

Transcript 93

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. As a Internet based ministry we use social media a lot and many of you have had positive experiences with the social media because there are some definite benefits to it. But there are also some downsides, and so our guest today, Pastor Douglas Bursch, has written a book on social media called Posting Piece, Why Social Media Divides Us, And What We Can Do About It. So Beth, one of the Got Questions employees and I are going to be interviewing Doug today just to get his insights on how we as Christians can use social media in a edifying and God honoring way. So Doug and Beth and welcome to the show.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

Thanks for having me.

Shea Houdmann

So Doug just to start off how do social media platforms impact how we interact with others? How is interacting on social media different from other venues?

Pastor Douglas Bursch

One of the things I realize is every one of us feels like social media is becoming more polarizing. We just kind of sense that even if we used it a couple of years ago versus now, and we're trying to figure out why, and one of the things I don't think we realize is Christians or recognize is that every medium influences how we communicate. The printing press is a medium. Radio, television and Internet is a new medium, and although the Christian message is the same yesterday, today and forever, when we communicate our faith online, online communities, online technology changes what we communicate and how we communicate.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

So a lot of my book is talking about this issue because I don't think people are always trying to get into fights. But the technology itself is causing that, and there's lots of different reasons, and I could certainly talk about some of them today, but I want people to understand that, that this technology is not neutral. It'll shift you in directions. It'll make conversations move in a direction that often we don't want them to move in, so we really need to be aware of what the technology is doing to us?

Beth DeVore

One of the things that you mentioned that I've seen this in Twitter especially it does not engender a thoughtful correspondence. Instead, it's quick judgments and short replies, and I I joined Twitter more actively a few months ago, and there's so many posts and you have to make judgment calls so quickly or it's going to, you're going to lose your chance to reply.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

Yeah, well, one of the things. Here's just an example of how different mediums influence what we communicate. Twitter for instance. It's hard to even post a scripture on Twitter because there's not

enough room on each tweet which is interesting. Have you ever tried to just post a whole scripture when you tweet something you realize most scriptures don't fit into that context. So that already tells you that we're communicating certain things in certain ways.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

The problem and the strength of social media is we can instantly communicate online whatever we think. That's also the weakness, because it takes away contemplation. It takes away you know what beats quick to listen, slow to speak those sorts of scriptures and so we have people expressing really passionate opinions immediately when they have them, responding immediately with no sorts of kind of waiting, pausing. We know Jesus even went away to be with the father to pray before he communicated to large groups. The strength is we can instantly get our ideas out there. The weakness is we can instantly get our ideas out there and so at one level we want to engage the conflict. We want to engage the important issue, but that's often not the best aspects of our humanity when we're immediately responding, 'cause often when we immediately respond to something, it's a visceral, emotional, reactive reality, and if we're not careful we'll just get into that kind of reactive argument, so I think that's kind of what you're hitting at with Twitter and with other social media platforms, it's suddenly everyone arguing about something, but we don't take enough time to pause to ask what God's heart is in this, and also even ask what is the goal of this?

Pastor Douglas Bursch

The big thing that I focus in on is reconciliation. We are called to the ministry of reconciliation every Christian, so my goal of communicating online isn't just to win the argument, but it's to win people to Christ or to facilitate an environment that makes room for God and makes room for redemptive conversations or reconciling conversations.

Beth DeVore

Uh, you also talk about how there's a difference between affinity groups online and there's our neighborhood, the people that we actually interact with or should interact with day to day. And I've been studying Luke 6 and the bulk of Jesus's Sermon on the plain is taking the initiative to be kind to what he refers to as our enemies. Which in this context is primarily those who persecute us because we follow him. But it struck me that this is even more important now, because if someone with a different opinion doesn't like what we're saying, they can quickly cancel us or mute us, or find people that who agree with them.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

