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Dealing with Opposition to the Church

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Dealing with Opposition to the Church 2

Rex C. Reeve, Jr.

About 120 BC, king Mosiah gathered the people of Zarahemla together to hear accounts of the afflictions and bondage suffered by the people of Limhi and the people of Alma in the land of Nephi (Mosiah 25:1–6). Those hearing the stories wept because of the suffering of their brethren, but were filled with joy and thanksgiving when they learned that deliverance from bondage came through the power and goodness of God (Mosiah 25:7–10).

From the time of his conversion, Alma the Elder labored faithfully to reestablish the Church among his followers in the land of Nephi and in the city of Helam for more than 25 years. After Alma's arrival in Zarahemla, Mosiah, who was both king and prophet, gave Alma authority to ordain priests and teachers and to administer the true church of God throughout the land. Under Alma's able leadership and with an outpouring of the Spirit of the Lord, the Church grew and prospered, eventually having seven churches in the land of Zarahemla. We might call them wards, or even stakes, but they were all part of the true church of God (Mosiah 25:19–24).

When doctrinal and procedural questions arose in the Church, Alma the Elder received guidance through revelation. From time to time, the members were admonished to have faith in Christ, to properly repent of their sins, and to become clean and pure before the Lord (see Alma 5:15, 21, 32–33).

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In Alma 1–4, the Church, then under the leadership of Alma the Younger, faced new internal and external problems. These problems eventually caused Alma to resign from his position as chief judge, allowing him time to administer the affairs of the Church and to travel among all the people of Nephi, bearing testimony against the wicked (Alma 4:16–19). The purpose of this paper is to identify both the internal and external problems faced by the Church; to see how Alma the Younger instructed Church members to deal with both problems; and to see how Church members today should react to similar problems.

External Opposition to the Church

In Alma 1:2–33, a large and powerful man named Nehor established a church of his own. In sharp contrast to the true doctrines of Christ, he taught “that every priest and teacher ought to become popular; and they ought not to labor with their hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people. And he also testified unto the people that all mankind should be saved at the last day . . . for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life” (Alma 1:3–4). Through his powerful teaching of these false doctrines, Nehor gained many followers who gave him money and who no longer felt obligated to follow the strict commandments of God.

Under Nephite religious law, all people were free to believe whatever they desired (see Alma 1:17). The law protected the right of personal belief and even allowed individuals to teach those beliefs as long as others were not forced or injured. An important teaching of the Church was and always will be to eliminate religious intolerance and bigotry. The true saints of God respected Nehor’s right to believe and teach as he pleased, but they armed themselves with the word of God so they would not be deceived.

In Nephite society, all were required to obey the civil laws of the land or face the prescribed punishment. Nehor violated the civil law by killing Gideon, an old and greatly respected

man of God (Alma 1:9). In his position as chief judge, Alma was required to judge Nehor according to the crimes he had committed. The law required those guilty of murder to be put to death. In the process of judgment, Alma said, “Behold, this is the first time that priestcraft has been introduced among this people. And behold, thou art not only guilty of priestcraft, but hast endeavored to enforce it by the sword; and were priestcraft to be enforced among this people it would prove their entire destruction” (Alma 1:12).

Many years earlier, Nephi had warned his people against the evils of priestcraft, which he defined as “men preach[ing] and set[ting] themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of the world; but they seek not the welfare of Zion” (2 Nephi 26:29). In our day, Elder Bruce R. McConkie has amplified this definition:

Priesthood and priestcraft are two opposites; one is of God, the other of the devil. When ministers claim but do not possess the priesthood; when they set themselves up as lights to their congregations, but do not preach the pure and full gospel; when their interest is in gaining personal popularity and financial gain, rather than in caring for the poor and ministering to the wants and needs of their fellow men—they are engaged, in a greater or lesser degree, in the practice of priestcrafts. (593)

Nehor was put to death for his crimes, but this did not end priestcraft. Many people became worldly and, following Nehor’s example, preached false doctrines for riches and honor (Alma 1:16). Those who did not belong to the Church began to persecute the members of the Church of God (Alma 1:19). This external persecution was a war of ridicule against church doctrines and beliefs: “Yea, they did persecute them, and afflict them with all manner of words, and this because of their humility; because they were not proud in their own eyes, and because they did impart the word of God, one with another, without money and without price” (Alma 1:20).

