

Justin Wise. *The Social Church: A Theology of Digital Communication*. Chicago: Moody, 2014. 180 pages. \$14.99.

There have been a number of books written over the last decade about social media as a ministry option. Many of them have delved into the options for utilizing digital media for preaching, worship, social outreach, children and youth ministry, prayer concerns, and more. Some of these resources offer a theology behind the use of these media platforms, but not all. This book, *The Social Church: A Theology of Digital Communication*, offers options for using digital media and a theological framework for the use of that media. Justin Wise has written a book that is accessible, informative, and engaging. The book is a quick read, which is appropriate for the times in which we are living. The book is divided into three sections: “The Why of Social Media, The Embedded Values of a New Media Culture, and To Whom Shall We Go?”

The first section, “The Why of Social Media,” takes a look at the historical evolution of mass production through a number of technologies—the printing press and eventually social media (23). The risk churches and pastors have to take is delving into social media for effective two-way communication for the 21st century (30).

Wise’s use of anecdote and story is powerful and provides the reader with multiple entry points into the discussion. The use of story to present the historical shifts in broadcasting news and changing events is intriguing (40). The transition from one voice to a multiplicity of voices on the web is a well-known reality; but his take on the difference between openness before and openness now is well done (44).

Chapter four includes a helpful look at how generational cohorts view social media (56–61). The new media values of interactivity, personalization, ubiquity/connectedness, and sharing are vital for many generations, but especially for Gen Y (59–60).

In the following chapters (Chapters 5–8), section two of the book, the reader is given more specificity about these new media values. The author helps the reader understand how these values are experienced anew in the ever-growing social media landscape. Chapter nine looks at the ways “the medium is the message” (102). But, the author is clear to remind the reader that the message does not necessarily change; just the medium needs to evolve (103). One of the helpful pieces in this book is that Wise provides both positive options for social media and cautions for its usage with equal affect.

The final section of the book, “To Whom Shall We Go?,” is a practical guide for persons and communities of faith who choose to use social media to present their message and the message of the Gospel in a new day. Having a Big Idea is an important concept for the church today. Jesus communicated his Big Idea and “it’s clear that it was heavily influenced by the power of narrative” (125). The narrative of God’s love and Christ resurrected for our salvation is a simple message but it need not be simplistic in its delivery system (125). The church must determine its best mode of communicating their big idea in the new media age.

Creating a unique and creative website that attracts the viewers’ attention in this media age is vitally important. Wise states that most visitors to webpages only view them for 7–12 seconds before deciding to move on if it does not grab their attention (139). That means working to convey the message is of upmost importance in a media saturated world.

The final piece of advice that the author provides is to understand the generational divide in culture today. There is a “tug-of-war” happening with a perfect storm of issues affecting the church today: “change in communication methods, transition in leadership, and social cultural

shifts as far as the eye can see” (159). We are called as the church to understand our context, utilize new mediums to tell the story of faith, and create relationships (168).

Churches must determine what media platforms work for them, how to limit their interactions in appropriate ways, and move outside of their four walls to interact with the world, especially through social media platforms. Wise helps the reader understand this as being both a possibility and a theologically sound option. One criticism of the book is that it is fairly simplistic; however, for many readers that might be an asset. There were moments in reading this book that I wanted the author to be more detailed; however, I still found it a worthwhile read and recommend it to others.

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