Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Social Media and Digital Discernment
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John MacArthur

Twenty-five years ago Neil Postman observed that television had become an American "necessity" and lamented its effects on society. He correctly described the culture of the 1980s as one that was amusing itself to death. If he were alive today, Postman would be astonished at how quickly Twitter, Facebook, and other forms of social media have gripped our society. His earlier criticisms raise an interesting question about these current trends: If TV put our culture in the casket, has social media nailed the coffin shut?

Almost overnight, the budding world of social media has revolutionized the way our culture communicates. Even our vocabulary has been affected. Suddenly, people are "tagging" each other, "tweeting" about themselves, and "liking" everything they see. For the first time, it's possible to have "friends" you've never even met. Those conversant in the language of social media rarely use complete sentences or even complete words (since they are limited to 140 characters). All the while, words like "screenager," "vlog," and "cyberslacking," are finding their way into dictionaries like Oxford and Webster's. It's funny to consider that, not too long ago, surfing was just a water sport and a yahoo was a crazy person. But not anymore.

Social media is also changing the way people spend their time. Recent statistics from Nielson indicate that Americans spend 906 million hours per month using social media.[1] Twitter has over 100 million users. YouTube serves more than two billion videos a day. And Facebook reports that, worldwide, its 500 million active users spend a combined 700 billion minutes on the site each month. That's roughly 24 hours per person, which is a lot of time to spend checking status updates and changing profile pictures.[2]

So what are Christians supposed to think about all of this? How can we exercise biblical discernment in the way we use this new media?

On the one hand, social networking websites provide numerous benefits and opportunities. Many of the ministries with which I am involved (like Grace to You and The Master's College & Seminary) utilize social networking to dispense resources and keep people updated with ministry news.[3] Social networking can be a useful tool when used to communicate the right things—messages that honor Christ, exalt His Word, and direct people to profitable tools for spiritual growth.

But social networking can also be abused. When it consists of nothing more than random babblings and personal monologues, it can become self-centered, unrestrained and narcissistic. When it consumes our lives, it can be addictive and controlling. Used unwisely, it is filled with potential pitfalls and temptations. For those who follow Christ, we are called to submit every area of our lives to His lordship—including how we use social media. With that in mind, let's look at the following five areas of caution:

Virtual Fellowship

First, consider the façade of friendship that can be created by social networking. It has the potential to foster shallow relationships and detract from real ones. Instead of enhancing deep friendships, it tends to flatten out and impersonalize the dynamics of human interaction—creating what Umair Haque calls "thin relationships." Writing for the *Harvard Business Review*, Haque notes, "Despite all the excitement surrounding social media, the Internet isn't connecting us as much as we think it is. It's largely home to weak, artificial connections, what I call thin relationships. . . . Thin relationships are the illusion of real relationships." He goes on to explain that, thanks to the explosion of so-called friendships in the world of social networking, the very word "relationship" has lost its value. "It used to mean someone you could count on. Today, it means someone you can swap bits with."[4]

Haque is not alone in his observations. Gervase Markham, a Mozilla Foundation programmer quoted in*The Sydney Morning Herald*, echoes that same concern: "Social networking en-courages people to have a greater number of much shallower friendships. I know what 15 of my friends had for breakfast, but I don't know whether any of them is struggling with major life issues. If this trend continues, people in 2020 will have hundreds of acquaintances, but very few friends."[5]

Researcher Mark Vernon, writing in *USA Today*, agrees: "While social networking sites and the like have grown exponentially, the element that is crucial, and harder to investigate, is the *quality* of the connections they nurture. . . . A connection may only be a click away, but cultivating a good friendship takes more. It seems common sense to conclude that 'friending' online nurtures shallow relationships."[6] His advice for maintaining real friendships is simple: "Put down the device; engage the person."[7]

Social networking gives the illusion of knowing everyone, and yet the reality is that oftentimes no one is truly known. It creates an environment where selfish, one-sided relationships seem to flourish, and where communication is largely unidirectional, made up of sound bites instead of deep interaction.

Moreover, it often distracts people from existing relationships. Instead of pouring themselves into the real-life friendships they currently have, people now spend hours with pseudo-friends online. This is especially seen within the family, where social networking constantly threatens to invade, bringing a

barrage of cultural influence into the private world of family life. In the home, focused training in godliness is essential for the development of spiritually-healthy relationships and biblical worldviews. But instant distraction is only a text message away.

