

Codes and Covenants

GORDON B. HINCKLEY

I am grateful to be here this Tuesday when all of us are basking in the afterglow of Saturday's victory. I congratulate Coach Edwards and his associates. I compliment most warmly the members of the team. I remind the coaches of the words of Casey Stengel, who, after winning the 1958 World Series, said, "I could'na done it without my players."

Our special elation is understandable. BYU beat the team that over all the years of football has been considered most formidable. Notre Dame is the university that won seven Heisman trophies and eleven national championships. It is the school of the Knute Rockne tradition of the Four Horsemen, of Joe Montana and other greats—the Fighting Irish of South Bend. Last Saturday's contest was a particularly interesting one. Here were the teams of two great universities, each sponsored by a religious institution. Notre Dame can take consolation from the fact that they have won two out of the three games BYU has played with them. But it was sweet victory on Saturday, and I think the sports pages of every major newspaper in the country must have

carried something on Sunday of the name *Brigham Young*.

It was a great victory. But it was one game in a series of many. With that one behind us, we face the future. What we do in the weeks ahead will determine whether we are champions or also-rans. For as Ecclesiastes says, "The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong," but to them that endure to the end (Ecclesiastes 9:11). And this brings me to the message I have this morning. This is Honor Week at BYU, and it has been suggested that I say something concerning the Honor Code and the Dress and Grooming Standards.

I suppose there are many who wonder why a great university need have an honor code. Isn't it rather childish, you may think, to require at a university that men and women with your maturity should be asked to subscribe to a code of conduct and a code of dress?

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Admittedly, it is a rather rare thing in this day and time. But codes of behavior are not new, nor are they out-of-date.

Athens in Greece was once recognized as the great and unique city of the world. Edgar Allan Poe wrote of “the glory that was Greece, And the grandeur that was Rome” (*To Helen* [1831], stanza 2). It was not only a seat of government but of learning and commerce, of art and science. Each young man of Athens, when he reached the age of eighteen, took this oath:

We will never bring disgrace on this our City by an act of dishonesty or cowardice.

We will fight for the ideals and sacred things of the City, both alone and with many.

We will revere and obey the City’s laws, and will do our best to incite a like reverence and respect in those above us who are prone to annul them or set them at naught.

We will strive increasingly to quicken the public sense of civic duty.

Thus in all these ways we will transmit this City, not lessened, but greater and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.

[Adapted from the ephebic oath, cf. Phillip Harding, ed. and trans., *Translated Documents of Greece and Rome 2: From the End of the Peloponnesian War to the Battle of Ipsus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 133–35 (109A)]

That solemn commitment and its subsequent expression in the lives of the young men of Athens became the foundation of principle and behavior that made Athens the cultural capital of the world.

Presidents of our nation, justices of the Supreme Court, our legislators, and public officers of many levels raise their arms to the square and solemnly pledge to uphold the laws of the land and prosecute their responsibilities with fidelity and honor.

The marriage ceremony of many faiths, including our own, is a covenant made in solemnity.

All of us in this country who are citizens of this nation salute the flag and pledge our allegiance to it and to the nation for which it stands.

Jehovah of old made a covenant with Abraham and his posterity that he would be their God and they would be his people.

Codes and covenants are as old as mankind and as contemporary as marriage.

I remind you that the Honor Code of Brigham Young University was not initiated by the board and the administration. It is an outgrowth of the action of a group of students who felt strongly that the acceptance of a code of honor by those who attended this school would have a salutary effect upon all.

By an evolutionary process it has continued, with modifications, until it has become the standard behavior of those of the university and has been endorsed by its board of trustees. It is for all students to accept and agree to live by—a statement of principle concerning honesty, charity, purity, modesty, and commitment.

It is not an inflexible law written in tablets of stone. It is a code of conduct. It is a statement of principles. It is a guide and a reminder concerning expected deportment. It is no more than might be expected of any good Christian, and no less than might be required of one who comes to this great institution sponsored by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The code is a guide, not a rigid set of rules. It does not address every specific issue. It is a table of standards, set forth clearly enough that there can be no question concerning what is expected and yet flexible enough to allow some freedom in application.

It represents an attempt to express, in terms of expected behavior, the principles set forth in the thirteenth article of faith:

We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men. . . . If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.

That, I submit, is a remarkable statement. I know of none other that, if followed, will more surely lead to behavior that is ennobling, reasonable, practical, and uplifting. Perhaps we may not always be able to measure up to all of its implications, but we can make the effort. As Robert Browning said, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, Or what's a heaven for?" (*Andrea del Sarto* [1855], lines 97–98).

