

*The limits of contention ought to be tight; the limits of difference ought to be wide.*

# LET CONTENTION CEASE: THE LIMITS OF DISSENT IN THE CHURCH

*By J. Bonner Ritchie*

IT IS A COMMON AND USUALLY CONSTRUCTIVE reality that there is tension between an organization and its intellectuals. Regardless of the institution—governments, trade unions, churches—there will always be tension. It is part of the larger world of conflict between intellectuals, who don't have to run the organization, and the people who do, who feel that independent thinking is a nuisance, especially when it doesn't support the established policy and programs. At some time, most members of the LDS church have experienced this tension, either as a dissenting intellectual or as a leader, or both. I will share some personal perspectives and strategies that help make this tension creative and constructive rather than wearisome and destructive.

An example of this dynamic is the current tension at Brigham Young University. BYU is in the process of coming of age as a major university; it is taking dramatic actions that move it in that direction, but also fuel the tension. In the last few years we have clearly started to hire the best people in their academic fields. They come with aspirations, dreams, and styles rooted in their training at Harvard, Stanford, Michigan, and Berkeley, and they want to behave like the people at those schools. When they get to BYU they find that they are part of a very powerful young group. So these young professors bring a front edge that is ahead of the existing faculty, the administration, and the system. As a result of their education, they not only see their academic fields differently, but also their religion and the role of the university. With that edge, they make demands—they have expectations for research money, for graduate students, and for a voice in the larger world of ideas. They receive

encouragement and reinforcement from strong deans and the fact that the first determinant for advancement is published research.

Ironically, at the same time these people are coming in, the university is saying that it is primarily an undergraduate institution and that its resources are primarily going to support its undergraduate students and programs, and that it is not going to increase research or graduate programs. But that's why these young scholars came; many feel betrayed in terms of why they came and where they are now. Understandably, they start looking at the system that makes these decisions. Recently, one new faculty member said to me, "Who's making these decisions anyway? Who do they think they are?" Many of these young people feel that the faculty *are* the university and should determine what the university is about. There are enough new faculty here now to form a critical mass. They see their actions and criticisms as natural, day-to-day expressions at a university, but others see them as major attacks on fundamental assumptions; and so the tension increases.

It is important to realize that the current tension at BYU is not just the result of the Church tightening control, it is not just over academic freedom, it is about the core and the soul and the definition of the university. All these forces come together, and so we have new academic freedom documents, new policies on promotion and undergraduate education, new policies on orthodoxy, and people feel that they have been betrayed; that what they thought they were hired to do is no longer accepted.

At this point in the history of the university there are many people, some of whom are in important positions, who feel that we have reached the point of greatest conflict between the intellectual and the institution. Whether that is true or not is subject to the test of time. But there is no question that the situation is tense, that there are extreme pressures, and that there are issues that are very troubling to a lot of people. The

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fact that employment at BYU requires a demonstration of "loyalty to the principles of the restored gospel" means that there are many individuals who are absorbing a lot of this tension in their roles as faculty members. Recognizing that this tension normally exists at various stages in the organizational maturation process does not make it any easier for those whose daily lives must absorb the conflict. This tense drama is considerably enhanced because many people value predictability, both in terms of work and Church membership, while trying to live principles that are not just of a passing interest, but are of passionate significance—such issues as academic freedom and freedom of conscience.

