

INCURVATUS IN SE(LFIE): UNDERSTANDING HOW A WORLD FRAMED BY SOCIAL
MEDIA PROMOTES THE THEOLOGY OF GLORY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

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MEQUON, WI

FEBRUARY 21, 2020

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ABSTRACT

Social media is a prevailing force in the world today. It shapes the way that people view the world. Consequently, social media affects the way that people think and act. In particular, social media caters to the natural tendency of the sinful nature to worship self. This promotes a theology of glory which seeks to avoid suffering and obtain pleasures. Through an examination of the theology of glory, the theology of the cross, and the curved-in essence of the sinful nature, as well as the core principles of social media, this paper seeks to demonstrate how social media fosters and inflates our inbred tendency to think with a theology of glory.

INTRODUCTION

The whole world exists on the other side of a window, yet what is seen through the window is not the whole world. The only thing that can be perceived through the window is what is contained within the window-frame. A whole world exists beyond the frame, but the frame only allows for certain views. The size and shape of frames can drastically alter perception of the outside world. Similarly, the angle at which someone looks through a window frame changes the view. Yet, one thing remains constant. No matter what, only what is in frame can be seen.

Who would venture to say that a picture of a vast mountain range is the same as standing before it down in a valley, where the full range of the human eye is able to soak in the massiveness of the entire scene, making full use of peripheral vision? No one would dare to equate the picture to the experience of a broader view. Likewise, perception of the world in psychological sense is altered by metaphorical frames, just as ocular perception is altered by physical frames. These metaphorical frames focus in on certain parts of the world with the result that the individual looking through them draws conclusions about the world and life based only on what is held within the frame. Naturally, the conclusions vary from frame to frame and indeed are much different than if the whole world were able to be perceived.

These frames we might consider to be aspects of what anthropologists call worldview. One such frame that alters the way the world is viewed in current times is the frame of social media. Social media presents a very particular portrayal of the world within the four sides of its frame. The world view that social media encourages is one in which the world is filled with

beauty and glory just waiting to be taken in. This worldview is in parallel with the theology of glory, which sees the main goal of life to be maintaining life by seeking after all that the self finds desirable and good. In the modern prosperity of a 1st world country, it is often easy to ignore suffering and weakness and focus solely on increasing in prosperity. Social media is the perfect format to promote such ideas because it is ubiquitous and tends to highlight only the good in life while ignoring anything that has a taint of suffering or plight. Social media is also manipulative because it gives an impression of neighborly intimacy that allows people to perceive a closer relationship with a greater number of people. This impression arises from the fact that onlookers and “friends” are granted a rather personal view into other’s lives regardless of how close the relationship may actually be in real life.

As a result, the old adage of “keeping up with the Joneses” no longer refers just to maintaining social standing with your neighbors down the street or the families at your church, school, or place of work; it can be applied to virtually anyone in the world. Social media pumps a healthy dose of growth hormone into the concept of “keeping up with the Joneses” because the opportunities to see the wealth that the world can offer are multiplied and the avenues for comparison of lifestyles is no longer limited by face to face interaction or geographical proximity. The whole world is your neighbor on social media, and the whole world has a lot to offer in regard to ways that you could satisfy your desires. Social media thrives on the sinful nature’s tendency to embrace a theology of glory because the desire to focus on the self and what it desires will drive a person back to use it again and again.

In order to understand the theological significance of this, one needs to look at the difference between the theology of glory and the theology of the cross. This is the terminology used by Luther to encapsulate a critical world view distinction made in the New Testament by

both Jesus and his Apostles. The theology of glory only becomes apparent when compared with the theology of the cross. The theology of the cross acknowledges suffering while the theology of glory shies away from any such notion. The theology of glory only seeks good things and assumes that enough effort will create success in attaining a satisfactory condition for the self.

In this paper, I intend to define and explore the theology of the cross and the theology of glory to demonstrate how the core characteristics of social media go hand in hand with the theology of glory. It is, of course, impossible to explore fully all of the implications of living under a theology of glory or the theology of the cross. Nor do I intend to delve into the significant trials and wonders of the life of a Christian living under the cross. Those items are beyond the scope of this work.

I will rather focus much more on the concept of glory and the tendencies of the sinful nature of man, which is curved in on itself. This truth—that the sinful nature is *incurvatus in se*—is the main point of contact for showing that social media is a healthy breeding ground for the theology of glory. The selfish nature of the sinful nature and the theology of glory are also partner concepts, since the object of worship in the theology of glory is the self. For the unregenerate unbeliever, the theology of glory drives him in a life that becomes an ever-descending path into a searching despair for unattainable and unsustainable glory. For the believer, it is a dreadful snare that seeks to lure him away from the cross of Christ to the pleasures that the eye perceives in the here and now. With the prevalence of social media in today's world it is a valuable discipline to examine how social media can bring these temptations into an individual's life.

This paper does not intend to cover every detail of the function of social media, nor will it sufficiently expound upon the differences which may be found between different social media

platforms. The focus is on the concept of social media and traits shared by all platforms. By exploring the way that social media presents a framed image of the world and examining the core nature of social media and the functions it serves, it will become apparent how and where the main features of a theology of glory overlap with social media. The thrust of this paper's argument, then, is that social media promotes the theology of glory by changing the way people view the world and themselves.

PART I: THEOLOGIES OF GLORY AND THE CROSS

The Theology of the Cross

Jesus himself sets forth the life of a Christian as a way of the cross in Mark 8:34–38 (NIV 2011):

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

Jesus words are clear and his point is unmistakable—following him is not an immediate path to a carefree and painless life. Yes, the inheritance that awaits the Christian in heaven is such great bliss and unbounded glory that it is unfathomable in this life, but the journey of the Christian while wandering here on Earth is a matter of the cross.

The cross is not something to be considered lightly. It is a burdensome and tortuous instrument of suffering and death. So, when Jesus says take up your cross and follow me, it is no mere footnote in the description of Christian life. Bearing the cross means putting the cross—the cross of Jesus and everything that it means—before all else, even going as far as giving up life itself for the sake of the Savior. Jesus puts this into perspective when he says, “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (Mk 8:36) He is illustrating that this matter of bearing the cross and enduring suffering is a matter of a temporary life in this world versus eternal life. Jesus’ question assumes the answer, “No good! It is no good to gain the whole world at the cost of the soul!” The theology of the cross helps the Christian see the big picture of eternity and salvation.

Understanding the cross also allows the Christian to better understand the world he lives in. It explains why becoming a believer doesn’t instantly insulate an individual from the ills of

this world. It explains why the ills of this world will continue to persist until its end. The cross turns the focus of the Christian toward everything Christ did and all that it means for eternity and turns the focus away from trying to grasp the perishable and turn it into a shimmering trophy that is in reality no more than dust.

The theology of the cross is big picture stuff. The theology of the cross is “foolishness” (1 Cor 1:18) that yet “transcends all understanding” (Phil 4:7) and is the “power of God.” (1 Cor 1:18) The salvation that God gave to us does not make sense to us because it’s not what we would do. God, being infinitely greater than us humans has chosen to do this—“‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’” (Is 55:8–9) That is what makes the theology of the cross so magnificent, but it is also what makes it so hard to grasp. It is not the natural inclination of humans to endure hardship, but rather to evade hardship and pursue glory.

