

A DIVINE DETERRENT TO CREEPING RELATIVISM

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The Apostle Paul prophesied of our day, and many of the elements of that prophecy are pathetically present in today's newspaper. "This know also," he wrote, "that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness; but denying the power thereof: from such turn away." Perhaps as an indication of the source of the problem in our day, Paul concluded that such souls would be "ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:1-7).

We live in the day of an information explosion, a time when raw knowledge is being processed and disseminated far faster than we can incorporate or inculcate. But we also live in a time of moral erosion, indicating clearly that our decency has not kept pace with our discoveries. As a world, and more particularly as a nation, we have drifted from our moral moorings, strayed from the faith of our fathers and mothers. That the decline in society is due to a moral decay is perhaps obvious to most of us. I desire, however, to take a step beyond that premise. I suggest that the lack of scriptural or theological literacy and the subsequent lack of doctrinal depth are at the heart of our problem. Very often what we believe and know affect what we do. I suggest that when men and women comprehend the great plan of happiness—the plan of salvation, the gospel—they begin to see themselves within that plan as a vital part of God's program. They then begin to govern their actions accordingly.

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THE EROSION

I would like now to discuss some key factors that have contributed to our doctrinal desensitization and thereby our moral decline. We could choose any number of things that have hacked away at the roots of our religious heritage, but I will focus on five: 1) the trivialization of religion; 2) the erosion of moral absolutes; 3) a denial of personal responsibility; 4) stressing ethics over doctrine; and 5) false teachings about men and women. In subsequent sections we will consider some solutions to our problem.

1. *The Trivialization of Religion.* Whereas a hundred years ago religion was central to the outlook of most Americans, we have in the last three

decades become prey to a growing secularism, a worldview that seeks to make sense of life without reference to God or the divine. If there is no real purpose to life—no God, no system of salvation, no hope of a life beyond the grave, and no divine parameters by which to distinguish right from wrong—in short, if anything goes, then eventually everything goes.

In the early 1960s a strange and to some frightful sound was heard throughout the academic world of religious studies—the cry that “God is dead.” Protestant, Roman Catholic, and even Jewish theologians spoke often of Godless theologies, Christless christs, and Christian atheism, phrases that at first blush seem meaningless and absurd. The essence of their rhetorical requiem was that God had died in the hearts of men and women, that “God [had] passed out of our existence and become a dead entity for us because we crowded him out of our consciousness in creating and worshipping idols of our own ethnic likenesses.”¹ How strikingly similar are the words of the Lord concerning the state of things at the time of Joseph Smith’s call: “They seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol, which waxeth old and shall perish in Babylon, even Babylon the great, which shall fall” (*Doctrine & Covenants* 1:16).

The Death of God movement, though not necessarily characteristic of the rank and file of the religious world (or even typical of the views or feelings of the average priest, minister, or rabbi), nevertheless symbolized a growing disease in society, a loss of confidence in religious life, and a gradual distancing from religious values and time-honored traditions. Though the pendulum would yet swing to the religious right during the 1970s with the rise of the Charismatic Movement and Christian Fundamentalism, yet the age of existential anguish, of moral malaise, of cynicism and skepticism and doubt would take its terrible toll.

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In recent times where religion has not been rejected outright, it has been either ignored or in many cases trivialized. As Professor Stephen L. Carter has pointed out

One sees a trend in our political and legal cultures toward treating religious beliefs as arbitrary and unimportant, a trend supported by a rhetoric that implies that there is something wrong with religious devotion. More and more, our culture seems to take the position that believing deeply in the tenets of one’s faith represents a kind of mystical irrationality, something that thoughtful, public-spirited American citizens would do better to avoid.... The consistent message of modern American society is that whenever the demands of one’s religion conflict with what one has to do to get ahead, one is expected to ignore the religious demands and act... well... *rationally*.

One good way to end a conversation—or start an argument—is to tell a group of well-educated professionals that you hold a political position (preferably a controversial one, such as being against abortion or pornography) because it is required by your understanding of God’s will. In the unlikely event that anyone hangs around to talk with you about it, the chances are that you will be challenged on the ground that you are intent on imposing your religious beliefs on other people. And in contemporary political and legal culture, nothing is worse.²

2. *The Erosion of Moral Absolutes.* Certain problems arise whenever people either deny or ignore absolute truths. Two Protestant writers have stated:

I believe that one of the prime reasons this generation is setting new records for dishonesty, disrespect, sexual promiscuity, violence, suicide, and other pathologies, is because they have lost their moral underpinnings; their foundational belief in morality and truth has been eroded.... At one time, our society, by and large, explained the universe, humanity, and the purpose of life from the Judeo-Christian tradition: a belief that truth existed, and everyone could know and understand it. A clear understanding of what was right and wrong gave society a moral standard by which to measure crime and punishment, business ethics, community values, character, and social conduct....

