

Posting Peace



**Why Social Media
Divides Us and
What We Can
Do About It**

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For my Jennifer.

Bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh. Together we are one.

You are the embodiment of God's love and grace.

I am forever yours.

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Angry Online

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

Why are we so angry online? Why are we so divided? I can imagine the apostle Paul tweeting, "If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other" (Gal 5:15). I can also imagine his words being disregarded or angrily refuted by most everyone. Why are we behaving in such a ridiculous manner with even the most mundane observations devolving into toxic absurdities? I can tweet the banal observation "I ate too many tacos," and five responses later someone angrily accuses me of being a "baby killer." If you

online environments as physically isolated people facing a collective traumatic experience increased their social media engagement on platforms that trended toward conflict in even the most peaceful of times. For many of us the dilemma was devastating. On one hand, we needed and craved community as the virus cut us off from many everyday human interactions. On the other hand, the online world we used to supplement our loss of in-person community became increasingly toxic, dehumanizing, and harmful to our emotional health.

United to Divide and Devour

Whether confronting a pandemic or tackling the realities of everyday existence, the internet is a wonderfully powerful, dangerous tool. Through online communication individuals unite and divide, relationships develop and implode, communities form and shatter. The internet increases our ability to connect with and to harm more people personally than ever. For every person we bless, others we offend. Although the internet brings us together, the online world also dehumanizes, detaches, divides, segments, and polarizes people. We're 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 feel so palpable, many of us dread expressing any possibly controversial opinions, fearing others will conscript us into ideological battles we're not trying to fight. The polarization of social media communication increases in many individuals a profound sense of anxiety, alienation, and frustration. The internet connects more humans and more people

the medium also forms us. The social media platforms we create are not just connecting us—they're changing us. They're 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 changes the way we view humanity. Social media transforms what we expect from each other and what we're willing to do to maintain, foster, and build healthy, diverse, meaningful, long-term relationships. The internet influences 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 establish strong relationships. The online medium fosters and exaggerates non-reconciling behavior. Simply put, social media normalizes and codifies bad behavior.

The internet is an amazing technological innovation. Sadly, we're harming ourselves with our own creation. Social media turns 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 don't know how to fix it.

Contending for a Better Witness

This book attempts to confront the social media-driven anger and polarization crippling our society. Christians must come out of this toxic, divisive social media chaos into a better way of online communicating. We must refuse to participate in the

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 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. on a very conservative Christian radio station. I began my radio career believing I could produce a show that united conservative, progressive, and moderate Christians around a better way of coexisting. 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 my show would grow in popularity and influence, eventually reaching national syndication, as I assumed people were hungry for a less contentious dialogue. When I finally resigned from my position, I had produced and broadcast over 1,200 shows and discovered that I was wrong! Completely wrong!

There was not a growing movement of people hungry for reconciling content or a growing radio audience to propel me into syndication. Although I was able to fulfill the requirements of my job by maintaining an audience, I found my moderate, reconciling voice faced constant rebuke, 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. I felt I had something to offer the world that the world wanted. I was wrong. With this perspective and through the leading of the Holy Spirit, I brushed the dust off my feet and headed in another direction. 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 tore into me weekly.

critique my personality (“He thinks he’s funny, but he’s not”), my politics (“He has a lot to say about nothing”), and my music (“ . . . and that terrible blaring intro”). Her oddest critique was her frequent mention of meeting with other people to talk about what a bad job I was doing. She would say, “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 imagined 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 local Gaelic community. Her discipline to regularly inform me of her displeasure went beyond the outcomes I had imagined for my radio career. In fact, much of the general 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 and to mention regularly that God is neither. 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, who happened to be a Democrat named Barack Obama. These radical notions of mine were met with extreme, personal rebuke, 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 received came from

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’s rooted in the implied fundamental job description. 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, he or she will speak about that event as if having the right perspective. Talk shows don’t thrive on the wisdom of their hosts, but rather on the confidence of their hosts and on the entertainment value and comfort they bring their audiences. Talk shows don’t need the truth to survive and thrive. Truth is mostly irrelevant to the equation. Talk shows don’t need to build consensus or find common ground among diverse people groups to achieve their objectives. Talk shows don’t 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. Talk show hosts are usually either very conservative or very progressive. The most successful 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’re addressing.

dynamics. Sharing your thoughts with the world was not easy. If people had opinions they wanted to share with the world, they made sure their opinions were worth sharing.