Well, one of the strengths of social media is we can find like minded people. I mean even the ministry that you do at some level is people are searching for answers. They have similar questions. They can unite together in that pursuit of questions and answers, and even identify that we kind of agree on the same thing here. So that's a strength, but the weakness of that is we sometimes don't have enough diversity in our communities.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

Now if you look at the neighborhood versus online affinity groups, online affinity groups you usually unite with someone based on a shared interest where you both like Star Wars or you have a certain

theological conviction. The problem is sometimes we only get along as much as we agree upon that one issue, now, think about your neighborhood. Neighborhood abiding is different. You have to learn how to exist with your neighbors, not just because you agree about everything, but because you're each other neighbors, you're going to exist with each other for a long time.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

Now through most of humanity what was our social network? Our social network was basically people in walking distance. You know, before the car, what did we do? We just basically maybe we could hitch up the wagon or something, but in general it was our neighbors. It was there was one or two churches in town. We learned how to get along with these people and we had to go through conflicts because if you didn't go through a conflict there was no one to talk to. If you didn't get along with your neighbor, there's no one to to, you know, interact with. If you don't get along in your church, there's only one other church in town and what are you going to do?

Pastor Douglas Bursch

So now, that wasn't always good, because sometimes in those settings you'd have a controlling pastor or controlling neighbor, but we learned how to go through conflict, how to reconcile, how to have diverse opinions, how to disagree and agree on the central things, what's happening in these affinity groups, and I think we've all found this. It doesn't matter what they believe in, if it's really strong progressives, or really strong conservatives the moment a conflict occurs they just break community, they just go into other communities because they don't know how to abide with each other in relationship.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

Now as Christians, our goal isn't just to surround us with people who agree with us. Our goal is to bring the light and life of Jesus Christ into every room. To do that it means we have to learn how to abide with people who are different than us. We have to learn how to communicate and walk through a conflict with someone. To decide what's most important and central and what's secondary. So this is again the strength and weakness of social media.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

I love that I can find people just like me online, however, it's keeping some of us from learning how to abide with people who are different from us, and as Christians, if we're going to reach the lost, we need to be around people who are different from us as well.

Shea Houdmann

Exactly so Doug, we just recently on our YouTube channel activated the ability for people to submit comments, for the longest time we were very resistant to this. Just seeing what it results in on other YouTube channels and then over the years it's complaint after complaint. How come you don't have comments on YouTube? How come you don't want other people's feedback and it's like we do. We truly do. But that's more what the website is designed for people to submit questions, but open it up maybe about a month ago. And there there's some really good conversations that are happening, but there also there's people who just oh wow. So the Got Questions now allows comments on their YouTube channel. I'm going to complain about every single video. And that's that's how they treat social media is just a

platform for them to tear people apart. They're not even seeking to really adding to the conversation. They're just basically saying, well, you're wrong, and therefore you're you and your entire ministry are bound for hell. Because of this, you take a different view of offering me on this totally ancillary issue.

Shea Houdmann

So now of course we're receiving complaints is I think you should turn comments back off on YouTube, and so we're kind of in a no win thing that we know that YouTube is a popular social media platform, especially in the comments section. But it's try to find this balance, we want to stimulate community we want to provide a place for people discuss and social media is a great place, but it so quickly devolves into something negative.

Shea Houdmann

I really like on your the back cover of your book how you say the Internet seems to have brought the whole world together only so we can tear each other apart. Social media platforms have become toxic and polarizing environments, so it's in your experience especially in your research for writing this book, what are some ways that we use Christians can use social media in a positive way? How can we contribute towards it to being edifying and encouraging, rather than what what it typically becomes?