As believers, we are called to love, encourage, instruct, admonish, and serve one another. That requires far more than social media can provide. The life-on-life discipleship that characterizes Christian friendship goes much deeper than any Facebook update or Twitter post. In so far as our fellowship is limited to 140 characters of text, it is not true fellowship at all.

Every Careless Word

The book of Proverbs tells us that, “He who spreads slander is a fool. When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise” (10:18b-19). A maxim for all of life, that statement certainly applies to social media.

Those who spread slander and gossip online can now find themselves in court.[8] Some might be sued.[9] Others simply fired from their jobs.[10]

But even if such potential consequences did not exist, Christians answer to a higher court. And God has made it clear what He thinks about gossip: “He who goes about as a slanderer reveals secrets, therefore do no associate with a gossip” (Prov. 20:19).

A study in the *New York Daily News* found that 80% of normal conversations consist of gossip.[11] Those numbers seem to be consistent with online interactions, where talking about other people is almost as popular as talking about oneself. In a helpful article entitled “Solomon on Social Media,” Tim Challies gives this timely warning: “There are many web sites, blogs and Twitter accounts dedicated almost entirely to gossip, to sharing what is dishonorable rather than what is noble. Avoid these people and their gossip!”[12]

But even beyond the world of slander, one has to wonder how many careless words are posted, texted, or tweeted every moment of the day. Statistics suggest that there are about 700 Facebook status updates and over 600 tweets every second.[13] Even if some of those are profitable, that still leaves a lot of empty chatter.

Our Lord addressed this issue directly in His statement, “Every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it” (Matt. 12:36). That’s a sobering thought, especially when paired with the maxim of Proverbs 17:28: “Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.” (Many a young blogger would do well to memorize those verses.)

In 1 Corinthians 10:23–24, Paul explains an important principle about Christian liberty. He writes, “All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. Let no

one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor." If we apply that truth to the world of social media, we can quickly separate that which is valuable from that which is merely wood, hay, and stubble. Tweeting about the inane details of life might not be sinful, but if it doesn't build others up spiritually, it might be better left unsaid.

Time Mismanagement

According to recent statistics, the average American worker spends almost six hours a month visiting social networking websites during work time. The majority of that time is spent on Facebook.[14]

But this is not just about wasting time at work. It's about wasting time, period. By its very nature, social networking is a massive distraction. It detracts from disciplined study, thoughtful meditation, and concerted prayer.

In a *Time* Magazine article entitled "It's Time to Confront Your Facebook Addiction," Kayla Webley shares some startling statistics. "One-third of women ages 18 to 34 check Facebook first thing in the morning. . . . Of the 1,605 adults surveyed on their social media habits, 39% are self-described 'Facebook addicts.' It gets worse. Fifty-seven percent of women in the 18 to 34 age range say they talk to people online more than they have face-to-face conversations. Another 21% admit to checking Facebook in the middle of the night."[15]

Some Facebook "addicts," like Maria Garcia of Philadelphia, spend as much as 56 hours a week on the site.[16] Reporting on her story, ABC News recounted the concern of those in the medical community: "The popularity and social acceptance of networking sites is one of the reasons Dr. Joseph Garbley says Facebook addiction is becoming a very real problem. . . . Garbley says unlike alcohol or drugs, social networking addiction is psychological not physical. But he adds it is still a serious problem: 'The problem comes in when life intercedes, when school work calls, when relationships demand your attention and you chose Facebook over those relationships.'"[17] It seems social media sites have become the new soap operas!

Of course, the real problem is a *heart* issue, not a *psychological* one. But the point remains. For many Americans, the amount of time spent using social media is out of control. Whether defined as "addicts" or not, people spend vast amounts of time browsing blogs, watching YouTube videos, reading tweets, and managing their profiles. We've already noted that, on average, the active Facebook user spends nearly 24 hours a month on the site. In September 2010, the amount of time spent on Facebook surpassed Google for the first time. Combine this with time spent blogging, micro-blogging, commenting, texting, instant messaging, and surfing—and the sheer hours represented become staggering.