The internet opened up our access to the world and to each other, which brought with it many positive and powerful implications. Our communication is no longer based on where we live and who we know. We don't have to wait for the gatekeepers to let us speak. We don't need to be called on by the moderator, pastor, organizer, or editor for us to share our messages. If we're passionate about an issue, we can instantly communicate our message to the world, or at least to a few hundred followers who might even carry our message to their social networks. The democratization of communication gives tremendous power and opportunity to each of us. The oppressed, marginalized, and previously silenced now have platforms that give their voices the potential to be heard. One of the greatest blessings of the social media age is our ability to instantly and broadly share our sincerely held convictions to many or to specific audiences, celebrities, or politicians with accessible Facebook pages, Instagram feeds, and Twitter handles. Yet the immediacy, ease, and relationally disconnected nature of social media devalues how we communicate with each other. Many have become far more concerned with sharing opinions than forming relationships. When they do form relationships, they form them in the manner of a talk show host: championing their opinions to rally people around shared ideologies, dogmas, and doctrines. In the social media age, every Christian has the potential to become their own talk show Jesus.

James warns, "Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (Jas 3:1). In the internet age, we act as

show on a conservative radio station. However, some days I feel as if I left talk radio and it 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 their readers. 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 dude 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.

Dream Big, Fail Big

I often tell people that my motto is “Dream big, fail big!” It’s not actually my motto because I don’t have a motto. I’m not an Instagram post. Regardless, I like the sentiment and the laughter my faux motto evokes. Why fail at something sensible when you can fail at a ridiculous dream? Why fall short of a possible goal when you can fall short of achieving the unachievable? What I’m attempting to express with these ridiculous statements is that I want my life to always be open to the miraculous. I don’t 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. 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 these three men, I’m struck by the realization they did not know the outcome of their story while

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 is full of polarizing people. Even worse, our culture rewards contentious behavior and rhetoric. The internet increases and normalizes the polarizing divides that exist within our culture. Many Christians embrace incredibly toxic forms of online communication. We boldly champion our opinions and argue our platforms at the cost of peace and love. We bow down at the altar of 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 facilitating environments that make room for the worship of our one true Savior. We have lost our way.

I'm tired of bowing down. I'm tired of letting the world set the agenda for how Christians communicate online. Christians are called to be peacemakers, to be light and life through social media. We can radically change online communication if we take seriously our mandate to participate in the ministry of reconciliation. It's time to stand up and stop worshiping the devouring idols of our age. We were created to turn our eyes, our hearts, and our intentions toward the motivations of heaven. I believe 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 One Questions

1. What are your primary reasons for reading this book?
2. What aspects of social media communication do you find most troubling?

Internet-Formed Identity

I'm familiar with a time radically different than this age. I remember life without the internet and 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 went online and followed 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 and then a daily necessity. I wasn't an early adopter, but I definitely went from being a horse-and-buggy communicator to a daily tweeting, frequent Facebooking, occasional Snapchatting, sometimes Instagramming, weekly

During the drive home, I talked with my wife 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 like right behind him! All he had to do was look a little to the left. I mean that store was tiny.”

I’m sure as I indulged in my soliloquy I felt a certain form of superiority, believing I would never succumb to such illogical reliance upon technology. I might have even defended my righteous perspective by making note of another technological absurdity I encountered in my early days of online communication.

In 1994 I graduated from the University of Washington with a BA in history. At the time, as with any time, there were not a lot of history job openings. However, I did get the opportunity of a lifetime to work for an internet startup company that was sure to make me millions. This isn’t hyperbole. I was hired when market investors believed almost every new online company was sure to make them rich. Most technology startups 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 tech company that would eventually have thousands of employees. I was the research assistant for the founder of the company, Tom. Tom was a former vice president at a software company who made millions through his stock options. I met him while we were both taking a history class at the University of Washington. 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 seemed like a miraculous opportunity. Tom told me he was

culture, so I was surprised when my attempts at face-to-face or verbal connection were thwarted with “Just shoot me an email.” I understood the principle of the phrase, but it seemed rather absurd in its implementation.

