



Understanding the Algorithms

Shepherding in the Digital Age

by Fr. George Jackson Louis

The New Public Square and Its Invisible Curators



Digital Presence

Social media: the new public square where communities form, values shape, identities forge

Missionary Imperative

Engaging this space isn't optional—it's fulfilling the call to go into all the world



Algorithms: The Invisible Curators



Complex Rules

Sorting machines that decide what content each user sees



Commercial Agenda

Goal: maximize time on platform for data collection and ad revenue

Our Mission

Equip pastors with a nuanced understanding of digital systems to shepherd effectively in the digital age.

Move beyond surface-level social media strategies to develop a robust theological framework for digital ministry.

"Become loving neighbors genuinely present on the digital highways where our communities gather."



Session Journey

Demystify the Machine

What algorithms are and what they want

The New Scribe: AI

AI's role in ministry content creation

Platform Case Studies

YouTube and Instagram in action

Pastoral Implications

Framework for shepherding in the algorithmic age



Digital Space Is Not Neutral

Platform Telos

Maximize engagement
through heightened emotion

Christian Telos

Reflection, nuance, peace,
embodied community

Part 1: Demystifying the Digital Curators

What Do They Want?



What Is an Algorithm?

A Recipe

Set of instructions to solve a problem

A Filter

Sorts overwhelming content volume

A Predictor

Shows what it thinks will engage you



The Prime Directive: Economics of Attention

Algorithms optimize for time spent,
not truth, beauty, or edification

Platforms are businesses selling
user attention to advertisers



Three Pillars of Algorithmic Relevance

How algorithms assess content for each user:

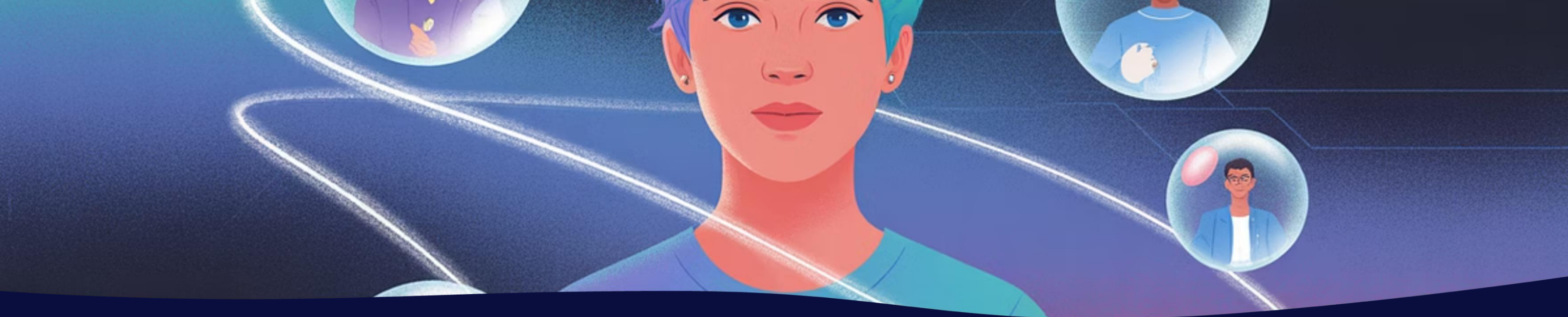




Pillar 1: Relationship

Who you know

- Monitors interaction history with accounts
- Measures "relationship strength" through likes, comments, messages
- Favors showing church content to already-engaged members



Pillar 2: Interest

What you like

- Builds profile of user's broader interests
- Analyzes past behavior: videos watched, posts lingered on
- Uses "collaborative filtering" to find "digital twins"