Ironically, people can spend hours jumping from link to link without even realizing how much time they are wasting. As author Ivan Misner explains in *Business Week*, “You go to LinkedIn or Facebook and you read a comment and it takes you to another link and now you’re on YouTube, watching someone’s video. Pretty soon something weird happens in the space-time continuum and you look up and you’ve lost two hours.”[18]

As believers, the command of Ephesians 5:15–16 is just as binding upon our modern lives as it was in the non-technological world of the first century. “Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise,*making the most of your time*, because the days are evil.” Paul’s exhortation has massive implications for how we interact with social media. One day we will stand before Christ to give an account for how we used His resources (including our time and energy). With that in mind, how much of this life can be justifiably devoted to Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and the like? Just a few hours each day, over the course of a lifetime, adds up to years of wasted opportunity.

Putting the ME in Media

If there is one word that perhaps best describes social media it is this: *self-promotion*. The narcissism fostered by status updates and tweets is undeniable. And cultural critics have taken notice.

Some respond with humor.[19] A few see it as a good thing.[20] Others are concerned that social media is ramping up society’s psychological maladies—like Narcissistic Personality Disorder.[21] (Of course, what psychologists label “NPD” the Bible calls the sin of pride.)

Even the majority of social media users admit that self-promotion is at its core: “A national study fresh out of SDSU is confirming that Generation Y really is Generation Me. The jaw-dropping conclusion? 57% of young people believe their generation uses social networking sites for self-promotion, narcissism and attention seeking.”[22] In the words of one British journalist: “The Me-Man is everywhere. And so is the Me-Woman. They are the millions of men and women . . . from every class, age and profession who want to talk about themselves, expose themselves, and promote themselves in glorious and often gory detail. . . . They blog and bleat and tweet and text you all the time. The medium may vary, but the message is always the same: Me. ‘Me, Me, Me!’”[23]

Dr. Lauren LaPorta, Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at St. Joseph’s, sees the popularity of social networking sites as a direct result of the growing narcissism in American culture (due largely to the self-esteem movement of the 90s). Writing for the *Psychiatric Times*, she observes, “It is my contention that these sites would not have risen to such prominence but for the fact that a generation of narcissists needed an outlet. The millennial generation needed a way to assert their uniqueness, their specialness and garner the attention and praise of the masses. Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and Twitter filled the bill.”[24]

But the*me*-centered world of social media is clearly at odds with the biblical call to humility and selflessness. Consider just a brief sampling of relevant Scripture passages on this subject:

Proverbs 16:18—“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling.”

Proverbs 27:2—“Let another man praise you and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips.”

Proverbs 30:2—“If you have been foolish in exalting yourself . . . put your hand over your mouth.”

Isaiah 66:2—“‘To this one I [the LORD] will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.’”

Matthew 23:11–12—“The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.”

Philippians 2:3–5—“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves. . . . Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.”

To these, a host of other passages could be added. All of them make the same point: God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

When so much about social media panders to pride and shameless self-exaltation, believers need to think about their motives before they jump on the bandwagon. If the goal is simply popularity or personal promotion, it’s time to do a heart check. Our celebrity-driven culture craves for notoriety. But Christians are called to be different. We have died to ourselves. Thus, our concern should not be, “How many people can I get to follow me?” but rather, “How can I bear witness to the wonder of following Christ?”

Trivializing Truth

None other than National Public Radio recently lamented the growing trivialization of values in American society.InanNPR web articleentitled, "Trivialization Nation” (Feb. 2010) Linton Weeks writes, “The wide-spread trivialization of meaningful things is indisputable. Sound bites and silliness reign supreme. . . . Perhaps the tendency to trivialize is born of band-wagonism or laziness. . . . Trivializing large ideals is easier than living up to them. And it’s less scary.”[25]

Elsewhere, the article cited an interview with the president of Harvard, Drew Faust, in which she was asked to respond to the dumbing down of American culture. “I worry about attention span,” Faust

said, “because people will not listen to more than a couple of sentences or read more than a couple of sentences. Does everything have to be a sound bite? Is everything to be digested into something brief? And aren’t there complicated ideas that we ought to have the patience to give our attention to?"[26]

