Digital Bibles: 
Aesthetics, Experience, and Performativity

A Thesis

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Abstract

This project examines the proliferation and use of digital Bibles. To do so, I address the history of Bible text authority, digital text reading experience, the importance of literacy for digital Bible dissemination, digital Bible aesthetics, individualism inherent in navigating mass amounts of information, the redemption expressed through digital Bibles and ‘hip church’ space, and how digital texts are performed in ‘hip churches.’ I focus on characteristics of digital Bibles, specifically the YouVersion Bible App, their effect on reader experience, and their use in a specific sect of technology-embracing Protestant ‘hip churches.’ Through ethnographic research, I situate the most widely used digital Bible in its primary support group.
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Introduction - The Proliferation of Digital Bibles

“Yes, it is a press, certainly, but a press from which shall flow in inexhaustible streams the most abundant and most marvelous liquor that has ever flowed to relieve the thirst of men! Through it, God will spread His Word.” – Johannes Gutenberg

The Bible is anywhere.¹ From bookshelves to screens to stereo speakers, from physical to digital to audio, embroidered, simplified, and customized, the Bible takes many forms. Its ubiquity is unprecedented, its reach is nearly endless, and its accessibility is utterly convenient. Given the nature of digital media, anyone may read the Bible, most likely in their own language and on their own digital device. Liquid² in its digital form, the Bible is encoded hypertext, an ephemeral occupant of cyberspace, a customizable interface, a series of codes, an application, a website, and a video. Transient yet contained by the device which accesses it, the digital Bible is downloaded and deleted, streamed and skimmed. Visible in one instant and invisible the next, marked by a URL, accessed by the click of an application, shared between devices, academically engaged with, and distributed with ecclesial intention. Read, handled, scrolled through, watched, and heard - the Bible takes many forms.

Because of the digital surge in Bible accessibility, it has never been easier to individually engage with biblical text without papal direction, a pastor’s guidance, or interpretive commentary. Protestant Christians have long considered the Bible as ‘God’s Word’ and, in its widely accessible state, God himself is made more accessible. Because many Protestants believe that individual engagement with biblical text informs a spiritual, personal relationship

¹ This slogan has been adopted by the creatives at YouVersion, a free Bible App offered through Life.Church Open Network containing over 1300 different versions of the Bible in over 1000 languages, and is a claim on the present state of Bible accessibility as well as a mission statement motivating further Bible distribution via translation and digital encoding.
² Jeffrey Siker uses the term ‘liquid’ to describe the multiple forms, movement, and formlessness of digital Bibles in his book Liquid Scripture.
with God, digital Bible distributors are urgent to reach the global masses with news of God’s accessibility. In doing so, they stress Bible text engagement, electronic dissemination, and individual experience.

While many digital Bibles are free to the public, others offer costly features such as access to books, photographs, and videos. Like any other application or service, digital Bible providers target a specific audience and express their theological beliefs through the features they offer. ³ Bible apps and website designs are also curated to enhance reader comprehension through intuitive userability. Because of this, many digital Bibles resemble book-like Bibles in their layout, structure, and interactivity. Among many other implications, digital Bibles have caused further individualization of Bible reading, increased Bible accessibility, connected the Bible to social media platforms, and created a hypermediated Bible reading experience while retaining the handheld biblical text container (at least with the mobile device). The digital device’s tactility continues to shape reading experience alongside its new liquid and ephemeral form.

³ The YouVersion Bible App emphasizes accessible Bible engagement and sharing through Bible reading plans, social networking, and a simple interface. Other digital Bibles target different audiences with their various features and calculated design. For instance, Glo Bible uses photographs, virtual tours of ancient spaces, and maps to historically contextualized Bible reading experience for historically inclined readers. Logos Bible Software offers original language exegesis tools, sermon templates, countless books and commentaries, cultural context studies, and more for original language Bible readers, pastors, and academics. Bible Gateway, BibleHub, Blue Letter Bible, and more also present the Bible towards a targeted audience, reflected by their design and features. While most digital Bibles display the same sacred text, their calculated design reveals distributors’ ecclesial intentions and theological beliefs, making a claim on ‘proper’ Bible interpretation and reading experience.
I use theoretical frameworks, survey responses, ethnographic observation, and personal experience to examine digital Bibles and their performance in church space. Growing up in an increasingly digitized Protestant church, Passion City Church (PCC), I learned that the beauty of Christianity lies in God’s accessibility and the truth of the Bible. God longed to commune with me, but pastors made clear that I was never good enough for him: I was dirty, unclean, and wrought with the tendency to worship what was not God. Only an intermediary savior, Jesus, who perfectly worshipped God when he walked the earth and died to make God accessible to his forgetful worshippers, could redeem my incomplete worship. This ‘Gospel’ message explaining the ‘good news’ of God’s accessibility and Jesus’ saving grace drove, and continues to drive, the motivations of my church. Its centrality cannot be overstated. Every Sunday sermon, every architectural decision, every financial move, the strategic placement of volunteers, vernacular used by church leaders, clothes worn, songs sung, interior design, digital media, and stage appearance are all informed by ‘God’s Word’ and curated to impart the church’s message. PCC communicated its visualized messages through a trendy and technologically driven conception of beauty marked by minimalism, graphic art, use of white

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5 My survey was digitally conducted from December 19–21, 2017. It was comprised of ten questions about God, church, and digital media and aimed to show how a small sample of churchgoers understand and engage with digital Bibles, social media, and church culture. Fifty respondents of varying ages from diverse religious backgrounds completed the survey. When referencing this survey, I will use respondents’ first names (if multiple referents have the same first name, I will use the first letter of their last name to distinguish between them).  
6 In my ethnographic study, I frequently allude to information and/or images on church websites, church and pastor Instagram pages, videos produced by churches, and newspaper and magazine articles to holistically present digital American Protestant ‘hip church’ culture.  
7 This paper does not discuss how other Christian denominations or sects have embraced or disregarded digital Bibles. It does not conclude whether the digital Bible is better or worse than the physical Bible or if ‘hip churches’ represent a biblical understanding of church. This paper also does not examine the effect of digital Bibles on non-American churches or cultures, the use of digital Bibles in homes or schools, the sharing of biblical text using social media platforms, the use of audio Bibles, the digitization of other sacred texts, the invocation of the divine using digital media, or the influence of cyberspace on religious space.
space, street fashion, industrial interiors, aesthetic photography, creative videography, and ornate typography. These trends are actively displayed in the church building, on their website, and on their social media platforms in order to appear visually engaging to a wide audience. PCC also uses expensive production equipment, digital screens, and a digital giving platform to appear current, lively, relevant, and familiar. Beauty, expressed by PCC’s architecture and digital aesthetic, is as informed by the Bible as it is culturally contingent.

I use the term ‘hip church,’ drawing on Enroth, et al.’s Jesus People, to describe Protestant churches like Passion City Church which have adopted innovative church spaces alongside their evangelistic intentions. ‘Hip churches’ also emphasize congregational connectivity through social gatherings and media platforms, view Christianity as a movement, actively use digital Bibles, advocate for the individualization of Bible reading experience, and present messages that reflect a contemporary, American, cultural understanding of beauty.8 Contemporary ‘hip churches’ break away from older architectural and aesthetic conventions to appeal to a targeted congregation and audience. These churches are ‘hip’ because of their close adherence to popular trend and embrace of innovative technology, which has challenged American understandings of church and social religion in general.

This project examines the aesthetics, experience, and performativity of digital Bibles. I first situate the proliferation of digital text in the history of the Bible, from scroll to digital scrolling. I assess curated reading experience of digital text and the individualism inherent in

8 This term is derived from Enroth, Ericson, and Peters who use the term ‘hip church’ to describe Protestant church groups in the 1960s-80s in The Jesus People. These groups were disenchanted with the ‘church’ as an establishment and appealed to American youth through cultural adaptation (most apparent through music and fashion), evangelistic outreach through mass public engagement, and overt physical touch.
information navigation as evangelical strategies. I explore the argument for redemption underlying the increased accessibility of digital Bibles, innovative church spaces, and how digital texts are performed in ‘hip churches.’ I focus on characteristics of digital Bibles, specifically the YouVersion Bible App, their impact on reader experience and a specific sect of technology-embracing ‘hip’ Protestant churches.

**Bible Text Authority**

Unprecedented accessibility and mass distribution, something that pastors and evangelists have awaited, are just two effects of digital technology on the Bible. Rising in popularity because of their multiple functions, effective user interface, convenience, and access to a variety of languages and translations, digital Bibles have tremendous impact on readers. Many Protestant pastors recognize the power of this digital medium and have taken to promoting digital Bibles from their pulpits to convey that biblical text engagement, regardless of its form, is of utmost importance. Many of the early supporting pastors of YouVersion (and Christian digital media in general) such as Francis Chan, Louie Giglio, Carl Lentz, Craig Groeschel, Judah Smith, and Chad Veach have obtained celebrity status among ‘hip church’ communities, often through their use of transmedia storytelling techniques. For them, digital Bibles provide useful and unique functions that complement book-like Bibles, such as audio recordings of biblical text, Bible reference hyperlinks, interactive maps, virtual tours, picture annotation, and

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9 Characteristics derived from responses to survey question “Is there a difference between reading the Bible from a handheld device vs. reading the Bible from a laptop?”