Is observance of the code too much to expect from any of us? I think not. Every one of you who is enrolled in this great institution and everyone who is a member of its faculty or its staff is part of a family unique and unusual. You are, in a very real sense, a chosen people. You have been selected through a rigorous process and found to be deserving of what this institution has to offer. That offering includes the opportunity for a first-class education for the students and a wonderful teaching environment and challenge for the faculty.

Much has been given; much is expected; and I am grateful to be able to say that the response on the part of most of the faculty and students is overwhelmingly in full and complete accord with the principles of the Honor Code, as well as the Dress and Grooming Standards.

I thank you for the manner in which you confront the intellectual challenges you meet every day. I thank you for making this institution a city set upon a hill whose light cannot be hid (see Matthew 5:14). I am sorry that we cannot accommodate all who wish to come here. But I am grateful that the university is so successful in accomplishing its twin objectives—of imparting first-class secular education combined with the teaching and advocacy of the gospel of Jesus Christ—that many more

than we can possibly accommodate wish to come and drink at these waters.

Now, I am going to take the risk of talking briefly about each of the five general elements that go into the Honor Code. I hope you will not think I am simply moralizing. I hope you will not feel that I am just one more in a long procession of preachers advocating today a return to old values. No! We are not returning—these values have always been taught here and are now being taught here. I anticipate they always will be. And you have become, by the goodness of your living, the shining example of the virtue of such values.

1. I begin with the simple word *honesty*.

We believe in being honest and true.

Walter Lippmann once said:

You don't have to preach honesty to men with a creative purpose. Let a human being throw the energies of his soul into the making of something, and the instinct of workmanship will take care of his honesty.

. . . A genuine craftsman will not adulterate his product. The reason isn't because duty says he shouldn't, but because passion says he couldn't. [*Elbert Hubbard's Scrap Book* (New York: Wm. H. Wise & Co., 1923), p. 62]

It is interesting to me to note that five of the Ten Commandments deal essentially with honesty in its broadest sense.

"Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13). It is an act of the worst kind of dishonesty to take away the life of another.

"Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). Adultery involves rank dishonesty. It becomes a betrayal of the solemn covenants of marriage.

"Thou shalt not steal" (Exodus 20:15). Stealing is obviously an act of dishonesty. It covers the whole broad field of theft, of cheating, of plagiarism, of lying, of deceit, of taking to oneself that which belongs to another. It is reprehensible, inexcusable, and a violation of a

standard of conduct that lies at the bedrock of civilization.

“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour” (Exodus 20:16). Falsehood is dishonesty. The malicious spreading of untrue accusations in an effort to injure another is one of the most vicious kinds of dishonesty. Said Shakespeare:

*Good name in man and woman, . . .
Is the immediate jewel of their souls:
Who steals my purse steals trash; . . .
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed.
[Othello, act 3, scene 3, lines 155–61]*

“Thou shalt not covet” (Exodus 20:17). Coveting is dishonest in its nature. It partakes of the greedy desire to have that which belongs to another. It is evil because it leads to evil consequences.

Can there be any question why those who partake of the blessings of this great institution should not subscribe to a code of honesty?

2. The same question may be raised concerning *charity*.

“Charity,” as Moroni reminds us, “is the pure love of Christ” (Moroni 7:47). It embraces kindness, a reaching out to lift and help, the sharing of one’s bread, if need be, and a spirit of civility in dealing with others.

As Paul reminds us, “Charity never faileth” (1 Corinthians 13:8).

I rented a house once to a graduate student from the Midwest who had come to work on a doctorate in physics under Thomas B. Parmley at the University of Utah. Dr. Parmley is still alive, now in his nineties. This student said to me:

Dr. Parmley is the most remarkable teacher I have ever known. He has a sense of charity coupled with an expectation of excellence. He will not let a student fail.

When he has a student who is having a difficult time, he assigns an A-grade student to work with him. The result is that the one who was stumbling comes to understanding and proficiency. And the one who serves without fee as tutor gains a better knowledge of the subject and develops a wonderful sense of service and kindness toward others.

This is the essence of charity—to extend without price a helping, lifting hand to those in need.

Charity also includes the element of civility toward others. Civility is the root of the word *civilization*. It carries with it the essence of courtesy and politeness and consideration of others. How very much of it we have lost in our contemporary society. The lack of it is seen in the endless barrage of faultfinding and criticism spewed forth by media columnists and commentators. Lack of civility is often the cause of death and injury on the highway. It is the smirk of arrogance worn by many who think themselves superior in intellect, in riches, in station in life. Oh, how we need to cultivate a greater measure of civility in our society.

3. I move to the element of *purity* in the Honor Code. I need not belabor it. Every man and woman here knows what is expected. Each of you knows that with the strength that comes from prayer and the self-discipline that comes of practice, you can hold to the standards that you know to be right.

