

SHEPHERDING DIGITAL SHEEP: PASTORAL RESPONSIBILITY REGARDING  
MEMBERS' USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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## ABSTRACT

The pervasiveness of social media is unquestionable. It has become a part of a majority of people's lives. As the sheep of God's flock move into a digital landscape, they may encounter a variety of problems that may pose a detriment to their spiritual and physical well-being. Pastors have the responsibility to address these problems and point the digital sheep to positively using social media. This paper will look at the problems the sheep may face, how the pastor's responsibility lines up with those problems, and how the pastor can carry out his responsibility in shepherding the digital sheep.

## INTRODUCTION

There is no denying that social media plays a role in our society today. There is no denying that this role is becoming more and more significant as we move forward. As of 2020, 3.81 billion people all over the world use social media. Five years ago, that number was 2.7 billion people. Today, those 3.81 billion people manage an average of approximately nine different social media accounts. Those 3.81 billion spend roughly two and a half hours a day on those nine different social media accounts.<sup>1</sup> The percentage of social media use is even greater in the United States. According to Pew Research Center, 72% of Americans use at least one kind of social media platform.<sup>2</sup>

Social media is pervasive in American culture, even in Christian communities. It would be hard to argue that the above numbers wouldn't reflect social media use among members of the Lutheran Church. Social media has become a part of the lives of Christians. But this new piece in the lives of so many is not a neutral force. Social media does impact and affect its users. While not "evil" in and of itself, social media is shown to impact its users negatively.

In his farewell to the elders of the church at Ephesus, Paul commissioned them to "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28–29 NIV). By

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1. "How Many People Use Social Media in 2020? (65+ Statistics)," *Backlinko*, 12 August 2020, <https://backlinko.com/social-media-users>.

2. "Demographics of Social Media Users and Adoption in the United States," *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/>.

his grace, the Lord has given his church overseers, shepherds to watch over it. These overseers or shepherds are entrusted with the pure teaching of the Word of God. They keep guard that members of the flock do not fall away from the saving truth of the gospel. Pastors today are commissioned with that same task as overseers and shepherds. They have the responsibility of preaching the Word of God in its truth and purity. They have the responsibility of watching over the flock that none fall into error or are led astray.

It is the goal of this paper to show that pastors have a responsibility to their flock regarding social media. This paper will first look at the effects that social media has on its users (both positive and negative). Social media affects the user's view of self, changing its users' view of identity, sense of self-satisfaction, and brings about envy. Social media also affects the user's interactions with others. As examined in research, social media leads people to get together less, leads to negative views of others, and gives license to cyber-shame and cyber-bully others. But social media also presents an opportunity for expanded communication, as well as a chance to promote community.

The next part of this paper will show the intersection between the effects social media brings and the responsibility of the pastor. As part of preaching the Word in truth and purity, pastors will naturally and evangelically address the issues their flock faces. Pastors will address those issues by teaching, equipping, and encouraging their sheep.

The final part of this paper will focus on how pastors can and will carry that responsibility out in their ministries. It will look at the various ways in which pastors can preach and teach to address the negatives and the positives that present themselves in the usage of social

media. This section will cover some areas in which the pastor can carry out his responsibility of equipping the digital sheep such as acting in love, acting as a community, and acting as lights.<sup>3</sup>

It is not the goal of this paper to argue that all pastors everywhere be fluent in social media or become professional social media users. This paper will simply show that pastors have a place in helping guide God's sheep as they encounter hazards that present themselves on the digital landscape.

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3. It should be noted that this paper does not provide an exhaustive list of ways for pastors to carry out this responsibility. It should also be noted that some of the ways mentioned in the list are not essential or necessary for the pastor to use. It is the opinion of the author that these ways would be beneficial for pastors to take into consideration as they wrestle with how to carry this responsibility out.

## PART ONE: SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENTS PROBLEMS FOR THE SHEEP

### **The Problem with People**

The unfortunate reality of humanity is that all people are sinful by nature. All people have the inborn desire to turn away from God and turn inward. The unfortunate reality of social media is that—whether intentional or not—designers and creators exploit this sinful human inclination. In his forward to Chris Nodder’s book *Evil by Design: Interaction Design to Lead Us into Temptation*, Don Norman makes this observation: “All laws are intended to stop or otherwise control human behavior. So, if you want to understand real human behavior, just see what the laws try to stop.”<sup>4</sup> Designers and creators of social media platforms are keen on what it is humans want and what they will do to get it. They are well aware of what humans are inclined to do, think, or say. “But why should design be based on evil? Simple: Starting with evil means starting with real human behavior. This doesn’t mean that the result is evil: It means that understanding what each sin represents adds to an understanding of people. And good design results from good understanding.”<sup>5</sup> This understanding of people leads to the trends, gimmicks, and functions that one finds on countless social media sites.

This isn’t to say that everything involved with social media is sinful and should be avoided at all costs. But social media sites want people to visit their sites and to remain on their

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4. Chris Nodder, *Evil by Design: Interaction Design to Lead Us into Temptation* (Indianapolis, IN: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013). xi.

5. Chris Nodder, *Evil by Design*. xi.



sites. “Designers work hard to control the emotions and behaviors of their users. Truly great websites—good or evil—use specific techniques to get users to perform the desired task time and time again.”<sup>6</sup> Designers of social media sites know that humans love to turn inward to self-justify and boast.

### **The Problem of Self-Justifying**

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul was dealing with this inborn desire. He writes to the Galatian congregation, “We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal 2:15–16). All people are born with the idea that they can justify themselves through what they do. People turn away from the justifying work that Christ has done and instead turn to their own works.

Social media did not create this inborn desire, but it does facilitate it.

Human users, being broken and sinful creatures, are inclined toward boasting in their own self-righteousness and building a case for their own self-worth. User-centered design strives to understand real human behavior and design with this in mind. Social media is a designed technology intended to maximize user experience and enjoyment. Therefore, this technology has been designed—at worst, furtively, or at best, unintentionally—in such a way as to facilitate our sinful penchant for self-justification and boasting.<sup>7</sup>

Social media encourages people to self-justify through their interactions and posting on whatever site they happen to use. Social media sites have become grounds for people to find validation in who they are and what they do. Whether it is what they eat, where they travel, or what they are doing at the moment, people are looking to justify themselves. Through the “like” mechanic on

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6. Nodder, *Evil by Design*. 1.

