

20 QUESTIONS

ESCHATOLOGY, TECHNOLOGY, & CHRISTIAN WITNESS



TC

TC

Thinking Christian

table of content

FROM THE AUTHOR	01
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	03
RESOURCES	04
INTRODUCTION	06
SECTION 1: ESCHATOLOGY & THE DIGITAL AGE	08
Q1: How should Christians think about digital surveillance?	08
Q2: Are digital IDs the mark of the beast?	09
Q3: How does technology encourage an alternative eschatology?	11
Q4: How can we be sober minded when thinking about digital technologies and Christian eschatology?	12
SECTION 2: THE HUMAN CONDITION & TECHNOLOGY	14
Q5: Why are we defaulting to technological solutions (despite the risks)?	14
Q6: Aren't the efficiencies technology promises good for humanity?	16
Q7: How can Christians cultivate virtue in a world of algorithmic incentives?	18
SECTION 3: BEING KNOWN VS. BEING WATCHED	19
Q8: Does having concerns about digital surveillance make you a conspiracy theorist?	19
Q9: What's the difference between being watched and being known?	20
Q10: How might Christian community serve as an alternative to surveillance culture?	22
SECTION 4: SYSTEMS, STRUCTURES, & CONTROL	26
Q11: What are digital IDs and data centers?	26
Q12: What are the upsides and downsides of digital IDs and data centers?	28
Q13: How can we understand the relationship between information and governance?	29
SECTION 5: PRIVACY, RIGHTS, & THE COMMON GOOD	32
Q14: What is the place of privacy in an Information Age?	32
Q15: Is privacy a right, a privilege, a theological necessity, or something else?	33

SECTION 6: FORMATION & FAITHFUL PRESENCE	35
Q16: What kind of preparation is necessary for Christians to bear faithful witness in a digital age?	35
Q17: How can Christians prepare themselves today?	36
Q18: How can the church help prepare Christians to resist the pressures of the world in a digital age?	36
Q19: How can Christians exercise discernment in using and adopting technology?	37
Q20: What can Christians in the U. S. do to voice concerns about the adoption of technology and technology policies?	38
CONCLUSION	39

from the author

I am not anti-technology. That disclaimer feels necessary in a polarized world that leaves little room for nuance. To be wary of technology acknowledges that technology can go too far. Being wary recognizes technology has limits that need to be observed to promote human flourishing—particularly human flourishing as understood from a biblical perspective.

When began writing about the intersection of faith and technology in 2018, I was concerned with how digital tools might reshape Christian interactions with Scripture. [i] Over time, my concerns have expanded. As technology has advanced, I've reflected on social media's effects on our mental health, relationships, and attention, artificial intelligence's reach into nearly every sphere of life, and the transhumanist philosophies fueling notions of limitless progress.[ii]

My focus has been on underlying ideologies of “progress” and “advancement,” the way technology influences our perception of the world, and how technologies rob us of the sort of effortful experiences that help us to mature. I have not yet written at length about privacy and the potential for surveillance, but it now seems essential to do so.

While the U.K.'s digital ID initiative (“Brit Card”) has received the lion's share of media attention, the TSA has been allowing digital IDs and certain states in the United States have been implementing voluntary digital ID initiatives. Other countries, including Estonia, Denmark, India, and South Korea, have adopted similar systems. The digital IDs differ from country-to-country; however, the digital IDs in Estonia (e-ID) and India (Aadhar) represent relatively mature systems with demonstrable benefits and documented problems.[i] Digital IDs won't usher in a utopian moment. At best, they will offer new conveniences and new vulnerabilities—a new set of trade-offs.

This guide offers twenty questions to help Christians reflect on digital IDs, data centers, and the growing reality of digital surveillance. It does not claim to answer every question or to provide exhaustive technical or policy analysis, though such matters are considered. Instead, it seeks to provide a theological framework for discernment—a way to think Christianly about technologies that increasingly define modern life.

As followers of Christ, we must resist the subtle (and not-so-subtle) pressures of the world that prizes convenience and efficiency and is desperately reaching for ways to

bring order to chaos. We can and often should use technology, but we must remember that every human innovation is a response to brokenness—a way of coping with life in a fallen world.[i] Since Adam and Eve covered themselves with fig leaves (Gen 3:7), humanity has turned to tools to navigate a world fractured by sin. God has provided similar tools (cf. 3:21). Yet, technology is neither savior nor enemy, but a sign that the world is not as it should be—a sign of our need for redemption.

Technology, like everything else, must be brought under the authority of Christ. It cannot distract us from our most basic purpose of pointing to and glorifying the Triune God. The world may well benefit from digital technologies—though not without trade-offs—but what it really needs is the gospel. Christians must continue to build the body of Christ through discipleship for God’s glory and the world’s sake.

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'James Spencer', with a stylized, flowing script.

James Spencer, PhD
Host of Thinking Christian Podcast
www.jamesgspencer.com

about the author

James earned his PhD in Theological Studies from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in 2012. He currently serves as President of D. L. Moody Center and host of Thinking Christian. James writes and speaks on biblical and theological topics, as well as on the intersection of politics, technology, media and faith.

His work has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, Sojourners, The Christian Post, American Thinker, and various other publications. James is a regular guest on Stand in the Gap Today from the American Pastors Network and a regular contributor to Christianity.com. He also serves as an adjunct instructor at Wheaton College and a member of the Faith and Media Coalition.

James published numerous books including *Serpents and Doves: Christians, Politics, and the Art of Bearing Witness*, *Christian Resistance: Learning to Defy the World and Follow Christ*, and *Thinking Christian: Essays on Testimony, Accountability, and the Christian Mind*.

He has been a guest on numerous podcasts, broadcasts, and live panels, including TBN's "The Rise of Artificial Intelligence," The Christian Post's "Politics in the Pews," and CBN's "Faith vs. Culture."

You can find out more about James at jamesgspencer.com.



resources

The Thinking Christian Podcast

- Krista Boan | Thinking Christian about Family and Technology Use ([episode link](#))
- David Eaton | How Should We Think about Kids and Technology ([episode link](#))
- Paul Hoffman | AI, the Imago Dei, and the Fight for Our Humanity ([episode link](#))
- Jay Y. Kim | How Should Christians Build Resilience and Character in a Digital Age? ([episode link](#))
- Derek Schuurman | Faith & Technology: Navigating the Digital Age with Wisdom ([episode link](#))
- James Spencer | AI, Adolescents, and the Apocalypse? Discerning the Digital Age without Fear ([episode link](#))
- James Spencer | The Phony Age: Navigating Digital Deception, Noise, and the Need for Truth ([episode link](#))
- James Spencer | Thinking Christian about Social Media (and Technology) with the Surgeon General ([episode link](#))
- James Spencer | Thinking about the Tower of Babel: Unrestrained and Unguided Human Capacity ([episode link](#))
- James Spencer | Thinking Christian about Loving Our Neighbor in a Digital World ([episode link](#))
- James Spencer | How Can Christians Be Good Neighbors? Thinking through the Good Samaritan ([episode link](#))
- Shane Wood | What Does It Mean to Be Human? Technology, AI, and the Imago Dei ([episode link](#))
- Felicia Wu Song | Restless Devices: How Technology Shapes Us & What We Can Do About It ([episode link](#))

YouTube Videos

- JD Vance Got Love Wrong - A Theological Take on the Order of Love ([episode link](#))
- Christians and Technology, Part 1: Just Because We Can, Doesn't Mean We Should ([episode link](#))
- Christians and Technology, Part 2: Misunderstanding Progress ([episode link](#))
- Christians and Technology, Part 3: Technology and Self-Sufficiency—Reflecting on Dependence ([episode link](#))
- Reordering Loves ([episode link](#))
- Reorienting Attention ([episode link](#))
- Responding to God ([episode link](#))

Articles

- James Spencer, "How Should Christians Respond to AI? Losing Touch with Reality" ([article link](#))
- James Spencer, "How AI Influences Our Perception of Reality and 4 Essential Questions Christians Should Be Asking" ([article link](#))
- James Spencer, "How Should Christians Respond to AI? Bias, Decision Making and Data Processing" ([article link](#))
- James Spencer, "How Should Christians Respond to AI? Losing Touch with Reality" ([article link](#))
- James Spencer, "How Should Christians Approach Progress in Technology?" ([article link](#))
- James Spencer, "Can AI Glorify God?" ([article link](#))
- James Spencer, "How Should Christians Respond to AI? Its Virtue and a Response to Vervaeke" ([article link](#))
- James Spencer, "5 Things Christians Should Consider About AI" ([article link](#))
- James Spencer, "Image Bearers in the Digital Age: Technology, Transhumanism, and Christian Discipleship" ([article link](#))
- James Spencer, "We are Always the Problem: Reading McLuhan's Four Laws of Media from a Christian Perspective in the Age of AI" ([article link](#))
- James Spncker, "Vulnerable World Hypothesis... How Christians Might Think Differently about the State of Things" ([article link](#))
- James Spencer, "Reframing the Artificial Intelligence conversation" ([article link](#))
- James Spencer, "'The Matrix,' transhumanism and Christ's incarnation" ([article link](#))
- James Spencer, "How Should Christians think about transhumanism" ([article link](#))

introduction

We live in an age of unprecedented visibility. Virtually every click, search, and purchase leaves a trace. Data—at least some of it—is stored, sorted, and sold. Our faces, voices, and movements are not as private as they once were. The digital world has rendered us perpetually observable, often without our consent or awareness.