Among the most provocative books I have read through the years is one published back in 1968, authored by Will and Ariel Durant. They had previously written ten large volumes of the story of civilization. This little book—their last—contained the wisdom distilled out of that vast acquaintance with history. Speaking out of that experience, they wrote:

No one man, however brilliant or well-informed, can come in one lifetime to such fullness of understanding as to safely judge and dismiss the customs or institutions of his society, for these are the

wisdom of generations after centuries of experiment in the laboratory of history. A youth boiling with hormones will wonder why he should not give full freedom to his sexual desires; and if he is unchecked by custom, morals, or laws, he may ruin his life before he matures sufficiently to understand that sex is a river of fire that must be banked and cooled by a hundred restraints if it is not to consume in chaos both the individual and the group. [The Lessons of History (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), pp. 35–36]

I need not say more on that.

4. I move to the standard of *modesty* described in the code. We live in an age of sloppy dress, sloppy grooming, and sloppy manners. We live in an era when much of dress and behavior are provocative, intended to invite curiosity and stir carnal desire.

I recognize that some have strong feelings concerning standards of dress and conduct. I can only say that in every game we play, we play by the rules. I hope you will not look upon the Dress and Grooming Standards as repressive. They have been designed with another objective in mind. Our leaders have taught through the generations that “cleanliness is . . . next to godliness” (John Wesley, *Sermon 93, On Dress*, c. 1780). Neatness in dress, modesty in dress, cleanliness in person—are these too much to ask of a student body of this kind of young men and women who carry in their hearts a conviction that you are indeed sons and daughters of God, our Eternal Father?

I want to tell you that it is a refreshing experience for visitors who have been on other campuses to come here and note the difference in you, the students of Brigham Young University. Whether it be in the length of your hair, in the laundered look of your dress, in the modesty of your appearance, you add so much to the remarkable and exceptional environment of this great institution.

In matters of dress we wish neither silk nor rags. We seek for the clean look—call it a

wholesome look—the bright and happy look of young men and women who walk with a sense of who they are, of what is expected of them, and of what they may become.

5. And now the final item in the Honor Code—*commitment*. It involves loyalty. It involves duty. It involves determination of objectives and the resolution to meet those objectives. It involves giving oneself without reservation to the accomplishment of a good and great purpose.

Wrote the poet Emerson:

So nigh is grandeur to our dust,

So near is God to man,

When Duty whispers low, Thou must,

The youth replies, I can.

[Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Voluntaries,” III, *May-Day and Other Pieces* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1867), p. 82; emphasis in original]

Everyone of you who has come here has made a commitment to give your time; to give your strength and energy; to work with singleness of purpose; to educate your mind, your heart, your hands, and your spirits so that by coming here to learn you may go forth to serve.

I know of no greater words of commitment than these given by the Lord:

And if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things. [D&C 88:67]

What tremendous power there is in commitment. What tremendous strength there is in singleness of purpose. What marvelous results follow commitment made to the glory of God, followed with the promise that that body which is filled with the light of Christ “comprehendeth all things.”

Every returned missionary is familiar with these words that speak of commitment:

Therefore, O ye that embark in the service of God, see that ye serve him with all your heart, might, mind and strength, that ye may stand blameless before God at the last day. [D&C 4:2]

I remind you, yours is the unique and wonderful opportunity to come to this great university, here to learn at the feet of a dedicated faculty that knowledge of a secular nature that will qualify you to fill a place of honor and usefulness in the society of which you will become a part. Further, while in that process, you may draw nearer to God as you increase your knowledge concerning him and his eternal purposes. How great is your privilege. How strong must be your commitment.

My beloved young friends, I wish to thank you for the goodness of your lives, for your desire to learn, for your willingness to live by the rules, for your commitment to the great cause of which each of you is a part. We speak of standards and codes and principles. I commend to you these great words of Solomon:

These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him:

A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,

An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief,

A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.

My son, keep thy father's commandment, and forsake not the law of thy mother: . . .

For the commandment is a lamp; and the law is light; and reproofs of instruction are the way of life. [Proverbs 6:16–20, 23]

It is customary for the president of the Church—or at his request, one of his counselors—to speak to you at the opening of the school season. I come with that delegation of authority and responsibility. President Hunter sends his love and blessing to you. You will hear from him later in the season. I assure you of my love and of my blessing that the Lord will smile with favor upon you as you walk worthy of his blessings. May your minds be opened, may your understanding be broadened. May your appreciation and respect for all men strengthen. May your love for knowledge increase. May you walk in virtue, and may these be days rich and unforgettable as you experience the great and wonderful blessings to be had here.

I know that most of you pray for us, and I thank you for that. Please know that we pray for you and now do so in the name of him who is the light of all truth, the epitome of all goodness, even the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.