

Social Media for Christians

Jim Stephens

Social Media Part 1 – Why I like Social Media

Jean and I have lived on both sides and the middle of the USA. We've lived in Jamaica, the UK, and we've ministered in countries across and up and down Africa. We have friendships spanning the globe, the generations, different segments of Christianity, cultures, and denominations. Since moving back to the USA a few years ago, we've reconnected with High School friends and good friends from the early days of our marriage. I have friends from my Vietnam Tour of Duty. We've also reconnected with members of our extended families, mostly cousins, as the "uncles and aunts" generation is mostly gone now. We'd lost contact with many of these old friends, acquaintances, and family members, but Social Media has made it possible to reconnect and stay connected across the years and the miles.

I like to read about what friends far and wide are doing after all these years, see photos of their grandkids, vacations, and events, and even see what they ordered at their last restaurant dinner! And I marvel that "they haven't changed a bit!" when I see their latest photos. ***My life is richer through my use of Social Media.***

How I use Social Media

I have a very eclectic Facebook page and Instagram presence! I post my daily devotional, GraceNotes, to three Social Media platforms each day. I post quotes from books and authors, challenging questions, crafted phrases and proverbs from my observations and meditations. I love to read and pass on puns, both written and visual. ***And I post photos of my dog Jake finding bones in the desert.***

I use Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram. I use each of those Social Media Platforms for specific purposes, and I'm able to link them so that I can post in one place and link that post to all my other accounts. This allows me to limit the time I spend on Social Media, yet communicate with a wider, more diverse audience.

Be Intentional in Your Use of Social Media

You Should Decide What You See and Say on Social Media. I'll use Facebook as an example. It's the platform more people in my demographic use. Each platform has its own system and procedures for choosing what you see. I'll include some of my thought processes in choosing what comes to my Timeline and how I actively manage the content.

Choose What You See on Your Timeline

Like some of you, I have Facebook friends from across the faith spectrum, the political spectrum, and most any other spectrum that comes to mind. When someone in my Friends list starts posting stuff that's so contrary to my convictions it makes my heart burn or my brain boil, I may not want to unfriend them because I always expect to have friends I don't agree with on everything. ***Depending on the issue, there are ways to limit what you see without slamming the door on the relationship.***

My advice is that if someone is posting stuff that offends you, hurts your sensibilities, or infects you with the outrage virus, stop seeing their posts. You don't have to unfriend them to do that. Click on the three dots in the upper right corner of the post. ***You'll see a menu of things you can do, from "snoozing" their posts, to unfollowing them, to blocking a particular "meme factory" they may be posting content from.***

If there's a Facebook friend who brings you some sunshine and sanity through their posts, but you're not seeing much of them, go to their Facebook page, and in the lower right corner of their cover photo click "Follow" or if you're already following them click "See First." If you want even more sunshine from them, move left to the Friends tab and click "Get Notifications." ***That sets you up to see lots of stuff from that friend!***

You can tweak your Timeline so that you have a great deal of control over what you see. You can even ask for different ads. You'll still get the ads, but you may as well have some that you like better than others. ***Controlling what you see on Facebook will take some awareness and diligence, but you can shape it.***

Choose Your Responses Wisely on Social Media

When you see a really funny meme you might respond with a "LOL"! Or not! You may react to a kitten video with "Awwwww! That's so cute!" You may react to a political post or one of the many variations on "Hot Button Issues" with outrage or even disgust. ***It's important that you think through the range of responses you could make and consider the consequences.***

- **First**, remember that you're not going to change someone's mind with angry words and an outraged reaction.
- **Second**, remember that a person is not the sum of their Facebook posts. Because we tend to live in a sub-cultural bubble on Facebook and other social media, we may see lots of posts that friends haven't really thought through or even checked carefully. It's unwise for them (or us) to do that, but equally unwise to have a meltdown when someone else does it!

- **Third**, decide if your relationship with that person has enough value that you don't want to throw it away in the process of attempting to tell them how wrong they are and how right you are.

Positive Responses to Posts

When you're scrolling your Timeline, you have some react-response tools at hand. 1) You can "Like" a post. 2) You can "Comment" on a post. 3) You can "Share" a post. Each of these is an escalation of your degree of interaction with the post and the person who posted it.

