

2-1-2019

# Social Media Polarization and the Ministry of Reconciliation

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This research is a product of the Doctor of Ministry (DMin) program at George Fox University. [Find out more](#) about the program.

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

SOCIAL MEDIA POLARIZATION AND  
THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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PORTLAND, OREGON

FEBRUARY 2019

Portland Seminary  
George Fox University  
Portland, Oregon

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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DMin Dissertation

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## DEDICATION

To my Jennifer, who is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. You are my true partner in life and in ministry. Thank you for helping me pursue every dream God has placed in my heart. I am forever grateful that God made us one and profoundly thankful that you are also an amazing editor. Thank you for loving me so well.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I foremost want to thank my wife Jennifer and my children Kysa, Anna, Nathan and Sam for their love, grace and support. I am also thankful for my dear friend and co-pastor Dan Behrens for allowing me to pursue my educational calling with joy. My heart is filled with love and overwhelming praise for my parents, Clifford and Jacqueline Bursch. They are amazing parents, teachers, leaders and dissertation editors. I am sincerely appreciative of Rudy and Carrie Dam for being tremendous editors as well as supporters of my work and calling. I am also deeply thankful for every one of my friends and family who encouraged me to finish this project and for the amazing leaders at Portland Seminary who allowed me to fulfill a lifelong dream. I am grateful to be surrounded by such a deeply loving community. Most importantly, I give all praise, honor and glory to God, who has reconciled us to himself through the powerful, transformative and loving work of the cross of Jesus Christ.

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## ABSTRACT

Online communication is becoming increasingly divisive. This dissertation argues that the best way for individuals to decrease social media polarization is for people to engage in the ministry of reconciliation in their social media interactions. Section One describes how social media polarizes because the medium promotes networked individualism, exaggerates dehumanizing “discarnate” communication and numbs humanity’s ability to form meaningful relationships. The left-brain focused argumentation, writing-centered communication and depersonalized nature of online interactions increase a lack of empathy in social media users and add to the polarizing chaos evident in many social media conflicts. Section Two examines how individuals have unsuccessfully tried to address the increased polarization of social media through employing non-relational, information-based solutions; engaging in increased argumentative partisan behaviors; embracing ideological segmentation and adopting conflict avoidance and disengagement practices. Section Three proposes how to facilitate social media reconciliation through (1) developing a Christ-centered theology of reconciliation; (2) advocating online reconciliation that addresses the unique challenges of the medium of social media and (3) utilizing Brenda Salter McNeil’s *Roadmap to Reconciliation* as a guide to internet conflict resolution. Section Four describes the artifact, a non-fiction book entitled, *Angry, Polarizing People: Communicating Truth in the Social Media Age*, that will help readers communicate in a way that promotes reconciliation. Section Five articulates the artifact’s specifications.

## SECTION ONE: THE PROBLEM

### **Introduction**

Social media communication is becoming increasingly polarizing and divisive. This polarization negatively influences the behavior and witness of Christians. Opinion-driven social media platforms facilitate angry and contentious political, religious and cultural discussions. Each day, the latest news stories and trending topics become fodder for argumentative individuals and partisan factions to justify and promote their ideologies and agendas. Many people gather to share information through social media to bolster their strongly held beliefs, rather than to connect with or work with individuals who hold different convictions. The result of this polarizing behavior is the fortifying of relational divides and the fracturing of society. Sadly, many Christians are unaware of the destructive fruit their social media behavior produces.

### **A Story**

Tim loves God and loves the small but vibrant congregation he pastors. Almost every day Tim uses Facebook and Twitter to post his strong convictions about faith and various trending topics. He writes authoritatively about what is right and wrong with America. He uses scriptures to defend his positions for and against specific laws and social causes, rebuking individuals and institutions that he feels are corrupting the message of the gospel or contributing to the moral decline of society. When people question Tim about the way he aggressively expresses his convictions, he often responds that he is “just standing up for the gospel” or “speaking unashamedly” or “unfiltered.” He regularly points out that Christians should “speak the truth” even if their words are not

popular or their message is rejected as divisive. In response to Tim's social media passion, he has developed a modest following of like-minded people who support his "tell-it-like-it-is" social media persona.

Tim firmly believes that he ministers the kingdom through his strongly worded social media proclamations. He is convinced that he advances the kingdom of God through his social media presence. However, Tim actually adds to the polarizing, destructive nature of social media. His communication causes harmful divisions between the people who disagree with his emotionally worded political, religious and cultural opinions. He increases the polarization between Christians who have different political affiliations and he weakens the witness of the gospel. Although Tim believes he is evangelizing through social media, he does not fully comprehend that the technology he uses negatively impacts his ability to minister the good news of Jesus Christ. Many unbelievers view his social media presence as an example of what is wrong with Christians and Christianity. Some of Tim's Christian friends believe his online presence harms the witness of Christ. In Tim's crusade to be right, he has forgotten the Christ-centered ministry of reconciliation.

### **The Social Media Age**

The internet has increased humanity's potential for connectedness and divisiveness. The present and future of humanity's ability to form meaningful, sustainable, diverse relationships depends upon how well humans comprehend the unique challenges of internet communication. People increasingly use the internet as an essential tool for facilitating communication, discovering information and forming relationships. Humans are rapidly connecting as internet access spreads throughout the world. "The

computer manufacturer Cisco estimates that there will be 50 billion devices on the internet by 2020, in addition to tens of billions of screens.”<sup>1</sup> Currently, 7 billion humans are connected to the internet, with this number rapidly approaching 9 billion people.<sup>2</sup> Technology expert Kevin Kelly estimates that if this growth trend continues, “...by the year 2025 every person alive...will have access to this platform [the internet] via some almost-free device. Everyone will be on it. Or in it. Or, simply everyone will be it.”<sup>3</sup> In the future, internet connectivity and online communication will be the primary way humans relate to each other and to the world.

One of the most substantial societal transforming fruits of internet connectivity has been the rise and normalization of social media platforms. A 2018 Pew Research Center report shows that American usage trends increased on the eight largest social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Pinterest and LinkedIn).<sup>4</sup> Considering the relative newness of these internet companies, the number of people using these platforms is rather staggering. Pew states, “Roughly two-thirds of U.S. adults (68%) now report that they are Facebook users, and roughly three-quarters of those users access Facebook on a daily basis.”<sup>5</sup> Besides using Facebook, “Roughly three-quarters of the public (73%) uses more than one of the eight [social

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Kelly, *The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces That Will Shape Our Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 283.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>4</sup> Aaron Smith and Monica Anderson, “Social Media Use in 2018,” *Pew Internet*, January 25, 2018, accessed April 20, 2018, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/01/25/the-strength-of-internet-ties/>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

media] platforms...and the typical (median) American uses three of these sites.”<sup>6</sup> For younger adults, the numbers are even higher with 88% of 18 to 29-year-olds stating they use at least one form of social media.<sup>7</sup> Although some social media platforms, such as Snapchat and Instagram, have more younger users compared to platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn, the larger trend suggests that humans feel extremely comfortable interacting through social media avenues.<sup>8</sup> Increased internet connectivity and social media interactivity are changing the way individuals interact with each other and process conflict. The internet is altering how humans view reality, understand relationships, process conflicts and fundamentally abide with each other. The medium of social media is forming humanity and, in some cases, making humans into a more polarizing people.

### **Internet-Formed Communication**

Technology both reflects and transforms the nature of human existence. As people use the tools they create, their humanity is shaped and transformed by that technology. Consequently, technological advancements do not just provide easier or better ways for humans to satisfy their needs, they also radically shift the ways individuals exist in the world and with each other. This shift is especially true of the internet, a technology that pervasively influences almost every area of human existence.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. The “Social Media in 2018” study also reveals that Americans 18 to 24 use Snapchat and Instagram more than any other age group. Snapchat and Instagram rely more on pictures and videos than on written communication. This shift away from written communication may be a reaction against the current polarization prevalent on older social media platforms such as Facebook. These generational trends warrant further study.

Social media is a technology that is markedly changing how humans exist with God and each other. The internet is forming humanity; transforming the way humans communicate. People engage with internet technology in such an immersive way that social media forms change the way we think, feel and process relationships. Internet technology facilitates environments where humans are prone to express more individualistic, non-empathetic, partisan, polarizing rhetoric and behavior. Consequently, social media platforms are becoming increasingly divisive.

*The Medium is the Message*

Social media is a technology that changes all human relationships. Technology and media theorist Marshall McLuhan views all technology as an extension of the human body, a way for humans to move beyond their mental or bodily limitations. For example, the wheel is “an extension of the foot,” the book is “an extension of the eye” and clothes are “an extension of the skin.”<sup>9</sup> Technological innovations extend the natural capacities of humans beyond their natural limitations. Humans form tools to express and extend themselves. McLuhan spoke of media as synonymous with technology: “All media are extensions of some faculty—psychic or physical.”<sup>10</sup> Books, newspapers, magazines, radios, televisions and other media innovations are ultimately ways humans extend their voice and identity. Through the technology of social media, humans are extending an expression of themselves to the world. Social media is the will, wants, desires and opinions of humans, extended and magnified. Nicholas Carr states, “Every technology is

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<sup>9</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Massage* (1967; repr., Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press, 1996), 31-39.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

an expression of human will. Through our tools, we seek to expand our power and control over our circumstances—over nature, over time and distance, over one another.”<sup>11</sup>

Social media enables individuals to express themselves to more people, in more places, with more control, than ever before. However, the technology of social media is not just expanding the ability of humans to communicate, but also changing the way humans communicate. The medium of social media transforms the message. Although Marshall McLuhan wrote before the onset of social media, his observations concerning media have a prophetic poignancy in the internet age. McLuhan argues that new media forms always do more than just extend or amplify old messages. Instead, every new media drastically changes the messages and the messengers. Every new medium changes the way we communicate ideas, the way we process truth and the way we fundamentally abide together. McLuhan believes media’s influence is so prominent and unavoidable that he confidently states, “the medium is the message.”<sup>12</sup>

Social media is far more than just a medium for communicating ideas or connecting people. Social media does more than amplify human communication; instead, online interactions transform the way humans fundamentally view each other. The medium of social media alters every aspect of human communication: what humans say, when they say it, where they say it, why they say it and how they say it. More importantly, social media changes who we are as humans and what we are becoming. The

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<sup>11</sup> Nicholas G. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 44.

<sup>12</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, critical edition, ed. Terrence Gordon (Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press, 2017), 17.

more social media usage becomes normative, the more human communication will be transformed by online platforms.

Social media is not just a messaging platform, but rather a platform that is radically changing our messages, even changing our basic understanding of moral decency, truth and humanity. Unfortunately, many people are unaware of the transformative influence of online communication. Shane Hipps writes, “We miss the power of the Internet to alter the very meaning of truth in our culture.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, humans do not realize that the medium changes humanity’s way of being. Social media is a form of communication that is actually forming humanness.

Social media is a form that structures how humans communicate. Unfortunately, many Christians spend far too little time examining how all forms affect the way humans exist in the world. McLuhan observes that humans frequently do not consider how forms influence them, regardless of their awareness:

To return to...formal causality for the moment: a formal cause exerts its pressure non-verbally and non-conservatively. Any substantial form impresses itself upon you without benefit of awareness or conscious attention on your part. You can be conscious about it if you like, but a tree, grass, stones, the world of forms in which we live impresses us steadily and constantly without intermission, without benefit of words or thoughts. They are total in their action upon us. It doesn't matter what theory we may have about them: their effect upon us is quite independent of any thought we have about them.<sup>14</sup>

Similar to natural forms, pervasive technological forms influence individuals, regardless of their awareness. McLuhan goes on to say that forms do not derive their ultimate meaning from what one thinks about them, but from the action those forms have

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<sup>13</sup> Shane A. Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 38-39.

<sup>14</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*, ed. Eric McLuhan and Jacek Szklarek (Toronto: Stoddart, 1999), 37-38.

on the individual: “It is a form: it acts upon you. It invades your senses. It re-structures your outlook... So our attitudes, our sensibilities, are completely altered by new forms, regardless of what we think about them.”<sup>15</sup> The internet is producing social media forms that are restructuring the attitudes and outlooks of humans.

Social media influences messages and messengers beyond the conscious choice of the medium’s users. As Neil Postman states, “Each medium, like language itself, makes possible a unique mode or discourse by providing a new orientation for thought, for expression, for sensibility.”<sup>16</sup> Internet technology has created new modes of discourse, expression and connection that are fundamentally not understood by those using the technology.

The internet is changing humanity. However, technology moves at such a rapid pace, humans have not been able to recognize fully the impact of this technology on human interactions. Kevin Kelly states the problem this way: “We are morphing so fast that our ability to invent new things outpaces the rate we can civilize them. These days it takes us a decade after a technology appears to develop a social consensus on what it means and what etiquette we need to tame it.”<sup>17</sup> Of course, when discussions of etiquette and civility arise, human perceptions have already been altered by the technology society is trying to reform. The medium has already transformed the way humans seek a cure to the medium’s weaknesses. Writing before the social media age, author and media theorist

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>16</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 10.

<sup>17</sup> Kelly, *The Inevitable*, 3.

Neil Postman points out that any major medium changes our discourse, including the way we understand and communicate truth:

My argument is limited to saying that a major new medium changes the structure of discourse; it does so by encouraging certain uses of the intellect, by favoring certain definitions of intelligence and wisdom, and by demanding a certain kind of content—in a phrase, by creating new forms of truth-telling.<sup>18</sup>

Although Postman was writing primarily about the impact of television, his observations are true of internet communication. Social media is transforming the structure of human discourse and influencing which aspects of humanity are most fully utilized and engaged. The internet is impacting the way humans speak truth to one another and navigate conflicts. All of this change is happening at a pace that is faster than society's capability to process clearly the negative and detrimental impacts.

### **Networked Individualism**

Social media is eliminating many of the practical reasons individuals use to resolve conflicts, pursue reconciliation and maintain long-term relationships with diverse individuals and communities. Before the internet gave humans the ability to connect with multiple social networks and countless individuals, people had to work harder to develop, maintain and foster relationships. Before the online world existed, most individuals gained knowledge and built relationships from their immediate family, close friends and local communities. The internet has almost eliminated this close community reality. A Pew report on “The Strength of Internet Ties” observes that “The traditional human orientation to neighborhood- and village-based groups is moving towards communities

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<sup>18</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 27.

that are oriented around geographically dispersed social networks.”<sup>19</sup> In this new dispersed reality, internet users do not rely on just one, fixed, local, highly relational community to meet their needs. Instead, people meet their needs with a form of “networked individualism” where “individuals often must actively seek out a variety of appropriate people and resources for different situations.”<sup>20</sup> In the modern era, community is increasingly formed around the fulfillment of individual needs.

### *The Death of Neighborhoods*

Before the internet, an individual had to work to maintain existing relationships because the potential to form relationships was hampered by a person’s physical environment and social standing. The potential for relationships and human interactions was greatly restricted by where someone lived, worked, went to church and carried on his or her daily activities. In the social media world, individuals are not as concerned with fostering existing relationships because they know they can easily search other social networks or pursue other online users to satisfy their desires. People in the online age have many more relational avenues to meet their personal needs. Consequently, humans are expanding where they seek fulfillment. Marshall McLuhan observes that electric media has and will continue to widen the family circle: “The world pool of information fathered by electric media...far surpasses any possible influence mom and dad can now bring to bear. Character no longer is shaped by only two earnest, fumbling experts. Now

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<sup>19</sup> Lee Rainie, John Horrigan, Barry Wellman and Jeffrey Boase. “The Strength of Internet Ties: Summary of Findings,” *Pew Internet*, January 25, 2006, accessed January 30, 2018, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2006/01/25/the-strength-of-internet-ties/>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

all the world's a stage."<sup>21</sup> McLuhan believes the electric media age will not only decrease the influence of family but also minimize the importance of the neighborhood and place: "The old civic, state, and national groupings have become unworkable. Nothing can be further from the spirit of the new technology than 'a place for everything and everything in its place.' You can't go home again."<sup>22</sup> In this cryptic language, McLuhan argues that the importance of a person's location will continue to diminish as the world becomes more interconnected. The current state of social media validates McLuhan's predictions.

The internet has produced a connectivity that is often void of intimacy and relational accountability. Professor Quentin Schultze observes that "geographic proximity" encourages groups with differing ideologies and perspectives to work together based on their need to live peaceably in community. In contrast, internet-formed communities usually unite based on shared interests or ideologies.<sup>23</sup> Social media allows individuals to connect with people throughout the world without forming strong bonds or having strong expectations of those relationships. When conflicts arise, individuals can simply move on to other online interactions without worrying about real world consequences. Author Shane Hipps states that this is the allure of the internet; online communication "...provides just enough connection to keep us from pursuing real

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<sup>21</sup> McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Massage*, 14.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>23</sup> Quentin J. Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2002), 172.

intimacy. In a virtual community, our contacts involve very little real risk and demand even less of us personally.”<sup>24</sup>

Schultze points out that internet communication “...tends to identify us as tourists roving across geographic space rather than as neighborly inhabitants of a particular place...cyber-technology makes it easier for us to move quickly from place to place without knowing the natives.”<sup>25</sup> Schultze argues that the internet has almost destroyed the concept of the neighborhood because “Neighborliness obligates us to know whom we are talking with, whereas cyberspace accepts anonymity, voyeurism, and superficiality.”<sup>26</sup> The absence of the need to be neighborly or to maintain permanent, lasting relationships online works against the process of conflict resolution and reconciliation.

Although “networked individualism” allows for individuals to get their momentary needs met, this way of viewing people as resources for self-fulfillment does not help individuals build long-term, meaningful relationships that withstand conflicts and disagreements. Networked individualism is rooted in people communicating for the purpose of having their individual needs met. As soon as a relationship does not meet their unique needs, they move on to other relationships to fulfill their individualistic desires. With many more online relational options available, individuals can avoid the difficult work of processing existing relational conflicts by simply moving onto new

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<sup>24</sup> Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 114.

<sup>25</sup> Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart*, 171.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

relationships to meet their needs. This self-centered view of community seems to be the cause behind much of the divisiveness and polarization in social media communication.

Although people still appear to communicate amicably with family or close friends, they are less likely to engage in reconciling behavior with people they are less bonded with or less likely to need in the future. As online communication gives humans more access to more people and to more information, many online relationships seem expendable and therefore are not necessarily given the appropriate energy to overcome conflicts, to handle disagreements or even to foster diverse opinions and thoughts.

### **A Discarnate Platform**

Technology increasingly allows humans to communicate with each other without abiding in the same room. This reality creates what Marshall McLuhan refers to as a “discarnate” existence:

Electric man is a “super angel.” When you are on the telephone you have no body. And, while your voice is there, you and the people you speak to are here, at the same time. Electric man has no bodily being. He is literally *dis-carnate*. But a discarnate world, like the one we now live in, is a tremendous menace to an incarnate Church, and its theologians haven't even deemed it worthwhile to examine the fact.<sup>27</sup>

A discarnate world works against the purposes of an incarnate God. A discarnate idea has no physical body to carry it; the idea is incorporeal, disembodied.<sup>28</sup> When a people are discarnate, they are not truly present with each other.

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<sup>27</sup> McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light*, 50.

<sup>28</sup> Merriam-Webster.com, s.v. “Discarnate,” accessed November 20, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discarnate>.

Scripture says, “In the beginning was the Word [Jesus], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1, 14). Jesus is God incarnate, the Word became flesh. Believers, through the working of the Holy Spirit, are called to embody or incarnate the will of God. Through the presence of believers, others should experience the presence, character and nature of God. Humans were ultimately created in the image of God, to image God on earth (Gen. 1:26-27; see also Matt. 6:10; Luke 11:2). Humans image God through being present, through revealing “Immanuel...God with us” (Matt. 1:23). The internet separates humans from incarnational connections, from clearly showing love in physically tangible, in-person ways.

People in discarnate relationships process the world differently than when they abide together, in the flesh. In-person communication includes various verbal, facial and environmental cues that are lost in online communication. Online interactions give preference to written and visual forms of communication that are frequently not conducive to fostering empathy, emotional connection and conflict resolution. Left-brain focused argumentation, writing-centered communication, depersonalized interactions and non-empathetic relating exaggerate social media’s discarnate polarizing nature.

### *Left-brain Argumentation*

Social media has the promise of being a multisensory platform that engages the mind’s visual and auditory processing pathways through pictures, videos and texts. However, in the context of argumentation, social media devolves into a text-dependent platform. Although people may post visually provocative pictures and videos, the

relational processing of those images is usually navigated through written communication. Written communication is more conducive to left-brain processing. This over reliance on left-brain processing, when confronting conflict, leads to divisiveness and detachment within the internet's discarnate environment.

Although the human brain is a complex organ that processes information between both hemispheres, generally speaking, "The left hemisphere is sequential, logical, and analytical. The right hemisphere is nonlinear, intuitive, and holistic."<sup>29</sup> The left hemisphere of the brain focuses on text, while the right side of the brain focuses on context.<sup>30</sup> Author Daniel Pink describes the brain's processing this way: "To oversimplify just a bit, the left hemisphere handles what is said; the right hemisphere focuses on how it's said – the nonverbal, often emotional cues delivered through gaze, facial expression, and intonation."<sup>31</sup> Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter lack mechanisms for individuals to determine emotional cues, facial expressions or intonations when discussing, debating or arguing sensitive issues. An online user's inability to pick up on these subtle cues makes dealing with conflict or avoiding conflict problematic as the right brain "...takes care of synthesis, emotional expression, context, and the big picture."<sup>32</sup>

To make matters worse, social media is an environment full of visually stimulating, provocative pictures and videos that evoke immediate right-brain emotional responses. However, in trying to deal with the emotional responses this visual imagery

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<sup>29</sup> Daniel H. Pink, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-brainers Will Rule the Future* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006), 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

evokes, humans use left-brain, written argumentation solutions. These left-brain solutions tend to separate people from their right-brain, big picture thinking. Big picture thinking remains crucial when people deal with complex relational struggles. Unfortunately, the discarnate reality of online argumentation is not conducive to big picture, problem solving, right-brain processing. Consequently, people are less likely to have the necessary skills to handle polarizing situations.

### *Detached Written Communication*

Along with limiting the ability of humans to engage in right-brain, big-picture processing, social media primarily limits conflict resolution to detached writing-centered solutions. Humans process information and connect with each other differently through written versus oral communication. In studying the differences between written and oral communication, Linguist Walter Jackson Ong notes a profound difference: “Oral communication unites people in groups. Writing and reading are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, written communication creates more relational distance, separation and isolation than oral communication.<sup>34</sup> Ong writes, “Spoken words are always modifications of a total situation which is more than verbal. They never occur alone, in a context simply of words.”<sup>35</sup> This modification of a total

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<sup>33</sup> Walter Jackson Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1991), 69.

<sup>34</sup> As previously mentioned, although social media uses visual forms in addition to written text, most online arguments and debates are conducted through written communication. Even the posting of videos or pictures creates relational distance as separation occurs between the act of posting and the act of receiving information. Online posting, regardless of content, is very different than the simultaneous communication that takes place with in-person interactions.

<sup>35</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 101.

situation is not true of written language, whether in a book or in a social media post because “...words are alone in a text. Moreover, in composing a text, in ‘writing’ something, the one producing the written utterance is also alone.”<sup>36</sup> Written communication isolates individuals from their words and distances communication within communities. When conflicts occur between two individuals online, their communication is never truly incarnational or truly abiding in the present. Instead, they write their statement down and separate their words from themselves and the present moment. Their statements are disembodied, written and read, exchanged back and forth, in hopes of reaching ideological agreement or at least some sort of ideological acceptance. In online communication, the written words of users become discarnate and detached from their sources.

Written, online communication is very different from the incarnational, reconciling work of Christ. Ong makes note that in the Scripture “The very Person of the Son is constituted as the Word of the Father.”<sup>37</sup> However, Christ is the living Word, not isolated from the Father, but fully expressing the will and presence of the Father through the Holy Spirit. Sadly, social media communication separates our words from ourselves, creating distance and disconnect, rather than incarnational connection.

### *Depersonalized Communication*

Although social media platforms hold the promise of bringing people closer together, these discarnate environments also create distance, disconnect and

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 179.

depersonalized relationships. Social media communication is driven by individualistic needs. Schultze notes, “For many people, the real lure of cyberspace is personal expression, not mutuality.”<sup>38</sup> Depending upon the platform, social media primarily provides a way for people to express their individual thoughts to the masses or to a select group of people. Regardless of how small the group is, the communication is much more about self-expression than dialogue, more about sharing than listening. Schultze wrote, “For all the rhetoric about cyber-community, the Internet is less a forum for shared public life than an area for individuals to express their egos and find information in tune with their personal needs and desires.”<sup>39</sup> Even when people do unite in communities, they often unite based on shared interests or shared beliefs, not because of a shared respect for each other’s humanity. Even when they join social media communities, they “...generally do not try through dialogue to become more than the sum of their preexisting selves. This kind of online individualism bypasses such crucial virtues as empathy, reciprocity, and humility.”<sup>40</sup>

The general self-expression communication, common to environments such as Facebook and Twitter, is very similar to that of the advertising industry or mass media. Consequently, our tweets and updates are similar to the selling of a product or service.

Schultze addresses this keen insight:

Digital messaging environments promote the ease of transmission and rarely facilitate careful communication. As a result, our own online missives increasingly take on the character of commercial mass media—short messages designed to gain attention rather than to engage in real dialogue. Shared knowing

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<sup>38</sup> Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart*, 182.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

requires patience, sincerity, and dialogue, whereas cyberspace emphasizes speed, facade, and transmission. Like the advertising business in general, cyber-communication is premised on quick message delivery and immediate message impact rather than on gradual discourse toward shared understanding.<sup>41</sup>

Social media has become the channel through which humans advertise and promote the best image of themselves. Through social media, individuals can present their message of self to the masses. This general messaging depersonalizes all sides of the communication. Schultz writes that this does the opposite of revealing our true selves:

On the contrary, industrial-grade messaging depersonalizes human interaction. It rarely improves our capacity to empathize with each other or helps us to love one another as distinctive persons. The power to send the same message simultaneously to dozens of friends or millions of potential customers is not a communicative ability as much as a messaging ability.<sup>42</sup>

Social media allows individuals to communicate to everyone and to no one simultaneously. This general communication depersonalizes the interactions of users and weakens their sense of responsibility for their communication. When users are not specifically communicating to specific individuals, they feel less responsible for how their communication impacts any one individual. Instead of taking responsibility for their communication or the effects of their communication, they blame the depersonalized nature of the medium for their reluctance to reconcile. In other words, they do not try to specifically deal with the consequences of their actions because their actions are supposedly not really addressed to any one person. Even when they do specifically address certain individuals, they still do this within an environment that views social media communication as primarily the right to self-expression. When individuals believe

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

social media is primarily an avenue for self-expression, they focus their energies on defending their self-expression, rather than working on the difficult tasks of reconciliation and conflict resolution. Instead of resolving conflicts, they interact with those who agree with their self-expression.

