

Strength to Protect and Defend Religious Freedom through the Enabling Power of the Atonement

Michael D. Fielding¹

Introduction

In recent years, several members of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have spoken about the need to protect and defend religious liberty.² But given our individual challenges and responsibilities coupled with the ever growing anti-religious sentiment in society, we can feel very overwhelmed and incapable of carrying out this prophetic direction. Fortunately, teachings from both the Book of Mormon as well as living day Apostles about weakness, the great and abominable church and the enabling power of the Atonement provide essential guidance about how we can apply Apostolic counsel to “work together to both protect religious freedom and restore morality.” Elder Quentin L. Cook, “Restoring Morality and Religious Freedom,” *Ensign*, September 2012, p. 37.

“Weak like unto their brethren”

The phrase “weak like unto their brethren” appears three times in the Book of Mormon. Mosiah 1:13; Helaman 4:42 and Mormon 2:26. Each use is highly instructive. To begin, in approximately 130 B.C., King Benjamin was preparing his son, Mosiah, to become king of the Nephite people. See *generally* Mosiah 1. As part of his instructions to his son, King Mosiah warned:

¹ Michael D. Fielding is a member of the J. Reuben Clark Law Society’s Religious Freedom Subcommittee of the Service & Outreach Committee.

² See Elder Dallin H. Oaks, “Hope for the Years Ahead,” address given at the Utah Valley University Constitutional Symposium on Religious Freedom on April 16, 2014 (for the full transcript go to: <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/transcript-elder-dallin-oaks-constitutional-symposium-religious-freedom>); Elder Dallin H. Oaks, “Witnesses of God,” *BYU-Idaho Devotional*, Part II.D (February 25, 2014). For the full transcript see www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/witnesses-of-god; Elder L. Tom Perry, “Mormon Apostle Promotes Religious Freedom,” Video at <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/official-statement/religious-freedom> (website last visited January 8, 2014); Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, “Faith, Family, and Religious Freedom,” *Clark Memorandum*, Fall 2013, p. 28 (available at http://www.ircls.org/clark_memo/sections/f13/CMF13_Holland.pdf); Elder Dallin H. Oaks, “Strengthening the Free Exercise of Religion,” Speech given at The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty Canterbury Medal Dinner in New York City, May 16, 2013 (for the full transcript see <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/transcript-strengthening-free-exercise-of-religion-elder-dallin-h-oaks>); Elder Quentin L. Cook, “Restoring Morality and Religious Freedom,” *Ensign*, September 2012 (pp. 32-39); Elder Dallin H. Oaks, “Truth and Tolerance,” *CES Fireside*, September 11, 2011 (for the full transcript see <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/-truth-and-tolerance-elder-dallin-h-oaks>); Elder Dallin H. Oaks, “Preserving Religious Freedom,” speech given at Chapman University School of Law on February 4, 2011. For the full transcript see <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/elder-oaks-religious-freedom-Chapman-University>; Elder Quentin L. Cook, “Let There Be Light!” *Ensign*, November 2010 (pp. 27-31), also available at <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2010/10/let-there-be-light?lang=eng> (hereinafter “Elder Cook, *Ensign*, 2010”); Elder Dallin H. Oaks, Speech on Religious Freedom given at BYU-Idaho on October 13, 2009. For the full transcript see <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/oaks-religious-freedom>.

...I say unto you, that if this highly favored people of the Lord should fall into transgression, and become a wicked and an adulterous people, that the Lord will deliver them up, that thereby *they become weak like unto their brethren*; and he will no more preserve them *by his matchless and marvelous power*, as he has hitherto preserved our fathers. For I say unto you, that if he had not extended his arm in the preservation of our fathers they must have fallen into the hands of the Lamanites, and become victims to their hatred.

Mosiah 1:13-14 (emphasis added). King Benjamin's warning is plain and straightforward. Sin and transgression lead to the Lord delivering up a people such that "they become weak like unto their brethren" and the Lord does not preserve them "by his matchless and marvelous power." King Benjamin had first-hand knowledge of the truth of his warning. During his reign there was a very serious war when the Nephite land was invaded by the Lamanites. Omni 1:24: Words of Mormon 1:12-14. However, the Nephites contended against their enemies "in the strength of the Lord....until they had driven them out of all the lands of their inheritance." Words of Mormon 1:14.

Nearly 100 years later, the Nephite land was again invaded which ultimately left them with only one-half the territory they previously had. See Helaman 4:1-19. They were significantly outnumbered and had great fear that they could be overcome and destroyed. Helaman 1:20. At this point "they saw that they had been a stiffnecked people, and that they had set at naught the commandments of God;...and they saw that their laws had become corrupted, and that they had become a wicked people..." Helaman 4:21-22. Moreover, "because of their iniquity the church had begun to dwindle; and they began to disbelieve in the spirit of prophecy and in the spirit of revelation; and the judgments of God did stare them in the face." Helaman 4:23.

