

# The Invention of Lying

A sermon about humanity's duplicitous nature, and how the Lord is overcoming it.

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, July 27, 2025

*"So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world." Revelation 12*

No one needs to be reminded about the human capacity to mislead and deceive. It is a common theme throughout the Word, beginning with the story of the serpent in the Garden of Eden as the source of all lies. When that serpent of old is cast out in the book of Revelation the implied promise is that someday our tendency to tell lies will be overcome as well.

Everyone understands how problematic lying is, and everyone loves honesty and honest people. Yet everyone engages in deceptions, and although the basic rights and wrongs of it are easy to understand it can also be a surprisingly confusing subject.

Our topic is an attempt to explain how lying was invented, going back to the dishonesty described by the serpent and the dragon. Then we will look at the Lord's beautiful solution to this fundamental problem of human existence.

The serpent's lie was the idea that worldly knowledge is more trustworthy and valuable than spiritual knowledge. The issue of deception is actually inherent in the distinction between the physical world and the spiritual one, a distinction that means that thoughts and intentions cannot be observed – and may therefore be less important.

Deception exists even among animals. Monkeys, for example, will sometimes sound a warning alarm when they are squeezed out of access to a source of food. When the other monkeys run for cover they stay behind and feast (*"Why We Lie"* TED Radio Hour, June 20, 2014).

## Our separated will and understanding.

Lying is especially an aspect of the human ability to separate the will and understanding, something that came into existence with the end of

the Most Ancient or Celestial Church, and the beginning of the Ancient or Spiritual Church. This is also associated with the development of spoken

language. The Most Ancients, we are told, barely spoke, and communicated instead by facial expressions:

The people of the Celestial Church *"spoke not so much by means of vocal utterances, as they did in later times and as they do nowadays, but like angels, by means of ideas. They were able to express ideas by means of countless*

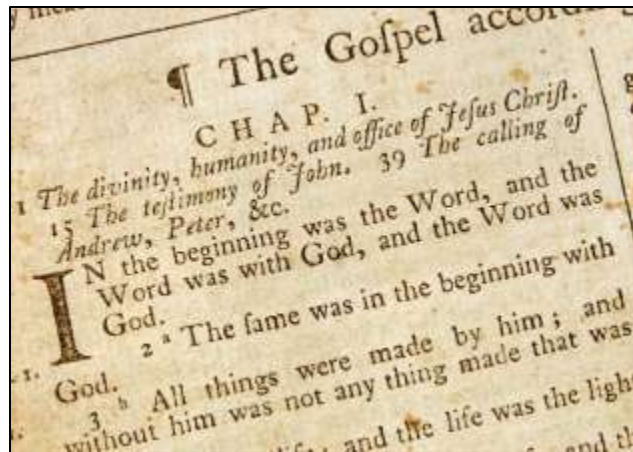
*alterations in their facial expressions and in their looks, and especially by means of alterations of the lips where there are innumerable threads of muscular fibers which are all knotted up nowadays but which had freedom of movement in those times. They were in this way able to present, mean, and represent inside a minute things which nowadays take an hour by the use of articulated sounds or utterance."* Arcana Coelestia 607

There are two aspects to the kind of speech described here. The first is that it is more efficient and complete than articulate speech. The second aspect is that it was completely honest. We read:

*"People in most ancient times were such that the face was in complete accord with internal things, so that anyone could see from another person's face the character of his disposition or mind (animus aut mens)." Arcana Coelestia 358*

*"Being celestial people, whatever they were thinking shone out of their face and eyes which altered correspondingly. They were quite incapable of assuming facial expressions that did not accord with what they were thinking."* Arcana Coelestia 1118

Remarkably, we are told that their facial expressions were governed by the cerebellum, the involuntary part of the brain (Arcana Coelestia 4326).



### **Spoken language facilitates dishonesty.**

This is how it was among the Most Ancient peoples, the people of the Golden Age or the Celestial Church. When this church became corrupted, however, as is described in Genesis by their being expelled from Eden, these things changed. The separation of the will and understanding with the people of the succeeding age, the Ancient Church, meant that they did not need to be driven by their now corrupt will to live selfishly, but could learn to behave in selfless and loving ways even if those actions did not represent what they really felt. Facial expressions came to be governed by the cerebrum, the voluntary portion of the brain. This distancing of a person's outer demeanor and communication from what they actually think and will allows for a process of reform and regeneration to take place. It also allows for lying and deception.

The development of spoken language greatly facilitated this. The two great issues with spoken and written language are adequacy and reliability. As memorized systems of symbols and sounds they have no organic connection to the things they represent, unlike facial expressions. As a result they not only describe thoughts and feelings imperfectly, but they easily become means of deception.

These two issues plague all of our communications and all of the information that we deal with on a daily basis. We can never be sure whether to trust it. It may be mistaken, it may be inadequate, it may be hard to understand, and it may be deceptive.

### **The quest for truth.**

We are all therefore on a quest, both individually and together, to discover the truth. We continually monitor the reliability of the information that we receive. We consider the source, we examine the information itself. We value people that we consider to be intelligent and honest.

