



MINDLESS JIBBER-JABBER

We live in a hugely polarised world. To illustrate this, try googling any one of the following subjects: wokeism v anti-wokeism; women's rights v pro-life; socialism v capitalism; freedom of speech v respect for others; Black Lives Matter v all lives matter; representation v authenticity; *Snow White and the 7 Dwarves* v ... *Snow White and the 7 Dwarves*. One extreme v another. And I get that some of this stems from injustices going back centuries. But *some* of it boils down to a failure to think hard, listen well ...

And keep some perspective.

Now, you might expect Christians to be different, but sadly, that's not always the case. I'm not talking outrage at something like last year's Olympic opening ceremony (though ironically, it was Christians who both highlighted the thing and sent it viral). I'm talking Christians damning people over things that are not foundational to our faith.

And damaging our witness in the process.

None of this is new, however: the Bible addresses it, too. And over the next few months we're going to be looking at one book in particular which does: Paul's first letter to Timothy.

1 Timothy 1:1-11

While this letter is addressed to Timothy, its message is for the church in Ephesus – a church that Paul had set up, with Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:18-

27), and a church he'd already written to, while under house arrest in Rome. And the theme of that letter was who we are in Christ, and how that affects the way we live and treat each other.

But between that letter and this, things have changed.

So, Paul sends Timothy to Ephesus to stage an intervention. And then he writes this letter to aid him in that endeavour. What was the problem? Like the global church today, the church in Ephesus had become a hugely divided place. And the main issue was what Paul tells Timothy to have nothing to do with (vs6):

"Meaningless talk." *Mataiologian*. Mindless jibber-jabber.

In vs3-4, he breaks it down into 3 levels of meaninglessness: 3 categories. What did these mean in 1st century Ephesus? What might they mean for 21st century us?

1) Meaningless Teachings. *Hetero-didaskalein* in Greek – heresies or dodgy doctrines. In particular, things we get wrong about Jesus – about His nature, about who He is.

This will usually involve some kind of separation of Jesus from God. E.g. in the 4th century you had this guy called Arius, who believed that Jesus was created by the Father, rather than being an aspect of the one true God. But in the 1st century you had the Gnostics, who taught that the God of the OT was a bad guy, out to oppress the human race; and Jesus a good guy, out to save the human race.

Either way, the teachings don't line up with Scripture, but you can see similar ideas today. From your liberal theologians who would see Jesus as nothing more than a brilliant rabbi, or your pseudo-Christian groups like the JW's or Christadelphians who would deny Jesus' deity, to celebrities who will basically try to separate the God of the Bible from a Jesus they've made up in their heads.

Whatever it looks like, we need to be able to spot it and challenge it.

Because how we see Jesus is the thing that ultimately saves us.

2) Meaningless Stories. *Mythois* – mythologies. The meta-narratives or big stories we tell ourselves about the world, the people around us, ourselves. Now Ephesus had its own meta-narratives – we'll be looking at some as we go through this letter. But what meta-narratives might people believe in today?

It might be naturalism: that we are nothing but highly developed animals; materialism: that the only thing that matters is material things; humanism: that the only thing that matters is human beings; universalism: that everyone will ultimately get into heaven; pluralism: that all religions / worldviews lead to God; existentialism: that all reality is personal – you have yours, I have mine.

Such ideas are rampant in the non-Christian world, but they've crept into the Christian one, too. And here's the reason we need to be ready to challenge

them: they're not good for us. They are weak narratives to live your life by, to build your life upon.

And besides, we know a better one!

So, those are the first 2 levels, both of which need challenging, in ourselves and others. But then there's ...

3) Meaningless Lists. *Genealogais* – genealogies. There may have been some who were playing the 'I'm an Israelite, so I'm more spiritual than you' card (hence the reference to *Torah*). Or this could be another reference to early Gnosticism (some Gnostics taught that they were spiritual descendants of Seth, third son of Adam and Eve, and heirs of a secret wisdom that was essential to know).

But notice: Paul doesn't say, "Challenge this stuff coz it's bonkers." He says, "Challenge this stuff, coz it causes trouble" (vs4). I.e. division in the church, distraction from the gospel. And that's what makes it *dangerous*.

Today it might be Calvinism v Arminianism; charismatic evangelicalism v cessationism; young-earth creationism v theistic evolution; pre-tribulation rapture of the church v any other take on the second coming. Or just different styles of worship! Stuff you might like to read about or hold to or have a chat about over a coffee or a curry, but are not salvation issues, not even spiritual health issues.

So don't make them sound like they are. Keep ...

The Main Thing, The Main Thing

So, Paul kicks things off by attempting to bring a little unity – which makes this letter one of the most ironic books in the Bible! Because there are parts of it which have proven pretty divisive, over the years. But once you read it in its context, you realise the purpose of it is the complete opposite. Paul isn't trying to divide people – he's trying to keep them together, in love (vs5). Because it's love that proves that we are Jesus' disciples (John 13:35).

Most of what we could fill our eyes and ears and heads and hearts with could probably fall into one or more of Paul's 'meaningless' categories. In fact, about 95% of what's on the internet could be described as 'meaningless talk.' And some of it might require a response – but a lot of it won't. So, next time your algorithm offers you yet another bunch of vids you might be tempted to click on or share, cheer for or rail against, use the THINK principle: ask, "Is this true; helpful; inspiring; necessary; kind?"

If the answer is no, you probably – scrap that, *definitely* – have better things to do with your time on planet earth.

So, do that instead.