

Welcome

If you scroll on Facebook for very long, you come across bland Christian memes. Maybe your uncle or your sister or a friend from the church where you grew up shared it. Some page with a name like “Jesus is Lord” or “God is Good”, and then an equally bland meme - a field of flowers with a verse about God’s goodness or trustworthiness.

I don’t know about you, but I never really pay much attention to these posts, let alone the pages that post them. So I was shocked when, in the lead up to the 2020 election, journalists published a leaked internal Facebook report that showed 19 of the top 20 Christian pages had been created by Eastern European troll farms as a way to influence American voters.

That’s right - the pages were created specifically to get Christians to like the pages and reshare the content. Then they would sprinkle in carefully crafted propaganda messages designed to exert unconscious influence on those who’d liked the page.

The report was damning - the author of the report observed that these troll farms were so successful because they exploited Facebook’s algorithms. Far from preventing its users from exploitation, the way Facebook decided what shows up in our feed actually made us more vulnerable to exploitation.

We received another shock the following year when a hack of the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytical revealed that Facebook allowed third party companies (like political consulting firms) unauthorized access to users’ data. Facebook sold access to tens of millions of users’ data, and when the ensuing lawsuit finally resolved, they settled for \$725 million without having to admit any wrongdoing on their part.

All of that is infuriating at a macrolevel, and when we remember the 2020 election and the role misinformation played - and continues to play - in efforts to undermine our democracy, \$725 million doesn’t feel like enough.

But the Facebook fiasco raises a more existential question about social media, namely that most of us treat our feeds as morally neutral. But they’re not. Our feeds are curated for us, controlled by invisible algorithms we never see or choose. And that means that what we see, what we watch, is being chosen by someone.

What does a faithful engagement with *that* reality look like? How can we be wise about what we’re consuming, and who’s choosing that for us?

Message

It's been nearly a decade since we did a series called SOCIAL, where we explored what it looks like to live faithfully in online spaces. I don't have to tell you that a lot has changed in the last decade, particularly in the world of technology. TikTok didn't exist, X was still Twitter and Facebook hadn't sold us out to the Russians yet.

Smart Home devices weren't everywhere, always listening to us quite yet.

Yeah, a lot has changed in the last decade, so we thought it would be good to revisit our Social series. What does it look like to think faithfully about technology in 2023? How do we understand the forces shaping our culture, our homes, our imaginations? And how do we chart out a faith-filled course in this always-changing technological landscape?

We started last week by looking broadly at a theology of technology. We saw God is not inherently anti-progress; quite the opposite. The long plan of Scripture includes technological advancement as we partner with God in exploring and caring for the world.

What we have to ask about technology is the same thing we ask about everything else: do they help me love God better? Do they help me love my neighbor better? Do they help me love myself better?

Today, let's explore social media more specifically. Social Media embodies the promise of the internet - a global village, intimately connected by electricity. And in so many ways that's true - I've met some of my best friends in the world through social media like blogs, Facebook and Twitter (RIP). Keeping up with family via Instagram and FaceTime takes some of the sting out of living far apart.

Being able to worship together as a virtual and in person congregation is an incredible gift that has helped us to connect with each other and with God in times where I know many of us were afraid we wouldn't be able to.

And the way social media helps us send money, prayers and tangible relief to those suffering around the globe is amazing.

And *all of it is free*. You don't have to pay for a YouTube account, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram - any of it.

Which... actually is an interesting problem. My podcast recently interviewed author Jason Pargin about the future of social media platforms, and he brought up this problem. He said something that continues to haunt me:

When the product is free, you are the product. -- Jason Pargin

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram... all these platforms give their services away. The only two ways they have to make money are 1) convince you to pay for what they give away for free - this is what Elon Musk has tried to do with Twitter and it's essentially destroyed the platform. Not a great option. The other is to sell ads. So when you're scrolling on your feed or before you can watch that video you clicked on, you're going to see an ad.

Since this is how the platforms make their money, they design their algorithms with one thing in mind: to keep you on the app as long as possible. This covers everything from user interface design to what is in your news feed.

Tech companies design their algorithms to manipulate us, to get us to act in ways that benefit *them*. Whether they benefit us or not is a secondary concern at best.

But you know as well as I do that tech companies didn't invent this sort of exploitation. As long as some have ruled over others, we've been trying to manipulate and control. And Scripture has some stark warnings about how people of faith should engage them.

Turn with us to Revelation 13.

Most of us get chills when we think about the book of Revelation. But there are few books that capture the danger of power and what it means for people of faith to resist better than this strange book at the end of our Bible.

It was written by a leader in the early church, sometime near the end of the first century CE. John - the only name we have for him - writes of a vision he receives from Jesus that's a message to the churches of the Roman province of Asia (modern day Turkey). These churches face a world that's hostile to their faith in Jesus, and they're all struggling with how to respond. Some are falling into legalism. Some have surrendered to the religion of Rome. Some are holding out and suffering for it.

Chapter 13 comes in the final section of the book, a big, sprawling vision that shows those early Christians that their struggles are part of a cosmic battle being waged between God and the devil. John sees the devil as a cosmic dragon with 7 heads. Having been cast out of the heavens by Jesus' resurrection and ascension to the throne of heaven, the dragon has come to earth to wage war on Jesus' followers - the very Christians to whom the letter is addressed!

