

FIXING MEANING, STOPPING GROWTH

By Dorice W. Elliott

In Neal A. Maxwell's speech "Overcome . . . Even As I Also Overcame," given at the spring 1987 General Conference and printed in the May 1987 *Ensign*, he told listeners that "maintaining Church membership on our own terms . . . is not true discipleship." While I know what Elder Maxwell meant—that picking and choosing which commandments to live is not really living the gospel—I have to disagree with the import of what he actually said. All of us, including true disciples—even Elder Maxwell himself—do take the gospel on our own terms. In fact, there is no other way we can take it.

A popular cliché in Mormon culture claims that "the Church is the same no matter where you go." However, while the organizational set-up, the cookie-cutter buildings, the lesson manuals and vocabulary may be the same, just what the Church is and what it means varies not only from place to place but from person to person. All of us filter what we read, hear, learn and experience through our own consciousness and interpret it in light of our own experiences. Even when one makes the "leap of faith" and decides to give up self to do what God and the Church asks, he or she still gives not actually what God asks, but what he or she *perceives* is asked—and I believe God wants it that way. All of us, from the prophet to the only slightly active member, take what we need from the Church and give what we can.

In a sense, we don't even belong to the same church. That is one of the most important reasons that we all need to refrain from judging each other. No matter how clear a talk, an admonition, or a commandment may seem to us, we can never assume that someone else heard the same thing. Some years ago, for example, I taught what I felt was an excellent

Relief Society lesson. I received a lot of praise for it, and really felt that I had gotten my message across. A few months later, a visitor to our Relief Society stood in a testimony meeting to tell us that her sister had written to her about my lesson, and that it had changed her life. I, naturally, sat back in a warm glow, convinced that I was a wonderful—and possibly even inspired—teacher. Then the speaker described the lesson I had given—her version, that is, of her sister's version. It was like the old pass-around game of "Gossip." The lesson she described, as far as I could tell, bore no resemblance to that lesson or any lesson I had ever (or would ever have) given. Upon reflection, however, I came to the conclusion that maybe I still could take some credit for a wonderful lesson. Something about it *had* touched these two women—not something I intended or even realized I was teaching—but something out of all the words I and others said that day, was heard. No matter how closely we adhere to the printed lesson—even if we read it word for word—we cannot control even what people will hear, let alone learn.

When leaders in the Church preach unity, in fact, what they may actually be seeking is control. I have always found Bruce McConkie's definition of "Unity" in *Mormon Doctrine* chilling because of its denial of difference and its lack of trust in God-created souls to think and create for themselves:

Those who attain [unity] will all know the same things; think the same thoughts; exercise the same powers; do the same acts; respond the same way to the same circumstances; beget the same kind of offspring; rejoice in the continuation of the seeds forever; create the same type of worlds; enjoy the same eternal fullness; and glory in the same exaltation (p.814).

But ultimately, the kind of unity Elder McConkie wishes for is only an illusion. Humans, at least as we know them, cannot even

read the same words on a page in the same way. According to Steven Mailloux, a current theorist studying the process of reading, "reading is not the discovery of meaning but the creation of it." (*Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction*, p. 20). To read, to listen, to engage in a conversation, is to participate in the *process* of interpretation, of creating meanings out of the raw materials, or "signs"—words, tone of voice, dress, gestures, and hundreds of other codes which can spark us to create meaning.

Those who want to fix meaning and hold it in stasis arrest the processes of individual growth and progression for which, according to LDS doctrine, we have come to earth. This attempt to fix meanings of spiritual laws was what Christ so damned the Pharisees for. Evidence now suggests that, contrary to the traditional view, most of the Pharisees were pious and devoted religious leaders. According to the annotations in *The Dartmouth Bible*, "These 'teachers in Israel,' usually of humble birth and devoting their lives without pay to study and to imparting their religious ideals and their knowledge, were more highly esteemed by faithful Jews than princes or priests" (p. 851). But in trying to teach his own disciples how to lead rightly and effectively, Christ castigated the Pharisees for hypocrisy—for attempting to define righteousness and judge others according to those definitions. The Pharisees tried to do what many would do today: to fix the meanings of spiritual laws and to eliminate competing or alternative interpretations. Jesus, on the other hand, continually demonstrated that spiritual laws should be administered only by taking into account the context of the individual situation. As he continually reminds us, judgment is only just when it looks on the heart—when it sees through the eyes of the judged—and who among us can escape our own consciousness in order to see out of another's eyes?

We are commanded to be one, but are we also commanded not to be hypocrites, not to judge, not to bear false witness. Unless these are simply contradictory commandments, impossible to live at the same time, then we must look for other messages of the term "unity" than the one which asks for control, for correlation, for fixing and stabilizing meaning, and for interfering with the dynamic processes of experimenting, interpreting, and growing. Arresting growth, however, is virtually impossible, at least with people. Because however "unified," controlled, or even totalitarian a society may be, the people who live in it will never think or see *anything* exactly alike—thank God.

DORICE W. ELLIOTT is a Ph.D. candidate in English literature at Johns Hopkins University with an emphasis in narrative literature.