

GUIDES TO CHRISTIAN ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

This guide (and others in the series) is an initiative of the Office of the Bishop and the Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand. It is intended to help church members consider how they might respond to contemporary ethical issues. It is meant for use in personal reflection and is not an 'official' statement of the church on the topic. I am grateful to Nick Schwarz, Assistant to the Bishop – Public Theology, for his ongoing work on this project.

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SOCIAL MEDIA

Learn about social media: what social media platforms are for and how they can be misused

What do we mean by 'social media'?

When we talk about social media in this guide, we mean forms of electronic communication such as websites, platforms and applications ('apps'), including Facebook, TikTok, WeChat, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter, that enable computer and smartphone users to send messages and share ideas, opinions, news and other content like images and videos.

Some upsides of social media

- Families and friends separated by distance can stay in touch, share news and participate in each other's lives in previously impossible ways.
- People with similar interests and problems can find each other, share ideas and experiences with each other, learn from each other and offer each other advice and encouragement.
- Citizens in countries with oppressive governments can communicate and organise politically with less risk to themselves.

Some downsides of social media

- Social media connections don't offer the real-life interaction humans need to build trust with each other. Trust is the basis of genuine, healthy communities. We learn and maintain trust and other vital social skills, including tolerance (the ability to live with differences) through in-person experiences of rupture and repair, failure and recovery and transgression and forgiveness. Children who learn that the way to deal with people who make them uncomfortable is to 'block' or 'unfriend' them don't properly develop social skills necessary for adulthood. Adults' social skills deteriorate when they conduct most of their relationships online rather than in person.

- When people communicate via a messaging platform rather than face to face, they are less likely to be sympathetic and respectful. Boorish, troll-like behaviour is especially common when people can hide behind false names.
- Platforms like Facebook and Twitter are frequently used as forums for discussing serious, complex and contested issues but are poorly suited to that purpose. High-quality opinions are easily lost among posts that are superficial, ill-informed, frivolous, inflammatory or intentionally misleading.
- The sheer quantity of online content encourages skimming and spending more time on eye-catching items than quality items. It is easy to get into the habit of flitting between short, shallow and entertaining things and ignoring longer postings and scholarly articles, essays and books that offer a deeper understanding of important issues.
- When we use the internet and social media, artificial intelligence monitors our searching and viewing history and forms a 'profile' of us based on things that seem to be of most interest to us. Social media companies make money by targeting us with advertising and recommending or suggesting video content based on our profile and the types of interests we are presumed or predicted to have. One foolish click, however, and we can be bombarded for days or weeks with invitations to view material we would be wise to avoid.
- Because most people prefer to discuss issues with people who agree with them than people who disagree with them, online discussion groups tend to self-segregate into communities of similarly minded people. These communities can become 'echo chambers', where participants affirm each other's views and express contempt not just for opposing views but for people who hold them. It is fair to say that social media promotes division and tribalism.
- Social media can be weaponised to bully, defame, publicly shame, incite hatred against and otherwise abuse and harm other people, including inciting them to kill themselves or others. It is used by predatory people to groom, scam and exploit vulnerable people, including impressionable children. It is used by vindictive people to publicly humiliate former sexual partners. It is used to spread rumours, disinformation (fake news), conspiracy theories and offensive, obscene, violent, and otherwise shocking and harmful imagery.
- Some social media features encourage or reward excessive use, such as instant accessibility, constant notifications of incoming messages, positive reinforcement (ie 'likes') for popular posts and 'clickbait' popups that stimulate our curiosity and encourage us to stay online. It is appropriate to speak of users developing an unhealthy habit, dependency or even addiction when they become distressed if separated from their devices or asked to switch off and when social media activity causes them to neglect self-care (such as needs for sleep, exercise, healthy diet and spiritual nourishment) and important responsibilities (such as schoolwork, chores and in-person relationships).
- Some celebrity 'influencers' make lots of money posting their lives for their followers to see on Instagram and similar platforms. But their perfect bodies and (apparently) perfect lives tend to induce as many feelings of failure, despondency and negative self-image in followers as feelings of admiration. Many Facebook and Instagram accounts function as shrines to the self. In our pride and vanity, we, too, are tempted to portray ourselves and our lives in the most flattering light and hide everything about us that is ordinary, boring or ugly. Many people with accounts dedicated to their own admirability appear to have an unhealthy, even pathological, desire to be noticed and admired.
- Content posted to social media cannot always be retrieved and deleted. Poorly considered posts can be found and used against us, for example, to harm our reputation, get us sacked from our job or extort money or favours from us. Many employers screen job applicants' social media activity to gauge their character. Thoughtless posts can jeopardise our chances of finding and keeping a job.
- Studies show that in the years since the advent of social media, there has been an alarming decline in the emotional wellbeing of teenagers and young adults. If you are wondering why, reread all the dot points in this section for some likely contributing factors. Perhaps you have read that many 'tech moguls', including Apple co-founder Steve Jobs, Microsoft founder Bill Gates, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and Instagram founder Kevin Systrom, ban or strictly

limit their children's use of mobiles, the internet and social media because they regard them as doing their children more harm than good.