7. A Trevor Sutton, “Inclined to Boast: Social Media and Self-Justification,” *Concordia Journal* 45.1 (2019): 33–44.

social media, people can pick and choose what they validate and what is deemed as good. People seek those “likes” for affirmation of who they are. “When you go on social media you post a status or you post a picture and all of a sudden you get all those likes, you get all those affirmations from people, and it can be addictive because you have the constant pats on the back that, like, ‘You’re smart, you’re funny, you’re attractive.’”<sup>8</sup> To fill that need for affirmation, people are looking to social media to feed that desire to find validation and affirmation.

The sheep of a pastor’s congregation are no different from any other human being. They, too, are inclined to look inward and are at risk of this every time they log on to a social media site. But seeking to find justification on social media leads to more problems in the lives of users.

### **The Problem of Envy**

In order to keep up in the quest for self-justification on social media, one must present themselves in a way that fits the culture of social media. Ph.D. Jean Twenge records one of her interviews on how those in the “iGen” generation understand that culture: “Normally you don’t want to look sad on there. If your friend is, like, out doing something, you can see all the cool things that they’re doing. No one does anything bad on it—we just see what each other is doing.”<sup>9</sup> But in a culture of self-promotion constantly seeing all the “good” all your friends and family are enjoying brings out an ever-increasing negative feeling in social media users: envy.

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8. Jean M. Twenge Ph.D., *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*, (New York: Atria Books, 2017). 56-57.

9. Jean M. Twenge Ph.D., *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. 55.

Research done on this negative feeling defines envy as “an unpleasant and often painful blend of feelings caused by a comparison with a person or group of persons who possess something we desire.”<sup>10</sup> While the individual may be putting on a show on social media, that individual may look out into the vast digital space and see the positive image that others are putting out there as well. The more that individual sees the “good” life people are putting on, the more the individual wants what others “have.” Individuals will look at their own life and compare it to the positive image that others are sharing on social media. They feel the desire to have the life, the wealth, and the possessions that others are flaunting on social media to elevate themselves. Individuals begin to feel unsatisfied with their own lives and what they have and, instead, fixate on what others have.

But this envy can grow and become worse than just wanting something that others have. Envy can even lead to the desire of wanting others to lose what they have.<sup>11</sup> Constant comparison with others through social media can bring people to view others negatively because others have life “better” than they do. These feelings, left unchecked, can fester and grow to cause the individual’s well-being to suffer because of the fixation.

Instead of removing that which brings about these negative feelings of envy, research has been done showing that people will “engage in even greater self-promotion and impression management.”<sup>12</sup> Individuals will seek to further self-justify themselves in an attempt to make

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10. Hanna Krasnova, et al. “Envy on Facebook: A Hidden Threat to Users’ Life Satisfaction?,” *ResearchGate*, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/256712913\\_Envy\\_on\\_Facebook\\_A\\_Hidden\\_Threat\\_to\\_Users'\\_Life\\_Satisfaction](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/256712913_Envy_on_Facebook_A_Hidden_Threat_to_Users'_Life_Satisfaction). 1-2.

11. Nodder, *Evil by Design*. 137.

12. Krasnova, “Envy on Facebook: A Hidden Threat to User’s Life Satisfaction?.” 12.

themselves look as good as their peers. Yet, the result is that the user falls into a “phenomenon of self-promotion – envy spiral.”<sup>13</sup> As users seek to promote themselves to keep up, they fall into greater feelings of envy as they see the positive posts of their peers.

The sheep of a pastor’s congregation face a great problem if left unchecked or untaught in their social media use. In their social media use, they face the temptation to continue this self-destructive tendency to use social media to self-justify in view of the envy they feel from others. By their own works, accomplishments, wealth, or experiences, people cannot justify themselves when it comes to God. David reminds us that “There is no one who does good, not even one” (Ps 14:3). The sinful nature proudly thinks that it can self-justify and make its own righteousness. But as social media users focus more on themselves and try more and more to self-justify on the internet, they are not finding the peace of mind for which they are searching.

### **The Problems of Mental Health**

Jean Twenge notes how this lack of a piece of mind is felt by its users. If an individual were to search “Facebook and Depression” on the internet, they would come up with an overwhelming amount of posts, comments, and research involving these two areas. She notes one such particular comment concerning Facebook, “Definitely makes me depressed. All my friends share the fun details of their glamorous lives and it makes me feel like \*\*\*\*. Kinda hate FB.”<sup>14</sup>

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13. Krasonova, “Envy on Facebook: A Hidden Threat to User’s Life Satisfaction?.” 12.

14. Jean M. Twenge Ph.D., *IGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. 83.

Social media effects on users' well-being were already under study back in 2013. These effects had negative effects on its users, both to their overall well-being and their satisfaction with their life.<sup>15</sup> The sheep of a pastor's congregation are facing problems that are affecting their mental health, turning them away from the peace and joy that comes through the knowledge of his Son.

### Problem of Happiness

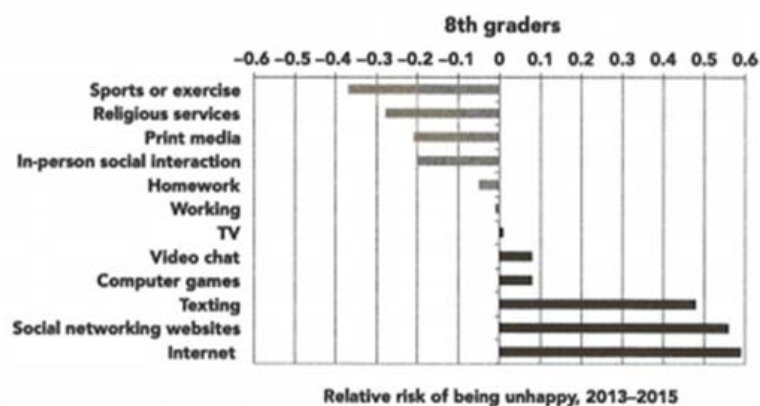
Recent research has come out looking at happiness in 8<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> graders of Generation Z.<sup>16</sup> This research has revealed that "teens who spend more time on screen activities are most likely to be unhappy than those who spend more time on nonscreen activities. All screen activities are linked to less happiness and all nonscreen activities are linked to more happiness."<sup>17</sup> A similar study with adults ended up having the same results.<sup>18</sup>

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15. Ethan Kross et al., "Facebook Use Predicts Declines in Subjective Well-Being in Young Adults," *PLOS ONE* 8.8 (2013): e69841.