That has changed dramatically, however. Our children are being raised in a society that has largely rejected the notions of truth and morality, a society that has somewhere lost the ability to decide what is true and what is right. Truth has become a matter of taste; morality has been replaced by individual preference.³

“If modern man has taken seriously the main intellectual currents of the last century or so,” Professor James Wilson has written,

he would have found himself confronted by the need to make moral choices when the very possibility of making such choices had been denied. God is dead or silent, reason suspect or defective, nature meaningless or hostile. As a result, man is adrift on an uncharted sea, left to find his moral bearings with no compass and no pole star, and so able to do little more than utter personal preferences, bow to historical necessity, or accept social conventions.

If the moral sense is the result of nothing more significant than a cultural or historical throw of the dice, then it will occur to some people... that they are free to do whatever they can get away with by practicing indulgent self-absorption or embracing an angry ideology.⁴

In the 1960s a second movement began to take shape—hand in hand with the Death of God Movement—one that has had its flowering in our own time. It was known as Situation Ethics or Ethical Relativism. Inspired by the writings of Bishop John A. T. Robinson and Professor Joseph

Fletcher, this movement proposed that any moral system is too shallow to provide answers to all situations and that every man and woman must decide what is right. It was a time when all were told to open themselves to the “new morality.” “The sanctions of Sinai have lost their terrors, and people no longer accept the authority of Jesus even as a great moral teacher. Robbed of its supranatural supports, men find it difficult to take seriously a code of living that confessedly depended on them.”⁵ Many of you will remember how common it was to hear young people spout off with “It’s all relative” or the even more common dictum, “There are no absolutes” (a pretty absolute statement, it seems to me!). Though we hear fewer chants and may notice fewer crusades for ethical relativism in our own day, the die is cast and what was once parlor conversation or even college colloquy is now applied theology.

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We seem to be caught in a vicious cycle. Knowing and sensing the things of God tend to prevent (or at least slow down) profligate wickedness. We cannot, however, come to know the things of God while we are sinning, for the Spirit of Truth will have difficulty penetrating the barriers we have erected through disobedience. Thus the need to declare repentance, to set forth the great plan of happiness, to teach of things eternal, of the need to bring our lives and our lifestyles into harmony with the mind and will of the Almighty. We cannot, simply cannot, as a people and a Church be guilty of moving the standards, shifting the anchors, or diluting the doctrine (especially the hard doctrine) in order to enhance our public image. Indeed, if those called to be the salt of the earth—those who have come out of the world by covenant (*Doctrine & Covenants* 101:39-40)—lose their savor, either by mixture or by contamination, wherewith shall the world be salted or the people be saved?

One Christian writer has observed: “If the stability of buildings depends largely upon their foundations, so does the stability of human lives. The search for personal security is a primal instinct, but many fail to find it today. Old familiar landmarks are being obliterated. Moral absolutes which were once thought to be eternal are being abandoned.” The modern mind has yielded to what has become known as the “poison of subjectivism,” the idea “that morality is manmade, private, subjective, a matter of feeling, a subdivision of psychology. ‘I feel’ replaces ‘I believe.’”⁶

Recently I listened to an Evangelical Christian speaker lament the changes that have taken place during the last two decades. He mentioned that for many years the most popular scripture among young Christians was John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Over time he has noticed a new favorite among young people—Matthew 7:1: “Judge not, that ye be not judged.” Such a shift speaks volumes. There are too many things that an earlier generation

would have spurned and rejected as deadly to their souls that we have allowed to become part of our world. Some of this has happened as a result of excessive tolerance or misplaced loyalty.

Let me illustrate. About fifteen years ago one of my students asked if she could visit with me after class. She had been with me for two semesters of Book of Mormon, and she was, frankly, a delight to have in class. The light of the gospel radiated from her countenance. She came in to tell me goodbye. I said, “Well, I’ll see you next year, won’t I?” She shook her head and said, “No, I won’t be coming back to BYU.” I asked why. She said: “Brother Millet, I’m tired. No, it’s more than that—I’m worn out. I haven’t slept for almost a year now.” Was she tired of studying? I asked. Wouldn’t a summer break do the trick? No, that wasn’t it. She explained that her roommates, all returned missionaries, had their boyfriends over each night in their bedrooms until the early morning hours, forcing this young woman to try to sleep in the kitchen or the living room. More specifically, there was never a place for her to sleep, inasmuch as two of her roommates had their male companions in bed with them every night.