And they saw that *they had become weak, like unto their brethren*, the Lamanites, *and that the Spirit of the Lord did no more preserve them*; yea, it had withdrawn from them because the Spirit of the Lord doth not dwell in unholy temples— Therefore the Lord did cease to preserve them *by his miraculous and matchless power*, for they had fallen into a state of unbelief and awful wickedness; and they saw that the Lamanites were exceedingly more numerous than they, and except they should cleave unto the Lord their God they must unavoidably perish.

Helaman 4:24-25 (emphasis added). In short, the Nephites had "become weak, because of their transgression, in the space of not many years." Helaman 4:26.

Despite a personal appearance by the Lord Jesus Christ after his resurrection followed by a remarkably long period of peace and prosperity, the Nephite people once again began to disobey God's commandments. See *generally* 4 Nephi. By about the year 345 A.D. their condition had digressed such that "they did not come unto Jesus with broken hearts and contrite spirits, but they did curse God, and wish to die." Mormon 2:14. Moreover, "the day of grace was passed with them, both temporally and spiritually." Mormon 2:15. At this time of such terrible spiritual degeneration the Nephites were being "hunted and driven." Mormon 2:20. In this desperate condition the Nephites assembled an army that prevailed in two battles with the Lamanites. Mormon 2:25-26. But despite this temporary victory, the prophet Mormon observed, "[N]evertheless *the strength of the Lord was not with us*; yea, we were left to ourselves, that *the Spirit of the Lord did not abide in us*; therefore *we had become weak like unto our brethren*." Mormon 2:26 (emphasis added). In the end, the Nephite civilization was ultimately destroyed. See *generally* Mormon 6.

As we consider these three accounts, we need to keep in mind President Ezra Taft Benson's declaration that "[t]he Book of Mormon ... was written for our day....It was meant for us." "The Book of Mormon—Keystone of Our Religion," *Ensign*, Nov. 1986, p. 6. An important message of the Book of Mormon is that when a covenant people turn away from keeping God's commandments, the Spirit withdraws from the people, they become weak like unto their brethren, and God ceases to preserve them with His miraculous power.

The Great and Abominable Church

During a February 2014 devotional at BYU-Idaho, Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles provided important and insightful instruction regarding the "great and abominable church" which is referred to in the Book of Mormon. He stated:

Book of Mormon prophecies describe the "great and abominable church of all the earth, whose founder is the devil" (1 Nephi 14:17). This "church" is prophesied to have "dominion over all the earth, among all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people" (1 Nephi 14:11). Called "most abominable above all other churches," this church is also said to act "for the praise of the world" to bring "the saints of God . . . down into captivity" (1 Nephi 13:5, 9). Since no religious denomination — Christian or non-Christian — has ever had "dominion" over all nations of the earth or the potential to bring all the saints of God down into "captivity," this great and abominable church must be something far more pervasive and widespread than a single "church" as we understand that term today. *It must be any philosophy or organization that opposes belief in God. And the "captivity" into which this "church" seeks to bring the saints will not be so much physical confinement as the captivity of false ideas.*

In modern usage and in many scriptural passages the word church usually identifies (1) a house of worship or (2) a particular Christian denomination, including the true church of God. But if we apply either of those meanings to the scriptures describing the "great and abominable church of all the earth" (1 Nephi 14:17), we miss the intended meaning. For example, Nephi was told by revelation that there were only "two churches": "the church of the Lamb of God" and "the church of the devil" (1 Nephi 14:10; also see 1 Nephi 13:4-6). This description suggests the contrast between those who believe in God and seek to serve Him according to their best understanding and those who reject the existence of God (see 1 Nephi 14:10).

Other teachings in the Book of Mormon also use the word church to signify belief or non-belief in God. The final chapters of 2 Nephi prophesy that in the last days the Gentiles will build up "many churches" that will "put down the power and miracles of God, and preach up unto themselves their own wisdom and their own learning, that they may get gain" (2 Nephi 26:20). They tell of "churches which are built up, and not unto the Lord" (2 Nephi 28:3), which will "teach with their learning" and "deny the power of God" (2 Nephi 28:4-5). They will "say unto the people: Harken unto us, and hear ye our precept; for behold there is no God today" (2 Nephi 28:5). In the Savior's ministry among the Nephites, He warned against a church that "be not built upon my gospel, and is built upon the works of men, or upon the works of the devil" (3 Nephi

27:11). *These warnings are not limited to religious organizations. In the circumstances of our day they include a multitude of secular philosophies and activities.*

Lehi and Nephi had a vision of this. Those who partook of the fruit of the tree of life were looked upon with scorn and mocked by those who had entered a nearby “great and spacious building” (see 1 Nephi 8:26-33). This building was the “vain imaginations and the pride of the children of men” (1 Nephi 12:18); its occupants were “the multitude of the earth,” and together they represented “the world and the wisdom thereof” (1 Nephi 11:35). Many people who believe in God experience such scorn and mocking from worldly teachings and from the denial of God in many organizations, including educational institutions and media.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks, “Witnesses of God,” BYU-Idaho Devotional, Part II.D (February 25, 2014).³

Covenants and the Enabling Power of the Atonement

In these trying times when there is increasing sentiment against religion, how do we avoid becoming “weak like unto our brethren” such that we are not taken captive by the great and abominable church? In his vision of the great and abominable church, the prophet Nephi also saw “the church of the Lamb of God...who were the saints of God” and their numbers were small and their dominions were few because of the wickedness of the great and abominable church. 1 Nephi 14:12. This abominable church “did gather together multitudes upon the face of all the earth, among all the nations of the Gentiles, to fight against the Lamb of God.” 1 Nephi 14:13. In the face of this, Nephi records:

And it came to pass that I, Nephi, beheld the power of the Lamb of God, that it descended upon the saints of the church of the Lamb, and upon the covenant people of the Lord, who were scattered upon all the face of the earth; and they were armed with righteousness and with the power of God in great glory.