Pastor Douglas Bursch

Well, that's one of the goals of writing the book is for us to each think about ways to facilitate healthier environments. One thing, anyone's Facebook page or any social media platform. I think we have the right to put the boundaries in there that we think are best for our, if it's your personal page, your own life, and if it's a ministry, the goals and objectives of your ministry.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

I don't think that everyone gets to have the same authority. For instance, in the church I serve, I love people when they come in the room, but if somebody came into our church and started yelling at people and swearing at people and treating people rude, I'd say we don't do that here. You're going to have to do that somewhere else, and I think we need to create in our social media spaces that same kind of accountability. This is the problem though. There isn't that accountability.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

One of the weakness of social media is that we're detached we're not in the room together. It's a disincarnate environment. Means we're not in the room with people. Even think about town hall, people say we're going to do an online town hall. That's not really possible. Town halls were when everyone was in the room, and when you're in the room with someone, it changes how you interact. There's not that anonymity. There's not the anonymous reality.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

If I say something jerky to you. You you can come over to me and look me in the eye. You can follow me out of the room and say let's talk more about this. There's a relational accountability. As we see online is people can post all their opinions, but they don't have accountability to interact with those opinions.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

So there's a lot of things I tell people to do personally in our own communication to help that communication works better. One I try to always communicate with people as if they're in the room with me, so if I'm dealing with someone on social media, I want to post about them, talk about them as if they're in the room, how would they feel if they were in the room? That really changes this, you know, this disembodied kind of spectator culture we live in and I did that with my radio show where I purposely even celebrities I would talk about them as if they were in the room. Would I say this joke about them? Would I, you know, treat them in this manner? So that's a huge issue for me.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

The other issue is the idea of truth and love. When people talk about this a lot but love without truth really is not love but truth without love is no longer truth in the sense of we know the Pharisees said a lot of truthful things for the wrong reasons. Or they took Scripture out of context, or they did it to hurt or to harm. Well, that's the same thing for me. So if I'm communicating truth, love better be connected 'cause let's say people even let's say arguing on your your Facebook page you know I I don't know you and I probably disagree on theological issues. I don't know how many we disagree, but if I love you, I'm going to communicate in a way that shows you know I disagree but this is why I want you to come into the light. The truth. I care about you. That's the kind of communication someone would do if they love you, even if we strongly disagree. It's not love to beat people up on Facebook. It's not love to tear them apart and tell them that they're going to hell, and you're 'cause you disagree with me. I won't even listen to people if I don't know they love me at some level. You know I should, maybe you know, even if it's true.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

But if I'm in the grocery store and someone says something true to me, but they don't know me. Let's say they don't like how I'm parenting my kids. The first thing is defensiveness, right? You don't know me, you don't care about me. So if we want to speak into people's lives first, they have to know that we at least care about them that we're communicating. Not so that we can be right, and they can be wrong, but that we generally believe. We want them to come into the truth and that this information will help them in their lives.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

So I think that's a lot of what we're looking at Facebook. Some people in these social media platforms, their goal is just to be right, but that's not our goal. I don't care if I'm right, I want to bring whatever is right or true or pure or holy in my life into the world for the world to be able to grab ahold of that as well. And that's the issue I'm seeing with social media is it's become a platform much more just for my individual needs. To be right in the world. I don't use it for that. I use it to build community. I use it to find the lost sheep or the person needs affirmation to be built up and to find a way to bring the love of Christ to them where they become closer to God. And hopefully we can be closer together in a way that I'm an advocate for their spiritual growth.

Beth DeVore

That part of the book was really convicting to me because I don't always think about the person behind the avatar and your orientation to use social media for reconciliation was one of those duh moments for

me. Can you talk about that? And do you mean reconciliation between people or reconciliation bringing people to God?

