

# How Christian Leaders Interact with the Twitter

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the relationship between Christian leaders and Twitter. Twitter's founding resulted in an outburst in the use of the social media platform. Christian leaders quickly caught on, and today they use Twitter for a number of different purposes, seeking first and foremost to challenge and inspire their followers. Through the study of 30 different leaders' tweets, as well as different blog posts, articles and interviews outlining different approaches to Twitter and other social media, the study concluded that pastors were most concerned with getting across the basic message of Christianity while adapting their methods to include the new medium of Twitter.*

## I. Introduction

Since its launch in 2006, Twitter has been a leader in the Internet socialization of the world, greatly fulfilling its mission: "To give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers." With 500 million Tweets sent per day by 241 million monthly active users, it has penetrated modern society to a degree once known only by MySpace and Facebook.<sup>1</sup>

Christian pastors, to a degree, are no different. And some of them get more interaction on Twitter than pop star Justin Bieber. In June 2012, Amy O'Leary published a story in *The New York Times* titled "Christian Leaders Are Powerhouses on Twitter," writing about how influential pastors and Christian speakers such as Joyce Meyer, Joel Osteen and Max Lucado were generating more reactions on Twitter than Bieber. Even though Meyer had just 993,000 followers as compared to Bieber's 22.6 million followers at the time, Meyer generated 170 reactions per 50,000 followers, while Bieber had just 59. This discovery resulted in Twitter executives encouraging more religious leaders to join the platform.

The company executive Claire Diaz-Ortiz ". . . spends half of her time on the road, offering training, analytics and help to swat away impostor accounts, as well as encouraging leaders to be less promotional and more personal in their posts," O'Leary wrote. "Pastors tell me," Diaz-Ortiz said, "Twitter is just made for the Bible."<sup>2</sup>

So if Twitter is "just made" for pastors' main source material, and some Christian speakers are gener-

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**Keywords:** Twitter, Christianity, pastors, communication, social media

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1 "Company," Twitter, accessed April 12, 2014, <https://about.twitter.com/company>.

2 Amy O'Leary, "Christian Leaders Are Powerhouses on Twitter," *The New York Times*, June 2, 2012, accessed March 15, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/02/technology/christian-leaders-are-powerhouses-on-twitter.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/02/technology/christian-leaders-are-powerhouses-on-twitter.html?_r=1&).

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ating more reaction from followers than pop stars, a study into the impact Christian pastors have on the social media platform would be worthwhile along with investigation into the collision of religion and culture in today's society. How involved Christians should be in "secular culture" is an on-going debate in the evangelical world. For some, Twitter is worthy of their time. In a blog post on *DesiringGod.org*, John Piper wrote, "In spite of all the dangers, Twitter seems like a risk worth taking. 'All things were created through Christ and for Christ' (Colossians 1:16). The world does not know it, but that is why Twitter exists, and that's why I tweet."<sup>3</sup>

The most important question this paper examined was how and why pastors and other Christian leaders used Twitter? It will also examine individual stories of pastors and Twitter and what Twitter means for the Christian community.

## II. Literature Review

Christians pastors/theologians/other leaders use Twitter, but there are not many concrete resources on this topic. The majority of information come from blog posts and other Internet-based sources, evidence of how religious thoughts are communicated in this current age.

Many resources were pulled from the evangelical Christian websites *The Gospel Coalition* and *Desiring God*. Members of *The Gospel Coalition* describes themselves this way: "We are a fellowship of evangelical churches in the Reformed tradition deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures. . . . We have committed ourselves to invigorating churches with new hope and compelling joy based on the promises received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone."<sup>4</sup> The website has several regular bloggers, plus many guest posts. In the list of sources from *The Gospel Coalition* used for this paper are blog posts from Trevin Wax, Kevin DeYoung, Joe Carter and Dustin Neeley, among others. *Desiring God* is a ministry started by John Piper, the former pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. There are a couple articles from that website that will be used. Since Piper is one of the most prominent sources on the tweeting side of things, a couple interviews with him about his social media use, and posts and interviews from others, are vital.

Big-time newspapers have also contributed to the research. Amy O'Leary wrote a story for *The New York Times* titled "Christian Leaders Are Powerhouses on Twitter." O'Leary writes about the popularity of accounts like Joyce Meyer and Joel Osteen, who averaged more reactions per 50,000 followers than Justin Bieber. She also quotes pastors and other Christian authors and speakers whose quotes are helpful. The *Los Angeles Times* also published a story on popular preacher Rick Warren and his use of Twitter and Facebook last year to share a sermon about loss in the week following the suicide of his son Matthew back in April 2013. The articles gives an overview of how Warren used Twitter and Facebook to thank those who offered words of consolation and express moments of sorrow to his followers. Likewise, *Christianity Today* has contributed several articles, including Sarah Pulliam Bailey's report from the 2011 Catalyst Conference, at which Twitter executive Claire Diaz Ortiz reached out to pastors and other attendees to try to help them use the social media network better.

