

# *Who Will Bear Reproof?*

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**I**n the summer of 1971 I was an undergraduate here at BYU and had been home from a mission for less than a year. I was in school and working hard in classes and at a part-time job.

I was assigned by my elders quorum president to home teach several people that summer.

My companion and I began contacting our people, two of whom were not much involved in the Church at the time. One of these was an attractive young lady who lived alone in a basement apartment. She seldom attended Sunday meetings and didn't "do appointments" with home teachers. She would talk to us if we happened to catch her at her apartment. It usually took several attempts each month to connect with her. As the weeks passed, we made a special effort to get to know her. I think she was beginning to trust us, and even like us. She was becoming less evasive and guarded.

She was an interesting and engaging person. Attractive and witty, she held her own in conversation. She resisted being anyone's service project and telegraphed just enough cynicism and mistrust to keep herself isolated from the well-intentioned. I sensed that she had been injured by people she had trusted the most and that her edginess and cynical humor were worn for self-protection. I was beginning to take on this relationship as a personal chal-

lenge, and I'll admit that I was beginning to enjoy the challenge.

One day, walking alone past her apartment on my way to campus, I decided to stop and knock on her door and see if I could catch her at home. I had some pretext for stopping. I don't remember what it was, but it was enough of an excuse to make the call seem comfortable. No one answered the door, so I went on my way.

A few days later I was in the company of my brother, Gene, who was serving in the bishopric of the same ward I was attending. He had just extended a calling to me in an interview and we were visiting for a few minutes before his next appointment. He asked me about my home teaching assignments and particularly how our efforts were going at helping this young lady. I mentioned casually that I had recently stopped by her place on my way to the campus but hadn't found her home.

At that moment the expression on my brother's face changed visibly. He looked carefully at me, put his hand on my forearm,

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and with that voice and expression I had come to know so well—the voice of the older brother—he said, “Michael, don’t ever, ever go over there on your own. Don’t risk being alone with her by yourself. Take your companion or call one of your quorum leaders or call me, but don’t go alone.”

I nodded and mumbled something like “fine” or “okay” and changed the subject to something that would let me quickly end the conversation. I ended it and left. I don’t know to this day if my brother heard the edge in my voice or noticed that I was suddenly very turned off. I was eager to get out of there and to get away from him. I was mad. He had given me some very direct counsel, and I had chosen, in an instant—as we so often choose on those occasions—to take offense.

Looking back on it, my reaction embarrasses me. It is very clear to me now why I was so offended. This response from my brother had cut me to the quick. He had felt impressed to tell me in that moment exactly what I most needed to hear. He had spoken the truth in love and courage, and I had retreated in resentment to sulk.

Ironically, his uninvited counsel worked. I followed his advice, and I was a lot more careful about home teaching and lot of other things throughout the rest of that summer. The effectiveness and care of my service improved. I don’t have much to report about the other events of that season. The summer passed quietly with no drama and no heart-break. By the way, that young lady moved from the ward at the end of the summer feeling better about her relationship with the Lord and with His church.

I truly believe now that through that one moment of unsolicited warning, delivered by an inspired messenger, I had been rescued from a temptation I was beginning to caress in my mind and heart.

But I rewarded my rescuer with a cold shoulder for several days afterward.

A cold shoulder and the resentment of another are often the reward for speaking the truth in love and courage. But that speaking out and reaching out are what great and inspired people do. My brother had put up a guardrail for me to glance off of. I was close to an edge that I did not see—or did not want to see.

As Elder Maxwell says:

*To withhold deserved reproof [as my brother might have done to avoid embarrassment or discomfort to both of us] may be to withhold a warning that is urgently needed. Reproof is often a last railing before an erring individual goes over the edge of the cliff.* [Neal A. Maxwell, “Insights from My Life,” *1976 Devotional Speeches of the Year* (Provo: BYU, 1977), 192]

That conversation with my brother had triggered a very natural reaction in me—the reaction of the natural man. Again, Elder Maxwell describes this natural response with surgical precision:

*Behold the natural man! Selfish, impatient, short-tempered, easily offended, unforgiving, proud, envious, covetous, carnal, and drenched in ego! No wonder he is to be “put off.”* [*That Ye May Believe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), 18]

I can be grateful that my brother did not put off his prompting to issue a warning. He had handled his end of the process much better than I had.