Pillar 3: Timeliness & Popularity

What's happening now
Recency

Newer posts favored over
older ones

Engagement Velocity

Speed of accumulating
likes, comments, shares

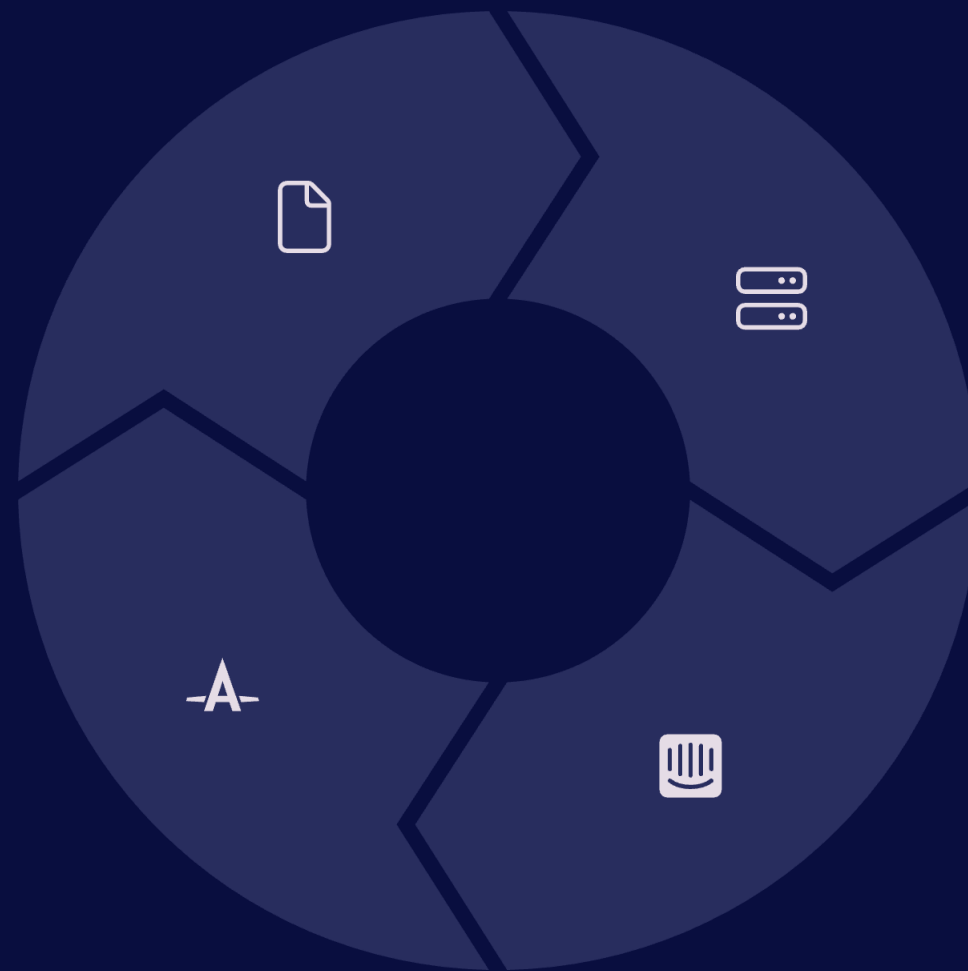
The Algorithmic Feedback Loop

Predict

Algorithm predicts what you'll engage with

Refine

Algorithm learns and shows more similar content



Serve

Shows content matching prediction

Interact

User engages, confirming prediction

The Echo Chamber Effect

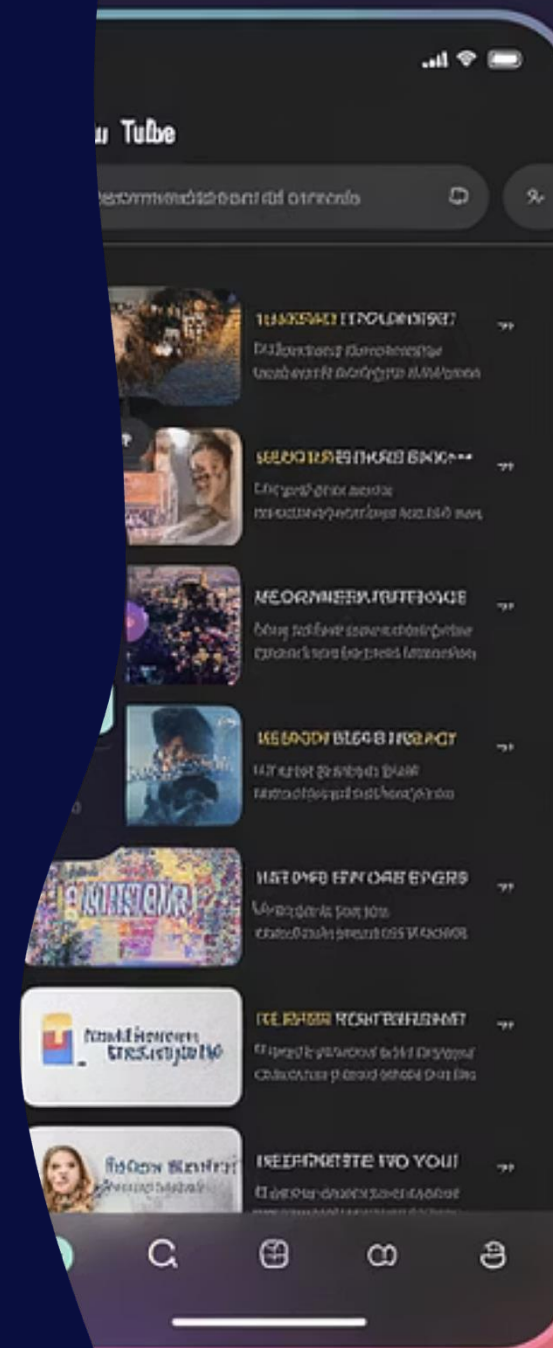
If user engages with unhealthy content,
algorithm serves more of it