I was stunned. Shocked. Sickened. “Well, why didn’t you tell someone? Why didn’t you mention it to the landlord or the bishop?” Her answer was very revealing, and it also highlights a significant problem that many in this generation face. She said: “But wouldn’t that be judging them?” We then had a long, long discussion about what it meant to judge righteous judgment. I explained to her that each of us, as men and women seeking to be holy, are under obligation to make judgments every day of our lives. We must decide whether we will spend time with some people, in particular places, doing certain things. Such decisions, very much a part of making our way through the mists of darkness, are vital; our hope for eternal life depends upon us doing so.

In our day, it seems as though the most serious flaw a person can have is to be intolerant. One would almost rather be immoral, unclean, degenerate. But whatever you do, don’t dare be intolerant. Now, to be sure, we must be Christian, must be understanding, must be loving and concerned. But such virtues must never cloud the issue of what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. We must not, as Elder Dallin H. Oaks pointed out to BYU students, allow our strengths to become our weaknesses.⁷ We must not allow our tendency to be tolerant to become the very means by which vice becomes acceptable and even encouraged. If we do not stand up for some things, we will fall for most anything.

3. *A Denial of Personal Responsibility.* The growth of the behavioral sciences in the last century has been phenomenal. Humankind seems at least as eager to understand the behavior and motivation of men and

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women as they are to understand light waves and black holes and the mysteries of DNA. The application of scientific principles to the study of human behavior—in an effort to formalize and objectify that study—has resulted in the superimposition of a cause-effect model on man and woman. Though it may be healthy and in some cases helpful to search for root causes, the cause-effect, stimulus-response model for understanding man will forevermore yield deficient and perhaps even perverse results, so long as we ignore the role of moral agency in that process. I say that not only in regard to Behaviorism but also any other system—Humanistic or Freudian—attempts to define the cause of human behavior solely in terms of inner mechanisms, self-actualization, id or ego functions, or even genetic predisposition.

Our fascination with causes ancillary to human agency has led us to paint ourselves into a corner in today's world. "Whereas in the late nineteenth century," James Wilson has written,

crime rates seem to have decreased during periods of economic growth, in the last few decades they have often increased during such periods. Over the course of the last hundred years the world has experienced a shift from an era in which crime chiefly responded to material circumstances to one in which it responds to cultural ones. That shift has many causes, but one is the collapse in the legitimacy of what once was respectfully called middle-class morality but today is sneeringly referred to as 'middle-class values.'

The moral relativism of the modern age has probably contributed to the increase in crime rates, especially the increases that occur during prosperous times. It has done so by replacing the belief in personal responsibility with the notion of social causation and by supplying to those marginal persons at risk for crime a justification for doing what they might have done anyway.⁸

Add to this movement the gradual attack our society has made on guilt—the inner monitor by which we sense within ourselves that we have violated the laws of God or the norms of society—and we find ourselves in a precarious position. "That kind of thinking," one Protestant theologian has observed,

has all but driven words like *sin*, *repentance*, *contrition*, *atonement*, and *redemption* out of public discourse. If no one is supposed to feel guilty, how could anyone be a sinner? Modern culture has the answer: people are *victims*. Victims are not responsible for what they do; they are casualties of what happens to them. So every human failing must be described in terms of how the perpetrator has been victimized.⁹

To be sure, there are real victims in society—abused children or spouses, persons who suffer at the hands of racism or sexism—and they deserve our empathy, our support, and our zealous defense against such

tragedies. My specific concern is with men and women who do wrong, who knowingly violate the laws of decency and morality, and then seek refuge behind the growing wall of victimization. For example,

A man who was shot and paralyzed while committing a burglary in New York recovered damages from the store owner who shot him. His attorney told a jury the man was first of all a victim of society, driven to crime by economic disadvantages. Now, the lawyer said, he is a victim of the insensitivity of the man who shot him. Because of that man's callous disregard of the thief's plight as a victim, the poor criminal will be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. He deserves some redress. The jury agreed. The store owner paid a large settlement. Several months later, the same man, still in his wheelchair, was arrested while committing another armed robbery.

Bernard McCummings parlayed a similar victimism into wealth. After mugging and brutally beating an elderly New York man in the subway, McCummings was shot while fleeing the scene. Permanently paralyzed, he sued and won \$4.8 million in compensation from the New York Transit Authority. The man he mugged, a cancer patient, is still paying doctor bills. McCummings, the mugger—whom the courts deemed the greater victim—is now a multimillionaire.

In two separate cases in England, a barmaid who stabbed another woman to death in a barroom brawl, and a woman who angrily drove her car into her lover were both acquitted of murder after they claimed acute pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS) addled their thinking and caused them to act in ways they could not control. Both received therapy rather than punishment.

