What's Happening in the Kingdom: Implications for Counselors

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What’s Happening in the Kingdom

Implications for Counselors

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I am grateful for the opportunity to be with you today and particularly appreciate this organization. As I was chatting with members of our faculty and staff at Ricks College about this set of meetings, they said how much they looked forward to it, and that last year they gained so much from it that they see it as one of the greatest professional opportunities they have. That, of course, leads me to feel very uneasy since, as you could tell by that long and kindly introduction, the question remains: "What in the world am I doing here trying to talk to you professionals?" I’ve looked at some of the talks that have been given to you, and I’m impressed by their quality. At least a number of them come from people who can, in an intimate way, share with you your kind of problems. I can’t really do that, but I think I can do something that might be useful to you. As I look at the general theme of the convention, I see that my particular assignment as an educator of the Church might give me a vantage point of some interest to you.

In looking over your program, I notice that it’s pointed toward the idea of current issues, the word “current” suggesting things with which we’re newly or more intensely concerned. And that raises the interesting question, “What are going to be the current issues a year from now, and four years from now?” On the assumption that I will not be here to eat my words, I’d like to suggest a little longer time horizon by asking, “What will happen in the dynamic and rapidly changing Church in the coming years that might be important to professionals in counseling?” In talking about what’s changing in this world-wide Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, one of the ways you might pick the question up would be to focus on the size and international character of the Church. I wish that someone like Elder Neal Maxwell were here to “wow” you with numbers and some kind of projection about the great organizational changes in the Church over the next decade. That, however, is not the aspect that I would like to take up with you. I would like to really stick my neck out and make this assertion about what I think is happening in the kingdom. Latter-day Saints are not only increasing their separation from a morally deteriorating world, but they are also increasing the distance which separates the highest levels of converted compliance of members from the lowest, as well as flattening the frequency distribution of performance.

What do I mean by converted compliance? I’ve been around Neal Maxwell, so sometimes I put words together like that, but I think it’s also quite descriptive. Converted Compliance is doing what the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints says ought to be done, and in some deep way being committed to it. It comes out of a real feeling, “It’s true; it’s right; it’s revealed; I really ought to do it.”

Let me suggest some evidence that I may be right about the effect of converted compliance. First, there’s the scriptural concept that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the organization which will evolve into the one which will host the Master when he comes. It will include the City of Enoch, which, as I understand the scriptures, is a place where Jesus Christ walks in glory with the inhabitants. Also, it seems very clear that the world will go increasingly deeper in sin. So there’s a fascinating sort of departing curve which says the world is going to go ever downward morally until it will finally be destroyed. At the same time, some members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are going to show some converted compliance that will take them to a point where they will join comfortably with the City of Enoch, where the Master apparently has been. Now that suggests that the whole Church will not separate from the world, but that some of it will move to some degree with the world while the rest of it moves very much away from the world. I’m not wise enough to know at what level we can receive the Master, but my assumption is that what I’m seeing is just the beginning.

My second source of data is anecdotal. I talk to lots of bishops, high school counselors, and parents, and I watch students at Ricks College. There are appearing in the Church increasing numbers of young Latter-day Saints who are deeply, totally committed to doing what they are asked. They are very far beyond where I remember myself at that age, perhaps beyond me now, in terms of converted compliance. I’ve been working with this theory for several years, and as I’ve talked to General Authorities and mission presidents, I’ve asked them, “What changes do you
think you are seeing in the missionary force?" A recently released mission president with whom I served as a missionary twenty years ago said, "Hal, do you remember when we were missionaries? The guy that we thought of as the cream of the crop is barely average compared to what I'm getting now in the mission field. And in the three years I've been out it's gone up." When I shared that story with a member of the First Council of the Seventy, he just laughed at me and said, "That mission president is saying what they all say." We're seeing that same thing at Ricks College but we tend to think we're just in love with our institution so they're just looking better every year. But on a number of indexes, I believe the difference is real. On the other hand, I get another picture from bishops with whom I chat from time to time. The stories that I heard when I was younger about people who had some very sordid kind of life were so infrequent that I would only hear them third and fourth hand about strangers. Today most of our young Latter-day Saints as they come to Ricks College have had close friends who have been through some of these extreme, often moral, difficulties. Now, I'm not suggesting that the Church is going to hell nor that it is going to heaven. Interestingly, I think I'm suggesting both.

