

4 Communication Lessons Churches Can Learn from the Brian Williams Controversy

Brian Williams seems like a good guy. He's been married for almost 30 years ... consistently reported news to the American public for *NBC News* for almost as long ... gosh, **the guy even won "Father of the Year"!** [\[ref\]](#)

Over the last six months, it all started to unravel for him. He was caught bending the truth in a number of stories to make himself sound even better than he is and it cost him a lot. **The pattern is that as time passed he put himself closer to the action than he really was for dramatic effect.** Rather than seeing a helicopter being fired on, he told the story of how the helicopter he was in was shot down ... instead of reporting on what the SEAL team did in Iraq, he claimed to be there with them ... he reported that he arrived at the Berlin Wall as it was coming down, but in fact he arrived the next morning.

This story makes my skin crawl, because the same impulse that was inside Brian Williams is inside me. I can see the pride that drove him to do this, because I see that same pride in myself. Unless **we keep our egos in check, we can find ourselves in the same spot that Brian did,** bending the truth to put ourselves closer to the center of the action so people will be drawn to us.

The Brian Williams controversy brings up some areas we should think about carefully as we communicate in our churches:

- **Let the truth get in the way of a good story //** Sometimes the truth isn't a good story. It's not as neat and tidy as we're tempted to make it. What actually happened doesn't fit the narrative we're trying to tell, so we are tempted to nip and tuck the story to fit the point we're trying to make. We push the story from being polished to being re-written. Don't force a story to become bigger, better or more interesting than it actually is to get your point across. Use a clip from a movie or television show ... those people are in the storytelling business and will get your point across in a form that is clearly narrative in nature. (Preachers: Pay close attention to this with your kids. If you tell a story that doesn't sound like what actually happened, they will know and it will erode their trust.)
- **How big is your church? Really? //** Is your Sunday morning attendance averaging 415, but you report it as almost 500 attending? Did 20 students and 10 leaders attend your youth event, but you said close to 40 people came? Did 102 people sign up for your conference, but you report well over 100 people are signed up already? It's so easy and tempting to fall into this game. So much about ministry is difficult to track and measure, so we hold onto attendance numbers as a sign of our effectiveness. We want to be bigger than we are, because we believe it shows greater effectiveness. I recently learned that one of the largest churches in the country under-reports its numbers by a significant margin, because their lead pastor doesn't want to get caught up in this game. My respect for that leader and this ministry shot up! I was also humbled, because I've played this game in the past.
- **We're not that big of a deal //** I think part of where it started to unravel for Brian

Williams was when he ventured beyond reporting on the news to becoming a personality. A number of times when he embellished stories, he wasn't on the news program, but on other entertainment-oriented programs (*Late Night with David Letterman*, *Saturday Night Live*, etc.). Being a news anchor is not nearly as exciting or adventurous as what most of the guests on those programs do. Brian stretched the truth to distance himself from his normal day job and make himself look cooler. We face the same temptation as church leaders. If there was a scale of "social importance" or "coolness factor," church leadership would be low on the list and getting lower all the time. It's a noble calling, but what we do is misunderstood by wide segments of our communities and we could face a similar temptation to make what we do sound cooler than it actually is. I remember hearing the story of a pastor who introduced himself as a "life coach and motivational speaker," because pastor didn't sound good enough. I threw up a little when I heard that. We're church leaders and, honestly, it's not that cool. Even the biggest of churches are dwarfed by the communities they serve. Avoid the temptation to jazz up what we do for a living.

- **Style over substance** // Brian Williams looks like he was genetically constructed to anchor the news. In fact, he has shaped his appearance, speech patterns, gestures, eye contact and more to play that role. He was playing a character and he tried to extend it into more exciting roles. Leading within the church can present itself with a similar challenge. If we're not careful, we can focus on external cues that help people follow us—our looks, the pattern of our speech, our clothing, etc.—but fail to develop our internal character. I recently heard a friend give some stellar advice to another friend who is the "heir apparent" to a large church. He encouraged his friend to "work on your character so when the time comes to assume leadership, you'll have the internal life to actually accept it fully." There is a "performance side" to our leadership within the church. We need to foster the internal spiritual life to match the external life we display for people.

I'd love to hear from you. In what other areas do you think church leaders are tempted to bend the truth? When have you been tempted?

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