

Faith and works in a secular world

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My dear brothers and sisters, what a sobering sight you are, coming from various walks of life and various parts of the country. And to think this evening we are assembled across the breadth of the earth. Between now and the rebroadcast of these proceedings, young adults throughout the Church will gather together and participate in such an event as this. It is truly marvelous.

A glorious thing happened at general conference last month. For most of the world it went unnoticed, but for those who know and love the truth it was as unforgettable as the clap of 10,000 thunders.

Think back to the closing session. From the Tabernacle Choir came the familiar strains:

We thank thee, O God, for a prophet

To guide us in these latter days.

We thank thee for sending the gospel

To lighten our minds with its rays.¹

Of a sudden, men and women, boys and girls assembled in the Conference Center arose in reverence and gratitude for the blessings spoken of in this hymn. We stood in grateful acknowledgment that the gospel of Jesus Christ has been restored, that God the Father and His Beloved Son have spoken from the heavens, that Joseph Smith was a prophet, and that President Gordon B. Hinckley is the Lord's prophet on the earth today.

It was a spiritually moving experience. It was a time when citizens of God's kingdom, acting under the influence of the Holy Ghost, stood up for their faith!

Earlier that day President Hinckley had spoken tenderly and gratefully about his advanced years and attendant health. Always an example of faithfulness, he pledged anew his life to the Lord's purposes. Said he:

"The Lord has permitted me to live; I do not know for how long. But whatever the time, I shall continue to give my best to the task at hand. . . .

". . . We shall carry on as long as the Lord wishes. . . . When it is time for a successor, the transition will be smooth and according to the will of Him whose Church this is. And so, we go forward in faith—and faith is the theme I wish to discuss this morning."²

His message was timely and inspired. It came as a spiritual reminder of what life is really about and how Heavenly Father's children can overcome every obstacle. It came to a world steeped in secularism, unbelief, and sin.

Secularism

Education in secular subjects contributes much to the betterment of our world. Secular learning of the highest level blossoms in an atmosphere of virtue, moral responsibility, spiritual truth, and faith.

Much is touted today about secular societies. People and nations pride themselves in being secular, in focusing on "worldly things or [on] things that are not regarded as religious, spiritual, or sacred."³

Much of the world today views secularism as vital to a balanced, just, and ordered government. Hence, religious expression is discouraged in public forums, civil rights are dependent on the courts and legislative processes, and men and women readily seek solutions and redress through litigious means. In the extreme, society's secularism overlooks the concept of eternal life, places all things in the context of the natural world, and consequently is prone to works without faith.

It requires watchfulness and great effort to be men and women of faith in a secular world. When inundated by worldliness, it is the nature of man to "first endure, then

pity, then embrace.”⁴ Secularism is inundating people today with such results.

Unchecked by faith in Christ as the Redeemer of mankind, this secular or natural world produces men and women who are “proud, obsessed with self, overly competitive, reactionary, fiercely independent, driven by desires, appetites, [and] worldly acclaim. . . . In general, the natural man is an unredeemed creature, a being who walks . . . in the light of his own fire . . . [see 2 Nephi 7:10–11]. Such a one is acclimated to the nature of things about him, taking his cues and bearings from a fallen world.”⁵ Succinctly stated, “Men that are in a state of nature . . . are without God in the world” (Alma 41:11).

Because secularism typically ignores the eternal perspective, it can in time lead to unbelief. In the words of Wolfhart Pannenberg, a professor of theology at the University of Munich:

“A public climate of secularism undermines the confidence of Christians in the truth of what they believe. . . .

“In a secular milieu, even an elementary knowledge of Christianity . . . dwindles. It is no longer a matter of rejecting Christian teachings; large numbers of people have not the vaguest knowledge of what those teachings are. . . . The more widespread the ignorance of Christianity, the greater the prejudice against Christianity. . . .

“ . . . The difficulty is exacerbated by the cultural relativizing of the very idea of truth. . . . In the view of many, . . . Christian doctrines are merely opinions that may or may not be affirmed according to individual preference, or depending on whether they speak to personally felt needs. . . .

“ . . . The thoroughly secularized social order gives rise to a feeling of meaninglessness.”⁶

Faith in Christ is replaced by faith in man. In public discourse and private thought, the questions of where we came from, where we go when life is over, and what ultimately governs the here and now not only go unaddressed but are also considered irrelevant. This state of unbelief is becoming a calamity of colossal proportions.

