

**Letter from Session on the use of social media  
December 2017  
City Reformed Presbyterian Church**

Over the last couple of years, many people have struggled to have healthy conversations on social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) when it comes to divisive issues. The personal distance created by platforms like Facebook seems to allow people to say very direct and even harsh things to others that would not likely be said in person. The damage caused online can spill over into other aspects of our relationships. Unfortunately, our church has not been an exception to this. We have experienced painful ruptures among members of our church that have roots in unhealthy online interaction. At some points in time, people outside of our congregation have remarked that our church appears to be tearing itself apart, based on what they read on Facebook. As leaders, we have often found that our own engagements on social media have become embroiled in tension and animosity.

One response of many of us is to simply “check out,” to not use social media at all. But whether we like it or not, social media are here to stay. Two billion people, about 30% of the entire world’s population, use social media, and that number is rising rapidly. About 20% of all Americans get their news mostly from Facebook. In past centuries, Christians have notably retreated from various mass media, such as movies or television, or even from the media-rich environments of cities, in favor of isolated rural living. While it may be the right decision for some people to not engage in social media, we also believe that the church as a whole is called to engage with the culture where the culture is, and for many Christians, that can include active participation in social media.

There are many aspects of social media use which we will not address in this paper. For example, there has been a great deal of discussion about how social media can disrupt our real life interactions and how it can encourage envy or self-centeredness. Also, the ever present temptation to present a false outward appearance can take on new dimensions in the online world. As Christians we should be thinking carefully about all of these matters, but in this particular paper we will address the narrower concern of fostering civil dialogue online.

This past year has been a season of soul searching and prayer as we consider what it looks like to have a faithful Christian witness in our manner of online communication. We are deeply concerned with not only what we say, but *how* we say it. As we present the following reflection on the conduct of Christians on social media, we recognize that we all need to give careful consideration to how our online interactions reflect on the body of Christ. This particular paper has been the product of ongoing conversations between elders and members of our church as we prayerfully consider how to guide our online interactions towards health and holiness. We recognize that deep disagreements exist among members of our church regarding political matters. But we believe that we will witness to the unifying power of the gospel by seeking to honor our common Christian identity even when we have disagreements.

In the following, it is our goal to present general principles, not to address all the specific situations that may come up. Please join us in prayerful consideration as we seek to strive for the peace and purity of the church.

**Does the Bible speak to social media?**

The first question that many may ask is whether the Bible has anything to say at all about an electronic medium in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our answer to this is emphatically *yes*. The world of social media is essentially just a more technological means of communication using our words. Although we may post videos or pictures, these are always “framed” by what we say about them, with our words.

The Bible is full of discussion about how we use our words; in fact, the Bible puts huge emphasis on our use of words. The book of Proverbs says,

“Death and life are in the power of the tongue,” (Proverbs 18:21)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations are from the ESV Bible unless otherwise noted.

and has dozens of verses on how we use our words (many of which we will review below). Two of the Ten Commandments deal exclusively with words: “You shall not take the Name of the Lord your God in vain”... “Do not bear false witness” (Exodus 20:7,16). When Isaiah confessed the sins of his people, the first thing he confessed was “unclean lips” (Isaiah 6:5). James says,

“The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life.” (James 3:6)

Jesus is even more stern:

“I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”(Matthew 12:36-37)

The Bible takes our words seriously! Our words reveal our hearts: “Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34, Luke 6:45). Social media are intrinsically about words and communication. Therefore they come under the general teaching of the Bible on our words and speech.

In the US we tend to have an aggressive sense of freedom of speech, and social media are in many ways the “wild west” of free speech, where everyone has a sense of no rules. Christians, however, are used to the idea that we may have moral constraints we place on ourselves even in places where there are no legal restraints of the law. Paul says,

“For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” (Galatians 5:13)

and Peter says,

“Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.” (1 Peter 2:16 )

Learning to use words properly is the hallmark of “wisdom” in the Bible, e.g.,

“There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” (Prov. 12:18)

It is part of the discipleship process of all Christians to grow in maturity in how they use their words. One who “thrusts his sword” rashly and randomly is not mature in Christ.

