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There Was No Contention

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Introduction

Appearing repeatedly in the book of 4 Nephi is a phrase which speaks to the heart of what Zion was and will be. Occurring three times in its singular form and once in the plural within the first 18 verses, this phrase explains a primary reason for the blessed state enjoyed by the Nephites as well as the results which flowed therefrom. The phrase simply reads: “There was no contention.” In its simplicity lies a pattern for reestablishing Zion which encompasses both a warning of what must be avoided and a promise of what can, with the Lord’s help, be achieved.

Early in the Lord’s visit to the Nephites, as recorded in 3 Nephi, he taught the people this principle:

And there shall be no disputations among you, as there have hitherto been; neither shall there be disputations among you concerning the points of my doctrine, as there have hitherto been.

For verily, verily I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another.

Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away. (11:28–30)

The people in 4 Nephi received, internalized, and lived this commandment for a lengthy time. Verses 2 and 15 detail the reasons for their success in eradicating contention: “The people were all converted unto the Lord, upon all the face of the land, both Nephites and Lamanites, and there were no contentions and disputations among

them, and every man did deal justly one with another”; and “there was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people” (4 Nephi 1:2, 15). Two other verses disclose the blessings arising from this condition:

And it came to pass that there was no contention among all the people, in all the land; but there were mighty miracles wrought among the disciples of Jesus.

And how blessed were they! For the Lord did bless them in all their doings; yea, even they were blessed and prospered until an hundred and ten years had passed away; and the first generation from Christ had passed away, and there was no contention in all the land. (vv 13, 18)

Contention

In order to better understand why the Lord so sharply condemned contention during his visit to the Nephites and why it is absent from such a blessed state, we must seek the true meaning of the word and examine its use. One definition of *contend* is “to assert or to maintain in argument.” It seems to be this meaning that the Lord used in a modern revelation: “Contend thou, therefore, morning by morning; and day after day let thy warning voice go forth” (D&C 112:5). Likewise, this meaning may be inferred when Jude admonishes us to “earnestly contend for the faith” (1:3) or when Paul says he was bold “to speak unto you the gospel of God with much contention” (1 Thes 2:2). Similarly, the command to “contend against no church, save it be the church of the devil” (D&C 18:20) may be read in this context. But this last verse may also advance a different definition of *contend*, namely “to struggle.” Read thus, there is still no suggestion that we *contend* against another person. The implication seems to be to struggle against evil or to fight the powers of darkness.

In the Book of Mormon, *contention* invariably carries this latter meaning of struggling or fighting, equating it with Webster’s definition, “violent effort or struggle to obtain, resist or compete.” What is it that causes *contention* to always be used in this negative manner? The Lord incorporates into *contention* an added ingredient when he indicates that the devil “stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another” (3 Nephi 11:29). *Contention*, then, as used in the Book of Mormon, is not just a matter of asserting or defending a position, but of doing so with anger as the added element. The Saints

may honestly and forthrightly differ in opinion on ideas, insights, or approaches while still remaining calm; but it is when hostile feelings are added that disagreement turns into contention. Thus, while it is possible to disagree without anger, *contention*, as used in the Book of Mormon, means disagreeing in anger. Once this more complete definition is understood, it is easier to comprehend why Nephi declared, "The Lord God hath commanded that men . . . should not contend one with another" (2 Nephi 26:32), and why the Lord promised: "I will contend with him that contendeth with thee, and I will save thy children" (1 Nephi 21:25).

Therefore, without exception in the Book of Mormon, the word *contention* refers to conflict in which heated passions play a part. The word is modified by adjectives such as "serious" (Hel 1:2), "warm" (Alma 50:26), "exceedingly sharp" (19:28), "much" (Hel 1:18) and "great" (Mosiah 19:3; Alma 22:22; Hel 3:19; 3 Nephi 7:7). The modifier "wonderful" in Alma 2:5 is used in conjunction with the phrase "much dispute" and seems to denote "astonishing" or "surprising." Even more instructive as to its meaning are other words with which it is coupled. It regularly appears in phrases like "much contention and many dissensions" (W of M 1:16; Hel 3:3) and is often found in conjunction with such companions as "disturbance(s)" (Alma 22:22; Hel 3:17), "difficulty" (Hel 1:18), "dispute" (Alma 2:5), "destructions" (Enos 1:23), "quarrelings" (Alma 50:21), and "bloodsheds" (35:15). It is remarkably telling that this word was engraved by Book of Mormon authors in almost the same stroke with "war(s)" a full 31 times.

