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Social Media and the Lack of Boundaries (with some reference to Tim Keller...)

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Alastair Roberts

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Transcript

On several occasions in the past, I have written or spoken about the dangers and the challenges of social media. After the ugliness of much of the conversation around Tim Keller over the last couple of weeks, I thought it would be helpful to reflect upon this subject again. My fundamental position is that the character of social media itself tends to shape those who are most invested in it in very unhelpful ways and also to malform our discourses.

Whereas speech in the flesh is typically clearly directed and contextualised, we know who we are addressing and the context in which we are addressing them. This is much less often the case on social media. Rather, on many social media, our speech indiscriminately reaches innumerable different contexts and persons.

This militates against the possibility of wise words in season. If a wise word in season is recognising the context and speaking well into that context, the collapsing of context makes this difficult. On social media, we can feel that we must address the world in general or no one at all.

As discrete contexts collapse into a flattened, discursive environment, the demands of various contexts increasingly collide with those of others. In addition to the vagueness of the addressee of our discourse online, our speech becomes increasingly self-reflexive,

increasingly entangled in dynamics of identity forming, of mutual display, of tribal belonging and their attendant preoccupations and anxieties. On Twitter, a person can easily identify themselves with the representation of themselves that they create and the affiliations that they form through their ongoing casual tweeting of random opinions and their positioning in wider discourses.

As they are seen to do these things over periods of time, people build up an identity for them and they are accepted or rejected in various quarters. Discourses are as much or more about continually negotiating and maintaining our identities, about social positioning, about self-branding and virtual in-and-out groups than they can be about supposed issues themselves. It should not surprise us that this makes discourses significantly more fraught.

In addition to the in-clarity about the addressees of our speech on social media to whom we're speaking, the self-reflexive character of the discourse leads to increased ambiguity about what the object of our speech is, to what extent is our speech about its ostensive objects, and to what extent is its object the management for our identities and alignments. When I pronounce an opinion about a recent news story, for instance, to what extent am I expressing an opinion and to what extent am I also performing and reinforcing an identity and policing the boundaries of in-and-out groups, seeking recognition and validation from others? If you have ever wondered why speech on social media is so often ugly and personal, or why it is so difficult to have conversations about ideas rather than just persons, this is much of the reason. Closely related to this, in such a context, a statement is experienced less as an inert and abstract proposition than it is as a dynamic action.

The meaning of a statement is less that of a proposition considered in itself than it is that of an action that is designed to produce certain effects. Interpretation, as a result, becomes increasingly preoccupied with people's intentions and alignments, while considerations of the truth or falsity of statements in themselves gets downplayed. As this functions in the dense and fraught social realms of social media, the driving concern in interpretation becomes that of whose side someone is on and how their speech serves various party agendas.

On account of the speed of discourse and the importance of social perceptions, impressions are privileged over careful interpretations. What matters is how a statement hits us. The possibility that many participants in our conversations may have intentions that are quite oblique to and different to, or which aim beyond the partisan conflicts that many are engaged within, is difficult for many to process when the intentions and the effects of speech acts so dominate their concern.

Historically, Christian discourse would have been far more rooted, contextualised and specialised. The sermon, for instance, is a highly contextualised semi-public form of

speech that has generally been directed to a particular body of people in a specific place and time. Pastors usually know their congregations well in person and typically speak from this knowledge into the lives of their people in a context of mutual knowledge, trust and fellowship.

Most forms of Christian discourse would have occurred in typically private conversational contexts, where people interacted in person, speech being clearly directed, bounded and contextualised. Besides sermons and conversations, there were Christian books and other writings. While these were not so clearly directed, they were for a general audience, their longer form and other factors helped to contextualise them.

Furthermore, on account of the slowness of their production and the far more private character of their consumption, printed works are far more inert. Print media themselves affect an abstraction from the immediacy and the heat of context and sociality that make it easier for people to think calmly, carefully and in principled ways about matters, to step back from the heat of the issues and to think about the underlying principles and ideas that have bearing upon them. Given the costs and the processes of print publication, these were also media that, while certainly not guaranteeing quality and excellence, they greatly privileged them.

Perhaps most importantly, the fact that historic forms of Christian discourse were far more contextual, bounded, directed and defined allowed for much more careful negotiation of and accommodation to context. When speech does not bear the burden of having to address everyone at once or to say everything at once, it bears a much more modest weight and can be much more variegated and specific, tailored to a specific audience or context. Without compromise of principle, a pastor could address the same issue in quite different ways in a sermon, in giving pastoral counsel to a congregant, in writing an academic essay for a theological journal, in addressing a non-Christian in public debate or in private evangelistic conversation.

