

I Was Just Wondering...How Do I Share My Faith in an Influencing Culture?

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1 Corinthians 9:19-23

In 2019, a writer for a Bloomberg article reported, “Social-media influencing has become such a part of life for young Americans that an overwhelming majority say they are interested in getting paid to promote products on sites such as Instagram and YouTube. 86% of people ages 13 to 38 are willing to try out influencing, according to a survey from Morning Consult.”

People in this age range are also more likely to buy things based on the recommendation of a social media influencer than on those of a celebrity or athlete. While my grandmother bought life insurance because Alex Trebek advertised for it on TV, someday sooner than I think my daughter will want to buy certain products because an influencer she likes promotes them on social media. I learned this week that Millennials and Generation Z are the first generations for whom the influence of friends and peers is thought to be more powerful than the influence of parents or grandparents. So the questions we ask about who we are, what we do with our lives, and the responsibility we have to direct our influence might be framed quite differently depending on when and where and how we grew up.

For some of us, the question of sharing Christ in an influencing culture isn't especially pressing. We log into a social media site to catch up on our friends and family's pictures once in a while. We spend much or most of our relational time with people in person or in time-tested forms of communication - letters, phone calls, emails, conversations. Whether our lives are online or not, today we can think about how we share Christ in whatever relational spheres we have influence.

But for others of us, YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram are a regular part of life. Our circle of connections with people like and unlike us reaches far and wide. We know that the video we release or the words we'll post in these big circles travels fast. We know what it feels like to share a personal success and have surprising clusters of people cheer us on. We also know what it feels like to see pictures of friends hanging out without us and wonder why we weren't included, or to feel gobsmacked and alienated after reading a social media post that clarifies how profoundly we disagree with someone we've counted a friend.

Social media offers us a public platform whether or not we're ready for the feedback loop that results. By historical standards, these ways of communicating are pretty young. Social media is a powerful tool that networks people, and it's wise to do some real-time processing with thoughtful people who love us about how these influential platforms influence us. How might we use our attention, time, energy and skills with them for God's glory and our own and others' well-being?

Long before any of our modern technologies were invented, the Apostle Paul was working out how to use the power of his influence to honor his God. Listen to how Paul describes his approach to the people he meets. I'm reading from 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. Hear these words: 19 Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 20 To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. 23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. Verse 19 says Paul has “made himself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.” What does “winning” mean for Paul? What's his goal?

Because Paul starts with a posture of serving others, “winning” can't mean he's looking to brag about how many converts he can claim. Because his posture is one of service, he's not suggesting that he somehow only plays a role, or that he's willing to act in a disingenuous way in an effort to somehow show people Jesus, who is, after all, the Truth.

No, “winning” for Paul means making an investment in other people's best interest in a way that they can receive. “Winning” means seeing that investment result in their gain; that they would know Christ. That's his own most valued treasure, and he can't wait to see others share in it too. What exactly is Paul willing to give

up in order to “win” people over? When he says he becomes like his audiences, is he a chameleon who blends into his surroundings? Does he exchange his core convictions for the sake of his influence?

Not at all. Not for a minute will Paul compromise on wholeheartedly preaching and living to honor Christ. One thing this short passage shows so clearly is how excited Paul is about Jesus. He is practically jumping up and down as he prepares to share Christ however and wherever he can. God prepared a challenging and exhilarating path for Paul as he shared Jesus on his missionary journeys. I wonder how eager I am to do that myself in ordinary ways.

Holding himself loosely wherever he goes, Paul gets to know the obstacles, concerns, preferences, hopes, ambitions, fears, and habits of those around him. Then all the different people he serves; Jews and Gentiles, those under the law and those not under the law, as well as those whose consciences are weak, sense that what matters to them, matters to God too. He seeks to reach out to them in a way that recognizes the particularity of where they come from. He’s not sharing Christ with them in order to gain power over them. And, he’s definitely not trying to win followers for Paul.

Paul does all kinds of different things to suit all kinds of different people, so that by all possible means he might embody and proclaim good news for them. He doesn’t want anything he brings along with him to compete with or detract from the precious message of life in Christ that he carries. The family isn’t complete without the people to whom he’s been sent! It’s for the sake of these Jewish, Gentile, hesitating, exploring, uncertain people that Christ has come, and why Paul becomes all things to all people! He wants nothing more than the joy of hearing them join in the song of God’s grace so the overtones vibrate out for the sake of the world.

