Gospel Speech Online: Speaking the truth in love in a digital world by Lionel Windsor (Matthias Media) 2017

This little book is one of those surprising little packages that is like a gift that keeps giving.

I picked it up half expecting it to be full of technical jargon, that I hoped I might be able to translate into my sphere of reference, and maybe pick up some clever tips I could make use of in my own shy, yet intrepid, forays into the online world. Furthermore, I was glad it was a short book, which I was likely to get through quite quickly, and not be an onerous commitment on my time.

What I found was a joy to read, to re-read, and to put into practice. For this is not just about concepts, but how as Christians, we express our faith in the virtual world, and that our lived-experience online is authentic to the values we adhere to.

The author, Lionel, carefully, and cheerfully, unpacks and guides us along a pathway through what some of us find is a confusing labyrinth. It is a world of words, and a deluge of words without the helpful cues of body language or audible tone and timbre, but it is a pathway which the author has walked multiple times before. You join with him in his successes, and learn from his failures, as you are guided through this pioneer land where the power of words is king.

Like babes in arms, we find ourselves in a new world with new and different sensations and experiences to adapt to and to learn to survive in. The author begins by orienting us in this online world, and anchoring it in a frame of reference that is decidedly Christian in its values and world-view. One of the first key items he expresses is that to authentically express Christianity online is to "put off" the old selfish-self, and to choose to be other-person-centred in our speech. For the online world is where the power of our words is magnified – either for good, or not for good.

We are negotiated through the paradoxes of the online world, become acquainted with its "ever-evolving etiquette" and at every point gently persuaded to "put off the old self", to "put on the new self and to "speak the truth" in love (Eph 4:24-25). We also learn about ourselves. Where we fit into the picture – how our responses to the online world fall into different categories. Categories we may wish to examine, and assess whether that's we actually want to be.

Four categories are named:

1. Embracers – they are really "at home" in the online world, and it embodies everything good about expressing yourself and "living" in this medium, sometimes at the detriment of the real world.
2. Naysayers – they consider the online world full of evil. It twists our words towards untruth, and twists our lives, manipulating us into being trapped in its evil tentacles.
3. Conscientious objectors – Those of us who deliberately keep away from it because they consider it bad for them.
4. Disciplined user – Someone who knows how to walk the pathway through the labyrinth of the online world without allowing it to bring out the worst in them.

It is this fourth category which the author advocates, as a means to "speak Christian" into the world at large that taps into the online world, but is much broader and real than just the words we read on the computer screen. There are opportunities in the online world, that we don't necessarily have in the real world, that when used properly, greatly benefit the human engagement with the lives of others around us, and a chance to live-out the truth of the gospel.

He admits there are challenges, and these are outlined as well, but if we can be "disciplined users" who "put off the old self", "put on the new self" and "speak the truth in love", then the opportunities are way beyond any challenges we may face.

Michelle Lee

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