



Douglas S. Bursch

Posting Peace



Why Social Media
Divides Us and
What We Can
Do About It



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Posting Peace* by Douglas S. Bursch. Copyright © 2021 by
Douglas S. Bursch. Published by InterVarsity Press,
Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com.

1

Angry Online



I anxiously pause and read, then pause and read again, carefully trying to parse the verbiage, analyze the tone, determine the intent, decipher the meaning, and find a way forward through this ever-expanding social media battlefield. I grow tired of this recurring, sinking, alienating feeling, my thumbs hovering over the phone, my eyes scanning and rescanning the inflamed words on the screen. Although I'm not looking for a fight, I face the familiar prospect that my next post, tweet, response, or lack of response will make someone angry.

Why are we so angry online? Why are we so divided? I can imagine the apostle Paul tweeting, "If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other" (Gal 5:15). I can also imagine his words being disregarded or angrily refuted by most everyone. Why are we behaving in such a ridiculous manner with even the most mundane observations devolving into toxic absurdities? I can tweet the banal observation "I ate too many tacos," and five responses later someone angrily accuses me of being a "baby killer." If you

don't see a connection between baby killing and taco consumption, you're correct. Unless you're interacting with these words and ideas on the internet. On the internet, everything's connected. This is the strange reality of our age; every idea becomes entangled through the emotionally chaotic, incessantly divisive world of social media. Our online existence is turning us into angry, dehumanizing, polarizing people.

Our response to a worldwide pandemic poignantly exemplified and exaggerated the most troubling aspects of our social media communication. While the world engaged in social distancing and at-home sheltering to stop the deadly spread of the coronavirus, the most divisive aspects of social media communication went viral. Angry partisan divisiveness and wild unfounded conspiracy theories spread rapidly through social media platforms. The World Health Organization (WHO) referred to this worldwide, massive spread of misinformation as an "Infodemic" where an overabundance of misinformation made "trustworthy sources" and "reliable guidance" hard to find when people most needed accurate information.¹ In the early days of the spread of the coronavirus and the spread of related misinformation, the internet's largest social media networks released an unprecedented joint statement declaring their intent to closely work together to combat "fraud and misinformation" and to elevate "authoritative content."² Although their statement dealt with misinformation, they could not address the general attitudes of anger and fear that infused into so many social media discussions.

One social media analytics tracking company found that disgust and fear were the most prominent emotions expressed by social media users during the early days of the coronavirus outbreak.³ This disgust and fear exaggerated already volatile

online environments as physically isolated people facing a collective traumatic experience increased their social media engagement on platforms that trended toward conflict in even the most peaceful of times. For many of us the dilemma was devastating. On one hand, we needed and craved community as the virus cut us off from many everyday human interactions. On the other hand, the online world we used to supplement our loss of in-person community became increasingly toxic, dehumanizing, and harmful to our emotional health.

United to Divide and Devour

Whether confronting a pandemic or tackling the realities of everyday existence, the internet is a wonderfully powerful, dangerous tool. Through online communication individuals unite and divide, relationships develop and implode, communities form and shatter. The internet increases our ability to connect with and to harm more people personally than ever. For every person we bless, others we offend. Although the internet brings us together, the online world also dehumanizes, detaches, divides, segments, and polarizes people. We're becoming angry, mean, and cliquish. People roam the online world looking for individuals they can fight or devour. Daily, we watch seemingly non-controversial posts or tweets spark contentious, bitter online battles. Earnest attempts to civilly address injustices quickly disintegrate into rancorous partisan extremism. The anger and toxicity feel so palpable, many of us dread expressing any possibly controversial opinions, fearing others will conscript us into ideological battles we're not trying to fight. The polarization of social media communication increases in many individuals a profound sense of anxiety, alienation, and frustration. The internet connects more humans and more people

groups than any technology in history. Yet, as we come together, we tear each other apart.