Pastor Douglas Bursch

Well, that's a good question, and one sometimes when we use reconciliation, people think just primarily, let's say in racial reconciliation and certain that's an aspect to reconciliation, but Paul uses it in the context of we've been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation, and I understand that to be this, that reconciliation is that God reconciled us to him through the cross of Jesus Christ. So the communication, anything I communicate is I want people to embrace that reconciliation to say yes to the gospel. To turn from darkness to light too. To surrender to the good news of Jesus Christ.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

To become Christians you know that idea and then even if they are Christians for them to grow in intimacy with God and to understand what life is really about if they're they're caught in a place where they're just doing things that are creating distance. Now I know God is not distant from us, but distance in that they're not listening to God. They're not hearing. They're not following. They're not pursuing the Kingdom. So that for me is any conversation if it's my first interaction or my last interaction with someone, I want to make room for them to find God.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

Now I know God is the one who moves and God is the one who seeks, but I don't want to stand in the way of people hearing the voice of God, or sensing the leading of God. I want this to be about God, right? The reconciliation though also, we know there's that other part that God is removed the dividing walls of hostility between us and the sense of I want to remove any dividing wall of hostility. You know, between Jew and Gentile, male and female, you know that kind of concept of reconciliation. So I want to communicate in a way that someone knows I want to be their brother in the in, in the truest Kingdom of God, we are all created by God, brothers and sisters in the Lord. That's important to me. I, I believe that especially with other Christians, it's going to be really awkward.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

I joke about this. It won't be awkward, but if you're in heaven and the only interaction you had with someone was yelling at him. There's a problem there. We have to find a way to, especially the scripture says a lot about how we treat the brotherhood. You know how we treat those who are, who are among the body. So that's what the concept of reconciliation, and I think you know, that's the strength of social media. All the big conversations of existence are occurring online. All the big conflicts, struggles, questions of existence.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

So we have opportunity to be Christlike in those communities. Some of us will do it more than others, but I don't want to be online and have my online presence contrary to what my in person presence is, and I've even seen like leaders like that where leaders in person, they're three dimensional. They're loving their caring, they have political opinions and social opinions, but that's not their whole identity. You see them online, and they're very one dimensional. You just see them always fighting about a political issue or always fighting about a social issue. And it's not whether that issue is right or wrong.

You just don't see the whole person and you don't necessarily see Christ. And as Christians, if people don't see Christ in our social media platforms, then what's the use? Why, even be on there if we look just like some of the worst people who exist online?

Beth DeVore

You have some convicting things to say about trolls like don't use the word troll. Can you talk about that a little?

Pastor Douglas Bursch

Yeah, and now I know why people use the word troll, but I purposely don't use it. I know that people can be trolling and trolling is, you know first it started as the idea of anybody fishing knows what trolling is. You put a nice lure in the water. You can drag it along the water. And then it becomes, you know, alluring to a fish and the fish bites on.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

It well, early days of social media, you even had trolling like this where someone would go into let's say a chat room that loves Star Trek and they'd start confusing Star Trek with Star Wars. Now they knew there was a difference, but by just saying that they knew it would cause a lot of conflict and people get all upset and so they were trolling and sometimes it was a playful term. However, it also became a very toxic term where people purposely went in to say things that they knew would hurt people and they got their excitement or their joy out of trolling people. Well eventually it became like this idea of a troll under the bridge. Just somebody who does terrible things, fights with people, doesn't want to get along. Now we know that trolling behavior exists.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

I purposely don't call people trolls because I think the term itself is dehumanizing. Trolling ultimately dehumanizes people. It means I don't care about you. I'm going to be mean. I'm going to be a jerk. I'm going to fight with you 'cause your humanity doesn't matter to me. Well, calling someone a troll is calling them even less than human, so I don't want to use that language and my father taught me that when I was younger. I remember seeing some terrible footage on Nazis and the Holocaust and I was so devastated and my dad said that behavior is monstrous.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

It is, but we have to be careful when we call people monsters, because sometimes we call people monsters to separate ourselves from them to say only monsters do terrible things. Only monsters murder, only monsters do the things that you know break the all the 10 commandments, but my father said that capacity is within all of us to do monstrous things, and so it's very important we don't use dehumanizing language to keep us from looking at how we could also do those terrible things.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

