

## THE WEAPON OF LOVE

David Pulsipher—Department of History

Last January I had the opportunity to visit several significant sites of the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama. I stood on the Montgomery street corner where Rosa Parks was arrested, setting off the famous bus boycott. I drove across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, where hundreds of freedom marchers were beaten on “Bloody Sunday.” And I walked through Kelly Ingram Park in Birmingham, where “Bull” Conner released high powered water hoses and police dogs on men, women, and children. But the place where I was most unexpectedly moved was the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, the site of Martin Luther King’s first pulpit, from which he encouraged his parishioners to effectively employ what he called the “weapon of love” in their struggle for dignity and equal protection under the law. As I stood in the aisle of that church, with the pale light of morning washing over the pews, I was touched with wonder and appreciation for what Dr. King tried to accomplish. I sensed, through the Spirit, that those early Civil Rights leaders were onto something deeply spiritual and powerful—an effective weapon in a war against hatred and intolerance.

Those battle strategies were based on spiritual truths found in the Bible. But over the last several years, as I have studied the events of Montgomery, Selma and Birmingham, I have been struck by parallel experiences and strategies from the *Book of Mormon*, which is often a chronicle of deep cultural conflict and intense hatred. The cultural conflicts of the *Book of Mormon*—Nephites vs. Lamanites, believers vs. nonbelievers—bear remarkable resemblance to the struggle between races and ethnic groups in America—White vs. Black, Anglo vs. Hispanic, Catholic vs. Protestant.

Now, as our nation plunges into another struggle with hatred and bigotry—Al Qaida and its Muslim supporters vs. the “infidels” of Western culture—the lessons of the *Book of Mormon* and those Alabama Civil Rights sites return to me. While our nation wages a physical battle to root out terrorism, there is an even more important parallel struggle to be won—the battle of hearts and minds, both within the oppressors and within us—a battle to root out the venomous hatred which ultimately fuels terrorists like Al Quaida. What then might we learn from the *Book of Mormon* about how to successfully vanquish hate, so that it will not rise again in the form of another terrorist network? Likewise, how might our own secular history—in particular the Civil Rights Movement—provide supporting clues? Drawing upon both of these historical contexts, there seem to be several principles that apply.

**There is an even more important parallel struggle to be won—the battle of hearts and minds.**

I. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO FORCE OTHERS TO CHANGE THEIR FEELINGS AND BELIEFS

This principle seems obvious, but it bears stating because one of the most human reactions in the face of stiff resistance, animosity or inappropriate behavior is to try to force the other person to do (or think or feel) what is right. As a nation, the United States succumbed to this temptation immediately after the Civil War (the original “civil rights movement”) when it tried to create equal protection for former slaves. Frustrated at intransigent southern culture, northern Radical Republicans decided to “reconstruct” the South through military occupation, forcing the rebel states to accept constitutional amendments which recognized black equality before they could be readmitted to the Union.

The problem with this type of strategy is that the people on the other end of the stick usually dig in their heels, become even more fiercely committed to their hatred or behavior, and resist the change in one of two ways: 1) they use violence to keep their culture alive; or 2) they find creative ways to take their culture underground. In the case of the South during Reconstruction, both strategies were employed. First, the Ku Klux Klan became an armed and violent resistance to military occupation and Republican rule in the South. Second, after Republican rule effectively ended in 1877, southern whites found creative legal maneuvers—including “grandfather clauses,” vagrancy codes, and property and firearms restrictions—which enabled them to suppress black political power and re-establish black economic dependency. Consequently, the attempt to force the South to give up a racist system actually entrenched racism even deeper into southern culture. Ironically, a black man was less safe in the south after the end of slavery than he was before, because southern whites no longer saw blacks as property—an “investment” that needed to be “protected”—and black deaths through mob violence increased dramatically.

The *Book of Mormon* provides an interesting example of this principle in the reverse—someone trying to forcibly keep people from doing something righteous. When Amulon tried to force the people of Alma to stop praying, the people simply found creative ways of keeping their belief system alive—taking it “underground” so to speak:

And Amulon commanded them that they should stop their cries; and he put guards over them to watch them, that whosoever should be found calling upon God should be put to death.