- **You can Like the post.** This adds you to the number of likes and anyone can look and see your name there behind the hearts or smileys or thumbs up. This means you're also likely to see more posts from the person in the future. If it's a post from a Group or a Page, you can Like, Comment, or Share and those will escalate your future interaction with the Group or Page.
- **You can Comment on the post.** This means you type in some words or post an emoji, and your name will appear beside your comment. Depending on settings, the person who posted may get a notification of your comment. If you want a friend to see the post, type their name in a comment and they'll normally get a notification.
- **You can Share the post.** If the post or meme has a Share button, you can share it with or without comment to your Timeline or send it by Messenger to a friend. This is a higher level of engagement as it's on your Timeline and in your network.

Social Media Part 2 – Post to Social Media With Care

When posting something to social media, make sure it's something you don't mind everyone seeing. You may not have hundreds of Facebook Friends and Followers, but remember that each one has a network of contacts that they might share your post with. Even if you post something and later decide to delete it, it's possible that some or many have seen it, read it, and reacted to it. ***Have you ever tried to "unsee" something or "unhear" something you wish you hadn't seen or heard?***

Here are some simple common-sense and common-courtesy guidelines for choosing what, why, and how you post and share on social media:

Tell the Truth

So stop telling lies. Let us tell our neighbors the truth, for we are all parts of the same body. (Ephesians 4:25 NLT)

10...because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. 11 Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false. (2 Thessalonians 2:10-11 ESV)

Social Media loves political posts! Have you noticed that in matters of opinion, especially opinions about politics, social issues, generational issues, and the like, much of the posting is done by sharing memes, cartoons, quotes, and news headlines about issues and individuals. We saw this pattern develop prior to the last national elections. ***It tapered off slightly between election seasons, but it's starting to ramp up again now.***

Many of the posts shared are negative—that is, they are attacking a person, a party, or a policy. However, relatively few of the most negative posts shared are actually true! Some, even many, of the posts shared are slanderous. They often consist of false headlines, false survey results, false videos, false accusations. Statements made in these memes are often so ridiculous they don't even pass the simple "Common Sense" test! ***It makes my heart ache when I see Christians share these posts!***

For a while, when these posts would show up on my Timeline, I'd do a quick fact check on Snopes or Politifact or Allsides and comment with a link to the facts and history of the false post. What I quickly discovered is that no one thanked me for pointing out the truth! ***The poster or some other commenter would reply, "Everyone knows those fact-checkers are slanted to the left (or right)."***

I've done enough research on legitimate fact-checking sites to know that the problem isn't the bias of the fact-checker site. The bias is in the person who has

decided, "I've made up my mind! Don't confuse me with the facts!" ***By the way, I still fact check. I just don't frustrate myself trying to present the facts to folks who don't want to know!***

Try This: Since Snopes is probably the best known fact-check site, go to Snopes.com and search "Is Snopes biased toward the left or right?" Take five minutes to read the comments on that question. ***Then make your own decision.***

There are a couple of reasons it's important to me that we "Tell the truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God" in our Social Media posts:

- **The truth is sourced in light.** Truth may be hard to hear and painful to process, but it's the only thing that leads us to light and freedom.
- **Lies are sourced in darkness.** Lies keep people in the dark, including the people who originate them, the people who pass them along, and the people who consume them.
- **Passing on lies, whether intentionally or not, undermines our credibility.** I'm a Christian, so I have a stake in the reputation of other Christians, whether or not we're of the same brand, or of the same political convictions. So when Christians pass on opinion posts that are false, slanderous, and often created in a meme factory in Eastern Europe, it reflects on all Christians. And this is not a time for followers of Jesus to throw away our credibility. ***We're gonna need it soon!***
- **My advice:** If it doesn't pass the basic fact check, don't post it! And block the organization that originated it. ***Your credibility as a truth-teller is more important than the "Zing" you get from posting!***

Social Media Part 3 – Do No Harm

One of our family patriarchs was born, grew up, and spent his whole adult life in the Southern Oregon town of Paisley (Pop 213) Most famous for its annual Mosquito Festival!). We lived in Tri-Cities, WA and traveled the 400 miles to Paisley every year or so for family visits. I remember an incident from a visit there in the mid-70's, when the Vietnam war was winding down.

Every evening, whoever was at home would gather in the living room for the news. Homes in Paisley had access to one TV station, from Klamath Falls. The reception was poor, the picture was snowy, the sound staticky. On this occasion there was a news item on about Vietnam and Papa Earl launched into a diatribe against the Vietnamese, all Asian people—in fact against all “those damn furriners” in general. He had a very strong opinion, anchored entirely and solidly in prejudices and misinformation!

