

Things That Change, and Things That Don't

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The title of my talk today is “Things That Change, and Things That Don’t.” With regard to things that change, I would like to look at two separate categories: first, things that change within the Church; and second, things that change within our individual lives.

The changes that have occurred and are presently occurring in the Church are of epic proportions: prophecy fulfilling, mind-boggling, and—for those of us who are convinced that the Restoration is a reality—thrilling. Let me first tell you about an incident in my own life, and then I’ll give you some figures.

Sometime about 1958 or ’59, a statistics professor at Brigham Young University named Howard Nielson—who later became a congressman from this district—did a statistical study and projected probable Church membership by the end of the twentieth century. At that time, the Church had something in excess of one million members. His projection was that by the year 2000 the membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would be in the range of six million people.

I remember my reactions at the time. In part, I felt a sense of pride and gratitude that the Lord’s work would have progressed so remarkably. But I also concluded that it just

could never happen. In my view, increasing the Church membership by four-or fivefold in just forty years would present logistical, leadership, and financial problems of such magnitude that the Church would never be able to deal with them.

Well, so much for my ability to see the future. Here we are almost a decade short of that projected time when we would have six million people, and we have already exceeded that figure by two million. But I was certainly right in one respect: The leadership, logistical, and financial adjustments that the Church and its members have had to make have been massive. When Professor Nielson made his projections in the late 1950s, we had thirteen temples. Today we have about three and a half times that many—forty-four. Even more impressive has been the increase in the number of missionaries and the fruits of their efforts, measured by the number of convert baptisms. When I served as a missionary in the mid-to late 1950s, there were about 5,600 of us worldwide. Today, there are some 45,000, and during the calendar

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year 1990, those missionaries baptized 330,000 new converts, many of them in the twenty-five countries in which just six years ago we had no missionaries at all.

Particularly impressive—and particularly gratifying to me personally—has been the Church’s experience in my own field of missionary labor. During the wonderful two and a half years that I spent knocking on doors in Mexico, there were maybe as many as a dozen branches that had sufficient leadership and membership strength that they could possibly have qualified as wards. Today—just three and a half decades later—Mexico has 124 stakes, which is twenty more than we organized in the entire Church during our first 100 years.

One of the things that has not changed over that time is my own inability to fathom the impact of what the future probably holds and how all of us as Church members will be able to adapt to it. Would anyone among us be willing to assume that we have now reached or will at any time in the future reach some kind of constant membership plateau—or even that our annual rate of growth will ever permanently level out? There is no enrollment ceiling on Church membership. I have reviewed for you the numbers that have characterized the Church’s growth over a period of just over thirty years. If the number of missionaries has increased sevenfold over that time, what is it going to be over the next thirty? And with what effects on the Church and its members? As I say, my mind has difficulty even coming to grips with those issues, much less supplying any kind of answers. The real solution, I think, lies in other, more important things that do not change, a subject to which I will turn shortly.

But first, I want to talk about things that change within our individual lives. I had an experience recently that provided a simple reminder that things do indeed change for each of us. About two months ago I was in the nation’s capital for some NCAA meetings. One

afternoon I took an hour to run along Rock Creek Parkway, which was one of my two or three favorite running courses when I worked in Washington from 1981 to 1985. Last November, as I churned along that beautiful wooded path to the side of the creek that gives Rock Creek Parkway its name, my mind turned back to so many occasions when over those five years I had bounced along that path either by myself or with friends.

There was one very noticeable difference. In those days, I was one of the terrors of the parkway. My energy seemed boundless, and I took almost fiendish delight in passing large numbers of people. Last fall I remembered those earlier days and could not help contrasting them with my circumstance now. I still love to run. I do it regularly, with the same beneficial consequences to my physical and emotional health that I have always experienced. And, as a social event, it is still as pleasant as it ever was. But I am just not as good at it as I used to be. Now I am the *passee*, not the *passer*. The only people I ever pass are either in their eighties or out strolling their pet turtles. Two months ago, as I wended my way along the course that over the years I enjoyed so much, it came home to me that whatever the reason or combination of causes, those days when eight minutes to the mile was a comfortable pace, and six-minute miles were within my capacity, are probably gone forever.

One level of analysis—and, frankly, I think a correct one—tells me that it is of little consequence that my comfortable jogging pace is noticeably slower than it was just a few years ago. Certainly it will have no impact on our national debt, on crime rates in the large cities, on spreading the gospel to Eastern European countries, or on my ability to do my job as president of BYU. And in any event, even in my better days my performance as a runner didn’t turn any heads. A six-minute mile is not going to be written up in the sports pages. But as I contrasted the way things are now with

the way they were some years ago, that simple little experience last November was for me a very powerful reminder that in our individual lives there are things that change, and when they do, some change irrevocably.

Each of you has already had to deal with some rather large changes in your own lives: leaving home to go to BYU or on a mission; returning from a mission; a BYU class that was more difficult or a grade that was lower than you would have ever thought possible during your high school days; no money to fix a car that breaks down (and a father who very helpfully reminds you of his advice that you never should have taken a car to college in the first place); or a boyfriend or a girlfriend who doesn't have quite the level of fondness for you that you have for him or her.

Some of the greatest challenges in adjusting to change have to do with the simple process of moving from one year to the next. A friend of mine told me that she had picked a dentist because she thought she recognized his name as one of her high school classmates. But when she saw him, she said to herself, "No way did I go to high school with this old man." As he began to talk to her though, she concluded that her initial impression had been correct, and as she left she said, "I'm sure that you and I were at Highland High School at the same time."

His response was, "Why that's fascinating. And what did you teach?"