On the other hand, the only positive references to contention in the entire Book of Mormon are to its absence. Unfortunately, recorded periods of Nephite history without contention are few and their duration short (Mosiah 1:1; 6:7; Alma 4:1; 16:1; Hel 3:1–2). With periods of peace being so scarce in the narrative, having a time with no contention must have seemed to Mormon a virtually unattainable condition. Considering the circumstances of his day in combination with all the history he had reviewed, Mormon mentions the absence of contention four times in 17 verses as if to convince himself of such a wonderment, to dispel the belief that this is only a heavenly goal, and to reenforce the possibility of a contentionless people. No wonder he exclaimed: "Surely there could not be a happier people among all

the people who had been created by the hand of God. . . . And how blessed were they!” (4 Nephi 1:16, 18).

Anger

To fully understand the Lord’s depth of condemnation of contention, it is necessary to examine the negative underpinning of anger, which is defined as “a feeling of sudden and strong displeasure and antagonism directed against the cause of an assumed wrong or injury” (Funk and Wagnells). Note that it is a feeling or emotion. One group of authors indicates that research in physiology shows “all strong emotions [grow] out of the same physical reaction . . . stress response” (McKay 22), and that “the sole function of anger is to stop stress” (44). Contrary to popular opinions that this emotion is biologically determined or instinctive or that its expression is a healthy release, these authors conclude that “anger is nothing more than a learned response to certain kinds of stress” (50). Whereas we may have learned to use it in an attempt to control stress, we are not compelled to do so because we “have a choice” (51). Thus, these authors propose that the individual is ultimately responsible for his anger: “There is a pleasure in blaming. . . . But there’s a problem with the habit of finding others responsible for your pain. It isn’t true. You are solely responsible for the quality of your life. Whether you are in pain or not, whether your needs are met or not, whether your relationships feel good or not is entirely determined by the choices you make” (58). Similarly, another author indicates that we largely bring on these hostile feelings ourselves “and have the responsibility for continuing to feel them or for giving them up” (Ellis 183).

Carol Tavris writes that anger involves conscious, split-second judgments “that an injustice, insult or idiocy has been committed, and a choice of reactions” (35). She concludes: “Judgment and choice are the hallmarks of anger” (36). Another writer agrees, stating: “Angry people are experts, truly experts, on what they believe *ought to be*” (Doty 15). Thus, anger requires the ability to reason, to make judgments, and to choose to respond with hostile emotions instead of forbearance or charity. Uncomfortable as it may seem to some, all this analysis points to the conclusion that anger is a conscious act, not, as some would rationalize, an uncontrollable emotion.

It is instructive to see how closely the findings of such writers conform to Lehi's witness that because the Messiah has redeemed all men and women from the Fall, "They have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon" (2 Nephi 2:26). While we may not be able to determine our circumstances, we are free to choose our responses to them. Should we choose to ignore the option we have to act with patience, understanding, and love, and react instead with anger, have we not, to a certain degree, relinquished that freedom so dearly purchased by the Redeemer's blood? Satan cannot destroy our agency, and God will not abridge it; but we may, by blaming others for our actions, diminish our capacity to choose freely and "by persisting long enough, reach the point of no return" (Romney 45). We may blind ourselves into accusing others for our failings and feelings, but we cannot escape the assigned consequences which will surely flow from our acts and attitudes.

A careful examination of the Old Testament verses dealing with anger, or its alternative rendering, "wrath," reveals the impression that it is a natural—or perhaps more accurately, a "natural man" (Mosiah 3:19)—response to stressful situations. However, when the risen Lord discussed the fulfillment of the Old Testament Mosaic law with the Nephites and Lamanites, he used several examples to indicate that carefully following the law would only elevate people to the status of honorable men and women of the earth. In order for them to become celestial, they had to take a further step, and move from obedience of Mosaic law to a higher level of sanctification where basic motivations were purified. Not committing adultery would bring one to a terrestrial plateau; but only by eradicating lust could one come to harmony with celestial law. From this standpoint Jesus indicated the new, higher commandment relating to anger in these words: "Whosoever is angry with his brother shall be in danger of his judgment" (3 Nephi 12:22). Clearly, this passage contains no old law qualifications for anger such as *whosoever is quick to anger, cannot control anger, continues in anger, or even the rationalization of one who is angry without a cause* that appears in the King James Version. These qualifications are conspicuously absent in the Book of Mormon, the Joseph Smith Translation, and even in many of the early manuscripts from which the gospel of Matthew was translated (for a more detailed discussion, see Welch 161–63).

