

Pastoring, parenting, and privacy

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I recently read [The Circle](#), Dave Egger's dystopian novel about a benevolent Internet company that eerily crept into every aspect of our lives, taking it over, one smiley emoticon at a time. Think about it like this: a company encompasses Facebook, Google, and Amazon, and then it begins partner with the government.

There are parts of the book that have haunted me. The main character got a peculiar calm by conjuring up the number rating her work performance. She would sneak back to work any time she was agitated and take customer service calls, so she could get the feedback. It reflected well the strange satisfaction we get with Facebook likes, blog stats, and (for authors) Amazon rankings.

But the most poignant parts of the book took place when it wrestles with what should be private and what shouldn't. Pastors have been thinking about this for generations—in a different sort of medium. Like, when we have a kid and we use her endlessly for sermon illustrations. We can't help it. She just says really cute and clever things that fit *perfectly* with what we are trying to say.

Then she gets older, and we begin to talk about the tough life lessons that she is learning. Usually we are the hero of our story, doling out parental wisdom gold. And we just can't let that gold sit there on the edge of our child's bed. We *must* tell our congregation about it, so that they can also be admonished and encouraged, just as our child was. Plus, we look pretty fantastic in the story, saving the day with our words. And how often do we get a chance to look that good when we're parenting—or pastoring for that matter?

Then she gets a little older, and she hates church and never wants to attend, because we have totally invaded her privacy and she realizes that she has become like one of those permanent flannelgraph figures in our lessons of the week.

Maybe we're smarter than this. I hope we are. I learn through screwing up and constant negotiation with my daughter. I take the illustrations to her, we talk about them, and she has veto power. She is an intensely creative, clever, and private person. She is full of sermon illustration gold, but I have to be really careful with it.

And, of course, all of it moves to a different level with the Internet. I've always said that there is no such thing as "private" on the web or our phones. We can put privacy settings in place (and we should). We can write disclaimers on the bottom of our emails. But if someone cared enough, they can gain access to that information. I don't say this to make us paranoid, just realistic. Someone who worked as an analyst for the government once told me, "Do not put anything on Internet or in a text that you wouldn't be comfortable with on the front page of the *New York Times*." And that's how I try to live my online life (though I transgress regularly). I share a lot. And I take responsibility for what I share.

We should just know what we're getting in to. If Google can scan our emails in order to advertise to us, then sensitive pastoral care information can be scanned too.

So, what about kids? Am I saying never put the face of a child up on the Internet? Am I saying that we should never post the ridiculously adorable things kids say? No. Of course not. But perhaps we should think about it a bit. **We should ask ourselves what the child would want.** When my child was a baby, I had no clue that she would prize her privacy so much. Thank God there was no Twitter at that time. I would have never thought twice about plastering her face on my timeline.

Think about the long-term implications. When you post that endearing picture of your son taking a bath in the sink, will it pop up when he's looking for a job? When you put that sassy video of him singing to Beyonce up on YouTube, is that what his college admissions officers are going to see? We're not just pulling out the embarrassing family photo album for his date, we're allowing that album to be perused by everyone.

Think about the marketing aspects. Advertising to our kids is relentless. And with the information available on the Internet, along with facial recognition abilities, companies are constructing what our children want so they can market to them with even more acuity. Knowledge is power. And in this day and age, we have to think about how much power over our children we are handing over to corporations.

I'm not saying all this to make anyone feel guilty. But I just think it's important for us to think about what we're doing. What are your best practices?