



The Christian and Social Media in the Age of Disappointment

By Darren Middleton

President Trump is a polarising public figure, and it's fair to say that even the mention of his name is to invite peak anger on social media. While not quite as divisive, Premier Andrews' unprecedented measures to quell the spread of this virus in Victoria has also seen social and political commentary that tends to rail and accuse, even insult and censure. Online aggressive, accusations, and insulting interactions are regular features in cyber communication.

I don't think it's just the pandemic, or American politics either, it runs deeper than particular issues or politicians. It's part of a more profound cultural disposition of disappointment that manifests itself in anger, and its ugly sibling: cynicism. People get angry because they do not get what they want (Jas. 4:1-2); this disappointment often ferments into bitterness and cynicism. It's the sore and swollen underbelly of a culture that promised a life of happiness through sexual freedom and material prosperity. Throw in a seven-month pandemic, and that's a recipe for lots of moments of peak anger and harsh words - online and elsewhere.

I have noticed on social media an increasing trend for people to preface their comments with calming words because they know what to expect if they post anything mildly controversial. Of course, there has always been 'argy-bargy' in public discourse. However, a Facebook post from a non-Victorian saying "Dan Andrews is doing a great job" or from some glutton for punishment saying "I support Donald Trump!" will likely be the precursor to a verbal riot that includes looting and burning. No wonder some Christians are 'taking a break' from social media.

So, what can a Christian do? My encouragement is not to retreat. Yes, the online public square is often robust, angry and sometimes poisoned. The issues debated are often challenging

to speak into easily, especially when our contribution might cut across social expectations. Yet, George Orwell wrote, *"If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear."*

How appropriate for Christians to make use of that liberty to tell people a gospel message they do not want to hear! For if we are to make use of our liberties (while we still have them), if we are to be "salt and light" (Matt. 5:13-16), if we are to give a reason for the hope that we have in Jesus (1Pet. 3:15) then it would be wise for us to make the most of every opportunity to speak in a way that honours Christ and models grace. As Paul urges us in Colossians 4:5-6, we are to *"Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. time."*

That doesn't mean there isn't a place for strong words; Jesus and his Apostle spoke in ways that rebuked, divided and upset others (e.g. Matt.23; Gal.2:11-14; 3:1) but they also urged gentleness in speech, walking in wisdom knowing when and how we ought to respond (Eccles. 8:5-6). The truth is, too often we head to social media without our spiritual armour on and leave feeling defeated, frustrated or angry. That's why we need resilience; it is not just gospel blessings that are often met with online curses; almost any online discussion can end in an online verbal melee. People are easily offended and can get angry at what one might think is just a fact, or one's faith, or in my case, my very appearance seems sufficient for the curses to flow.

G.K. Chesterton has some wise words for dealing with someone who 'curses' us, someone he described as a 'madman' saying,

“If you argue with a madman, it is extremely probable that you will get the worst of it; for in many ways his mind moves all the quicker for not being delayed by things that go with good judgment. He is not hampered by a sense of humour or by clarity, or by the dumb certainties of experience... The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason.”

John Calvin calls this ‘inordinate desires’ where people fixate on politics, sexuality or social issues and lose sight of compassion, kindness, patience and grace for one another, especially so, in what David Brooks describes as an ‘Age of Disappointment’.

Let that not be us.

Let us not turn into a ‘madmen’ with harsh words born of ‘inordinate desires’ even in good causes, such as to see abortion stopped, or refugees helped, or immorality opposed or even the gospel proclaimed. Rather let us work hard at gracious speech and to do that by God’s grace with resilience. The sort of resilience that Jesus and his disciples needed in the face of

unending opposition. Resilience to stay the course when Caesars forbid, when crowds walk away, and when people “*are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you*” (1Pet. 4:4). This is resilience in an ‘Age of Disappointment’ that is marred by anger, cynicism and intolerance; resilience grounded in the gospel of hope, “*for God gave us a spirit not of fear, but of power and love and self-control*” enabling us to be “*to be strong in the Lord and the strength of his might*” (2Tim. 1:7; Eph. 6:10).

We live and witness in an intolerant ‘Age of Disappointment’. Let us make every effort to announce Jesus and his Kingdom clearly, defend it resolutely and communicate it graciously and patiently, and to do that with all of our speech, all of the time, but especially on the choppy seas of social media.

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