Ed Stetzer's "The Exchange" blog on *Christianity Today* is also a popular source of information for the author's paper. Guest posts from Clark Campbell ("Social Ecclesia: Spirit-Led Digital Presence") and Justin Wise ("Social Media and Christian Ministry: Reaching the World for the Kingdom of God") are two sources of good insight from pastors on how the Christian church should and is using Twitter to reach their congregants and others. Stetzer frequently writes and speaks on Christianity and social media. Wise wrote a book entitled *The Social Church*, a look at how the church should approach new opportunities the social media growth has provided. Stetzer also has written and commented extensively on the subject.

## III. Methodology

The first series of resources will be Twitter pages themselves. I have decided on 30 Twitter users

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3 John Piper, "Why and How I Am Tweeting," *Desiring God*, June 3, 2009, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/why-and-how-i-am-tweeting>.

4 "About," *The Gospel Coalition*, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/about/who>.

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from which I will draw information (Refer to Table 1).

**Table 1. Twitter accounts for church/ministry**

| Name                    | Twitter Handle   | Church/Ministry                         | Location                | Followers as of March 24 |
|-------------------------|------------------|---|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>Albert Mohler</b>    | @albertmohler    | Southern Baptist Theological Seminary   | Louisville, Ky.         | 77,578                   |
| <b>Andy Stanley</b>     | @AndyStanley     | North Point Community Church            | Alpharetta, Ga.         | 367,329                  |
| <b>Beth Moore</b>       | @BethMooreLPM    | Living Proof Ministries                 | Houston, Texas          | 471,552                  |
| <b>Brian Houston</b>    | @BrianCHouston   | Hillsong Church                         | Sydney, Australia       | 335,571                  |
| <b>C.J. Mahaney</b>     | @CJMahaney       | Sovereign Grace Church                  | Louisville, Ky.         | 40,467                   |
| <b>Chuck Swindoll</b>   | @chuckswindoll   | Stonebriar Community Church             | Frisco, Texas           | 71,429                   |
| <b>Craig Groeschel</b>  | @craiggroeschel  | Lifechurch.tv                           | Oklahoma City, Okla.    | 198,152                  |
| <b>David Platt</b>      | @plattdavid      | The Church at Brook Hills               | Birmingham, Ala.        | 245,016                  |
| <b>Greg Laurie</b>      | @greglaurie      | Harvest Christian Fellowship            | Riverside, Calif.       | 80,326                   |
| <b>J.D. Greear</b>      | @jdgrear         | The Summit Church                       | Raleigh, N.C.           | 42,250                   |
| <b>James MacDonald</b>  | @jamesmacdonald  | Harvest Bible Chapel                    | Chicago, Ill.           | 90,374                   |
| <b>Jefferson Bethke</b> | @jeffersonbethke | Author, YouTube star for spoken word    | Tacoma, Wash.           | 134,205                  |
| <b>Joel Osteen</b>      | @JoelOsteen      | Lakewood Church                         | Houston, Texas          | 2,490,596                |
| <b>John Piper</b>       | @JohnPiper       | Bethlehem Baptist Church                | Minneapolis, Minn.      | 604,201                  |
| <b>Joshua Harris</b>    | @HarrisJosh      | Covenant Life Church                    | Gaithersburg, Md.       | 80,217                   |
| <b>Joyce Meyer</b>      | @JoyceMeyer      | Joyce Meyer Ministries                  | St. Louis, Mo.          | 2,692,271                |
| <b>Judah Smith</b>      | @judahsmith      | The City Church                         | Seattle, Wash.          | 291,227                  |
| <b>Kevin DeYoung</b>    | @RevKevDeYoung   | University Reformed Church              | East Lansing, Mich.     | 42,872                   |
| <b>Louie Giglio</b>     | @louiegiglio     | Passion City Church                     | Atlanta, Ga.            | 434,402                  |
| <b>Mark Dever</b>       | @MarkDever       | Capitol Hill Baptist Church             | Washington, D.C.        | 47,336                   |
| <b>Mark Driscoll</b>    | @PastorMark      | Mars Hill Church                        | Seattle, Wash.          | 467,843                  |
| <b>Matt Chandler</b>    | @MattChandler74  | The Village Church                      | Dallas-Ft. Worth, Texas | 263,053                  |
| <b>Max Lucado</b>       | @MaxLucado       | Oak Hills Church                        | San Antonio, Texas      | 935,375                  |
| <b>Perry Noble</b>      | @perrynoble      | Newspring Church                        | Anderson, S.C.          | 110,844                  |
| <b>Ravi Zacharias</b>   | @RaviZacharias   | Ravi Zacharias International Ministries | Norcross, Ga.           | 134,904                  |
| <b>Rick Warren</b>      | @RickWarren      | Saddleback Church                       | Lake Forest, Calif.     | 1,340,512                |