Early on, I would walk down the hall to his office and ask Tom a simple question such as, “Are we going to lunch?” and Tom would respond with, “Shoot me an email.” In response to his request, I would walk fifty feet back to my office, sit down in my chair, turn on my computer, open my email, type in Tom’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.” If I was lucky, it would include a time and location. Knowing I could just yell “Great!” and he would hear me down the hall, I would instead type “Great,” hit send, and look forward to our upcoming lunch. 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 the individuals forming the internet platforms of our future viewed detached connection as normal or even preferable. Both moments are imbedded in my memory: my busy boss, too hurried to answer a question in person, needing the intermediary of email as a buffer to give his replies, and a family friend searching for his lost girlfriend in a tiny store through text messaging without ever looking up to see her standing just a few feet away. These were signs of things to come. My responses were as well.

I was self-righteous and simplistic about how I processed those moments. I thought myself above the influence of technology in the same manner as those I judged. I thought my

Marshall McLuhan's observations concerning all forms of media have a prophetic poignancy in our social media age. McLuhan argues that new media forms always do more than 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 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 capacities, and shifted our focuses to visual stimulation over an auditory focus. Every new and different medium shapes us.

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

Social media is more than just a medium for communication. The internet does more than magnify or amplify our expressions. Social media fundamentally changes what we say, when we say it, where we say it, why we say it, and how we say it. Most importantly, social media modifies who we are and what we are becoming. Social media isn't just a messaging platform, but rather a platform that changes our messages, even revising our

the impact 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.”⁸ Of course, when we finally have discussions about etiquette and civility, our perceptions have already been radically altered by the technology we’re trying to reform. The medium itself transforms the way we seek a cure for the medium’s ills.

Writing before the social media age, author Neil Postman explains 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.⁹

Although Postman wrote 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 ways we speak truth to one another and the ways we navigate conflicts. Social media influences us at a pace faster than our capability to process clearly the internet’s negative and detrimental impacts.

Our complete enmeshment in the internet age severely hampers our ability to gain perspective. We are not outside observers, measuring the pros and cons of participation.

was far less broadcasting of our thoughts and feelings and far more living with our thoughts and feelings.

The pre-internet age is becoming a distant memory. We are no longer limited in our ability to quickly communicate every thought and word with an instant audience of family, friends, and strangers. We have constant access to an always-on platform that connects us to an endless array of people. We don't have to wait for time and relational circumstances to communicate our hearts. Instead, we share whichever words we want whenever we want to share them, at any time of the day. Just as the automobile expanded the territory humans could traverse, our thoughts travel farther and quicker than ever before. The internet extends our voices beyond anything our ancestors 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.¹⁰ 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."¹¹ 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."¹² The more we rely on wayfinding apps, the less we are able to find the way through our own cognitive abilities.

Similarly, the internet allows us to instantly connect and communicate. This immediate access to connection and

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'm 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 don't want connection; I just want to share my thoughts and then disappear from the online cacophony. The internet makes detached, careless communication easier for me.

The internet is changing us, numbing us, forming us into different people. 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 mean and more kind, less polarizing and more filled with Christ's reconciling love. We might even become peacemakers.

Chapter Two Questions

1. What are some of your earliest positive and negative social media memories?
2. When did you first realize social media was having a negative influence on your life?
3. What does the phrase "The medium is the message" mean when referring to social media?
4. How does social media affect the way you communicate with people? How would your communication be different if social media did not exist?

3

Detached Individualism

Our lives find meaning and movement through relationships. We learn to crawl and walk toward those called to love us. We move forward in life expecting new relational horizons and possibilities. To be human is to be relational. It was not good for Adam to be alone; it's not good for us to be alone (Gen 2:18). We need the promise and possibility of healthy, life-giving relationships.

