

DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

BEN WORKENTINE

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INTRODUCTION

In 2013, Justine Sacco's life changed with 140 characters and 170 followers. Moments before boarding an international flight from New York to Cape Town, South Africa, Ms. Sacco tweeted an off-color joke about AIDS and being white. After posting the comment, she shut off her devices and slept for her 11-hour flight back home (she was from South Africa originally). After landing (#HasJustineLandedYet) she reopened her device to find her tweet trending #1 online, reposted by celebrities, and an email from her employer alerting her that she no longer had a job. Do you remember the incident? Justine sure does.

Or, consider the April 29th, 2024 event in Baltimore, MD where a disgruntled Athletic Director fabricated, with the power of AI, a conversation where his principal went on a racist tirade about students, teachers, and the Athletic Director. The AD tried to use the fabricated audio to get the principal fired.¹

Each example demonstrates a physical world and digital one that overlap but are not the same. It is hard to overstate the tremendous impact the online world has on our world and thereby our ministries. What we say, what we do, how we interact online has reverberations in our real world. And because what's online is forever (or as close to immortality as you can get without a resurrection), the reverberation can be felt years

¹ A. B. C. News, "Deepfake of Principal's Voice Is the Latest Case of AI Being Used for Harm," ABC News, accessed May 13, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/deepfake-principals-voice-latest-case-ai-harm-109751987>.

and decades afterward. Online is the new reality, it is where the world lives and interacts. Take a stroll at your nearest park, I'm willing to bet you'll see more parents looking down at their phones than watching their children. Go to your nearest public library and compare book readers to computer users. People are online. It is true of Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z, and to a growing extent Generation Alpha.

I have heard and read many presentations, papers, and books asking the question, "How do we reach Gen Z?" Their church attendance is certainly lower than previous generations.² The recent statistical analysis of the WELS (2023) points to a growth in small churches (those worshipping 50 or fewer) and an decline in attendance for those age 18-34. Many parents and grandparents look around and ask, "Where are our kids?" There are at least two generally true answers: 1) not at church, and 2) online! Is it possible that our social media usage has something to do with those two answers? Introspection requires we ask, is it possible that we've alienated Gen Z and Alpha in their home (online) and so they won't come into ours (church)?

And that is the root of the title and thesis of this paper. Our Lutheran forefathers thought of the world in terms of two kingdoms. Our paper and presentation yesterday expertly led us through those waters, a good refresher as we approach the November 5th elections. However, those illustrious men could never dream of this new digital world with a population of 5.35 billion³. When I want a good chuckle, I imagine what it would be like to bring my fully functioning smartphone back to Dr. Luther around 1520 and get his reaction (listen, as long as I'm time traveling, I might as well be bringing fiber optic cables and WIFI capability with me!). Would he also chuckle at cat videos? Would he become incensed at the injustice and scope of war in our world? What would he say about the modern human being's ability to access more information⁴ than any one person could hope to read in multiple lifetimes.

We live in a modern world with a third kingdom, a digital one. A kingdom that transcends language and race, that divides based on platform usage, punctuation usage, and the latest online influencer trends. You may assume that the terming of the online world as a separate, distinguishable "nation" or "kingdom" is hyperbolic

² "Gen Z and Religion in 2021," *Religion in Public* (blog), June 15, 2022, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2022/06/15/gen-z-and-religion-in-2021/>. See figure 2 below.

³ "The 2024 Social Media Demographics Guide," accessed May 13, 2024, <https://khoros.com/resources/social-media-demographics-guide>.

⁴ According to HealthIT.com, the total information on the internet is 64 Zetabytes. That number is expected to hit 175 ZB by 2025. 175 ZB of information would fill enough DVDs to stack 222 times around the globe.

or poetic. Consider two definitions given by Black's Law Dictionary "A large group of people having a common origin, language, tradition, and usage constitutes a political entity." Or here's another, "community of people inhabiting a defined territory and organized under an independent government; a sovereign political state..."⁵ Combining those two definitions, a nation is tied together by 1) common origin, 2) language, 3) tradition, 4) usage, 5) territory, 6) independent government, and 7) sovereignty. Of those seven marks, perhaps the online world lacks only the territory, if we are to understand that in purely physical terms.

In his recent WLS Symposium paper, author Paul Koelpin cited Luther's definition of the "temporal kingdom" as, "[that] which restrains the un-Christian and wicked so that—no thanks to them—they are obliged to keep still and to maintain an outward peace."⁶ A simple definition and one the Digital Kingdom simply meets. Who keeps banks in check who deal in international waters away from the prying eyes of any national government? Hackers, online detectives, and activists. Who tracks down those who traffic in the exploitation of children when it is far outside the capabilities and purview of governmental authorities? Organizations like Thorn⁷ and Operation Underground Railroad (founded by now-famous Tim Ballard, the subject of the movie "Sound of Freedom").⁸ These are non-government entities whose work straddle the physical and digital worlds.

The internet is the platform for the highest forms of democratization of individualization. If you love to raise rabbits, invest in cryptocurrency, and create AI art, there is a Reddit board and Facebook group specifically for you. The internet is a meritocracy where every voice is heard, and the best ideas carry the day. It, like any earthly kingdom, incentivizes the desires of the sinful nature and gratifies the most carnal cravings of the fallen human condition: racism, sexual exploitation, human trafficking, drug dealing, murder, fraud, and reputation assassination. Just as alive and well are philanthropy, invention, community, safety, and connection.