BYU is only an example of the dynamics of this tension in institutions. This talk applies to all intellectuals and Church leaders. Its title alludes to the recent book, *Let Contention Cease: The Dynamics of Dissent in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, edited by Roger Launius and Pat Spillman.<sup>1</sup> I recently reviewed this provocative and fun book for the *Journal of Mormon History*. While its accounts do not deal with the Utah Latter-day Saint tradition, they do discuss the Nauvoo and Kirtland time periods plus the Reorganized Latter Day Saint tradition. The title came from a revelation to the Church in 1922 recorded by RLDS President Frederick M. Smith. This was a time of great debate over change in the Reorganized Church and the revelation concluded with the command, "Let contention cease" (RLDS D&C 134:7). The book posits an interesting and instructive analysis of RLDS history, which for some time during the first part of this century included a dissenting movement that came from a strong liberal coalition. This dissent was a movement to open up the church, to somehow make more tenable a flexible, theological, and administrative process of church life. Ironically, now the dominant dissent within the RLDS Church is coming from the Right in protest of the church's general acceptance of the liberal issues for which the Left had earlier campaigned. These include ordination of women to the priesthood, changes in administrative procedures, and backing off from traditional orthodox positions. Now the conservative, or orthodox, dissent is outside the mainstream and finds itself in a troubling position, with questions such as: "Where do we stand concerning these new changes? How do we maintain the fundamental Restoration theology? How do we keep true believers in the fold?" I appreciated the book's title and content, and would like to explore the issues of dissent and contention we experience in the LDS church, not so much in our LDS historical tradition as in our current philosophical debates.

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## A PERSONAL FRAMEWORK

I N order to put the issue of individual and organizational dissent in perspective from my vantage point, I would like to explore some complementing dimensions. First of all, I recognize that I am a broken record on one topic, for which I make no apologies. Those in my classes have heard it several times;

those who have read my articles in SUNSTONE and elsewhere have read it several times. Regardless of frequency, it's important to restate. Its importance is not just academic—I really believe it; it drives my decisions and actions. Very simply, the dominant motive in my professional world is to *help people protect themselves from organizational abuse*. I make that statement as a professor in a school of business; I make it from a standpoint of having done a lot of teaching and consulting in a world that is clearly top-down and institutionally biased, rather than one that is bottom-up, with democratic participation. My criterion has always been the same: to help people understand organizations well enough so that when they take a stand, it's done with information and analysis rather than by default; when they oppose or when they support the organization, it's done not with total,

but with at least reasonable insight and understanding; when they protest or deviate, they understand the goal and cost of that protest and deviance, and they have some calculus that allows them to compute what those limits are in terms of their own idiosyncratic criteria of what constitutes a comfortable world.

I should note that my comfortable world involves a fair amount of dissent, a lot of dissonance, and extensive ambiguity. Everybody's does not. I respect and appreciate that; but if there is too much calm, I may well try to create a wave because that's what's exciting and invigorating, but more important, it is the lifeblood of the organization. It is also the force that generates needed change in both the individual and the organization. "If it ain't broke, break it." Creating a wave also provides a laboratory to learn about the organization, and it provokes the creative thinking and analysis necessary for survival.

I spent a good part of the last two or three years in the Middle East doing management research and training, attempting to bring Palestinians and Israelis together to improve management, and in the process trying to understand the cultures, overcome conflict, and build bridges. It was a great experience. Some people asked, "Weren't you afraid?" "Weren't you fearful?" "Weren't the prospects of failure high?" The

answer to all those is, Yes. But it was a marvelous learning experience.

I'll share one facet of that experience. One evening I was returning from Tel Aviv where I had been interviewing some executives from one of the largest organizations in Israel. It was about dusk on a hot, September evening. We'd driven back to Jerusalem, and I had dropped my wife and son off at home and went on to BYU's Jerusalem Center to return the BYU car.

