

Digital Discernment

What does it mean to have a distinctly Christian method of communicating online? That's the question being weighed by Daniel Darling, senior vice president for communications at National Religious Broadcasters, in his upcoming book, *A Way With Words*. In his current job and his previous one—serving for six years as vice president of communications for the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission—Darling's job has been to think critically about the way Christians communicate. The internet era presents new challenges, but the call to communicate in a Christlike manner remains the same.

"I really wanted to help us Christians think about the way we communicate online," Darling says. "There's a lot of helpful discussion about screen time, social media habits and digital fasting, which I think are all really important. But the truth is, these mediums—social media, blogging, Facebook, all the digital tools we use—are here to stay. They're not going anywhere. In fact, during this [coronavirus] pandemic, they've actually been a lifeline for many of us. So the question we have to ask ourselves is, how do we communicate in this age?"

It's an important question for Darling, not just conceptually but personally. As a father with four children entering the social media space, he says it's important to teach them how to use technology appropriately.

"This is the first fully-wired generation," Darling says. "What is constant online interaction and screen time doing to help them develop or stunt their growth? ... One of the temptations is to have no guidelines or guardrails and just let our kids run wild with access to the internet and smartphones and all that. On the other hand, there's a temptation to almost be Amish, where we don't want our kids to have any technology. And I think that's wrong too. We as

parents are given the task to launch our kids into the world. They're going to go into a world where digital communication is essential for flourishing. So just like we teach them how to drive a car and gradually move them into that, we need to figure out ways to do that with technology."

Darling spoke to *Charisma* about how Christians should communicate with others online, the dangers of misinformation and why our words matter as believers.

Remember Your Witness

Darling says Christians need to be conscious of how they are communicating online and should be held to a higher standard. He notes that the concept of words and speech are a key theme throughout Scripture, and points out how many passages in the Bible instruct God's followers on how they ought to speak to one another.

"I think one of the tendencies we have when we're engaging online is to forget that we're Christians," he says. "It's so easy to fire off a response or to post something when we're angry. But what does it look like to have a distinctly Christian way to communicate? It's intriguing to me because the Bible talks a lot about words. Christianity is a religion about words. God spoke creation into existence. ... Jesus is described as the *logos*, the Word of God, the way that God speaks to us, as it says in Hebrews. The Bible has a lot to say about the way we use our words as His image bearers. In some way, when we communicate, we're reflecting how God communicates. So there's a distinctly Christian way to do that."

Darling says that while working on his book, three key truths emerged. The first, he says, concerns love and empathy—remembering the essential humanity of the people you are digitally interacting with.

"I think No. 1 is to recognize that the people we are

communicating with online are not just avatars,” Darling says. “They’re not just digital bots. This is not just a video game. There are real people behind those comments or tweets or Instagram photos. Remember the humanity of the people we communicate with. Even when we disagree, even when they’re wrong, they are people made in the image of God. Their value and their worth are not reduced to their opinion.”

Second, Darling says it’s important to question our own motivations for our behavior online.

“For instance, why are we tempted to curate this perfect image on Instagram?” he asks. “Why are things like Instagram influencers becoming more popular, where you craft this whole personality? What is behind our temptation to chronicle our whole life on YouTube? I’m not saying that’s good or bad—but what are the motivations behind what we’re doing and why we’re doing it?”

Finally, just as someone’s in-person speech demonstrates their spiritual character, Darling says the way someone communicates online is a clear display of spiritual fruit (or lack thereof). Even if your tongue is letting your fingers do the talking, the Bible’s commands still hold true.

“James 3’s strong admonitions about the power [of the tongue] in the shape of our words really matters when we go online,” Darling says. “James 1—where it says ‘Be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger’—applies to the digital space. So how do we apply those things when we’re posting or engaging? ... We have to understand technology is really just the act of image bearers taking dominion over the earth and innovating. When we innovate and we create, we reflect a Creator who’s an innovator. So technology is a good thing in that way. But in a fallen world, it also can be corrupted, and we can have corrupt motives. The mediums can be the message in the sense that they shape the way we think.”

Don't Be Deceived

Darling says it is important to not only be discerning about our own speech but to thoughtfully weigh the words and information we absorb online. The problem of “fake news” and misinformation online has been thoroughly documented over the last few years. But nonbelievers do not have a monopoly on being fooled by misinformation. A 2019 study in the *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* found that religious fundamentalists were one of the three groups most likely to be fooled by misinformation. That study backed up the results of a 2018 study in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, which observed that in 2016, social conservatives—many of whom identified as Christian—were the least discerning and analytical group, making them the most likely to fall for fake news. Though it's tempting to blame the problem on media producers for creating false content, the blame must be shared by those who fall for it.

Darling says Christians must become more discerning, rather than simply accepting whatever we hear that “fits our narrative.” Our credibility is at stake.

“I think that's a real issue not just for Christians, but for everybody,” Darling says. “We're so tribal that we run to our ideological corners to get the news that fits our narrative, and I think we have to be very careful about that. I think we need to consume news from a variety of sources and really be slow to react online until we've really gotten the full story. I talk about this at length in the book—about our tendency to fall prey to conspiracy theories and other things, but also the way that we read the news and make sure we're getting the whole story. ... I don't think we need to just always say stories that make our tribe or our people look bad are always fake news; sometimes it is genuine, and you know, we just have to accept that.

“At the same time, I think we need to be wary about whatever

the kind of reigning narrative is. We have to be skeptical of that. Get all the news and information. Read from a variety of sources, and really come to conclusions. Sometimes that means we're slower to react online or to post an opinion, which is really OK."

Yet Darling does not believe the internet has to be regarded as negative. Though there are ways it can lead to sin, it can also be a positive force for the kingdom of God. Consider the recent quarantine due to the pandemic; many churches were able to continue operating and even reach larger audiences than usual due to the power of online platforms.

"I think as Christians, we need to both leverage the tools that are in front of us to communicate the gospel around the world," Darling says. "We also need to be wary of the temptations and pitfalls. More importantly, I think we need to get underneath the reasons why we do what we do. Why do I want to be angry online? Am I trying to project a version of myself that I feel is incomplete in my real life? Am I trying to find acceptance with a peer group? Am I trying to curate an image of myself that I think is more complete than the real person, because I think they'll be more accepted? I really think all of this goes back to the message we find in the gospel: That God in Christ has accepted us not for the image that we portray ourselves to be, but for who we really are. God loves the real version of us, not the digitally curated version of us. I think getting underneath that is maybe the most important part of what we're talking about." {eo}

Taylor Berglund is the associate editor of *Charisma* magazine and host of several series on the *Charisma Podcast Network*.