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Discipleship and Scholarship

Neal A. Maxwell

I have come to thank and to offer a few words of encouragement and guidance to scholars, whose work collectively has been used, is being used, and hopefully always will be used to protect and to build up the Kingdom.

Do not underestimate the importance of what you do as articulators. In praising C.S. Lewis, Austin Farrer wrote:

Though argument does not create conviction, lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows that ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.¹

I am thankful to those who help to provide the needed “climate.”

Several notable examples could be cited. It may be too soon to know all the implications of much scholarly research that has been reported in recent years, but it will likely illustrate, again, something basic about the Prophet Joseph. The Prophet Joseph, a very good though not perfect man, will be vindicated in this statement about his own mission: “I never told you I was perfect, but there is no error in the revelations which I have taught.”²

In this same illustrative connection, you will remember the Lucy Mack Smith description of the Prophet’s experience as a lad with an infected leg. Amputation was considered. His story of “doctors” went unbelieved by some. In the Manuscript History, Joseph’s “doctors” were named along with references to a “council of surgeons.”³ Being so attended to, medically, seemed so unlikely in rural New England. Only a few years ago, however, Dr. LeRoy S. Wirthlin researched this very interesting episode, which shows

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some micromanaging by the Lord. The medical doctor in final attendance, it turns out, was Dr. Nathan Smith, founder of the Dartmouth Medical School. He brought two doctors and several medical students with him to attend to young Joseph, who resisted amputation and pain-deadening alcohol. It turns out that Dr. Nathan Smith was highly qualified, and he was using a very advanced technique. Thus “the only man in America who could save [Joseph’s] leg was just five miles away.”⁴ Happily, for young Joseph, Dr. Smith’s plans to leave the area had been delayed by a typhoid epidemic. Joseph Smith could scarcely have led the long march of Zion’s Camp years later without this dramatic medical help.

Joseph will go on being vindicated by further disclosures in all the essential things associated with his prophetic mission. Many of you, both now and in the future, will be part of that on-rolling vindication through your own articulation about the Restoration.

In so doing, you may also help another special group who need a particular strengthening. Lewis’ mentor in absentia, George MacDonald, noted how “it is often incapacity for defending the faith they love which turns men into persecutors.”⁵ Happily, defenders beget defenders. Unhappily, dissenters beget dissenters, and doubters beget doubters. Some of the latter may be able to be helped.

I share the next thoughts with you simply because they are especially on my mind.

One of the striking dimensions of the restored gospel is the *democracy* of demands. Yet, it seeks to build an *aristocracy* of saints. Certain standards and requirements are laid upon all disciples. The member who is an automobile mechanic does not likely have all the skills of a scholar, and not likely you his. But both of you are under the same spiritual obligations to keep the same commandments and the same covenants. Furthermore, the mechanic is under the same obligation to develop the attributes of patience and meekness as are you.

Frankly, the world holds to no such democratic view. If one is a superb scholar in a narrow discipline, such is considered enough. One so gifted can then be as bohemian in behavior as one likes. But it is not so in the Kingdom, is it?

Of course, we all enjoy certain of the fruits of the labors of secular geniuses who may be visibly or significantly flawed in some respects. Nor would we desire to detract from their important contributions. A just God will surely credit them. However, God will excuse neither them nor us from keeping his commandments,

including the requirement given to us by him and his Son to become more like them (Matt. 5:48; 3 Ne. 12:48; 27:27).

Recently, my wife took a friend to hear a presentation by a Latter-day Saint of outstanding talent. The friend, who has born considerable grief and disappointment in her life, truly appreciated the presentation. Then she said simply, "I hope he is as good a person as he seems." It is a shame, isn't it, that such reserve even needs to be felt. But we "have learned by sad experience" that our spiritual applause is sometimes given to the undeserving. I hasten to add, from all I know of the foregoing case, the applause is fully justified.

Whatever our particular fields of scholarship, the real test is individual discipleship, not scholarship. But how good it is when these two can company together, blending meekness with brightness and articulateness with righteousness. Such outcomes only occur, however, when there is commitment bordering on consecration. Therefore, a word about consecration is appropriate.

You will recall the episode in the fifth chapter of the book of Acts about how Ananias and Sapphira "kept back part" of the monetary proceeds from their possessions (Acts 5:3). We usually tend to think of consecration in terms of property and money. Indeed, such was clearly involved in the foregoing episode. But there are so many ways of keeping back part and so many things we can withhold a portion of besides property. All things really ought to be put on the altar.

This holding back may occur even after one's having given a great deal, as likely had Ananias and Sapphira. Having done much, we may mistakenly think that surely it is all right to hold back a remaining part. Obviously, there can be no total submissiveness when this occurs.

Lately, when considering the atonement of Jesus Christ, I have been helped by a particular scripture. It is about how consecrated and sanctified Jesus allowed his will to be "swallowed up" in the will of the Father:

Yea, even so he shall be led, crucified, and slain, the flesh becoming subject even unto death, the will of the Son being swallowed up in the will of the Father. (Mosiah 15:7)

While pondering that very concept, I came across this unsurprisingly parallel quote from Brigham Young, upon whom the Book of Mormon had made such a deep impression:

When the will, passions, and feelings of a person are perfectly submissive to God and his requirements, that person is sanctified. It is for my will to be swallowed up in the will of God, that will lead me into all good, and crown me ultimately with immortality and eternal lives.⁶

There are so many ways in which one can hold back a portion. For instance, one might be giving as to money and also serving as to time and yet hold back a significant portion of himself or herself. One might share many talents but retain a pet grievance, thereby keeping it from resolution.

Scholars might hold back differently than would a businessman or a politician. A few hold back a portion of themselves merely to please a particular gallery of peers. Another might hold back a spiritual insight from which many could profit, simply wishing to have his or her “ownership” established. Some hold back by not appearing overly committed to the Kingdom, lest they incur the disapproval of particular peers who might disdain such consecration. In various ways, some give of themselves, even extensively, but not fully and unreservedly.

While these patterns are a clear form of selfishness, I am inclined to think that holding back can also reflect a mistaken understanding regarding our individuality. Some presume we will lose our identity if we are totally “swallowed up.” Of course, our individuality is actually enhanced by submissiveness and by righteousness. It is sin that grinds us down to sameness—to a monotonous, single plane.

In any case, there is no lasting place in the Kingdom for unanchored and unconsecrated brilliance. Fortunately, those of you whom I know are both committed and contributive. In any case, ready or not, you serve as mentors and models for the rising generation of Latter-day Saint scholars and students. Let them learn, among many other things, submissiveness and consecration from the eloquence of your examples.

God bless you!

NOTES

¹ Austin Farrer, "Grete Clerk," in Jocelyn Gibb, comp., *Light on C.S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1965), 26.

² Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 368.

³ LeRoy S. Wirthlin, "Joseph Smith's Boyhood Operation: An 1813 Surgical Success," *BYU Studies* 21 (1981): 148.

⁴ LeRoy S. Wirthlin, "Joseph Smith's Surgeon," *Ensign* 8 (March 1978): 59.

⁵ George MacDonald, *Anthology* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 121.

⁶ Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855), 2:123 (April 17, 1853).