Instead of going around the west side of Hebrew University, which is our normal route, I decided to go around the east side adjacent to the little Arab village of Issawiya—one of the centers of the *intifada* (the Palestinian uprising which began three years ago). The Unified Leadership had a printing press there where they put out their weekly bulletins and have a series of caves where they stash supplies and materials. It's a quaint little village on the Jordanian side of French Hill and Mount Scopus—northeast of the Mount of Olives. As I drove along, a car pulled out in front of me and stopped, blocking the relatively narrow road. I'd only been there a short time so I didn't have my cultural eyes attuned and sensitized. Then some kids appeared over the edge on the left-side of the road, and I realized that I was going to have a really interesting learning

experience. They had stones, but not the kind you read about that David picked up in the brook to throw at Goliath. These were six- to eight-inch diameter boulders that they held over their heads. I was driving a little stick-shift Subaru that I had had trouble getting into reverse all day. I couldn't get around the car that was blocking the road in front of me, so I had to try to get my car into reverse and back up, but it wouldn't go. Finally, I did get it into reverse, backed up, and drove out of the area, but not before windows were broken. One of the "holy stones" came through the driver's side window, burying several pieces of glass in my left arm. By the time I got back home my white shirt and pants were covered with blood. It was a somewhat dramatic ending to an interesting day, and the beginning of an important symbolic learning process. I went into the house, and my wife decided I needed more care than she could provide so we went to Hadassah Hospital, where I did a case study of the hospital organization. The high level of professional expertise would have made me perfectly comfortable with having brain surgery there, but the organization, human interaction, and sensitivity left much to be desired.

That close encounter triggered a kind of inquiry for me in understanding dissent. The story of Ahmed Issawi, the head of the village, was written up by John and Janet Wallach, award-winning journalists, in a book called *Still Small Voices* where

they attempted to capture the human side of both Israeli and Palestinian personalities, including many of those in the news during the recent peace conferences. In reviewing the profile of Issawi, I learned an important lesson from this book and later from personal conversations with these people. If I had gotten out of the car I would not have been hurt. The car probably would have been torched, and that would have been fine by me, but they would not have hurt me. The car was a

symbol—its license plate identified it as oppressor property (as the village chief explained to me: "It deserved to be destroyed").

Beyond the car and the stones was a more important lesson. The Issawi family has a story that illustrates their attachment to the land and the roots of the insult. The story teller says, "My grandfather Mohammed goes to heaven and God asks him if he was a worthy servant. The primary question is: 'What did you do with the land?' He can say, 'I took good care of it. I was a good steward. And I gave it to my family, to my son Ali.' Ali will have the same experience with God. Then I will go to heaven and God will say to me, 'Ahmed, what did you do with the land your father gave you?' 'I cared for it well, I was a good steward, but the oppressors took it away. But I will not be crestfallen, my head will still be raised. But if I said I sold it to

the Jews for a lot of money, I shall be condemned.' Can I say I sat by passively and allowed it to be confiscated? What can I say? You don't understand that our land and property are sacred. You are only an insult because you don't know our values. These symbols of our values are important, and we will fight to defend them and to get them back."<sup>2</sup>

It was a humbling story. I learned to use Palestinian means of transportation and to respect symbols of dissent.

#### INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY & ORGANIZATIONAL DISSENT

THE limits of dissent are, of course, idiosyncratic. There is no abstract rule that defines them. If we were to simplify the logic, the limits would be: you go to that point where the benefits of dissent are outweighed by the benefits of conformity; or when the costs of dissent become so high that you lose the community that you need. This, of course, becomes more complicated as more important principles are involved. For some of us that boundary is a long way out; for others it is fairly close. Regardless, each of us has the responsibility as a member of the LDS church, or any organization, to clearly define their theory of dissent, their theory of comfort, their theory of freedom, their theory of leadership, their theory of organiza-

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tion, their theory of relationships and community. In the absence of doing that, individuals drift, act impulsively, impute motives to others, and take stands on the basis of second-hand criteria or rumors. Only when *individuals* decide, only when they accept responsibility for who they are and how they fit in the organization and what they want out of the organization are they in a position to say, "This is where I stand and why"—to decide our limits of dissent.

