

## Chapter 1

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# Introduction

## In Search of a Script: Is the Bible Media Savvy?

Discerning what characterizes the socially constructed worlds people around us inhabit places us in a better position to address the generation God calls us to serve. Doing so, however, necessitates that we conceptualize and articulate Christian beliefs—the gospel—in a manner that contemporary people can understand. That is, we must express the gospel through the “language” of the culture—through the cognitive tools, concepts, images, symbols, and thought forms—by means of which people today discover meaning, construct the world they inhabit, and form personal identity.

—STANLEY GRENZ AND JOHN FRANKE<sup>1</sup>

“Daddy, my homework is to do a project about somebody important in history.”

“Yeah? Who do you think you will study?”

“Um, I think . . . Jesus.” I am proud, of course. The little guy is seven years old and already at risk of being stereotyped as a preacher’s kid, supplying the right answers in Sunday school and doing homework projects

1. Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 159.

on Jesus in primary school. But his curiosity about Jesus is sincere so I am keen to encourage him.

Along with being a dad and a minister, it just so happens that I am also a doctoral student focusing on the Gospels and thereby uniquely qualified for the parental task of guiding this homework project. With dense books on New Testament studies weighing down the shelves behind me, I pose my first questions as my son's self-appointed research supervisor: "So where do you think you would go to find out about Jesus? What are the best sources?" (Bibliographies are a big deal, you know.) Before he is able to respond, his big sister passes by in the hallway and knowingly provides an answer.

"Google! That is the best place to go to find out anything about anything!"

I am aghast. After a decade of life in the twenty-first century, my eldest child somehow knows intuitively that Google is the end-all and be-all for knowledge. The response I am anticipating is "the Bible" or "the four canonical Gospels." I am hoping that maybe early Christological hymns or ancient creeds of the church will be identified as potential bibliographic material. Instead, I am given the name of an Internet search engine.

To my relief, it occurs to me that my daughter has no idea that Jesus is the subject matter of this homework assignment. Still, I am unsettled that her reflex as a digital native is to say "Google" at the instant a question arises about sources.

As much as I want to protest, though, she is on to something.

Though Christian scripture is surely a better source than the Internet for understanding Jesus, Google could very easily direct my son to an online version of the Bible. If he types "Jesus Cappadocian Fathers" into the search field, within seconds of hitting "Enter" he could begin learning patristic Christology without having to rush off to the university with my library card (assuming his father's personal collection on those shelves is found wanting for the advanced research needs). After a few clicks on my laptop he could instantly begin reading the Nicene Creed. He could be staring at maps of ancient Palestine within seconds. Google could offer him timelines, charts, images of archaeological artifacts, and artistic depictions of first-century life.

So could my wife's thick study Bible, but it is all the way up the stairs.

If you are thinking, "C'mon, don't be ridiculous—just send the kids upstairs to fetch that study Bible," then what informs your suggestion?

Is the media format of a screen inferior to the media format of a book? Why so? And if you are wearied by all this internal wrangling and trying to figure out why I am hesitant in letting my son do an innocent Google search, then what suppositions underlie your bewilderment? Ease with the media format of the screen? Is it pragmatism? Displaying one of the Gospels or Philippians 2:5–11 on the computer screen is more convenient than having my children hunt down and thumb through that unwieldy, page-bound study Bible. If pragmatism is a motivation, though, is it okay to make all our media decisions on the basis of whatever seems most practical at the time?

## READING AN OLD SCRIPT IN A NEW AGE

That little episode with my two oldest children took place within sixty seconds. It is one scene out of countless others in which I am regularly forced to make decisions about media technology. The questions continually raised by these little interactions have ricocheted in a vast blank cavern in my head, exposing the absence of a biblical frame of reference for understanding and appropriating the new media that have suddenly dawned on the scene.

Does the Bible actually offer such a frame of reference for new media? Can sacred ink voice wisdom for understanding Facebook, Google, Angry Birds, avatars, and online Jesus research?

