

In a time where we find it so hard to ‘switch off’ – literally, when it comes to screens and social media – Ben Horrex pleads with Christians to ‘switch on’ to who we are as children of God in Jesus Christ. As we reach for our phones first thing in the morning and post to please an audience of however many, Horrex reminds us that we live to please an audience of One, and that we wake up to a Father who already delights in us, in Christ.

Jerry Taylor, Vicar, Enderby Parish Church,
Leicester

Time online is not just a big part of our lives; it’s where much of our lives are lived. So it’s really important to think through what it means to live the Christian life in an online world. That’s what Ben Horrex does in The Gospel Online. In an accessible and engaging way, Ben shows how the Bible speaks to this issue with relevance and hope.

Tim Chester, Senior Faculty, Crosslands Training

We live in an age where it is more possible than ever to live a lie. In our identity online, we can so easily inflate our ego, invent multiple personas and hide behind the veil of anonymity. In The Gospel Online, Ben equips us to navigate this challenging and ever-evolving world, calling us all to live authentically for Jesus online. Here we have a book which I am eager to share with my children, and our young people at church, but also to read and live out myself as we answer the call to live and speak for Jesus online.

Phil Moore, Musician, Songwriter, Director of Ministry for Cornerstone Church, Nottingham

The Gospel Online is a great book for helping young people to understand the impact that social media can have on their faith, both in a positive and negative way. It's an engaging read and balances lived experiences and reflections with Scripture and biblical principles. The theology in this book is accessible for young people and it reads like a conversation with a youth worker who really cares about young people. While aimed at young people I also think that it's a brilliant resource for youth leaders and parents to enable them to start conversations about this important subject.

Mike Kelly, Youth and Families Development Officer, Diocese of Ely



THE GOSPEL ONLINE

WHY THE
GOSPEL
TRANSFORMS
YOUR ONLINE
IDENTITY

BEN HORREX

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Publishing

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INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM WE FACE

I don't know about you, but my time online really matters. There are so many exciting things we can do online, from buying what we want and having it arrive at our doors in a few hours' time to speaking to friends thousands of miles away without having to wait for the post to arrive! We can form genuine friendships and authentic virtual communities, sharing what matters to us.

Maybe you're now able to keep in touch with family far away who you only used to see at Christmas. Maybe you've seen one of your friends go viral with one of their dance videos or streaming on Twitch. Maybe you can't imagine

a world where Amazon doesn't deliver what you need tomorrow!

And yet, there are problems with our new online world too. We begin to separate who we are (our person) from who we want others to see (our persona), presenting the best version of ourselves online and hiding the bad bits. Companies boast how great they are, showing off their new recycled cups rather than mentioning the low wages their staff are paid. Individuals shout about how great their recent exam results were rather than how badly they lost their temper with their parents last week.

Social media companies are constantly battling against bullying, hate and extremism, trying to keep their spaces open to free speech while keeping them safe. Plus we waste so much time online! I expect most of those reading this, like me, check their phone within just a few minutes of waking up in the morning and then have it glued to their side. Work is continually interrupted by notifications and family dinners are fighting grounds for whether screens are allowed.

None of these are problems exclusive to social media because we've always had difficulties

with things like speech and identity. However, social media tends to accentuate, accelerate and exaggerate the issues we already have. If we had a bad temper before, it's much easier to shoot off a negative comment online than say something face to face. If we're ignoring others in person, the online world is somewhere we can escape easily, consuming and observing rather than interacting. Something we wouldn't say out loud face to face might be something we feel comfortable posting.

As Christians, we should also think through how our faith interacts with our online world. Just because the Bible, a 2000-year-old book, doesn't talk about social media doesn't mean that God is silent on the topic. We need to see the opportunities for evangelism and discipleship online, both sharing our faith and encouraging other Christians in their walk with Jesus.

Maybe you already share the gospel online and show that you're willing to talk with people about your faith. Maybe you share links with friends to videos or websites that can explain a Christian view on issues better than you could in person. Maybe you use your online relationships with other Christians to urge them on in their

faith in a kind of unofficial support group. Maybe being online is a good way to spend more time with other members of your church and to celebrate things virtually between seeing each other on Sundays.

