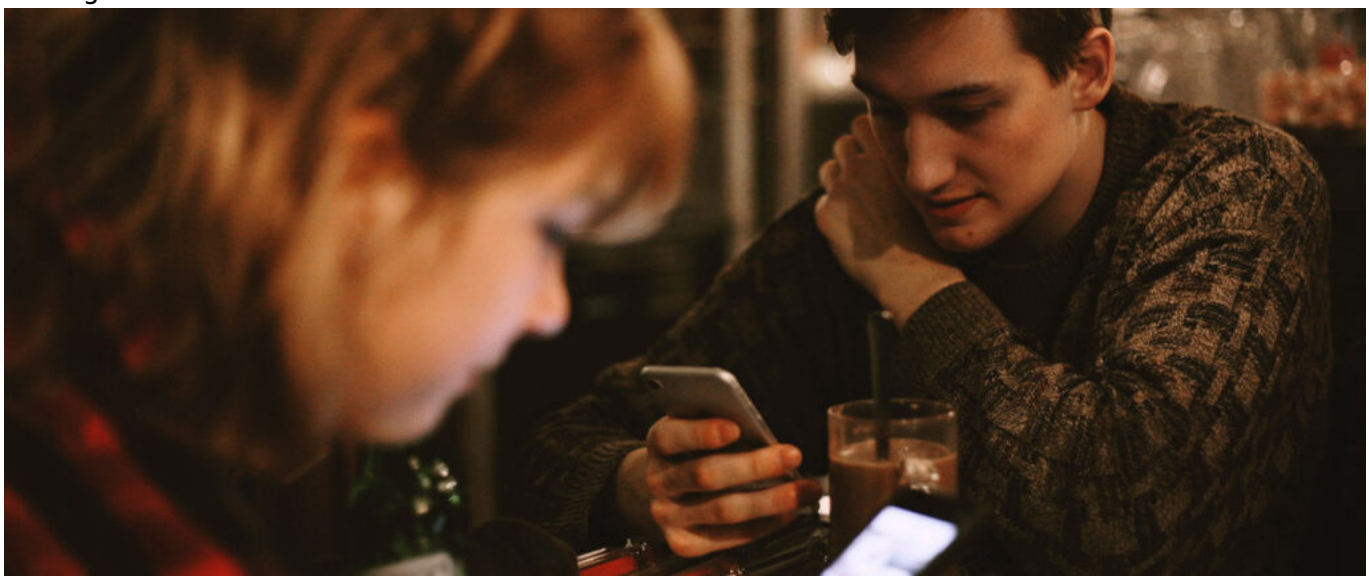
Saints on Social Media

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At the beginning of 2022, **Facebook had 2.85 billion active users** (that's around 30% of the global population), while **Instagram had 1.13 billion active users**. Some Christians choose to stay off social media, and that is good if you feel that is right for you. But what about the saints who choose to engage?

Representing Christ on Social Media

For those of us who are active on social media, how can we best represent Christ and what are some pitfalls we can avoid?

Journaling and Ranting

It is easy to treat social media like journaling. We often write posts alone, in the privacy of our own home. But social media isn't private – it is more like taking out a full-page ad in the Sunday Times newspaper. Whatever we put on social media is there for the whole world to see. Our posts go far and last forever. Even if we delete a post, potentially, it is still out there. We can limit our 'friends' and edit our privacy options, but most of us post without any knowledge of exactly who will be seeing it.

> Make Facebook your Faithbook, not your Wailing Wall!

So show restraint. Never say something online you wouldn't say at the back of church over coffee. Every comment has a global audience. Paul said, '*Let your conversation be always full of grace*' (Colossians 4:5,6 NIV). We should desire to reflect Jesus to a world very much in need of him. As Jonathan Stanfield has said, 'It's too easy to use social media to get things off your chest, but it won't help or encourage those who hear. Make Facebook your Faithbook, not your Wailing Wall!'

Boasting

When did a ‘personal best’ stop being personal? One of the odd things that happens on social media, is that we behave in ways we never would in normal social circles. I know many runners. But I know none who have a sign in their front window, updated every morning with their daily time and distance. I know many cyclists. But I know none who, before greeting me, have already given me their route and speed to work that morning! Yet social media enables us to do that.

> Rather, let us boast of our weaknesses so that we can boast in the Lord.

Perhaps it doesn’t harm to post your routes and progress, but it is good we check our hearts as to why. Are we, like an artist, hoping to bring joy or encouragement to others with our achievements, or are we just bragging? And if bragging, is that something we should do? When Paul spoke of his personal achievements he said, *‘I speak like a fool’* (2 Corinthians 11:23). Rather, let us boast of our weaknesses so that we can boast in the Lord. (2 Corinthians 12:9, 1 Corinthians 1:31)

Information Overload

But this pitfall is merely a symptom of a more general problem: information overload. It was the philosopher, Voltaire, who said, ‘The secret of being boring is in telling everything.’ We used to go on holiday and send postcards; a picture of a landmark with a heartfelt “wish you were here”. This left plenty of room for filling in the blanks and sharing personal photos when we got back. Today, we destroy this opportunity for conversation by sharing every detail of our lives as they unfold, moment by moment, on social media.

