5 Biblical Principles for Social Media
by Rob Brockman

The Bible was written far before the invention of the internet, cell-phones and Twitter. However, the Scriptures have plenty to say about how we ought to engage as Christians in the public square. They are, after all, profitable for teaching us how to be equipped for living as Christians (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Much of what Peter, Paul and James wrote to the first-century church is as relevant for Christians on Facebook today as it was for Christians in their social interactions then.

Did you realize that you are responsible for your online behaviour as much as you are responsible for your in-person behaviour? There is no distinction between the character of your online avatar and your in-person character. If this is the case, then what can we glean from the scriptures on how we are to behave in the online public square?

Don't instigate quarrelling.
It is no great surprise that much of what is posted online is geared towards stirring up controversy for the sake of getting 'eyes' on content. One of the goals for people online is to drive traffic to websites and to create an online presence. One of the sure-fire ways to accomplish this is by stirring up debate. However, did you know the Bible commands Christians to avoid stirring up controversy? *Titus 3:1-2: "Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people."*

Over and over, throughout the NT, quarreling is seen as an ungodly behaviour to be left behind. In fact, a few verses later in Titus 3:10, Paul will encourage Titus to warn people who stir up division and controversy, and if necessary avoid them because they are warped and sinful! Bible knows nothing of Twitter hot-takes. The Bible knows nothing of Facebook rants. Do your tweets often stir up debate? Do you often have to mitigate fallout after your posts? Do you often dog-pile onto other people's posts? Are you drawn to controversy? If so, ask yourself – what is motivating your posts? In many cases, there may be a sinfulness behind it. So let's check our motives, and think twice before posting. (See also 1 Tim. 2:8; 3:3; 2 Tim. 2:23.)

Don't be impulsive.
Much of what gets us into trouble online is that we post out of a moment of frustration, a build up of irritation, or a gut-reaction to something we see. This lack of self-control and discipline is repeatedly identified as a fruit of the flesh, and not the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). Impulsivity is a symptom of sin and ought not to be how we act as Christians. James 1:19-21: "Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls."

For example, I have a rule with my wife when it comes to what I post on social media. Since my wife works in the industry, and knows me well, I have asked her to read everything before I post it. I do not always trust myself and my motives, and thus I have built an accountability system. If I want to post something, I ensure that she has okayed it, she has inquired about my motives, and then I submit myself to her recommendations. She even approved this article! Another practice I have is that I keep a document on my phone where I write down what I want to say first, and let it sit there for a while before I show it to her. There are still several unsent tweets, posts, and thoughts in that document I have not nor will ever post. This helps me avoid the impulsivity that the Scriptures forbid. If you find yourself posting without any kind of filter or accountability process, you are at risk of being governed by the flesh and it will show in the fruit. Christians ought to be known for careful, thoughtful, insightful and self-controlled engagement.

Don't be disrespectful.
It is inevitable that engaging in quarreling and slander online will lead to hostility and tension. The fruits of hot-takes and ranting are often anger, vitriol, ad-hominem remarks, and hostility. Consequentially, such behaviour is condemned by the apostles, and people who participate in these things are to be reprimanded. These kinds of conversations can easily devolve into insults and sarcasm. Again, the apostles teaching on this is crystal clear. 2 Timothy 2:23-25 says, *"Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness."*

I can hear the responses already, "But Christians are to be marked by boldness and courage! Jesus flipped tables in the temple!" Okay, but Christians are also to be marked by kindness, patience, gentleness and respect! Right?
You cannot sacrifice kindness and gentleness on the altar of boldness; the Scriptures do not allow such hermeneutical leaps. We are not Elijah before the prophets of Baal! We are not the OT prophets, sarcastically taunting Israel! Those are narrative stories, not behavioural commands. We are the people Paul is writing to when he says we are to be, "correcting his opponents with gentleness" (2 Tim. 2:25). The NT is not murky on this issue.Christian, be respectful and be gentle. Always! We are meant to be an example of honor among the watching world, so that, "they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (1 Pet. 2:12). (See also 1 Tim. 4:12; Titus 3:2; James 4:11).

Don't gossip.
As much as the Bible teaches on avoiding quarreling, the Scriptures instruct us to avoid gossip, rumours and slander. In fact, we are told to, "not associate with a simple babbler" (Prov. 20:19). Much of what is posted online is editorial, and there is little-to-no accountability for what we post. 'Babbling', or foolish talk, is often engaged in without hindrance online and often can lead to serious damage and confusion. The current Christian fascination with conspiracy theories and theological 'watchdogs' has added fuel to the fire of further popularizing babbling, gossip and slander.

We should have little desire to engage in spreading unsubstantiated rumours, poorly researched theories, and misinformation which only leads to sowing division, fear and strife. Gossiping about ministries we know nothing about, people we have never met, or ascribing pejorative labels upon people we don't know personally is entirely deplorable behaviour for the Christian. *2 Tim. 2:16: "But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness." 1 Tim. 4:7: "Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness." James 1:26: "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless."* Think back to what you have posted recently. Have you engaged in simple babbling? Have the posts you made, the articles you shared, the rumors you have perpetuated, the theories you have given your approval to, or have the accusations against others you have made reveal your religion as worthless? Jesus warns us that we will give an account to every careless word we speak (Matt. 12:36). Let's heed His warning, and let's think before we post a careless word.

Don't seek attention.
The goal of anything we do ought to be for the betterment of others, and not the expansion of our platform or the stroking of our ego. If my motives are purely for the edification of the church, or the encouragement of my friends, then much of what I will post will reflect that. Again, the Scripture are replete with the command that, as Christians, we ought to only pursue what is edifying for others. *Eph. 4:29: "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear." 1 Thess. 5:11: "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing." Rom. 14:19: "So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding."*

Much scientific research has been done on the drug-like effects social media has on the brain.[1] The recent Netflix documentary, "The Social Dilemma" explored the near narcotic like effect social media has, and how companies understand this and use it to their advantage. For humans, the boost of dopamine that comes from getting a like or a comment can be intoxicating, and it can become the motive behind by why we engage online. Social media is seem more and more like a drug, and the fix we need is in our pocket every moment. Many Christians now use Twitter and Facebook to find affirmation, attention and importance. The intoxicating nature of social media can create and fuel a desire for attention and fame (or infamy). I'm not saying social media is purely evil; it can be used in a healthy way, but, like sex (for instance), it can also be used to find self-worth and value. The drug-like effect can pollute our motives and cloud our judgement. But only Christ can truly fill our hearts with purpose, identity, and fulfillment. So, before we post, we should check our motives for WHY we are posting. Are we bored? Longing for attention?

Looking for that dopamine hit? Searching for affirmation?
Then perhaps it's best that we put down our phone, open up the scriptures, and preach to our needy hearts the truths of the Gospel instead. In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul will tell us that out of fear of God (vs. 11) we seek to persuade others out of love (vs. 14), to be reconciled to God (vs. 19), as ambassadors of Christ to this world (vs. 20), with a ministry of reconciliation! There is nothing that social media can give you that is better than Gospel purpose!
Having said all this, I am still convinced that social media can be used in a god-honoring and edifying way. However, I have also seen how it can also ruin our reputation as Christ-followers. We ought to live honorable both in the sight of God and man (2 Cor. 8:21), and this requires us being honest about our motives behind our social media usage. Jesus warns us that if something is causing you to sin, get rid of it (Matt. 5:29). You can gain all the followers, all the attention, all the controversy, and yet ultimately bring shame and disrepute unto Christ. My prayer is that these principles would help you as you seek to honor Christ before man, and, if necessary, pluck out the eye that is causing you to sin.