For many, dissent may be too strong a word; for me, freedom is a better word. The kind of freedom that John Taylor talked about in his underground presidency during the polygamy persecutions. In one of his letters President Taylor wrote, "I was not born a slave. I cannot, will not be a slave" to governments, to other people, to any person or institution. Then, finally that telling line, "I would not be [a] slave to God!"<sup>3</sup> For John Taylor, freedom was not a passing principle, it was a compelling passion that he had to honor. That freedom, even if it meant that the United States government disagreed with him, or caused him discomfort, was worth the price. Thomas Jefferson wrote these words that are now inscribed in his memorial: "I have sworn upon the altar of Almighty God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." That is a profound statement of freedom; not a convenient rationalization for a form of government, but a passion for translating personal issues into organizational action.

#### THE GOSPEL AND RELATIONSHIPS

**A**NOTHER framing consideration. Among the many purposes that one could define for the use of the gospel, the one I would suggest is that the gospel is a set of values for defining the quality of relationships in an array of organizations—male/female, individual and neighbor, Church member and non-member, individual and community, individual and state, individual and employer, individual and church, and individual and God. Frankly, I can't think of any higher purpose of scripture than to define the purpose of each of those relationships and what is required to obtain a quality dimension in them. The ultimate theological relationship, of course, is between the individual and God, and any ordinance or procedural system that we follow in our ecclesiastical world is predicated toward that. And so, in our quest to develop quality relationships, we should ask where we fit in a particular organization. The definition of quality relationships is fundamental in defining the limits of dissent.

#### PROTECTING YOURSELF FROM ORGANIZATIONAL ABUSE

**N**OW, as I stated, my goal is to help people protect themselves against organizational abuse. In an absolute sense, no one can ever protect you against abuse—only you can protect yourself. Organizations can never be made safe for people; we can only try to make people safe for organizations.

**W**e all need enough of a community that we have a place to go where people do love and understand us. But don't demand universal agreement or support for all of your idiosyncratic positions.

We must prepare people to try to make organizations noble instruments rather than victimizing machines. But we can never have an organization that is pure enough that it will not abuse. The warning in the Doctrine and Covenants that almost everyone will exercise unrighteous dominion was not given to teamster officials, nor was it given to Watergate conspirators; it was given to priesthood leaders (D&C 121:39). I have observed that usually the unrighteous dominion is not intended. Usually it is done with good will and with an intent to help people and to look out for their best interests. Nevertheless, unrighteous dominion is exercised in every organizational setting. The scripture doesn't say every person will exercise unrighteous dominion, it says *almost* all. And when you get in an organization with a large number of people, "almost all" will certainly include at

least one of them. And so in every organization you have that immoral reality.

As stated above, you can never make the system safe or risk-free. If it could be made safe, it would be so sterile that it would be of no value to anyone. If any system is going to be useful it must have free choice, risks, and may even be dangerous and threatening. You need to teach people to protect themselves against that—not by circling the wagons, not with a siege mentality, but with an inner security that is not threatened by those who think differently, a security that comes from understanding the world and organizations well enough to realize what's going to happen and to be able to transcend the situation.

All organizations have dynamic tension. Those in leadership roles tend to take stands that move the organization toward a conservative position; yet, interestingly, dynamic organizations are those that also move in the direction of change. And, of course, the exciting dilemma is that we must do both at the same time. So there are going to be strong differences and currents that people must navigate. There will be conflicting institutional pronouncements when these two forces converge in the organizational dynamic, and some will feel threatened by the diversity or by the changes going on in the world and try to say something to console those on the

conservative side. (This is the issue that the Reorganized Church is struggling with right now.) Others will try to interpret the situation in terms of the need to change, or to provoke the change. There will always be that tension. What is important is the way we manage the tension, the dissonance, and the organizational process. It will never be safe; it will never be totally comfortable; but nothing worthwhile is. The question is whether our different perspectives become causes for destructive contention or forces for positive change.