Summing up, social media has remarkable potential for good but also for bad. Using social media well enhances our lives and the lives of others. Excessive use and misuse of social media has the opposite effect.

A Christian perspective on social media

Christians' first and highest moral authority is God. The Bible is the best source of God's will for us on ethical issues, such as how to conduct ourselves on social media.

The Bible was written centuries before the internet and social media were conceived, so it doesn't explicitly mention social media. Nor does it contain detailed ethical guidance on debating, networking, social activism, marketing and other activities that commonly occur in the social media world. But the Bible still contains much we can learn from. In the table below, we present some biblical themes relevant to social media and a selection of Bible verses to ponder as we reflect on our use of social media.

Biblical theme relevant to social media	Selected Bible verses we can learn from
Things we treat as being of ultimate importance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'You shall have no other gods before me' (Exodus 20:3). • 'But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (Matthew 6:20,21).
God's love and care for all people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another' (John 13:33,34).
Humans tend to judge by outward appearance; God judges by the state of the heart	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, or I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart"' (1 Samuel 16:7). • 'Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account' (Hebrews 4:13).
Dealing with people who are hostile to us or treat us as enemies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves' (Matthew 10:16). • 'But I say to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you' (Luke 6:27). • 'Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. • Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written; "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: • "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals

	<p>on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (Romans 12:14–21).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when he stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice, or the Lord will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from them' (Proverbs 24:17,18). • 'Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces' (Matthew 7:6).
The sorts of people, ideas and images we voluntarily expose ourselves to and allow to influence our thinking and actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character"' (1 Corinthians 15:33). • '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 – think about such things' (Philippians 4:8).
God-pleasing ways of speaking with other people and listening to them and trying to persuade or influence them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions' (Proverbs 18:2). • 'For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted' (Luke 14:11). • 'Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement ...' (Romans 12:3). • 'Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ' (Ephesians 4:15). • 'Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen' (Ephesians 4:29). • 'My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you' (James 1:19–21). • 'Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth' (2 Timothy 2:23–25). • 'Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak' (1 Corinthians 8:9). • 'Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity' (Colossians 4:5). • 'So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets' (Matthew 7:12). • 'As I have observed, those who plough evil and those who sow trouble reap it' (Job 4:8).
Virtues and vices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law' (Galatians 5:22,23). • 'Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

	<p>Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres' (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind' (1 Peter 2:1).
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Turning to Lutheran confessional writings, Martin Luther's *Small and Large Catechisms* also offer helpful teachings to guide our social media activity. For example:

- Luther's explanation of the First Commandment in his *Small Catechism* says, 'We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things'. Here Luther reminds us not to treat things like spreading our own opinions, earning the admiration of others and keeping up with the latest news and fashions as matters of ultimate importance. In other words, we are not to turn them into idols.
- The relevance of Luther's explanation of the Eighth Commandment to social media activity is even more obvious. It says, 'We are to fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbours, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead, we are to come to their defence, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light'.
- The Ninth and Tenth Commandments have to do with covetousness, ie envy or a strong desire for something that belongs to someone else. What do those commandments say about how we view others' bodies, relationships, possessions, skills or experiences?

In the further reading section below and elsewhere, you can find much more from wise contemporary Christians on the godly use of social media.

Social media as a tool for Christian evangelism

Some Christians use social media to connect and engage with people searching for answers about the meaning of life, faith and God. The advantages and disadvantages and dos and don'ts of social media evangelism are outside the scope of this guide (sorry!).

