Seeing Through News Media Bias: Exposing Deception and Proclaiming Truth in an Age of Misinformation

Steve Cable examines the role of deception in how we receive much of today's information, providing perspective on how to see through it to the truth.

Biblical Perspective on Truth

We live in an age when many of us feel as if we are swimming in a sea of information. From broadcast media to cell phones to ubiquitous internet access, we are assailed with more information than we can possibly assimilate. Just on the internet alone we are asked to deal with social networking, blogs, news feeds, forwarded emails, spam, not to mention our compulsion to Google any topic that crosses our mind.



Most of the information we encounter is intended to impact our view of truth; what we think about politics, economics, relationships, needs, and wants. Its purpose is to reshape your current view of reality into a different view that someone else is promoting. This reshaping may be good or bad depending upon the validity and implications of the revised view.

One response to this deluge of information is to despair of ever discerning truth. After all, what standard can I use to compare competing truth claims? If one medical doctor promotes eating fish daily and another doctor says it is dangerous due to high mercury levels, how can I discern the truth? I may be tempted to retreat into a postmodern perspective, creating my own personal, relative truth that works for me while affirming

that others may need to create a different truth that works better for them.

However, as a Christian, I know that there is absolute truth. I may not have full awareness of truth, but it does exist regardless of my lack of knowledge or understanding. Absolute truth is reality as seen from God's perspective, lived out through the person of Jesus Christ and recorded for us in the Holy Bible. When I consult that Bible, I find that I am not to be tossed about by all of this competing information, but rather I am to be grounded in the truth and to speak the truth in love. If I am responsible for speaking truth then God must have equipped me to discern truth from falsehood.

In this article, we will begin by looking at a biblical perspective of truth and the battle between truth and deceit. Then we will look at some of the ways misinformation is being foisted upon us today and explore some biblical principals to expose it.

Truth Is Central to the Gospel

Some people suggest that truth is of secondary importance in the work of Christ. According to this view, we should focus on grace and relationship rather than doctrine and not be concerned if people profess faith in a perception of Jesus that is not consistent with the biblical record. On the contrary, the Bible is clear that grace and truth are both indispensable parts of the gospel. Let's consider three passages from Scripture:

- Paul tells us that "God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of *the truth*" (1 Timothy 2:4).

- Jesus explains to Pilate, "For this I have been born and for this I have come into the world, to testify to *the truth*" (John 18:37).

- In his gospel, John proclaims, "The law was given through

Moses, grace and *truth* were realized through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

From these passages we see that:

- Knowing the truth is what God desires for people.
- Proclaiming the truth is central to the purpose of Jesus' incarnation.
- Jesus is the source of both grace and truth.

When we receive Jesus we are not only accepting God's grace for us, but also enthroning Jesus as our source for truth.

Challenge of Deception

We are called to walk in the truth and to speak the truth, but we find this to be a challenge. One consistent theme of the Bible is that the war between good and evil is a conflict between truth and deception. As we strive to walk in the truth, we will find ourselves assailed with deception, misinformation and partial truths. If we look at our world objectively, we will see that deception is at the heart of most problems. The Bible gives us insight into three reasons why exposing deception is at the heart of our Christian walk.

First, deception is at the heart of Satan's plan to destroy us. Jesus tells us that Satan "was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there *is no truth* in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a *liar and the father of lies*" (John 8:44-45). Satan began by deceiving Eve in the garden and his campaign of deception remains the centerpiece of his strategy to attack God

Second, deception is at the heart of man's separation from God. As Paul explained in Romans, "For they exchanged *the truth of God for a lie*, and worshiped and served the creature

rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25). When we accept Satan's lies, we begin a life of self deception buying the illusion that we can truly live apart from our Creator.

Third, deception is at the heart of man's efforts to exploit you. Peter warns us "because of false teachers the way of *the truth* will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with *false words*" (2 Peter 2:2-3). By convincing us to buy into a "false truth", exploiters can manipulate us into doing what they want us to do rather than what God has called us to do.

Through Jesus Christ, God has redeemed us from slavery to deception, and there will be no deception in heaven. While we live on this earth, God knows we are going to have to deal with deception everyday. He commands us to be on our guard so that we can walk in the truth. In Ephesians, we are told that

> We are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the *trickery of men*, by craftiness in *deceitful scheming*; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ (Ephesians 4:14-15).

The importance of being on our guard is also emphasized in Colossians where Paul writes,

> See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and *empty deception*, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ" (Colossians 2:8).

God gives us this warning because many Christians live with their minds captive to a world system based on empty deception. Although these believers have an eternal inheritance, they are largely ineffective in bearing fruit for Christ. We are commanded to take positive action to see that this does not happen to us and to tear down the walls of deception that hold others captive.

