

View

“Social Networking” and the Christian

For some of you, this will be old news; for others, it might be surprising news. Some months ago I signed up for Facebook, just out of curiosity; but someone “added me as a friend” and ever since, I have been a fairly active participant.

Yes... I preached a lesson critical of “social networking” websites a little over a year ago. At that time, MySpace was the main player in this genre, and it was fraught with danger. Young women, especially, were being targeted by sexual predators because there were very few, if any, safeguards in place to keep other people out of your “space.” There were a plethora of reports about young girls being contacted online through MySpace, and its reputation suffered, and rightly so.

Meanwhile, Facebook raced ahead of MySpace in number of subscribers because you can control the people who see your particular pages; you have to approve any “friends” that may want to be part of your “network.” That makes it much safer and more “friendly,” so to speak (though, not foolproof, of course. Parents should carefully monitor any online activity their children may be engaged in).

But safety is not the only issue. I was also trying to warn about the amount of time some people were spending on MySpace, and similar sites. Of course, that’s not an issue particular to this relatively new phenomenon; I used to get literally hundreds of e-mails per month – sometimes many each day – from certain individuals who were forwarding this or that story, joke or video. You can get addicted to e-mail, too.

But there is no debate: social networking, whether on Facebook, MySpace or whatever, can be addictive and chew up hours of precious time before you know it – time that should be devoted to family or to Bible study. I know that some even log on at work, probably unknown to their superiors.

We can be very hard on those who have an addiction that is clearly evil — say to alcohol, drugs or online pornography — but then spend hours upon hours on Facebook. So is using up valuable time with what is mostly trivia an *acceptable* addiction? When did any addiction become “acceptable”?

Paul tells us in Eph. 5:15-16, “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise, but wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.” How can we spend 3-4 hours a day on Facebook and then come to a Bible class totally unprepared and expect not to have

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to answer for that at judgment? It's scary to think about it, because this is a subtle addiction. Remember, Satan is clever and deceptive

Of course, it's not just Facebook and other social networking sites that some are addicted to; you can become addicted to surfing the Internet, even if not for nefarious reasons (i.e., pornography or other inappropriate material). But because the Facebook class of website is "viral" in nature, it is more likely to promote addictive behavior than the web by itself.

For those who aren't aware, the term "viral" has been applied to a process of spreading or broadcasting information, particularly through social networking websites. For example, if I give 5 friends a piece of information, then each of those five friends share that information with their list of friends – which may number 300 or more – you can imagine the result (this has not been lost on advertisers, by the way, and "viral marketing" is a hot trend that many companies are exploiting). That can be a bad thing or a good thing or just a monumental waste of time as you scour the sites of friends of friends. It all depends on the kind of information that is being disseminated and the amount of time devoted to it.

So, should any Christian be on Facebook at all? Is there any value in it? Is there a way to use it appropriately?

Much, in every way! If the information that is being spread "virally" is good, healthy, biblical and/or edifying, then it may just help someone.

Facebook can be a harmless, enjoyable diversion. I don't personally play any of the games or send virtual flowers or engage in virtual "pillow fight," but there is nothing inherently with doing that kind of stuff for fun, as long as it doesn't become a bad habit that eats up hours of time. I got on it originally because it is easy to post pictures that we can share with our grandkids in Connecticut, and they with us. We have posted a lot of other photos, too, some from many years ago – we have a lot of fun with that.

But there is another beneficial use of Facebook that goes well beyond any diversionary value. Since I have been on Facebook, I have been able to connect with many people I knew in

the past – some from the distant past. Now that's a neat thing in itself, but there's more to it than just the "hey, it's cool to renew old acquaintances" factor.

Here's one example: some of you will remember Guy Dawson, who was a member here for awhile, but then kind of just disappeared. Just a few days ago, Guy added me as a "friend" to Facebook and, of course, I accepted. I then wrote him a message asking how he was doing. I received a long message in reply in which he informed me that he is living in North Carolina and doing very well; he has a good job and is attending a church of Christ there. He even told me – and wants you all to know – that he is attending faithfully is now very active in the church in North Carolina.

This is tremendous news and I probably would never have known it had it not been for Facebook. Yes, he might have been able to locate me through our website, if he knew it, and thought about it. But I never could have found *him*; Facebook makes it so much easier.

I could multiply this story several times over. I have learned that many former members or acquaintances that I had lost track of have returned or continued to be active in their service to the Lord.

Not only that, I have had many spiritual discussions with old friends who are not doing as well spiritually (and most of these have admitted as much). It has opened a door to discussions with these people, and friends who rarely, if ever, attend an assembly and that would not be likely without this avenue of communication.

The reason for that is simple: if someone is on Facebook, you can search for them and ask to be added as a friend. They don't have to accept, but if they do, then it is easy to begin communicating with them.

Facebook is really just a means of communication with other people; it's a "network." It can be abused and become a snare for those who do not have the self-discipline to control its use. But it also can be a tool to open the door of communication to new friends and old, and there's a lot of good that come from that.

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