We sense and even lament the foreboding growing tensions and divisions rising up in our social media age, yet many of us are fatalistic when contemplating solutions. While some people pessimistically accept the hostility of social media as an inevitable reality of the medium, I want to confront that notion. I might be foolish in my attempt, but I want to challenge the spirit of our age to seriously call into question the fundamental ways we interact with each other online. I'm tired of the fighting. I'm tired of being afraid of the fighting. I no longer desire to engage in fruitless heated discussions and meaningless contentious debates that don't have a redemptive or transformative purpose. I want my best energy directed toward Christ-centered, truth-advancing, life-affirming, grace-filled, reconciling communication. I want to be a Christ-motivated peacemaker.

I believe many of us hunger for a better way to respond to this antagonistic, divisive, polarizing age. We yearn to live as true agents of peace and reconciliation in this troubled world. We recognize the internet is a powerful tool with the profound potential to cause great harm, but also to produce great good. However, we sometimes grow disillusioned and overwhelmed by the toxic social media environment surrounding us. Sometimes we just grow annoyed!

Although the online world is no longer a new phenomenon, we must remember that our generation is still pioneering social media communication, creating a foundational online culture that will impact future generations. The fundamental principles of social media communication are not set in stone. Rather, we form those principles in our daily interactions. We must realize that as our daily interactions form the medium of social media,

the medium also forms us. The social media platforms we create are not just connecting us—they're changing us. They're changing how we view reality, understand relationships, process conflicts, and abide with each other.

The internet is not a neutral information-gathering and sharing tool. Social media does far more than simply provide an environment where individuals can connect to share ideas. Instead, the online world changes the way we view humanity. Social media transforms what we expect from each other and what we're willing to do to maintain, foster, and build healthy, diverse, meaningful, long-term relationships. The internet influences how I abide with you and how you abide with me. Even though we desire meaningful human connections, social media platforms are structured to separate us from some of the most basic interactions we need to establish strong relationships. The online medium fosters and exaggerates non-reconciling behavior. Simply put, social media normalizes and codifies bad behavior.

The internet is an amazing technological innovation. Sadly, we're harming ourselves with our own creation. Social media turns communication into destructive confrontation. Even worse, we seem to have lost our ability to speak the truth in love. The work of peacemaking has been supplanted by an endless war of words. Many are aware of the growing problem, but we just don't know how to fix it.

Contending for a Better Witness

This book attempts to confront the social media-driven anger and polarization crippling our society. Christians must come out of this toxic, divisive social media chaos into a better way of online communicating. We must refuse to participate in the

devouring spirit of our age, even as we fulfill our calling to fight against injustices. This isn't a book that instructs Christians to yield their rightful engagement within culture. Instead, I'm advocating for believers to transform culture through expressing a better witness in this frequently bitter world.

Peacemakers position their communication on the firm foundation of the transformative gospel of Jesus Christ. They advocate for social media communication that takes seriously the biblical mandate to participate in the ministry of reconciliation. Practically, peacemakers are less jerky, less annoying, less angry, and less eager to turn taco tweets into inflammatory abortion debates. Whether dealing with mundane daily conflicts or confronting the profound impacts of a pandemic, peacemakers relentlessly contend for Christ-centered reconciliation.

Throughout my adult life I've had a profound interest in the internet's societal impact. In my early twenties, I worked for an internet start-up that developed technologies to increase online communication and connectivity. As a pastor, I've seen the power of the internet to foster relationships and fuel divisiveness. Recently, my interest in online technologies became the primary focus of my doctoral work. I've dedicated much of my life to the ministry of reconciliation, directing my passion and studies toward how to best use social media to promote peacemaking. However, to truly understand my passion for reconciliation, let me take you back to an earlier time in my life when I tried to reconcile the world through hosting my own daily talk show on a far-right Christian radio station.