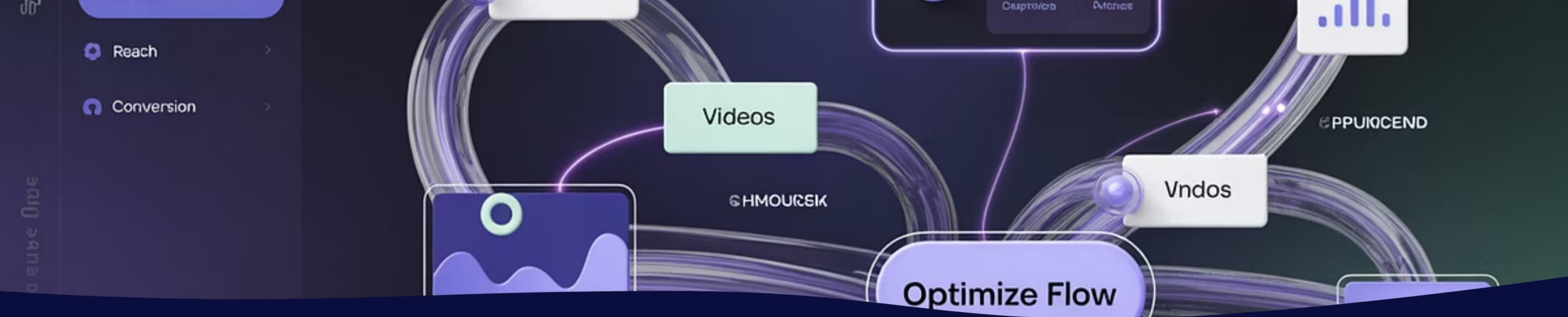
No balancing perspective—
only reinforcement



