Pastor, Your Church Needs a Social Media Policy

I interrupt your profound theological reflection with a growing social media crisis. Church members are not always acquitting themselves or representing Jesus well online. Yes, churches have added social media clauses into their personnel policies, but the vast majority of social media users in your church are not on your staff. They need guidance, too.

"Just be smart" is not guidance.

While we are answering the much more fundamental questions about identity and social media, we need to offer some leadership to our church members on the proper Christian use of social media. I'm bringing this matter to our CPT community because I couldn't find much to go on; a bit about "brand management", a lot about child protection, not much about Christians and social media usage. We need to change that.

Below is a proposed starting point for a conversation in your church about social media. You'll notice that it's mostly behavioral, focused on symptoms. After reflection and conversation with my own church members, this seemed to be the most helpful way to get Christians thinking about how they approach their time with social media. If you have a better approach, please let me know!

I do not submit this proposal as one-size-fits-all. These guidelines were written with our small, conservative Baptist church in mind. But your church and my church probably have more in common than not, so I would very happy to learn how you choose to modify this starting point. Use as much of it as helps you.

Social Media Guidelines for Churches

Christians Should Use Social Media

We have access to far more people in the digital world than in our physical neighborhood. We *should* be using our social media presence and influence to engage our world with truth, hope, and the good news of Jesus Christ. In fact, with social media, we can think of the entire world as our neighbor! Most churches have websites, good tools for disseminating information. But social media – stories, pictures, observations – connects more strongly with more people.

In using social media, we should remember two things. First, it is in the "as we go" part of our lives governed by Christ's Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20:

> Jesus came near and said to them, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe

everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Second, social media is communication. Everything the Bible says about communication is true of digital communication. Consider James 3:9-10:

With the tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in God's likeness. Blessing and cursing come out of the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, these things should not be this way.

We need to treat every tweet and post and pic with the same care and consideration as our face-to-face words. But it is not always clear how we should do that! Below is a proposal of social media guidelines, organized by obligation (though not importance!):

- Guidelines for Church Members
- Guidelines for Church Leaders
- Guidelines for Church Staff

We put this list together with a conservative Baptist church like FBC Thomson in mind, but our hope is that this will be useful to Christians of all backgrounds.

But We Should Do It Wisely

We expect every church member to pay attention to these guidelines because we are all, first and foremost, ambassadors for Christ. And that comes with a high expectation from God Almighty Himself. Paul summarized in Philippians 2:14-16,

Do everything without grumbling and arguing, so that you may be blameless and pure, children of God who are faultless in a crooked and perverted generation, among whom you shine like stars in the world, by holding firm to the word of life.

We have a high obligation to use social media with care and caution. Sadly, many Christians seem to think that God's expectations for us as His children do not apply to our social media use! That's simply not true.

Social Media Guidelines for Church Members: You're Still a Christian While Online

Use Social Media

- **Promote the church and the gospel.** If there are good things going on or matters for praise, don't hesitate to share them. Don't be ashamed of the gospel or your church!
- **Share your insights and opinions.** That is one way we "season the world with salt" and "let our light shine before people". But make it clear that it is your personal opinion.

- **Post content that is meaningful**. You can't make disciples through small talk. Sure, create posts that are humorous, but also posts that are truthful and important.
- **Be mindful of your audience**. Consider the age, gender, and social status of anyone who might read your content. Be appropriate for the widest audience.

Communicate as a Christian

- **Listen before you send**. The internet invites you to broadcast your thoughts to no one in particular. That's not biblical. Listen to what's going on.
- **Ask before you assume**. So many arguments happen online because people assume they know what someone else means. Take the time to clarify before you argue.
- **Verify before you repost**. Just because someone you know has posted something that sounds really good doesn't mean it's true. Do some homework before reposting.
- **Be kind, courteous, and respectful**. Even when we share the truth, we are to do it in love. In everything we do, we must represent and attract people to Jesus.
- **Care about your tone**. On social media, this includes your use of capital letters and punctuation. Would you YELL at them IN *PERSON*???!?
- **Always take the high road**. Social media can be a cesspool of sniping. Don't engage. If someone does you wrong, do them right in return (or don't do anything at all).

