

Why We Must Act to Preserve the Families of the World

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The prophet Isaiah gave a prophetic warning about watchmen who are “blind” and “ignorant, dumb dogs [that] cannot bark,” “sleeping, lying down [and] loving to slumber” (Isaiah 56:10). The prophet likened them to “shepherds that cannot understand . . . [who] look to their own way, every one for his gain” (v. 11). When this happens, he declared, “the righteous perisheth, and no man layeth it to heart” (Isaiah 57:1).

I am grateful that watchmen on the tower have alerted us to enemies and conditions that threaten to undermine the family—the foundation of societies and nations in every part of the world. Ironically, some of these enemies are working through the UN and using its stature and authority on the world stage to pursue anti-family efforts that must be of concern to us all.

Before this conference is over, I trust there will be ample demonstration of these assertions of alarm, and a clear consensus on the reality that international law has the capacity to directly impact the family. Informed by these facts, we must be sure that we, who should be watchmen on the tower, are not like the blind and slumbering watchmen that the prophet Isaiah condemned.

Basic Principles

A passage from the Old Testament stresses God’s concern for children and the responsibility of parents to teach them:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up (Deuteronomy 6:4–7).

The word *family* is used 296 times in the King James version of the Old Testament. The Old Testament is a record of a succession of families. The Abrahamic covenant, between the Lord and Abraham, was a covenant whose blessings were secured through the government and the family and descendants of Abraham. There is a profound eternal truth in the statement in Genesis, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (2:18). In truth, a family consisting of father, mother, and children, is not a human creation, but a divine institution.

I am indebted to a Brigham Young University publication,

Religions of the World (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1997), by professors Palmer, Keller, Choi, and Toronto. It taught me that most great religions of the world are family-centered in their theology and their thinking. This is obviously true of all the religions that trace their ancestry through Father Abraham. To Christians, Jews, and Muslims, the family is the sacred hearth around which the truths of life and religion are taught and practiced (*Ibid.*, at pp. 174, 180–182, 231–233, 236). The same can be said of other great religions and philosophies of the world, notably Confucianism and Zoroastrianism (*Ibid.*, at pages 102, 105–106, 154–155, 159).

Our Church

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which sponsors Brigham Young University, is known as a family-centered church. Our theology centers on the family. It begins with heavenly parents. Our highest aspiration is to attain this status ourselves. We believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the plan of our Heavenly Father for the benefit of His spirit children. That plan is made possible by the sacrifice of our elder brother, Jesus Christ. As earthly parents, we participate in the gospel plan by providing physical bodies for the spirit children of our heavenly parents. We solemnly affirm that the fullness of eternal salvation is a family affair and that families are central to the Creator’s plan for His children. We may truly say that the gospel plan originated in the council of an eternal family, it is implemented through our earthly families, and it has its destiny in our eternal families. The mission of our church can be expressed in terms of the mission of the family.

In September 1995, the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the two presiding councils of our church, issued “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” solemnly declaring that “marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and that the family is central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children.” In view of the purpose of this gathering and the nature of this keynote, I believe it appropriate to read key paragraphs of this proclamation. Our proclamation declares:

All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.

Our proclamation concludes by calling upon responsible citizens and officers of government everywhere to “promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society.” Any questions about why we wanted to sponsor this conference are surely answered by the content of the proclamation.

Disturbing Trends

The noted British legal historian, Sir Henry Maine, observed that modern society has been characterized by a shift from status, such as kinship, to contract. Maine observed that the unit with which civil laws is concerned is more and more an individual contracting party and less and less the family entity. This shift from kinship to contract has been accompanied by the emergence of individualism as the fundamental principle of Western thought.

A central theme in the emergence of individualism is the weakening of laws and expectations concerned with responsibilities, those institutions that characterize family relations and increase reliance upon rights that characterize individualism (See Dallin H. Oaks, “Rights and Responsibilities,” 36 *Mercer Law Review*, 427–442, 1985).