This, brothers and sisters, is my theme today: Who will give loving and wise reproof, and who will bear it with meekness?

I know this theme is not among the sentimental favorites of LDS audiences or of any other audience that I can imagine. It certainly doesn’t “market well,” as we say in the Marriott School. But I feel a need to say that this theme of giving and bearing reproof has been at the very heart of my own labors

to become a disciple of the Master lover and reprover of the human family.

The Prophet Joseph Smith described this duty as integral to his calling as prophet and dispensation head. He said:

*I frequently rebuke and admonish my brethren, and that because I love them, not because I wish to incur their displeasure, or mar their happiness. . . . But these rebukes and admonitions become necessary, from the perverseness of the brethren, for their temporal as well as spiritual welfare. They actually constitute a part of the duties of my station and calling. [HC 2:478]*

In another place Joseph talked about the effects of an inspired reproof. It can purge the bad motives and double-mindedness out of the one reproved—if there’s enough humility and good sense there to take the licking and be better for it. If not, everything gets suddenly worse, and dark motives turn black.

The Prophet Joseph said, “When a corrupt man is chastised he gets angry and will not endure it” (*Teachings*, 195). He also said:

*A frank and open rebuke provoketh a good man to emulation; and in the hour of trouble he will be your best friend; but on the other hand, it will draw out all the corruptions of corrupt hearts, and lying and the poison of asps is under their tongues; and they do cause the pure in heart to be cast into prison, because they want them out of their way. [Joseph Smith, HC 3:295]*

That principle sobers me. At the moment of that reproof I received many years ago, I wanted my brother out of the way—or, at least, I wanted to be out of the way of my brother. Laman, I’m sure, often wanted to be out of the way of Nephi, until he could stand his presence no longer, and then he was convinced he *had* to have Nephi out of the way.

Joseph also gives us this haunting insight about one who absolutely refused to bear a

reproof from the Savior: “Judas was rebuked and immediately betrayed his Lord into the hands of His enemies, because Satan entered into him” (*Teachings*, 67).

Somewhere, Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, “Pride grows in the human heart like fat on the body of a pig.” Pride, and the prickliness that accompanies it, can insulate us from the things we most need to learn.

I spend a lot of time with my graduate students in the Marriott School. The nature of some of the courses I teach requires that I evaluate the students, and they evaluate each other on their performance as writers and presenters of ideas and proposals. Most of them seem to take this feedback with a good heart. Some even express gratitude that someone—anyone—has paid enough attention to their efforts to give them a specific, detailed assessment. A few—not many—seem to say to me and others, “If you have anything to say to me other than ‘That was great’ or ‘It could not be better,’ please keep it to yourself. I just do A’s and success. I don’t do the other stuff.” These people, with all their talent, are asking either to be flattered or left alone.

Isaiah said it well, didn’t he:

*This is a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the law of the Lord:*

*Which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophesy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits. [Isaiah 30:9–10]*

Now, something must be said about giving reproof: when and how. We cannot script this process. There are no rules, only a few principles. We should give correction far less often than we give commendation and praise. Praise should come often, and it should be specific and concrete. Praise is a way of saying to another, “I’m looking at you. I’m observing you, and I like what I see.” When our praise is abstract or general, or if it is shoveled

out indiscriminately, it loses its power and becomes flattery.

On those rare occasions when we take up a chastening rod, or offer even a mild caution, we have to be in possession of a lot of other things to go with the chastening. Among these is what President Young called “the healing balm” (JD 9:125). He said: “If you are ever called upon to chasten a person, never chasten beyond the balm you have within you to bind up” (JD 9:124–25).

I have been in situations where I felt a person needed a gentle correction, but I wasn’t in good enough shape to give it: not enough love, not enough charity or commitment toward the other person; not enough trust in the bank to have earned the right. No, in those situations silence or a listening ear is the safest response.

