Practicing Integrity Online

How to have better conversations in the digital age

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Words are powerful. They have the ability to change people. That is why Scripture exhorts us to use them carefully, especially if we're preachers and teachers of the gospel (James 3:1).

Proverbs 12:18 says, "The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing."

The proverb mentions the *tongue,* the organ of speech, but it applies equally to *fingers,* by which we write or type. Our words, whether spoken or written, make things worse or better. They hurt or heal.

Digital Amplification

If words have this effect in person, imagine their potential online.

My prayer is wherever smartphones, tablets, and laptops connect to the internet, users will access the good news of Jesus in their own language. May we use technology to amplify the gospel!

However, I also know digital platforms can amplify harmful voices.

Too often, social media users unwittingly share false web articles, blog posts, and memes (misinformation) because it agrees with their point of view.

Some intentionally post false statements (disinformation) to shift public opinion through deception.

Either way, such falsehood creates an environment in which it becomes harder to communicate truth.

Loss of Trust

When people feel they can no longer believe what they hear and read, skepticism abounds.

Consider the erosion of trust in today's media.

A recent Gallup poll asked, "How much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media — such as newspapers, TV and radio — when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?"

Only 32% of Americans said they trust the media "a great deal" or "a fair amount." That represents a steep decline from 1976, when 72% of Americans trusted media.

Media critics blame journalistic bias. Many outlets craft narratives and headlines to generate clicks among target audiences. This explains why some sites attract left-leaning voters and others right-leaning voters.

Meanwhile, readers want stories that don't contradict how they view the world — and they often feel distrustful of anything challenging their perspectives.

Social media exacerbates distrust. Its algorithms feed users a steady stream of content that cuts them off from alternate viewpoints and reinforces partisan preferences.

Such content becomes increasingly sensationalistic and provocative. It reinforces preexisting ideas rather than providing new, useful information.

While traditional mass media employs editors and fact-checkers, anyone can now set up a social media account and generate content that travels the globe.

Integrity Needed

All of this points to the need for integrity.

Integrity is about *goodness* and *wholeness*. A person of integrity is trustworthy.

Proverbs 18:17 says, "In a lawsuit the first to speak seems right, until someone comes forward and cross-examines." Replace those first three words with "In social media," and the effect is the same. When each side can cite a media story in its favor, discerning truth is difficult.

Discerning people *want* the truth. And honest people *tell* the truth. Those who desire to know the truth will seek out honest people who can share it.

> *Do your posts build up others, or do they engage in character assassination of those with whom you disagree?*

In America, when witnesses take the stand to offer testimony, they swear to tell "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth." They promise not to offer half-truths, which are also half-lies. Nor will they bury the needle of truth in a haystack of irrelevant information. As you look at your most recent social media posts, do they exhibit both goodness and wholeness?

Ephesians 4:29 says, "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."

Do your posts build up others, or do they engage in character assassination of those with whom you disagree?

Are your posts giving a complete picture of the topic? Or are they like the proverbial blind men describing an elephant? The first man describes the ear, the second the trunk, the third a foot, and the fourth the tail. None of them describes the whole elephant.

Are people better informed because they follow you online, or are they only getting half-truths (and thus half-lies)?

And what about the people you follow online? Are their posts gracious and truthful?

Self-Examination

Let me close by offering a few suggestions for how we, as Christians and ministers of the gospel, can improve what gets posted online.

To the fault finders in His day, Jesus said, "First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:5).

This suggests we start with self-examination.

Don't believe everything you read or hear until you've verified the information. This is a biblical imperative. "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but *test the spirits* to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1, emphasis added).

Pause before you post or hit "send" on a critical email. Let it sit overnight. Tomorrow you may feel differently. As James 1:19 puts it, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."

Paul says "speaking the truth in love" is a characteristic of mature Christians (Ephesians 4:14–15). Foster relationships where others can hold you accountable by speaking the truth lovingly to you.

Accept that you may not always be able to vindicate yourself to others. Have you ever considered that Joseph died without convincing his buddies Mary's conception of Jesus was divine? Sometimes we must simply pray as David did: "Vindicate me in your righteousness, Lord my God; do not let them gloat over me" (Psalm 35:24).

The Bible's commandments regarding how we speak *about* and *to* others have not been canceled. As Jesus taught, "Do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

Constructive Critique

How can you help fellow believers when their online posts lack integrity?

Start with questions. What is the source of their information? Why do they feel it's important to post about this topic? In your comments, point them in a healthy direction of conversation rather than adding emotional fuel to the rhetorical fire.

Proverbs 27:6 says, "Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses." Cultivate the kind of relationships with others where they prefer to hear loving correction from you more than easygoing compliments from others.

Utilize the communication platform most appropriate to the content under discussion. The apostle John wrote, "I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink.

Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete" (2 John 12).

There's something about personal conversation that technology simply cannot reproduce.

Use texts to check in with your friends and emails for exchanging detailed information. But for difficult conversations, pick up the phone and call them, or better yet, make an appointment to meet in person.

Whatever you do, don't get trapped in an exchange on social media. You don't want a public — and permanently archived — digital conversation when a private talk will accomplish better results.

That said, there may come a time when the Lord prompts you to confront someone publicly. Paul opposed Peter openly when circumstances warranted (Galatians 2:11). But that is a last, desperate resort, never a first option.

In an age of mistrust, integrity has never been more vital. As ministers of the gospel, pointing to truth is our mission and calling.

Jesus *is* truth (John 14:6). Those who represent Him must stand for truth as well.

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