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Over decades, Chattanooga ministry encouraged millions to read the Bible more closely. Can it fulfill this mission through an app?

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by [Andrew Schwartz](#)



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Staff photo by Matt Hamilton/ Christina Hamby, digital product manager at Precept Ministries, demonstrates the new app on Wednesday.

The Chattanooga nonprofit Precept trains thousands of Bible study facilitators every year. Its guides in three-ring binders can be found in prisons, home churches and in fellowship halls of large congregations. According to its CEO, Precept teaches a course on sex in every public school in Moldova.

Now in its sixth decade, Precept — which strives to help people make sense of Scripture for themselves — is trying something new.

With a fresh brand and a just-launched mobile application, the nonprofit seeks to replicate the model of habit-forming software like the Duolingo language app and bend it to the cause of Christ.

From papyrus and parchment to the printed book and the computer screen, the Bible has taken many historical forms. Precept's new application, Yarrow, is the latest in a wave of smartphone software — ranging from daily devotional prompters to an artificial intelligence Jesus — that seek to place Scripture within the familiar cadences of modern life, and in doing so reach a generation many evangelists fear they are missing.

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To some, the idea of phone-based, deep scriptural study might seem like an oxymoron. In developing Yarrow, now available on iOS and Android, Precept learned that users of Bible study applications tend to spend a max of three minutes per day on the software, said Precept's president and CEO, David Arthur, in an interview.

"And you take that and you go into the gaming world, it's an average of 30 minutes a day," he said. "So that's where we start thinking, 'Okay, what has gaming got that's keeping people on their phone?'"

Photo Gallery

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Part of the answer, he said, is that they grab users at every stage. Whimsical animations mark minor triumphs. Challenges increase steadily over time. The apps celebrate consecutive days of use, and lightly shame those who break the "streak."

Arthur and others at Precept got to wondering: Could they, without being kitschy, give users of a Bible study application a similarly engaging experience?

If Precept's group-based Bible study series encourages believers to slow down, focus and engage with Scripture on its own terms, Yarrow seeks to replicate that concept in forms that appeal to a new generation of believers.

It moves to draw users back, every day, toward a text that carries the power to change a person's life, said Kristen Newitt, a content marketing manager at Precept. And to that end, it marshals not just the allure and benefits of spiritual well-being, but the familiar, more secular tools of contemporary psychology and technology.

"We want people to be habitually going to Scripture," Newitt said.

Studying together

Many people want to read the Bible more regularly. But they can find its prose dense, strange and forbidding — and that its meaning goes right over their head.

One way people have historically addressed that challenge is through Bible study groups. They gather, morning and night, in diners, living rooms and church basements, to discuss the imperatives and applications of Scripture.

Sensing such groups were central institutions of evangelical life, James Bielo, now an anthropologist of religion at Northwestern University, observed several of them in Michigan's evangelical community and wrote a book on his findings.

In a phone interview, he described social spaces where the meaning of Scripture was actively negotiated and up for grabs. Sometimes, he said, the search for consensus faltered over difficult themes such as free will versus predestination. But group members often found an outlet from those impasses by turning to the text's application in everyday life. That made theoretical problems practical and concrete — and sometimes worked to domesticate Biblical themes unpalatable to the contemporary American ear: Jesus condemns wealth accumulation? Let's talk charity.

According to Bielo, the groups he observed had little tolerance for being told what to think, although they often relied on guides. Sometimes that was a pastor figure, sometimes a curriculum: The Alpha Bible study course made appearances, Bielo said, as did the writings of the pastor Bill Hybels and those associated with Rick Warren's "The Purpose Driven Life."

[\(READ MORE: The Protestant Bible and Catholic Bible are not the same book. Here's what you need to know about the difference\)](#)

Bielo recalled observing no group that used the Precept curriculum. Still, fueled in part by the television ministry of its founder and longtime principal figure Kay Arthur, the nonprofit publisher reports having sent its study series, which today take many forms and collectively cover every book of the Bible, to nearly every nation on Earth.

Reading Amos

According to David Arthur, Kay's son who took his leadership post in 2012, Precept is nondenominational. Many Bible studies teach what the author thinks, he said, adding that there is nothing inherently wrong

with that. But he said Bible study is most effective when people are shown how to dig out its meaning for themselves.

