

Discussion Questions for Ethics Week #3a: Telling the Truth

I. Ethics in Evangelism and Mission

One of your friends, Jan, works as a fundraising director for ChristianVision, a Christian aid and relief organization that provides food and medical supplies to drought-ridden parts of sub-Saharan Africa. You are always impressed by the great advertising appeals Jan has put together. In fact, you have cut out one of these ads and taped it to your refrigerator so that you will remember to send in a donation. In the center of the ad is a picture of small African girl, perhaps five years old, trying to smile in a very uncertain way. Above the picture are the words, “She’s all alone now” and below the picture are the words “Who will help Meera?”

A few days later, you are thumbing your way through a Christian magazine and notice a picture of the same little girl. This time, however, the picture says, “Help Dina get the education her parents are too poor to give her. You can make a difference, one life at a time. Call ChristianVision today.”

Needless to say, you do call ChristianVision and ask Jan to explain to you how this one little girl can have two different names, live in two different countries and have two very different kinds of problems. Jan explains with embarrassment that Meera and Dina are actually made-up names and that their stories are each a composite of different people’s experiences, creatively compiled at the head office in Chicago on the basis of various project reports sent in from seven African countries.

What do you say? Is there an ethical issue regarding truthfulness, deception or misrepresentation here or not?

II. Ethics in Sermon Preparation and Preaching

Sometimes when you have free time on a Saturday, you skim the Internet for sermons on the biblical text that will be read and studied in the next day’s Sunday service. One Sunday you recognize that the preacher at your church has taken one of these Internet sermons and is using it almost word for word, even taking over the Internet sermon’s personal anecdotes and presenting them as if they were events that had happened to himself and his own family!

As members of the congregations leave the church, you hear a number of them congratulate the preacher on the fine, inspiring sermon he has preached and he accepts their praise. When you confront the preacher privately about this, he admits that he had found the sermon on the Internet, that he does this on a regular basis and doesn’t see any problem with this practice. Indignantly, he responds, “You laypeople just don’t understand what a pastor’s life is like! There’s never enough time to get everything done and you’ve just got to make some choices about how you’re going to deal with it! Better a sermon off the Internet than some garbage I threw together late Saturday night!”

What do you say?