



Language Translating and Interpreting Is a Ministry That Helps the Church

The Wired Word for the Week of October 30, 2022

In the News

As far as we know, there was no particular event that led to the publishing of an article on the United Methodist News site about Donald Reasoner. He was neither retiring nor being promoted. The article, by Eveline Chikwanah, a communicator in the Zimbabwe East Conference of the United Methodist Church, mentioned no particular milestone in Reasoner's life. And he is not a celebrity or a scoundrel, so he's not newsworthy on either count.

Rather, the article features Reasoner to highlight his ministry as a layperson -- a ministry not commonly thought about but one vitally necessary in a world where we don't all speak the same language.

That ministry, which has gone on for more than three decades, is translating other people's words so that others who don't know the speaker's language can understand what is being said.

"My grandparents served 40 years as missionaries in Brazil, and my parents also served almost 40 years," Reasoner, who was born in California, said. "I grew up speaking Portuguese; in Mexico and Central America, it was Spanish, so I speak three languages including English."

Reasoner's early experience translating came when English-speaking visitors came to Brazil. His parents asked him to take them on a tour of the city and places of interest, and he interpreted for the guests who didn't speak Portuguese.

Whenever Reasoner had vacation time from school," he recalled, he would travel with his father and thus developed, "great appreciation for the work of mission and evangelism and the importance of communicating in the language that people can understand and use."

As an adult, he was asked to coordinate interpretation for multinational church gatherings of Presbyterians and Methodists. He spent almost 10 years in Nicaragua, where he translated for visiting delegations of church groups.

Now 64, Reasoner's primary role has been to provide and coordinate translation for United Methodists, who commissioned him as a missionary. In his work, he employed additional translators to cater to as many as 10 different languages in one gathering. For the last UM General Conference in 2016, he oversaw close to 200 interpreters because there were about 1,000 delegates and several thousand guests and observers.

"I see what I do as a ministry, not just as a job or a profession," Reasoner said. "I feel a vocation to work with the church, but I don't feel a calling to become an ordained clergy in the church. I think I can work as a layperson to help with the church, and what I see as part of my ministry is to help facilitate the communication."

He later moved to New York where he worked as a Global Ministries regional officer -- he was the area secretary for the southern part of Latin America, dealing with church relations and the 60 missionaries in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Cuba, Peru and Uruguay.

Eventually, the agency had more than 200 units of FM equipment and 200 units of the infrared system for larger meetings. Reasoner became responsible for coordinating all the equipment as well as for recruiting interpreters.

"We are a global church," Reasoner said, "and not everyone speaks English. I see my work as a ministry to help build a bridge to enable the two sides [to] talk to each other and let the Holy Spirit work for the synergy between them.

"My mission," Reasoner said, "is to facilitate the communication process, not do it for them. I have to be very careful ... not to interject my ideas or my opinions. I may not agree with what participants are saying, but I have to be true to what [they are] saying and let them work it out among themselves."

In addition to translating words from one language to another; Reasoner must delve into the nuances which each word might convey in a given context.

Maintaining professionalism and confidentiality is essential for his work. "During executive sessions," he said, "everyone else leaves the room, but I get to stay. I need to make sure information that has been shared is accurate."

Over the years, Reasoner has built a pool of 600 to 700 interpreters across the world, ensuring that local interpreters are hired to cut transport costs and promote their work.

While Reasoner's work has been largely at multinational church gatherings, translating and interpretation is also important in local church services where not all parishioners and staff speak in the same tongue. Translators can also serve the church when, for example, a non-English speaking church needs someone to temporarily fill the pulpit, but no pastor is available to preach in the language of that congregation. Then, an English-speaking pastor can be invited to preach through an interpreter.

In those cases too, accurate translation, free from the interpreter's opinion but which is conscious of the context of the words in the speaker's language, is a vital ministry.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[A Ministry of Interpretation. *UM News*](#)
[Interpreting and the Church. *In All Things*](#)

Applying the News Story

The need for correct interpretation of words *and their intent* is vitally important in church communication that is intended to occur across language barriers. Thus, we need language specialists who can not only translate words, but can also interpret their meaning. A translator can go from a word in one language to a word in another, but an interpreter also knows the cultures of the two language groups and can recognize when a literal translation does not express the intended meaning in the destination language.