"We don't say, 'Here, it's the road to salvation,'" he said. "We stay away from all that. We say, 'Let's go study Amos together. And when we study Amos, we're not going to bring in commentary. We're going to say 'Let's read Amos, four, five times before we get started. Now let's go back, let's mark Amos and let's start making a list. What did we learn about Amos?' It's an investigative mindset."

Today, anyone can search the internet for a Precept group meeting in their area — or, increasingly since the pandemic, one taking place online. Kristen Hammel's mother found Precept following a move to Houston decades ago. Now, in her new church, she did the "Precept Upon Precept" study program and liked it so much she brought the nonprofit's curriculum home to her daughter.

At home, Hammel, then in seventh grade, did a devotional from Precept's "Lord Series," which went through the Lord's Prayer in 28 days, Hummel recalled in an interview.

The learn-for-yourself ethos drew her in, and before long, she was traveling to Chattanooga for a Precept conference, and eventually, undergoing training with other high schoolers to facilitate study groups herself.

"The thing that most people say about studying the word of God is, 'If I don't have someone to explain it to me, I don't feel like I can understand it,'" Hammel said.

But Precept's inductive slow-it-way-down method made the text seem more approachable, she said. The sometimes errant worldly teachings of others fell away; God's word, the theory went, was sufficient. If the

meaning of a passage seemed unclear, one could seek out the theme in question elsewhere in the Bible for corroboration, she said. And it helped to be joined by fellow seekers: Precept study group members could run ideas by one another, cement the learning process through verbal expression and check themselves against errant views.

Sometimes, even after all of that, the Bible's meaning on a certain point could remain elusive.

"If it's not something clear in the text," Hammel said, "we're not going to build a doctrine on it. We're not going to build our lives around that thing."

Of the screen

The Bible has taken many forms over the years. There was the scroll, which could be rolled one way or another to reveal discrete segments of text. Then as now, scrolls had gravitas — perhaps they were kept in some kind of official case — but they were also a bit difficult to transport, said John Dyer, a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary and the author of "People of The Screen: How Evangelicals Created the Digital Bible and How It Shapes Their Reading of Scripture."

Before long, the Bible began appearing on an emerging technology: The hand-written book. Also known as a codex, the new form featured what Dyer called paratextual additions — artwork on the cover of a physical Jesus, perhaps — that bore fresh meanings of their own. Producing a codex could take years, a period dramatically shortened by the printing press, which ushered in yet another epoch of scriptural engagement.

Scripture was suddenly available in people's native languages. Some new versions, like the Geneva Bible, included substantial interpretive notes framing how readers should make sense of it.

Innovations continued. Soon, standardized verse numbers emerged, not only paving the way for punchy bumper stickers and T-shirts of today, Dyer said, but changing the way people discussed and thought about the text at the center of their theology. Suddenly, he said, the Bible seemed like a scientific textbook to which one could refer with pinpoint accuracy in demonstrating that a given verse meant one thing, or perhaps, another.

Translation

Dyer's twin paths of programmer and theologian united in an early Bible software he made to translate Scripture to the original Greek or Hebrew.

Given the fate of, say, the scroll, some foresaw in the emergence of the computer near total doom for the printed page. So far, it has defied the naysayers; even Yarrow, Precept's new youth-centric brand, offers in addition to its phone application a printed series of books.

Still, the digital Bible has in recent decades made huge gains.

Looking back, Dyer observes five distinct waves. Wave number one, he said, arrived in the 1950s and '60s with the early big computers, used primarily by academics and publishers to study texts and make indexes. Wave two corresponded to the 1980s arrival of the home computer -- whose early Bible software mainly, he said, just replaced the print text on a screen, offering a few nifty features like search, useful to pastors and the occasional spiritually devout hacker-type.

In the '90s, the World Wide Web facilitated public websites, many of which reign to this day. Someone who Googles a vaguely recalled Bible passage will probably encounter a link to Bible Gateway. It launched in 1993.

In 2007, the iPhone ushered in the mobile era, and with it, according to Dyer, wave four of the Bible's digital journey. YouVersion's phone application, launched in 2008, remains the most popular Bible app today, he said.