16. In her book, Jean Twenge refers to this generation as iGen. This age group includes those who were born after 1995 and grew up in an era of smartphones.

17. Jean M. Twenge Ph.D., *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. 77-78.



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Social media is a large factor in contributing to the lack of happiness in more and more people. While the flock is never told by the Good Shepherd that they will always be happy,<sup>20</sup> social media use is causing people to be less satisfied with their life situation. In addition, continued use of social media can lead to loneliness and depression.<sup>21</sup>

### The Problem of Loneliness

Further research done on Generation Z has found out that teens are spending more time on their phones and less time interacting face-to-face. A severe drop in in-person meetings occurred right as smartphones came out and when the popularity of social media began to rise.<sup>22</sup> Teens and

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19. Jean M. Twenge Ph.D., *IGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. 78.

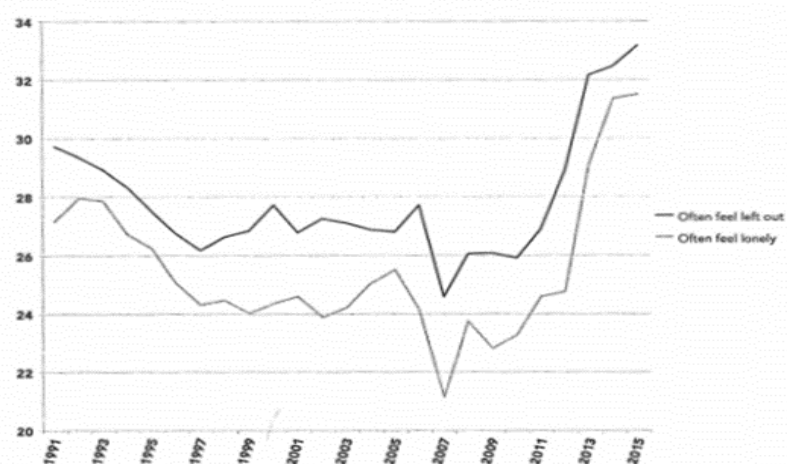
20. Cf. John 16:33

21. Jean M. Twenge Ph.D., *IGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. 79.

22. Jean M. Twenge Ph.D., *IGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. 72-73.

others who use social media are spending less time meeting together offline and more time together online. With social media's capacity to increase and expand communication, it would follow that more and more people are feeling included. According to the research, that doesn't appear to be the case.

As online interaction, such as through social media, increase, feelings of loneliness and being left out are increasing.



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As users of social media view all the positive things that their peers post, whether it be what they have or what they are doing, they feel left out of what is happening. This sense of loneliness appears to be a widespread phenomenon. Demographic groups across the board have increased feelings of loneliness due to social media usage.<sup>24</sup>

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23. Jean M. Twenge Ph.D., *IGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. 97.

24. Jean M. Twenge Ph.D., *IGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. 81.

Those numbers would also reflect the sheep under a pastor's care. Feelings of loneliness are creeping into the lives of members and making them feel isolated. But unhappiness and loneliness can devolve into actual mental illness which in turn can lead to disastrous results.

### The Problem of Depression

"I don't know why I am so stupid. I don't know why I am so sad. They all look so damn happy to me. Why couldn't I look like that?"<sup>25</sup> Thoughts like this brought about by depression are more common than they used to be. Depression, such as experienced by the author of that quote, is more common than it used to be.

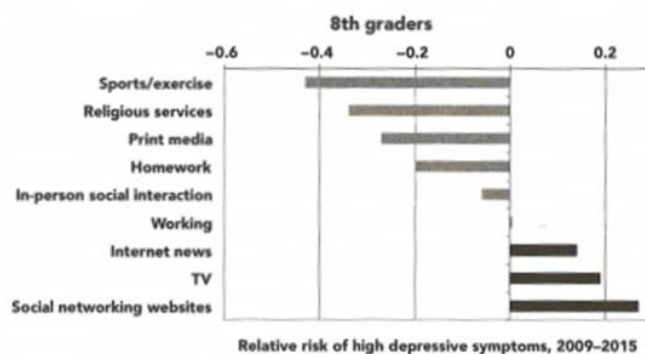
Cases of mental illness are far more common than they used to be and the amount at which they are being reported is more than they used to be. According to the research, this spike began right around the same time smartphones and social media became popular.<sup>26</sup> Those who spend more time on social media sites are more likely to have depressive or suicidal thoughts.

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25. Jean M. Twenge Ph.D., *IGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. 99-100.

26. Jean M. Twenge Ph.D., *IGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. 100.





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In this depressive state, people will find themselves feeling inadequate.<sup>28</sup> They express feelings of uselessness. They find that they don't enjoy life as much.

Social media might play a role in these feelings of inadequacy: many people post only their successes online, so many teens don't realize that their friends fail at things, too. The social media profiles they see make them feel like failures. If they spent more time with their friends in person, they might realize that they are not the ones making mistakes.<sup>29</sup>

Accompanying the increase in cases of depression is an increase in suicidal rates. This increase is linked to the increase of time spent on smartphones and online activities. Social media is adding to the feeling of hopelessness and despair that people are feeling.

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27. Jean M. Twenge Ph.D., *IGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. 82.

28. These feelings of inadequacy can range from feelings about possessions, life experiences, social and economic status, and even about body image. Rachel Cohen and Alex Blaszczynski have done research that indicates social media sites (in this instance Facebook) bring about negative views on body image. Not only are users feeling upset about their lives, but they are also feeling inadequate about their own bodies (Body image dissatisfaction or BID). Their research showed that while eating disorders are not a direct consequence of social media use, social media does seem to reinforce the over-evaluation of a user's weight and shape.

29. Jean M. Twenge Ph.D., *IGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. 101.

Increases in mental illness across the board mean that sheep within the flock are facing these problems as well. The flock is coming to terms with the effects that social media brings, whether it be first- or second-hand.

## **The Problems in Interacting with Others**

### The Problem of Lack of Empathy

Social media has the possibility to change the way the sheep view and interact with others on various platforms. While users may try to present themselves positively, it doesn't change the range of stories, events, and imagery one can find through social media. "A considerable portion of the content on the internet features startling stories, grief, and violent imagery. Because social media users are confronted with more suffering than they can meaningfully respond to, social media further produces the problem of empathy burnout."<sup>30</sup> Users are being drained emotionally due to what they see on social media and are losing sensitivity to what they see on a daily basis.

