

Act 2: The Algorithmic Apprenticeship

By *Jake Wilkinson*

All right, well, I'm glad we can be here together, and I'm really excited about what's going on in this church right now. It's been a pleasure.

I was listening to a podcast recently, hearing other pastors talk about sharing specific events from the front. They mentioned situations like the Charlie Kirk controversy, or COVID, or wearing masks—any number of public issues. And no matter what you say, no matter what position you take, for somebody, you're wrong. You feel that?

They were talking about how pastors would say one thing, or take a position, and people would disagree and walk out. We watched people walk out of churches left and right over significant events in the community that we disagreed about. I'm not going to talk about any of those today, so you can relax. Thank you. Somebody thank me. You're welcome.

Mostly because I want you all to still like me. But there's another reason. This is the reality of the culture we live in. We walk away from each other very quickly. We walk away because we disagree, because people make mistakes, because they hurt us. Something happens and we say, "I'm not doing that anymore."

Sometimes there are good reasons to create distance, and we'll talk about that a little bit. But right now, what I want to talk about is this tendency we have to walk away. I think there's a reason for that, and part of that reason is the algorithm you watch every week.

An algorithm is the thing that dictates what you watch—on Reels, YouTube, all of it. It's geared toward you. It sees what you watch, and it actually gets more extreme as you keep watching. How much screen time do you think the average American spends per day? Four hours? Six? You're closer. It's actually seven hours per day.

Seven hours per day. Multiply that out—that's about 200 hours a month on the low end. Do you know how many hours the average church attender spends in church per month? Not Americans—church attenders. It's 1.6 hours. One-point-six.

I have no ability to speak through the 200 hours you spend on your screens. Our music doesn't either. That's the challenge the church is up against today. I'm not saying it's all bad, and I'm not saying you're watching things that pull you away from God. I have a phone too. I watch Reels. I get sucked in sometimes.

But here's the thing: there's this idea that whatever we watch is truth. And you all know that's not true. Your brain doesn't actually believe what is true—it believes what is repeated. I'll say that again. Your brain believes what is repeated over and over again.

When something is repeated by an algorithm, eventually you begin to see it as a way of life. That's our culture. And when you come across someone who disagrees with you—someone with the opposite algorithm—what do you do? You unfollow them. Goodbye. I do it all the time.

This is actually a real issue. I'm reading a book called *The Anxious Generation*. It talks about Gen Z and our addiction to technology. Part of the anxiety comes from a fear of social death. It's not just anxiety about screens—it's anxiety about being rejected or abandoned.

This is why suicide rates are so high. Sometimes we're more afraid of social death than physical death. We've realized how deep the social need really is. This is also why Gen Z is facing a leadership crisis. If you disagree, if you make a mistake, the cultural instinct is to expose you—to blast it all over the internet. It happens every day.

No wonder we're afraid to be ourselves. No wonder we're afraid to make mistakes. We put on masks and become someone else to protect ourselves. You can call it cancel culture or whatever you want—it's everywhere now. This is the world we live in. We walk away from each other. We abandon each other.

When someone threatens the "truth" that your algorithm keeps repeating, they become the enemy. In church, we call this discipleship—a way of learning life, a belief system shaped by what you live with daily. I like the word *apprenticeship* better. It's practical, but it's also deeply rooted in belief.

You are being disciplined. It's not a question of whether you are—it's a question of *what* you're being disciplined by.

Your mind believes what is repeated. Now let me shift for a moment.

Do you know why our church exists—specifically? We often say loving Jesus and loving one another. But what most churches do is go in ten thousand directions and end up doing nothing well. We don't want to do that here.

We want to be narrow. We want to be focused. We want to move together in the same direction, on the same mission. That's why we're doing this revision process. We're not there yet. I'm not going to tell you exactly what it is because I don't know yet. We're still figuring it out.

What we're doing now is broad strokes—why churches exist, why faith exists, why we exist. That's why we've gone back to the beginning, to Abraham, and to Genesis. We're looking at how this applies not just to us as individuals, but to us as a church.

Last week, we talked about Abraham as the prototype of faith. And yes, it feels good to be part of a full church. It does. But it's not enough. Transformation doesn't happen in one hour a week. It happens in community. It happens when we speak into each other's lives and heal from the inside out.

Abraham wanted recognition, meaning, and respect—those are real needs. But God had a different plan than the world's way of getting those things.

Last week I talked about how we know God is working when we see healing—addictions broken, families restored, relationships healed. But today I want to ask a harder question.

What if that doesn't happen? What if the addiction remains? What if the cancer stays? What if the marriage doesn't survive? Sometimes prayers aren't answered, and sometimes the most devastating ones are our fault. We know it, and we carry the guilt.

Abraham hears God's voice, leaves his home, and heads toward the Promised Land. Then a famine hits. God is silent. Abraham panics. He goes to Egypt and lies out of fear. He says Sarai is his sister. Plagues follow. Thousands suffer.

God had promised Abraham would be a blessing to all nations—and now he's causing harm. What would we do if we were God? Shame him? Expose him? Remove the promise?

God doesn't do any of that. He protects Abram and Sarai. He keeps the promise. Abraham leaves Egypt richer than before. It's backwards.

Why does God keep using people who mess things up? Why does he use you and me? He doesn't abandon us at our lowest moments—even when we know we're wrong.

There's a lyric from a song that says, "He knew everything you would do before he chose you, and he did it anyway." That's freeing. God knew, and he still called you.

Maturing in faith is messy. We bleed on people. People bleed on us. Abraham isn't the ideal—he's the prototype. Faulty, messy, but he clings to God and won't let go. That's why he matters.

Jesus tells us to "be perfect," but the word means *complete, whole*, lacking nothing. And he says it in the context of loving enemies. That's the hard part.

We were once enemies of God, and he loved us back into existence. Can we do that for others? Can we be a church that holds boundaries against evil but still chooses love and reconciliation?

When culture pushes us to expose, shame, and retaliate, can we choose prayer first? Forgiveness first?

That's the challenge.

Let's pray.

Lord, forgive us. Save us from the culture that tells us to hate and retaliate. Teach us to love as you loved us, even when it's hard. Help us walk your way. In Jesus' name, amen.