While there are certainly reasons to be concerned about being watched and monitored, the Christian story has always been and will always be a story of being known. God’s people are known by God, and we are to be known by others. People should know we are Christians—it isn’t something we hide because hiding our faith compromises our faith.

Clearly, Christians face different challenges in a digital world. One of those challenges involves thinking clearly about what is going on in the world and why it matters. Christians can be too quick to jump into eschatological speculation making claims that keep us from more nuanced thinking. This set of twenty questions is an invitation to this sort of discernment: to think carefully about how we inhabit digital spaces, how our technologies shape our loves, and how we can bear faithful witness in a world where we are to be known whether we are being watched or not.

coming soon to thinking christian.

Thinking Christian is rethining podcasting. In 2026, we will be releasing audio and video series designed to cover topics normally covered in seminary, as well as an AI-library that will allow you to go deeper into specific topic areas.

audio seminary.

Turn your commute into a classroom.

You'll learn through structured podcast series addressing topics such as the Reformation, biblical books, and discipleship.



video seminary.

Turn (almost) and screen into a classroom.

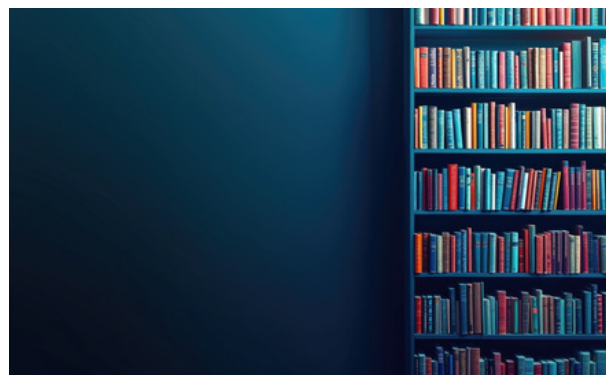
Each Video Seminary series provides a structured learning pathway for you to deepen your understanding of biblical, theological, and spiritual growth topics.



seminary essentials.

It's Not Seminary, but It's Pretty Close.

Seminary Essentials bundles audio, video, and text-based resources an AI-powered Thinking Christian Library and live lectures and Q & A sessions with James Spencer and Thinking Christian guests.



Subscribe to the podcast or YouTube channel for information on the audio and video seminary and seminary essentials.



Podcast



YouTube



section one: eschatology & the digital age

Before we talk about technology itself, we need to consider how Christians frame history. Eschatology—the study of the last things—is not merely about the end; it’s about how we live now in light of Christ’s victory today. We need to be careful not to boil eschatology down to an identification exercise—mapping one current event after another onto a supposed end time grid. Eschatology is about expectation. We often refer to the positive expression of that expectation is hope. We look forward to the consummation of God’s kingdom. Yet, it isn’t all roses. We should also expect challenges because the friction between the world and Christians often produces heat that ends up burning Christians. Eschatology informs how we live today because when we know what’s coming, we can prepare for it.

Q1: How should Christians think about digital IDs, data centers, and the potential for digital surveillance?

First, we need to recognize that those who don’t know Christ are in a difficult situation. The world is broken, and everyone is responding to that brokenness. As Christians, we order our lives according to Christ trusting that his way will allow us to overcome the world just as he did (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 21:7). For non-Christians, the broken world has no clear solution. Because non-Christians do not recognize the basic human problem (i.e., human sin) and solution (i.e., faith in Jesus Christ), they are left with only with attempts to control and/or survive in a hostile world. From a theological perspective, we know that when human capacity is unrestrained and unguided by the word of God, it will increasingly diverge from God’s order (listen to my interpretation of the Tower of Babel for more on this understanding).

Even if those who are pushing for technological advancements like digital IDs or digital surveillance don’t have pernicious motives, we can be sure that human attempts to control the world won’t fix the world. Often, those attempts will create new problems. As Iain McGilchrist notes in *The Matter with Things*,

“We take the success we have in manipulating it as proof that we understand it. But that is a logical error: to exert power over something requires us only to know what happens when we pull the levers, press the button, or utter the spell...It is hardly surprising, therefore, that while we have succeeded in coercing the world to our will to an extent unimaginable even a few generations ago, we have at the same time wrought havoc on that world precisely because we have not understood it.”

section one: eschatology & the digital age

If our predominant way of thinking is pragmatic in nature, it seems likely that we, as Christians, will be tempted to adopt the world's logic—to prioritize control and efficiency over wisdom and humility.

Second, we must account for those who have pernicious motives. There are people in the world who seek to exert control over others or to use the authority they've been given for their own benefit. We should not automatically assume that we understand the motives of those advancing new ideas. There are those whose ambitions and will to power should not be trusted.

As Christians move into an increasingly digital world where being surveilled is easier and maintaining an appropriate private life more difficult, we need to be sober minded. The problems this world poses present complex challenges that can create challenges to Christian witness in a number of different ways. Considering the challenges of the digital from a single point-of-view makes us more susceptible to bad ideas. One such idea involves identifying certain technologies with the mark of the beast.

Q2: Are digital IDs the mark of the beast?

(Digital IDs and data centers will be used as examples throughout this piece. In part, this is due to their connection to surveillance matters. If you aren't familiar with digital IDs and data centers, you can get an overview via question #11)

I do not believe there is a strong case to be made to identify digital IDs as the mark of the beast though the question has arisen as part of the conversation in the UK about the institution of "Brit Card," a digital ID being advanced by the Labour Party (see Chris Follett's, "[Explained: Why Do Some Christians Think Digital ID Cards are the Mark of the Beast?](#)") While I can appreciate that interpretations of the book of Revelation differ, asserting that digital IDs are the mark of the beast is highly speculative. Suggesting that digital IDs are the mark of the beast misunderstands or—at the very least—underplays aspects of Revelation's message.

First, it isn't clear that the mark of the beast will be a visible mark. Revelation consists of four different interpretive levels described by [Vern Poythress](#): (1) linguistic, (2) visionary, (3) referential, and (4) symbolic. The linguistic level consists of the text itself—what is actually written down. The visionary refers to the visions John actually had prior to writing the letter. These visions, presumably, are only partially recorded

in the letter itself. The referential level consists of the historical references to which the text points. The symbolic involves interpreting what the imagery encoded in the text means—how it describes the historical referent or event it symbolizes.

The reference to the beast forcing all people to have a mark put on their hand and forehead (13:17) comes as part of the vision of the second beast (13:11). The “mark” needed to be visible as part of John’s vision. He needed to see it in the vision (visionary) to communicate it (linguistic), but that doesn’t necessarily mean we should be looking for a visible mark within history (referential). It may be that the mark John sees in the vision is representative of a state of affairs that will come about in the course of history (symbolic). It may reflect a situation in which many humans give their allegiance to the beast (cf., 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4).

Whether the mark is visible or not, it is a sign of one’s compromise and willingness to participate in the world’s systems on the world’s terms rather than remaining faithful to Christ. Even if it is a visible mark, the Bible is not condemning genuine Christians coerced by earthly powers to receive it. The beast’s mark is a symbol used to differentiate those who adopt the world’s systems willingly with those who have the seal and name placed on their foreheads marking them as belonging to Christ (Rev 7:3, 4; 9:4; 14:1; 22:4).

Second, while Revelation points to the future, it is also deeply embedded in the Roman Empire. The book needed to make sense to the original audience that received it. The dynamics of buying and selling, for example, would not have been foreign to those reading Revelation (cf. Rev 2:8-11; 3:14-22). Trade guilds often incorporated pagan worship. Participating in those guilds as Christians would have required Christians to compromise their faith. Again, Revelation does point to the future, but it also establishes patterns of political, economic, and social dynamics that we continue to experience today. Digital IDs, then, could represent a present-day mechanism by which Christians are tempted or pressured to compromise their faith. To the extent that they encourage compromise, they would be problematic. Still, the more basic issue at stake is not the mechanism, but the compromise it produces.