And Alma and his people did not raise their voices to the Lord their God, but did pour out their hearts to him; and he did know the thoughts of their hearts. (Mosiah 24:11, 12)

People on the other end of the stick usually dig in their heels, become even more fiercely committed to their hatred or behavior, and resist the change.

While it is easy to see that forcing people to change their hearts and minds is impossible, we should not underestimate how appealing force can be as a motivational tool. After all, one-third of the pre-mortal spirits apparently thought it was a viable strategy for negotiating this mortal experience, and governments (and parents) still find it an attractive temptation.

## 2. VIOLENCE IS INEFFECTIVE BECAUSE IT USUALLY BREEDS MORE HATE

Aside from a temptation to see force as an effective motivational power, violence is sometimes perceived as an appropriate and just “response”—not because it will change the heart and mind of other people, but because it will appropriately “punish” them for some vile deed. The Nephites fell for this temptation in relationship to the Lamanites. Remember Ammon’s description of Nephite attitudes when he and his brothers proposed to go preach to the “enemy”:

For they said unto us: Do ye suppose that ye can bring the Lamanites to a knowledge of the truth? Do ye suppose that ye can convince the Lamanites of the incorrectness of the traditions of their fathers, as stiffnecked a people as they are; whose hearts delight in the shedding of blood; whose days have been spent in the grossest iniquity; whose ways have been the ways of a transgressor from the beginning?...

...Let us take up arms against them, that we may destroy them and their iniquity out of the land, lest they overrun us and destroy us. (Alma 26:24, 25)

In the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s similar voices gained popularity. Many blacks, frustrated at the slow rate of change, began to question peaceful resistance and advocate more open and violent resistance to white culture. H. Rap Brown, for example, urged groups to arm themselves in words which strangely echo the ancient Nephites:

**Violence is so appealing because the response is so immediate. When we strike we get an immediate change in behavior.**

You’d better get you some guns. The man’s moving to kill you. The only thing the honky respects is force... I mean, don’t try to love that honky to death. Shoot him to death. Shoot him to death, brother, cause that’s what he’s out to do to you.<sup>1</sup>

Violence is so appealing because the response is so immediate. When we strike we get an immediate change in behavior. The problem, of course, is that the change is rarely what we want, and even if it is, it is rarely permanent. It does not go to the heart of the person whose heart you want to change, and it simply allows the other person to rationalize their own attitudes, feelings, and behavior. Disobedient children who get yelled at by their parents, for example, focus their anger on the behavior of their parents instead of examining their own behavior. The same principle works in the

interaction between cultures. A violent response to violence allows the original perpetrators to say, “See, they are just as depraved as we said they were.” White segregationists could point to leaders like H. Rap Brown and say, “I told you so—blacks don’t really want equality, they want retribution.” Consequently, voices like Brown dismayed other Civil Rights leaders, like Martin Luther King, who eloquently countered such strategies:

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.<sup>2</sup>

**“Through violence  
you may murder the  
hater, but you do  
not murder hate.”**

This principle is demonstrated in the history of the Gadianton Robbers. The group would be eradicated, only to resurface again in a different era and under different leadership. The faces changed, but the *hate* remained the same. The Nephites could kill the *hater*, but they could not kill the *hate*—it was always reborn.

Ultimately, the greatest weakness of a violent response to hatred is that it suggests a pessimism about the capacity of people to change. Violence essentially communicates an attitude about the other person—“They have always been this way and will always be this way.” To put it another way, violence denies the possibility of repentance and the atonement.