TWW team member Frank Ramirez, who is bilingual (English and Spanish), offers these examples of mistranslations he's heard, when the translator didn't know the language well enough to render the sense of what was intended. He heard a man say, *Estoy nervioso y excitado para mi entrevista mañana*. What he meant to say was "I am nervous and excited for my interview tomorrow." What he actually said was "I am nervous and aroused for my interview tomorrow." (The correct word for excited is *emocionado*.)

Also in Spanish, *éxito* is the word for "success," but some translators have used that word thinking it means "exit," which is actually *salida*. *Retirar* means "to remove," but some translators apparently think it means "retire," which is *pensionar*. Just think of the confusion that could cause!

Some mistranslations can have more serious consequences, as was illustrated in a scene in the 2005 thriller-flick, *The Interpreter*, starring Nicole Kidman and Sean Penn. Kidman's character, Silvia Broome, is an interpreter at the United Nations, and she overhears a death threat against an African head of state named Zuwanie, spoken in a rare dialect only Broome and few others can understand. When she reports the threat, however, Tobin Keller, the agent assigned to protect Zuwanie, is skeptical of her claim. The following dialog ensues:

Broome: Do you think I'm making it up? Why would I report a threat I didn't hear? ...

Keller: Maybe you don't want Zuwanie at the UN.

Broome: I didn't make it up.

Keller: How do you feel about him?

Broome: I don't care for him.

Keller: Wouldn't mind if he were dead?

Broome: I wouldn't mind if he were gone.

Keller: Same thing.

Broome: No it isn't. If I interpreted "gone" as "dead" I'd be out of a job. If dead and gone were the same thing, there'd be no UN.

Interpretation that is careful and mindful of nuance and word choice differences from one language to another is a vital activity at places like the United Nations, but it's also a vital ministry in the church.

The Big Questions

1. Why do you think God did not make us all speak the same language?

2. Unless you can read ancient Hebrew and biblical Greek, any Bible you read is a translation. To what degree is translation of scripture also a matter of interpretation? When have you found one translation more useful than another in helping you understand God's Word?
3. What makes work like Reasoner's a legitimate form of ministry? What factors suggest that the need for that ministry is likely to increase in the future? How might advances in technology affect that need?
4. What does it imply about his work that Reasoner's denomination decided to commission him as a *missionary* even though he does not preach himself?
5. What is suggested by Reasoner's frequent use of the word "facilitate" to describe his ministry?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Genesis 11:5-7

The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the LORD said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." (For context, read [Genesis 11:1-9](#).)

This account from Genesis tells of a primordial time when everyone spoke the same language, and they decided to build a city with a tall tower. They started with a plan: "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (v. 4). But, according to the text, God saw what they were doing and disapproved, and so he came and confused their language so they would not understand one another. That, of course, made cooperating to build the tower and finish the city impossible, and so they scattered across the earth. Because of the confusion of language, the city they had started was called Babel.

But what exactly had these builders done so wrong that caused the Lord to interfere with their plans? We sometimes assume their sin was that the tall tower was a human attempt to storm the heavens and displace God. But if that were the case, the tale would be little more than a primitive allegory about an insecure God who is so threatened by human achievement that he needs to wreak havoc on the best-laid human plans. What's more, the story is not just an attempt to explain the vast multiplicity of human languages. Nor is it a lament about some lost primeval unity.

No, the sin of the Babel builders was likely that congregating everyone in a single place was a direct violation of God's command, given after the great flood, that [the people should multiply and fill the earth](#). (Remember the builders said they wanted to avoid being scattered.) One interpretation of that is that the refusal to spread meant they were seeking uniformity. When the people are all the same, speaking the same language and having the same attitudes and biases, individuals are reduced to insignificance. "If no one is anyone in particular, then who cares what

happens to them?" So maybe the old story of Babel is about a human attempt to root out individuality, which goes against God's wishes, since, he, after all, made us in his image. "To try and eradicate human uniqueness is to declare war on God's image and thus to declare war on God," says one biblical commentator.

If that is a correct view of the story, then God's action in confusing their language was no punishment at all, but a move designed to put people back on the path he intended for their good -- to scatter them across the earth and become the unique individuals God wants. So God confounded their language, and "scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city" (v. 8).

Questions: In what ways might the multiplicity of languages on Earth contribute to the common good? In what ways might they hinder movement toward the common good?

Nehemiah 8:7-8

Also the Levites Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiiah helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. (For context, read [Nehemiah 7:73b--8:12](#).)