10 Siker notes this phenomenon in his analysis of “low-liturgical, high-tech” churches where pastors support the phrase, “Scripture is sacred, but its form is not” (Siker 168).

11 Transmedia storytelling, as described by communication ecologist Carlos Scolari, “proposes a common experience that encompasses various media and devices, all united by a narrative link” (Scolari 71).
video reenactments. This new digital format is widely validated by pastors and congregants alike because for many Protestants, the Bible is the Word of God, whether in book form, digital form, or audio form.

Ink on paper and the Bible’s two covers visually contains biblical text, but the Bible is still considered ‘the Bible’ without them; text\textsuperscript{12} is of utmost importance. Louie Giglio, pastor of Passion City Church and a proponent of digital Bibles, notes that ‘Scripture’ is God’s Breath and therefore more than just a cover-bound book, “Scripture is not just ink on a page, it is God’s Breath in our hands.”\textsuperscript{13} Reading the Bible now means listening to God himself, an experience that goes beyond physicality. But Giglio also realizes that Scripture is ‘ink on a page’ and that ‘God’s Breath’ is handled. He cannot get away from the physical because, for Giglio, ‘Scripture’ is ‘on a page’ and ‘in our hands.’ Whether operating as ink or breath, Scripture is material. Giglio refers to the book-like Bible in an authoritative way to embrace a more holistic, liberal, yet still physical conception of the Bible’s contents. ‘Scripture,’ ‘ink on a page,’ and ‘God’s Breath,’ are all tactile. The Bible takes many forms, and Giglio is a large supporter of digital Bibles, but in attempt to expand his congregation’s understanding of the Bible’s authority, he limits ‘Scripture’ to a physical object. This is worth noting given the present digital climate, where physical texts are frequently accessed through digital proxies.

Ink expresses a finalized, canonical, and complete work while covers bind and unify.

Book-like Bibles are authoritative for Giglio, but digital Bibles may also be authoritative, final,

\textsuperscript{12} Biblical text takes on an ephemeral quality along with an ability to quickly shift between forms when stripped of its physicality. Because of digital texts, ‘text’ has become more liberal and transient, consisting of words on a page, illuminated and transitory words on a screen, spoken word, etc. Therefore, God’s Word has many forms.

\textsuperscript{13} Passion 2018 – Louie Giglio
and absolute. While effectively formless, digital ‘Scripture’ and ‘God’s Breath’ are made tactile by digital devices – they are contained so long as they are accessed. Much is lost in this move, such as canonical contour, spatial context, and a larger biblical narrative, and because digital Bibles are recent innovations, many consider them as spiritually authoritative as book-like Bibles. Thus, tactility is key to contemporary conceptions of Bible authority. When asked “Is there a difference between reading the Bible from a handheld device vs. reading the Bible from a laptop?” many survey respondents noted the importance of handling their Bibles:

| Shannon H. | “I personally would prefer reading the Bible from a handheld device because it is more portable and slightly more personal.” |
| Grayson | “I feel like a handheld device is more ‘intimate.’” |
| Kyle | “I would rather read from a handheld device – more similar to a book.” |
| Lauren | “I prefer reading from a handheld device as it feels more ‘book like’ to be holding the word in your hand rather than looking up at a screen.” |
| Shannon F. | “I more fluently interpret the Bible through seeing the Words of God on physical pages… In fact, I hold my Bible as I worship, so that I can more easily flip through the familiar pages and re-read God’s promises.” |
| Mary Grace | “I like a physical bible better… I feel like I take more time to study and read it when it’s physically in my hands.” |
| Bethany | “I prefer to hold the bible in my hand rather than rely on my phone.” |

As Giglio alludes to, it seems that ‘Scripture’ is widely understood as ‘in our hands.’ These respondents, all ages 19-22, make clear that intimacy, closeness, and personal experience are most powerfully experienced with a holdable Bible. Within this, some prefer book-like Bibles for their tactility while others would rather read from a handheld digital device than a laptop because of its book-like feel. While digital devices are used to access the Bible using websites, applications, and software, many find personal and intimate Bible experiences contingent on the text’s ability to be held.

Because this trend generalizes to most contemporary Protestant Christians, it is no coincidence that Bible software programs such as YouVersion, Bible Gateway, Blue Letter Bible,
BibleWorks, and Olive Tree Bible all feature books in their logos (Figure A). Given Giglio’s words along with the logos of many Bible applications, it is fair to conclude that many Bible users attribute spiritual authority to text ‘in our hands’ – the Bible is recognized as such by its intimate tactility. Without the physical cue of pages bound by covers, it remains unclear whether ‘God’s Breath in our hands’ is also ‘ink on a page.’ Therefore, ‘God’s Breath in our hands’ is both ‘ink on a page’ and the ephemeral, yet personalized and containable digital Bible.

**A Brief History of Bible Authority**

To contextualize this liquid conception of Bible text authority, one must understand the history of Protestant efforts to translate the Bible into local vernacular. Each shift in the presentation of biblical text – from oral to scroll to codex to print to digital – is marked by a desire for greater dissemination and accessibility along with a change in textual expression and reading behavior. At most if not all points in this history, reading behavior and experience significantly changes as a result of a text’s medium.

In the fourth century A.D., the codex made accessible and portable what would have been contained in scrolls. Perhaps the greatest effect of the codex on Christian thought was its binding and unifying of multiple, otherwise separate, books. This change in text presentation suggests a connection between supposedly different texts, “The concept of multiple booklets now contained in one larger book gave a sense of unity and authority to the collected works as a whole... The codex facilitated the fixing of a particular set of writings as authoritative scripture.”

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14 Siker 28
cultural contexts – texts that would have been transcribed onto multiple scrolls – asserted those texts as a single codex with a single authoritative source. Together these codices created the Bible, a sacred text to be read in constant reference to its parts; no longer *hai graphai*, but *ta biblia*.\(^\text{15}\) The codex offered easy and even random navigation between books, enabling readers to see where each passage lie in relation to the other, along with visual images and accompaniments that fostered wonder for the sacred text.\(^\text{16}\) As a single, large, authoritative book, the codex shifted Christian conceptions of biblical text, but these codices were incredibly expensive, sparse, and time-consuming to make especially given their typical embellishments. The Gutenberg Bible, using an innovative and streamlined production process, shifted this culture of hand transcription into automated print.

Johannes Gutenberg printed the first Bible using movable type in 1455, making biblical text much more accessible and standardized, but the switch from hand transcription to print was not immediate. The Gutenberg Bible originally left spaces for religious orders to uniquely embellish letters and emphasize specific passages with red ink (Figure B). The result was a visually engaging, prompted text that, though not completely illuminated with pictures like some codex Bibles, preserved the tradition of hand embellished biblical text. Few laypeople could read this Bible, however, and even fewer could access their own Gutenberg Bible, assuming they had the money to pay for it.\(^\text{17}\) The printing press undoubtedly streamlined book production, decreased costs, standardized texts, and allowed for mass dissemination of

\(^{15}\) Greek for “the writings” and “the books” respectively. This move is subtle, but fosters a conception of collected authoritative writings as books containing separate stories yet united purpose and authority.

\(^{16}\) Siker 25

\(^{17}\) Embellishments were added by hand into Gutenberg Bibles alongside text printed using movable type. Intended to be used by clerics and various church orders, this Bible was an edition of the Vulgate written in Latin, the language of the church.
material like never before, but it also held on to older means of book production. Nonetheless, a cultural shift from images to the printed word occurred rapidly and emphasis on textual authority was quickly established, “The growing availability of comparatively inexpensive books, especially Bibles, combined with the Protestant Reformation’s newfound emphasis on the Bible as the very Word of God, resulted in greater authority and reverence for the printed Word of God.”

As books became more affordable and commonplace, the ability to read became increasingly valuable. Movable type technology quickly progressed and led to further Bible accessibility and, via vernacular Bibles, further altered the Christian conception of scripture. 

*Sola scriptura*, a theological doctrine meaning “scripture alone” established by Martin Luther at the onset of the Protestant Reformation in 1517, placed a clear emphasis on the saving nature of biblical text. The phrase suggested that anyone capable of engaging with a Bible might understand and find the salvation it claims. While against his intentions, the phrase also transferred interpretive authority from the church to the Bible-reading individual. As a precursor to the Reformation, vernacular Bibles asserted God’s Word as personal, accessible, and domestic, placing an emphasis on literacy and individual knowledge:

The translation from either the Latin Vulgate or from the Hebrew and Greek ‘original’ into various vernacular languages of the people (English, German, French, et al.) was criticized by the official church as a domestication of God’s word, a diminishing of the authority of the word of God as recorded in scripture, a de-sacralizing of the text translated and read in the vulgar tongues of the people... It also involved the de-clericalizing and democratization of the Bible.

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18 Siker 33, original italics
19 With the printing press and a new cultural emphasis on literacy, bibliolatry, the excessive worship or idolatry of biblical text as book, was introduced into Christian households. This hyper-authorization of the Bible entails little distinction between God’s Word and God himself.
20 Siker 184
Such moves greatly challenged church authority as salvation was available without priestly intercession. Neil Postman claims that the domestication of biblical text turned “the Word of God into the words of God.”\textsuperscript{21} This shift questions the standardization of biblical text instituted by Gutenberg and introduces new problems of accurate translation and translation bias. It also personalizes God himself, abstracting from the original Greek and suggesting that God’s revelation occurs in every vernacular. With their own vernacular Bibles, individuals held interpretive power. A stress on the saving nature of biblical text, experienced tacitly and individually, made phrases like \textit{sola scriptura} popular and accepted.