## **Principles of Christian Speech**

Given this overall framework for applying the Bible to our speech, the following are general principles with some specific applications to social media.

### **1. “Speaking the truth in love”**

As social media use exploded over the past decade, people have developed different patterns of use. Some people will use social media (like Facebook or Instagram) as a means of sharing photos or brief updates about their life. Others use it primarily to view what other people are doing. Many people share links to articles that they have read—a practice encouraged by most online news sites. Businesses increasingly try to leverage social media for their own advertising purposes. Even churches (such as City Reformed) have to think about how event information is shared on Facebook. Social media is also used to share and discuss important ideas. For example, our church has often posted blog content onto our Facebook account. All this goes to show that people can come to their engagements of social media with wildly differing expectations about what is happening. It is not always clear whether a particular interaction is public or private.

The broad range of information available on the internet allows for different groups people to form their opinions based on widely divergent sources of information. This can heighten our divides in an already polarized culture. Social media

also allows for rapid fire responses and relative anonymity. For example, we can find ourselves debating the friends of a friend—even someone that we have never met before—or arguing with a church member that we will sit next to in worship on Sunday. In such settings we may speak more bluntly than we would in person and not realize the effect of our words.

It has become evident that the social media world is a powerful tool for shaping public opinion. This is not bad in and of itself, but it can create an added sense of weightiness to online interactions. As Christians we have opportunities to promote important ideas online. Social media can be a powerful tool for expressing important ideas about our world and God's kingdom. But like all powerful tools the temptation for misuse can be great.

As Christians we ought to be foremost guided by the dual principles of *truth* and *love*:

“Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” (Ephesians 4:15)

As people of truth, we should take care to be certain that the things we write about and the pictures that we post are truthful. In varying degrees we will all make statements about what we believe about God and the world that we live in. Sometimes truth can be challenging, and disagreements are not necessarily signs that we have failed to be loving. But we should be reminded that our pursuit of truthfulness is always married to our commitment to love our neighbor. Another way of looking at this is found later in the same section of Ephesians. All of our language should be language that will build others up:

“Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” (Ephesians 4:29)

These are very broad parameters, and Christians will find many areas of disagreement within these bounds. It is not the desire of our church leaders to continually oversee the content of our online discussion. Instead we believe that God has given his Spirit to each person who is connected to Christ, and we are called to examine our own conscience in regard to our conduct. As we engage in social media, it is important questions to repeatedly ask ourselves: “Is this true,” and “is it loving”?

## 2. “Slow to speak”

It is quite common to read things online that make us angry. Some anger can be a righteous response to sin and injustice. But it is also true that anger is a place in which Christians can be drawn into sin. Even though we can sense a lot at stake in online interactions, it is wise to proceed cautiously.

The Bible is full of statements of the wisdom of carefully considering what we say. As Proverbs 12:18, quoted above, says, “rash words are like sword thrusts.” By contrast, there are many verses which tell us to be “slow,” such as the following:

“Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.” (James 1:19)

“Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding.” (Prov. 14:29)

“Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty.” (Prov. 16:32)

“The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer.” (Prov. 15:28)

“Good sense makes one slow to anger.” (Prov. 19:11)

“Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” (Prov. 29:20)

Social media give us an unprecedented opportunity to react quickly to issues and the words of others. In many ways, the culture of the internet encourages quick responses, with things like snap polls and one-click “likes” and “shares.” Christians need to create a culture of careful consideration.

This does not mean that we can never respond to error or sin. But it does mean that when we are angry about something, we should trust ourselves much less to respond. For example, suppose that you are scrolling through your Facebook feed and find something that offends you, or seems deeply wrong, that someone else has posted. Being “slow to speak” in this context may mean taking the time to consider your words and the impact they will have on others, perhaps waiting for a day before responding. On the other hand, suppose that you come across a news story that supports your viewpoint. Perhaps before instantly sharing it and forwarding it, it might be wise to do some checking to make sure the story is true and will be of benefit to others.

### 3. The “mockers”

If there is anything that characterizes American public culture including social media, it is the proliferation of mocking. Comedy shows often are a main source of news for Americans. On social media, “memes,” that is, graphic images with single punch-line statements are very common, and can often be a form of mocking. “Trolling”—deliberately mocking others by saying something extreme to get a reaction from them—is also common.