Nehemiah 7:73b-8:12 records a time after the exile, when the temple and the walls of Jerusalem have been rebuilt. Shortly after the completion of the walls, the people requested that the scribe Ezra gather the people in a square of the city and read scripture (very likely some parts of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible) to them.

While the people were Jews and their ancestors had likely been taught the scriptures, most common people in that day couldn't read, and there were few copies of the scripture scrolls in any case. They had to rely on scribes to teach them the scriptures. But the first return from exile had occurred 92 years before the Jerusalem walls were rebuilt, and there had been no scribes among those first returnees. The generation that built the walls had likely heard *about* the scriptures from older relatives but now wanted to hear them for themselves, and the arrival of Ezra, who was both a priest and a scribe, made that possible.

Ezra was quick to comply with their request. And so, at a public gathering, Ezra read the scroll aloud, and he had help from 13 Levites (see their names in the verses above) who "helped the people to understand the law [of Moses]." While it's not clear exactly how these Levites functioned during the public reading, there are three logical possibilities:

- Because there was no technology for amplification, the Levites stood among the crowd and *repeated* what Ezra had read so everyone in the crowd could hear.
- They *explained* the meaning of what Ezra read.
- They *translated and interpreted* what Ezra read. The scriptures would have been written in Hebrew, but by the post-exilic period, the common language among the Jews was Aramaic, so the Levites may have been rendering the Hebrew into Aramaic.

Whatever the case, these Levites performed a service similar to what interpreters like Reasoner do today: They worked in the service of God to help people receive and understand what was being said by a speaker.

The people received this reading of the scripture scroll seriously. When Ezra blessed the Lord, the people responded with a twofold "Amen," which indicated their acceptance of what was being read. As they listened, they were struck by how far their daily practices were from the holiness the text called for, and they began weeping. At that point, Ezra told them to rejoice instead, because "the joy of the LORD is your strength!" (8:10). God was giving them the teachings that make for a wholesome and holy life, which is a source of joy. When the people understood this, a "great rejoicing" (8:12) took place. The scriptures now became the basis of their existence as a community, and their faith and practice was to be dominated by it.

Questions: Who has helped you understand the scriptures and how they apply to you? In what ways have you helped others to understand them?

Acts 2:5-8

Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" (For context, read [Acts 2:1-41](#).)

This reading is about the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus, who then went out and began to speak to the crowds. People from all over the known world had come to Jerusalem for the annual Pentecost observance, and the list of their nationalities sounds like a roll call at a plenary session of the United Nations: "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs. ..." And there were no multilingual translators at the ready ... none except the Holy Spirit that is. The wonder of it all rumbled through the crowd: "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?"

So the first public miracle that Pentecost day was the gift of instant translation. According to the narrative, however, translation alone was not sufficient, for the text tells us, "All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'" Thus the miracle of translating the words from the Galilean tongue into the multiplicity of languages spoken by the hearers enabled the crowd to comprehend the words of the disciples, but not to discern what those words meant.

It was Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, who explained the meaning (see vv. 14-36.)

And after that, 3,000 of those present were baptized, and the church was born.

Questions: In what ways does the Day of Pentecost illustrate the difference between translation and interpretation? To what extent was Pentecost the undoing of what happened at the tower of Babel? In what ways was God present in both events?

1 Corinthians 12:4, 7-8, 10

Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, ... To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ... to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. (For context, read [1 Corinthians 12:4-10](#).)

1 Corinthians 14:9, 13

So with yourselves: If in a tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is being said? For you will be speaking into the air. ... Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret. (For context, read [1 Corinthians 14:6-19](#).)

First Corinthians 12 is one of the places where Paul discusses the gifts of the Spirit -- skills and abilities individuals in the church are given and called to use for the good of the church. In the chapter 12 passage above, one gift of the Spirit Paul identifies is "the interpretation of tongues." First Corinthians 14 contains some commentary on the gifts, including an explanation of why the church needs people with the interpretation gift.

In fairness to Paul's discussion, we should point out that he is not talking about general interpretation of the sort Reasoner does, but rather a specialized interpretation to complement another gift, sometimes called "tongues" or "glossolalia" -- a kind of spiritual utterance in no known language but which the speaker understands as praising God. Paul says that the tongues gift by itself does no good for the rest of the congregation because they cannot understand what is uttered. However, if someone present has the gift of interpretation, then that person can communicate the speaker's message in plain language.

