

## “We Believe in Being Honest”

MATTHEW L. CARPENTER

My wife, Shelly, and I recently returned from serving for three years in the area presidency of the Africa Central Area. We loved it. We loved the people and the opportunity to see firsthand the Lord hastening His work in Africa. The Church is growing rapidly there. Many of the noble people of Africa believe in Jesus Christ and seek the greater hope that comes from Him. They live simply.

Let me show you a picture of a boy coming home from school, playing in the rain. [A photo was shown.] He’s having a great time, but he’s really getting drenched. We found that many Africans are quick to laugh in the face of challenges. For many living in Africa, economic challenges are very real. In several countries the official unemployment rate is 30 percent, and the unofficial unemployment rate can be as high as 70 percent. Many live on less than a dollar a day.

With that background, listen to this true story of a missionary who was completing his mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He was a faithful and diligent missionary. When the day

arrived for him to go home to Liberia—one of the poorest nations in Africa—his mission president in the Democratic Republic of the Congo provided him with one hundred dollars in cash to cover any unexpected expense he might incur on his trip home.

In Africa, traveling is complicated, and there are frequent delays in flight schedules. The one hundred dollars—drawn from Church funds designated to support missionary needs—was given with the instruction that the returning missionary was to use it for food and any bus, taxi, or lodging expense incurred on his way home. He was asked to keep track of his expenses and to provide receipts, along with any unused money, to the priesthood leader who would be releasing him.

When the missionary landed in his home country, he was greeted by his priesthood leader—the mission president in his home country. The priesthood leader extended to him a release as a full-time missionary. At the conclusion of the release interview, this young returned missionary handed his priesthood leader ninety

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dollars and the receipts for the ten dollars spent en route. After the interview, the local priesthood leader drove this young man some distance into the bush near his village. When they arrived at the place where his mother was waiting for him by the roadside, the missionary got out of the car. As the mission president watched this young man walk away with his mother, he realized that the ninety dollars could have fed this young man's family for many months.

Sometimes there is a temptation for a returning missionary living in a poor country to say that they lost the receipts and that they spent all the travel money—and then keep any remaining funds for themselves or their family. But this elder did not fall to that temptation. This young man proved that day that he could be trusted—he was honest and true.<sup>1</sup>

President Howard W. Hunter taught:

*We should always remember that we are never alone. There is no act that is not observed; there is no word spoken that is not heard; there is no thought conceived in the mind of man that is not known to God. There is no darkness that can conceal the things we do.*<sup>2</sup>

Let me repeat that: “There is no darkness that can conceal the things we do.”

Isn't it interesting that when Adam and Eve heard the voice of God after they had transgressed in the Garden of Eden they “hid themselves from the presence of the Lord”?<sup>3</sup> The enemy of our souls not only tempts us to sin but, when we sin, also tries to maintain power over us by suggesting that we should hide our sin, cover it up, and not seek the healing that comes from God. Satan wants to keep us in darkness. God brings all things to light.

### Underlying Doctrinal Basis

In our last general conference, President Russell M. Nelson encouraged us all to “think celestial”:

*The very things that will make your mortal life the best it can be are exactly the same things that will make your life throughout all eternity the best it can be! Today, to assist you to qualify for the rich blessings*

*Heavenly Father has for you, I invite you to adopt the practice of “thinking celestial”!*<sup>4</sup>

I love that talk from President Nelson. As I pondered his words and his invitation, I asked the question “What are the characteristics of those who live in the celestial kingdom?” That is where we all want to be.

The scriptures tell us that those who live in that kingdom are “those who are just and true.”<sup>5</sup> They personify the attribute outlined in the thirteenth article of faith: “We believe in being honest.”<sup>6</sup> As we “think celestial,” are we thinking about being honest and true?

Additionally, those in that kingdom are those who “shall overcome all things,”<sup>7</sup> who “shall dwell in the presence of God and his Christ forever and ever.”<sup>8</sup> They become even as God and Christ are.<sup>9</sup>

Well, what are God and Christ like?

They are beings of light and truth. There is no darkness in Them. Because They are full of light, it is contrary to Their nature to lie or to hide some dark deed in a shadow. They are brighter than the sun at noonday.<sup>10</sup> There is no shadow or darkness in Them.

