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## Study guide

# The search for truth

By Robert C. Blezard

Growing up is hard at any age, but today's youth have it especially hard because of the pressures created by social media. A Pew Research Center survey found that nearly half of teens ages 13 to 17 were online almost constantly, and nearly all used a social media platform. Though there are some benefits to youth being connected to social media, there can be a lot of harm too. Social media can amplify and distort negative self-images and encourage unfair comparisons with others. As Christians, we can remind young people that our true identity is found exclusively in God.

### EXERCISE 1: YOUR YOUTH

As a study group, share and compare stories of the challenges and pressures to “fit in” that you faced during your teen years.

- What were the biggest obstacles you faced? Where did they come from? How did you cope (or fail to cope)?
- Describe the peer pressure you encountered. What was your response?
- If you could go back in time to your teen years, knowing what you know now, what would you do differently?
- From the responses of the study group, how have social pressures facing teens changed over time? Are things worse today?
- How do your experiences compare with the problems youth face today with social media?

### EXERCISE 2: YOUR IDENTITY

Most teens have some degree of insecurity about who they are and how they will engage the world when they reach adulthood, but most of us somehow land on our feet.

- How did you mature into the adult you are today?
- What sources of strength and vision guided you?
- As a teenager, did you face false images and distorted information about who you were? How did you recognize and overcome them?
- Did you compare yourself to others? If so, how did you typically compare—favorably or unfavorably?
- Teens today have these same problems, but social media makes them worse. How can you, as a caring adult, guide and help a young person?



## Study guide: **The search for truth** *continued*

### EXERCISE 3: SOCIAL MEDIA LIES

Whether it's spreading misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic, global warming or political scandals, social media has displayed a propensity to amplify falsehoods and provide a platform for malicious people.

- What falsehoods have you seen on social media? How has it affected you?
- Have you encountered people who have fallen prey to lies they heard on social media? How did it affect their lives?
- How can we educate youth (and adults) to help them navigate the world of social media, which contains both truth and fiction?
- In the close social circles that teens operate, falsehoods, insults and lies can cause great harm. Have you experienced or observed this? What can we do about it?

### EXERCISE 4: BENEFITS

There are some real benefits for youth being connected to social media, including the ability to network with friends, to make new friendships, to express oneself more easily, to find entertainment and information. For shy youth or those living in remote areas, social media can provide an outlet of support and friendship. Networking can also give teenagers support for personal problems and protection from bullies (“Surprising ways your teen benefits from social media,” [verywellfamily.com](http://verywellfamily.com)).

- Have you experienced these benefits or observed a young person who found social media to be helpful?
- How can adult friends, family and mentors help encourage teenagers to find the benefits of social media while avoiding the downfalls?

### EXERCISE 5: HARMS

Though there are some benefits to young people using social media, some real dangers can exist too. Researchers say social media can distract teens, disrupt their sleep and expose them to harms, including harassment, peer pressure and bullying. Moreover, many studies link social media use to poor mental health, depression, anxiety and unhappiness. The studies indicate that the problems intensify the more involved a youth is in social media (“What Is the Link Between Social Media Use and Mental Health?”; [psychologytoday.com](http://psychologytoday.com)).

- Have you experienced or observed any of these symptoms in a teenager who was involved in social media? Can you share? How did you or they handle it? What did you learn?
- How can adult friends, family and mentors help teenagers to cope with or avoid these harmful side effects of social media?

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## Study guide: **The search for truth** *continued*

### EXERCISE 6: HOW TO HELP

Here are some ways to help, according to the Mayo Clinic (“Teens and Social Media: What’s the Impact?”; [mayoclinic.org](http://mayoclinic.org)):

- **Set reasonable limits.** Talk to your teen about how to avoid letting social media interfere with his or her activities, sleep, meals or homework. Encourage a bedtime routine that avoids electronic media use, and keep cellphones and tablets out of teens’ bedrooms. Set an example by following these rules yourself.
- **Monitor your teen’s accounts.** Let your teen know that you’ll be regularly checking his or her social media accounts. You might aim to do so once a week or more. Make sure you follow through.
- **Explain what’s not OK.** Discourage your teen from gossiping, spreading rumors, bullying or damaging someone’s reputation—online or otherwise. Talk to your teen about what is appropriate and safe to share on social media.
- **Encourage face-to-face contact with friends.** This is particularly important for teens vulnerable to social anxiety disorder.
- **Talk about social media.** Talk about your own social media habits. Ask your teen how he or she is using social media and how it makes him or her feel. Remind your teen that social media is full of unrealistic images.

### EXERCISE 7: IDENTITY IN GOD

For youth and young adults struggling with identity crises exacerbated by social media, the Bible has an excellent message: You are loved, we are loved, and you are enough, we are enough, because we are children of the one true God. Here are some Scripture passages to remember. Why not print them out and paste them on the wall to remind you?