Also in the room was a young man in his early 30's who had not long before spent a year in SE Asia and had lived and worked among and fought alongside the “furriners!” This young man really, really wanted to bring some light to bear on the one-sided discussion taking place!

But Papa Earl was not interested in accurate facts or correct information. He was not interested in knowing the truth. He did not want light. He was more interested in generating heat! And the young man, that would be me, decided not to engage Papa in an argument about Vietnam, the world political situation, or “furriners.”

I had facts that could enlighten his uninformed, misinformed opinion. I had experience that could have informed his prejudice-based, bigotry-fueled rant! But my facts would also damage or destroy a relationship that was far more valuable to me than “Being Right!” There would be no satisfaction in winning in an argument at the cost of a relationship! And I really loved the old guy! I learned a lot from him through the years. Just not about Global politics and “damn furriners!” (He was about the age then that I am now!)

Whenever I remember that little vignette from 45 years ago, I remind myself that if you win an argument and lose a relationship, nobody really wins.

As Christians, we may choose to align ourselves with a particular ideology and political party. We may choose to support and promote political candidates we feel will serve us well and lead us wisely. We may choose to communicate our ideas and opinions with others on social media and in our small groups and at lunch and wherever. But our true allegiance is to a servant-King, Jesus Christ, who is not up for election or re-election this or any other election year. And Jesus Christ has some clear and simple things to say about our lives in community and about our communication with those we agree with and those with whom we strongly disagree!

Here are some questions to ask before posting to Social Media: Is it true? Is it helpful? Is it kind. Will it encourage or discourage. Will it build or destroy? Will it open minds or close minds? Does it need to be said?

Add Value Every Time

31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. 32 Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:31-32 NLT)

Let's be sure we think through these things I've mentioned. I don't mean that every time you want to post a kitten video, or a photo of your birthday cake, or the snow on the patio furniture in your backyard on Facebook, that you've got to pray and fast and seek legal advice before hitting the "Share" button.

Let's be aware, friends!

- Be aware of credibility.
- Be aware of truth and lies.
- Be aware of "Do No Harm".
- Remember that keeping a relationship healthy is way more important than winning an argument.

To paraphrase Ephesians 4:29 ***"Let everything you post be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who read them."***

A Couple of Footnotes to this series of posts:

- **Among the unhealthy effects too much engagement with social media can have on us is discouragement and depression.** We're sitting on the couch in our pajamas watching NCIS reruns (again), scrolling through our Facebook Timeline on the tablet while the commercials are on. We're looking at this seemingly endless stream of photos and stories of vacations, parties, family gatherings, and adventures our Facebook Friends it can seem really depressing. We're comparing our dull lives to their exciting lives, and we end up feeling left out and alone. Or is that just me?
- **Try to remember that people carefully curate their story and its accompanying videos and images to present the very best moments in the very best and most exciting way!** And it's entirely possible that while you're scrolling through the social media record of their Most Excellent Adventure, they're sitting on the couch eating Doritos, watching Guy's Grocery Games and scrolling through someone else's Best Life Now presentation on Facebook.
- **The instructions I listed earlier for how to control what you see on your Facebook Timeline are not absolute guarantees.** Facebook does use algorithms that affect what gets sent our way, but you have some control. Your Social Media experience will be enhanced if you use it wisely!

Here are some scriptures that have influenced me in my Social Media use and in writing this article:

And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. (Philippians 4:8 NLT)

25 So stop telling lies. Let us tell our neighbors the truth, for we are all parts of the same body. 26 And "don't sin by letting anger control you." Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry, 27 for anger gives a foothold to the devil. 28 If you are a thief, quit stealing. Instead, use your hands for good hard work, and then give generously to others in need. 29 Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them. 30 And do not bring sorrow to God's Holy Spirit by the way you live. Remember, he has identified you as his own, guaranteeing that you will be saved on the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. 32 Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:25-32 NLT)

I hope this has been helpful!

Grace and Peace,

Jim Stephens
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Social Media Part 1 of 3 – Why I like Social Media

<http://www.jimastephens.com/2020/01/12/social-media-part-1-why-i-like-social-media/>

Social Media Part 2 of 3 – Post to Social Media With Care

<http://www.jimastephens.com/2020/01/13/social-media-part-2-of-3-post-to-social-media-with-care/>

Social Media Part 3 of 3 – Do No Harm

<http://www.jimastephens.com/2020/01/13/social-media-part-3-of-3-do-no-harm/>