President Kimball was a man who spoke the truth in love. His love was, in fact, legendary among the Saints. In Elder Bruce Hafen’s recently published biography of Elder Neal A. Maxwell, he mentions an encounter a young Neal Maxwell had while sitting on the stand next to President Kimball in a sacrament meeting. President Kimball turned to him and said, “Do you know that I love you with all of my heart?” Seeing Elder Maxwell again a few days later, President Kimball asked, “Do you remember what I said to you last week?” (in Bruce C. Hafen, *A Disciple’s Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002], 422). This is love showing later an increase of love. It is water in the desert, and it melts the human heart.

President Kimball said once:

*Because Jesus loved his followers, he was able to level with them, to be candid and forthright with them. He reproved Peter at times because he loved him, and Peter, being a great man, was able to grow from this reproof. . . .*

*Jesus saw sin as wrong but also was able to see sin as springing from deep and unmet needs on the part of the sinner. This permitted him to condemn the sin without condemning the individual. We can*

*show forth our love for others even when we are called upon to correct them. We need to be able to look deeply enough into the lives of others to see the basic causes for their failures and shortcomings.* [TSWK, 481–82]

I have noticed over the years that some of the most challenging corrections and cautions come to our local Church leaders from the Brethren. When the Saints sit in stake conference sessions, they are often praised and encouraged by these great men—and rightly so. We need the encouragement and confidence of our leaders. But the Saints don’t often hear the more candid and rigorous conversations the Brethren hold with our local leaders in private.

I read not long ago a passage in a book by Elder Gene R. Cook of the First Quorum of the Seventy that illustrates this process very well. In fact, I am bold enough to say that this experience shared by Elder Cook is the most unnerving account of correction and challenge issued by a contemporary Church leader that I have ever heard of. It is unnerving because it is the kind of counsel that could be given to many of us—you and me—in our own callings. I have read it time and again, almost haunted by the question “How would I have responded in this situation?” We may smile as we read about the blistering reproofs of a Brigham Young. We don’t have to respond to those reproofs because they were not directed toward us.

But reproofs and corrections are still meted out by inspired leaders. They are given out of inspiration, not ego or impatience. And when they come, we are bound to respond in meekness and submissiveness. Here is Elder Cook’s account of one such correction.

*At a stake conference I was amazed at the number of worthy young men who had not been on a mission, even though they were of age. There were so many at the conference that I had them stand up. Seventy-six of them stood. I was overwhelmed. And I wondered in my heart, where are our leaders?*

*After the conference I called a special meeting of the stake presidency and bishops. When we were finished I left them with a challenge: "Brethren, I'd like to ask you to interview every one of those young men, all seventy-six of them. Talk to them in the Spirit of the Lord and invite them to respond to his call. Please get back to me in a couple of months and give me a report on each one."*

*About six weeks later, the stake president came to me with a report. He said, "Elder Cook, we've completed every one of the interviews."*

*"That's great," I responded. "How many are going on missions?"*

*He paused. He was pleased that all the young people had been interviewed, but he didn't want to tell me how the interviews had turned out. Finally he said, "Well, there are three or four. And there are five or six others who will probably go next year."*

Elder Cook then wrote:

*I prayed. What should I say? Then I felt that the Lord wanted me to speak boldly, and I said, "President, I can come to only one of two conclusions."*

*"What's that?" he asked.*

*I said, "It may be that this is the most unworthy, unresponsive group of young people I've ever met."*

*He shook his head. "No, that's not right, Elder Cook. These are great young people."*

*"I know they are. I visited with a number of them at the conference."*

*We talked about the youth for a few moments, and then he said, "What's the other conclusion?"*

*I said, "I guess this one has to be true then, if the other one was false."*

*"And what is that?" [the president asked.]*

*I would never have answered him if the Lord hadn't directed me to, but I could tell it was important that I be very forthright. I said, "I guess I've found the most ineffective group of priesthood leaders I've ever met." And I didn't crack a smile.*

Let me interrupt Elder Cook's narrative with a question: How do you think you would have handled this if you had been in the shoes of that

stake president? The natural man might have said any number of things, such as "Well, I'd like to point out that my counselors and I feel we are doing the very best we can. We don't make other people's decisions for them. We have invited these young men to serve. They have their agency, and I think we have to honor their choices to go or not go on missions."