### 3. THE WEAPON OF LOVE IS EFFECTIVE, BECAUSE IT CHANGES THE HEART AND MIND OF THE OPPRESSOR.

In the words of the Proverb, “A soft answer turneth away wrath” (15:1). While we are used to thinking of this as a prescription for inter-personal relationships, it also works for inter-cultural conflict. This strategy can be called “The Weapon of Love,” or more commonly referred to as “non-violent resistance.” Phrased in the words of Martin Luther King: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”<sup>3</sup> But it is older than King, or Ghandi, or a handful of others who have used it in the last century or two. It was eloquently and effectively implemented over two-thousand years ago among Lamanite converts known as the “Anti-Nephi-Lehies” or “The People of Ammon.” The story is familiar to every Primary child, how the People of Ammon buried their weapons of war in the earth, and some of their Lamanite brethren were “stirred up” by apostate Nephites until “their hatred became exceedingly sore against them [the People of Ammon].” Then the angry Lamanites came up to battle:

Now when the people [of Ammon] saw that they were coming against them they went out to meet them, and prostrated themselves before them to the earth, and began to call on the name of the Lord; and thus they were in this attitude when the Lamanites began to fall upon them, and began to slay them with the sword.

And thus without meeting any resistance, they did slay a thousand and five of them; and we know that they are blessed, for they have gone to dwell with their God. (Alma 24:21, 22)

When many of the angry Lamanites saw this behavior, they stopped killing the people of Ammon because their “hearts had swollen in them” and “they repented of the things which they had done” (24). Remarkably, the people of Ammon gained more converts that day than the number of people who were killed.

While we instinctively realize the spiritual power of what happened, we seldom analyze *why* their strategy worked the way it did, or how the principles might be generalized and applied to other situations. The Weapon of Love as implemented by the People of Ammon had two main characteristics. First, it was a genuine love, both for God and for the people who hated them. In order for the Weapon of Love to work effectively, it must be based on genuine love. Martin Luther King made this point repeatedly during the boycotts and sit-ins, that African-Americans could not hate those who hated them. They had to love, and forgive. Second, the love used by the People of Ammon was not passive, but confrontational. They did not sit in their houses, praying and waiting to be slaughtered, but “went out to meet them” on the battlefield. This is literally *meeting* hate with love. Likewise, King and other Civil Rights leaders urged their followers to get up and *do* something with their Weapon of Love. So they went out and met their oppressors in coffee shops, bus stations, department stores, and other segregated places. Always with dignity. Always with love. But always confrontational.

When these two basic qualities are achieved—genuine but confrontational love—the Weapon can effectively achieve its desired goal. What usually happens next is violence—but it is one-sided violence. Over one thousand of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies were slaughtered when they went out to meet the angry Lamanites. In the South, dogs, water hoses, billy clubs, and burning crosses were common responses to Civil Rights workers. But in both cases the violence of the oppressors was left naked and exposed for what it was—unjustifiable hatred. As noted above, when violence is met with violence, the oppressor can justify his behavior, but when violence is met with love, the oppressor cannot justify what he is doing, and is forced to confront his own depravity. The Weapon of Love then “pricks the heart” of the oppressor, and that person can begin the process

**The Weapon of Love had two main characteristics. First, it was a genuine love, Second, the love was not passive, but confrontational.**

of repentance. In the case of the People of Ammon, many of the angry Lamanites were “stung for the murders which they had committed,” and they fell down in shame.

In the case of the Civil Rights movement, many southern whites were touched by the spectacle of men, women, and even children willing to face police dogs and water hoses, and these whites began to work within the political structure to tear down the legal and cultural scaffolding of racism in their communities. For example, in 1965 Martin Luther King organized a march from Selma to Montgomery to present a petition of grievances, specifically grievances about the denial of voting rights. As the marchers organized in Selma’s Brown Chapel, King told them: “I can’t promise you that it won’t get you beaten. I can’t promise you it won’t get your house bombed. I can’t promise you won’t get scarred up a bit. But we must stand up for what is right.” As the marchers approached the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the gateway out of Selma, they were attacked by a hundred state troopers and another hundred deputized possemen, who brutally beat, tear-gassed, and cattle-prodded the panicked marchers. Images of this scene—“Bloody Sunday”—were broadcast on network television across America, including the White House. President Lyndon B. Johnson, a southern politician who understood the intractable attitudes of his fellow southerners, was moved. Just over one week later, Johnson spoke to a joint session of Congress, presented them with a voting rights bill and in his unmistakable southern drawl made this remarkable statement of sympathy for the Civil Rights struggle:

What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. This cause must be our cause too. It is not just Negroes, but all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we *shall* overcome.<sup>4</sup>

Several southern congressmen joined President Johnson in this fight, and stood up for what was right. Thus, in the case of the People of Ammon and the Selma marchers, one of the most desirable goals of these types of struggles—that of *redeeming* the oppressor, not simply *stopping* him—was achieved to a remarkable degree.