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After the Teton Dam broke, a number of us at Ricks College interviewed several bishops, asking them to describe for us the characteristics of a highly dedicated Latter-day Saint before the flood. We asked them to pick nine families, three in each level of compliance - high, middle and low - and to compare the measure of their compliance before and after the flood. There were almost no reversals. That's fascinating to me, because the way I've misread the Book of Mormon all my life it seems like whenever folks got out of line, something awful hit and they all got better. But the data doesn't seem to run that way. It seems to suggest a sifting. The folks who were quite dedicated before the dam broke suddenly appeared far more dedicated because they were doing more heroic things. And those who couldn't handle things before the disaster actually disappeared afterward. Some of them didn't come back for days. Some were unable to cope with their own immediate family situation, turning it over to their wives and refusing to even admit they were dealing with a disaster. Although there were one or two reversals, there was an apparent separation. And I prophesy that as more disasters hit, the spread will increase in intensity. Those who are sifted out as the powerful will gain in power, while those who are already weak will fall through. What you will get then is a much wider spread in the kingdom.

Now I haven't overwhelmed you with my data, I know, but I've got you thinking anyway about the notion that within the kingdom there are rapid and important changes in the spread, that there are both people more righteous and people in deeper kinds of personal difficulty along some dimension of compliance with our moral and normative standards in the Church. And that there are now larger numbers appearing at the very top and the very bottom. If that's true, and I think it is, then I want to make some predictions about some things of importance to you if you are in the counseling business and if Latter-day Saints, or people who are around Latter-day Saints, are going to make up a good part of the people you work with. My suggestion is that what you are going to see is an increase in cognitive dissonance.

You can put it in this context. By in large, if you ask a Ricks College student who has been immoral how moral the students are at Ricks College, he will say, "My, there's a lot of immorality here!" But if you ask a student who has never been immoral nor close to immorality, what Ricks College is like, he will say, "Now there may be someone immoral here, but I've never met them, and I would be surprised if there were." Both are distorted and in a very particular way, but they are both saying, "Gee, I'm close to average."

One of the things we like to do is to reinterpret our environment by perceiving selectively to come out with a comfortable feeling about ourselves. And one of the ways we do that is to say, by in large, the Church is somewhat like ourselves. I appreciate the fact that you have run into people in your practice who have not been able to convince themselves of that, or didn't want to, but I'm speaking on the average. There's a tendency even among the disturbed to see themselves as more representative than they really are.
Now here’s Hal’s prophesy: I think that more and more Latter-day Saints are not going to be able to kid themselves. They’re not going to feel nearly so typical when, on their block, in their ward, among their immediate acquaintances there will be more and more people far away from them in terms of what they are doing as Latter-day Saints. Instead of great spiritual stories about a patriarch in Logan, they’ll be hearing about their own roommates – not Nephi in Logan but Nephi in the next bunk. He’s a relevant other and he’s doing things very differently than you are. My guess is you’re going to see these very distinct examples around you in larger numbers.

Let me suggest some things about the three issues you are going to cover in your conference. First, I’m fascinated by the notion of the Church as a subculture. I think that fits very closely with what I’m talking about, if you think of a culture as a group of people who share norms. As a Mormon subculture we’re diverging from the world and diverging from each other. From a therapeutic point of view, let me make a prediction. More and more people will be faced with saying, “Hey, I’m not average! And I’m uncomfortable with that. These people are converted in a way I used to think of as just some next-world hope, and now I’m living next door to them!” I think at least some folks are going to react to that dissonance by becoming very discouraged. Their self-esteem and their feeling of being loved by God are going to decrease.