Heavenly Father knew this would happen. The Restoration of the gospel rekindled faith in Jesus Christ as Creator, Savior, and Redeemer. It brought again the correct understanding of life’s purposes. In 1831 Heavenly Father’s children were told:

“Wherefore, I the Lord, knowing the calamity which should come upon the inhabitants of the earth, called upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and spake unto him from heaven, and gave him commandments; . . .

“That faith . . . might increase in the earth” (D&C 1:17, 21).

Before the foundations of this world were laid, before the orbs of the universe received their place, men and women lived and moved and had their being (see Acts 17:28). The secular thought that life is nothing more than biology denies the fundamental truth, the subconscious awareness residing in the recesses of every living soul, that “man was also in the beginning with God” (D&C 93:29; italics added). This fact is immutable and irrefutable.

Paradisiacal Eden with our first parents, Adam and Eve, came thereafter so that man, through mortal life’s experiences and Christ’s Redemption, might become a complete, fully developed, and perfected being. The ages of the patriarchs, the supernal advent of our Savior and His incomparable Atonement in the meridian of time, and “the times of restitution of all things” (Acts 3:21), which began in 1820, set the framework by which men and women, boys and girls, could once more govern their lives and surroundings by “faith in the Lord Jesus Christ” (Articles of Faith 1:4).

My dear young friends, you stand at the confluence of these world events. "What is past is prologue, and what has been is yet to be."⁷ What can happen—what must happen—is that your faith and accompanying works will stem the tide of unbelief. This is your lot in life. This is your sacred duty.

Benchmarks of Faith

Our Master said, "If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, . . . nothing shall be impossible unto you" (Matthew 17:20). President Hinckley reminded us:

"When all is said and done, the only real wealth of the Church is in the faith of its people."⁸

"In the on-working of this great cause, increased faith is what we most need. Without it, the work would stagnate. With it, no one can stop its progress."⁹

Such faith is more than attitude, more than belief, more than testimony of what one knows or feels. Real faith, the faith spoken of by our beloved prophet, begets righteousness in this life and salvation in the life to come. It is centered in the true and living God and in Jesus Christ whom He has sent (see John 17:3). It is founded on truth, preceded by knowledge, and perfected by works. It causes mortals to understand and behave as Heavenly Father's children should. This faith "is the first great governing principle which [enables us to have] power, dominion, and authority over"¹⁰ how we think, how we act, and what manner of men and women we are.

The Apostle James gave us the formula for such faith:

"What profit is it . . . for a man to say he hath faith, and hath not works? . . .

"Yea, a man may say, I will show thee I have faith without works; but I say, Show me thy faith without works, and I will show thee my faith by my works. . . .

". . . Faith, if it have not works is dead, being alone. . . .

"Seest thou how works [are] wrought with . . . faith, and by works [is] faith made perfect?" (JST, James 2:14–15, 17, 21).

We hear much about benchmarks. A benchmark is "a standard of excellence [or] achievement . . . against which similar things [are] measured or judged."¹¹

There are four benchmarks that can help each of us know if our personal faith in Christ is being "made perfect" by our works. These benchmarks are (1) the choices we make, (2) the devotion we exhibit, (3) the obedience we practice, and (4) the service we give. Permit me to explain.

The Choices We Make

First, the benchmark of choice. Latter-day Saints "believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous. . . . If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things" (Articles of Faith 1:13; italics added).

Imagine a young elder, whom we will call Bill. He learned this in Primary. He believed it then; he believes it now. For some time, however, Bill has been plagued with pornography. He has found its allurements powerful and addictive. After each encounter with this sleazy stuff, Bill has felt sickened, ashamed, and worthless inside.

Bill attended general conference a few weeks ago. In the priesthood session, he heard President Hinckley say:

"There is not a man or boy in this vast congregation tonight who cannot improve his life. And that needs to happen. After all, we hold the priesthood of God. . . .

"With this priesthood comes a great obligation to be worthy of it. We cannot indulge in unclean thoughts. We must not partake of

pornography. We must never be guilty of abuse of any kind. We must rise up above such things. 'Rise up, O men of God!' and put these things behind you, and the Lord will be your guide and stay."¹²

Bill decided, "It is time for me to stand up for my faith!"

