

The Struggle for Integrity

It used to be so simple.

Tell the truth. Honesty is the best policy. A man is as good as his word. You lie, you fry.

No more. Integrity, we are told, is old school. Billed as a repressive value of a dying culture, a culture rooted in hypocrisy and phony idealism, it deserves our scorn. Nobody believes that stuff anymore.

Funny thing about integrity, though. The less we have of it, the more we long for it.

Professional athletes, one in particular whose name dominated the news at the close of 2009, but certainly not the only one, have been pilloried unmercifully in the press for their lack of integrity. Political careerists, televangelists, church leaders, entertainment personalities, executives of international conglomerates, military brass, university professors, high school teachers, doctors, lawyers, judges and on and on have constantly had their dirty laundry hung out to dry. (One has to wonder if the media types who traffic in this garbage are themselves as pure as the driven snow!) Cheaters, infidels, embezzlers, frauds and liars—one is tempted to quote the scripture:

“There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: Their feet are swift to shed blood: Destruction and misery are in their ways: And the way of peace have they not known: There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Romans 3:10-18.

It seems unthinkable that anyone should be confused about something as basic as honesty and integrity. For one thing, the Scriptures speak with such stark clarity about these matters that all of us should be solidly convinced. But beyond that, common sense, the human conscience or the fear of consequences ought to serve as powerful deterrents to dishonesty.

But, the carnal nature is too devious for such simplistic views. The truth is that too many people find ways around the truth. Moreover, they have discovered that they can define truth in many different ways. They can have their own truths. So, what is infidelity to one is merely creative therapy to another. Or, what is lying to one is simply “truth in a larger, more meaningful context” to another. What is fraud to one is “justifying a previous generation’s injustices” to another. Look at the following excuses our culture often offers up for dishonesty:

Managing impressions: Some believe they have the right, or even duty, to control their publicly perceived image. If it means misrepresenting facts, withholding information or embellishing an image, it’s okay. **Agenda-driven actions:** Goals thought to be worthy or noble enough cause people to “sell” them by exaggerating, hiding or manipulating facts. “Yes, I lied, but it was necessary to get the right outcome.” **Protection:** Some deflect threats to their persons, families, possessions, or finances by dishonest means. They call it self-defense. **Context:** Those who champion the causes of the oppressed, aggrieved or injured often justify wrongdoing by reversing blame. They believe the context of past wrongs in which their actions take place cancels out any moral turpitude of their own. **Competition:** Pressing for an edge in position or recognition leads some to believe that fairness is all that matters; eye for eye, tooth for tooth; get them before they get you. Other excuses include greed, selfishness, prejudice and various forms of the works of the flesh.

For the world, these equivocations come as no surprise. It does shock us, however, that some professing believers would handle the Scriptures the same way. But, we have been warned. Peter wrote, *“They that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.”* 2 Peter 3:16. Also, Paul admonished Timothy, *“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”* 2 Timothy 2:15.

Someone has defined *honesty* as our relationship with others; *integrity* is our relationship to ourselves. Integrity drives honesty. As pastors, ministers, organizational and church leaders and saints, I am extremely concerned that we maintain our basic integrity because it determines the way we deal with each other. This is more than a platitudinous “be good,” an insistence on doctrinal correctness or cosmetic conformity. In a very real sense, integrity represents the backbone of the church and the organization. It is believability, trust, shared conviction and good faith interaction. It’s the “I’ve got your back” kind of commitment.

Apostolic people who attend congregations in fellowship with the United Pentecostal Church, International should be very grateful for the integrity that exists among our ministers. Our organization maintains a high standard for our ministers. We ask them to sign an affirmation statement every two years that vouches for their integrity. With few exceptions, we continue to embrace the same devotion to the expectations of the Scripture and the agreed upon provisions of our ministerial manual that we always have.

Such vigilance is encouraged by the words of the Apostle Paul: *“In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren.”* 2 Corinthians 11:26. He likens false brethren to every kind of danger imaginable. Everything falls apart when there is no integrity to cement it together. And so, when a saint interacts with a pastor, there should be absolute trust in each other’s character. When ministers talk among themselves, there should be no question as to the motive, intent or substance of the conversation. Everything we *do* must originate with who we *are*.

Should it be a struggle? Yes. Good comes from struggle. It forces self-examination, realignment and re-commitment. The maze of confusing new issues, the shifting sands of popular beliefs and pressure of insincere voices make the struggle necessary. At day’s end, when the struggle briefly abates, we must always make sure that our integrity remains intact.

“Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.” Psalm 51:6.