Question: What abilities do you have that you can offer to the church?

For Further Discussion

1. Respond to this: Both translation and interpretation are still necessary to the spread of Christianity, even if we are with people who speak our language. Translation is the work of putting the faith into plain language for people to understand. Lots of books, websites, Christian education classes and sermons do that. They explain what the Christian story is, what we believe, how to read the Bible, what is expected in the way of behavior and so forth. And often, the Holy Spirit is involved in that work.

But there is still the need for interpreters. That's because there are always people who can say, "Look, I understand what Christianity teaches, but so what? What does it mean for me? Why should I buy into it?" Interpreters are people who are convinced about the great value of Christ in their own lives, and who can therefore answer the "What does this mean?" question from personal experience.

That doesn't demand that we are especially eloquent or have a convincing speech ready. It doesn't mean we have a degree in Christian apologetics or narrative evangelism. But it does mean we are willing, when asked, to speak about our own experience of Christ. One of the most

powerful interpretation methods is simply to state your own experience and tell why your contact with Christ has made a difference in your life. For example:

- "I can no longer be comfortable with my prejudices."
- "I have peace that stays with me, even when everything is going wrong."
- "I am less judgmental and more able to forgive."
- "I never knew a time when I was not a Christian, but I wouldn't want to be without Christ."
- "I'm not angry all the time now."
- "My natural inclination is to think only of myself. But because of Christ, I can no longer ignore the needs of others."
- "The guilt I lived with has been taken away."
- "It has put a song in my heart."
- "I cannot sin in peace."
- "Christ has given my life a purpose."

None of this interpreting guarantees the conversion of those who hear it, but in the long run, statements about what commitment to Christ means to you personally has a greater impact than the best written Sunday school lesson or the most articulate sermon that explains the faith. That's because nobody can deny your personal experience. Realistically, all they can do is say that they have never had a similar one, and when they do, you can encourage them to give Christ a try and see for themselves.

2. Speaking of interpreting the faith, one need not be a scholar to do it. In the 19th century, British biologist and educator Thomas Huxley was widely known for his brilliance and his scientific writings, but also for his agnosticism. Sometime toward the end of his life, he attended a house party at a country estate. When Sunday came, most of the other guests prepared to go to church, but not Huxley. Perhaps only because he wanted some company, he approached another guest, a man known for his solid and simple Christian faith. Huxley proposed that instead of going to church, the man stay home with him and explain why he was Christian and what his faith meant on a personal level. The man protested, "But you could demolish my arguments in an instant. I'm not clever enough to argue with you." When Huxley assured the man that he had no intention of arguing, however, the man agreed. He stayed and told Huxley in simple terms what his faith provided him. When the man had finished, Huxley said, "I would give my right hand if only I could believe that."

If you had been the person Huxley asked to explain what your faith means to you, what would you have said?

3. When have you wished you could communicate with someone who didn't speak your language? TWW team member Stan Purdum tells of such a situation: Not long after we were married, we drove to Mexico City in an old Volkswagen van. Neither of us speak Spanish, but along the primary route down and in Mexico City itself, we had no trouble communicating because many people there spoke English. After spending a few days in that city, we decided to make our exit from Mexico by driving up a highway along the west coast of the country, a route that provided us many attractive views of the Pacific Ocean and, as we got farther north, the Gulf of California, the body of water between the Mexican mainland and the Baja peninsula.

As we got away from the more populated areas, we found fewer people who spoke English. We were carrying most of our food in the vehicle, so we didn't have to negotiate restaurants, and we were able to purchase gas for the van without much difficulty, because both we and the attendant knew what we were after. We had learned to understand the money exchange, and had memorized a few Spanish phrases that enabled us to ask where the bathrooms were, to say "Thank you," and to say that we didn't speak the language. So we ambled along without too much problem.

But then one day, spotting a beautiful mostly deserted beach, we decided to stop and swim. After we were there a while, we noticed a man and a boy some distance out in the water, and they seemed to be trying to push a raft of some sort toward the beach. They appeared to be having some difficulty, so I waded out, grabbed hold of the raft, and helped them maneuver it to shore.

They appeared very appreciative and the man began speaking rapidly in Spanish, pointing to the rocks placed on the raft. Adhering to the rocks were oyster-like shells, and as the man continued to speak, he pried open a shell and pulled out the material inside. I guessed that this was abalone, and the man handed one to me, indicating with his hands that I should eat it raw, something I wasn't accustomed to. At the same moment, my wife said to me, "Don't let them give me one of those!"

