Contents

Chapter 1

detox

The first time Facebook failed me was in my senior year of high school, though I really didn't know it until my first year of college. (In fact, I didn't fully understand the significance of this failure until I began the research that resulted in this book.) When I was a high school senior, Facebook was still relatively new; in fact, the powers-that-be had only recently opened the site to high school students and people without .edu email addresses. I found Facebook to be a fun way to spend a few minutes online after school. This was before apps, chat, or even "likes" came to be, so Facebook was not nearly the time vacuum it is today.

In February of 2007, I was accepted to the college of my dreams, Moody Bible Institute. A few months later, I logged onto Facebook to discover an invitation to the "Moody Bible

Institute Class of 2011" Facebook group. This glimpse into my future, provided by dozens of gleaming profiles of my soon-to-be-classmates, became a balmy oasis in the midst of my senioritis-induced boredom.

I'd been experiencing symptoms of senioritis since my sophomore year of high school; by the time I began my senior year I could barely stand to sit in my high school any longer. I desperately wanted to shuffle off the coil of my Midwestern high school and flee to Chicago where, I was sure, a better life awaited me. So imagine my delight upon discovering this digital invitation awaiting me at home one afternoon. I immediately accepted and plunged into a world of exciting new friendships. I would spend hours on Facebook writing back and forth with my newfound "friends."

At first, most of our communication was the typical get-to-know you stuff: hometown, interests, intended major at Moody, dreams for our futures. Soon, however, it turned into something far more personal. Someone created a discussion board or two for us to share prayer requests and our testimonies. The two dozen or so of us using the group regularly hailed this as a great idea. Soon we were sharing the wounded parts of ourselves with each other; we found great comfort and encouragement during those weeks and months, written in friendly Facebook font.

Like I mentioned, there were only about two dozen of us using the group with any regularity—the other hundred or so tended to use it to ask the few upperclassmen who had joined what to bring or not to bring, which classes to take or not to take, and so on. That's if they used it at all. I remember feeling bad for the majority of people who weren't using the group to what I saw as its potential. I think the two dozen true users all felt that we were getting a running start on our social lives via Facebook. I was investing in friendships that, I was sure, would become the most treasured of my life.

As it turned out, I was wrong.

We moved onto campus on a clear, sunny Chicago day in late August. As I stood in lines waiting to get my keys and the signatures of various officials around campus, I saw familiar faces—those who had posted their Facebook photos over the summer. Yet very few of us approached each other that day to say hello. And when someone did come to greet me, a funny thing happened: we didn't know what to do. Should we hug, or just shake hands? Being the kind of guy who hugs, I considered this a serious question. I hug my friends when I see them, so was I supposed to hug my Facebook friends now that I was meeting them in person?

It got stranger. As we met in person, we were confronted by the strangest questions: do we introduce ourselves as if we'd

never met, or were we to greet each other as old friends? Were we to skip the details we already knew—hometown, major, struggles, and heartaches—or were we to start over and discuss them like it was the first time we'd heard such news? *When I met my Facebook friends in the flesh, I found that our exchanges were not easier but more difficult.* They were awkward and stiff. Our first conversations, of the get-to-know-you kind we all use to start relationships, were derailed, short-circuited.

Fast forward a few years, and my college career is over. In my four years studying at Moody, I met some of my best friends. We walked through many hard things together and struggled together through many griefs; we also had many shared joys and fun moments. However, none of the people who played a significant role in my life on Facebook *before* coming to college played a significant role in my life *during* college.

It seems that, while I truly believed I was becoming a part of these people's lives via Facebook, I wasn't. Many of the people I "got to know" on Facebook are little more than acquaintances now and weren't much more during our first semester. Today, all of those with whom I'd shared my life via social media are not my friends. They were never the people intimately involved in my life, despite the things I told them online. Oddly enough, it is the people I "friended" on Facebook, but with whom I interacted little electronically,

that I am closest with today.

