Thinking Theologically About Social Media

Subject

Not enough faith leaders stop wringing their hands over the perceived impact of social media on worship attendance long enough to ask deeper theological questions about the changes that accompany the rise of social media today. Exploring such questions might enable religious leaders to help shape its impact.

Occasion

For example, consider this issue: Christians take embodiment seriously--we believe in a God who became flesh, after all--but is embodiment limited to face-to-face, in-the-flesh interactions? Tired arguments over what is real engagement and what is not real persist, usually suggesting that face-to-face is real and virtual interactions are not. But if we apply some robust thinking to this issue, these categories don't hold up. People move seamlessly between virtual and face-to-face interactions all the time, and they don't experience one as real and the other not. Sure, sharing a laugh on Facebook is different from getting a cup of coffee with a friend. But is it any less real that a telephone conversation with your mother? No. So then, how is Christian community embodied well online?

Purpose

Or think about this. The models of church that structure a faith community's thought and practice will have an impact on its ability to embrace or resist social media influences. For example, a hierarchical church structure that locates authority atop the ladder may have difficulty using social media because social media encourage people to share information with friends rather than wait for word from on high. On the other hand, a flatter church structure in which clergy and lay people share power may struggle with the idea of a pastor who uses social media to reach those outside the community. What can we learn about social media when we think theologically about models of church?

And what's new about new technology, anyway? Faith communities have adapted to new technology before--the printing press and the telephone, to name a few. We've done so without losing core beliefs, right? Wrong. Core beliefs have changed. The earth is round and it rotates around the sun, after all. Perhaps we ought to engage core beliefs with the reality of changing technology to test those core beliefs and see whether new theological insights might emerge. Or does all the glitz and glamour of these particular changes just distract us from following a steadfast and loving a God? It's worth exploring.

Christian doctrines themselves might be changing as well. For example, if, as some doctrines teach, the preached word can save a person, or lead to the salvation of that person, what happens if the Word of God is conveyed digitally over Twitter or on YouTube? Is the means of salvation different? So then, does the definition of salvation change?

One thing that is new is how far we can look into communities online. I call this, "communities in high relief," in an essay I wrote. Social media shine light on relationships making them more vivid and certainly more public. Mark Zuckerburg famously talks about social media mapping relationships, making them more visible. What a blessing this could be for oppressed communities who are often hidden and silenced by those in power. However, it might also bring to light ugly disputes, making them even worse under the glare. For better or for worse, social media can throw communities into high relief. What might we ask theologically, then, about communities?

Another thing we've learned from observing innovative pastors is that the best social media practices in churches arise organically from the life and leadership of that faith community. For example, one church hopes to nurture small group connections between meetings so they use Facebook groups. Another church wants to share their view of progressive Christianity with a wide audience so they broadcast worship and study material. While some stretching is required (another best practice involves willingness to experiment with new media) the most effective uses of new and social media in congregations seem to be those that "fit their flow," as one pastor said.

g- Big Idea

g- Relation to AOTD

g- Audience

Jones, Verity A. *Huffington Post*. N.p., 28 June 2012. Web. 14 Mar. 2013. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/verity-a-jones/thinking-theologically-about-social-media\_b\_1634878.html>.

Speaker