But I gathered that this was their way of saying thank you, and I didn't want to appear rude, so I ate it. Then the man launched into a new monologue, which of course we couldn't understand, but he was using his hand to point toward a hut not far away and was making motions that finally led me to believe he was inviting us to join his family for dinner.

I would have loved to accept the invitation and to have the experience that such a visit would bring. But because we couldn't communicate effectively, I felt the whole thing would be awkward and exhausting. So using my own hand motions, I indicated that we had to be moving on, and after a profuse exchange of "*Gracias*," we drove off.

But I wished for some sort of device such as the one that exists on *Star Trek*. It's a little machine called the Universal Translator. In the series, it takes the language of any interplanetary species and converts it accurately so that the individuals involved can communicate freely. But alas, we didn't have that, and we missed what we assumed would have been a good experience.

Responding to the News

This is a good time to think about the abilities that God has given you, and how you can employ them for the church.

Prayer

O God who hears and understands us regardless of what language -- or no language at all ([Romans 8:26](#)) -- we use to address you, thank you that you make it possible for us also to hear and understand you. Help us to listen, learn and love as your Son taught us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Other News This Week

How Children Learn Social Expectations RE: Lying and Truth-telling

The Wired Word for the Week of October 30, 2022

In the News

A just-released study on how children learn about lying and truth-telling shows that parents and other caregivers tend to give mixed messages on the subject. The Texas State University research, conducted by Laure Brimbal and A.M. Crossman, indicates that children are socialized to not tell the truth in every situation.

"Children ... develop the ability to tell lies from an early age. Learning to tell lies is a normal part of children's social development," Brimbal said. "Children are learning about honesty in a quite complicated environment. It appears to be an important social skill to lie to fit in with other's expectations, ... despite ... conflicting messages from their adult caregivers that it is wrong to lie ... whilst in addition, it sometimes is perceived as unkind to be honest."

The study differentiated between antisocial and prosocial lying. The former, which is deemed morally unacceptable, is self-serving, self-protective, or aimed at gaining a reward or benefit for oneself. The latter (sometimes called "white lies" or "altruistic lying") is meant to protect or benefit others, to strengthen relationships or nurture positive interpersonal interactions, and is considered socially acceptable.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines "white lies" as "lies about small or unimportant matters that someone tells to avoid hurting another person."

"A white lie," says Dr. Julia Breur, a licensed marriage and family therapist, "is a well-intentioned untruth ... to spare someone's feelings and to do no harm."

Dennis Manning, a student, explained how he thinks about what constitutes a "white lie": "The standard is, if the truth hurts and serves no purpose to the greater good by being revealed, and the lie hurts no one, it is considered a white lie. Telling Aunt Ethel her pies don't last long at your house because of her stellar pie-making skills makes her happy. To tell her you throw her pies in the trash because they are inedible might hurt her feelings." Same truth, but different ways of communicating it. Different results.

According to Brimbal and Crossman, "parents could be socializing their children to rephrase harsh truths or to outright lie to be polite or protect someone." They point to the oft-repeated instruction parents give to children who speak a little too honestly, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all."

Jason Anthony, who calls himself an "armchair philosopher," responded to a post about lying on *Quora* this way: "White lies are often used as 'social grease' to foster communication or to avoid awkwardness or to simply be polite. Being diplomatic sometimes requires us to say things we really don't mean or to behave in ways that are scripted and not really genuine."

On balance, the researchers found that the adult participants in the study viewed lying more negatively than truth-telling, and subtlety more positively than bluntness. Children who made subtle statements (whether true or false) were viewed more positively than those making blunt statements (whether true or false).

How the adult participants viewed the children depended in part on what they thought motivated them, if they told a lie. The adults tended to reward children who appeared to lie to be polite or to protect someone, while punishing those who told blunt truths. Subtle truth-tellers were rewarded most for their behavior.

Brimbal and Crossman discovered that as children age, they learn to consider the context when deciding when and how to tell the truth or a falsehood.

"Although liars are typically judged negatively, individuals differentiate lie acceptability as a function of contextual factors, such as who is lying to whom, with what benefit, and why," they explain. Adults socialize children to evaluate whether in a particular situation it is better to lie politely, tell the truth bluntly, or tell the truth subtly.