⁵ Bryan A. Garner and Henry Campbell Black, eds., *Black's Law Dictionary*, 10th ed (St. Paul, Minn: Thomson Reuters, 2014). P 1183

⁶ "Koelpin - The Kingdom(s) and the Power and the Glory.Pdf," accessed June 3, 2024, <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/bitstream/handle/123456789/7345/Koelpin%20-%20The%20Kingdom%28s%29%20and%20the%20Power%20and%20the%20Glory.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

⁷ <https://www.thorn.org/>

⁸ <https://ourrescue.org/>

It's as though we are missionaries landing, for the first time, on a heretofore unexplored continent. A Kingdom rich with a variety of people, cultures, expressions, and expectations. A continent with its own culture and a limitless plethora of subcultures. The question for each missionary, for each of us, is: how will we evangelize this new continent? Will we traipse around, oblivious to what makes this kingdom unique and try to impose laws and culture from the old kingdom to a place where they do not belong? Will we syncretize and fully immerse ourselves into the culture of this new continent and so give up the leverage we have as heralds of the Gospel? That is the question before each of us. It's not a new question, we should probably have been asking it since at least the advent of social media, pocket computing, and high-speed internet (circa 2007). But here we are. A chance to recommit to thoughtful and careful cultural exegesis in order to open doors for the Gospel.

OBJECTIVES

The genesis of this paper was a request for a "How-to" for social media and other online media. A "how-to" that was accessible to all ages and experience/comfort levels. My qualifications? I am under 40. That's not exactly what the committee said, but that's how I internalized the request. Well, jokes on them. I might be under 40, but I rarely post to social media. I use it for information gathering: stories, writers, creators, and movements that I am interested in update me on the latest events and happenings through social media. I've probably posted something original (not a repost) less than a dozen times over the last year. If you include reposts, that number probably jumps to 30.

But, jokes on them again, my interest was not so much a "how-to do social media" but a "how-to-think-about-all-things-digital" kind of paper. See, a how-to for social media is, 1) already widely available in a variety of places from your local library to instructional videos on YouTube⁹, and 2) quickly outdated. In just the last several years, Twitter has become X, Facebook has become Meta, and the introductions of technology like Apple Vision Pro represents a significant evolution, if not outright revolution, of how people interact with each other in the digital space. Imagine what the next 12 months might bring!

⁹ See Appendix 3 for a curated list of resources designed to guide churches in the realm of social media use.

With that in mind, here's what I hope to accomplish in our time together today:

- Understand the state of online technology today including its inertia towards a counter-Gospel
- Reiterate a number of biblical principles any child of God brings to any online interaction
- Identify the tremendous opportunity presented by the digital kingdom
- Through a number of case studies, gain new perspectives on our own use of social media.

STATE OF TECHNOLOGY

There is so much technology we could discuss, technology that has profound implications for God's ongoing preservation of creation, our stewardship of creation, our interactions in the world, our perceptions of that world, and the fabric of our various communities. Artificial Generative Intelligence, Quantum Computing, Decentralized Computing, Augmented/Alternate Reality, and the Internet of Things all come to mind. While each technology has had and will continue to have seismic impact on the world we live in, for the sake of this paper let's focus in on one cluster of technology in particular.

Arguably, the technology with the greatest societal and individual impact of the last 20 years is social media. In his must-read book *Hybrid Church*, author James Emory White identifies five key impacts of social media and the online world. The Digital Kingdom is, 1) hurting our kids, 2) changing how we view and have sex, 3) costing us community, 4) making us angrier, and 5) fueling a rapid change of culture.¹⁰ (Dr. White writes dozens of pages on this, if you're curious for more, please pick up a copy of *Hybrid Church*) These are pervasive changes that leave no area of life untouched. In other words, this digital kingdom is a field ripe for spiritual harvest. Because of its seismic impact on culture and our mission field, we'll spend the duration of this paper/presentation looking solely at this technology. With that in mind, "technology" will be used interchangeably with "social-media" here, but should the two terms are not usually synonymous.

¹⁰ James Emory White, *Hybrid Church: Rethinking the Church for a Post-Christian Digital Age* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2023). Pg 54-56

Digital technology's rise has been facilitated by a logarithmic growth in computing power and affordability¹¹, internet speed, and information security, and a world-wide adoption rate. Combined, they made social media a self-perpetuating system. Have you ever tried to quit social media? I have. I've never stayed clean for long. Social media has reshaped the human brain (not just of young people). Author Nicholas Carr says,

Dozens of studies by psychologists, neurobiologists, educators, and web designers point out the same conclusion: when we go online, we enter an environment that promotes cursory reading, hurried and distracted thinking, and superficial learning...

One thing is very clear: if, knowing what we know today about the brain's plasticity, you were to set out to invent a medium that would rewire our mental circuits as quickly and thoroughly as possible, you would probably end up designing something that looks and works a lot like the internet.¹²

This technology gives any who engage with it a bullhorn on a streetcorner. Messages are crafted and amplified. How clever, clear, and creative you are with your message determines just how much your message is amplified. Catchy phrase? 3x amplification. Arresting image? 10x amplification. Emotional short video? 100x amplification. Viral cat? 1000x amplification. Gone are the days when you could have a bad Sunday service, say something boorish and move on after a few apologies. Our message gets in front of more people than we ever dreamed possible. The weight of the opportunity and corresponding responsibility draw us back to the Scriptures so that we might engage with while grounded in ultimate Truth.

BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES

How can we think about social media? What mental models might fit best? One model might be war. The soul of every man, woman, and child is at stake. Church leaders are not innocent bystanders, nor are they victims of the winds of change. We are agents of the Risen King for the proclamation of truth, a truth that has the essential quality of bringing about the unbelievable vision it proclaims: the Kingdom of Heaven. Paul makes clear, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against

¹¹ For comparison, the CRAY-2 supercomputer (\$12 million) of the 80's was already 155,000 times faster than the Apollo Guidance Computer (\$25.8 billion). But a dusty iPhone 12 (\$280) is 5000 times faster than the room-filling CRAY-2.

¹² Nicholas G. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020). Pg 3

the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). I fear that social media has been a flash bang grenade for too many of us: it has confused us. We have confused the real battle with the secondary battle. We have forgotten what powers stand arrayed against us and confused them with the avatars of political parties. We have launched wars over things which will “burn away” by fire on the final day. I know that each leader in our churches deeply cares about truth. But when the Truth is exchanged for truth, it is still a lie if it obscures the greatest Truth with a lesser truth. The battle is for souls, not the White House. The battle is about the kingdom, not one nation. Social media lures you into confusing the two and so losing our credibility in both.

Our posting, sharing, commenting, and liking of social media posts are marked by a different reality from 90% of social media citizens. We seek wisdom, not just truth, we seek reconciliation, not just peace, we seek restoration, not just being right. Paul writes, “But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them” (Titus 3:9-10). Paul identified the foolishness we engaged in before the kindness of and love of our God appeared in our lives. We no longer engage in that foolishness. Warn once, twice, and then leave. How many social media threads would be shortened significantly if Christians applied this wisdom?

The encouragement toward wisdom litters the pages of Scripture, nowhere stronger than in Proverbs - the stated purpose of the whole book is to give wisdom, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7). Or, “Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men, from men whose words are perverse” (Proverbs 2:12). Or “A person’s wisdom yields patience, it is to one’s glory to overlook an offense” (Proverbs 19:11). The encouragement toward, or teaching of, wisdom shows up more than 50 times in that particular book with wisdom finding its highest fulfillment in Christ himself and fear of the same.

But it’s not just the Proverbs, Paul gives fitting instructions in the area of social media use when he says, “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:15-16). We live in an evil age. Good is bad, bad is good. The natural knowledge of God has been actively expunged from the hearts and minds of our culture. You meet more and more people who have no memory of the Gospel, no spiritual background: religious “nones”.

War is one mental model. Perhaps a more captivating image, is that of missionaries. A brand-new continent has been created beneath our feet. A continent that does not require we leave our home country, not even our own couch, to access. A continent with rules, expectations, and opportunities. This continent is unchurched and desperately seeking the answers to the biggest questions of worth, origin, purpose, and destiny. Every video is a request by the creator, “Look at me, I’m somebody worth watching, right?” Every rant that begins with, “I’m a _____ (doctor, dietician, insider, expert) and I...” asks of us, “Isn’t where I come from worth something to you?” This new continent offers only echoes of answers. It validates sexual identity, which is only an echo of the fuller, brighter identity Christ offers. It affirms origin which is only an echo of the careful intentional craftsmanship our perfect Creator put into each of us. It offers purpose to persuade, oppose, and plant a flag which is only an echo of the greatest purpose to worship the Creator by living in his New Creation. It offers the destiny of being remembered forever which is only an echo of the destiny of the eternal home our Risen Savior bids us to inhabit upon his return.

These implicit searches for meaning, value, and destiny present some incredible opportunities in this online continent. Opportunities to bring the Bread of Life to those who are dying a daily empty death. Opportunities to bring living waters to those who are thirsty for a reliable identity. Opportunities to be ambassadors in the enemy’s stronghold. Let us not waste those opportunities!

At first, the disciples were supposed to wait for the Paraclete. After he was given, those same disciples were supposed to go... do you remember where? To “Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

When a social media user indulges in her/his sinful nature, social media is really selfish media. It serves as an accelerant to my yearning to make me the star, the center of the whole world. It bends information to my will and shapes it around my preferences. Social media used through the lens of the Old Adam manufacture a counter-Gospel; it promises to sanitize the world of anything I object to, gives me the power to define sin – even the unforgivable kind--, it exalts my actions to be praised and approved of by those who “follow me” (ironic when considering that Jesus invites us to follow him), and it tantalizes with a promise that better information will cure all societal ills. We must stand against each warped promise.

Social media is really selfish media. Its fundamental promise is to make me the star, the center of the whole world.

The claim of this technology and many like it is nothing short of divine. Consider this quote from MIT professor Max Tegmark, “We might build technology powerful enough to permanently end [social] scourges – or to end humanity itself. We might create societies that flourish like never before, on Earth and perhaps beyond, or a Kafkaesque global surveillance state so powerful that it can never be toppled.”¹³ Save humanity or destroy it. Understand the underlying claim, if technology can save us, and we created technology, then we can save ourselves. The trap is not just self-centered, it is mankind-centric.