It is tempting for Christians to “fight fire with fire” and adopt the same approach. But the Bible has very severe things to say about those who love mocking others, i.e., “mockers” or “scorners” or “scoffers” as the opposite of wise :

“He mocks proud mockers but gives grace to the humble.” (Prov. 3:34, NIV)

“If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you; if you are a mocker, you alone will suffer.” (Prov. 9:12, NIV)

“The proud and arrogant man — “Mocker” is his name; he behaves with overweening pride.” (Prov. 21:24, NIV)

“The schemes of folly are sin, and men detest a mocker.” (Prov. 24:9, NIV)

“The ruthless will vanish, the mockers will disappear, and all who have an eye for evil will be cut down.” (Isaiah 29:20, NIV)

The Bible also places special emphasis on treating those in authority over us with respect: “Honor the emperor.” (2 Peter 2:17)

There is a place for humor, but many social media memes are simply insults or mocking, dressed up with graphics. To those who agree with the sentiment, they can seem pithy and witty, but to those they mock, they come across merely as simplistic and insulting. Rather than persuade the opponent, they frequently have the effect of deepening hostility.

Before posting a graphic or meme, think to yourself: does this come across as “mocking” or as seriously engaging others with whom I disagree? Am I “doing to others as I would have them do to me”?—how would I feel about a graphic mocking my viewpoint or my favorite politician?

### 4. Name calling

Related to mocking is name calling. Above we quoted Jesus’ stern words about being held accountable for our speech. Jesus also said,

“Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matthew 5:22)

This is a serious matter. For example, saying “Republicans are fools,” or “Democrats are fools,” knowing that some members of our church, and in the church in general, align with that party, brings us to the very threshold of hell itself. Grace for this sin comes from Christ, but it is a grace that demands repentance.

At heart, name calling and insults are dismissals of persons, treating them as less than humans made in the image of God. The grace of God, even when it sees people acting foolishly or sinfully, always calls them back to wisdom and repentance through reason and grace; it does not dismiss them.

## 5. “Coarse language”

In our society in general and on social media, the use of “four-letter words” is becoming commonplace, even among evangelical Christians. We can distinguish between three types of “bad words”:

a) *Taking the name of the Lord in vain.* This is non-negotiable for Christians. The Fourth Commandment tells us in no uncertain terms that we are not to use the name of the Lord lightly, much less as a term of insult or mockery. God’s name is “holy”—exalted and jealously guarded by him:

“You shall not profane my holy name, that I may be sanctified among the people of Israel. I am the LORD who sanctifies you.” (Leviticus 22:32)

b) *Treating sexuality lightly.* Sex was made by God as a good and holy thing. There is nothing wrong with speaking of sexual activity in its appropriate context. But treating it lightly, as a “four-letter word,” is profaning it. The Bible tells us

“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled.” (Hebrews 13:4)

An example of this is the “f-word.” Using the “f-word” (and many other crude words about sexual acts) has its origin in a world view that sexuality is something common, to be joked about, not a serious and holy thing.

For many people in our society, such words have become detached from any connection with sexuality, just as “minced oaths” like “geeze” and “gosh” have become detached from their origins in taking the Lord’s name in vain. But there is still a large fraction of our society that still hears sexual content in the “f-word”. The principle of the “weaker brother” tells us it is better to refrain from something debatable, than to flaunt our freedom:

“But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak... Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.” (1 Corinthians 8:9, 11-12)

c) *Coarse words for common body functions.* The English language has a great number of euphemisms for common body functions, while many other languages don’t. But all cultures and languages have a distinction between speech that is “coarse,” that is, designed to shock with its bluntness, and that which is polite. The Apostle Paul tells us that whatever our native language, we should be not be “coarse”:

“Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place.” (Ephesians 5:4)

One could become legalistic, and demand exact rules for what words are appropriate and which are not. This is a hopeless task, as language is always changing. But the Christian is not to ask “What is forbidden to me?” Rather, we are to ask, “What is encouraging to others?”—

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” (Ephesians 4:29)

Before posting something, ask, “Am I using this word to shock others, to show them how free I am?” A person who insists on his or her freedom to use any words he or she chooses, is someone who is ultimately self-centered, not concerned about building others up.