About 450 years later in 1980, Bible Research Systems (BRS) created the first digitized Bible designed for personal computers, \textit{Verse Search}, heralding even greater Bible accessibility on a global scale.\textsuperscript{22} Hypertext, portability, and mass dissemination were gradually introduced, but \textit{Verse Search} was the first of many software programs to integrate quick-search and statistics into the everyday Bible-user’s study. Using digital technology to aid in critical biblical text analysis first began among a small conglomerate of academics in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{23} Algorithms executed by computers greatly increased the speed and scope of linguistic study within critical textual analysis; extremely laborious tasks were made simple, abstracted by a computer interface. Scholars, and subsequently anyone else with the proper software, were then able to compare texts, translations, and linguistic patterns quicker than ever before. But digital Bibles were not used in households or for evangelistic purposes until BRS’s debut of \textit{Verse Search}. As

\textsuperscript{21} Postman 65
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Verse Search} released in 1980 on eight diskettes for the Apple Ile computer. Users were able to search the entire Bible in one hour using the latest search capabilities (“25th Anniversary”).
\textsuperscript{23} Scholars such as Yehuda Radday, A.Q. Morton, and Roberto Busa first used computer algorithms to find linguistic patterns, such as how many times the word \textit{kai} appears, within the Greek New Testament and other classic Christian texts. Busa did most of his linguistic analysis on texts written by Thomas Aquinas (Siker 37).
the first digitized Bible, *Verse Search* provided the tools for unprecedented numbers of people – agnostics, priests, scholars, and critics alike – to study, read, and interpret biblical text. With their digitized Bibles, all assumed interpretive authority and a responsibility of reading biblical text within its cultural context. Churches and their leaders held even less control over interpretation and Bible text engagement.

In the Internet age, thousands of Bible translations, historical Christian texts, and scholarly articles on the Bible are readily available alongside visual aids and virtual realities. The approach to biblical study and reader experience with biblical text has been altered as information proliferates to the point of obfuscation; anyone may publish what they wish about the Bible. Individuals must navigate mass amounts of biased information in search of robust, historically accurate material as church leaders no longer control Bible interpretation. And even the apps are partial to specific theologies and interpretational traditions, linking specially curated notes, videos, photos, references to other Bible passages, and more within digitized biblical text to drive reader comprehension.\(^{24}\) Digital Bibles have fostered wide yet individualized interpretational frameworks.

And as individuals spend more time reading from digital devices, reading behavior changes. Digital reading is cursory due to the availability of mass information, eye strain associated with exposure to blue light in screens, text layout size determined by device dimensions, and text format (especially on mobile devices). Readers engage digital text with a

\(^{24}\) YouVersion Bible App is run by Life.Church, an Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC denomination). According to Life.Church’s website, an ECC church “strongly affirms the clear teaching of the Word of God [and] allows believers the personal freedom to have varying interpretations on theological issues that are not clearly presented in Scripture.” This emphasis on the Bible as God’s Word and on having a relationship with God is evident in YouVersion’s study tools, reading plans, devotional guides, and webpage banners.
key-word search mindset, glancing over words to find relevant information. Shallow reading characterized by scanning and skimming dominates reading patterns today:

Screen-based reading behavior is characterized by spending more time on browsing and scanning, keyword spotting, one-time reading, nonlinear reading, and reading more selectively, while less time is spent on in-depth reading, concentrated reading, and decreasing sustained attention... concentrated reading is typically done on paper. Online reading tends to encourage discontinuous reading.²⁵

If skimmed and scanned, the Bible is subject to selective reading, altering the reader’s experience of narrative and canonical contour.²⁶ This introduces flexibility to the Bible’s narrative authority because, while context may be overlooked, no two readers experience biblical text the same way. In short, the digital medium does not foster in-depth, concentrated reading, but rather fosters unique, cursory reading experiences.²⁷

Furthermore, it is unlikely that readers read a digital text in its entirety. Figure C shows eye-scanning patterns of digital reading in comparison to physical text reading as discovered by Jakob Nielsen in a study he conducted in 2006. These visuals show how information is skimmed by readers in an F-shaped pattern on digital platforms, entailing that digital readers favor what is presented at the top few text lines on a page while paying less attention to text below these lines. Thus, the layout of digital pages drive reader choices on what is important to read.²⁸ It is rare for web pages to contain large chunks of text that are not interrupted with pictures, advertisements, videos, enlarged quotes of the text, or different sized/colored/styled subtitles.

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²⁵ Liu 88; In his study, Liu considers a number of other studies on digital reading, such as Nicholas and Rowlands (2008), Hillesund (2010), and Baumann (2008), to support his findings.
²⁶ Siker 67
²⁷ Sven Birkerts claims that concentrated reading and experiencing ‘deep-time’ with the ‘electronic impulse’ is impossible. He notes that a lack of deep time results in a lack of resonance and wisdom (Birkerts 76).
²⁸ It is very common for ads or pictures to appear on the right side of digital screens using F-shaped text. This is less common on mobile devices where advertisements are typically interspersed with text in a layered format.
With regards to digital Bibles, simple designs emphasizing white space and bold subtitles interspersed throughout longer passages are used to keep reader attention and visually break up large chunks of text. While most digital Bible applications, websites, and software do not contain ads, pictures, or anything overtly distracting from the text, page designers primarily rely on format to construe what is most important. Designers of different Bible versions may limit margin size, begin new paragraphs, and change text color in order to direct reader attention to specific passages (Figure D). In a larger attempt to maintain reader attention, designers allow readers to customize their digital Bibles with font, font size, background color, and more to further abstract the technological medium from the reading process. Many of these moves are done in order to make digital Bibles resemble the pages of a book, what many readers are familiar and comfortable with. While digital pages may be skimmed, web/app designers for Bibles have made significant efforts to maintain reader attention, dictating how biblical text is visualized and, in some cases, directing what should be read in the process.

Alongside simple layouts, hyperlinked information, and customizability, digital Bibles use visual tools to enhance reading experience. John Rallison, the pastor of Journey of Life Lutheran Church, finds that digital Bibles, specifically Glo Bible, offer a multimedia approach to studying biblical text, “[Rallison] uses the Glo in his Sunday sermons to project maps on the screens in the front of his church. The Glo allows him to zoom down from an aerial perspective to street level. He can show worshipers what a particular place looked like in Jesus’ time and what it

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29 If pictures, explanatory text, or references are necessary, they are almost always included using hypertext.
30 Some Bible versions appear in different formats which assert specific passages as integral for readers. For example, the Contemporary English Version within YouVersion displays the first fourteen verses of John 1 in lines of text containing 4-5 words. After verse fourteen, up to 15 words appear per line, but are interrupted every four to eight verses with bold subtitles.
looks like today as an archaeological site.” Many pastors, such as Rallison, use tools provided by digital Bible software to complement biblical text read from a book-like Bible and projected onto screens. Congregants listen to the pastor read as they follow along on screens or with their own personal Bibles. Digital Bibles are not handled, navigated, or annotated like book-like Bibles, but both platforms offer unique reading experiences with useful tools for studying biblical text. In all this, God’s Word is most important for Protestant Christian thought, “Yes Scripture is sacred, but its form is not.” Through its changing presentation, biblical text is continually asserted as an accessible text worth engaging.

**Emphasizing Literacy**

The Bible exhibits its authority as ‘Scripture’ across formats through tactility and textual integrity. With this, Protestants greatly emphasize literacy. Ultimately, the Protestant mission for Bible distribution, as expressed by YouVersion, is to foster biblical engagement among peoples of all languages and geographies. Bible engagement entails providing individuals with the opportunity to approach and re-approach the Bible, most effectively realized through

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31 Kunerth; While many digital Bible designers do not wish to supplant physical Bibles, Nelson Saba, founder of Glo Bible intends for Glo to function as an alternative to paper Bibles. His audience, he claims, are “generations of people that don’t engage paper very well.” (Kunerth)

32 Mike Miles who preaches for Westside Church of Christ in Ames, Iowa finds advantages to using multiple Bible formats and frequently uses both: “When I preach, I still carry my print Bible to the pulpit, but I have all of the Scriptures on the projector... In my personal study, I use BibleGateway.com and YouVersion on my smartphone, though I still like flipping through my print Bibles for their handy, convenient commentaries” (Ross).

33 Siker 168

34 Most digital Bibles also feature audio Bibles. Users may listen to their Bibles, increasing the convenience of engaging with biblical text and emphasizing the oral culture in which the Bible was distributed and interacted with for hundreds of years. While this is certainly a popular way to experience the digital Bible, especially among blind communities, Bible apps intend for their users to read. This is made clear by the many ways in which one may interact with digital Bible text. Mass distribution and translation of digital Bibles has greatly valued literacy.

35 “About YouVersion”
reading. Engagement also implies personalizing biblical text through annotation, exegesis, customization, and/or life application. Literacy is very important to Bible engagement. Walter Ong, a now deceased Jesuit priest and professor at St. Louis University, explains that reading is the only way to properly experience God’s Word:

The well-known Protestant stress on literacy has deeper psychological roots than those allowed for when this stress is taken to be due simply to the desire to have as many as possible read the Bible for themselves. More profoundly, this stress appears to come from an unarticulated feeling that without reading one does not have quite the proper feel for words or for God’s word itself.36

Text and literacy is paramount in the Protestant mind, but an individualized text-engagement experience complete with the ability to annotate and hold biblical text is also important. As Ong notes, the ‘proper feel’ for God’s Word, though ‘unarticulated,’ comes through reading. This experience is utterly individualized.