I cannot escape the trap without first recognizing and confessing that I have bought into those promises myself. I have set myself up as the leading expert on some topic, divisive or otherwise, political or otherwise. I have claimed authority and rights that belong to God. I have assumed I know, not just what is true, but what is right. I have made proclamations as though omniscient. I have kept up with stories and news articles in

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pursuit of omnipresence. I have proposed remedies (or suggested who to vote for) as though all-powerful. I have called down curses as though vengeance were mine. I have advocated for absolution of this person or that movement as though I were love itself. I have wasted precious time being consumed by the news cycle. I confess. I confess to you my brothers and sisters that I have sinned. Against

you, against the kingdom of my God, against God himself. I have stolen his glory and set up for myself an online kingdom with myself as king leaving no room the King of Kings to reign. That’s me. It’s you too. I haven’t combed your social media posts, I haven’t looked at every picture or clicked on every shared article. But I know your heart. It beats to the rhythm of the same sinful drum as mine. Let us confess our sins of pride, of kingdom building, of blasphemy.

And let us meet such confession with nothing less than the rich and revitalizing Gospel. Spoken to the sinner in the mirror, spoken to the penitent fellow minister, spoken to your pastor, your member. Consider the words that preceded our Titus 3 passage, “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:4-5). God’s love and kindness *has* shown up.

¹³ Max Tegmark, *Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, An Allen Lane Book ([London] UK [New York, NY] USA [Toronto] Canada: Penguin Books, 2018). Pg 37

It came, born of a woman, born under law. He overthrew the empire of sin and death that had had been established at the first bite of the forbidden fruit. He stood against the powers of this dark world, like a meek shepherd boy, he answered the call to battle, approaching the giants of sin and death with his perceived weakness and lured them into a battle for the soul of creation. But he never confused his overthrow of the Prince of Darkness with the Caesar of Rome. He stayed focused; you needed him to. While you were confused about the real enemy, while you thought the enemy lived out there in an ideology or status, he never was confused. While you had cozied up to those who would snatch your soul just as quickly as the heathen pagans, he never was confused. Here is our substitute. He came to build a kingdom-not-of-this-world which cannot be overcome by the likes of high-speed internet or constant connectivity. His is an eternal kingdom. While our posts will fade with the sands of time, his Word will never fail.

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Do you need a reminder of your new status? Are you wrapped up in the battles that do not matter in the eternal scale? Next time you walk into the sanctuary, walk over to that baptismal font. Let Paul take you, as he did his young protege Titus, to that ordinary bowl filled with ordinary water. Dip your fingers in. Recall the day you were reborn. The day when arms scarred with piercings opened wide to welcome you into an eternal kingdom and invited you to a new life under the benevolent rule of an eternal King.

This is who you are. Every week, you walk out of public worship and into a dangerous, sinful, and dark world.

Jesus didn't encourage his disciples to set up Christendom in Jerusalem and construct a theocratic Babel that allowed the world to burn around it as it sank into ever-more self-indulgent desires.

That's a good thing. Jesus didn't encourage his disciples to set up Christendom in Jerusalem and construct a theocratic Babel walled off from a world that burns with its self-indulgent desires. He sent them out, into the darkest places, those places that were farthest from his eternal rule. Those first disciples traversed river and mountain to seek out those who needed to know the River of Life.

We are not to be modern day Essenes who remove themselves from the real world in order to protect ourselves against its evil influence. We are not called to be hermits; we are called to be missionaries. Missionaries who endeavor into the unsafe, uncultured, uncivilized parts of the world. Not as colonizers, but

as salt designed to preserve an ailing world from its worst tendencies. As lights to shine on the Lord of the Nations.

DIGITAL PHILOSOPHY

I look out across a large room full of spiritual leaders and influencers. Whether it's the 8th grader who soaks up every word in catechism class, or the 23-year-old single mom who just needs someone to talk to, the 47-year-old who remembers you visiting the hospital room in the middle of the night for his Dad's final hours, or the 80-year-old who looks to you to remind her she still has a role to play in God's Kingdom even as she feels her years and energy has been spent down to nothing. You hold a position of influence. Like the finances we've been given, the time we have, the skills and gifts we steward, influence is a gift from God to be husbanded with care and Gospel-orientation. In pursuit of being better stewards of our God-given gift of influence, especially online, here are four questions to ask, four tests to give yourself when sharing, liking, and posting.

THE OFFICE WALL TEST

If you have an office at church, what do you put on the walls? Is your seminary diploma there? Your baptismal certificate? Do you have a cross wall? Perhaps you've got pictures of the family or other keepsakes. If you are a lay-leader at church, you may not have an office wall at church, but what would you put in the yard at church for a sign? Maybe you've put banners up for Easter or VBS? Maybe you've set out some signs that help people find parking or the right entrance for an event.

I call this the office wall test. If you wouldn't put it on the wall of your office, if you wouldn't put it on a sign on the church lawn, don't post it on social media. People love getting quality references from you about blogs, books, or videos they should check out. You might even put up an article you wrote for Forward in Christ. Pictures of your kids, your last vacation, your hobby, both candid and staged. Whether the post is political, personal, sensitive, or in questionable taste, the "Office Wall" test says, "If you wouldn't hang it on your office wall, leave it off your public social media page."

If you wouldn't put it on the wall of your office don't post it on social media.

THE TIME TEST

Have you ever looked back at an early sermon and thought, “What was I thinking?” Many of my sermons, pictures, and retweets have aged like powder-blue leisure suits. There are pictures of me wearing a goatee that extended a few inches below my chin. They exist in the internet world. I look at those pictures and think, “What was I thinking?”