Knowing that the recognised differences between these contexts, forms of discourse and audiences would both make his intent fairly readily discernible and far more effectively direct specific forms of speech to their intended hearers. This is certainly not to suggest that historic Christian forms of discourse were always clearly defined, bounded and addressed. Evangelistic sermons frequently address some generic and unknown outsider who has walked in off the street, making elaborate yet questionable assumptions about his beliefs and psychological states in the process.

This tendency could be exacerbated in the context of open air preaching, for instance, where it was easier for speakers to fancy themselves to be immediately addressing the society and the culture at large, rather than a defined and known audience within it. This mode of speech made it naturally more prone to raving, as speakers could easily address themselves more to exaggerated projections of their imaginations than to concrete

persons. Clearly defined contexts and addressees are powerful ballasts that ground speech and protect it from drifting away into such raving.

It's imperative that we grasp the weirdness and the inherent dysfunctionality of speech on social media, and the damage that results when it becomes the focal location of Christian speech. As it collapses the boundaries between innumerable conversational and social contexts, it undermines distinctions between public and private, or official and unofficial speech. It teaches us to address very vague and generic audiences within relatively undefined contexts, and places our negotiation of our affiliations and identities front and centre.

It radically compromises fruitful communication. As social media is a realm of decontextualised speech, where our identities and affiliations are continually being formed and performed, countless Christians now feel an imperative to participate in order to be recognised and to belong. As you express your opinions on social media and align with others who are expressing theirs, you feel part of something, you feel that you're recognised and seen.

As their expression of opinions is also a continual performance of their selfhood, any resistance that they experience can be felt quite keenly, as an attack upon their identities or their communities. That such a context should consistently produce rancour should be entirely unsurprising. On social media, it's very easy for every Christian to imagine themselves to be on the front line of immediate engagement with the culture as such.

Where such an impression prevails, Christian speech will increasingly become a matter of ideological advocacy, identity politics and distributed demagoguery, inflamed by constant exposure to the craziest expressions of their ideological adversaries, which they will constantly amplify and spread. Christians, like everyone else who has excessively invested in social and mass media, can swiftly radicalise themselves, increasingly viewing all opposing viewpoints as incipient or dissembling forms of ideological movements that they imagine are most clearly perceived in their most egregious extremes. When as Christians we come to regard the culture writ large as the primary addressee of Christian discourse, our speech can become increasingly driven by free-floating anxieties and fears, fixated upon vague ideologies, characterised by insecure, ambitious tribalism, and preoccupied with politics.

Christian leaders will face increasingly urgent demands to prioritise addressing the threats of the culture, preoccupation with which steadily marginalises devotion to the regular means of Christian formation. As the threatening culture becomes the all-framing discursive and psychological horizon for many, those Christian leaders who do not adopt an aggressive culture war posture and engage in assertive political advocacy for Christians as a constituency, can appear to them like a treacherous fifth column, useful

idiots for the establishment, or people who are just blind to the threat. Perspectives of the culture are almost invariably parochial and partial, and the dynamics of social media will tempt us to project our particular community or constituency's psychodramas onto the vast canvas of some imagined society.

Our vision of concrete society will increasingly dissolve into the abstractions of great ideologies and shadowy malign forces. Christians are hardly unique in often falling prey to this. We can all easily think that the hall of mirrors that is the spectacle of social media is actual social reality.

We can exaggerate our centrality in the larger picture. We can easily lose sight of the many radically different worlds that other people inhabit, and the limits of our knowledge and exposure to those. Whether we are looking for white supremacy, the patriarchy, liberalism, heterosexism, socialism, capitalism, or some fundamental conflict between the right and the left, or something else entirely, we can become driven by suspicion to the point of paranoia and inability to engage in good faith with realities and persons that are directly in front of us.

Everything starts to become an expression of the great ideological conflict, and our entire perception is dominated by it. Healthy psychologies and discourses require boundaries. Such boundaries enable us to be engaged with realities, contexts, and persons without being bound together in what Edwin Friedman calls a feeling plasma, where we are constantly reacting against each other.

Boundaries can take many different forms. They can be physical, psychological, social, interpersonal, temporal, and many other things. A boundary might be the time that we take before sending a letter, or going into a room to read a book by ourselves, or it might be stepping back a little from a person so that we're not getting up into their face.