Like many of their forebears, he said, the creators of YouVersion were evangelical Christians who believed that when people read the Bible it transforms their lives. By that logic, Dyer added, it seemed proper to do everything possible to get people to read the most amount of Bible as possible.

[\(READ MORE: Hamilton County committee with members of different faiths to review Bible in the Schools curriculum\)](#)

Enter persuasive computing, which, in an age of apps aimed at personal betterment, took many now-widely familiar forms, such as daily reminders, reading plans and an emphasis on a community of users who theoretically hold each other accountable.

"Bible engagement," Dyer said, has become in the evangelical software industry a ubiquitous term of art.

The age of specificity — wave five — is ongoing, he said. Today, the Bible gets digitally rendered to highly particular ends. Some applications aid memorization. "Our Bible," enjoining users to ditch what it calls toxic theology, is oriented toward LGBTQ+ people. Artificial intelligence has become involved. Promising a

"divine connection in your pocket," the application "Text with Jesus" offers devoted Christians the ability to chat with "some of the Bible's most iconic figures."

Each of those new endeavors gives the Bible a new framing, a new kind of paratext. To Dyer, Precept's Yarrow application seems to be a method of study that changes not the text but the way people encounter it.

The app

Yarrow opens to a message: "Join thousands digging deeper into God's Word," it says. "Together."

After a new users enter their name, a pop-up appears.

"Want help building a habit?" it asks. "Visit your profile to set up a goal."

Tap that message and another replaces it.

"Don't lose your streak!" it says. "It only takes five minutes."

The user can then proceed on one of three paths, some free, others free for a trial period. The mid-length Planted Studies pull vexing topics from the headlines. The longer Grounded Studies, which have analogs in Yarrow's print form, promise to bring users deeper. Reading, responding to prompts, reflecting and reading again, users are invited to identify and apply core refrains they might have overlooked in just a single brisk skim.

Finally there are the five-minute Daily Growths, envisioned as a keystone of Yarrow's aspirational community, since users would theoretically all be doing the same one every day, said Christina Hamby, a

digital product manager.

"If you and your friend are doing it, you could be like, 'Hey, I'm doing that!'" Hamby said in an interview.

"Did you read that? That was an interesting point."

The vision for Yarrow came into focus following Precept's 50th anniversary and the self-assessment that accompanied it, said David Arthur, the CEO.

"We discovered that we were not serving a whole generation," he said.

Precept enlisted the Barna Research Group to study the cohort. According to David Arthur, a few key findings emerged: Millennials and Gen-Zers by and large sought Biblical guidance that was specifically relevant to contemporary issues, he said. Inundated with advertising at unprecedented rates, young adults didn't mind some hand-holding, he said. But they wanted flexibility -- the ability to study on their own time by phone or in print.

([READ MORE: How a small-town church used mail to bring Bible lessons to 330,000 people](#))

The tendencies of the target user group having been established, the task was set, and Precept hired editors, writers, developers and marketers to carry it out, David Arthur said.

The old branding and aesthetic would not do, he said, adding that the three-ring binder of the standard Precept-branded curriculum evoked high school classes.

The old Precept would remain for those who wanted it, but the new brand would be a study in sleekness. The app would be lean. The print study books would come outfitted with sturdy paper, ample white space,

rich color pictures and flowing graphics. And it would be named after a plant widely used in traditional medicine, which flowers around the world.

Earlier this year, David Arthur said, he took a motorcycle trip through 13 states over 14 days and 6,000 miles of often-unpaved road. Yarrow abounded.

"Now that I know what it looks like, I see it everywhere," he said.

Pay reverence

Like many at Precept, Hamby mined the literature, reading the bestselling book "The Power of Habits" for guidance as she worked on Yarrow. For someone to form a habit, she said she learned, they must quickly perceive its payoff.

Many phone applications seem designed around that principle. Noom, a goal-oriented weight loss application, is a case study in light, warm and encouraging design. Duolingo, the language learning app, is famously gamified, motivating users to try just one more quick module.

Inspired in part by those apps and other well-known software, the Yarrow application keeps its instructions succinct and offers a variety of modes of engagement. After a couple quick sections of Scripture, it becomes time for prayer or a video or to reflect in a quick written section. Users can see their streaks, day after day.