Another contributing factor that leads to a lack of empathy is the fact that it is very easy for users to detach their "true selves" from what they are doing or saying on social media.<sup>31</sup> There is a capacity for users on social media to consider their online actions as an exaggeration or an enhancement of who they are. Chris Nodder references a list of six factors that John Suler, professor of psychology at Rider University, posits to what he calls the "online disinhibition

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30. Angela Gorrell, "Spiritual Care in a Social Media Landscape," *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 72.3 (2018): 221–222.

31. Angela Gorrell, "Spiritual Care in a Social Media Landscape". 222.

effect.”<sup>32</sup> The second factor he calls “You can’t see me.” Here he defines this factor as what happens when “someone’s online embodiment is different than that person’s true self.”<sup>33</sup>

Whether intentionally or not, users can go on not viewing their interactions as something that they themselves are truly doing. This means that the digital sheep may be tempted to go on and interact on social media with an “excuse” as to how they act. This excuse can lead to poor or inappropriate behavior on social media sites.

Not only do users have the capacity to view themselves differently online, but they can also view other users as different, or even diminish the humanity of others. “Minimizing the humanity of *other people* online contributes (at the very least) to saying and doing hurtful things online that are normally more private, for example, said or done between friends and family members or acted out while alone.”<sup>34</sup> This acting out toward others on social media sites may be attributed to the fact that users don’t have to deal with the repercussions of what they have said (at least not immediately) because what they are doing is not in a face to face context. “It’s easier to assign negative traits to people you don’t interact with face to face.”<sup>35</sup> Users, again, find an “excuse” to act or speak certain ways on social media that may not be appropriate. Such excuses as mentioned in this paragraph and the paragraph above lead to an ongoing problem on social media in the forms of cyber-shaming and cyber-bullying.

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32. While these factors focus more specifically on online communities where users are anonymous, it does still demonstrate the potential users have for viewing their online selves as different from their true selves.

33. Chris Nodder, *Evil by Design*. 120.

34. Angela Gorrell, “Spiritual Care in a Social Media Landscape”.

35. Christ Nodder, *Evil by Design*. 120.

## The Problem of Cyber-Shaming and Cyber-Bullying

In 2017, Pew Research Center reported that roughly four-in-ten Americans have faced some kind of online harassment.<sup>36</sup> In the digital landscape, there are countless places where users can go to say whatever they want to say about whatever or whomever they want to talk about. This “freedom” to do whatever the user wants has led to a culture of shaming and bullying in social media.

As opposed to the judicial courts in past centuries, shaming is now carried out by the worldwide community. Posts, pictures, and personal information are so readily accessible and so easily spread that news of someone who “needs to be shamed” can reach the other side of the planet in an instant. And when that news reaches the screens of countless users throughout the world, the social media “hive mind” can quickly take over.

This may be as innocuous as someone taking up too many seats on public transit or leaving a pet in the car while picking up clothing from the dry cleaners. Photos, videos, and hashtags buzz around the internet as fast as a swarm of bees coalesces around its prey. No time of incentive to think for yourself or consider the individual being shamed—there is only enough time to swarm, destroy, and move on to the next target.<sup>37</sup>

This shaming takes place regardless of caring about the feelings or well-being of the one being shamed. This shaming is used, in a way, to protect the morals of the community and to punish those who would violate the norms. However, “there are few limitations on the ‘mob’ of online users who can pile up victims. The postmodern context of contemporary cyber-shaming has blurred the moral boundary lines so that what is shameful and what is honorable is highly

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36. “Online Harassment 2017,” *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech*, 11 July 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/07/11/online-harassment-2017/>.

37. A. Trevor Sutton, *Clearly Christian: Following Jesus in This Age of Confusion* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2018). 24.

relative.”<sup>38</sup> Online communities are attempting to promote morality through social media and cyber-shaming. But as opposed to the past, this shaming carries dangerous consequences.

First, cyber-shaming leaves its mark far longer than traditional shaming. “Social media now has the ability to ‘impose a digital mark of shame’ which is almost impossible to remove. There is an incredible risk that you will give someone a permanent digital scarlet letter that they simply don’t deserve.”<sup>39</sup> When something is posted online, it is virtually impossible to take it down. The actions or words that were shamed online stick around and can bring constant shame.

Second, mental health problems can emerge in those who are victimized by cyber-shaming and cyber-bullying. Much like the bullying that takes place in schools or even work environments, these mental health problems can lead to suicidal tendencies. For example, Angela Gorrell sites an example of a ten-year-old girl, Ashawnty Davis, who took her life because a video of her being bullied was posted online.<sup>40</sup> For digital sheep, there is a temptation to play a part in this shaming culture. On the other hand, there is also a danger for the digital sheep to be victims of this shaming culture.

### **There Are More than Just Problems**

While a large chunk of this paper has been dedicated to the problems the digital sheep may face, let that not take away from the fact that social media does have its benefits. The most obvious

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38. Glenn Russell, “Fame, Shame and Social Media: Missional Insights for Youth Ministry,” *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 16.1 (2017): 35.

39. Glenn Russell, “Fame, Shame and Social Media: Missional Insights for Youth Ministry,” 35.

40. Angela Gorrell, “Spiritual Care in a Social Media Landscape”. 222.

positive to social media is the ability to communicate. People from all over the world are a single press away from instant conversation. The digital sheep have access to a worldwide platform that was not possible decades ago.

Another positive is the role that community places on the various social media sites. “Most online activity comes from a desire to connect.”<sup>41</sup> Users are looking for interaction and for a place to belong on social media platforms. Oftentimes, users find a community that shares common interests, opinions, or worldviews. People are looking for places to belong. Since face to face interaction is growing less, there is a need to fill that social interaction. Social media provides a means to fill that need (whether or not it actually carries that out) by giving users access to countless different online communities.

Research has also been done that indicates that some interaction on social media can be beneficial. It seems that when a user receives personalized, effortful communication from someone with whom they have a very close relationship can improve overall well-being.<sup>42</sup> If users are taking time to communicate positively with those they know well, social media can become a benefit and a means to strengthen relationships with others.

The digital sheep are not walking into a purely evil environment. There are certainly benefits to be found in the world of social media. The sheep need encouragement and reminders about the things that they may struggle with or benefit from while on social media.