The Theology of Glory

The theology of glory is what stands in opposition to the theology of the cross. In fact, one may say that “there are at the bottom only two types of theology, glory theology and cross theology. ‘The theology of glory’ is a catchall for virtually all theologies and religions. The cross sets itself apart from and over against all of these.”¹ Of course, the theology of glory is appealing, for that is the nature of the term glory. Glory is anything that appears magnificent, beautiful, and delightful. Glory is desirable. That doesn’t mean that glory must be classified as solely as

1. Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross, Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 2.

something aesthetically enticing or pleasurable. The concept of glory within a theology of glory is the seeking of an end goal that brings fulfillment for the individual seeking it. Since the theology of glory is a playground for the unfettered sinful nature, the pursuit of glory can take many forms.

Perhaps the pursuit of glory is works-based, whereupon the individual pursues tasks viewed as noble and satisfactory, whether in regard to the standards established by some form of “god” or simply by standards established by the self. Perhaps glory is seen as a status or image, whether merely on a personal level that is more reflective or a public level that is more ostentatious. Whatever the individual operating within a theology of glory sees fit to be deemed glory becomes the purpose and goal for living. Included in this mode of living also is an avoidance of anything contrary to the “glory goal.” So, any form of antithetical suffering or any prolonged endurance of conditions outside the “glory” are abhorred.

In the particular context of modern-day America, glory is not likely to be encapsulated so much by a certain works desire as it is by status and prosperity. The way that Americans desire to always get more betrays an already present theology of glory. Lack of healthcare? It should be unheard of! Rules about sexuality? Unchain me from them please! Newest iPhone? Yes, I’ll take it! The American self wants what it wants. The modern American wants to have the life that he or she will find comfortable, fun, and carefree. The modern American wants to be at least as good as everyone else and maybe a little better, if possible. From a first person point of view the American’s reasoning would sound something like this: if everyone could just get exactly what they wanted but also make sure that in the end they cater to me and my wants, that would be perfection. That’s glory. That’s my *modus operandi* in life, and consequently, my *modus operandi* when it comes to theology. I might be unaware of the fact that this is my theology

simply because I am ignoring the spiritual truth about myself, but whether I am aware of it or not, the truth does not change.

It would be very possible to plug in any variable components to the above outlined theology of glory and still make it work. Would I like a god who will grant me this prosperity because I think that's how he operates? Fine, let's plug in a little prosperity gospel. Do I consider myself to be altruistic and concerned for the greater good? That's ok, it will make me feel good, plus I'll be improving my surroundings—the “glory” is intact. It may be disguised as something wholly secular, but, in view of theological and eschatological reality, the principle of living life this way is still a theology of glory. The theology of glory can exist and thrive in so many different forms because it is reliant on only one thing—what the self wants.

Incurvatus in se

The theologies of cross and glory hinge on the self. The trouble with sinful human nature is that it is so focused on self that it seeks to serve itself to the exclusion of all else. Often this is disguised or limited, but only in an effort to more successfully reach its end goal of serving itself. “In order to get our own way we have to learn how to hide our real intention of achieving the triumph of our own will over the will of another.”² The self-serving nature of the sinful nature can properly be called worship of self. When the assertion is made that this is a breaking of the 1st Commandment the picture becomes clearer. True worship of an object places that object in front of all else. That is good and complete worship. In the case of the sinful nature, the object is

2. Daniel Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross: Reflections on His Cross and Ours* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2008), 15.

self. The sinful nature is good at worshiping self; in fact it is so good that Martin Luther used the Latin phrase *incurvatus in se* to describe the nature of sinful man.

The phrase *incurvatus in se* means “curved in on oneself.” Luther makes regular use of this phrase in his commentary on Romans as he talks about the sinful nature, the will of man, and the place of suffering in life. About the will of sinful man Luther says:

It knows nothing but its own good, or what is good and honorable and useful for itself, but not what is good for God and other people. Therefore it knows and wills more what is particular, yes, only what is an individual good. And this is in agreement with Scripture, which describes man as so turned in on himself that he uses not only physical but even spiritual goods for his own purposes and in all things seeks only himself.³

Earlier in the same work, as he expounded upon Romans 5:4, Luther talked about this truth of *curvedness* in view of the theology of the cross. It is necessary to understand the way that self, the theology of the cross, and the theology of the glory are related in order to understand the nature of each individual element. The theology of glory only becomes apparent when compared with the theology of the cross. The theology of the cross is only understood in view of how the sinful nature is curved in on self and needs to be broken of this tendency. Likewise, the nature of self explains why the theology of glory is man’s natural theology. So, when Luther talks about justification, glory, and suffering in Romans 5:1–5, he neatly summarizes the truth about the theology of the cross and more significantly, the objective truth about sinful man’s relation to God:

For if God should not test us by tribulation, it would be impossible for any man to be saved. The reason is that our nature has been so deeply curved in upon itself because of the viciousness of original sin... Thus the prophet Jeremiah says in Jer. 17:9: “The heart is perverse above all things, and so desperately corrupt; who can understand it?” That is, it is so curved in on itself that no man, no matter how holy (if a testing is kept from him) can understand it... Therefore our good God, after He has justified us and given us His spiritual gifts, quickly brings tribulation upon us, exercises us, and tests us so that this

3. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, trans. Jacob A. O. Preus and Walter Tillmanns, Vol. 25 in *Luther’s Works*. Edited by Hilton C. Oswald (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1972), 345.

godless nature of ours does not rush in upon these enjoyable sins, lest in his ignorance man should die the eternal death.⁴

Note how Luther calls these sins of *curvedness* “enjoyable sins.” We shall see that that is exactly how the world today, as it is seen through the frame of social media, presents a menu of glories to pursue. Note also how Luther states in this same section of his commentary that the sinful nature “turns the finest gifts of God in upon itself and enjoys them.”⁵ It is not only what we might consider vices and shameful acts, but even those things God intends for good, which can be used to fuel the self’s desire for glory. It is vital to remember that, “our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Phil 3:20) The good things that God gives us in this life are not an end in themselves. There is a greater glory than what can be found on earth. That is why the Apostle Peter wrote, “Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.” (1 Pet 2:12) Both of these passages emphasize the reality that there is something greater than what can be found in this world and that there is a need to guard against the sinful nature’s desire to make temporal items its idol. This is an especially important point to remember when considering the impact that social media has upon an individual’s spiritual condition.

The truth that man is *incurvatus in se* can rightly be considered the very greatest problem of man because it is tied inseparably to the truth that man is born sinful as Romans 5:12 says, “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned.” Considering this, it is not surprising that Jesus confronts self so harshly. Indeed, Article II of the Augsburg confession states, “All human

4. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 291–292.

5. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 291.

beings who are born in the natural way are conceived and born in sin. This means that from birth they are full of evil lust and inclination and cannot by nature possess true fear of God and true faith in God.”⁶ For Jesus to preach against the curved-in self is a proclamation of law against the root cause of man’s problem. Consequently, Jesus ties denial of self inseparably with being his follower. This alone is a testimony to how great a matter this self-denial is. Luther was not saying anything new when he pointed out how important the sufferings of the cross are in the life of a saved human. He was merely repeating the truth that Jesus taught, which the Apostle Paul was expounding in his letter to the Romans. Suffering is a necessary part of the life of a Christian because it drives the Christian away from self and back to the cross of Christ where true and lasting salvation and glory is found in the magnificent act of redemption.

