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Facebook Turns Five: Thoughts on Social Networking

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Facebook marked its fifth anniversary on February 5, setting a milestone for social networking as a cultural phenomenon. Just five years ago Harvard undergraduate Mark Zuckerberg launched the site and service. Just as Facebook celebrated its fifth anniversary, it passed rival MySpace in registrations.

Together, MySpace and Facebook report over 280,000,000 registered users. Those services, first popular among high school and college students, are now joined by Twitter, a micro-blogging service. Together, these represent nothing less than a major social movement.



Social networking differs from other Internet services by creating a virtual community of linked users, whose updates, photographs, and postings allow for communication anytime and anywhere.

Today's student generation, the "Digital Natives," know of no existence before cell phones, the Internet, e-mail, and text messaging. Social networking perfectly fits their lifestyle and worldview. They assume 24/7 social contact — or at least access to this contact just a few clicks away.

Social networking is like any new technology. It must be evaluated on the basis of its moral impact as well as its technological utility. Social networking sites offer unprecedented opportunities for communication and contact — and that is both the promise and the peril of the technology.

Here are a few suggestions for safeguarding the social networking experience:

1. Never allow social networking to replace or rival personal contact and communication. God made us to be social creatures that crave community. We cannot permit ourselves to substitute social networking for the harder work of building and maintaining personal relationships that are face to face.
2. Set clear parameters for the time devoted to social networking. These services can be seductive and time consuming. Social networking (and the Internet in general) can become obsessive and destructive of other relationships and higher priorities for the Christian.
3. Never write or post anything on a social networking site that you would not want the world to see, or anything that would compromise your Christian witness. There are plenty of young people (perhaps older persons now, too) who are ruining future job prospects and opportunities by social networking misbehavior. The cost to Christian witness is often far greater.
4. Never allow children and teenagers to have independent social networking access (or Internet access, for that matter). Parents should monitor, manage, supervise, and control the Internet access of their children and teens. Watch what your child posts and what their friends post.

5. Do not allow children and teens to accept any “friend” unknown to you. The social networking world can be a dangerous place, and parental protection here is vital.

6. Encourage older friends and relatives to sign up and use the technology. Grandparents can enjoy keeping up with grandchildren and with friends and loved ones separated by distance or mobility.

7. Use the social networking technology to bear witness to the Gospel, but never think that this can replace the centrality of face-to-face evangelism, witness, and discipleship.

8. Do all things to the glory of God, and do not allow social networking to become an idol or a display of narcissism.

The fifth anniversary of Facebook is a milestone in American culture — and a good time for a reality check. We were made by our Creator to be social creatures, but made for far more than mere social media.

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