

## Social Media Resource Paper

Lightbearers resource papers are designed as a resource to Lightbearers staff as they interact with students and partners and are asked to provide wisdom on a variety of topics. These papers should be considered an internal resource providing clarity on a sound evangelical stance on issues.

Foundational to each paper is the perspective that the Gospel is primary, recognizing that the Gospel impacts every corner of life (1 Corinthians 6:20); therefore, we aim to provide staff with direction that is Biblically sound and points them to view any issue through the lens of the Gospel.

**What drives this paper?** A recent Pew Research report notes, “Society has long fretted about technology’s impact on youth. But unlike radio and television, the hyperconnected nature of social media has led to new anxieties, including worries that these platforms may be negatively impacting teenagers’ [and I would add college students’] mental health.”<sup>1</sup> The report goes on to note, “Despite these concerns, teens themselves paint a more nuanced picture of adolescent life on social media. It is one in which majorities credit these platforms with deepening connections and providing a support network when they need it, while smaller—though notable—shares acknowledge the drama and pressures that can come along with using social media.”<sup>2</sup> Not only are students being impacted mentally, social media factors in areas of identity, persona, self-worth, and even a platform for upholding causes and expressing opinions. While it can be used as a tool for helpful soundbites and sayings, social media also can be a visceral vice that can turn very inward-focused as a means of distraction and can become toxic in how we speak to one another through such means. Whether we realize it or not, social media is disciplining us. This paper will explore what the Bible says about how we are to think of ourselves and others, and in turn how we are to use our words and our phones (even via the channels of social media) for the glory of God.

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Social media is a game—a game of relevance. Trevin Wax, in his book *This is Our Time: Everyday Myths in Light of the Gospel*, states, “The goal [of social media] is to promote yourself, gain favor from other (cooler) kids, climb up the social ladder, and cultivate an online presence that other people care about. Through likes, comments, and posts, you can unfold the social map of your school [or community] and see where everyone stands.”<sup>3</sup> The statistics reveal this sentiment—80 percent of teens say that what they see on social media makes them feel more connected with those in their community, 71 percent say social media provides an outlet for creativity, and 67 percent use social media for a means of support.<sup>4</sup> One female in the Pew Research study comments, “[Social Media] connects me with the world, provides an outlet to learn things I otherwise wouldn’t have access to, and allows me to discover and explore interests.”<sup>5</sup>

Consider that this is not only the case for teens or college students, but even for adults. We feel the need to constantly check, scroll, click, like, browse... but why? Truly what are our phones and, in turn, social media doing to us? Jason Thacker writes in his book *A Student’s Guide to Social Media*, “Technology often represents a culture that we live in and the tools we choose to

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<sup>1</sup> “Connection, Creativity and Drama: Teen Life on Social Media in 2022,” *Pew Research Center*, [pewresearch.org, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/11/16/connection-creativity-and-drama-teen-life-on-social-media-in-2022](https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/11/16/connection-creativity-and-drama-teen-life-on-social-media-in-2022).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Trevin Wax, *This is Our Time: Everyday Myths in Light of the Gospel* (B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 17.

<sup>4</sup> “Connection, Creativity and Drama,” *Pew Research Center*.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

use are shaping us in particular ways, whether we realize it or not.”<sup>6</sup> Consider that 38 percent of teens say they feel overwhelmed by all the drama they see on social media, 31 percent feel that they are being left out of things, 29 percent feel the pressure to post for the sake of getting ‘likes,’ and another 23 percent say that social media makes them feel worse about life.<sup>7</sup> While these statistics paint the broader picture, Chris Martin, author of *Terms of Service*, highlights the particular impact this has on teen girls in degrees that it doesn’t affect teen boys. He cites Jonathan Haidt in an article in *The Atlantic*, where Haidt states,

“Far easier to show is the damage to a specific class of people: adolescent girls, whose rates of depression, anxiety, and self-injury surged in the early 2010s, as social-media platforms expanded. Much more than for boys, adolescence typically heightens girls’ self-consciousness about their changing body and amplifies the insecurities about where they fit in their social network.”<sup>8</sup>