A much harder question is when we should share or forward stories or posts from others that use unnecessarily coarse or sexual language. So much of the world is filled with this type of language that an authentic engagement with the world means sometimes we do quote it or share it. As a general approach, we can ask, is there something here which is “honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable or excellent” (Philippians 4:8) which outweighs the negativity of some its parts?

## 6. “Do not bear false witness”

It probably goes without saying that Christians should be truthful in what they pass on. But this does not mean only refraining from outright lies. It can also be false witness if we present something with more certainty than we know it deserves. As mentioned above, this may mean that we refrain from forwarding a news story until we are sure that it is correct and correctly interpreted. Besides the possibility of erroneous or false stories, there is often a problem of lack of *context*. The context of facts matters quite a bit—we may report something truthfully, or forward a video which is not doctored, but we may miss important background information. Ask yourself before you share or post a news item—have I looked into the possibility of mitigating circumstances?

The flip side of this is that we should also be very wary of *accusations* of falsehood. We live in a society in which it is now common to talk about “lies” of others, “fake news,” and failing the tests of “fact checkers” on all sides of the political arena. Rather than moving away from the idea of truth and falsehood, as was once the case with the growth of relativism, our culture is moving back toward seeing things as absolute black and white, with a vengeance.

Our basic approach should be to recognize that it is not easy to get at the truth, in many cases. Facts do not “speak for themselves.” Our world view, what we expect to see and hear, plays a huge role in what we perceive as fact. That doesn’t mean that we can never conclude that we know the truth—we can indeed know truth. But we are wise to be slow to proclaim something either as true or as false, especially when it comes from a distant news source on the internet.

## 7. “As a Greek to the Greeks”

One of the most polarizing aspects of our culture, and social media, today is the tendency to draw lines and respond to others as members of a group, instead of as individuals: “You’re just saying that because you’re a liberal,”...“You’re just saying that because you have white male privilege,”...etc.

Jesus and the Apostles took a very different approach: they responded to people as individuals. When the woman of Samaria said “you Jews” have a different religion (John 4:20), Jesus redirected the conversation to relationship with God, not group identity.

Similarly, the Apostle Paul described his ministry as follows:

“For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. (1 Cor. 9:19-22)

In other words, Paul argued as though he was a member of the other community. An example of his approach is seen in his speech to idolaters in Acts 17. Even though he was “incensed” by the practice of idolatry (Acts 17:16), he “reasoned” with the idolaters (Acts 17:17) and affirmed those of their beliefs that could be affirmed (Acts 17:22-23). Instead of dismissing that community, he sought to understand them and persuade them.

It is true that different groups can have common beliefs in which common errors and sins arise. But it rarely is helpful to treat people merely as members of a group. We need to listen to what people say for themselves, and reason with them, even if they are repeating fallacies that people in certain “bubbles” hold to.

This approach is countercultural in our present day, because various political movements on the right and left have embraced the idea of “de-legitimization.” This approach says that some viewpoints are so dangerous that they cannot be treated rationally. To debate them rationally is to grant them legitimacy; therefore they can only be shouted down or defeated.

It is sometimes important for Christians to take a vocal stand against certain viewpoints, and the church has sinned at times in the past when it did not confront certain societal and political sins.<sup>2</sup> But it is important even when we take such stands to speak rationally as well as relationally and to address the concerns of the opponent. At times of high emotion or social unrest, it is crucial that we do not lose sight of the basic humanity of every person.

Although we may strongly reject certain viewpoints (such as the alt-right), we cannot, as Christians, lose sight of the fact that these people need Christ, and we must still treat them as people made in the image of God; we must “love our enemies” (Matthew 5:44). This is the pattern Jesus laid down. Because of the distance of time, we often don’t remember how shocking it would have been to people at the time to see Jesus eating with certain groups: the tax collectors supported a Roman system that was fascist (in modern terms) and practiced genocide; Zealots practiced armed guerilla warfare and terrorism; Pharisees were racist, sexist and classist and looked down on whole swaths of other peoples and ethnic groups. Yet Jesus talked to each group rationally and fraternized with them, even while confronting them.

