

Followers, friends and faith in the digital age

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The digital age is changing not only the words we use but also their meanings. Have you noticed, for instance, that “Christ follower” is replacing “born again” and “evangelical”? Take a moment to peruse the list of [who Rick Warren follows on Twitter](#):

- A handful of individuals describe themselves as “born again.”
- A couple dozen use “evangelical.”
- Almost 800 use some form of “Christ follower” or “Jesus follower.”

It is not just “follower” that is on the rise. Thanks to Facebook, “friend” is, too. Subtly yet profoundly, these concepts are being transformed in ways that alter how Christianity is understood and lived.

Throughout American history, both “friend” and “follower” have experienced their fair share of shifting. In English Common Law, calling someone a “friendless man” meant that he was an outlaw. To be a “friend of the court” was a legal position as well. It allowed someone to provide advice to a judge or jury.

In the young United States, Noah Webster delicately distanced “follower” and “friend.” In his [American Dictionary of the English Language of 1828](#), a “follower” was “one that takes another as his guide in doctrines, opinions or example.” It could be “a disciple” or “one under the command of another.” To explain this final meaning, Webster quoted a poem from Alexander Pope where a soldier calls his mates, “No follower, but a friend.”

As for “friend,” Webster’s later abridged dictionary defined the word as “a person attached to another by affection.” Other 19th-century dictionaries routinely used “intimate” or “intimacy” to characterize friendship.

Dictionaries rarely eliminate words’ definitions over time. Instead, words have new meanings added to them. For instance, as machines became more commonly used

throughout the 19th century, Webster's and others added this definition to "follower": "[the part of a machine that receives motion from another part.](#)" After the 1960s saw critics of conformity challenge everything from Jim Crow segregation to short hair for young men, "follower" could be used as a pejorative. It could mean "[one with little initiative; one who imitates someone else.](#)" With the rise of the digital age, online dictionaries added "[someone who is tracking a particular person, group, organization, etc. on a social media website or application.](#)"

"Friend" too has had its additions. In the late 19th century, abridgments of Webster's dictionary included associations that may be far more imagined than intimate: "[one of the same nation, party, kin, etc.](#)" Twenty-first-century online dictionaries provided a new verb form: "[to add \(someone\) to a list of contacts associated with a social networking website.](#)"

Shifting meanings of "friend" and "follower" offer problems and possibilities to Christian communities. Key biblical passages may lose and gain significance. For instance, in [John 15](#), Jesus explains that he no longer calls his followers "servants" but instead calls them "friends." In the 19th century, this passage was crucial for African American slaves who found friendship with Jesus a powerful force in their embrace of the religion called by his name. Has Facebook so redefined friendship that this passage is diluted and devalued? Or do the widening bounds of friendship offer an occasion to discuss Christ's inclusivity, that the "followers" were also his "friends"?

The same could be true for a church song popular since the 19th century, "[What a Friend We Have in Jesus.](#)"

What does it mean to follow? When Jesus called upon the fishermen to leave their homes and "follow me," how is that distinct from "following" an individual online? When one clicks to "follow" Lady Gaga or Toyota on Twitter, one is not necessarily agreeing to become a passive adherent to the messages. Rather, one agrees to enter into dialogue and engagement. Followers and the followed can debate and discuss. Perhaps this, too, can offer a way to consider Jesus, a man who engaged in back-and-forth conversations routinely with those who followed him and those who did not.

All in all, while the digital age is transforming the meanings of "friend" and "follower," Christians have an opportunity to use their scriptures and their histories

to animate those words with new life. One magic of the faith has long been to transform words, a magic so powerful that on one occasion, “the Word was made flesh.”

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