

Your Fact Is My Fake News!

“The party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command.”

“And if all others accepted the lie which the Party imposed - if all records told the same tale - then the lie passed into history and became truth.” George Orwell, “1984”.

We seem to be entering a post truth era where fake news and conspiracy theories seem to be given greater prominence than truth. In general, “fake news” refers to the spreading of disinformation online or in the traditional media. It has to do with false information that is based on non-existent or distorted data, and that is meant to deceive and manipulate the reader. An important question to ask is: “How are Christians supposed to respond?” Not an easy question to answer.

The debate “What is truth?” goes back thousands of years. On June 20th and July 25th this year, Jewish people in synagogues around the world will hear the same story of Moses sending out 12 spies into Canaan and their report. One account is from Numbers chapters 13 & 14, the second from Deuteronomy chapter 1. These accounts of the same event are very different - who initiated it, the report and its conclusion. Pulpits, synagogue magazines and Jewish discussion groups will be full of people defending one reading as the truth and giving arguments about why the other is a misreading, a distortion of the facts. This debate has been going on for millennia, since the whole of the Hebrew Bible started to be read each year, which means Jesus may well have been active in these discussions both before, and during, His ministry.

Why is it so hard to tell what’s true or not? There are 3 reasons:

- 1) There’s too much information, which adds to the confusion and makes it even harder to sort out the wheat from the chaff.
- 2) There’s deception. Long before digitally-manipulated photos and videos, the Bible was warning that “false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect”, (Matthew 24:24).
- 3) There are people who are simply misinformed. Not all falsehoods are intentional; some wrong teachings are delivered with the best intentions. But, sincerity is no measure of accuracy.

Why is it so easy to believe it? Is it because fake news could be something we want to hear? Is it attractive because it feeds our hopes and dreams, like a report of free giveaways at a local supermarket? Is it convincing because it reinforces a long-held conspiracy theory or taps into our feelings of injustice, like an allegation of fraud in a big, successful company?

What makes a piece of fake news so attractive, perhaps, is that it sounds true. And what makes it potentially dangerous is that we begin to re-order our lives according to it. Just as we are inundated today by many news reports which may be false, we also receive many “Christian” teachings that may not be entirely correct. They are half-truths and almost-truths that sound true - but aren’t.

So, what can we do? By not taking everything as Gospel truth and checking everything against the Bible. There is a Biblical basis for this instruction. In Acts 17:11, we hear of the Berean Jews receiving the apostle Paul’s message “with great eagerness”. Yet they took care and “examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true”.

Pope Francis, too, is concerned about this topic, “Spreading fake news can serve to advance specific goals, influence political decisions, and serve economic interests”, he wrote.

“It is a sign of intolerant and hypersensitive attitudes, leading only to the spread of arrogance and hatred.... The tragedy of disinformation is that it discredits others, presenting them as enemies, to the point of demonising them and fomenting conflict... Fake news is primarily effective because it mimics real news, and because it grasps people’s attention by appealing to stereotypes and common social prejudice, exploiting emotions such as anxiety, contempt, anger and frustration.... Untrue stories can spread so quickly that even authoritative denials fail to contain the damage.”

The best antidote against falsehoods, the pontiff has argued, is people who are ready to listen, who engage in honest dialogue so the truth can emerge, and who are attracted by goodness and are responsible in the way they use language.

Returning to the spies’ story from the Hebrew Bible, one of the points in Numbers is a blurring of the line between opinion and fact. Today, we must be wary of an increase in the relative volume, and resulting influence, of opinion and personal experience over fact.

Thessalonians 5:20-21 states, “Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all.” Perhaps in such times, we have to consider what we learn with care, neither dismissing it entirely nor believing it wholesale. Until we can be sure, perhaps it is safest to try putting it “on hold”.

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