I just finished reading an impressive book by an astute writer offering a sophisticated critique of our media culture. Though the author wrote as a Christian, there was very little engagement with the Bible. Another book I just finished reading draws from scripture haphazardly to show that a golden age of techno-utopia awaits if the church would just jump aboard the new media train. The dual messages are 1) the Bible has little to say about media culture, or 2) you can make the Bible say what you want about media culture when it seems to be reticent. Both cases contribute to the nagging sense that the sacred texts of our faith have little to do with life in the digital realm.

The conviction underlying this book is that Christian scripture is not only the best source for understanding Jesus but also the best source for understanding Google. The church has been adequately provisioned with a robust script for guiding our task of thinking about media. As a “script,” the Bible offers an authoritative vision that gives shape to how

the people of God conduct themselves in the unfolding drama of life.<sup>2</sup> The rich theological traditions of the church help interpret this script for its continual reenactment on the contemporary stage.

This book is a product of my ongoing process of stumbling onto the stage of the digital world. Like a theater company staging a Shakespearean play with twenty-first-century language within a current-day setting, I am trying to read that old script well enough to make some faithful performance or improvisation in a brand new media culture.

## FROM POPYRI TO PIXELS: DOES THE BIBLE NEED AN UPGRADE?

It is hard to see how an ancient collection of documents can serve as such a script in a cutting edge digital era.<sup>3</sup> The authors of our sacred texts and the bygone leaders of the church's theological thinking did not foresee the luminous powers and capabilities of twenty-first-century media technology. Can our doctrinal heritage and those age-old creeds really guide how we read the script in our current mediascape?

Everything at our fingertips today seems to require updates or upgrades. Our gadgets and their programs are so acutely self-aware of the perpetual threat of antiquation that they tell us periodically when we need to check for the latest downloads to stave off their irrelevance. Like us, our devices are averse to becoming outdated, and we have taught them how to speak up and let us know when they sense they are getting old. Heeding their alerts is to our advantage, of course. No one wants the burden and incompatibility of outdated stuff.

So is the Bible in need of an update?

We have to acknowledge that the Bible's content is old. *Very* old. New translations occasionally appear and electronic versions are now available, but in spite of these updates in language usage and media form, the raw textual material of the Bible has been canonically stabilized and

2. By "script" I am relying on Kevin Vanhoozer's media-related imagery of Christian theology as a dramatic performance. See Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 115–185; see also his essay "The Voice and the Actor." Also helpful, with different nuances, are Brueggeman, *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*, 64–69; and Wells, *Improvisation*, 59–70.

3. John Dyer points out that the biblical Abraham and Abraham Lincoln would probably have more in common with each other than with those of us living in the technological landscape of the twenty-first century (*From the Garden to the City*, 21).

left unchanged for centuries. The canonization process firewalled the Bible so that it resists additions, downloads, and new uploads.

We all know what happens to media products that resist adapting their content to shifting cultural trends and technological advances. They risk that most dreaded twenty-first-century malady of slipping into *irrelevance*. So does “antique” mean “antiquated” when it comes to the sacred text of the Christian church?

The high-speed velocity of technological innovation reinforces the suspicion that we are a civilization developed so far beyond the ancient contexts out of which scripture grew that words once etched into stone or penned to papyrus are surely outdated and out of touch. Western society is ever poised on the cusp of the celebrated *next* and the anticipated *new*. While Christian scripture has remained a fixed, stable corpus of really old poems, songs, tales, laws, and letters, the civilized world has impressively gone on to invent gunpowder, discover a heliocentric solar system, harness electricity, and create that ephemeral matrix of the Internet.

Of all the advanced sophistication we regularly observe and experience, few areas of technological prowess are more all-encompassing in the daily lives of Westerners than that of media technology. So we are asking in this book, *is the Bible media savvy? Is Christian theology media competent?* Can the ancient medium of scripture offer fresh words for new media? Is there a compelling theological vision in those inked pages for twenty-first-century mass media and communications technology?

Yes.