Part 2: Case Studies in Digital Curation

YouTube and Instagram





Platform Ecosystems

YouTube

Video-focused, evolved from views to satisfaction

Instagram

Multi-format, different algorithms for different features

YouTube's Evolution



View Counts

Initial focus rewarded clickbait



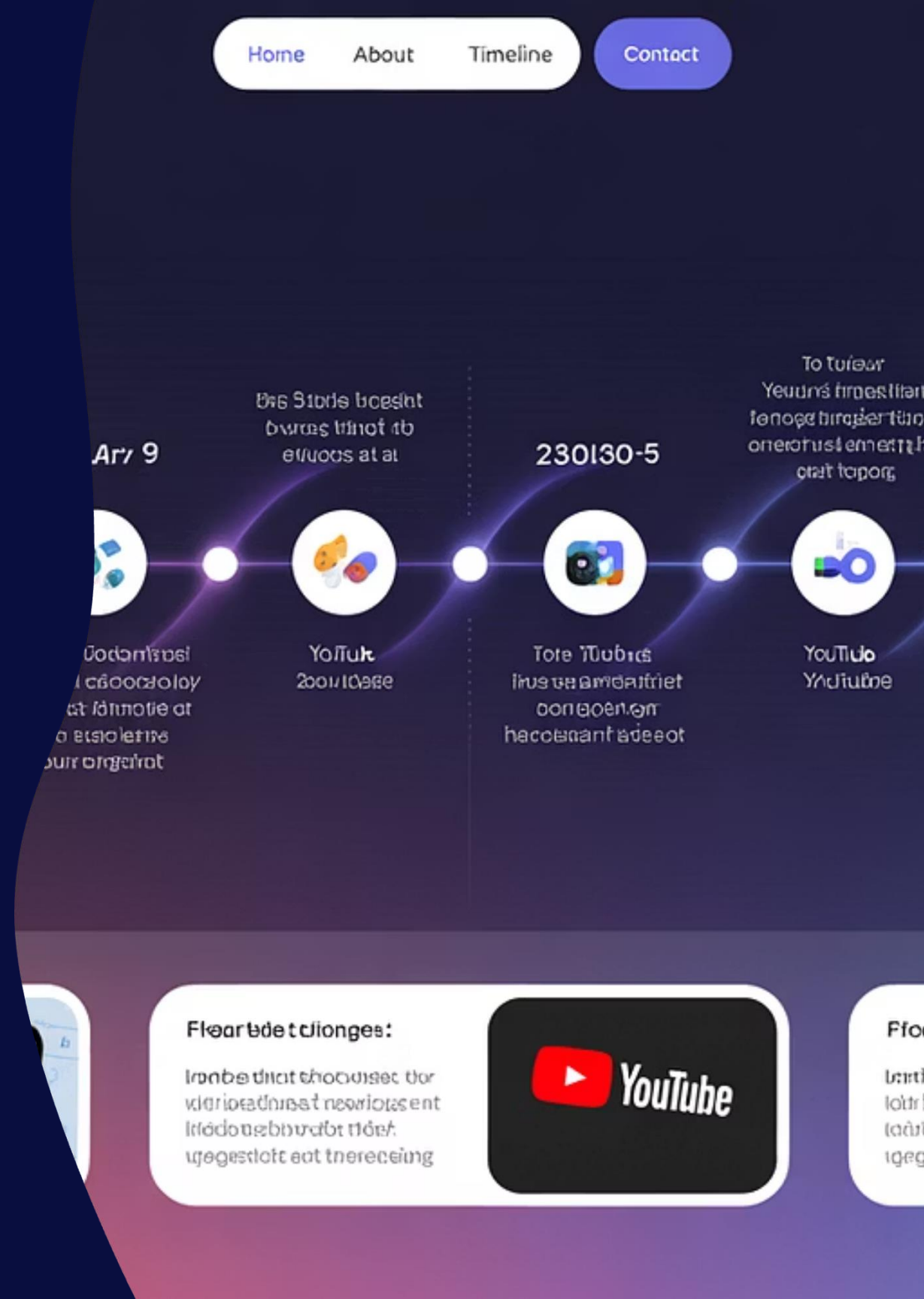
Watch Time

Shifted to total viewing minutes



Viewer Satisfaction

Now prioritizes valuable, satisfying experiences



YouTube's Key Metrics

1

Click-Through Rate (CTR)