Digital IDs may be problematic in many ways. It isn’t clear, however, that they represent an allegiance to “the beast.” Allegiance—either to Christ and his way or to the world and its way—is the primary issue in Revelation. If Digital IDs become more prevalent, they may come to require Christian compromise of some sort. At this point, the bigger problem seems to me to be an underlying techno-eschatology that displaces God as the sole hope for humanity and creation.

Q3: How does technology encourage an alternative eschatology?

In Christian theology, eschatology refers to the study of last things—the culmination of God’s purposes for this creation and the in-breaking of the new creation.

Eschatology is not the end of humanity or creation, but it’s restoration. Humanity will stand in the presence of God and, as we read in Revelation 21:4: “He [God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

Eschatology doesn’t just describe what will happen in the end; it also gives meaning to the present. How we live and who we seek to become is related to eschatology. Our future hope and conviction that God will be victorious shapes our behaviors and identities. We are called:

- to be faithful and watchful because Christ will return (Matt 24-25)
- to be steadfast in doing the work of the Lord because of the coming resurrection (1 Cor 15:58)
- to live as witnesses to the coming reality in which God will make all things new (Rev 21-22)

Eschatology is formative. It points to the end or goal of our lives encouraging us to live faithfully by reminding us that the faithful will overcome.

Though they don’t normally use the word “eschatology,” secular ideologies tend to adopt a vision of the future that gives meaning to history. In secular ideologies, God is replaced by narratives about progress toward some utopian future. As Richard Bauckham writes in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, “The idea of progress historicized eschatology in the sense that much of what Christian eschatology expected from God was now to be expected from incremental historical progress. Humanity was to be perfected by reason and education, and the world recreated through the great modern project of technological mastery of nature.” Technology often features in these narratives because technology and progress are closely connected.

While there is a form transhumanist philosophy that envisions a human upgrade to post-humanism, there are also what might be called softer forms of transhumanism. These softer forms encourage trust in and dependence on technology and human ingenuity. They envision a future where the disease of death can be overcome through technological innovation (see “[The Transhumanist Manifesto](#)”).

The basic point is that technology of various sorts can give us false hope, displacing God. We lean on new devices, medications, or innovations. God, not technology, is our hope. It is his action that will restore the world. While technologies may help us survive in this broken world, there is a difference between managing the world's chaos and fixing it. Technology may help us manage the world's brokenness or amplify some of our better tendencies, but it can't fix the world. As such, we need to situate technology—which is not necessarily a bad thing—within the context of our human lives today and in our hoped for future in which God reigns.

Q4: How can we be sober minded when thinking about digital technologies and Christian eschatology?

Eschatology is important; however, we can become overly obsessed with mapping the future. When we read books like Revelation, we shouldn't simply poke and prod for clues about what will happen and when. Doing so tends to overemphasize the referential aspects of the text to the detriment of the linguistic, visionary, and symbolic. As we read Revelation, we should not be so consumed with end time events that we fail to encounter Jesus (listen to my discussion with Shane J. Wood titled ["Encountering Christ in Revelation"](#) for more on this approach).

Christians need to recognize that eschatological speculation can easily become problematic. We need to acknowledge that trying to nail down a date when Christ will return is futile. We don't need to know all the details. Trying to seek them out can become a distraction.

It can be tempting to think of the latest technological advancements as signs that we are entering the final stages of the end times. While it is true that at some point, someone will be right about living in that final stage, it has always seemed better to me to think in terms of patterns. What we are seeing are recurring dynamics. For instance, rulers and nations seek to assert control, often in ways that rival or replace God's rightful authority. Technology frequently amplifies this tendency. Each generation develops new tools that promise security, prosperity, or unity—echoes of Babel's tower rising again and again from the plains of human ambition. The forms change—now it may be digital IDs, AI systems, or global data networks—but the underlying pattern remains the same: human beings striving to transcend their limitations apart from God. Recognizing these patterns allows us to discern the spirit of the age without succumbing to panic.

Being sober-minded means understanding that technology is a response to the world's brokenness. As a tool, technology has legitimate and illegitimate uses. Tools

can be used for God's glory or twisted to serve human ends, but they always reveal something about who or what we depend on. Do we depend on ourselves and our creations or do we depend on God within his creation? Rather than reacting to every new development as a potential fulfillment of prophecy, Christians would do well to interpret the times with an eye toward Christian witness: how might this or that new technology or situation stifle Christian witness? Revelation encourages us to endure in the faith rather than solving the problems of the world. That said, while we must trust Christ, we can still respond to the world's challenges through the use of technology. We simply need to be diligent in considering whether our efforts are restrained and guided by God's instruction.

Sober mindedness also requires hope. Eschatology is not meant to cultivate fear but perseverance and faithfulness. To be sober-minded is to live with a clear-eyed awareness of evil's persistence while maintaining confidence in Christ's victory. Our task is not to locate ourselves at some specific point in an eschatological scheme but to bear faithful witness regardless of where we are in history, trusting that the end belongs to God.

Finally, we remain sober when we let eschatology form us rather than simply fascinate us. Speculation that does not lead to sanctification is to be avoided. When we see the world through the hope of Christ's return, we can engage technology without fetishizing its potential or fearing its power. Those who wield technology for their own gain or use it in misguided ways to control and correct what is wrong in the world should not be ignored. Such people have an effect on the world. Yet, as Christians, it is our job to respond faithfully to God from within the situations he places us rather than responding to the situations themselves (watch "[Responding to God](#)" for more on this concept).

section two: the human condition & technology

Eschatology grounds us in hope, but technology can distance us from God if we are not careful. In today's world, technology has become a ready answer to almost any problem. Again, while technology has its place in a broken world, it is a response to diminished human capacity. Humans flourish in the presence of God. When our fellowship with God was fractured through sin, we lost capacity and used technology as a way to deal the difficulties we face in a fallen world. We see this in the transition from being naked and unashamed (Gen 2:25) to needing fig leaves and skins to cover our nakedness in Genesis (3:7, 21; for more on the connection between capacity and technology, see my draft chapter titled "Human Capacity and Technology" on my [Substack](#)). The next three questions explore why we keep turning to technology as our savior and how Christians can resist its subtle distortions of virtue, identity, and attention.

Q5: Why are we defaulting to technological solutions (despite the risks)?

Although Artificial Intelligence (AI) has received most of the press, the Enhanced Games provide an excellent example of the underlying philosophy driving much of our adoption of technology. The [Enhanced Games](#) "redefine super humanity through science, innovation and sports." The Enhanced Games use performance enhancing techniques and substances to maximize human performance while preserving the safety of athletes and competitors.

The Enhanced Games are rooted in Transhumanist-like principles. Transhumanism is a philosophical movement that advocated for using science and technology to transcend human biological limitations (for more on Transhumanism listen to "[How Should Christians Think about Transhumanism](#)"). The Enhanced Games website notes, "Scientific and technological advancements can be safely applied to sport. Their use should be embraced and celebrated in elite competition." The statement aligns with one of the basic tenets of transhumanism: that we can and should be able to overcome our biological limitations to become post-human (see Nick Bostrom's, "[Transhumanist Values](#)"). Technology thus becomes a means of improving our individual and collective lives—of becoming more than human.

So, why do we keep defaulting to technological solutions? In part, it is because the myth of progress has become so ingrained in our culture that it is difficult for us to escape. We also tend to default to technology because we have lost sight of what it means to be human. I like technology. I'd much rather be typing on a word processor

VERUM

SEMINARY

- AI-powered instruction
- Regularly scheduled Zoom sessions with expert faculty
- Low-cost (\$150 per course)
- Learn at your own pace

At Verum Seminary, we believe that theology is not merely an academic pursuit but an encounter with the ultimate reality—God Himself. Rooted in the conviction that God's truth shapes all of life, Verum Seminary equips students to live, lead, and bear witness in a world yearning for what is real.

The name Verum, Latin for "the true" or "the real," reflects our commitment to exploring the reality of God as revealed in Scripture and creation. At Verum Seminary, students are invited to seek not only knowledge but a transformative relationship with the God who defines all truth and reality.

Using a state-of-the-art, AI-powered educational platform, Verum Seminary offers a dynamic and accessible learning experience. This innovative approach delivers personalized learning paths, interactive content, and deep engagement with theological concepts—all while maintaining the depth and rigor of a traditional seminary education.

a Encounter the Reality of God. Live the Reality of Faith. **Learn to live in light of reality, particularly the reality of God with Verum Seminary.**

ENROLL TODAY

Find out more or enroll today at:
verumseminary.com or scan the QR code below.



than using a typewriter and white out or even writing something with pen and pencil. Still, technology can and does distance us from one another.