As I stopped by the Seminary-Institute Program headquarters today, someone handed me a card that’s going to be given to every student in Seminary-Institute. It was signed by Spencer W. Kimball, and had his picture on the front with the fascinating title, “The Goal of Every Latter-day Saint is Eternal Life and Exaltation.” We’ve always heard that, and we’ve always been able to comfort ourselves by saying, “I’m not getting there very fast, but neither is anybody else.” But I’m predicting that within this subculture that’s diverging you’re going to see lots of disconfirming evidence. You’re going to have the experience I had as a bishop when a man came in to ask for my forgiveness because he had been angry with me for going two weeks beyond when I’d said I would release him from a job, and he’d ended up with two jobs. It irritated him that I had not kept my word, so he came to ask for my forgiveness for his having felt angry. That same man came to me seeking a temple recommendation and in all seriousness said that he thought he had conquered everything in the moral area except his dreams occasionally contained some erotic elements. What could I do as his bishop to help him purge that last bit from him? I think I’ve never felt so startled by anyone seriously presenting to me a picture of having gone beyond where I was and maybe even beyond where I thought I would get to in this life. You are going to begin to run into far more people with deep concerns about their spiritual standing mixed with other emotional problems. I’m not suggesting that feelings of lack of self-worth or lack of love make someone emotionally disturbed. I’m saying mixed with the problems you’ll be dealing with, but now in larger proportions, will be deep questions as we begin to see more and more evidence of people who are really achieving the Mormon Ideal.

Your program is going to talk about women and their problems in professional life. It may be that there are some Mormon women in their households who are frustrated – I’ve met some. It may be also true that one of the things that frustrates them is a sense of striving for an ideal. Now if Hal’s theory of what’s happening in the Church is true, let me tell you some interesting things that are going to happen. One of the patterns of the Church that we’re used to seeing is unevenly yoked women. If any of you have lived in the mission field, you’re used to seeing women drag their husbands through life. Here in more prevalent parts of the Church, the dragging is done more gently – the husband may be a high priest – but she’s still dragging, at least in some cases where the woman seems to be feeling some spiritual things a little more than the man. As a corollary of Hal’s theory of what’s happening in the Church, this spreading isn’t going to be random among men and women. We’ve already seen that women are perhaps more inclined on the average toward spiritual compliance with the norms of the Church, and they will respond to this change more rapidly than men. As a result, you may see a higher proportion of women who are to some degree unevenly yoked, a little more committed than their husbands. On the same block, you are now going to see some husbands that are really goers. No longer can a spiritually advanced wife excuse her lagging husband, saying, “Well, my husband isn’t very good at leading our Family Home Evening, but neither is anybody else in the block.” Because down on the corner will be Charlie, whose Family Home Evenings will be so spiritual that the Master Himself might comfortably attend. The woman will know about it, and where there’s been frustration before, that feeling will be even deeper.

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In addition, as women begin to be affected differently and some get to be more deeply committed Latter-day Saints, you’re going to see some much more effective mothers and wives. You’re going to see not only Charlie the Great Husband, but Susie the Super Mother on the same street as Martha Mediocre. These super-mothers used to bother the average home-
maker only when she went to Education Week and some zippy speaker would make her feel bad for three weeks about her housekeeping. Now zippy Susie is on Martha's block, with her well-scrubbed kids and peace and harmony in her home, while in contrast, Martha's not doing so well. While some will see Susie's example and say, "Now that I see it's possible, I'll do it," a larger number will find it very difficult to deal with.

The mother's role will look much tougher as the apparent standard rises. For many women who are combining professions and families this struggle will increase. It will be harder for them to be out in their profession and then go home to their families and say, "I'm doing both well," when some full-time home-maker down the street, Super Susie the Great Mother, is putting all her time and effort into her home and is getting better results. My forecast is turmoil for the woman who's trying to do both in a world that's saying it's not worth it to be a mother, and a Church where the Brethren are very firmly saying, "Home is first."

You're also going to talk about confidentiality at this conference, and that's an interesting point in my theory of what's coming in the Church. I'm projecting that a higher proportion of the Church will have so much dissonance that they're going to be saying, "I'm not really just a Mormon with a few adjustments to make, I'm a Mormon in deep need of repentance."

This isn't just the guy whose been in some terrible public scandal that needs to talk to a bishop. "Maybe the things I once thought were all right in my life would be called immoral by the kids coming up in the Church now. I wonder if I ought to go back and deal with that." I'll make this prediction. More and more of your clients will feel the need for both you and the bishop or stake president. They'll realize that mixed in with their problems are things that may need the only person in the world who can take them by the hand and say, "In the name of the Church I forgive you. Now you may go and get the Lord's forgiveness from Him." And they won't quite trust you to decide their need. Forgiveness is a valuable thing. You can't give it; bishops and stake presidents can. If my theory is right, a higher proportion of the people in the Church will suddenly come to feel that they need that forgiveness. I think you'll see that need spread with the increasing dissonance in the face of these examples of excellence.