But some will counter that the Lord did not mean to condemn the emotion altogether. Yet is that not exactly what he said? Did he not direct Paul to utter this blanket condemnation: “Can ye be angry, and not sin?” (JST Eph 4:26). “But the anger or wrath of God is often spoken of in scripture. Are we not to follow His example?” Reference has already been made to the fact that our anger is the result of judgments quickly made and that it is a chosen response. While we have been commanded to “judge not unrighteously” (JST Matt 7:2), the realities of life often prompt us to judge people by their words or actions. We are not in a position to judge others’ motivations and certainly not to render a verdict on the status of their hearts, even though we sometimes think otherwise. Only the Lord can do that. He taught the prophet Samuel, “For the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” (1 Sam 16:7). The only recorded instance of attributing anger to the Lord during his earthly sojourn speaks of his judging the heart. It is written that he looked upon the Pharisees “with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts” (Mark 3:5). While the Lord’s anger or wrath is often referred to in scripture, it is usually spoken of in terms of the judgment resulting from his justice, often in the context of the Lord’s people having broken their covenant with him. A definition of his anger, different from that ascribed to mortals, might be “a feeling of strong displeasure toward persons who have hardened their hearts against light and truth.” It is his all-seeing, all-knowing judgment of people’s hearts which evokes his perfect justice (D&C 84:24; 1 Kings 11:9).

Mortals, on the other hand, are simply not in a position to make such judgments. Therefore, human anger is not acceptable. The only exception seems to be when the Lord’s Spirit moves us to know his will and to act in his behalf. Unless and until that happens, human anger, not just its outward expression, but its existence, is unjustifiable. The Lord has indicated we should “reprov[e] betimes with sharpness,” but only in those rare instances “when moved upon by the Holy Ghost” (D&C 121:43). It is in that context that Lehi steps in to defend Nephi from the accusations of Laman and Lemuel: “And ye have murmured because he hath been plain unto you. Ye say that he hath used sharpness; ye say that he hath been angry with you; but behold, his sharpness was the sharpness of the power of the word of God, which was in him; and that which ye call anger was the truth,

according to that which is in God” (2 Nephi 1:26). Notice Lehi’s approving use of the word “sharpness,” identical to the use thereof in Doctrine and Covenants 121:43, where the meaning seems to indicate preciseness or accuracy, not harshness or overbearance.

Perhaps the permissibility of anger in our lives could be compared to the Lord’s instructions regarding forgiveness: “I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men” (D&C 64:10). While he, who is from everlasting to everlasting and who knows the thoughts and intents of all our hearts, can look upon us and render righteous judgments, we, who “see through a glass, darkly” (1 Cor 13:12), who understand so imperfectly, dare not venture blindly onto the stand, declaring ourselves to be the judge. Yet, that is precisely what we are doing when we feel anger—we are declaring ourselves judge, jury, and often, in the flash of the moment, executioner. Perhaps we could paraphrase the Lord’s directive to us regarding this matter in these terms: “I, the Lord, will feel anger [ie, render judgment] toward whom I will; but of you it is required not to feel anger toward anyone.”

Attitudes Leading to Contention

If contention and anger are so strongly condemned by the Lord, what underlying attitudes tempt us to embrace them? One of the foremost is pride. The book of Proverbs tells us that “only by pride cometh contention” (13:10). In Doctrine and Covenants 64:8, the Lord indicates that, in days of old, his disciples “sought occasion against one another and forgave not one another in their hearts.” One such moment may have been the occasion of the Last Supper. Elder Bruce R. McConkie speaks of contention in the upper room as a result of the apostles’ order of seating. Judas, who was “more of a Pharisee than a Christian” by both inclination and custom, sought for himself the seat of honor. Were there those at the table who, when “Jesus rebuked the contention” (4:31–33), might have harbored ill feelings toward Judas for his claiming preeminence? Was it not pride that prompted Judas to take the undeserved seat and the same motivation that may have prompted any resentment for his doing so? Neither seeking position nor reacting in anger or by lack of forgiveness is becoming of Saints.