In hindsight, this chapter in my life displays how social media were and are offering more than they can deliver. It was reflecting on this experience as I started studying and reading and writing that helped me confirm that there was something not quite right about social media and the way we use them.

Don't Be a Hater

As I write, I am only weeks away from graduation, a twenty-three-year-old about to enter the "real world." I started a Facebook profile in high school, and continue to maintain it. Most often, I check Facebook and other social media from my phone. I have been known to use Twitter, and I occasionally blog (I say "occasionally" because I rarely have the necessary discipline to keep it going with any regularity).

What I'm trying to say is that I am one of you, one of you college-aged social media users who make up a hefty portion of social media's clientele. I have grown up on Facebook and grown up online. I am not an outside observer to social media and technology; I am a native. My concerns have grown while living inside the digital bubble, and even with those concerns I have chosen to remain inside of the bubble. Condemnation rarely changes anything.

In other words, this is not a book about how Facebook is evil; it is a book about thinking. Writing in 1963, Harry Blamires

said, "There is no longer a Christian mind."[1] In Professor Blamires' view, Christianity lacked any kind of intellectual tradition with which to engage in the hottest issues of the day. "In short we have, both at the public level and at the private level, a positively nurtured negative attitude toward ideas, ideals, and theories."[2] Writing nearly fifty years later, and specifically on this issue, Tim Challies concludes: "Many of us live in the experience circle, where we have never invested any significant effort in understanding the theory of technology and have never paused to even consider the theological dimension of technology."[3] This book is an attempt to enter into the spheres of theory and theology and come to conclusions about social media[4] and their impact on our relationships, our communities, our thinking, and our living.

At its core, this is a book about the promises Facebook and other social media make and how they often fail to deliver on those promises. I should perhaps be a little clearer: many of the promises Facebook makes us are not downright lies crafted by some public relations professional at Facebook's offices on the West Coast. When I say, "Facebook tells us lies" or "Facebook makes us promises it doesn't keep," I do not mean Facebook the corporation. I mean Facebook the website and the culture we have created around it. More often than not, Facebook allows *us* to make these promises, and *we* propagate them.

Also, I want to note that I do not have a particular beef with Facebook. I am not only concerned with Facebook in particular, but with social media in general. In my mind, Facebook is the epitome of social media, the prime culprit, and the most notable example of what we will discuss in these pages. And frankly, it's the most popular social media platform and the most widely used. So, while I will most often hold up Facebook for examination, I will often make reference to social media and Twitter and, maybe, MySpace (for old times' sake).

In any case, it's often hard to see a problem in the middle of the situation, so it's helpful to step out of the situation to see the problem more clearly. This is why we are unfriending ourselves for the weekend: being away from Facebook may help us to see it more clearly.

Promises, Promises

In the next few pages, I want to explore and expose the promises social media make and show how they are negatively affecting us and our relationships. Consider the following points as the major themes of social media. In the next chapter, we'll consider these themes through a theological lens.

Promise 1: Media are amoral.

When I began researching for the project that gave birth to what you're reading now, I read a book that totally wrecked my life. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in*

an Age of Entertainment was written by Neil Postman in the 1980s. His work came alongside another similar work, *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man* by Marshall McLuhan, who coined the famous (though mysterious) adage, "The medium is the message."

This is an often-used and little-understood phrase. But when I came to see what McLuhan, and then Postman, meant by it, everything began to make sense. The medium is the message means that

> in the long run a medium's content matters less than the medium itself in influencing how we think and act. As our window onto the world, and onto ourselves, a popular medium molds what we see and how we see it—and eventually, if we use it enough, it changes who we are, as individuals and as a society.[5]

Postman wrote that every medium has resonance.[6] That is, a medium's power and influence resonates—echoes, grows, increases—in ways that we can't quite predict. In the end, a medium changes the way we think and the way we relate; a medium has creative power that extends far beyond itself. "A medium is the social and intellectual environment a machine creates," he says.[7] Media have a peculiar power to shape and change us as we use them and they use us. Media have great effect on us because they are "intellectual technologies." "It is

our intellectual technologies that have the greatest and most lasting power over what and how we think," writes Nicholas Carr. He says that intellectual technologies