A San Francisco city supervisor claimed he murdered a fellow supervisor and Mayor George Mascone because too much junk food—especially Hostess Twinkies—made him act irrationally. Thus the famous 'Twinkie' defense was born. A lenient jury bought the line and produced a verdict of voluntary manslaughter rather than murder. They ruled that the junk food resulted in 'diminished mental capacity,' which mitigated the killer's guilt. He was out of prison before the mayor's next term would have been complete.¹⁰

In the words of one author, what we have here is

a formula for social gridlock: the irresistible search for someone or something to blame colliding with the unmovable unwillingness to accept responsibility. Now enshrined in law and jurisprudence, victimism is reshaping the fabric of society, including employment policies, criminal justice, education, urban politics, and, in an increasingly Orwellian emphasis on 'sensitivity' in language. A community of interdependent citizens has been displaced by a society of resentful, competing, and self-interested individuals who have dressed their private annoyances in the garb of victimism.¹¹

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4. *Stressing Ethics over Doctrine.* In the absence of the real thing—the fulness of the gospel—there are many ideas and movements that seek to occupy center stage. Among the more popular in today’s world is a focus upon Jesus as loving teacher, guide, and moral leader. For some persons, Jesus stands as the preeminent example of kindness, the ultimate illustration of social and interpersonal graciousness and morality. A favorite text for this group is the Sermon on the Mount, while their highest aspiration is the call to live the Golden Rule. A Roman Catholic philosopher has observed:

According to the theological liberal, [the Sermon on the Mount] is the essence of Christianity, and Christ is the best of human teachers and examples.... Christianity is essentially ethics. What’s missing here? Simply, the essence of Christianity, which is *not* the Sermon on the Mount. When Christianity was proclaimed throughout the world, the proclamation (*kerygma*) was not ‘Love your enemies!’ but ‘Christ is risen!’ This was not a new *ideal* but a new *event*, that God became man, died, and rose for our salvation. Christianity is first of all not ideal but real, an event, news, the gospel, the ‘good news.’ The essence of Christianity is not Christianity; the essence of Christianity is Christ.¹²

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For many, the doctrine of Christ has been replaced by the ethics of Jesus. Those who insist that ethics must be discussed or taught or enforced point toward the declining moral standards of our day, the increase of drug abuse or teenage pregnancy, the prevalence of our inhumanity to each other. They contend that if Christianity is to make a difference in the world, we must find ways to transform ethereal theology into religious practice in a decaying society. They thus promote a social gospel, a relevant religion. The problem with a social gospel is that it is inherently and forevermore deficient as far as engaging the real problems of human beings. It almost always focuses on symptoms rather than causes. Ethics is not the essence of the gospel. Ethics is not necessarily righteousness. The very word *ethics* has come to connote socially acceptable standards based on current consensus, as opposed to absolute truths based on God’s eternal laws. Ethics is too often to virtue and righteousness what theology is to religion—a pale and wimpy substitute. Indeed, ethics without that virtue that comes through the cleansing powers of the Redeemer is like religion without God, at least the true and living God.

5. *False Teachings about Men and Women.* Both men and women in the last three decades have bought into ideas and world views that are destructive of individuals and families. Many men, for example, have been told that they must be stoic, stern, and macho. They have been instructed to guard their feelings, hide their emotions, and maintain a cool exterior. Some have imbibed the poisonous notion that the great indicator of success in life is to be found outside the home, to be ascertained in terms of portfolios,

chrome, real estate, business contacts, or academic degrees. Some have become so ensnared by their work—that which is intended, at best, to be a means to an end—that they have abrogated their responsibilities toward home and children. Some have given way to carnal urges, learned to relabel sin as psychology, and tragically surrendered to that great lie we have come to know as the “mid-life crisis.” Far too many men in the Church have missed the mark in leading their families, have taken license from what they would call the patriarchal order of government, and have become tyrannical and dictatorial in their leadership of the home. Truly, the vicious but versatile father of lies rages in the hearts of some, while he pacifies others (see 2 Nephi 28:20-21).

There can be no question that women have been the object of abuse and indignity for centuries and that even today many women—in and out of the Church—live under circumstances that range from the uncomfortable to the intolerable. Men have too often been cruel and uncaring, insensitive to women—their needs, their desires, and their voices. In that sense the effort on the part of women to reassert their value and their critical place in society has been sorely needed. Many women have turned, however, to brands of feminism that have brought more heartache than help. “What is so frustrating,” one woman has written,

looking back on all this, is how unnecessary and destructive it all was. American women in the fifties needed feminism, real feminism, feminism that would embrace both its career women and its career mothers.... A real feminism would have affirmed them both, searched for ways to allow each to be more secure and more valued in what she had chosen to do. Instead, the false feminism we got declared war on mothers.