Perhaps our anger is sometimes generated by our being offended. Speaking of mortality, Elder Boyd K. Packer has stated that each person “will have a test sufficient to his needs; how each responds is the test” (“The Mystery of Life” 18). For some of us, our test may be whether we respond to offenses with anger. The opposite response was displayed in instances when the righteous Nephites were persecuted. They responded not by taking offense but by fasting and praying often, and “yielding their hearts unto God” (Hel 3:35). At another time, it was recorded that they would “receive railing and persecution and all manner of afflictions, and would not turn and revile again, but were humble and penitent before God” (3 Nephi 6:13). At times it may be as sinful to take offense and respond negatively as to give the offense. Certainly, the Zion of 4 Nephi could never have been established if people were regularly taking offense and responding with anger.

It is relatively easy to see contentious feelings coming to the fore as a defensive mechanism, when we know we are doing wrong but object to being told so. A more subtle excuse often expressed for such feelings is the frustration and fear which result from losing face or a sense of selfworth, a recognition of who we really are in the midst of a confusing and insecure world. The milieu of competition which so pervades society adds to this sense of frustration, anger and, ultimately, contention. Competition frequently combines several of the contention-causing attitudes just discussed. If it is defined as “mutually exclusive goal attainment,” it means that “my success requires your failure. Our fates are negatively linked” (Kohn 4). There is a significant difference between the desire to do well and the desire to do better than someone else. C. S. Lewis wrote: “Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. . . . It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition has gone, pride has gone” (109–110). Is this not the goal of contention, to be above, to be better, to be victor or conqueror? When we exclusively live by the rules of competition, we tend to look sideways and compare ourselves to others, instead of looking up to God.

On a personal, internal level, many of us have come to believe that we only have selfworth if we are successful. We live in a world which preaches, at every turn, that you are only successful if you are a “winner,” which, in worldly terms, means you must prove your

worth by “beating” someone else. “Ultimately, this strategy reveals itself as futile, since making our self-esteem contingent on winning means that it will always be in doubt. The more we compete, the more we need to compete” (Kohn 183). Thanks be to God for a prophet who has told us that we need not get caught up in this maelstrom of combative comparison and resulting contention. President Benson has stated: “If we love God, do His will, and fear His judgments more than men’s, we will have self-esteem” (“Beware of Pride” 6). To paraphrase, “The essence of self-esteem is the approval of God.”

From a gospel perspective, something seems intrinsically wrong with a system where somebody must lose, which is the espoused desire of Satan and an often overlooked facet of contention. Elder Packer has stated:

In this life we are constantly confronted with a spirit of competition. Teams contest one against another in an adversary relationship in order that one will be chosen a winner. We come to believe that wherever there is a winner there must also be a loser. To believe that is to be misled. In the eyes of the Lord, everyone may be a winner. Now it is true that we must earn it; but if there is competition in His work, it is not with another soul—it’s with our own former selves. (*That All May be Edified* 84)

The operative phrase in this last sentence is “If there is competition in His work.” If competition is defined as “mutually exclusive goal attainment,” then focusing our efforts on reaching the standard the Lord has set, by striving to perfect ourselves, does not qualify as competition since no one need lose. In a class where the discussion of the Nephite Zion raised questions about the promised latter-day Zion, a student queried, “Will there be competition in Zion?” My immediate thoughts turned to a recent “fun run” held as part of our stake’s July 24th celebration. Most of the members of my family had participated, some walking, some jogging, and some actually running. All finished, each received some ribbon or other token, but none had been trying to outdo someone else. I was grateful not to sense the desire to “beat” another person, to be proclaimed winner at the expense of the loser(s), since such an attitude speaks more of contention than of the spirit of cooperation and oneness which is a prerequisite to Zion. After some reflection, I responded to my student with this thought: “I feel sure we will participate in wonderful activities in Zion; but I rather doubt anyone will be interested in keeping score.”