#### 4. SOMETIMES THE WEAPON OF LOVE WILL NOT WORK AND OTHER CREATIVE RESPONSES ARE REQUIRED

Unfortunately, the Weapon of Love is not a panacea for all cultural conflict. Sometimes, for a variety of reasons, people are “past feeling” and their hearts cannot be properly reached by genuine confrontational love. This is exactly what happened to the People of Ammon. Many of their oppressors—in particular, the apostate Nephites—refused to be moved

Many southern whites were touched by the spectacle of men, women, and even children willing to face police dogs and water hoses.

The Weapon of Love is not a panacea for all cultural conflict.

by the innocent slaughter of their brethren, and so “they began to stir up the people in anger against their brethren... therefore they began again to destroy them” (Alma 27:2). Likewise, during the Civil Rights movement there were southern whites, like Birmingham Police Commissioner “Bull” Conner, who refused to be swayed, and continued to send the dogs. During the 1956 bus boycott, for example, while other cities around the South decided to integrate their bus systems, the leading citizens of Montgomery, where the boycott began, refused to buckle.

**When met with such unfeeling resistance, the Weapon of Love cannot work.**

When met with such unfeeling resistance, the Weapon of Love cannot work. Consequently, other creative responses are sometimes necessary. But the most successful strategies will follow one of the basic characteristics of the Weapon of Love, by refusing to fight on the same terms—to refuse to meet hate with hate. For example, the People of Ammon ultimately had to leave Lamanite territory and throw themselves on the mercy of the Zarahemla Nephites, where they were given land and protection against their enemies (Alma 27).

Likewise, southern Civil Rights leaders, in the face of a significant number of intransigent white leaders, often had to resort to creative alternative strategies—achieving victories in the courts rather than in the hearts. It was not until the Supreme Court stepped into the fray that the Montgomery bus company was forced to change its segregation policy. Although there were many southern whites who supported black liberation, too often the opposition was maddeningly fierce—too many whites, like the apostate Nephite and angry Lamanites of old, were “past feeling” and could not be converted.



**We can employ the Weapon of Love in the way we conduct our lives and how we relate to those around us, especially those who might hate us.**

Ultimately, the current battle against hatred must be won in the hearts of those Muslims who support or sympathize with the Al Qaida network and in our hearts as well, or there will be no victory—at least not a lasting one. What guidance, then, do these principles give us? Well, cultural conflict and hatred occur at both the collective and individual levels, and have been with us from the beginning. As President Hinckley noted in our last General Conference: “Now, all of us know that war, contention, hatred, suffering of the worst kind are not new. The conflict we see today is but another expression of the conflict that began with the War in Heaven.”<sup>5</sup> While most of us have very little impact on national or global strategies, we can develop strategies within our individual lives and within our families to resist the growing tide of hatred and violence in the world. We can employ the Weapon of Love in the way we conduct our lives and how we relate to those around us, especially those who might hate us. We can meet our oppressors—whether they are around the world or in

our neighborhoods and families—with genuine and confrontational love. At the very least, we can forgive them for the horrible pain they have caused. And we can join with President Hinckley in his prayer during this season of international conflict:

Bless us with love. Bless us with charity in our hearts. Bless us with a spirit of perseverance to root out the terrible evils that are in this world... Bless the cause of peace and bring it quickly to us again, we humbly plead with Thee, asking that Thou wilt forgive our arrogance, pass by our sins, be kind and gracious to us, and cause our hearts to turn with love toward Thee.<sup>6</sup> ☹

**“Bless us with love.  
Bless us with charity  
in our hearts.”**

## ENDNOTES

1. As quoted in Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1980* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 154.
2. Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).
3. King, *Where Do We Go From Here?*
4. Sitkoff, 189-194.
5. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Times in Which We Live” (Sunday Morning Session, General Conference, October 2001).
6. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Till We Meet Again” (Sunday Afternoon Session, General Conference, October 2001).