One novelist-turned-blogger provides firsthand testimony of that trivialization in his own experience. He writes: “This is, I think, the real danger of social media and Twitter. . . . It changes the way I process information. Or to be more precise, I no longer process information—I merely consume it. I speed read hundreds of bits of articles a day, absorbing lots of information, but rarely actually thinking about it. . . . The difficult thoughts, the ambivalent thoughts, the repulsive thoughts, the thoughts too complicated to be reduced to a tweet. They are labeled low priority and sent to the back office of my mind.”[27]

Geoff Dyer, writing in *The Guardian*, echoes that concern: “Sometimes I think my ability to concentrate is being nibbled away by the internet; other times I think it’s being gulped down in huge, Jaws-shaped chunks.”[28] A CNBC article entitled, “Is Twitter Making You Stupid?” concludes with this sobering assessment: “It seems that we’ve managed, in the words of playwright Richard Foreman . . . to transform ourselves into ‘pancake people’—spread wide and thin as we connect with that vast network of information accessed by the mere touch of a button.”[29]

While scientists and social critics debate the effects of social media on how we think, one thing remains clear: Christians must guard themselves against becoming theological pancakes. Thanks to the market-driven methodologies of the seeker-sensitive movement, the dumbing down of doctrine has characterized American evangelicalism for decades. In many ways, sites like Twitter and Facebook only exacerbate that problem because they provide a venue in which reductionism and extreme brevity simultaneously coincide with information overload and infinite distraction.

But not every theological truth can be adequately summarized in just a phrase or two. And not every debate can be resolved in just one blog article. Many doctrines require extended time and thought to properly process. Mature believers reflect deeply on the things of God and the truths of His Word.

They are not a mile wide and an inch deep. Instead their lives are marked by rich devotion, focused study, prolonged prayer, and careful mediation. Cultivating those kinds of spiritual disciplines takes time and effort—traits that are rarely prized in the information age.

In light of that, believers must not allow blogs, tweets, and status updates to become their *primary* source of theological education or spiritual input. If they do, they will inevitably become doctrinally shallow and spiritually malnourished.

God’s Word repeatedly calls us to use our minds wisely. We are to think on things that are right and true (Phil. 4:8) as we test all things carefully (1 Thess. 5:21) and bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). Our minds are to be renewed (Rom. 12:2) as we allow the Word of Christ to dwell in us richly (Col. 3:16). We are to be sober-minded (1 Cor. 15:34) as we set our minds on things above (Col. 3:2) and prepare them for action (1 Pet. 1:13).

Clearly, God cares how we think and what we think about. Insofar as social media websites cultivate the trivialization of profound truths, while simultaneously fostering shorter attention spans, believers would do well to proceed carefully.

Something to Think About

At this point it is important to reiterate what I said at the beginning. Social networking can be a useful tool when it is used in moderation and for the right things. At the same time, however, pitfalls and temptations do exist; and believers need to arm themselves accordingly. Social media are obviously not going away any time soon. But that doesn’t mean we can be undiscerning in how we approach them.

For me, as a pastor, this issue is particularly important from a shepherding perspective. Christian leaders are called to equip their people to think through every area of life with biblical wisdom. And this is no exception.

Moreover, believers (and especially pastors) need to be careful what they communicate to the world about their lives. Once something is posted online it can be seen by anyone else. Once it’s cached, there is a permanent record of it. That means every status update and every tweet is part of the believer’s public testimony as a Christian.

As Paul told the Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (2:20). Like Paul and every other believer, my life is no longer my own. The focus must not be on me, but on Christ. When someone hears from me publicly, I want it all to point to Him.

NOTES:

* Special thanks to members of the Grace Church staff for helping to find these online sources.

* The citation of sources here does not imply blanket endorsement of these websites or authors.

1 http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/what-americans-do-online-social-media-and-games-dominate-activity/

2 http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics

3 In my case, our staff at Grace to You maintains a social media presence for me (on both Facebook and Twitter) in order to direct people to biblical teaching resources. Though I am not personally involved in posting anything to Facebook or Twitter, I do see the value of those sites for ministry purposes.

4 http://blogs.hbr.org/haque/2010/03/the_social_media_bubble.html

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6 http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/2010-07-27-column27_ST_N.htm

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26 Ibid.

27 http://themanwhofellasleep.wordpress.com/2010/10/13/social-media-and-digital-narcissism/

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