The idea of “media” is bigger than formats like an email, a tweet, or a blog post. A medium is not just a gadget like a TV or an iPad. More fundamentally, I am understanding “media” as means of communication or revelation.<sup>4</sup> Though scripture says nothing about digital media, it is enormously invested in communicative and revelatory *means*. God speaks. He reveals. Humans respond and interact in diverse ways with him and with one another. Media formats and media gadgets will feature throughout this book, but our primary task is to understand how scripture portrays media as a concept. So to retrain what we think about “media,” we are going to make a pilgrimage of sorts throughout the entire biblical saga, tracing the narrative plotlines of the epic story of Creation,

4. Philosophical theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff is careful to make the distinction between revelation and discourse/speaking, hence my definition of media as means of *communication* and *revelation*. See his chapter, “Speaking is not Revealing,” in *Divine Discourse*, 19–36.

Fall, Redemption, and Re-Creation to show that the idea of media is a central theme of the church's most sacred text.<sup>5</sup>

So how can the narrative of scripture speak to us about the concept of media? Here is a quick overview . . .

## MEDIA AND THE BIBLICAL STORY

We should acknowledge first that although there is such a thing as “new media,” the actual concept of media is as old as the hills. This is true literally, because the hills themselves are a form of media.

God's media. Or, we could say, “TheoMedia.” Media production began with God.

As self-revelatory artistry, creation can be understood as divine media. Silicon Valley has nothing over the one who made valleys and silicon. Big shot marketing firms perched within the glass and steel of metropolitan skyscrapers may actually have the sky itself as a competing media product.

The aesthetic media of God's creation was produced by another form of divine media. The slope of the valleys and the rise of hills beneath glorious sky blue all came about through the medium of holy speech. Divine words addressed the primordial cosmic blankness, and ever since “let there be . . .” sounded in the dark, creation has served as a means of divine revelation and divine self-communication. The idea of media goes back to the decision of the Creator to create, to produce by his word self-expressive artistry in the glimmer of star and the flutter of wing.

The divine medium of holy speech soon became interactive with other speakers. Amidst the sounds of the buzzing and whirring in this fresh new world, divine monologue became *dialogue*. Words produced Eden, and then words echoed in Eden. Pristine words, words directly from the mouth of God, words dense with splendor and power, laden with the strength to birth solar systems—such words were addressed to and comingled with the voice of human beings. These lovely new

5. John Dyer's *From the Garden to the City* takes a similar approach in understanding technology in general, working through the biblical story and addressing media issues as they arise. I read Dyer's book twice during my research, both times after having crafted the approach and plan of my own book. I was pleased to find a solid resource making a similar trek through the biblical story. It is the best work I know of on technology that is accessible for non-specialist readers yet rigorously biblical and theological.

creatures with whom the Creator shared such open, unhindered communication were themselves designated as holy media.

That's you. And me.

Unlike the other creatures, human beings were fashioned in God's image. The most fundamental vocation of humanity is a *media vocation*, that of divine image bearing. Though the rest of creation reflects divine glory and beauty, Adam and Eve were endowed with an even more intrinsic capacity for conveying God's character and intentions in the world.

So the opening page of scripture is soaked in media-related themes. Here is what we have thus far in this brief overview of the biblical story: the medium of God's word produced the media of creation, including Adam and Eve, chief media agents who uniquely shared divine likeness and enjoyed open, unhindered communication with their Maker.

Then there was this serpent.

A new voice from somewhere offstage interrupts Eden's ongoing dialogue. Satan volunteers his hermeneutical services as an interpreter of holy speech. *Did God really say that? Let me clarify. Let me explain.* The unambiguous words of God about that intriguing tree are garbled up a bit and then re-presented, re-transmitted. The serpent offers himself as deceptive *medium*, as an intermediary, as a communicative agent between two parties—two parties never intended for intermediation. His uninvited voice is inserted between human ears and God's direct address.

The serpent interposes himself as an unsolicited *mediator*.

It does not follow, however, that "media" as a concept is bad or satanic just because Satan appears as a mediator in the opening of the biblical story. Remember, God came up with the idea of media, making the repeated observation "it is good" of creation and of the media agents of his image. And another Mediator will make an appearance in the biblical story about whom nothing bad can be said.

It is important to recognize, however, that the "Fall" of humankind comes about through the uncritical embrace of a plausible yet unsanctioned media source.

The results of heeding this interrupting mediator can be described in terms of a cataclysmic media obstruction. Sin effects communication loss. The first result of harkening to this unreliable media source over the TheoMedia of God's unambiguous words is the horizontal damaging of interpersonal relations between Adam and Eve. "Naked" and "unashamed" they were. No secrets. There is a total openness to the other.