From The Wright Foundation for the Realization of Human Potential comes this advice: "Now there might not be a kind way to answer, 'Do these pants make my butt look bad?' But most pals would appreciate knowing the truth from us before they walk out the door. There are nicer ways that we could say it, like, 'I think those blue pants are more flattering on you.' In choosing a gentler approach, we're not telling a white lie but rather sticking to the truth in a less hurtful way. The results and the message are still the same, and our friend will appreciate our candor."

Tish Tanner, who describes herself as a stay-home mom and homemaker, wrote, "I will tell a white lie rather than a mean truth."

Wendy Rose Gould, of *Business Insider*, suggests we should deliver honesty "with a side of gentleness."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Inconvenient Truth-tellers: Perceptions of Children's Blunt Honesty. Taylor & Francis Online](#)
[Children Who Tell Blunt Truth, as Opposed to Lying, are Judged Harsher by Adults. Baptist News](#)

[Is it Ever OK to Tell a White Lie? Ethicssage.com](#)

[White Lies: Kind or Cruel? Psychology Today](#)

[Is it Ever Okay to Tell 'White Lies'? Wright Foundation](#)

Applying the News Story

The responsibility of raising children is one of the greatest challenges afforded to human beings. Part of what makes parenting a challenge is the need to teach children about values that sometimes seem to conflict with one another. Values such as truthfulness and kindness are an example of this.

Though most people can see the value of so-called white lies in certain circumstances, we at TWW are not recommending the practice in any kind of blanket way. It always needs to be thought about in the context of Jesus' words about loving our neighbor. Use this discussion guide to explore this idea further.

The Big Questions

1. Is honesty always the best policy? Should we always be "brutally" honest? Why or why not?
2. Why do people lie? Whom are we protecting, and from what, when we tell "white lies"? Is the purpose of a "white lie" to spare someone else's feelings or to relieve yourself from having to share an uncomfortable truth? What is the difference, if any, between a white lie and a lie?
3. Is it ever okay to tell a "white lie"? When, if ever, is telling an untruth acceptable or innocuous? When, if ever, might telling a "white lie" actually cause harm, to whom, and why?
4. Can you imagine Jesus telling anyone a "white lie"? Why or why not?
5. In what circumstances and about what subjects might adults sometimes be tempted to tell what they believe are harmless lies instead of the blunt truth?
6. What factors into a person's decision about whether to tell a blunt truth or to soften the truth for some reason? What other options might be available in addition to this binary choice? What alternatives can you imagine to telling a blunt truth or lying to spare someone's feelings?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Proverbs 12:17-18, 22

*Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence, but a false witness speaks deceitfully.
Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. ...
Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who act faithfully are his delight.*
(For context, read [Proverbs 12:17-22](#).)

One of the Ten Commandments forbids "bearing false witness against your neighbor" ([Exodus 20:16](#)). This passage in Proverbs indicates how seriously God views lying ("Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD"). At the same time, "rash words" such as might be spoken by someone who tells "the brutal truth," have the power to wound and even to kill, while wiser words have the power to heal.

Questions: Do different rules about telling the truth or "white lies" apply when people are giving testimony in court, as opposed to in less consequential situations? Why or why not?

1 Kings 22:15-16

When he had come to the king, the king said to him, "Micaiah, shall we go to Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall we refrain?" He answered him, "Go up and triumph; the LORD will give it into

the hand of the king." But the king said to him, "How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?"(For context, read [1 Kings 22:5-36](#).)

Ahab, king of Israel, asked Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, if he would go to war against the king of Aram, in order to reclaim territory. Jehoshaphat was willing to ally himself with Ahab, but wanted confirmation from the prophets that God would bless their efforts. Four hundred of Ahab's hand-picked yes-men agreed that Ahab's plan would succeed, but Jehoshaphat was not satisfied. He wanted another opinion.

So to gain Jehoshaphat's support, Ahab summoned the prophet Micaiah, whom he despised because Micaiah always told him truths he didn't want to hear.

When Micaiah approached the throne, he was advised to agree with all the other prophets, "to go along to get along," but Micaiah was determined to tell the truth, no matter what the cost to himself.

Initially, when Ahab asked for his analysis, Micaiah gave him the party line: Go into battle, all will be well! But Ahab knew his answer was uncharacteristic for Micaiah, so he pressed the prophet to tell him the truth, even though he had already decided to ignore it and go his own way.