Still, the secular market model had its limits. Hamby and her colleagues wanted to make the application consumable -- but it still needed to pay proper reverence to Scripture. At one point, the idea was floated, Hamby said, of introducing an avatar akin to Duolingo's "Duo" -- the green bright-eyed owl which

expressively celebrates when the user enters a correct answer. But such an avatar, Hamby, said, didn't feel quite appropriate for an app centered in the word of God.

Content-wise, Yarrow diverged from Precept in certain ways. Precept's studies are traditionally centered on a book of the Bible. Yarrow, by contrast, focuses on themes like identity. Still, Precept staffers said they sought to keep the nonprofit's DNA alive in the new brand.

In the digital realm, that was not always easy. Highlighting keywords is a big part of the Precept program, for example. But test users found the highlighting function in an early version of the application was a clunky interface, Hamby recalled. Developers studied workarounds. In the application now on the market, users are invited to acknowledge keywords with a tap.

The message

Evangelicals have a complex relationship with technological and cultural change, Dyer said. A desire to claim a distance from the world sits against a desire to appropriate its technologies for the Christian cause. Ever pragmatic, evangelicals have a history of going where the people are, he said, and that tendency lives on in a time when everyone seems to always be on their phones.

Conventional wisdom about technological studies, embodied in the philosopher Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase, "the medium is the message," would suggest that when the Bible comes in a new form, its readers draw out a slightly new meaning.

Dyer has studied whether that is the case. A few years ago, he said, he went to several churches, and had half the people read the Book of Jude in print and half of them read it on a screen. Then he asked two

questions: What was the passage was about? And how did it make them feel?

Print readers, he said, said the book was about God's judgment for sin. Phone readers, he said, said they felt it was about God's faithfulness.

The second group seemed at first to have landed on a sunnier outlook. But their answers to the second question suggested otherwise. The print readers, Dyer said, reported feeling encouraged. The phone readers? Discouraged and confused.

Dyer developed a theory: People still associated print with something old school: perhaps a bit firm, but ultimately reliable and encouraging. Phones on the other hand, seem fun — hence the pleasant reading that God is faithful — yet they are also the locus of many peoples' anxiety, their fear of missing out, their frustration.

If the supplemental text of the Geneva Bible was its interpretive notes on the margins of the page, Dyer said, the add-on for the smartphone is everything else it gets used for.

"Whatever it is that's around your religious app," Dyer said, "you're gonna carry those in with you as you read."

One another

In the future, Precept's CEO David Arthur said, people won't be spending three minutes a day on their phone with Scripture. They'll be spending 30 minutes a day on their phone with Scripture — and it will be a period of active, deep spiritual engagement.

Still, he said a phone application alone does not seem capable of fully enacting Precept's mission to plant people in the word of God. Phones, he said, can make people more lonely and isolated, yet many key spiritual ideas — truth, for example — only make sense in community.

"If you think about the 'one another' passages, you can't do that by yourself," he said. "You can't be patient by yourself. You can't be forbearing. You can't be gentle, right? There's an assumption that there are others."

Yarrow is designed in part to reflect another of Precept's market research findings -- that young people are not interested in group-based study. David Arthur said with Yarrow the nonprofit seeks to reach people where they are. But he hopes the new initiative will in turn encourage them to reach out to others, to spark intimate, organic and rich conversations.

The application remains a work in progress. The first priority was making a good basic user experience, said Hamby, the digital product manager, but in the future the nonprofit might introduce more components to facilitate community. For now, the application gestures towards that idea with a few quick features.

After a Daily Growth session, for example, the Yarrow application tells the user, "Nicely done. Dig deeper with us tomorrow!" and invites a 1 to 5 star rating. Above the stars, a button says "suggest to a friend." Tapping that button creates a draft of a potential message, which can be sent to a phone contact of the user's choosing.

"Ever Feel Powerless?" one such form message asked. Underneath those words was a hyperlink, leading to Yarrow's page in the app store.

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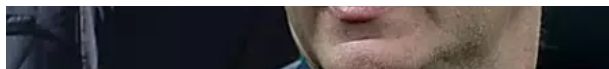
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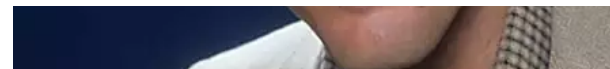
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