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Elder Hafen Speaks at Second Annual Neal A. Maxwell Lecture

Defining his purpose as exploring “the relationship between the life of the mind and the life of the spirit, with some connection to Elder Maxwell’s life as a mentoring model,” Elder Bruce C. Hafen, of the First Quorum of the Seventy, spoke at the second annual Neal A. Maxwell Lecture, held March 21, 2008.

Sister Colleen Maxwell, widow of Elder Maxwell, other members of their family, and BYU President Cecil O. Samuelson and other dignitaries were among the large audience who gathered for the lecture.

Elder Hafen began by speaking warmly about the Maxwell Institute, saying, “I have cheered since first hearing that there would be a Neal A. Maxwell Institute. I’ve known the people in this institute a long time, and to see those people and that name come together warms my heart.”

In 1999, when Elder Maxwell invited Elder Hafen to work on his biography, Elder Hafen discovered that his “research on [Elder Maxwell’s] life revealed a different core message than the one I had expected to find.” Although “the theme of his life story” could be “his contribution to the Church as a role model for educated Latter-day Saints, showing how religious faith and intellectual rigor are mutually reinforcing,” Elder Hafen said “personal Christian discipleship is really the central message of Elder Maxwell’s life and teachings.”

Elder Hafen said that in his own life Elder Maxwell’s mentoring about faith vs. intellect issues prepared him “to benefit even more from his later, higher-level mentoring on very personal questions about being and becoming.” To illustrate, Elder Hafen described his early days in college after serving as a full-time missionary, and the confusion he felt in “trying to reconcile the conflicting viewpoints” among teachers he revered up to that point in his life. Experience reinforced his inclination to seek what he termed “level two: a balanced approach between the liberal and conservative tendencies” he had seen, and he concluded he didn’t need to make a “permanent choice between his heart and his head.” Later as a professor he was able to explore the “tension between faith and reason,” and taught that “the gospel contains strands that connect to both the Hebrew and the Greek elements in our heritage.” Elder Hafen explained these two heritages and said “we will be in

trouble if our individualistic Greek strain cuts loose from the anchoring authoritarianism of our Hebrew strain.” Quoting President Spencer W. Kimball, Elder Hafen said “we must become ‘bilingual’ in speaking the language of scholarship and the language of the Spirit.” Elder Hafen offered to his students Elder Maxwell as a role model of someone whose “heart and head worked so well together.” For Elder Maxwell, “every dimension of the gospel was relevant to modern social problems.”

His own experiences pushed Elder Hafen beyond his “second level of balance toward yet a third level of understanding.” He explained, “When we find ourselves stretched to our extremities, we need a new level from which to draw more deeply on our Hebrew roots than our Greek roots. No wonder Elder Maxwell often said ‘we should have our citizenship in Jerusalem and have a passport to Athens.’” Elder Hafen said that “part of the sacrifice the Lord may require is that we accept what He may inflict upon us without understanding to our rational satisfaction.”

Elder Hafen briefly chronicled Elder Maxwell’s journey of understanding, applying, and teaching discipleship, and how he saw the connection between discipleship and adversity. “No wonder, then,” Elder Hafen noted, “that when he found in 1997 that he had an aggressive form of leukemia, he said, ‘I should have seen it coming.’” Because Elder Maxwell was an “ardent student of discipleship,” he “embraced the heart-wrenching process of sanctification as his final tutorial.”

Elder Hafen noted that he still can’t quite find the words to define this third level, but “the consecrated sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit blesses us with inner sight in our lives and in our religious problems.” He invited his listeners to find their “own words” and then showed an image of what he thinks “level three looks like.” The painting by Eugène Burnand depicts disciples Peter and John running to the tomb on Easter morning. Elder Hafen said his wife Marie suggested that the picture captured “the ultimate tension between faith and reason.” When they met the risen Lord, “their being faithful enough to see Him was the ultimate resolution of the tension between faith and reason.” Elder Hafen encouraged his audience to “live closer to ‘the things of eternity’ even now, so that the Lord can prepare us now for whatever further sanctifying tests await us.” 