This does not mean that the Christian actively seeks out suffering in order to follow the words of Jesus. Pieper explains well that although Christianity and the cross are inseparably connected “this does not mean, however, that the Christian may impose a cross upon himself or upon others. He must leave that to God (1 Pet. 3:17; 1:6), for God alone knows which cross is beneficial and only God gives the strength needed to bear the cross (1 Cor. 10:13). Luther calls those who purposely seek a cross ‘work saints’ and ‘the devil’s martyrs.’”⁷ It is also possible that because of the curvedness of the sinful nature that even in the midst of suffering an individual may become even more self-absorbed, limiting their world to the boundaries of their suffering. How indicative that is of the curvedness of the sinful nature that even in the situation where an

6. Augsburg Confession, Article II in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 38.

7. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1962), 71.

individual ought to be driven to lay bare before God, begging for mercy, the self is quick to turn inward and look for a solution or at the very least curl up in despair!

Yet, the true purpose of the cross, rightly bestowed by the will of God, is still “to serve the purpose of testing us, and thus also of making us clear about our spiritual condition, which again can only serve as a motive to put on the new man (1 Pe 4:12).”⁸ Suffering, then, ought not to be seen as the greatest activity of man on earth, but rather ought to be put into a proper perspective which shows that in suffering, God is not far away, but instead is close by reminding the Christian that this life is not the only life and that a far greater glory is in store.

The trouble with being so turned in on ourselves is that social media plays directly into this tendency. Social media enters us into a world where there is constantly a mirror, a menu, and a measuring stick placed at the forefront of our vision. The mirror allows us to look at ourselves; something that we love to do. The menu provides us with options to seek out desires and pleasures and satisfy our need for glory. The measuring stick allows us to compare what we see in the mirror with what we think we should be getting based off our menu choice. As we look outward through the frame of social media, we only see more of what we hope to see when we look back inward. The world within the frame of social media is the carrot on the stick that we chase in an act of self-worship.

8. Adolf Hoeneke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, Vol. III., Trans. James Langebartels, (Milwaukee: Northwestern 2003), 403.

PART II: SOCIAL MEDIA AND PURPOSE IN LIFE

Basic Principles of Social Media

Social media is exactly what its name says: the sharing of media within a society or community. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are currently the most used platforms as of September 2019.⁹ The popularity of the different platforms varies year to year, and some may all but die off completely while others resurge based on trends or rebrands. However, no matter what the platform, the concept is the same: you share information about your life with others while also observing what they share about their lives. Mixed in with this basic principle are additional modes of communication such as: direct messaging (which is akin to texting) and the sharing of third party content such as news, entertainment media, or memes.¹⁰ At its core, however, social media is intended for an individual to allow others to take a glimpse into his or her life and see what is happening and look at an image, metaphorically speaking, of how that person wants to portray themselves as an individual.

Social media is a departure from the way people shared information about themselves prior to the internet age. It is much easier to look into the lives of those around us and even to be familiar with the lives of people who we may never meet. The amount of wealth and grandeur that is paraded before our eyes is no longer limited to the number of pages that a company can

9. Clement, J.. "Most popular social media apps in the U.S. 2019, by audience." Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/248074/most-popular-us-social-networking-apps-ranked-by-audience/>.

10. These additional features of social media are exceptionally commonplace and may even make up a majority of a user's use of a social media platform, but they are not the basic principle upon which social media operates, though they do reflect the core. The core is to share and learn about the self. What an individual may share publicly or privately is very much a reflection of the self, but it is not a clear image the same way that content original to the individual and relevant to that individual's actual life. Especially interesting among these are memes, a term that actually predates what most today would call memes. These are a shared culture which often are used to reflect emotions and opinions which are often elicited by the other more core features of social media. A study of shared internet culture and its effect on Christians and Christianity would certainly merit attention in our present world.

publish in a catalogue or magazine, or limited by the number of places we have means to visit, but it is now virtually limitless. The faraway places which once were only something that most heard about in grand stories, now are just a hand gesture away. It is true that this is not only the domain of social media, but of computer technology and the internet in general, yet social media plays a devilish role in that it not only parades this wealth and grandeur before us, but it personalizes it—showing us people just like us who are enjoying these things and asking the question, “Why not you too?”

Envy: The Real Evil of Social Media

It can be easy to attack “selfie culture” for being narcissistic. After all, “self” is the basis for the term. It would be easy to blame this desire to constantly be looking at oneself—literally—as the basis for an argument that social media is nothing but an altar in the temple of self that *homo incurvatus in se* loves to worship in front of. I would argue that it is not that simple. Nor, would I say that the problem with social media is found in the validation of likes and hearts and comments. These are components of the real problem, but they are not the core problem. The real problem is not in the literal gazing upon oneself, but in the gazing upon oneself that goes on in the heart and mind. Remember, the self is so absorbed in itself that all it does is seek to fulfill its desires. That means a whole lot more than just taking a nice picture and having others verify that it is a good picture. The self wants to build a world for itself to rule over. Social media keeps telling the self that the world it lives in is not enough—it can be better. So, the real evil in social media is envy—envy over glory which social media holds in its frame for the user to lust after.

It’s understandable that envy is prevalent among social media users when you consider the sort of content that is common on social media. Consider, for example, the case of Bergün,

Switzerland, a tiny village nestled in the Alps. Bergün made international news in 2017 after its local officials instituted a ban on tourists taking photos to share on social media. Why did the officials decide to implement such a ban? Bergün is a beautiful and picturesque mountain village which, according to the officials of the village, is too beautiful and picturesque to have scores of visitors posting pictures on their social media lest their friends become sad that they cannot be there too. In fact, a posted notice in the town reads, “Photographs of our picturesque landscape, shared on social media, can make others unhappy because they themselves cannot be here.”¹¹

While one news outlet reported that there were those who saw such a move by the local government to be “a strategic public relations plan to boost tourism further for the village,”¹² there is still something to behold in the fact that such a policy reveals a certain truth about the way social media influences its users. Whether the town officials of Bergün were wholeheartedly serious or not, even a tongue-in-cheek gesture that nods toward an issue with social media indicates that a real issue exists. What you see on social media will elicit feelings from you that are not always positive. You might feel like you are missing out on all of the great adventures of the world.¹³ You might feel inadequate and yes, as the official notice in Bergün says, sad. How could that not illicit some envy, to constantly be bombarded with beauty that you could be enjoying if you just directed your efforts toward it?

11. Larbi, Miranda. “You can’t share Insta pics of this stunning Swiss town unless you’ve got a special permit.” Metro. <https://metro.co.uk/2017/06/04/you-cant-share-insta-pics-of-this-stunning-swiss-town-unless-youve-got-a-special-permit-6683407/>.

12. Philippines Daily Inquirer. “Swiss Town Bans Photos of Scenery to Avoid Social Media Envy.” 4 June 2017.

13. This is part of a concept known online as FOMO, or Fear Of Missing Out, a concept too deep to be explored in this paper. FOMO commonly includes the fear of missing out on the actual activity as well as the feeling of missing out on updates which are constantly being given on social media when unable to be online.

The beauty associated with travel and the most picturesque areas of the world are just one way that social media elicits envy. The cases of social media envy get much more personal than a town implementing a policy based on a general assumption of people's feelings and a chance to promote its own beauty. A *New York Times* article entitled "The Agony of Instagram" explores the personal frustrations of several individuals who struggle with seeing the more glamorous lives of people they know play out before their eyes on social media. The article quotes a woman named Erin Wurzel, who describes her experience using the social media platform Instagram like this, "I let out an 'Oh, my God!,' like a little kid who wants something they cannot have... You're searching through your feed and a picture will hit you, like that Paris shot. It's just so perfect. You just think, 'I want that, I want that life.'"¹⁴ The article calls Ms. Wurzel's feelings "Instagram envy."¹⁵ Who wouldn't agree that her assessment of her feelings and experience are anything less than a textbook definition for envy.