Sometimes I think we look at Paul’s example and say, “Well, that was Paul’s story. I certainly don’t have a wide field of influence like he did.” Maybe we mostly talk to our family members or a neighbor or two; we’re in a season of life that necessarily keeps our circles smaller; or we just don’t think our little lives or what we have to say will matter to anyone.

But multiply your Christ-indwelled, gracious influence on one life by the number of people worshipping together today, in this place and across the globe. When we tend a Spirit-breathed awareness of God’s goodness to us, personally and collectively, we’re ready to walk in the servant ways of Jesus and speak about Jesus when and where he shows us how. Jesus works within the sphere of influence he grants us and with the lives he gives us. He knows what he’s planned for us to do, even if we don’t. And that can give us humility, motivation, and confidence to respond as his people to the situations he presents.

We can be ready to speak in unforced ways when someone asks about the reason for our hope in the face of a challenging world. We do it the way a healthy vine grows fruit; simply because we’ve been planted, tended, and trained to do it. Sharing our faith can happen in person, and it can also happen online. For some of us, developing content to share Christ in digital places calls to us vocationally. Lots of thoughtful, creative people are working and growing online platforms for the purpose of sharing the gospel. If you’re one of the students who raised this question for the series and you’re interested in this work, you probably already know of platforms that do this well.

One place to explore might be with Christianity Today’s two-year old podcast called Viral Jesus. The host, Heather Thompson Day, is a communications professor and author who interviews authors, speakers, and other content developers about the intersection of digital communication, social connections, and Christian faith. What’s good about our digital connections? What’s problematic? How do we work through the questions and needs with other faith-filled people?

If you are gifted with creativity and skills to develop online tools and communications strategies to share the message of Jesus meaningfully in this world, find ways to do it! Learn all you can, and bring your dedicated effort to this. Become all things to all people and speak Christ within and to the digital world.

Or maybe you’re a person who uses your personal social media tools to refract the light of Christ’s presence in your own life. I’ve heard of people starting their own, small-circle texting chains to encourage each other in their faith on a regular basis. I’ve read social media posts from people in this church who reflect on God in their lives in lovely, honest ways. They know who and whose they are apart from a social media platform. They reflect their lived reality appropriately and honestly, and their posts allow their readers to glimpse something that God has shown them in the day.

We can share much of our lives and much of the content of our faith online. But we worship an incarnate Savior. The living, breathing substance of our faith comes to life alongside other living, breathing people. And as the crowds began to follow Jesus, no matter how many outer-ring followers Jesus had, he still needed his closest friends and disciples to be with him in the thick of things. If Jesus didn't exist only in front of a large following, certainly we shouldn't do that. Do we nurture relationships with people we can count on one hand who will encourage us and show up for us when the chips are down? Can we be that kind of presence for a couple of others?

A few years ago a college student named Amy Crouch and her father Andy wrote a book called *My Tech Wise Life: Growing Up and Making Choices in a World of Devices*. Amy writes about the experience of scrolling through Instagram after a high school dance. Alongside all the "perfectly pressed suits and shiny dresses," Amy saw pictures of herself. And she realized to her horror that what stood out to her most were her flaws.

"I texted my friends right away," she writes. "I'm just looking through all these photos, and I hate all of them. I wish I had never taken any pics." They responded quickly with love and support. But even though my friends meant well, seeing the words on my phone screen wasn't enough. I was still sitting alone in my room on my phone. "... Eventually, I realized tech couldn't fix me. So I sent my youth pastor, Bethany, a text for help. We went to dinner together, and I told her about what had engulfed me, about the dark, cold, place those photos had plunged me into. She embraced me, she prayed with me, and she told me about the bad photos of her own that she had cringed over. We talked and wept, and broke bread together."

"And at some beautifully invisible moment we both just started to laugh. Suddenly we saw the smallness of these insecurities; even the very worst pain our doubts put us through was nothing compared to the light and love of God. Three hours earlier I had been sobbing on my bed, broken by my ugly insecurities, I went home with a joyful heart full of the peace of community...." "This is the relief you cannot get from kind texts or viral videos or games. It's the relief you feel when you bare your wounds to someone else, and they reach out to embrace you."

We live from the foundation of this relief. Jesus our Savior bared his own wounds and took on our own to embrace us. We don't have to hide. Jesus our Savior became like us, not just to show us how to live life on God's terms but to deliver us when we could not. Because this salvation is such a relief for us we offer our hearts and lives to share Jesus with others.

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