| Name                | Twitter Handle | Church/Ministry                                  | Location             | Followers as of March 24 |
|---------------------|----------------|--|----------------------|--------------------------|
| Russell Moore       | @drmoore       | President, Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission | Washington, D.C.     | 44,025                   |
| Steven Furtick      | @stevenfurtick | Elevation Church                                 | Charlotte, N.C.      | 198,399                  |
| T.D. Jakes          | @BishopJakes   | The Potter's House                               | Dallas, Texas        | 1,410,267                |
| Tullian Tchividjian | @PastorTullian | Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church                  | Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. | 82,074                   |

These are some of the most popular Twitter accounts in all Christianity. Meyer, Osteen, Jakes and Warren have all eclipsed one million followers; Piper, Driscoll and Chandler are popular names in evangelical Christian circles; and Bethke, Mohler and Moore provide different perspectives as non-pastors. Tabulating tweet types and follower counts are the primary pieces of information from these accounts, and there will be interpretations about leaders' tweeting from these numbers.

## IV. Findings and Analysis

Jefferson Bethke is one of current Christendom's most popular young faces. His popular spoken word YouTube video, "Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus," has over 26 million views since it was released in January 2012<sup>5</sup>, and the following book, *Jesus > Religion: Why He Is So Much Better Than Trying Harder, Doing More, and Being Good Enough*, is listed as a New York Times Bestseller<sup>6</sup>. He also has an extremely popular Twitter account, with over 134,000 followers.

Being a younger guy - he's in his 20s - Bethke admittedly has a pulse on the current generation, a generation that has flocked to one thing in droves: social media, particularly Twitter. "It's just how we communicate," he said in an interview, "so similar to how older generations used the phone. Just a tool."<sup>7</sup> For a fair number of Christian leaders, Twitter being a popular communication tool seems to be one of the main reasons they utilize it. Speaking from a secular perspective, Twitter executive Claire Diaz-Ortiz said, "(Religion is) about relationships and social media is about relationships. A lot of companies don't understand that. They think it's a new way to market themselves. In contrast, religious organizations have been relying on word-of-mouth marketing and relational marketing forever, so they take to social media well."<sup>8</sup> Writing on a blog post on *The Gospel Coalition*, Trevin Wax, an author and former associate pastor, said, "Missionaries learn the language of the people around them so they can communicate the gospel and connect with the people they are trying to reach. In the same way, pastors should engage social media as part of their overall communication and connection strategy."<sup>9</sup> According to Buzzplant, a Christian-based advertising agency, "45 percent of church staff use Facebook every day . . . (and) 56 percent allowed or encouraged staff members to update their personal social media pages while at work." But perhaps the most revealing number is that 46 percent of churches claim social media as "their most effective outreach method."<sup>10</sup>

5 Jefferson Bethke, "Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus," *You Tube*, January 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IAhDGYlpqY#!>.

6 amazon.com, "Jesus > Religion: Why He Is So Much Better Than Trying Harder, Doing More, and Being Good Enough," Accessed April 12, 2014, <http://www.amazon.com/Jesus-Religion-Better-Trying-Harder/dp/1400205395>.

7 Jefferson Bethke, e-mail message to the author, March 15, 2014.

8 Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Twitter Reaches Out to Christian Leaders at Catalyst's 'Be Present' Conference," *Christianity Today*, October 7, 2011, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/octoberweb-only/twittercatalyst.html>.

9 Trevin Wax, "4 Things a Pastor Should Consider Before Engaging Social Media," *Kingdom People*, February 3, 2014, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevinwax/2014/02/03/4-things-a-pastor-should-consider-before-engaging-social-media/>.

10 Joe Carter, "9 Things You Should Know About Social Media," *TGC Voices*, July 17, 2013, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2013/07/17/9-things-you-should-know-about-social-media/>.

Gospel outreach seems to be one of the main uses of Twitter for a lot of Christian leaders. “It’s how people communicate, share, learn, etc, so I enjoy it personally for that and also think it’s a great tool to communicate things about Jesus,” Bethke said. “It’s how people communicate and you want to be in the world and place where people communicate. It’s a digital coffee shop.”<sup>11</sup> In a post on the *Christianity Today* website, Clark Campbell, a member of Social Ecclesia, an organization committed to helping churches adjust to the social age, wrote, “(Social media) is a tool for interaction and connection, not merely a megaphone to announce the next church program and party. Social media opens doors and opportunities to engage with people who rarely, if ever, step foot in a church building.”<sup>12</sup> Making a comparison to the parable of the sower found in the New Testament passage Mark 4:1-9, Ray Ortlund said, “The media we now have offer us a tremendous advantage for getting the gospel out. I think of the parable of the sower in Mark 4. He was not dropping one seed at a time along a little row, the way we do in a modern garden. He was throwing handfuls of gospel seed out there. Lots of waste. But also growth. And only God knows how it will turn out.”<sup>13</sup>

Ed Stezer, a blogger on ChristianityToday.com and president of LifeWay Research, went as far to say that pastors who weren’t on social media should “repent. You should get on Twitter and Facebook right away. If you don’t, you’re missing a great opportunity. These micro blogging platforms give you the ability to have short conversations to communicate helpful things to your people and beyond.”<sup>14</sup> The consensus for most seems to be an emphasis on meeting the culture where they’re at.

