

# To tweet or not to tweet?



**Selfies and likes, clips and comments, tweets and timelines are all now part of the everyday experience of most Christians. Hugh Bourne considers the opportunities and challenges of social media for the church**

Social media, especially Twitter and Facebook, have dramatically altered the way we think and communicate. It's hard to overstate the impact they've had in the heads and hearts of individuals, or on the world in which we live. The church, of course, is not somehow immune to these monumental shifts in culture and communication.

Rather than falling into the temptation of bemoaning the decline of letter writing, paper bound books and face-to-face relationships, the church needs gospel ministers who deeply understand the ever shifting culture in which they minister. We need to recognise the impact of social media for good and for ill.

Today we live in a world of 24/7 news entering our consciousness through a plethora of media. News is everywhere and social media has revolutionised our ability to access it – anytime, anywhere with as many sources and angles as we choose. Many people are so deeply immersed in this world that the virtual has become reality. This is now the world in which we live. You don't have to like it, but you can't ignore it.

However, I firmly believe that social media is a mission field. It is a field that has far too few missionaries, but a mammoth harvest. Who is speaking the gospel into the lives of the Twitter

*Photo: sotaglass*



trolls, the Facebook stalkers and Instagram addicts?

It's easy to be critical of the culture, but perhaps we need to examine ourselves first. The way social media causes information overload is all too obvious, but there's a danger that the church can be guilty of doing exactly the same. Are we overloading our church members?

Church on Sunday (twice), home group, prayer gathering, leaders' training, business meetings, serving, giving, weekend events, evangelism, and out at work 7-till-7. People have busy lives and are overloaded through their electronic devices. Is the church in danger of becoming yet another task on the to-do list?

And there is another somewhat pointed parallel for those in ministry. We rightly acknowledge the danger over being immersed in online relationships to the detriment of the face-to-face conversation. However, we

**How many Facebook friends have I got? How many shares and comments did I get? Why hasn't anyone liked my new picture yet? It's been online for 10 minutes!**

must also recognise there are plenty of ministers out there (I've met a few) who feel most comfortable behind a desk with their head in books for the bulk of the week to deliver an eloquent and engaging sermon from the pulpit.

But ask them to open up and have a normal conversation with a member of their congregation and they're floundering. It's easy to critique new technologies, but it's harder to face our own character flaws.

So should the church leader tweet?

It's worth remembering that every church minister has an audience ready to listen, a message that changes lives and a freely available tool, unparalleled in human history in its capacity to communicate with a global audience.

Social media may not be your thing. You may be a bit of a technophobe, you may be worried it will waste your time, but you can't say you've got nothing to say. So to reject it outright would be folly. Even within an already saturated inbox and diary, I think there can still be room to speak peace into distracted hearts. Tweeting is used by people for many things: conversation, marketing, gossip, funny YouTube videos, showing off and telling stories. But it can also be used for preaching.

Social media extends the reach of our influence. Many of us carry out our ministry in churches where the majority of our congregation don't live locally. Others of us lead large churches where we may not even know all our members, at least not beyond the

basics. There's a danger in both those contexts of church members feeling disconnected: 'I don't really know my pastor'.

But if we are smart and personal in the way we use social media, we can effectively know and be known by a much larger group of people than face-to-face relationships allow. We can do this by offering our followers a mixed diet in our tweeting or Facebook posting: sending out thoughts and short readings, for example, mixed with personal responses to those who reply to us. At heart, social media is sociable.

At the same time as taking up the positive challenges of social media, we need to be aware of the negatives people can fall into. One church member commented to me: 'I feel like I know Jennifer [name changed] so well through her blog, but I wish she'd be that open in person, at church.'

The virtual mask of a blog, Facebook profile or Twitter feed can be genuinely positive, of course, providing a creative outlet for personal communication and engagement. But if it becomes a substitute for face-to-face relationships, the danger is that people can start living vicariously through their social media profiles.

Compounding that, the concept of Facebook, as Tim Chester has noted, is that it allows users to portray themselves in an image of their own creation, always looking beautiful and doing something exciting. Facebook is turning us into a new generation of

## Facebook fasting

Although I'm slightly skeptical of 'Give up Facebook for Lent' campaigns, I do think there is wisdom in fasting from social media. Sometimes we simply need to switch off and disconnect from the media that invades our homes and pervades our lives. The distraction of endless notifications is no mere interruption, but demands our attention, often at the expense of our families, friends and God.

It's striking how often in the Gospels Jesus retreats to the solitary place to pray. Even in a world that was entirely unwired by technology, Jesus recognised his need to switch off to the world and switch on to his Father.

We need to help people develop wise habits for using social media, and that includes knowing when to switch off.

But we should also encourage the redemption of social media – using Facebook messages to encourage, following helpful pastors and teaching on Twitter, and using apps such as YouVersion, which bring the Bible to our smartphones, and PrayerMate which helps us to pray.

narcissists, obsessed with the portrayal of ourselves which we create day by day.

This can become something approaching an identity crisis when we start believing our own hype. It leads to what the philosopher Alain de Botton calls 'status anxiety' – a craving for love, acceptance and respect from the world. How many Facebook friends have I got? How many shares and comments did I get? Why hasn't anyone liked my new picture yet? It's been online for 10 minutes!

For some people, the world of social networks leads to pride, inflating their ego with their measured popularity on display to the world. For others it leads to despair, as their isolation and ostracization is displayed for no one to see, at least not anyone who cares.

The dramas of social media and the strong feelings they give rise to tell us that social networks are the new battleground for the hearts and minds of the people we serve.

I believe church leaders can have a role to play in showing how to use social media well, and in using digital communication as a springboard for face-to-face engagement. We can befriend the lonely and tweet encouragement to the downcast.

Although it's fair to say that much social media is filled with selfies and pictures of cats, the reality is that people are sharing and living out their lives through these new media. To take an example from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, what would it look

like if we shared not only the gospel through social media, but also our lives? I have a suspicion that while Paul longed to see his people face-to-face, he would probably have made the most of all the tools at his disposal to build those long distance relationships: tweeting Timothy, skyping Silas and texting Philemon.

Most of us would be happy if we knew that church members (and even beyond) were downloading and listening to our sermons on the way to work. It is only a small step from that to tweeting 140 characters of truth and encouragement to our followers on Twitter. And if you can't summarise your weekly sermon in that length it's probably not going to be memorable anyway.

At a time when people are overloaded with information and burdened by status anxiety, we need gospel ministers who resist the temptation to indulge in critique from the sidelines, and instead enter this important new world to live out and proclaim the redeeming work of Christ. Entering the world of social media will look and feel differently depending on your personality and gifts, and the kind of ministry you are doing. But used wisely, new media can enable you to speak a timeless and timely word directly into the hands of the people God entrusts to your care.

*Hugh Bourne is an ordinand at Oak Hill who holds a degree in Internet computing*