As individuals, however, we are almost inevitably dishonest to some degree. One of the problems of human language is that it allows us to communicate in ways that favor our own thoughts and interests. The subjective nature of human experience, the vagueness of much of the information that we deal with, the requirements and expectations of social and business interactions, and our own ambitions and anxieties cause us to stretch the truth in small ways, and sometimes in important ways.

We also misunderstand what constitutes lying. The

2009 film, *"The Invention of Lying,"* imagines what contemporary American life would be like if lying did not exist. The humorous movie depicts people as brutally honest about everything, resulting in depressing social interactions, cruelly competitive office politics, and a completely dispassionate and pitiless medical system. When a man invents the concept of life after death to comfort his dying mother, to the amazement of the impossibly credulous hospital staff, he sets the ball rolling towards the world of misinformation and fraud that we know so well.

### **Honesty requires charity.**

But honesty is meaningless without charity. The Ancients were able to be completely honest about their thoughts and intentions because *"they were never afraid that others might know their ends and intentions, for they willed nothing but good. For anyone who allows himself to be led by the Lord never intends or thinks anything else"* (Arcana Coelestia 3573). The point of tactful and polite speech is to promote charity, so honesty doesn't usually require the kind of blunt speech that we sometimes imagine it does. True honesty is only possible where there is love and kindness.

Similarly, on a personal basis, regeneration is not possible unless we are able to be honest with ourselves, and the more disorderly our life is the harder it is to be honest. When a person becomes involved in practices that are not good, we read:

*"he looks around for ideas such as will support the notion that the thing is not an evil, until he becomes thoroughly convinced it is not. Then he strives so far as he can to get rid of external restraints and to make it allowable and smart, and at length even attractive and honorable."* Arcana Coelestia 6203

These efforts to justify evil confuse and mislead people all over the world. In our lesson we read:

*"In the spiritual sense, bearing false witness refers to convincing people that a false belief is a true one and an evil life is a good one."* True Christianity 322

This phenomenon is especially pernicious in this day and age with its sophisticated arguments:

*"At the present day there are persons who not only disbelieve everything they cannot see and feel, but who also confirm themselves in such incredulity by knowledges unknown to the ancients, and thus occasion in themselves a far greater degree of blindness."* Arcana Coelestia 196

It is no wonder that so many people today are misled by false and dishonest information. Fortunately these same “*knowledges unknown to the ancients*” can also have the opposite effect.

### **How the Lord overcomes dishonesty and lies.**

**T**he inadequacy and unreliability of information is a problem that everyone is aware of. This means that it is an issue that people have been thinking about for a long time in a ceaseless quest for the truth, as we mentioned above. The result is that there have been developments that make it easier to know the truth and avoid deception.

A remarkable aspect of the times that we live in is that a large portion of what we do and say is documented. We communicate by email, by recorded or text messages, and receive information in written, video-taped or published forms that can be endlessly replicated and examined. Our daily activities leave a discoverable trail of transactions, movements and appearances that may have seemed unimaginable even fifty years ago.

The Heavenly Doctrines tell us that everything in our life is recorded in our memory, and that after death this can be examined. It is called our “*Book of Life*.” As we go through the process of understanding our true nature it can sometimes be “played back” to us there, especially when we deny the kind of life we have led (*Heaven and Hell* 463). This is what is meant by the Lord’s words in Luke:

*“There is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nor hidden that will not be known. <sup>3</sup> Whatever you have spoken in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have spoken in the ear in inner rooms will be proclaimed on the housetops.” Luke 12:2,3*

In the past this idea must have seemed amazing, but it is an increasingly familiar reality to people today. It really does help keep people honest. Studies show, for example, that people are many times more likely to tell lies in phone calls, which are not normally recorded, than in e-mails, online, or text messages (“*Why We Lie*” *TED Radio Hour*, June 20, 2014).

On a larger scale, the development of the scientific method and evidence-based research has greatly increased the adequacy and reliability of our information about the physical world.

The same need is filled in spiritual things by the existence of the Word. This highlights the importance of a confidence in and belief in what it teaches. It also highlights the need for a

sophisticated, fully explanatory guide to this belief that can withstand the assaults of our skeptical age. This is what the Heavenly Doctrines are.

Learning these things and being reminded of them really does change your life.

In an experiment conducted among M.I.T. students, they were asked to solve a series of ten difficult math problems and given five minutes. The average student completed four of them. When, however, they were told to shred the page and merely report how many they completed the average rose to seven. When the same thing was repeated, but they were first asked to write down as many of the Ten Commandments as they could, the average returned to four. The same was true when they were asked to sign at the top of the page their agreement to abide by the M.I.T. Honor Code – even though no such code actually exists (“*Why We Lie*” *TED Radio Hour*).

The point is that everyone knows that honesty is important, and almost any kind of reminder will make us more honest. You will be more honest today because of attending this service.