In another article, Martin reflects on these ill effects of social media on teen girls, noting that most girls are suffering, and nearly one third have considered suicide.<sup>9</sup> Very few, though, recognize these negative effects on them personally (9 percent), but do sense the impact on their friends’ lives (32 percent).<sup>10</sup>

The reality, according to Trevin Wax, is that “smart phones [and social media] tend to tell us that we are the center of the universe.”<sup>11</sup> He writes that we are those who thirst for knowledge because having the knowledge about something gives you a sense of power and control.<sup>12</sup> The people we wind up following are those who we like, who we trust, who value what we do, and ultimately make us feel like we are ‘right.’ Social media tends to reflect within us less of a desire for information and more of a sense of affirmation. Wax states, “Once you’ve taken this step, technology is no longer just about *informing* you; it’s *forming in you* a desire to hear people who usually affirm and never challenge your assumptions. It provides commentary in three directions—‘Amen,’ ‘How Dare You?,’ or ‘You Are Right.’”<sup>13</sup> Thacker writes, “[Social media] is altering how we see the world but also the things we value . . . it has the tendency to push us to care more about picking up more likes and shares on the things we post, rather than the truth of what we said.”<sup>14</sup> We need to model a posture of humility, recognizing that we don’t have to respond to or have an opinion on everything. So how *do* we as Christians need to reflect and respond as we think about the ways in which social media is shaping us? Let’s turn to the Scriptures for that answer.

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<sup>6</sup> Jason Thacker, “A Student’s Guide to Social Media,” (Christian Focus Publications, 2023), 19.

<sup>7</sup> “Connection, Creativity and Drama,” *Pew Research Center*.

<sup>8</sup> Chris Haidt, *The Atlantic* in “How Teens Feel About Social Media in 2022,” by Chris Martin, [termsofservice.social](https://www.termsofservice.social/p/new-research-how-teens-feel-about), <https://www.termsofservice.social/p/new-research-how-teens-feel-about>

<sup>9</sup> Chris Martin, “Social Media is a Major Cause of the Mental Illness Epidemic in Teen Girls,” [termsofservice.social](https://www.termsofservice.social/p/social-media-is-a-major-cause-of), <https://www.termsofservice.social/p/social-media-is-a-major-cause-of>

<sup>10</sup> “Connection, Creativity and Drama,” *Pew Research Center*.

<sup>11</sup> Wax, *This is Our Time*,

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 30–31.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Thacker, *A Student’s Guide to Social Media*, 19.

### ***The Bible's Focus on Our Identity***

The Bible states that for those of us who are Christians, we have been given a new nature (2 Corinthians 5:17) and a new identity (2 Corinthians 5:20)—we are new in Christ and are his ambassadors. Therefore, we represent the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Our lives have been “hidden in Christ,” as Colossians 3:3 states, and we have been “crucified with Christ, and [we] no longer live, but Christ lives in [us]. The life [we] live in the body, [we] live by faith in the Son of God who loved [us] and gave himself for [us] (Galatians 2:20).” So as Wax writes, “Faithful Christian living involves turning away from self and toward God, a daily exercise of remembering that we were made to know and love God, that we were made to be known and loved *by* God and that God (not us) is at the center of all things.”<sup>15</sup>

### ***The Bible's Wisdom on Words***

Therefore, considering our new nature and identity being bound up in Christ, we find confidence in who we are because of who Christ is, not because of how many likes we get or what persona we portray on social media. It also means that we must watch how we communicate when using social media. Of all the ink spilled in the book of Proverbs, more is focused on the use of words than any. Proverbs 10 is a good place to highlight:

Proverbs 10:11 - *The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.*

Proverbs 10:13 - *Wisdom is found on the lips of the discerning, but a rod is for the back of the one who lacks sense.*

Proverbs 10:19 - *When there are many words, sin is unavoidable, but the one who controls his lips is prudent.*

