

Elder Neal A. Maxwell

“The enemy is combined”

Years ago, I wondered over the scriptural imagery of angels waiting “day and night” for “the great command” to come down and reap the tares in a wicked and suffering world; it seemed rather eager to me (see D&C 38:12; 86:5). Given such massive, needless human suffering, I don’t wonder anymore!

Even so, the final reaping will occur only when the Father determines that the world is “fully ripe.” Meanwhile, brothers and sisters, the challenge is surviving spiritually in a deteriorating “wheat and tares” world (D&C 86:7).

Granted, occasionally a few defectors or dissidents may try to vex us as they hyperventilate over their particular concerns, but it is the engulfing effects of that deteriorating world on Church members which are the clear and present danger. “Evils and designs” really do operate through “conspiring [individuals] in the last days” (D&C 89:4). The Lord has even announced, “Behold, the enemy is combined” (D&C 38:12).

Evils need not intimidate

Yet we must not be intimidated or lose our composure even though the once morally unacceptable is becoming acceptable, as if frequency somehow conferred respectability!

One of the most subtle forms of intimidation is the gradual normalization of aberration. Alexander Pope so cautioned:

Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
As, to be hated, needs but to be seen;
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.

[*An Essay on Man*, epistle II, lines 217–20]

Today, lust openly parades as love, license cleverly poses as liberty, and raucous sounds mockingly masquerade as music. Evil even calls itself good and often gets away with it!

While I would not shrink the circumference of freedom, the size of that circle is not the sole measure of social well-being.

Hence, to exult, as some do, over how much decadence is permissible at the edges ignores the erosive effects of such grossness upon all within that circle. Yeats’s descriptive imagery fits:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.
[William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming,” stanza 1]

Attributed to historian Will Durant are these relevant words: “If the hunger for liberty destroys order, the hunger for order will destroy liberty.” In this connection, how can there possibly be a disturbing loss of individual impulse control without a corresponding loss of collective freedom?

Violence and abortion

Violence abounds, often as people purchase drugs in order to “tune out” of the world instead of overcoming it. Just as foretold, our days actually are fast resembling the days of Noah, especially notable for their pattern of corruption and violence (see Matthew 24:37; Genesis 6:11). No wonder the adversary steadily promotes all the ancient sins—not because he is uninventive but because his harvest is so constant.

Abortion, which has increased enormously, causes one to ask, “Have we strayed so far from God’s second great

commandment—love thy neighbor—that a baby in a womb no longer qualifies to be loved—at least as a mother’s neighbor?” Even so, violence to an unborn child does not justify other violence!

Lack of neighboring

What of neighboring? Long ago, Tocqueville anticipated how individualism, unenriched by family and community, could produce the “lonely crowd,” saying:

“Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart” (Alexis de Tocqueville, “Democracy in America,” in Andrew M. Scott, *Political Thought in America* [New York: Rinehart and Co., Inc., 1959], p. 225).

In their search for identity and belonging, too many supposedly savvy teens are now confined to the solitude of a lonely gang. What is the lasting advantage of becoming streetwise if one is on a street to nowhere? Gangs mark the failure of both families and communities as well as symbolizing the pervasive revolt against authority.

Talk shows and soap operas

Instead of being communicating neighbors, we are flooded with talk shows, some of which feature not real conversation but exhibitionism and verbal voyeurism among virtual strangers.

We are lathered with soap operas in need of nothing so much as soap—for the scrubbing of themselves! Some seriously maintain that media violence and sleaze leave consumers untouched. But revenue is received from commercials precisely because of their influence. Either we deserve reforms, or sponsors deserve refunds!

Sin makes us “past feeling”

Those who mock the traditional moral values should heed this lesson of history from the Durants:

“A youth boiling with hormones will wonder why he should not give full freedom to his sexual desires; and if he is unchecked by custom, morals, or laws, he may ruin his life before he matures sufficiently to understand that sex is a river of fire that must be banked and cooled by a hundred restraints if it is not to consume both the individual and the group” (Will and Ariel Durant, *The Lessons of History* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968], pp. 35–36).

Lasciviousness wrongly celebrates the capacity to feel, so that people lose their capacity to feel! Three different prophets in three different dispensations bemoaned those who became “past feeling” (see 1 Nephi 17:45; Ephesians 4:19; Moroni 9:20). Do we really expect those presently “past feeling” to fashion an acceptable future? Gross sin not only dulls the feelings, it also impairs the intellect. After murdering Abel, Cain ironically boasted, “I am free!” (Moses 5:33). Did the herd of Gadarene swine similarly console themselves, thinking that they were actually rugged individualists as they raced down the hill to their destruction?

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn lamented recently how those who hold that “there is no God, there is no truth, the universe is chaotic, all is relative” constitute a “relentless cult of novelty . . . [which] conceals an unyielding and long-sustained attempt to undermine, ridicule and uproot all moral precepts” (“The Relentless Cult of Novelty and How It Wrecked the Century,” *The New York Times Book Review*, 7 Feb. 1993, p. 17).

Protecting pornography and resisting moral education

Today’s anguishing mortal scene gives rise to still other questions.

Pornography especially victimizes women and children. Why then the inordinate preoccupation with its protection? Pornography is better protected than citizens on the streets!

Even with its flaws, the family is basic, and since no other institution can compensate fully for failure in the family, why then, instead of enhancing the family, the desperate search for substitutes? Why not require family impact studies before proceeding with this program or that remedy, since of all environmental concerns the family should be first? Hundreds of governmental departments and programs protect various interests, but which one protects the family?