Angry Far-Right Christian Radio

Along with being a pastor, God granted me the honor of being a "radio personality." I use the words "radio personality" to evoke

the fully ambiguous nature of the role I held and the relentless struggle I confronted trying to honor God while maintaining my identity. I started my radio personality journey in a rather contentious environment. For five years I hosted a talk show Monday through Friday from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. on a very conservative Christian radio station. I began my radio career believing I could produce a show that united conservative, progressive, and moderate Christians around a better way of coexisting. I thought I could facilitate an environment where we could learn to disagree without being jerks about it. I thought there were many Christians hungry for a better form of communication that was not rooted in partisan bickering and bitter political divisiveness. I believed my show would grow in popularity and influence, eventually reaching national syndication, as I assumed people were hungry for a less contentious dialogue. When I finally resigned from my position, I had produced and broadcast over 1,200 shows and discovered that I was wrong! Completely wrong!

There was not a growing movement of people hungry for reconciling content or a growing radio audience to propel me into syndication. Although I was able to fulfill the requirements of my job by maintaining an audience, I found my moderate, reconciling voice faced constant rebuke, scorn, or indifference from my employer and the station's core listening audience. My dream of reconciling the world through radio was met with the reality of ingrained political divisiveness. I felt I had something to offer the world that the world wanted. I was wrong. With this perspective and through the leading of the Holy Spirit, I brushed the dust off my feet and headed in another direction. Those five years were a gift from God, but they hurt me. I still think about the many ways I was wounded by the devouring spirit of Christians who tore into me weekly.

The first few weeks I was on the air were memorable because I was relatively new to talk radio and extremely inexperienced. Trying my best to honor God and my employer, I hosted the daily show with a genuine conviction and passionate work ethic. Even so, I often struggled to know whether or not I was achieving my objectives. My supervisors usually went home before I finished my two-hour show. When I left the studio, most of the offices were empty. My walk, through the office corridor to the elevator and my car in the parking garage, was lonely. The hour commute home was even lonelier.

To make matters worse, my talk show had a very different focus from the conservative political talk show host I replaced. They had fired my predecessor and were simulcasting a show from the Portland area until they decided to once again fill the Seattle host position. People waiting for the Seattle position to open up expected something more far right and politically partisan than what they got in me. Consequently, early on I received very pointed negative emails and phone messages requesting my removal from the station. I could almost always spot a critical email by the formality of the greeting. Whenever individuals started their communication with “Dear Mr. Bursch” or “Dear Pastor Bursch,” what followed was almost never cordial. Polite greetings were the prerequisite for impolite comments about the integrity of my faith or the worthiness of my labor as a radio host and pastor.

One particularly negative interaction sticks with me to this day. A woman with some sort of Irish or Scottish accent (excuse my limited linguistic expertise) called me anonymously on several occasions to complain about my hosting prowess. She would usually call after the show and leave long messages about what was wrong with me as a host and as a person. She would

critique my personality (“He thinks he’s funny, but he’s not”), my politics (“He has a lot to say about nothing”), and my music (“ . . . and that terrible blaring intro”). Her oddest critique was her frequent mention of meeting with other people to talk about what a bad job I was doing. She would say, “A bunch of us have been talking to each other about this Doug Bursch fella. We’ve had about enough of it.” This was the part of her rebuke that captured my imagination. I imagined some sort of Irish and/or Scottish Christian entertainment mafia gathering together weekly to determine how to respond to this “Doug Bursch fella.” I realized I was not only ruining someone’s favorite show, but I was also profoundly impacting the gaiety of a local Gaelic community. Her discipline to regularly inform me of her displeasure went beyond the outcomes I had imagined for my radio career. In fact, much of the general meanness I received went beyond my expectations.

To be clear, my show was not an extremist expression. Or at least I didn’t believe it was extremist. I just decided to present a show that welcomed Christians who were Democrats or Republicans and to mention regularly that God is neither. In fact, I often pointed out that God isn’t even an American. I tried to focus on our faults instead of the faults of others. I wanted to communicate in a way that made much of the plank in our own eyes before we tried to remove the specks in the eyes of the world. I attempted to speak in a way that honored our president, who happened to be a Democrat named Barack Obama. These radical notions of mine were met with extreme, personal rebuke, castigations that questioned my salvation, my integrity, my worth, and just about any other area of my radio personality that could be insulted.