God is “a God of truth, and canst not lie.”<sup>11</sup>

Christ is “the way, the truth, and the life.”<sup>12</sup>

Christ and God the Father are the personification of truth. *They are truth!*

Elder Neil L. Andersen taught this beautifully. He said:

*God our Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, are beings of absolute, perfect, and complete honesty and truth. We are sons and daughters of God. Our destiny is to become like Him. We seek to be perfectly honest and true like our Father and His Son. Honesty describes the character of God (see Isaiah 65:16), and therefore honesty is at the very heart of our spiritual growth and spiritual gifts.*<sup>13</sup>

What are the implications of God and Christ being completely honest? Because God and Christ, by definition, are truth and They cannot lie, we can trust whatever They say. The scriptures teach this clearly: “For as I, the Lord God, liveth, even so my words cannot return void, for as they go forth out of my mouth they *must* be fulfilled.”<sup>14</sup>

God keeps His promises. He is all-powerful. When He gives or speaks His word, He has the capacity and the character to keep His covenants.

When He says we are His child—a child of God—we can believe it. Conversely, when we hear voices telling us that we are worthless and a failure, those voices are *not* coming from God. They are coming from Satan and his followers—adversaries of our souls.

When God says we are forgiven, we can believe it. As with Enos, our guilt relating to a sin we confess and forsake can be “swept away,” for we know that God cannot lie.<sup>15</sup>

God has not, He does not, and He will not lie!

With that as a doctrinal context, let’s take a few minutes to see how we respond to the following three multiple-choice questions.

For those here in the Marriott Center, we invite you to take the survey with the help of Google and a QR code shown on the jumbotron. Now, we’re kind of breaking new ground here—let’s see how it works. Please use your phone to respond. Please be honest. Also, I invite you to reflect on what the Spirit is teaching you as you respond.

### **Question 1: Religious Interviews**

During interviews with your bishop or stake president, are you

- a. Completely honest
- b. Mostly honest, disclosing sins only if asked directly
- c. Answering in a way that ensures you receive your endorsement or recommend, even if it means being less than truthful

### **Question 2: Social Media Accuracy**

As you represent yourself on social media, are you

- a. Completely accurate
- b. Mostly accurate, with only a few embellishments
- c. Accurate half of the time
- d. Posting anything to make you look good, even if it’s not true

### **Question 3: Academic Integrity**

When taking exams or completing school assignments, do you follow the instructions of the professor and refrain from cheating

- a. Always
- b. Most of the time
- c. Half of the time
- d. Do what it takes to achieve the highest grade, even if it means cheating

### **Reviewing the Results**

For the question on honesty in religious interviews, the results were about 87 percent for answer *a* and around 12 percent for answer *b*.

For the question regarding social media, the results were about 62 percent for answer *a* and around 35 percent for answer *b*.

For the question on academic integrity, the results were about 64 percent for answer *a* and around 33 percent for answer *b*.

What impressions are coming to your mind? Do you need to make any changes personally?

In a recent study, approximately 40 percent of United States residents reported that they lied often.<sup>16</sup>

What does it mean for us to be honest?

Some may say that to be honest means that we do not tell lies. While not telling lies is certainly a component of being honest, honesty is not just about not lying. It is also about not deceiving, misleading, or stating half-truths.

Let’s look at a few true-life examples that illustrate different aspects of being honest and true. I invite you to consider what the Holy Ghost reveals to you personally as we listen to these examples.

### **Example Number 1: Honesty with Church Leaders**

Let’s talk about situations we all face: ecclesiastical interviews.

While I was serving as a stake president, a young man came for an interview prior to submitting his missionary application. The interview began something like this. I said:

*If there is any serious sin, it is better to resolve that sin now in a private, confidential manner with your*

*bishop and stake president. If you wait and confess serious sin in the mission field, it becomes more complicated. The sin becomes even more serious because of the lie to conceal it. If you delay repentance by not confessing any serious sin, Satan gains more power over you. Satan seeks to keep us bound by sin, and he succeeds when we don't confess. Confession of serious sin to an ecclesiastical leader is an essential part of spiritual healing.*<sup>17</sup>

After I shared this with the young man, he answered the questions I asked, stating that he was fully worthy—but something didn't feel quite right, so we set up another meeting for the following week to continue our interview. At the beginning of our interview the next week, the young man confessed to a long-standing sinful addiction.

