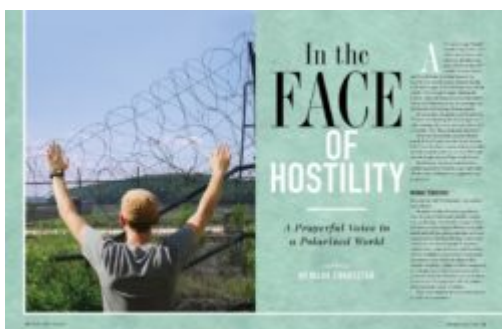


In the Face of Hostility

A Prayerful Voice in a Polarized World

By Mark Forrester



A few months ago I found myself at the world's most militarized border—the infamous demilitarized zone (DMZ) at the 38th parallel between North and South Korea. Looking beyond the barbed wire, guard shacks, and patrols, the hills and villages of North Korea were clearly visible. Red triangular signs, dotting the hillside, signaled the presence of land mines. Most overwhelming at the site, perhaps, was the broadcasted barrage of propaganda.

At one point, my guide stopped and said, “I think we’re hearing the North right now.” After pausing a few more moments, she smiled nervously. “Yes. That’s definitely the North.”

From the South, loud speakers blasted trendy K-Pop¹ tunes onto the North Korean hills. From the North, music and passion-filled speeches rushed across the narrow DMZ and into the border town of Paju, South Korea.

In-between, we found ourselves in a confusing mesh of sounds: angry and calm, classical and contemporary, oppressive and progressive.

Rising Tensions

Do you ever feel “in-between” two conflicting cultures?

In today’s world of increasing polarization, it’s easy to feel bombarded by competing, conflicting, even hostile messages. News headlines are increasingly difficult to decipher amid inherent bias among reporters and news organizations. Reading through social media newsfeeds can alienate people. In personal relationships, cultural tensions and hostilities arise in workplace conversations, impromptu encounters, even the family dinner table. Simple statements, which could be interpreted in multiple ways, create controversies never intended. Some social media users seem determined to live in a perpetual state of conflict, thriving on the energy of debate.

How can a believer thrive or even survive in such an environment?

Running from Our Mission Field?

As in the story of Jonah, it’s tempting to run away from the places God calls us to serve. Jonah resisted speaking to the people of Nineveh (Jonah 1:1–3). Perhaps fear, hatred, or even pride caused him to run.

The heart of Christ, however, shows love unconditionally and never avoids dangerous or uncomfortable situations. Time and time again in the Gospels, we find Christ in such situations, breaking cultural barriers to reach an individual with a message of hope.

How?

- Be a voice of hope at work, in your community, and even in your home.

- Bring the light of Christ into the darkness.
- Be a voice of hope to the homeless and hurting. Seek ways to become involved in your community in a positive way.
- Be a beacon of hope in the middle of a rancorous social media environment.

Perhaps the conflict you are facing is a God-ordained opportunity for ministry. A word of encouragement to a grumpy co-worker may change his or her emotional trajectory. A “soft answer” may turn away the irrational wrath of a family member (Prov. 15:1).

More than two billion people are active on social media.² For many of them, social media could be the first voices and the last voices they encounter each day. Imagine the impact we could have on a person’s first waking social media interaction if we’re led by the Spirit.

No, social media is not a “safe place” for those looking to avoid conflict. But the work of a successful missionary has never been confined to what is safe. George O. Wood, leader of the 68-million-member Assemblies of God denomination, often says, “Look anywhere in the world where you see a work of God, and you will find the story of those who have risked greatly.”

Social media interactions are no exception. Don’t run from the place God has called you. Be a light to those around you. We can have no impact where we fear to go. Without risk there is no reward.

Post Prayerfully

Peak hours for social media usage have held steady at around 9:00 to 11:00 p.m. Most studies conclude that this peak happens as young couples have put their children to bed and may be relaxing in front of a television screen.

Users will see plenty of messages to conclude their day: partisan headlines, rants from the offended, people lashing out in hurt, pictures that portray a perfect life. What will your message be to people at this critical time in their day? Choose to be a voice of hope in the chaos.

Approach your own online posting and personal interactions prayerfully. Ask God to give you wisdom and courage as you face others who may have hostile attitudes. Pray that your conversations will be led by the Spirit and that your social media posts will lead people closer to Christ.

Encouragement, Not Debate

One day during my junior year of college, my sociology professor started the class by bringing up a topic of monumental controversy for an evangelical university. For the next ten minutes, he unpacked an extremely controversial case for an issue each student there would have opposed. Then he yielded the floor for discussion.

Hands went up across the small auditorium, and students raised heated objections to the professor's ideas. The temperature was quickly rising.

After a few student responses, the professor stopped in his tracks, folded up his notes and simply said, "You're right. I was wrong." He then walked calmly to a stool on the side.

The class sat in stunned silence, wondering what had just happened.

After a few moments, the professor asked, "Why are you shocked? Didn't you enter the debate to change my mind? Why are you so surprised that it worked?"

The answer was so clear that it did not need to be verbalized. We never truly expect a debate to end in changing the other's

mind. If it happens, we're shocked.

Jesus frequently confronted individuals who tried to lure Him into debates over theological or ethical dilemmas, but He never sank to their level. He spoke simple words of truth and wisdom.