Externally motivated honesty is not enough:

*“Let it be known, that a person must do these commandments from religion, because they are commanded by the Lord; and if he does them from any other consideration whatever, for instance, from regard merely to the civil law or the moral law, he remains natural, and does not become spiritual.” Apocalypse Explained 902*

Still, these external motivations develop habits and norms, and these serve as a basis for the growth of a true spiritual conscience over time.

Everyone loves an honest person, and we both sorrow at the serpent’s deception in Eden and rejoice in his downfall in Revelation.

It often seems to us that the world is more deceptive than ever and getting worse all the time. But the Lord’s means of combatting the serpent also grows more powerful all the time.

Honesty and sincerity are really about love and charity, living a good life, and avoiding evil, so that what is in our hearts can shine in our faces.

*“LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? <sup>2</sup> He who walks uprightly, and works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart.” Psalm 15 AMEN*



## Readings from the Word

### Genesis 3

**N**ow the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?"

<sup>2</sup> And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; <sup>3</sup> but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.'

<sup>4</sup> Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. <sup>5</sup> For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

<sup>6</sup> So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate....

<sup>13</sup> And the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

### Revelation 12

**A**nd war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, <sup>8</sup> but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. <sup>9</sup> So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

### True Christianity 321

*The Eighth Commandment - You Are Not to Bear False Witness against Your Neighbor*

**I**n its most accessible earthly meaning, "bearing false witness" includes not being a false witness before a judge, or before others outside of a courtroom, against someone who is wrongly accused of some evil. We are not to make such false assertions in the name of God or something sacred, or base them on our own authority or on some expertise for which we are well known.

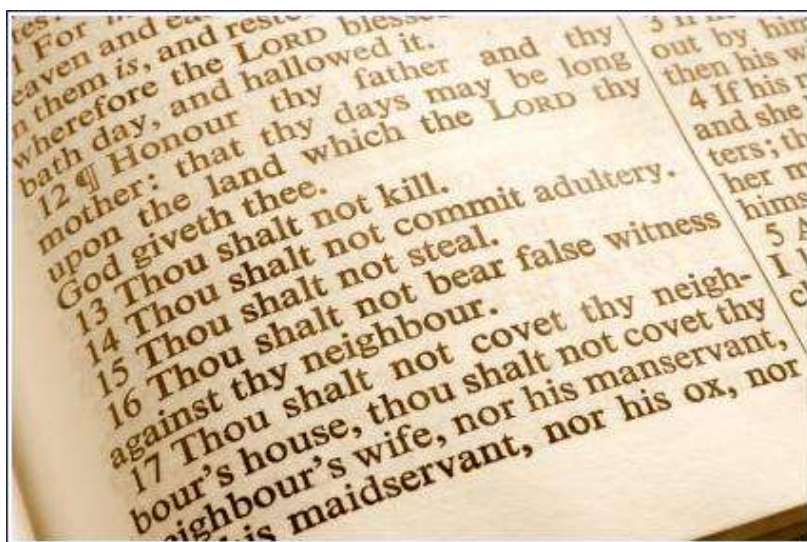
In a broader earthly sense, this commandment applies to political lies and hypocrisies of every kind that have an evil intent, as well as disparagement and slander of our neighbors to undermine the status, name, and reputation on which their whole good character depends.

In the broadest earthly sense, this commandment includes plots, deceptions, and evil intent against anyone for a variety of motives such as hostility, hatred, desire for revenge, envy, rivalry, and so on. These evils have false witness hidden inside them.

**322** In the spiritual meaning, testifying falsely refers to convincing people that a false belief is a true one and an evil life is a good one, and the reverse; but only if these things are done deliberately, not out of ignorance.

### Apocalypse Explained 902

**B**ut let it be known, that a person must do these commandments from religion, because they are commanded by the Lord; and if he does them from any other consideration whatever, for instance, from regard merely to the civil law or the moral law, he remains natural, and does not become spiritual. For when a person acts from religion he acknowledges in heart that there is a God, a heaven and a hell, and a life after death. But when he acts merely from the civil and moral law, he may act in the same way, and yet in heart may deny that there is a God, a heaven and a hell, and a life after death. And if he shuns evils and does goods it is only in an external form, and not in an internal form; thus while he is outwardly as to the life of the body like a Christian, inwardly as to the life of his spirit he is like a devil. All this makes clear that a person can become spiritual, or receive spiritual life, in no other way than by a life according to religion from the Lord.



9:30 am Family Service: Rev. Jeremy F. Simons [www.brynathynchurch.org/family](http://www.brynathynchurch.org/family) “The Lies of the Serpent”  
The first liar in the Word is the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Ever since then people have had trouble telling the truth. But in the book of Revelation the serpent, also known as the dragon, is defeated.

11:00 am Adult Service: Rev. Jeremy F. Simons [www.brynathynchurch.org/adult](http://www.brynathynchurch.org/adult) “The Invention of Lying” The Heavenly Doctrine tells us fascinating things about how deception and lies made their way into the world. We are also told about the meaning of the eighth commandment and how the Lord is leading us into an age when bearing false witness will be increasingly rare.