

Family Perspectives

NEAL A. MAXWELL

I commend Brigham Young University for its special commitment to family life, reflected not only by this special week of substance and counsel, and not only by its continuing curricular concern and the nearly unique College of Family Living but also for the commitment to the family by this University expressed in so many other ways. Other universities and colleges teach about the family, but sometimes others view the family as a transitory, economic unit in human history—not as an eternal unit. Curricula elsewhere deal with the need for certain skills in family life (which none of us doubts) and with the interrelationships among humans who are temporarily collected as families—but not with individuals as eternal realities. This University and its College of Family Living act from an entirely different point of view and even though the form may parallel the academic form elsewhere, the operating assumptions and the theological foundations produce a deep and pervasive commitment to the family, making what happens on this campus unique.

I am grateful for the faculty and students alike at this University, who understand the tandem relationship between theology and identity, between family and eternity. At this University there is coequal concern with that

nutrition pertaining to the body and that nutrition pertaining to the spirit. We certainly share with the secular world concern over diets required for our physical health, but we also assert to a sick and undernourished world that a divine diet has been prescribed for the soul of man, and further, that the primary source of his succor should be the family.

Divine Revelation About the Family

In 1902 President Joseph F. Smith said that it is “family life, on which the government of the Church is based and perpetuated” (“Editor’s Table,” *Improvement Era* 5 [February 1902]: 308–9). I know of no parallel institutional commitment to the family anywhere else in the world. The prophets of the Church have all drawn on the same divine well; therefore, their doctrines and teachings are the same. Seers see not only farther but deeper than other men, taking into account the relationships of truths and realities. Our late President, Harold B. Lee, counseled us with the same kind of specificity

Neal A. Maxwell was commissioner of the Church Educational System of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 15 January 1974.

when he said, “. . . remember that the most important of the Lord’s work that you will ever do will be the work you do in the walls of your own home” (“Strengthening the Home,” p. 7). It is significant that the summation of his counsel focused, again, on the family and on the home.

President Spencer W. Kimball focused on the family as he offered this advice: “I like to compare the home evening, family prayer, and other associated activities of the Church for the saving of the family, when they are conscientiously carried out, with an umbrella. If the umbrella is not opened up, it is little more than a cane and can give little protection from the storms of nature. . . . The umbrella spread out makes the silken material taut. When the rain falls, it runs off; when the snow falls, it slides off; when the hail comes, it bounces off; when the wind blows, it is diverted around the umbrella” (*Conference Report*, October 1969, p. 23).

We are at a point in human history when, unfortunately, it is no longer merely sprinkling; the rains have begun to fall, and at this very point in history, ironically, many umbrellas are being folded up and put away.

Secular Fallacies About the Family

Isn’t it ironical that some of those who are most vigorous in taking the American family apart are also among those who are the first to complain because, then, the family does not work? Isn’t it ironical that in an age when we are learning almost feverishly about what is most ecologically sound, what are the most efficient and economic ways to produce energy or protein in order to help other human beings, that we should be so incredibly blind—because like ancient Judah, we are “looking beyond the mark”—when it comes to pursuing those processes which are best for the production of good human beings? The relative spiritual, as well as the physiological efficiencies of systems are a justifiable concern. Beef cattle foraging on a poor range require twenty pounds of food in order to produce one pound of gain. Chickens

with a good balanced diet produce one pound of gain for every two pounds of feed. One approach is many times more efficient than the other, just as (so far as human goodness is concerned) the social and spiritual sum of our political, educational, and economic institutions is usually not sufficient to offset the deficits in the home.

Analogously, we have far too many lonely humans foraging on deficient “homesteads” and too many governmental programs which attempt abortively to substitute a less efficient system of helping humans than the home; it is the home that we must rescue, repair, and sustain. Only when homes are full of truth, warmth, and trust, can our other institutions perform their tasks, and when too many homes are defective, then the deterioration becomes contagiously interinstitutional, affecting schools and governments. If we are really concerned about the most economical way of achieving happiness for ourselves and/or our fellowmen and about those skills that are needed in successful human enterprises, then we should seek these gains through the family, with the help, of course, of other institutions. Otherwise, we shall always be investing dollars and hopes in less efficient ways of helping mankind. Just as the wheel does not have to be reinvented perpetually, we do not have to reinvent the family, a divine institution.