### *Lack of Empathy*

The discarnate realities of social media communication are also causing a lack of empathy in online social interaction. Psychiatrist Daniel Siegel has demonstrated "...that children need eye contact to develop parts of the brain that are involved with attachment. Without eye contact, there is a persistent sense of disconnection and problems with empathy."<sup>43</sup> Cognitive neuroscientist Atsushi Senju has shown "that the parts of the brain that allow us to process another person's feelings and intentions are activated by eye contact. Emoticons...don't have the same effect."<sup>44</sup> Eye contact is primarily absent in most forms of social media communication. This lack of eye contact lends itself to interactions that lack empathy and to increased polarization in many forms of social media communication. Studies have even demonstrated that human beings are becoming less empathetic in general as a result of prolonged social media use. "One analysis of seventy-two studies found that empathy has declined among college students between 1979 and 2009. They're less likely to take the perspective of other people and show less

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<sup>43</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 170.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

concern for others.”<sup>45</sup> This trend will most likely continue as “...the average schoolchild age between eight and eighteen years spends a third of her life sleeping, a third at school, and a third engrossed in new media, from smartphones and tablets to TVs and laptops.”<sup>46</sup> In the majority of cases, the average child “spends more time communicating through screens than...with other people directly, face-to-face.”<sup>47</sup> Online communication is creating a crisis of empathy.

People struggle with their ability to care about the individuals they offend. Instead of trying to connect emotionally with how their behaviors affect others, many people spend their time online justifying their behavior from a disconnected, self-focused perspective. Adam Alter aptly explains, “Humans learn empathy and understanding by watching how their actions affect other people.”<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, social media interactions often prevent individuals from truly encountering the emotional consequences of their behavior. Even worse, a culture raised through social media screens has in many ways lost the empathetic desire to seek out the signs necessary to demonstrate kindness or to decrease polarizing behavior.

### **A Numbing Technology**

Although social media originally promised to bring people together through the ability to communicate easily and to share ideas and experiences, the medium has also had a negative effect on basic human interactions. Often technology weakens or numbs

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<sup>45</sup> Adam Alter, *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 40.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

the capacity of humans in the very areas the technology was created to help. This is especially true of tools that are created to help the mental or interactive capacities of humans. Carr writes, “The tools of the mind amplify and in turn numb the most intimate, the most human, of our natural capacities—those for reason, perception, memory, emotion.”<sup>49</sup> As an example, Carr illustrates how the creation of the map helped humans navigate the world, but has hurt the ability of people to know where they are: “Our ancestors’ navigational skills were amplified enormously by the cartographer’s art...But their native ability to comprehend a landscape, to create a richly detailed mental map of their surroundings, weakened.”<sup>50</sup> As humans increasingly relied on maps, their ability to map out their surroundings deteriorated.

This same numbing of the mind occurs in how people relate with each other. Social media has provided humans with easier ways to communicate, but at the cost of learning how to develop and maintain more lasting, complex relationships. Social media technology numbs the relational capacity of humans, creating a gap in the ability of individuals to connect with each other or to constructively process conflict. McLuhan believes this is the cost of all media, in that media as an extension of the human body is always in the process of “numbing” the part of the body it is trying to “amplify.”<sup>51</sup> This numbing of human capacity is not conducive to helping humans actively deal with increased social media polarization.

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<sup>49</sup> Carr, *The Shallows*, 211.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 63-70.

Social media possesses a chaotic number of characteristics that foster polarization and discourage reconciliation. Society seems unwilling to seriously examine the ways social media thoroughly influences what and how humans communicate with each other. Many do not take seriously McLuhan's warning concerning the profound impact media has on messaging:

All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the message. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments.<sup>52</sup>

In summary, social media is an environment that is radically changing the way people communicate, connect and abide with each other. Social media gives preference to networked individualism, exaggerates depersonalized communication through discarnate expressions and produces a numbing effect in society's ability to form meaningful connections. These expressions of the social media environment lead to increased polarization and a resistance to the process of reconciliation. Any attempt to address the problem of increased social media polarization must address how the social media medium itself exaggerates the problem. Section Two will examine key ways Christians have tried to address or ameliorate the problem of increased social media polarization through employing non-relational, information-based solutions; engaging in increased argumentative partisan behaviors; embracing ideological segmentation and adopting conflict avoidance and disengagement practices. Attention will be given to the perceived strengths and ultimate insufficiencies of these solutions.

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<sup>52</sup> McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Message*, 26.

## SECTION TWO: OTHER SOLUTIONS

### **Non-relational, Information-based Solutions**

Many people assume the best way to address an argumentative social media climate is to develop and promote better arguments. They believe better information will lead to better discussions. This assumption is rooted in humanity's almost utopian view of the internet's capability. One of the promises of the internet age has been the belief that unlimited and instantaneous access to information will save humankind. The result of pursuing this promise has been the exponential increase of what Neil Postman coined "information glut" in a "Technopoly" or technology-ruled world:

In Technopoly, we are driven to fill our lives with the quest to "access" information. For what purpose or with what limitation, it is not for us to ask; and we are not accustomed to asking, since the problem is unprecedented. The world has never before been confronted with information glut and has hardly had time to reflect on its consequences.<sup>1</sup>

In the age of information glut, information becomes the currency of humans. People measure the effectiveness of an internet tool on how quickly it enables them to find the right information, not in how that tool helps them understand the information they are gathering. They believe problems are solved by having the right information, rather than by having the right relationships. They assume a lack of information is the reason for their lack of success or their inability to solve their problems. The mantra of the internet age is "Information will save us." Schultze challenged this unfounded notion:

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 61.

“The idea that we are witnessing the emergence of a beneficent information society is triumphalist propaganda.”<sup>2</sup>

The information accessing power of the internet influences how humans interact with each other through social media. Schultze writes, “We are succumbing to *informationism*: a non-discerning, vacuous faith in the collection and dissemination of information as a route to social progress and personal happiness.”<sup>3</sup> Schultze believes this faith in “informationism” has become a “quasi-religion” that preaches “observation over intimacy, and measurement over meaning.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, people relate to each other through ideas, positions and postulates, rather than through genuine human connection. Schultze points out that “...our informational practices position us as impersonal observers of the world rather than intimate participants in the world.”<sup>5</sup>

Humans have more instant access to more information than ever before. However, people seem to be less able to process and communicate this unlimited information in ways that build genuine human connections. In fact, humans seem to have less of a desire to form genuine connections and more of a desire to communicate non-relational knowledge and ideas. Social media has become a reflection of this information-driven age. The online world is increasingly becoming a place where individuals unite around agreed upon information. Even those who desire meaningful connection find the forging of meaningful relationships profoundly difficult. Schultze expresses this problem well:

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<sup>2</sup> Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart*, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 27.

We assume in our public imaginations that new communication technologies will forge voluntary associations among mutually benevolent persons. Instead, we discover that our over dependence on informational knowing makes our relationships superficial, transitory, and ultimately selfish.<sup>6</sup>

The accessibility of information and society's optimistic belief in the power of information to transform the world has made a large fraction of social media communication informational, rather than relational. This non-relational abiding means when conflicts occur, individuals often resort to information-based solutions, rather than relational solutions. People become more concerned with communicating their important information than they do with communicating in a way that restores their relationships.

In "an information will save us" society, communicators become more concerned with the information in the argument than the relationships themselves. The goal of their arguments is to have right data, not to have right relationships. Sharing right information first and facilitating right relationships second does not facilitate unity or alleviate divisiveness. Information-based arguments will resolve only when the individuals agree upon the information. On the other hand, relational-based arguments find resolution when individuals value and respect each other's humanity. Unfortunately, many people are willing to interact civilly only with individuals who unite with or agree with the data or information they champion. This non-relational communication has created extremely polarizing social media environments.

### **Increased Argumentative Partisan Behavior**

In addition to embracing non-relational methods of argumentation, many individuals respond to the polarization of social media with increased argumentative

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 34.

partisan behavior. Although partisanship has always been present in American politics, “There is evidence that the American public has become more polarized in its political views over the past twenty years.”<sup>7</sup> In *Red and Blue Nation?* Alan Abramowitz’s statistical analysis demonstrates that, “On a wide range of issues, rank-and-file Democrats and Republicans are much more divided today than in the past—and the sharpest divisions are found among the politically engaged partisans who constitute the electoral bases of the two parties.”<sup>8</sup> Abramowitz argues, “Partisan polarization makes it much more likely that ideological and cultural conflicts in society will be expressed politically.”<sup>9</sup>

To make matters worse, individuals increasingly seek information from more extreme partisan and polarizing sources. Matthew Baum and Tim Groeling studied the effects of partisan news media outlets on political discourse. They confirmed that new media and the internet media landscape exaggerate partisan polarization by allowing individuals to look only at material that confirms their political worldviews. Baum and Groeling find, “While political partisanship is by no means the only dimension upon which niche-marketing strategies might be based, in the realm of political information,

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<sup>7</sup> Alan I. Abramowitz, “Disconnected, or Joined at the Hip?” in *Red and Blue Nation? Characteristics and Causes of America’s Polarized Politics*, ed. Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 72.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

partisanship is one of the key lines of demarcation allowing Web sites to attract a relatively loyal audience.”<sup>10</sup>

In her article in *Red and Blue Nation?* Diane Mutz argues that the prevalence of more media choices and more news sources has allowed individuals to engage in a greater degree of selective exposure.<sup>11</sup> Selective exposure theory suggests that individuals seek out information that confirms their view of the world, while they avoid information that contradicts their preconceived notions of reality.<sup>12</sup> Studies have shown that people consistently pursue news that meets, satisfies and confirms their self-interests.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, people reject or see bias in balanced reporting that contradicts their preconceived political opinions and narratives.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, the more choices individuals have when seeking political news, the more they are likely to exclude ideas they find

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew A. Baum and Tim Groeling, “New Media and the Polarization of American Political Discourse,” *Political Communication* 25, no. 4 (2008): 347, accessed July 22, 2017, <https://georgefox.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=poh&AN=35484161&scope=site>.

<sup>11</sup> Diana C. Mutz, “How the Mass Media Divide Us,” in *Red and Blue Nation? Characteristics and Causes of America’s Polarized Politics*, ed. Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 225.

<sup>12</sup> Kevin Arceneaux, Martin Johnson, and Chad Murphy point out that “Scholars have recognized for decades that people selectively expose themselves to media messages, blunting media effects (Hovland 1954; Klapper 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948).” Kevin Arceneaux, Martin Johnson, and Chad Murphy, “Polarized Political Communication, Oppositional Media Hostility, and Selective Exposure,” *The Journal of Politics* 74, no. 1 (Jan 2012): 174, accessed November 22, 2018, <https://doi-org.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/10.1017/S002238161100123X>.

<sup>13</sup> Toby Bolsen and Thomas J. Leeper, “Self-Interest and Attention to News Among Issue Publics,” *Political Communication* 30, no. 3 (July 01, 2013): 329-348, accessed November 23, 2018, <https://doi-org.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/10584609.2012.737428>.

<sup>14</sup> Arceneaux, Johnson, Murphy, “Polarized Political Communication,” 174.

disagreeable.<sup>15</sup> Mutz notes “...the Internet encourages those with similar political leanings by reinforcing and exacerbating the extremity of their views, and by convincing them that they are not alone and thus need not abandon their unpopular positions.”<sup>16</sup> The increased ways individuals are engaging in selective exposure is, in Mutz’s opinion, “cause for alarm.”<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, selective exposure keeps individuals isolated in their worldviews and prevents them from learning how to work through the natural conflicts that arise when people with differing opinions and differing ideologies interact on a regular basis.<sup>18</sup>

Sadly, the most extreme and prevalent emotional expressions on social media are frequently partisan. These extreme displays of partisan divisiveness do not lead to the building of relationships between individuals with conflicting ideologies. In their article *Partisan Provocation: The Role of Partisan News Use and Emotional Responses in Political Information Sharing in Social Media*, Hassel and Weeks’ survey of several studies suggests that negative emotions play a powerful role in the dissemination of information and political news stories. One study of *The New York Times*’ website demonstrates that “...emotionally arousing stories, including those that generated

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<sup>15</sup> Diana C. Mutz and Paul S. Martin, “Facilitating Communication Across Lines of Political Differences: the Role of Mass Media,” *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 1 (2001): 97-114, accessed November 23, 2018, <https://georgefox.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/docview/214423470?accountid=11085>.

<sup>16</sup> Mutz, “How the Mass Media Divide Us,” 232.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> For example, one study shows that almost all political events become segmented on Twitter within their own ideological echo chambers. P. Barberá, J.T. Jost, J. Nagler, J.A. Tucker, and R. Bonneau, “Tweeting From Left to Right: Is Online Political Communication More Than an Echo Chamber?” *Psychological Science* 26, no. 10 (2015): 1531-1542, accessed November 24, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797615594620>.

negative emotions, were more likely to be both read and shared...<sup>19</sup> Another study of Twitter usage found people were more likely to share and retweet “emotionally negative political messages.”<sup>20</sup> These studies demonstrate that individuals prefer to disseminate partisan tinged negativity far more than politically unifying positivity on social media. This trend to share inflammatory negative information shows that many people do not view social media as a tool for facilitating positive engagement between disagreeing parties. Instead, many people use social media as a place to express their strong political opinions for the purpose of uniting with similarly opinioned people.

Throughout America’s history, political engagement and party politics have played a central role in the life of the average citizen. Alexis de Tocqueville states political engagement was truly a unique characteristic of the American experience:

It is difficult to say what place political concerns occupy in the life of a man in the United States. To get involved in the government of society and to talk about it, that is the greatest business and, so to speak, the only pleasure that an American knows.<sup>21</sup>

Partisan politics have played such a central role in the American experience that even George Washington warned of the dangers of party in his Farewell Address, a letter he wrote to the American people that was published in all major American newspapers before he retired from the presidency. In his Farewell Address, Washington dedicates a

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<sup>19</sup> A. Hasell and Brian E. Weeks, “Partisan Provocation: The Role of Partisan News Use and Emotional Responses in Political Information Sharing in Social Media,” *Human Communication Research* 43, no. 4 (October 2016): 644, accessed August 3, 2017, <https://doi-org.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/hcre.12092>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 644.

<sup>21</sup> Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: In Two Volumes*, ed. Eduardo Nolla and James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Incorporated, 2012), 397.

large portion of the letter to pleading for unity and warning against the divisiveness of embracing a partisan political mentality. Washington believed that unity was a key pillar of strength for America's stability:

The unity of Government, which constitutes you one people, is also now dear to you. It is justly so; for it is a main pillar in the edifice of your real independence, the support of your tranquillity [sic] at home, your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; of that very Liberty, which you so highly prize.<sup>22</sup>

Washington was convinced that it was of utmost importance that Americans valued their unity and rejected any attempt to weaken the cohesiveness of the United States:

...it is of infinite moment, that you should properly estimate the immense value of your national Union to your collective and individual happiness; that you should cherish a cordial, habitual, and immovable attachment to it; accustoming yourselves to think and speak of it as of the Palladium of your political safety and prosperity; watching for its preservation with jealous anxiety; discountenancing whatever may suggest even a suspicion, that it can in any event be abandoned; and indignantly frowning upon the first dawning of every attempt to alienate any portion of our country from the rest, or to enfeeble the sacred ties which now link together the various parts.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> George Washington, "Farewell Address, September 19, 1796" in *The American Presidency Project*, Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, accessed July 28, 2017, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65539>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Ultimately, Washington believed the “spirit of party” or partisan politics was the greatest threat to damaging the unity and peaceful prosperity of a new-formed nation.<sup>24</sup>

George Washington understood partisan divisiveness to be the enemy of the people:

This spirit [the spirit of party], unfortunately, is inseparable from our nature, having its root in the strongest passions of the human mind. It exists under different shapes in all governments, more or less stifled, controlled, or repressed; but, in those of the popular form, it is seen in its greatest rankness, and is truly their worst enemy.<sup>25</sup>

The current social media landscape has embraced much of the political, partisan mindset George Washington lamented.<sup>26</sup> Washington believed the “spirit of party” was harmful because it led to “The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension...”<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, many individuals are dealing with the angry polarizing climate of social media by engaging in partisan tactics that promote one faction at the cost of other factions. This partisan behavior creates increasingly divisive conversations and fractured communities. Instead of decreasing polarization, partisan rhetoric turns online communication into a place

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<sup>24</sup> Some scholars and politicians warn this contentious partisan rhetoric is devolving into an even more dangerous political tribalism. Speaking in Johannesburg, South Africa to honor the legacy of Nelson Mandela, President Obama warned that “...countries which rely on nationalism and xenophobia and doctrines of tribal racial or religious superiority as their main organizing principle, the thing that holds people together – eventually those countries find themselves consumed by civil war or external war.” Cable News Network. “READ: Obama’s full speech about the ‘politics of fear and resentment.’” CNN.com., accessed November 20, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/17/politics/barack-obama-mandela-speech-transcript/index.html>; see also Jonah Goldberg, “Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics is Destroying American Democracy,” *National Review* 70, no. 8 (4/30/2018): 22-26; Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld, “The Threat of Tribalism,” *The Atlantic*, October 2018, accessed November 17, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/the-threat-of-tribalism/568342/>.

<sup>25</sup> Washington, “Farewell Address.”

<sup>26</sup> Douglas S. Bursch, *The Community of God: A Theology of the Church From a Reluctant Pastor* (Seattle: Fairly Spiritual, 2017), 65.

<sup>27</sup> Washington, “Farewell Address.”

where people communicate for the purpose of winning arguments or destroying the arguments and platforms of their perceived partisan opponents.

The increased partisan nature of internet communication has produced profound fatigue among many social media users. The Pew Research Center found that over “...one-third of social media users are worn out by the amount of political content they encounter, and more than half describe their online interactions with those they disagree with politically as stressful and frustrating.”<sup>28</sup> Pew observed that “a substantial share of social media users feel these platforms are uniquely angry and disrespectful venues for engaging in political debate.”<sup>29</sup> One survey showed 40% of users agreed strongly and 44% of users agreed somewhat with the idea that on social media platforms “people say things while discussing politics that they would never say in person.”<sup>30</sup> These trends towards increased polarization have made many conversations toxic and have led some individuals to disengage from arguments that could potentially lead to conflict. Others are responding to the increased argumentative partisan nature of social media communication through embracing ideological segmentation.

### **Ideological Segmentation**

Along with expressing increased argumentative, partisan behavior, many individuals are coping with social media polarization through abiding in ideologically segmented online communities and relationships. Social media allows individuals to

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<sup>28</sup> Maeve Duggan and Aaron Smith, “The Political Environment on Social Media” *Pew Internet*, October 25, 2016, accessed August 1, 2018, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/10/25/the-political-environment-on-social-media/>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

unite around shared interests and ideologies. As a result, many individuals choose to connect online primarily with individuals and communities that hold similar worldviews. Ideological segmentation creates peace and unity between individuals who abide within distinct homogeneous groups. However, ideological segmentation does not facilitate healthy interactions between individuals with opposing, differing or competing ideologies. When individuals embrace ideological segmentation, they avoid the uncomfortable realities of interacting with individuals dissimilar from themselves. Author Andrew Keen addresses this phenomenon in a story about Robert Scoble, an American blogger, author and technical evangelist. Keen noticed that Scoble spoke of technology bringing the world together, yet he did not know his own neighbors in the community of Half Moon Bay, California where he physically lived. Scoble answered Keen concerning this seeming incongruity with this relational disconnect:

He confessed to me that he had more in common with Web programmers in Beijing and social media entrepreneurs in Berlin than he had with local people such as his unknown neighbor. Thus, he explained, he chose to make his friends on the Internet, using social networks to identify people around the world with whom he shared interests.<sup>31</sup>

Scoble used social media to connect with people similar to himself. Keen observes that for Scoble, "...social media community was, therefore, an extension of his self, a never-ending hall of mirrors all reflecting the same opaque image of Scoble..."<sup>32</sup> When individuals view social media as a place to connect only with similar people, they have little need to connect with individuals who have different ideas or opposing views in their neighborhood or on the internet. Social media allows individuals to unite with

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<sup>31</sup> Andrew Keen, *Digital Vertigo: How Today's Online Social Revolution is Dividing, Diminishing, and Disorienting Us* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012), 158.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

people who reflect the image they desire to see. As more people define community in terms of ideological segmentation, people will become less willing and less able to learn how to abide with individuals with differing worldviews and life interests. People who limit their interactions to those with whom they have shared interests or ideological agreement, give less effort to finding meaningful ways to deal with conflicts, disagreements and polarizing issues. Ultimately, conflict resolution only happens if conflicting parties believe they need to have relationship with each other. Conflicts are solved when people want to continue in their relationships. The opportunity for individuals to segment into groups with likeminded people through social media has led many to resist or avoid doing the hard work of trying to build positive relationships with individuals who have opposing opinions and perspectives.

Regretfully, technology also partners with human preferences to further the segmentation of individuals into homogeneous communities. Every major internet media company utilizes some form of user behavior algorithm to recommend to their users the right products to buy, services to purchase and even the best friends to follow based on the observable preferences and past behaviors of their customers. Kevin Kelly explains how this technology influences almost every product people purchase or stream on the internet:

It is in wide use at Amazon, Netflix, Twitter, LinkedIn, Spotify, Beats, and Pandora, among other aggregators...Clever algorithms churn through a massive history of everyone's behavior in order to closely predict my own behavior. Their guess is partly based on my own past behavior, so Amazon's banner should really say, "Based on your own history and the history of others similar to you, you should like this." The suggestions are highly tuned to what I have bought and even thought about buying before (they track how long I dwell on a page

deliberation, even if I don't choose it). Computing the similarities among a billion past purchases enable their predictions to be remarkably prescient.<sup>33</sup>

Although these personal preference algorithms can quickly and conveniently provide users with content and relationships that satisfy their existing likes and wants, Kelly warns these algorithms can also isolate users into an “egotistical spiral” where they become “blind to anything slightly different” from what they already love.<sup>34</sup>

Sadly, these algorithms and the hundreds of choices individuals make on a weekly basis to connect or disconnect with certain people and specific social networks are isolating internet users into increasingly homogeneous ideological groups. Nicholas Carr suggests that internet users, aided by internet algorithms, are clicking their “...way to a fractured society.”<sup>35</sup> Instead of opening internet users to more diverse thoughts, ideas and peoples, personalization is isolating people into their own ideological camps that reinforce their existing worldviews. Instead of expanding users’ understanding of the world and each other, ideological segmentation is narrowing their worldviews, creating an environment that is not conducive for dealing with divergent opinions or solving conflicts proactively.

Carr states the problem well:

We welcome personalization tools and algorithms because they let us get precisely what we want when we want it, with a minimum of fuss. By filtering out “the detritus” and delivering only “the good stuff,” they allow us to combine fragments of unbundled information into new bundles, tailor-made for audiences of one. They impose homogeneity on the Internet's wild heterogeneity. As the tools and algorithms become more sophisticated and our online profiles more

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<sup>33</sup> Kelly, *The Inevitable*, 169.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>35</sup> Nicholas G. Carr, *The Big Switch: Rewiring the World, from Edison to Google* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 160.

refined, the Internet will act increasingly as an incredibly sensitive feedback loop, constantly playing back to us in amplified form, our existing preferences.<sup>36</sup>

Preference algorithms create homogeneous isolation, where individuals find themselves abiding within their own feedback loops of pre-existing self-preferences, likes and wants. However, this continuous feedback loop of giving people more of what they want does not prepare them to deal with disharmonious ideas and individuals. The internet's desire to satisfy the user has created users that are increasingly incapable of dealing with undesirable situations. Turkle observes, "The web promises to make our world bigger. But as it works now, it also narrows our exposure to ideas. We can end up in a bubble in which we hear only the ideas we already know. Or already like."<sup>37</sup> Consequently, many individuals struggle with how to deal with conflict or they simply avoid even trying to handle conflict in a reconciling manner, knowing they can retreat to their homogeneous ideology community safe havens.

### **Avoidance and Disengagement**

In addition to embracing ideological segmentation, some individuals are responding to the increased polarization of social media by intentionally avoiding or disengaging from all potentially polarizing conflicts. For instance, Pew Research reports that 83% of social media users "...say that when their friends post something about politics that they disagree with they usually just try to ignore it..."<sup>38</sup> If ignoring doesn't work, they mute, un-follow, block or change their social media settings to limit the posts

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 161-162.

<sup>37</sup> Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 307.

<sup>38</sup> Duggan and Smith, "The Political Environment on Social Media."

they see from disagreeable feeds or disagreeable people.<sup>39</sup> They handle negative situations by leaving polarizing interactions and through adopting internet practices that minimize the possibility of encountering conflicts.

Some social media influencers are promoting conflict avoidance and disengagement to deal with toxic or polarizing social media activity. For example, Jen Hatmaker is a respected Christian author, speaker and popular social media influencer. In a well-liked and shared Facebook post, Hatmaker listed the positive outcomes she desired from social media community. She mentioned that she wanted “kindness,” “humor,” “honesty,” “measured responses” and other positive expressions from social media communicators. Her suggestion on how to get more of these positive responses was to encourage her followers to disengage from or avoid divisive people:

So here is me suggesting to you that if the people you follow regularly make you feel bad, sad, mad, or less, unfollow, mute, or hide them and see if you don't notice an immediate difference. Let's protect our minds and hearts, because we need them to be healthy. They have too much work to do. Since social media won't censor ITSELF, we have to censor it for OURSELVES.<sup>40</sup>

Hatmaker's response to online conflict highlights the allure of disengagement. Instead of learning how to process the conflicting emotions and attitudes that accompany divisive internet communication among conflicting parties, Hatmaker suggests individuals simply “censor” the possibility of interacting with difficult people. She instructs her followers to avoid negative people and to avoid feeling strong negative emotions. Unfortunately, this advice does not promote conflict resolution or help when individuals are required to challenge injustices. Instead, this isolating behavior limits the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Jen Hatmaker, Facebook post, July 31, 2018 (9:33 a.m.), accessed November 29, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/jenhatmaker/>.

possibility of individuals interacting with disagreeable people. Even worse, when individuals isolate or disengage for fear of conflict, this behavior allows for injustices and wickedness to flourish unchallenged.