Percentage who click after seeing thumbnail/title

2

Audience Retention

Average percentage of video watched

3

Watch Time

Total minutes viewers spend watching

4

Satisfaction Signals

Likes, comments, shares, survey responses



YouTube as Digital Pastoral Care

Strong CTR

A compelling invitation

High Retention

A substantive message

Positive Signals

Meeting spiritual needs

Algorithm Promotion

Sharing with seekers

Instagram: Multi-Algorithm Platform

 Not one algorithm but many, each with distinct purpose



Feed

Catching up with followed accounts



Stories

Intimate updates from close connections



Reels

Discovering entertaining short videos



Explore

Finding new accounts and content

Instagram Feed & Posts

User Goal

Connection with followed accounts

Key Signals

Likes, comments, shares, saves, time spent

Pastoral Opportunity

Share reflective content, devotionals, theological insights

Ask thoughtful questions to spark discussion



find
your
wit



Instagram Stories

User Goal

Intimacy, real-time personal updates

Key Signals

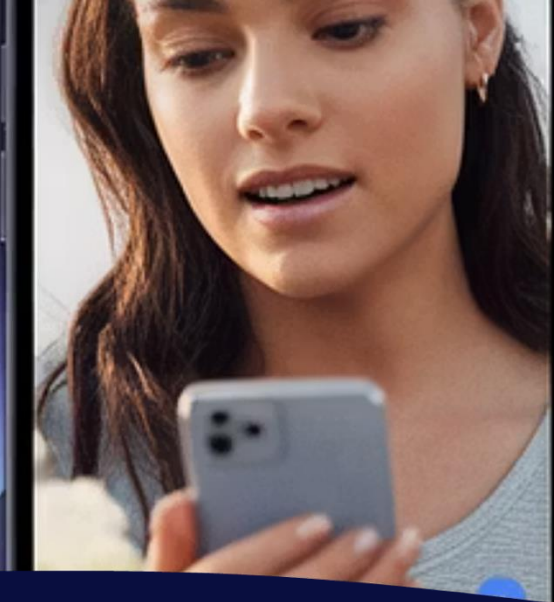
Replies, poll interactions, consistent viewing

Pastoral Opportunity

Behind-the-scenes church life

Interactive prayer requests

Brief, unpolished devotionals



Instagram Reels

User Goal

Entertainment, discovering short content

Key Signals

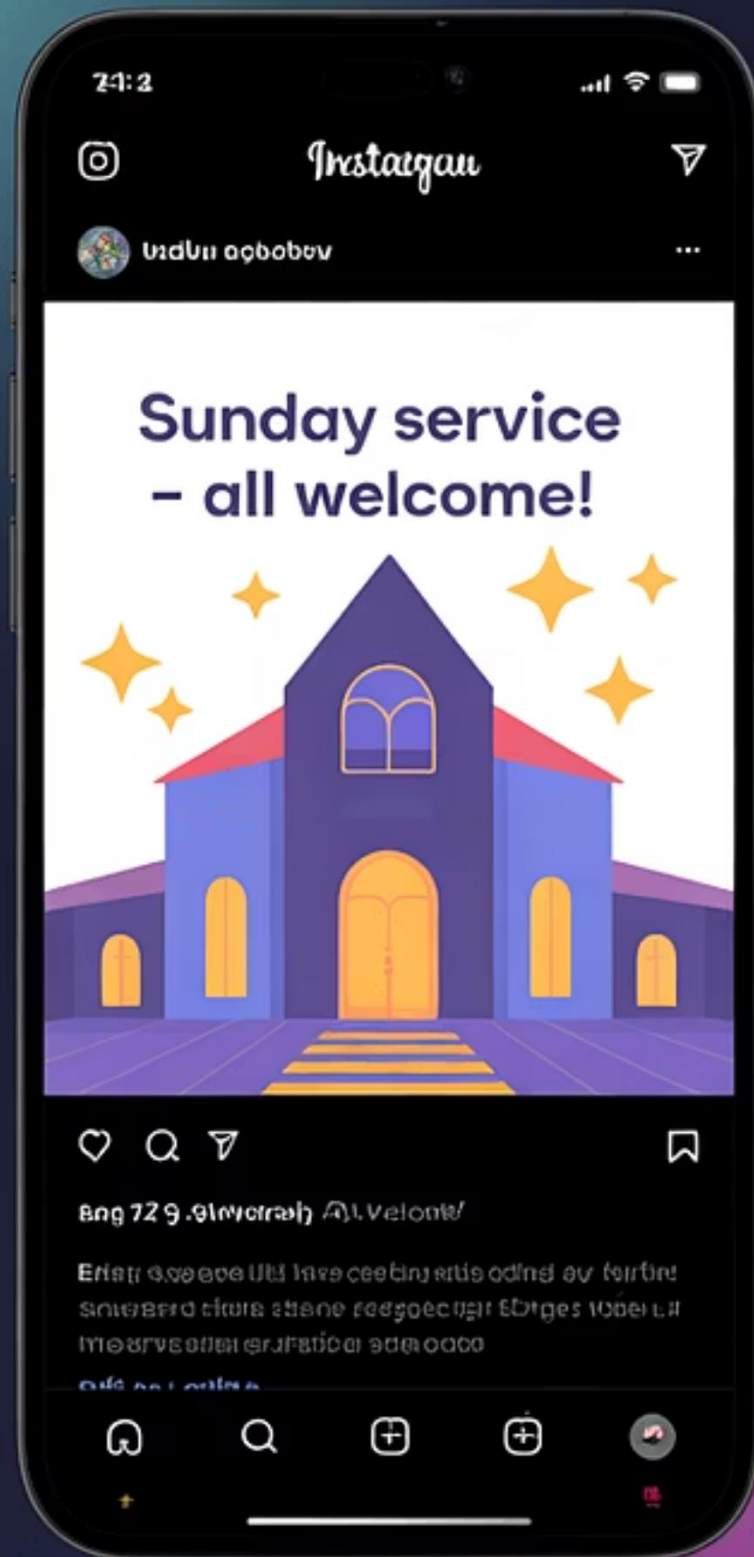
Watch-to-end rate, shares, trending audio