So Micaiah then prophesied that Ahab's military operation would end in disaster and claimed that all the other prophets were lying when they predicted a glorious victory for Israel. Ahab rewarded Micaiah's truth-telling by throwing him into prison and giving him reduced rations.

Then Ahab and Jehoshaphat went to do battle. But Ahab hedged his bets by asking Jehoshaphat to wear his royal robes, while he disguised himself (essentially, lying about his identity when on the battlefield). Ahab wouldn't accept the truth from God's honest prophet, but he couldn't trust his own lying prophets either, so he had to resort to subterfuge to try to save his life. But his strategy failed, and he died an ignominious death, killed by a random arrow from an ordinary archer.

Questions: Would you rather hear a "white lie" or the honest truth from the pulpit? What would happen if we decide to reject God's message to us before we have even heard it?

Luke 20:4-8

[Jesus asked,] "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" They discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' all the people will stone us, for they are convinced that John was a prophet." So they answered that they did not know where it came from. Then Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things." (For context, read [Luke 20:1-8](#).)

Once when Jesus was proclaiming the good news to the people in the temple, the religious leaders confronted him, challenging him to explain who gave him authority to do the things he was doing. Rather than answer them immediately, he asked them a question. Their answer would

reveal whether they wanted an honest answer from him, or were instead trying to trap him into saying something that might get him into trouble with the civil authorities, or cause him to lose popularity with the people.

When the religious leaders declined to answer Jesus, he chose not to engage in any further discussion with them, knowing that it takes honesty on the part of every participant to have a meaningful discussion.

"Sometimes people can't handle the truth," author Matt Pavlik writes. "If you told them, they might harm themselves, someone else, or even you."

Pavlik offers the following as alternatives to lying or harmful truth-speaking: "Better than lying is to say something like, 'I don't want to answer that now.' You're being honest, but you don't have to share. Or you could say, 'How truthful would you like me to be with you?' This acknowledges that the person might not be able to handle the truth, but lets them decide."

Questions: How do you decide which conversations to have, and with whom? How can you determine whether other participants in the conversation are really interested in learning the truth?

Ephesians 4:15, 25

... but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ... So then, putting away falsehood, let each of you speak the truth with your neighbor, for we are members of one another. (For context, read [Ephesians 4:14-29](#).)

James 1:19

You must understand this, my beloved brothers and sisters: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, ... (For context, read [James 1:19-20, 26](#).)

Paul gives guidance to his readers about how to converse with one another in ways that will "build up" rather than tear down, and "give grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29). James indicates that we need to "bridle" our tongues (a reference to the way a powerful horse is controlled) (James 1:26) and think carefully before we speak.

Nathanial Lee Vigder, an entrepreneur, wrote, "My main peacekeeping tool is omission of facts." Once when he was invited to an event he didn't want to attend, that would have required a long, expensive drive, he loaned his truck to his cousin and told the person who had invited him that he didn't have transportation. He just omitted the information that he had "done it intentionally."

"If you can't speak the truth in love, you're more loving if you don't speak at all. Better to cause no harm. Don't use the truth as a weapon," writes Matt Pavlik, author. "It's okay to have a filter in this case. It's possible to speak the truth, but in a way that is sensitive."

"Speaking the truth, even in love, may evoke fierce and costly conflict before it yields true peace -- if it ever does," [wrote David Gushee](#), past-president of Society of Christian Ethics. "When our words yield conflict, it may or may not mean we have failed to speak the truth in love. And when

we have managed to keep the peace, it may or may not mean we have met our obligations to Christ."

Questions: How is telling the truth to others a sign of love? What does Paul mean by the phrase "we are members of one another"? How might remembering that we are members of one another motivate us to "speak the truth in love" more consistently?

For Further Discussion

1. React to this, from [Hal Runkel](#), a marriage and family therapist, conflict mediator and best-selling author of *ScreamFree Parenting*: "Kicking the can of truth up the road just invites a barrel to roll back on us."

2. Christian leaders have held divergent views on the seriousness of telling white lies.

Sir Thomas More, Lord High Chancellor of England (1529-1532), who was tried, convicted, and beheaded for treason after he refused to acknowledge King Henry VIII as the head of the Church of England, once wrote that he hoped he was "not so superstitiously veracious as to reckon every white lie as black as murder." Centuries later, More was canonized by the Catholic Church as a saint, and named a "Reformation martyr" by the Church of England.