As Christians, we need to be asking how a given technological solution will benefit humanity—how will it reinforce what it means to be human—and how it will diminish it. Philosopher Albert Borgmann’s distinction between “devices” and “things” is instructive:

“A thing...is inseparable from its context, namely, its world, and from our commerce with the thing and its world, namely, engagement. The experience of a thing is always and also a bodily and social engagement with the thing’s world. In calling forth a manifold engagement, a thing necessarily provides more than one commodity. Thus a stove used to furnish more than mere warmth. It was a focus, a hearth, a place that gathered the work and leisure of a family and gave the house a center. Its coldness marked the morning and the spreading of its warmth the beginning of the day. It assigned to the different family members tasks that defined their place in the household. The mother built the fire, the children kept the firebox filled, and the father cut the firewood. It provided for the entire family a regular and bodily engagement with the rhythm of the seasons that was woven together of the threat of cold and the solace of warmth, the smell of wood smoke, the exertion of sawing and carrying, the teaching of skills, and the fidelity to daily tasks” (see *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, 41-42).

A centralized thermostat can’t replace all that the wood-burning stove provided, even though we tend to see a centralized thermostat as an advancement on the wood-burning stove. The efficiency of the thermostat supposedly “frees up” time for other things. As true as that may be, the other things we do don’t always draw us together in the same way that Borgmann’s example of the wood-burning stove describes. For efficient heating, a centralized heating system likely beats a wood-burning stove, but if we only consider the trade-off from the position of efficiency, we are highly likely to lose important aspects of life in the shift from a wood-burning stove to a thermostat. If we narrowly focus on efficiency when evaluating technology, newer technologies will likely outperform older technologies. That makes sense if what we are shooting for is efficiency. The trouble is that life isn’t only about efficiency. We need to be thinking about the things that make us human (e.g., relationships with others, hard work, rest, deliberation, etc.). When we don’t, we may find that we end up diminishing our own humanity.

Q6: Aren’t the efficiencies technology promises good for humanity?

Efficiency is a relational term—it is always related to a particular goal. We become efficient at doing something, but efficiency isn't always good. There are times when efficiency becomes robs us of the relationships and effort that is necessary for us to develop virtue and character. There are times when we need to engage in inefficient processes.

The Christian life often requires us to embrace inefficiency. Consider practices like prayer, contemplation, Bible study, and community seldom move at the pace of technology. They aren't efficient. They are slow, deliberative, iterative practices that we engage in not to be efficient but to be faithful. So, yes, efficiency can be a good thing, but it isn't always a good thing. To become like Christ, we don't need to abandon every efficiency technology provides, but we do have to ensure that we do not allow efficiency to drive us away from conforming to the image of Christ.

Efficiency isn't necessarily a bad thing. Some efficiencies can be helpful; however, even good types of efficiency can have what Edward Tenner calls "revenge effects... the ironic unintended consequences of mechanical, chemical, biological, and medical ingenuity." Think, for instance, of email. It is a more efficient way to communicate than "snail mail" allowing for quicker communication, file sharing, and storage. Still, emails speed can create pacing issues. We can't keep up with the stream of email coming into our inbox. When we try, we tend to lose focus on other things.

The "revenge effects" Tenner describes remind us that technology changes our world in unexpected ways. Once we have experienced technology's efficiency, we may assume it's better because it allows us to upgrade a particular aspect of our lives. Yet, the speed and convenience we experience may come at the cost of depth and discernment. We might trade formation for function and deep attention for shallow immediacy. Efficiency itself isn't a problem but in the way that it shapes the way we determine value—velocity becomes more important than virtue.

At times, we are right to consider how to make our life in the world more efficient, but we should always ask ourselves why we are pursuing efficiency. Efficiency isn't an abstract concept, nor is it one that doesn't lead somewhere. Understanding where our efficiencies are leading us and how they are shaping and forming who we are is crucial because God's people are not called to be efficient but faithful.

If efficiency appeals to our desire to get things done, algorithms, social media, and various other digital technologies shape our behaviors, interests, and desires. As people who are to be conformed to Christ's image, we need to ensure that we are cultivating virtue—aligning who we are with God's order. To do so, we need to change

the way we interact in the digital world.

Q7: How can Christians cultivate virtue in a world of algorithmic incentives?

The digital world is designed to form us, even when it pretends only to serve us. Every click, scroll, and reaction has the potential to train our desires and habits, reorienting our attention and keeping us engaged on anything other than God (see [“Reorienting Attention”](#) for more on this concept). Algorithms do not appeal to our best selves but to our most reactive ones—curiosity, outrage, fear, and pride. To cultivate virtue in such an environment, Christians must become acutely aware of how their digital habits shape the soul. Virtue is not an abstract ideal; it is a way of conforming to a particular order, practiced until it becomes second nature.

Cultivating virtues requires us to resist the urgencies of the day. Algorithms reward speed. Social media platforms encourage instant reactions, quick opinions, and emotional intensity. Virtue requires deliberation. Patience, gentleness, and self-control demand time and reflection. Christians must create rhythms that interrupt the economy of reaction: understanding before speaking, praying before posting, reflecting before sharing. Such simple acts of restraint allow us to cultivate a more deliberative lifestyle.

Virtue also requires reorientation toward the good. Algorithms tend to flatten value into preference—what we “like” becomes what is “good.” The good becomes something we choose instead of something that has a claim on us—an intrinsic part of reality that we don’t determine. But the Christian life begins not with preference but with participation in Christ and a recognition of his authority. We cultivate virtue by learning to live under the authority of Christ letting Him redefine our desires and rightly order our love (watch [“Reordering Loves”](#) on YouTube). When our loves are rightly ordered, our digital presence becomes less about self-expression and more about bearing witness.

Finally, virtue is sustained in community. We need fellow believers who remind us of what truly matters, who call us to account when we drift away from faithfulness, and who model patience and courage in their own lives. The cultivation of virtue in a digital age depends on recovering this shared pursuit of holiness. The church becomes the context where we learn not merely to resist the algorithms of our devices, but the deeper algorithms of sin that promise autonomy and deliver bondage. Virtue—conforming to God’s order—is a sign of our freedom. As we bear witness to Christ, we proclaim the gospel to a world that needs to hear it even when doing so may mean that we suffer negative consequences in the present.

section three: being known vs. being watched

Technology touches not only what we do but who we are. It has the ability to draw us away from dependence on God and toward independence from him. Just as technology can be both good and bad, it is also multifaceted. Its positive and negative effects aren't always straightforward. We need to consider the complex way technology can form and shape us. The following questions deal with the tension between visibility and identity—between being known as Christians and being watched by human systems.

Q8: Does having concerns about digital surveillance make you a conspiracy theorist?

In a 2001 interview on Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher, comedian George Carlin was accused by Horace Cooper, former Republican spokesman, of propagating conspiracy theories about buying elections and controlling the country. Carlin responded saying, “You don’t need a formal conspiracy when interests converge. These people went to the same universities and fraternities, they are on the same boards of directors, they’re in the same country clubs. They have like interests. They don’t need to call a meeting—they know what’s good for them.” Rather than assuming some plot cooked up by a ring of bad actors, Carlin highlights the challenge of shared interests. There is a shared disposition—a shared sense of how the world works.

As we consider the potential for digital surveillance, then, we should not relegate it to the realm of dystopian literature. The Orwellian vision of 1984 does not have to become reality for us to acknowledge that, at some point, it may become conducive for corporations and governing authorities to use our data to further their own agendas. Some of those agendas may be motivated by a desire for human flourishing. Others may be anti-human.

The implications of pursuing a given agenda via technology won’t always be transparent to those pursuing it. For instance, commenting on the web today, Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web, notes, “We demonstrated that the Web had failed instead of served humanity.” He goes on to suggest that the Web “ended up producing—with no deliberate action of the people who designed the platform—a large-scale emergent phenomenon which is anti-human.” Whether or not you agree with his conclusions, Berners-Lee’s comments illustrate the life that technology can take on apart for any “deliberate action” by those who create it.

Michael Shermer, author of Conspiracy, suggests, “Because both history and current events are brimming with real conspiracies, I contend that conspiracism is a rational response to a dangerous world.” In the case of digital IDs and data centers, some conspiratorial thinking may be warranted, particularly the sort Shermer characterizes as “realistic conspiracy theories, pertaining to normal political institutions and corporate entities that are conspiring to manipulate the system to gain an unfair, immoral, and sometimes illegal advantage over others.”

Surveillance isn't a conspiracy theory. The House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance held a hearing in April of 2025 to evaluate patterns of government surveillance of U. S. Citizens. In 2024, the American Bar Association issued a statement on Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) noting, “The government collects and stockpiles enormous amounts of Americans’ international communications, including their texts, emails, phone calls, and chats on social media platforms. While the law requires this surveillance to be directed at people overseas, the government casts such a wide net that it invariably sweeps up Americans—including many who are communicating with family members, friends, or business contacts abroad. U.S. intelligence agencies describe this spying on Americans as ‘incidental,’ but in reality, the government treats it as a rich, ongoing source of intelligence for domestic investigations.”