I've been talking about how I think the Church may be changing and how the mix of problems you're dealing with as counselors may change. Now if you were willing to bet some professional effort on the validity of my predictions, what skills do you have or what problems would you work on to adjust your counseling skills to the changing needs of the Church? What skills could help you become more effective, or at least stay as effective as you are?

Now I see myself as converted compliant, and fairly squared away. Yet if you'd ask me, "Hal, do you always, or at least frequently, feel the approval of your Heavenly Father?" I'd say honestly I go long periods of time when I hit as hard as I can. I love God; I serve Him as best I can. Yet I understand the prophet Joseph going to God and asking, "Am I still approved?" I think Joseph was living better than I have ever lived. Yet he would go in prayer and say, "Now, I need to know, am I approved?" I suggest that's a very real need now, and it may increase and become more intense. And if you knew how to help a person get the answer from God that, "Although you're not perfect, and I certainly don't approve of some of the things you do, I still love you," you'd be doing an important work that I think is going to get more important in the future.

As I reviewed some talks that people have given to counselors like you, I found that they all gave the same talk. They all told you that you ought to combine the concepts of sin, guilt, and repentance with your counseling techniques. All of you I've talked
with personally say, "Yeh, yeh, terrific!" You've taken lots of notes, but when I've asked you how your technique has changed in light of them, the honest answer is, "A little," or, "Not much." I guess I'm really asking you if you believe this picture that I'm giving. It suggests that mixed in with the problems people will bring to you there will be huge components of really deep concerns over "Do I need to be forgiven?", "Can I be clean again?", "Can I have the approval of God?" And that's more than just "Am I a child of God?" They'll be asking you, "Have I squared my life away?" Some of it will just be a dissonance that comes from suddenly realizing they're not quite what they ought to be. But a lot of the questions remain even after they've done all the reduction of dissonance they can. They still say, "Hey, I'm still in sin. I still need forgiveness."

I know you've been told that before. I read Joe Christenson's talk to a group of counselors in San Francisco in 1964. He said essentially that guilt and sin are important concepts in counseling and in using the gospel of Jesus Christ. I'm urging you once again to listen to that counsel and to begin to be serious about it at a practical level. It's not just desirable to synthesize counseling with the gospel so you can feel integrated and not somewhat split as counselors. That would be nice for your mental health, but your mental health is not my concern right now. I'm talking in terms of getting something done. I sincerely believe that the people you're going to be working with, whether they're good Latter-day Saints or not, are going to be more than awkward for you. Some of you might say, "Now look, Brother Eyring, I know that repentance, sin, and guilt are all important concepts, and I know that every person has sinned. I know, therefore, that every person needs repentance, but that's not my role, Let the Church do that. What I do is strengthen people enough to get them going again emotionally so they can go into the repentance process." You may have hidden behind that for some time, but not completely. I have a feeling that even the band aids that you've been putting on don't seem to work any more. Because I believe that a higher proportion of your clients are going to know -- you're not going to have to talk them into it -- that sin and guilt are mixed in with the difficulties they have. Therefore, they're going to demand that you somehow deal with their problems in that light.

What, then, should be your relationship with bishops? I believe that the dimension of confidentiality (who can share what information) is one of the lesser aspects of the situation. In the larger view, I don't see how either bishops or counselors are going to be very helpful unless they learn to work as a team. And I think it goes far beyond the simple notion of saying, "How do we get out of these awkward impasses where the bishop knows one thing and I know another?"

Now, I'm not sure how that's to be done. But I'd just like to make my prediction that it will happen. Over the next few years you're going to see marked improvement in the way we learn to work as a team where the counselor has his skills, but oh, the bishop has a key to do something only he can do. Many of your Latter-day Saint clients are going to know what they need, and somehow you've got to be involved in helping that person move towards that great moment when not you, but the bishop takes their hand and says, "In the name of the Church, you're forgiven. Now go to the Lord and get your forgiveness from Him."

My prayer is that I might have not so much entertained you as interested you in this idea that the Church is changing, that is, its people are changing, and that they're changing rather rapidly and not in one direction. That idea is going to markedly change the mix of problems that you face and your opportunities for service.