Good Contention?

Having discussed contention, anger, and some of the attitudes which lead us to both, we must address the question, “Is there such a thing as good contention?” Some have rationalized that it is justifiable to enter into contention when defending the truth. However, the Prophet Joseph Smith said: “Avoid contentions and vain disputes. . . . Remember that ‘it is a day of warning, and not a day of many words.’ If they receive not your testimony in one place, flee to another, remembering to cast no reflections, nor throw out any bitter sayings. If you do your duty, it will be just as well with you, as though all men embraced the Gospel” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 43). Even when we have a spiritual witness that something is true, it is unwise to argue to prove a point. For example, regarding an issue as provocative of heated debate as the theory of organic evolution as the explanation for the origin of man, Elder Packer has wisely cautioned that we present the scriptural view and then let the Spirit work: “Do not be contentious. Speak of conscience, values, moral law” (“The Law and the Light” 25).

As people engage in contention, they tend to become more and more entrenched in the positions espoused, increasingly solidified in the points of view taken, until they become so hardened they can hardly feel the promptings of the Spirit. Inspiration, light, and truth are locked out. Even those supposedly arguing for the right may become so puffed up in their learning (2 Nephi 9:28; 28:4) or so engrossed in their interpretation of doctrine, history, or prophecy as to preclude any illumination from the Spirit which might temper or even change their strongly forged opinions. While the Spirit can and does bear witness to the truth, the Spirit is rarely called to witness when contending parties are busy throwing proofs and epithets at each other. Speaking of this problem, Elder Theodore M. Burton said:

Whenever you get red in the face, whenever you raise your voice, whenever you get “hot under the collar,” or angry, rebellious, or negative in spirit, then know that the Spirit of God is leaving you and the spirit of Satan is beginning to take over. At times we may feel justified in arguing or fighting for truth by contentious words and actions. Do not be deceived. Satan would rather have you contend for evil if he could, but he rejoices when we contend with one another even when we think we are doing it in the cause of righteousness. He knows and recognizes the self-destructive nature of contention under any guise. (56)

The Savior told the Nephites that if they remembered anyone had aught against them, they should first be reconciled with them and then return to worship the Lord (3 Nephi 12:23–24). Who might be right or wrong in such a case is not relevant to that command. Elder Dallin H. Oaks has written, “We are obliged to ‘be reconciled to [our] brother’ even when he is wrong and we are only the victim of the grievance. . . . Reconciliation seeks the restoration of relationships, not the adjudication of differences” (142–143). He further stated, “It is noteworthy that the Savior did not limit his teaching about disputations and contention to those who had wrong ideas about doctrine or procedure. He forbade disputations and contention by everyone. The commandment to avoid contention applies to those who are right as well as to those who are wrong” (142).

The following words of President Joseph F. Smith confirm that “positive contention” is a contradiction in terms:

You find the spirit of contention only among apostates and those who have denied the faith, those who have turned away from the truth and have become enemies to God and his work. There you will find the spirit of contention, the spirit of strife. There you will find them wanting to “argue the question,” and to dispute with you all the time. Their food, their meat, and their drink is contention which is abominable in the sight of the Lord. We do not contend. We are not contentious, for if we were we would grieve the Spirit of the Lord from us, just as apostates do and have always done. (372)

President Ezra Taft Benson has succinctly summarized: “Contention must cease” (*Teachings* 527). And cease it must; but how?

Faith

In order to have the peace which the gospel promises, we must move positively toward change. While we may not be able to alter all the “negative” circumstances in our lives, we can and must change our attitude concerning them. This is the starting place. The Lord grants unto us according to our desires (Alma 29:4; D&C 137:9) and, therefore, our first goal should be to purify our desires. What is required of us to eradicate contention from our lives, our homes, our communities? It will take faith in Christ, hope in Christ, and the charity that Christ freely bestows on those who seek him with all their hearts.

