



# FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

## Deception and Truth by Jill M. Johnson



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Differing concepts of truth and deception have always shaped our cultural and political conversations. During this time of Advent, what can we learn from the birth narratives of Jesus about both truth and deception? As Christians, how do we recognize deception and embrace truth?

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This issue of FAITHLINK is the second in a series of four lessons during this Advent season inspired by the book *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, by Miroslav Volf.

### Bias or Truth?

Each week I receive a weekly digest of the top news stories delivered to my e-mail. The digest is called “Story of the Week” and is published by the website AllSides. As stated on its website, AllSides seeks to “expose people to information and ideas from all sides of the political spectrum so they can better understand the world—and each other.” The publishers of the site believe that unbiased news doesn’t exist, and in response they seek to provide balanced coverage. Their goal is to strengthen democracy through diverse perspectives and real conversation.

For example, in its November 14 digest, AllSides reviewed news coverage of oral arguments before the Supreme Court about Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Sample headlines were shown from the center (“DACA Recipients Look to the Supreme Court for Hope”—NPR), the left (“Don’t Count on the Senate to Save Dreamers from SCOTUS”—*Politico*), and the right (“Overturning DACA Would Be a Win for the Constitution”—*National Review*). Following each headline was a short summary of how the story was presented. Unsurprisingly, each contained differing opinions and views.

Same facts, different presentation—which prompts the obvious question: What is truth?

How we see the truth doesn't just affect today; it also affects how that truth gets recorded in our history books. In the revised and updated version of the book *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Miroslav Volf examines the difference between memory and history. In the chapter titled “Deception and Truth,” Volf reminds us that history should be “a critical reconstruction of the past,” while memory is more often an “identity shaping remembrance of the past.” Volf writes that these boundaries are fluid, because all historical reconstructions are shaped by “particular identities and interests.”

For instance, when we think about the truth of something like the birth narratives of Jesus, as we often do this time of year, we have to consider that they too were shaped by the identity, politics, and personal memories of those involved. Nevertheless, those of us who love and respect Scripture find truth in these stories year after year.

**REFLECT:**

- What tools do you use to recognize media bias?
- How do you define *truth*? How do you define *deception*?
- What are your thoughts on the difference between history and memory?
- Consider an oft-told story in your family that's told differently depending on the teller. Whose memory do you trust and why?

## Grace and Truth

The **Gospel of John** mentions the word *truth* numerous times. Some of the most quoted verses in the Bible come from this book, such as when Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you have really known me, you will also know the Father. From now on you know him and have seen him” (14:6-7). In the opening words of this Gos-

pel, the writer introduces some beautifully poetic themes: union of the Word (Christ) with God from the beginning, life that comes from the Word, light that overcomes darkness, and, most importantly, a Christ who became flesh and “pitched his tent” to dwell with humans (1:1-18).

In 2006, N. T. Wright gave a sermon titled “Full of Grace and Truth” based off words found in **John 1:14**. In the sermon, Wright connects this phrase back to **Psalms 85:10-11**, which says, “Faithful love and truth have met; righteousness and peace have kissed. Truth springs up from the ground; righteousness gazes down from heaven.” **Psalms 85** is essentially a prayer for restoration and mercy during Israel's exile, and John's words echo the longing for this renewed vision.

According to Wright, “Grace is the fresh love of God coming from beyond our world, and truth is the plant which springs up, strong and tall and resilient, from within our world.” Wright says that while Christmas is about a birth, “in another sense it is about a wedding: the marriage of grace and truth, which is in fact the marriage of heaven and earth.” In Jesus, we see the fulfillment of the psalmist's longing. Free, unmerited grace meets truth, and we're invited into this new reality where God is both with us and for us.

**REFLECT:**

- What does the phrase *grace and truth* mean to you?
- N. T. Wright paints a picture of Advent as a wedding, a marriage of heaven and earth. How do you see the season of Advent? Does this imagery connect with you?
- Share your favorite verse about truth from Scripture, and explain why it's important to you.