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41. Angela Gorrell, “Spiritual Care in a Social Media Landscape”. 222.

42. Moira Burke and Robert E. Kraut, “The Relationship Between Facebook Use and Well-Being Depends on Communication Type and Tie Strength,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 21.4 (2016): 265–281. 279.

Encouragement and reminders should be seen as necessary because the benefits, as well as the problems, are not going anywhere soon.

### **The Problem with the Problems (and Positives) Not Going Away**

As was stated in the introduction of this paper, the pervasiveness of social media is quite evident. If almost three-quarters of Americans are using at least one form of social media,<sup>43</sup> it stands to reason that a great deal of the members of Christ's flock is using social media as part of their daily life. It also appears that social media is going to be sticking around. The average Generation Z teen is spending six hours per day on "new media,"<sup>44</sup> i.e., electronic gaming, internet, social media, etc. Social media has turned into daily activity for a large majority of the Generation Z population. Since 2015, 87% of twelfth-grade girls and 77% of boys are using some kind of social media sites.<sup>45</sup>

Social media is a reality that is a part of a vast amount of people's lives. Members of Christ's flock have made social media a part of their lives. In this reality, the sheep who go digital are faced with problems that can impact their spiritual life. It is part of a pastor's responsibility to address the problems, steer the digital sheep away from those problems, and encourage them to use social media for their benefit.

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43. "How Many People Use Social Media in 2020? (65+ Statistics)," Backlinko, 12 August 2020, <https://backlinko.com/social-media-users>.

44. Jean M. Twenge Ph.D., *IGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. 50.

45. Jean M. Twenge Ph.D., *IGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. 54-55.

## PART TWO: A PASTOR'S RESPONSIBILITY TO THE SHEEP

John Schuetze introduces his book on pastoral theology this way: “As ministers of the gospel, we are shepherds of the Good Shepherd and doctors of the Great Physician. We serve the people the Lord has placed under our care.”<sup>46</sup> In his grace, the Lord has given overseers to take care of his flock until he comes again. These overseers, pastors, or shepherds have been given a responsibility to those over whom the Good Shepherd has placed them. “For to the pastor is committed the pulpit, baptism, the sacrament [of the altar], and he is charged with the care of souls.”<sup>47</sup> These responsibilities show themselves in a number of ways. These responsibilities will also relate to the problems and positives that the sheep of whom they have been given charge will face in their use of social media.

### **The Responsibility to Preach Christ**

After his resurrection, when Jesus reinstated Peter as a disciple, he told him, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:17). It is only the gospel message that can feed the needs of Jesus’ sheep. What the flock truly needs to hear and be reminded of is the good news of their Good Shepherd who lived and died to bring them the forgiveness of sins.

The pastor’s greatest responsibility is to preach and teach that good news so as to spiritually feed the sheep that have been placed under his care. The pastor recognizes just how

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46. John D Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls: The Art of Pastoral Theology* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017). 1.

47. Martin Luther, “Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers,” in *Luther’s Works Vol. 40 Church and Ministry II*, ed. Conrad Bergendoff and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 380–394. 384.



beautiful that gospel message really is. For in his love for his sheep, the Good Shepherd lived a perfect life and then gave up that perfect life in order to save his sheep for the punishment of their sins.<sup>48</sup> Through this saving work, the Good Shepherd brought his sheep into right standing with God.

### Christ: The One for Whose Sake All Are Justified

As the pastor carries out his responsibility of preaching Christ, he of course is going to speak of the doctrine on which the Church stands or falls: justification. As the heart of the Christian faith, the biblical teaching of justification tells us how people are saved. It tells us how sinful human beings stand in relation to a perfect, holy God. God demands perfection. God demands righteousness. Human beings, sinful from the moment they are conceived<sup>49</sup>, could not live in accordance with God's law. Because of their sinful nature they could not nor did they want to follow God's will for their lives.<sup>50</sup> Because of their failure, human beings stood as enemies of God, guilty of eternal punishment. Yet, in his grace, God would not leave the world lost and condemned to sin. In his love for the world, God sent his Son to take on human nature in order to take humanity's place.<sup>51</sup> Christ lived a perfect life in the place of all people, following God's law perfectly. Then, to pay for the sins of all people of all time, Christ died on the cross. Jesus suffered the punishment for every single sin of every single person.<sup>52</sup> Because everything had

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48. John 10:11.

49. Psalm 51:5.

50. Romans 8:7; Ephesians 2:1.

51. John 3:16; Galatians 4:4–5.

52. Hebrews 7:27.

been accomplished,<sup>53</sup> God made a universal judgment: all people are now declared righteous for the sake of Christ. Paul elaborates on this decree in Romans 3:20-24,

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

All people now stand as righteous in God's eyes. God no longer sees sin, but rather the righteousness of Christ. This ruling by God is made evident to us by Christ's resurrection. "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Rom 4:25). Jesus' resurrection tells us that God approved of Christ's saving work and has declared both him and all people righteous.

No work of man brought about this justification. Nor is there anything that man can do to earn the benefits of this justification. Those blessings come only through faith. "Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace" (Romans 4:16). Through faith, God imputes the righteousness Christ achieved to the sinner. This faith is not a meritorious work, rather the "organ" through which God credits righteousness. Paul explains in Romans 4:5, "However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness."

Even though the sheep, who have been justified and brought to saving faith, know what their Savior has done for them, they still have that *opinio legis* that wants to take some credit from Christ and put it on themselves. No matter how small the deed, the sinful nature thinks it can prove itself as good in the sight of God. This is proven to be the case in the world of social

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53. John 19:30.

media. Where people use any number of social media platforms to self-justify and validate who they are and what they do. Pastors as part of their responsibility will continue to teach the sheep Christ and how they are justified on account of what he has done.

### **The Responsibility to Guide the Sheep**

Paul says in Ephesians 4:11–12, “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.” The Good Shepherd has given shepherds to the flock to teach them and guide them in their daily lives as Christians. “When believers share the Word and live the Word in everyday life—whether that be inside of the congregation or outside of it—the body of Christ is built up.”<sup>54</sup> Not only is the pastor there to equip the believer in service to the church, but also in service to God in their vocation. Whether a person is a father, a daughter, an employee, a boss, a citizen, a political leader, a friend, a neighbor, etc., the pastor is there to help give the biblical principles for a Christian’s life. Pastors will strive to equip their sheep so that they become more mature in their understanding of God’s Word so that they may apply that knowledge to their lives.

