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Spirituality and Political Reform

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Abstract: On the subject of national political reform, the Book of Mormon speaks out with unwavering conciseness. It states that no form of government will succeed unless the people maintain a high spiritual level; national ills cannot be cured by any amount of legislation if the spirituality of the people remains neglected.



A beacon shining forth in the darkness—The National Capitol Building, Washington, D. C., at night.

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SPIRITUALITY AND POLITICAL REFORM

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THE LEADERS of nations were in conference at Versailles, France. The year—1919. The event—the framing of a peace treaty by the allied nations to be imposed upon the Entente. In that peace conference one figure towered above all others: Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States. The world was sick. It was reeling from a major attack of the disease—war. There was in the minds of millions the hope that the patient would have a permanent recovery, and the diplomats were full of plans for the prevention of further attacks.

President Wilson and his staff attended that peace conference with a plan for permanent peace. That plan had three major aspects: first, the establishment of a League of Nations; second, the self-determination of the minority groups of Central Europe as to their national allegiance

and the establishment of forms of government under which any new nations should function; third, the establishment of a democracy in Germany.

All of the above objectives were of the same general nature. They all had to do with principles and forms of political government. It was a frank attempt to alleviate the world's troubles by political reform. President Wilson had already thought to solve the problem of the Far East by aiding a movement to establish a republican form of government for the age-old empire of China.

In the three decades that have passed since that memorable peace conference, the world has been plunged into World War II and seems to be fast approaching another such conflagration.

It is not that political reform was not needed, but it should be apparent

that political reform alone will not solve national or world problems. Today there is a wave of feeling among the peoples of all nations that the solution to all humanity's problems lies with government. When people are unhappy, they appeal to the government for aid. When they fail to get what they want, they plan to overthrow the government. So universal has the feeling become that government is responsible for individual welfare, that today no single government in the world is secure, and those governments most easily overthrown are undergoing changes as often as the seasons.

IN nations like the United States of America, public pressure upon government to cure their troubles by new legislation and executive decree has become so great as to override the common sense of legislators, so that there pours forth annually a mass of new legislation that makes it difficult to keep abreast of it and a battery of courts to interpret it. The discontented of America are beating a path to Washington. As one commentator put it, the people have turned to government rather than to God for succor.

Here and there a voice is raised to show the futility of attempting to cure our ills by legislation while the nation continues in spiritual lethargy. Dr. Joseph Sizoo, for twelve years pastor in Washington, D. C., states

his observation on this matter as follows:

I have seen all manner of individuals and groups traveling like caravans to the nation's capitol thinking that the fulfillment of their hopes turned on what could be provided for them by the government. Everybody who came there during the latter years wanted something.

But he concludes,

You can no more build our national life upon economic legislation only or on a new social code than a watch can run with a broken mainspring. We are wise enough today but we are not good enough.¹

In the midst of current problems it is well to look to the past for guidance. What the centuries say to the minutes must not be ignored. And the centuries have much to say in regard to the relationship of political reform with other factors. We are far too ready to look upon our political ills as new phenomena, whereas few situations arise that have not had their parallels in the past. In regard to problems of political and social reform, the Book of Mormon presents some important lessons, for although the book was written to portray other than political problems, such political information is nevertheless set down as to cast much light upon the relationship of political reform to spirituality.

The Book of Mormon is unique, in that it gives a continuous account of two nations which existed, one following the other, upon the American continent for a period totaling nearly three thousand years. Further, these nations rose and fell primarily because of internal causes and were signally free from outside influence or pressure. Hence, the record, fragmentary and brief as it is on political matters, nevertheless offers a study of human society rarely equalled in the story of mankind.

The Overall Lesson on Forms of Political Government.

THE Jaredite and Nephite peoples, whose story is depicted in the Book of Mormon, lived at various times under forms of political government ranging from pure theocracy to monarchies and dictatorships. There were periods of democracy when all political officers were elected and civil liberties were preserved under a written constitution or set of laws.² There were periods

when central governmental control gave way to local tribal government.³ Out of the account comes this great lesson to mankind: No form of government succeeds unless the people maintain a high spiritual level, and most forms of government are successful when high spirituality obtains among officers and subjects.

