

## LAMENTATIONS IN THE FALL

By Elbert Eugene Peck

“WE’LL FIND THE place which God for us prepared. . . ,” we sang that black, cold morning gathered in Cottonwood Stake Center’s parking lot, keeping vigil while inside Paul Toscano defended his faith, theology, and public statements to fifteen of his brethren. Later in the day Paul recounted his give-and-take with the disciplinary council. He was impressed with the conscientiousness of these good men trying to truly understand him and fairly evaluate his thoughts.

Many accused authorities, local and general, of being unloving, illustrating the growing polarization and position-hardening, seeing the other as evil, or at least benighted, while self-righteously defending themselves. “Why don’t they love instead of coerce?” some asked. Yet the simplistic “These are good men doing wrong things” didn’t fit either.

The morning broke with a blast of cold; then in concert with the sun’s growing warmth we discarded the layers accumulated to survive the blackness—blankets, coats, sweaters, candles. Dave Knowlton marvelled at the beauty of the sunrise, and I thought of Matthew 5: the Father makes the sun rise on the evil and good and sends his life-giving desert rain on the just and unjust. How those verses follow the commands to go the extra mile, to willingly grant the plaintive the extra coat, to give when asked, to resist not evil, to love enemies, and to bless cursing critics. All examples of God democratic acts. He doesn’t corner us so we must bend or break; he overcomes our evil with a surplus of good. Then comes the summing command: “Be ye therefore perfect as your father is.” That *therefore* links the verse to the preceding examples and defines the perfection we must seek—an overflowing fountain of goodness.

I surveyed my pained friends, some becoming distant from the Church or from God. What would have happened had the Brethren chosen to overcome with bounteous good works what they see as evil, use love, instead of force? How many “intellectuals” who, because of integrity could not compromise their conscience, would have responded enthusiastically to calls to serve in creative or humanitarian projects? Picky theological points become irrelevant as people transmit God’s

light. They and the Church would have been transformed by good works. Liberals are difficult to force but easy to co-opt.

We have a strange notion of purity that requires intellectuals to purge their obsessions, or at least be silent, *before* serving. We do the opposite with other sins: greed, pride, even hate. It’s superficial purity that ostracizes the smelly smoker from the pews but lets a coveting heart preside on the stand. Don’t banish the coveter; make place for the smoker. Embrace all with God’s warmth.

Coincidentally, that afternoon I taught Sunday School on Doctrine and Covenants 121, the most-quoted section at the vigils and this fall’s general conference. No power ought to be maintained by priesthood position but only by persuasion, love, and knowledge—engaged dialogue and relationship. Like the world, our contemporary definition of priesthood is institutional power and prerogative keyed to position. But section 121 clearly states that priesthood is fundamentally knowledge, not power, and is primarily accessed by love, not ordination or position. We often start reading with verse 34, “many are called but few are chosen. . . ,” but verse 33 states God’s purpose (to what we are called): to pour “down knowledge from heaven upon the heads of the Latter-day Saints.” Then verse 45 concludes that virtue and love to *all* allows the “doctrine of the priesthood to distill upon thy soul.” The famous passage in between merely describes what prevents obtaining true knowledge—unrighteous dominion; institutional power games.

Yes, there are duties to teach, lead, shepherd, *and* rebuke—all with the same increased love our Father shows. Mormon institutional love means engaged, never-ending relationship. What else is persuasion, gentleness, long-suffering, bearing and enduring, not being easily provoked *but* relationship? Church discipline requires relationship. A leader can’t discipline and claim love is unfeigned unless there is a meaningful history of dialogue intended to understand as well as persuade. Administrative love means “being with” the person, not a distant love that can’t know the individual and her thoughts and feelings, but only her offending words and

actions. Only after such sustained conversation can the rebuked know that the leader’s faithfulness is stronger than the cords of death (or excommunication). If one hasn’t paid the price of relationship, he hasn’t acquired the right to rebuke; priesthood office doesn’t give it. Brochter Oaks is correct that local leaders who know the individual must be unhindered in determining discipline.

How far from that vision of relationship-based, knowledge-obtaining priesthood were September’s events? Women and men rebuked for disagreeing with leaders—what kind of engaged, dialoguing relationship is that? Both sides wielding scripture; both quoting Joseph Smith, who maddeningly exhibited both prerogative-laden, obsessive dominion and kind, meek, long-suffering, relationship-based influence. Both sides digging deeper, fortifying self-righteous positions. Fortunately God loves unconditionally, sending his warming rays on the parking-lot vigillantes and the disciplinary high council.

The essential temple covenant of the Doctrine and Covenants is consecration. It will take us generations to collectively live that principle, but it’s a quest we can never long abandon because it’s hauntingly embedded in that foundation text. Similarly, section 121 is a prophetic call that will take time to realize.

At present we are in a perplexing conflict. How to bring good out of it to help achieve that vision? Sadly, in our fallen state most human change comes through confrontation. Our souls are so set that critiques inevitably bring tension before they bring change. Think of the Civil Rights Movement: the U.S. would not have acted to overcome racism otherwise. But the outcomes of conflict are not automatically good—separation, schism, hard hearts, cold and hot wars are more likely. Good outcomes require work. The way to bring good is to persevere in a loving, respectful engagement that can turn into dialogue and relationship. In saying “I’m not leaving, address me,” our community can grow in love and knowledge. If we work through such differences in love and relationship, the Church will eventually fulfill Christ’s mustard seed parable, becoming a community with branches so strong that even iconoclastic, great-souled eagles may comfortably dwell.

Mormonism is unfolding. Let’s use its unfulfilled prophetic calls as a gift of God to help us all see, stretch, and grow in God’s light as we discard our unneeded self-protective layers. Instead of using our teachings as a club to beat each other with, we can use them to drive away our useless cares and make the church a place where none shall hurt or make afraid. “There the Saints shall be blessed.” ☪