Within Mormonism, I think there is enough good will from enough people to be patient, tolerant, loving, and understanding as we work through our issues. But liberals, for example, should not expect top-down support for a pro-change position in an organization that tends toward conservatism. We must expect the tension and the frustration. I have often said, if you want to behave like an independent deviant and still have the rewards of a conforming conservative, you're in organizational trouble. You can't have it both ways. You must accept that tension is going to exist, and you must learn to maintain a tenuous balance. It is never really comfortable.

#### INDIVIDUAL COMMITMENT TO PRINCIPLES

**I**N the process of thinking through the limits of dissent, I referenced Arab culture. Now let me reference Jewish culture. In Elie Wiesel's forward to *The Testament*, he re-tells a powerful allegory:

One of the just men came to Sodom, determined to save its inhabitants from sin and punishment. Night and day he walked the streets and markets, protesting against greed, theft, falsehood, and indifference. In the beginning people listened and smiled ironically, then they stopped listening, he no longer amused them. The killers went on killing and the wise kept silent as if there were no just men in their midst. One day a child moved by compassion for the unfortunate teacher approached him with these words, "Poor stranger, you shout, you scream, don't you see it as hopeless?" "Yes, I see," said the just man. "Then why do you go on?" "I will tell you why. In the beginning, I thought I could change man. Today, I know I cannot. If I still shout today, if I still scream, it is to prevent man from ultimately changing me."<sup>4</sup>

I like the metaphor in that allegory, especially the reference

system of individual responsibility. I have no illusions of making the world safe, but I have a passion against the world co-opting me. I have no illusions of making the LDS church safe for liberals—that's a contradiction in terms—but I am committed that I will not be co-opted in terms of what I believe out of fear or threat or especially by default. Of course I may change what I believe, I may modify my position on a particular issue, but my commitment to principles must be clear.

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#### CAUTIONS TO CHURCH LEADERS

**A**N interesting and useful insight regarding that logic is in Elder Boyd K. Packer's very telling address, "Let Them Govern Themselves." The title, of course, builds on Joseph Smith's answer to a question regarding Church governance: "I teach the people correct principles and they govern themselves."<sup>5</sup> It also builds on President Harold B. Lee's statement with respect to Doctrine and Covenants 107:99: "Let every man learn his duty, and to act in the office in which he is appointed, in all diligence."<sup>6</sup> President Lee said he had read that passage many times and each time he had read it he had heard

it as an order, as a command, to learn and perform your duty. Then he read it again, and he heard the word *let* as *allow* each to learn their duty, *allow* each to interpret their duty, *allow* each to receive the personal revelation to define and implement their duty. With that interpretation in mind, let me quote some things from Elder Packer's address that apply to our discussion:

In recent years we might be compared to a team of doctors issuing prescriptions to cure or to immunize our members against spiritual diseases. Each time some moral or spiritual ailment was diagnosed, we have rushed to the pharmacy to concoct another remedy, encapsulate it as a program and send it out with pages of directions for use.

While we all seem to agree that over-medication, over-programming, is a critically serious problem, we have failed to reduce the treatments. . . .

We now have ourselves in a corner. . . . It is time now for you who head the auxiliaries and the departments and those of us who advise them, after all the repetitive cautions from the First Presidency, to change our mind-set and realize that a reduction of and a secession from that constant programming must be accomplished.

The hardest ailment to treat is a virtue carried to the extreme. . . . In recent years I have felt, and I think I am not alone, that we were losing the ability to

correct the course of the Church.

I might add that I'm glad it was Elder Packer who said that. Elder Packer went on to say:

Both Alma and Helaman told of the Church in their day. They warned about fast growth, the desire to be accepted by the world, to be popular, and particularly they warned about prosperity. Each time those conditions existed in combination, the Church drifted off course. All of those conditions are present in the Church today. . . . [T]he patience of the Lord with all of us who are in leadership position, is not without limits.