He went to that secret place, retrieved the filthy pictures, the vulgar films and literature, and destroyed them. He purged his library of the hard, raucous music and sordid lyrics. He deleted from his computer all references to pornographic sites, installed a protective filter, and placed his computer in a more public place so as to fortify himself against repeating his sin.

Bill acknowledged his transgressions before God. He prayed fervently for the strength to repent, to expel this evil from his life. He sought help from his bishop and loved ones. In his extremity, Bill has felt the quiet assurance, "My son, you are on the right path." His faith, because of his works, is being affirmed and strengthened.

Much remains to be done. There will be fasting, prayer, scripture study, and many tears. A good bishop will provide indispensable help. The faithfulness and prayers of parents and loved ones will provide needed support. Nevertheless, the benchmark shows: Bill is beginning to exercise faith unto repentance—he has made the right choice!

The Devotion We Exhibit

Second, the benchmark of devotion. Latter-day Saints "believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.

"We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes; that Zion (the New Jerusalem) will be built upon the American continent" (Articles of Faith 1:9–

10) and that men and women are "called of God, by prophecy" and divine authority to bring this about (Articles of Faith 1:5).

True devotion is tied to divine causes set in motion before the foundations of this world. Righteous ancestors enlisted in them and gave their lives to the furtherance of Heavenly Father's purposes. We have been entrusted to carry on, to build upon their consecrated labors.

Now a story, one familiar to some of you:

In 1856 Robert and Ann Parker, with their four children, embarked from England to join the Saints in Utah. A prophet had spoken, and theirs was the charge to gather to the Great Basin and help build Zion. As members of the McArthur handcart company, each in their family bore a share of the work. Father and Mother pulled the heavy cart, Maxie (12 years of age) pushed, and Martha (10 years old) tended little Arthur (6 years of age). Baby Ada (1 year old) toddled, was carried, and rode in the cart.

Somewhere in Nebraska little Arthur sat down to rest and fell asleep. A sudden storm arose. The company hurried on and made camp. It was then they discovered that Arthur was not with the other children.

Days of searching were in vain. The company had to press on. This was the time for Robert and Ann Parker to act in accordance with their faith. Archer Walters recorded in his diary under July 2, 1856, "Brother Parker's little boy . . . was lost, and the father went back to hunt him."

As Robert departed, Ann pinned a bright red shawl about his shoulders and said: "If you find him dead, wrap him in the shawl to bury him. If you find him alive, you could use this as a flag to signal us." She, with the other children, took up the handcart and struggled on with the company.

Robert retraced the miles of forest trail, calling, searching, and praying for their helpless little son. At last he reached a mail and trading station where he learned that their child had been cared for by a woodsman and his wife. Little Arthur had been ill from exposure and fright, but God had heard the prayers of his loving parents.

On the trail each night, Ann and her children kept watch. On the third night, as the rays of the setting sun caught the glimmer of a bright red shawl, this brave mother sank in a pitiful heap in the sand. Completely exhausted, Ann slept for the first time in six long days and nights.¹³ God indeed was kind and merciful; their works had rewarded their devotion and sanctified their faith, and in the gladness of their hearts the Saints sang, "All is well!"¹⁴

Baby Ada, my grandmother, grew to womanhood and married my grandfather, Brigham Young McMullin. Now here is the moral. She never allowed her children to forget that she and her family came across the plains with the Daniel D. McArthur handcart company. The story of the red shawl became our story—the legacy of their faith became ours as well. And so we all "carry on,"¹⁵ and great obstacles fade as the dew before the morning sun.

About these early Saints, the benchmark shows: Their works were a hallmark of faith, their devotion a standard for their posterity to live by.

The Obedience We Practice

Third, the benchmark of obedience. Latter-day Saints "believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel" (Articles of Faith 1:3; italics added).

Here we imagine a young couple representative of those living in this secular world. David and Michelle knew this article of faith long before they knew each other. Even so, they deal with concerns facing many

participating in this broadcast. You see, David and Michelle are in their mid-to-late twenties. They have known one another for some time, they "hang out" together, and they are in love. Nevertheless, they are indecisive about marriage and family. Should they postpone marriage until they have completed their schooling, until they have more money, until some of their personal ambitions are realized?