Digital Bibles further individualize Bible reading through the text’s customizability. YouVersion has two slogans for their Bible app: “Experience it anywhere” and “Make it your Bible.”37 Launched nearly ten years ago on July 10, 2008, the YouVersion Bible App intended to integrate the Bible into people’s lives through its sheer accessibility and proximity. As of April 19, 2018, the app has been installed over 319 million times38 and has allowed many individuals to personally engage with an accessible Bible text. The app offers countless tools to foster continued biblical engagement including 1300 different Bible versions,39 Bibles in over 1000

36 Ong 280
37 Bible.com (YouVersion’s website version of their Bible app)
38 Statistics found on the homepage of Youversion.com; YouVersion released one year after the first iPhone became available – new developments in technology drove YouVersion’s creation.
39 ‘Versions’ refer to various Bible translations from the original language text. Examples include the English Standard Version, the King James Version, and forty-seven other versions for English speakers.
different languages, reading plans,\textsuperscript{40} verse of the day images and notifications, and the ability to connect with friends, but the app also personalizes Bible reading experience. When reading any given Bible verse within the YouVersion app, one may share, highlight, attach an image, compare to other versions and translations, bookmark, annotate via a digitally attached note, copy, and/or view what YouVersion readers have said about the verse through an integrated social media platform. Users may also change the font and font size of their text along with its appearance (white background with black text or black background with white text). After creating a free account with YouVersion, every highlight, note, photo creation, version preference, desired font, font size, and more is saved. Readers may even earn medals and badges for reaching certain engagement thresholds.\textsuperscript{41} Opening the YouVersion app thus accesses a Bible, along with reading plans and supplementary information, that is unique to the user. Experience is individualized and a digital text is made personal, familiar, and recognizable – each user may have a unique experience with the digital Bible, making it their own (Figure E).

\textit{Reading Digital and Physical Texts}

But even more is being done to ensure personal connection to digital Bible text, specifically with regards to haptic reading and spatial recognition. As noted by Jeffrey Siker in his close analysis of reading digital and physical texts, physical books offer a reading experience

\textsuperscript{40} YouVersion’s Bible reading plans follow topical, textual, and expository styles of Bible engagement. Users may choose from a wide range of plans covering specific feelings such as anger, depression, anxiety, pride, and patience or phases of life such as marriage, dating, divorce, and new to faith or important Christian rituals such as prayer, worship, and forgiveness. YouVersion also offers plans curated to men, women, and youth. According to an Instagram post by lifechurchokc on November 8, 2017, YouVersion users have completed more than 100 million Bible plans since the app’s release in 2008.

\textsuperscript{41} Badges are awarded for nineteen different engagement goals including “Created 500 highlights,” “Complete first reading plan,” and “Created 100 [public] notes.”
that better fosters reader comprehension and spatial understanding, “There are significant implications for how we read and understand the Bible when the book loses its covers. In part, it results in a loss of knowing the geography, the shape, of the biblical text itself.” Haptic reading, which Siker describes as a working together of eyes and hands to form memories, is present where pages may be turned. Physical books foster a spatial understanding of its contents because a beginning and end is visually marked. Digital Bible software developers have recognized the significance of canonical contour and spatial awareness for reader comprehension and have implemented a number of features to their e-text in attempt to foster haptic perception including virtual page turns (pages visually flip with a finger swipe or press of a button) and interactive Bible navigation. These features rely on perceived spatial structure to enhance reader comprehension. Digital Bibles do not foster the same reading experience as book-like Bibles, but many measures have been made to more closely link the two. These measures reflect a Protestant desire for individual engagement and personal experience with Biblical text.

While reading experience certainly differs, some find digital Bibles less authoritative than book-like Bibles because of their apparent ‘unbound’ nature. Phones and digital devices, intended for multiple functions, take on a singular and authoritative role once illuminated with biblical text and, at least momentarily, are the Bible. But a significant number of Protestants, namely older Protestants, hold that the book-like Bible is authorized as God’s Word in light of

42 Siker 5
43 In June 2014, a U.S. ambassador to Switzerland was sworn into office with her hand on a Kindle displaying the Bible and later that year, a county executive from Long Island and a firefighter crew in New Jersey respectively swore their oaths around an iPad (Brian Fung). In these cases, digital devices illuminated with the Bible (either accessed through an app or website) perform the same ritualistic functions as physical Bibles.
its physicality. Here, authoritative ‘Scripture’ is ‘in our hands’ and exclusively ‘ink on a page.’

Siker explains, “It is the placing of covers, boundaries, on this sacred book that helps to authorize its contents as the Word of God beyond all other words about God.” Placing covers on a Bible binds its contents, presents it as a finished work, and ultimately authorizes it as God’s Word to many older Protestants. Covers reflect a long history of canonical debate and ultimately give precedence to the text itself without distraction. While covers present a text as complete and finished, digital texts may be distributed, shared, and reproduced with ease. The digital Bible’s transience fulfills ecclesial intent, but challenges reader awareness of the Bible’s canonical context and contour. With both, a sacred text comprised of fifty-two books written by about forty different contributors over the course of 1500 years, takes on a single narrative expressed by a single Word: God’s Word.

**Navigating an Information Overload**

The Bible as God’s Word and ‘God’s Breath’ is intended for personal experience and individualized study within Protestant thought, but this personal Word entails a rigorous navigation of supplemental information. Bible apps and study software similar to YouVersion such as Logos, Olive Tree Bible, Bible.is, Blue Letter Bible, Glo Bible, BibleWorks, Accordance Bible, and more aim to provide simple user interfaces while simultaneously providing hundreds of ways to engage with biblical text. Not only may users change the font, take notes, or bookmark specific Bible texts, but they may access thousands of commentaries, Greek word studies, historical context articles, virtual maps, theological books, and more at a tap. Siker

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44 Siker 9
finds that users must navigate through these informational features which alter and inform their personal, Bible reading, “People are pursuing thousands of different paths in accessing and seeking to understand the Bible, empowered in new ways by new possibilities… [Clickbait] opens up digital rabbit holes that may land you in a fourth-century commentary by Chrysostom, a sermon by Joel Osteen, or a debate about textual variants.”45 Users must navigate this proliferate information, on some level, alone and without reference to historical acclaim, denominational esteem, or even personal interest. Each approach to the Bible is utterly unique.

The Protestant emphasis on text, literacy, and individual Bible engagement entails a personalized journey to understanding biblical text. Neil Postman, an American author and cultural critic, builds on Siker’s notion of Bible readers as information navigators by claiming these individuals authorize what information they choose to agree with. No longer must Bible readers directly consult priests, pastors, or elders to understand biblical text. Instead, they may read for themselves, develop their own beliefs, and arrive at their own conclusions – or seek guidance freely given by both qualified and unqualified web-dwellers. After analyzing a quote from Martin Luther in response to Gutenberg and the dangers of printing the Bible, Postman finds that regulation and valuation of information is individually navigated, “Luther understood, as Gutenberg did not, that the mass-produced book, by placing the Word of God on every kitchen table, makes each Christian his own theologian – one might even say his own priest, or, better, from Luther’s point of view, his own pope.”46 An accessible Bible comes with the responsibility of individually engaging with and understanding biblical text – a large task given

45 Siker 116
46 Postman 15
that every translation, commentary, cross reference, study guide, chapter header, hyperlink, interface, and layout are intentionally curated and subject to bias. Especially in this present age where anyone may be published via magazines, blogs, or online forums, readers are responsible for navigating and authorizing the vast supplemental information available. Each Bible reader now acts as their ‘own pope,’ regulating the information they face and diminishing church leader authority in the process.

But this is exactly what Protestant church leaders wish for. Though mass distribution of the Bible puts great responsibility into the hands of laypeople, the cost of misunderstanding is worth its vast accessibility. People may act as their own popes and church leaders may be questioned so long as the Bible is experienced. Text, literacy, and personal engagement are so important to the Protestant mind because biblical text is believed to transform individuals who engage with it.\footnote{Ong 280} Ultimate authority is always attributed to \textit{biblical text} in Protestant churches. Viewed as God’s Word and ‘Breath,’ it is the only apparent consistent and absolute truth available; everything outside of it may be questioned, challenged, or disregarded. Adam Donyes, a Christian summer camp and gap-year program director, noted impudently in one of his exhortations to teenagers that biblical text trumps everything, “If it don’t match the Word, forget what you heard.”\footnote{Adam Donyes – “Social Media”} Donyes spurs his audience to develop a habit of comparing ‘what you heard’ to ‘the Word,’ implying that biblical text possesses ultimate authority even in ordinary circumstances. Despite the information glut faced by Bible readers, the great responsibility of navigating that information, and the extensive customizability, features, and distractions that
arise with digital Bibles, Protestants encourage Bible engagement because of its perceived authority, transforming effect, and reference to ultimate salvation.