> Avoid sharing your whole life online and having nothing left to talk about as you build your real friendships.

One of the things that makes conversation fun is having something new to say or new to hear. So often when we meet, the conversation becomes, ‘I went to…’ – ‘Yeah, I saw.’ or ‘I found this great new…’ – ‘Yeah, I know.’ The Bible teaches us that the wise listen more than they speak (Ecclesiastes 5:3b, Proverbs 10:8,19). As Will Marais would say, ‘It’s important to be interested as well as interesting’. Social media makes it hard to be either. Avoid sharing your whole life online and having nothing left to talk about as you build your real friendships.

P.D.A.

Occasional gushing tributes, done in the right tone, may be quite honouring of a new relationship or spouse. But too much is, well, too much. Again, the illusion of privacy on social media sometimes tricks us into sharing more or more often than we really should. And why all the public displays of affection? You’re in a relationship, we get it. But it is unfitting to fill our newsfeed with photos of you smooching. If you wouldn’t behave like that at your grandma’s house, don’t post it online.

Gym and Beachwear

The same goes for beach, gym or poolside photos. Do you really want guys from church (who may also stumble over) looking at you in a bikini while they scroll through Instagram on their lunch breaks? And guys, God does not delight in the legs of a man (Psalm 147:10), so why do you need

the world to know you didn't skip leg day? Peter and Paul both speak against us focusing on our fleeting external beauty (1 Peter 3:3,4, 1 Timothy 2:9). Don't market yourself as someone who is only surface deep. If you wouldn't wear it to the shops, don't post it online. Rather, use your posts to model true beauty and true love.

Public Quiet Times

Jesus said of those who pray on street corners, '*They have had their reward*' (Matthew 6:1-6). Social media is often referred to as the new Public Square, yet many of us use it as a platform for demonstrating our spirituality. Sometimes it's a 'faith and hints' prayer: 'Lord, I'm trusting You for money to go on the Brazil Outreach – about $1300, plus spending money'. Don't be that person. Other times, we share highlights from our quiet times or all the Bible verses we read that morning. Don't be that person either. What is done in secret the Lord will reward, but what is done in public has already had its full reward.

Like the illusion of privacy, social media also gives an illusion of false equality. There are some God has called to be teachers, but on Facebook, it can feel like everyone is trying to teach you something. James says, '*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness'* (James 3:1). As saints, we are called to sober self-judgment. Act online within the gifts God has given you, just as you would in church.

> Choose the things you post because they will build others up, not because they will build you up in the eyes of others.

I'm not saying we shouldn't share Scripture or encourage one another in our faith. But don't do it to look good and be careful what you repost so that you don't lead others astray. Don't 'cast pearls before swine' by speaking about God in ways that are easily misunderstood or could lead to people turning on you (Matthew 7:6). By all means, share prayer needs with your home group or church friends, but don't fish for your prayers to be answered online. Choose the things you post because they will build others up, not because they will build you up in the eyes of others. (Hebrews 3:13, 1 Corinthians 8:1)

Clickbait

Clickbait is a post designed to generate advertising revenue through sensational headlines and eye-catching visuals. Manipulative captions like, 'If You REALLY Love Jesus, Like and Share', do not glorify Jesus. This is not what Jesus meant when He said, *'Deny me before men and I will deny you before my Father'*! So think before you 'Like' or repost. Is your God as desperate for Facebook likes as these posts suggest? Does He really count 'Likes' as prayers? He is not and He does not.

FakeNews

Many well-meaning Christians fall prey to FakeNews stories that continue to circulate because no-one takes the time to fact-check. 'A Muslim man in Egypt killed his wife because she was reading the Bible…', 'Scientists discover the missing days from Joshua battle…', 'Noah's Ark found!'. These stories are not current news, or even old news, but FakeNews.

> Christian FakeNews stories make Christians look stupid. Don't be a victim. Treasure

truth over sensation.

How can you tell the FakeNews from the real? Check the source. If the page carries no date, isn't a legitimate news site, doesn't cite sources or just looks plain dodgy, then it's probably FakeNews. If the post is just text that has been cut and pasted into a status, even if it says it's from Bill Gates or Jesus Himself, don't share it! If you want to make sure, cut and paste a few lines from the story and the word "hoax" into Google, and if it is a known hoax, it will soon be confirmed. Christian FakeNews stories make Christians look stupid. Don't be a victim. Treasure truth over sensation.



Letters Read by All

Finally, Paul told the Corinthians that they themselves were letters, read by everyone. '*You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts'* (2 Corinthians 3:3 NIV). Today, thanks to social media, our lives really are read by everyone. Does yours read like one written with the Spirit of God? Does it focus on whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, or worthy of praise? (Philippians 4:8) Because these are the things we are supposed to think about before we post.