But that uninterrupted, unmediated state proves short lived. At the taste of illicit fruit the cover-ups begin. Dark secrets enter the scene of human-to-human communication. Then they hear a sound once received so warmly and now understood as ominous—the sound of their Maker’s approach.

“Where are you?” God asks.

This is the sound of a great gash ripped between two intimately bound parties. “Where are you?” is the sound of an epic communications disaster. “Where are you?” is the sound of a transmission loss of biblical proportions. *Did you heed some other voice?* The second result of sin is a loss of human-to-God communication. Yielding to the influence of an unauthorized mediator left humanity and God in need of continual mediation . . .

We have only made it past the first three chapters of the Bible. This account of Genesis 1–3 is seminal for all that lies ahead in this book.

As we proceed in our brief overview of the saga of scripture, we find that one of the greatest external threats to the redemptive program of God continues to be that of alluring and unauthorized media sources. The image bearers were naturally image producers. The Creator’s chief media agents began creating their own media products. Much of the production was marked by beauty. But much of it was smeared by something twisted, by some corrosive influence now embedded deep within humanity’s veins. Some of the media produced by these fallen creatures were explicitly produced for fallen purposes.

The visual and aural space of our own physical and social context today is voluminously occupied by ads, images, and sound bytes. Our term for this is “media saturation.” As in the ancient world, a lot of the imagery today is wholesome, while much of it is not. In spite of the long chronological toll from the earliest days of the Bible to this day, not that much has really changed. Visual media dark and perverse haunted the ancient landscapes of Egypt, Canaan, Babylon, Greece, and Rome—the imagery of pagan religion and pagan empire. Often promiscuous in nature, often covered with silver or gold and commonly minted on coins—we should note that worldly media’s partnership with sex and money is almost as old as those hills. And sadly, the lovely hills of divine media became the domain of this dark media as pagan altars and idols were positioned “on

every high hill and under every green tree”—that phrase is common in the Old Testament.<sup>6</sup> It is the biblical language for “media saturation.”

So how was Israel to maintain its distinct identity in a media saturated world?

*TheoMedia* saturation.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, Israel is poised on the plains of Moab and eyeing the Promised Land across the River Jordan. They could almost taste those streams of milk and honey. But Canaan’s geography was besmirched and littered with media. There were no billboards or digitized screens, but the poles, idols, and hand-wrought altars of idolatry were aplenty. Hence God’s call to *TheoMedia* saturation, a call issued in one of the most heavily weighted passages of Scripture: the *Shema*.

Readers familiar with the New Testament will recognize the commandment Jesus deemed “the greatest”: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:29–30; cf. Matt 22:37). Though familiar with the commandment, we may be less so with its context. It comes from Deuteronomy 6:4 opening the passage known as the *Shema* (from the Hebrew “to hear”). The context of the *Shema*—the words Jesus designated the most binding command on our lives—is a call to *media saturation*. It is a call to be saturated with the *TheoMedia* of God’s words. Love the Lord your God with all your being, Israel, and

These *words*, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your hearts. And you shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:6–9; emphasis added)

The words of God were to saturate the daily grind of the Israelite family. They were to feature orally in conversations in the fields and in the home. Bound to the hand, stuck between the eyes, and emblazoned on the entranceways of the home, the *TheoMedia* of God’s words were also to occupy the visual space of God’s people. In a world rife with unauthorized

6. Deut 12:2; 1 Kgs 14:23; 2 Kgs 16:4; 17:10; 2 Chr 28:4; Jer 2:20; 3:6; 17:2; Ezek 6:13.

media sources, the Israelites were commanded to esteem their God as their primary media source, holding fast to the TheoMedia of divine words, embracing a life saturated by holy speech.