Sometimes the envy is not just a feeling of "wanting that" but also of wanting to "be that," a tightly related concept but one even further curved in toward self. At that point, the focus of envy is no longer on wishing that you had the pleasures that you most desire, but wishing that you could be elevated to an even more godly state in your worship of self where you are on a higher level of worthiness surrounded by even more pleasures that you would surely enjoy up on that new plateau.¹⁶

14. Alex Williams, "The Agony of Instagram," *The New York Times*, 13 December 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/15/fashion/instagram.html>.

15. Williams, "The Agony of Instagram."

16. The last word in this sentence is a deliberate reference to the song "Plateau" by the Meat Puppets, which was popularized by its live performance by the band Nirvana on its *MTV Unplugged* episode. The song speaks of climbing a plateau and finding, "nothing on the top but a bucket and a mop and an illustrated book about birds,"—a reference to the meaninglessness often found as humans seek new levels of glory; something overlooked until it occurs.

To illustrate this point, consider another experience described in that same *New York Times* article. Another woman who was interviewed, Sara Benincasa, speaks about one of her friends on social media, named Heather Fink, whose job in the film industry takes her to numerous exotic locations. The following excerpt relates an experience Ms. Benincasa had with the feelings of envy that content on social media can elicit:

Ms. Benincasa recalled being at a CVS drugstore, waiting to pick up her refills of Prozac and Klonopin, when she began scrolling through Ms. Fink's feed, which is updated frequently, especially when Ms. Fink is jetting around the world. "She's in Cannes, she's in New Mexico. She's in Abu Dhabi for a film shoot. She's going to Holland. She was just at Jared Harris's wedding on a yacht in Miami," Ms. Benincasa said. "I'm standing there in my stained sweatpants, I was thinking, 'I really need to up my game in life.'"¹⁷

The reaction of Sara Benincasa was not only that she wished she could have her friend's life, or at least some of the elements that were found in her friend's life, but that she was inadequate and needed to improve her own life, meeting the standards that her friend was meeting in her posts, but not necessarily replicating the glories in the same way. The envy experience has its own unique flavor for each user.

Add to the friends and strangers on the internet an older source of envy: celebrities. Celebrities only become more powerful tools of envy with the intimate views into their personal lives social media makes possible. *New York Times* writer Valeriya Safronova puts it this way:

And how has your summer been so far? Have you been frolicking in the Hamptons with an Academy Award-winning actress? No? Then you have clearly not been having as good a time as Amy Schumer, who, as reported by *Vanity Fair* in an article titled "See Jennifer Lawrence and Amy Schumer Together on the Summer Vacation of Our Dreams," documented on her Instagram account a trip she recently took with Ms. Lawrence, posting a blurry shot of herself and Ms. Lawrence on a Jet Ski...Is all this bringing out the envious side of you? You're not alone...when various combinations of celebrities join forces; escape to shimmering sunshine-soaked locales; and document their

17. Williams, "The Agony of Instagram."

escapades on social platforms. It's hard to ignore the underlying message: They're having a fabulous summer while you, poor soul trapped in a grim cubicle, are not.¹⁸

Those people who look so glamorous, who live so lavishly, who have what we want and are who we want to be, are so much more enviable when we can look at their lives through the exact same means that we can see our friends' lives or share the details of our own lives. We see where we want to be, who we want to be with, and imagine who we might be in those circumstances. As Huffington Post associate editor Emily Tess Katz says about viewing celebrity social media posts, "Not only am I not on this epic trip in Cannes, but I'm also not on this yacht in Cannes with Gigi and Bella Hadid and Hailey Baldwin...It exacerbates the feeling. I can't help but have the delusion that they would enjoy me there."¹⁹

Travel, fashion, lifestyles, even food are some of the main objects that social media glorifies and incites envy over. They're enticing to the eye, they're easy to compare to what we already have, and it's not hard for the imagination to think about making them realities. These features are so often pushed before the social media user not only by friends, but by literally millions of strangers in all varying stages of fulfilling their own desires and posting them for all to see.

Consider a feature of the social media platform Instagram, called the Explore Page, an image of which is attached in the Appendix. The Explore Page is meant to be a way for the user to find new content which they enjoy. Apart from the main screen of the Explore Page—customized for the user based on Instagram's algorithms which take into account the user's likes, follows, and views—there are tabs with the most popular categories which allow the user to

18. Valeriya Safronova, "On Instagram, the Summer You're Not Having," *The New York Times*, 19 August 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/20/fashion/on-instagram-the-summer-youre-not-having.html>.

19. Safronova, "On Instagram, The Summer You're Not Having."

access numerous posts featuring those specific categories' content. It's instant access to a near infinite amount of envy fodder. Included in those categories are Science & Tech; Nature; Décor; Food; Travel; and Style; all of which bring the user to an image of a (usually) beautiful person, in a beautiful location, enjoying something beautiful. Seeing all of this fill your screen causes that envy to rise, whether in a small amount or a large amount, in a way that encourages you to seek after those glories, or in way that at the very least encourages you to get to work on making your current life the best it can be so that it can be at the top of its own category.

The author of the article "The Agony of Instagram" makes the case that Instagram, the social media platform that was the article's sole focus, is worse than other forms of social media like Facebook and Twitter because they are messier, containing not only the glamorous posts but also,

a clutter of birthday wishes to Aunt Candace, one-liners about airline food and links to the latest Onion headline or New Republic deconstruction of Obamacare. Instagram, rather, is about unadulterated voyeurism. It is almost entirely a photo site, with a built in ability (through the site's retro-style filters) to idealize every moment encouraging users to create art-directed magazine layouts of their lives, as if everyone is suddenly Diana Vreeland.²⁰

Likewise, Susannah Butter writes, "[Instagram is] worse than Facebook because it's just photos, and you can follow strangers with more glamorous lives than yours." She also adds, "There are as many shades of envy as there are filters on the app — I've felt envious of others' locations, funny caption writing ability, friends, social life and photographic skills."²¹

Is Instagram alone in how it creates envy? Yes, it may be better at eliciting those feelings from some because of its format, but the same elements and capabilities necessary to create envy

20. Williams, "The Agony of Instagram." Diana Vreeland was a renowned fashion magazine editor in the mid-20th century.

21. Susannah Butter, "Help, I've Got Insta-Envy!" *Evening Standard*. 3 June 2013.

exist in any social media platform. The very things that Susannah Butter lists as enviable—locations; writing ability; friends; social life; photo skills—can be displayed on virtually all social media platforms. All of the most popular platforms allow users to share photos. They all allow users to share writing. Twitter especially is known for short witticisms. The social part of social media means that every platform is going to show some element of real-world social life. Friend counts and who follows whom shows up across platforms. The necessary ingredients for envy are present no matter what the social media platform.

It is not just reporters and individuals who are noticing the envy that social media causes. These feelings are not merely the emotions of a select few who have been caught up in the social media frenzy and now are looking for an outlet to vent their personal views. Scientific researchers are taking notice too and gathering hard data through studies. Personal stories pack emotional punch, and make the problem real and tangible, while the scientific data proves that it is a common and extensive issue.

According to one study conducted in Germany, the information shared on Facebook produces “a basis for social comparison and envy on an unprecedented scale.”²² Additionally the study showed that envy “could be one of the most common negative consequences of following others on these [social media] platforms.”²³ The definition for envy used by this study encapsulates everything that the personal accounts cited above said about which feelings were experienced and why they arose. The definition used in the study is, “a painful emotion that emerge[s] as a result of upward comparison to advantages others, who possess something, that

22. Hanna Krasnova, Helena Wenninger, Thomas Widajaja, and Peter Buxmann, “Envy on Facebook: A Hidden Threat to Users’ Life Satisfaction?” (paper presented at the 11th International Conference on Wirtschaftsinformatik. Leipzig, Germany, 27 February–1 March 2013), <https://doi.org/10.7892/boris.47080>, 1.