Pastoral Opportunity

Sermon highlights (<90 seconds)

Quick spiritual Q&As

Member testimonies



Instagram Explore Page

User Goal

Finding new accounts based on interests

Key Signals

Post popularity, past Explore activity

Pastoral Opportunity

Not a direct posting destination

Reward for creating excellent content

Exposure to massive new audience



Connection vs. Discovery

Connection

Nurturing existing community

Built on consistency and depth

Feed, "Following" tab

Discovery

Reaching new people

Driven by shareable content

Reels, Explore, "For You" page

An illustration on the left side of the slide. A hand with a glowing blue and purple circuit-like pattern on the sleeve reaches out from the top right towards a group of sheep at the bottom. The sheep are colored in shades of blue and purple. A large, flowing ribbon of blue and purple colors curves from the top left towards the hand. The background is dark blue with some faint geometric patterns.

Two-Pronged Strategy

Connection Strategy

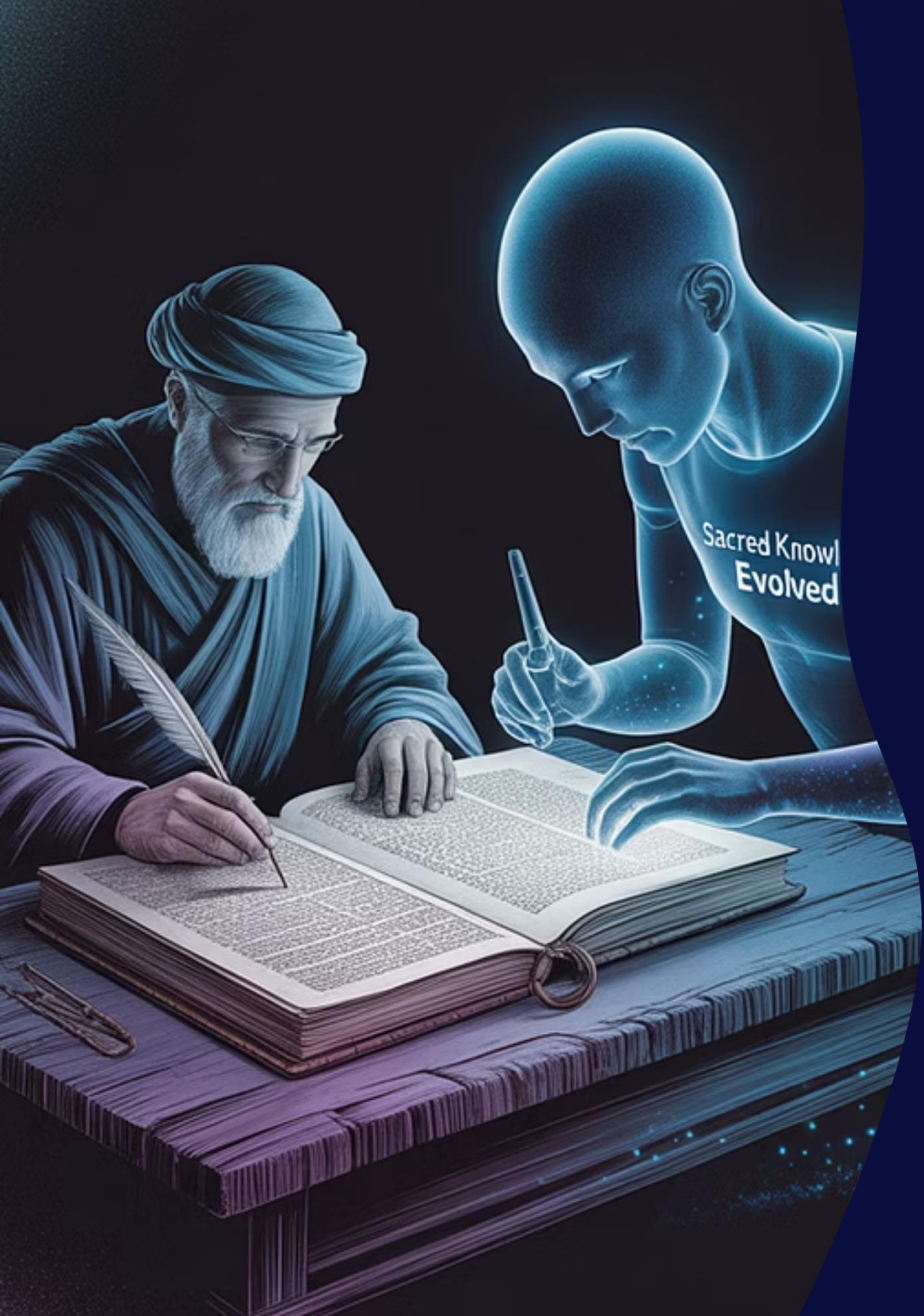
Pastor existing flock through community-focused content