I would argue that having concerns about digital surveillance—and thus components that have the potential to be employed in digital surveillance like digital IDs or data centers—is appropriate. We should evaluate new technologies so that those concerns are addressed. I am not suggesting that we dismiss ideas out of hand, nor would I advocate for eschatologically driven speculation. We need to be aware of the dangers new technologies may pose, the way technologies are being used, and how it may impact our everyday lives. Still, as Christians, we should take care not to correlate surveillance and persecution too closely. After all, if the government has to discover that we are Christians by mining our private communications, we may be doing something wrong.

Q9: What's the difference between being watched and being known?

Christians are supposed to be known. We are known by God, but we should also be known by others. We don't hide who we are, nor do we stop proclaiming the gospel in the face of pressure and persecution. We are to make Christ and our allegiance to Him known even if it means suffering loss.

Because we are to be known, one part of the concern with digital surveillance is

virtually eliminated. We aren't hiding our commitment to Christ, so whether we are recognized by our unwillingness to engage in pagan worship practices and unable to participate in the social and economic life of the world or are recorded on a list makes little difference. We are to be known as Christians even when being Christian brings negative social and economic consequences (Rev 2:8-11; 3:14-22). As Joseph Mangina states in Revelation, "The utterly unsentimental witness of the Apocalypse is that, in the larger scheme of things, the church needs to be prepared to lose, not because failure is good, but because this happens to be that nature of the story in which we are involved."

This understanding of being known doesn't mean that we should have no concern about being watched. Jeremy Bentham's inspection principle, which was demonstrated in the Hawthorne effect studies of the 1920's and 1930's, suggest that when we think we are being watched by someone whose job is to enforce a set of norms, we are more likely to perform according to those norms. Bentham believed that surveillance would influence those being watched so that they didn't misbehave.

In Panopticon, he notes, "the more constantly the persons to be inspected are under the eyes of the person who should inspect them, the more perfectly will the purpose of the establishment have been accomplished." He goes on to admit that perpetual surveillance is both impractical and—at least theoretically—unnecessary. Constant surveillance may be preferred, but so long as the one being watched thinks he or she is being watched, the inspection principle holds. According to Bentham, being able to monitor the behavior of others would result in "morals reformed, health preserved, industry invigorated, instruction diffused, public burdens lightened, economy seated as it were upon a rock, the Gordian knot of the poor-laws not cut but untied."

As Christians, we know God is watching, but we are not immune from other "watchers," nor should we think we are exempt from the scrutiny of governing authorities (Rom 13:1-7). If we were, for example, under 24-hour surveillance, it is highly likely that our behavior would change—we might be more likely to compromise our convictions. Being watched, in other words, reinforces expectations that may dampen our zeal for the gospel. We might not actively compromise our faith, but, as Jürgen Moltmann rightly notes,

"It is usually said that sin in its original form is man's wanting to be as God. But that is only the one side of sin. The other side of such pride is hopelessness, resignation, inertia and melancholy...Temptation then consists not so much in the titanic desire to be as God, but in weakness, timidity, weariness, not wanting to be what God requires of us."

Being watched is, I would submit, has less to do with persecution than is often assumed—we are to be known as Christians and because we are known we may experience persecution--and more to do with compromise as we bow to the ongoing pressures of the world. At the same time, I do not wish to minimize the experiences of Christians living in surveillance states. It is not that being surveilled (or watched) can't be problematic for Christians. It certainly can be. Whether we are being watched or not, we cannot hide the fact that we are Christians. The point, however, is that the church is to be known.

Q10: How might Christian communities serve as an alternative to surveillance culture?

In his book titled *Torture and Eucharist*, William Cavanaugh notes, “There is no way to ease into the subject of torture.” We might say the same for surveillance. Surveillance implies that someone is always watching. That “someone” wants us to behave in a certain way and has the data and coercive power to produce those behaviors. Surveillance is observation, but not necessarily intimacy. It allows for the redirection of behavior according to expectations that may or may not align with God's order.

Such is the basic conundrum of surveillance—of being watched: it all depends on who is watching and what expectations and norms they are reinforcing. Our behavior isn't simply shaped by a single, tyrannical authority, but by a myriad of forces and pressures emerging from society more generally. As Vaclav Havel's “Power to the Powerless” illustrates, the expectations of society often condition the way we behave. Havel's greengrocer demonstrates the influence society can have on our behavior. It is worth quoting at length below:

“The manager of a fruit-and-vegetable shop places in his window, among the onions and carrots, the slogan: ‘Workers of the world, unite!’...I think it can safely be assumed that the overwhelming majority of shopkeepers never think about the slogans they put in their windows, nor do they use them to express their real opinions. That poster was delivered to our greengrocer from the enterprise headquarters along with the onions and carrots. He put them all into the window simply because it has been done that way for years, because everyone does it, and because that is the way it has to be. If he were to refuse, there could be trouble. He could be reproached for not having the proper decoration in his window; someone might even accuse him of disloyalty. He does it because these things must be done if one is to get along in life. It is one of the thousands of details that guarantee him a relatively tranquil life ‘in harmony with society,’ as they say.

Obviously the greengrocer is indifferent to the semantic content of the slogan. The manager of a fruit-and-vegetable shop places in his window, among the onions and carrots, the slogan: 'Workers of the world, unite!...'I think it can safely be assumed that the overwhelming majority of shopkeepers never think about the slogans they put in their windows, nor do they use them to express their real opinions. That poster was delivered to our greengrocer from the enterprise headquarters along with the onions and carrots. He put them all into the window simply because it has been done that way for years, because everyone does it, and because that is the way it has to be. If he were to refuse, there could be trouble. He could be reproached for not having the proper decoration in his window; someone might even accuse him of disloyalty. He does it because these things must be done if one is to get along in life. It is one of the thousands of details that guarantee him a relatively tranquil life 'in harmony with society,' as they say.

on exhibit; he does not put the slogan in his window from any personal desire to acquaint the public with the ideal it expresses. This, of course, does not mean that his action has no motive or significance at all, or that the slogan communicates nothing to anyone. The slogan is really a sign, and as such it contains a subliminal but very definite message. Verbally, it might be expressed this way: 'I, the greengrocer XY, live here and I know what I must do. I behave in the manner expected of me. I can be depended upon and am beyond reproach. I am obedient and therefore I have the right to be left in peace.' This message, of course, has an addressee: it is directed above, to the greengrocer's superior, and at the same time it is a shield that protects the greengrocer from potential informers. The slogan's real meaning, therefore, is rooted firmly in the greengrocer's existence. It reflects his vital interests. But what are those vital interests?"

Like Havel's greengrocer, we are pressured to put up signs in our windows that allow us to go along to get along. When we know we are being watched, it is easy to change our behavior to conform to expectations that may or may not reflect conformity to Christ.

Christian community has the potential to be something different. The church offers a radical alternative: a fellowship where truth and grace coexist, where confession leads to restoration rather than punishment., and where aligning with God's order is paramount. Christian community watches to care. Any evaluation given of one's behavior is intended to result in ongoing sanctification and restoration. Christian community, to the extent that it recognizes Christ's authority, employs social pressure