There are times when the church must pass judgment on certain views—this is done through public letters and statements from our denomination and/or our local Session, as well as by the means of church discipline.<sup>3</sup> But following the example of God himself, we must be “slow to anger” (Psalm 86:5, 103:8) and give all a chance to repent (2 Peter 3:9).

## 8. “Go to your brother”

Many of us are familiar with the process laid by down Jesus in Matthew 18:15-17, that when we see a brother or sister in sin, we need to first go to that person privately, and then with a few others, before publicly embarrassing them. Yet social media is rampant with “public shaming” of others, and evangelical Christians sometimes take part in this.

How public are Facebook and other social media? On one hand, these media allow us to select only some people as “friends”. But since each other person has their own set of friends who may listen in, the circle widens so that all these media must be considered mostly public. Perhaps the best analogy is a conversation at a party with hundreds of people, in which two or three people are talking privately but dozens of other people nearby feel free to listen in and to jump in with their comments.

Because of the public nature of social media, Matthew 18:15-17 applies. If we feel a person is in sin in something they have posted, we need to start by talking to them privately (ideally in person, but if not, by private email or text), not by publically calling them out. If a person is a “public figure” whose views are well published, it may be appropriate to state publicly our differences. But for most of our brothers and sisters, this is not the case.

Not all disagreements need to be addressed. However, if a fellow believer posts something that we find to be of sufficient concern, it is important to go to that person first. If our brother or sister agrees with us, then we have “won them over.” In an ideal world, Christians would agree and the offending post could be removed or modified. We recognize that will not always happen and that further steps may be necessary. However, if we jump immediately to public confrontation, then we usually end up causing our opponent to become entrenched and the dispute to escalate. Furthermore, speaking to the others before we have talked to the offending party could be considered a type of gossip.

This doesn’t mean that we can never have disagreements on social media. There is often a place for correcting facts or assumptions, and in some cases, closed forums with referees can provide a great place for debate. When disagreeing on social media, three rules apply: *reasonableness*, *grace*, and *encouragement*.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the evangelical church and Reformed churches in general did not speak up as they ought during the Civil Rights era; our denomination has recently issued a position paper on this topic. See the [letter from Session on racism in the PCA \(2016\)](#).

<sup>3</sup> Various passages in Scripture (Matthew 16, Matthew 18, John 20, 1 Corinthians 5, 2 Corinthians 2, Titus 3) lay out the pattern for the discipline of a church member who does not repent of sin, which can include false teaching such as denying the equal value of all humans (e.g., racism, sexism, genocide or infanticide). Our denomination applies this pattern to our context through the process prescribed in the *Book of Church Order*, including the biblical censures of admonition, suspension from the sacraments, and excommunication from the church. Yet discipline is restorative, not punitive: in all these types of censure, the church does not abandon the offender, but strives to call him or her to repentance and faith in Christ.

a) *Reasonableness*. “Let your reasonableness be seen by all” (Phil. 4:5); “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason” (James 3:17). We are to argue with reasonableness, allowing counterpoints by the other side, and arguing against the best possible version of the other viewpoint, not the worst version.

b) *Grace*. “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters” (Romans 14:1, NIV). We should assume the other person is not in sin, but just sees things differently. If two possible interpretations are possible for what they said, and one of them is sinful and the other is not, assume the non-sinful version.

c) *Encouragement*. “Only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” (Ephesians 4:29) One way to restate this is, aim not to “win” but to “win over”.

We may indeed come to the conclusion that the other person is in sin, in which case we need to move to the process of Matthew 18:15-17, discussed above—begin with private discussion, not public confrontation.

## Conclusions

As discussed at the beginning, we do not think it is necessary for all Christians to pull back from social media, though that may be a wise course for some. It is an important sphere of our culture, the “marketplace” of our day. But Christian presence in this sphere should be distinctively Christian and biblical:

“Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”  
(Col. 4:6)

Christians should be the “salt” of society, with the seasoning of *grace*. We should be the best of all at dealing with people of other viewpoints, both inside and outside of the church, showing a different way from the world.