Since democracy depends upon citizens' obedience to the unenforceable, why then the stiff resistance to moral education which could emphasize widely shared and time-tested principles?

A sin-resistant counterculture

Only reform and self-restraint, institutional and individual, can finally rescue society! Only a sufficient number of sin-resistant souls can change the marketplace. As Church members we should be part of that sin-resistant counterculture. Instead, too many members are sliding down the slope, though perhaps at a slower pace.

In a "wheat and tares" world, how unusually blessed faithful members are to have the precious and constant gift of the Holy Ghost with reminders of what is right and of the covenants we have made. "For behold, . . . the Holy Ghost . . . will show unto you all things what ye should do" (2 Nephi 32:5). Whatever the decibels of decadence, these need not overwhelm the still, small voice! Some of the best sermons we will ever hear will be thus prompted from the pulpit of memory—to an audience of one!

Follow the Brethren

While living amid the foreseen "distress of nations, with perplexity" (Luke

21:25; see also D&C 88:79), members also have prophetic leadership which provides direction. Several times a year we sustain fifteen Apostles as prophets, seers, and revelators. So we know to whom to look, even though there are a few members who "seek not the welfare of Zion" and "set themselves up for a light" (2 Nephi 26:29). Furthermore, the Prophet Joseph clearly taught that recipients of that Apostleship possess "all the keys that ever were, or that can be, conferred upon mortal man" (cited by Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 1:137).

Repetitive experience teaches Church members that we need not be prey to pretenders. Besides, "the day cometh that they who will not hear the voice of the Lord, . . . neither give heed to the words of the prophets and apostles, shall be cut off from among the people" (D&C 1:14).

Additionally, the very process of Church government also ensures that we do not have secret leaders:

"It shall not be given to any one to go forth to preach my gospel, or to build up my church, except he be ordained by some one who has authority, and it is known to the church that he has authority and has been regularly ordained by the heads of the church" (D&C 42:11).

President Wilford Woodruff urged the Church flock to follow the Brethren because, he said, "the very moment that men in this kingdom attempt to run ahead or cross the path of their leaders, . . . they are in danger of being injured by the wolves. . . . I have never in my life known it to fail" (in *Journal of Discourses*, 5:83).

Further help comes to us through sermons, the sacrament, the holy temple, prayers, the scriptures, tithing settlements, and admonitions from loved ones. However, when members cut themselves off from all of these, then there is trouble. For instance, it is from estranged and self-justifying lips that some devastated spouses hear those terrible words, "I never loved you!"

Orthodoxy ensures balance

With the enemy combined, it is so vital to keep "in the right way" (Moroni 6:4). Orthodoxy in thought and behavior brings safety and felicity as the storms come, including "every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:14). Happily, amid such winds the Holy Ghost not only helps us recognize plain truth but also plain nonsense!

Orthodoxy ensures balance between the gospel's powerful and correct principles. In the body of gospel doctrine, not only are justice and mercy "fitly joined together [for] effectual working," but so is everything else! (Ephesians 4:16). But the gospel's principles do require synchronization. When pulled apart from each other or isolated, men's interpretations and implementations of these doctrines may be wild.

Love, if not checked by the seventh commandment, could become carnal. The fifth commandment's laudable emphasis upon honoring parents, unless checked by the first commandment, could result in unconditional loyalty to errant parents rather than to God.

Care is even needed in our renderings between God and Caesar (see Matthew 22:21). Even patience is balanced by "reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost," *betimes* meaning early or soon (D&C 121:43). Spiritual poise also includes both taking time to smell the flowers and noticing the leaves on the fig tree to see if "summer is nigh" (Matthew 24:32).

Thus, the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ is greater than any of its parts and larger than any of its programs or principles!

"Armed with righteousness"

Even during these difficult times, members "armed with righteousness" can

do so many things (1 Nephi 14:14). We can have love at home, even though the love of many waxes cold in the world (see Matthew 24:12). We can have inner peace even though peace has been taken from the earth (see D&C 1:35).

We can keep the seventh commandment even though others break it and mock it. We can render individualized, humanitarian service even though the mass of human suffering seems so overwhelming.

We can use our tongues to speak the truth in love, while refusing to use them to bear false witness (see Ephesians 4:15; Exodus 20:16). We can stand fast "in holy places" even though in the world "all things shall be in commotion" (D&C 45:32; 88:91).

We can reach for "hands which hang down" even if some refuse our proffered hands of friendship (D&C 81:5). We can hold to the iron rod even if others slip away and a few end up mocking us from the "great and spacious building" (1 Nephi 8:26; see also 8:27-28).

Like Nephi, we may not always know the meaning of things happening to us or around us. Nevertheless, like Nephi, we can still know that God loves us! (see 1 Nephi 11:17).

Yes, "the enemy is combined," but when we are combined with the Lord's "chariots of fire," then "they that be with us are more than they that be with them"! (2 Kings 6:16-17). Furthermore, the divine promise is that no weapon formed against the Lord's work shall finally prosper; "this is the heritage of the servants of the Lord" (Isaiah 54:17; see also D&C 71:9). I so assure; I so testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen!

President Monson

Elder Neal A. Maxwell of the Council of the Twelve has just spoken to us. We shall now hear from Elder Gene R. Cook of the Seventy.