During my five years on Christian radio, some of the meanest, angriest, harshest words I received came from

Christians. These destructive words flowed from Christians who believed they had the right to dehumanize me because they perceived in me an errant political or religious conviction. Regardless of the accuracy or absurdity of their accusations, I met many an email with tears. Frankly, I naively thought Christians would treat me differently than they would treat an angry pagan talk show host. I thought that if I just facilitated a better dialogue, people would be kinder and more loving. However, the longer I ministered and communicated over the airwaves, the more I realized how many people were not hungering for the ministry of reconciliation. In fact, many Christians worked against any attempt to foster a reconciling spirit.

Talk Show Jesus

I walked away from talk radio right before Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton faced off in their final year of campaigning for president. The partisan rancor I faced in those early years of talk radio appears to have grown exponentially through online platforms. A 2019 Pew Research Center study found the “intense partisan division and animosity” of the 2016 election cycle had “only deepened” in almost every category surveyed.⁴ Our most recent elections, political events, and pandemic chaos demonstrate a level of contentiousness unprecedented in the modern era. Political contentiousness married itself with social media and the church in such a way that many people see political partisanship as indistinguishable from the gospel message. I honestly could not have predicted our present bitterly divisive reality. The fiery partisan rhetoric I confronted in my early days of radio thrives online as many Christians eagerly fan the flames. My desire to host a life-giving, unifying radio show seems an antiquated notion in light of the madness surrounding us.

I used to joke that I was a great talk show host because “I have an opinion about anything, even if I know nothing about it.” That line would always get a laugh because it’s rooted in the implied fundamental job description. A talk show host is hired to have an opinion about everything and to express that opinion in a way that grows and maintains an audience. No matter the news event or the limited expertise of the host, he or she will speak about that event as if having the right perspective. Talk shows don’t thrive on the wisdom of their hosts, but rather on the confidence of their hosts and on the entertainment value and comfort they bring their audiences. Talk shows don’t need the truth to survive and thrive. Truth is mostly irrelevant to the equation. Talk shows don’t need to build consensus or find common ground among diverse people groups to achieve their objectives. Talk shows don’t exist to heal societal divides. The ultimate goal of any talk show is for the host to build an audience around his or her personality and ideology.

Within this personality-centered, opinionated, audience-driven environment, most talk shows build their audience by embracing ideological segmentation. Talk show hosts are usually either very conservative or very progressive. The most successful shows thrive by fortifying and justifying rather than challenging and expanding the worldviews of their audiences. Ultimately, these partisan, segmented talk show communities gather together like-minded people to make like-minded observations to strengthen their shared entrenched convictions. Whether the host is telling the truth or dividing our nation is irrelevant to the objectives of the talk show format. As long as the audience is growing and the advertisers are satisfied, the hosts will continue to have opinions about everything, even if they know little or nothing about the topics they’re addressing.

In the social media age, everyone becomes their own talk show host, their own political pundit, their own daily broadcaster of passionate, opinionated responses about every major event and every important person. We post, tweet, and share with our audiences of friends and followers our unique perspectives concerning the daily trending topics that have flooded into our feeds and captured our online attention spans. We are bold and straightforward with our opinions:

“Every single one of them who kneels should be fired!”

“He is not my president!”

“Kanye has lost his mind!”

“Taylor Swift should stick to music and stay out of politics!”

“God is using our president to rescue America!”

“God has abandoned our political process!”

“*The Bachelor* season finale was lame!”

“The guy next to me in this theater has the world’s most annoying laugh!”

“I’m pro waffles!”

