

When Things Get Crazy on Social Media: Responding Biblically to Firestorms

Recently, a firestorm erupted over some viral videos of some high school students allegedly harassing a Native American veteran who was chanting and banging a drum. In a frenzy of name calling, people quickly ascribed disrespect, racism, and hatred to the students. The veteran made statements about the event that were also shared virally. Some media figures and a lot of Twitter users blew up the internet, condemning the students for their interpretation of what they saw.

But then, more and longer videos showing the true picture of what happened became available online, and the student at the center of the original viral video released an articulate statement explaining what really happened. It has become apparent that the media had mischaracterized the event, and some media figures have actually apologized for jumping to premature conclusions.

We are in a new place in history, where the internet makes news available immediately, faster than the speed of thought and analysis. At least in the United States, we now live in a culture of criticism and rush to judgment before all the facts are in. This is fed by our postmodern loss of belief in truth. Without recognizing it, many many people no longer believe in Truth with a capital T, just individual truth with a lowercase t. We are encouraged to find and hang onto “our own personal truths” rather than pursue knowledge of what is actually True. (Ever heard the phrase “true for you, but not for me”?)

This loss of confidence in ultimate truth, combined with the technology to record and edit videos that provide what someone wants others to see disconnected from context, has brought us

to this place where “fake news” is only distinguishable from real news by investigating the details, assertions and context of what is published and promoted.

That takes time. And deliberation. Neither one is a friend of those who want to manipulate how others think and react.

But we can protect ourselves from this manipulation if we will install a filter of the Bible’s sage wisdom that is even more true today than it was 2700 years ago when Solomon wrote Proverbs 18:17:

The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him.

As [Dr. Phil](#) loves to say, no matter how flat the pancake, it always has two sides. And particularly with stories and videos going viral, there’s always more information, there’s always context, and there’s always the worldview and agenda of those pushing the virality. The deeply beautiful truth of this proverb makes for an exquisite filter for every aspect of life. (See my blog post [Headed to the Courtroom](#))

What creates an online firestorm is people quickly jumping onto social media to comment, judge, and share. The immediacy of the social media universe feeds the bad habit of reacting instead of responding, of blurting out one’s first thoughts before giving time to consider alternative explanations or perspectives. This is why the wisdom of the Lord’s brother James shines through for us in 2019:

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. (James 1:19)

We should also take note of the keen observation that God gave us two ears and one mouth, so maybe we should listen twice as much (and as long) as we speak. Or tap. All three parts of this verse would have a profound effect on the frenzy of

social media if more of us followed it!

One final suggestion for a filter as we experience this new post-truth, super-immediate, easily-manipulated world:

So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

How do we read a Twitter or Facebook or Instagram feed to the glory of God? By inviting Him into the experience, lifting people and situations before His throne and asking for His blessing, asking Him to show ourselves and others what's true, and remembering that He sees all, knows all, and loves all.

How do we respond to social and news media accounts, rumors and stories to the glory of God? By inviting Him into the way we process these, remembering His word that there's always more to whatever story we are hearing in the moment, and waiting to draw conclusions and take a position.

How do we post and comment on social media to the glory of God? By following His command in Ephesians 4:29–

You must let no unwholesome word come out of your mouth, but only what is beneficial for the building up of the one in need, that it may give grace to those who hear.

God's word has always been a source of great blessing, teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). But perhaps never more than right now!

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/when_things_get_crazy_on_social_media_responding_biblically_to_firestorms on January 22, 2019.