They also wonder about the escalating trends of divorce, the wars and tumults around the world, and overpopulation. Would their marriage survive? Should they bring children into such a world?

Oh, David and Michelle, exercise your faith! Remember: "Marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God."¹⁶ "What . . . God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matthew 19:6; see also D&C 132:19–20). "Children are an heritage of the Lord" (Psalm 127:3). "The earth is full, . . . there is enough and to spare" (D&C 104:17).

Act upon what you know to be true and your righteous works will perfect your faith. Your lives will be full and wonderful. Follow the good example of your parents. They could not afford to get married, but they did. They too worried about war and tumult, but they exercised their faith and had you! The demands of marriage and family did not deter their education; they enriched it. As for their personal ambitions, they are completely and happily entwined in the well-being of each other and of you, your brothers and sisters, and the grandchildren.

Life was not easy for your parents. They had to scrimp and save, make do with what they had. They too faced questions and circumstances they could not answer, but they knew that the pathway ordained by Almighty God decreed that they move ahead. And you are so much "richer" because of it.

From the stories they have told you over and over again, you know that everything

for them has been uphill, “both ways.” But their works have sanctified their faith.

They are older, to be sure. Their step is not as spry, their manner not as intense, their appearance not something advertisers typically clamor for. But their love for God and for each other reflects deep reverence and adoration. The scars of life have afforded them wisdom, patience, and gratitude. In small but important ways they have become “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1)—things they could not see earlier in life. But they obeyed. Exercising their faith, they were sealed in the temple, were blessed with children, and now know the true sources of happiness. The benchmark shows: Obedience calls forth the blessings of heaven—it did so for your parents and it will do so for you.

The Service We Give

Fourth, the benchmark of service. Latter-day Saints “believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost. . . .

“We believe . . . that Christ will reign personally upon the earth; and, that the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory” (Articles of Faith 1:1, 10).

We know more about the Godhead than all the minds of men have ever conceived—and what we know is true. Furthermore, we know the purposes of Deity for this earth and all of its creatures. Because of what we know and because the Lord has placed upon our shoulders the sacred duty to help bring it to pass, we must not be casual about our Church membership.

Some are enticed into being less committed for fear of appearing to be too religious. They view “the Church as an institution, but not as a kingdom.”¹⁷ “O youth of the noble birthright,”¹⁸ make the work of the Church and kingdom of God the center of

your life. When called to serve, say, “Yes,” and do your very best. Listen to this charge from the Lord: “Wherefore, seek not the things of this world but seek ye first to build up the kingdom of God, and to establish his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you” (JST, Matthew 6:38).

In just four days from now, on November 9, it will be 150 years since the ill-fated Willie handcart company pioneers struggled into the Salt Lake Valley. They had waded through much suffering and death. The storms and their weakened condition had claimed many—the rescuers had saved many more.

Levi Savage was among those arriving that day. History records his faithful and dogged labors to save the Saints and bring them safely to the valley. But his noble service did not begin on the snowbound plains of Wyoming. This was but another chapter, perhaps the crowning one, in a consecrated life of service.

Levi was baptized in June 1846 at 26 years of age. Answering the prophet’s call to move west, he noted that “we prepared as well as we could for a long journey into a strange and to us wholly unknown country. . . . We bid adieu to the old homestead . . . and directed our course westward, not knowing the place of destination, only we expected to locate somewhere in the western wilds of the Rocky Mountains.”¹⁹

On July 16, 1846, he, with other valiant men, again responded to the prophet’s urging, enlisted in the Mormon Battalion, and marched approximately 2,000 miles from Council Bluffs, Iowa, to San Diego, California, and then on to Los Angeles. Here they were discharged from government service. Though they knew nothing of the whereabouts of their homes and families, they began their trek to the valley of the Great Salt Lake. The route Levi Savage traveled was an additional 1,300 miles over rugged and hostile terrain, but he finally arrived in the Salt Lake Valley.

Here Levi pioneered, fought crickets, married, had a son, and buried his wife some months following the child's birth. Ten months after his wife's death, in the October conference of 1852, he and several other faithful brethren were called by the prophet to open a gospel mission to Siam (today's Thailand).