Gary Hendrix, the lead pastor at Grace Reformed Baptist Church in Mebane, N.C., has just 179 followers, much less than the leaders studied for this research, but he has a unique perspective on using Twitter. His tweets usually revolve around three things: Jesus, Wake Forest University sports and music. He says that he doesn’t have an overriding Twitter philosophy, but he does see a use for Twitter as a ministry tool. “We need to say more not less sometimes if we’re really going to speak into the culture. There’s a lot we need to say. You can’t say very much on Twitter,” he said. “But that being said, C.S. Lewis, most of his most memorable statements were very brief, cogent. It’s a good opportunity to sharpen that skill, and for that reason I think it could be a good tool of ministry.”<sup>15</sup>

The following table is an analysis of tweets from the week of March 17-23, except for Mark Driscoll<sup>16</sup>, whose tweets from March 6-12 are shown:

There are a few interesting points to take from these numbers.

First, most leaders in the study do not take advantage of Diaz-Ortiz’s suggestion that Twitter is “perfect” for the Bible. T.D. Jakes, John Piper and Perry Noble led the 30 with just four Bible verse tweets each, and only six total leaders tweeted a total of 23 verses, just over two percent of the total tweets. Some leaders, Piper in particular, will sometimes tweet verses, parts of verses or the reference to a verse and add a piece of commentary or a thought of their own in addition. During the week the study was conducted, 15 of Piper’s 41 tweets were in this vein. For instance, on March 19 Piper tweeted, “ ‘Whatever was written in former days was written that . . . we might have hope.’ Rom. 15:4 All of it. Find hope every morning.”<sup>17</sup> Speaking in an interview on his Twitter use, Piper said, “Basically, I just want to put in a sentence three times a day something that seems to me would be provocative concerning the character of God or the Lord Jesus or upbuilding for peoples’ faith or helpful in our understanding of what’s going on in the world.”<sup>18</sup> His tweets reveal that he does exactly that.

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11 Bethke, e-mail interview.

12 Clark Campbell, “Social Ecclesia: Spirit-Led Digital Presence,” *The Exchange*, January 24, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/january/social-ecclesia-spirit-led-digital-presence.html>.

13 Tony Reinke, “Serving Up Tweets: An Interview with Ray Ortlund on Social Media,” *Desiring God*, March 9, 2012, <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/serving-up-tweets-an-interview-with-ray-ortlund-on-social-media>.

14 Drew Dyck and Kyle Rohane, “Not Tweeting? Repent!,” *Leadership Journal*, Summer 2013, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2013/summer/not-tweeting-repent.html>.

15 Gary Hendrix, interview with Zachary Horner, Burlington, N.C., April 11, 2014.

16 Driscoll abandoned use of his Twitter account temporarily on March 15, so a different week was used. For more information on that abandonment: <http://www.religionnews.com/2014/03/17/pastor-mark-driscoll-apologizes-missteps-quits-social-media/>.

17 John Piper, Twitter post, March 19, 2014, 1:03 p.m., <http://twitter.com/johnpiper>.

18 John Piper, “Who Is In Charge of Your @JohnPiper Twitter Account?,” *Desiring God*, January 2, 2010, <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/who-is-in-charge-of-your-johnpiper-twitter-account>.

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**Table 2. Analysis of church/ministry tweets over a week**