For example, consider the matter of children’s rights. All of us would affirm that children have rights, and they need to be protected. The problem occurs when the type of protection recognized by the law has the effect of superceding parents or families and substituting the state or some of its authorized workers as the responsible custodian or advocate for children. Children’s rights can become a wedge to split a family. None would deny that they are necessary when the family has already been split by parental abandonment or gross physical abuse. But, even those concepts become dangerous when clever legal definitions allow state representatives to replace parents because those representatives disagree with what parents are teaching their children. (On children’s rights, see generally, Bruce C. Hafen, “Puberty, Privacy, and Protection: The Risk of Children’s ‘Rights’,” *American Bar Association Journal*, Vol. 63, p. 1383, Oct 1977, and sources cited.)

Over fifteen years ago, while I was serving as a justice of the Utah Supreme Court, we had a case challenging a provision under the Utah Children’s Rights Act. This law allowed a judge to take away a parent’s rights to a child if the judge found that termination of parental rights was “in the child’s best interest.” Our court found this Utah law unconstitutional because it went beyond termination for unfitness, abandonment, or substantial neglect, and allowed the state or its agents to substitute their own ideas of a child’s best interest for those of the parents. Our opinion, which I authored for the court, ran in the face of the modern movement toward individualism by declaring:

The integrity of the family and the parents’ inherent right and authority to rear their own children have

been recognized as fundamental axioms of Anglo-American culture, pre-supposed by all our social, political, and legal institutions. [Here we quoted these sentences from three earlier opinions in the courts of other states:] 1) To protect the [individual] in his constitutionally guaranteed right to farm and preserve the family is one of the basic principles for which organized government is established; 2) The family is the basis of our society; 3) The family entity is the core element upon which modern civilization is founded.

We concluded:

This parental right transcends all property and economic rights. It is rooted not in state or federal statutory and chronologically prior, but in nature and human instinct (*In re J.P.*, 648 P. 2d 1364, Utah Supreme Court, 1982).

Threats to the Family

As church leaders we have observed many worldwide trends and conditions that threaten the traditional family and have a disturbing effect upon our church members. I list six of these, not necessarily in order of importance:

1. As a result of increases in divorce and separation, the traditional two-parent family is decreasing as the setting within which most children are raised.
2. Increasing numbers of women are working outside of the home and devoting less attention to their responsibilities as mothers.
3. As more and more people travel great distances and enjoy flexibility as to where they reside, extended families are scattered and the nurturing and disciplinary roles of grandparents, aunts and uncles are felt by a smaller proportion of children.
4. The network of mothers who keep an eye on one another’s children in a tight-knit community is likewise weakening.
5. The competitive demands of a variety of community and school activities weaken family activities and togetherness.
6. Current attempts to redefine the family by treaty or law include everyone who has keys to the same house, threatening to dilute the legal concept of family beyond the point where it merits special protection.

Someone has observed that by strengthening employment rights in the U.S. at the same time that we have adopted liberal divorce laws; we have made it easier for a man to get rid of an unwanted spouse than to get rid of an unwanted employee. That is what happens when contractual rights become more important to society than familial responsibilities.

The popular terms “women’s liberation” and “men’s liberation” suggest other problems. This kind of “liberation”

often purports to free men and women from familial responsibilities. Whatever may happen in the short run, no one can ever achieve true liberation or freedom by deserting or neglecting family responsibilities, which are eternal.

What our Church has Done

As The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has seen alarming threats to the families of the world and to moral standards, we have taken many steps to strengthen families of our members. The curriculum used to teach our members has been restructured and correlated with the home. We have emphasized a weekly family gathering that we call “family home evening.” Our worldwide efforts to gather genealogical information have been renamed “family history” to be more clear about their purpose. We have strengthened our efforts to collect all family records and make them available to everyone. We have issued the “Proclamation on the Family,” quoted earlier. The family and how to strengthen it have become prevailing themes in our meetings, conferences, and councils.

In all of this, we follow the teachings of modern prophets. For example, over half a century ago President Joseph F. Smith declared:

[To] do well those things which God ordained to be the common lot of all mankind, is the truest greatness. To be a successful father or a successful mother is greater than to be a successful general or a successful statesman.” Success in an occupation—even a lofty one—is only temporary, President Smith concluded, whereas success as a parent is “universal and eternal greatness” (*Gospel Doctrine*, p. 285, 5th Ed., 1939).

I pray that God will inspire us as we seek wisdom on how to strengthen the families of the world and bless us as we go forward in this vital work.