Luther points out what and by what means the pastor will teach the Christian life:

These two are the first elements of Christian life: Repentance or contrition and grief, and faith through which we receive the forgiveness of sins and are righteous before God. Both should grow and increase in us. The third element of Christian life is the doing of good works: To be chaste, to love and help the neighbor, to refrain from lying, from deceit, from stealing, from murder, from vengeance, and avenging oneself, etc.

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<sup>54</sup>. John Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls*. 32.

Therefore again and again the Ten Commandments are to be assiduously taught, for all good works are therein comprehended.<sup>55</sup>

After the pastor has preached law and proclaimed the gospel to the sheep, it is the responsibility of the pastor to show the sheep God's will for their lives found in his law. That pastor carries out that responsibility as he teaches how Christians can respond in love to the love that was shown them. Luther stresses the teaching of the Ten Commandments as they give an exposition to the Christian on how they can follow God's law of love.

All Christians have the vocation to serve God in whatever life situation in which they find themselves. A Christian will proclaim the Word and will live the Word in their daily lives. This also includes their involvement in social media. Whether they are a "friend" with someone on social media, a part of a community, or just someone who is a social media lurker, a Christian social media user still carries their Christian vocation. As part of equipping the Christian for sanctified living, the pastor will also lay down principles as a sheep becomes a digital sheep in the world of social media.

### **The Responsibility to Encourage the Sheep**

But, of course, the pastor does not just lay down the principles for Christian living and leave it at that. True sanctified living comes only through the motivation that comes from the gospel. Paul encouraged the Ephesian Christians by saying, "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 5:1). Christians are humans. Humans get weak

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55. Martin Luther, Conrad Bergendoff, and Helmut T Lehmann, "Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors," in *Luther's Works Vol. 40 Church and Ministry II* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 263–320.

Humans get tired. Humans struggle to keep up the effort day in and day out. Even with the best intentions, Christians will grow lax, or frustrated, or discouraged as they serve the Lord by carrying out their various vocations. It is the responsibility of the pastor to continue to bring them the powerful gospel message.

The pastor does not just remind the sheep of their motivation, but that the one who calls them to live Christian lives is the one who gives the ability and helps them to live those lives. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:10, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” God created his people to serve him. Through faith, he gives his sheep the ability to do what he has made them to do. And as the sheep seek to do what they have been created to do, Jesus gives this reminder, “Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:4–5). Jesus walks right alongside his sheep, supporting them, aiding them, and strengthening them in their daily lives. As part of his responsibility, the pastor will continue to remind his sheep of this fact. No matter where the sheep roam, their Lord is there aiding them as they seek to follow his will, even if the sheep roam to digital places.

### PART 3: THE PASTOR CARRIES OUT THAT RESPONSIBILITY

Don Norman made a good point in his forward to *Evil by Design*. He wrote, “The more the tactics are understood, the more readily they can be identified and resisted, fought against, and defeated.”<sup>56</sup> While he is writing about the tactics of designers of websites, there is a truth that can be applied here. Understanding the problems (and benefits) of social media can help the pastor equip his sheep to identify and resist them. As the pastor seeks to carry out his responsibilities, he will be sure to take his understanding of social media and use it in his ministry for the benefit of his sheep.

#### **Preaching Christ to the Sheep**

There is no other force that will create and enact a change in the people than the message of the Good Shepherd’s love for his sheep. There is no greater answer to the problems that plague the digital sheep than Jesus. To aid the digital sheep in their interaction with social media, the pastor can find specific ways to apply the gospel. To those who struggle to find validation, Christ provides it. To those who are unsatisfied with their station, Christ brings contentment. To those who are troubled in mind and spirit, Christ gives comfort.

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56. Chris Nodder, *Evil by Design*. xii.

## Christ Validates

As was noted, users on social media are looking for validation. They are looking for reasons to put confidence in themselves and what they have done. They constantly seek to justify themselves, comparing themselves to others and, competing against them. Often, that validation is empty or quickly fleeting. They flock back to sites again and again looking for the same or greater validation.

If the Apostle Paul were our contemporary, few would be able to compare themselves to his extensive accomplishments and illustrious status. If he were around today and had his own Twitter handle or Facebook page, he himself would be pretty popular. But, perhaps some of his posts would come as a surprise to people. Paul has words for those who seek validation in themselves in Philippians 3:4–11,

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul finds no value in what he has done. He finds no value in his status. It is the knowledge of his Savior Jesus that he finds worthwhile.

These words serve the pastor and the sheep over whom he has responsibility. The pastor can point to any numerous accomplishments that the sheep may do in their life and show that those acts by themselves are completely worthless in God's eyes. Because of the complete

corruption of man, no work that is done is good. All works that are done are done in sin. This gives the opportunity to turn the sheep's attention to that which is worthwhile: the knowledge of Jesus and what he has done for the sheep. For it is Jesus who validates the sheep in God's eyes. For Christ has robed the sheep in his righteousness. The Savior who gave them right standing with God makes their works good and worthwhile in God's eyes.

Those who are looking for validation, those who are looking for justification should know they have it, not because of a popular post or a witty comment. They won't find it in themselves. They will find it in Christ. The sheep are valued, dearly loved children of God through faith in their Good Shepherd.

#### Christ Brings Contentment

Earlier, this paper noted the self-promotion – envy spiral<sup>57</sup> in which users of social media can find themselves. Social media opens up the user to a whole world of possessions, fame, and experiences that are desirable. Because of this envy, many become unsatisfied with their own lives. Those desires may result in further sins in either thoughts, words, or actions.<sup>58</sup>

Even before modern technology such as social media was even a concept, Solomon, the Teacher, made note of this problem with envy: “And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (Eccl 4:1). The pastor will carry out his responsibility to his sheep by reminding them of the meaninglessness of envy and that which springs from it. Instead, the members will be turned to

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57. Krasonova, “Envy on Facebook: A Hidden Threat to User's Life Satisfaction?.” 12.

58. James 1:14–15.



the contentment they have because of Jesus. In an unmeasurable display of grace, God showed his great care and concern for his sheep. God provided for the greatest need of all people through the work of Christ. As if that were not enough, God continues his amazing grace by providing for his people daily. “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things” (Rom 8:32)? God continues his care and concern for his people. God continues to show his care and concern for his people by giving to them what they need in life. God will continue to provide for his people. In love and thanks for what God has done through his Son and what he continues to do in their lives, the pastor can direct the digital sheep to avoid those feelings of envy while on social media and keep the contentment they have in Jesus ever in mind.