Be Shrewd as a Serpent

- **Assume that everything you post and share online will become public**. If you don't want everyone to know, then don't share it on any form of social media.
- **Approach controversy with caution**. The Bible praises discretion. Some "points" aren't worth it. Be knowledgeable and well-supported. Don't be presumptuous or flippant.
- **Use private groups where needed**. To communicate with youth, kids, recovery groups, etc., find the most private, safest method possible.
- **Set boundaries**. Be extremely mindful of the age and gender of the person(s) with which you carry online conversations.
- **Set limits**. Self-control applies to all things, including your social media usage. Watch the amount of time you spend consuming social media and posting it.
- **Don't break news unless it's yours**. If you aren't 100% certain that news about a person or event is supposed to be public, don't share it.
- **Protect individuals and kids**. Don't say something that would put someone else in an awkward or compromising position. Don't reveal the location of kids or teens. **Don't post a picture of a child unless you have the parent's expressed permission.**
- **Monitor activity on your accounts**. People are constantly posting inappropriate items to others' accounts; you need to take it down and block the offender immediately.

Use Common Sense

- **Think before you click "send".** Think about your state of mind and your motives when composing your post; reread the content. Are you sure you want to do this?
- **Be truthful.** Don't be lazy or misleading; do the work necessary to make sure that whatever you post is true, accurate, and clearly written.
- **Respect copyrights and intellectual property.** Give credit where credit is due, and include links to your sources where possible.
- **Care enough to proofread.** You don't have to use perfect syntax, but you should always reread your post for obvious or confusing grammatical errors.
- **When in doubt, delete.** If you're not utterly convinced that your post is "right", just don't send it. It is *not* better to ask forgiveness; the internet is not forgiving.

If you find yourself in an argument:

- **Shift to private communication.** If at all possible, when a conversation turns into an argument, turn to some form of private messaging. It does not need to be public.
- **Don't retaliate or fight fire with fire.** Retaliation always leads to escalation. But a gentle answer is the Bible's solution to an angry argument.
- **When you get irritated, "walk" away.** Communicating while angry is a sure way to make matters worse. Stop; spend time with God; come back later.
- **Give the benefit of the doubt.** If love bears all things, then it is a little thing for you not to assume the worst in your "opponent". Perhaps you misread or misunderstood.
- **Always be willing to admit your mistakes.** If you were wrong, admit it. It may not be the primary issue, but an injection of humility into an argument may calm things down.

Social Media Etiquette:

- **There is a wrong time to be on your phone.** If your social media usage distracts you *or anyone around you* from what's going on, put the phone away.
- **Don't mix your groups.** You have work friends, family friends, and church friends. Those are probably distinct groups. Treat them distinctly.
- **Be careful with tags.** We love to tag our friends in photos and posts. Please consider whether your friend would *want* to be associated with that photo or post.
- **Don't overshare!** Oversharing wearies your friends, and it puts you at risk for identity thieves (or regular thieves when they know how long you will be out of town).
- **Watch your abbreviations.** Use too many of them and you'll sound like a preteen, not to mention potentially alienating anyone who doesn't understand your shortcuts.
- **Everyone can see what you "like".** Be cautious with your posted reactions to other posts. We can all see what you've liked and what you've tagged to read later.

Social Media Guidelines for Church Leaders:
The Expectations Are Higher

Everything said above applies to church members, church leaders, and church staff. Likewise, everything said here to church leaders equally applies to all church members. The difference is that expectations are higher for church leaders. Here are expectations written with FBC Thomson in mind.

We expect our church leaders to embody our church's values and measures while online.