> are our most intimate tools, the ones we use for self-expression and for shaping personal and public identity, and for cultivating relations with others . . . when [intellectual technologies] come into popular use, [they] often promote new ways of thinking or extend to the general population established ways of thinking that had been limited to a small, elite group.[8]

So back to the promise Facebook makes, or more appropriately, that technology makes as a whole. We have come to believe that how we communicate doesn't really matter; we think that media are neutral vehicles, well under our control. We believe that social media are our tools, and that these tools are our friends. As Carr notes,

> In the end, we come to pretend that the technology itself doesn't matter. It's how we use it that matters, we tell ourselves. The implication, comforting in its hubris, is that we're in control. The technology is just a tool, inert until we pick it up and inert again once we set it aside.[9]

We are wrong. A medium is not a neutral bystander in our communication. Quite the opposite: "Every technology has an inherent bias," writes Postman. "It has within its physical

form a predisposition toward being used in certain ways and not others. Only those who know nothing of the history of technology believe that a technology is entirely neutral . . . Each technology has an agenda of its own."[10] Media desire, ever so subtly, to be used in certain ways to the exclusion of others. Take television, for example. Postman's work dealt largely with the shift from a culture built on the written word to a culture built on the televised world. "Entertainment," he wrote, "is the supra-ideology of all discourse on television."[11] In essence, whatever you put into television comes out the other side as entertainment. Whether it be a cartoon, an evening drama, or even the morning news, television's agenda is to make everything into entertainment. The television's agenda is the laugh.

Of course, there are some instances in which the use of a medium can escape the agenda: "After all, it is not unheard of that a format will occasionally go against the bias of its medium."[12] For example, the Sunday morning news program *Meet the Press* is a very thoughtful, information-packed program that doesn't seek to entertain us, but to inform us. Implied in Postman's comment is that it is the exception, not the norm, for information generated through a medium to go against the very nature of that medium. The agenda of a medium is very difficult, indeed, to circumvent. As we use media, they shape intellectual and social ecosystems that in

turn shape the way we see the world.

Instead of being neutral bystanders to our everyday lives, Facebook and its compatriots have an agenda, a way that they want to be used. Every time we log on we are participating in the creative power of the medium; our use of Facebook is changing the way we see the world and how we interact with each other. Our use of social media is creating an intellectual, and more importantly, social environment in which we all live, move, and breathe.

Promise 2: It's okay to make it all about you.

When we move online to Facebook and other social media, we find that these technologies, too, have their own agendas. Where the supra-ideology (or controlling set of values) of television is entertainment, the supra-ideology of social media is *me.* In essence, Facebook's agenda is for us to broadcast ourselves (notably the YouTube tagline), to talk about what we're doing and what we like. This is what psychologists might call "self-presentation," which is a fancy psychological word for what we do all the time: we wear clothes, talk in a certain way, do things how we do them, all to tell the world about who we are. Facebook is a digital opportunity for us to self-present through status updates, photos, and "likes."

The problem with the promise comes when we realize that:

Self-Presentation
+ Sinful Selves
= Self-Promotion

When we step into our digital lives, we suddenly find that instead of passively or thoughtlessly telling people about ourselves (like we do in casual conversation, or with our clothing), we are sending to the world constant and premeditated messages about the details of our lives. We present—or promote—ourselves in such a way to cause people to think of us in a certain way. When I log on to Facebook, I find that I want to put my best foot forward; as a result, I find myself bending the truth and skirting circumstance, ever so slightly, to offer to my "friends" the best part of myself, the part of me that is the coolest, the funniest. I announce to others something good about me with the goal of getting others to think a certain way about me. The biblical term for this kind of self-promotion is "boasting."