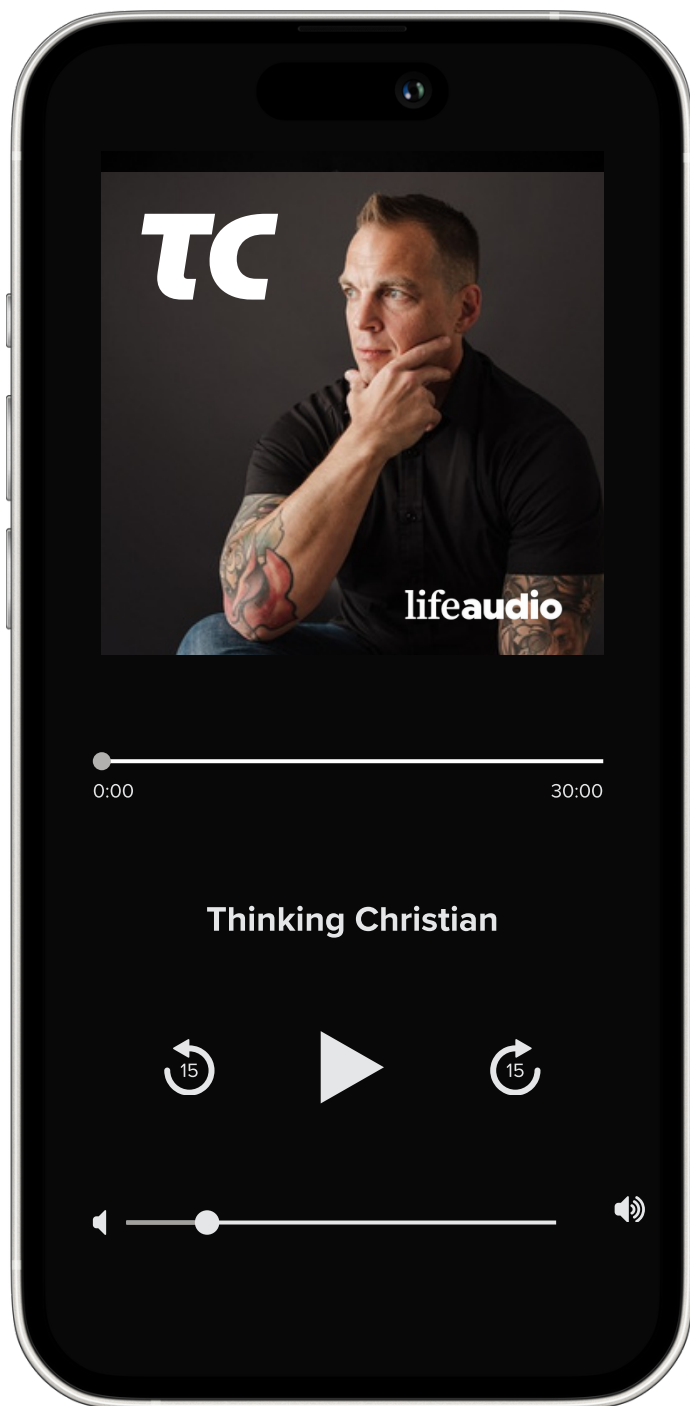
for the purpose of encouraging every member of the body of Christ to imitate the Master.

To serve as an alternative, Christian communities must cultivate practices of presence—knowledge with intimacy—rather than surveillance—knowledge without intimacy. Shared meals, corporate worship, and acts of service embody a kind of knowing that cannot be captured by data or metrics. These practices communicate, “You are not a profile or a dataset—you are a person made in God’s image.” The church thus becomes a living sign of God’s relational knowledge of His people—a space where visibility is transformed from observation into communion.

Such communities must also resist the temptation to adopt surveillance logics themselves. Churches that measure success solely by considering attendance data, clicks, or engagement analytics risk merging with the systems for which they are to provide an alternative. Faithful communities prioritize formation over performance, trust over tracking, and faithfulness over efficiency. This may mean embracing smaller gatherings, slower communication, or less polished presentation. What matters most is not how much data we can collect, but how faithfully we embody the love of Christ.

Finally, Christian community can serve as a sign to the world that Jesus is King. When believers live as those known and loved by God, they offer an alternative to the emptiness of a culture obsessed with control. At its best, the church’s transparency flows from repentance, humility, and hope, not from algorithmic accountability. In such a community, the watching world glimpses the truth that real freedom is not the absence of observation, but the presence of grace. The church becomes the one place where being known is not dangerous, but redemptive.

TC Thinking Christian.



**Calm, Thoughtful,
Theological Conversation.**

Hosted by James Spencer, PhD, the Thinking Christian Podcast is the heart of our platform. Each week, James provides commentary on various theological issues, current events, and biblical texts, as well as interviewing Christian authors, scholars, ministry leaders, athletes, musicians, and actors. Thinking Christian is available on all major podcasting platforms and is part of Salem's LifeAudio network.

SUBSCRIBE TODAY



Podcast



YouTube

www.thinkingchristianpodcast.com

section four: systems, structures, & control

Having explored some of the personal and spiritual dimensions, we now turn to the structural realities that define our digital world—how information is gathered, stored, and governed. The focus of the following section is admittedly narrow. It deals with digital IDs and data centers. While it is not covered in the current document, artificial intelligence needs to be kept in mind in this conversation. AI is allowing governmental agencies and corporations to leverage collected data in ways that was previously impossible. Yet, AI cannot work without infrastructure. It needs some application—a real-life use case—to serve the potentially problematic ambitions of those seeking to control or take advantage of the world’s brokenness. Digital IDs and data centers are part of that infrastructure.

Q11: What are digital IDs and data centers?

Digital IDs

Not all digital IDs are equal. They tend to differ in type, use-case, technology, and structure (See table 1 below for a comparison of some of the cards already in use). Because of the various differences between the digital IDs currently in use, it may be helpful to discuss the various features of the digital IDs rather than dismissing them altogether.

What are those features? We can divide them into four basic categories:

1. Breadth of Use/Use Case
 - *Foundational*: Designed to serve as a general-purpose identification system across multiple arenas of life (e.g., voting, banking, healthcare, government services, travel, employment, etc.)
 - *Functional*: Narrow identity confirmation purposes not necessarily spanning multiple fields (e.g., a digital driver’s license or social security number)
2. Legal Requirement
 - *Mandatory*: Legally required to utilize a digital ID
 - *Quasi-mandatory*: Not technically required legally, but de facto required due to use cases
 - *Optional*: Available for use instead of a physical ID
3. Underlying Technology: Digital IDs are not all built on the same underlying technology. See Table 1 for information.
4. Data Storage Strategy

- *Centralized*: All identity data is stored in a single location controlled by a governmental entity
- *Decentralized*: Data is stored in separate databases and transferred between them through a secure data exchange
- *Device-based*: Identity data is stored locally on a user's smartphone (think Apple Wallet)
- *Blockchain + mobile*: Data stored on a user's device and verified against data on the blockchain.

5. Data Collected

- *Biometric data*: India's Aadhaar digital ID collects the most comprehensive data set used for identification purposes. It requires the collection of fingerprints, iris scans, and facial recognition. Estonia's e-ID also requires fingerprints though they are not used for authentication purposes at this point.
- *Demographic data*: This data set can include information such as name, date of birth, gender, address, citizen information, etc.

6. Data Access/Permissions/Controls

- *Governmental Entities*: In cases like Estonia and India, governmental entities have access to all data stored. In instances like South Korea and the mobile Driver's License, users have more control over their data.
- *Private Sector Companies*: Again, Aadhaar is uniquely problematic and concerning because it creates a broad authentication infrastructure that private companies are allowed to query. Citizens have low control over their data. In other cases, individuals can choose to share their information with institutions, such as banks.
- *Individuals*: Individuals tend to have access to their information across the board.

At least two considerations need to be considered when thinking about this broad typology. First, the categories are not rigid. A digital ID could begin as optional and decentralized and then shift to required and centralized. Just because a digital ID begins with a limited breadth of use doesn't mean it couldn't expand over time. As such, it is important to understand the more extreme cases like Aadhaar, as well as more reasonable systems like that of South Korea. Policy frameworks (e.g., user-controlled information), baseline technology strategies (e.g., blockchain and device-based technology), and data storage and access should be scrutinized carefully in any adoption of digital IDs.

Second, if and when governing authorities in the United States begin conversations about digital IDs, we need to be prepared to ask intelligent questions about these

systems rather than accepting the “efficiency and convenience” argument without further discussion. There are some forms of digital ID that seem relatively innocuous (e.g., mobile driver’s license, South Korea’s digital ID system), but vigilance and deliberation continue to be necessary.

Data Centers

Governmental and private sector data centers house applications and data critical to a given enterprise. Data centers can contain structured and unstructured data of various sort. Government data centers store personal information from census data, tax records, identification documents, etc. After the 2010 Federal Data Center Consolidation Initiative (FDCCI), data management has become a bigger part of the federal government’s agenda. You can see their strategy for federal data [here](#).

While data centers may not seem particularly dangerous at the moment, they create an underlying infrastructure for data storage, data mining, and centralized digital ID strategies. These data centers may be necessary; however, they also create capacities that should not be ignored. Central to the question about data centers is who has access to the data and for what purposes.

Q12: What are the upsides and downsides of digital IDs and data centers?

Digital IDs

In general, proponents of digital IDs point to increased efficiency and convenience for uses and operators. Fraud prevention or reduction also appears to be a strength of digital IDs. This reduction in fraud pertains not only to the financial sector but also to the distribution of government aid. Beyond preventing fraud, digital IDs are often credited with reducing or eliminating duplicate beneficiaries of government funds.

However, digital IDs are susceptible to data breaches. For example, Aadhaar, India’s digital ID, for instance, has reported multiple [breaches](#), raising [questions about the security of the system](#). In addition to breaches, there have been instances of surveillance and [private sector data-mining](#). Though Aadhaar seems to have more issues than some of the other digital IDs, Estonia’s e-ID has also had some issues, including: [programming errors](#), [technical flaws](#) that would have made users susceptible to identity theft, and a [malware attack](#).