Then there are the psychological boundaries that enable us to listen to many different people without taking all of their opinions on board, or being hurt by their impressions of us. With good boundaries, we don't feel always so exposed to things when we interact with them, and we're much better able to respond rather than simply reacting. I've dealt with this subject on several occasions before.

Boundaries also enable us to differentiate ourselves from our opinions and from our various environments. When someone disagrees with me, they're not necessarily attacking me. It's a difference between my person and my opinions.

When we have well differentiated ourselves, we're also in a considerably better position to differentiate other things and persons from each other. Those with weak boundaries, who are overly psychologically and socially exposed to the spectacle of social or mass media, tend to suffer from a dulling of their capacity to perceive the manifoldness of the world, of people, and of the viewpoints within the world. Realities, persons, and

viewpoints increasingly get fused together in one grand vision, some ideology, or something like that.

Healthy boundaries enable us to establish the sort of distance from which we are free to respond to things in a careful and considered way. Such boundaries, for instance, enable us to break down ever more paranoid fixations on the conflict between the left and the right, making it possible for us to see a far more diverse and complex field of positions, which we can then consider and position ourselves within. Such boundaries enable us to define our context and our realms of concern, without needing to solve the problems of the culture at large.

Such boundaries enable us to ignore many things or persons that might otherwise aggravate us, or even better, so to overcome our reactivity that we can listen to them and take things on board, without being overly psychologically exposed to them. Such boundaries help us to recognise that most things are not about us. So much of the heat of our online conversations is created by people who have not been able psychologically to detach themselves from the opinions of others, and to establish a healthy distance.

This is a problem that typically comes with psychological overinvestment in social media. They may adopt a very aggressive posture, but their reactivity seems to portray a measure of sensitivity and insecurity, a vulnerability to opposing opinion and action. There are people who get exercised every Sunday by the latest David French essay, when they could simply ignore him.

The mere presence of French's published opinions in their awareness dampens their Sabbath joy. They have not succeeded in establishing a clear psychological boundary that enables them to maintain equanimity in the face of such opposing or hostile opinion, or they have fixated upon them as a foil for their own opinions, not appreciating the degree to which one's choice of a foil will tend to shape one's own intellectual character. Choose a bad foil, one that you're always reacting against, and you become a reactive person whose thought is not worth much.

With good psychological boundaries we can develop the security required to read intelligent critics of ourselves and our groups thoughtfully and attentively, neither reacting defensively nor aggressively. The criticisms may not be accurate in our case, but perhaps they are accurate in others. We will also be much less likely to make everything about us, recognising that most of what is said that might otherwise psychologically impact upon us is neither about us, addressed to us, or applied to our context.

In addition to psychological boundaries that make us less sensitive or reactive to opposing opinion, we need contextual boundaries. We need to recognise that people are speaking from and into different contexts, even if they fancy that they are addressing the culture in general. We need to be firmly rooted in bounded contexts so that we don't

get psychologically sucked into the ideological spectacle of social media.

Yes, there are cultural battles to be fought, but few of us live most of our lives on the front line, while we might fret a lot about the culture wars. For the most part they do not impact upon our lives directly. A fixation upon culture war mentality can restrict our imaginations and consequently limit our potential actions.

Much of the most effective work to be done against abortion, for instance, will be done from a position that eschews a culture war framing, and focuses mostly upon building trust and helping those women who are most in need. People who adopt such an approach, downplaying politics and the antagonisms of it in order to build trust and help people in those sorts of situations, are not necessarily denying the importance of the political and cultural struggles. They may merely recognise that in addressing the same cultural evil, they have a different calling to perform.

With good contextual boundaries we can recognise that we don't all have to fight the same fights. We don't have to tackle the same evils in the same way. We don't have to die on the same hills.

While most who fancy to take up the mantle of a prophet are totally unsuited for the task, some are called to play the part of someone like an Elijah, to stand up against the prophets of Baal and to have direct conflict with Ahab and Jezebel. However, there are also some who are called to be like Obadiah, to be trusted servants of a really wicked king, and as a result to be able to do far more good in certain ways than Elijah could do. Obadiah could save many prophets of the Lord, while Elijah was not in the same position to do so.

If Elijah had demanded that Obadiah speak up against Ahab in the same way that he was doing, from a distance, Obadiah would not have been able to save the prophets that he saved, and as a result the work of the Lord would have suffered. Elijah might have had some catharsis and not felt so alone, but the work of the Lord would have suffered. We should be invested in faithfulness in our small corners, recognising that few of us are players on the greater stages.