- **Jeremiah 1:5**—“**[God said,]** ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.’”
- **Jeremiah 29:11**—“‘For surely I know the plans I have for you,’ says the Lord, ‘plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.’”
- **Psalms 139:13-14**—“For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.”
- **2 Corinthians 5:17**—“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”
- **1 John 3:1**—“See what kind of love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.”
- **Ephesians 2:19**—“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.”
- **Ephesians 5:8**—“For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light.”
- **Galatians 3:26**—“In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.”

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## Study guide: **The search for truth** *continued*

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How has social media made it harder for young people to make the journey to adulthood? What have you experienced or observed? What can we do about it?
- In many ways social media creates a false world that lures our young people into believing lies about themselves and their social contexts. How does social media do this? How can we help keep our youth grounded in reality?
- Social media provides a platform for bullies and mischief-makers to harass and harm our youth. Which authorities should be responsible for identifying, stopping and punishing bullies? Schools? Police? The courts? What would help?
- Social media has proven to be a perfect platform for malicious people to spread lies and misinformation, deceiving and confusing many people. How can we separate truth from the lies that we see on social media, and how can we train our youth to do so?
- Should social media companies be held responsible for the impact that their services have on young people? How can they be held accountable?
- What kind of limitations or restrictions can and should parents put on their children's use of social media? Make a list of potential measures. Now look at each one and evaluate how it might be implemented and enforced.
- How can parents help their teenage children to understand and navigate the potential pitfalls and traps present in social media?
- Churches have the wonderful potential to bring people together for education, training and awareness. What kind of workshops could be held to help parents better understand social media and help their children with the internet? What kind of workshops could a youth group hold to help teenagers cope with social media? Make a list of potential workshops, flesh each idea out and present it to your pastor or congregation council for action.
- As baptized Christians, we have our primary identity as children of God. We are wonderfully made and unconditionally loved by the creator of the universe. That being the case, what insult, barb, put-down, snub or sneer can possibly harm us? How can parents and caring adults help our young people to understand that?

MY TAKE



# THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

*By Elizabeth Barton*

**ADOLESCENTS, THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

The teenage and young adult years are hard, especially now. These are the years when youth discover and shape their identities. With this search for identity come questions:

Do I matter?  
Am I enough?  
Am I worthy?  
Do I belong?

For teenagers and young adults, these are such powerful, deep and vulnerable questions!

Increasingly, adolescents are asking these life-shaping questions in the highly curated world of social media, which tears at their hearts, minds and mental health. Fortunately, the church has a role to play when the truth can't be found through Instagram.

Research (including that done by Facebook itself) shows that, in adolescents and young adults, social media use correlates with anxiety, depression, negative body image and eating disorders. While no one has shown that social media causes these problems, experts now agree that excessive use of these networks exacerbates many mental health struggles. Social media amplifies the vulnerabilities of the adolescent brain and of negative mental health states.

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### **THE CHURCH HAS A ROLE TO PLAY WHEN THE TRUTH CAN'T BE FOUND THROUGH INSTAGRAM.**

Adolescence is a magical, weird and egocentric time when human brains function differently. Social comparison comes naturally to adolescents as a means of exploring identity. In the past, self-exploration and questions about identity were confined to small, contained communities. But in the vast social media landscape, today's adolescents are comparing themselves to millions of individuals in a curated, distorted and false world.

Instagram turns on its head what developmental psychologists call the adolescent "personal audience," a unique phenomenon wherein a young person thinks everyone is looking at and critiquing them with the same thoughts that the young person has of themselves. For youth with preexisting vulnerabilities (anxiety, depression, poor self-image), the distortion can be more intense.

A hallmark of anxious and depressive thought processes is the tendency toward upward social comparison and confirmation bias. That is, when stressed, strained, anxious or depressed, people

ask, "Do I measure up? Am I enough?" They tend to compare themselves to those who are smarter, more popular or better-looking, and fear that the answer is "No, I'm not enough."

Such underlying, distorted thoughts persist or deepen, confirming the youth's own fears. Instagram and social media are like a funhouse mirror—one sees oneself, but one's image is warped and dysmorphic.

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### **GOD WALKS WITH US AND KNOWS THE DEEPEST AND MOST HIDDEN PARTS OF US—THERE IS NO FILTER NEEDED. GOD SEES, KNOWS AND LOVES.**

At the heart of the gospel lies liberating truth that speaks to the adolescent search for identity, worth and belonging. We are not to seek out the distorted reflection of social comparison for our worth. Rather, we know the truth; the mirror of Scripture tells us that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14).

The Spirit whispers into our hearts, telling us we have been called and we belong. And our Lutheran theology reminds us that we are known:

"Oh Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely" (Psalm 139:1-4).

Despite our imperfection, through God and in God we are sufficient, worthy and enough. God walks with us and knows the deepest and most hidden parts of us—there is no filter needed. God sees, knows and loves.

Adolescents will always ask if they are worthy enough or if they belong. Social media is one of many false mirrors that distort the answer, so the body of Christ must hold up the truth of Scripture to youth in real and brave ways. We must take the time to know our adolescents deeply enough to call out when we see distortion and comparison reflected in their lives, and to remind each youth of who and whose they really are. †

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