These examples are not representative of all digital IDs, but they do provide examples of the way that systems can go wrong. Any shift toward digital IDs of this sort, needs to be interacting analyzing why these systems failed and how such failures might be mitigated. In certain instances, specifically Aadhaar, it is difficult to believe that the

upsides outweigh the downsides.

Data Centers

As one might assume, data centers are necessary to store, access, and secure data transmitted over the internet. Data centers enable electronic health records, real-time payments, fraud detection, inventory management, and online shopping. They also provide backup capabilities to guard against data loss due to hardware failures, cyberattacks, and natural disasters.

Data centers offer many benefits, there are some notable downsides. Data centers require massive amounts of energy that many communities are struggling to supply. There are also certain security and privacy risks, including the potential for mass surveillance.

Digital IDs and data centers aren't perfect, but what is? Banks can be robbed, physical IDs can be faked, credit cards can be stolen. No system is completely immune to bad actors. Still, we need to be informed about the specific dangers associated with new technologies. How data will be protected and used is crucial. While clickable terms and conditions allowed companies to meet the legal requirements for communicating how data would be used, those terms and conditions are far from transparent.

Beyond these practical benefits and concerns, we must also reflect on how the data we attend to shapes our understanding of ourselves and one another. Broad-scale data that generalizes human behavior is valuable, but it must be balanced with an organic, relational understanding of individuals in their particularity. When people are reduced to data points, something essential is lost. As necessary as it may be to collect data and statistics, they cannot be the only lenses through which we view humanity. Nor should they define how governing authorities see us—though, too often, they do.

Q13: How can we understand the relationship between information and governance?

In his book *Seeing Like a State*, James C. Scott argues, "Certain forms of knowledge and control requires a narrowing of vision." According to Scott, this narrowing of vision allowed the state to make the society over which it ruled more "legible." Without some principle of abstraction that would turn individual persons into a set of manageable data points, the governing authorities found it difficult to manage the day-to-day affairs of their territory. As Scott notes, "In state 'fiscal forestry,' however, the actual tree with its vast number of possible uses was replaced by an abstract tree

representing a volume of lumber or firewood.” The real-life “thing” is translated into information that can be tracked, measured, and monitored.

In seeking to make the world easier to understand, the state runs the risk of oversimplifying the complexities that exist in the real world. The “map” would become the “territory” replacing reality with a representation of it (see Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*). In essence, the state constructs a false understanding of the world it oversees and, as a result, becomes less capable of overseeing it.

Consider, for instance, the Facebook Files leaked in 2021. Facebook had plenty of user data, but the company took a narrow view of its users and continued to develop their platform even when it became clear that their platform was harmful to some of those using it, namely teenage girls. Users were treated simply as data points to be monetized rather than as complex individuals, some of whom might be better off not using the platform. This perspective may seem overly bleak, but the relative lack of action taken by Facebook—even up to the present day—suggests that the company either doesn’t believe the research, feels it is relatively inconsequential, or simply doesn’t care (see “Instagram Promised to Become Safer for Teens. Researchers Say It’s Not Working” at time.com).

As Christians reflect on the implications of data centers, data mining, and digital IDs, we must keep in mind the dynamic Scott describes. As governments rely increasingly on abstracted representations of reality—statistics and data analyses—they inevitably flatten the contours of actual human experience. Part of our responsibility is to consider how our participation in data sharing contributes to this flattening. Yes, sharing our data has implications for our privacy, but it also affects how ruling authorities or corporations perceive and interact with us—whether as complex beings or merely as profiles.

Feature	Estonia (e-ID)	India (Aadhaar)	South Korea (i-PIN)	U. S. (Mobile DL's)
Type	Mandatory	Quasi-Mandatory	Voluntary	Functional
Technology	PKI, Chip-Card, Mobile	Biometric	Mobile + Blockchain	Mobile
Storage	Decentralized	Centralized	Device-based	Device-based
Use Case	Government services, voting, signatures	Welfare, financial inclusion, fraud reduction	Governmental and Private services	TSA, Age Verification, Driving
Coverage	Universal	Universal	Universal	Varies by State

Table 1: Comparison of Digital IDs

section five: privacy, rights, & the common good

Information technologies blur the boundary between public and private life, creating a world in which our thoughts, habits, and relationships are constantly subject to visibility, surveillance, and interpretation. What once remained personal—our preferences, movements, even emotions—can now be captured, analyzed, and commodified. This collapse of distance between the public and private spheres raises not only legal and ethical questions about consent, ownership, and control, but also profoundly theological ones.

At its core, privacy touches on what it means to be a person before God and others. If every action, word, and inclination is recorded, who holds the right to know us fully? Scripture affirms that only God truly searches the heart and mind. When human systems attempt to assume that role, they risk distorting our understanding of personhood, freedom, and relational trust. The next set of questions, then, wrestles with privacy not merely as a matter of data protection or social contract, but as a theological issue—one that invites us to consider the sacredness of the hidden life, the divine prerogative to know, and the integrity of our relationships in a world that no longer easily distinguishes between what is seen and unseen.

Q14: What is the place of privacy in an information age?

The simple answer is that the place of privacy is currently uncertain. As the capacity for data collection and analysis expands, we face ongoing decisions about what data to surrender and what data to keep under our control. While the digital age certainly raises new concerns about privacy, even philosophers like Plato considered the relationship between privacy and the public good.

The basic privacy debate hasn't changed much over the years. We are consistently in the position of negotiating our willingness to give up certain information about ourselves for the good of our community and our desire to protect against tyrannical excess—protecting ourselves (and others!) from government overreach. In an information age, we also have an increased concern for bad actors.

In addition to privacy as we normally think about it—the freedom from being observed and/or disturbed by others—we now have to consider something of a pseudo-privacy due to AI deepfakes. Because the virtual world and the real world have begun to merge together, there is a sense in which deepfake representations have a similar “exposure” effect as the release of actual data.

Overall, privacy in the information age is in flux. There is a need for ongoing negotiation and re-negotiation as new technological possibilities arise. It seems appropriate for us to retain some level of privacy while, at the same time, acknowledging that self-protection via privacy can go too far. We are individuals, but we are also part of multiple communities. We can't simply make decisions based on what is good for us. We also need to consider how our decisions contribute to the common good.

Though she does not address privacy, Nancy Pearcey's distinction between contractual and covenantal relationship in *The Toxic War on Masculinity* is instructive. She suggests, "Both [covenants and contracts] are agreements, but the differences between them are crucial. A contract defines an exchange of goods and services. But a covenant defines a moral relationship between persons. In a contract, I seek my own interests, I strike a deal. But in a covenant, I seek the common good of the relationship and everyone in it." It seems appropriate for Christians to think in covenantal terms as we consider how to reinforce the common good while pointing beyond that good to the Triune God who defines what "good" is.

Q15: Is privacy a right, a privilege, a theological necessity, or something else?

In the United States, there are several laws and court decisions that recognize citizens' right to privacy. For instance, the fourth amendment protects against unreasonable searches and seizures where a person has a reasonable expectation of privacy (see *Katz v. United States*). *Griswold v. Connecticut* also found that "a right to privacy can be inferred from several amendments in the Bill of Rights and this right prevents states from making the use of contraception by married couple's illegal." Privacy is also addressed in the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), and Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). The U. S. places a high value on the right to privacy though there is a sense in which digital technologies are posing a threat to privacy (see "*Privacy is Not For Sale, and Neither is Democracy*").

Privacy is clearly a right, but is it more than that? Does the Bible speak to privacy? To a certain extent, yes. We need to be careful, however, not to assume that our notion of privacy would have been the same as that found in the ancient world. The Israelites recognized private property and public spaces; however, Israel's private property was understood within the context of divine ownership (Lev 25:23; cf. Josh 22:19; Hos 9:3; Ps 85:1; Jer 16:18). God apportioned land, property, etc., to the Israelites (as he continues to do with us) who were responsible to steward what belonged to God. Modern notions of private property rarely operate within this sort of theological framework.

Several biblical passages suggest principles related to privacy:

- Deuteronomy 24:10 says a lender should not enter a borrower's home to collect what is owed, but should wait outside for the borrower to bring it out
- Proverbs 11:13 speaks against revealing secrets (cf. Prov 17:9; 20:19; 25:9)
- Daniel 6:10 portrays Daniel's private prayers
- Matthew 18:15 encourages a private meeting with someone who has wronged another
- Jesus and his disciples also meet together in private suggesting that—at the very least—authorize private conversations (Matt 17:19; 24:3; Mk 4:34; Lk 9:10; Jn 11:28)).

These verses provide broad parameters for respecting the privacy of others. They imply an expectation that certain matters are to be kept private. However, the Bible does not directly address the specific privacy issues we face today.