Though envy, dissatisfaction, and the toil that results from both is meaningless, those feelings are not so easily erased from the hearts and minds of the sheep. Luther comments on the Ninth and Tenth Commandments:

These two commandments are set as a goal which we do not obtain, and we reach out to them only in thought right up till death. For nobody has ever been so holy that he never felt some evil inclination within himself, especially when occasion and temptation were present together. For original sin is born in us by nature: it may be checked, but it cannot be entirely uprooted except through death.<sup>59</sup>

Yet, despite the reality of the sinful nature, the pastor will continue to preach Christ to the digital sheep. While the digital sheep will be faced with many opportunities to fall into envy and sin, they will keep in mind the divine providence of God and what the writer of the book of Hebrews encourages, “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Heb 13:5).

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<sup>59</sup>. Martin Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” in *Luther’s Words Vol. 44 The Christian in Society*, ed. James Atkinson and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966). 114.

### Christ gives comfort

Part of the pastor's responsibility to his flock is to provide spiritual help to those who are doubting, anxious, or worried. Social media certainly can place these spiritual hurdles in the way of the sheep. Constant viewing of social media can lead to negative consequences for mental health and overall well-being. Digital sheep will need a constant reminder of the invitation that their Savior offers them: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28).

The Good Shepherd beckons his flock to come and hear of his great love for them. Throughout his Word, the Good Shepherd shows his love for the sheep. He offers his promises to always be with his sheep, to help them in times of trouble, and to constantly offer them the forgiveness of sins. To those who feel little self-value, he reminds them how he died on the cross for their sins. He reminds them that their sins have been washed away in baptism and that they are now beloved children of God. To those who feel lonely, he first reminds them of his omnipresence; that he is ever with his people, watching over them. Then, he reminds them that they are a part of the body of believers. He has given the sheep fellow brothers and sisters for encouragement and strength. Pastors certainly have a large role to play when it comes to those who may be facing issues of mental health or overall well-being. Yet, there is a limit to the responsibility that a pastor has in this area.

While the pastor's responsibility will be in the spiritual side of the sheep's well-being, when the problems on the psychological side become more and more of an issue, the responsibility of the pastor shifts to referring the sheep to a professional in this field. Most pastors are not trained to handle most cases of mental illness. The pastor will certainly walk with

the sheep to offer spiritual support, but if the mental factors from social media become too much for the pastor alone, other help must be sought out.<sup>60</sup>

### **Equipping the Sheep...**

“Pastoral care in the digital age also involves guiding people toward constructive engagement with social media.”<sup>61</sup> Part of the pastor’s responsibility to equip the sheep will be to teach and remind them how they are to act and interact on social media. Social media presents a great opportunity for Christians to carry out their vocations as God’s children. Social media presents the sheep opportunities to act in love, to act as a community, and to act as lights to the world.

### To Act in Love

In the section prior, we saw how the pastor can lead the sheep to correctly react to what they encounter on social media through the preaching of Christ. The pastor in turn can also show how the sheep can actively respond in love and thanks to God by acting in love on social media platforms. It is perhaps in this area that the Eighth Commandment<sup>62</sup> can receive some special attention.

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60. John Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls*. 274.

61. A. Trevor Sutton, “Inclined to Boast: Social Media and Self-Justification,” 42.

62. There are certainly other commandments that could be discussed here. In its report “A Snapshot of Trending Tools: Christians and Social Media,” The Luther Church—Missouri Synod comments on the Fourth Commandment: “Social media provides a handy platform to express our opinions, political, theological or otherwise, when we are really ‘joining hands’ with other users to bear false witness.” (23). It was the choice of the author to focus on the Eighth Commandment as it has more general application in regards to social media.

Luther comments at the end of his exposition on the Eighth Commandment in his Large Catechism, “For there is nothing on or in a person that can do both greater and more extensive good or harm in spiritual and in temporal matters than the tongue.”<sup>63</sup> This comment certainly is still true today. But perhaps the fingers are fast becoming a number two contender in this area. For it is with the fingers (primarily) that users are communicating, writing, and posting. Whatever the medium, the sin of slander or false testimony persists. God has given reputation as a benefit to his people. God wants that good name preserved.<sup>64</sup> God has given his sheep the role of protecting the good name of others. That means the sheep will want to avoid hopping onto social media and speaking out against others. Rather, the sheep will have ample opportunity to use the platform to defend their online neighbor and to speak well of them and to them.

The pastor can also equip his members to think about how others will react to them. “Furthermore, pastors should help people think through the ways in which their own social media usage can either incite or abate feelings of envy within others: Might this post trigger the ‘self-promotion–envy spiral’ within someone else?”<sup>65</sup> In love the sheep will carefully choose their words and post carefully, not wanting others to fall into sinful thoughts.

The pastor can also equip the digital sheep to express their love and thanks through growing their relationships through social media. Through thought-out and continued communication, the sheep can positively impact the well-being of their close friends and

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63. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Large Catechism with Study Questions*, ed. Paul T. McCain (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010). 71.

64. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Large Catechism with Study Questions*. 65.

65. A. Trevor Sutton, “Inclined to Boast: Social Media and Self-Justification,” 42.

family.<sup>66</sup> Social media can give the sheep new opportunities to live out their vocation as friend and relative in service to God.

### To Act as a Community

Another vocational area in which the pastor can carry out his responsibility to equip the digital sheep is the Christian community. Through social media, the pastor can equip the sheep to carry out their own responsibilities to their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ through loving encouragement and loving discipline. Paul encouraged the Christians in Thessalonica, “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing” (1 Thess 5:11). Social media has given the sheep new ways to communicate and interact with the rest of the Christian Church like never before. This gives the sheep great opportunities to reach out in love and fellowship to offer words of encouragement to strengthen and build up their brothers and sisters. This can take place in many ways: simply sharing a Bible verse with someone who has gone through a loss; offering congratulations and a Christian encouragement to someone who is celebrating a milestone in life; building a relationship with a brother or sister who may not have as many connections as others in the church do.