| Name             | Twitter account  | Bible Verses | Self-promotion | Others-promotion | Inspirational Messages | Personal Statements | Total tweets | Tweets/day |
|------------------|------------------|--------------|----------------|------------------|------------------------|---------------------|--------------|------------|
| Albert Mohler    | @albertmohler    | 0            | 7              | 6                | 6                      | 22                  | 41           | 5.86       |
| Andy Stanley     | @AndyStanley     | 0            | 2              | 3                | 0                      | 27                  | 32           | 4.57       |
| Beth Moore       | @BethMooreLPM    | 0            | 0              | 0                | 0                      | 5                   | 5            | 0.71       |
| Brian Houston    | @BrianCHouston   | 0            | 0              | 0                | 7                      | 2                   | 9            | 1.29       |
| C.J. Mahaney     | @CJMahaney       | 0            | 4              | 20               | 28                     | 12                  | 64           | 9.14       |
| Chuck Swindoll   | @chuckswindoll   | 0            | 12             | 6                | 5                      | 0                   | 23           | 3.29       |
| Craig Groeschel  | @craiggroeschel  | 0            | 0              | 0                | 0                      | 0                   | 0            | 0          |
| David Platt      | @plattdavid      | 0            | 7              | 1                | 0                      | 1                   | 9            | 1.29       |
| Greg Laurie      | @greglaurie      | 0            | 13             | 0                | 3                      | 8                   | 24           | 3.43       |
| J.D. Greear      | @jdgrear         | 0            | 6              | 2                | 3                      | 11                  | 22           | 3.14       |
| James MacDonald  | @jamesmacdonald  | 0            | 8              | 2                | 7                      | 4                   | 21           | 3          |
| Jefferson Bethke | @jeffersonbethke | 0            | 3              | 1                | 3                      | 14                  | 21           | 3          |
| Joel Osteen      | @JoelOsteen      | 0            | 0              | 0                | 14                     | 0                   | 14           | 2          |
| John Piper       | @JohnPiper       | 4            | 8              | 12               | 16                     | 1                   | 41           | 5.86       |
| Joshua Harris    | @HarrisJosh      | 0            | 0              | 4                | 0                      | 2                   | 6            | 0.86       |
| Joyce Meyer      | @JoyceMeyer      | 2            | 31             | 0                | 20                     | 3                   | 56           | 8          |
| Judah Smith      | @judahsmith      | 0            | 0              | 1                | 1                      | 3                   | 5            | 0.71       |
| Kevin DeYoung    | @RevKevDeYoung   | 0            | 3              | 1                | 12                     | 21                  | 37           | 5.29       |
| Louie Giglio     | @louiegiglio     | 0            | 0              | 1                | 4                      | 17                  | 22           | 3.14       |
| Mark Dever       | @MarkDever       | 0            | 0              | 1                | 5                      | 6                   | 12           | 1.71       |
| Mark Driscoll    | @PastorMark      | 6            | 5              | 2                | 20                     | 0                   | 33           | 4.71       |
| Matt Chandler    | @MattChandler74  | 0            | 0              | 11               | 1                      | 12                  | 24           | 3.43       |

| Name                | Twitter account | Bible Verses | Self-promotion | Others-promotion | Inspirational Messages | Personal Statements | Total tweets | Tweets/day |
|---------------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------|------------------|------------------------|---------------------|--------------|------------|
| Max Lucado          | @MaxLucado      | 0            | 0              | 2                | 10                     | 0                   | 12           | 1.71       |
| Perry Noble         | @perrynoble     | 4            | 2              | 6                | 8                      | 29                  | 49           | 7          |
| Ravi Zacharias      | @RaviZacharias  | 1            | 17             | 8                | 26                     | 53                  | 105          | 15         |
| Rick Warren         | @RickWarren     | 0            | 0              | 1                | 3                      | 1                   | 5            | 0.71       |
| Russell Moore       | @drmoore        | 2            | 15             | 26               | 5                      | 58                  | 106          | 15.14      |
| Steven Furtick      | @stevenfurtick  | 0            | 6              | 2                | 0                      | 2                   | 10           | 1.43       |
| T.D. Jakes          | @BishopJakes    | 4            | 27             | 5                | 69                     | 31                  | 136          | 19.43      |
| Tullian Tchividjian | @PastorTullian  | 0            | 11             | 2                | 25                     | 6                   | 44           | 6.29       |

About 30 percent of the tweets (301 of 988) sent out by these leaders come in the form of these “inspirational messages” tweets with statements meant to encourage or challenge their followers, often connected to spiritual things. On March 23, Tullian Tchividjian tweeted, “People who know that they are weak are much more intimate with God’s grace than people who think that they are strong.”<sup>19</sup> Another example is Joyce Meyer’s tweet on March 17: “We may not always get what we want, but God will always provide what we need.”<sup>20</sup>

Like any other hashtags that you’ll usually find in the Trending Bar with “Promoted” beside it, leaders will use tweets with hashtags to promote things they’re up to. During the week studied, T.D. Jakes (#IN-STINCT - 64 tweets) and Mark Driscoll (#BoldJames - 11 tweets) used hashtags related to sermon series they were in the middle of, usually coupling it with an inspirational message or video from the sermons. Perry Noble (#OverwhelmedBook) and Max Lucado (#GRACEthebook) helped promote books they’ve written. Joyce Meyer used the hashtag #3030Challenge as part of an effort to encourage her audience to read their Bibles more. In this vein, many of the leaders used Twitter for “self-promotion,” tweeting links to articles they’ve written or sermons they’ve preached.