## Who Can You Trust?

Whether it's related to our interactions with the media, politicians, family, or coworkers, we all struggle with trust. Discerning deception from truth is exhausting, but it's a daily task. To trust

someone is to know they will tell you the truth. We're constantly searching for a trustworthy person who has no ulterior motives or behaviors that they hide in the shadows. The writer of **Proverbs** advises, "People long for trustworthiness; it is better to be poor than a liar" (**19:22**).

I recently became part of a new community filled with its own preexisting trust issues. It's hard to walk into a new place with unfamiliar people and not know who you can trust. Everyone has their own agendas and viewpoints, and it's been a struggle to figure out how to navigate this new terrain as I try to be an example of trustworthiness myself. During this process, Scripture has become a source of strength and direction as I remember that God is truth and God is faithful.

No amount of deception or darkness can overcome the light, but we must continue to actively seek that light. In discussing truth, Volf shares a simple but often overlooked point: "Before you can search for truth you must be interested in finding it." In order to see Christ, we must constantly look for God's grace and truth in our daily lives.

*REFLECT:*

- Do you struggle with trust? If so, where?
- Who in your life is a source of trust and comfort?
- In what ways do you seek out and value truth as you go about your day?

## Core Bible Passages

Each Gospel paints a different picture about the birth of Jesus, and reconciling these stories can be difficult. Yet, as some have argued, a story doesn't have to be factual to be true.

In the **Gospel of Mark**, the birth narrative is omitted entirely. Writing to a Roman audience primarily concerned with social status, Mark cared more about who Jesus was than where he came from. All that mattered was that Jesus Christ is the good news (**Mark 1:1-3**).

The primary audience for Matthew, on the other hand, was the Jewish people. As a result, Matthew focused on lineage and sought to show how the birth of Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies. He presents Jesus as a ruler and shepherd but also as Emmanuel, or "God with us" (**Matthew 1:23; 2:6**). Included in Matthew's story are examples of deception, as Joseph intends to hide his engagement to Mary and the magi deceive Herod in order to help Joseph, Mary, and Jesus flee to Egypt (**1:18-2:23**).

Writing to the Gentiles, Luke offers his version of the facts. He even begins the book by saying, "Now, after having investigated everything carefully from the beginning . . ." (**Luke 1:3**). Women, shepherds, old people, and the poor get a much larger role in his story (**chapters 1, 2, 4**).

The **Gospel of John**'s poetic and mystical opening focuses not on Jesus' human birth but rather on his relationship to eternity. Connecting us back to **Genesis**, we learn of a preexistent Christ who is light and logos yet chooses to become human (**John 1:1-5**).

*REFLECT:*

- Can something can be true without being factual? Why or why not?
- Share your favorite birth narrative, and explain what you like about it.

## What's in a Name?

Jacob was pinned as a troublemaker even before he was born. His name literally means “to supplant or circumvent.” In **Genesis 25**, Jacob’s mother asks God why her twins are fighting in her womb, and God replies that this is a foreshadowing of the animosity that will exist between the two nations arising from them. Jacob will be the forefather of Israel, and Esau of rival Edom.

Perhaps spurred on by this prophecy, Jacob and his mother engage in a number of deceitful acts, including stealing Esau’s birthright as the firstborn son. Jacob also tricks his father, Isaac, into giving him what was to be Esau’s blessing (**Genesis 27**). While Jacob eventually receives a new name (Israel) and becomes the patriarch of the twelve tribes of Israel, it comes at a great cost.

In his song “Jacob,” Christian artist Chris Renzema paints a painfully human picture of Jacob, a man running from lies. The Jacob in this song says that since his mom called him a deceiver, he believed her. The next line includes Jacob lamenting, “Some nights I stay up and wonder, am I a con man or a brother? / But in the morning my heart wakes up numb.” In the chorus, Jacob shares how he craves forgiveness and redemption but admits how hard it is to be completely vulnerable before God, a stark contrast to his life of deception.

### REFLECT:

- Why do you think Jacob and his mother worked together to commit these acts of deception?
- Does complete vulnerability before God scare you? Share your thoughts about the need for honesty before God.

## A True Sermon

In an article for Preaching.com, John Bishop argues that John Wesley understood the importance of knowing one’s audience and intentionally aimed his writing at other preachers. These writings were filled with theological depth, but his sermons to people in the fields were different. According to Bishop, “The sermons he preached to the crowds were much lighter in texture, more anecdotal and more interesting to a popular audience. No man could preach incessantly, as Wesley did—often four or five times a day to all sorts of people—without getting to preach easily and conversationally.”