**An Accessible Word of Redemption**

Bible accessibility is at the forefront of concerns for Protestant app developers with ecclesial mindsets like YouVersion because of the text’s authority as God’s Word. The Word of God may also function as a person within Protestant thought where Jesus himself is ‘the Word.’ John Piper, a popular Presbyterian church pastor and theologian, explains on his website that Jesus embodies God’s message by proclaiming and living it as evident in the Gospel of John:

> John calls Jesus the *Word* because he had come to see the words of Jesus as the truth of God and the person of Jesus as the truth of God in such a unified way that Jesus himself – in his coming, and working, and teaching, and dying and rising – was the final and decisive message of God. Or to put it more simply: what God had to say to us was not only or mainly what Jesus said, but who Jesus was and what he did.49

Jesus is the incarnated Word of God in Protestant thought and, as such, an exemplar of obeying, proclaiming, and living God’s Word. Piper’s claim, that Jesus ‘was the final and decisive message of God’ has tremendous theological implications, namely that the Bible has one central character, one narrative, and one overarching message. Biblical text is comprised of a message, a *Word*. Many messages lie within this text, but one takes precedence: Jesus.

Louie Giglio, driven by this idea in collaboration with various Protestant pastors including Piper, created a book-like Bible called the Jesus Bible. Its cover page reads, “The Jesus Bible: sixty-six books. one story. all about one name.”50 Accessibility to biblical text results in an

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49 *In the Beginning Was the Word*, original italics
50 *The Jesus Bible*, NIV
accessible Bible message – Jesus, according to Piper and Giglio. Because the ‘Word of God’ is interchangeable with ‘Jesus’ in the Protestant mind, Protestants imbue the Bible with spiritual authority and encourage a personal relationship with Jesus by making God’s Word, the Bible, widely available. Through an increasingly accessible text, they hope all people will have the opportunity to understand and ultimately encounter Jesus, the Bible’s message.

Jesus, the object of biblical text, and the redemption he offers is reflected in the delivery of the text itself. Marshall McLuhan illuminates this idea with his famous words, “the medium is the message.”  

In the Protestant Christian case, Bible app developers have sought to bring what they find as transformative, interactive, and authoritative text to digital devices created to multitask. The message of biblical text, Jesus and his actions, summed up in what is popularly referred to as “the Gospel” reflects itself in the transient device. According to an anonymous survey respondent, the gospel story and main message of the Bible is that, “We are far more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus than we ever dared hope.”

Because of the potentially profane and unbiblical ways in which digital devices may be used, endowing them with a sacred text means redeeming them for sacred use.

More plainly, devices used for imperfect pursuits may house a perfect text; in the moment of Bible access, devices are the Bible. The redemption of device and space mirrors the biblical redemption of spiritual souls. Siker condescendingly reminds readers that devices, and thus digital Bibles, are always subject to interruption, “This

51 McLuhan 5
52 Anonymous response to survey question, “Explain the Gospel in 1-2 sentences.” Most of the fifty responses focused on notions of redemption, grace, and hope. Thirty-one responses mentioned Jesus.
53 Sacred use, inferred by YouVersion, entails reading biblical text and meditating on how it applies to daily life (“About YouVersion”).
very moment of transfiguration in which the digital device becomes the sacred text, can be shattered in an instant with a text message, a tweet, a Snapchat message, a call, a reminder, or any number of other distractions that break the scripture spell.”

But this transience, this ebb and flow of sacred and profane, at one moment attending to God’s Word and at another moment attending to the words of a friend, reflects the readers’ very own dilemma. For Protestants, this is the redemption and gospel they speak of – resurrecting what was once unspiritual into a vessel for the spiritual and continually making dwelleable the profane. Digital Bibles embody the very message that Protestants proclaim. The digital medium, given its transience, upholds the gospel message as a message of redemption within a redeemed space, reflecting ways in which readers themselves may experience redemption.

**Redeemed Church Space**

“Saving souls is a business like any other. Pastors today who want to start a ministry for those 40 and under follow a well-traveled path. First, they lease an old theater or club. Next, they find great singers and backup musicians. A fog machine on stage is nice. A church should also have a catchy logo or catchphrase that can be stamped onto merchandise and branded — socks, knit hats, shoes and sweatshirts… And lastly, churches need a money app — [such as Pushpay] — to make it easy for churchgoers to tithe with a swipe on their smartphones.” - Holson, *NY Times*

In the same way that digital media convey messages proclaimed by digital Bibles, church spaces also communicate theological beliefs to congregants. Many Protestant churches today, which I refer to as ‘hip churches,’ have rejected steeples, stained glass windows, wide pews, and spectacular organs and have changed social rituals, Christian vernacular, worship, and even dress codes to better present their messages and more effectively reach the

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54 Siker xi
‘nones.’ For them, ‘church’ signifies a meeting of people, not a building or historical phenomenon; people are more important than the space in which they meet. Nonetheless, church meeting space is intentionally selected, designed, and built to convey important messages to congregations. In this section, I will look specifically at how churches that meet outside, in convert venues, in warehouses, and online use space to communicate. Just like their digital Bibles, spaces in which ‘hip church’ Protestants convene are transient, ephemeral, and multifunctional.

Churches without a building or consistent meeting-place typically capitalize on their lack of space by emphasizing the ‘church’ as community. Francis Chan, the pastor of We Are Church Movement in San Francisco, and his congregants typically convene in parking lots, outdoor auditoriums, and homes. Without a church building, We Are Church emphasizes communal gatherings, flexibility, and the movement of people; congregants are told where to gather every week (Figure F).\(^56\) Likewise, pastor Miles Fidell’s Auburn Community Church (ACC) has coined itself, “Church without walls,” and meets in various rented spaces on a week by week basis.\(^57\) By gathering in different spaces and emphasizing church as community, Fidell believes he has created a movement of Christians instead of another gathering:

**Auburn Community Church does not exist to put another church on the ground at Auburn. Auburn Community Church exists to go and be the church for Auburn. We do**

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\(^{55}\) Bishop Robert Barron explains that evangelizing the ‘nones,’ “those who have no religious affiliation,” is the Christian’s greatest task (Barron). He finds that engaging ‘nones’ with the beautiful is the most effective form of evangelism: “distinguished from what is merely subjectively satisfying... the beautiful does not merely entertain; rather, it invades, chooses, and changes the one to whom it deigns to appear” (Barron). While the Catholic church largely presents beauty through church structures and material objects, ‘hip churches’ have taken to digital beauty in the form of photography, design, videography, and fashion as evangelism.

\(^{56}\) According to the We Are Church website, Sunday gatherings focus on Bible teaching, fellowship, communion, and prayer. The We Are Church model resembles models for discipleship, rarely applied to churches. This model entails multiplication, i.e. splitting into two churches within six months to a year. Operating as a house church without a church building, this multiplication process is not logistically strenuous.

\(^{57}\) auburncommunitychurch.com; “Church without walls” appears on their home page.
not want to put together another meeting; we want to put together a movement. We are about a group of who comes together to come out. Gather, then scatter.\footnote{Year One}

ACC meets in different spaces including hotels, event tents, and schools to emphasize “[coming] together to come out.” Church is not a place to attend, but rather a conglomerate of likeminded individuals who gather and scatter. This is reflected in ACC’s lack of meeting space. Fidell and Chan both create churches that focus less on gathering and more on scattering to reach the ‘nones.’

While many ‘hip church’ Protestants assert that the church is less about a building and more about its people, churches that meet in concert halls greatly rely on venue space to make congregants feel welcome and immersed in the familiar. Hillsong Church NYC, led by celebrity pastor Carl Lentz, consistently meets in the Manhattan Center’s Hammerstein Ballroom.\footnote{Hillsong NYC has locations in Manhattan and Montclair, NJ. They offer Sunday services at 10:00AM, 12:30PM, 5:00PM, and 7:30PM.}

Here, lights, cameras, large digital screens, a large stage, and large crowds are characteristic of a Sunday experience. As a part of the Australian mega-church Hillsong Church, Hillsong NYC considers ‘church’ to be, “a global movement positioned at the intersection of Christianity and culture.”\footnote{According to the “Hillsong Church Fact Sheet,” the church is very much a global movement: “Headquartered in Sydney, Hillsong has churches in city centers in 21 countries and on five continents. The church has an average global attendance approaching 112,000 weekly.” Hillsong also produces music through the record label “Hillsong Worship,” holds multiple conferences around the world, and runs various social-justice-focused initiatives.} Hammerstein Ballroom, is perfect for this church vision. Valuing performance and production, Lentz seamlessly integrates cultural trends into Sunday services through fashion, stage lighting, and stage design (Figure G). In his exhortations, Lentz frequently references cultural issues and stresses the importance of lovingly engaging all people like Jesus. Reminders of Hillsong’s global reach, updates on their church plants, and news on ‘what God is doing’ in
Manhattan are regular. Loud, concert-style worship is also important for Hillsong NYC. During worship, it is not uncommon to see people lifting their hands emphatically, jumping, dancing, or even weeping. With more than two thousand people singing, emotion and an overwhelming sense of community floods the venue. The intentional choice of atypical church space is meant to create a familiar, urban environment where people feel comfortable, engaged, and a part of some global movement (Figure H). Hillsong NYC uses performance and production to emphasize relevance, culture creation, and community.

