

Editorial: Fake news isn't new; guard your witness

December 14, 2016

You've probably heard [the buzz about fake news](#). Pundits, politicians and normal people have been [apoplectic](#) over made-up "news."



Marv KnoxThe fake-news phenomenon took flight during the recent presidential campaign. Fake news became so prevalent, it upended intelligent and accurate political conversation. It caused thoughtful observers to question whether we live in a post-truth culture.

Eventually, we learned more about the fake-news fabricators. They included teens in Eastern Europe, Americans looking to make an Internet splash and organizations whose political ambitions overshadowed their respect for truth.

Disconcerting, disgusting, disturbing

As the presidential campaign progressed, you may have found fake news disconcerting if you got suckered by the ["truthiness"](#) of its appeal. You may have found it disgusting if you feel Americans should respect truth over political gain. And you may have found it disturbing to think Americans may have decided how to vote based upon falsehood rather than facts.

One of the most ironic facets of fake news is the fact it turned generations of cultural preconceptions upside down. Conservatives—many Baptist

Christians included—look upon truth as absolute. They criticize liberalism for seeing truth as “relative.” But, sadly and embarrassingly, some conservatives spread fake news like confetti at an inaugural ball.

However, fake news isn’t new, and its spread wasn’t unprecedented. You would know this if you received letters and email from thousands of Baptists across the decades.

Old rumors & fake facts

For example, Baptists were the most promiscuous purveyors of the old rumor [“Madalyn Murray O’Hare is taking religion off the airwaves.”](#) It had no basis in reality, but it stayed alive long after O’Hare died, thanks in large part to paranoid Baptists.

And then the [“Procter & Gamble is a satanic cult”](#) story just wouldn’t go away. Built on speculation about P&G’s moon-and-stars logo, it was nonsense, but Baptists and other Christians kept it going.

Remember the emails that began, “Dear Beloved in Christ ...” from a [“Nigerian prince”](#)? A baffling number of Baptists fell for the chance to grab a greed-bucket full of cash.

More recently, crowds of conservative Christians perpetuated the “birther” rumor against Barack Obama. Racism and nativism proved hard to deny when emails pointedly mentioned his middle name, Hussein.

Also, an unseemly number of emails defamed Barack and Michelle Obama. Many forwarded them for the apparent pleasure of mocking a president and first lady they detest. Online searches typically debunked these rumors in less than two minutes. But senders never bothered to verify facts when spreading fiction was such fun.

Anti-fact flurry

Next, an anti-fact flurry camouflaged the truth and clouded the contours of the 2016 presidential campaign. Responsible news organizations deployed teams to fact-check the candidates and their minions. But they could not keep up—especially when the fake-news outlets kicked into gear.

If you visited the Internet, you could not avoid fake news. And if you clicked onto Facebook, you probably felt you were swimming in a rancid sea of it. If you got fed up, you probably started unfriending the worst offenders. And if you're offended now, you probably participated in the post-fact melee.

This would be minor if it were only annoying or simply embarrassing. But it's serious for at least two reasons.

First, failing to seek the truth and, worse, disseminating untruth runs counter to the gospel. Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). The Lord was talking about capital-T truth, but his mandate applies to ordinary, everyday truth.

A corollary also applies. Lies enslave, cripple and demean. This particularly is important in a democracy. When we base our shared, public decisions on falsehood, we cannot hope for better tomorrows.

Second, participating in falsehood undermines our Christian witness. If we spread lies, how can we expect people to believe we proclaim the Truth? No wonder non-Christians question our faith.

Be free ...

Fortunately, people can free themselves from the web of falsehood. Here are ideas to consider before you forward emails or pass along the latest rumor:

- Your mama was right: If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

- Resist rumors that appeal to fear. Demagogues and other evildoers manipulate people by frightening them. In 2016, the fusillade of falsehood primarily preyed on fear. Fear is the antithesis of faith.
- Evaluate “news” or appeals that play with your deepest desires. A moral weakness of America today is its failure to consider the common good. In addition to fear, politicians and pundits manipulate Americans by appealing to their self-interest. This leads to tyranny of the majority. Baptists of all people—whose history builds upon their minority/outsider status—should resist.
- Check the facts. You may feel ill-equipped, but it’s not hard. Type key words from stories—the words and phrases that describe the purported “truth”—into search engines and quickly find the back story. One of the most helpful is the [Snopes.com website](#). For information about how to identify fake news, click [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

Christians who feed the fake-news frenzy damage American democracy and, worse, undermine the gospel.

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