Think of all the people you know, the relationships that swirl around you. Think of your family, your friends, your neighbors, your work acquaintances, the people you see on a regular basis or seldom at all. Think about the strangers who briefly wait on your table, ring up your groceries, help you return an overly large sweater, or just nod in your direction as you pass by on the street. Think about that barista attending community college who remembers your drink, your name, and the fact that you only like small straws in big cups. Contemplate the woman who cuts your hair and recalls not only the style you want but the names of your kids and exactly where you left off

communicating for the purpose of having everyone meet your needs. Everyone exists to serve you. Instead of watching how your words affect others, you're only noticing 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. View all your relationships 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? Can you see a world where you only accept and abide with people who meet your needs and serve your purposes? If you can, welcome to the internet.

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, 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 produce so much conflict, we need to examine the concept of networked individualism.

Networked Individualism

Social media eliminates many of the practical motivators that used to help people resolve conflicts or maintain long-term relationships with differing individuals and communities. As I

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 don't believe they fully grasp the fundamental problem of using the internet primarily for individualistic pursuits. Networked individualism makes the online world transactional rather than a place where individuals 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, a means to solve a problem, answer a question, or fulfill a desire. If an individual doesn't meet our needs or answer our questions sufficiently, we simply move on to someone else who can satisfy us. Networked individualism fosters a society where people are loosely connected with many networks of individuals, yet deeply connected with fewer and fewer people.

From a networked individualism perspective, I only care about my regular barista as long as she gets my drink right. Her community college struggles are of no concern to me. The woman who cuts my hair only has value to me if she provides exactly what I paid for and steers every conversation toward what makes my visit most convenient. Her life, her needs, her pains are not considered in a world focused on self-satisfaction. Even when money isn't involved, networked individualism assesses people based on how they benefit or inconvenience our

have abandoned. The many weak ties of networked individualism encourage us to not reconcile. We're 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. We neglect the ministry of reconciliation and our polarizing behavior continues unabated.

The internet produces a relational connectivity that is frequently void of intimacy and accountability. 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.⁶ Social media allows individuals to connect with people throughout the world without other relational entanglements or expectations. When internet conflicts occur, individuals can easily move on to other online relationships without suffering real-world consequences.

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."⁷ 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."⁸ 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

communication. We're simply less likely to reconcile with people we're less bonded with or less likely to need in the future. With the greater connectivity of the internet, many of our online relationships appear expendable. Therefore, we're 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 increases polarizing communication, divisive behaviors, and individualistic pursuits. Even in our healthy online relationships many feel profoundly disconnected, as if we're networked with many people but not truly connected with anyone. 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."¹⁰

Networked individualism creates a climate where polarizing, divisive behavior flourishes. 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 makes 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 the people God entrusts to our care, we use them.

move and shake my leg as a rather discomforting tingling begins to reanimate my foot until it once again finds its way back into full feeling and form.

Some mistakenly believe our feet or hands “fall asleep” due to a lack of blood flow. In reality, this numb feeling is caused by our nerves being unable to send their sensations to the right places. Pressure on one part of the body keeps the flow of our nerves from sending nerve sensations to another area of the body. For instance, crossing our legs can lead to a pinched nerve and a numb foot. Removing the pressure on the nerve by uncrossing our legs allows the flow of sensations to head in the right direction and bring back the appropriate feeling in our previously numb appendage. A change of position or posture stops the nerve blockage and allows sensitivity to return to the needed part of the body.

In some ways, this book is my attempt to get us to move, to realize that many of us have embraced a posture with social media that numbs our spiritual sensitivity. We are so enmeshed in the most destructive realities of internet toxicity that we don't even realize how numb we've actually become. To fully appreciate how much these social media platforms dehumanize us and weaken our capacity to form strong relational bonds, we need to start moving, to look at our world from a different perspective and posture. We need to move in different ways to recognize the awkward positions and stances we've been holding for far too long. I am confident we will experience strange new sensations as parts of our humanity wake from their slumber. The process of awakening might even come with a painful tingling of our conscience as our spiritual sensitivity returns.

What might be numbing your ability to advance the fullness of Christ's kingdom in your social media presence? What is

Whatever you post, make sure the focus is someone other than you. Okay, maybe this is a little bit about you . . . process how this experience makes you feel. Use the #PostingPeace hashtag.