The option to avoid polarizing or divisive social media interactions is frequently a luxury of the economically, socially, religiously and racially privileged. Individuals who exist in a privileged majority culture can disengage from controversial or polarizing issues primarily because their economic and social wellbeing are not dependent upon constructive resolution of the controversial issues they are avoiding. Arguments about such issues as poverty, crime, race, gender and religion have greater importance to minority groups who are facing greater oppression from those in power. Oppressors or those who benefit from oppression are more likely to argue for disengagement when the situation becomes emotionally uncomfortable primarily because they benefit from nothing changing. The oppressed do not have the luxury of disengagement because they will experience the negative costs of not challenging injustices.

Individuals who embrace a social media presence that avoids all conflict are somewhat reminiscent of the white moderates who frequently criticized Martin Luther King Jr.'s confrontational tactics during the civil rights movement. King believed this aversion to conflict was a great detriment to the cause of justice:

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's greatest stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept

of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a “more convenient season.”<sup>41</sup>

When individuals choose avoidance and disengagement, they reject their moral mandate to stand against oppression, speak against injustice and work towards a just society. True societal transformation comes through true engagement with the injustices of society and people who promulgate the injustices. Disengagement does not confront injustice; instead, disengagement allows immoral men and women to operate without being challenged with or harassed by the truth. Conflict avoidance gives corrupt individuals and institutions free reign to continue practicing evil, unencumbered by the conflict that arises when good people confront wicked practices. Specifically, if Christians structure their online presence to avoid polarizing people and behaviors, they also will avoid addressing situations that need the prophetic voice of Christ and the transformative truth of the gospel. If social media becomes a place where people avoid confronting the darkness for fear of angry, polarizing people, then the church will truly have forgotten its mandate to be salt and light in the world (Matt. 5:13-16).

### **Conclusion**

The internet is transforming the way humans communicate with each other. Social media polarization makes many aspects of online communication toxic. In response to this divisive atmosphere, some are implementing non-relational, information-based solutions that assume every bad argument can be made better by more accurate

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<sup>41</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” *Literary Cavalcade*, 50, no. 14-15 (April, 1998): 27, accessed November 30, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/docview/210469403?accountid=11085>.

information. Unfortunately, this information-based approach does not take into account the importance of relationship-centered communication. Other individuals are responding to a polarized social media landscape by engaging in increasingly divisive partisan behaviors. This partisan approach is strengthening and fortifying our societal divides. Recognizing this divided reality, numerous individuals are living increasingly segmented online lives. Many people are trying to avoid all conflict through disengaging from any real or perceived situations that might lead to online polarizing communication. Although some of these behaviors, such as uniting with like-minded individuals, might temporarily alleviate the angst or discomfort of social media, none of these responses decrease social media divisiveness. Instead, these inadequate reactions are weakening the ability of individuals to learn how to build healthy, reconciling communities. In Section Three we will examine how embracing a biblical understanding of reconciliation will radically decrease social media polarization and positively impact the witness of Christians on the internet.

## SECTION THREE: THESIS

### **Introduction**

Social media is rapidly changing the way humans communicate. The arena of social media is vast and forever growing, "...covering blogs and blogging platforms, social networks such as Facebook, content-sharing sites and apps including YouTube and Instagram, and forums and communities like reddit and 4chan."<sup>1</sup> As more networks are formed and more individuals use these formative social media platforms, the short-term and long-term effects of online communication remain uncertain. Regardless, many agree that social media is negatively influencing the way humans communicate. Online communication is becoming increasingly divisive and discordant. Popular responses to decrease divisive and polarizing internet communication have, for the most part, been unsuccessful. Consequently, social media users need to pursue better communication approaches. This paper postulates that the most effective way for people to decrease social media polarization is for individuals to engage in the ministry of reconciliation in all of their social media interactions through (1) developing a Christ-centered theology of reconciliation; (2) advocating online reconciliation that addresses the unique challenges of the medium of social media and (3) utilizing Brenda Salter McNeil's *Roadmap to Reconciliation* as a guide to internet conflict resolution.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Highfield, *Social Media and Everyday Politics* (Cambridge, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 6.

### A Theology of Reconciliation

The gospel message is the story of reconciliation. Through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, humans find reconciliation with God and with each other. In *Reconciliation and Justification: The Sacrament and Its Theology*, Kenan Osborne argues that reconciliation is central to the ministry of Jesus: “Every page of the New Testament speaks of reconciliation. The words of Jesus, his actions, his cures—all betoken reconciliation. From the New Testament period onward, the Christian tradition has understood the message of Jesus as a message of reconciliation.”<sup>2</sup> Reconciliation is the defining purpose of the church and the reason the Holy Spirit was sent to empower the church. Osborne argues that the work of reconciliation is the true work of every Christian:

For a Christian, then, reconciliation is synonymous with the gospel message itself and forms an essential part of gospel living. In other words, Christian life as such is a life in and through reconciliation. Were one to remove every aspect of reconciliation from the life of a Christian, then there would be no Christian life at all.<sup>3</sup>

The gospel is the story of Jesus reconciling humanity to God through the work of the cross. On the cross, Jesus died for the sins of all humanity and he identified with those sinned against. Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection provided humans the forgiveness of their sins and healing for the sins done against them. Through Christ’s sacrifice, people have been transformed from enemies of God to ambassadors of his transformative work. This transformation is evidenced in the way we relate with God and

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<sup>2</sup> Kenan B. Osborne, *Reconciliation and Justification: The Sacrament and Its Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

each other. In *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*, John W. De Gruchy writes, “The calling and task of the Church is to tell the story to others and invite them to participate in what God has done and what God is doing in reconciling the world.”<sup>4</sup> This means the primary purpose of every Christian and Christian community is to facilitate an environment conducive to reconciliation. De Gruchy states, “The Church is God’s reconciled and reconciling community, God’s new humanity, a sign and witness of God’s purpose for the whole inhabited universe....”<sup>5</sup> For the church to be vibrantly present online, Christians must engage in reconciling social media behavior that takes seriously the work of the cross.

### *Reconciliation and the Cross*

The ministry of reconciliation is ultimately rooted in the work of Christ on the cross. R. Scott Appleby observes that most Christian theological traditions, including Catholic, Mennonite, Lutheran and Orthodox theology, view the cross as the central framework for reconciliation: “Such a theology presupposes the possibility and reality of individual conversion and understands conversion as the passage from self-protection to self-donation, according to a theology of the cross.”<sup>6</sup> Within these various theological traditions, a common ecumenical understanding of reconciliation has emerged that incorporates central themes of the cross narrative. Some cross-centered themes influencing believers and their understanding of reconciliation are as follows: the belief

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<sup>4</sup> John W. De Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 50.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>6</sup> R. Scott Appleby “Toward a Theology and Praxis of Reconciliation,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 39, nos. 1-2 (Winter-Spring): 135, accessed January 10, 2017, <https://georgefox.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0001426033&scope=site>.

that Christ faced suffering to bridge the divide between humans and God; the understanding that the cross is scandalous and not easy to explain or avoid; the conviction that the cross represents the true brutality of sin, death and violence towards the innocent that cannot be glossed over by simplistic religious platitudes; an awareness that the cross calls Christians to give of themselves, sacrificially, to suffer and surrender themselves for the sake of others; a knowledge that Christ faced abandonment to reconcile all, therefore all will find abandonment to be part of the process of contending for reconciled relationships and a strong conviction that reconciliation is a process rooted in submitting oneself by faith into the hands of God, where believers follow the example of Christ and carry the reconciling cross set before them.<sup>7</sup>

The cross stands as the ultimate example of reconciliation. When believers have faith in the efficacy of the cross to restore relationship between humanity and God, they are also proclaiming faith in the power of the cross to restore relationships in and through humanity. N.T. Wright states the Christian faith in the crucified Jesus "...is the faith that on the cross Jesus in principle won the victory over sin, violence, pride, arrogance and even death itself, and that that victory can now be implemented."<sup>8</sup> Christ's work on the cross stands as both the way of freedom for all bound by sin and as an example for all desiring to bring restoration to a fractured world. Wright reveals that through Christ's restorative work on the cross, humans have been brought into right relationship with God

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 135-136.

<sup>8</sup> N. T. Wright, *For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 55.

and have been given the ability to participate in the transformative work of the kingdom of God:

To say that the cross changed the world is a statement of faith; but it is not blind faith, whistling in the dark. It is faith that looks up at the creator God and knows him to be the God of love. And it is faith that looks out at the world with the longing to bring that love to bear in healing, reconciliation, and hope.<sup>9</sup>

The cross delivered believers from the bondages of sin so that they can be “agents of reconciliation and hope, of healing and love.”<sup>10</sup> The nature of the cross demands a reconciling response from those the cross has reconciled. A sign people understand Christ’s mission through the cross is that they engage with Christ in the mission that delivered them. When addressing justice and reconciliation through the cross, Ada María Isasi Díaz writes, “To embrace a spirituality of reconciliation is to understand that for Christians there can be no possibility of relating to God unless we have a reconciling attitude and a reconciling practice towards each other.”<sup>11</sup> Such a response is primarily because “...our relationship with God is intrinsically linked to the way we relate to each other, a reconciling God cannot but ask of those who believe to have a reconciling attitude towards each other.”<sup>12</sup> Christ’s sacrificial, restorative work on the cross is the foundational reason believers are called to embrace the daily mission of the ministry of reconciliation, whether in person or through social media interactions.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>11</sup> Ada María Isasi Díaz, “Reconciliation: An Intrinsic Element of Justice,” in *Explorations in Reconciliation: New Directions in Theology*, ed. David Tombs and Joseph Liechty (New York: Farmham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd), 106.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

*Forgiveness, Repentance and the Cross*

Restoration of relationships is at the heart of reconciliation. Consequently, reconciliation always involves two parties. From a vertical perspective, reconciliation is concerned with the restoration of relationship between the Creator and those he created. From a horizontal perspective, reconciliation is the mending of divides between the children of God. Since reconciliation involves at least two parties, there are elements that must be addressed by all sides in a conflict for true reconciliation to take place. Joseph Liechty states, “At its most basic, reconciling involves the complementary dynamics of repenting and forgiving, the first a way of dealing with having done wrong, the second with having suffered wrong. Thus reconciliation is achieved when perpetrators have repented and victims have forgiven.”<sup>13</sup> Liechty points out that within the interplay between repentance and forgiveness, the Western tradition has often placed a greater weight on “forgiving rather than repenting.”<sup>14</sup> However, for restoration to take place, the more relationally complex process of repentance is just as crucial as forgiveness, particularly because repentance requires the arduous work of acknowledging wrongs done, accepting responsibility, showing remorse, demonstrating new attitudes, engaging in new behaviors and making restitution.<sup>15</sup>

A healthy reconciliation process will fully engage the need for true repentance and forgiveness. Consequently, every examination of reconciliation must take seriously

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph Liechty, “Putting Forgiveness in its Place: The Dynamics of Reconciliation,” in *Explorations in Reconciliation: New Directions in Theology*, ed. David Tombs and Joseph Liechty (New York: Farmham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd), 82.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 83.

the central role of justice within the process of forgiveness and must recognize the danger of minimizing any aspect of the fullness of Christ's work on the cross. In his introduction to *Exclusion and Embrace*, Miroslav Volf expresses the true theological and personal tension at the root of any authentic theological inquiry into reconciliation:

It was a difficult book to write. My thought was pulled in two different directions by the blood of the innocent crying out to God and by the blood of God's Lamb offered for the guilty. How does one remain loyal both to the demand of the oppressed for justice and to the gift of forgiveness that the Crucified offered to the perpetrators? I felt caught between two betrayals—the betrayal of the suffering, exploited, and excluded, and the betrayal of the very core of my faith. In a sense even more disturbingly, I felt that my very faith was at odds with itself, divided between the God who delivers the needy and the God who abandons the Crucified, between the demand to bring about justice for the victims and the call to embrace the perpetrator.<sup>16</sup>

Ultimately, for reconciliation to be theologically authentic, believers must fully engage the radical call of the cross to forgive sinners and bring justice to the sinned against. If sin is the cause of the divide between God and humans, as well as the reason for the fracturing of every human relationship, then individuals must understand reconciliation within the context of how God has radically dealt with the sin that divides us. This understanding can come only through individuals having a greater awareness of Christ's work on the cross that takes seriously the role of repentance and forgiveness in the reconciliation process.

### *The Embrace of the Cross*

True reconciliation involves two parties participating in a process that restores, strengthens or renews relationship between both parties. However, Christians are called

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<sup>16</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 9.

to participate in the ministry of reconciliation regardless of whether their efforts are accepted or rejected. This means Christians are called to a way of living that welcomes reconciliation in every relationship, even though every interaction will not necessarily lead to Christ-centered unity. For the Christian, reconciliation is the ultimate goal of every human interaction, even though restored relationships will often not be the outcome. When two parties agree to reconcile with each other, there are expectations and obligations that both sides must address. However, when only one side is willing to pursue reconciliation, the ministry has a different focus and intent. To understand the dynamics of one-sided reconciliation, Christians have the example of the embrace of the cross. On the cross, Jesus embraced those who rejected him. Not waiting for the enemies of God to admit to their rebellion, Jesus opened himself up to forgive every person and every sin. He embraced humanity before humanity embraced him. In *Exclusion and Embrace* Miroslav Volf writes extensively about the essential role embrace plays in the process of reconciliation:

When God sets out to embrace the enemy, the result is the cross. On the cross the dancing circle of self-giving and mutually indwelling divine persons opens up for the enemy; in the agony of the passion the movement stops for a brief moment and a fissure appears so that sinful humanity can join in (see John 17:21). We, the others-we, the enemies-are embraced by the divine persons who love us with the same love with which they love each other and therefore make space for us within their own eternal embrace.<sup>17</sup>

God did not wait for humanity to enter the process of reconciliation before he fully embraced all of humanity. God did not ask for the offending party to repent before he provided a way of forgiveness, deliverance and restoration. The path and destination of reconciliation was provided unilaterally through Christ's embrace on the cross. The

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 129.

offer to receive or reject this embrace is truly one of the mysteries of the gospel. Christians who adopt a reconciling attitude or posture in their witness will live in such a way that they will continually invite individuals to receive the gift of Christ's saving embrace. An environment that promotes reconciliation provides opportunity for people to accept or reject the embrace of Christ. As Christ was rejected, so will Christians be rejected or even persecuted for embracing the ministry of reconciliation. Volf notes that the embrace of the cross is a scandal that cannot be avoided when living out the Christian faith: "In the final analysis, the only available options are either to reject the cross and with it the core of the Christian faith or to take up one's cross, follow the Crucified-and be scandalized ever anew by the challenge."<sup>18</sup> A cross that embraces sinners and enemies will also invite persecution and hardship from those who reject its offer. Even so, reconciliation maintains a posture of embrace.

### *Reconciliation and Eschatology*

While rooted in the cross, the church's call to embrace the ministry of reconciliation is also an overflow of believers living in the eschatological age. The death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, followed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church at Pentecost, signified to New Testament believers that they were living in the end times. As citizens of the last days, believers eagerly expected and welcomed the reconciliation of humanity. Gordon Fee points out that this understanding of living in the last days radically influenced how believers embraced their ministry calling: "In contrast to most of us, eschatology—a unique understanding of the time of the End—conditioned the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 26.

early believers' existence in every way."<sup>19</sup> The New Testament church believed Christ's resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church had ushered in the beginning of a new age. Fee states that in "...its hope of a coming Messiah and the resurrection of the dead, the early church recognized that the future had already been set in motion."<sup>20</sup> However, the church realized "the End had only begun" and would not be consummated until "...the (now second) coming of their Messiah Jesus, at which time they too would experience the resurrection/transformation of the body."<sup>21</sup> Fee believes the New Testament Christians viewed themselves as living "between the times," recognizing that the future had already begun, yet was not fully consummated.<sup>22</sup> Fee argues, "From the New Testament perspective the whole of Christian existence—and theology—has this eschatological 'tension' as its basic framework."<sup>23</sup> This understanding of living in the "already but not yet" tension of the eschatological age influenced how Christians understood their role in the ministry of reconciliation. This is demonstrated in the ministry of the apostle Paul.

Paul believed that the eschatological age, prophesied in the Old Testament, was being fulfilled in his lifetime.<sup>24</sup> His own Damascus conversion experience testified to this

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<sup>19</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 803.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Paul was well-versed in eschatological messianic passages such as Jeremiah 31:31-34, Ezekiel 36:36-37:14, Joel 2:28-30, Deuteronomy 30:1-6, Isaiah 8:14, 11:10 and 28:16.

truth.<sup>25</sup> After rejecting the testimony of Christians and the authority of Christ, Paul was confronted with the resurrected presence of Jesus Christ on the Damascus road. In this confrontation, Paul realized he had been living as an enemy of God, resisting the fulfillment of messianic prophecies. Although he was living in the beginning of the last days, Paul had been working in opposition to the plans of God. Even so, God did not abandon or reject Paul for rejecting him. Instead, Paul was reconciled and restored through his encounter with Christ. While living in the in-between time of the eschatological age, Paul entered into reconciling relationship with Christ and Christ's church. Corneliu Constantineanu addresses the importance of Paul's testimony in relationship to his understanding of reconciliation:

Paul, contrary to his expectations, was not rejected by God, but found himself reconciled. He experienced personally the profound and radical nature of the grace of God, who did not count Paul's sin against him but rather accepted and forgave him. This was to change radically the direction of Paul's life because not only was Paul reconciled to God but he was commissioned into God's service to proclaim that message of God's radical grace and forgiveness, the message of reconciliation.<sup>26</sup>

Paul's own testimony highlights the role of reconciliation within the eschatological age. Although the end times had been ushered in through the resurrection of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, God continued the work of reconciling Paul through his transformative love, forgiveness and grace. Even though the restorative power of the gospel had been ushered in through the cross and Pentecost, God's reconciling power had not yet reached Paul until his Damascus road conversion. However, when the message of the cross was revealed to Paul and received by him, the

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<sup>25</sup> Corneliu Constantineanu, *The Social Significance of Reconciliation in Paul's Theology: Narrative Readings in Romans* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2010), 65.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

result was full reconciliation with God and full restoration with his church. Just as Paul was brought into right relationship with God and the church, so the gospel will reconcile all who receive the message of Christ by faith. Constantineanu suggests that Paul's personal testimony explains why Paul repeatedly helped new believers "realize that their new status should affect their life and behavior; their reconciliation with God means also reconciliation with others."<sup>27</sup> Paul understood this reconciling process not only to be his personal testimony but the fulfillment of prophecy and a sign that Christ had ushered in the eschatological age. With this mindset, Paul continued to urge the church to usher in the fulfillment of God's eschatological promises:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Cor. 5:17-20; see also Rom. 5:1-11; Eph. 2; Col. 3:15-23)

Although reconciliation is provided through the work of the cross, the ultimate consummation of reconciliation is an unfolding process. The trajectory of reconciliation moves from the past work of the cross, to the present work of the church, to our final eternal abiding with God. Reconciliation is not just the event of the cross but the perpetually unfolding journey of humans receiving the work of the cross. De Gruchy writes, "Reconciliation is, if you like, a journey from the past to the future, a journey from estrangement to communion, or from what was patently unjust in search of a future that is just."<sup>28</sup> In other words, all reconciliation has already occurred through the saving

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 28.

work of Christ, the reception of that work is unfolding through each person and each generation until the final judgment. De Gruchy argues that individuals must differentiate between reconciliation as an event versus an unfolding process:

So it is important to recognize the relationship and distinction between reconciliation as an event, a process and a goal, and not to confuse our ultimate hopes with realistic possibilities even if they are connected. In Christian theology there is always a tension between the ‘here and now’ and the ‘not yet’, between the language of the penultimate and that of the ultimate, between the secondary and primary expressions of reconciliation.<sup>29</sup>

Reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel. Christ’s life, death, resurrection, ascension and empowerment of the church are for the purpose of reconciling people to God. This reconciling work motivated the early church and should be the heart behind why Christians proclaim and live the message of Christ today. Sadly, current social media trends work against the ministry of reconciliation. Social media has become so polarizing, partisan and self-focused that the ministry of reconciliation is languishing. Many Christians have forgotten or simply refuse to examine seriously the purposes behind why they communicate online. Many people post and tweet about what is right and wrong in the world, but there are fewer examples of reconciling dialogues and relationships. Some are so busy trying to win their online arguments that they have forgotten to make room for the reconciling presence of Christ.

Hebrews states, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). When people live by faith, they seek Christ-centered resolutions for present problems. People of faith believe there is a way forward out of the polarizing darkness. They are convinced that a better path is worth finding and following.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Faith-motivated people are confident in the reconciling power of Christ's love. They proclaim along with the apostle Paul, "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor heights nor depths, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39). Consequently, people who passionately live by faith challenge every form of communication that separates individuals from giving and receiving the reconciling love of God. They believe that not even the most foundational, fundamental broken aspects of social media communication can separate individuals from advancing the good news of Jesus Christ. Consequently, people of faith contend for the ministry of reconciliation online.

Social media polarization will not decrease until individuals begin to seriously embrace the ministry of reconciliation as a motivating factor for every one of their online interactions. God embraced, forgave and restored humanity through Christ's death and resurrection. Every believer has received that forgiving, restorative embrace. In this eschatological age, every believer is called to offer this reconciling embrace to others. Believers are called to contend for truth in a way that brings people closer to God and closer to each other. This means believers must respond to every discordant aspect of social media communication with the intention of facilitating reconciliation. When individuals are motivated by a theology of reconciliation, they will learn to recognize the inherently polarizing aspects of online technology and will intentionally communicate in ways that combat those weaknesses.

### Reconciliation Through Social Media

If believers are called to decrease online polarization through engaging in the ministry of reconciliation, then they need a clear understanding of how the medium of social media helps or hinders the reconciliation process. Individuals who are aware of the ways social media hinders reconciliation will become strategic in how they engage the ministry of reconciliation online. This requires that people seriously examine the ways online communication is changing how humans interact with each other. In other words, one of the best ways to facilitate reconciliation is to understand how social media works against reconciliation. Although many of the problems of online communication were addressed in Section One, the following points are key aspects of online communication that individuals should understand to facilitate reconciliation through social media.

#### *Reconciliation and Networked Individualism*

Although social media can connect more people, in more places, at more times, in more ways than ever before, in reality social media has often led to increased individualistic pursuits. Certainly, there are many examples of social media unifying likeminded people in powerful ways. In *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, M. Castells highlights some powerful political and social movements that have been organized through the use of social media and internet technologies.<sup>30</sup> However, social media has not been as effective in uniting or bringing together individuals with differing perspectives, opinions and ideologies. Instead of facilitating reconciliation, the internet has increased polarizing communication, divisive

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<sup>30</sup> M. Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

behaviors and individualistic pursuits. Even in healthy online relationships, many people feel a profound sense of disconnect where they are networked with many people, but not truly connected with anyone. Sherry Turkle addresses in *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* that the internet has become a place where people frequently use each other for momentary validation, agreement or entertainment without forming meaningful relationships: “Networked, we are together, but so lessened are our expectations of each other that we can feel utterly alone. And there is the risk that we come to see others as objects to be accessed—and only for the parts we find useful, comforting, or amusing.”<sup>31</sup> (154) When people don’t get what they want from a relationship, they simply move on to something or someone else. In other words, relationships are becoming increasingly transient and disposable.

The self-interest, self-focused nature of social media is a primary reasons online communication frequently lacks the fruit of reconciliation. Social media increases the ability of a person to use individuals and communities of individuals for his or her own individualistic needs. Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman’s *Networked: The New Social Operating System* paints a very optimistic picture about this current individualistic state of social media communication.<sup>32</sup> Within their glowing picture of networking possibilities, they trace the American progression of identity as moving from a group focus to an individual focus; a self-centered orientation where “...it is the person who is

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<sup>31</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 154.

<sup>32</sup> Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman, *Networked: The New Social Operating System* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012).

the focus: not the family, not the work unit, not the neighborhood, and not the social group.”<sup>33</sup>

Rainie and Wellman argue that as individuals have gained greater personal autonomy and mobility, their ability to interact with many more networks of individuals has increased.<sup>34</sup> For instance, the automobile allowed humans to live, work and play in different places, forming different relationships with different people. Having more relationship possibilities decentralized the importance of previously traditional relationship groups such as the family, local church and even one’s own neighbors. With the advent of the internet and social media, humans now have many more relationship network possibilities. These greater possibilities allow for more relational opportunities that can benefit individual needs. Consequently, people now view their many networks through the lens of having their personal needs met. As mentioned previously in Section One, Rainie and Wellman refer to this way of viewing relationships as “networked individualism.”<sup>35</sup>

Networked individualism creates an online landscape where interactions with people are viewed as the utilization of resources, rather than as opportunities to form, maintain and preserve meaningful relationships. The internet has created an individualistic environment where people are loosely connected with many networks of individuals, yet deeply connected with fewer and fewer people. Rainie and Wellman refer

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 6.

to this lack of deep connections as “weak ties” versus “strong ties.”<sup>36</sup> Their somewhat utopian view of technology presents the increase in weak ties as a positive development, providing individuals with the opportunity to gain access to more useful information and individualized help from more sources. However, within the context of reconciliation, there are profound negative implications to these weak ties. Many individuals lack deep connections or the ability to form deep connections because they no longer have to maintain strong ties to function well in society. Before humans had tremendous transportation mobility and access to numerous social networks, they were more likely to learn how to abide with their families, neighbors, churches and local communities. In part, they learned to relate with these communities because they had no other networks to replace them. They learned how to get along because there was no one else to get along with if their existing relationships failed. Polarizing behaviors were constructively dealt with to ensure community cohesiveness, primarily because the ability to form other relationships was limited.