Not everything we post is controversial, inflammatory, or even profound, but collectively our society is trending toward a talk show ethos. People have always had opinions, but those opinions used to be shared within the confines of in-person relational abiding. In the past, if someone desired to share their opinions beyond their own personal acquaintances, they had to put forth at least somewhat of a concerted effort. They had to find a townhall, church group, civic organization, or local newspaper willing to hear their message. Even after finding this group, they had to convince its gatekeepers to let them share their ideas with the larger community. Doing so took a fair amount of effort and planning, as well as the negotiating of relational and community boundaries, standards, and power

dynamics. Sharing your thoughts with the world was not easy. If people had opinions they wanted to share with the world, they made sure their opinions were worth sharing.

The internet opened up our access to the world and to each other, which brought with it many positive and powerful implications. Our communication is no longer based on where we live and who we know. We don't have to wait for the gatekeepers to let us speak. We don't need to be called on by the moderator, pastor, organizer, or editor for us to share our messages. If we're passionate about an issue, we can instantly communicate our message to the world, or at least to a few hundred followers who might even carry our message to their social networks. The democratization of communication gives tremendous power and opportunity to each of us. The oppressed, marginalized, and previously silenced now have platforms that give their voices the potential to be heard. One of the greatest blessings of the social media age is our ability to instantly and broadly share our sincerely held convictions to many or to specific audiences, celebrities, or politicians with accessible Facebook pages, Instagram feeds, and Twitter handles. Yet the immediacy, ease, and relationally disconnected nature of social media devalues how we communicate with each other. Many have become far more concerned with sharing opinions than forming relationships. When they do form relationships, they form them in the manner of a talk show host: championing their opinions to rally people around shared ideologies, dogmas, and doctrines. In the social media age, every Christian has the potential to become their own talk show Jesus.

James warns, "Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (Jas 3:1). In the internet age, we act as

teachers, each of us communicating to our followers what they need to know. However, we frequently mistake strong opinions and large followings for wisdom, knowledge, and expertise. James goes on to say that the tongue “is a fire, a world of evil” (Jas 3:6). Of the untamed tongue, he warns, “Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark” (Jas 3:5). The internet allows our untamed thoughts and inclinations to manifest themselves immediately through social media. An instant thought turns into an instant post causing instant reactions. The flicker becomes consuming flame as the tool of our untamed tongue extends through the tool of social media. The world is set ablaze.

Disillusionment nicely represents the trajectory of my talk radio career. My illusion that I would discover a large, appreciative audience hungry for unifying content slowly dissolved into an awareness that my employer and most of the radio station’s listenership did not really value the core of what I loved. For the most part, they were satisfied with the far-right partisan direction of Christian radio. My desire to facilitate a reconciling, respectful dialogue that welcomed and valued Christians with different political convictions was tolerated by management, but never celebrated. Although some listeners valued my attempt to facilitate a better dialogue, many, if not most, saw me as an odd distraction from the normal fare they expected to encounter on their Christian radio station. I went into Christian talk radio believing I was helping answer the problem of extreme political divisiveness. I left Christian talk radio disillusioned, realizing most people didn’t really believe there was a problem.

I would like to say that my disillusionment decreased once I escaped the day-to-day realities of hosting a Christian talk

show on a conservative radio station. However, some days I feel as if I left talk radio and it followed me home. I now live in a nation where politicians daily tweet whatever inflammatory thoughts come to their minds without care for how their words might divide their readers. At any moment of the day, I can peruse Facebook or Twitter and find Christians devouring each other in the name of Christ. I can read posts from pastors mocking atheists, conservative Christians mocking progressive Christians, progressive Christians mocking conservative Christians, and plenty of posts by that one angry dude simply mocking everybody who offends him. Sometimes social media feels like an endless cacophony of righteous voices looking for a fight. In other words, one endless angry talk show.