Option Two: Think about a social media relationship that you have used primarily for selfish purposes. Ask God how you can serve this person. Follow through on what God reveals to you.

persistent personas that seem real even to someone scrutinizing them. They will be able to pose as individuals on social media and send personalized texts. They will be replicated in the millions and engage on the issues around the clock, sending billions of messages, long and short.⁴

The fact that we are fooled online by technology masquerading as humanity points to the profound limitations of social media communication. The online world is a disembodied existence where deeply important aspects of our humanity have no avenue for expression. Our inability to be fully present with other humans online or our inability to even know if a human is present on all sides of our social media conversations, sharply contrasts with the embodied, incarnational ministry of Jesus.

“In the beginning was the Word [Jesus], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:1, 14). Jesus told his disciples, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). Paul stated that in Jesus “all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Col 2:9). In Christ’s bodily, earthly ministry we experience the fullness of God.

Jesus is God incarnate, the Word become flesh. We, as believers, through the working of the Holy Spirit, are called to embody, or incarnate, the will of God. Through our physical presence, others should experience the presence, character, and nature of God. We are created in the image of God to image God in our relationships. We image God through revealing “Immanuel . . . ‘God with us’” (Mt 1:23). The internet separates us from being present with each other, from

to be fully present drastically works against the ministry of peacemaking.

A Divided Brain

Social media has the promise of being a multisensory platform that engages our mind's visual and auditory processing pathways through pictures, videos, and texts. However, when arguments break out, many tend to just write a lot of words. When social media fights become extremely text-dependent, humans have a more difficult time processing the complexities and nuances of the issues they are fighting about. This is partially because the reliance upon written communication limits the full usage of our brain's problem-solving capabilities. Written communication is more conducive to left-brain processing. Over reliance on left-brain processing works against peacemaking. To bring peace we need the full resources of the mind, along with all the help God will provide.

Author Daniel Pink points out that although our brains are complex organs that process information between both hemispheres, generally speaking the left hemisphere of our brain focuses on text while the right side of our brain focuses on context.⁷ 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."⁸ Regardless of exactly where the mind processes information, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter limit our mind's ability to process information holistically. These platforms often lack mechanisms for individuals to determine emotional cues, facial expressions, or intonations when discussing, debating, or arguing sensitive issues.

Contrast this confusion with me sitting in a room with my friends while we share memes or GIFs with each other. First, our communication is intentionally directed. We're sharing not for a general audience but for specific people. Second, we are experiencing the external reality of what is happening with each person in the room. We can hear the laughs or the silence. We can see the smiles or the frowns. We can sense acceptance or rejection without words being said. In-person communication gives our brains a wealth of information to determine how best to make our next relational move. The internet simply does not provide this kind of helpful feedback.

We have all run into the struggle of having our post or its intent misunderstood online. I have often lamented the lack of fonts or filters that could express my attitude or the intent behind my communication. I would gladly use an "I'm not angry" font or a "This is a sincere reply" filter or an "I'm honestly trying not to fight with you" typeface or an "I don't know why you're so angry at me right now, but I'm not angry with you and I'm sincerely trying my best to find a way to communicate in a way that doesn't make things worse" emoji. As of yet, that technology is unavailable and a smiley emoji isn't a sufficient substitute for in-person, in-flesh communication.

Reading, Writing, and Memeing Alone

Humans connect differently through oral communication. It's why we make our wedding commitments verbally, even if we're just standing in front of a judge and two witnesses. In contrasting written versus 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."¹⁰ In other words,

Father, but fully expressing the will and presence of the Father through the Holy Spirit. Social media separates our communication and intentions from ourselves, creating distance and disconnect rather than holistic connection.

Advertising Ourselves

Social media does more than distance us; it exaggerates our self-centeredness. Quentin Schultze writes, “For many people, the real lure of cyberspace is personal expression, not mutuality.”¹³ 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. For many, social media platforms only interest us as much as they satisfy our personal needs for expression.

Regardless of the size of the group, our online communication is more about self-expression than dialogue, more about sharing than listening, more about being heard and understood than about forming a healthy community. 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.”¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵

We view our social media communities very differently than other communities we affiliate with, such as church groups or