Similar to Hillsong NYC, Josh Kelsey’s C3 Brooklyn makes church familiar through its choice in venue. C3 regularly stresses their ‘Dinner Party/Family Group’ church model, where small, frequently gathering groups of twenty people or less convene altogether in one of the four C3 Brooklyn locations on Sunday morning. Moving from the intimate environment of apartment space into a more spacious concert venue suggests, like Hillsong NYC, the size of this Christian movement. Here, high quality stage production, loud worship, and church banners are employed to make these spaces familiar, largely to young adults, while also revealing a dedication to ‘tasteful’ music and direct engagement with unchurched space. Mitch Luther, production volunteer and drummer at C3 Brooklyn’s lower Manhattan location, testifies that

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61 C3 emphasizes larger gatherings of small, intimate communities: individuals gather for Family Group on Wednesdays, Family Groups gather for church on Sundays, all four church locations gather once a month for All Team Night, and all church leaders worldwide gather yearly at Presence Global Conference in Sydney, Australia. It is assumed that frequent churchgoers know their Family Group members along with a majority of people in their church. C3 churches are localized and kept fairly small (more locations are added if churches increase in size), but C3’s global community is frequently alluded to. C3 Brooklyn is a part of Australia-based C3 Church Global, which has over five hundred churches in 64 countries.

62 In a recent email updating C3 Brooklyn attendants on the church’s financial vision, significant focus was given to improving worship and production in order to more effectively evangelize: “We’re continuing to invest in our worship experience to raise the level of excellence and atmosphere in our production through equipment purchases that impact all four locations.” (C3 Brooklyn). Production and ‘worship experience’ are incredibly important to C3 and the effectiveness of their message, evident in their choice of church space.
his familiarity with spaces like C3’s church space helped foster vulnerability and a personal understanding of the church’s message:

I showed up to the service. I walk in. And it was in a venue just like all these venues I’d been playing in with my band. It was like God had met me in my familiar space. It felt like home. It was a church that embodied the literal act of love that Jesus did in the Bible. It wasn’t me trying to get to God; it was God meeting me exactly where I was comfortable.63

For Mitch, C3 Brooklyn’s edgy-yet-familiar church space helped him understand their message more effectively; the venue held his attention. Without the venue, fashionable congregants, and young demographic, it is likely that Mitch would not have felt so welcomed, moved, or open to the church’s message. C3 Brooklyn and Hillsong NYC seek to engage New Yorkers (and subsequently millennials) in spaces where they are familiar in order to emphasize the relevance of Christianity and its role in popular culture as well as the importance of authentic community.

Other Protestant ‘hip churches’ convene in large, church-owned warehouses and rely on white, commodious industrial spaces with minimalist design to convey messages of openness, forgiveness, and beauty. Pastors Louie Giglio and Craig Groeschel respectively lead Passion City Church and Life.Church which meet in repurposed warehouses.64 In the warehouse, design – graphic, multimedia, interior, fashion, stage, and industrial – is incredibly important (Figure I). Similar to the function of the concert venue for C3 and Hillsong NYC, innovative interior design claims cultural relevance for warehouse church spaces. Passion City church designer Jason Dyba explains the intention behind using relevant-yet-innovative design, fashion, and architecture:

Because God is the most beautiful One of all, beauty matters in all we do. Every sign, place, communication, decoration – every inch of our space is designed. Intentionally.

63 *Mitch’s Story*
64 Groeschel and Giglio hold that “church isn’t a building. It’s people,” but both intentionally use space to convey important messages to their congregations (“Church Online”).
Culturally. Purposefully... Design affirms that we are current, and helps us usher His unchanging message to a rapidly evolving world. That’s why we put so much thought and energy into the spaces we invite people into. Before most people hear us, they see us. We want what they see to be inviting, interesting, inspiring, excellent, and compelling.65

Many churches intentionally use design to inspire, engage, and hold attention as well as make claims on relevance. Relevant, captivating design then helps “usher His unchanging message,” and convey a church’s intentions. Using interior design within their warehouse space, Passion City Church and Life.Church express an open invitation while asserting their cultural relevance. Ideally, attendants are compelled by the church’s design and subsequently willing to listen to the people they encounter.

Outside of their churches, Giglio and Groeschel use space in unique ways to foster meetings of churchgoers on a large scale. Giglio runs an annual meeting of 18-25 year olds called Passion Conference, selling out entire stadiums and sports arenas and challenging the precedent for production quality within these large spaces. In 2013, more than 56,000 18-25 year olds gathered in the Georgia Dome at the Passion Conference to hear from celebrity Christian pastors, sing popular songs, and meet ‘like-minded’ individuals from around the world (Figure J). Giglio uses sports arenas to emphasize the size of the Christian movement, community, and global reach. The space typically elicits emotional responses. Using a different approach to gathering mass amounts of churchgoers, Groeschel runs a global online church complete with pastors, virtual volunteers, meeting times, prayer hosts, and chat rooms. In the most extreme example thus far, Groeschel shows that a building, and even face to face contact, is not necessary for church to occur with Life.Church online. Instead, digital space is used to

65 Passion City Church: This is US
creatively link ‘congregants’ while simultaneously implying that church is wherever it is streamed. Seventy different online services are offered every week, tending to all time zones and giving individual ‘attendants’ freedom in their churchgoing habits. Online space is utilized in order to stress the global nature of the Protestant ‘hip church’ movement as well as Life.Church’s reach. On their live church stream, note-taking, digital Bible access, confidential live prayer chats, and a chat forum are seamlessly integrated (Figure K). The global church and the ‘church’ as a people are emphasized through these mass gatherings.

The ‘hip church’ movement has made church space ephemeral. Whether outside, in a nightclub, concert venue, warehouse, elementary school, modern building, old building, or the interwebs, these churches emphasize ‘church’ as a meeting/movement of people on a global scale. In all these cases, architecture, stage production, interior design, specific colorways, fashion, and creative digital design convey engaging, culturally relevant messages of beauty, openness, simplicity, truth, and forgiveness. These innovative designs and creative visuals resemble what is trending; at times, churches are at the forefront of design innovation, but other times, churches rely on trend to appear relevant (Figure L). In this way, the ‘hip church’ uses space to evangelize ‘nones’ through notions of the beautiful; familiar-yet-innovative design is capitalized on so as to ‘compel’ viewers and maintain attention. Church spaces, like digital Bibles, then become a medium by which the church’s message is proclaimed.

66 On Life.Church’s “Church Online” webpage, three quotations from online church attendants/volunteers are featured. “Sarah from Jordan,” “Keith from Wales,” and “Angelica from Peru” reiterate Life.Church’s online global reach and influence. This also creates a sense of global community for congregants.

67 Digital Bible developers have taken similar approaches to their designing and formatting of biblical text. Simple design capitalizing on white space along with intuitive navigation and muted color palettes characterize most Bible apps, websites, and software.
Performing Digital Texts

Many Protestant ‘hip churches’ have adopted technology, including large screens, televisions, lights, cameras, projectors, websites, iPads, etc., to more effectively communicate to their communities. Digital Bibles, though not provided by the church, are also used frequently in these spaces. Their performance express messages of redemption (intrinsic to its digital medium), practicality, and relevance. Ashley, a regular attendant of Athens Church in Athens, Georgia, notes that technology in her church makes a claim on Jesus’ relevance:

[ Athens Church] has the latest technology like iPads to check in and a local brand of coffee for sale... I attend a satellite church which means that my pastor is on a screen, preaching a message that may have been said a year ago. It creates a technologically driven atmosphere and works in unity to give the impression that Jesus has evolved into the modern-day church and world. 68

‘Hip churches’ depend on technology to appear youthful, hip, and relevant and as of July 10, 2008 when YouVersion released its Bible app for the original iPhone, digital Bibles became necessary for this claim. Here I will focus on three spaces in which the digital Bible is performed: on stage, on screens, and in pews. Their performance by church leaders and congregants marks the church space as relevant and makes practical a sacred text.

Digital Bibles on stage may be used flamboyantly as a stage prop, discretely as a reference tool, or not used at all. How the digital Bible is used and performed on stage is primarily determined by personal preference, but sometimes churches may advocate for specific apps, express that digital devices are acceptable, or claim a message’s relevance through intentionally performing and displaying digital devices.

68 Response from Ashley to survey question, “Describe your church building. You’re your church building reflect in any way the message your church preaches?” Athens Church is located in Athens, Georgia.
Using the book-like Bible as a prop is a common tactic used by pastors to visually authorize claims made about the Bible as a whole. Those who use the Bible in this way typically use it also as a reference tool on stage. Louie Giglio, Francis Chan, and John Piper prefer to use their own physical Bible along with printed/handwritten notes when sermonizing. Though they may pace the church stage with their phone in their pocket, there is no reference to handheld digital screens. Frequently, these pastors use their worn Bibles as props – flipping through pages, lifting the book with one extended hand, reading directly from it, tenderly displaying it with both hands, etc. – to imbue their specific message with authority. Here, the book-like Bible functions both as a prop and reference tool, but is intentionally displayed to imbue authority.

To demonstrate the ‘proper’ balance of technology and physical text when studying the Bible, pastors may discretely use iPads as reference tools while flamboyantly displaying their Bibles as stage props. Here, a reverence for the book-like Bible is maintained while digital devices are used primarily for their practicality and key benefits such as easy scrolling between notes and Bible app, access to multiple translations, and ability to enlarge font size. Carl Lentz, Josh Kelsey, and Miles Fidell use book-like Bibles and iPads on stage in this way. Their book-like Bibles function as props and quick reference tools while they heavily rely on iPads for digital notes and Bible references. Fidell and Lentz occasionally lift and display their Bibles to congregants like Giglio, Chan, and Piper; Kelsey strictly uses his Bible as a prop, leaving it open next to his iPad on a small table while reading from screens when referencing verses (Figure M). Lentz, Kelsey, and Fidell never use their iPads as props, but only as reference tools.