During interviews, do we ever resort to sharing incomplete truths, misleading statements, or even blatant lies? At times we may not want to confront the truth of our sins because of embarrassment or the fear of appearing imperfect. We may be tempted to give evasive responses that can mislead—or we may even outright lie.<sup>18</sup>

Dear brothers and sisters, if we lie and enter the mission field unworthily or lie and obtain a BYU endorsement unworthily or lie and enter the temple unworthily,<sup>19</sup> we compound our sins. We act contrary to the Light of Christ in us. We push away the Holy Ghost. When we hide or cover up our sins, we open ourselves to be under the power of Satan, and that is a path of darkness, not light. We are not “thinking celestial.”<sup>20</sup>

Studies have shown that each time we lie or mislead others, each consecutive lie makes us feel less and less bad. In short, we become “past feeling,”<sup>21</sup> and we become prey to the adversary of our souls, who “leadeth them by the neck with a flaxen cord, until he bindeth them with his strong cords forever.”<sup>22</sup>

Elder Andersen stated:

*When we desire to repent, honesty becomes crucially important. . . .*

*. . . Any type of deceit delays the repentance process. . . .*

*When we seek out the Savior's forgiveness, only total and complete honesty will open that important door.*

*Remember, God knows the thoughts and intentions of our heart.*<sup>23</sup>

If we have made mistakes, Christ stands ready to forgive us now—as soon and as often as we truly repent. When we repent, our guilt is swept away, and we feel “peace of conscience.”<sup>24</sup>

What a great feeling that is.

The young man preparing for his mission fully confessed. We delayed the submission of his mission papers for a time. The full confession helped him to seek help; he fully repented of his sins and entered the mission field worthily, free of the addiction that had been binding him.

If we are “thinking celestial,” we are honest in our interviews with our ecclesiastical leaders.

What has the Holy Ghost revealed to you in this example?

### **Example Number 2: Honesty in Relationships**

How do we represent ourselves online?

One study found that 43 percent of men admitted to making up facts about themselves online.<sup>25</sup> I guess that's what guys do.

That same study found that more than 80 percent of men and women reported that their Facebook profile did not display a completely accurate reflection of themselves and their lives.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps more importantly, how do we represent ourselves to our friends, our family members, or our spouse—or, for those who are single, our future spouse?

The following is a true story I share with permission, and the names have been changed. A former student at BYU shared the following experience about choosing her marriage partner:

*While I was dating at BYU, the principle of honesty in my romantic relationships ultimately helped me decide whom I wanted to marry. When Sam and I were in a serious relationship, I shared with him my desire for complete transparency in my future marriage relationship. For me, transparency was very important. Sam was transparent, vulnerable, and honest about his weaknesses, even though it was hard work to be open. I knew that, through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, he was clean and worthy and could overcome his weaknesses. We dated for many more months but eventually*

*knew it wasn't right for us to get married at that time because of other areas in which we both needed to grow individually.*

*Much later I started going on dates with Jack. We both saw the potential for marriage someday. However, Jack was not willing to be transparent and vulnerable with me. I felt a renewed sense of gratitude for Sam's willingness to be honest, even when it wasn't easy. I desired that transparency again because I knew that being vulnerable and open ultimately could lead to a greater unity in a marriage. Through a series of small miracles, Sam and I got back together, and we both felt it was right for us to progress toward celestial marriage. A year later we chose to be sealed to each other in the temple. Now, years later, we are happily married with a family of our own and are eternally grateful for the principle of honesty.<sup>27</sup>*

This wise couple understood the principle that when we are transparent at the appropriate time as a relationship progresses toward an eternal marriage, we can help each other to draw more quickly upon the grace of the Atonement of Jesus Christ to overcome our weaknesses. We can also avoid triggers that potentially lead to recommitting past sins, and we can progress more rapidly toward exaltation. And isn't that what it's all about?