1 Nephi 14:14.

As followers of the Lord Jesus Christ how can we avail ourselves of God’s power to withstand the great and abominable church? Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles has answered this question.

We need strong Christians who can make important things happen by their faith and who can defend the truth of Jesus Christ against moral relativism and militant atheism. What is the source of such moral and spiritual power, and how do we obtain it? The source is God. Our access to that power is through our covenants with Him.

Elder D. Todd Christofferson, “The Power of Covenants,” *Ensign*, May 2009, p. 20.

Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has further elaborated on the enabling power of the Lord’s atonement that comes to us as we keep our covenants with God. In his April 2014 General Conference address Elder Bednar cited the Book of Mormon account of Alma and his

³ For the full transcript see www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/witnesses-of-god

people who had been put in bondage and were being persecuted. Elder David A. Bednar, “Bear Up Their Burdens with Ease,” *Ensign*, May 2014, p. 88. In the afflictions of this trying circumstance, the Lord said to Alma and his people: “Lift up your heads and be of good comfort, for I know of the covenant which ye have made unto me; and I will covenant with my people and deliver them out of bondage.” Mosiah 24:13. Elder Bednar points out that we should “[n]ote the centrality of covenants to the promise of deliverance.” *Ensign*, May 2014, p. 88. Keeping covenants with integrity coupled with proper priesthood ordinances “are necessary to receive all of the blessings made available through the Atonement of Jesus Christ.” *Id.*

The Lord did not immediately deliver Alma and his people from bondage. Rather, He stated that He would “ease the burdens which are put upon your shoulders, that even you cannot feel them upon your backs.” Mosiah 24:14. The next verse illustrates how this was done: “And now it came to pass that the burdens which were laid upon Alma and his brethren were made light; yea, *the Lord did strengthen them* that they could bear up their burdens with ease, and they did submit cheerfully and with patience to all the will of the Lord.” Mosiah 24:15 (emphasis added). In the end, “[t]hese good people were empowered through the Atonement to *act* as agents (see D&C 58:26–29) and *impact* their circumstances. And ‘in the strength of the Lord’ (Words of Mormon 1:14; Mosiah 9:17; 10:10; Alma 20:4), Alma and his people were directed to safety in the land of Zarahemla.” Elder Bednar, *Ensign*, May 2014, p. 89 (emphasis in original).

Elder Bednar further elaborates:

Not only does the Atonement of Jesus Christ overcome the effects of the Fall of Adam and make possible the remission of our individual sins and transgressions, but His Atonement also enables us to do good and become better in ways that stretch far beyond our mortal capacities....[T]he Lord desires, through His Atonement and by the power of the Holy Ghost, to *enliven* us—not only to guide but also to strengthen and heal us.

Ensign, May 2014, p. 89 (emphasis in original). Indeed, the Lord “can reach out, touch, succor, heal, and strengthen us to be more than we could ever be and help us to do that which we could never do relying only upon our own power. Indeed, His yoke is easy and His burden is light.” *Id.* at p. 90.

Conclusion

Religious freedom is extremely important for many reasons, one of which is that it allows us teach *and* act upon God’s commandments to His children. Of course, there is “opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11) and there are also countervailing forces that seek to distort God’s light and inhibit (or even prohibit) action in accordance with God’s revealed standards. In prophesying of our day, the prophet Nephi warned that, “because of pride, and wickedness, and abominations, and whoredoms, they have all gone astray save it be a few, who are the humble followers of Christ; nevertheless, they are led, that in many instances they do err because they are taught by the precepts of men.” 2 Nephi 28:14; *see also* D&C 33:4 (“there is none which doeth good save it be a few; and they err in many instances because of priestcrafts”). Fortunately, the Lord has provided a way that we may escape the spiritual captivity that comes from these false teachings. As Elder Bednar explains:

As we are yoked with [Jesus Christ] through sacred covenants and receive the enabling power of His Atonement in our lives, we increasingly will seek to understand and live

according to His will. We also will pray for the strength to learn from, change, or accept our circumstances rather than praying relentlessly for God to change our circumstances according to our will. We will become agents who act rather than objects that are acted upon (see 2 Nephi 2:14).

Ensign, May 2014, p. 90. Let us ever remember that by keeping our covenants with God we will experience the enabling power of the Atonement in our own lives whereby God strengthens and empowers us beyond our own ability. This increased capacity will be essential as we “work together to both protect religious freedom and restore morality.” Elder Quentin L. Cook, “Restoring Morality and Religious Freedom,” *Ensign*, September 2012, p. 37.