External persecution was either a blessing or a curse, depending on how members responded to it. When members followed the laws of the Church and the counsel of their leaders,

they became stronger in the faith and were blessed both individually and as a church. When members refused to follow this counsel, they brought many trials and afflictions upon themselves and the whole Church. If they did not repent, their membership was taken away.

The leaders' counsel for reacting to this opposition was simple, yet when followed, had a profound influence for good: "Now there was a strict law among the people of the Church, that there should not any man, belonging to the Church, arise and persecute those that did not belong to the Church" (Alma 1:21). The members were expected to turn the other cheek, or to return good for evil. They were expected to be living examples of the teachings of Christ and to love their enemies. When some members violated this instruction and fought openly with their enemies, even with their fists, it caused much affliction and trial for the Church. Guilty members who would not repent and leave nonmembers alone were removed from the Church (Alma 1:23–24).

In addition, members were to be united and show love and respect for each other. They were to forgive and support one another, especially in times of persecution. The "strict law among the people of the Church" included the stipulation that "there should be no persecution among themselves" (Alma 1:21).

These members who stood fast in the faith remained "immovable in keeping the commandments of God" (Alma 1:25). They were true followers of Christ at all times, in all places and in all things (see Mosiah 18:9). The humble, sincere, and obedient individuals were living examples of the truthfulness of the gospel, which withstood all persecution.

Faithful members meekly suffered the persecutions heaped upon them (Alma 1:25). They had faith in their leaders and in the Lord. They did not take matters into their own hands; if wrongs needed to be corrected, the leaders took appropriate action. They saw persecution as an opportunity to grow and a challenging time to apply the teachings of Christ.

Still, members took time to sustain one another. When the priests left their labors to teach the word of God, the people would come listen to their words. When the priests had completed teaching, all would return to their work (Alma 1:26). Even in times of persecution, members were to continue in their daily labors and their family duties, along with attending meetings and doing the work of the Church.

The priest would not elevate himself, understanding that the teacher was no better than the learner. All were considered equal; all labored according to their strength (Alma 1:26). All imparted of their substance, according to that which they had, to those in need. The people were instructed to be neat and clean in their dress, yet they were not to wear costly apparel in order to appear better than others (Alma 1:27).

Members were basically taught not to react to the persecution, but to focus on being good members of the Church: keeping the commandments, attending to their church duties and continuing to care for the needy. If further action did need to be taken the Church leaders would be responsible to see that it was done, such as Alma dealing with Nehor. Being patient and Christlike in a difficult situation would be an example to others and would open the eyes of some nonmembers who were sincerely seeking after truth.

External Opposition to the Modern Church

Since 1830, the modern Church has faced various types of external persecution, and the counsel to church members has been exactly the same as in the time of Alma. And when members have followed this counsel, they have been individually blessed and the Church itself has grown and prospered.

During the past few years, there has been a widespread effort by groups outside of the Church to criticize the doctrines and ordinances of the Church. One example of this is the film *The Godmakers*, which has been shown in many places around the world. In a letter dated 1 December 1983, the First Presidency carefully taught members of the Church how to respond to

external opposition. Their instructions have a familiar sound and are in harmony with Alma's instructions to his people in similar circumstances.

We are pleased that in recent months there has been a growing interest in the Church on the part of the media. . . . Much of what has been presented has been accurate and favorable to the Church.

However, some of it has been inaccurate and parts of it highly critical of the Church. These include films which pretend to represent the position of the Church on matters of doctrine and belittle the ordinances of the gospel, including the most sacred temple ordinances.

We wish to point out that this opposition may be in itself an opportunity. . . . These criticisms create . . . an interest in the Church. . . . We have evidence to indicate that in areas where opposition has been particularly intense, the growth of the Church has actually been hastened rather than retarded.