It is natural for each of us to want to have others like us, think highly of us, and respect us. We want to say the right things, make a good impression, and look our best. These desires and efforts are normal and acceptable as long as we are honest. Being honest and true means that we do not mislead in how we represent ourselves to others, online or in person.

After this mortal probation, there will be no secrets. All the works of men will be known. As pointed out earlier, God and Christ are beings of light and have no darkness in Them. If we are to "become the sons [and daughters] of God" and "be like him,"<sup>28</sup> we need to be honest in our relationships, particularly in marriage.

When we marry, we are commanded to cleave unto each other, to be unified with our spouse, to be one.<sup>29</sup> There is no other mortal on the earth who should be more interested in our everlasting welfare than our spouse to whom we are sealed.

As President Nelson has taught, "Salvation is an individual matter; exaltation is a family matter."<sup>30</sup> Our spouse sees us at our best and at our worst. If we are appropriately vulnerable, meek, humble, and transparent with our spouse and sincerely ask for his or her help as we seek to draw upon the grace of the Atonement of Jesus Christ to overcome our weaknesses, our spouse can provide loving encouragement and support in our journey.

I have a personal testimony of this principle. As a young man and during my mission, I had many opportunities for leadership and public speaking—in some cases speaking to groups of up to ten thousand people. For an eighteen-year-old, that was a big deal. Public speaking for me was easy and natural. After my mission I experienced a mental block, and I struggled to overcome a paralyzing fear of public speaking for more than fifteen years. I could not speak to more than two people at a time. The thought of giving a presentation in a classroom or speaking in a sacrament meeting was terrifying. I would sweat all the way down to my belt buckle.

Although I didn't know it at the time, I had been experiencing what we now know as panic attacks and anxiety. This became a significant stumbling block not only in college but also professionally and in the Church. I shared this fear with my dear wife, Shelly. With her support and the help of God, I learned to overcome this fear by focusing on others and on the message that needed to be conveyed.

For forty-one years of marriage with my best friend, Shelly, I have found that if I am open and honest with her about my weaknesses and struggles and she with me, with the help of God we can help each other to overcome our weaknesses. As we work together in unity, we are stronger and closer in our marriage. We have no secrets from each other. And that is a great joy, my brothers and sisters.

I invite you to review your communication, both online and in person. Are you misleading others by sharing partial truths? If so, I invite you to change and to be totally honest. Let others—particularly those who are close to you, such as Heavenly Father and your spouse or your prospective spouse—know you and love you for who

you really are. I witness that Heavenly Father sees you for who you are, and He loves you. He can help us overcome our weaknesses and our sins, but we must be honest with Him.

### Example Number 3: Honesty in Academic Life

This example focuses on school assignments and tests.

A professor here at BYU shared the following when I asked him whether or not he had experienced anyone cheating on exams or assignments. He said:

*I tried letting the students take the exam online—closed notes and closed book. I discovered that a couple of students had the clever idea of all being in the same room at the same time while one student took the exam. That enabled them to all help him to do well, and it allowed all of them to see the questions and answers before they took the exam. I only found out about it . . . because one of the women who participated had been . . . consumed by her guilt, so she came in and confessed and told me how they had all cheated.*<sup>31</sup>

This professor went on to share his perspective on students who cheat:

*One of the challenges I've seen with all of this is not that these are bad kids. But they do rob themselves of the opportunity that school was designed to be. . . . If you plow through school just trying to figure out how to get the best grade and the highest GPA, you limit the actual learning that takes place.*<sup>32</sup>

This professor told me that because the woman was honest, she did not fail the exam or the class but did incur some penalties. Others who cheated and did not come forth failed the class.

If you are honest, you do not cheat.<sup>33</sup>

Final exams are coming up in just a few days. Finals bring a lot of pressure and some sleepless nights. I remember those days well.

Brothers and sisters, school is not so much about getting a grade but about shaping you to be men and women who are not only proficient in your field of study but—particularly at BYU—men and women who are honest and true.<sup>34</sup>

As the adversary of your soul tempts you to cheat on school assignments or on an exam or anywhere or anytime in life, I invite you to consider Jesus Christ. Do you think that the Savior of mankind cheated going through the Atonement? He paid the price for every sin for those who repent. That means He suffered for everyone. He did not take a shortcut, bypassing anyone with the last name that begins with the letter *A* or *Z*. He lovingly and dutifully completed the assignment from Heavenly Father to take upon Himself *all* our sins.