This time they journeyed by team and wagon back to lower California and the Pacific Ocean. In time, they sailed from San Francisco to Calcutta, bound for their mission to Siam. Levi's journal entry of January 29, 1853, provides us a glimpse into the hearts of these early missionaries. He wrote:

"Our gallant ship, propelled by a gentle breeze, steered her course across the boisterous deep for our places of destination; leaving behind us our much loved native land. . . . Each sought his own place for meditation, and there reflected upon the comforts of his home, the affections of his beloved wife and children or friends. . . . But now he was called to take up his abode in the remote parts of the earth, and for what? For the sake of heaping up gold and silver, or to secure for himself the honors, pomp and splendor of this world? No, verily no! But in obedience to the commands of the Lord to carry the message of truth and . . . salvation to the benighted and superstitious nations. Soon after, each retired to his cot for rest and repose. But whether asleep or awake, his mind continued to wander upon the realities of the past, and the prospects of the future."20

Following his mission, Levi sailed home by way of Boston, Massachusetts, made his way to his place of birth in Greenfield, Ohio, and noted upon his arrival there, "I have circled the globe."21 He joined the Willie handcart company in Iowa City, Iowa, which began a saga of eternal importance to him, his family, and the entire Church. His works in that epic crowned a life of sacrifice and service. Of these pioneers, the benchmark shows: Their faith and works were a beacon in an unbelieving world, their service a pattern for each of us to follow.

We are moved by the words from the clergyman Frederick W. Faber:

Faith of our fathers, living still,
In spite of dungeon, fire, and sword;
Oh, how our hearts beat high with joy
Whene'er we hear that glorious word.
Faith of our fathers, we will strive
To win all nations unto thee,
And thru the truth that comes from
God,
Mankind shall then be truly free.
Faith of our fathers, we will love
Both friend and foe in all our strife,
And preach thee, too, as love knows
how,
By kindly words and virtuous life.
Faith of our fathers, holy faith,
We will be true to thee till death!22

I bear you my witness, my dear brothers and sisters—God is in His heavens, His name is Elohim, and He knows all of His children, irrespective of from whence they come or where they dwell. Jesus, the Holy One of Israel, is His Beloved Son, the Redeemer of all mankind. Joseph Smith, a young lad, was called by the voice of God and His Holy Son as a prophet, and ensuing from that call the true Church and kingdom of God was restored on the earth. How blessed we are to know these things, and you, my dear brothers and sisters, you stand at the confluence of history. You came from realms of glory. It is your singular privilege to be true to the faith, to press forward in good works. Do what the prophets say. Generations past expect it, generations present are saved by it, generations future

depend upon it, and the Holy Spirit will guide you every step of your way.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet," Hymns, no. 19.

2. In Conference Report, Sept.–Oct. 2006, 87; or Ensign, Nov. 2006, 82; italics added.

3. Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, 2nd ed. (2001), "secular," 1731.

4. Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, epistle 2, line 220.

5. *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (2003), 582.

6. "How to Think about Secularism," *First Things*, June–July 1996, 27, 30, www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9606/articles/pannenbergh.html.

7. Boyd K. Packer, General Authority training meeting, Oct. 2006; see William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. W. J. Craig, *Oxford Shakespeare* (1924), act 2, scene 1, line 261.

8. In Conference Report, Apr. 1991, 74; or Ensign, May 1991, 54.

9. In Conference Report, Sept.–Oct. 2006, 90; or Ensign, Nov. 2006, 85.

10. Joseph Smith, comp., *Lectures on Faith* (1985), 5, 8.

11. Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, "benchmark," 193.

12. In Conference Report, Sept.–Oct. 2006, 66; or Ensign, Nov. 2006, 60.

13. See Boyd K. Packer, *Memorable Stories and Parables* by Boyd K. Packer (1997), 4–6.

14. "Come, Come, Ye Saints," Hymns, no. 30.

15. "Carry On," Hymns, no. 255.

16. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," Ensign, Nov. 1995, 102.

17. Neal A. Maxwell, in Conference Report, Oct. 1992, 89; or Ensign, Nov. 1992, 66.

18. "Carry On," Hymns, no. 255.

19. In Levi Savage Jr. *Journal*, comp. Lynn M. Hilton (1966), xii.

20. In Levi Savage Jr. *Journal*, 5; italics added.

21. In Levi Savage Jr. *Journal*, 59.

22. "Faith of Our Fathers," Hymns, no. 84.