The First Presidency continued and recommended the following:

1. Do not "challenge" or "enter into debates" with those who criticize the Church. Meet every situation "without resentment and without malice."

2. Prepare with "prayer" and "humility," be guided by inspiration, and take every opportunity to explain the doctrines and practices of the Church in a "positive" Christian-like manner.

3. In the proper forum, "point out the high standards expected of members of the Church." Stress positive values such as "temperance . . . morality . . . fidelity in marriage [and] . . . worthy citizenship." Discuss the "dedication and faithfulness of members . . . taking care of [members] who are in need, in service to others, in missionary work, in the payment of tithes [and] in keeping their covenants and obligations."

4. "Above all . . . bear testimony of the restoration of the gospel, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the only begotten of the Father. And that 'There is none other name under heaven, given among men whereby we must be saved.'"

5. Even if opposition seems hard, members should "renew . . . faithfulness to the principles of the gospel . . . take

upon [them]selves the armor of righteousness” and the Church will be blessed and prosper (First Presidency letter 1 December 1983).

In summary, members both in Book of Mormon times and today are taught to react positively to persecution, to look at it as a blessing and an opportunity to demonstrate and to teach the doctrine and blessings of the gospel. They are counseled to seek the guidance of the Holy Ghost and to increase in faith and obedience to the commandments of the Lord. The assurance is given that when the members do their part in facing persecution, the kingdom of the Lord will continue to roll forth until it fills the whole earth.

Internal Opposition to the Church

By following the counsel of their leaders and humbly serving one another, the Church in Alma’s day enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity, despite the persecutions the members suffered. Because of the steadiness of the Church, they accumulated flocks, herds, grain, gold, silver, “fine-twined linen,” and “precious things” (Alma 1:29). Though they were prosperous, they were generous to all and did not lust after riches, but took care of the poor and the needy—whether they were members of the Church or not (Alma 1:30). Because of this, “they did prosper and become far more wealthy than those who did not belong to their church. For those who did not belong to their church did indulge themselves in sorceries, and in idolatry or idleness, and in babblings, and in envyings and strife . . . and all manner of wickedness” (Alma 1:31–32). For the people of Alma, it was a time of prosperity and happiness in the midst of a world of wickedness and sorrow (Alma 1:28–33).

As is typical in the Book of Mormon, the members of the Church were not able to keep the commandments of God for long in the face of such prosperity. The paradox lies in their becoming prosperous because of righteousness, industry, hard

work, and generosity, and then permitting that same prosperity to lead them to pride, contentions, and other serious sins. A cycle can be seen:

1. They followed their leaders and kept the commandments of God.

2. Because of their obedience and industry they were blessed with prosperity and many riches (Alma 1:29; 4:6).

3. Some began to be proud because of their riches even to wearing very costly apparel and thinking they were better than others (Alma 4:6).

4. Some began to set their hearts on riches and the vain things of the world (Alma 4:8).

5. Some began to be scornful toward one another (Alma 4:8).

6. Some began to persecute those who did not believe as they believed (Alma 4:8).

7. There began to be envyings, strife, malice, persecutions and great contentions among the members of the Church (Alma 4:9).

8. Many members of the Church became more prideful than those who did not belong to the Church of God (Alma 4:9).

9. Many members of the Church turned their backs and would not help the needy, the naked, the sick, and the afflicted (Alma 4:12).

10. Those members of the Church who remained faithful and who continued to be humble followers of God had to endure greater and greater afflictions and persecution from both members and nonmembers of the Church (Alma 4:15).

Wickedness from within creates many serious problems for the Church. When members are contentious and do not keep the commandments of the Lord, the Holy Ghost withdraws and leaves them without guidance. They do not accomplish the mission of the Church to perfect the saints, nor do they proclaim the gospel; therefore, the Church does not grow and prosper. In Alma's time, the contention and wickedness within the Church was most likely a great stumbling block for nonmembers who

were seeking for truth and would have liked to be baptized. Alma was concerned because he knew that wickedness both in and out of the Church would soon bring destruction to all the people (Alma 4:10–11).