Jesus Christ is not a cheater.

Jesus Christ stands ready to lift and empower you as you are honest with Him and follow His direction.<sup>35</sup>

### Invitation

I invite you to follow Jesus Christ and to be honest in all you do. Be honest in your ecclesiastical interviews. And, where needed, seek the peace and healing that comes through repentance. Be honest in your relationships with God and with your friends and family, especially your spouse. Be honest in your academic and professional pursuits.

As you are honest in all you do, you will feel happier. You will feel more full of light. You will feel more confident and more comfortable in your relationships with others. I testify that God is honest. He is a God of truth. Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Light. *We can trust Him.*

During this Christmas season, I testify that Christ was born of Mary in Bethlehem, that He lived a life of honesty and truth, and that He lives today. He is the light of this world. Because He is the light of this world, as we come closer to Him, He can illuminate our lives and enlighten our minds with more guidance on what we need to do to overcome the natural man and woman in us. He is 100 percent honest. He completed the Atonement for each and every one of God's children.

He did not skip over you; He did not skip over me; He did not skip over anyone. We can trust Him to judge us perfectly because He knows us perfectly—knowing why we do what we do and knowing how best to help us overcome any sin or weakness.

This Christmas, may we consider how we will more fully turn to Him. May we be more honest and true in our lives. May we listen and follow as He answers us and guides us to overcome our weaknesses and sins. May we “think celestial” and be honest and true as disciples of Christ. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

### Notes

1. Elder Marcus B. Nash of the Seventy recounted the story of the missionary serving in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Elder Matthew L. Carpenter.
2. Howard W. Hunter, “The Message: Basic Concepts of Honesty,” *New Era*, February 1978; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Howard W. Hunter* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), 239.
3. Genesis 3:8.
4. Russell M. Nelson, “Think Celestial!” *Liahona*, November 2023; emphasis in original.
5. Doctrine and Covenants 76:53.
6. Articles of Faith 1:13.
7. Doctrine and Covenants 76:60.
8. Doctrine and Covenants 76:62.
9. See 3 Nephi 27:27.
10. See Joseph Smith—History 1:16; see also verse 30.
11. Ether 3:12.
12. John 14:6.
13. Neil L. Andersen, “The Divine Standard of Honesty,” *Ensign*, August 2017.
14. Moses 4:30; emphasis added.
15. Enos 1:6.
16. See Fintan Costello, “The US States with the Most Dishonest People,” *BonusFinder* (blog), 27 April 2023, [bonusfinder.com/about-us/blog/dishonest-us-states](https://bonusfinder.com/about-us/blog/dishonest-us-states).
17. Missions require a lot of hard work and sacrifice. Effective missionaries are conduits of the Holy Ghost. As they teach and testify of gospel truths, the Holy Ghost—in His role as testator—witnesses of all the divine truths they teach. If missionaries have any unresolved serious sins in their past, the Spirit will also testify to them of their need to repent and to resolve those sins.

18. If we were to visit a doctor because we were concerned about an ailment, would we mislead or lie and not disclose what is going on with us physically? Of course not. When we answer a medical doctor’s questions thoroughly, we increase the likelihood of their ability to help diagnose and treat our physical malady. The same is true when we turn to God and Christ, the Master Healer of our souls. They have given us spiritual helpers in the form of bishops and stake presidents to help us draw upon the power and grace of Christ’s Atonement. Christ has all power to heal us spiritually when we sin.