Very simply, for everyone of us changes are inevitable. Some of them we can anticipate; many we cannot. Many are fulfilling and joyful; some are devastating. The important issue is not whether changes will occur, because inevitably they will. The only real issue is how well we deal with them.

Among the best antidotes to the adverse consequences of things that change in our lives are things that don't change—which is the final subject that I want to discuss with you.

I begin from the premise that there are in this life absolutes and constant values that do

not change because they are always true, always certain, and always reliable regardless of time, place, or other circumstances. Some of them are principles of revealed doctrine such as prophecy, revelation, restoration. Some are guides for living, which, if we observe them, will make our lives happier and more satisfying—outstanding examples are moral cleanliness and the Word of Wisdom. I want to tell you, brothers and sisters, that there are absolutes, verities that do not change no matter what else in life may change. They constitute the anchors to which we ought to tie the vessels of our souls.

Throughout your lives, you will come across some people who will assure you with great solemnity that there is no such thing as an absolute. In these people's view, everything is relative. All of life's values, decisions, and principles are subject to what lawyers call case-to-case balancing. Under that view, truth is determined not at all by stable verities that do not change from one context to the next, but rather on the particular facts, circumstances, and competing considerations that obtain and arise in each individual instance. Most of those people are very sincere. And all of them are dead wrong. Their attacks and assertions in this respect go beyond doctrines and practices unique to Latter-day Saints.

It is distressing, for example, to see Bible scholars and others wandering into a wilderness of doubt and questioning about subjects that ought be free from either doubt or question. Professor Robert Matthews of our religion faculty, in an address at last year's Sidney B. Sperry Symposium, reviewed news reports of activities and conclusions from a group of about 200 Bible scholars and Christian ministers who have met every six months in several major U.S. cities over the past five years. Among other conclusions, they assert that the Savior did not deliver the Sermon on the Mount, did not walk on the water, did not speak the Beatitudes nor the Lord's Prayer, and

did not pray against temptation in the Garden of Gethsemane.

There are other examples. You will hear them during your lifetime. I promise that you will. You will hear these scholarly assertions, many of them well-intentioned, that call into question the very foundation stones of our religion. They relate not only to Jesus Christ's bonafides, as reported in the New Testament, but also to prophecy, including that in the Old Testament. They relate to Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, priesthood, and modern revelation. In some people's view, everything is up for grabs and nothing is fixed.

There is nothing more important for each of you to do than build a firm, personal testimony that there are in this life some absolutes, things that never change, regardless of time, place, or circumstances. They are eternal truths, eternal principles—and, as Paul tells us, they are and will be the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Given the importance of building such a testimony, how do we go about it? How do we establish these absolutes as our own personal foundation stones? Let me suggest two different approaches. They involve different tools but are in the final analysis mutually supportive of each other. The best learning occurs when these two approaches are used in tandem with each other, as clarified by such well-known scriptures as Moroni 10:4–5 and section 9 of the Doctrine and Covenants.

One of these approaches is to give it our best objective, intellectual effort. Use the same tools of rational analysis that have been so key to your daily university studies here and then ask yourselves if it makes common sense, if it stands the test of rationality. I have thought for decades, and I still do, that the best test in that respect is the Book of Mormon—not the only one, but, for me at least, the most obvious. For me, it simply defies all reason that that book, with all of its complexities—complex names, history, human interrelationships, and particularly its doctrine—could possibly have been

written by a man in his early twenties over the space of a few months. Moreover, it is a book that has withstood the test of time. It has been with us now for more than 160 years, and notwithstanding repeated and vigorous assaults over those entire sixteen decades, the worldwide influence of the Book of Mormon has continually expanded.

And so I urge you, whether it is the divinity of the Book of Mormon or any other important question, religious or other, reason it out in your own mind and do the best job that you can to come to some rational, logical conclusions. That is a good way to tie your lives to some absolutes. But not the best. Real conviction concerning absolutes that are essential to our stability, happiness, and eternal salvation can come only through additional processes beyond those of reason, logic, and mental exercise. Moroni told us how to do it.

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things. [Moroni 10:4–5]

In short, the final vindication for absolutes in this life necessarily comes through a process that is itself one of those absolutes—revelation.

Let me end with my own personal testimony and assurance to you that there are absolutes. Some of these pertain to the way we conduct our lives. Honesty and integrity will never go out of style. And any violation of the Word of Wisdom or principles of sexual morality will never be anything but sinful, wrongful, and harmful to our eternal welfare and to our happiness in this life.

Other absolutes are rooted exclusively in doctrine. Let me mention just a few.

1. Jesus Christ is the Savior of the World. He is not just a very smart man and a very good philosopher. He is the literal Son of God, the Jehovah of the Old Testament. Regardless of what so-called Christian ministers and advocates tell us, he is exactly what he tells us he is. Peter's testimony, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," is unequivocal and straightforward (Matthew 16:16). It is just as correct and just as reliable today as it was 2,000 years ago.

2. The Book of Mormon is also exactly what it purports to be—scripture. It is a divinely inspired record, kept by prophets and restored to the earth through divine persons and processes in these last days. And its principal purpose is to bring to the world a new testimony of Jesus Christ and his divinity.

3. In these last days, Heavenly Father has again spoken to his children here on earth

through living prophets. And they are prophets—not just good, wise, and virtuous men whose lives we can emulate, but literally our Heavenly Father's representatives here on earth. Through them he speaks to us—his children. Other related absolutes include prophecy, revelation, and both the need for and also the existence of divine authority.

The Church and its members will continue to grow and be successful and happy so long as we recognize and incorporate into our lives these and other absolutes. Our ability to maintain ourselves in the face of changing circumstances and a changing world will depend principally on our ability to build our house on those things that do not change. This is my personal testimony, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.