In combatting internal wickedness, Alma the Younger could look to an experience his father had dealing with the same problem. When Alma the Elder was the leader of the Church, many of the younger generation did not believe the traditions of their fathers and would not become members of the Church. This was a serious problem, but the greater problem was that many of the Church members followed the nonmembers in committing many serious sins (Mosiah 26:1–6). To solve the problem, the Lord instructed Alma the Elder in the following points:

1. When there was sin in the Church it was necessary, even required, that the leaders of the Church admonish, instruct or confront the guilty members. Leaders could not just ignore the sin. It was imperative that they do something about the problem (Mosiah 26:6).

2. Alma the Elder had been a priest of king Noah in his young life, and from his own experience learned that repentance works. Repentance cleansed his sin so that he was now worthy of eternal life (Mosiah 26: 15–20). This same repentance was available to each member.

3. Alma the Elder was taught that it was Christ who would perform the Atonement and take upon himself the sins of the world. Christ would freely forgive the sins of any person who was received into the Church by faith, repentance, and proper baptism (Mosiah 26:22–23).

4. Alma the Elder was told that those who sincerely sought forgiveness must confess their sins before Church leaders and before the Lord (Mosiah 26:29).

5. If they expected to be forgiven of their own sins, members must forgive their neighbors' trespasses, especially when their neighbors say they have repented (Mosiah 26:31).

6. Those who would properly repent could be forgiven and could still be numbered among the Church of God (Mosiah 26:35).

7. Those who would not repent were excommunicated from the Church and their names were blotted out (Mosiah 26:36).

Alma the Younger knew that the basic solution to the problem of sin within the Church was for the members to either sincerely repent or to be removed from the Church. In either case, the Church would become clean again. He also knew that bringing people to repentance would require all his time and effort, so he resigned as chief judge to devote himself to the duties of the high priesthood. The only way to stir the people up to repentance was to bear “pure testimony” against them according to the spirit of revelation and prophecy (Alma 4:19–20). Alma spent the rest of his life laboring to bring people to repentance and regulating the affairs of the Church.

Internal Opposition in the Modern Church

In our day the Lord has established his Church. He is desirous that there be no iniquity in the Church and that the members be clean and pure before him. He said this is “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I, the Lord, am well pleased, speaking unto the church collectively and not individually—For I, the Lord cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance” (D&C 1:30–31). On another occasion he said, “Purge ye out the iniquity which is among you; sanctify yourselves before me” (D&C 43:11). He said, “Behold, I, the Lord, have looked upon you, and have seen abominations in the Church that profess my name. But blessed are they who are faithful and endure” (D&C 50:4–5). His command is, “Wherefore, let the Church repent of their sins, and I the Lord, will own them; otherwise they shall be cut off” (D&C 63:63).

Certain officers in the Church have the responsibility to be judges in the Church. They are to see that there is no iniquity in

the church. They are to counsel members and use church discipline when serious transgressions have occurred. Just as in Book of Mormon times, there are still only two ways to cleanse the Church: (1) Members can sincerely repent, or (2) they can be excommunicated. Either way the Church will become clean before the Lord.

Conclusion

Simple principles govern how members should deal with outside and inside opposition to the Church. The principles taught and used in the Book of Mormon still govern what is taught and used in our day. When the Church is being attacked by those outside the Church who would destroy its doctrines and beliefs, members should not retaliate. Members should live good lives, be steadfast and immovable in keeping the commandments, and be patient in their afflictions. They should take opportunities to positively teach the doctrines of the Church. When the Church is attacked internally by sins in the lives of its members, there are two ways to restore the Church to an acceptable and clean condition. The members guilty of sin can sincerely repent and live in harmony with Church standards. If they will not repent on their own, Church leaders are expected to continue to teach with the spirit and encourage them to repent. Members who will not respond and who continue to commit serious sins must be removed from the Church.

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