Dream Big, Fail Big

I often tell people that my motto is “Dream big, fail big!” It’s not actually my motto because I don’t have a motto. I’m not an Instagram post. Regardless, I like the sentiment and the laughter my faux motto evokes. Why fail at something sensible when you can fail at a ridiculous dream? Why fall short of a possible goal when you can fall short of achieving the unachievable? What I’m attempting to express with these ridiculous statements is that I want my life to always be open to the miraculous. I don’t want to limit God’s work to my limited perspective and expectations. I would rather fail at making room for the miraculous plans of God than succeed at making room for nothing. I want to live in a way that changes the world, even if I never see that change take place in my lifetime. I want Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faith.

In reading the story of these three men, I’m struck by the realization they did not know the outcome of their story while

they experienced their circumstances. The story is rather familiar. This trio of Yahweh worshipers refused to bow down and worship a golden image of King Nebuchadnezzar. The punishment for their crime was they were to be thrown into a fiery furnace. Before their punishment was inflicted, they were brought before an enraged Nebuchadnezzar to hear his judgment and to give a defense of their rebellious behavior. Their response to Nebuchadnezzar is a motivating Scripture for my life:

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” (Dan 3:16-18)

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s response was clear in both its certainty and uncertainty: Our God will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if he doesn’t, we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up. They declared God would rescue them, but even if he didn’t, they would not bow down. This is what faith must look like when we have no idea what will actually happen at the end of the story. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s faith moved forward regardless of the final results. The ending was secondary to their faith in God. They chose to surrender their lives into the hands of God and decided that a surrendered life was far greater than a life spent bowing down to the idols of their age. For them, death in a fiery furnace was far better than becoming ensnared by the golden statue. They rejected the gods

of their age and invested their lives into the hands of their one true God and Savior. Whether or not they were to be rescued, they simply refused to bow down.

We live in a divisive, devouring age. The world is full of polarizing people. Even worse, our culture rewards contentious behavior and rhetoric. The internet increases and normalizes the polarizing divides that exist within our culture. Many Christians embrace incredibly toxic forms of online communication. We boldly champion our opinions and argue our platforms at the cost of peace and love. We bow down at the altar of divisive partisan rhetoric without considering the mandate of the cross to participate in the ministry of reconciliation. We worship our ideas, ideologies, and theologies instead of facilitating environments that make room for the worship of our one true Savior. We have lost our way.

I'm tired of bowing down. I'm tired of letting the world set the agenda for how Christians communicate online. Christians are called to be peacemakers, to be light and life through social media. We can radically change online communication if we take seriously our mandate to participate in the ministry of reconciliation. It's time to stand up and stop worshiping the devouring idols of our age. We were created to turn our eyes, our hearts, and our intentions toward the motivations of heaven. I believe God can rescue the way we communicate. However, even if God does not rescue us, I will not bow down. Come and join me.

Chapter One Questions

1. What are your primary reasons for reading this book?
2. What aspects of social media communication do you find most troubling?

3. What has been the primary motivator for your online communication?
4. Think about an online conflict you have experienced. What happened? How was the conflict handled? What could you have done differently?
5. What would Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's faith look like for you online?

#PostingPeace

To enrich your reading experience and the reading experience of others, each chapter will conclude with #PostingPeace social media challenges. I'm asking you to engage in at least one of these challenges for each chapter. Along with thoughtfully addressing these exercises, please engage in reconciling behavior with anyone who responds to your posts. In other words, no fighting! This is an opportunity to put peacemaking into practice. At the end of this book, I'll invite you to join me in a Seven Day #PostingPeace Challenge. Just remember to use the #PostingPeace hashtag so that readers of this book can learn from and inspire each other on this journey.

Chapter One #PostingPeace Challenge

Option One: Share your thoughts about online polarization on at least one social media platform. Try to simply thank people for their responses to your post. Process how the experience makes you feel. Use the #PostingPeace hashtag.

Option Two: Share a story about an online conflict you could have handled better on at least one social media platform. Try to simply thank people for their responses to your post. Process how this experience makes you feel. Use the #PostingPeace hashtag.

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/posting-peace