In today's world, when co-workers, acquaintances, or family members try to lure you into a debate, recognize the situation for what it is and follow the example of Christ.

Although Paul's warning in 1 Timothy 1:3–8 refers to arguments and distractions within the church of Ephesus, his counsel applies to our daily personal interactions and social media participation as well. Paul told Timothy that some people "waste their time in endless discussion" leading to "meaningless speculations, which don't help people live a life of faith in God" (v. 4, nlt). Paul emphasized that the purpose of his instruction was "that all believers would be filled with love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and genuine faith. But," he says, "some people have missed this whole point" (vv. 5–6, nlt).

In social media, avoid endless debates that will have no winner. Instead, focus on being a voice of hope and encouragement.

We all know people who focus relentlessly on one issue. It could be a political candidate they love or despise. It could be a divisive issue they hold dear. Chances are, you won't change their minds by entering a debate.

Pray that God will give you a measure of grace as you interact personally or online. Pray that your interactions will reflect Christ's heart and point people to the gospel. Trust that the Spirit will guide your posts and interactions to demonstrate hope, healing, and reconciliation.

Take a Break

In the early days of Apple's revolutionary iPhone, an app was created to integrate the camera into text messaging as a safety feature. Users could keep their eyes glued to their screens while walking. With a sort of picture-in-picture technology, they could see what was ahead. No need to physically interact with those nearby or even lift your eyes from your phone.

Social media addiction has become a concerning phenomenon. National Public Radio (NPR) recently reported a sharp rise in depression among adolescent girls.³ The link they found? The girls spent a large portion of their day on social media, comparing themselves to the seemingly perfect lives of their friends and heroes.

FOMO (fear of missing out) has become a lynchpin in social media marketing. On Snapchat, Instagram, and now Facebook, "stories" will disappear within 24 hours. Live posts on Instagram disappear when the broadcast ends. This creates a competitive environment where many strive to be the first to know even the most trivial information. The pressure is on. They think they must be glued to their devices all day, every day.

Healthy social media interactions happen within well-defined boundaries. Don't allow yourself to get sucked into the constant hype of friends' rants, misleading headlines, or nonstop debates. Set parameters so your social media usage remains a tool, not an addiction.

In regards to your personal time with God and others, ask His help in resisting social media distractions. Trust that the Lord will give you grace to avoid traps of narcissism, fear, and jealousy that can come with unhealthy social media use. Pray that your posts will bring hope to those dealing with addiction or damaged self-worth.

Walk in the Spirit

A Spirit-led life always points to Christ. After sharing an article on Facebook, I received a private message from someone in Eastern Africa. He had a spiritual struggle directly related to the subject matter in the article I had shared. He needed prayer. Within a couple of hours, I contacted our missions office to find someone close to this man. They connected him to someone who could personally help him through his struggle. This isn't a unique case. God can use any means of communication to bring a message of hope and healing.

In part, walking in the Spirit means that we remain open and willing to share His message in all settings. When we do, He is faithful.

Walking in the Spirit also means that we reflect the true nature of a Spirit-empowered life—the fruit of the Spirit. Will the fruit of our social media and other interactions be contention, strife, or anger? Or, will the world see us as being primarily characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? (Gal. 5:22–23).

Ask God how you can show hope and kindness in a hostile environment. It could be mailing an encouraging note to a local business owner, sending flowers to a friend facing anxiety, or even spending a few more minutes of personal time, listening.

Pray that the Holy Spirit will work in your heart to bring forth His fruit in your life. Ask God to help you maintain a spirit of love in what you say in person and online. Believe that the Lord will provide opportunities for the messages you post to impact the lives of readers when they need them most.

Let Prayer Arise

Just on the other side of the North Korean border town of Paju sits the Osanri Prayer Mountain, operated by the world's largest church, Yoido Full Gospel Church (YFGC). The day after being at the DMZ in Paju, I took the hour-long shuttle from YFGC in Seoul to the Prayer Mountain.

When walking through the mountain facilities, one can hear literal cries of prayer echoing off the Korean hills. Here, too, is a barrage of sounds along the contentious Korean border. But this is different.

Unlike the conflicting sounds along the DMZ, the *prayers* at Osanri rise in concert—from believers praying in multiple chapels, praying in hundreds of individual prayer grottos, and even praying while roaming the hills.

As I sat on the hillside in the still chilly Korean air, hearing the cries of saints from various nations, I noted the contrast. Unlike the two loud competing voices the previous day, here various voices cried out in the unity of the Spirit.

Our challenge in a polarized world is to stand out as voices in clear harmony.

Psalm 133:1 reminds us how rare and precious it is when God's family dwells together in unity. Let's pray that as people encounter the conversations and online messages from followers of Christ, they will find that rare, precious beauty that will lead them ultimately to faith and hope in Jesus.

¹Korean popular music

²[statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/](https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/)

³[npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/04/22/474888854/suicide-rates-climb-in-u-s-especially-among-adolescent-girls](https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/04/22/474888854/suicide-rates-climb-in-u-s-especially-among-adolescent-girls)

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NOTE: This article is from a past issue of *Prayer Connect* magazine. For more helpful articles on prayer, we recommend **subscribing**.

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