Wesley understood truth to mean simple speech. “I design plain truth for plain people. . . . I labor to avoid all words which are not easy to be understood, all which are not used in common life,” he said in one of his sermons. Wesley even understood the power of a three-point illustration for easy recollection. He said, “Our main doctrines . . . are three: That of repentance, of faith, and of holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third, religion itself.”

*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2016* contains a section on theological guidelines that explains the importance of Scripture, stating, “Through this faithful reading of Scripture, we may come to know the truth of the biblical message in its bearing on our own lives and the life of the world. Thus, the Bible serves both as a source of our faith and as the basic criterion by which the truth and fidelity of any interpretation of faith is measured.”

### REFLECT:

- How would you describe the nature of your speech? Do you speak truthfully and plainly?
- Why is it important to understand your audience when you’re trying to communicate?

## Helpful Links

- A video from AllSides explaining news bias: <https://youtu.be/xTfYdlzxhiI>
- The full text of Dr. N. T. Wright's sermon can be found here: <http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/03/29/full-of-grace-and-truth/>
- The full text of the "Theological Guidelines: Scripture" section of the *Book of Discipline*: <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/theological-guidelines-scripture>
- "Jacob," by Chris Renzema: <https://youtu.be/ssCOOw3r9u4>
- Summary of the Netflix documentary *Tell Me Who I Am*, by *Time*: <https://time.com/5706370/tell-me-who-i-am-netflix-true-story/>
- Find the book *Exclusion & Embrace, Revised and Updated: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, by Miroslav Volf, at Cokesbury: <https://www.cokesbury.com/p-9781501861079-Exclusion-and-Embrace--Revised-and-Updated-1-1-1>

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or at <http://www.facebook.com/faithlinkconnectingfaithandlife>.

## Next Week in FaithLink Connecting Faith and Life

### Oppression and Justice

by Doug Paysour

In the wake of damaging wildfires in recent years, some Native Americans have been working to reclaim practices that helped protect the land for thousands of years. Why were these and many other traditions suppressed? What can the experience of Native Americans teach us about injustice and oppression? How can we as Christians help create a more just world?

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## Opening Prayer

Jesus, in you we have the perfect example of truth. We can always trust you and never doubt your guidance for our lives. Open our hearts, even the dark areas where falsehood resides, as we discuss the topic of truth and deception. In you we find forgiveness and embrace, even when we fail. Thank you for your everlasting love. Amen.

## Leader Helps

- Have several Bibles on hand (or encourage participants to use smartphone Bible apps) and a mark-erboard and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own. Invite participants to take a moment to take a few deep breaths in and out. Spend a few moments in silence before praying.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions to stimulate discussion.
- Set aside some time for spiritual reflection. Make sure everyone has something to write on and to write with. Read aloud John 8:32. Read it again, and encourage participants to spend a few moments in silence, reflecting on this verse. Read it a third time, then state: “Write down those areas of your life where truth hasn’t reached you and where lies keep you in bondage. What are you hiding from God? What are you hiding from yourself? From what do you long to be set free?”
- Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

## Teaching Alternatives

As a group, watch the Netflix documentary *Tell Me Who I Am*, which was released in October. This film covers the lives of twin brothers Alex and Marcus Lewis. After Alex suffers a traumatic head injury at the age of 18, his memory is completely erased. It’s up to Marcus to fill in the missing pieces of their childhood. Marcus chooses to paint a picture of an idyllic childhood, rather than tell Alex the truth, in order to protect them both from painful memories. The documentary is a fascinating examination of when deception is justified and the consequences for hiding the truth. The trailer can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLjaRjaGjRc>. (Note: Please be advised that this film includes descriptions of child sexual abuse.)

## Closing Prayer

God of grace and truth, your light shines in us and around us, and the darkness will never overtake your glory. Help us to seek authenticity in our speech, actions, and relationships so that others will only see a genuine devotion to you. Fill us with your Spirit that always leads to truth. Amen.