News Media As a Source of Misinformation

Clearly, the Bible teaches us that Satan and the world system are out to take us captive and make us ineffective in our Christian lives by deceiving us into conforming to a perverted view of truth. Every successful con begins with an attempt to validate the trustworthiness of the conman. A recent example is the complex investment Ponzi scheme run by Bernard Madoff which has purportedly cost investors $50 billion. His impeccable credentials and complex models convinced not only friends, but also large hedge funds to trust him with their money. This aura of trustworthiness allowed his scheme to continue for years even though a Boston analyst had been reporting him to the SEC consistently for the last nine years.

The most dangerous sources of information are those that occupy positions of trust. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that the mechanisms we turn to for factual information or truth are oftentimes the biggest sources of misinformation. In our society, we look to the news media, academia, government and the arts to provide information and perspective to understand reality or truth. As Christians, we need to approach these sources of information with a degree of caution to avoid being taken captive by a distorted worldview.

In what follows we will focus on how to approach information we receive from the news media (newspapers, magazines, television, internet news, and blogs). As recognized by the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights, we need the press to be free to provide news and commentary as they see them without fear of retribution. However, the press can also wield a dangerous amount of power when left unbalanced. As Mark Twain quipped, “There are laws to protect the freedom of the press’s speech, but none that are worth anything to protect the people from the press.”

First let’s consider the question, Is the information we receive really biased toward deception? In America, multiple

polls have found that the vast majority of the members of the press are secular and liberal. But some argue that their personal views should not keep them from presenting information in an unbiased manner. However, multiple academic studies of this question have shown that news reports are biased. For example, an analysis of news reports done by researchers from UCLA and the University of Missouri concluded:

> Our results show a strong liberal bias: all of the news outlets we examine, except *Fox News' Special Report* and the *Washington Times* received scores to the left of the average member of Congress. . . . *CBS Evening News* and the *New York Times* received scores far to the left of center.{1}

Many reporters are trying to provide objective reports, but it is very hard for any of us to completely set aside our biases and agendas. What we consider balanced is in fact skewed by our own views and thus off center from true objectivity.

The deceptive nature of news reporting is not new. Writing about the period around the First World War, C. S. Lewis stated,

> Even in peacetime, I think those are very wrong who say that school-boys should be encouraged to read newspapers. Nearly all that a boy reads there in his teens will be known before he is twenty to have been false in emphasis and interpretation, if not in fact as well, and most of it will have lost all importance. Most of what he remembers he will therefore have to unlearn.{2}

Part of the reason for biased reporting is the view held by most people in the news media that their calling is to shape society into a better place, not just provide people with the facts. Therefore, news reports are not simply unbiased facts but rather a product created by newspeople to impact society. As Terry Eastland observed in his study on the collapse of

mainstream media,

> The most influential journalists understood that news is rarely news in the sense of being undisputed facts about people or policy, but news in the sense that it's a product made by reporters, editors, and producers. . . those who define and present the news have a certain power, since news can set a public agenda. And they weren't shy about exercising this power.{3}

Bias in news reporting shows up in subtle (and not so subtle) ways. Four of those ways are:

1. Setting the agenda
2. Slanting the information
3. Skewing the facts
4. Skewering the truth

By "setting the agenda" we mean that people within the news establishment determine what information makes it into print and onto television newscasts. An event that highlights a favorite cause of the journalist or news organization may receive extensive media coverage while another receives little or no coverage. One area we see this occurring in is so-called hate crimes where coverage may vary greatly depending upon the "disadvantaged group" represented by the victim. This method is the hardest to detect since it is based on the absence of information. However, the recent growth of alternative news sources makes detecting this method of bias easier.

"Slanting the information" uses subtle techniques to influence that way people interpret the information included in a news story. Examples of this are the selection of headlines, the type of words used to describe the topic, the selection of experts, and how the experts are described. Warning signs of this technique include words that seem to overstate the case or emphasize a point which is secondary to the facts. One example of this was an August 2006 *Washington Post* article on

economic reports showing record growth and outstanding performance of the economy. One might expect a headline stating something like “Economic News Encouraging in All Areas.” Instead, the actual headline stated, “Economic News Isn’t Helping Bush.”{4}

Other common techniques for slanting information include the use of labels or definitions that communicate an implied value judgment. Examples of this are using the label “anti-choice” instead of “pro-life” and defining Intelligent Design as a form of Creationism formulated to allow it to sneak into public schools.