That’s true of opinions, too. Especially on temporal issues like culture and civics. All of us assume, “I’m always going to feel this way about issue x or person y.” You know that’s not true, it hasn’t been, why would it start being true now? Assume that you will change - even if you find out ten years later that you haven’t. Give

*What if my feelings
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yourself the room you need to grow. Ask the question, “What if my feelings about this thing is 180 degrees different in 10 years?” That doesn’t mean you can’t share “hot takes”, but do so in a way that leaves you room to change your mind. When you post, “What idiot would think x?” are you putting yourself in the position of having to say, “Me. I’m the idiot that thought x.”

TRUTH TEST

We are always looking for opportunities to give a reason for the hope that you have. The truth test goes beyond asking the fundamental question, “Is this true?” It answers the question, “Does this build an opportunity to give testimony to the Truth?” In other words, does this post help establish an opportunity to witness?

*Does this build an
opportunity to give
testimony to the Truth?*

Here’s one way to think of the Truth Test: what kinds of posts spark someone to ask you, “What do you believe?” or “Who is Jesus?” or “Can I come to your church?” If your posts don’t spark that kind of curiosity, then think twice about such a post.

That is not to say that you can never post a cat video, family update, or new recipe. But each post should play into a larger narrative Kingdom-bearers tell of the over-arching joy, peace, contentment won for us at the empty tomb and conferred in the waters of our baptism. Another way to say this is to create the digitally embodied version of Paul’s exhortation, “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—*post* about such things.”

GENERATION TEST

This final test can leave something to be desired if used in isolation. But, in conjunction with the other three tests, it can be useful to see the impact of social media through the eyes of those who consume it. The generation test is this: Would my grandfather *and* my grandson publicly say the same thing? This may require a lot of assumptions (maybe your grandfather isn't still alive, or you don't even have kids yet let alone grandkids), don't take the test too literally. The test centers around identifying the power of speaking/posting words that endure and reverberate.

I don't know if you've ever watched your favorite comedy movie or show from a bygone era with someone of a much younger generation? If so, you know that not everything ages well. Your social media posts are forever, saved and resaved on far too many mainframes for you to hack and delete one-by-one. Post the kinds of things to which every generation would say "Amen".

Post the kinds of things to which every generation would say "Amen".

APPLY THE TESTS

Understand that all social media is trying to push for more and more visibility for each of its users. The more clicks, the more discussion, the more cross-sharing, the more revenue they make. No social site incentives privacy and invisibility, privacy and invisibility undermine their business plan. So, even if your settings are extremely private (settings I recommend a yearly review of), those sites are going to try and find ways to loosen your imposed restrictions. That's leaving aside all hacks and malicious actions by individuals or groups. Considering the likelihood of exposure, you **MUST** assume that every post, every like, every share, every comment will be visible to all people for all of time. And why would we seek to create an alternate persona online that is inconsistent with our IRL (In Real Life) character? If there is such a bifurcation of your actual character and digital persona, it's time to seek a reconciliation through community, confession, and therapy. These kinds of inconsistencies are the basis of Paul's call to Timothy to be above reproach, respectable, not quarrelsome and having a good reputation.

CONCLUSION

We come as missionaries, warriors, and envoys into a sin darkened world, no place exemplifies that more than the burgeoning online space. In other words, we come as heavenly citizens dispatched by the King of Kings to make a difference in this Digital Kingdom. He sent us with His power to save souls. Let's be about that work with such focus and determination that nothing can distract us. You work against a wily and tireless enemy: Satan. His highest objective is to get you to fall, each of us knows well the stories of the catastrophic damage he can wreak by getting one undershepherd (Staff Ministers, Teachers, and Lay Leaders, I'm looking at you, too) to fall. But if he can't get them to fall, maybe he can get them distracted. It's an acceptable "Plan B". He is just as happy to render us impotent in our mission as he is to disqualify us. If he can't kill the warriors of God's army, maybe he can get them fighting the wrong battles. Maybe he can get them swinging a mighty sword at straw men and false enemies. Then at least, they are not swinging the Sword of the Spirit at his demonic forces. That is the enemy's battle plan. It cannot succeed, in the end, because our Champion has already won. Whether his undershepherds stand tall or they fall, the battlefield is already the Lord's. Be comforted in knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that the answer to our prayer "Your Kingdom come" is not dependent on your social media usage.

But because that victory is already ours, it is more reason for us to engage the enemy with our own wisdom, peace, and joy. Know the enemy's battle plan and frustrate it. Know it and counteract it. Know it as the losing strategy that it is. Peace, friends, God reigns in this Digital Kingdom, too. You get to be the ones who take his dominion to the far reaches of the internet. Fellow servants of the Living God may God give us strength to answer his call. These fields are ripe. May we work them with end-times zeal, wisdom, and shrewdness that sees through the enemy's plan so that his diversions may come to naught.

CASE STUDIES

The following case studies are designed to spark conversation and real-life applications of the attitudes and heuristics outlines throughout this paper. When possible, I've tried to keep the situations realistic, in many cases reflecting real-life situations. As you discuss these case studies, my encouragement is to bring into your discussion as diverse a group as you can: Old, young, male, female, single, married, non-Christian, baby Christian, long-time Christian. Seek to understand before being understood, really hear the reactions and thoughts of those who see through different lenses than you do.

