

St Paul warns of disinformation

We recently heard these words;

“The time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths”.

It's around 60AD, Paul is writing to Timothy from prison, and is clearly already concerned about correct interpretation of scripture. Paul is probably himself a victim of disinformation as the authorities try to suppress these revolutionary ideas spreading from the eastern Mediterranean.

Although Paul is warning about loss of focus, this passage must surely have a political context as well. The metaphor of itching ears can easily be transferred to the itching eyes and fingers of the current digital world where so much can be said so quickly, with so little accountability.

Neither is disinformation a new phenomenon. It has been rife both within Christendom (look at what Catholics and Protestants have written about each other) but across the whole faith spectrum. There are some whose self-identification with Christianity is completely bound up with hatred of Islam.

Here are some checks we might run if something looks off-colour;

Does it accord with the Second Commandment?

Are we being asked to exercise suspicion and hatred?

Are we giving people the benefit of the doubt?

Is the writer in a position of power?

What evidence is on offer, and how does that evidence balance up with the opinions on offer?

Have we looked first for the good in other people or are we being asked to rush to judgement?

Christians must be careful though; our position rests greatly on faith, on the repetition of ideas, and on our buying into ancient accounts of events which have an oral origin. This why healthy debate is so important. Does scripture align with modern historical knowledge? What does archeology have to say? What does modern social science tell us? If indeed modern science is a gift from God, we should not be shy in testing scripture against it. Truth can be slippery, and evidence-based judgement is an essential tool for the faithful in 2022. Paul's letters are a good place to start. His accounts really do stack up. We need to beware of wandering away to myths.

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