The first major step to overcoming contention is to come to truly believe that it is possible to do so. Many of us, from our expressed attitudes and actions, seem to disbelieve that such a world could really exist—our lip service to such a desire aside. It is not uncommon to brush off such a suggestion by labeling it an “unrealistic dream.” When our children bicker and fight with each other we say, “Well, what do you expect; they’re only children,” or “Boys will be boys,” indicating a deep-seated belief that such actions are inherent in human nature and cannot be modified. By reacting so, we effectively absolve ourselves of the responsibility of teaching the truth and bringing about change. King Benjamin taught: “And ye will not suffer your children that they go hungry, or naked; neither will ye suffer that they transgress the laws of God, and fight and quarrel one with another, and serve the devil. . . . But ye will teach them to walk in the ways of truth and soberness; ye will teach them to love one another, and to serve one another” (Mosiah 4:14–15). There are some who can testify that by obeying those very verses they have been able to teach children from an early age that, because of the constraints that God has placed upon them as parents, they cannot allow fighting and quarrelling in the home. It is possible to live in a home devoid of such contention. Until we begin to exercise our faith in the words of Christ and adhere to his commandments, how can we expect a changed result? Miracles follow only the faithful and obedient.

When we decry the responsibility to bring about change with excuses such as “That’s just the way it is,” we are acknowledging the doubt that a better condition could really exist. The real question is “Do we believe Christ?” It is one thing to believe in him and quite another to believe him (Robinson 8–12). Mormon’s record in 4 Nephi indicates that “The people were all converted unto the Lord” (1:2). Is it possible that being “converted unto the Lord” has stronger connotations than being converted to the Church? To be truly converted to him is to truly believe him. By contrast, some of us react to his injunction to “turn the other cheek” as an altruistic, but unreachable, goal. Should we not, instead, believe him? Did he really mean that we should forgo the lawsuit even when we feel justified in pursuing it? Did he mean that we must work and pray and struggle toward truly forgiving another who has offended us, even when that person has not asked our forgiveness? He could not possibly have meant that when we are rudely cut off by another driver on the freeway, we should

respond by hitting our brake instead of our horn. Or could he? There is a tendency to believe that intrinsic goodness can only be experienced when the world is a better place.

If we mistakenly rationalize that such innate goodness will have to wait until the Millennium when all others will act similarly, have we not missed the point? Is not the Savior asking us to act that way *now*, in the midst of offense and confrontation, so that we might be counted worthy to continue acting that way *then*? Mormon's day cannot have been so different from the era into which we are rapidly moving, which is perhaps why he marveled so much at the lack of contention he reads about during the period after Christ's ministry. We too can live peacefully in a turbulent world if we will, like him, follow the Savior's teachings and example. Elder Dallin H. Oaks has indicated that the current leaders of the Lord's church are living proof. He has "marveled at how effectively they live the commandment to avoid disputation and contention. They are not always in agreement, but they are always in harmony. They are not uniform in opinions, but they are united in effort. They are many, but they are one" (150).

Hope

If we can come to believe that it is truly possible for some to live without contention, not just in the abstract but in reality, then the next issue becomes, "but what about me? It may be possible for some, but is it possible for me?" Hope in Christ adds the personal dimension, "I believe it can exist for me." Amulek said that "Now is the time and the day of your salvation; and therefore, if ye will repent and harden not your hearts, immediately shall the great plan of redemption be brought about unto you" (Alma 34:31). Does that not include the elimination of contention? The ethical theorist Immanuel Kant wrote: "Duty demands nothing of us which we cannot do. . . . When the moral law commands that we *ought* now to be better men, it follows inevitably that we must *be able* to be better men" (43, 46). The same idea expressed in a prophetic voice is, "I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them" (1 Nephi 3:7).

The Lord promised: “Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, which is right, believing that ye shall receive, behold it shall be given unto you” (3 Nephi 18:20). That brings us back to the question of whether I really believe him. Do I trust him? If I do, will not my prayers be answered as he has promised if I humbly put myself in his care? I must work and pray to avoid disputations and deal justly with others as the Nephites did (4 Nephi 1:2, 15). While there may seem to be no end to the stresses and offenses that could give rise to my justification for a contentious attitude, there is also no end to the assistance that will be freely offered me to overcome such an attitude, if I seek the Lord with faith and hope.