Consistent, relational depth

Discovery Strategy

Fulfill missional call to reach new people

Shareable content addressing universal spiritual questions



Part 3: The New Scribe

AI, Content, and the Church

AI in Ministry

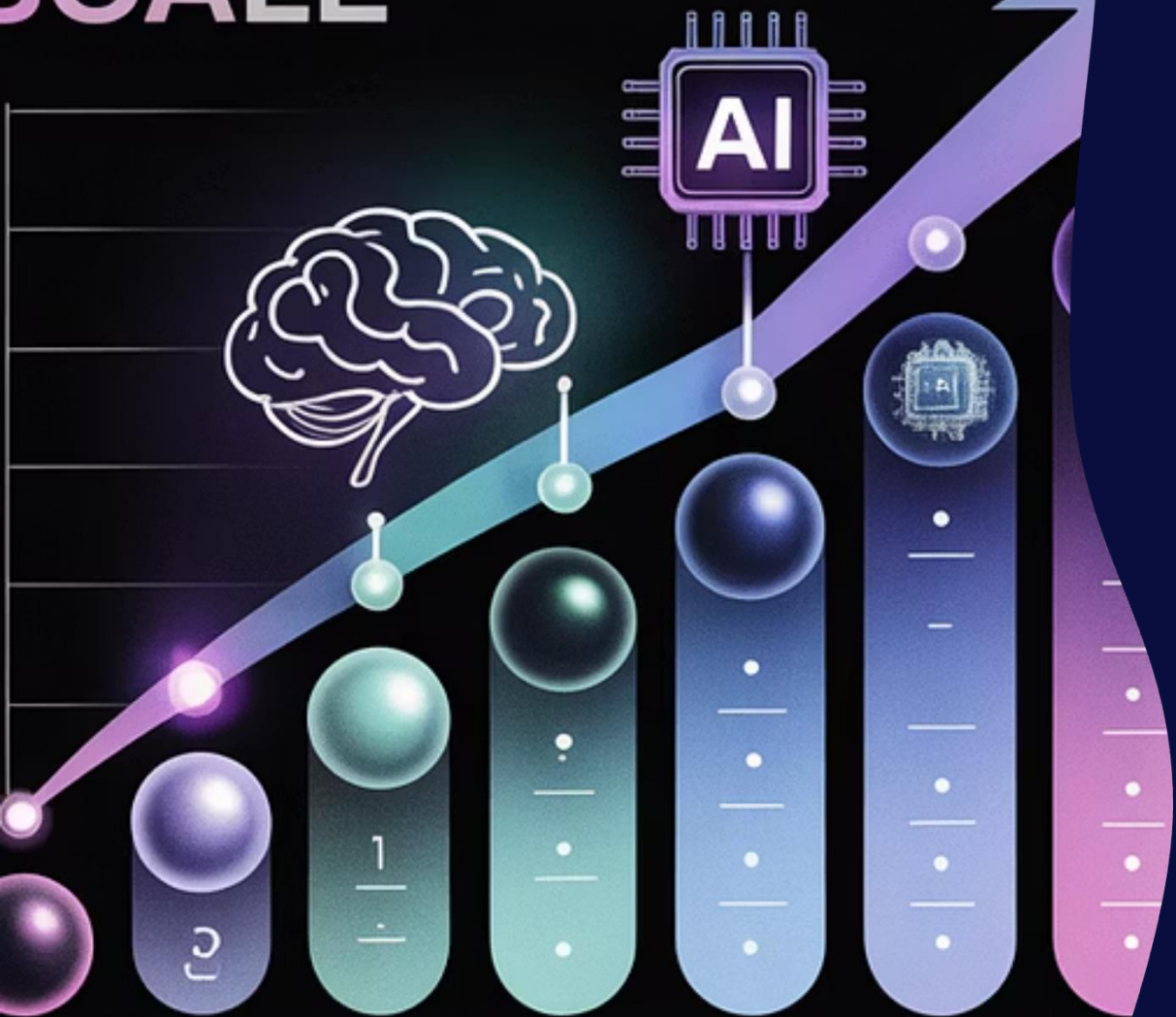
Rapid emergence of generative AI

Unprecedented opportunities

New challenges



CONTENT QUALITY SCALE



HUMAN VS. AI EVALUATION

How Platforms View AI Content

Common Misconception

Platforms penalize content simply for being AI-generated

Reality

Platforms care about quality, not creation process

Low-quality content downranked regardless of source

E-E-A-T Quality Standard

Experience

Firsthand, lived experience with topic

Expertise

Necessary knowledge and skill

Authoritativeness

Recognized go-to source

Trustworthiness

Accurate, honest, reliable

AI as Ministry Multiplier

Dramatically increases content creation capacity

Transformative for smaller churches with limited resources



Sermon Repurposing Workflow



The Indispensable Human Shepherd

AI Limitations

No genuine experience

No personal testimony

Cannot feel compassion

AI Purpose

Increase operational efficiency

Free time for embodied ministry

Handle technical so pastor can focus on personal





You are
Seen

The Value of Human Authenticity

As AI generates generic content, human authenticity becomes more valuable

Content that stands out: unique voice, personal stories, theological depth

Embrace AI as assistant while doubling down on irreplaceable ministry



Part 4: The Pastoral Implications

Shepherding in the Algorithmic Age

Beyond Technical Understanding

Algorithms shape more than content
They shape cultures, communities, souls



From Community to Echo Chamber

Algorithmic Reinforcement

Shows users more of what they already like

Creates "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers"

Engagement Economics

Anger and fear drive engagement more than grace