The most dangerous side effect of all we have prescribed in the way of programming and instruction and all, is the overregimentation of the Church. . . . "Teach them correct principles," the prophet said, "and then let," *let*—, a big word, "them govern themselves." . . . Can you see that when we overemphasize programs at the expense of principles, we are in danger of losing the inspiration, the resourcefulness, that which should characterize Latter-day Saints. Then the very principle of individual revelation is in jeopardy and we drift from a fundamental gospel principle! [People must] *act for themselves and not . . . be acted upon*. . . . (2 Nephi 2:25,26.)

[I]s it possible that we are doing the very thing spiritually that we have been resolutely resisting temporally; fostering dependence rather than independence, extravagance rather than thrift, indulgence rather than self-reliance? . . . "We have done it all with the best intentions."

If we teach them correct principles rather than overburden them with too many instructions . . . they can be both free and spiritually safe in any nation, among any people, in any age. If we indulge them too much, or make them too dependent, we weaken them morally, then they will be compelled by nature itself to find the wrong way. . . .

There is no agency without choice; there is no choice without freedom; there is no freedom without risk; nor true freedom without responsibility. . . .

There are some things which cannot be counted and should not be programmed. Matters with deepest doctrinal significance must be left to married couples and to parents to decide for themselves. We have referred them to gospel principles and left them to exercise their moral agency.<sup>6</sup>

Those are good lines. They are powerful lines. I recommend the talk to you in terms of a larger set of principles, and I encourage its application in a larger array of situations than the one in which it was originally given.

#### TRANSCENDING CONTENTION

**A**S you look at the larger world, consider the scriptures that talk about dissension and contention, especially in the

Book of Mormon:

And he commanded them 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. And thus he commanded them to preach. And thus they became the children of God. And he commanded them that they should observe the sabbath day, and keep it holy, and also every day they should give thanks to the Lord their God. . . . that the priests whom he had ordained should labor with their own hands for their support. And there was one day in every week that was set apart that they should gather themselves together to teach the people, and to worship the Lord their God. (Mosiah 18:21-25.)

I define contention as anything that undercuts the capacity of people to work together and to love. Contention never implies differences in interpretation. It never implies an enthusiastic debate over how you apply concepts. It implies a destructiveness in terms of the basic purpose for coming together, which is to love, to serve, to build, to grow, to develop, to learn, to explore, to take risks, to make mistakes, and to translate all these into eternal learning experiences.

In the Doctrine and Covenants there is a qualifying comment in terms of this process: "I . . . establish my gospel, that there may not be *so much* contention" (D&C 10:63). We clearly don't want destructive contention, and we don't want unnecessary contention; but also we don't want artificial harmony or a facade of homogeneity—there always will be and should be a diversity of personality, gifts, perspective, and behavior.

My recent BYU devotional speech, *Taking Sweet Counsel*,<sup>7</sup> takes its title from David's encounter with God where he struggles with his attempt to escape the consequences of his behavior and to hide from God. He finally wrote with respect to God, "a man mine equal"—an interesting term—"we took sweet counsel together, and walked unto the house of God in company" (Psalm 55:14). I suggest that sweet counsel—spelled both counsel and council—is a condition of non-destructive, non-contentious differences. In an autocracy, power rests with the sovereign; in a democracy, power rests with people; in a council, power rests with truth. Therefore, the quest is to discover truth, which, in Joseph Smith's conceptualization, implies that "by proving contraries, truth is made manifest."<sup>8</sup> This means debate and discussion and exploration with a noble purpose in a sweet council that does not condemn those who disagree, does not demean those who are different, be they on the Right or the Left, that has understanding of a dynamic system that engenders patience even with those on the opposite end of the continuum. I ask for that indulgence from conservatives as they judge my position, and they should expect the same from me. Sweet council implies a process of trust, faith, search, and debate; but not of condemnation, intimidation, rejection, and contention.