19. Elder Richard G. Scott shared:

*Before entering the temple, you will be interviewed by your bishop and stake president for your temple recommend. Be honest and candid with them. That interview is not a test to be passed but an important step to confirm that you have the maturity and spirituality to receive the supernal ordinances and make and keep the edifying covenants offered in the house of the Lord. [“Receive the Temple Blessings,” *Ensign*, May 1999]*

20. Remember these words from President Nelson: “The baseless notion that we should ‘eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die; and it shall be well with us’ is one of the most absurd lies in the universe” (“Think Celestial!”; quoting 2 Nephi 28:7). As we continue a little further after the verse referred to by President Nelson, verses 8 and 9 warn of additional deceptions:

*There shall also be many which shall say: Eat, drink, and be merry; nevertheless, fear God—he will justify in committing a little sin; yea, lie a little . . . ; there is no harm in this . . . ; and if it so be that we are guilty, God will beat us with a few stripes, and at last we shall be saved in the kingdom of God.*

*. . . There shall be many which shall teach after this manner, false and vain and foolish doctrines . . . ; and their works shall be in the dark.*

21. 1 Nephi 17:45; Moroni 9:20.

22. 2 Nephi 26:22.

23. Neil L. Andersen, “5 Principles to Help You Understand and Access the Atonement of Jesus Christ,” *YA Weekly*, December 2022, digital only, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ya-weekly/2022/12/5-principles-to-help-you-understand-and-access-the-atonement-of-jesus-christ](http://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ya-weekly/2022/12/5-principles-to-help-you-understand-and-access-the-atonement-of-jesus-christ).

24. Mosiah 4:3.

25. See Cortney S. Warren, “How Honest Are People on Social Media?” *Naked Truth* (blog), *Psychology Today*, 30 July 2018, [psychologytoday.com/us/blog/naked-truth/201807/how-honest-are-people-social-media](http://psychologytoday.com/us/blog/naked-truth/201807/how-honest-are-people-social-media).

26. See Warren, “How Honest Are People on Social Media?”

27. Personal letter sent to Matthew L. Carpenter, 23 October 2023.

28. Moroni 7:48.

29. See Genesis 2:24; Doctrine and Covenants 42:22; Moses 3:24; Abraham 5:18.

30. Russell M. Nelson, “Salvation and Exaltation,” *Ensign*, May 2008.

31. Personal story shared with Matthew L. Carpenter by Alonzo L. Gaskill.

32. Personal note from Alonzo L. Gaskill to Matthew L. Carpenter, 22 October 2023.

33. “In surveys from 2006 to 2010 by Donald L. McCabe, a co-founder of the Center for Academic Integrity and a business professor at Rutgers University, about 40 percent of 14,000 undergraduates admitted to copying a few sentences in written assignments” (Trip Gabriel, “Plagiarism Lines Blur for Students in Digital Age,” *Education*, *New York Times*, 1 August 2010). In another study in March 2020, 28 percent of those surveyed worked with others on an assignment when told to do individual work. One in four used unauthorized electronic resources for a schoolwork assignment, more than 60 percent freely admitted to cheating

on a test, and 95 percent confessed they had participated in some form of cheating. (See McCabe survey, Facts and Statistics, International Center for Academic Integrity, [academicintegrity.org/resources/facts-and-statistics](http://academicintegrity.org/resources/facts-and-statistics).)

34. In the professional world, I have heard that employers are increasingly seeking out graduates of BYU because of their integrity. Remember: “Enter to learn; go forth to serve.” For the purposes of my message today, I would add, “go forth to serve *honestly*.”

35. President James E. Faust taught:

*Honesty is a principle, and we have our moral agency to determine how we will apply this principle. We have the agency to make choices, but ultimately we will be accountable for each choice we make. We may deceive others, but there is One we will never deceive. From the Book of Mormon we learn, “The keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel; and he employeth no servant there; and there is none other way save it be by the gate; for he cannot be deceived, for the Lord God is his name.”* [“Honesty—A Moral Compass,” *Ensign*, November 1996; quoting 2 Nephi 9:41]

In 1982, Elder Neal A. Maxwell pointed out another scripture that “says he waits for you ‘with open arms’” (Mormon 6:17) and shared the tender insight that Christ will employ no servant there not just because He knows us perfectly but also because He seeks to personally welcome and embrace “us with open arms, because his love of us is perfect” (“But a Few Days,” address to CES religious educators, 10 September 1982; quoted in Tad R. Callister, *The Infinite Atonement* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000], 29). Christ is there not to exclude people but to personally welcome and embrace us.