Focusing on our small corners we can be a lot less paranoid than if we spent much of our lives fixating on the vast forces of the culture, or trying to judge each other's servant of the Lord because they are not handling their corner in the way that we think that we should handle ours. Fixating upon the vast forces of the culture can encourage a sense of bitterness, anger and impotence, but focusing on our small corners can increase our sense of agency and limit our psychological exposure to forces beyond our control. With firmer contextual boundaries, the words that someone like Keller addresses to his context will not need to intrude so much upon our own.

We recognise that he is working in his corner, we are working in ours. We will be in a

much better position than, also, to recognise the very different ways that Keller's words are functioning in the context into which he is speaking. They would not function in the same way in ours, and that's okay.

With better psychological boundaries of our own, we will be able to recognise also how the world appears to other people. For instance, in a piece that many circulated in criticism of Keller, he spoke about the way that the hostility and fearmongering of much of the Christian right in their treatment of gay persons in the past created a rod for their own back and even something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. When people are preoccupied with the desperate struggle for cultural survival between the left and the right, such statements will be seen as punching right.

Yet many on the front lines trying to defend Christian liberties know the way that the cause has suffered as a result of the culture war framing. As Christians have reacted out of hostility and fear, other groups have responded in kind. However, on other occasions where Christians have not taken such a reactive approach and have not led with hostility and fear, surprising degrees of mutual accommodation without compromise have been able to be achieved.

There are deep problems in many of our cultural institutions, but those problems are seldom helped when everyone tries to pile in and address them, even when they don't understand the issues or when people push for an all-or-nothing culture war and failing to explore possibilities of mutual protection. This sort of thing is really important in cases where Christians seemingly have the upper hand, for instance in the current situation where *Roe v. Wade* may be overturned. It is imperative that Christians listen carefully to many of their strongest critics.

There are great dangers of injustice when our primary concern is to have laws that let us win. In the case of tackling abortion, for instance, this can lead to genuine dangers such as the criminalisation of some women who have miscarriages. Yes, such examples are used to legitimise the great social evil that abortion represents.

Yes, such cases may be very rare. However, if in the thrill of victory we do not take such concerns very seriously in the way that we craft laws, we end up creating a rod for our own back, fuelling some of the anger and the aggression that will be pushed back against us in the future. Clearly this does not mean that Christians are responsible for all of the opposition that they face, but a no-cauter culture war approach is responsible for a lot of the opposition that we experience.

The sooner that we stop being defensive and reactive and start facing up to this reality, and start to adopt postures that are truly trying to form a peaceful and good and just society, the better. There are contexts where we do need to fight culture wars, but while such wars may be necessary, they are not sufficient to win the culture. It seems to me that Tim Keller makes a lot more sense when we start to read him in terms of these

boundaries.

First of all, Tim Keller is very much aware of the specific context that he is addressing. He is not saying that the same approach should be applied in every single context, nor does he say that every single person must fight their cultural battles in exactly the same way as he does. He may criticise other people for some of the ways that they fight their battles, but this is definitely not the same thing as saying winsomeness is all that we ever need, nor is his argument based upon the supposed effectiveness of winsomeness.

He has readily acknowledged in various contexts the changing cultural climate. However, it seems to me that Keller's approach to discourse is very different from many of his critics. Keller is not addressing the culture as such, he is addressing specific persons with the good news of Jesus Christ.

Many of his critics, by contrast, seem to be focusing far more upon political posturing, in addressing abstract and generalised political and ideological realities. The result can often be a form of discourse that is far more driven by our free-floating anxieties than one that is driven by the need to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ to our neighbour who has never heard it before. How do you explain the love of Jesus Christ to a gay neighbour who feels demonised and hated by Christians, and as a result rejects Jesus Christ? Sure, you want to hold the line and not compromise, that's very important, but you might find winsomeness would help.

Indeed, one of the things that can lead to people failing to hold the line is the cognitive dissonance that they feel between their natural love for a friend or family member who comes out as gay, and their formation within the church where such persons are often seen principally as threats. Similar things could be said about so-called critical race theory. Yes, there are genuine threats of extreme anti-racist ideologies in various quarters, but a far more immediate threat for most Christians is with their preoccupation with the culture war and the horizon of the culture, they can fail to welcome the black person within their midst, or to understand that even when people have good intentions, he might find your society and your church inhospitable.

