

# What Missionaries Ought to Know about Rumors

More than a century ago Louis Stern conducted an experiment on rumors in which a “chain” of people passed a story from “mouth to ear” without repeating or explaining anything. He found that the story was shortened and changed as it passed through the chain.

This experiment became a parlor game in which people often purposely changed things to make it humorous. However, the story changes even if people really try to pass it on accurately. To see for yourself ask four or five people to pass the following paragraph to one another.

“Pablo woke with a start. It was 7:27AM, barely time for him to get through Madrid and catch his flight. He quickly tossed things into his backpack carryon and barely made it to the gate on time. Reaching into his backpack about three hours into his flight to New York while sitting near the rear of the 747, Pablo discovered the souvenir foot-long “sword” he had purchased in Toledo. How had it ever cleared security in Madrid? As soon as he landed at JFK, he found a trash can and discretely discarded it.”

If a story of less than 100 words can be changed by passing through so few people, imagine what changes occur as longer stories are passed through many people. This is one way stories become rumors. Such rumors about missionaries may occur with devastating effects.

## What are rumors?

Rumors are unverified information from an unknown source. This information

may have been started intentionally or unintentionally, and it may be true or false or a mixture of both. When you hear someone begin with “I heard that...” or “They say that...” a rumor is likely to follow. Rumors often go by other names, such as the following.

- News, beginning with, “I learned some news today....”
- Hearsay, beginning with, “I heard that....”
- Gossip, beginning with “Have you heard...?”
- Grapevine, beginning with, “I heard someone in the other office say that....”
- Urban legends “I found this all over the Internet...”
- Prayer requests, beginning with “I don’t want to mention any names but...”

## What can rumors do?

Rumors can have positive or negative effects in many areas. They are used to win elections or to cause others to lose elections. They are used to help pass legislation or to help defeat legislation. However, missionaries are most concerned about certain negative effects.

- They may damage a cause. For example, rumors about spying may thwart efforts by an NGO bringing in relief supplies.
- They may hurt a ministry. For example, rumors about heretical theology may end the effectiveness of a church.
- They may destroy a reputation. For example, someone accused of sexual misconduct may lose his or her position in an organization serving others.

Even when malicious rumors are intentionally started, are totally false, and the ones who began them confess what they did,

the rumors may continue to hamper a ministry so much that the innocent persons have to leave the host country or quit their ministry.

## What does the Bible say about rumors?

Of course, in the Old Testament the Ten Commandments forbid giving false testimony about people (Exodus 20:16). At the end of the New Testament liars are condemned to a lake of fire (Revelation 21:8).

When paid to do so by the chief priests and elders, the guards at the tomb spread rumors about Jesus and his disciples. Those rumors were still circulating years later (Matthew 28:11-15).

People in many places spread rumors of various kinds about Paul, early missionary.

- Antioch (Pisidian): They “talked abusively against” him (Acts 13:45).
- Iconium: They “poisoned their minds” (Acts 14:2).
- Philippi: They said Paul was “advocating customs unlawful for us” (Acts 16:21).
- Thessalonica: They said that Paul had “caused trouble all over the world” and was “defying Caesar’s decrees” (Acts 17:6-7).
- Berea: They were “agitating the crowds” (Acts 17:13).

Rumors about missionaries were obviously common in Bible times. While preaching in Galilee, Jesus also said that people would have to give account for every careless (idle, thoughtless) word they had spoken (Matthew 12:36). Before passing on hearsay, missionaries must check its truthfulness.

## How do rumors spread?

Louis Stern originally defined rumors as passing from “mouth to ear.” However, inventions near the end of the twentieth century increased the ways rumors can spread. Here are some of the more recent ones.

- Voicemail. The telephone was available when Stern did his experiment, but it was still one person talking directly with another. With voicemail, people can leave rumors for others to hear later in time.
- Email. Email allows people to spread rumors to dozens or thousands of others with a click of the mouse. They can simply forward the original or add comments of their own.
- Websites. Anyone with a computer, Internet access, and a few dollars can develop their own website on which they can post nearly anything they want. They can leave rumors for someone to find.
- Social Networks. Millions of people belong to social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. Though these networks rumors can spread to millions of people worldwide in hours.

Once a rumor enters this digital world it seems to take on a life of its own and become an “urban legend.” This does not mean that it originated in an urban area but is just the label given to unverified stories from unknown sources that circulate widely, often digitally.

Even after such a rumor is clearly identified as false, it tends to resurface months or years later, often in a slightly modified form. Once it has been digitized, it may turn up over and over.

## What do you do when you hear a rumor?

The most important thing to do is not to pass it on. Avoid becoming part of the “chain” that keeps the rumor alive if tempted to pass it along. Sometimes the email comes with instructions to forward it to “everyone you know” along with an implied threat that if you do not do so something terrible will happen. Do not be misled—don’t forward it.

If you are unsure and want to check out the facts, [www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com) is the best Internet reference source for determining the truthfulness of urban legends, folklore, myths, rumors, and misinformation. When you find out the truth, you may want to let the person who sent you the rumor know what those facts are—along with a gentle reminder to check such things before sending them along.

If you find out that the rumor is true, certainly pray for the person or persons involved.

If you cannot verify either the truth or falsity of the information, you can ask the person. Of course, do it in a non-condemning way, noting that you do not think it is true. That person may not even know what is circulating about him or her. If so, they will most likely be thankful that you told them. Also offer to help in any way that you can.

## What can you do if you are the victim of a rumor?

First, pray and ask God for his protection from the falsehood and ask for his

guidance as you decide how to act. Just as you would pray for someone else, pray for yourself. Also talk with trusted friends and ask for their prayers as well.

It would be nice if there were “12 easy steps to squelching rumors,” but such is not the case. Note how Paul responded to each of the situations he faced.

- Antioch (Pisidian): Paul and Barnabas “answered them boldly.” (Acts 13:46).
- Iconium: Paul and Barnabas “spent considerable time there, speaking boldly” (Acts 14:3).
- Philippi: After being beaten and arrested, Paul and Silas prayed to God and sang (Acts 16:25).
- Thessalonica: Jason and others posted bond for Paul and Silas and sent them off (Acts 17:9-10).
- Berea: The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast where he was escorted to his next destination (Acts 17:14-15).

Note that sometimes Paul spoke boldly, at other times he left, and at still other times he prayed and sang to God. There is no one correct way to cope with being the victim.

However, also note that Paul never responded alone. In each case he had friends who were there to help and advise him. Having the support and counsel of other like-minded people is probably one of the best things a missionary can do.

Finally, something you can do today that Paul could not do is send the truth to everyone you know who got the misinformation. Just as malicious rumors can spread quickly, so can the truth. If the rumors were partly true, and you did something wrong, come clean. If it is true, don’t deny or admit only part.

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