A. The local school board election is deeply divisive in your community. On the one hand, those who see themselves as "protecting the marginalized" on the other those who see themselves as "protecting safety and values". A particularly civic minded member who is prominent in your church posts on a social media website something critical about one of the candidates. Some of your members ask if you are doing anything about the person who has "slandered the reputation" of a civil leader. How do you address 1) the concerned members, 2) the posting member, 3) the general public who saw the post.

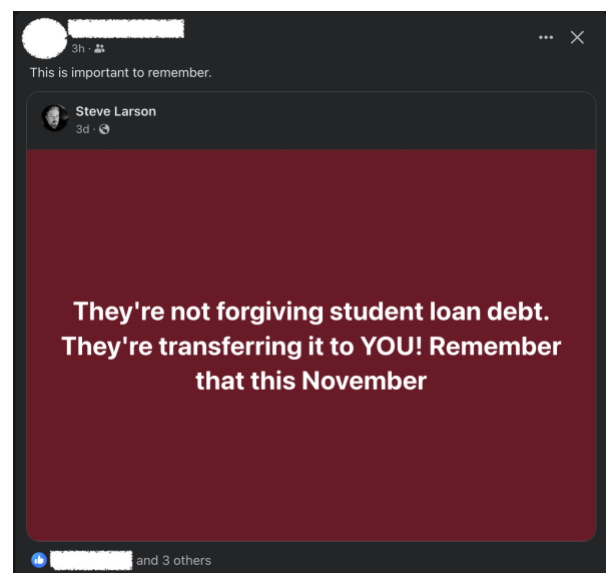
B. Your member posts this meme to the right. How soon do you start an End Times Bible study?



C. You've formally been the campus minister at a local college for years but only recently gotten active. At the college event that features all campus organizations and allows them to have a booth and invite students to participate, a college student walks up with her phone in her hands. "I checked you guys out. You are a church for old, white men, aren't you?" As evidence of her condemnation, she pulls up your personal social media page and points to the images, videos, posts that you've reposted, shared, and liked. This student isn't being quiet and soon

a crowd gathers. "Your church isn't for people like me, it's for people like you," the student ends her accusation and waits for your response. What are you going to say?

- D. You step into a thorny issue of the day on your personal social media page (not the church's official page). Your associate (or congregational president) does the same but on the opposite side of the issue. Some members come up to you after church and ask if everything is ok between you and your associate. They saw the posts and are concerned that there is a rift between the two of you.
- E. You recently reposted a conservative pundit who excoriated the worldview of Critical Race Theory. An African American friend that you've been witnessing to stops answering your texts/calls. Finally, after some silence he sends an brief message with a sense of finality, "I thought you saw me as a human, but after seeing your post, I can see that I was wrong. Goodbye."
- F. Upon his inauguration, you pray for the new president and congressional representatives by name in the prayer of the church. Afterward, you receive an email informing you that two families will be leaving your church because they can't believe you would pray for "that evil man." How do you respond?
- G. This post is from a lay leader in our church body and "liked" by pastors. See it from the perspective of a 20-something who is drowning in college debt greater than their income level for the next 10 years. How open do you think that 20-something will be with struggles, challenges, asking for help if this is the posture he sees them take toward the next generation.



- H. Consider the direction you tend to lean politically. Can you offer an honest Biblical criticism of your “side?” Consider the “other side.” Can you give a commendation of that “side?” What is something about their platform that pursues the good of creation?
- I. There is a group of 17-year-old girls in your congregation that have been close for a long time. They do everything together. Including, recently, a fledgling social media empire. They aspire to being influencers. How might you mentor, encourage, and empower them to be influencers for the Kingdom?
- J. Take a look at Appendix 1 Figure 1. What challenges might this pose in a polarized and contentious culture? In what ways could you be intentional about presenting Christ in a way that makes clear, “Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (Colossians 3:11)?