In summary, Scripture supports an expectation of privacy grounded in God's order. Ownership—or stewardship—was to be respected. The prohibitions against theft and coveting affirm that property and relationships have their proper place. Moreover, spreading information can sometimes cause harm. There must be a realm of confidence where people trust that what is said and done will remain private. Thus, there is a biblical basis for preserving privacy, connected both to God's wise ordering of property and community and to the peace that can be disrupted when secrets are revealed through slander or gossip

section six: formation & faithful presence

Having considered the theological, structural, and ethical dimensions of the digital age, the final questions turn toward practice—how believers and churches can live wisely and bear witness in this context. We still need to have everyday tactics we can use to avoid falling prey to some of the digital dynamics that might lead us away from Christ. We need to be prepared.

Q16: What kind of preparation is necessary for Christians to bear faithful witness in a digital age?

Faithful witness in the digital age requires cultivating attention, not merely managing information. The constant hum of digital life trains us to react quickly and superficially, forming habits of distraction that are incompatible with the patience and discernment the Christian life demands. Bearing witness to Christ in such a world begins with the slow, interior work of learning to attend—to God, to others, and to reality itself. Preparation involves reclaiming the capacity for deep focus, contemplation, and relational presence.

We also need theological clarity. Christians must understand that the digital world is not neutral ground, but a realm shaped by particular visions of power, success, and identity. Algorithms, platforms, and technologies are not simply tools; they are environments that form our loves and loyalties. If we are to bear faithful witness, we must learn to inhabit these environments without adopting their assumptions about truth and value. That means recovering a distinctly biblical imagination—a way of seeing all of life, including the digital, through the lens of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.

Practically speaking, such preparation requires embodied disciplines. Prayer, silence, Scripture reading, and fellowship are not quaint religious exercises but forms of resistance against digital fragmentation. These practices orient us toward reality and anchor our witness in God's presence rather than in public approval. They re-form our attention so that our engagement with technology becomes intentional and worshipful rather than compulsive and self-referential.

Ultimately, preparation for faithful witness is less about learning new digital strategies and more about recovering ancient ones. It is about becoming the sort of people whose identity in Christ remains stable even when our digital environments shift. Faithful witness grows out of spiritual integrity—out of being the same person before

God in secret as we are in public online spaces.

Q17: How can Christians prepare themselves today?

Preparation begins with repentance—an honest reckoning with how deeply the patterns of the digital world have shaped us. We must acknowledge the ways we have traded contemplation for consumption, communion for connectivity, and spiritual depth for digital visibility. Repentance is not simply about rejecting technology but about turning from misplaced trust. It is a reordering of loves, a conscious movement from the immediacy of the digital toward the enduring reality of God.

From repentance flows reorientation. Christians must recover rhythms that root them in God's time rather than the tyranny of the urgent. This might include Sabbath from screens, daily prayer before digital engagement, or fasting from media that feeds envy, anger, or anxiety. These practices are countercultural—they interrupt the constant motion of the digital world and train us to wait, listen, and respond rather than react. Formation happens through such interruptions.

Embodiment is another crucial dimension. The digital realm tempts us to live as disembodied minds curating experiences rather than living lives. We prepare ourselves by re-engaging the physical: sharing meals, serving neighbors, worshiping in person, and delighting in creation. These embodied acts remind us that grace is not abstract but incarnational. Christ came in the flesh, and our discipleship must remain grounded in flesh-and-blood reality.

Finally, preparation involves cultivating wisdom. We cannot predict every technological shift, but we can become the kind of people who respond to change faithfully. That requires learning to see the world sacramentally—to recognize God's presence and purposes in every sphere, including the digital. Preparation is not about escape but about readiness. The question is not whether we will inhabit the digital world, but whether we will do so as its disciples or as disciples of Jesus within it.

Q18: How can the church help prepare Christians to resist the pressures of the world in a digital age?

The church's role is to model a different kind of community—a community that forms people in truth and love rather than in self-promotion and competition. In a world obsessed with visibility, the church must become a place of depth. Its rhythms of worship, confession, and communion slow us down and draw our attention to God and one another. By gathering around Word and Table, the church teaches us that

presence, not productivity, is the essence of Christian life.

Teaching and formation must also address the digital explicitly. Churches should help believers understand not only how to use technology but how technology uses us—how it shapes our imaginations, desires, and sense of identity. Sermons, classes, and small groups can become spaces for theological reflection on digital habits, inviting honest dialogue about how our online lives align with our confession of faith. In doing so, the church reclaims its role as a community of discernment.

Beyond instruction, the church must foster covenantal relationships. Many of the pressures of the digital world—comparison, anxiety, isolation—thrive in the absence of genuine community. The church offers an alternative, a fellowship where people are known and loved not for their performance but for their participation in Christ. Within such relationships, we are strengthened to resist conformity to the world's patterns because we are reminded daily of who we are and whose we are.

Finally, the church should embody hope. Our resistance is not rooted in fear of technology but in faith in God's sovereignty. The digital age, with all its complexity, lies within the providence of the Creator. The church's task is not to retreat but to bear witness—to show that life together under Christ's lordship offers a more human, more joyful way of being. By living differently, the church prepares its people to live faithfully.

Q19: How can Christians exercise discernment in using and adopting technology?

Discernment begins with the recognition that every technology carries a theology. Each device, platform, or system embodies assumptions about what is valuable, what it means to be human, and how the world should be ordered. Christians must learn to see through the promises of convenience and efficiency to the underlying vision of life that each technology promotes. That vision must then be tested against Scripture and the character of Christ.

Such discernment requires humility. We are often too quick to adopt new tools because they seem useful or impressive. Yet wisdom calls for patience—the willingness to ask whether a given technology draws us toward or away from love of God and neighbor. Before adopting a tool, we might ask: Will this deepen my attention, or divide it? Will it enhance community, or replace it? Will it make me more human, or more mechanical? These questions slow us down long enough to remember what matters most.

Community is essential to discernment. Individual judgment is limited, and the power of cultural momentum is strong. We need others—pastors, friends, fellow believers—to help us see what we cannot see ourselves. The body of Christ provides perspective and accountability, ensuring that our choices about technology align with our shared confession of faith. Discernment is not a solitary activity but a communal practice of seeking wisdom together.

Ultimately, discernment aims not at rejection but at redemption. The goal is not to abandon technology but to inhabit it faithfully—to use it as a means of serving God’s purposes rather than substituting it for them. When technology helps us love more deeply, steward creation more wisely, and proclaim Christ more clearly, it becomes a servant of grace. But when it tempts us to trust in our own power, it must be resisted. Discernment teaches us to know the difference.

Q20: What can Christians in the United States do to voice concerns about digital IDs, data centers, and AI policy?

Christians should engage questions of technology and policy as informed participants, not as fearful bystanders. The first act of faithful engagement is learning—understanding how digital IDs, data centers, and artificial intelligence systems function, what values they embody, and how they affect human dignity. Thoughtful participation in public life requires knowledge. Without it, our voices lack credibility and nuance, and our moral insights go unheard.

Once informed, believers should speak with both conviction and grace. We are called to advocate for policies that honor human dignity, transparency, and justice. This can take the form of writing to legislators, joining advocacy organizations, contributing to public discussions, or supporting ethical innovation within the tech industry. Our participation should be marked by humility and courage—refusing both naïve optimism and cynical withdrawal.

Christians can also model alternative values in their personal and institutional choices. Churches, ministries, and Christian organizations can prioritize data stewardship, protect privacy, and champion ethical technology practices. Such local acts of integrity often speak louder than public statements, demonstrating that technology can be governed by love of neighbor rather than by profit or power. Faithful presence in the digital sphere becomes its own form of advocacy.

Finally, our witness must be rooted in hope. Policy engagement is important, but our ultimate confidence is not in legislation or regulation. It is in the reign of Christ, who

holds all things—including the digital future—under His authority. As we participate in public debates, we do so not out of fear of losing control but out of faith that God is sovereign. Christians who speak from hope, not hysteria, can offer the world a rare and much-needed gift: theological clarity grounded in trust.

conclusion

We cannot escape being watched, but we can choose by whom we will be defined. The Christian hope is not that surveillance will end but that the One who truly sees us will also redeem us. Our task is not to predict the end of the world but to live faithfully within it—to use technology without letting it use us, to speak truthfully even when it costs us, and to remain known by God even as the world monitors and measures us. The digital age may tempt us to anxiety, but Revelation reminds us that the Lamb already reigns. The world's systems may count and track and sort, but they cannot number the saints. In the end, our confidence does not lie in privacy, encryption, or policy but in promise—the promise that the God who sees us will also vindicate us. To be known by Him is not to be exposed but to be redeemed. That is the truest kind of security the digital world can never offer.

TC

Thinking Christian