They fail. Misguiding visual media proved more alluring than the verbal media of scripture. This is not to say that visual media is “bad” and verbal media “good.” As we have just seen, the words of the *Shema* were to be visually rendered as well as orally shared. God is dazzlingly visual at times in his media making (just think of creation!), and the sacrificial system was a multimedia worship exercise that engaged the full range of the senses. But God’s form could not be visually rendered, and the other deities seemed irresistibly tangible in their graven representation. For many, looking at idols replaced listening to Torah. Israel’s plunge into spiritual collapse corresponded with its media preferences: dark, twisted, and idolatrous media over TheoMedia.

You might recall that there was a famous spiritual revival under King Josiah. The renewed devotions of God’s people in his day corresponded with a return to TheoMedia when a dusty old scroll of scripture (likely Deuteronomy) was discovered during a Temple repair job. That revival was short lived. And Israel went adrift in a sea of propaganda, imagery, and rhetoric from pagan gods and pagan empires.

Originally destined as the bearers of God’s image in the world, humanity—both Gentile and Jewish—had become shaped by the world’s unwholesome images and untruthful words. The once uninterrupted interaction with God was now clouded; the transmission was lost in the distracting white noise of worldly media. Such a disastrous media situation required a media “eucatastrophe,” to borrow a term coined by J. R. R. Tolkien.<sup>7</sup> That media “eucatastrophe” (an event of catastrophically *good* proportions) finally took place.

It was the Incarnation. The TheoMedium of God’s Word became flesh.

The public announcement of what Jesus has done on our behalf as the God who took on flesh is called “gospel.” It is a media term. In the genre of a eucatastrophic newflash, the TheoMedium of the gospel is the breaking news that our King has arrived and conquered, that the mediated distance between humanity and God is to be bridged through the work of the Incarnate Christ, a new Mediator who has come from

7. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 153.

offstage as abruptly as that serpent of old. And this Mediator is hailed as the untainted “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15).

In the wake of bloodied cross and vacated tomb, a new TheoMedium was formed. Indwelled by the Spirit, that society we call “church” was created as a new TheoMedium in the world in the sense that we as the church are now being restored as bearers of God’s image. And we are entrusted with divine media forms like the sacraments and biblical preaching by which we are shaped and transformed. The covenant we call “new” has set us on a trajectory that ends with the end of intermediation: “they will see his face” (Rev 22:4).

The cosmic communications disaster that resulted in God’s “Where are you?” (Gen 3:9) will end with “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man” (Rev 21:3). To the first mediator’s “Did God actually say?” (Gen 3:1) Christ the final Mediator will respond with, “Behold, I am making all things new” (Rev 21:5). Sin has effected a cataclysmic communications disruption answered by God’s decision to close that distance through means of revelation and communication—TheoMedia—by which he not only presents himself to us but actually restores us into his precious company.

So let’s revisit our earlier questions: Is the Bible media savvy? Is Christian theology media competent?

Absolutely. The explosive tide of new media technology has hurled the people of God into waters uncharted, *but not unchartable*. As a medium featuring media-related themes, the Bible as script is competent to address a media saturated society. It has been doing just that from the days when it was first chiseled into stone, inscribed onto scrolls, and bound in parchment or vellum codices. No reconfiguring upgrade is required for the content of Christian scripture.

## NOT NECESSARILY AN UPDATE, BUT HERMENEUTICS

There is, however, the urgent need for careful and rigorous *hermeneutics*, that is, biblical interpretation. We do not need to trade in our Bibles for a more relevant, newfangled source for understanding media. But we do need lively and faithful interpretation of our ancient texts under the guidance of God’s Spirit.

To embrace the task of hermeneutics is to acknowledge that the Bible was produced from contexts dramatically different from our own

(see the next chapter). It is also to acknowledge that the Bible is not in the form of a well-ordered catalogue of dos and don'ts applicable for all times and seasons. If I want to know whether I should let my kids watch a particular movie, I cannot turn to the Bible's index listing of "Secular entertainment; Children." As a minister in university contexts, I've yet to find a section in the Bible on "Physical Intimacy in Dating" to which I can direct students when they have those sorts of questions. If only we had clear rules and regulations set in black and white, right?