APPENDIX 1

The party registration of religious leaders

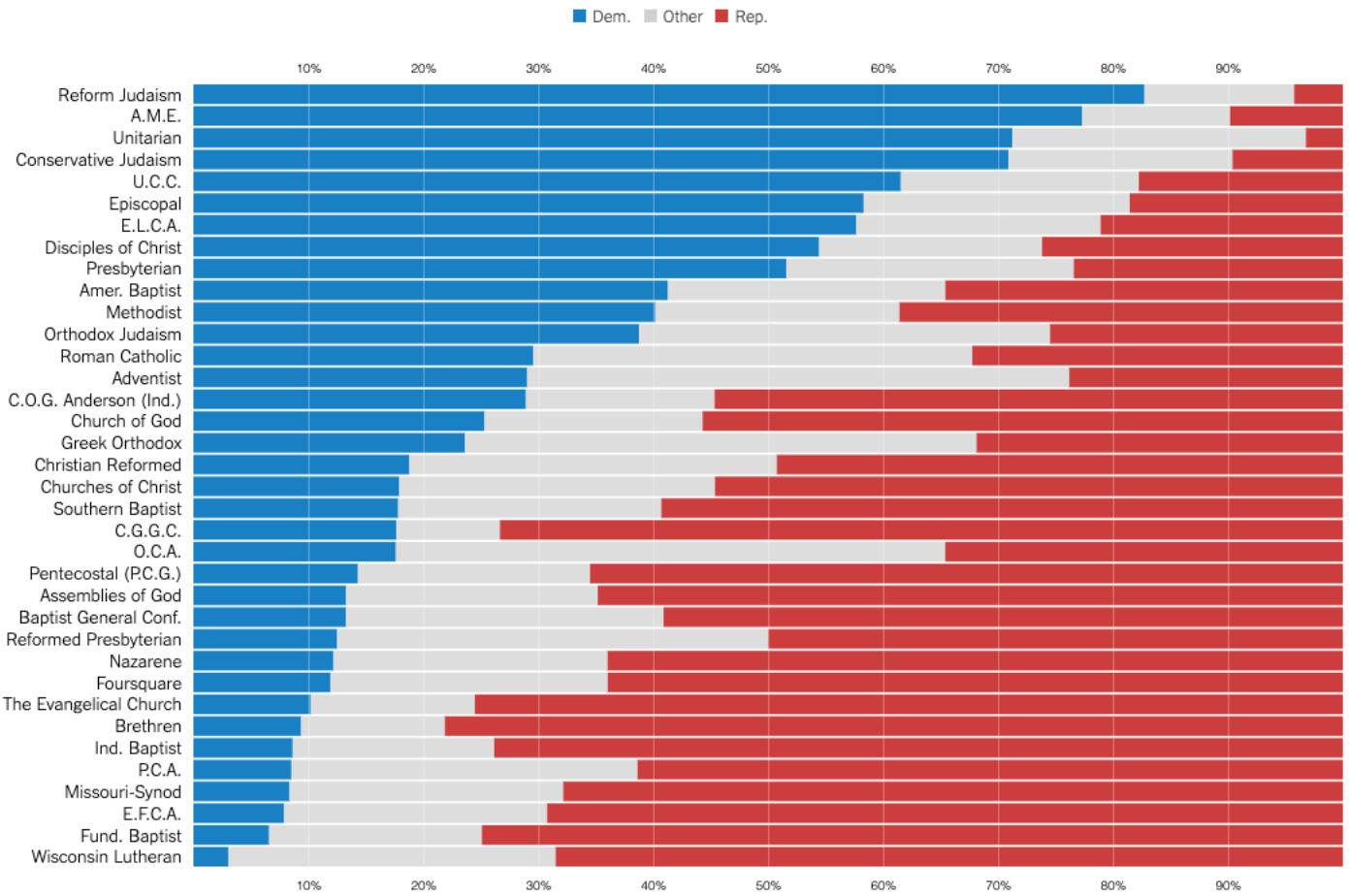
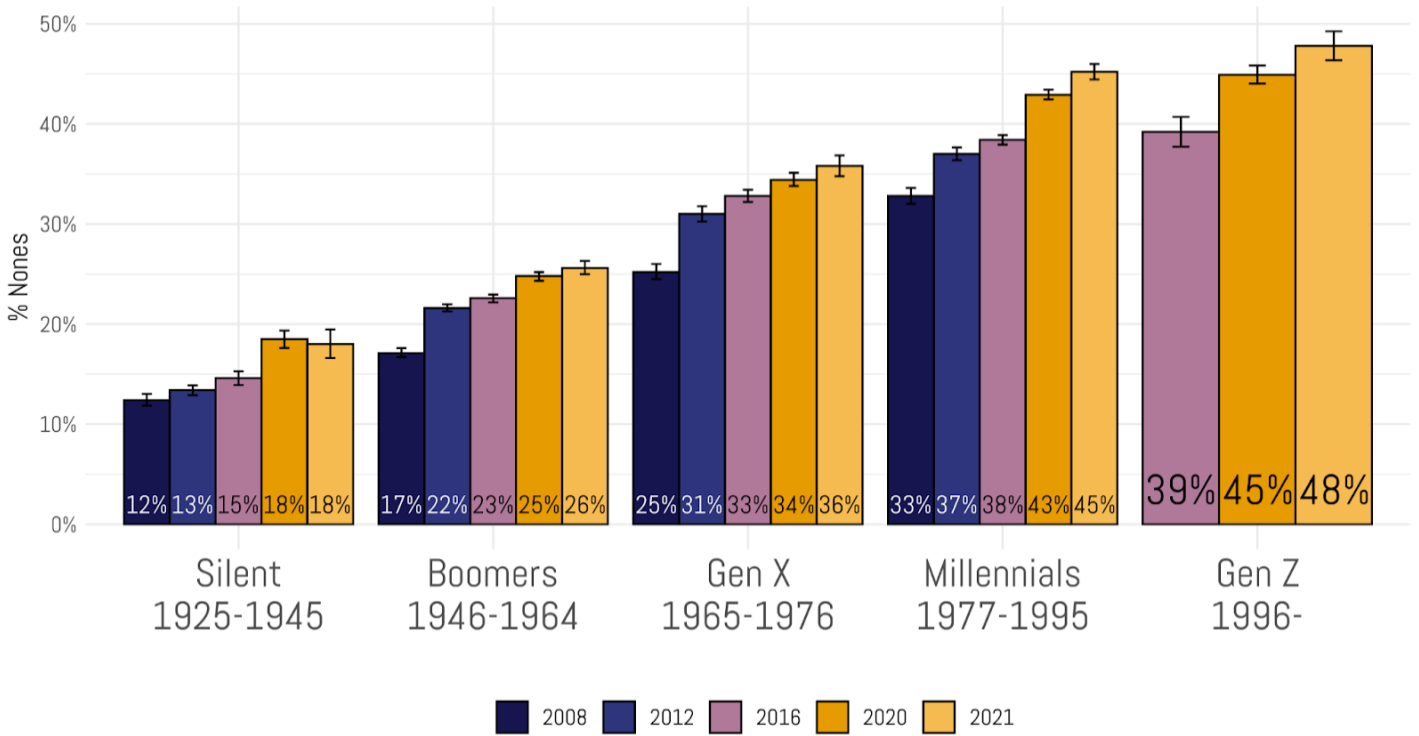


Figure 1 – From the New York Times. Study conducted in 2017.

