Allegations of sexual harassment and assault are widespread concerns in society, and BYU is among the institutions confronting these issues.

Family, Home, and Social Sciences dean Benjamin M. Ogles was called to serve on BYU’s Advisory Council on Campus Response to Sexual Assault as well as on a second committee that surveyed students concerning their experiences with sexual assault. Recently, Dean Ogles gave the campus devotional “Agency, Accountability, and the Atonement of Jesus Christ: Application to Sexual Assault,” which addressed how the issue affects BYU students and how victims, perpetrators, families, and friends can move forward. Below are several highlights from the devotional as well as student reactions to the impactful message.

Sexual assault is a difficult, highly charged, and sometimes political topic not easily discussed in any setting. I feel an urgency to address this delicate topic.

Accountability and Atonement
Not all suffering or adversity in life is the result of our mistakes, transgressions, or sins. Some of the most complicated problems in
life are the direct result of injuries caused when our fellow human beings unrighteously exercise their agency to hurt, control, coerce, or use others. But God did not leave us to suffer at the hands of others without providing “a way of overcoming the tragic consequences of such damaging use of agency.” The Savior’s atoning sacrifice can heal us from the hurt and abuse of others.

Sexual Assault at BYU
Of the 12,602 students who completed the [Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault], 475 reported 730 separate incidents of unwanted sexual contact. Fifty-two percent of the incidents were perpetrated by a current or former boyfriend or girlfriend or spouse. A combined 37 percent were perpetrated by an acquaintance, friend, or former friend. Only 6 percent were perpetrated by a stranger.

Consent
I believe some instances of unwanted sexual contact at BYU occur because one person assumes the other is interested and “goes for it” without ever checking to see if their perception of the other person’s wishes is accurate. I wish that all people knew how to ask first.

The pain of being physically violated is much worse than the brief and potentially awkward moment when someone lets you know that they would like to be more physically intimate.

Covenant Marriage and Consent
Marriage itself is not consent to intimacy.

Victims
To those who have had traumatic experiences, please know there are people—many people—who are concerned for your welfare and many people who have experienced on a personal level what you have experienced. You are not alone. You are not damaged or worth less because of the incident. You are children of God, and He stands ready to assist you.

We know the road you now travel is often filled with suffering and doubt, and we are ready to help.

Self-Blame
Sometimes victims try to figure out why these bad things happened to them. Some wonder if they did something wrong to deserve this circumstance. But you are not responsible for that to which you did not consent! That is the essence of agency.

Friends, Relatives, and Bystanders
Many of you have been neither perpetrators of nor victims of sexual assault. You want to help but may not know exactly what to do. Whether you are aware of it or not, there is someone around you whose life has been altered by sexual violence.

You can do much good in a general way without realizing how the Spirit is working through you to bless the lives of others. Only by uniting our voices and actions to assist victims and to promote respect for others can we help to end sexual violence.

To access the full devotional, visit speeches.byu.edu.

FOOTNOTES
2. See Alma 7:11–13; Isaiah 61:3; also Elaine S. Marshall, “Learning the Healer’s Art,” BYU devotional address, 8 October 2002.