The limits of contention ought to be tight; the limits of difference ought to be wide. Because contention destroys the

capacity of the organization to become a vehicle for the exploration of truth, we have to find the sweet council that allows us to live together even with the diversity and differences—not *even with*, but *especially celebrating* their interpretations—and the variation of revelation given to individuals for what they should do. To honor that diversity necessitates an organization with a council as its criterion, rather than a bureaucracy or an autocracy or even a democracy. Votes don't reveal truth. While they are useful in civil government, there is a higher truth that can only be found in the righteous operation of a council—in giving and receiving sweet counsel at all levels of the organization.

WE must acknowledge that within organizations are the seeds of self-destruction. The normal state of an organization is to die. It is a miracle when they survive more than five years, and most don't. But some do, and those that do are worth looking at because they survive for a reason. And we ought to look at the LDS church carefully as an organization that has survived and flourished for some time—not as long as the Catholic Church, although some would debate at what point an organization becomes a different organization (you can debate that same issue about the changing Reorganized Church).

When Brigham Young made a decision that Bishop Edwin Woolley didn't like, Brigham said to the bishop, "Well, I suppose you are going off and apostatize." Bishop Woolley replied, "No I won't. . . . If this were your church I might, but its just as much mine as it is yours."<sup>9</sup> I see that as a good example of engaged and spirited differences—not even allowing Brother Brigham to make an interpretation of a policy a contentious point of debate. It's a commitment to relationship, to exploration, to staying, and to not demanding that everyone love you, agree with you, or appreciate you as a condition of your continued involvement.

Nevertheless, in order to continue one's involvement in an organization, somebody needs to love and appreciate you. We all need enough of a community that we have a place to go where people do love and understand us. I've often said that the ultimate definition of loneliness is not physical isolation, it's enduring the presence of those who don't understand you. And when you have a religious community that doesn't understand you—not that it doesn't agree with you—it can be lonely. But don't demand universal agreement or support for all of your idiosyncratic positions. We ought to be part of creating a world where the individual's diversity is respected and appreciated, even if it is not the agreed-upon position of everyone in the organization.

I feel that the Mormon intellectual community is at a

turning point within the institutional Church. There are severe tensions. Many of the tensions do not turn on symposia like Sunstone's. Most focus on different issues. But in all cases, the contentious motives of destruction, viciousness, or embarrassment are inappropriate. There are reciprocal burdens of membership. And if we do claim a faith and a commitment, then we ought not be derisive in terms of our style or content.

A good example of this is the letter written by BYU professors Eugene England and Edward Kimball in response to a *BYU Daily Universe* editorial about Sunstone and the statement issued by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve regarding unauthorized symposia. The Brethren's statement, the editorial, and their letter are reprinted in the previous SUNSTONE.<sup>10</sup> That diplomatic letter made a big difference in the minds of many people I talked to. Those of you who think that writing letters doesn't matter do not realize how important that letter was in helping put the issue in perspective. Implicit in the letter was the authors' faith and commitment along with a critical analysis and logical argument.

Individuals need to ask themselves, What are we really claiming to say or do? For example, if we were advocating an alternative voice with respect to the basic concept of running the Church, that would be quite different from a community exploring different ways of translating gospel principles into practice. How we act on these principles influences the organization's response. We all need to be clear about our motives and desires.

#### STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH CONFLICT

LET me offer a bit of advice. When you feel that you have reached your limits, I suggest the following strategy that I have found useful when people disagree with me, or when I disagree with them. Rather than arguing the point, or rather than trying to convince them of my way of thinking, which I have done enough to realize both its costs and limitations, just say, "Do you realize how difficult you have made it for me? Do you realize the bind you put me in?" When somebody tells you to do something you don't like, you can argue, you can subvert, you can beat the system, you can do all kinds of things, but you can also tell the person, "Do you realize how sad I feel when you reject my position?" My experience is that even reactionary zealots often back down after that comment. You don't say, "Do you know how wrong you are?" or, "Do you know how stupid you are?" or, "Do you know how impossible you are?" But you do say, "Can we understand each other?"