Make wise and responsible choices

Questions to ask yourself

- Am I clear on why I want to use social media?
- Have I chosen a suitable platform to use? Do I understand the trade-offs I make in using social media, for example, that data is being collected about me for the purpose of influencing me?
- Am I in control of my social media use, or is it controlling me? Have I set sensible boundaries, and do I stick within them? Am I using social media at inappropriate times and places? Do I hide what I am doing on social media from my parents or spouse because I am ashamed of it? What would my mum or grandma say if she knew what I was doing on social media? What would Jesus say?
- Is social media distracting me and causing me to neglect important people and tasks in life? Am I getting involved in things that don't concern me?
- Is my behaviour on social media worthy of a follower of Jesus?
- When I am open about my faith with others online, are my actions likely to draw others to Jesus or turn them away?
- Do I assume the worst of others and treat them that way, or do I act charitably towards them?
- Do I honestly portray myself on social media or try to lead others to believe things about me that aren't true?
- Do I constantly compare my life with the life others portray on social media, and is it making me envious or depressed? Is it harming my ability to enjoy the things I have and do?

Some social media commitments a Christian might choose to make

- Social media is a useful tool that I use with care. I can recognise signs of Satan's corrupting, destructive and divisive presence in cyberspace.
- I try to make the fruit of the spirit visible in my social media activity.
- I treat others with respect. I criticise ideas, not try to destroy people. I talk to other people, not at or about them. I try to write clearly and politely, even when I disagree strongly with someone. When others write something ambiguous, I seek clarification or choose to interpret it charitably rather than assume the worst.
- I don't only engage with people who think as I do.
- I am slow to post. I do so only after listening well to what others have said and checking my motives for responding. I avoid antagonising others and piling on. If I can't be polite and constructive, I don't post at all; I disengage.
- I manage any personal issues with others privately. I do not try to shame others by telling the world of their faults.
- I portray myself honestly, and I do not try to deceive. My online character is true to my offline one.
- I try to be positive and be known more for what I am for, not what I am against. I try to be a positive influence, serve others and do good without making it my goal to attract 'followers' and 'likes'.
- I keep in mind that God will call me to account for my social media activity.
- I do what I can to avoid leading myself into temptation. I set boundaries for myself and seek the support of others to help me stay within them and hold myself to account.
- If I find myself in situations that make me feel uncomfortable or unsafe, I turn to people I trust for help.

Review your social media use regularly

Ask yourself the following accountability questions. Even better, ask a person you respect to answer them for you!

- How healthy are your social media practices – for you and others?
- Are there warning signs that your use is harming you and others? For example, are you inclined to get angry and defensive when somebody comments on how much time you spend on social media?

Do not let your social media use harm your relationships and cause you to neglect your responsibilities. Be honest with yourself. Change your behaviour if it is harming you and others.

If you have engaged in ungodly social media behaviour, are sorry for what you have done and sincerely wish to reform your ways, consider confessing your sins to your pastor. Create a plan for change. Discuss it with your pastor and show him how you intend to stick to it. Then accept with thanksgiving his assurance of God's forgiveness.

Further reading and listening

Short articles

- Rev Nathan Campbell (Presbyterian Minister, Brisbane), '10 tips for using social media as a Christian', <https://st-eutyclus.com/10-tips/>
- Rob Brockman, '5 biblical principles for social media', The Gospel Coalition, 27 September 2021, <https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/article/5-biblical-principles-for-social-media/>

Podcasts

- Andy Crouch, 'Disconnected: why technology keeps disappointing us', Centre for Public Christianity Richard Johnson Lecture 2022, <https://podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/richard-johnson-lectures/id1641445740?i=1000583607366>

Explicitly Christian books

- Amy and Andy Crouch 2020, *My tech-wise life: growing up and making choices in a world of devices*, <https://www.koorong.com/product/my-tech-wise-life-growing-up-and-making-9780801018671>
- Andy Crouch 2017, *The tech-wise family: everyday steps for putting technology in its place*, <https://www.koorong.com/product/the-tech-wise-family-everyday-steps-for-putting-technology-in-9780801018664>
- Andy Crouch 2022, *The life we're looking for: reclaiming relationship in a technological world*, <https://www.koorong.com/product/the-life-were-looking-for-reclaiming-relationship-in-9781399801768>

Informative non-Christian books

- Jean Twenge 2018, *iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy – and completely unprepared for adulthood – and what that means for the rest of us*, <https://www.amazon.com.au/iGen-Super-Connected-Rebellious-Happy-Adulthood/dp/1501152017/>

Legislative recommendations

- C Morell, A Candeub, J Twenge and B Wilcox, August 2022, 'Protecting Teens from Big Tech: Five policy ideas for states', Legislative Briefing, Institute for Family Studies and Ethics and Public Policy Center (US), <https://ifstudies.org/ifs-admin/resources/final-ifs-eppc-protectingteensfrombigtech-aug2022.pdf>