Thus it was that in the wake of the defeat of the ERA and the growth of the prolife movement, many feminist organizations, especially the National Organization for Women, woke up to ‘family issues.’ I would like to say that was a hopeful sign. The Lord only knows, we need some constructive thinking about family issues.

All indications, however, are that nothing much has changed, except the rhetoric. Not a single one of the major mainstream feminist organizations is willing to consider marriage and motherhood as anything but a problem. Not one of them is interested in helping women who want to make that choice pursue it in dignity. Everyone wants to make that choice a near or total impossibility. Being ‘just a housewife’ still gets you no respect, especially from feminists.... For a movement dedicated so stridently to choice, they are remarkably selective in the choices they are willing to allow other women to make.

...It’s no wonder that the new woman of the nineties has no self-respect. You cannot devalue motherhood without devaluing everything else women do. You

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cannot declare the primary work of most women throughout most of history to be beneath serious consideration without sending women the covert message that it is really women who are beneath serious consideration. You cannot train a whole generation of women in contempt for their mothers without training them in contempt for themselves....

“The New Woman of the nineties didn’t need a society full of sexist men to make her believe she was worth nothing. She had the new wave of American feminism to do it for them.”¹³

In general we could say that men and women, in and out of the Church, have been sold a bill of goods. They have been taunted by and titillated with views concerning man, woman, priesthood, and family that are at odds with the revealed word and thus with things as they really are and as they really will be. Confusion and conflict have ensued, and a few have forsaken the faith because they chose to give heed to seductive voices. No person, not here or in eternity, can be happy or find real fulfillment who revolts against the divinely established role and calling they were given before the foundations of this earth were laid.

IT’S ALL ABSOLUTE

Let us begin with the certain assurance that we cannot solve spiritual

maladies through temporal solutions. Our problem in the world today is a detachment from morality; and morality cannot, in the long run, be severed from religion. *Religion* is a most interesting word. It means literally “to tie back to.” It is related to the word *ligament*, that which ties the bone to the muscle. Religion is thus that which ties us back to God and to sacred things. To define morality in terms of utility (what works) or in terms of consensus (what most people believe) is to fall short of what was, is, and is to be (*Doctrine & Covenants* 93:24).

Some things are. They just are. Neither congressional decisions nor popular opinion changes absolute truth. All the people in the world but the Latter-day Saints may decide that abortion is humane, homosexuality is merely an alternative lifestyle, and assisted suicide is compassionate; but that does not change the fact that these matters are sinful and wrong and contrary to the great plan of the Eternal God. They cannot bring happiness. They cannot result in peace. Every religious body on the globe except the Latter-day Saints may conclude that God is a spirit, that He is uninvolved in the daily doings of men and women, and that men and women will prosper according to their genius and not through the divine assistance of a Savior. But such sentiments do not matter a snap of the finger in the eternal scheme of things, for what God is, does, and accomplishes among his children—through the mediation of his Beloved Son—is in

the realm of absolute truths. These things we know from scripture, from modern prophets, and by personal revelation.

“We know instinctively,” one Christian writer has observed,

that some things are right and some things are wrong. Let [a young woman] discover, for example, that her soccer shoes were stolen from her school locker and she'll feel wronged. She would not argue that the thief is entitled to his opinion of right and wrong; she would appeal to an objective sense of justice because she would claim that she had suffered an injustice. In so doing, of course, she would appeal to a moral law that she believes everyone—not just herself—ought to follow.¹⁴

That is to say, while many who yearn to speak of ethical relativism or situational ethics do so from their philosophical perch above the real world, those same persons expect others to treat them according to a model of truth and morality that reflects a more objective and absolute way of knowing what is right or wrong. If it is true that “There are no atheists in foxholes,” then it is also true that “There are no relativists who expect to be treated relatively.”¹⁵

THE FOUNDATION FOR ETHICS

“It is one thing,” Elder Bruce R. McConkie has written,

to teach ethical principles, quite another to proclaim the great doctrinal verities, which are the foundation of true Christianity and out of which eternal salvation comes. True it is that salvation is limited to those in whose souls the ethical principles abound, but true it is also that Christian ethics, in the full and saving sense, automatically become a part of the lives of those who first believe Christian doctrines.