But what goes around comes around. "By showcasing the most witty, joyful, bullet-pointed versions of people's lives, and inviting constant comparisons in which we tend to see ourselves as the losers, Facebook appears to exploit an Achilles' heel of human nature."[13] As I "stalk" the profiles of my "friends," I find that they, too, have put their best foot forward; and tragically, I don't measure up. Suddenly, I think to myself: "Oh, I'm not nearly as fit as he is," or "She is far

more witty than I am." As a result, I want to find ways to make myself look better so that I can keep up with everyone else. So begins an endless cycle of self-promotion and self-rejection.[14]

Quite frankly, it's exhausting, running on this hamster wheel of the approval of others; and I am almost positive that I am not the only one to have experienced this.

Facebook has a tendency to inflame a condition we already have (striking our aforementioned Achilles' heel): thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. Facebook, Twitter, and other social media provide us with unhindered opportunities to distribute information about ourselves to mass amounts of people very quickly. The problem is that this information is often trivial and inane, which subtly teaches us that the inane details of our lives are important for other people to know.

Before we know it, our way of thinking has changed. We broadcast everything to everyone all of the time, and consider this normal and acceptable. A quick look on Facebook tells me that a "friend" has four tickets to a concert he wants to give away, that another got pulled over last night, that another hates spiders. Facebook and social media tell us that the endlessly inane and mindless details of our lives are newsworthy (notice Facebook calls it a "news feed"). But this promise is a lie.

I am not the center of the universe, and the funny thing my friend's cat just did is not all that important. Sure, there is a laugh to be had, but ever so subtly we have come to believe that everything about me matters, when it truly doesn't. Boasting, self-promotion, and self-construction are dangerous habits of the mind and heart.

Promise 3: Community can be found anywhere.
Facebook offers us convenience and ease when it comes to friendship and community. Quality time with friends used to be spent over coffee or dinner. Now more and more of our community life is managed digitally. Some studies show that most people communicate more online than they do offline.[15]

Remember that a medium creates a social environment. This is exactly what is happening. We go to Facebook only to build community, rather than maintain it. This was my goal when I was seeking out so many people on Facebook before going away to school—I was seeking to build a community. Yet this project failed.

Attempts to build a true community online will always fail, because you are using the tool for a task the designer didn't have in mind. It's like using a screwdriver to cut down a tree. In the early days, we called Facebook and other similar sites "social networks," but now we call them "online communities." As *networks*, the sites operated on clearer boundaries.

Carr concludes, "The interactivity of the medium has also turned it into the world's meetinghouse, where people gather to chat, gossip, argue, show off, and flirt on Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and all sorts of other social (and sometimes antisocial) networks."[16]

Somewhere, somehow, networks and communities became one and the same. Networks, intended for touch-point, shallow relationships based on a single affinity, became communities, intended for authenticity, intimacy, and all-of-life affinity. What we find is that "we are changed as technology offers us substitutes for connecting with each other face-to-face."[17]

Unlike a network, which is built on communication, community is built on communion. "Too often we applaud technologies that enable us to exchange information (communication) without attending to those means of sharing that build intimacy and deepen our communion with God and each other."[18] Communication is easy. A simple text is communication, but it is not communion. A wall post is communication, but it is not communion.

Communion is constructed from two simple, yet profound, elements: orality and presence. Orality is "our speaking and listening 'in person' with each other."[19] Presence is physical, in-the-flesh togetherness. Notice, though, that both of these

elements dwindle in the world of social media. You may have one (typically orality) but never both. Suddenly, these building blocks are removed, and instead of communing, we are only communicating.

While we would like to believe social media offer us opportunities for friendship, community, and communion, we ask too much. This, perhaps, is a promise Facebook never intended to propagate and we have forced upon it. After all, according to the website and tagline, Facebook only promises opportunities to *connect* with friends.

The truth is, community—true community, where we find intimacy and authenticity—requires a lot more than a simple message. Yet, we are easily deceived, and we easily accept off-brand community when we should be partaking of the real deal.

