

God and Social Media – Who are you really following?

Psalm 1

Sunday 8th October

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A teenager filled with social media anxiety

A number of years ago, near the start of the social–media age, I was visiting a household, which included teenagers. As soon as I came through the front door it was clear the family was in crisis.

Upon asking what the problem was I was told that one of the teenagers had lost her mobile phone and was in serious emotional melt-down as a result.

Later that evening the phone was found down the side of a settee. This was the first time I had come across such an event and I was baffled by it.

But as the years have rolled by, and we have all become more aware of the mental health issues caused by excessive social media usage, the meaning of that event has become clearer.

This term we've been taking six issues that we will all face in one way or another, at some time or another, and asked how we should think about them as followers of Jesus Christ: and today, God and Social Media, by which we mean everything from YouTube to WhatsApp, from LinkedIn to X, from Spotify to Tiktok. Social media is:

“A computer based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts and information through virtual networks and communities,” according to Investopedia.

If it seems strange that a Bible-believing evangelical church should preach about issues like this, remember the words of the Apostle Paul:

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Romans 12:2)

“Think deeply about every aspect of life: don’t blindly follow every trend in contemporary society, instead to be transformed by the Word of God.”

If we are to gain a proper understanding of the new social media revolution, we need start, few facts:

Social Media is NEW. Facebook is 19 years old, Instagram 13 years old, and TikTok is 6 years old. So if you were born this century, social media is the air in which you breathe. Some older folks may be personally largely untouched by it, but everyone young in your life, will be profoundly affected by this innovation. Every Christian parent should be especially concerned.

Social Media is FAST-GROWING. Just over half the world's population use social media (4.5 billion people). To make sense of that figure, although TV has been around for much longer than social media, only 25% of the world have access to it—in other words—social media in its much shorter lifespan has already grown twice the size of TV.

Some Effects are clear already. Although it’s new, some effects are already clear. Experts say that in moderation it can be positive—and who of us who use social media would not be able to point to many benefits, not least keeping in touch with family and friends. But the same experts are unanimous in their judgement that excessive use of social media is harmful, in some cases very harmful

A Christian View

So what are followers of Jesus to make of this new thing called social media? There is so much to say, talk with one another about these things, discuss them in home groups: *“I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge, and competent to instruct one another.” (Romans 15:14)*

All I want to do is to share three potential dangers that social media poses to followers of Jesus Christ. There may be many blessings with this technology, but one of the tasks of church pastors is to warn their flocks of spiritual dangers.

When John Bunyan was in prison in the 1600s just for being a faithful pastor, (12 years) he wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* for his flock, a book that is filled with warnings about the dangers that were around in his day. Warning is one of the tasks of an under shepherd to warn the sheep. Did you know that? Do you listen to your spiritual leaders when they warn you?

So three warnings about social media this morning, brothers and sisters. The first is about our the precious gift of time.

#1 TIME

“Teach us to number our days (count them, be aware of how few they are) that we may gain a heart of wisdom. (then we will be wise in how we live.)” (Proverbs 90:12)
“...make the best use of the time, because the days are evil.” (Ephesians 5:16)

Here is the first danger of social media - it can consume, and if we are not careful, waste - God's precious gift of time. The average UK user spends 2 hours a day on social media, a conservative estimate, which peaks for 17 year olds at around 6 hours a day.

We all need down time, we all need to unwind and relax and God has given us “everything for our enjoyment” writes Paul in 1 Timothy 6, Christians are not kill joys, but it is so easy to waste precious time on social media, especially when the algorithms are designed to feed us even more of what we enjoy! It's easy to waste time on social media. Precious time we could use in more profitable pursuits, serving others, serving the Lord?

Wasting time is a special danger when we're young and we think that forever stretches before us. How did Pink Floyd phrase it:

*You are young and life is long,
 and there is time to kill today
 And then one day you find ten years have got behind you*

But old age, warns Solomon, is just around the corner:

“Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say “I find no pleasure in them.” (Eccles 12:1)

Reluctantly, I decided to watch two video clips from two of the world’s biggest YouTube influencers, PewdiePie (111 million subscribers) and Mr Beast (203 million subscribers). The PewDiePie video was 25 minutes long, 7 things in 7 days to impress his baby son, from learning to spin a Frisbee on his fingers to making shadow figures on the wall. I skimmed through it, but 2 million people have watched it, equating to 100 years of wasted human time. Mr Beast’s video, on the other hand takes you around a \$100 million mansion, wasting only 17 minutes of your time, but 124 million people have seen it, wasting 4000 years of human time.

After just three years of ministry, the apostle John writes about Jesus, this is how he ends his Gospel, *“Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written” (John 21:25)*. Time was precious to Jesus!

How do you and I use our precious time? We’re thinking about our disposable time here, not those hours when we must cook, go out to work, sleep and so on, but the hours when we are free to choose to do what we want to do. Do we spend some of those hours serving the Lord, serving others? Doing good?