Our failure to apply ourselves well to our own small corners in these regards, and our preoccupation with fighting the big culture wars, so often has the effect of exacerbating the problems that we find in our small corners. A church with poor boundaries that is constantly preoccupied with the culture wars will often be an unwelcoming place for people whose presence does not easily fit in with that culture war mentality. As the culture looms larger and larger for many churches, those churches can lose their boundaries.

One of the common effects of this is churches that are preoccupied with speaking against the culture, they've lost the ability to speak to themselves to address their own sins, to address the sorts of sins that are more characteristic on their side of the culture

war. While this is often seen as punching right, what it is more properly understood as, is caring about our small corner, about dealing with our own hearts and the sins that most readily take up residence within it, about dealing with our own communities and those habits and attitudes that most cause damage within them. The more that we are able to bound our context, the more that we'll be able to speak to our own sins and address our own hearts, the more also we'll be prepared to actually address the culture when the time comes.

We will not be in an anxious relationship to it, seeking to defend ourselves against it or aggressively attack it. We'll be able to listen to and understand and then to act wisely into it and to speak in a way that really is understood. In 1 Corinthians 4, verses 12 and 13, the Apostle Paul says, When reviled, we bless.

When persecuted, we endure. When slandered, we entreat. Part of what Paul is describing here is the way that Christians, when under attack within their society, are able to respond in a different kind.

They are not bound up in an anxious relationship with their culture, but are confident in the Lord, and as a result can act in ways that are unpredictable. They can act in a way that is not determined by their opponents. They do not, for instance, automatically have to fight a war against those who war against them.

One of the things that has been very evident in the conversations surrounding Tim Keller is the way in which the current environment is poisoned by the ways that people despise or feel despised by other cultural groups. This is part of the way that people are not bounded. People are thin-skinned, paranoid and vengeful.

They can feel criticism and opposition as arising from enmity or antipathy towards them, when that may not be the case. Likewise, people can direct their loathing and derision towards people that they feel, and who often may, despise them. Even when hostility does exist, people struggle to imagine ways of relating to people that don't merely respond in kind.

Keller seems to be trying to speak into his context in ways that overcome some of the ways that people feel despised by Christians. He is also encouraging other Christians to take similar approaches. One of the challenges of the current conversation is that many of the people who are criticising Keller seem to feel despised and disregarded by many of Keller's constituency, and even by Keller himself.

Perhaps they hear in some of Keller's remarks a sense that they are the embarrassing relative with whom he does not want to be seen in public. They might also have anxieties about an increasingly hostile culture, and feel betrayed by a Christian leader who is not publicly standing up and advocating for them. How should such Christians respond? Firstly, by following the principles of speech and behaviour laid down for us in

scripture.

When reviled, we bless. When persecuted, we endure. When slandered, we entreat.

Second, by guarding hearts against bitterness. In Leviticus 19, verses 17-18, we have the principles of forgiveness. Finally, the ability to do both of these things is a result of having healthy boundaries.

How does that start for the Christian? By looking to the Lord. By focusing a lot less upon those people who are in apparent conflict with us, or upon the culture, but learning to see others in terms of the Lord's love. The more that we look to the Lord in this way, and the more that we focus upon our own small corners, the less threatened we'll feel by what people are doing or saying elsewhere, and the more equipped we'll be actually to address them.

Practically, I would advise many people just to step back from social media, to recognise the dysfunctionality of it as a context of discourse, and the effect that it has upon our society and upon our souls. When these sorts of steps have been taken, I would not be surprised if many of the people who are currently exercised about this opinions would find that Keller does not register on their radar anymore. Having defined the objects of their thought and the boundaries of their context well, Keller's voice would only carry very faintly into their worlds.

Having taken these steps, I also believe they would be in a much better position to understand what he's saying, why he's saying it, and into which context he's saying it. They would then be able to come to far more thoughtful criticisms of his position, having established enough of a psychological distance from the conversation to give them clarity of perspective. There are genuine and deep forms of distrust within the church in America at the moment.

There is real hostility and enmity to be found in various quarters. However, for Christians, addressing such issues must start with addressing our own souls, with addressing the dysfunctional context within which we are being formed, and within which we are speaking. As we undertake this, I believe that we will find that the tensions and the antagonisms and the forms of enmity between us are greatly diminished and a much healthier situation can arise.

So much of this will be about being less invested in social media.