23. Krasnova, Wenninger, Widajaja, and Buxmann, “Envy on Facebook: A Hidden Threat to Users’ Life Satisfaction?” 1.

one covets but lacks.”²⁴ Note how the comparison—the looking at a world held in a particular frame—is a major cause for the envy. Likewise, envy is connected to a desire for something one does not currently possess. In terms of raw statistics, the study found that when survey respondents were asked to answer the question, “*Many users report feeling frustrated and exhausted after using Facebook. What do you think causes these feelings?*”²⁵ 29.6% of users mentioned envy as the major reason for others feeling frustrated.²⁶

Additionally, this study believed not only that social comparison itself caused feelings of envy but that the “environment [of social media networks] is particularly likely to exacerbate envy feelings, since it promotes narcissistic behavior, with most users sharing only positive things about themselves.”²⁷ Social media users tend not to share anything except the best and most glamorous parts of their lives. Some will even post pictures of past trips, or past social events, or even just old selfies with regular frequency, just to keep their post feed full of quality content even when reality limits that person from having those types of experiences and good days year round or even for more than a few weeks. It’s not uncommon to see a travel photo captioned with #TakeMeBack, a common hashtag used to refer to one’s desire to go back to a time and place encapsulated by a post when the user felt good while living the high life. The poster can at the same time maintain quality content while also indulging in the admission that he or she wishes life could be as great as the social media feeds shows.

24. Krasnova, Wenninger, Widajaja, and Buxmann, “Envy on Facebook: A Hidden Threat to Users’ Life Satisfaction?” 3.

25. Krasnova, Wenninger, Widajaja, and Buxmann, “Envy on Facebook: A Hidden Threat to Users’ Life Satisfaction?” 5.

26. Krasnova, Wenninger, Widajaja, and Buxmann, “Envy on Facebook: A Hidden Threat to Users’ Life Satisfaction?” 5.

27. Krasnova, Wenninger, Widajaja, and Buxmann, “Envy on Facebook: A Hidden Threat to Users’ Life Satisfaction?” 3.

Not to be lost in this discussion of social media and envy is perhaps the most recognizable and most talked about basic elements of the big three social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter): likes and followers. The number of friends or followers that a person has on social media is often a sign of popularity. Celebrity accounts have millions of followers, average models or lesser or regional public figures may have upwards of hundreds of thousands, and maybe that pretty, popular girl at school has even eclipsed a thousand herself. Followers can become a source of validation and worth and can just as easily be envied as the material contained in posts. The connection is the same— if I was living as good of a life as that person with a thousand followers then I'd have a better life and then probably more followers too.

Likes tend to correlate with followers.²⁸ More followers means content that is posted will be seen by more people and get more likes. Consequently, likes are coveted in the same way that followers are because they are an indication of status. It is true that perhaps an exceptional post may garner likes purely on merit, but that is an exception to the rule, and even exceptional posts only deviate a minimal amount from the usual trends.

A good number of those who have written about social media that I have encountered tend to focus on the gratification element of “likes.” Some even reference the chemical reactions that occur in the brain when such validation is received. In Susannah Butter’s article for *Evening*

28. An interesting observation I have made, though certainly not scientific, is that on Instagram while a user can expect a higher net amount of likes with more followers, the number of likes on any given post may not represent high percentage of the number of followers liking the post. In all cases the number of likes only represented a small fraction of the number of followers. For example, when comparing users who had only hundreds, thousands, or millions of followers, those with more followers were often not gaining more likes per follower. While these are not hard statistics, it is notable to see how likes are perhaps not as much of a currency as some believe, as much they are an indicator of circumstance that corresponds to all other features of a social media user. In short, a person on a certain plateau of living is not really getting more likes, they are just living a different life in which their net amount of likes is greater, yet proportionally equal to almost anyone else.

Standard, reference is made to the dopamine release that occurs when likes are received and quotes Dr. Michael Sinclair of Berlin Humboldt University speaking on that matter. She writes, “When someone’s picture is ‘liked’ they get a jolt of dopamine, the feel good chemical in the brain. ‘But the effect is short-lived,’ says Sinclair. Over time, what happens in the brain is similar to what makes drug addicts go back for another hit.”²⁹

In her book about the generation she calls iGen, Jean M. Twenge puts a great focus on the social media habits of young kids in the 2010s. She also comments on how likes are viewed by young people and notes how many of them comment about maintaining likes and followers. She quotes one 20 year old interviewee as describing likes in this way, “When you go on social media you post a status or you post a picture and all of a sudden you get all those likes, you get all those affirmations from people, and it can be addictive because you have the constant pats on the back that, like, ‘You’re smart, you’re funny, you’re attractive.’”³⁰

While there is no denying the mental effects of receiving validation through social media, I see validation as a more important concept than the feelings that go with it. While on the surface it may appear that chasing likes is the goal and that likes are akin to currency where the more you have the better off you are because it is social capital, at the core, likes may be closer connected to those feelings of envy and desire for a certain life and status than even users may realize.

Consider it like this: likes are just confirmation that your status is as good as you are wanting it to be. Likes say, "Yes, your vacation was good. Yes, you are attractive. Yes, you are able to do fun things. Yes, your life is what you desire it to be. Yes, you’re doing a good job of

29. Butter, “Help, I’ve Got Insta-Envy!”

30. Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria, 2017), 56–57

serving yourself." Likes are less of an end in and of themselves and more a barometer for what is encapsulated in the frame. Has a post appropriately achieved your vision of self? The likes will tell you. Likes affirm that you've made it to the plateau. In the end, after seeing so much glamour and glitz paraded before your eyes on social media, all you want to do is know if you can do the same and if you're measuring up. The problem with using likes as your barometer is that chances are they'll never be enough. As a result, you'll have to go back to see what you can do better to be more like everything that you see day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute as you scroll through your virtually endless feed.

Finally, no discussion about social media is complete without addressing the notorious selfie. Here again, I argue that there is more to the selfie than just shallow, surface-level narcissism. It's not that those who are taking selfies need to see themselves or even need others to see themselves. Their selfies are a way of checking in on themselves. Selfies are mirrors with a timestamp – an opportunity to see where I am on the levels relative to what I see and where I want to be. It's because of this that this paper is given the playful title *Incurvatus in se(life)*. The selfie is not merely a symbol of sinful man's nature to be curved in upon one's self, it is the *practice* of curving in on one's self. The selfie, like likes, followers, and envy over feed posts is directly related to self-assessment on the basis of a theology of glory.

This system of self-assessment and validation helps operate what can be called a "fame-shame" culture. "Although the United States has usually been categorized as an innocence-guilt society, there is growing recognition we are living in a postmodern 'fame-shame' society, a media-saturated culture that is distinctly different from traditional honor and shame cultures."³¹

31. Glenn Russell, "Fame, Shame and Social Media: Missional Insights for Youth Ministry," *The Journal of Youth Ministry* Vol. 15, No. 1 (Fall 2017): 34.