I think that's the same thing when it comes to trolling. What I want to learn is first, do I have any of that behavior in me, first to look at that, I can see what's wrong in them. Do I have any within me and then how can I communicate where someone at least knows they're loved and the scripture says, you know,

bless your enemies. Also, this has nothing to do with a divisive person after you've worn them a couple times, so it doesn't mean you're going to hang out with the trolls.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

You know, I just said that troll, but the people who are trolling but you are going to still see them as humans and that the fact that I block them or mute them or don't have anything to do with them is not an expression of hate. It's actually love. It's like I don't want to allow you to keep sinning against me. I don't want to, you know, if you're just sinning against me, I don't want to carry that on. You don't look good in that, certainly not edifying. So in love. And we have scripture for this right? You hand someone over to Satan. You brush the dust off. You say this is not redemptive. But I want you to know I'm here in the sense of I still am praying for you. I love you and I'm hoping for your repentance. So that's to me how we look at trolling.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

We do have boundaries. We do block people and mute people, but not to punish them or hurt them. It just makes sense. It's like I don't think it's good to let you sin against me and others repeatedly. I'm gonna stop that. I'm gonna mute you. You can't do that. You gotta go somewhere else and then maybe they'll they'll learn. They probably won't, you know, but maybe they'll turn and realize better behavior is expected of them.

Beth DeVore

On the flip side, I know I can be trollish. And you talk about repentance on social media. I have seen that very, very rarely.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

Yeah, well.

Beth DeVore

But I can see how it's incredibly important.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

Yeah, well, here's the. By the way, this is not just online. If you understand the grace of God, that we are saved not by works but by grace, then you can look at the sin in your life. And a sign that we truly have apportioned the grace of God, in that we know we've been saved by grace, a gift from God, not of ourselves, is then it search my heart Lord, know my ways. And if there be any wicked way and me reveal it, cast it out, and so I think Christians should be known by genuinely apologizing, genuinely repenting. Sometimes we don't because we think being right makes us righteous and we're afraid that if I did something wrong, it means God no longer loves me or I'm no longer on the right side. I don't know any humans who are perfect, so to me as a Christian I, uh, repentance is a part of my life. Apologizing is a part of my life. Online that's a way we can be radically different than other people, and it's hard to do because sometimes when people attack you, they're still being jerks. But I still have to find a way to get to the source of things.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

I had someone accuse me of mansplaining, and for those who don't know what mansplaining is, as I'm a man, I'm going to explain it to you. You know it's just, basically, where a man talking down, particularly to other women and saying this is what you should do, and this is how you should live, and it's kind of that paternalistic thing. Well, I didn't think I was mansplaining, right? You know? So I, I become defensive and I try to explain that I'm not. And by the way, if you explain that you're not mansplaining, it's just another form of mansplaining. You're just caught it. It doesn't matter what you say, but I realize that.

Beth DeVore

But honestly, I've seen, I've seen many men mansplain to each other more than I have seen them mansplain to women.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

Right and that spirit happens regardless of gender dynamics. But I realized in that context I wasn't listening to this person. I was just talking and talking and talking, and I apologized. I said I'm sorry and instead of defending I go whatever I'm doing this is not working. I'm sorry I don't want this to be our relationship and then I asked a question. Please tell me more and then they shared their heart and it changed our relationship.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

That to me is one of the strengths, not only just apologizing, but be willing to just first set a relationship where, yeah, I disagree with you, but I want to know more. You know it's OK to still say I disagree, but let me know more because I want a relationship to develop. You know, I know who I am. I don't need to convince people who I am, but I think often we miss that as well, and I'm sure you guys run into this as well, when people are asking questions about different theological issues, sometimes people are not ready to hear you.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

So first you facilitate an environment where they're ready to hear. And then. You answer the question, but first it might just be 'cause they're so they've been hurt by a pastor you know. Some people have terrible church experiences. They've been hurt by pastors and other Christians. I just have to show I'm not that, but I do care about the truth so you can have difficult discussions with me. Because I am going to answer them, but hopefully I'll be safer than the people who are just there to be right.