In total, 187 of the 988 tweets (18.9%) were “self-promotion.” This took a few different forms. David Platt, who tweeted just nine times the entire week of study, posted the link to register for his “Secret Church” event taking place on Good Friday in seven of his tweets. In several tweets, Joyce Meyer linked to her Facebook page (5.5 million likes) to point her followers (about 2.7 million) to more content. In total, Meyer had 31 tweets that were classified as “self-promotion,” the most of any of the leaders. Ravi Zacharias had 17 tweets of “self-promotion,” often related to his trip to Texas A&M University and his speaking engagements there that week.

The fourth category considered was “others-promotion.” These were tweets that linked to articles or sermons or events that they were not responsible for. “Others-promotion” tweets accounted for 126 of the tweets from the leaders. Examples include Russell Moore tweeting a link to a story about Kenya legalizing polygamy without consent from the wife<sup>21</sup> and Andy Stanley posting a link to an article by Jonathan Merritt on *Religious News Service*.<sup>22</sup>

The final category to determine tweets was the most-used one, called “personal statements.” “Personal statements” are tweets that reflect a personal, more informal statement made by the leader. It can sim-

19 Tullian Tchividjian, Twitter post, March 23, 2014, 2:46 p.m., <http://twitter.com/pastortullian>.

20 Joyce Meyer, Twitter post, March 17, 2014, 1:30 p.m., <http://twitter.com/joycemeyer>.

21 Russell Moore, Twitter post, March 22, 2014, 7:21 p.m., <http://twitter.com/drmoore>.

22 Andy Stanley, Twitter post, March 20, 2014, 3:31 p.m., <http://twitter.com/andystanley>.

ply be a picture of the weather, a happy birthday to a child or a sports reference. On March 20, Matt Chandler simply posted, “0-1 #MadnessBegins,” in reference to the start of the NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament.<sup>23</sup> On the same day, also in reference to college basketball, Kevin DeYoung tweeted, “It is impossible for me to watch (Michigan State basketball player) Travis Trice and not think of Hector Zeroni,” the latter name a character from the book *Holes* by Louis Sachar.<sup>24</sup> In terms of numbers, this was the most popular category, with 351 of 988 tweets (35.6 percent).

Hendrix sees a great benefit to tweeting personal statements. He often tweets analysis of Wake Forest basketball. But he said it’s important for pastors to realize who they are when they tweet. “I believe that it’s important for a pastor to realize that he’s a pastor on Twitter, and if you’re going to tweet about basketball, football, I think it’s good,” he said. “Sometimes people need to see a different side of pastors, their humanity. But you’ve still got to be mindful that you are a pastor, you represent Christ.”<sup>25</sup>

Leaders have found different ways to utilize their Twitter profiles in this personal statement vein. Nearly every Sunday, you can count on a tweet from Noble regarding the number of salvations that took place at his church. During the week of study, Chuck Swindoll posted five tweets regarding his trip to Israel with the hashtag #Israel2014, with updates on what the group he lead was doing. Eleven of the tweets C.J. Mahaney posted were retweets, all NCAA tournament brackets, from the @MahaneySports Twitter handle, a sports-related account used to “bring a unique gospel-driven discernment to sports.”<sup>26</sup> Hendrix has used his Twitter to reach out to some Wake Forest athletes and coaches as well as other Christian sports figures. He shared a story about exchanging private messages on Twitter with Paul Tesori, who’s a Christian and the caddy of Webb Simpson, a professing Christian and professional golfer. “I know that often I’ll quote a text, just print the text, or make a statement relevant to the gospel or truth, I know at least there’s a possibility it’s going to some of these athletes, coaches,” he said. “I wouldn’t have access to these guys (without Twitter).”<sup>27</sup>

The plurality of the tweets being in the “personal statement” vein is indeed interesting because pastors and other leaders are seeming to say, “We’re people too.” Whether it’s sports or music or their kids, these leaders saw fit for whatever reason to dedicate the plurality of their tweets to displaying who they are. Thirteen of the 30 leaders had a plurality of their tweets in the “personal statement” category, with a mix of younger leaders like J.D. Greear and Jefferson Bethke and some of the older guard like Ravi Zacharias and Dr. Albert Mohler.

Hendrix’s use of Twitter is just one method of using Twitter that just might be considered appropriate for pastors. There aren’t bookstore shelves full of volume on “Twitter theology” or social media Christianity. Christian author Jon Acuff said, “Social media’s like a brick — you can use it to build an orphanage or throw it through somebody’s car window. . . . There’s no precedent. We can’t go, ‘Here’s how C. S. Lewis handled Twitter.’”<sup>28</sup> There are different ways Christian leaders approach Twitter, and perhaps that’s because it’s such a relatively new tool of ministry that they haven’t quite figured out how to do it properly yet.