Share Who Have No Religious Affiliation



@ryanburge
Data: CES 2008-2021

Figure 2 - Number of "nones"

O Discerning Spirit,
 who alone judges all things rightly,
 now be present in my mind and active
 in my imagination as I prepare to engage
 with the claims and questions of diverse cultures
 incarnated in the stories that people tell.

Let me experience mediums of art and
 expression, neither as a passive consumer nor
 as an entertainment glutton, but rather as one
 who through such works would more fully and
 compassionately enter this ongoing, human
 conversation of mystery and meaning,
 wonder and beauty, good and evil, sorrow
 and joy, fear and love.

All truth is your truth, O Lord,
 and all beauty is your beauty.
 Therefore use human expressions of
 celebration and longing as catalysts to draw
 my mind toward ever deeper insight,
 my imagination into new and
 wondering awe, and my heartbeat into
 closer rhythm with your own.

Shape my vision by your fixed precepts,
 and tutor me, Holy Spirit, that I might learn
 to discern the difference between those stories
 that are whole, echoing the greater narrative
 of your redemption, and those that are bent
 or broken, failing to trace accurately the
 patterns of your eternal thoughts
 and so failing to name rightly the true condition
 of humanity and of all creation.

Grant me wisdom to divide rightly, to separate
 form from content,
 craft from narrative,
 and meaning from emotion.
 Bless me with the great discernment to be able

A LITURGY BEFORE

Consuming Media

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MAKE ME TO KNOW
 YOUR WAYS, O LORD;
 TEACH ME YOUR PATHS.
 LEAD ME IN YOUR TRUTH
 AND TEACH ME, FOR
 YOU ARE THE GOD OF
 MY SALVATION; FOR YOU
 I WAIT ALL THE DAY LONG
 PSALM 25:4-5

to celebrate the stamp of your divine image
revealed in an excellence of craft and artistry
even while grieving a paucity of meaning
or hope in the same work.

Guard my mind against the old enticement
to believe a lie simply because it is beautifully told.
Let me not be careless. Give me right
conviction to judge my own motives
in that which I approve,
teaching me to be always mindful
of that which I consume, and
thoughtful of the ways in which I consume it.
Impart to me keener knowledge
of the limits of my own heart in light
of my own particular brokenness,
that I might choose what would
be for my flourishing and not for my harm.

And give me the grace to understand that
what causes me to stumble might bear no
ill consequence for another of your children,
so that while I am to care for my brothers
and sisters, I must also allow them,
in matters of conscience, the freedom
to sometimes choose a thing your Spirit
convicts me to refrain from. Even so, let my own
freedoms in Christ never be flaunted or
exercised in such a way as to give cause for
confusion, temptation, or stumbling in others.

May the stories I partake of,
and the ways in which I engage with them,
make me in the end
a more empathetic Christ-bearer, more
compassionate, more aware of my own
brokenness and need for grace,
better able to understand the hopes
and fears and failings of my fellow humans,
so that I might more authentically

live and learn and love among them
unto the end that all of our many stories
might be more beautifully woven
into your own greater story.

Amen.

SO WHATEVER YOU
BELIEVE ABOUT THESE
THINGS KEEP BETWEEN
YOURSELF AND GOD.
BLESSED IS THE ONE
WHO DOES NOT
CONDEMN HIMSELF BY
WHAT HE APPROVES.
ROMANS 14:22

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APPENDIX 3

FURTHER RESOURCES:

If you are in the market for “how-to” help on social media, here is a list of various sites and sources that have served me well.

- [Pro Church Tools](#). Breakdown of latest trends, best strategies, and upcoming developments.
- [Emily Writes LLC](#) A gifted WELS member who works with a variety of churches on strategy and tactics.
- [WELS Intersections](#) – an active Facebook community that shares resources and tips for maximizing
- [Social Media Examiner](#) is a guide on many different aspects of marketing and digital communication
- [SermonPrep.ai](#) a great resource to explore what AGI might mean for worship, content creation, sermon work

In the Realm of Best Practices for private online interactions, consider...

- [Zero Abuse Project](#) A phenomenal resource with expertise in churches doing all they can to keep minors safe

FURTHER STUDY

Another paper and topic that need to be addressed sooner than later is on the topic of AI and AI safety. We need to address questions such as:

1. What guidance ought we give called workers on how they ought to use AI in their ministry, especially for writing sermons and Bible studies?
2. How best to use AI to streamline mundane tasks (e.g. write promotional blurbs, mass emails, calendar keeping, virtual assistance, etc.)
3. What protections exist for pastors and churches from those who might use their digital footprint to create counterfeit material?
4. Assuming the proposition that social media represents a Digital Kingdom, how best do we carry out “Authentic Christian witness” in that new kingdom?

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