In the internet era, humans are not as motivated to learn how to reconcile with individuals and communities because they have many other community opportunities to replace the ones they have abandoned. The weak ties of networked individualism encourage people not to reconcile. People do not pursue reconciliation because they have many other relational options. Instead of trying to reduce or mediate social media conflicts, individuals simply abandon conflict-ridden relationships and move on to other relational networks. Consequently, the ministry of reconciliation is neglected.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 49.

For Christians to implement the biblically mandated ministry of reconciliation through social media platforms, individuals will need to work against the relational detachment prevalent in society. This work requires social media users to embrace a counterculture intentionality in their online communication that values the fostering, developing and maintaining of stronger relational ties. To decrease polarization, the goal of online communication cannot just be the pursuit of information, answers or self-fulfillment, but instead online interactions must be rooted in a willingness to foster meaningful connections, with diverse peoples, through intentional reconciling behavior.

Ultimately, Christian must respond to the polarizing individualism of social media with the self-giving, other-focused reconciling example of Christ. Miroslav Volf points out that the believer's life should reflect the example of Christ:

I want to spell out the social significance of the theme of divine self-giving: as God does not abandon the godless to their evil but gives the divine self for them in order to receive them into divine communion through atonement, so also should we—whoever our enemies and whoever we may be.<sup>37</sup>

In the context of social media, Wolf's admonition means Christians must give of themselves through surrendering the goal of networked individualism. Instead of abandoning polarizing social media platforms or using platforms for selfish purposes, believers are called to interact with these platforms for the purpose of serving Christ and others. Christians engaged in the ministry of reconciliation online will surrender their personal desires for the purpose of loving, serving and reconciling others.

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<sup>37</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 23.

*Reconciliation and Instantaneous Interaction*

Social media is a medium ripe for contentiousness because of our ability to respond instantaneously to anyone at any time, with the possibility of profoundly negative relational consequences. Nicholas Carr writes, “By choice or necessity, we’ve embraced the Net’s uniquely rapid-fire mode of collecting and dispensing information.”<sup>38</sup> The internet’s capacity to provide people unlimited information and a platform to communicate immediately the information they have accessed has led society to an almost addictive intoxication with rapid-fire social media engagement. Carr points out, “The Net’s interactivity gives us powerful new tools for finding information, expressing ourselves, and conversing with others. It also turns us into lab rats constantly pressing levers to get tiny pellets of social or intellectual nourishment.”<sup>39</sup> This perpetual hunger for interactivity weakens our resolve for thoughtful contemplation and in-depth processing when faced with relational conflicts. Individuals must take seriously the immediacy of social media communication when attempting to facilitate reconciliation.

The ability of individuals to instantly respond to or comment about anything and everything makes social media a highly charged, emotionally visceral environment. Wisdom and thoughtfulness are rooted in contemplation, meditation, prayer and introspection. However, the medium of the internet frequently does not produce contemplative processing. Technology theorist Kevin Kelly points out that the way humans process ideas is being radically changed as we move from being “People of the

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<sup>38</sup> Carr, *The Shallows*, 10.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

Book” to “People of the Screen.”<sup>40</sup> Kelly describes a present and future where “People of the Screen” are increasingly influenced by the ever-present reality of electronic screen culture:

Screen culture is a world of constant flux, of endless sound bites, quick cuts, and half-baked ideas. It is a flow of tweets, headlines, instagrams, casual texts, and floating first impressions. Notions don’t stand alone but are massively interlinked to everything else; truth is not delivered by authors and authorities but is assembled in real time piece by piece by the audience themselves. People of the Screen make their own content and construct their own truth...Screen culture is fast, like a 30-second movie trailer, and as liquid and open-ended as a Wikipedia page.<sup>41</sup>

This instantaneous screen culture keeps people from engaging the deeper contemplation that occurs when individuals engage in what Kelly refers to as their “literature space” or the conceptual place of imaginative processing.<sup>42</sup> When people engage their literature space, they are not just screening, “skipping around distractedly gathering bits,” but they are reading deeply, becoming “transported, focused, immersed.”<sup>43</sup> Kelly argues that much of humanity’s internet activity is void of this literature space:

One can spend hours reading on the web and never encounter this literature space. One gets fragments, threads, glimpses. That is the web’s great attraction: miscellaneous pieces loosely joined. But without some kind of containment, these loosely joined pieces spin away, nudging a reader’s attention outward, wandering from the central narrative or argument.

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<sup>40</sup> Kelly, *The Inevitable*, 85-108.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

The absence of literature space and the ability for humans to immediately respond to conflicts without thoughtful contemplation frequently hinders the insightful work of reconciliation.

To facilitate online reconciliation, individuals will need an increased awareness of the dangers of immediately responding to conflict without appropriate consideration. People should be cognizant of the dangers of screening information without truly engaging the deeper meaning of what they are reading or writing. To promote online reconciliation, believers will need to behave with measured, thoughtful, genuine intentionality.

### **Brenda Salter McNeil's Model for Reconciliation**

Along with having a clearer understanding of the ministry of reconciliation and the unique challenges of internet communication, individuals need healthy models of how to facilitate reconciliation through social media. Brenda Salter McNeil's *Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice* works is a powerful tool for assessing healthy social media practices.<sup>44</sup> Although McNeil's work focuses primarily on promoting reconciliation between groups of people or within conflicted organizations and communities, the principles she outlines provide a helpful model for processing individual social media conflicts.

Salter McNeil's practical model for reconciliation aligns well within Donald Walker and Richard Gorsuch's study of sixteen therapeutic, popular and religious models

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<sup>44</sup> Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

of forgiveness and reconciliation.<sup>45</sup> Walker and Gorsuch found six similar traits within the sixteen paths of forgiveness and reconciliation they studied. All sixteen paths “...supported a model whereby people simultaneously experience Hurt and Anger while Receiving God’s Forgiveness, and which then relate to Emotional Forgiveness, then Empathy, then Reconciliation.”<sup>46</sup> Salter McNeil’s model is also based on people needing to recognize the hurt and anger they have caused while they pursue emotional forgiveness. In Salter McNeil’s model, this “catalytic” experience will lead to empathy and the pursuit of concrete reconciling actions. The alignment of Salter McNeil’s model with other reconciliation and forgiveness research makes it extremely practical and effective.

In *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, Salter McNeil describes a clear pathway for individuals trying to facilitate genuine and lasting racial healing within their church or institutional settings. This path to racial reconciliation contains principles that apply to any reconciliation path. Salter McNeil argues that before people enter into the work of reconciliation, they are often caught in a cycle of preservation.<sup>47</sup> Preservation is a condition where individuals find refuge with those who think and act like them, who share their beliefs and hold their values. Salter McNeil writes that in this preservation state “We see ourselves reflected there, and the rituals and customs that bond us together

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<sup>45</sup> Donald F. Walker and Richard L. Gorsuch “Dimensions Underlying Sixteen Models of Forgiveness and Reconciliation,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 32, no. 1 (2004):12-25, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://georgefox.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0001582514&scope=site>.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>47</sup> Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, 42-45.

make us feel safe and comfortable.”<sup>48</sup> In a cycle of preservation, individuals are isolated in their own world, with their own people groups.<sup>49</sup>

The internet allows for individuals to stay in a cycle of preservation through ideological segmentation, partisan polarization and active disengagement from conflict. Individuals who are resisting the ministry of reconciliation will remain in environments that allow them to maintain their cycles of preservation through uniting with like-minded individuals, demonizing people with opposing views or simply avoiding anyone with contrasting opinions.

Salter McNeil suggests that to escape this pattern of preservation and to begin the process of reconciliation and transformation, individuals must experience a “catalytic event” that pulls them out of their cycle of isolation.<sup>50</sup> Salter McNeil points out that these catalytic events force people to reevaluate their perception of the world and to examine their need to change.<sup>51</sup> Catalytic events can either set people into a cycle of transformation or keep them in a state of entrenched preservation. In the context of social media, a catalytic moment may be a negative online interaction that finally causes

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>49</sup> Miroslav Volf points to how isolation works against reconciliation: “If you insist that others do not belong to you and you to them, that their perspective should not muddle yours, you will have your justice and they will have theirs; your justices will clash and there will be no justice between you. The knowledge of justice depends on the will to embrace.” Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 220.

<sup>50</sup> Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, 45-54.

<sup>51</sup> The Indigenous People’s Conference on Reconciliation Processes and Indigenous Peoples’ statement supports Salter McNeil’s conviction that people must engage the reconciliation process with a powerful, catalytic event: “Reconciliation from an indigenous perspective also means that this cannot only be an intellectual exercise. Reconciliation is an issue of the heart and spirit. It is profoundly emotional.” “Resolution on Outcome of the Indigenous People’s Conference on Reconciliation Processes and Indigenous Peoples.” *Ecumenical Review* 68, no. 2-3 (2016): 312-15, accessed November 20, 2018, <https://doi-org.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/erev.12237>.

someone to realize there must be a better way of communicating through social media, or the awareness might rise up in someone's heart through a time of prayer and contemplation. Regardless, the individual experiences a moment of clarity to actively pursue a path that embraces a new way of looking at the situation and of abiding with people.

Individuals who embrace their catalytic moment as a sign that they need transformation will enter a realization phase.<sup>52</sup> Salter McNeil explains that in the realization stage people go beyond just having a mental assent that things are wrong; they come to a profound realization that change must happen. They begin to reorient and ready themselves for the work of reconciliation, with a commitment to "...identify things to do" believing "there has to be some activity that helps us to return to the hope of possibility."<sup>53</sup> In the context of social media polarization, this realization phase requires that individuals thoughtfully examine both their social media behavior and the social media behavior of others. They must have a willingness to see both problems and solutions, to identify polarizing and divisive behaviors and to make room for reconciling behaviors, actions and attitudes. Rather than just complaining about the negative climate of social media activity, reconciling individuals actively examine how they contribute to the increase or decrease of social media polarization and the work of reconciliation.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, 55-64.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>54</sup> In the realization phase, individuals open themselves up to the reality that "...the ministry of reconciliation signals both the work of negotiators and the extension to friendship." Laurie Brink, "From Wrongdoer to New Creation: Reconciliation in 2 Corinthians," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 71, no. 3 (2017): 307, accessed November 21, 2018, <https://doi-org.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0020964317698765>.

After the realization phase, Salter McNeil believes people must enter the identification phase.<sup>55</sup> The identification phase is “where we start in on the hard work of building a new collective identity and a collaborative community that can hold the concerns, values, desires and experiences that we share.”<sup>56</sup> From a social media standpoint, the identification phase requires that individuals see their online activity as more than the process of communicating ideas, but the activity of facilitating healthy, loving, diverse community. Reconciling individuals are motivated by a sincere desire to find shared purposes, values and concerns with every person they interact with through social media. They actively seek to humanize every internet interaction, attempting to find common ground with every individual, regardless of ideological differences; particularly when dealing with relational conflicts or polarizing situations.

Salter McNeill believes people must move from the identification stage to a phase that people often overlook or hurry through, the preparation phase.<sup>57</sup> In the preparation phase, Christians must understand and value the need to create structures, systems and cultures that facilitate and maintain the process of reconciliation. Salter McNeil argues that once the momentary passion to reconcile has passed, there must be an intentional framework and foundation in place to help reconciliation succeed and develop as a sustainable culture. Salter McNeil explains, “...relational connections cannot be sustained without structural intentionality. Structures to support our efforts toward long-

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<sup>55</sup> Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, 65-79.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-94.

term reconciliation have to be established, and it happens here, in the preparation phase.”<sup>58</sup>

As mentioned previously, there are many inherent aspects of social media that work against the ministry of reconciliation. Sadly, most social media providers seem reluctant to address seriously the structural issues that exaggerate polarizing communication. John De Gruchy states, “Reconciliation is about building bridges, about allowing conflicting stories to interact in ways that evoke respect, build relationships and help restructure power relations.”<sup>59</sup> Consequently, individuals need to engage voluntarily in their own “preparation phase” of communicating with intentionality while advocating for changes in the systems and cultures that facilitate online communication.<sup>60</sup> People serious about the preparation phase will develop clear principles, boundaries and ways of communicating they can implement when conflicts arise.

The last phase of transformation in the reconciliation process is activation.<sup>61</sup> Salter McNeil writes, “...the goal of this final stage is to ‘activate’ the skills and competencies learned in the preparation phase by actively getting involved.”<sup>62</sup> This involvement requires intentional communication, advocacy, relationships and education.<sup>63</sup> In the context of social media, Salter McNeil’s roadmap to reconciliation implies that every

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>59</sup> De Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*, 184.

<sup>60</sup> De Gruchy and other scholars frequently address the importance of intentionally building bridges and facilitating space for people to find each other in the reconciliation process: “Creating space is critical, irrespective of the nature of the reconciliation we seek.” De Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*, 148.

<sup>61</sup> Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, 95-105.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 96-103.

person must be an intentional advocate for better internet communication. No one, especially no Christian, should ever assume they can opt out of the ministry of reconciliation. Every believer is responsible for facilitating the ministry of peacemaking.

Corneliu Constantineanu writes that Paul saw reconciling peacemaking as an essential ministry of every believer:

However, to live according to the logic of the gospel and in the light of the life of Christ also means to be community oriented; and that is to create a community in which everyone is to nurture and embody reconciling practices that enhance and enrich the life together: harmony and solidarity, peace, love, and regard for others.<sup>64</sup>

When communicating online, Christians are responsible for bringing people closer to God and closer to each other. In the context of Salter McNeil's model, successful communication is not just the communication of ideas, but the facilitating of transformative interactions between diverse and frequently divided people groups.

Ultimately, Salter McNeil argues that intentional realization, identification, preparation and activation will lead to transformation in the reconciliation process. Her tested observations provide a genuine roadmap for facilitating reconciliation in any context. Salter McNeil's roadmap to reconciliation provides a powerful tool for any individual who desires to live out a theology of reconciling within an extremely complex, polarizing, online world. Individuals serious about using Salter McNeil's resource to facilitate reconciliation will engage the following process. They will (1) realize their need to engage in reconciling online behavior; (2) identify ways they can decrease online polarization; (3) prepare themselves for inevitable social media conflicts and (4) activate the necessary behaviors they must display to decrease divisiveness. Social media users

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<sup>64</sup> Constantineanu, *The Social Significance of Reconciliation in Paul's Theology*, 181.

who intentionally utilize Salter McNeil's reconciliation model will facilitate climates that decrease polarization.

### **A Story Revisited**

In light of these proposed solutions to the problem of social media polarization, let us revisit the story of Pastor Tim, introduced in Section One. As previously stated, Tim believes that his impassioned, strongly worded, divisive social media posts are helping advance the kingdom of God. In reality, Tim is increasing the polarization of social media and hindering his ability to effectively minister the gospel. Social media technology is forming Tim into a divisive person. How can individuals, such as Pastor Tim, embrace the ministry of reconciliation?

Pastor Tim loves God and loves the congregation he serves. He understands that through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, he can communicate his strong religious convictions to many different people. Tim is trying to serve God, to honor Scripture and to stand up for his faith with genuine tenacity and passion. Sadly, Tim is expressing truth in a way that works against people accepting that truth. If Tim embraces the ministry of online reconciliation, he does not need to abandon his love for truth. Instead, he will need to develop a better way of facilitating an environment where people are open to the truth he communicates. For Pastor Tim to change his ways, he will need to first gain a far deeper understanding of the ministry of reconciliation and the central role reconciliation plays in the communication of truth in every situation, including online environments. Next, he will need to educate himself on the unique ways internet communication exaggerates polarization, so that he can avoid engaging in behaviors that further the divisive nature of social media. Lastly, if Pastor Tim is serious

about changing the way he expresses the kingdom of God online, he will adopt the model of reconciliation outlined by Brenda Salter McNeil to guide his internet communication.

Pastor Tim can either defend his current way of communicating online or he can open his heart to discovering a new way of interacting. He can embrace the ministry of reconciliation and thoughtfully engage the unique challenges of internet communication or he can continue to produce divisive and polarizing fruit. Pastor Tim must decide whether he wants to exhibit behavior that increases or decreases social media polarization. His ability to facilitate radical transformation is dependent upon his willingness to repent and embrace a new way of abiding online. Tim must have his own catalytic experience if he is truly to change his ways. In light of that catalytic experience, he must be willing to recognize his need to change. Ultimately, the de-polarization of the internet is dependent upon Tim's willingness and every person's willingness to surrender to the ministry of reconciliation.

### **Conclusion**

When addressing the problem of increased social media divisiveness, individuals need to remember that the internet and the medium of social media are still very much in their infancy. Unfortunately, sometimes society has a fatalistic view of the negative inevitabilities of technology. Sherry Turkle points out that people need a broader perspective of the current state of technology, "Because we grew up with the Net, we assume that the Net is grown up. We tend to see it as a technology in its maturity. But in fact, we are in the early days. There is time to make the corrections."<sup>65</sup> In other words,

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<sup>65</sup> Turkle, *Alone Together*, 294.

the medium of social media is still in a formative stage. The decisions individuals make today will influence the social media environment of the future.

The internet has expanded humanity's opportunity to connect with individuals, groups and networks of people through social media platforms. However, as the ability of individuals to communicate ideas, opinions and information has increased, there has also been an increase in hostile, polarizing, divisive communication. Instead of using connectivity to come together, society has found new ways to fall apart. Reconciliation is a central theme of the gospel. Salvation is the restoration of relationship between humans and God, as well as the restoration of relationships between God's children. The ministry of reconciliation is rooted in the cross that provides true justice, forgiveness, mercy and grace in the powerful embrace of a crucified Messiah. The church is involved in the ministry of reconciliation because reconciling is the ethic of the eschatological age in which the church abides. Consequently, every activity of the church should be reconciling, including all social media activity. Christians must be intentional in using social media to mend relationships and to fulfill the scriptural mandate to be ministers of reconciliation. This paper argues that individuals will decrease social media polarization through (1) developing a Christ-centered theology of reconciliation; (2) advocating online communication approaches rooted in a theology of reconciliation that address the unique challenges of social media and (3) utilizing Brenda Salter McNeil's *Roadmap to Reconciliation* as a guide for internet conflict resolution. The implementation of these approaches will not only lead to decreased polarization, but also to the advancement of the transformative work of the cross of Christ.

#### SECTION FOUR: ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

The artifact is a non-fiction book titled *Angry, Polarizing People: Communicating Truth in the Social Media Age*. This dissertation will include chapters one through eight of the book. *Angry, Polarizing People* is written for a general Christian audience to help readers navigate an increasingly toxic social media landscape. The book will examine why the internet is turning individuals into angry, polarizing people and what Christians can do to fight against this trend. *Angry, Polarizing People* will deal with the following topics:

- Why the internet is making society angry and polarized
- The author's struggle against polarization as a pastor and as a radio host
- The Scripture's response to angry and polarizing people
- The need to embrace the ministry of online reconciliation
- Practical ways to de-polarize online communication
- Hopeful possibilities for the future of social media communication

*Angry, Polarizing People: Communicating Truth in the Social Media Age* will provide readers with relevant theological insights, engaging contemporary research and practical implementable advice. The book will help people understand some of the problematic realities of social media, while providing hope for how to address these problems with biblically based, proactive responses. Ultimately, people will learn how to engage in less angry, less polarizing social media communication and become better equipped to engage in the ministry of reconciliation online.

## SECTION FIVE: ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

**Query**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Why is everyone so angry online and what can we do about it? The internet age seems to have brought the world together so that we can tear each other apart. *Angry, Polarizing People: Communicating Truth in the Social Media Age* is a non-fiction, in-depth, spiritual examination of how the internet divides us and what we must do to fight against this divisiveness. *Angry, Polarizing People* presents engaging contemporary research, relevant theological insights and practical implementable advice to address the ways the internet increases our polarizing dialogue.

With a clearer understanding of the pitfalls of our present social media discourse, *Angry, Polarizing People* looks at how the biblical ministry of reconciliation is the best answer for dealing with our current online divisiveness. Along with examining how to address online toxic environments, I share personal stories of my struggles to facilitate a better dialogue in a frequently bitter world through pastoring for 20 years and through hosting a daily radio talk show for 5 years with over 1,200 shows.

*Angry, Polarizing People: Communicating Truth in the Social Media Age* is my second, Christian, non-fiction book at 50,000 words. My first book was *The Community of God: A Theology of the Church From a Reluctant Pastor*. I am the lead editor and reviser of a major update of *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology* by Guy P. Duffield and Nathaniel M. Van Cleave. I've written a weekly column for the Auburn Reporter Newspaper, had pieces posted online at Christianity Today, On Faith, The Moderate Voice and The Evangelical Pulpit (Patheos). For 5 years I hosted Live From Seattle With Doug Bursch on 820 AM KGNW. I currently pastor Evergreen Church and host and produce the Fairly Spiritual Show, a weekly radio show and podcast. I have thousands of fans through Facebook, Twitter and my website [www.fairlyspiritual.org](http://www.fairlyspiritual.org).

I would be grateful to send you a sample at your request. Thank you for reading. I look forward to receiving your reply.

Peace,

Douglas S. Bursch

## Cover Letter

Agency Address

Dear Mr. or Ms. Agent,

Why is everyone angry online? The internet seems to have brought the world together so that we can tear each other apart. Social media platforms are becoming increasingly divisive, polarizing and angry. Many individuals are overwhelmed and disillusioned by the seemingly endless online conflict and negativity.

*Angry, Polarizing People: Communicating Truth in the Social Media Age* is a non-fiction, in-depth, spiritual examination of how the internet divides us and what we must do to fight against this divisiveness. *Angry, Polarizing People* presents engaging contemporary research, relevant theological insights and practical implementable advice to address the ways the internet increases our polarizing dialogue. With a clearer understanding of the pitfalls of our present social media discourse, *Angry, Polarizing People* looks at how the biblical ministry of reconciliation is the best answer for dealing with our current online divisiveness. Along with examining how to address online toxic environments, I share personal stories of my struggles to facilitate a better dialogue in a frequently bitter world through pastoring for 20 years and through hosting a daily radio talk show for 5 years with over 1,200 shows.

I've written this book for a general Christian audience. Anyone who is trying to navigate the conflicts that arise through social media or who has grown greatly concerned with the current state of our popular discourse will find my book informative, encouraging and challenging. Glenn Burris Jr., the President of The Foursquare Church denomination, referenced my ability to tackle such a challenge: "Doug Bursch is one of the best thinkers of our day. He artfully mixes a sound theology with a practical application in a complex, combustible 21<sup>st</sup> Century culture that desperately needs a clarion voice."

*Angry, Polarizing People: Communicating Truth in the Social Media Age* is my second non-fiction book at 50,000 words. My first book was *The Community of God: A Theology of the Church From a Reluctant Pastor*. I am the lead editor and reviser of a major update of *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology* by Guy P. Duffield and Nathaniel M. Van Cleave. I've written a weekly column for the Auburn Reporter Newspaper, had pieces posted online at Christianity Today, On Faith, The Moderate Voice and The Evangelical Pulpit (Patheos). For 5 years I hosted Live From Seattle With Doug Bursch on 820 AM KGNW. I currently pastor Evergreen Church and host and produce the Fairly Spiritual Show radio program and podcast. I have thousands of fans through Facebook, Twitter and my website [www.fairlyspiritual.org](http://www.fairlyspiritual.org).

Thank you for taking time to read my proposal. I look forward to receiving your reply.

Peace,

Douglas S. Bursch

## Book Proposal Outline

- Title:** *Angry, Polarizing People: Communicating Truth in the Social Media Age*
- Author:** Douglas S. Bursch  
18610 SE 440<sup>th</sup> Street  
Enumclaw, WA 98022  
253-797-0119  
evergreenlife@mac.com
- Overview:** The book is an in-depth, research-based, spiritual examination of why social media divides people and how Christians can stop this polarization through embracing the ministry of reconciliation. Pastor Douglas Bursch shares personal stories from his extensive experience as a pastor, talk radio host and social media influencer and provides observations from technology experts concerning how social media radically changes the way humans communicate. The book provides practical examples of how to proactively deal with social media conflicts and includes questions at the end of each chapter to facilitate further discussion on how best to use social media in a positive, Christ-like manner.
- Purpose:**
- Highlight the ways the internet is changing not only how humans communicate but what humans communicate; and how these factors are making our communication more divisive, polarizing and angry.
  - Demonstrate that the ministry of reconciliation is a central purpose for every Christian and the key to healthy online communication.
  - Provide practical examples of how individuals can handle online conflict in a redemptive, reconciling manner.
  - Change the discourse of online Christian communication.
- Promotion:** Besides being marketed through traditional Christian booksellers, pastors and church leaders' markets, the author has many relational avenues through which this book could be promoted. Doug Bursch has almost 6,000 Twitter followers, over 1,300 followers of his Fairly Spiritual Facebook page and his FairlySpiritual.org website has around 16,000 page views and over 10,000 visitors a year. Doug's social media posts, tweets and blogs frequently attract thousands of views. He also has positive relationships with editors at Christianity Today and Christ and Pop Culture as well as with other Christian social media influencers and online content creators. Doug is a member of the national doctrine and education committees of the Foursquare Denomination and his first self-published book sold over 1,200 copies mostly by word of mouth, without any official promotional tour. Doug also hosts the weekly Fairly Spiritual radio show and podcast that reaches thousands of listeners.

Competition: There have been several successful secular books written about how technology is changing how humans communicate with each other. The following are just a few examples:

- *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* by Sherry Turkle. Published by Penguin in 2015.
- *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* by Nicholas Carr. Published by W.W. Norton in 2010.
- *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* by Neil Postman. Published by Vintage Books in 1993.
- *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* by Marshall McLuhan. Published by McGraw-Hill in 1964.

The following are Christian books that address how we communicate through social media:

- *Redeeming How We Talk: Discover How Communication Fuels Our Growth, Shapes Our Relationships, and Changes Our Lives* by Ken Wystma and A.J. Swoboda. Published by Moody Publisher 2018.
- *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age* by Alan Noble. Published by InterVarsity Press 2018.
- *Christians in the Age of Outrage: How to Bring Our Best When the World is at its Worst* by Ed Stetzer Published by Tyndale House 2018.