But if that were all Scripture offered, the continual emergence of scenarios unforeseeable to the biblical authors would make downloadable updates an unending necessity! The rules and regulations Scripture *does* provide are often modified or even upended as the larger biblical drama unfolds (good news for bacon lovers, right?). So fresh (yet truthful and orthodox!) interpretations rather than new content uploads are ever needed within the church.<sup>8</sup>

## ABOUT THE BOOK

This book is a hermeneutical project in the church's wider efforts of trying to understand the technological mediascape of the twenty-first century. The purpose is not to offer a how-to guidebook to help churches incorporate communications technology into their worship and witness. I am hoping to provide something more foundational. The point is to make some headway in constructing a theological frame of reference for understanding and appropriating media in the digital age and in the ages to come.

### The Book's Strategy and Layout: Reading for Reorientation

On offer here is a *reading*. After a few more chapters of introducing and situating our topic of media (Part 1), this book will take a brisk plunge into the biblical story, tracing the idea of TheoMedia throughout the Bible's "salvation-history." That phrase simply denotes the biblical vision of God's unfolding saga of redeeming humanity and all of creation. Attention will be given to the sights, sounds, words, and texts constituting the media of our own day, but as indicated above, our interest lies

8. For more on this, see my blog post "Technological Upgrades and Christological Hermeneutics."

primarily with the sights and sounds of Israel's God in the Old Testament (Part 2), with his use of spoken and written words (Part 3), and with the "media legacies" and "focal media practices" established for the church by Christ's Incarnation, life, death, Resurrection, Ascension, and Return (Part 4). The final chapter will offer a summary of our discoveries, sketching the "rough overarching theological framework" for understanding media. The last few pages cast a vision for the church's use of its own media forms (preaching, spiritual gifts, the sacraments) in a media saturated society.

This extensive "reading" of Scripture is designed to baptize our senses so thoroughly into biblical ink that our faculties of understanding media in our day can be reoriented according to biblical logic. The church is embracing (and sometimes rejecting!) media technology faster than it can be theologically assessed.<sup>9</sup> What I hope this book will provide is a theological lens through which we can make sound evaluations when it comes to the media appearing so rapidly in the digital age. We need an interpretive grid that will shape and inform our media instincts.

## The Book's Perspective: Between Technophobia and Technophilia

I will go into more details later, but when I originally approached this writing project I was somewhat of a technophobe with a chip on my shoulder. While interfacing new media with the Bible in my research, however, I began experiencing a shift in perspective. Though some of my preconceived suspicions have been confirmed and even intensified, many have been relieved. To a certain degree, the redemptive potential of media technology now strikes me as quite astonishing. So this book is no outraged condemnation of the digital age.

Neither is it an unqualified endorsement of the limitless communicative powers of the Internet, with the implication that Christians who refuse to get on board with all things digital and pixelated are cultural curmudgeons who, as Twitter might put it, are likely to "miss out."<sup>10</sup>

9. From the *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*: "[t]he moral challenges surrounding technology are exacerbated by the fact that new technologies are appearing at an exponential rate, threatening to outstrip the pace at which Christians can evaluate them." Hatch and Kallenberg, "Technology," 764.

10. "Don't miss out" is a message that sometimes appears in emails sent to me by Twitter to keep me in the social media game. See the TheoMedia Note following this

There are a number of Christian books, blogs, and articles out there representing these contrasting poles in the church's thinking about media technology (we will get to those in chapter 3). My own treatment walks between the aisles of the technophobes and technophiles.

### The "TheoMedia Notes": Blogging Through the Book

Interspersed between many of the book's chapters are "TheoMedia Notes." These brief sections are like blog posts that will complement the discussions in the larger chapters, usually addressing the practical side of the concepts we will be addressing. Some Notes are longer than others, and some are more conceptual than practical. They are not superfluous add-ons. The reflections found in these Notes are integral to the book's underlying conviction that the ancient text of scripture is to inform the daily reality of our lives.

### A Word about Vocab (and Media Wars)

Writing as an amateur in media and theology, there are some words I have had to learn or gain a better grasp of while working on this book. We have already defined "media" as means of communication or revelation. When I refer to "new media," I have in mind online social media. The "mass media" of Western societies in the form of commercialized ads will be getting some press as well. I will spend some time on "news media" in chapter 13 (focusing on cable news networks), but aside from TheoMedia Note 2, "entertainment media" does not get much attention in what follows.<sup>11</sup>

We have also already used the terms "TheoMedia" (plural) and "TheoMedium" (singular) to refer to the media employed specifically by God for communicating or revealing himself. TheoMedia can be formal in that they have been specifically commissioned as divine media, e.g., prophetic speech, the Tabernacle complex, etc. They can also be informal or ad hoc, like when God utilizes something according to the need of the moment, e.g., Balaam's donkey or the writing on the wall in Babylon.