In summary, “It is only when gospel ethics are tied to gospel doctrines that they rest on a sure and enduring foundation and gain full operation in the lives of the saints.”¹⁶

The Latter-day Saints are occasionally criticized for expending so much of the resources of the Church on missionary work or the construction of temples. Some indicate that the institutional Church should be more involved in leading or officially supporting this or that crusade, in laboring for this or that social cause. I agree with Bruce Hafen, who pointed out that

The ultimate purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ is to cause the sons and daughters of God to become as Christ is. Those who see religious purpose only in terms of ethical service in the relationship between man and fellowmen may miss that divinely ordained possibility. It is quite possible to render charitable—even ‘Christian’—service without developing deeply ingrained and permanent

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Christlike character. Paul understood this when he warned against giving all one's goods to feed the poor without charity.... While religious philosophies whose highest aim is social relevance may do much good, they will not ultimately lead people to achieve the highest religious purpose, which is to become as God and Christ are.¹⁷

The Master warned what would happen if we seek to be his but are not built upon his gospel. If our effort “be not built upon my gospel,” he said, “and is built upon the works of men, or upon the works of the devil, verily I say unto you they have joy in their works for a season, and by and by the end cometh, and they are hewn down and cast into the fire, from whence there is no return” (3 Nephi 27:11). The works of the devil obviously pertain to carnality and devilishness, what Paul called “the works of the flesh”—such sins as adultery, fornication, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, strife, and heresy (Galatians 5:19-21). They bring pleasure and celestial titillation for a season, but they result inevitably in shrinkage of the soul, followed in time by bitter loneliness and that awful alienation from things of lasting worth. Indeed, “their works do follow them, for it is because of their works that they are hewn down” (3 Nephi 27:12).

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God's work and glory is to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man (Moses 1:39). Our most noble work will be accomplished and our greatest glory and joy will come, to the degree that we are similarly occupied with this overarching objective. The “works of men” may refer to what we know as honorable endeavors, worthwhile efforts to improve man and society, but labors whose focus are not truly on the Lord or his work and glory. Political agendas, ethical concerns, and environmental issues, all works of men, are good and proper; and we should be involved in them to the degree that our time and circumstances allow. Noble enterprises bring a measure of personal satisfaction. Too often, however, the works of men bring glory to men. More often than not, the works of men hack away at the leaves of the inconsequential while ignoring the spiritual roots of attitudes and behavior.

The poignant message of the Savior is that happiness, meaning lasting joy, comes only to those who are built upon his gospel and whose works are really the Lord's works. So many people, as C.S. Lewis observed, seek to

invent some sort of happiness for themselves outside God, apart from God. And out of that hopeless attempt has come nearly all that we call human history—money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, slavery—the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.

The reason why it can never succeed is this.... God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it

is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.¹⁸

Similarly, Elder Neal A. Maxwell pointed out that “Mankind has not had much success in keeping the second commandment by loving our neighbors as ourselves, without also keeping the first great commandment, loving God with all of our heart, might, mind, and strength. Try as mankind may to achieve the brotherhood of man without the Fatherhood of God, it is cosmetic and does not last!”¹⁹

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GETTING BACK TO THE SOURCE

Let me propose what might be a rather typical discussion between an LDS parent and child:

Father: “Billy, is it wrong to steal?”

Son: “Yea, Dad, it’s wrong to steal.”

Father: “Why is it wrong?”

Son: “Because you taught us that it’s wrong.”

Father: “That’s right, son, we did. But why did we teach you that?”

Son: “Because the Church teaches us that it’s not right to steal.”

Father: “Right again. But why does the Church teach that?”

(Then there is a long pause.)

Son: “I don’t know, Dad. Is it because Heavenly Father doesn’t want us to steal?”

Father: “You’re absolutely right, Billy. Heavenly Father does not want us to steal. Why doesn’t he want us to steal?”

(This time there is a longer and even more uncomfortable pause.)

Son: “I don’t really know, Dad.”

This fictional encounter highlights a problem we face in teaching one another (and especially our children) the principles of morality and decency. Notice that the PRECEPT of “Thou shalt not steal” is pretty clear in this young man’s mind. He has been taught the commandments and is able to articulate what he understands. A little less clear is that which underlies the precept, namely the PRINCIPLE, in this case the principle of Honesty. Our young man knows what has been forbidden (to steal), and he senses that the major reasons it is forbidden is because his parents, his Church, and his Heavenly Father have condemned it. Now those are all fine sources for the precept and the principle, but are they the ultimate or absolute source? No, for beneath the principle is the PERSON of God. A vital part of the great plan of happiness is the nature and kind of Being we worship. Fundamental to the purpose of life and the hope for glory hereafter is the knowledge that has been revealed concerning God—his

character, his perfections, his relationship to us, and, most important to this discussion, the knowledge that we can become as he is.

To complete our conversation,

Father: “Billy, we are commanded not to steal [the Precept] because the Lord wants his people to be honest [the Principle]. He wants us to be honest because he is a God of truth [the Person]. We are sent to earth to strive as best we can to become as he is. Only as we become a people of truth can we ever hope to be like our Heavenly Father.”

