

Will you  be my  
 be my 
Facebook
friend?  

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE GOSPEL

 Tim Chester

Will you be my Facebook friend?
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9D Centurion Court, Farington, Leyland, PR25 3UQ

Email: info@10ofthose.com
Website: www.10ofthose.com

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“Tim Chester is always insightful, and this little book is no exception. Wise, gracious, challenging and thoughtful, it will benefit anyone who uses social media. First class.”

Andrew Wilson, Teaching Pastor, King’s Church, Eastbourne.

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+1 What's the Problem?



When Facebook launched on the NASDAQ stock exchange in May 2012, it was valued at over 100 billion dollars. Not bad for a company that had only been in existence for eight years. The website's revenue in 2011 was 3.7 billion dollars, up from 153 million in 2007. It is clearly offering its user something significant.

In just a few years, Facebook has gone from nothing to a major feature of modern life with over 500 million users, half of whom use it on any given day. More than 200 million users access Facebook through mobile devices. Facebook is itself part of the wider phenomenon of mobile technology and social networking or Web 2.0 – the use of the Internet not just to find information, but to connect with people. Social networking has rapidly become a significant aspect of the lives of many people today.

Every minute of every day:¹

- YouTube users upload forty-eight hours of new video
- email users send over 200 million messages
- Google receives over 2 million search queries
- Facebook users share over 680,000 pieces of content
- consumers spend £175,000 in online retailing
- Twitter users send over 100,000 tweets
- Tumblr users publish over 27,700 new posts
- Apple receives about 47,000 app downloads
- brands and organizations on Facebook receive almost 35,000 'likes'
- users of Flickr add 3,125 new photos
- Wordpress blog users (like me) publish 347 new posts
- 571 new websites are created
- the mobile web receives 217 new users

Every minute.

And I know this because I found the information online.

Benefits



There is much that is good about this. New technologies reflect humanity's God-given, Godlike creativity. God gave us a mandate to take his world and invent, create, produce.

Social networking brings many benefits.

One of my colleagues is from Australia. Looking over his shoulder in the office last week, I saw a video of his 2-year-old son. His wife had taken it moments before on her iPhone and then emailed it to the grandparents, copying in my colleague. New technologies are enabling people to keep in touch over long distances.

In the early days of email, our church was involved in sending missionaries to Azerbaijan. I remember a prayer meeting in which we prayed for the wife because she was struggling with a headache. We were all awed by the fact that we were praying for their prayer needs in much the same way as we were praying for the needs of one another. Instead of having to wait weeks at a time for letters that

summarized months of news, we were able to pray for them in real time. Now texts, emails, blogs, Twitter and Skype enable missionaries to keep in constant touch with sending churches. These things may not replace face-to-face contact, but they are a big improvement on occasional letters.

New technologies are also enabling the message of Jesus to go into countries where missionaries cannot readily go, or to reinforce the work of missionaries on the ground. Once it was radio. Now websites and online TV channels bring the gospel to people while Skype and emails allow follow-up discipleship. I have Christian friends who are working with immigrants in the United Kingdom. They are able to give them readings of the Scriptures in their native language by sending audio files by Bluetooth between their phones.

People are able readily to organize events or arrange meetings. The recent change of regime in Egypt was called by some 'the Facebook revolution' because of the way Facebook was used to organize the protests. It is creating a culture of collaboration where products,

campaigns, software and social enterprise can all be developed through cooperation.

We can all list the benefits in our own daily lives – from texting ahead to let someone know we are running late, to checking football scores when we are out, to reading the Bible on the commute home, to hearing about good resources through a blog or receiving an encouraging Tweet.

Dangers



But, despite all of this, there are also dangers. What's more, while the benefits of new technologies are immediately apparent, the negatives are more hidden. Tim Challies says: 'a technology wears its benefits on its sleeve – but the drawbacks are buried deep within.'² Technology is good. But it readily gets perverted by our sin, and used for selfish ends.

More than that, 'the medium is the message'. This is what the cultural critic Marshall McLuhan has alerted us to. In other words, *how* we communicate changes what we communicate.

The technology we use to express our thoughts actually changes those thoughts. It changes what we think is important.

Some problems with social networking are obvious.

Perhaps the clearest danger is the amount of time many of us spend using social media. Over 700 billion minutes are spent each month on Facebook. That is a lot of minutes.

Not only that, but more than half its users log on at least once every day. Nearly half of Facebook's users between the ages of 18 and 34 check Facebook within minutes of first waking up in the morning. Over a quarter of them do so before they even get out of bed.

The problem is not just quantity of time, but the constant interruption. Lots of people talk about Facebook as the greatest distraction from work ever. Students are suffering from lack of sleep because they are texting or on Facebook late into the night.