Whether discretely or flamboyantly displayed, a visible digital device on stage signals that devices are permissible to use in that specific church space. Similarly, if a pastor looks to
her/his iPad as a reference for biblical text, their stage performance advocates for the use of Bible apps as well as personal devices. Craig Groeschel utilizes both book-like Bibles and iPads/iPhones as props and reference tools when speaking. This is not surprising as Groeschel and his team at Life.Church run YouVersion Bible App and “Church Online.” Because of the association Life.Church has with digital media, when Groeschel overtly uses digital devices in front of his congregation, this advocates for his church’s ministries. In other words, Groeschel advertises for his church’s Bible app by visibly using it on stage. And this is true for all pastors: By using digital Bibles on stage, church leaders advocate for and permit their use in church.69

What pastors use on stage as props and reference tools greatly effects how different media and technology are received and adopted by congregants.

Because a number of pastors prefer not to use digital devices on stage, many churches have strategically resorted to delivering this signal before offerings are collected. C3 Brooklyn and Passion City Church, for example, have instituted a time of giving where a member of the “Host” team reads a Bible passage from her/his phone, shares its personal relevance, and prays before congregants are asked to give. Typically, this host emphasizes generosity in reference to the church’s various giving platforms. Because most congregants have their phones, C3 Brooklyn encourages giving through a church-offering app called Pushpay. Congregants may give by texting a number or downloading the Pushpay app, streamlining the giving process.70

Apps like Pushpay also facilitate weekly, monthly, or yearly tithes, which automatically transfer

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69 Using digital Bibles on stage may also advocate for specific devices by which the digital Bible is read from.
70 C3 Brooklyn uses Pushpay’s echurch platform, an app and online donation collection service specifically designed for churches. According echurch.com, Pushpay is “the leading provider of custom church app experiences and mobile giving to the church.” Hillsong NYC, Elevation Church, Zoe Church, and Northpoint Church are just some of 7,000 churches that use Pushpay. See the third image in Figure L.
from a congregant’s bank account. Because digital giving is recognized as the primary means by which churches collect funds, it is important to incorporate descriptions of how to navigate payment apps during the designated giving time. It is natural, then, that those asked to facilitate this process begin by flamboyantly using a digital Bible displayed on their own personal device, as a reference tool and stage prop, to transition into instructions on how to give digitally. Unlike how pastors use digital Bibles largely based on personal preference, giving/offering facilitators intentionally use digital Bibles displayed on a phone to promote digital giving, advocate for digital Bibles, and signal that phones are permissible in church. By offering digital giving platforms, churches increase their giving by 32%.

Biblical text projected on large screens functions much differently than the performance of Bible apps or physical Bible text because it fosters a common Bible reading experience. As presentation slides, Bible text appears on screens when a pastor or church leader reads from the church stage/pulpit. At Passion City Church, because more than two thousand people may attend any given service, close camera views of Bible reading individuals are projected onto three screens as the verses being read appear below their face in real time. Displaying biblical text in this way creates an environment of intimacy in a large space and communalizes Bible reading experience around one reader and one Bible version. Congregants are encouraged to read along with the Bible reader on stage using their Bibles, personal devices, or the screens.

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71 According to Nonprofit Source, a nonprofit digital marketing agency, “49% of all church giving transactions are made with a card” and “25% of donors complete their donations on mobile devices” (“The Ultimate List of Online Giving Statistics”).
72 “The Ultimate List of Online Giving Statistics”
73 Large screens in Protestant ‘hip churches’ are typically placed above the church stage and in front of the congregation. These 1-3 screens project close camera views of the pastor, church leaders, or worship band on stage as well as words to songs, Bible verses, sermon notes, announcements, videos, and images.
Because thousands of Bible versions are accessible with digital Bible apps and because congregants undoubtedly differ in their version of choice, projecting biblical text on screens ensures that congregants may follow along with the reader’s version (typically the English Standard Version in ‘hip churches’). Some congregants use their default Bible as they listen to a different version, fostering rich textual analysis, but the screens offer an easier, less involved reading experience. On screens, Bible text functions like pew Bibles, making Bible reading communal, simple, and practical. Viewers are not challenged to analyze the text or consider its application as the reader or church leader will likely explain its relevance - screens make biblical text accessible and consistent.

In pews, or more generally among congregants, smartphones and tablets are commonly used to access digital Bibles, take notes, and tithe to ‘hip churches,’ but a stigma around their use remains. As digital devices can be used to text, email, social network, browse the internet, read the news, and do other tasks unrelated to church activities, many find these devices are distracting. According to a 2015 AT&T survey, twenty-five percent of worship service attenders “used a mobile device/internet to connect with faith or inspiration during worship services… [but] more people have used their mobile device to engage in activities unrelated to the worship than used them for worship-related activities.” Especially when notification jingles, ringtones, or vibrations are heard, digital devices can distract individuals, the congregation as a

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74 Specific descriptors, verbs, or sentence structures may differ between Bible versions. Listening to one version while reading another lets the reader focus on discrepancies between the two texts.

75 When projected on screens, biblical text loses its context and reference to canonical contour; congregants do not need to navigate the text and situate it within the Bible’s spatial structure.

76 Inspired Mobility Survey Results; According to the survey, “Forty-four percent of the 25-34 year olds have used their mobile device to engage in activities unrelated to the worship they are attending.” The unit of observation for this data is ‘worship service’ attenders, not specifically Christian church attenders.
whole, and even those on stage. Instead of banning digital devices from church services, many ‘hip churches’ recognize their ubiquity and suggest their ‘proper’ use within and beyond Sunday services. For example, on November 26, 2017, Life.Church Oklahoma City attendants found cards placed on every sanctuary chair reading, “Go ahead – use your phone in church,” and explaining how to develop worship habits during the week by engaging with the Life.Church app (Figure N). Similarly, Francis Chan encourages all We Are Church attendants to follow a digital Bible-in-a-year plan available on the church’s website or through the Read Scripture app (Figure O). These and other pastors leverage the influence of the church stage, performance of the digital Bible, and the accessibility of worship-related mobile apps to encourage ‘healthy’ device habits. Devices can be distracting, but their pervasiveness has caused churches to creatively suggest their proper place in church spaces.

As mobile phones and personal devices become ubiquitous, many churches have invested in technological devices such as large screens, televisions, lights, cameras, projectors, websites, iPads, and digital Bibles in order to better communicate their messages. Sanctioned by the performance of digital devices on stage, congregants use their own devices in church namely for digital giving, referencing digital Bibles, and/or taking notes. On screens, the digital Bible is made common as individuals read on stage, directing congregants to a single Bible version and creating an oral-visual Bible reading experience. In pews, or among congregants, digital devices are frequently used in church, but are stigmatized for their distracting nature.

77 ‘Proper’ appears in quotations because it is completely subjective to a pastor or church’s judgment.
78 Many pastors such as Craig Groeschel, Francis Chan, Louie Giglio, John Piper, and Matt Chandler have created daily Bible reading plans through YouVersion in order to encourage [guided] daily Bible engagement to their congregations. Some advocate for these plans from the church stage, while others rely on the ubiquity of YouVersion to advocate for them.
Because of this, church leaders utilize the performance of digital devices on stage to suggest how to ‘properly’ use these devices within church spaces. Despite their tendency to distract, ‘hip churches’ use digital technologies in order to claim relevance and better communicate to their congregation. It is very likely that this trend will continue.

**Conclusion**

The future of Protestantism is digital, hip, ‘on the go,’ ‘in the cloud,’ ‘data driven,’ and ‘highly connected.’

As a popular and dynamic mode of engagement, digital Bibles have helped fulfill ecclesial demands for accessibility while emphasizing literacy and individual study. This thesis has examined the customizability, abundance of commentaries, interactive visual aids and supplementary plans as tools for culture creation in ‘hip’ churches. Their interface, page layout, alignment, responsiveness, color scheme, use of negative space, typeface, etc. are all strategically coordinated in order to best fit the distributor’s intentions and the user’s needs. YouVersion, for instance, desires continued and shared Bible engagement and offers many customizable features to support a specific target audience.

As the complex relationship between digital and physical text continues to evolve, the Bible in its various formats offers a transmedia narrative that is accessible and convenient, shareable and customized, downloaded and purchased, heard and watched, and engaged anywhere at any time. Utterly close and seamlessly integrated, transcending form and defying boundaries. Digital Bibles are liquid in the sense that anyone may access them, read them, and make conclusions about them. ‘Scripture’ for many is still marked by its ‘in our hands’ tactility,

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intimacy, and proximity. As digital Bibles illuminate devices and exist in some cybernetic sense, reader experience is greatly impacted by the physical device. Dimensions of the screen, brightness, glare, screen protector malfunctions, and more inform reader experience like app design and usability. Though Bible liquidity has greatly altered Protestant culture and will likely continue to challenge mainstream Christian notions of Bible engagement, presentation, and interactivity, the physical is not entirely lost. Many digital Bibles are created to resemble and function like book-like Bibles; the physical is frequently used as a stable referent to inform digital experience. Ephemeral, boundless, free-moving, and convenient, digital Bibles function like ‘God’s Breath,’ while it remains ‘in our hands’ on mobile devices.
Bibliography


*Passion City Church: This is US. YouTube.* Passion City Church, 21 June 2016. Web. 16 Nov 2017.