“Skewing the facts” is a technique of selectively emphasizing the facts that support the journalist’s point of view while either discounting or leaving out facts that run counter to that point of view. It can also include drawing illogical or unsubstantiated conclusions. Whenever you encounter a journalist using statistics to paint a conclusion as fact, you should view it with skepticism. Mark Twain reported that Disraeli was the first person to warn us that “There are lies, damn lies and statistics!”

One example of skewing the facts prominent in the recent presidential campaign dealt with the potential impact of developing more of the oil reserves of the United States. One of the candidates (and their running mate) made the following statement during multiple televised debates: “But understand, we only have three to four percent of the world’s oil reserves and we use 25 percent of the world’s oil, which means that we can’t drill our way out of the problem.”{5} What they are implying is that because twenty-five is a bigger number than four, it is obvious that our oil reserves cannot help us. Of course, most of us learned in the third grade that percentages are not absolute numbers. For example, would you rather have four percent of Bill Gates’s net worth or twenty-five percent of what he spent for lunch today? In fact, comparing the size

of our reserves and our yearly oil consumption, it appears that North America's known recoverable reserves would last over one hundred years if we used them to meet half of our needs. This would certainly buy us a long period of energy independence while we develop alternative sources.

More complex examples are often found in reporting on public health issues and climate change. Skewed facts are used to promote public policy around conclusions which are not really supported by the raw data. I encourage you to check out articles on our web site on condoms preventing HPV and global warming for detailed examples on how statistics can be skewed.{6}

"Skewering the truth" is the most blatant technique for biased reporting where the journalist misrepresents the information and/or presents faulty conclusions as established fact. Oftentimes the first three forms of bias may be unintentional, but usually skewering the truth requires an overt attempt on the part of the journalist to deceive the recipient. One technique used to mask these misstatements of fact is to put them into the mouths of unidentified experts or couch them as general common knowledge among the well-informed. For example, a recent *Newsweek* article is subtitled "Opponents of gay marriage often cite Scripture. But what the Bible teaches about love argues for the other side."{7} In this article selective, liberal interpretations of scriptural passages are used to support the following conclusion: "Religious objections to gay marriage are rooted not in the Bible at all, then, but in custom and tradition."{8} For those of us who are students of the Bible, this statement is clearly false, but it is stated as a clear fact.

In another blatant example, Michael Ennis, in his article entitled "Dissing Darwin," claims that there is a correlation between what a state's education standards say about the teaching of evolution and the performance of its students on standardized science tests.{9} However, when we examined the

data he cited, we found that the actual correlation was exactly the opposite of what Ennis claimed. So, either he did not take the time to actually look at the information to see if it agreed with his claims or he hoped we would not take the time.

Uncovering Misinformation

If we are not to be taken captive by the philosophies of a godless world, it is important for us to be on the lookout for biased, agenda-driven reporting. Too many times Christians have been either unaware of the biased message or unconcerned about its impact. Looking back at the social and spiritual changes in our country over the last fifty years, we can see how this lack of awareness and concern have contributed to the emergence of dominant views on morality and religion that are counter to a biblical worldview.

The Bible instructs us to be on our guard. Let’s look as some things we should be doing to proclaim truth in a world filled with misinformation.

The first step we should take is to know what the Bible teaches and allow the Holy Spirit to use the scripture to bring discernment. As the letter to the Hebrews tell us,

> For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews 4:12-13).

Second, we need to be on the alert for the warning signs of misinformation. When we recognize the need for discernment, begin by asking God for wisdom in looking for and applying the truth:

> But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who

> gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him (James 1:5-6).

Then we need to ask ourselves some tough questions about the article or news report:

1. Does it begin with truth?
2. Is it logical?
3. Does it consider all of the evidence?
4. Does the conclusion make sense apart from the argument?
5. Does it stand up to close examination?

Based on the answers to those questions, we have a pretty good idea whether we need to be concerned about being deceived. If so, the next step is to do some digging into the background to see if any of the four techniques for biased reporting have been employed. In today's world, we can often use the internet to get access to source material that has been referenced by the journalist. However, in many cases the best way to check up on questionable reporting is to consult a trusted resource. Organizations like Probe have often already done the research. If we don't have something on the specific article, we will probably have information on the primary topic of interest.

Once you have done your research, go back to the Bible. God has the only perspective that cannot be deceived by the schemes of the world. Compare your conclusions with Scripture and ask the Holy Spirit to lead you in truth. When the facts are not clear, you will not go wrong by being biased in favor of a biblical worldview. Remember how David delighted in God's word, saying, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105).

Finally, share what you have uncovered with others. Don't let others you know be deceived. Follow the command to speak the truth in love. If you have done some research that other need to know, you may want to look for a venue to share it with a broader audience. One approach would be to contact us at Probe

to see if it is a topic we should address on our Web site.