Remember, the medium is the message. In the

case of Twitter, this means thoughts must be expressed in 140 characters. For blogs it means around 400 words (anything more and people will not read it). Facebook, too, is designed to deliver short updates and comments. Not using proper grammar and sentences is affecting the way we express ideas. We are losing our ability to construct an argument. 'Internet users skim text rather than read it. In fact, "skimming" is now the dominant metaphor for reading.'³

The combination of Google and smart phones mean we access information whenever we like and this is changing our attitude to ideas. Why learn historical dates when you can look them up on Wikipedia? The problem is that no longer holding information in our minds prevents us making connections between ideas. Or, if forgetting a few historical dates seems harmless, let me rephrase the question: Why learn Bible verses when you can look them up on your iPhone? Yet the Bible itself invites us to mediate on and retain its words. 'I have hidden your word in my heart', says the psalmist, 'that I might not sin against you' (Ps. 119:11). Jesus said: 'If you remain in me

and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you' (John 15:7). Chuck Swindoll wrote:

I know of no other single practice in the Christian life more rewarding, practically speaking, than memorizing Scripture... No other single exercise pays greater spiritual dividends! Your prayer life will be strengthened. Your witnessing will be sharper and much more effective. Your attitudes and outlook will begin to change. Your mind will become alert and observant. Your confidence and assurance will be enhanced. Your faith will be solidified.⁴

What is it that drives this concern for brevity and this constant movement to new content? The answer is commercial interests. What is Facebook's product? It is you. You are its product, delivered in large quantities to advertisers! It is the same with Google. They make money when you click on adverts, so it is in their interest for you never to spend long on one page. The medium is designed to keep you constantly surfing,

constantly skimming, constantly clicking. And this is reducing our ability to concentrate. We zip from one piece of information to another. We keep stopping to check texts, emails, tweets, Facebook. People increasingly find it hard to concentrate for an extended period on a complex argument.

Technology makes us more efficient. And efficiency is good. But only in some contexts. Do you want to be an efficient lover? An efficient parent? An efficient worshipper?

But all these things are just the symptoms. The real issue is this: Why do people spend so much time on Facebook? Why do they feel the need to check and recheck their social media? What does it *do* for them? What does it offer?

What's the Problem?



These questions matter because it is not enough simply to say 'Stop' or 'Do it less'. If the only response you can give me is to be more self-controlled then you are inviting me to be my own saviour. Suppose you stop reading at this

point, and leave this booklet determined to use Facebook less. You may succeed, in which case you will probably feel pretty proud of yourself. Or you may struggle to wean yourself off your social media, in which case you will probably feel pretty bad about yourself. You are reliant on willpower. It is the way of legalism. The Bible says rules on their own have no power to make us godly (Col. 2:20–23). Even on a good day legalism leads to pride, because the focus is on our efforts.

We need instead to see how Christ offers more. It is the grace of God that leads to self-control. ‘For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age’ (Titus 2:11,12). In this case, Christ more than meets the needs that social media appear to satisfy for us. When we grasp the goodness of Christ then the focus of change is not on us, but on him, and any change brings him glory rather than us.

In the case of social media we also need to look

at why some people find using it so compulsive, because some of us may not be convinced we need saving from it! Why give up something I think is good? And social media are good. As we have seen, they bring many benefits. The problem is that their dominance in some of our lives may be a sign that we are turning to them when we should be turning to God. We are not going to give up something we find good until we recognize that something better is on offer.

So the key question is: Why? This enables us to make the gospel the answer.

For countless people, of course, using Facebook is not a problem. For many it is all blessing. But there are dangers in social networking, and here are some possible warning signs:

- Do you check your Facebook page more than once or twice a day?
- Do you spend more than twenty minutes a day on Facebook?
- Do you find it difficult to imagine a day without technology?

- Have you ever read a text or gone online during a church gathering?
- Have you stayed up beyond your normal bedtime because you were on Facebook or playing online games?
- Do you use your mobile phone during meals or keep it in the bedroom?

Those are some warning signs. What are the dangers? What is it about Facebook that makes it so addictive?

+2 Recreating My World

The first reason many of us find Facebook so compulsive is that *on Facebook I can recreate my world through my words to gain approval.*

Think about the name 'Facebook'. It suggests a place where I can show my 'face' or my 'image'.

1. I can recreate my 'face'

One reason Facebook is popular is because it appears to allow me to create my image using my words. I type in a version of the person I want to be. I use my words to create a positive image. Or I upload pictures that portray me in a certain way, usually having a good time or looking beautiful in artistic poses. There are no pictures of me first thing in the morning or being bored.

Celebrity culture pours over the minutiae of the lives of the rich and famous. Facebook, blogs and Twitter allow us all to be celebrities with our lives on show. It blurs the public and the private. The