

***People of the Screen: How Evangelicals Created the Digital Bible and How It Shapes Their Reading of Scripture.* By John Dyer.**
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“Be wary of the *modern* age.” This warning, delivered by the Swedish holiness preacher Emil Gustafson in 1896, echoes the sound of a widespread idea among evangelicals: The modern world is a dangerous place, where godless philosophy and licentious entertainment can lead the faithful astray. But this suspicion of modernity has one great exception: technology. In the nineteenth century, evangelicals took printing to the ends of the world and hailed the advent of railroads. Modernity might be spiritually depraved, but its technology was a godsend.

In his book *People of the Screen*, John Dyer argues that evangelicals’ relation to technology—be it the radio in the 1930s or the podcast in the 2010s—has been shaped by something he calls Hopeful Entrepreneurial Pragmatism. Dyer, an assistant professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, examines digitalization and evangelicalism through the lens of Bible software. He interviews developers at three Bible software companies: YouVersion, Bible Gateway, and Logos Bible Gateway. But he also studies the users through focus groups in three evangelical congregations. Theoretically he places himself in the camp arguing for the Social Construction of Technology, a perspective that challenges the more deterministic outlook of Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong by emphasizing the ongoing negotiation in the development and use of technology.

In the introduction, Dyer writes that the primary question of the study is this: “What characteristics of evangelicalism have enabled it to create the most commercially successful and widely used Bible software?” (4). But soon after that, the order shifts and Dyer describes it as a study of how evangelical ideas shape digital Bible technology (17). In the end of the book, a third option is given when the study is summarized as an investigation of “how Bible software changes the way that readers engage the scriptures and what role evangelical programmers have in that change” (181).

It is not quite clear if the primary focus is evangelicalism as such, evangelical influence on Bible software, or changes in evangelicalism due to digitalization. Of course, these are all related, but if Dyer had set his foot down more firmly from the start, he might have formulated more pointed conclusions. However, when you enter a hermeneutical circle, it can sometimes be hard to know where an argument begins. Despite this inconsistency the study, as a whole, is both well-argued and clearly written.

After setting up the study (chapters 1–3), the proper investigation begins as Dyer maps the Bible software landscape. According to Dyer, the evangelical domination of the Bible software industry stems from a desire to disseminate the scriptures, a deeply ingrained entrepreneurial spirit, and a successful network of evangelical institutions. Evangelicals have been the industry’s driving force since the 1980s, when evangelical developers created tools such as Quickverse (1988) and Logos (1991) that pushed Bible software from the libraries of universities to the personal computers of pastors. When the internet launched, digital Bibles became accessible to regular readers. Bible Gateway (1993) was the first website with the Bible text and a search function. From around the year 2000, the mobile app era began and YouVersion became the most popular app with over 500 million downloads.

From his interviews with evangelical developers, Dyer concludes that their core value is “scripture engagement.” The Bible is understood as having transformative power,

which is why the developers want to put it on every screen. They care less about the exact form of engagement—be it hard textual study, a quick verse of encouragement, or *lectio divina*—than the engagement itself. The evangelical ethos is not so much present in a particular coloring of the Bible software, but rather in the desire to foster engagement.

In chapter 6 Dyer shows that most evangelical readers choose between different formats, sometimes opting for a print copy and other times a desktop, e-reader, or smart-phone version. In lines with the theory of Social Construction of Technology, they are depicted as conscious readers who rather than being tossed back and forth by every wind of technology navigate the sea intentionally.

But do they really?

More often than not, Dyer finds that the Bible format they choose is the one that is closest at hand—what he calls the Nearest Available Bible. Further, he reveals that while Bible software can help evangelicals maintain a regular reading habit, their comprehension is diminished when they read on screen. Dyer's results are in line with the leading scholars on digital reading (cf. Maryanne Wolf, Anne Mangen), but how well is this problem known among evangelicals? If Dyer's research is any barometer, the answer is likely "not at all." At the beginning of his study, few participants expressed skepticism toward Bible software. But after they had participated in his digital reading plan, almost half has changed their minds. In explaining their change of mind, the participants primarily cited distractions and a tendency to skim the text on-screen.

In his presentation of evangelicalism, Dyer refers to David Bebbington's famous quadrilateral and highlights biblicism and activism as important markers of the movement. But there is another, less-referenced aspect of Bebbington's thesis that is perhaps even more relevant to this study. It is his argument that evangelicalism can adapt to different cultural climates—enlightenment, romanticism, modernism—while keeping the four identity markers intact. Dyer's conclusion extends this argument to the digital culture of late modernity: "the new generation [of evangelicals] will continue to find ways to faithfully navigate whatever comes, embracing new technology while holding onto what they believe is essential" (188).

Like the evangelicals he studies, Dyer has a hopeful view of technology. But his research hints that digitalization might lead to a more fundamental transformation of evangelicalism than he at times acknowledges. After all, he notes that digitalization makes the Bible less prevalent as a material item and impairs understanding of it. Further, when interpreting digitally mediated texts, even evangelicals are drawn toward Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.

It might very well be the case that evangelicalism belonged to the Gutenberg galaxy—that it was a religion of the printing press but not one for digital screens. Dyer does not delve into this issue himself, but to his credit, his book provides material to think through fundamental questions regarding evangelicalism's identity and future. In sum, *People of the Screen* gathers and analyzes new data on an important topic and does so with the help of relevant theoretical perspectives. It is a well written, carefully researched and highly relevant study that helps us to better understand evangelicalism and lived religion in a digital age.

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