Because the Western world is highly individualized, collective honor has been replaced in this sort of culture system with individual fame.³² Once an individual has entered himself or herself into this world, he or she will have to face the potential shame of not living up to the expectations of a faceless mass of people. A collective drives the standard, but the individual bears the brunt of the expectation. Naturally, envy will arise for those who have seemingly mastered the system. Despair will set in for those who again and again fail to meet the standard. Through all of this, social media will persist in encouraging the user to keep up and keep going in a never-ending scramble up the plateau. In this situation, social media becomes less of a charming motivator for a theology of glory and more of a cruel whip. Regardless, the encouragement to pursue glory remains.

The whole package of social media is a dashboard, where an individual can see where he or she stands in pursuit of higher glory. Let's recall once more Ms. Benincasa's comment upon seeing what her friend was doing in comparison to where she was at that moment, "I really need to up my game in life."³³ Up the game—so that life will be post-worthy which then reflects back that reality is good because it reflects my desires to have a post-worthy life. Life on social media can become a cycle of seeking to reach a level, validating that level, then looking back to what is held in the frame of social media to find the next level. Envy is like the logs, and likes the twigs, that fuel the fire of the theology of glory that social media promotes. The seeking of glory for self in sinful man is ever present and social media is ever present with suggestions on how to do so.

32. Russell, "Fame, Shame and Social Media: Missional Insights for Youth Ministry," 34.

33. Williams, "The Agony of Instagram."

PART III: SOCIAL MEDIA AND THEOLOGY OF GLORY

Fueling the Desire for Glory

How does social media promote the theology of glory? To see how this happens it is now time to look where the two concepts intersect. After understanding how social media plays on the emotions it is possible to connect those responses with the characteristics of the theology of glory. As connections are drawn between social media and the theology of glory it is important to remember that the theology of glory is the natural theology of the sinful nature and as such is the natural impetus for the course of action that an individual takes in life according to the desires of that sinful nature.

We remember that the goal in the theology of glory is bound up with the desire to serve and worship the self by indulging in personal pleasures. In the end, the person is so turned in on the self that he or she has no other goal or concerns. The theology of glory seeks to avoid anything that would hinder this goal, calling that bad or evil. The end goal of a theology of glory varies from individual to individual, but because this theology is always considered in view of the theology of the cross, it is important to keep in mind that the theology of glory is a substitution for God; at least the true God as he presents himself through his son Jesus, who died on the cross. Therefore, since humans have a natural knowledge of God, they will reach out and try to find their own god which is always, because of the corruption of the sinful nature, a god that fits the theology of glory. In today's context in America and other prosperous 1st-world countries, it could reasonably be said that god is no longer the goal. Yet, whatever people place as their goal and object of worship is for them, their god. As Luther says in the Large Catechism:

What does it mean to have a god? What is God? Answer: To have a god means this: You expect to receive all good things from it and turn to it in every time of trouble. Yes, to have a god means to trust and to believe in Him with your whole heart. I have often said that only the trust and faith of the heart can make God or an idol. If your faith and trust

are true, you have the true God, too. On the other hand, where trust is false, is evil, there you will not have the true God either. Faith and God live together. I tell you, whatever you set your heart on and rely on is really your god.³⁴

In the theology of glory, self is god and religion is whatever playbook of actions will worship the desires of that particular self.

It may be asked in this modern 1st-world context, “Who is trying to do good works any more?”³⁵ Consider the difference in theological thinking in the current age compared with the past as Daniel Deutschlander lays it out:

In earlier times it was common for people to consider life difficult. The further back we go in history, the more often we encounter in the writings of seers and sages the assumption that life’s difficulties are rooted somehow in the interaction between God and man...By the end of the 19th century, direct assaults on the Bible had become so common that the only arguments left in the scholarly world were between different schools of unbelief...[those who defended the Bible] were dismissed as ignorant miscreants from a bygone age...This supposedly scholarly rejection of the Bible and its God as the ultimate source of truth is assumed by now in every field of human endeavor. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the role of God in nature and in the course of history rarely comes into the modern mind.³⁶

Considering this, it seems fitting to say that the world is more primed than ever for a theology of glory that looks to the greatness of humankind to eradicate all suffering and produce only good. Many in the world conduct their lives with a sort of eschatological procrastination: they do not consider what comes at the end of life because there is too much good that they are able to concern themselves with at the present. Their idea of salvation is not an eternal concept nor even necessarily related to the concept of “God” at all—it is wholly secular and temporal and other from life after death. As Deutschlander describes the thinking of the person caught up in the

34. Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, Trans. Robert E. Smith, *Project Wittenberg*, <https://christian.net/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/luther-devoted.txt>

35. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*, xiii.

36. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross: Reflections on His Cross and Ours*, 67–68

theology of glory, “There is a heaven if I believe there is and the way to get to the heaven of my own inventing is the way that I plan to get there.” Deutschlander implies that a culture such as ours can only lead to hedonism and the assumption that the only thing that is real is myself and the moment.³⁷

Now, drop social media into that context and what you get is a tool for promoting this concept. As demonstrated, social media keeps placing the best the world has to offer before our hungry eyes. What does a theology of glory feed off of? “It operates on the assumption that what we need is optimistic encouragement, some flattery, some positive thinking, some support to build our self-esteem.”³⁸ That is precisely what social media does. All those enviable posts are quietly offering you the encouragement to change your envy to reality. Every time that you make your own post, you receive some flattery that congratulates you for succeeding in your quest for glory. Social media simultaneously provides the support needed to make a pursuit of glory feel good and a prod to keep going.

The beginning of this paper talked about frames. In a world that already ignores suffering because of its humanistic tendencies,³⁹ social media only serves to further such ignorance. The portrait of the world that is held in the frame of social media is overwhelmingly positive. Travel destinations, social gatherings, high fashion and art, sensuality – these are the motifs that dominate social media.⁴⁰ Those who use the media themselves don’t deny that people primarily

37. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross: Reflections on His Cross and Ours*, 72.

38. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*, 16

39. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross: Reflections on His Cross and Ours*, 68–69

40. Cf. the Appendix. Interestingly enough these motifs are often combined. E.g. it is just as common if not more common for a picture of a beautiful landscape to be accented by the presence of a beautiful woman in the photograph overlooking the scene. This can be seen in one of the thumbnails in the image in Appendix 1.

look to promote what is best, “‘People try to create their most desirable selves online,’ said Max Wedding, [age] 24...‘They want to create a self that looks like it’s having as much fun as possible. The mundane middle ground is lost.’”⁴¹ Much like ignoring the eschatological truth that everything must end and there must be some reckoning at the end of our time on earth, those on social media ignore the mundane and undesirable in an effort to see the unpleasant go away entirely.

Additionally, social media will work to make the even the individual who feels content uncomfortable. Contentedness is not allowed on social media because the prod is always present pushing the individual on to be better. Take this scenario for example:

Erin Wurzel, 26, thought she had plenty to feel thankful about this Thanksgiving weekend: she is engaged to a great guy (and was spending the holiday with his family), working on her first novel and taking French with an eye to moving to Paris someday. Then she checked her Instagram feed. One friend had posted a Martha Stewart-worthy photo of her “mashed potato bar” featuring 15 spud-filled martini glasses artfully arranged in a pyramid, alongside a matching pyramid of bowls of homemade condiments. Another friend had posted a close-up of a cranberry barrel, with a sieve scooping up a Technicolor explosion of the crimson fruit above the caption, “Last minute grocery run.” A third posted her holiday table setting in Paris, complete with burning candles, rolled napkins with napkin rings, an open Champagne bottle, a huge centerpiece of fall flowers and the illuminated Eiffel Tower framed in a casement window.⁴²

Just when Ms. Wurzel thought that she was enjoying life, indeed living a good life—perhaps a life that others might envy—social media quickly bombarded her with numerous examples of how she could yet be doing better. Her response, of course, was to give in to the message the media was selling her and say, “I want that.”