Consider an example. I know a woman who went jogging in shorts and was told by her bishop that she was violating her

There are reciprocal burdens of membership. If we do claim a faith and a commitment, then we ought not be derisive in terms of our style or content.



temple covenants. She argued and won by every point of logic, but her bishop still would not give her a temple recommend because she removed her garments to go jogging. Only when it was pointed out that university and Church leaders and many other people go jogging in shorts, and only when she said, without accusation, “Do you realize how difficult you make it for me?” did things start to change.

When you push people into a corner they may fight back. When you give them a reason for your position, acknowledging their difference of interpretation, you have an arena of negotiation, exploration, and reconciliation. In effect you are saying: “Not that you have to agree with me, not that you are wrong, but rather you and I are different and you have made it very hard for me, given my values and your values. Can we explore how to translate that into action? What can we do in that process?”

My point is that we need to learn to create a strategic rather than a defensive position, an exploring rather than an argumentative environment. Use the metaphor of council where the objective is discussion and collaboration instead of a metaphor of fighting where the objective is to destroy, or a metaphor of a game where the objective is to win, or a metaphor of debate where the objective is to convince the other person that you are right. The metaphor of council and love is an exploration of what is in the best interest of both people without having to agree, without having to keep score, without having to define who is on which side of an issue as the ultimate test of virtue or legitimacy.

I would hope we could create a world of diversity, modeled beautifully by the current general presidency of the Relief Society. In their sesquicentennial conference, we observed a tribute to diversity—worshipping together with people who talk, look, and behave differently, who may play bongo drums in church instead of organs. By their openness and their commitment to the worldwide sisterhood of love and support, rather than judgment and control, the Relief Society has done a beautiful job; they have left people who want to make changes and who want to do creative things without excuse to be involved in the process. It’s a metaphor of love and council rather than of fights, games, and debates. I commend that process to you.

## CONCLUSION

**I**N closing, I am grateful for the opportunity to be part of the saving mission of the Church, the excitement of teaching at BYU during a period of redefinition, the intellectual inquiry of Sunstone, and to be part of a world that is changing so dramatically. It is both exhilarating and scary. It is worth noting that in the Middle East, the former Soviet republics, and Sarajevo, we see tragic demonstrations of the cost of suppressing diversity. It’s sad to think that the price of stability was the suppression of diversity. We must learn to rise above that tragedy in every context. One of my favorite teaching devices is an upside-down map of the Americas with South America at the top (even the use of *upside-down* is loaded—who said

north should be at the top?). It’s a nice metaphor for seeing things from a different perspective. Your ability to be a constructive member of an organization depends upon your ability to draw the map upside down and not call it upside down, but to see it as a natural viewpoint. If we insist on one viewpoint, we’ve said something very troublesome to others in the way we draw maps, in the way we draw organizations, in the way we draw symbols, the way we use metaphors, and in the way we invoke our own favorite theories.

As individuals, then, may we clearly identify, based on our limits of dissent, principles that deserve our deepest commitment. May we assume responsibility for acting within an organization that may not always be benevolent. And may we engage in sustaining quality relationships, both with our needed supportive group of like-minded friends and with those Saints who see things differently than we do and with whom our conversations must be non-contentious disagreements rooted in a love that respects their symbols and positions and in a desire to serve and explore.

And when in the roles as leaders, may we manage the inherent tension by acknowledging and celebrating the different perspectives of members of the community. And may we facilitate their reconciliation in sweet council that prizes loving relationships and sustains individual dignity, that doesn’t pronounce judgments on perspectives, and that creatively seeks for commonalities that transcend differences and makes a place for all.

I hope, I pray, that all of us might find within us the ability to tolerate dissonance, the ability to love those who are different than we are, and the ability to engage in a council that will push the limits of differences—not the limits of contention—as far as they need to go to love and support all of God’s children. ☒

## NOTES

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