Promise 4: Nowhere is somewhere, and it can be anywhere. Remember that while orality may continue when we go online, our presence disappears. We leave our bodies behind, and step into a place that is not a place, a world that is not a world. Social media tell us that we can be anywhere, even miles apart from our loved ones, and still be intimate with them. We can meet them "online," which we consider a "there" and "place" and find community. But the problem is that "there" is nowhere at all.

A funny thing happens, though, when we conceive of the digital world as just that, a *world.* "When part of your life is lived in virtual places—it can be Second Life, a computer game, a social networking site—a vexed relationship develops between what is true and what is 'true here,' true in simulation."[20] A strange kind of seeping happens when we live more and more of our lives online. What is acceptable *there,* in Facebook or Twitter, becomes acceptable *here,* in real life.

Facebook and social media teach us, subtly, that our bodies don't matter. We can abandon presence and spend more and more time online. Sure, we spend time together, but not really; we spend time "together," online, in chat rooms, and in texting conversations. This, however, is a problem, for

> if you're spending three, four, or five hours a day in an online game or virtual world [or a social media site] . . . there's got to be somewhere you're not. And that someplace you're not is often with your family and friends—sitting around, playing Scrabble face-to-face, taking a walk, watching a movie together in the old-fashioned way.[21]

As we are robbed of our bodies, and presence is eviscerated from our friendships, we face a tragic loss: we are no longer face to face, but screen to screen. We become mediated (note the first five letters, *media*). Yet "the best relationships we can

have are *not* those that rely on mediation, but rather the ones that allow for *unmediated* contact and communication."[22]

We seem to have an innate sense that being in the flesh is more meaningful than being mediated over Skype or Facebook or the telephone. I left home in 2007 to go to college, and I frequently returned home. Why? Because unmediated communication—*communion face to face*—is innately better than mediated communication. If we really believed that mediated communication makes no difference to our relationships, and if we really believed that unmediated quality time and mediated communication were really one and the same, why do we go home from college?

We go home because we know that dwelling bodily with one another is the best kind of relationship, and that playing Scrabble and going on walks and having long conversations over coffee and playing Frisbee in the yard is far preferable to being apart. While social media may have tried to teach us differently (and with some success), we have to remember that our bodies matter and that true communion is found when we are together in the flesh.

Unkeepable Promises

As we think through these issues, I hope we learn to disbelieve some of the things we have come to believe about our

lives and our relationships. Social media offer unkeepable promises. Now that we've exposed and explored these broken promises, in chapter 2 we'll look at those promises from a theological perspective. The Scriptures have much to say about the themes brought to light by communication theory—the importance of the body and in-the-flesh togetherness, boasting, and community. I was surprised at how much God's Word says; you may be, too.

The "Facebook Group"

My undergraduate career began with a four-day orientation; we were handed a rigorous schedule that we had to follow to the letter. During that week, I found my friends. As noted in the beginning of this chapter, many of them were my Facebook "friends," but we had never exchanged more than a couple wall posts back and forth. As a matter of fact, most of these people thought the way some of us were using Facebook was creepy, bordering on unhealthy.

Out of that orientation week, a dozen or so of us from the original Facebook group *did* become close, and before we knew it, we were doing everything together. We had grand adventures into our new city, ate great food, and probably spent more money than we should have those first few weeks. We were loud, obnoxious, and loved every minute of it.

Early in the semester, though, a funny thing happened: other

students started calling us the "Facebook group," which was ironic, because none of us had ever really spoken to each other digitally once the school semester began. Our friend-ships were built on a foundation of in-the-flesh togetherness and intimacy through conversation: trips to Navy Pier and Millennium Park, long hours spent "studying" (read: talk-ing and procrastinating) in local coffee shops. The original "Facebook group," of which I had been a digital member, was scattered all over campus, victims of the promises of digital community, font-based friendships, and bodiless bonding.