

Ethicists suggest delete mean-spirited e-mails

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Blessed are they who hit the “delete” key instead of “forward” when it comes to mean-spirited e-mails of questionable veracity, several Christian ethicists suggested.

Christians have a responsibility to tell the truth and to tell it in love, they agreed. They suggested several guides:

- **Administer the “smell test.”** Christians should ask if any e-mail passes the “smell test” before passing it along, said Bill Tillman, holder of the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian ethics at Hardin-Simmons University’s [Logsdon Seminary](#) . If “something just doesn’t smell right about this,” delete the message, he suggested.



Passing along stinky e-mails that fail the test can damage a Christian’s witness. David Gushee, distinguished university professor of Christian ethics at [Mercer University](#) , suggested a couple of pointed questions to ask: “Is this one of those mass e-mail forwards so often shown to be filled with innuendo and half-truths? Do I really want to be one of those people who fills up other people’s in-boxes with forwarded e-mails?”

Obvious warning signs that signal questionable content include inadequate or invisible sources, sourcing in obviously partisan or ideologically agenda-driven sources or readily apparent defamatory speech, he added.

- **Don’t just trust. Verify.** Christians have a responsibility to ensure the

truthfulness of any information they communicate, the ethicists agreed.

Tillman recommended using trusted fact-checking websites such as www.snopes.com, www.truthorfiction.com and www.hoax-slayer.com.

He also suggested checking the original source of information.

“The integrity of the sender—the original sender—can verify the authenticity of the information,” he said.

“So much copy/paste work can be done now that even verification processes won’t always reveal some of the real sources of an e-mail. Notice the amount or lack of details. Embellished e-mails’ content gets deleted last and forwarded more quickly. But check the modifiers, language (and) formatting. Do they scream off the screen? If they do, the e-mail is probably questionable.”

- **Consider the “seven deadlies.”** Before forwarding an e-mail, Robert Kruschwitz, director of the [Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University](#), suggested asking whether the desire to spread the message relates to any of the seven deadly sins—lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride.

“Is this titillation, preoccupied with our pleasures or financial profit, vain or envious, misguided striking back at our enemies or a time-wasting distraction?” he recommends asking.

- **Check motives.** First, consider why someone wrote the e-mail in the first place. Gushee suggested asking: “What are the likely motives of those who sent me this e-mail?”

Next, Christians should examine their own motives. Before passing along information—or a juicy story by e-mail—Christians should ask themselves what prompts their desire, Tillman said. Ask: “Just what is it about me that I have to pass along something that may make someone else appear

smaller, weaker or dumber?”

Self-examination may reveal “our fear that we are not appreciated and our views are not taken seriously, and thus our desire to make ourselves and our perspective look better by making someone else, or their views, look worse,” Kruschwitz added.

- **Measure gossip against the Golden Rule.** “If the e-mail is about someone’s character, is the content something I would be willing to say to another’s face? If one passes the content on, will there be any advancement of the values of the kingdom of God?” Tillman suggested asking.

Gushee advised Christians to ask if they have checked the information with the person being attacked or those who represent that person.

When it comes to digitally transmitted gossip, Gushee recommended applying the Golden Rule in terms of “pass on accusations about others as you would want others to pass on accusations about you.”