What if I have made some terrible errors? How can I ever forgive myself? Are we not commanded “to forgive all men”? (D&C 64:10). Does not that require that I forgive myself as well? A major danger of anger is that it is often turned inward. When we have erred, it is appropriate for us to experience that “godly sorrow” which leads to true repentance. But to feel hostile emotions toward ourselves is to become both aggressor and victim. The resultant two-edged injury—suffering from acting as judge on the one hand and feeling the sting of being attacked on the other—leads us away from God instead of toward him and can severely damage our sense of selfworth. God knows our hearts far better than even we do. Why not let him be the judge? President Spencer W. Kimball said we must “lean heavily upon the Lord and trust in him, acknowledging that ‘with God all things are possible’” (339).

As we apply this hope personally, the “them,” “you,” and “they” of the Lord’s counsel become “I” and “me.” I must hope in Christ for the miracles that attended the people of 4 Nephi to attend *me*, realizing that before contention will depart from my home it must depart from my soul. As I rid myself of those attitudes which promote anger, and thereby purify my emotions, I must be prepared for miracles to become my reality as well. George Q. Cannon promised:

By the Saints refusing to be led by the influences of Satan and not yielding to his seductive temptations, he is virtually bound so far as they are concerned; and, when the head of the family can attain unto this power and persuade his wife and family to do likewise, the power of Satan will be bound in that habitation, and the Millennium will have commenced in that household. (1:88)

Charity

Unless we are “meek, and lowly of heart,” Mormon says our “faith and hope [are] vain” (Moroni 7:43–44). But if we have exercised our faith in Christ and have felt the wellsprings of hope in him, then we “must needs have charity” (v 44), which is “the greatest of all” (v 46). In the first part of 4 Nephi, there was no contention “because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people” (1:15). It is in the heart where Zion must begin. Elder Orson F. Whitney wrote: “The redemption of Zion is more than the purchase or recovery of lands, the building of cities, or even the founding of nations. It is the conquest of the heart, the subjugation of the soul, the sanctifying of the flesh, the purifying and ennobling of the passions” (65).

Contention, while separating persons or groups, also drives a wedge between our natural selves and our celestial reconciliation with God. It causes a blockage in the heart, for the love of God cannot coexist with contention. If we fully love God, our turning the other cheek cannot be a mere outward show, it will be the outward expression of an inner conviction. The Savior commanded “Love one another; as I have loved you” (John 13:34). If he is truly our example, why do we not act charitably toward others even when confronted with hostility? Certainly he showed us the way when he absorbed all the hurt and evil of the world in Gethsemane and on Golgotha, yet returned only good (Robinson 122–23).

We must be filled with the pure love of Christ. It is both the cleansing agent and the resultant blessing of becoming clean. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to “pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that [we] may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ” (Moroni 7:48). One who is endowed with this promised gift “suffereth long, and is kind, and envieth not, and is not puffed up, seeketh not her own, [and] is not easily provoked” (v 45). How opposite these attributes are to a contentious attitude!

Conclusion

Alma the Elder commanded his people that “there should be no contention one with another, but that they should look forward with

one eye, having one faith and one baptism, having their hearts knit together in unity and in love one towards another” (Mosiah 18:21). Sadly, the success of the people to follow his command was short-lived. There were brief periods of righteousness; but not until the record reaches 4 Nephi was there a sustained period which resulted in the full establishment of Zion. There were no “Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God” (1:17). Undoubtedly that blessed people, like those of Enoch’s day, were “of one heart and one mind” (Moses 7:18). By definition, “one heart and one mind” can not be characterized by disputations, divisions, “ites,” or any of a myriad of related evils which constitute contention, for all of these poison righteous unity.

Mormon tells us what will come from obedience: “And it came to pass that there was no contention among all the people, in all the land; but there were mighty miracles wrought among the disciples of Jesus. . . . And how blessed were they! For the Lord did bless them in all their doings; yea, even they were blessed and prospered” (4 Nephi 1:13, 18). Imagine the marvels and wonders, the knowledge and majesty which the Lord bestowed upon this people because of their righteousness. It takes faith, hope, and charity to obtain such bounteous blessings and participate in such mighty miracles. It will require opening our hearts to Christ without reservation for us to so partake; for the same promises and possibilities are extended to us by that same Lord, conditioned on obedience to the same commandments. We will be ready and willing to love so that we will have no contention but will live with surpassing joy. Then will it also be written of us: “Surely there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God” (4 Nephi 1:16).

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