- **Think like Jesus**. Our posts should be consistent with biblical truth. We must be clear that Jesus is the only path to salvation. We don't tear down other Christians even when we disagree with them. We are honest about the world around us.
- **Be like Jesus**. These character traits should be evident in our every post: patience, joy, peace, love, gentleness, self-control, faithfulness, humility, and kindness. And yes, it's more work to translate those qualities to social media.
- **Act like Jesus**. Our online identity should include our priorities as Christians: worship, Bible study, prayer, service and evangelism. The biggest challenge is to make them real and natural, not contrived or off-putting.

We expect our church leaders to support our church's decisions and programs.

- **Don't continue a private debate in public**. No church gets 100% agreement on every decision. But once that decision has been made, we expect our leaders to get in step with it publicly.
- **Support the members who are doing the work**. Every church changes over time. While it is fun to remember the past, make sure your posts don't take away from the present. Every public post should be positive and supportive of current work at the church.
- **Criticism should be made privately and to the right person**. Every parent eventually has a complaint about a teacher or coach; social media is not the place to air it. Church leaders must follow Jesus' commands for resolving disagreements.

We expect our leaders' behavior to be above reproach.

- **If you're doing something that looks questionable, don't post it!** Online, there is no context for the drink in your hand or the person you are photographed with. On social media, perception is reality; it matters how your post will be perceived.
- **Be modest**. If you are intending your post to "show off" something – your body, your wealth, your company, your location, your toy – you are probably better off not making the post. Celebrate your blessings modestly.
- **Be wise with your influence**. God has placed you in a position of leadership because you have gifts and talents that make a difference. The world is aware of that and is watching you. Be smart about what you post.

Social Media Guidelines for Church Staff: You Have a Signed Contract

The primary difference between leaders and paid staff is the employment contract; expectations are otherwise the same. In addition to statements about harassment, child protection, office security, and confidentiality, most churches have a formal social media policy that can be summarized in these statements:

- Be responsible with online communication.
- Let official church accounts be operated by the proper church member.
- Respect intellectual property rights.
- Be proactive with the church's online reputation.
- Respect the church's mission, beliefs, and values.
- Do not promote your personal beliefs as the church's beliefs.
- Pay close attention to confidentiality.

Just as with a secular company, violating the church's personnel policies can result in termination of employment. We take social media very seriously.

With personnel policies in mind, I found it very instructive to research social media policies for major companies whose bottom lines are heavily influenced by their social media presence. These are the "experts" in social media; their opinions are valuable. What follows are three lists that were helpful in crafting this document: biblical passages related to communication, a business approach to social media, and a short list of applicable website.

Biblical Passages about Communication

- Proverbs 12:18 - There is one who speaks rashly, like a piercing sword; but the tongue of the wise brings healing.
- Proverbs 15:4 - The tongue that heals is a tree of life, but a devious tongue breaks the spirit.
- Proverbs 20:3 - Honor belongs to the person who ends a dispute, but any fool can get himself into a quarrel.
- Ecclesiastes 7:21-22 - Don't pay attention to everything people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you, for in your heart you know that many times you yourself have cursed others.
- Matthew 5:13-14 - You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt should lose its taste, how can it be made salty? It's no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

- Matthew 12:36 - I tell you that on the day of judgment people will have to account for every careless word they speak.
- Matthew 28:19-20 - Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember. I am with you always, to the end of the age.
- Romans 12:2 - Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.
- Romans 14:19 - So then, let us pursue what promotes peace and what builds up one another.
- 1 Corinthians 8:13 - Therefore, if food causes my brother or sister to fall, I will never again eat meat, so that I won't cause my brother or sister to fall.
- Ephesians 4:25-32 - Therefore, putting away lying, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, because we are members of one another. . . . No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear. And don't grieve God's Holy Spirit. You were sealed by him for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice. And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.
- James 1:19 - My dear brothers and sisters, understand this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.
- 1 Peter 3:14-16 - But even if you should suffer for righteousness, you are blessed. Do not fear them or be intimidated, but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. Yet do this with gentleness and reverence, keeping a clear conscience, so that when you are accused, those who disparage your good conduct in Christ will be put to shame.