We also need to recognise the issues social media presents for Christians. The Bible clearly shows us that our whole lives should revolve around our commitment to God, but our time online can tempt us to focus elsewhere. Adverts pull us towards consumerism. Oversexualised photos and videos tempt us towards unhelpful thoughts and actions. And the growth of advice and ‘inspirational’ self-help accounts can suggest that answers to our problems should come from the world rather than from God.

Misunderstandings can grow faster online without body language and tone to help, making constructive and sensitive debate difficult. Maybe you thought someone was joking with you online, only realising that they’re actually quite hurt by what you said when you see them the next day in school.

Working out what is true in extreme opinions can be exhausting, with fake news and jokes spreading without people knowing that they’re

not true facts. How we relate to others online can become impersonal. Rather than interacting with others and deepening our relationships, we can become consumed by spending our time looking at advertising, news and clickbait articles. When we do notice that people are struggling in our online communities, it can be overwhelming to know where to start when we have thousands of online relationships.

What we do know is that rules won't fix the problem.¹ No matter how many limits you put on yourself about the amount of time you spend online, the websites you'll visit or the numbers of followers you'll have, the root issue is much bigger.

All of us are sinful people. We 'sin' by rejecting God and how he wants us to live. We have hearts that want to choose and do their own thing in rebellion against God. The truth is if we don't understand how much better God is than all the things that tempt us, sin will control us. Sin transforms us into selfish people, doing things for the wrong reasons and making bad choices,

1 Have a look at Colossians 2:20–23 for why rules can sometimes be unhelpful.

and pulls us away from our God-given identity. We want the never-ending videos and constant scrolling because, in the moment, it can give us more immediate satisfaction than spending time offline. We can forget that we're loved by God and brought into his family because we would rather turn away from him and choose things that give us instant joy, even if they're sometimes not good for us.

And yet, God doesn't abandon us. As Christians, we have 'the gospel', literally the 'good news'. Our gospel is that God came to earth as the person of Jesus to save us. He went to the cross and took all of our sin on himself to save us. He was raised back to life to prove that he had defeated sin and death to save us. The gospel, the good news, is that God loves us and wants us to turn back to him.

Our challenge now is to understand how we can live as those who are loved by God and dependent on him when we're online. We don't want to be people who build up our own identity and forget that we're God's children. We don't want to forget that we're adopted by our heavenly Father, brought into his family and given an amazing new identity as his sons and daughters.

It can be so tempting to inflate and exaggerate our own personality, to feel proud of what we do and who we are. One of my most memorable art projects at primary school was making a paper mache balloon. We blew up a balloon as big as we could before covering it with newspaper dipped in glue. Once it was dry and had hardened, we burst the balloon but the shell survived, ready to be made into something useful like a slightly flimsy bowl or plant pot!

Well, imagine that balloon being blown up more and more is filled with all of our own hype about how good we are and how much we've done for others. When we post about ourselves online, it's then like putting paper mache all over the balloon, so that our great identity seems more solid. Everyone can see how great we are, even when we have days when we feel a bit deflated inside.

The problem is that God doesn't care how good you look on the outside. He doesn't love you because you're the best at sports or get the best grades. He doesn't love you because of that amazing paper mache balloon you're showing off. He loves you even if the balloon inside the paper mache burst long ago and you feel like all

that's left is the shell. He loves you because he is gracious and generous. He sees and knows the real you. He loves you even though you are broken and sinful, loving you so much that he sent Jesus to die for you.

As Christians, the power of the gospel will transform every part of our lives. As believers who are trusting in God, we're privileged to have a new identity founded upon what Jesus has done for us. The Bible may not obviously give a perspective on social media on first reading. And yet, God's Word is living and active, showing us principles to live by that will transform our earthly lives. We would be foolish to think that new inventions such as social media aren't included in that transformation.

In the next five chapters, I'm not going to set a series of rules for using our time online or even give you a list of top tips for how to get the most out of social media. Instead, I will trace five significant themes through the Bible. These will show us what it looks like to be a Christian online, living for God's glory and resting in our knowledge that Jesus has saved us – not because of what we do, but because of how gracious God is.