Or another natural reaction might be to hide one's sense of hurt and offense and say something like "Well, maybe you *have* found an ineffective stake president" and then retreat to sulk in silence and resentment.

Now let's return to Elder Cook's account and hear the rest of the story:

*The stake president took it hard, and I knew he would. But the bottom line was that he needed it. He was not acting as humbly as he should have. He had gone out and operated like a man, and that's why he got the results he did.*

*As we concluded the interview, I put my arms around him and I loved him. We knelt and prayed together. Then I bore my witness to him: "President, you go out now and act in the authority of God, and he will respond. You go into the homes of those young men and kneel down and pray with them. You ask each one to explain to the Lord in your presence why he can't go on a mission. Then if the Lord says he doesn't have to go, it's okay with me. But if the Lord says he has to, then tell the boy to be honorable enough and get on with it." We agreed we'd meet in another six weeks and he would give me another report.*

*After the meeting I called his regional representative and said, "I just had this difficult meeting with President So-and-so. I'm sure he's feeling pretty low. Will you go to him and strengthen and bless him?"*

*Six weeks later this stake president came back with his report. Here's what he said:*

*"Brother Cook, I went out of your office terribly offended. I was humiliated and angry. I stewed for a whole week. During that whole time, I was absolutely miserable.*

*"Finally I mentioned it to my wife. She heard me out, and then said, 'My dear, I don't want to*

*offend you either, but a servant of the Lord talked to you and I feel a burning in me that tells me he spoke for the Lord. He's only asking you to go and talk to them again. Quit fighting it. Do it.'*

*"I knew she was right. For the first time I humbled myself and desired to do it the Lord's way. We knelt and prayed together, and a great power came over me. I felt I could do anything, even move a mountain, and I said, 'I will go and do it without further excuse.'"*

*So he went out and, with the help of his bishops, began to interview these young men again. After six weeks he had interviewed twenty-seven men. Twenty-five of them had agreed to go on missions and were filling out their papers. Prayer had softened his heart and enabled him to go forth, and prayer softened the hearts of the young men, that they would respond.*

[Gene R. Cook, *Receiving Answers to Our Prayers* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 113–15]

I have no idea who that stake president is or where he is. But you will believe me when I say that I revere him. I am awed and touched by his humility and his courage, just as I am awed by the courage of Elder Cook, who spoke the inspired truth—the sharp, diamond-edged truth that in one pivotal moment called a man to do the work of a ministering angel. Notice how Elder Cook described the stake president's initial effort: "He had gone out and operated like a man, and that's why he got the results he did." Most of us would have left a man to operate like a man, or a woman like a woman. Elder Cook pursued a more courageous path.

Can we, in our sphere, walk that same path? Can we speak, as Samuel the Lamanite did and as Elder Cook did, and say "whatsoever things should come into [our] heart[s]" (Helaman 13:3)? Each day as I walk into the Tanner Building on this campus, I wonder, "What conversations will I have today? What people will I encounter?" On most days I have the sense to pray that my thoughts will be the Lord's thoughts and my words the Lord's words. Isn't it stunning to realize how much of our behavior is verbal behavior? Most human action takes the form of talking and listening. These conversations, even casual ones, are not to be taken too casually. Inspired lines from a hymn I love capture the thought:

*By a whisper sow we blessings;*

*By a breath we scatter strife.*

*In our words and thoughts and actions*

*Lie the seeds of death and life.*

[*"We are Sowing," Hymns*, 1985, no. 216]

This inspired level of performance is required not just of general authorities and stake presidents. You and I are called to drink from the same cup. We have within our own sphere of influence just as sacred a duty to seek and speak the truth in love and courage and to submit in meekness to inspired counsel.

May we be among those who give and receive counsel and commendation as moved upon by the Spirit of Him who knows and loves us best. I pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.