in its proper place: powerful servant, poor master.

A theology of attention therefore requires practices of resistance. Christians can read entire biblical books rather than only verse images. We can allow a passage to remain open after the first insight appears. We can practice prayer without simultaneous media. We can create device-free spaces for worship, meals, conversation, and rest. Churches can teach media literacy as part of discipleship rather than treating technology as a subject external to spiritual formation. Christian creators can refuse to turn every theological question into outrage because outrage performs well.

Creators can also design for depth. A brief post can link to a substantial article. An article can cite Scripture in context and acknowledge sources. A video series can follow the argument of a biblical book rather than treating every episode as an isolated product. Search architecture can connect introductory resources with advanced ones. The goal is not to make every reader consume everything. It is to ensure that the path toward greater depth exists.

There is also a pastoral reason to resist the demand for constant stimulation. Many people encounter Christian content while grieving, frightened, lonely, ill, or spiritually exhausted. They do not need a ministry that treats their pain as an engagement opportunity. They need truth delivered with patience and dignity. Jesus' encounter with Mary and Martha after Lazarus's death offers a different rhythm. He teaches, questions, weeps, acts, and reveals himself (John 11). The narrative cannot be reduced without losing something of its pastoral and theological texture.

The resurrection itself is a rebuke to the tyranny of immediacy. Christian hope is not built on the promise that every present circumstance will resolve quickly. It is built on the risen Christ and the promised renewal toward which history moves. Formation in that hope requires a time horizon longer than the feed. It teaches believers to remain faithful when immediate reinforcement is absent.

This is where algorithmic culture and Christian eschatology may pull in opposite directions. The algorithm is optimized around the next prediction of attention. Christian hope is oriented toward the kingdom of God, the resurrection of the dead, and the final reconciliation of all things in Christ. One horizon is measured in seconds; the other teaches us to live faithfully across a lifetime.

The church should therefore neither romanticize a pre-digital past nor baptize every digital innovation as progress. Christians have always needed discernment about the technologies through which they communicate. The present task is to ask whether our tools are helping us attend to what is true, good, and worthy of love—and whether we remain capable of turning them off when they interfere with that calling.

For Christian publishers, this means success must have more than one dimension. We should care about reach, because the gospel is meant to be proclaimed. We should care about clarity, because confused communication does not serve readers. We should care about discoverability, because resources no one can find cannot help anyone. But we should also care about depth, context, continuity, and whether our work points beyond itself.

The best digital Christian resource may therefore be one that eventually makes itself unnecessary. It helps a person open Scripture, understand it more faithfully, pray more honestly, join the life of the church more fully, love a neighbor more concretely, and follow Jesus when no screen is present.

Technology can carry a message across the world. It can organize a library larger than a physical room. It can connect teachers and learners who would never otherwise meet. Those are

genuine gifts. But Christian formation finally depends on something an algorithm cannot manufacture: the work of God through truth received in faith, practiced in community, embodied in love, and sustained through patient obedience.

The decisive question for digital Christianity is therefore not whether Christians can win attention. We already know that attention can be captured. The question is what we do after it has been given.

If we use attention merely to secure another impression, we have accepted the logic of the platform as our final horizon. If we use it to lead people toward Scripture, prayer, community, wisdom, repentance, love, and Christ himself, technology can become a servant of a deeper purpose.

Christian discipleship has never been about consuming the largest possible quantity of religious material. It is about following Jesus. In an age of algorithms, that ancient calling may require a newly intentional discipline: learning again how to attend.

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## Author and Disclosures

Douglas Vandergraph is an independent Christian writer, Bible teacher, podcaster, and digital publisher whose work centers on Jesus Christ, Scripture, spiritual formation, practical Christian encouragement, and long-form Bible study.

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