

EXCERPT



Posting Peace

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

April 20, 2021 | \$17, 224 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4780-8

The internet seems to have brought the world together only so we can tear each other apart. Social media platforms have become toxic and polarizing environments. Many of us are overwhelmed and disillusioned by the endless online conflict and negativity. How did we get here, and what can we do about it?

Why are we so 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 that "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 COVID-19 virus, the most divisive aspects of social media communication went viral. Angry partisan divisiveness and wild, unfounded conspiracy theories spread rapidly through social media platforms.

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 personally and to harm personally more people 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 noncontroversial 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.

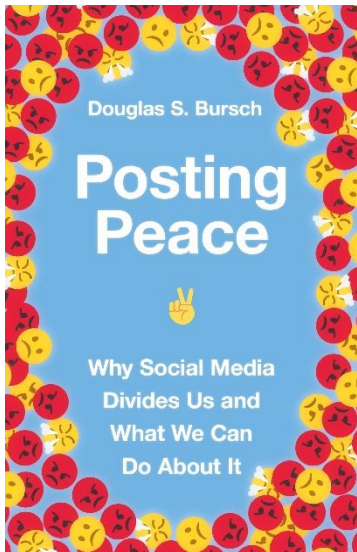


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We sense and even lament the foreboding, growing tensions and divisions rising up in our social media age, yet many of us are fatalistic when contemplating solutions. While some people pessimistically accept the hostility of social media as an inevitable 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 nonreconciling 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.

—Adapted from chapter one, "Angry Online"

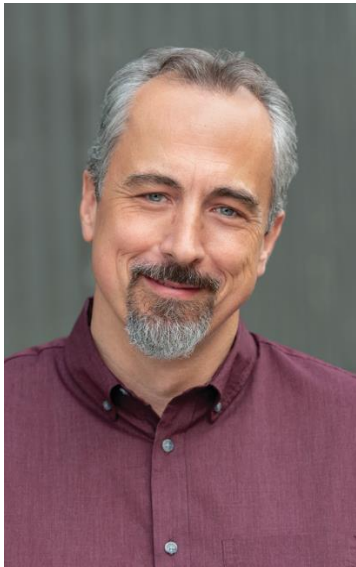


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**Posting Peace***Why Social Media Divides Us and What We Can Do About It*

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Douglas S. Bursch is copastor of Evergreen Foursquare Church in Auburn, Washington. He serves on the US Doctrine Committee, International Doctrine Committee, and Education Commission of the Foursquare Church, and he has taught theology courses as adjunct faculty for Life Pacific College and Life Ministry Institute. He earned a DMin from George Fox Evangelical Seminary with his dissertation research focusing on social media. A former newspaper columnist and talk radio host, he is the producer and host of the *Fairly Spiritual Show* radio program and podcast.

The Power of the Online Peacemaker

How is social media shaping our culture?

Douglas Bursch: Social media radically impacts the way we communicate truth. Individuals are adopting online behavior that works against the ministry of reconciliation. I wrote this book because I believe people are not truly aware of how much the medium of social media exaggerates divisive and dehumanizing behaviors. My desire is to provide people with a resource to help them facilitate and communicate a better witness in their online communication.

In what ways does your book help readers answer the call to be peacemakers in a digital world?

Douglas: *Posting Peace* is an in-depth, research-based, spiritual examination of why social media divides people and how Christians can stop this polarization through embracing the ministry of peacemaking. I share personal stories from my extensive experiences as a pastor, talk radio host, and social media influencer and provide observations from technology experts concerning how social media radically changes the way humans communicate. I share examples of how to proactively deal with social media conflict and provide #postingpeace questions and challenges at the end of each chapter to encourage practical online peacemaking.

How can Christians best engage in the ministry of social media peacemaking?

Douglas Bursch: All Christians are called to engage in the ministry of social media peacemaking, and we can be filled with hope for the possibility of radically changing how and what we communicate online:

- Recognize the unique ways the medium of social media exaggerates our polarization.
- Be willing to fight against the most divisive aspects of online communication.
- View social media as less of a tool for individual expression and more of a tool to facilitate reconciliation.



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