The dragon begins by summoning a beast out of the sea. Like the dragon, this beast has 7 heads, and John tells us this beast is Rome, the mighty Empire that crucified Jesus and now seeks to suppress worship of him. But when the beast crawls out of the sea - like Roman ships docking, it summons a second beast, a Land Beast. This Beast is the propaganda machine - and it's insidious. It sounds like the dragon, like the devil. But it looks like a lamb - which is how Jesus is described.

The Land Beast is the one you really have to watch out for. He's the propaganda arm of this attack - his job is to get everyone to follow the Sea Beast (which is Rome, which is the Empire which is the devil). And one of the most insidious things he does is insist that everyone get a mark on them. Let's read:

He required everyone—small and great, rich and poor, free and slave—to be given a mark on the right hand or on the forehead. And no one could buy or sell anything without that mark, which was either the name of the beast or the number representing his name. Wisdom is needed here. Let the one with understanding solve the meaning of the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. His number is 666. -- Revelation 13:16-18

That's right! Heavy metal and horror movie fans know this one, the infamous Mark of the Beast, 666. I grew up during the Satanic Panic of the 80s and the Left Behind panic of the 90s, so I can tell you what we thought this meant - a barcode or something tattooed on our hand or forehead, and you wouldn't be able to shop without it.

But Revelation means something very different here. First is the number itself - 666. Without going too far down the nerd rabbit hole, ancient Romans *loved* to play with codes and numbers. They assigned each letter of the alphabet a number and added up the values of letters in a name, then used it for all sorts of things. So for instance, we found graffiti at Pompeii that reads, "I love her whose number is 545." You can imagine the young women of Pompeii all trying to figure out whose letters added up to 545, and then figure out who wrote the message.

All of that to say, 666 adds up to the Hebrew letters in "Nero Caesar." Nero was dead by this time, but he had been such a violent, anti-Christian emperor (he killed both Paul and Peter) that he served as a figure-head for Rome's anti-Jesus behavior.

And putting the mark on our hands or foreheads? Those symbolized then much the same as they do today - our public work and our thoughts. In other words, what the land beast does is make it so that unless you obey the Empire in both thought and action, you can't participate in the economy. You can't work. You can't buy food.

And that's exactly what Rome did to these ancient Christians. A shipwright who worked in a port town would be excluded from the guild because he refused to participate in the sacrifices to Neptune that opened guildhall meetings.

It might feel like a long walk from an ancient shipwright's guildhall to social media accounts today, but I want to ask if that's really true, especially when we consider these algorithms. We have ample data to demonstrate that frequent social media use affects our behavior and our beliefs. They affect our politics and our theology. They affect how we see God, how we see our neighbors, how we see ourselves.

And just because it's not the federal government deciding what we see or how we should act doesn't mean there's not a hidden hand directing our gaze and charting our behaviors.

Before we can resist that, we have to be aware of it. The question Revelation asks us is, Whose mark are we bearing? Mark Zuckerberg? Elon Musk? Whoever makes TikTok? Or do we bear the seal of the Holy Spirit?

Song

What does it mean to resist these algorithms? Obviously it *can* mean just getting rid of social media altogether. That sort of wholesale rejection of technology has a long history in the Christian tradition from monks to the Amish. And I want to be clear: I don't think there's anything wrong with a person deciding that is the best path. I have some dear friends who have done exactly that.

But I also don't think that's the *only* solution. If we're going to live with social media, we have to know what it wants and how to resist those parts of it that are bad.

Pictures of puppies and crazy cat videos are terrific. But you know what it turns out *really* keeps our eyes on the screen? Drama.

Arguments. Posts from people who disagree with us. Tech companies figured this out, and a number of them, including Twitter, designed their algorithms to deliver us a lot of content it knew we wouldn't like. They manufactured outrage because they know outrage gets eyeballs. When we use these apps unthinkingly, we end up holding little outrage machines in our hands!

Turn with us to Philippians 4.

I love this closing bit of Paul's letter to the Philippians because he's just giving them some general instructions. I'm amazed how fresh and relevant they feel, particularly in our social media age.

I'd like to offer Paul's instructions here as an antidote to the algorithms. This is, for Paul, what it looks like to bear the mark of Jesus:

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stay true to the Lord. I love you and long to see you, dear friends, for you are my joy and the crown I receive for my work.

Now I appeal to Euodia and Syntyche. Please, because you belong to the Lord, settle your disagreement. And I ask you, my true partner, to help these two women, for they worked hard with me in telling others the Good News. They worked along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are written in the Book of Life.

Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon.

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. -- Philippians 4:1-8

When it comes to how you use social media, how mindful are you? I want to share a few tips I've found helpful over the years to help me be mindful of my social media usage:

1. Use app timers
2. Keep the apps off your homescreen
3. Curate your feeds - use that unfollow button!
4. Don't scroll in bed.

Social media are powerful tools to help us connect. But if we're not in charge, we're at the mercy of whoever designed the app. Remember: if the product is free, you are the product. And you're so much more than a product. You were created in the image of the one who shaped the stars. Don't give yourself away so freely.

Examen + Communion

Jesus doesn't trick us. He invites us to bear his mark:

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Assignment + Blessing

What does it look like for you to take control of your social media?