But with changing times and the erosion of time-honored values, many look about hopelessly for a more solid and enduring foundation.

It is one thing to teach that honesty is the best policy (utility) or to teach that it is best to be honest because most people in society expect us to deal respectfully and responsibly with one another (consensus). Both utility and consensus have done much in the past to maintain some semblance of order in our world. But with changing times and the erosion of time-honored values, many look about hopelessly for a more solid and enduring foundation. That foundation is doctrinal; it is the foundation of faith and theology. Our children deserve answers to the hard question of WHY. And the only lasting and satisfying answer to why we do what we do or why we do not do other things is to be found in the great plan of happiness, in the understanding of God and man, in the clear statement of our eternal possibilities here and hereafter.

As a priesthood leader, I have had occasion to listen as young people confess major moral transgressions. I have asked about why the violation of the law of chastity is so serious. I have been interested as they have spoken of disappointing their parents, postponing temple marriage or missions, bearing children out of wedlock, and contracting deadly diseases—all of which, from the perspective of utility or consensus are pretty good reasons to stay morally clean. But there is more to it, much more, and it is that added light and added knowledge that come from our divinely given doctrine to which we turn for the greatest preventative medicine against serious sin.

I learned something very valuable many years ago when my wife and I timidly approached the much dreaded but needed conversation about the facts of life with our oldest child. We sweat and we stewed for weeks. We read. We debated. We prepared charts and graphs and pictures of the human reproductive system; we went into the conversation with several books under our arms. We had also prayed earnestly for inspiration. We dove into the presentation and discovered to our surprise that it was going in a direction that neither my wife nor I had anticipated. For about an hour we spoke of the plan of salvation—of who we are, where we came from, why we are here, and where we are going when we die. We spoke of physical bodies and experiences and Satan and opposition and relationships and families and temples and covenants and ordinances and eternal life. The Spirit of the Lord was present, and so we learned a great

deal from what we said. I think my daughter did also. At the end of that most unusual hour, I asked: “Now, sweetheart, do you understand why it is so very important to stay morally clean?” She nodded.

It was not until many years later that I sensed the significance of a passage of scripture, one that President Boyd K. Packer has emphasized again and again. Speaking of the ancients, Alma said: “God gave unto them commandments, after having made known unto them the plan of redemption” (Alma 12:32). From the knowledge of the person of God, as well as the doctrines and principles that follow, come the precepts. President Packer explained to Church Educational System personnel:

Young people wonder ‘why?’—Why are we commanded *to do* some things, and why are we commanded *not* to do other things? A knowledge of the plan of happiness, even in outline form, can give young minds a ‘why.’

A parent once angrily scolded a child for a serious mistake, saying, ‘Why on earth did you do such a thing?’ The child answered, ‘If I’d had a Why, I wouldn’t have done it.’

Providing your students [or, we might add, our children] with a collection of unrelated truths will hurt as much as it helps. Provide a basic feeling for the whole plan, even with just a few details, and it will help them ever so much more. Let them know what it’s all about, then they will have the ‘why.’

Most of the difficult questions we face in the Church right now, and we could list them—abortion and all the rest of them, all of the challenges of who holds the priesthood and who does not—cannot be answered without some knowledge of the plan as a background....

You will not be with your students or your own children at the time of their temptations. At those dangerous moments they must depend on their own resources. If they can locate themselves within the framework of the gospel plan, they will be immensely strengthened.

The plan is worthy of repetition over and over again. Then the purpose of life, the reality of the Redeemer, and the reason for the commandments will stay with them.

Their gospel study, their life experiences, will add to an ever-growing witness of the Christ, of the Atonement, of the restoration of the gospel.²⁰

Having said all this, I hasten to add that even with a knowledge of the great plan of happiness before them, men and women, boys and girls may choose to walk in the ways of the world and thus settle for less than what they could be. But I have a conviction that the proper teaching of the Father’s plan will do much to hold on to those who are children of

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the covenant and heirs to the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

It is especially during the times of stress and distress, during the times of crisis and trauma, that the Saints of the Most High would do well to direct their attention to the words of living prophets. Their seeric vision grants them an elevated perspective, a capacity to see beyond the here and now and plan and prepare today with “an eye of faith” toward tomorrow. While each one of us who enjoys the gift of the Holy Ghost should and must seek for the power to recognize and discern the signs of the times for what they are, the wisest among us will always and forevermore have an eye toward the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and an ear attuned to their words.

