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Robert L. Gleave

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Ye are the Light of the World

Robert L. Gleave, PhD

Dr. Nelson (1994) in his article, "Professional Organizations: Whither Thou Goest, Will I Go?" raises some valuable and interesting points which are worthy of discussion and response. I agree in many ways with Nelson's (1994) conclusion that much more can and should be done to speak out for traditional values. I disagree, however, with the reasons that he cites for doing so. Nelson's (1994) approach was laced with alarmist cries and finger pointing, which attributes malicious intent to organization leaders. The tone and flavor of his article seems to leave us helpless, with only limited options, such as abandoning the organization.

I do not argue with Nelson's (1994) position that professional organizations are giving more effort to advocacy. I also do not argue against any individual making a personal choice to terminate support of an organization on that basis (or any other). It is also legitimate, as Nelson (1994) does in this article, to long for the "good old days" of yesteryear, and/or to prefer the "way things were." However, I would argue that none of these preferences can be used to support a current moral imperative with implied or stated expectation that all (or many) "should" act likewise. The more relevant question, it seems to me, becomes what can we do and what will we do to make our concerns public? What choices will we make given circumstances as they currently exist?

Nelson (1994) is critical of APA leadership for making assumptions about what is representative of the membership. Leadership
in all large associations has a responsibility, in my opinion, to operate on such assumptions. It is logistically impossible to take every decision back to the entire membership for a vote. In fact, it seems to me that this concept underlies the entire notion of a representativel leadership. In a representative leadership system, the burden of getting one’s views heard must rest squarely upon the individual constituent. It is unreasonable to wait for one’s opinions to be requested by leadership.

I am aware, from personal experience, that leadership for the most part anxiously welcomes feedback from constituents, and is more than willing to make adjustments when called into question by those within the organization. It is unreasonable to expect that leadership would on a regular basis solicit such feedback from the entire membership. It is rather an expectation that each constituent will make his/her views known and his/her position clear when the organization diverges from his/her sense of propriety.

Nelson (1994) further criticizes the APA and other such professional organizations for adopting a stance which includes social advocacy. Social advocacy, while not (I would agree) a primary function of a professional association, is still a duty that cannot be totally ignored. Our social structure and governmental system are founded upon the premises of a representative society and for any group to avoid its responsibility to make information available to leadership is to perform less than its duty. Our society continues to ask for “expert opinion,” and “light of the world” (Matthew 5:14) duty leads one to offer information. Our legislative system, as with other representative systems, works best when information is made available. There is a fine line, however, that we must bear in mind between offering information and discharging one’s duty as a constituent in a representative system, and advocating single issue (special interest) specific actions.

Nelson (1994) appears to be aware of the above mentioned “salt of the earth” (3 Nephi 12:13) duty as evidenced by his article and his call for action. However, his request to the AMCAP organization to make an organized response to these other professional organizations seems to express a hope that AMCAP would become a social advocacy organization to censure social advocacy in other
professional associations. The difference, it appears to me, in what is requested is that, hopefully, the AMCAP position would be more to the liking of this particular author. I would guess that it was a similar feeling and motivation that began the before mentioned increase in social advocacy activity in professional organizations in the first place. Perhaps a cry for moderation and temperance could replace our outcry against social advocacy in general.

The question which Nelson (1994) raises, "Shouldn't AMCAP do something?" also reflects an attitude with which I am uncomfortable. This question seems to reflect a view that organizations are "they" and not "us." It is far too easy to avoid personal responsibility for action by crying out loudly that "they" are not fulfilling their responsibility, and should do differently. I can imagine that there might have been similar pleas from APA members in the early stages of the shift toward an increase in social advocacy efforts. Perhaps no one intended for things to "get out of hand." Perhaps "we" didn't attend closely enough to what "we" were doing, but rather complacently hoped that "they" would act appropriately. (Now we can complain that "they" didn't do very well and cut off affiliation with a clear conscience, even a sense of righteous indignation.)

Nelson (1994) has encouraged opposing or alternative views. From where will these views come if many of "us" abandon ship? Perhaps there is reason to join Nelson (1994) and to encourage the "silent majority" to no longer remain silent. It may be that it is often those with a "particular political ideology and social agenda" (Nelson, 1994) that generate the energy to overcome inertia and to write articles? Perhaps "we" could get energized to counter radical expression if it is offensive, or even put forward a proactive position suggesting action "we" would welcome. Those who publish the periodicals would surely respond to well written feedback.

Nelson (1994) criticizes the content of APA Monitor articles, suggesting that the editorial staff are purposely and maliciously choosing radical positions and content to be published. I have had enough experience with professional organizations and publications to wonder if the slant taken is the result of publishing what is available rather than purposely weeding out portions of what is
submitted. I have often heard editors’ pleas for more options among which to choose go begging. Portions of Nelson’s (1994) current critique would have made a great follow up article or letter to the editor.

Nelson (1994) suggests that there are specific impediments inherent in the LDS population which inhibit responding in the ways required by membership in a representative system. I would suggest that if there are such impediments, that they are not founded in doctrine, and therefore do not constitute sufficient reason for not discharging such duty.

There is indeed a great sifting that is apparent in the world in general. It is no surprise that this is also occurring, or is apparent in professional organizations. The questions that remain are still the same. Will we place our light upon the hill, or leave that to someone else? Will our leavening (Luke 13:21) influence be felt within the organization? Will there be alternative options presented to the organization from within, and be openly available to leadership in spite of the risk of censure to those who raise such alternative options? Are we sufficiently sure of our grounding to proceed forward in faith, confidence, and peace?

It is possible that the majority view is being expressed in APA, and that it may be valuable to maintain membership in the organization precisely to add a dissenting voice and to bring balance and reason back to a valued organization. Jumping ship and other forms of abandonment may not be the prudent course.

I applaud Dr. Nelson (1994) that this thought-provoking article was written and submitted. It is precisely this kind of effort that contributes to a more representative balance, for which he has advocated. It is my hope that Nelson’s (1994) article has the effect of stimulating many more opinions to be expressed in a variety of forms including the process of submissions to journals and newsletters.

Robert L. Gleave is Associate Clinical Professor of Counseling and Development at Brigham Young University
References