

73 The Bible and Social Media

One of the new pastimes of our age involves the widespread use of "social media" - in particular, Twitter, Facebook and Youtube. The effect of these potent forces is that anybody, at any time, can say more or less anything, about more or less anything!

Clearly many people value these tools, as a way of keeping in touch with friends, events and opinions, and of expressing their own views on whatever is being discussed.

Like many modern tools, these "social media" in themselves are morally neutral - they can be used for good or for ill, just as applies for example to the internet itself, or to television, or to motor cars. It is *how* we use these tools that matters, and that brings us to choices and decision-making.

The dangers of social media being misused are obvious. They can absorb a great deal of time and attention, becoming an obsession for some folk, or at the very least a real distraction from more important things in our lives. They can be used to spread unpleasantness and falsehood, and when something is "out there" on Facebook for example, it is very hard to undo any damage that has been done.

They also encourage a very modern notion - that every opinion, from anybody at all, on any subject, is worthy of being expressed! But is that really the case? The mood of the age is that everyone should have their say. Just think of all the invitations in the broadcast media for us to phone in or send an email with our comments. Does anybody read these comments? Is anybody actually bothered what we may happen to think about this, that or the other?

Social media can also have a more sinister effect - the provoking of widespread discontent, anger, even violence. Statements, opinions and plans can now "go viral", being circulated to millions of people, literally within hours. Mass movements can be mobilised far more easily and quickly than ever before. Again, these movements might turn out to be beneficial, if they involved the overcoming of evil regimes for example, but more often than not they can produce dangerous instability which legitimate governments may find very difficult to counteract.

It is no secret that various violent Islamic groups for example are adept at using social media to spread their messages and their plans. Or can we imagine how Moses and Aaron would have coped in the wilderness wanderings if the Israelites had had Facebook and Twitter?! The people were ever-quick to moan anyway, and on several occasions rebellion was a real possibility. How much worse things would have been if criticisms and suggestions could have shot round the camp within minutes!

The Holy Spirit in the Bible does not actually refer to Facebook, Twitter or Youtube! - but He does have much to say about how we should treat one

another, lessons we can apply directly to the issues raised by the social media phenomenon.

All our behaviour must of course be in accord with the Lord's wishes. He desires us to speak the truth with one another, with the aim of building up and encouraging.

Crucially, let us think before speaking - it is as simple as that - but this is something that the social media, in their atmosphere of rush and excitement, make it easy for us to forget. In the Epistle of James, the Holy Spirit speaks of the tongue being like a bit in the mouth of a horse, a small object but with great power to direct the animal; or like a rudder, small, but able to set the course of a great ship; or like a spark, able to ignite a terrible forest fire (James 3. 3-12). How true this is! How often do we quickly regret having said something, perhaps in haste or anger, when the damage has already been done.

So let us, as those seeking to be Christ's faithful sheep, use these social media sparingly and wisely, for good and not for ill. Those of us who are parents need to guide our children closely - not easy when they will probably be far more knowledgeable than we are over all that is going on!

"Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves Do not be proud Do not repay anyone evil for evil Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone (from Romans 12.9-18, NIV). If we can keep these words of the Holy Spirit in mind, then we will play our small part in making sure that the social media are a blessing not a curse.

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