Do we, even now, recognize the power of pure doctrine set forth in the *Proclamation on the Family*, a power that will do much to secure the home and preserve the family unit in even more troublesome times ahead? That divinely inspired document teaches us of the *person* of God, of the doctrine and *principles* underlying the establishment of an eternal family unit, and of the *precepts* we must understand and observe to qualify to have an eternal seal placed upon our families. We have the scriptures, the standard works, and God be praised for them. There are timeless lessons, eternal doctrines, and marvelous inspiration to be found within their covers. We can profitably study them over and over again, year in and year out, and still find new insights and new application with every reading. But the written word of God, as priceless a treasure as it is, is not what distinguishes the Latter-day Saints from those of other faiths. We have the living prophets, the living oracles in our midst, and their word we are “to receive as if from mine own mouth, in all patience and faith” (*Doctrine & Covenants* 21:5). The Lord of Light has given this stern warning to us: “And all they who receive the oracles of God, let them beware how they hold [receive] them lest they are accounted as a light thing, and are brought under condemnation thereby, and stumble and fall when the storms descend, and the winds blow, and the rains descend, and beat upon their house” (*Doctrine & Covenants* 90:5).

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The Lord’s living Church is indeed alive and well, for it is led by living Apostles and prophets. It is to be governed by revelation—current, modern, daily revelation—and not by canonized scripture alone. Nothing is more fixed, set, and established than the fact that among the people of God the canon of scripture is open, flexible, and expanding, and also that the ongoing will of heaven will come through those charged to direct the destiny of this Church. The mark of distinction for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the flow of “revelation adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom are placed.”²¹

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude where I began—with the sobering prophecy of the Apostle Paul. You recall that he warned of such sins in the last days as pride, blasphemy, disrespect for parents, ingratitude, dishonesty, immorality, and perversion. Finally, he spoke of persons who are “ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:1-7). The visible disarray in our world is but symptomatic of the invisible decay, an evidence that our moral foundation is under attack. And should we be surprised? The Psalmist warned that “the wicked bend their bows; lo, they make ready their arrow upon the string, that they may privily shoot at the upright in heart, to destroy their foundation” (*JST*, Psalms 11:2).

It is worth noting that the Apostle Paul did not leave us without comfort or recourse. Later in that same chapter, he wrote to Timothy:

But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived. But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; and that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. And all Scripture given by inspiration of God, is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works (*JST*, 2 Timothy 3:13-17).

The scriptures. The word of God. The living oracles. The doctrines of salvation—these are the means by which we come to know the *precepts*, the *principles*, and the *person* of God. They set forth what we must and must not do, as well as who we are and what we may become. Thus President Packer explained: “True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior. The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior.... That is why we stress so forcefully the study of the doctrines of the gospel.”²²

There is a power, a supernal power that flows from us when we teach the great plan of happiness—the divine Sonship of Christ; the reality of his power to forgive and transform our souls; his ability to right all of the terrible wrongs of this life; his infinite capacity to raise us from the dead in glorious immortality; and his intention to bestow upon us the greatest of all his gifts, even eternal life, including the continuation of the family unit in eternity. We are under covenant to stand as a light to a world that has been traveling in darkness, a world gripped by relativism, a world that desperately needs the hope and prospects and eternal values we alone have to offer. We are commissioned to be the savor of men, even the saviors of men (*Doctrine & Covenants* 101:39-40; 103:9-10) in offering the path of peace and the solution to this world’s most vexing challenges. There is peace, consummate peace that comes into our lives

when we erect our divine domiciles on the foundation of doctrine and faith. Therein is our safety. Therein is our hope. ☪

NOTES:

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3. Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *Right from Wrong* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1994), 12-13.
4. *The Moral Sense* (New York: Macmillan, Inc., 1993), 5, 9.
5. John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), 109; see also Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), chapters 1 and 2.
6. John Stott, *Life in Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1991), 22.
7. 1991-92 *BYU Speeches* (Provo: BYU Publications, 1992), 107-115.
8. *The Moral Sense*, 10.
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10. Cited in MacArthur, *The Vanishing Conscience*, 22-23.
11. Charles Sykes, *A Nation of Victims* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 15.
12. Peter Kreeft, *Back to Virtue* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 83, emphasis in original.
13. Orania Papazoglou, "Despising Our Mothers, Despising Ourselves," *First Things*, (January 1992), 16, 18-19, emphasis added.
14. McDowell, *Right from Wrong*, 78.
15. Cited by McDowell, *Right from Wrong*, 78.
16. *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1985), 699-700.
17. *The Broken Heart* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1989), 196-97.
18. *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 54.
19. "This Is a Special Institution," Inaugural Address at BYU-Hawaii; cited in *Profile Magazine* (December 1994), 9.
20. "The Great Plan of Happiness," Seventeenth Annual CES Religious Educators' Symposium, 10 August 1993, 3.
21. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 256.
22. *Conference Report*, October 1986, 20.