“Values.” We Are Church. Web. 22 Mar 2018. <wearechurch.com/values-1>


Figure List

Figure A. These Bible app logos suggest the authority of books by visually referencing their physical features – the integrity of digital Bible text is validated by its tactility. In this the digital Bible function likes a proxy for book-like Bibles.

YouVersion

Blue Letter Bible

Olive Tree

BibleWorks

Bible Gateway

Figure B. The Gutenberg Bible leaves room for hand-scribed embellishments and is does not result in the complete mechanization of Bible production. Colored ink was added in by scribes to emphasize passages important to a specific convenant. The Gutenberg Bible pictured here resides in the Morgan Library and Museum in New York, NY.

Psalms I, 297v-298r.
Figure C. The F-shaped pattern of reading, a finding published by Jakob Nielsen in 2006, shows how readers skim and scan digital texts (left image). This visual was obtained from Jeffrey Siker’s book *Liquid Scripture* (pg. 88-89) and is a simplified version of Nielsen’s website eye-traffic heat maps. The right image is a Z-shaped visual describing the pattern of reading associated with physical texts. Skimming and scanning still occurs with the Z-pattern of reading, but less information is lost.


Figure D. Within YouVersion, different Bible versions use format to implicitly comment on biblical passages. This is a screenshot of the YouVersion web page (bible.com) where John 12 of the NASB (left) and NIV (right) Bible are viewed side by side. Both denote quotes from the Old Testament by formatting choices: the NASB uses a change in font style as the NIV reduces margins and inserts clickable hyperlinks. Similarly, the NASB uses italicized words to mark narrative shifts and the NIV regularly uses hyperlinks. Both display Jesus’ words in red, but the NIV relies so heavily on paragraph breaks and margin reductions to maintain reader attention that Jesus’ words do not yet appear in this screenshot. Note the simple, uncluttered layout resembling two pages of a book.

![Screenshot of www.bible.com/bible/100/JHN.12.nasb?parallel=111](image-url)
Figure E. Screenshots of YouVersion’s mobile app exhibit a simple interface resembling the structure and design of popular social media applications. Upon opening the mobile app, users may digitally scroll through a home page presenting YouVersion’s main features: verse of the day, verse images, Bible reading plans (topical, textual, and expository), suggested friends and social network invitations, videos enacting Bible stories, and notifications of personal Bible engagement. The app streamlines sharing Bible verses, images, plans, and reading achievements to social media platforms.

Other significant features, not completely evident in the images above include full access to a shareable and customizable Bible text, a personal page where activity and achievements are recorded, and a mapping system which allows users to discover churches, church-related events, and YouVersion community gatherings near their location. Screenshots (taken on April 17, 2018) displaying these features are below.
Figure F. The We Are Church Movement gathers outside in parking lots, parks, or amphitheaters in order to more closely resemble the church they find in biblical text: “As summarized in Acts 2:42... there’s no precedent for anything flashy or glamorous – just a focus on the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe that a contemporary gathering ought to strive to do so as well. While a superb sound system, a spacious building, convenient childcare, and an engaging speaker can be blessings to the body, too often we become dependent on any one of these items” (“Values”). Outside church space is intentionally designed and chosen to reflect beliefs of what is a biblical church.

Figure G. These two images show Hillsong NYC and their concert venue church space (the Hammerstein Ballroom). The first image, taken from the stage, shows how the venue’s architecture directs one’s gaze towards those performing. Lights, stage design, and digital screens are central elements of this church experience. Microphones, large screens, and loud speakers are necessary in order for congregants to see and hear those on stage.
Figure H. Hillsong NYC’s “Welcome Home” webpage banner on the home screen of their website resembles popular television show advertisements with its dramatic and moody colorway. This cityscape is a harsh environment, but the warm sunset and white “Welcome Home” text works to bring beauty to this cold metropolis. Here, the city is home, but Hillsong’s welcome suggests their function as a home within the city. This banner also hangs in Hillsong’s church space on Sundays, visible in the second level of the Hammerstein Ballroom in Figure F. While their concert-venue space is not home-like, “Welcome Home” is simply a welcome to the familiar.

![Screenshot of hillsong.com/nyc.](image)

Figure I. Passion City Church (PCC) uses minimalist interior design to convey messages of cleanliness and open invitation. Congregants move through this gallery-like space before entering a dark, concert-venue-style performance space (pictured on next page). An anonymous survey respondent reported that Passion City Church’s building reflects its message: “My church is very opened and welcoming. It emphasizes and fosters the importance of community and the building communicates that message.” PCC’s atrium is open, white, and informal (picture retrieved from Greene Staging’s interior design website). Lights hang from exposed rafters and digital screens hang along the walls.

Inside the sanctuary (a concert-venue-style space), lights, loud music, a stage, and digital screens are used to create an emotionally intense ‘worship experience’ similar to C3 and Hillsong NYC (image retrieved from PCC’s Instagram). According to Pastor Louie Giglio, this experience reflects the church’s message: “Our worship is loud because [God’s] grace is beyond anything we could dream or imagine” (*Passion City Church: This is US*).


Figure J. This image was created by one of Passion City Church’s photographers at the Passion Conference in 2016. The conference’s production scale is very large, but innovative. All lights, speakers, screens, projectors, stage pieces, cameras, and other equipment belong to PCC and are used outside of the Conference by Passion Music and other bands within sixstepsrecords, PCC’s record label. When not singing at PCC’s main church location in Atlanta, Passion Music tours worldwide.

Figure K. This screenshot from a live Life.Church online stream shows how chat forums, notes, the online church schedule, YouVersion Bible (which is run by Life.Church), and confidential prayer chats are integrated into the digital platform. In the live chat, where HATEMYSELF openly speaks about her/his depression, ‘attendants’ are very candid about issues they are struggling with. Volunteer hosts mediate these forums and function as spiritual leaders, prayer guides, and emotional counselors. A few moments after this screenshot was taken, 4sevens expressed her/his self-centeredness and struggle mental illness. HATEMYSELF and 4sevens proceeded to encourage each other.

Figure L. Many ‘hip church’ pastors use their clothes to create a church aesthetic, appear approachable, claim relevance, and welcome newcomers. The first image, an excerpt from the Christian faith and culture editorial Relevant magazine, satirically presents trends in church leader fashion. Readers are invited to “Dress your own hipster pastor” as ripped jeans, a leather jacket and accessories are presented as hipster pastor garb.
The second image shows a church merchandise line released by Zoe Church in Los Angeles (image retrieved from pastor Chad Veach’s Instagram). This clothing line emulates trendy street-style clothing with minimalist design, bright colorways, and unconventional text and logo placement. Comments on this picture express the ‘hype’ induced by Zoe’s merchandise marketing approach. On May 29, 2017, Zoe Church sold $10,000 of apparel within the first hour of opening their online pop-up store (Holson).

Figure M. These three images illustrate ways in which Bibles and digital devices are used as props and reference tools through pastoral performance. The top image shows Francis Chan holding his Bible, open to the very last page, with both hands. Chan references a specific text in this picture, but also seems to use his Bible as a prop to stress the authority of the entire text.
The second image (my image; November 11, 2017) shows Josh Kelsey reading a Bible passage from his iPad while resting his hand on a physical Bible. He uses the physical Bible as a prop while screens project the verse he reads and distract from his iPad use. The third image (my image; December 2, 2017) shows a member of C3 Brooklyn’s Host team facilitating a time of giving. As he reads from a digital Bible on his phone (a $1000 brand new iPhone X), a slide explaining how to digitally donate through the Pushpay app is projected on a large screen behind him.

Figure N. This card, distributed by Life.Church on November 26, 2017 reads in bold letters, “Go ahead – use your phone in church.” The text under this banner explains how digital devices may enhance Life.Church’s Sunday service as well as continue church experience during the week: “Download the Life.Church app for iOS or Android to follow along in each service and take the Life.Church experience with you throughout the week.” This image was retrieved from Life.Church Oklahoma City’s Instagram page.

"Phone in Church.” lifechurchokc, www.instagram.com/p/BcAlYjmDc3Q/?hl=en&taken-by=lifechurchokc.
The Read Scripture mobile app developed by The Bible Project incorporates illustration into a daily Bible-in-a-year reading plan. To advertise for the app, their webpage features six illustrations of robed men and women, one of which resembling popular depictions of Jesus, holding smartphones (three are pictured here). The figures are posed like sermonizing pastors; app reviews are placed in quotations above them. Chan structures his exhortations around this Read Scripture plan, which he devised with the help of The Bible Project. His plan can be accessed on the We Are Church website or through the Read Scripture mobile app.

**Figure O.**

![Screenshot of www.readscripture.org.](image)

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**What people think**

- "This app makes reading scripture fantastically engaging and accessible for everyone — to those who know nothing about scripture and those who have been reading the Bible for years."

- "This app and the videos are incredible! It has opened up my mind and heart to understanding God's word more clearly and with a better perspective."

- "This is the best bible reading plan ever!"