At this point one could make the accusation that all of this ignores other uses of social media, particularly the ability to share thoughts and ideas. I would respond that even these uses

41. Valeriya Safronova, “On Instagram, The Summer You’re Not Having.”

42. Alex Williams, “The Agony of Instagram.”

can still lend themselves to the encouragement of the same motivations. Additionally, the promotion of ideas, or in extreme cases social outrage, is yet another evidence of the theology of glory being present in social media. This does merit some consideration since public outcry has become a large part of social media usage. "It seems that we can hardly go five minutes without a new episode of outrage erupting in the public sphere...If you spend any time on social media, you might have a sense that we are locked in a state of perpetual outrage."⁴³ This outcry is another attempt at ignoring suffering and the undesirable. While that may seem contradictory, considering that the object of outcry tends to be objectionable and undesirable events, circumstances, or conditions, consider the motivation for outcry against such undesirable events. Is not the goal of outcry to change the undesirable so that it no longer exists and rather only the desirable exists? Who is it that gets to determine what is undesirable and therefore deserves outcry against it? It is the self, who is troubled by the presence of an undesirable object clogging its vision of glory. The object of outcry is a smudge on the picture in the frame of social media. So, the self must use the tools at hand to restore the picture held in the frame.

All of these factors are only amplified when you consider how much content is constantly being paraded across screens on social media. The world of social media never sleeps. Somewhere, maybe halfway across the globe, someone is doing something that will be posted on social media. There's never enough content to satisfy our desires. Only boredom of seeing the same thing over and over again can get a person to pull their eyes away from the fantastical parade. How ironic that oversaturation is a main cause of turning the social media off for a moment. However, as soon as enough time has passed, and a person has tired of looking around at his or her mundane surroundings, the screen lights back up, the finger scrolls, and a parade of

43. Saralyn Cruickshank, "Moral outrage overload? How social media may be changing our brains." Johns Hopkins University. <https://hub.jhu.edu/2019/09/25/molly-crockett-social-media-outrage/>

the best sights, sounds, and witticisms pass before the ever-eager eyes longing for more inspiration, more satisfaction, more pleasures.

The constant bombardment of content that social media provides means that all of its enticements will sooner or later take effect on even the most contented user. What riverbed will resist erosion from the most powerful of floods day after day? What stone on the beach will not eventually be pummeled into sand when wave after wave crashes down on it incessantly? If the prisoners in Plato's cave were directed to look out a window where the world was framed by social media instead of gazing at shadows what would they think? Likely they would think that the world was nothing but a land filled with great beauty, constantly enjoyed by all. It would appear to be a place where social gatherings were always of the grandest order and occurred with frequency. It would seem like a land where everyone enjoyed themselves all the time and every aspect of life was directed toward living more and living better. The world framed by social media is a playground. It is a field covered by fresh snow waiting for the eager ones to come place their tracks in it. When perception of the world is seen only through what is framed by social media, then the world is about nothing but glory.

Another problem with social media is the fact that it is a fast paced and ever-changing landscape. Trends are always shifting. What is cool with the kids one year, or even one month, falls out of favor the next. Only recently has advertising become commonplace in social media. Traditional style ads, celebrity endorsements, and brand recognizability have been joined by the trend of influencer. The influencer is a recognizable person with a sizable following who essentially functions as a small-scale marketer. Such a person could be considered the most minor of celebrities. Famous for doing nothing special except being present on your social media

feed, the influencer not only portrays the perfect life of glamour and pleasure for their own sake, but also for the sake of a businessman trying to market a product.

Yes, advertisers recognize the power that social media has to incite envy and desire and has harnessed that power to drive already consumeristic people to be more consumeristic. On top of that, everyone now desires to become an influencer themselves. The influencer is a veritable king or queen, living a supposedly lavish life, adored by loving and jealous fans, making money from nothing more substantial than being a supposedly desirable person.

What trend will come next that will incite further envy for glory on social media? It is hard to say, but no doubt it will capitalize on the powerful emotional effect that social media has on people. Social media distracts from the unanswerable questions that trouble the person living a theology of glory. Why do certain tragedies seem to occur without the slightest reasonable explanation? Why do some seem more favored than others despite how much effort is put into living pleasurable? What will happen when I die? How can I be sure of what I think will happen? What is my purpose on this earth? The theology of glory is all too ready to say, “Ignore these questions because they will make you sad and keep you from making yourself greater.” Likewise, social media says, “Don’t ponder such things, look at this instead. See what you could be doing that is much more enjoyable than considering those questions. Look at how these people are enjoying themselves free of such constraining questions.” Social media can quickly lead to delusions about what the world really is—a fallen domain scarred by sin.

Additional Considerations

The intended scope of this paper was to demonstrate how social media encourages an already present theology of glory which is the natural theology of fallen man. In drawing that connection

between social media and the theology of glory this paper does not explore every facet of social media, nor does it even assume to have examined fully the depths of those elements used to demonstrate the connection between social media and theology of glory. They have only been examined and discussed insofar as is necessary to draw fair conclusions. Additionally, studies in social media, both secular and religious, are relatively new. Only now is this topic being explored on a deeper level than the news report style examinations that were typical of sources for this paper.

Also, as mentioned previously, the world of the internet and specifically, the world of social media, is always changing. This makes it difficult to always understand trends and the way that they affect people. What has a great influence today may not have the same significance tomorrow. There is a need to stay up to date with the specifics of how information is being communicated on social media platforms. This paper intends to propose a starting point that will remain fairly constant—that social media appeals to the natural tendencies of the sinful nature.

All of this is to say that this paper is only a start to understanding the theological implications of social media. Many other facets and effects of social media merit attention. There is a wealth of information waiting to be uncovered and verified. Those who care about the gospel message of our Lord Jesus Christ would do well to pay attention to social media and trends within social media, not merely to condemn it, but to see how it fits into the lives of both people in the world who are wandering and lost sinners, and the flock of the church who are *simul justus et peccator* and still susceptible to the desires of the sinful nature.

Areas for Further Study

I find it appropriate here to propose some other areas of interest that either arose in the course of this paper or are tangential to it that deserve further attention and study.

As I mentioned earlier, I do not consider “likes” on social media to be a core issue with social media. They are certainly tied closely, perhaps inseparably to the core issue of social media being focused only on the concept of glory in life, but as they relate to the theology of glory, likes are relational to the problem and are not the cause of it. However, this is not to say that the culture of “likes” does not have its own consequences which are worth considering, nor is it impossible that one could see likes as of equal value in promoting a theology of glory or other evils wholly apart from the methods by which social media promotes a certain worldview. Just the fact alone that science has demonstrated the chemical reaction in the brain from the validation of likes shows that it merits serious study.

Similarly, the contemporary “shame-honor” or “fame-shame” culture fostered by social media deserves investigation. While shame certainly drives an individual to strive for greater and greater heights of social media glory there are other aspects of this cultural phenomenon that are beyond the scope of this thesis. Shame on social media creates its own moral code in a postmodern world that seemingly is devoid of a collective moral. As a result, many are ostracized in an acceptable way because of how the mass collective reacts to something that appears on social media. Due to the ubiquity of cellphone cameras and instant reporting, these matters may be out of the control of the victim at the center of the ostracism. Certainly these matters are quite relevant to the Christian witness and counselor in contemporary times.