Many leaders advise caution. DeYoung writes, “Assume that everyone, everywhere will read what you write and see what you post. . . . the Internet is like God and like the devil. It sees all and forgives nothing.”<sup>29</sup> In a blog post on *The Gospel Coalition*, Dustin Neeley, a pastor who runs the church planting blog cp4us.org, wrote, “The developing technology of social media (blogging, Facebook, Twitter, and so on) can and should be used for the glory of God and the advancement of the gospel in every possible way. But natural-born idolaters like you and me are no more than a few clicks away from making this good thing a god.”<sup>30</sup>

Some leaders have used Twitter to do ministry directly like Hendrix. A prime example is Rick Warren, who shared a “sermon” through his Facebook and Twitter pages a week after the death of his son Matthew

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23 Matt Chandler, Twitter post, March 20, 2014, 2:21 p.m., <http://twitter.com/mattchandler74>.

24 Kevin DeYoung, Twitter post, March 20, 2014, 6:30 p.m., <http://twitter.com/revkevdeyoung>

25 Hendrix, interview, April 11, 2014.

26 <https://twitter.com/mahaneysports>

27 Hendrix, interview, April 11, 2014.

28 O’Leary, “Christian Leaders Are Powerhouses on Twitter.”

29 Kevin DeYoung, “The One Indispensable Rule for Using Social Media,” *DeYoung, Restless, and Reformed*, June 13, 2012, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindyoung/2012/06/13/the-one-indispensable-rule-for-using-social-media/>.

30 Dustin Neeley, “Justification by Twitter,” *TGC Voices*, May 9, 2012, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/05/09/justification-by-twitter/>.

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in April 2013.<sup>31</sup> Reporters Kurt Streeter and Joseph Serna wrote, “Over the last seven days, Warren has written about his son’s struggles with mental illness, talked about forgiving the person who gave his son an unregistered gun, cited Bible verses that give him comfort and even taken on Internet ‘haters’ who said they ‘celebrate your pain.’” The article cited several tweets from Warren’s stream, including this: “Someone on the Internet sold Matthew an unregistered gun. I pray he seeks God’s forgiveness. I forgive him. #MATTHEW 6:15.” Speaking about the tweeting, Greg Laurie, the pastor of Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside, Ca., said Warren was “modeling how faith works in the real world.”

In January 2014, *Christianity Today* reported that Leonart Barroso, a Cuban pastor who says he drew inspiration from German theologian/pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was put under house arrest as “part of a larger crackdown on political dissidents across the country,” the article reports. Barroso used social media such as Twitter to share his experiences with followers. Melissa Kimiadi, the author of the article, wrote, “Utilizing social media, (Barroso) communicates with his supporters as well as further drumming up awareness for a pro-democracy Cuba. His Twitter account is regularly updated with up to 10 tweets a day. He has also blogged his experiences (sometimes translated into English) since 2010. His wife Yoaxis is also active on Twitter.”<sup>32</sup>

Even though this spiritual good can be done on Twitter, the concern remains on the part of some Christian leaders. “Social media, I think, has a lot of traps for Christians,” Hendrix said. “We have to be thoughtful and purposeful in everything we do, and even though I don’t have a philosophy for using Twitter, I hope that I’m thinking. I think it’s important for Christians to think about the gospel in everything they say, everything they put on Facebook or Twitter.”<sup>33</sup> There’s an emphasis from the pastoral community for caution to be exercised. Speaking about himself, Piper expresses, “(Twitter)’s just fraught with dangers, especially ego dangers of people saying, ‘O yeah, I’ll get an account. How many followers can I get? Woohoo! I’m up to 100 followers!’ or whatever. I just think it’s so unbelievably dangerous, so I want to be checking myself all the time about why I do this. Do I really love the church and want to bless the church? Or do I just like having people listen to me?”<sup>34</sup>

Wax wrote, “In the heat of the moment, it is easy to say things you wish you could take back. Never has it been easier to have your words broadcast to the world. I’ve seen pastors embarrass themselves through comments they’ve made on a blog, a rant they posted on Facebook, or an insensitive remark on Twitter.”<sup>35</sup> Ortlund conveys the advantage of using new media for spreading the message of the Christian faith, but has a warning. “The book of Proverbs speaks clearly about the impact of our words,” he wrote. “With our media, we can now harm and embarrass and stigmatize people with greater force than ever before in human history. We don’t have to be political heavyweights to wield that power. Any blogger will do. Self-restraint has never been more important.”<sup>36</sup> Christians who seek to live “above reproach” (a phrase from Philippians 2:15 meaning to be without reason to be accused of wrongdoing) seem to seek caution in how they use their Twitter accounts, because, as Ortlund said, harm can be done with social media outlets.