Uniqueness: Doug Bursch's unique background as a pastor, educator, newspaper columnist and radio talk show host gives his writing a unique perspective that will distinguish his book from other previously published works. Although Doug's work will have academic and spiritual depth, the writing will be approachable and understandable for a general Christian audience. The book will be informative as well as transformative, providing both interesting insights and practical ways for readers to apply those insights to their lives.

Endorsements:

The author has contacted for an endorsement:  
 Glenn Burris Jr., President of the Foursquare Church  
 Beth Moore, Christian author and speaker  
 William Paul Young, author of *The Shack*  
 Jack Hayford, author and pastor  
 A.J. Swoboda, author and pastor  
 Karen Swallow Prior, author and educator

Book Format: The book will be approximately 50,000 words, with 20 chapters that are each 2,000 to 3,000 words in length. At the end of each chapter there will be discussion questions. At the end of the book there will be an endnote section based on works cited in the chapters.

## Chapter Outline:

### **Part One: An Online Problem**

- Chapter One: Angry Online

This chapter introduces the problem of individuals engaging in angry, polarizing social media communication and encourages social media users to embrace a reconciling dialogue. The chapter addresses the author's history of working with angry, polarizing people in his radio career and discusses his disillusionment with non-reconciling Christians.

- Chapter Two: Talk Show Society

This chapter addresses how social media users are behaving like angry talk show hosts. Doug examines how Christians are called to have Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego faith that does not bow down to our culture. The chapter ends with a call for individuals to embrace a faith that radically confronts the polarizing madness.

- Chapter Three: Disconnected Foundations

Chapter three starts with Doug sharing stories of how the internet age has radically changed him and others. He focuses on events he experienced while working for a relationally disconnected internet company at the burgeoning of the social media age. Doug ends the chapter arguing that humans have been overpowered by the internet.

- Chapter Four: Internet-Formed Humans

Doug looks at how social media is radically changing how people exist with God and with each other. He examines how social media is not just a messaging platform, but a platform that is fundamentally changing the messages humans communicate. Doug ends the chapter looking at how the internet is numbing our relational sensitivity and numbing our fundamental ability to form meaningful human relationships.

- Chapter Five: Detached Individualism

This chapter starts by asking readers to imagine a world where they only accept and interact with people who meet their needs and serve their purposes. The chapter then explains that this kind of self-centered behavior is a foundational principle behind most social media communication. The chapter then examines how the internet is structured for networked individualism that births angry, polarizing people who are unable or unwilling to reconcile with each other.

- Chapter Six: Discarnate Communication

This chapter looks at how the internet promotes discarnate, disembodied communication. Doug examines how left-brain argumentative, written, depersonalized, non-empathetic communication promotes discarnate polarizing, angry online behavior. He looks at how our online behavior is influencing our in-person behavior.

- Chapter Seven: Opinionated Partisan People

This chapter looks at how our responses to the problems of internet technology are making the problems worse. Doug starts the chapter with an illustration on how Disneyland and social media both can be nightmares without an intentional plan. Doug then examines how we are trying to solve conflict through non-relational, information-based solutions that are actually increasing polarization. He ends the chapter addressing how social media communication is becoming more destructively argumentative and partisan.

- Chapter Eight: Segmented and Disengaged Users

This chapter starts with examining how people, with the help of preference algorithms, choose to abide online in ideologically segmented groups. Doug then looks at the dangers of people choosing increasingly to avoid or disengage from all social media conflict, particularly issues of social justice. Doug ends the chapter arguing that Christians must confront the negative realities of social media with a passionate Hebrews 11 faith that is confident in the power of God to truly change the world.

## **Part Two: A Divine Answer**

- Chapter Nine: A Reconciling Savior

This chapter explains that the central message of the gospel is reconciliation. Doug provides a theology of reconciliation that is rooted in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. He ends the chapter looking at Christ's example of embrace as the Christian example for reconciliation.

- Chapter Ten: A Reconciling Church

This chapter examines Paul's teaching on and testimony of reconciliation. Doug looks at scriptures and biblical stories that communicate the importance of reconciliation in the life of Paul. Doug explains how the early church embraced the ministry of reconciliation as a fundamental principle in how individuals lived and communicated.

- Chapter Eleven: A Reconciling People

In this chapter Doug examines how the Bible calls people into personal reconciling accountability. He explains how every Christian is to be known as a reconciler. The chapter ends by showing that reconciliation is an expression of abiding in the last days.

- Chapter Twelve: A Reconciling Testimony

In this chapter Doug shares his own testimony of reconciliation. He talks about how he came to Christ and how his testimony influences the way he communicates with others. Doug shares how his awareness of Christ has radically influenced his desire to facilitate environments where people experience the presence of God.

- Chapter Thirteen: A Reconciling Problem

In this chapter Doug looks at the failure of Christians to be reconcilers online. He gives illustrations of how Christians have failed to take seriously their mandate to be expressions of reconciliation. Doug also shares his own reconciliation failures and points out the disconnect between right theology and right practice.

- Chapter Fourteen: A Reconciling Hope

In this chapter Doug summarizes the main points of the entire reconciliation section. He shares an impassioned plea for embracing the ministry of reconciliation. Doug ends the chapter with a simple story about the power of focusing on reconciliation.

### **Part Three: Our Practical Response**

- Chapter Fifteen: An Intentional Plan

In this chapter Doug argues for a new way of abiding online with a new purpose. He examines the importance of developing a specific plan for online communication. Doug shares his journey of discovering the importance of intentional internet communication.

- Chapter Sixteen: A Practical Checklist

In this chapter Doug lists practical behaviors people can express to de-polarize social media. The list includes the attitudes people should have, the language they should use and the reasons they should or should not respond to certain posts.

- Chapter Seventeen: An Answer for “Trolls”

This chapter looks at how to deal with extreme trolling, partisan posts and religious fights. Doug explains why he never refers to anyone as a troll. He also argues for contending for humanizing language at all costs; even when muting, blocking or reporting someone.

- Chapter Eighteen: A Spiritual Battle

This chapter looks at the spiritual battles individuals face when they contend for reconciliation. Doug examines ways to pray and face the struggles of internet communication. He ends the chapter looking at his own spiritual battles contending for reconciliation throughout his life.

- Chapter Nineteen: A Call for Grace

This chapter looks at the profound implications of social media communication failure. Doug gives examples of how he and others have failed in their online communication. He ends the chapter advocating for a climate of grace when dealing with each other online.

- Chapter Twenty: A Hopeful Future

This chapter summarizes the main points of the book. Doug speaks about the importance of optimistically approaching the future. He reminds readers that the internet is still in its infancy. The chapter ends with Doug advocating for a vision of online reconciliation between individuals and between communities.

Intended Readers:

- Primary: General Christian audience 25-55
- Secondary: Millennial Christians; Non-Christians interested in partisan Christian communication; Pastors, ministers and Christian ministry leaders trying to navigate social media effectively

Manuscript: Eight chapters (20,000 words) of the 50,000-word manuscript are completed. The author will need 6 to 8 months to complete work after signing book deal.

Author Bio: Douglas S. Bursch is Co-Pastor of Evergreen Foursquare Church in Auburn, Washington. He serves on the Doctrine Committee and Education Commission of the Foursquare Church and has taught theology courses as adjunct faculty for Life Pacific College and Life Ministry Institute. Doug has produced and hosted over 1,200 Christian radio broadcasts. He is currently the producer and host of the Fairly Spiritual Show radio program and podcast.

### Publishing Credits:

- *The Community of God: A Theology of the Church From a Reluctant Pastor* by Douglas S. Bursch. Published 2017 by Fairly Spiritual. Used by small groups, leadership groups, Sunday school classes and chaplains throughout the country.
- Lead reviser and updater of *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology: Revised and Updated Volume 1 and 2* by Guy P. Duffield and Nathaniel M. Van Cleave. Wrote many paragraphs, sentences and sections in the new volumes.
- *On Donald Miller, Protestant Popes, and Inside Reformation and Rebellion: Failure or Fruit? The Blame for Conflict Can't Always Fall on the Leadership*. Both published online at Christianity Today.
- *When Internet Authority Trumps Church Authority*. Published at On Faith.co.
- *So You've Been Caught Sinning: Now What?* and *The Masculinity Myth: The Real Reason Men Don't Go to Church*. Both published at The Evangelical Pulpit on Patheos.com.
- *The Community of God: A Theology of the Church From a Reluctant Pastor* chapter excerpt published online at Christ and Pop Culture.
- Numerous posts published at TheModerateVoice.com.
- Numerous posts published at FairlySpiritual.org.
- Numerous columns published in The Auburn Reporter Newspaper.

### Future Projects:

- *Wonderfully Dangerous: The God-Given Destructive Power of Humans* is a book dealing with the amazing creative power God has given every human to do tremendous good or tremendous evil. The book will examine the dangerous power of being made in God's image, how humans have used their created capacity for good and evil and how every human is daily given the choice to serve the Creator or the created. The book will give examples of how some of the most famous people in the world have chosen to serve the created instead of the Creator and will call people to a greater appreciation of their God-given capacity to transform the world.
- *The Church Growth Movement Must Die* is a book dealing with the fundamental theological and practical flaws of the church growth movement. The book will look at the toxic fruit of the church growth movement, examine better ways to classify church health and argue for a better way to encourage present and future pastoral leadership.
- *Beyond the Petri Dish: Embracing the Mysterious Side of God* is a book that argues God is revealed as much through art, poetry, philosophy, song and dance, as he is through carefully outlined theological arguments. The book will talk about the problem with turning faith into a scientific equation and will examine various theological issues from an artistic, poetic perspective.

## SECTION SIX: POSTSCRIPT

In 2005, after much prayer and a fair amount of crying, I gave up on pursuing my doctoral work. I was enrolled in a different school than Portland Seminary and had completed all my course work, except my dissertation. The seminary I was attending at the time had an excellent cohort and the courses helped me with my development as a leader. However, the dissertation element of my program was extremely frustrating and seemed disconnected from the rest of my educational and ministry goals. The dissertation element of the program was barely integrated into the overall course work and the pseudo-scientific expectations the school had of my dissertation research seemed artificial, perfunctory and profoundly limiting to the learning process. Ultimately, I had no excitement or desire to complete my dissertation within the constraints of that seminary's process. I honestly did not want to spend many hours of my life working on a paper that would be primarily perfunctory. I did not want to just receive a degree; I wanted to produce a paper that would truly make a difference in my life and in the lives of other ministers. Consequently, I withdrew from the program and placed my hopes of completing my doctoral work in the hands of God.

Portland Seminary of George Fox University gave life to my dormant, seemingly dead dream. The dream must have been alive in the heart of God, but as far as I was concerned, there was no life left in the possibility of me finishing my doctoral work until I was embraced by the staff of Portland Seminary. I cannot adequately put into words the acceptance I felt as Portland Seminary listened to my heart, accommodated my history and found a way to allow me to complete my doctoral education. I am forever grateful that I have been allowed to finish my doctorate through Portland Seminary and that the

work I am doing has had a profound and meaningful impact on my life. I can confidently say that I have done more than just complete my dissertation, I have radically grown in my understanding of the issues I have been studying. This process has deeply changed my life and ministry.

When I started my classes at Portland Seminary, I thought I understood my task. I knew I wanted to address the polarization in social media and I thought I had an awareness of how to address that problem through the ministry of reconciliation. However, with the help of my second advisor, Dr. Michael Hearn and his reading recommendations, my thinking about technology began to take a radical shift. Before Dr. Hearn's recommendations, I did not have a mature or well-developed understanding of how media influences our messaging. With Dr. Hearn's direction I began to realize that social media polarization cannot be addressed by simply encouraging people to communicate better. Instead, individuals must realize how online technology is influencing almost every aspect of our communication. This new direction from Dr. Hearn was critical in giving focus and depth to my dissertation and my learning experience.

I believe my dissertation is effective in communicating why social media is so polarizing. I also believe I have argued well for why Christians should embrace the ministry of reconciliation in their online interactions. I realize that I could have provided more practical models of how to facilitate reconciliation beyond presenting Brenda Salter McNeil's model for reconciliation. However, I chose to focus more on how social media negatively influences individuals, believing that practical solutions will situationally arise when individuals become more generally aware of the deceptively polarizing influences

of online communication. In a similar manner, I believe advocating for a general focus on the ministry of reconciliation will lead individuals to pursue their own relationally specific implementations.

As a result of this dissertation, I have gained a greater awareness of the many ways social media forms our society. I have also developed a greater appreciation of the centrality of the message of reconciliation within Scripture. As I have examined some rather large and broad topics, there are many issues I would love to investigate at a deeper level. Although this paper talks about social media as a general category, research on the differences between various social media platforms would be helpful in determining what communication fosters or decreases polarization. Also, further study on generational usage would help determine what are transitory or normative social media trends. From a theological perspective, the issue of engaging injustices online and dealing with oppression and oppressed groups would be worth further consideration and study. Ultimately, I have been greatly encouraged and challenged through this dissertation process. My research has expanded my understanding of technology, reconciliation and the complexities of integrating my faith online. This journey has inspired my imagination and will produce a book that will at least be self-published, if not picked up by a publisher. Most importantly, I can confidently say that I have done more than just perform a perfunctory task; I have been transformed by a process that will advance the kingdom of God. I am profoundly thankful Portland Seminary provided me this opportunity to finally finish my doctoral journey.

APPENDIX A: ARTIFACT

Angry, Polarizing People  
Communicating Truth in the Social Media Age

By Douglas S. Bursch

## **Part One: An Online Problem**

### **Chapter One: Angry Online**

I pause and read, then pause and read again, trying to parse the verbiage, analyze the tone, determine the intent, decipher the meaning and find a way forward through this seemingly ever-expanding social media battlefield. I grow tired of this recurring, sinking, alienating feeling; my thumbs hovering over my phone, my eyes scanning and rescanning the inflamed words of others on the screen. Although I am not looking for a fight, I am faced with the familiar prospect that my next post, tweet, response or lack of response will make someone angry.

Why are we so angry online? Why have we become so divided? It has all gotten a bit ridiculous, how even the most mundane observations can devolve into toxic absurdity. I can tweet something such as “I ate too many tacos today” and five responses later someone is angrily accusing me of supporting “baby killers.” If you do not see any connection between baby killing and taco consumption, you are correct, there is not a connection; even though some of you are trying to find a way to make such a connection, because you cannot possibly believe I would list these two ideas next to each other, unless there was some sort of way to draw a line between the two. However, this is the strange reality of our age; there is no way to draw a line and connect the emotional chaos, except through the strange divisive line of social media. The online world is turning us into angry, polarizing people.

#### **United to divide and devour**

The internet is a wonderfully powerful, dangerous tool. Through online communication individuals are united and divided; relationships are fostered and destroyed; communities are formed and shattered. The internet has increased our ability to connect personally and to harm

personally more people than ever. For every person we may bless, there are three we may offend. Although the internet brings us together, the online world is also dehumanizing, detaching, dividing, segmenting and polarizing. We are becoming angry, mean and cliquish. People roam the online world, looking for individuals they can fight or devour. Daily, we watch seemingly non-controversial posts or tweets spark contentious, bitter online battles. Earnest attempts to civilly address injustices quickly disintegrate into rancorous partisan extremism. The anger and toxicity are so great, many of us are afraid to express any possibly controversial opinions for fear of being conscripted into ideological battles we are not trying to fight. The polarization of social media communication has increased in many of us a profound sense of anxiety, alienation and frustration. The internet is interconnecting more humans and more people groups than in any other time of human history. Yet, as we come together, we find ourselves tearing each other apart.

We sense and even lament the foreboding, growing tensions and divisions rising up in our social media age, yet many of us are fatalistic when contemplating the possibility of solutions. While some people accept the hostility of social media as an inevitable reality of the medium, I want to challenge that notion. I might be foolish in my attempt, but I want to challenge the contentious spirit of our age. I seriously want to confront the fundamental ways we interact with each other online. I am tired of the fighting. I am tired of being afraid of the fighting. Most importantly, I no longer want to engage in fruitless heated discussions and meaningless contentious debates that do not have a redemptive or transformative purpose. I want my energy to be directed towards Christ-centered, truth advancing, life affirming, grace-filled reconciling communication.

I believe many of us are looking for a better way to respond to this antagonistic, divisive, polarizing age. We are looking for ways to be true agents of peace and reconciliation in a troubled world. We recognize that the internet is a powerful tool with a profound potential for great harm, but also for great good. However, we sometimes grow disillusioned and overwhelmed by the contentious social media environment that surrounds us. Sometimes we just grow annoyed! Although the online world is no longer a new phenomenon, we must remember that our interconnected technological reality is still in its infancy. Our generation is pioneering social media communication, creating a foundational online culture that will impact future generations. The fundamental principles of social media communication are not set in stone; rather, we are forming those principles in our daily interactions. Even so, we must realize that as our daily interactions are forming the medium of social media, the medium is also forming us. In other words, the social media platforms we have created are not just connecting us; they are changing us. They are changing how we view reality, understand relationships, process conflicts and abide with each other.

The internet is not a neutral information gathering and sharing tool. Social media does far more than simply provide an environment where individuals can connect to share ideas. Instead, the online world is changing the way we view humanity. Social media is transforming what we expect from each other and what we are willing to do to maintain, foster and build healthy, diverse, meaningful, long-term relationships. The internet is influencing how I abide with you and how you abide with me. Even though we desire meaningful human connections, social media platforms are structured to separate us from some of the most basic interactions we need to form and maintain strong, long-term healthy relationships. The online medium fosters,

exaggerates and normalizes non-reconciling behavior. Simply put, social media normalizes and codifies bad behavior.

The internet is an amazing technological innovation. Sadly, we are harming ourselves with our own creation. Social media is turning communication into destructive confrontation. Even worse, we seem to have lost our ability to speak the truth in love. The work of peacemaking has been supplanted by an endless war of words. Many are aware of the growing problem, but we just do not seem to know how to fix it.

### **A call to contend for a better witness**

This book is my attempt to confront the social media driven anger and polarization that is crippling our society. I am calling people out of the toxic, divisive chaos into a better way of communicating. I am urging us to refuse to participate in the devouring spirit of our age. I am not asking us to isolate from conflict or to abandon our mandate to fight against injustices. This is not a book that instructs Christians to yield their rightful role within culture. Instead, I am writing this book to contend for a better witness in this frequently bitter world. I am challenging Christians to position their communication on the firm foundation of the transformative gospel of Jesus Christ. I am advocating for a way of social media communication that takes seriously every Christian's mandate to participate in the ministry of reconciliation. I am instructing us to be less jerky, less annoying, less angry, less eager to turn taco tweets into abortion debates.

In the following chapters I will examine how the internet negatively influences the way we process conflict and abide with each other. I will also demonstrate how Scripture gives us clear instructions on the way we should respond to the toxic climate of our social media age. Along with these insights, I will share my own personal struggles with trying to facilitate social

media reconciliation as a pastor, radio host and social media communicator. However, before I do this, let me tell you about the time I failed to reconcile the world through hosting my own daily talk show on a far-right Christian radio station.

### **Angry far-right Christian radio**

Along with being a pastor, God granted me the honor of being a “radio personality.” I use the words “radio personality” to evoke the fully ambiguous nature of the role I held and the relentless struggle I confronted trying to honor God while maintaining my identity. I started my radio personality journey in a rather contentious environment. For five years I hosted a talk show Monday through Friday from 4 to 6 pm on a very conservative Christian radio station. I began my radio career believing I could produce a show that would unite conservative, progressive and moderate Christians around a better way of coexisting with each other. I thought I could facilitate an environment where we could learn to disagree without being jerks about it. I thought there were many Christians hungry for a better form of communication that was not rooted in partisan bickering and bitter political divisiveness. I believed that my show would grow in popularity and influence, eventually reaching national syndication as I thought people were hungry for a less contentious dialogue. When I finally resigned my position, I had produced and broadcasted over 1,200 shows and discovered that I was wrong! Completely wrong!

There was no growing movement of people hungry for reconciling content and no growing radio audience to propel me into syndication. Although I was able to maintain enough of an audience to fulfill the requirements of my job, I found my moderate, reconciling voice faced constant rebukes, scorn or indifference from my employer and the station’s core listening audience. My dream of reconciling the world through radio was met with the reality of ingrained

political divisiveness. With this perspective and through the leading of the Holy Spirit, I brushed the dust off my feet and headed in another direction. I thought I had something to offer the world that the world wanted. I was wrong. Those five years were a gift from God, but they hurt me. I still think about the many ways I was wounded by the devouring spirit of Christians who weekly tore into me.

I remember the first few weeks I was on the air. I was insecure and new to radio as a medium. I was trying my best to honor God and honor my employer. Even so, I often struggled to know whether I was achieving my objectives. I would finish my two-hour show usually after all of my supervisors had gone home. Most of the offices were empty. My walk from the studio to my car in the parking garage was lonely. The hour commute home was even lonelier.

To make matters worse, my talk show had a very different focus from the extremely conservative political talk show host I replaced. They had fired my predecessor and were simulcasting a show from the Portland area until they decided to once again fill the Seattle host position. People waiting for the Seattle position to open up were expecting something more far right and politically partisan than what they got in me. Consequently, early on I received some very pointed negative emails and negative phone messages requesting my removal from the station. I could almost always spot a critical email by the formality of the greeting. Whenever individuals started their communication with “Dear Mr. Bursch” or “Dear Pastor Bursch,” what followed was almost never cordial. Polite greetings were the prerequisite for impolite comments about the integrity of my faith or the worthiness of my labor as a radio host and pastor.

One particularly negative interaction sticks with me. A woman with some sort of Irish or Scottish accent (excuse my limited linguistic expertise) called me anonymously on several occasions to complain about my hosting prowess. She would usually call after the show and

leave long messages about what was wrong with me as a host and as a person. She would critique my personality, “He thinks he’s funny, but he’s not.” She would critique my politics, “He has a lot to say about nothing.” She would critique my music, “...and that terrible blaring intro music.” However, her oddest critique was she would mention that she was getting together with other people to talk about what a bad job I was doing. She would say phrases such as, “A bunch of us have been talking to each other about this Doug Bursch fella. We’ve had about enough of it.” This was the part of her rebuke that captured my imagination. I began to imagine some sort of Irish and/or Scottish Christian entertainment mafia gathering together weekly to determine how to respond to this “Doug Bursch fella.” I realized I was not only ruining someone’s favorite show, but I was also profoundly impacting the gaiety of a Gaelic community. Her discipline to inform me regularly of her profound displeasure went beyond the outcomes I had imagined for my radio career. In fact, much of the meanness I received went beyond my expectations.

To be clear, my show was not an extremist expression. Or at least I didn’t believe it was extremist. I just decided to present a show that welcomed Christians who were Democrats or Republicans; to mention regularly that God is not a Republican or a Democrat. In fact, I often pointed out that God isn’t even an American. I tried to focus on our faults instead of the faults of others. I wanted to communicate in a way that made much of the plank in our own eyes, before we tried to remove the specks in the eyes of the world. I attempted to speak in a way that honored our president, even when he happened to be a Democrat and named Barack Obama. However, these radical notions of mine were met with extreme, personal rebukes; castigations that questioned my salvation, my integrity, my worth and just about any other area of my “radio personality” that could be insulted.

During my five years on Christian radio, some of the meanest, angriest, harshest words I've ever received came from Christians. These destructive words flowed from Christians who believed they had the right to dehumanize me because they perceived in me an errant political or religious conviction. Regardless of the accuracy or absurdity of their accusations, I met many an email with tears. Frankly, I naively thought Christians would treat me differently than they would treat an angry talk show host. I thought that if I just facilitated a better dialogue, people would be kinder and more loving. I know these words sound simplistic, but this was the delusional logic that motivated much of my thinking. However, the longer I ministered and communicated through the airwaves, the more I realized many people were not hungering for the ministry of reconciliation. In fact, many Christians will work against any attempt to foster a reconciling spirit. They are the ones gnashing their teeth as they read these words.

I understand that talking about radio might seem like an odd place to start when dealing with the internet age. Radio talk shows are a form of media the internet is quickly replacing. For some of you, the radio is that thing in your car that you sync your phone with to stream your favorite music or podcasts. I know I seldom listen to the radio. However, even though mediums change, human nature is a constant. Some of the worst aspects of human nature that I saw exaggerated while hosting a radio talk show, I see exponentially expressed on social media platforms. The angry, polarizing climate of talk radio has so pervasively infiltrated our culture, that some days it appears almost everyone is acting like an angry, partisan talk show host. However, in the internet age, our station of choice is social media.

**Chapter One Questions**

- What is your primary reason for reading this book?
- What aspects of social media communication do you find the most troubling?
- What has been the primary motivator for your online communication?
- How much has God influenced the way you communicate truth online?

## Chapter Two: Talk Show Society

I walked away from talk radio right before Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton faced off in their final year of campaigning for president. The partisan rancor I faced in those early years of talk radio appears to have grown exponentially. Our most recent elections and political events have demonstrated a level of contentiousness that appears unprecedented in the modern era. This political contentiousness has married itself with social media and the church in such a way that many people see political partisanship as indistinguishable from the gospel message. I honestly could not have predicted the bitterly divisive reality of our present age. The fiery partisan rhetoric I confronted in my early days of radio appears to be thriving as many Christians eagerly fan the flames. My desire to host a life-giving, unifying radio show seems like such an antiquated notion in light of the madness that surrounds us.

I used to joke that I was a great talk show host because “I have an opinion about anything, even if I know nothing about it.” That line would always get a laugh because it is rooted in the implied fundamental job description of every talk show host. A talk show host is hired to have an opinion about everything and to express that opinion in a way that grows and maintains an audience. No matter the news event or the limited expertise of the host, the host will speak about that event as if he or she has the right perspective. Talk shows do not thrive on the wisdom of their hosts, but rather on the confidence of their hosts and on the entertainment value and comfort those hosts bring their audiences. Talk shows do not need the truth to survive and thrive. Truth is mostly irrelevant to the equation. Talk shows do not need to build consensus or to find common ground among diverse people groups to achieve their objectives. Talk shows do not exist to heal societal divides. The ultimate goal of any talk show is for the host to build an audience around his or her personality and ideology.