No algorithm rewards grace

Pastoral Consequences

Increased conflict within congregations

Algorithm becomes force of anti-discipleship



The Temptation to Perform

Metrics as Measure

Likes, shares, followers become de facto success metrics

Shift in Focus

From faithful shepherding to performative brand-building

Digital Gnosticism vs. Incarnational Presence

Digital Gnosticism

Prioritizing content over connection

Information over implementation

"Virtual disciples" without accountability

Incarnational Faith

"Word became flesh and dwelt among us"

Physical gathering essential

Digital as "front porch" to "living room"



Redefining Success



Vanity Metrics

Attendance, reach, viral views



True Ministry

Transformation, not just attention



A Call to Digital Wisdom

1

Algorithms Are Not Neutral

Recognize commercial agenda often counter to pastoral goals

2

Serve People, Not the Machine

Create content for spiritual needs, not algorithm hacking

3

Digital Must Lead to Embodied

"Front porch" inviting to "living room" of community

4

AI as Tool, Christ as Shepherd

Leverage technology, embody authentic pastoral care

Return to Ancient Wisdom

"Quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger"
(James 1:19)

"Speech gracious, seasoned with salt" (Colossians 4:6)

Radically counter-cultural to social media ethos

Not just communication tactic—spiritual discipline

Master ourselves, by grace, within algorithm's world





Thank you

visit: www.frjacksonlouis.com

Journey Together

Thank you for joining us in exploring the intersection of faith, technology, and pastoral care in our digital age.

Ancient Wisdom, Modern Tools

May we use these insights to shepherd well—leveraging algorithms while anchoring in timeless biblical truth.

Continue the Conversation

Questions? Want to discuss further? We're here to support your ministry in the digital age.