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chapter.

11. For entertainment media, see the recent study by Laytham, *iPod, YouTube, Wii Play*.

I should mention here that a host of media-related controversies will soon begin to surface. Sometimes I address these tensions directly, at other times rather subtly. Though I hail from a Protestant tradition emphasizing “word-media,” we will soon observe that TheoMedia are so vast and varied in form that they appeal to the entire range of our senses. Media scholars sometimes use the impressive-looking word “sensorium” to refer to our various means of sense perception in communicating or receiving communication (seeing, tasting, touching, smelling, hearing).<sup>12</sup> Today and throughout history, friction has persisted among various Christian groups as to which sensory organs are to be prioritized when it comes to “doing church.” Visuality and sight-related media are sometimes set at war against orality (referring to spoken word-media) and textuality (referring to written word-media). Put more concisely, images and words are often pitted against one another. We will see as the book progresses that some of these tensions are valid.

Many are not.

## WHAT THE BOOK WILL NOT OFFER

There is one final point to make in this introduction. Remember that I have called “rough” the “overarching theological framework” I am developing here. That interpretive grid will not serve as a hermeneutical key for unlocking all the mysteries faced daily by those of us who are struggling to understand our faith and our media use. And others would perhaps offer readings of media in the Bible’s salvation-history that differ from my own. When I write “rough,” I mean it.

Jason Byassee has written an essay on social media subtitled “An Underdetermined Response”<sup>13</sup>—“underdetermined” because hermeneutics does not always offer a tidy, concise, and definitive quotient, sum, or product. Alan Jacobs points out that a society’s decision to embrace certain technologies with sweeping consequences takes a long time to assess. In writing about the specific technology of the “codex” (that handy media format of pages bound together along the same margin, essentially what today we call a “book”), Jacobs writes,

12. For a brief overview of the idea of “sensorium,” see Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 1–16.

13. Byassee, “Practicing Virtue with Social Media.” Byassee writes in n. 17 that he is borrowing the term “underdetermined” from Fowl, “Stories of Interpretation,” 32–61.

... only in the last half-century has a sound understanding begun to emerge of the relations between emergent Protestantism and print culture, and many of the details are still highly contested. So it may be far too early to grasp how a shift away from the codex might affect culture as a whole, or even the part of it that Christianity represents.<sup>14</sup>

Neil Postman, in spite of his adamant defense of print culture's superiority to screened culture, also expressed reserve about sweeping statements: "we must be careful in praising or condemning because the future may hold surprises for us."<sup>15</sup> Along similar lines, when it comes to the effects of an electronic age on biblical interpretation, A. K. M. Adam has suggested that we can at best "make provisional observations" and "hesitantly anticipate" what awaits "beyond a fog bank, over an unfamiliar horizon."<sup>16</sup>

Though it is satisfying as a writer to make bold, confident assertions, it seems best to offer a reading along with a theological frame of reference that are both tentative and open to modifications by readers and interlocutors as we grow and learn together. "Rough" is intended to provide this qualification.

On the other hand, we cannot just plod haphazardly into the digital age with the hope that the historians will one day figure out what the church did well and not so well when new media dawned on the scene. A retrospective assessment of the past does not help us in the present. For today, we must put forward some form of theological guidance, carefully reading an ancient script to negotiate an urgent present in anticipation of a rapidly unfolding future.

To that end, I want to venture two claims here at the outset that will be prominent throughout all that follows, both of which have already been suggested above. First: *if God himself creates and employs media, then there must be a theological logic that can guide how we produce and use media and communications technology today.* Here is the second claim: *Christians are called to media saturation, but the primary media that are to shape, form, and saturate our lives are the media of God—Theo-Media, the communicative and revelatory means God employs to share himself and to influence humankind as his image bearers.*

14. Jacobs, "Christianity and the Future of the Book," 28.

15. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 29.