Remember, deception may create detours in our lives, but truth will always be truth and will win out in the end.

Notes

1. Tim Groseclose and Jeffrey Milyo, "A Measure of Media Bias," www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/groseclose/Media.Bias.8.htm.
2. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Fontana, 1959), 128-29.
3. Terry Eastland, "The Collapse of Big Media," *The Wilson Quarterly*, Spring 2005.
4. Jonathan Weisman and Nell Henderson, "Economic News Isn't Helping Bush," *The Washington Post*, August 6, 2005, D1, accessed online at tinyurl.com/9krga.
5. NDTV.com, October 16, 2008, tinyurl.com/cfqbe8.
6. Steve Cable, Despite Media Claims, Condoms Don't Prevent STDs," Probe Ministries, 2006, and Ray Bohlin, "The Complex Realities Behind Global Warming," Probe Ministries, 2008.
7. Lisa Miller, "Our Mutual Joy," *Newsweek*, Dec 6, 2008, accessed online at www.newsweek.com/id/172653.
8. Ibid.
9. Michael Ennis, "Dissing Darwin," *Texas Monthly*, April 2005, accessed online at www.texasmonthly.com/preview/2005-04-01/ennis.

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Leftist Jewish Journalist

Survives Evangelical Beat

Quiz: What do you get when you take one leftist Jewish journalist, assign him to the evangelical Christian beat for major newspapers on both US coasts, sprinkle in some fiery sermons and politically conservative speeches, mix thoroughly, and bake with the heat of fiercely contested national elections?

Note: This is not a joke.

Sound like a recipe for nitroglycerin shortcake? Maybe you'd expect mutual animosity: "Those wacko God-squaders are at it again, imposing their beliefs and politics on the rest of us sane people." "He's just another example of the biased secular humanist liberal media that's ruining America."

Yet this cake hides no explosives. The leftist Jewish journalist made a significant discovery on the road to meeting deadlines, one he feels can instruct his colleagues and us all.

He says to effectively cover the strange tribe to which he was assigned, it helps to know its members as neighbors and friends. His lesson has affected his writing in ways that have conservative evangelicals commending him for fairness and that provide useful illustrations for managing today's turbulent culture wars.

A Jew Among the Evangelicals

Mark Pinsky's new book, *A Jew Among the Evangelicals: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Westminster John Knox), tells how this "nice Jewish boy from Jersey" ended up attending church "more often than many Christians" and sometimes more often than he attends his own synagogue. During his ten years covering religion for the *Los Angeles Times*, he focused on leaders of major evangelical ministries and had little connection with

local grassroots evangelicals.

When he moved to Florida in 1995 to write for the *Orlando Sentinel*, they were everywhere: In the neighborhood, at kids sporting events, birthday parties, PTA meetings, Scouts, "I encountered evangelicals simply as people, rather than as subjects or sources of quotes for my stories."

Still a committed Jew, Pinsky found they were neither monolithic nor, as *The Washington Post* once claimed, ""poor, uneducated and easy to command." They displayed surprising diversity on a range of issues including the Iraq war, environmentalism, tax policy, women in leadership, and immigration.

The Readable Radical

Disclaimer: Pinsky, whom I've known since our university days, is a personal friend, so I'm biased. But I've also observed a curious development here that merits wider consideration. His *Duke Chronicle* column was entitled "The Readable Radical" and he was at the vanguard of late-1960s campus leftist causes. I didn't always agree with his politics, but I admired his concerns about justice, hypocrisy and the disenfranchised.

He still votes with the Democratic left, but he also understands the Christian subculture he covers better than many of its members. Mutual respect characterizes his relations with its leaders.

Pinsky is not without good natured humor as he highlights evangelical quirks. Example: the Orlando golf club that hyped its Easter sunrise service and "Easter Egg Scramble" golf tournament. And, perhaps-not-so-tongue-in-cheek, he admits he especially likes about evangelical Christians that "if you are sorry, they have to forgive you." He knows their boss said, "When you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against{1}.

Lessons for Life in the Larger World

His book draws lessons from his peculiar and unlikely journey for life in the larger world. His stories of “how people just like you wrestle with feelings, values, and beliefs that touch the core of their beings” provide “a glimpse of someone learning to understand and get along with folks whose convictions differ from his own.”

Get to know your intellectual and philosophical adversaries, he recommends. Take them to lunch. Ratchet down the rhetoric. Maybe connection can produce understanding and civility can grow into bridgebuilding.

Not bad advice in a world too-often filled with brickbats and name calling.

Note

1. Mark 11:25 *New Living Translation*.

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