#2 PEOPLE

The second challenge social media poses for followers of Jesus Christ, is our desperate need to be in personal fellowship with one another. God is a social being: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, co-equal in glory and honour, dwell in eternal co-dependant communion with each other.

And you and I have been made in this image, which means—whether we acknowledge it or not, whether we enjoy it or not, we desperately need one another.

Someone might argue—“but that’s what social media does, it puts us in contact with one another,” which is true, it’s one of the blessings of social media.

But, there's more, God has given us bodies and we've been created by God to communicate with one another in person, physically, bodily! We know that, from those studies which reveal that most of our communication with one another comes through non-verbal means. Only 40% of what we say to one another comes through speech (and only 10% through the words themselves, the other 30% is through *the way* we say things!) A full 60% of what we say comes through our bodies; if we are bored we fidget, if we are anxious or exhausted it shows on our face, and so on.

We need to meet with one another face to face, not through a screen.

Our example is the Lord Jesus Christ, who deliberately surrounded himself with people. With twelve disciples, "*that they might be with him*" we read in Mark 3:14) With sisters, such as Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna. (Luke 8)

One of the deepest paradoxes of social media is that while it claims to connect us to others, it fails to connect us truly, because we have been designed to communicate in person. The experts say, "*The more you prioritise social media interaction over in-person relationships, the more you're at risk for developing or exacerbating mood disorders such as anxiety and depression.*"

Why do we have nine small groups at MPC scattered all through the week, every week? Five in the evenings, four in the day time? Because we desperately need to meet one another in person, so encourage, to share, to learn, to challenge, to pray!

Do you remember lockdown? When we were forced to meet on Zoom? Many of us found that hard! It was better than nothing, but as soon as we were able to meet in person we did, even though it was freezing cold, remember?

3 INFLUENCE

From a pastor's perspective, the most dangerous spiritual problem posed by social media is that we could easily be led astray by the thinking of the world if we immerse ourselves in the philosophy, the ethics, the worldview of the world all week long.

Psalm 1, reminds us that there are only two ways to live, and they flow directly from who and what influences us.

The blessed life

The blessed life is described in verses 1-3. Here's the negative, *"Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers."* The blessed man, the blessed woman, avoids being influenced by secular society, it's worldviews, its celebrities, it's sceptics. Instead, here's the positive, *"But his delight is in the law of the Lord (that's the Bible), and on his law he meditates day and night."* The blessed man or woman fills his mind, her mind with the life-giving words of Scripture.

And the result? *"He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither..."* The man or woman who is deeply influenced by God's word turns out like a mighty fruitful tree, strong against the howling winds, fruitful to all who turn for help.

The wasted life

The wasted life, on the other hand, is a life influenced by every twist and turn of modern culture, philosophy and ethics. The end result of such a life? *"The wicked are like the chaff that the wind blows away."* Not like a strong life-giving tree, but like the chaff that surrounds a kernel of wheat and is discarded, useless, wasted, valueless.

And it is not only in this life that these two paths differ, their eternal destinies differ too! *"Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement or sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the Lord watches over the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish."*

When I was growing up, my godly parents, prayerfully did many things to fulfil Psalm 1 in the lives of, 6 kids. Negatively they tried to limit the impact of the world on our lives. "Why do you always need a noise in your ear, kid, are you frightened of your own thoughts?" He removed Pink Floyd's "Dark Side of the Moon" from the boys room and at least one David Bowie album from my sisters! *"Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers."*

Positively, they read the Scriptures to us each day. They encouraged all six kids to go to church every Sunday morning, to hear God's Word. (As soon as they are able to, our children need to hear sermons. They spend 30 hours at school each week under the constant influence of the world, don't they need 30 minutes of God's word on the Lord's Day? - especially when you add to the influence of their peers, the influence of social media? And we are blessed at MPC because the sermons are simple to understand and we even provide a sheet to help our children along!) *"But his delight is in the law of the Lord (that's the Bible), and on his law he meditates day and night."*

My mom and dad may not have got everything right, what parent does? But half a century down the line, by the grace of God, all six children continue to follow Jesus, and to God be the glory!

The call to follow Jesus

When you boil it all down to basics, a Christian is someone who has heard the voice of Jesus say "Come and *follow me*." Nothing has changed with the passing of two millennia, not really, *"As Jesus was walking beside the sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake for they were fisherman. Come follow me, Jesus said."* (Matthew 4:18,19)

Is someone wondering, "What is a Christian?" Well, a Christian is someone who has heard the voice of Jesus say "Come to me, I will forgive your sins, I will reconcile you to God, I will give you a new life in this world and the living hope of eternal life in the world to come. Come follow me, learn from my words and my life." Just as he called fishermen Peter and Andrew, so he calls you today. Have you responded to his call? If so, make sure his voice rings in your ears more than the vain philosophies of this passing age, and if you have not responded yet to his call, he calls you today, "Come, follow me!"