Within this personality-centered, opinionated, audience driven environment, most talk shows build their audience by embracing ideological segmentation. In other words, talk show hosts are usually either very conservative or very progressive. The most successful talk shows thrive by fortifying and justifying, rather than challenging and expanding the worldviews of their audiences. Ultimately, these partisan, segmented talk show communities gather together like-minded people, to make like-minded observations to strengthen their shared entrenched convictions. Whether the host is telling the truth or dividing our nation is irrelevant to the objectives of the talk show format. As long as the audience is growing and the advertisers are satisfied, the hosts will continue to have opinions about everything, even if they know little or nothing about the topics they are addressing.

In the social media age, everyone becomes their own talk show host, their own political pundit, their own daily broadcaster of passionate, opinionated responses about every major event and every important person. We scour social media platforms to determine the latest enraging issue or, more aptly, the latest enraging issues that come flooding into our social media platforms. We post, tweet and share with our audiences of friends and followers our unique perspectives concerning the daily trending topics that have captured our online attention spans. We are bold and straightforward with our opinions:

“Every single one of them who kneels should be fired!”

“He is not my president!”

“Kanye has lost his mind!”

“Taylor Swift should stick to music and stay out of politics!”

“God is using our president to rescue America!”

“God has abandoned our political process!”

“The Bachelor season finale was lame!”

“The guy next to me in this theater has the world’s most annoying laugh!”

“I’m pro waffles!”

Not everything we post is controversial, inflammatory or even profound, but collectively our society is trending towards a talk show ethos. People have always had opinions, but those opinions used to be shared more within the confines of in-person relational abiding. In the past, if someone desired to share their opinions beyond their own personal acquaintances, they had to put forth at least somewhat of a concerted effort. They had to go find a townhall, church group, civic organization or local paper to hear their message. Even after finding this group, they had to convince the gatekeepers of the group to let them share their ideas with the larger community. This took a fair amount of effort and planning, as well as the negotiating of relational and community boundaries, standards and power dynamics. Sharing your thoughts with the world was not easy. Consequently, if people had opinions they wanted to share with the world, they made sure their opinions were worth sharing.

The internet has opened up our access to the world and to each other. There are many positive and powerful implications concerning this new access. Our communication is no longer based on where we live and who we know. We do not have to wait for the gatekeepers to let us speak. We do not need to be called on by the moderator, pastor, organizer or editor for us to share our message. If we are passionate about an issue, we can instantly communicate our message to the world. The democratization of communication has given tremendous power and opportunity to each of us. The oppressed, marginalized and previously unheard now have platforms to allow their voices to be heard. Our ability to share instantly our sincerely held conviction with the larger world is one of the great blessings of the social media age. However,

the immediacy, ease and relationally disconnected nature of social media communication has led to the devaluing of how we communicate with each other. Consequently, we are far more concerned with sharing opinions than forming relationships. If we do form relationships, they are formed in the manner of a talk show host; championing our opinions to rally people around our shared ideologies, dogmas and doctrines.

James warns us that “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1). In the internet age, everyone appears to have become a teacher; each of us communicating to our followers what they need to know. However, we frequently mistake strong opinions and large followings for wisdom, knowledge and expertise. James goes on to say that the “tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness” (James 3:6). He mentions “How great a forest is set ablaze...” by the untamed tongue (James 3:5). The internet has allowed for our untamed thoughts and inclinations to manifest themselves immediately through social media. An instant thought turns into an instant post, causing instant reactions. The flicker becomes consuming flame as the tool of our untamed tongue is extended through the tool of social media.

Disillusionment nicely represents the trajectory of my talk radio career. My illusion that I would discover a large, appreciative audience hungry for unifying content slowly dissolved into an awareness that my employer and most of the radio station’s listenership did not really value the core of what I loved. For the most part, they were satisfied with the far-right partisan direction of Christian radio. My desires to facilitate a reconciling, respectful dialogue that welcomed and valued Christians with different political convictions was tolerated by management, but never celebrated. Although some listeners valued my attempt to facilitate a better dialogue, many, if not most, saw me as an odd distraction to the normal fare they expected

to encounter on their Christian radio station. I went into Christian talk radio believing I was helping answer the problem of extreme political divisiveness. I left Christian talk radio disillusioned, realizing most people didn't really believe there was a problem.

I would like to say that my disillusionment decreased once I got outside of the day to day realities of hosting a Christian talk show on a conservative radio station. However, some days I feel as if I left talk radio and talk radio followed me home. I now live in a nation where politicians daily tweet whatever inflammatory thoughts come to their minds without care for how their words might divide our nation. At any moment of the day, I can peruse Facebook or Twitter and find Christians devouring each other in the name of Christ. I can read posts from pastors mocking atheists, conservative Christians mocking progressive Christians, progressive Christians mocking conservative Christians and plenty of posts by that one angry Christian simply mocking everybody who offends him. Sometimes social media feels like an endless cacophony of righteous voices looking for a fight. In other words, one endless angry talk show. How did we get here? How did we become such angry, polarizing people?

### **Dream big, fail big**

I often tell people that my motto is "Dream big, fail big!" It is not my motto, because I do not have a motto. I am not an inspirational poster. However, I like the sentiment and the laughter my faux motto evokes. Why fail at something sensible, when we can fail at a ridiculous dream. Why fall short of a possible goal, when we can fall short of achieving the unachievable. What I am attempting to express with these ridiculous statements is I want my life always to be open to the miraculous. I do not want to limit God's work to my limited perspective and expectations. I would rather fail at making room for the miraculous plans of God than succeed at making room

for nothing. In other words, I want to live in a way that changes the world, even if I never see that change take place in my lifetime. I want Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego faith.

In reading the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, I am struck by realizing they did not know the outcome of their story while they were experiencing the events. The story is rather familiar. This trio of Yahweh worshipers refused to bow down and worship a golden image of King Nebuchadnezzar. The punishment for their crime was they were to be thrown into a fiery furnace. Before their punishment was inflicted, they were brought before an enraged Nebuchadnezzar to hear his judgment and to give a defense of their rebellious behavior. Their response to Nebuchadnezzar has been a motivating Scripture in my life:

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.” (Dan. 3:16-18)

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego’s response was clear in both its certainty and uncertainty: “...our God...will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not...we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.” They said, God will rescue us, but even if he does not rescue us, we will not bow down. This is what faith must look like when we have no idea what will actually happen at the end of the story. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had a faith that moved forward regardless of the final results. The ending was secondary to their faith in God. They chose to surrender their lives into the hands of God and decided that a surrendered life was far greater than a life bowing down to the idols of their age. For them, death in the fiery furnace was a far better fate than becoming ensnared by the golden statue. Consequently, they rejected the god of their age and invested their lives into the hands of their

one true God and Savior. Whether or not they were to be rescued, they simply refused to bow down.

We live in a divisive, devouring age. The world seems to be full of angry, polarizing people. Even worse, we have a culture that rewards contentious behavior and rhetoric. The internet increases and normalizes the polarizing divides that exist within our culture. Sadly, many Christians are embracing incredibly toxic forms of online communication. We are boldly championing our opinions and arguing our platforms at the cost of love. We bow down at the altar of angry divisive partisan rhetoric without considering the mandate of the cross to participate in the ministry of reconciliation. We worship our ideas, ideologies and theologies instead of facilitate environments that make room for the worship of our one true Savior. We have lost our way. I am tired of bowing down. I am tired of letting the world set the agenda for how Christians communicate online. I believe Christians are called to be light and life through social media. I believe we can radically change online communication if we take seriously our mandate to participate in the ministry of reconciliation. In the following chapters I strongly advocate for a better way of abiding online, as we examine the ways social media radically influences how we communicate truth and view each other. I will not rest in this place of disillusionment. Instead, I will work for a better future. I believe that God can rescue the way we communicate. However, even if God does not rescue us, I will not bow down. Come and join me.

**Chapter Two Questions**

-Think about an online conflict you have experienced. What happened? How was the conflict handled? What could you have done differently?

-How have you increased or decreased social media polarization?

-What does Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego faith look like for you online?

### Chapter Three: Disconnected Foundations

The internet is a relatively new technology that is already thoroughly changing us. We have all had those foreshadowing moments when we realized something is happening to us and it might not be good. A couple decades ago, I was doing some rather non-essential shopping in Seattle's International District in a small Japanese drugstore, when I ran into a family friend. He was just out of college and eager to talk with me about his new computer technology job and to introduce me to his steady girlfriend. The conversation was pleasant and intellectually stimulating as he talked about how the company he was working for was going to revolutionize how people form community online. I do not remember what company he was talking about and honestly if you live in the Seattle area for some time, you are used to not remembering what new technology company someone might be talking about.

Anyway, the conversation lengthened enough that his girlfriend decided to wander off and to continue shopping. There was a long line at the register, so we stayed in line and continued to talk. Eventually, after having a great conversation about life and the tremendous potential of his current career path, we said our goodbyes about one customer before he reached the register. Then he did something that is lodged in my very weak memory. He referenced that he needed to find his girlfriend before he reached the cashier counter, in case she had anything else she wanted purchased. Then, he immediately looked down on his phone and began to text her. I looked up and scanned the small store to find his girlfriend standing about 20 feet away from him. I pointed a little to the left and behind him and said, "There she is." He looked up and said, "Thanks." We went our separate ways. My wife was with me that day and I immediately began to talk with her in the car about the irony of the encounter:

We spent almost our entire time talking about how his internet company was going to connect people and he couldn't even find his girlfriend without his phone! She was just

right behind him. All he had to do was look to the left, but he immediately went to his phone.

I am sure as I indulged in my lamenting soliloquy with my wife on the ride home, I felt a certain form of superiority, as if I would never succumb to such illogical dependency upon technology. At the time, I possessed confidence in my ability never to be ensnared by smartphone dependence. I might have even defended my righteous perspective by making note of another technological absurdity I encountered in my early days of online communication.

### **Disconnected technology pioneers**

In 1994 I graduated from the University of Washington with a B.A. in History. At the time, there were not a lot of history job openings but I did get the opportunity of a lifetime to work in an internet startup company that was sure to make me millions. This is not hyperbole; I was hired during the time that market investors believed almost every new online company was sure to make them rich. Consequently, almost every technology company that went public immediately ended up with an inflated stock price and some very wealthy employees.

I was the third employee in the Seattle offices of a company that would eventually be known as Real Networks. I was the research assistant for the founder of Real Networks, Rob Glaser. Rob was a former vice-president at Microsoft who had made millions through his stock options. I met him while we were both taking a history class at the University of Washington. In that class, he liked the way I argued politics and ideas, so he offered me a job in “this new company” he was starting. I really had no idea who he was until I did an internet search. The job was an opportunity of a lifetime. Rob told me he was trying to form a company that would connect people to bring about social change. I also knew that he was launching a business that would make me rich. However, the company eventually morphed from its mission to bring about

social change to simply becoming a tech company. When this change occurred, God called me to leave Real Networks and become a pastor. I knew at the time I was giving up the chance to make millions, but I also knew I was not going to live my life simply to make money. That's a story for another book.

During my time at Real Networks I saw a glimpse of the future of online communication. As the company was just being formed, our Seattle headquarters consisted of a few offices on the top floor of an old building across the street from the now demolished Seattle Kingdome stadium. Rob's office was down the hall and I shared a room with his office manager. I think there might have been another room for meetings, but I do not think we ever went in there.

Rob is the kind of guy who talks so fast he would speak binary code if it were possible. He was traveling various places throughout the United States organizing the company. He really did not have the time to handle me as his research assistant with a history degree. Consequently, he would basically give me an assignment, leave for a few days and come back to see if I had done something with his instructions. However, because Rob talked so fast and was seldom available, combined with the fact that I knew very little about the field I was researching, I often felt overwhelmed and confused with the assignments he gave me. I struggled determining if I was doing well at my job because I frequently did not understand the job I was doing.

To add to this confusion, communication was often convoluted. I had not come from a technological background, so I was a little bit surprised when my attempts to have face to face or verbal connection were thwarted with, "Just shoot me an email." I understood the principle of "just shoot me an email" but it seemed rather absurd in its implementation.

Early on, I would walk down the hall to his office and ask Rob a simple question such as, "Are we going to lunch?" and Rob would respond with, "Shoot me an email." In response to his

request, I would walk 50 feet back to my office, sit down in my chair, turn on my computer, open my email, type in Rob's address, enter "lunch" into the subject headline, write "Are we going to lunch?" in the body of the email, press send and wait for a reply. About two minutes later I would receive a "Yes" with possibly a time and location. Knowing I could just yell "Great!" and he would hear me down the hall, I would instead, reply "Great," hit send and look forward to our upcoming lunch. I assume at lunch, Rob and I talked about connecting people for social change. Eventually, I stopped heading down the hall and went straight for the computer.

This kind of detached, technological communication was common. I distinctly remember thinking this way of communicating was a bad sign for the future of humanity, particularly because these individuals forming the internet platforms of our future seemed to view detached connection as perfectly normal. Both moments are imbedded in my memory: my busy boss, too hurried to answer a question verbally in person, needing the intermediary of email as a buffer to give his replies and a casual acquaintance searching for his lost girlfriend through text messaging, without ever looking up to simply see her standing just a few feet away. These were signs of things to come. Not only were these events a sign, but my responses were a sign as well.

I was self-righteous and simplistic in how I processed those moments. I thought I was above being influenced by technology in the same manner as those I judged. I thought my phone, my computer, even the online world could not really change how I connected with others. I was wrong. I did not understand the power of the internet until the internet overpowered me.

I know my words might seem like hyperbole to suggest that I have been overpowered by the internet, but I believe this is an honest appraisal. The more I've researched the power of online communication, the more I've come to realize the internet has radically transformed me. Social media has profoundly changed the way I abide with humans. I believe our sense of reality

has also been radically altered by online communication. Even if we believe we have opted out of the main trappings of the internet age, I know many of our friends, family, children, coworkers and neighbors have not opted out. I know that much of our work and leisure life has been irrevocably influenced by our online culture. We might not have kept up with every social media trend, but the trends have changed our environment and changed how we connect with just about every human being on this planet. This is only the beginning of the substantial change that is coming. The internet is essentially transforming all of us. Consequently, we must become aware of how the online age is influencing how we abide with each other and with God. To gain a greater awareness of social media's profound societal influence, we must examine social media's transformative power. Therefore, we will now look at how the social media world we have formed is actually forming us.

**Chapter Three Questions:**

- What are some of your earliest positive or negative social media memories?
- When did you first realize social media was having a negative influence on your life?
- What is your greatest fear about your continued use of social media?

## Chapter Four: Internet-Formed Humans

Social media is a technology that is dramatically changing how we exist with God and with each other. To understand social media's pervasive nature, we need to examine how all forms of media influence society. Technology and media theorist Marshall McLuhan has significantly influenced my thinking concerning the nature of technology and media. Although McLuhan wrote before the social media age, his media insights are profoundly relevant. McLuhan views all technology as an extension of the human body, a way for humans to move beyond their limited mental or bodily capabilities. For example, he writes that the wheel is "an extension of the foot," the book is "an extension of the eye" and clothes are "an extension of the skin."<sup>1</sup> McLuhan believes that technological innovations extend our natural capacities beyond their natural limitations.

McLuhan believes that all media is technology that extends us beyond our natural abilities. He writes that "All media are extensions of some faculty—psychic or physical."<sup>2</sup> Books, newspapers, magazines, radios, televisions, and every other form of media innovation are ultimately ways humans extend their voice and identity. Technology writer Nicholas Carr expresses similar sentiments: "Every technology is an expression of human will. Through our tools, we seek to expand our power and control over our circumstances—over nature, over time and distance, over one another."<sup>3</sup>

Although Marshall McLuhan wrote before the onset of social media, his observations concerning media have a prophetic poignancy in our age. McLuhan argued that new media forms always do more than just extend or amplify messages. Every new medium, changes the messengers and their messages. The printing press did not just allow for us to communicate the same ideas to more people. Instead, books changed what we communicate and how we

communicate. They changed our understanding of authority, truth and argumentation. Books changed how we order our thoughts and present our conceptions of existence. Television changed what and how we communicate based on the unique visual and auditory realities of the medium. Television limited our attention spans, weakened our reading capacity and shifted our focus to visual stimulation above an auditory focus. Every new and different medium shapes us.

As new mediums develop, new messages and new ways of existing form around those mediums. Every new medium changes the way we communicate ideas, the way we process truth and the way we fundamentally dwell together. This is especially true of the internet and our social media age. Our minds, attention spans, thought processes and feelings formed by the media we use and embrace. McLuhan thought media's influence was so prominent and unavoidable that he confidently proclaimed, "The medium is the message."<sup>4</sup>

Social media is more than just a medium for communication. The internet is doing more than magnifying or amplifying human expression. The medium of social media fundamentally changes what we say, when we say it, where we say it, why we say it and how we say it. More importantly, social media modifies who we are and what we are becoming. Social media is not just a messaging platform, but rather a platform that is fundamentally changing our messages, even revising our foundational understandings of moral decency, truth and humanity.

Unfortunately, many of us are unaware of the full extent of social media's transformative reality. Author Shane Hipps writes, "We miss the power of the Internet to alter the very meaning of truth in our culture."<sup>5</sup> In other words, we don't realize that the medium reshapes our way of being. Social media is far more than just a form of communication; it is actually forming us.

Social media is a tool or form that influences our messaging. Sadly, many Christians spend far too little time examining how the forms we use affect the way we exist in the world.

McLuhan observes that humans frequently do not consider how forms influence us, regardless of our awareness:

You can be conscious about it if you like, but a tree, grass, stones, the world of forms in which we live impresses us steadily and constantly without intermission, without benefit of words or thoughts. They are total in their action upon us. It doesn't matter what theory we may have about them: their effect upon us is quite independent of any thought we have about them.<sup>6</sup>

Similar to natural forms, pervasive technological forms influence us, regardless of our awareness. McLuhan points out that new forms do not derive their meaning from what we think about them, but from the actions those forms have on individuals: "It is a form: it acts upon you. It invades your senses. It re-structures your outlook... So our attitudes, our sensibilities, are completely altered by new forms, regardless of what we think about them."<sup>7</sup> The internet is producing social media forms that are restructuring our fundamental attitudes and worldviews. Social media influences the content and delivery of our messages beyond our own awareness. Internet technology creates new unique modes of discourse, expression and connection that we do not yet fundamentally understand.

The internet is reshaping humanity. However, technology is moving at such a rapid pace we have not been able to fully recognize the impacts of this new technology on our relationships. Technology theorist Kevin Kelly expresses the dilemma well: "We are morphing so fast that our ability to invent new things outpaces the rate we can civilize them. These days it takes us a decade after a technology appears to develop a social consensus on what it means and what etiquette we need to tame it."<sup>8</sup> Of course, when we finally have discussions about etiquette and civility, our perceptions have already been radically altered by the technology we are trying to reform. The medium even transforms the way we seek a cure to the medium's weaknesses.

Writing before the social media age, author Neil Postman pointed out that every major medium changes our discourse, including the way we understand and communicate truth:

My argument is limited to saying that a major new medium changes the structure of discourse; it does so by encouraging certain uses of the intellect, by favoring certain definitions of intelligence and wisdom, and by demanding a certain kind of content—in a phrase, by creating new forms of truth-telling.<sup>9</sup>

Although Postman was writing about the impact of television, his observations are true of internet communication. Social media clearly transforms the structure of our discourse and influences which aspects of our humanity we utilize and engage. The internet impacts the way we speak truth to one another and navigate conflicts. Our social media age is influencing us at a pace that is faster than our capability to process clearly the negative and detrimental impacts.

Our ability to gain perspective is severely hampered because we are fully enmeshed in the internet age. We are not outside observers, measuring the pros and cons of participation. Instead, we are expressions of a society that is being transformed by social media. Even if you do not have your own personal social media account, your identity, along with every person's identity, is being shaped by the way social media changes human communication. The interactive forms our society adopts transform the fundamental ways humans treat each other. Although not everyone uses social media, the societal consequences of social media affect every person. What becomes normalized online becomes normalized in our day-to-day living. What becomes standardized in our social media practices becomes standardized in our marriages, families and friendships. What we do online and how we do it online has consequences that go far beyond the online world.

I realize that my generation is similar to those who existed before the automobile or before electricity or maybe even before the invention of the wheel. I still have a memory of life without the internet; life without immediate access to unlimited information, instant opinions and

countless social networks. I was born in the pre-online, pre-social media, pre-posting, pre-tweeting, pre-sharing, pre-friending, pre-following, pre-tagging, pre-blocking, pre-muting, pre-trolling, pre-remotely caring about Wi-Fi speed age. I stumbled into the internet age like the rest of my generation. I did not pre-plan the influence this technology would have on my soul or the soul of my nation. I just started to go online and to follow the habits of those around me. As life progressed, the connection speeds increased, the social networks expanded and the amount of time I spent online grew exponentially. The internet moved from being a strange oddity, to a clever tool, to a daily necessity. I was not an early adopter, but I definitely went from being a horse and buggy communicator to becoming a daily tweeting, frequently Facebooking, occasionally Snapchatting, sometimes Instagramming, weekly blog updating, yearly LinkedIn maintaining, hardly ever Pinteresting social media junky.

Social media has changed the way I exist in the world. There was a time when I did not have the opportunity to share instantly every thought I had and every word I wrote with every person I knew. I also did not have the opportunity to have every thought I had and every word I wrote to be viewed instantly by and commented on by thousands of strangers. Instead, I had to simply think thoughts and write words without sharing them with anyone but my closest friends and family members. To make matters even more complicated, I had to wait for my life to intersect with my friends and family members for me to share my thoughts with them or I had to call them and share my messages with each of them separately. Instead of just posting one message that everyone could see, I had to share my message over and over again, to each person, in the context of our relationships, in the context of the right time and right place.

Communication took so much effort before the internet that I did not even share most of the thoughts that I share today, with most of the people that I share them with today. Instead, I

shared fewer thoughts, with fewer people. Instead of tweeting, many of my thoughts just came to my mind and went away, never to be shared with anyone but me. In short, there was far less broadcasting of my thoughts and feelings.

However, the pre-internet age is a distant memory. I am no longer limited in my ability to quickly communicate every thought and every word with an instant audience of family, friends and strangers. I have constant access to an always-on platform that connects me to an endless array of people. I do not have to wait for time and relational circumstances to communicate my heart. Instead, I can share whatever words I want, whenever I want to share them, at any time of the day. Just as the automobile expanded the territory humans could traverse, my thoughts can travel further and quicker than ever before. The internet has extended my voice beyond anything my pre-internet self could have truly imagined. Even so, this extension comes with a cost.

One of McLuhan's most important ideas concerning technology and media is his conviction that every tool or technology ultimately numbs the part of the body it extends.<sup>10</sup> Carr summarizes the numbing dilemma of technology this way, "The tools of the mind amplify and in turn numb the most intimate, the most human, of our natural capacities—those for reason, perception, memory, emotion."<sup>11</sup> For example, Carr points out that map technology had a numbing effect in the area it extended: "Our ancestors' navigational skills were amplified enormously by the cartographer's art...But their native ability to comprehend a landscape, to create a richly detailed mental map of their surroundings, weakened."<sup>12</sup> The more individuals relied on map makers, the less they maintained the ability to map out the world on their own.

Similarly, the internet has allowed us instantly to connect and communicate. This immediate access to connection and communication has numbed us to the work of forming and maintaining meaningful relationships. The internet's easy access dulls our ability to know when

to speak and when to remain silent. The convenience of social media communication has weakened our ability to process conflict and engage in the difficult work of reconciliation. We are so rich in shallow relational opportunities that we have become poor in developing and strengthening deep, long-term, personal relationships. Our disembodied connectivity has left us less capable of embodying the gospel. Our seemingly endless social network possibilities have made us numb to the importance of valuing every relationship, every interaction and every person we meet online. Our unlimited access to countless people has made us numb to the gospel mandate to engage in the ministry of reconciliation with every person we meet. Access to the world has numbed our sensitivity and turned many into angry, polarizing people.

Everyone is not angry online, but many appear to be more numb to the importance of human connection; to the need to contend for meaningful, loving, caring, reconciling relationships. Even though we recognize online polarization is tearing our world apart, we often approach this development with a fair amount of indifference or apathy. Although the internet is a recent development in human history, we are already accepting the most negative outcomes of social media communication as inevitable.

I once thought I would not succumb to the dehumanizing, distancing trends of online communication. As a young man, I thought I would avoid the smartphone and computer dependency I saw in early technology adopters. Now, as I examine my online integrated life, I realize I have not stood above the technological fray. I might not be frequently angry and polarizing in my online communication, but my connection with others has been numbed by the connectivity of the internet. Although I communicate with more people than ever before, I often feel a profound level of emotional distance and disconnect within my online social networks. I have many avenues for my ideas to be expressed and many opportunities to hear ideas from

diverse people groups, yet in this vast arena of communication opportunities, I often feel lost and alone. There are days when I feel that online I am known by many people, but understood by very few. Honestly, there are days when I realize I have so many social media connections that I cannot really give enough energy to truly connect with anyone. Some days I do not want connection; I just want to share my thoughts and to disappear from the online cacophony. The internet has made detached, careless communication easier for me.

The internet is changing us, numbing us, forming us into different people. However, if we can become aware of what is happening, if we can intentionally examine the unique challenges of this new technology, we might be able to become less numb and more caring, less angry and more kind, less polarizing and more filled with Christ's reconciling love. In the following chapters we will look at specific ways the internet is transforming us. To begin with, we will look at America's favorite pastime, detached individualism.

#### **Chapter Four Questions**

- What does the phrase "The medium is the message" mean when referring to social media?
- How does social media affect the way you communicate with people? How would your communication be different if social media did not exist?
- What is God saying to you about the way you use social media to connect with other people?

## Chapter Five: Detached Individualism

I would like you to take a moment and to think about all the people you know. Think about your family, your friends, your neighbors, your work acquaintances and any other people you see on a regular basis or even once or twice a year. Think about that female clerk with the low gravelly voice who seems to welcome every person who enters your favorite grocery store. Think about that elderly man you see every week, walking slowly into town, who always waves at the passing cars. Think about that crossing guard who enjoys slowing traffic and allowing the children to meander across the street at their own pace. Remember that homeless man you frequently see caring for his dog. Of course there are those two kids who play in the ditch near your house and that guy with a yo-yo who you spot at almost every community event or parade and then there is that big table of senior citizens that gather regularly at Starbucks to talk about taxes and the government and to give each other a bad time about something dumb someone just said.