16. Adam, "Interpreting the Bible at the Horizon of Virtual New Worlds," 159.

## When Our Social Media Talk Back

We should neither try to demolish technology nor run away from it. We can restrain it and must redeem it.

—ALBERT BORGMANN<sup>1</sup>

As we turn to the Bible as a source for understanding our twenty-first-century digital culture, we should note that there are a lot of sources out there offering wisdom on how we should understand and use new media. Among them are the new media themselves.

Twitter has a voice.

The powers that be in their San Francisco office have taken to emailing me every now and then. There is apparently some concern around their conference table that I am drifting out of touch with the world's goings-on since my tweet sending and tweet reading are registering low of late (maybe that is why they sent an email, not a direct tweet). They gently nudge me in these emails to get back into the game: “*Don’t miss out. Stay up to date on what’s happening*” (emphases original).

Graciously, they send a list of tweets from other people more faithful in their tweeting that inform me of online articles I will surely find of interest. One link directed me to a story at *Christianity Today*'s website about Twitter and a major Christian conference.<sup>2</sup> In a gesture of impressive magnanimity, Twitter execs are giving attention to church leaders.

1. Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 8.

2. Bailey, “Twitter Reaches Out to Christian Leaders at Catalyst’s ‘Be Present’ Conference.”

As it turns out, theology and parish ministry are among their concerns. If you don't believe me, you can send a direct message to @Pontifex and ask the Pope himself.

On another encouraging note, WordPress is really helping me along in this blogging thing. I noticed not too long ago that the WP team began providing accolades upon my reaching a certain number of entries: "Congratulations! This is your 160th post!" Then they started setting attainable objectives: "Next goal: 165 Posts." I also noticed that formatted into the bottom of the "new post" screen is the inspiring exhortation, "Just Write."

It is nice for us Christians to get all this attention from social media firms, with Twitter helping clergy extend their reach and with WordPress coaching writers along in their blog ministries.

But in all honesty, WordPress might say "Congratulations! This is your 160th post!" even if my previous 159 were all about how to cheat on one's spouse or how to hurt lots of people really badly. And when Twitter rejoices with my ego when I get some online attention via their channels ("Andrew Byers, you were mentioned in a tweet!"—note the exclamation mark), it is unlikely that they have noticed whether I was being praised or slandered in those 140 characters. Now, I really like WordPress, and I am sure they would condemn any blog sponsoring dangerous activities. I am also growing in my appreciation of Twitter. Surely no one in their San Francisco office would delight in online mud slung in my direction. And for the record, I think it's great that the Pope has a Twitter handle.

The point here is that social media does not just amplify our voice—they have voices themselves. "Don't miss out. Stay up to date on what's happening." "Next goal: 165 Posts." "Just write." "What's going on, Andy?"—that's from Facebook. And let's not forget YouTube's imperative, lacking no subtlety, of "broadcast yourself." We do not just talk *through* social media. Our social media is talking to *us*.

Twitter's apparent anxiety over my tweetlessness and WordPress's enthusiasm over my pressing of words are about *activity*, not *content*. Neither of these fine and upstanding companies are weighing the validity of my blog posts or my occasional tweets based on their theological integrity or stylistic sophistication. "Just write." But just write *what*? Anything? *Just write . . .* because writing creates posts, and posts create traffic. Traffic is activity. And somewhere down the road for a dot-com, activity is income.

Social media companies are providing us with a platform. It is not their job to police poor grammar or correct bad theology promulgated through their channels. As media platforms, Twitter, Tumblr, Blogger, and Wordpress offer remarkable opportunities for conducting God's mediated voice into the cybersphere. I just think it is important for us to recognize that behind the graphics on the screen are corporations with budget goals, profit plans, marketing strategies, and other business-oriented agendas. These are not necessarily corrupting influences. But they are there, barely perceptible in those imperatives ("just write") and questions ("what's happening, Andy?").

Responsible use of media technology means we that rely on more authoritative voices to govern our online activity than those coming from executives poised in their corporate suites. As Christians, we take our theological and technological cues from elsewhere.

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