

## **Media Dimensions of Christian Scandals**

In recent years a number of appalling abuse scandals have emerged in the evangelical church as leaders such as Ravi Zacharias, Bill Hybels, Mark Driscoll, James MacDonald, John Smyth, Jonathan Fletcher and Steve Timmis have been exposed as abusive. Social media has sometimes played a positive role in the exposure and evaluation of these scandals, giving voice to victims, but it has also been used to make false allegations or mount vitriolic attacks on other innocent leaders. Speaking from his personal experience as a network leader addressing allegations of abuse, John Stevens will share how social media can be used and misused where there are claims of abusive leadership, how leaders should respond to claims and demands made on social media, and how we can maintain wisdom and godliness in our own engagements on social media.

**John Stevens** is the National Director of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, a family of over 500 Bible-centred churches in the UK, a position that he has held since 2010. Prior to this, he was one of the founding pastors of City Evangelical Church Birmingham, which was planted in the centre of the UK's 2nd largest city in 1999. He was instrumental in starting the Midlands Gospel Partnership, was the course Director of the Midlands Ministry Training Course and is a visiting lecturer at Oak Hill Theological College. John is also one of the pastors of Christchurch Market Harborough, a church he helped to plant when he took up his current role. He was converted whilst studying law at Cambridge University, and after taking a post-graduate degree at the University of Oxford worked for 16 years as a University Lecturer, ending his career as Deputy Head of the Law School at the University of Birmingham. John is married to Ursula and they have four children aged between 12 and 7. He blogs at [www.john-stevens.com](http://www.john-stevens.com) on theology, church life and ministry, culture, and politics.

### **1. My Experience of Recent Scandals**

Jonathan Fletcher – Emmanuel Church Wimbledon

Steve Timmis – The Crowded House/Acts 29

Instigating investigations

Accusation of cover-up

Criticism of process

Claims of more victims

Allegations of bullying

Defence of leaders who had been abused

Facebook and Twitter hostility

1 year on...

### **2. The Positive Power of Social Media**

Exposing abuse and abusers

- Enabling multiple victims to connect
- Preventing cover-ups of abuse
- Demanding justice, investigations, and due process
- Expressions of empathy and support for victims

### **3. The Negative Dangers of Social Media**

- False accusations
- Unsubstantiated claims
- Circumventing process
- Demanding an instant response
- Uninformed judgements/verdicts
- Victims demand to be treated as such before investigation

### **4. Advice for Organisations Facing Accusations of Abuse**

- Acknowledge that abuse is being alleged
- Invite further allegations or evidence
- Explain how investigation will be conducted
- Indicate likely timeline
- Provide regular updates if anything changes
- Observe confidentiality required by process
- Offer professional support to victims
- Report outcome as soon as possible and as fully as possible
- Make apologies and reparations as needed
- Explain changes in organisational culture/practices/policies to address abuse

### **5. Advice for Leaders Facing Allegations of Abuse**

- Do not respond on social media

Trust to the process

Do not seek to defend/vindicate on social media

Take a break from social media altogether

## **6. Advice for Leaders Dealing with Allegations of Abuse**

Acknowledge the allegations

Affirm their seriousness

Express support for victims

Question false statements

Block aggressive individuals

## **7. Temptations on Social Media**

Gossip

Witch hunt

Virtue signalling

Vindication

Revenge

## **8. Godly Character and Social Media Use**

Gracious conversation

Truthfulness

Silence

Turn the other cheek

### ***Further Reading:***

Tim Keller, *Social Media, Identity, and the Church* <https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/social-media-identity-and-the-church/>