Thus long periods of national prosperity and social equality were enjoyed under monarchies. In giving an account of his reign to his people, the aging King Benjamin said:

I say unto you that as I have been suffered to spend my days in your service, even up to this time, and have not sought gold nor silver nor any manner of riches of you;

Neither have I suffered that ye should be confined in dungeons, nor that ye should make slaves one of another, nor that ye should murder, or plunder, or steal, or commit adultery; nor even have I suffered that ye should commit any manner of wickedness, and have taught you that ye should keep the commandments of the Lord, in all things which he hath commanded you—

And even I, myself, have labored with mine own hands that I might serve you, and that ye should not be laden with taxes, and that there should nothing come upon you which was grievous to be borne—and of all these things which I have spoken, ye yourselves are witnesses this day.

Yet, my brethren, I have not done these things that I might boast, neither do I tell these things that thereby I might accuse you; but I tell you these things that ye may know that I can answer a clear conscience before God this day.⁴

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The Book of Mormon speaks on current problems

The earlier Jaredite civilization also had long periods of peace, prosperity, and justice under kings. Thus we read:

And after that he had anointed Emer to be king he saw peace in the land for the space of two years, and he died, having seen exceeding many days, which were full of sorrow. And it came to pass that Emer did reign in his stead, and did fill the steps of his father.

And the Lord began again to take the curse from off the land, and the house of Emer did prosper exceedingly under the reign of Emer; and in the space of sixty and two years they had become exceeding strong, insomuch that they became exceeding rich—

Having all manner of fruit, and of grain, and of silks, and of fine linen, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious things;

And also all manner of cattle, of oxen, and cows, and of sheep, and of swine, and of goats, and also many other kinds of animals which were useful for the food of man.⁵

A similar account is found in Ether which ends with this significant sentence, "And never could be a people more blessed than were they, and more prospered by the hand of the Lord." (Ether 10:16-28.)

There were, however, periods under wicked kings, when the people mourned.⁶

It is a king who points out the strength and the dangers inherent in monarchies. King Mosiah, in proposing a democracy for his people, to follow his death said:

Now it is better that a man should be judged of God than of man, for the judgments of God are always just, but the judgments of man are not always just.

Therefore, if it were possible that you could have just men to be your kings, who would establish the laws of God, and judge this people according to his commandments, yea, if ye could have men for your kings who would do even as my father Benjamin did for this people—I say unto you, if this could always be the case then it would be expedient that ye should always have kings to rule over you.

And even I myself have labored with all the power and faculties which I have possessed, to teach you the commandments of God, and to establish peace throughout the land, that there should be no wars nor contentions, no stealing, nor plundering, nor murdering, nor any manner of iniquity;

And whosoever has committed iniquity, him I have punished according to the law which has been given to us by our fathers.

Now I say unto you, that because all men are not just it is not expedient that ye should have a king or kings to rule over you.

For behold, how much iniquity doth one wicked king cause to be committed, yea, and what great destruction! . . .

Therefore, choose you by the voice of this people, judges, that ye may be judged according to the laws which have been given you by our fathers, which are correct, and which were given them by the hand of the Lord. . . .

And if the time comes that the voice of the people doth choose iniquity, then is the time that the judgments of God will come upon you; yea, then is the time he will visit you with great destruction even as he has hitherto visited this land.⁷

BUT while the prophets favored democracies over kingdoms, such democracies did not always result in happiness for the people. Internal

¹Make Lije Worth Living, p. 24.

²See Alma 30:9-11.

³See III Nephi 7:1-4.

⁴Mosiah 2:12-15.

⁵Ether 9:15-18.

⁶See Mosiah 11:1-7; Ether 10:5-8.

⁷Mosiah 29:12-17, 25, 27.

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difficulties and even armed strife arose in democracies quite as readily as in kingdoms. In each instance the factor most important seems to be the spiritual level of the people rather than the form of government under which the people lived.

No form of political government can fail so rapidly as a so-called democracy when the moral level of a people is lowered. A single generation without God can plunge a nation toward oblivion. Dr. Albert Schweitzer, from his famed hospital in the heart of Africa, puts it this way:

If you think it through, you cannot escape the conclusion that if men do not adopt an ethic which carries with it a respect for the dignity of others and hence the submission to a personal moral restraint, then the only two other alternatives are anarchy with its inevitable chaos and demoralization, and rule of might with decrees and an order established by ruthlessness, as is done by the Communists.⁹

In the book of Doctrine and Covenants section 134, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints recognizes the value and efficacy of all forms of political government, so long as that government preserves religious liberty. The experience of the Church has been that the cause of Christ can flourish under many forms of civil government so long as the right of worship is left inviolate.