Think about all the people that pass through your life on a regular basis. More than this, think about all the people you have the potential of meeting in the coming year, the rooms you might enter, the places you might go, the communities you might visit and the relationships you might form. Take some time to think about the relational reality of your existence. Go ahead, take some time. I'll wait...

Once you have taken the necessary time to ponder these relationships, I want you to selfishly imagine that all these relationships only exist to serve you. I want you to see every person in your life as someone who exists purely to meet your individualistic needs. More than this, I want you to imagine that every person you just thought of only exists so that you can use

them. These people or these networks of people are only in your life to be used by you, to meet your needs and to answer your problems.

I know some of you are getting uncomfortable with what I am asking you to imagine. However, I want you to continue to follow this little experiment in imagination. I want you to see yourself communicating to every person you just thought of, but without looking anyone in the eye. Imagine never looking any of these people in the eyes again, never hearing their voices or seeing their faces when you speak. Imagine communicating to them without truly acknowledging them. Imagine sharing your ideas, opinions, wants and perspectives with these people without noticing the impact you are having on their being as you speak. Remember, you are now only communicating for the purpose of having everyone meet your needs. Everyone exists to serve you. Instead of watching how your words affect others, you are only examining if their responses bless you.

Now that you see everyone in your life as a resource to be used for your individualistic needs, I want you to imagine accepting or rejecting each person you know, purely based on whether they meet your needs. I want you to see yourself abandoning every relationship that does not serve your individual purposes, wants, desires and aspirations. Imagine all the relationships you have as disposable, as completely dependent upon whether the person you encounter is willing to immediately give you what you want to be satisfied. Can you imagine that? Can you see a world where you only accept and abide with people who meet your needs and serve your purposes? What I am asking you to imagine is how many of us use the internet.

Self-focused, detached individuality will produce angry, divisive communities. One of the primary reasons online communication is becoming increasingly toxic is many internet activities are rooted in relationally detached, individualistic pursuits. For a growing number of

us, the online world has become a place to primarily get our personal needs met without truly engaging the humanity of those we encounter. Our encounters are driven by self-oriented pursuits and hampered by the fundamental dehumanizing nature of online communication. To understand why social media platforms are producing so much conflict, we need to examine two very important concepts: networked individualism and discarnate communication.

### **Networked individualism**

Social media is eliminating many of the practical motivators that used to help people resolve conflicts or maintain long-term relationships with differing individuals and communities. As stated previously, before the internet gave us the ability to connect with multiple social networks and countless individuals, we had to work harder to develop, maintain and foster our relationships. Before the online world existed, most individuals gained their knowledge and relationships from their immediate family, close friends and local communities. The internet radically changed this close community reality. A Pew report on “The Strength of Internet Ties” observes that “The traditional human orientation to neighborhood- and village-based groups is moving towards communities that are oriented around geographically dispersed social networks.”<sup>13</sup> In this new reality, as internet users we do not rely on a fixed, local, highly relational community to meet our needs. Instead, we meet our needs with a form of “networked individualism” where we seek out the right individuals with the appropriate resources for each of our unique situations.<sup>14</sup>

Social media has increased our ability to use individuals and communities for our own individualistic needs. Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman’s *Networked: The New Social Operating System* presents the concept of networked individualism as a positive development in human

history. They trace the American progression of identity as moving from a group focus to an individual focus; a self-centered orientation where "...it is the person who is the focus: not the family, not the work unit, not the neighborhood, and not the social group."<sup>15</sup> Rainie and Wellman argue that as we gain greater personal autonomy and mobility, our ability to interact with many more networks of individuals increases. For instance, the automobile allowed humans to live, work and play in different places, giving us the ability to form multiple relationships with different people at different times of the day and different days of the week. Having more relationship possibilities decentralized the importance of previously traditional relationship groups such as our family, local church and neighbors.

With the advent of the internet and social media, we now have many more social network opportunities that can benefit our individual relational needs or networked individualism. Although Rainie and Wellman see the development of networked individualism as a positive way for people to get their needs met and questions answered, I believe they do not fully grasp the fundamental problem of using the internet primarily for individualistic pursuits. Networked individualism creates an online landscape where human interactions become transactional, rather than opportunities to form, maintain and preserve meaningful relationships.

Networked individualism creates an environment where people use each other primarily for self-fulfillment. People are viewed as a resource to utilize or as a means to solve a problem, answer a question or fulfill a desire. If an individual doesn't meet your need or answer your question sufficiently, you simply move on to someone else who can satisfy your desire. Networked individualism fosters a world where people are loosely connected with many networks of individuals, yet deeply connected with fewer and fewer people.

Rainie and Wellman refer to this lack of deep connections as “weak ties” versus “strong ties.”<sup>16</sup> The weak ties created by networked individualism have a negative impact on conflict resolution. Many individuals lack deep connections or the ability to form deep relational connections because they no longer have to maintain strong ties to function well in our online society. We simply search the internet for new people and new networks to meet our needs.

Before humans had tremendous transportation mobility and almost unlimited access to numerous social networks, we were more likely to learn how to abide with our families, neighbors, churches and local communities. We learned to relate with these communities because we had no other networks to replace them. There were no other online options or online individuals to take the place of existing relationships. In other words, in the past we learned how to get along with people because there was no one else to get along with if our existing relationships failed. We dealt with polarizing behaviors constructively to ensure community cohesiveness, primarily because the ability to form new relationships was limited. If we got angry with our neighbors, we had to learn how to reconcile. Otherwise, we would find ourselves alone.

In our modern era, we are not as motivated to learn how to reconcile with individuals and communities as were our forbearers. This lack of effort occurs primarily because we have many other community opportunities to replace the ones we have abandoned. The many weak ties of networked individualism encourage us not to reconcile. We are not reconciling or pursuing reconciliation because we have many other relational options. Instead of trying to lessen or mediate social media conflicts, we simply abandon conflict-ridden relationships and move on to other people and other relational networks. Consequently, we neglect the ministry of reconciliation and our polarizing, angry behavior continues unabated.

The internet has produced a relational connectivity that is frequently void of intimacy and relational accountability. Author Quentin Schultze observes that “geographic proximity” encourages groups with differing ideologies and perspectives to work together based on their need to live peaceably in community. In contrast, internet-formed communities usually unite based on shared interests or ideologies.<sup>17</sup> Social media allows individuals to connect with people throughout the world without forming strong bonds or having meaningful expectations of those relationships. When a conflict occurs, the individuals can easily move on to other online relationships without suffering real-world consequences.

Author Shane Hipps states that this lack of personal involvement is the allure of the internet; online communication “...provides just enough connection to keep us from pursuing real intimacy. In a virtual community, our contacts involve little real risk and demand even less of us personally.”<sup>18</sup> Schultze adds that internet communication “...tends to identify us as tourists roving across geographic space rather than as neighborly inhabitants of a particular place...cyber-technology makes it easier for us to move quickly from place to place without knowing the natives.”<sup>19</sup> Schultze points out the internet has almost destroyed the concept of the neighborhood because “Neighborliness obligates us to know whom we are talking with, whereas cyberspace accepts anonymity, voyeurism, and superficiality.”<sup>20</sup> The absence of the need to be neighborly or to maintain permanent, lasting relationships on the internet works against the process of conflict resolution.

Although networked individualism allows us to have our momentary needs met, this self-focused pursuit doesn't help us build long-term, meaningful relationships that withstand conflicts and disagreements. Networked individualism is rooted in interacting with people for the purpose of having our needs met. As soon as people do not meet our needs, we can move onto other

people. Since there are many people available to meet our needs, we are becoming more reluctant to walk through conflicts when they arise. This lack of intentional bonding seems to be the cause behind much of the divisiveness and polarization in our social media communication. We are simply less likely to reconcile with people we are less bonded with or less likely to need in the future. With the greater connectivity of the internet, many of our online relationships seem expendable. Therefore, we are not inclined to give the energy needed to rectify conflicts, to handle disagreements or to foster diverse thoughts and opinions.

Instead of facilitating unity, social media has increased polarizing communication, divisive behaviors and individualistic pursuits. Even when we have healthy online relationships, many of us feel profoundly disconnected, as if we are networked with many people, but not truly connected with anyone. Author and social scientist Sherry Turkle spoke of this reality in *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Turkle points out that the internet has become a place where people frequently use each other for momentary validation, agreement or entertainment without forming meaningful relationships: “Networked, we are together, but so lessened are our expectations of each other that we can feel utterly alone. And there is the risk that we come to see others as objects to be accessed—and only for the parts we find useful, comforting, or amusing.”<sup>21</sup>

Sadly, networked individualism creates a climate where polarizing, divisive, angry behavior is allowed to flourish. Online community is so individually centered and individually focused that many of us are unwilling to do the work necessary to deal with genuine relational conflicts. Consequently, unresolved, nasty interactions are the norm in many online communities.

Social media has made many relationships disposable. Networked individualism encourages social media users to view other people as resources to be exploited. This dehumanizes and cheapens online human interactions. Instead of valuing or loving people, we use them. Instead of forming meaningful, lasting relationships, we interact with people for as long as they meet our relational, emotional or informational needs. When someone doesn't satisfy our desires, we simply search for someone else among the seemingly endless array of online relational possibilities. However, in the process we stop forming strong bonds with anyone. This detached, networked individualism has been exaggerated by another detrimental byproduct of the internet: the social media world encourages discarnate communication. We will now turn our attention to examining the destructive phenomenon of discarnate communication in light of our incarnate savior.

**Chapter Five Questions:**

- What is networked individualism?
- What are ways you practice networked individualism in your online communication?
- What are “weak ties” and “strong ties” relationships?
- How is social media helping or hindering you in developing healthy “strong ties” relationships?

## Chapter Six: Discarnate Communication

The Bible says that “In the beginning was the Word [Jesus], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1, 14). Jesus is God incarnate, the Word becoming flesh. We, as believers, through the working of the Holy Spirit are called to embody or incarnate the will of God. Through our presence, others should experience the presence, character and nature of God. Ultimately, we were created in the image of God, to image God in our relationships. We image God, through being present, through revealing “Immanuel...God with us” (Matt. 1:23). The internet separates us from incarnational imaging and connections, from clearly showing love in physical, tangible and knowable ways.

Technology increasingly allows humans to communicate with each other without abiding in the same room. This reality creates what Marshall McLuhan refers to as a “dis-carnate” existence:

Electric man is a “super angel.” When you are on the telephone you have no body. And, while your voice is there, you and the people you speak to are here, at the same time. Electric man has no bodily being. He is literally *dis-carnate*. But a discarnate world, like the one we now live in, is a tremendous menace to an incarnate Church, and its theologians haven’t even deemed it worthwhile to examine the fact.<sup>22</sup>

A discarnate world works against the purposes of an incarnate God. A discarnate idea has no physical body to carry it; the idea is incorporeal, disembodied. When a people are discarnate, they are not truly present with each other.

When we are in discarnate relationships, we process the world differently from when we abide with people together, in the flesh. In-person communication includes various verbal, facial and environmental cues that are lost in online communication. Online interaction gives preference to written and visual forms of communication that are frequently not conducive to

fostering empathy, emotional connection and conflict resolution. Social media fosters argumentative, left-brain, detached, written, depersonalized, non-empathetic discarnate communication.

### **Discarnate, left-brain argumentative communication**

Social media has the promise of being a multisensory platform that engages the mind's visual and auditory processing pathways through pictures, videos and texts. However, when arguments break out, social media devolves into a text-dependent platform. Although people may post mentally stimulating and provocative pictures and videos, the relational processing of those images is usually navigated through written communication. Written communication is more conducive to left-brain processing. When confronting conflict, this over reliance on left-brain processing often leads to divisiveness and detachment within social media's discarnate environment.

Author Daniel Pink points out that although our brains are complex organs that process information between both hemispheres, generally speaking, “The left hemisphere is sequential, logical, and analytical. The right hemisphere is nonlinear, intuitive, and holistic.”<sup>23</sup> The left hemisphere of our brains focuses on text, while the right side of our brains focuses on context.<sup>24</sup> Pink concisely describes the brain's processing this way: “To oversimplify just a bit, the left hemisphere handles what is said; the right hemisphere focuses on how it's said — the nonverbal, often emotional cues delivered through gaze, facial expression, and intonation.”<sup>25</sup> Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter lack mechanisms for individuals to determine emotional cues, facial expressions or intonations when discussing, debating or arguing sensitive issues. Our inability to

pick up on these subtle cues makes dealing with conflict or avoiding conflict problematic as our right brain "...takes care of synthesis, emotional expression, context, and the big picture."<sup>26</sup>

To make matters worse, social media is an environment full of visually stimulating, provocative pictures and videos that evoke in us immediate right-brain emotional responses. However, when we try to deal with the emotional response these visual images evoke, we use left-brain, written argumentation solutions. These left-brain solutions cut us off from our right-brain, big picture thinking. Big picture thinking remains crucial when dealing with complex relational struggles. Unfortunately, the discarnate reality of the online world is not conducive to big picture, problem solving, right-brain processing.

We have all run into the struggle of having our words or the intent of our words misunderstood online. I have often lamented that I wish there were fonts that could express my attitude or the intent behind my communication. If the technology were available, I would gladly use an "I'm not angry" font or a "This is a sincere reply" font or an "I'm honestly trying not to fight with you" font or an "I don't know why you are so angry at me right now, but I am not angry with you and I honestly am trying my best to find a way to communicate in a way that doesn't make things worse" font. However, that technology does not seem to be available and a smiley emoji is not a sufficient substitute for in-person, in the flesh communication.

### **Discarnate, detached written communication**

Along with limiting our ability to engage in the right-brain, big-picture processing of conflict, social media limits our handling of conflict to writing-centered solutions. Humans connect differently through written versus oral communication. In studying the differences between written and oral communication, Linguist Walter Jackson Ong notes a profound

difference: “Oral communication unites people in groups. Writing and reading are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, written communication creates more relational distance, separation and isolation than oral communication. Ong observes, “Spoken words are always modifications of a total situation which is more than verbal. They never occur alone, in a context simply of words.”<sup>28</sup> This extra context is not true of written language, whether in a book or in our social media posts because, as Ong notes, “...words are alone in a text. Moreover, in composing a text, in ‘writing’ something, the one producing the written utterance is also alone.”<sup>29</sup>

Our written communication isolates us from our own words and distances our communication from our communities. When we have a conflict with someone online, the conflict is never truly incarnational or never truly abiding in the present. Instead, our statements are written down and separated from ourselves and the present moment. Our statements are disembodied and exchanged back and forth, written and read with the hope of reaching ideological agreement or at least ideological acceptance. Through online communication, the written word becomes discarnate and detached from our present selves.

Written online communication is very different from the incarnational, reconciling work of Christ. Ong notes that in the Bible “The very Person of the Son is constituted as the Word of the Father.”<sup>30</sup> However, Christ is the living Word, not isolated from the Father, but fully expressing the will and presence of the Father through the Holy Spirit. Sadly, social media communication separates our words from ourselves, creating distance and disconnect, rather than incarnational connection.

### **Discarnate, depersonalized communication**

Although social media platforms hold out the promise of bringing people closer together, these discarnate environments often create profound distance, disconnect and depersonalized relationships. Social media communication is driven by self-satisfying needs. Quentin Schultze writes, “For many people, the real lure of cyberspace is personal expression, not mutuality.”<sup>31</sup> Depending upon the platform, social media is primarily a way for us to express our individual thoughts to a select group of people or a general audience.

Regardless of the size of the group, our online communication is more about self-expression than dialogue, more about sharing than listening. Schultze states, “For all the rhetoric about cyber-community, the Internet is less a forum for shared public life than an area for individuals to express their egos and find information in tune with their personal needs and desires.”<sup>32</sup> Even when we unite in communities, we often unite based on shared interests or shared beliefs, not because of shared respect for each other’s humanity. Schultze rightly observes that even when people join social media communities, they “...generally do not try through dialogue to become more than the sum of their preexisting selves. This kind of online individualism bypasses such crucial virtues as empathy, reciprocity, and humility.”<sup>33</sup>

The self-expression communication that is common to environments such as Facebook and Twitter is remarkably similar to that of the advertising industry or mass media. We post and tweet updates in a manner similar to how advertisers sell their products or services. Schultze writes about the fascinating parallels between online communication and advertising:

Digital messaging environments promote the ease of transmission and rarely facilitate careful communication. As a result, our own online missives increasingly take on the character of commercial mass media—short messages designed to gain attention rather than to engage in real dialogue. Shared knowing requires patience, sincerity, and dialogue, whereas cyberspace emphasizes speed, facade, and transmission. Like the advertising business in general, cyber-communication is premised on quick message

delivery and immediate message impact rather than on gradual discourse toward shared understanding.<sup>34</sup>

Social media has become the channel through which we advertise and promote the best image of ourselves. Through social media, we can present our carefully crafted, simplistic, polished messages of self to the masses. In contrast to interpersonal, face-to-face communication, this broadcasting format depersonalizes and oversimplifies our communication.

Schultz believes that this hides our true selves:

On the contrary, industrial-grade messaging depersonalizes human interaction. It rarely improves our capacity to empathize with each other or helps us to love one another as distinctive persons. The power to send the same message simultaneously to dozens of friends or millions of potential customers is not a communicative ability as much as a messaging ability.<sup>35</sup>

Social media allows us to communicate to everyone and to no one at the same time. The internet's generalized communication depersonalizes our interactions and weakens our sense of responsibility for the effects of our communication. When we do not specifically communicate to specific individuals, then we feel less responsible for how our communication specifically impacts any one individual. Instead of taking responsibility for our communication or the effects of our communication, we blame the depersonalized nature of social media for our reluctance to do the difficult work of reconciliation. In other words, we do not try to deal specifically with the consequences of our actions because we do not address our actions to any specific person. Even when we do address particular individuals, we still do this within an environment that views social media communication as primarily a place where individuals have the right to self-expression, regardless of the relational consequences. When we believe social media is primarily an avenue for self-expression, then we focus our energies on defending our self-expression, rather than on working on the difficult task of reconciliation and conflict resolution. In this self-

focused environment, instead of resolving conflicts, many of us primarily interact with those who agree with us.

### **Discarnate, non-empathetic communication**

Discarnate social media communication is also causing us to lack empathy in our online social interactions. Psychiatrist Daniel Siegal demonstrated that eye contact is crucial for healthy brain development and attachment in children. Children who did not receive nurturing eye contact as infants struggled to show empathy as they grew older.<sup>36</sup> Cognitive neuroscientist Atsushi Senju has shown “that the parts of the brain that allow us to process another person’s feelings and intentions are activated by eye contact. Emoticons... don’t have the same effect.”<sup>37</sup>

Eye contact is primarily absent in most forms of social media communication. This means online interactions frequently lack empathy. When there is a lack of empathy, people are less likely to care about the negative impacts of their communication. Studies have even demonstrated that humans are becoming less empathetic as a result of prolonged social media use. Author Adam Alter writes that “One analysis of seventy-two studies found that empathy has declined among college students between 1979 and 2009. They’re less likely to take the perspective of other people and show less concern for others.”<sup>38</sup> Alter argues this trend will most likely continue as “...the average schoolchild age between eight and eighteen years spends a third of her life sleeping, a third at school, and a third engrossed in new media, from smartphones and tablets to TVs and laptops.”<sup>39</sup> Alter points out that in the majority of cases, the average child “spends more time communicating through screens than...with other people directly, face-to-face.”<sup>40</sup> Online communication is creating an empathy crisis.

We seem to be struggling with our ability to care about the individuals we offend. Instead of emotionally connecting with how our online behavior affects others, many of us spend our time online justifying our behaviors from an extremely disconnected, self-focused, non-empathetic perspective. Adam Alter reminds us “Humans learn empathy and understanding by watching how their actions affect other people.”<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately, social media interactions often distance us from truly encountering the emotional consequences of our behavior. We do not truly see, feel or experience the pain we cause others in this disembodied internet environment. Even worse, as generations are raised on social media screens, many people have lost the desire to show empathy, to demonstrate kindness or to decrease hurtful, harmful or polarizing behavior.

### **IRL versus online communication**

Although social media held the original promise of bringing us together, the medium has had a drastic, negative effect on how we process human interactions and conflict. Social media has many characteristics that foster polarization and discourage reconciliation. Our society seems unwilling to examine seriously the ways online communication thoroughly influences how and what we communicate with each other. Many do not take seriously Marshall McLuhan’s warning concerning the profound impact media has on our messaging:

All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the message. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments.<sup>42</sup>

I like how McLuhan uses the word “message” to play on his own statement that the “medium is the message.” The point is clear: media messages, shapes and molds the messages of society. Media changes the messages we communicate and the way we communicate them.

Social media is an environment profoundly changing the way we communicate and reside with each other.

At the beginning of this chapter I asked you to think about the many people you encounter, in person, on a regular basis. People use the term IRL (In Real Life) to distinguish between online connections and in-person encounters. Many believe this distinction is artificial or inaccurate because our internet communication exists in real life (IRL). All communication, whether in person or online, exists in the real world. Everything we do is IRL, including the most detached online behavior. However, the use of IRL is a perfect example to demonstrate that people recognize how vastly different we are online, versus in person. IRL basically recognizes that social media communication includes behavior that is contrary to real-world behavior. Our online behavior would not be tolerated or even understood in real-world contexts. Unfortunately, as we spend more time online, our social media behavior is transforming our IRL behavior. The dehumanizing, individualistic, disincarnate aspects of social media communication are bleeding into our IRL relationship dynamics. Consequently, we must deal constructively with our online disconnected selves or our future IRL interactions will become more narrowly and individualistically focused.

The discarnate, networked individualism of the internet age damages our ability to get along. The internet seems to be full of angry, polarizing people. In the following chapter we will look at some of the harmful ways people are trying to deal with increased social media polarization. We will examine how individuals are promoting non-relational, informational-based solutions; embracing ideological segmentation; engaging in increased argumentative, partisan behaviors and detaching or disengaging from social media conflicts. Ultimately, we will

consider the insufficiencies of these solutions in light of our responsibility to embrace the ministry of reconciliation. But first let's visit Disneyland.

### **Chapter Six Questions**

- What is discarnate communication?
- What are some of the main reasons social media encourages discarnate communication?
- What are some ways your IRL and online witness differ?
- What is God saying to you about your online communication behavior?

## Chapter Seven: Opinionated, Partisan People

Speaking of angry, polarizing people, let's talk about Disneyland. Now before I offend any Disneyphiles or lifelong Mouseketeers, let it be known that I am one of you. I too have surrendered large sums of money for the privilege of repeatedly wandering the Magic Kingdom. However, as a repeat Disneyland visitor, I can confidently say, The Happiest Place on Earth frequently makes people extremely angry. You really cannot visit the park without seeing at least one angry outburst. No matter how pristine and magical the moment, eventually the anger and frustration inevitably boils up somewhere in a frustrated parent or overtired toddler. I have seen the anger expressed in the red-faced seething stare of a father threatening to take his frowning son back to the hotel if he kicks his sister one more time in what seems to be an endlessly meandering ride line. I have watched happiness disappear as a harried mother whisper-lectured her crying preschooler as they waited, sitting on the pavement, for a late-night pyrotechnic fireworks display that was far beyond the bedtime or interests of the child who simply wanted to go to sleep. I remember the exasperated phrases sharply emanating from the mother's mouth: "Do you have any idea how much we've spent on this vacation," "You are going to sit here and enjoy this show," "I'm tired of hearing you complain all day," "If you don't stop complaining, we are not coming back tomorrow," "Oh look, there's Mickey!"

There is a lot of potential for people to get angry at Disneyland. Primarily because everything is so exaggerated. The Most Exaggerated Place on Earth might be a better slogan. The financial pressures are exaggerated as Disneyland is also one of The Most Expensive Places on Earth for a family on a budget. The time pressures are exaggerated as Disneyland is also one of The Most Crowded Places on Earth, especially for people trying to get their money's worth in rides. Relational pressures are also exaggerated as many families are trying to align their

vacation reality with The Happiest Place on Earth motto expectations. The pressure of trying to make memories that last a lifetime can be enough to make anyone crack, or at least to get angry when your favorite ride breaks down, or when they say your kid is a half an inch too short to go on Splash Mountain and when there is even a line for the bathrooms.

The foundational constraints of Disneyland, from cost to crowds to expectations, can make a visit extremely stressful. Consequently, every magical Disney dream experience has the potential to turn into a bit of a nightmare; unless, you truly recognize, accept and work within the realities of the environment. For the most part, the people who have the happiest experience at Disney are those people who have the clearest understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the place. People with the greatest awareness of the potential pitfalls are more likely to make choices that improve their experience. In other words, they are able to make choices that keep bad experiences from getting worse. Their ability to recognize the pitfalls of the environment keep them from falling into the pits. They accept limits and structure their visit, anticipating potential problems and weaknesses. They realize kids will get bored in line, food does cost too much and any child will get fussy being dragged around a hot park all day. Sometimes we have to realize the kids don't care how much we paid for the experience. If the trip is really about making them happy, then we need to pack up early and miss the firework extravaganza.

Disney is the perfect example of how we can make a pressure-inducing situation better or worse, depending upon our awareness and intentionality. The experience can be tremendously positive if you manage expectations and recognize the realities that will lead to anger and frustration. Sadly, some people don't seriously consider the negative realities of Disneyland. When they face the problems of a high pressure, exaggerated environment, their inappropriate responses make the environment even worse.

Up to this point, we have primarily talked about how social media as a technology is negatively forming and transforming the way we communicate with each other. We have looked at how social media changes our messages and messaging and how technology numbs our ability to form meaningful connections while encouraging us to pursue disincarnate, individualistic pursuits. We have examined how these problematic fundamental aspects of social media are turning us into angry, polarizing people. As a society we are gradually becoming aware of the limitations, weaknesses and failings of social media communication. However, many of us are not developing intentional, thoughtful strategies to confront the limitations of social media communication. Consequently, our online behavior is frequently making bad situations worse.

In this and the following chapter we will examine some of the unhealthy ways we are individually and collectively adapting to the problems of internet communication. We will focus on how our responses to angry, polarizing online interactions often make problematic situations worse. For example, our attempts to solve internet conflicts through detached information-based solutions are increasing the non-relational, divisive nature of online communication.