Yet so many fail to hear the crash of the surf of statistics generated by an abundance of research about the importance of early life and of family influence. There is in the secular world either a failure to generalize from the research or, when generalizations emerge, the generalizations are not acted upon. It is almost as if the secular world condemned itself to act like Sisyphus, who was condemned to roll a huge boulder to the edge of the mountain top only to have it come tumbling back down whereupon the process is repeated endlessly. Indeed, the sincere Sisyphus syndrome is all about us. The eternalism approach of the

gospel of Jesus Christ lays great stress, for instance, on the innocence of the newborn and on the importance of helping that individual “streamlet,” nearest its source, so it can achieve identity and maintain purity. Secularism, on the other hand, tends to become fascinated with building vast purification plants downstream; but, ironically, secularists have difficulty agreeing on what dirt is—on what is to be filtered out.

If you prefer a different analogy, we are witnesses to a rather bizarre game of human chess in which there is strange value placed on the various pieces on the chess game. The kings and queens, the parents, are thought of as being inconsequential; the castles, or homes, get traded off for pawns with great casualness; the bishops, which might represent religion, remain largely unused in responding to the challenge. Yet, in the midst of this strange pattern of play, the world wonders why it cannot checkmate human misery.

While more research and information are almost always desirable, how much more research do we need before we begin to accept the realities of how, almost relentlessly, parental patterns are projected into their posterity? How much more research do we need with regard to the sources and the importance of self-esteem? There is an ecology that pertains to the world of man’s spirit and his self-esteem. We must begin to think about the deprivation of the individual storehouse of self-esteem as a vital community concern. We have a stake in each other’s self-esteem.

How much more research does the world need before we can accept parents as pivotal and before we focus on the family without apology and half-heartedness? Of course, there are rogue parents just as there are rogue policemen. Of course, there are some people, through no fault of their own, who do not marry. Of course, there are some, who, through no fault of their own, experience defective and broken homes, but these exceptions are not reasons for

abandoning this remarkable resource, the family. The family is the tilt point for a vast number of souls who can go either way—to alienation and anger or to sweetness and service.

Latter-day Saints to Preserve Truths About the Family

Alas, it may be true that those who do not believe in God, who is a loving parent and who is the Father of the human family, will also never be able to accept the eternal importance of the institution of the family, except as something that is socially useful—little wonder we arrive at different conclusions or that we have different priorities. How important, therefore, is it that we remain at our posts as sentries over doctrines and teachings like that concerning the family, even if the world in its mistaken, but sincere way, seems to be headed in entirely different directions. The Latter-day Saints ought to understand, for instance, that the wars of tomorrow are this day being forged in the overheated families of today. How many dictators or assassins do we need to study in order to understand the consequences of distortion in the home? How many more examples do we need, including the energy crisis, where a few control the resources needed by many, before realizing that food and fiber are not the real challenge? Rather, it is selfishness and our human delivery systems. And where, indeed, can one learn, first-hand, selflessness and sharing? In the home, where such skills and attitudes tend to be learned, if they are learned at all.

Many citizens today, for instance, are alarmed, and rightfully so, when they see a vast oil slick develop which may be headed for the habitat of wildlife or a culinary water resource. Isn’t it interesting that only the seers seem to be able to see the approaching tide of effluence flowing from parental permissiveness that is now in the process of engulfing so many? So few other voices are raised in alarm. The ears of the secular world are attuned to the messages that come from the Paul Reveres, not the

prophets. There appear to be so many Paul Reveres riding about, issuing so many jeremiads and warnings, that the crucial warnings are being drowned out.

Isn't it interesting that at a time when we ought to know better about the limitations of what legislation can do to change human behavior, that some women prefer legal power to righteous influence? Some may choose to ignore or to rechannel the maternal instinct, but they cannot rise above it. Isn't it interesting that the secular world now directs our attention (with certain justifications to be sure) to the unmet needs of women, when the most common tragedy in the modern home is the malfunctioning father who so often leaves his post untended and who is so often insensitive to the needs of his wife? Isn't it interesting with regard to the matter of individual fulfillment, a natural and basic human need, that some fail to observe that one of the great advantages of being fulfilled is that one does not have to spend all of his or her time thinking about being fulfilled? Those I know and admire, who have deep and abiding testimonies, do show differences in certain preferences and in some dimension of their life-styles, but on things that really matter, they are incredibly alike!