Proverbs 10:20 - *The tongue of the righteous is pure silver; the heart of the wicked of little value.*

Proverbs 10:21 - *The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of sense.*

Proverbs 10:31 - *The mouth of the righteous produces wisdom, but a perverse tongue will be cut out.*

Proverbs 10:32 - *The lips of the righteous know what is appropriate, but the mouth of the wicked only what is perverse.*

The tongue is a powerful tool, even as it is used through the keypad of an iPhone. We must watch our words wisely. Proverbs 14:2 admonishes us to live with integrity to reveal that we fear the Lord. Proverbs 22:17-19 instructs us to allow wisdom to be with us and constantly on our lips (or in our tweets and posts).

### ***Application***

Is social media sin? No. Can it be used as an instrument to sin? Yes. We, as believers in Jesus Christ, must preach the gospel of Christ to ourselves. We know God, are known by God, and are called to make God known to the watching world around us. Therefore, preach the gospel to

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<sup>15</sup> Wax, *This is Our Time*, 35.

yourself daily and reflect the gospel in who you follow, what you post, and how you portray yourself.

Consider the following from Trevin Wax and Jason Thacker:

- 1) Carve out time daily, weekly, and monthly for your phone to be off.
- 2) Carve out spaces and blocks of time for you to be phone-free.
- 3) Pursue authentic relationships with real people in your school, community, and church.
- 4) When you need your phone for reflecting on others' viewpoints related to a news headline, issue, etc., seek out voices that are full of grace and truth, and pause before responding to consider how this reflects on your witness.

"We live in an age," Wax says, "of smartphones and selfies. Let's not fret over this era but be faithful in it."<sup>16</sup>

The truth we must wrestle with as Great Commission Christians is that we are being disciplined by someone or something. Are we being disciplined by the Word or the world, by the people around us or our phones, by the church or by the chatter on social media? Social media is the place we turn to get news, share stories, define our allegiances, and connect with friends, but we do reach the point of burnout and fatigue with the constant scroll. We must ask why we use such platforms – to build our own kingdom or to seek the good of others? Just because the tool is there doesn't mean we must use it. We must steward the tool for good and not for evil, and for God's glory and not our own. Submit even social media under the Lordship of Christ.

#### **Q&A:**

- 1.) ***How should I rightly view technology?*** Technology can be seen simply as a tool that is neither good nor bad by itself, but we must also view technology as a culture with tools like phones, social media, etc. that disciple us.
- 2.) ***Should I then ditch all forms of social media if I feel as if they are becoming a vice?*** No, we don't necessarily need to ditch all social media. However, we must think deeply about the things we expose ourselves to and the things that shape our world. Consider Romans 12:2 – *Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.* Use social media wisely, and set up parameters for when you use it, how long you use it, and for what means you use it. Bring others into accountability with you to help guard you in these ways. Ask reflective questions as you evaluate who to follow or how much to use it – *Are we being shaped to be more like the world or like Jesus?*
- 3.) ***Why do I turn to social media when I am \_\_\_\_\_?*** Social media can be a means of distraction especially when stressed, dealing with crisis, or needing to relax. We try to use these tools to be in control of our lives, rather than resting in the control of the One who made everything. When you find yourself doom surfing or doom scrolling, stop. Reflect on the Scriptures and remind yourself from passages like Psalm 46 that God is in control and a very present help in times of trouble.
- 4.) ***Why is everyone so angry on social media?*** Often, we are seeking to find our identity in the amount of likes we receive, replies we get, and followers we have. Jason Thacker states, "In our digital age, we must take time to slow down, listen to one another, and to

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<sup>16</sup> Wax, *This is Our Time*, 41 and Thacker, *A Student's Guide to Social Media*, 22, 88.

process the things we hear, read, and experience.”<sup>17</sup> Recognize that relationships are not transactional, but are truly meant to be lived out face-to-face in real life.

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<sup>17</sup> Thacker, *A Student’s Guide to Social Media*, 67.