Another concept which was mentioned in this paper which merits further attention of its own is the concept of memes. Memes are a powerful communication method and have grown

immensely in popularity because of social media. What effects might this method of information sharing have on the psyche of humans? How do memes fit into the sphere of theology? How do they shape worldviews and is there a place for them to be utilized in Gospel ministry? All of these questions are beyond the scope of this paper, but stem from it.

This paper focused on drawing lines between the theology of glory and the principles of social media, but did not focus as much on the long term or short term effects that has. This paper expressed the negative ways that social media can influence a person already susceptible because of his sinful nature to the pull of glory. Further focus may be merited on specific consequences such as changes in lifestyle because of social media or on the phenomenon known as FOMO. Specific focus could be given to different demographics as regards social media, especially considering that young people are some of the most prevalent users of social media and contribute heavily to the trends on those platforms.

Additionally, trends such as advertising and the influencer phenomenon could be worthwhile topics for examination because of the way that they use old methods of targeting the desires of man and place them into a new context. Is an increasingly digital world creating a disparity between perception and reality—between the screen and real life?

These are all interesting topics that are related, but not central to my core topic of how social media plays to the sinful nature's appetite for a theology of glory. Still, they merit further exploration.

CONCLUSION

It is important to remember how the sinful nature works when considering the effects of social media on sinful humans. The sinful nature uses even those things which God intends to be

blessings as instruments for pleasing itself in a sinful way. This is important to remember so that it does not seem that this paper intends to condemn all or some social media as a wretched source of evil. Social media is no more a tool of the devil than the Word of God misapplied by sinful humans can be. Of course, social media is a product of the world, so Christians are right to evaluate its use in their life. However, much of what makes up the concept of social media is directly related to the way God created humans to live.

God created humans to be social and interact with one another. That's why he created Eve to be a suitable partner for Adam. That's why he blesses married couples with children. That's why he gathers his Christians together in communities around his gospel. God intends for people to join into communities, something that social media does very well, even connecting people in far off places to one another.

God also created communication. He spoke to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Even after he confused the languages of the people at the tower of Babel, he still communicated his message of salvation in spoken and written form to be transferred throughout generations. God uses people as messengers of that Word. Communication through various forms of media is certainly a blessing of God. It does much good. Social media connects people in ways that did not exist previously.

God also created all the pleasures of this world that are featured so heavily on social media. Beauty is from God. Splendor is his. We are right to appreciate all those splendid things that reflect his glory. Like anything God blesses us with in the world, the objects themselves are not evil in essence, but they have been corrupted because of sin and are misused by people who are sinful. Social media is no exception.

Social media is exceptional, however, in the role that it plays in the lives of people today and the way that it greatly influences how people live. There is a need to always be on the lookout for the subtle ways that the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh seek to lure people away from God. Social media is one such way that the sinful nature especially seeks to deceive people into forsaking God. The sinful nature sees in social media a convenient way to indulge its tendency to be *incurvatus in se*.

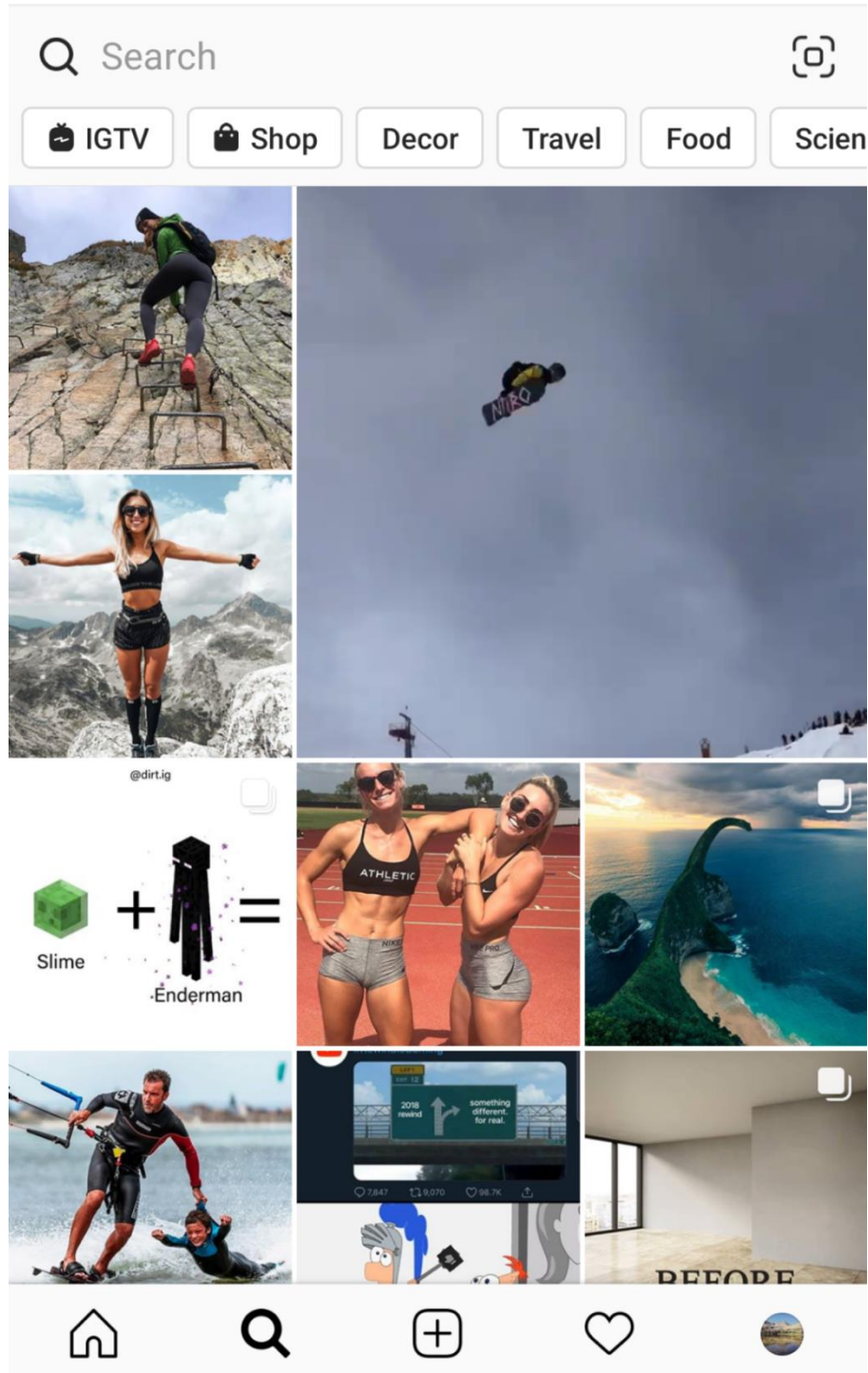
Through its instant and nearly infinite availability, social media feeds its users with the best of what the world has to offer, giving them a worldview that focuses only on glory to the exclusion of nearly all displeasure. Social media's powerful influence on the emotions moves people to reevaluate their lives in view of the glories of the world and seek to gain more glory themselves. The focus on the self that social media promotes further elevates the self to a position of worship. The constant comparison of lifestyles fuels a constant race to better the self.

The theology of glory is alive and well despite the world's departure from a concern with theology as most think of it. Modern theology has become covered with a veneer of secularism and worldly otherness. Despite this, the truth remains that humans are spiritual creatures, created with souls by an almighty and righteous God. In view of this, the Savior's words are relevant as ever in our modern context with our modern devices such as social media.

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? (Mk 8:34–37)

APPENDIX

FIGURE 1



A screenshot of Instagram's explore page. Notice the categories at the top of the page.

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