Attempts to Cure National Ills by Legislation.

The Book of Mormon stands as a signpost to nations that national ills cannot be cured by legislation while the spiritual condition of the people remains neglected. The younger Alma sought to bring about reform by entering political life and rose to the chief-judgeship, the highest civil office in his nation (Mosiah 29:42), only to find that while immorality, bribery, and dishonesty prevailed in the ranks, little could be done for his people. Accordingly, Alma resigned his civil position to return among his people as a prophet of God and teacher of righteousness.

And this he did that he himself might go forth among his people, or among the people of Nephi, that he might preach the word of God unto them, to stir them up in remembrance of their duty, and that he might pull down, by the word of God, all

the pride and craftiness and all the contentions which were among his people, seeing no way that he might reclaim them save it were in bearing down in pure testimony against them.⁹

That Alma and his fellow missionaries called into like service had great success toward bringing about reform by preaching the word of God is attested to by the record.¹⁰

In a later period another man of God, Nephi, also arose to the highest civil position in the land, and like Alma he too resigned that position to bring about national reform by preaching the word of God.

And it came to pass that in this same year, behold, Nephi delivered up the judgment-seat to a man whose name was Cezoram.

For as their laws and their governments were established by the voice of the people, and they who chose evil were more numerous than they who chose good, therefore they were ripening for destruction, for the laws had become corrupted.

Yea, and this was not all; they were a stiffnecked people, insomuch that they could not be governed by the law nor justice, save it were to their destruction.

And it came to pass that Nephi had become weary because of their iniquity; and he yielded up the judgment-seat, and took it upon him to preach the word of God all the remainder of his days, and his brother Lehi also, all the remainder of his days.¹¹

⁹Alma 4:19.
¹⁰ibid., chapters 5, 6, 7.
¹¹Helaman 3:1-4.

ADVICE TO YOUNG EXPLORERS

By Maryhale Woolsey

Go, build new trails for your strong young feet;

There are always new worlds calling.
But do not forget how the stars are set,
How a compass is worthy of watching yet—

For your triumphs will never be quite complete

Till you map the new so others can view
And come following you, come following.

And make new songs for your singing, child;

There are countless melodies slumbering.
But your sweetest refrains will echo strains
From some that were caroled in Eden-lanes;

You'll find them worthy^o of bringing, child,
From the yellowed page to your shining age

For remembering, further remembering.

A bright new day will be yours, child—yours!

Lift up clear eyes to its dawning—
With the mind to heed what an older creed

Saved from yesterday for tomorrow's need.
The spirit which swiftest and highest soars
Must have learned to fly in a lower sky—

And treasured the joy of learning!

While no details are given of the attempts made by either Alma or Nephi to bring about reform through governmental measures, it can well be assumed that such attempts were made and failed.

No Security in Government Without Spirituality.

THE Book of Mormon attests the insecurity of a people who have lost the spirit of God. Such people invariably became involved in international strife as well as in international war which sapped their strength and reduced them to poverty.

The secret of national security and peace is found in this explanation by Alma:

And now, because of the steadiness of the church they began to be exceeding rich, having abundance of all things whatsoever they stood in need—and abundance of flocks and herds, and fatlings of every kind, and also abundance of grain, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious things, and abundance of silk and fine-twined linen, and all manner of good homely cloth.

And thus, in their prosperous circumstances, they did not send away any who were naked, or that were hungry, or that were athirst, or that were sick, or that had not been nourished; and they did not set their hearts upon riches; therefore they were liberal to all, both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, whether out of the church or in the church, having no respect to persons as to those who stood in need.

And thus they did prosper and become far more wealthy than those who did not belong to their church. . . .

And it came to pass that by thus exercising the law upon them, every man suffering according to that which he had done, they became more still, and durst not commit any wickedness if it were known; therefore, there was much peace among the people of Nephi until the fifth year of the reign of the judges.¹²

Much as we may desire national reform and international peace, we must not be misled into supposing that these ends can be achieved by new legislation alone, or by the setting up of new political reforms like the United Nations. Without spiritual reform, the new legislation is likely to become the tool of knaves, and political organizations like the United Nations but screens behind which flourish new forms of international chicanery.

¹²Alma 1:29-31, 33.

⁹As quoted by Harold E. Stassen, in *Ladies' Home Journal*, July 1951, p. 131.