### **Non-relational, information-based solutions**

Some of us are trying to combat our argumentative social media climate by developing and promoting better arguments. We believe if we provide better information, that information will lead to better discussions. This assumption is rooted in our utopian view of the internet's capability. One of the promises of the internet age has been the belief that our unlimited and instantaneous access to information will save us. Pursuing this promise has created an exponential proliferation of what Neil Postman coined "information glut" in a "Technopoly" or technology-ruled world:

In Technopoly, we are driven to fill our lives with the quest to “access” information. For what purpose or with what limitation, it is not for us to ask; and we are not accustomed to asking, since the problem is unprecedented. The world has never before been confronted with information glut and has hardly had time to reflect on its consequences.<sup>43</sup>

In our age of information glut, information becomes the currency of our lives. We measure the effectiveness of an internet tool on how quickly that tool enables us to find the right information, not in how well that tool helps us understand the information we are gathering. We believe problems can be solved by having the right information, rather than by having the right relationships. We assume a lack of information is the reason for our lack of success or our inability to solve our problems. The mantra of the internet age is “Information will save us.” Quentin Schultze challenges this unfounded notion stating that “The idea that we are witnessing the emergence of a beneficent information society is triumphalist propaganda.”<sup>44</sup>

The information accessing power of the internet influences how we interact with each other through social media. Schultze writes, “We are succumbing to *informationism*: a non-discerning, vacuous faith in the collection and dissemination of information as a route to social progress and personal happiness.”<sup>45</sup> Schultze believes this faith in “informationism” has become our “quasi-religion,” preaching “observation over intimacy, and measurement over meaning.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, we relate to people through ideas, positions and postulates, rather than through genuine human connection. Schultze points out that “...our informational practices position us as impersonal observers of the world rather than intimate participants in the world.”<sup>47</sup>

We have more instant access to more information than ever before. However, we seem to be less able to process and communicate that information in ways that build genuine human connection. In fact, we seem to have less of a desire to form genuine human connections and more of a desire to communicate non-relational information and to argue ideas endlessly. Social media has become a reflection of our information age. The online world is increasingly

becoming a place where we unite around agreed upon information. Even when we desire meaningful connections, we often find the forging of meaningful online relationships to be excessively difficult. Schultze expresses this problem well:

We assume in our public imaginations that new communication technologies will forge voluntary associations among mutually benevolent persons. Instead, we discover that our over dependence on informational knowing makes our relationships superficial, transitory, and ultimately selfish.<sup>48</sup>

The accessibility of information and our optimistic belief in the power of information to transform the world has made much of our social media communication informational, rather than relational. This non-relational living means when we have an online conflict, we often resort to information-based argumentation, rather than relational sensitivity. We become more concerned with communicating our important information that bolsters our point of view than we do with communicating in a way that restores the relationship. In “an information will save us” society, we focus more on the arguments than the relationships themselves. The goal of our arguments becomes to have the right data, not to have right relationships.

This goal of sharing right information first and facilitating right relationships second is not conducive to promoting relational unity or decreasing divisiveness. Information-based arguments only find peace when individuals agree upon the information. On the other hand, relational-based arguments find peace when individuals value and respect each other’s humanity. Unfortunately, many people are willing to act civilly only with individuals who unite with or agree with the data or information they champion. This non-relational communication has created extremely polarizing social media environments.

As Christians, we are not called just to be right, but to be reconciling. This means we must always communicate truth in a way that values the relational significance of why truth matters. Ultimately, God calls every Christian to communicate truth for the purpose of

reconciling the lost. The goal of Christian communication is not to win the argument but to win people to Christ; to demonstrate the love of God in and through every conflict.

### **Increased argumentative partisan behavior**

In addition to embracing non-relational online communication, many of us are responding to social media polarization with increasingly argumentative partisan behavior. Although partisanship has always been present in American politics, we have become more politically polarized in the past twenty years.<sup>49</sup> In *Red and Blue Nation?* Alan Abramowitz's statistical analysis demonstrates that "On a wide range of issues, rank-and-file Democrats and Republicans are much more divided today than in the past—and the sharpest divisions are found among the politically engaged partisans who constitute the electoral bases of the two parties."<sup>50</sup> Abramowitz argues, "Partisan polarization makes it much more likely that ideological and cultural conflicts in society will be expressed politically."<sup>51</sup>

To make matters worse, many of us seek information from more extreme partisan and polarizing sources. Matthew Baum and Tim Groeling studied the effects of partisan news media outlets on political discourse and confirmed that new media and the internet media landscape exaggerate partisan polarization by allowing us to look only at material that confirms our political worldviews. Baum and Groeling find, "While political partisanship is by no means the only dimension upon which niche-marketing strategies might be based, in the realm of political information, partisanship is one of the key lines of demarcation allowing Web sites to attract a relatively loyal audience."<sup>52</sup> In her article in *Red and Blue Nation?* Diane Mutz argues that the prevalence of more media choices and more news sources has allowed us to engage in a greater degree of selective exposure.<sup>53</sup> Selective exposure theory states that we seek information that

confirms our view of the world, while we avoid information that contradicts our preconceived notions of reality. Mutz notes, "...the Internet encourages those with similar political leanings by reinforcing and exacerbating the extremity of their views, and by convincing them that they are not alone and thus need not abandon their unpopular positions."<sup>54</sup> This increased selective exposure keeps people isolated in their worldviews and prevents individuals from learning how to work through the natural conflicts that arise from interacting with people with differing opinions and ideologies.

The most extreme and prevalent emotional expressions on social media are frequently partisan. These extreme displays of partisan anger do not lead to relationship building between individuals or groups with conflicting ideologies. Several studies suggest that negative emotions play a powerful role in disseminating information and political news stories. For instance, people are far more likely to read and share stories that evoke negative emotions.<sup>55</sup> One study examining Twitter usage found people were more apt to share and retweet "emotionally negative political messages."<sup>56</sup> These studies demonstrate that we prefer to disseminate partisan tinged negativity far more than politically unifying positivity on social media. This trend to share inflammatory negative information shows that many people do not view social media as a tool for facilitating positive engagement between disagreeing parties. Instead, many people use social media as a place to express strong, divisive political opinions for the purpose of uniting with similarly opinioned people.

Throughout America's history, political engagement and party politics have played a central role in the life of the average citizen. Alexis de Tocqueville believed political engagement was truly a unique characteristic of the American experience:

It is difficult to say what place political concerns occupy in the life of a man in the United States. To get involved in the government of society and to talk about it, that is the greatest business and, so to speak, the only pleasure that an American knows.<sup>57</sup>

Partisan politics have played such a central role in the American experience that even George Washington warned of the dangers of political parties in his Farewell Address, a letter he wrote to the American people that was published in every major American newspaper before retiring from the presidency. In his Farewell Address, Washington dedicated a large portion of the letter pleading for national unity while warning against the divisiveness of embracing a partisan mentality. Washington believed that unity was a key pillar of strength for America's stability:

The unity of Government, which constitutes you one people, is also now dear to you. It is justly so; for it is a main pillar in the edifice of your real independence, the support of your tranquillity [sic] at home, your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; of that very Liberty, which you so highly prize.<sup>58</sup>

Washington was convinced that Americans should value their unity and rejected any attempt to weaken the cohesiveness of the United States:

...it is of infinite moment, that you should properly estimate the immense value of your national Union to your collective and individual happiness; that you should cherish a cordial, habitual, and immovable attachment to it; accustoming yourselves to think and speak of it as of the Palladium of your political safety and prosperity; watching for its preservation with jealous anxiety; discountenancing whatever may suggest even a suspicion, that it can in any event be abandoned; and indignantly frowning upon the first dawning of every attempt to alienate any portion of our country from the rest, or to enfeeble the sacred ties which now link together the various parts.<sup>59</sup>

Ultimately, Washington believed the "spirit of party" or partisan politics was the greatest threat to damaging the unity and peaceful prosperity of the newly-formed nation. George Washington understood partisan divisiveness to be the enemy of the people:

This spirit [the spirit of party], unfortunately, is inseparable from our nature, having its root in the strongest passions of the human mind. It exists under different shapes in all governments, more or less stifled, controlled, or repressed; but, in those of the popular form, it is seen in its greatest rankness, and is truly their worst enemy.<sup>60</sup>

Our current social media landscape has embraced much of the political, partisan mindset George Washington lamented.<sup>61</sup> Washington believed the “spirit of party” was harmful because it led to “The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension...”<sup>62</sup> Unfortunately, many individuals are dealing with the angry polarizing climate of social media by engaging in partisan tactics that promote one faction at the cost of other factions. This partisan behavior creates increasingly divisive conversations and fractured communities. Instead of decreasing polarization, partisan rhetoric is turning social networks into combative forums for winning arguments and destroying or discrediting perceived opponents.

The increased partisan nature of internet communication produces profound fatigue in many of us. The Pew Research Center found that over “...one-third of social media users are worn out by the amount of political content they encounter, and more than half describe their online interactions with those they disagree with politically as stressful and frustrating.”<sup>63</sup> Pew observes that “... a substantial share of social media users feel these platforms are uniquely angry and disrespectful venues for engaging in political debate.”<sup>64</sup> One survey showed that a majority of us believe on social media platforms “people say things while discussing politics that they would never say in person.”<sup>65</sup> These trends towards increased partisan polarization have made our conversations toxic and have led many individuals to want to disengage entirely from any online connections that could potentially lead to conflict.

Partisan anger has created in individuals a desire to isolate that is advancing two of the most troubling trends in social media communication: the ideological segmentation and disengagement of internet users. In our Disney analogy, this means people would rather avoid anything at Disneyland that might cause conflict, including avoiding an actual visit, than try to

figure out how to deal with all the potential drama associated with a full day at the park. We will see in the following chapter that avoiding Mickey Mouse trauma is not nearly as problematic as avoiding potential online conflicts.

**Chapter Seven Questions:**

- What are some of the ways people increase angry, polarizing online behavior?
- What are some ways you embrace information versus relational solutions for internet conflicts?
- What are some ways you embrace divisive partisan behavior versus reconciling behavior when communicating online?

## Chapter Eight: Segmented and Disengaged Users

As mentioned in the previous chapter, our social media satisfaction is similar to a Disneyland visit in that exaggerated environments require intentional strategies. If you do not have an intentional game plan for visiting the Magic Kingdom, you are probably not going to be prepared for the many potential anger-producing situations. However, if you make yourself aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the environment, you can mitigate your risk factors. If you are not aware or thoughtful in your planning, there is a good chance you will actually make the situation worse. This is also true of social media communication. People are responding to the anger and polarization of social media, not by developing a careful strategy, but by trying to avoid all conflict. While conflict avoidance might be a viable solution for visiting a theme park, isolation and segmentation is not a healthy way to deal with social media anger and polarization. Unfortunately, many of us are segmenting ourselves from online conflict, thereby removing ourselves from the ministry of reconciliation in social media environments.

Many of us are dealing with social media polarization through abiding in ideologically segmented online communities and relationships. Social media allows us to unite around shared interests and ideologies. As a result, many of us choose to connect online primarily with people who hold similar worldviews. Ideological segmentation tends to create peace and unity within our separate homogeneous groups. However, when we divide ourselves into quarantined ideological groups, we do not learn how to interact with individuals with opposing, differing or competing ideologies. When we fully embrace ideological segmentation, we avoid the uncomfortable realities of interacting with individuals who are different from us.

Author Andrew Keen addresses this phenomenon in a story about Robert Scoble, an American blogger, author and technical evangelist. Keen noticed that Scoble spoke of

technology bringing the world together, yet Scoble did not know his own neighbors in the community of Half Moon Bay, California. Scoble answered Keen concerning the seeming incongruity with this relational disconnect:

He confessed to me that he had more in common with Web programmers in Beijing and social media entrepreneurs in Berlin than he had with local people such as his unknown neighbor. Thus, he explained, he chose to make his friends on the Internet, using social networks to identify people around the world with whom he shared interests.<sup>66</sup>

Scoble used social media to connect with people similar to himself. Keen observed that for Scoble, "...social media community was, therefore, an extension of his self, a never-ending hall of mirrors all reflecting the same opaque image of Scoble..."<sup>67</sup>

When we view social media as a place to connect only with people who are like us, we will have little need to connect with individuals who have different ideas or opposing views in the world or on the internet. Social media enables us to unite only with people who reflect the image we desire to see. As more people define community in terms of ideological segmentation, people will become less willing and able to learn how to interact with individuals who have differing worldviews and life interests. If we limit our interactions to shared interests or ideological agreement, then we will give less effort to finding meaningful ways to deal with genuine conflicts, disagreements and polarizing issues.

Ultimately, conflict resolution only happens if conflicting parties believe they need to maintain meaningful relationships with each other. We solve conflicts when we want to continue in our relationship. The opportunity to segment ourselves into groups of likeminded people through social media has led many of us to resist or avoid doing the hard work of building positive relations with individuals who have opposing opinions and differing perspectives. Instead of dealing constructively with our anger, we simply hang out with people who don't make us angry.

Sadly, technology is not only enabling but encouraging our ideological segmentation. Every major internet media company uses some form of a user behavior algorithm to recommend to us the right products to buy, services to use and even the best friends to follow based on our observable preferences and past behaviors. Kevin Kelly explains how this technology influences almost every product we purchase, stream or use on the internet:

It is in wide use at Amazon, Netflix, Twitter, LinkedIn, Spotify, Beats, and Pandora, among other aggregators...Clever algorithms churn through a massive history of everyone's behavior in order to closely predict my own behavior. Their guess is partly based on my own past behavior, so Amazon's banner should really say, "Based on your own history and the history of others similar to you, you should like this." The suggestions are highly tuned to what I have bought and even thought about buying before (they track how long I dwell on a page deliberation, even if I don't choose it). Computing the similarities among a billion past purchases enable their predictions to be remarkably prescient.<sup>68</sup>

Although these personal preference algorithms can quickly and conveniently provide us with content and relationships that satisfy our existing likes and wants, Kelly warns that these algorithms can also isolate us into an "egotistical spiral" where we become "blind to anything slightly different" from what we already love.<sup>69</sup>

These preference algorithms, and the hundreds of choices we make on a weekly basis to connect or disconnect with specific individuals and social networks, are isolating us into increasingly homogeneous ideological groups. Nicholas Carr suggests that internet algorithms are helping us click our "...way to a fractured society."<sup>70</sup> Instead of opening internet users to more diverse thoughts, ideas and people, personalization is isolating us into ideological camps that reinforce our existing worldviews. Rather than expanding our understanding of the world and each other, ideological segmentation is narrowing our worldview, creating an environment that is not conducive for dealing with divergent opinions or for proactively solving conflicts. Carr states the problem well:

We welcome personalization tools and algorithms because they let us get precisely what we want when we want it, with a minimum of fuss. By filtering out “the detritus” and delivering only “the good stuff,” they allow us to combine fragments of unbundled information into new bundles, tailor-made for audiences of one. They impose homogeneity on the Internet’s wild heterogeneity. As the tools and algorithms become more sophisticated and our online profiles more refined, the Internet will act increasingly as an incredibly sensitive feedback loop, constantly playing back to us in amplified form, our existing preferences.<sup>71</sup>

Preference algorithms create homogeneous isolation, where we find ourselves abiding within our own feedback loops that refine and amplify pre-existing self-preferences, likes and wants. However, this continuous feedback loop of giving us more of what we want does not prepare us to deal with disharmonious ideas and individuals. The internet’s desire to satisfy us has made us increasingly incapable of dealing with undesirable situations. Sherry Turkle observes, “The web promises to make our world bigger. But as it works now, it also narrows our exposure to ideas. We can end up in a bubble in which we hear only the ideas we already know. Or already like.”<sup>72</sup> Consequently, many of us struggle with how to deal with conflict or we simply avoid handling conflict completely, knowing that we can simply retreat to our homogeneous ideology community safe havens.

### **Avoidance and disengagement**

In addition to embracing ideological segmentation, some of us respond to the increased anger and polarization of social media by intentionally avoiding or disengaging from all potential conflicts. For example, Pew Research reports that 83% of social media users “...say that when their friends post something about politics that they disagree with they usually just try to ignore it...”<sup>73</sup> If ignoring doesn’t work, they mute, un-follow, block or change their social media setting to limit seeing posts from disagreeable feeds or disagreeable people.<sup>74</sup> Pew’s research demonstrates that most of us handle negative situations by leaving polarizing interactions and by

adopting internet practices that prevent us from coming into contact with present or future conflicts.

Some social media influencers promote conflict avoidance and disengagement as a valid way to deal with toxic polarizing social media activity. For example, Jen Hatmaker is a respected Christian author, speaker and popular social media influencer. In a well-liked and shared Facebook post, Hatmaker listed the positive outcomes she desired from social media community. She mentioned that she wanted “kindness,” “humor,” “honesty,” “measured responses” and other positive expressions from social media communicators. Her suggestion on how to get more of these positive responses was to encourage her followers to disengage from or avoid divisive people:

So here is me suggesting to you that if the people you follow regularly make you feel bad, sad, mad, or less, unfollow, mute, or hide them and see if you don't notice an immediate difference. Let's protect our minds and hearts, because we need them to be healthy. They have too much work to do. Since social media won't censor ITSELF, we have to censor it for OURSELVES.<sup>75</sup>

Hatmaker's response to online conflict highlights the allure of disengagement. Instead of learning how to process the conflicting emotions and attitudes that accompany divisive internet communication among conflicting parties, Hatmaker suggests individuals “censor” the possibility of interacting with difficult people. She instructs her followers to avoid negative people and to avoid feeling strong negative emotions. Unfortunately, this advice does not promote conflict resolution or help when we are required to challenge injustices. Instead, this isolating behavior limits the possibility of us interacting with disagreeable individuals. Even worse, when we isolate or disengage for fear of conflict, this behavior allows for injustices and wickedness to flourish unchallenged.

The option to avoid polarizing or divisive social media interactions is frequently a luxury of the economically, socially, religiously and racially privileged. Individuals who exist in a privileged majority culture are able to disengage from controversial or polarizing issues primarily because their economic and social wellbeing are not dependent upon constructive resolution of those controversial issues. Arguments about such issues as poverty, crime, race, gender and religion have greater importance to minority groups who are facing greater oppression from those in power. Oppressors or those who benefit directly or indirectly from oppression are more likely to disengage from the difficult work of conflict resolution when a situation becomes emotionally uncomfortable. This is primarily because oppressors or people in power benefit from the status quo. The oppressed do not have the luxury of disengagement, primarily because they will experience the negative costs of not challenging injustices.

Individuals who embrace a social media presence that avoids all conflict are somewhat reminiscent of the white moderates who frequently criticized Martin Luther King Jr.'s confrontational tactics during the civil rights movement. King believed this aversion to conflict was a great detriment to the cause of justice:

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's greatest stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season."<sup>76</sup>

When we choose avoidance and disengagement, we reject our moral mandate to stand against oppression, to speak against injustices and to work towards an equitable society. True societal transformation comes through challenging the injustices of society and the people who promulgate those injustices. Disengagement does not confront injustice; instead, disengagement

allows immoral men and women to operate without being challenged or harassed by the truth. Conflict avoidance gives corrupt individuals and institutions free reign to continue practicing evil, unencumbered by the conflict that arises when good people confront wicked practices. If we structure our online presence to avoid polarizing people and behaviors, we will also avoid addressing situations that need the prophetic voice of Christ and the transformative truth of the gospel. If social media becomes a place where we avoid confronting the darkness for fear of angry, polarizing people, then we will truly have forgotten our mandate to be salt and light in the world.

### **This isn't Disneyland**

I understand that I have focused much of my attention on the problematic realities of social media communication. I am well aware of the amazing potential, possibility and promise of online communication. I have experienced profoundly meaningful, life-changing, positive interactions through social media. I love the amazing relational possibilities of our online world. I am an avid user of the technology that is forming us and I consider myself a strong proponent of the immeasurable value healthy internet communication has for individuals and for our society. My love of social media is one reason I am contending for better online communication and communities. I find that people can have wonderful experiences if they approach social media interactions with intentionality. Just like visiting Disneyland, you can have a lot of fun online if you are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the environment. The online world is not The Happiest Place on Earth, but it is The Place Everyone on Earth Seems to Be Heading. Consequently, we all need to find ways to make the journey more enjoyable for all of us.

As I've expressed in several different ways, we must recognize that the internet is forming us. Online communication is creating an environment where our interactions are becoming increasingly toxic. In response to the divisive nature of the online world, some of us are implementing non-relational, information-based solutions with the hope that every bad argument can be made better by better information. Unfortunately, this information-based approach does not take seriously the importance of relationship-centered communication. Some of us respond to our polarized social media landscape by also engaging in increasingly divisive partisan behaviors. This partisan approach strengthens and fortifies our societal divides. Recognizing this divided reality, many of us are living increasingly segmented online lives or we are simply avoiding conflict and disengaging from any real or perceived possibility of online polarizing communication. Although some of these behaviors might temporarily alleviate our angst or discomfort through uniting us with like-minded individuals or through disengaging us from the potential of immediate hurt, none of these behaviors help us resolve conflicts or reconcile with people. In fact, many of our online choices are making the online world even more hostile. Some days, no one seems to be that happy.

Even so...I have hope; hope for a better present and a better tomorrow. Hope for an online future that is far better than the present. Hebrews states, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). Faith lives, believing we will find resolutions for our present conflicts, answers for our current problems and healings for our immediate hurts. Faith believes there is a way forward, out of the darkness. Faith is convinced that there is a truer way, worth finding and following. Faith says, "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of

God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39). Therefore, faith tears down every wall or form of communication that separates us from giving and receiving the love of God. Faith says not even the most foundational, fundamental broken aspects of social media communication can separate us from advancing the good news of Jesus Christ.

There are many problems with the way we communicate online. Social media is truly full of numerous angry, polarizing people. However, the Scripture provides an answer to this problem that is rooted in the reconciling work of Jesus. When we begin to understand the reconciling power of the cross and our role in receiving and sharing reconciliation with others, we will be able to develop the necessary skills to respond to an angry, polarizing world.

All of us have been called into the ministry of reconciliation. When we understand and embrace the importance of the ministry of reconciliation, we become true online peacemakers. Are you tired of people endlessly talking about the problems of the world, but providing few or no solutions? I am too. What follows are answers, rooted in the faith conviction that God can change the climate of our angry, polarizing online communication through people just like you and me. To find these answers, we will first look to the reconciling work of the cross of Jesus Christ.

### **Chapter Eight Questions**

- How ideologically segmented are your online relationships?
- Are you more likely to avoid or confront injustices online?
- What is God saying to you about your social media engagement?

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Massage* (1967; repr., Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press, 1996), 31-39.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.
- <sup>3</sup> Nicholas G. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 44.
- <sup>4</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, critical edition, ed. Terrence Gordon (Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press, 2017), 17.
- <sup>5</sup> Shane A. Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 38-39.
- <sup>6</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*, ed. Eric McLuhan and Jacek Szklarek (Toronto: Stoddart, 1999), 37-38.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.
- <sup>8</sup> Kevin Kelly, *The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces That Will Shape Our Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 3.
- <sup>9</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 27.
- <sup>10</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 63-70.
- <sup>11</sup> Carr, *The Shallows*, 211.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> Lee Rainie, John Horrigan, Barry Wellman and Jeffrey Boase. "The Strength of Internet Ties: Summary of Findings," *Pew Internet*, January 25, 2006, accessed January 30, 2018, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2006/01/25/the-strength-of-internet-ties/>.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman, *Networked: The New Social Operating System* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 6.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.
- <sup>17</sup> Quentin J. Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2002), 172.
- <sup>18</sup> Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 114.
- <sup>19</sup> Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart*, 171.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>21</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 154.

<sup>22</sup> McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light*, 50.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel H. Pink, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-brainers Will Rule the Future* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006), 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>27</sup> Walter Jackson Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1991), 69.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>31</sup> Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart*, 182.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 170.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Adam Alter, *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 40.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 40

<sup>42</sup> McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, 26.

<sup>43</sup> Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 61.

<sup>44</sup> Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart*, 16.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>49</sup> Alan I. Abramowitz, “Disconnected, or Joined at the Hip?” in *Red and Blue Nation? Characteristics and Causes of America’s Polarized Politics*, ed. Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 72.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>52</sup> Matthew A. Baum and Tim Groeling “New Media and the Polarization of American Political Discourse,” *Political Communication* 25, no. 4 (2008): 347.

<sup>53</sup> Diana C. Mutz “How the Mass Media Divide Us” in *Red and Blue Nation? Characteristics and Causes of America’s Polarized Politics*, ed. Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 225.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>55</sup> A. Hasell and Brian E. Weeks “Partisan Provocation: The Role of Partisan News Use and Emotional Responses in Political Information Sharing in Social Media,” *Human Communication Research* 43, no. 4 (October 2016): 644.

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<sup>57</sup> Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: In Two Volumes*, ed. Eduardo Nolla and James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Incorporated, 2012), 397.

<sup>58</sup> George Washington, “Farewell Address, September 19, 1796” in *The American Presidency Project*, Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, accessed July 28, 2017, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65539>.

<sup>59</sup> Washington, “Farewell Address.”

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Douglas S. Bursch, *The Community of God: A Theology of the Church From a Reluctant Pastor* (Seattle: Fairly Spiritual, 2017), 65.

<sup>62</sup> Washington, “Farewell Address.”

<sup>63</sup> Maeve Duggan and Aaron Smith, “The Political Environment on Social Media” *Pew Internet*, October 25, 2016, accessed August 1, 2018, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/10/25/the-political-environment-on-social-media/>.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Andrew Keen, *Digital Vertigo: How Today’s Online Social Revolution is Dividing, Diminishing, and Disorienting Us* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2012), 158.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 158.

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<sup>68</sup> Kelly, *The Inevitable*, 169.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>70</sup> Nicholas G. Carr, *The Big Switch: Rewiring the World, from Edison to Google* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 160.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-162.

<sup>72</sup> Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 307.

<sup>73</sup> Duggan and Smith, "The Political Environment on Social Media."

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Jen Hatmaker, Facebook post, July 31, 2018 (9:33 a.m.), accessed November 29, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/jenhatmaker/>.

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