Isn't it interesting that at a time when patriotism is called into question, that some fail to realize that one cannot really have a sense of country without a sense of kinship, that one cannot have a sense of kinship without family, and one cannot have a sense of family without parents?

Isn't it interesting that in a time when we want to demand increasing accountability from each other that so many fail to realize that no deep-seated sense of accountability can exist without reference to absolute values and truths, such as the brotherhood of man?

Isn't it, of course, simply that the gospel of Jesus Christ contains all the correct principles for human conduct, but it is also the way in which these principles are interwoven with

each other. Secularism so often seizes upon a single true principle and elevates it above all others. This act of isolation does not make the principle seized upon any less true, but to isolate any principle is to make it monastic. How many today live within the prison of just one principle? Elevating any correct principle to the plane of a religion is poor policy; just as one person makes a poor church, one principle makes a poor religion. Principles can become "prodigal" as well as people and can be estranged in "a far country" and be "spent" with little to show.

Most every secular cause about which I know anything at all usually focuses on a single principle or concern, but it is an act of isolation, not of correlation. It is the orthodox orchestration of the many principles found in the gospel of Jesus Christ that is necessary for human happiness. One would be amused at the so-called new "moral geometry" with its alien angles, fluid lines, and restless unfixed points, if the human consequences were not so tragic.

Insofar as he has it, where does man suppose he gets his inborn sense of righteous indignation anyway? And if our sense of righteous indignation does not rest on some divine moral absolutes, why should anyone pay any attention to us? When he sees the imperfections all around him, the disciple of Jesus sees such imperfections as an invitation to help. But for those who see life, man, and the universe (without looking through the lens of the gospel), imperfection means rejection. When we hate ourselves, the defects of others loom especially large. Where better can we learn how to forgive, how to love, and how to cope with our failures than at home? Strategically speaking, the choices are clear: family or anomie!

Isn't it ironical that those who have been described as the "new impuritans" in their iconoclasmania not only reject the existence of God but also the existence of Satan himself, and, in their celebration of sensual things, they end up in the employ of the very adversary

whose existence they scoff at? The great trap is sprung because Satan's most powerful desire is that "all men might be miserable like unto himself." However few we may be, we must hold up to the world the true picture of mankind, "things as they really are" and "as they really are to come."

We can best learn that we are children of God by experiencing that kind of relationship and teaching in the home; we can best learn in the home that we are important, that we matter, and that there are at least some others who love us.

Those who have not known love are more likely to have a special struggle accepting the existence of a God whose greatest attribute is his love and all of whose laws hang on the first two commandments with their high requirement of love. Those who have not known forgiveness are more apt to have difficulty forgiving others. Those who have never had to be accountable will have greater difficulty learning to be accountable themselves and are apt to be more shrill in the demand about the accountability of others. Those who have not been trusted will find it more difficult to trust others. Those who have not known peace, both in their homes and in their souls, will find it more difficult to fashion a world in which there is

peace, because conflict will seem so normal. Those who do not know specifically what the conditions of righteousness are as described by God will find it more difficult to become righteously indignant at the human conditions that do cry out for change. Those who have not known the rigors of repentance in family life are less apt to be able to cope with the stress of change.

Several years ago, an astute friend of mine, Dr. Jack Adamson, concluded a commencement address by recalling John Milton's phrase concerning England's legendary image about how St. Michael, the warrior, would appear off Cornwall to save England from her external menaces, chiefly Spain. Milton's counsel was that the angel, and England, had for too long been looking seaward, for England was soon to be engulfed in a civil war. Milton's poetic plea was: "Look homeward, angel, now and with pity and compassion." That counsel is appropriate for Americans, and others, today in yet another sense—for too long we have looked outside ourselves, and beyond our homes, in trying to improve the human conditions. But the message of poets, as well as prophets, is "Look homeward, now!" That we may do so I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.