On the other hand, in a 1955 article, American evangelist, Billy Graham, labeled as sin "malice, gossip, the white lie, anger" that "gets into the holy eyes of God."

Where do you come down on the seriousness of telling white lies, and why do you take that position?

3. "Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!" That line, from Sir Walter Scott's play *Marmion*, suggests that telling one lie often has a domino effect, in that one lie leads to another, which generates another, until we are caught in the web of deceit we ourselves created. Educator Mervin Ridley provides this illustration from the life of a toddler:

"Did you brush your teeth, Billy?"

"Yes'm, I sure did."

"Why isn't your toothbrush wet, then?"

"Because I used the hair dryer on it afterward."

"Billy, we don't have a hair dryer."

How is telling a white lie similar and/or different from the kind of "practicing to deceive" that Scott described?

4. In Mark Twain's book, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck lies for different reasons, such as to get out of trouble; to secure something he needs; or to keep himself or Jim, who is trying to escape from slavery, from being detected. In another of Twain's books, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Tom ponders the moral question, is lying or telling an untruth always bad, or can a lie ever be used in the service of a greater good? How would you respond to a child who asked you that question?

5. In *The Hiding Place*, Holocaust survivor Corrie TenBoom describes what happened early in the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands during World War II, when citizens were ordered to turn in all private radios: "Realizing it would look strange if our household produced none at all, we

decided to turn in the portable and hide the larger, more powerful instrument" beneath a staircase.

When Corrie took the portable radio into the department store where the electronics were being collected, she was asked, "Is this the only radio you own?" "Yes." The officer consulted his list. "TenBoom, Kasper. TenBoom, Elizabeth. At the same address. Do either of them own a radio?"

"I had known from childhood that the earth opened up and the heavens rained fire upon liars, but I met his gaze. 'No.' Only as I walked out of the building did I begin to tremble, not because, for the first time in my life, I had told a conscious lie, but because it had been so dreadfully easy."

The TenBooms were among those who hid Jews in their home to protect them from the Nazis.

How would you understand Proverbs 14:25 ("A truthful witness saves lives, but one who utters lies is a betrayer") in light of Corrie's lie about the radio?

Are there situations in which telling deliberate lies is not only forgivable, but justifiable and even morally obligatory? Explain your answer.

6. Respond to this: Melody Bertrile, who says she is the parent of a toddler, wrote that her mother devised a system of codewords and numbers for her and her brothers to text or say in a phone call if they felt they were in danger. One time, a man attempted to assault Bertrile at a party, and she managed to invent an excuse to call home. Using codewords such as "tampons" and "kitty litter," she communicated to her mother that she needed help, without the would-be assailant catching on to the truth. The ruse gave her enough time to escape the situation. "In the end, I lied," Bertrile wrote. "But I would've been raped if I hadn't. It's a system I'm glad to pass on to my daughter!"

7. Some have pointed out that adults tell their children harmless "white lies" all the time, when reading them fairy tales, telling them about Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny or the Tooth Fairy, so they can believe in magic and enjoy the innocent mysteries of life for as long as possible. Or they may say that the child's pet fish "missed his family and went home" to avoid having to talk about a topic (death) they may feel the child is too young to understand. How do you determine whether such messages could be harmful to your child? How would you attempt to mitigate any harmful effects of such messages or stories?

Responding to the News

1. Be determined to practice the "Ten-Second Countdown Method" this week before opening your mouth to speak. Count down from ten to one, listening carefully to others before you speak. Take note of how this discipline helps shape the way you communicate with others.

2. For further study, select one of the following passages, and answer the following questions: What lies were told, by whom, for what reason? What did the liar(s) risk by not telling the truth? How are the people who lied portrayed? What aspects of their character and behavior are depicted negatively? Positively?

[Genesis 38:1-26](#)

[Exodus 1:15-19](#)

[Joshua 2:1-6](#)

[Judges 4:1-3, 17-22](#)

[Matthew 2:7-16](#)

Prayer suggested by [Numbers 23:19](#); [John 14:6](#); [Revelation 19:11](#); [John 15:26](#); [John 16:13](#); [1 John 2:3-6](#)

O God of Truth, who does not lie as human beings do, we thank you that we can count on you to always keep your word. Spirit of Truth, guide us, in the way of the One whose name is Faithful and True, to obey God's commandments, so that we may walk in the same way as he walked, and so that in us the love of God will reach perfection. Amen!

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