On the one hand, social media presents a new platform for the sheep to write and communicate in ways that are not God-pleasing. On the other hand, it offers a chance for the digital sheep to hold each other accountable. The Good Shepherd spoke of this accountability in Matthew 10:18, “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their faults.” Social media

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66. Moira Burke, *The Relationship Between Facebook Use and Well-Being Depends on Communication Type and Tie Strength*. 279.

presents temptations to sin in private and public internet spaces. In private settings, the digital sheep have the responsibility to privately engage their erring brother or sister and admonish them for their sin. “Here you have a precious and excellent teaching for governing well the tongue,<sup>67</sup> which is to be carefully kept against this detestable misuse.”<sup>68</sup> For the building up of the Christian community, the pastor will equip the sheep to privately deal with these kinds of matters. Likewise, in public settings, the pastor will equip the sheep to address matters publicly yet lovingly. “Where the sin is public, the rebuke also must be public that everyone may learn to guard against it.”<sup>69</sup> While difficult, this is the chance for the digital sheep to show love and strengthen the Christian community through the rebuking, correcting, and further prevention of sin in the community.

### To Act as Light

As those who have seen the glorious light that is Christ<sup>70</sup> through the Word of God, the sheep naturally want others to come to the knowledge of that glorious light. Social media gives a vast platform for that light to be spread to anywhere on the planet instantaneously. This gives the sheep countless opportunities to reach out to the world and reflect the light that was shone on them.

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67 One could also insert “fingers” here.

68 Martin Luther, *Luther’s Large Catechism with Study Questions*. 69.

69 Martin Luther, *Luther’s Large Catechism with Study Questions*. 70.

70 Cf John 1.

In this area, the pastor might need to be the most patient and careful as he instructs. First, Sutton makes an observation concerning the gospel and instant communication,

The internet has enabled the Good News of Jesus to move around the globe with unprecedented speed and agility. Yet, this technology has also allowed confusion and misinformation about what it means to be a Christian to spread around the globe with unprecedented speed. In this present moment in human history, the followers of Jesus must find a way to clearly articulate the truth while living in a worldwide web of (mis)information and digital connectivity.<sup>71</sup>

While the sheep may run the risk of becoming confused about the Christian faith through reading different ideas and teachings on social media, the digital sheep has an opportunity to clear up the confusion and let their light shine through the mist to the world who needs to hear the message.

Second, while opportunities abound for the digital sheep, the sheep may show a lack of eagerness to act as a light. It can be an awkward and even painful ordeal for the sheep as they share the gospel message in person. There is fear for how the recipient will react to the message of the world's need for a Savior and the one who came to be Savior for the world. The sheep may want to avoid having others feel negatively about them because of what they are saying. The sheep may fear a loss in status because of what they are sharing with others.<sup>72</sup> Social media perhaps adds another layer to their hesitation in sharing the message. Cyber-shaming and cyber-bullying are very common on social media platforms. Aggressive comments written by aggressive people may prevent people from opening up. Christianity, especially, is attacked and heavily criticized on social media. "Such stereotypes may instill fear in Christians and

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71. A. Trevor Sutton, *Clearly Christian*. 20.

72. Dunaetz, David R. "Evangelism, Social Media, and the Mum Effect," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 42.2 (2019): 138–51. 140-143.

discourage them from revealing their Christian identity online lest they become labelled or criticized inappropriately.”<sup>73</sup>

But in patience, the pastor will lead the sheep to see past the potential criticism and negative remarks. The digital sheep will be reminded of the importance of the gospel message. They will recall how important it is for them and how they want others to know the light that has been revealed to them. People are looking for that light. Social media presents the digital sheep to reach those who are looking for light by creating a welcoming community.

As was mentioned above, another positive aspect of social media is that it provides people with social groups where they can meet up and feel a sense of belonging. The digital sheep can offer such communities to those who are looking to belong and make connections. As the sheep build each other up, they can create a place on social media where others can come and hear about their Savior and how he has made them belong as God’s precious child.

### **Encouraging the Sheep**

The pastor has a veritable treasure-trove of encouragement in Scripture that he can share with the digital sheep as they seek to serve God as they engage with social media. But perhaps there is a much closer resource that the pastor can use as encouragement for the digital sheep: himself. In his letter of encouragement to Titus, Paul said, “In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us” (Titus 2:7-8). He similarly writes to young pastor Timothy, “Don’t let anyone look

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73. David R. Dunaetz, “Evangelism, Social Media, and the Mum Effect.” 144.



down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity” (1 Tim 4:12). In both instances, we see Paul’s encouragement for pastors to be examples to the flock under their care. Pastors on social media can provide a positive example for others in their own personal use.<sup>74</sup> The digital sheep will see their pastor on social media and find a gentle reminder for their interaction in whatever platform they find themselves. Just as Paul encouraged the Philippian congregation<sup>75</sup>, pastors can encourage the digital sheep to look to their example to learn and keep up God-pleasing interaction.<sup>76</sup>

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74. This, of course, comes with the understanding that pastors themselves will act responsibly and appropriately with their own social media use. Just like anyone else (and even more so than anyone else), pastors need to be cautious of the potential problems social media can cause and strive to turn social media into a beneficial experience for themselves and their social media neighbors.

75. Philippians 3:7.

76. As it was mentioned in the introduction, it is not the author’s intent to claim that all pastors should and must use social media. It is the opinion of the author that this is a good and appropriate way for pastors to carry out their responsibility as examples and as encouragers of the flock over which God has placed them. It is also the opinion of the author, however, that more research should be done in the area of a pastor’s role in social media. For while there are certainly positives to a pastor being on social media, there can also be negatives.

## CONCLUSION

“Facebook, in and of itself, may be an inconsequential technology for pastors and theologians. Facebook, as it is deployed in the world and used by billions of people, is massively important for pastors and theologians.”<sup>77</sup> Take that quote and replace it with any popular social media site and the truth still rings through. Problems aside, the pervasiveness of social media in our culture ought to cause pastors to take note of it and how it can affect those who are under their care.

There are many potential problems that can affect the spiritual life of the flock. The flock has been given to the shepherd, and the shepherd has a responsibility to that flock. Noting the problems and positives, a pastor has a responsibility to address social media to the flock and engage in teaching and correcting those who may stumble in their online interactions. The sheep of God’s flock are going and have become digital. The pastor who keeps his careful eye on the sheep recognizes the responsibility he has. With constant prayer and diligence to the Word and sacraments will the pastor seek to carry out that responsibility. With the gracious help of the Good Shepherd, it can be carried out.

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77. A. Trevor Sutton, “Inclined to Boast: Social Media and Self-Justification.” 43.

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