Common Business Guidelines for Social Media

Every employer has a document governing expectations for employee online behavior, and some have posted them (like Coca-cola, adidas, FedEx). Just about every policy I read shared these bullet points in common. Should Christians have higher or lower expectations for on-line behavior?

Commonly Accepted Secular Guidelines for Social Media

- Be transparent.

- Protect privacy.
- Respect others' rights and properties.
- Observe the company code of conduct.
- Do not claim to speak on behalf of the company when you don't.
- Let the "pros" handle the difficult questions or complaints.
- Be knowledgeable, accurate, and professional.
- Do not use slurs, obscenities, or crude language.
- Online isn't always a good place for a conversation.
- Everything you share online is public forever.

I like that list. Simple and versatile.

- **Be transparent**. Companies don't want their employees pretending to be a regular consumer or impersonating a competitor. This guideline means "Don't hide who you are or what you represent". That is equally true of Christians. Perhaps you can get a better hearing if you pretend not to be a Christian or church member, but that's not how Jesus wants us to represent ourselves or Him.
- **Protect privacy**. Companies don't want employees betraying the outcomes of private meetings or leaking private information. Christians have that too, particularly in the form of "prayer requests". Basically, don't post any information unless you **know** that the source wants that information shared.
- **Respect others' rights and properties**. Companies don't want employees plagiarizing other people's work or using copyrighted/trademarked phrases and graphics; there are legal ramifications. This also applies to Christians: if a thought or a graphic isn't original to you, don't claim it to be. If you've copied something from another account or website, make sure you have the right and also give credit.
- **Observe the company code of conduct**. This one should be obvious from a secular perspective. For Christians, our "company code of conduct" is the Bible.
- **Do not claim to speak on behalf of the company** when you don't. Companies don't want their employees saying things that may not be accurate. Instead, they want all official communication to come through the public relations department. The same is true of Christians and their churches. First Baptist Church has some official statements (found on our website), but no one can claim to speak on behalf of every member of FBC (or every Christian). Rather, we should at most say things like "this is what our church website says [quote], and this is what I believe about it".
- **Let the "pros" handle** the difficult questions or complaints. Companies train certain employees to handle controversial, problematic, or difficult situations online. They don't want a random employee to jump in and create a problem. The same can be true of Christians. If you don't know what you're talking about, you should stay out of a conversation. We will have someone in our church family with first-hand experience who can speak to a situation knowledgeably and accurately. Ask for help.

- **Be knowledgeable, accurate, and professional.** This is a universal expectation of companies for their employees. It should be a minimum expectation for Christians. And this is not just talking about biblical matters. If a Christian wants to speak to a social or political issue, we should expect that Christian to have taken the time to learn about that issue and be able to speak clearly and informatively to it.
- **Do not use slurs, obscenities, or crude language.** Again, if this is a universal expectation of secular companies for their employees, it absolutely should be for Christians as well. Companies understand that even on personal time, an employee always represents the company. Isn't that even more true for every Christian and how they represent their church and also Jesus?
- **Online isn't always a good place for a conversation.** Based on everything said above, these last two rules should only make sense. Sometimes it is impossible to be clear and accurate online, where people can and will misconstrue and misunderstand what you say. Some conversations (perhaps most) should be had in person and in private.
- **Everything you share online is public forever.** Likewise, companies want their employees to respect the immediacy of social media. Once something crosses a person's screen, it can be captured and distributed, even if you intended it to be private or something to delete later. And that's true for all people who use social media, whether you like it or not.

Some Websites That Helped Us

- "A template to help start your social media policy", https://www.socialfresh.com/a-template-to-help-start-your-social-media-policy/
- "Biblical Guidelines for Social Media", http://www.operationsaveamerica.org/biblical-guidelines-for-social-media/
- "12 guidelines for church social media", https://ministrytech.com/social-media/12-guidelines-church-social-media/
- Statements related to our church's beliefs can be found on our website, https://www.fbcthomson.org/about-us