Journal of Religion, Media & Digital Culture (JRMDC)

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Review

Meredith Gould

The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways.

(Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013) 152 pp. Paperback \$14.99

ISBN: 978-0-8146-3558

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In *The Social Media Gospel*, Meredith Gould proclaims the by-now-familiar news that churches need not fear social media. Written for an audience of pastors and church lay leaders, Gould's manuscript discusses the process of strategizing and establishing an online presence as part of a broader ecclesiastical mission. The book offers practical how-to advice for developing a social media policy, so it will be pertinent both for those newly considering the role that social media might play in a church community and for those looking to rethink an established online presence.

Gould is by no means the first author to write about the use of social media in the church. Other books, some of which have been reviewed by this journal, tackle the same topic, and many do so with a more scholarly focus: Toni Birdsong and Tami Hemi's *@stickyjesus*, Douglas Estes's

SimChurch, and Laura Krokos and Angi Pratt's *Reach: How to Use Your Social Media Influence for the Glory of God* come to mind. Although Gould is a sociologist by training, her contribution is primarily pragmatic and draws on her experience as a church media consultant and founder of a weekly Tweetchat (xvi). While there is a nod to the theoretical, Gould is clear about the orientation of her book from the beginning: "Although I have oodles of scholarly training, this is not an academic book" (xv). Understood in this light, *The Social Media Gospel* can be a fruitful resource for its intended audience.

The manuscript is divided into three sections that gradually introduce the social media landscape. The first section, entitled *Frameworks for Understanding*, makes an argument for why churches should use social media and offers several lenses for assessing the usefulness of social media platforms. Chapters in this section briefly touch on various factors impacting users' choice of social media platforms, including generational affiliation, learning style preferences, and personality type. The second and third sections of the book present the nuts and bolts of digital engagement. *Choosing Social Media* highlights the challenges that organizations face while building a social media presence, such as increasing member participation, curating digital content, and connecting with the tech-adverse. Gould also offers snapshots of the capabilities of the major social media platforms at the time of publication (Twitter, Pinterest, Facebook, etc.). *Making Social Media Work*, the third and final section, covers guidelines for effective digital interactions. These chapters offer pragmatic advice on content creation, syncing several social media platforms, avoiding jargon, and more.

Gould's efforts to demystify social media will be attractive to those who want a quick introduction to digital forms of communication, and her generalized approach is the foundation of both the strengths and limitations of *The Social Media Gospel*. The latter two sections of the book highlight Gould's expertise as a media consultant. She presents sufficient information to spark conversation and encourage her audience to explore various social media platforms, but not enough to overwhelm novices. The appendices are likewise practically helpful checklists that walk readers through the process of creating a social media policy tailored to the needs of their organizations. Gould's language and the manuscript's organization are geared to make her information – and thus social media – as clear and accessible as possible.

At the same time, Gould's style is potentially distracting. She assumes that her audience has a high level of familiarity with church culture, and she peppers her text with allusions like "As for me and my software, we serve the Lord by keeping tech-talk and jargon to a minimum" (3). Most readers will understand that the word play is all in good fun, but when taken alongside the cover illustration of a digitally altered icon of Christ, it could also be interpreted as evidence of a glib or even flippant attitude toward church traditions.

The theoretical issues raised in the first section also suffer from oversimplification. Gould often draws quick conclusions that may be somewhat jarring to more theoretically-minded readers. For example, a paragraph is devoted to connecting social media to the larger issue of how to balance innovation with the preservation of church traditions. This theme could have been a fruitful framework for the entire monograph, but it is abandoned after one intriguing paragraph. Further, while Gould gestures to the ways that on- and offline interactions develop reciprocally, she does

not really consider the differences between these interactions. The book rests on the claim that “virtual community is real community” (27). This may be true in the author’s own experience – she notes that she conducts many of her most cherished relationships primarily online (xvi) – but research by popular scholars like Sherry Turkle would suggest that digital relationships and those with face-to-face components are not equivalent. For the pastors and lay people in the book’s intended audience, many of whom lead communities that frequently interact offline, a more nuanced discussion of how to integrate digital and face-to-face communication might be useful. Beyond this, Gould’s non-academic style generally precludes the use of footnotes and citations, so the basis of her analyses of generational and learning style-based platform usage is often unclear.

Despite all of this, *The Social Media Gospel* is useful as a gateway to the questions and issues around ecclesiastical social media participation. Gould’s reimagination of Saint Theresa of Avila’s “Christ Has No Body” perhaps best conveys the message and spirit behind the monograph:

Christ has no online presence but yours,
 No blog, no Facebook page but yours,
 Yours are the tweets through which love touches this world,
 Yours are the posts through which the Gospel is shared,
 Yours are the updates through which hope is revealed... (8)