Shea Houdmann

So to Pastor Doug, so there will be links to where people can acquire *Posting Piece*, the books. Excellent book, well worth the read and has a lot of insights that was encouraging to us and also convicting to us and how we can improve our social media ministry so so thank you for that but kind of in summary to close up, what would be like a Christian vision of how to use social media? How can Christians use social media to glorify God and to encourage others versus how it is typically employed, and again there'll be links to where you can learn more about Doug and is fairly spiritual ministry of his, his own podcast, and also his book in the show notes in the description field on YouTube and also at podcast.gotquestions.org. But Doug once you close this out with what is a Christian vision for using social media for positive things.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

Well one, I think all of us are made a little different. We have a little different nature and nurture and different giftings and callings, so one of the things I encourage in the book is that each of us need to ask some questions. So this is kind of a starting point and I think it might, I don't know, some people might feel like I'm attacking them in this, but I really am not. I'm not trying to make you feel bad, but here's the old pastor thing. If you died today and the pastor stood up and he and he or she read your she read or he read your last 20 posts. Just in front of the congregation, would you feel good about that? Would that reflect who you are? Would that reflect your faith?

Pastor Douglas Bursch

One of the best things you can do is just go look through your last weeks or months of posts and just look at them. And see, does that really reflect who I am? Does that reflect who Christ is? Is that how I want to be known by the world? Is that a part of my mission? We're letting even trending topics set the agenda for our life where maybe God didn't want us to spend our energy on that topic. It might be an important topic, but it wasn't the topic we were supposed to address. That to me is a huge issue. Intentionality. What am I doing and then prayerfully consider, we know the son of God prayerfully had to consider his role as he walked this earth. If if Jesus had to do that, we certainly need to do that, and that means to me daily coming away from social media praying before we respond.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

Lord what do you want me to say? Who am I? You know those sorts of things. And what's the scripture say. Even emotionally. Why am I responding right now? Is this truly because I love this person or am I offended or am I hurt? Those are important motives, so we can look at our motivations to communicate with people as if they are in the room with both truth and love and then to recognize that social media has limits. When people read read stuff. It only uses a certain part of their brain and when we fight we often begin to write our fights. You know, we write back and forth these long things. That only uses a certain aspect of our brain, so we also need to think, OK, there's a conflict here. Somethings happening where this person isn't getting it. They're reading my words in the wrong way. So how do we find ways to access other parts of their brain and other parts of their emotional life. And that means maybe having to put in qualifiers that say I'm not upset with you.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

I'm actually thankful you know, just things that let them know where you're at, how you're responding to this. I know I do this with texts. Sometimes I'll show a picture of me smiling just so someone knows I'm not angry, I'm just just in my room texting you back. So we have to work intentionally at giving those other contexts for things. And then also Jesus said what? Love your enemies, do good to them, bless them, lend to them, and don't expect to be repaid. There are enemies online, but the admonitions are pretty clear. Even the enemies of God are to be loved and blessed in the name of God. So that's something we have to see. Am I living as Christ has called me to live? Or am I just swept away by the emotional chaos that exist around me? So those are some starting points. Some of you will do it differently depending upon your calling, but we all I think would recognize we all can take an inventory and do a little better.

Shea Houdmann

Absolutely, and again I'm Posting Piece is an excellent book. I would highly encourage our listeners to pick up a copy there that's all digital format print for whatever you like to read. This is a book well worth reading, so again, we'll include links to where that can be purchased. So Pastor Doug, thank you get for being on the show. We truly appreciate your insights.

Pastor Douglas Bursch

Thank you so much for having me on and I thank you for just having this discussion because that's what we're all going through and we need to have these honest discussion.

Shea Houdmann

And Beth, one of the administrators that for Got Questions Ministries, thank you also for joining me on the podcast.

Shea Houdmann

This has been the Got Questions podcasts. Got Questions? The Bible has answers. And we'll help you find them.