In his post on *The Exchange*, Justin Wise cites Gateway Church in Austin, Texas, as an example of how what he calls the “New Media era” can influence a church. He writes that the church “weaves social media into their cultural fabric. Whether it’s volunteering on the church’s digital street team or participating in a real-time church-wide chat on Gateway’s mobile app, they have placed a clear priority on being a social church.”<sup>37</sup> He goes on to say that Christian churches need to “understand a fundamental truth of the New Media era: You cannot control the online conversation surrounding your church. You can only take steps to

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31 Kurt Streeter and Joseph Serna, “Rick Warren uses Facebook, Twitter to share sermon about loss,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 12, 2013, accessed March 15, 2014, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/apr/12/local/la-me-ln-rick-warren-leads-sermon-in-loss-using-facebook-twitter-20130412>.

32 Melissa Kimiadi, “Cuba Case Study: Bonhoeffer-Inspired Pastor Arrested After Blogs, Tweets, and D.C. Trip,” *Christianity Today*, January 20, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2014/january/cuba-case-study-pastor-mario-leonart-arrested-csw.html>.

33 Hendrix, interview, April 9, 2014.

34 Piper, “Who Is In Charge of the @JohnPiper Twitter Account?”

35 Wax, “4 Things a Pastor Should Consider Before Engaging Social Media.”

36 Reinke, “Serving Up Tweets: An Interview with Ray Ortlund on Social Media.”

37 Justin Wise, “Social Media and Christian Ministry: Reaching the World for the Kingdom of God,” *The Exchange*, February 21, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/february/social-media-and-christian-ministry-reaching-world-for-king.html>.

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influence it. . . . The question remains--a question which demands an answer from all of us--what will the church do next?" In his book *The Social Church*, Wise answers that question, by saying that Christian leaders need to adjust how they approach social media, maybe even do things differently than some Christians might expect. He writes, "We need men and women who are willing to challenge long-standing and widely-beloved methods of communicating the gospel message. People who are willing to bring some sacred cows to the barbecue and butcher them in front of everyone."<sup>38</sup>

Pastors and other Christian leaders seem to be reluctant to change their message, but as shown by the 30 leaders researched as part of this study, they are more than willing to adapt to the growth of social media in order to reach people with their beliefs. As of July 2013, there were 9,100 tweets per second from the 241 million monthly active users, while 222 million users don't tweet but watch others tweet<sup>39</sup>. The emphasis on reaching those people has been a constant in Christian leadership recently. Looking at the dates these 30 leaders joined Twitter, they were not too far behind the times. Rick Warren was the earliest (April 2007), Kevin DeYoung was the latest (May 2012), while 23 of them joined from May 2008 to June 2009.

This also might be considered a reflection of the progress of the relationship between religion and communications. Along with musicians, actors and athletes, Christian leaders are able to reach their followers with their messages of encouragement and challenge. Hendrix says there's great potential in Twitter being a really solid ministry tool, speaking to its accessibility, and saying that for the current college generation specifically that pastors "probably . . . should use it"<sup>40</sup>. Religion has become something that is more and more accessible to the current generation through Twitter, just like their favorite athletes and movie stars. In fact, Wise postulates about the impact social media would have had on famous church reformer Martin Luther: "Would social media be his (Martin Luther's) new printing press? What might his Twitter feed look like? Would he have turned the Ninety-Five Theses into a flashy infographic? Blogged about the merits of infant baptism? Would his job title on LinkedIn be 'Pastor, Reformer, Beer Drinker'? Maybe he would have configured a way to live-stream his classes, giving access to all who wanted it. Either way, Luther would have been all over social media"<sup>41</sup>.

These thoughts come out of an on-going discussion in Christian circles about "engaging the culture." In a blog post, Ed Stetzer wrote, "Engaging culture, contextualization, and relevance are common issues in missiological discussion. They tend to be assumed as we are engage in God's global mission. As I see it, it is both necessary and dangerous to engage culture. I believe (and have often said) that the church must be a biblically faithful, culturally relevant, counterculture community for the kingdom of God."<sup>42</sup> The comment about "necessary and dangerous" plays itself out in the discussion about the dangers of using tools such as social media. But some Christians-- particularly those who have Twitter accounts-- might argue the necessary part simply by their presence, and ever-growing presence at that, on social media networks.

## V. Conclusion

Twitter has dominated the social landscape, as one might see that little bird stuck to buildings, business cards and at the end of blog posts nowadays. Pastors have taken advantage of that in a big way, and they're reaching many with their messages of hope. Wise adds on *The Exchange*: "The 21st-century church has an unimaginable opportunity in social media to extend the borders of God's Kingdom online. The methods have changed, but the message remains the same."<sup>43</sup>

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38 Justin Wise, *The Social Church* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 26.

39 Carter, "9 Things You Should Know About Social Media."

40 Hendrix, interview, April 9, 2014.

41 Wise, *The Social Church*, 30.

42 Ed Stetzer, "How Should We Engage Culture?," *The Exchange*, April 16, 2010, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2010/april/how-should-we-engage-culture.html>.

43 Justin Wise, "Social Media and Christian Ministry."

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