

Children of God

PRESIDENT BOYD K. PACKER

Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

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For further information write:

Conferences & Workshops
352 Harman Continuing Education Building
Provo, Utah 84602
(801) 422-3559

E-mail: conferences@byu.edu

Home page: <http://womensconference.byu.edu>

Beloved sisters, the very sight of you and the influence you have is overpowering.

The Twelve Apostles are called to “set in order” (D&C 107:58) and “regulate all the affairs of the [Church] in all nations” (D&C 107:33) under the direction of the First Presidency. That is not always easy to do.

I feel much as King Benjamin must have felt when he saw dangers among the people and said, “[I came not] to trifle with . . . words” (Mosiah 2:9). It can be very uncomfortable when we see thickening clouds and feel responsible to protect our families.

Nephi said, “I must speak concerning the doctrine of Christ; wherefore, I shall speak unto you plainly, . . . for my soul delighteth in plainness” (2 Nephi 31:2–3).

And Jacob said, “Wherefore I, Jacob, gave unto them these words as I taught them in the temple, having first obtained mine errand from the Lord” (Jacob 1:17). I too made that same preparation, as best I could, and obtained my direction from the same source.

Jacob and Joseph “had been consecrated priests and teachers of [the] people” (Jacob 1:18; see also 2 Nephi 5:26). They expressed concern for “the hearts of [the] tender wives” (Jacob 2:35) and for the children.

Whenever we speak of home and family and motherhood, we fear we might wound the tender hearts of those who may never marry or those whose marriages have failed. There are those who are greatly disappointed with their children. There are heartbreaking gender problems, untimely deaths, abortion, abuse, pornography, and, in addition, an endless list of things which almost dissuade us from speaking with the plainness that the scripture commands us to do.

I return, as I have on countless occasions, to the inspired words of a Relief Society president. I will ever be grateful to Sister Alberta Baker. A convert of the Church, she was mission Relief Society president when I was mission president in New England. She was a very small woman and walked with a very pronounced limp from childhood polio.

We had sixty Relief Societies scattered across the mission. Some of them were off-course and some of them were little more than sewing circles and a few had lost their way entirely. Sister Belle Spafford, president of the general Relief Society, provided some simple guidelines that could be followed.

We called the Relief Society leaders together in the chapel at the Joseph Smith Birthplace Memorial in Vermont. I asked Sister Baker to explain the changes we were asking them to make. She gently invited the sisters to conform more closely to the patterns set for the Relief Society.

One sister stood and said defiantly, “That doesn’t fit us. We’re an exception!” She repeated with more emphasis, “We are an exception!”

It was a very tense moment, something of a crisis. Sister Baker turned to me for help. I was not interested in facing a fierce woman, so I motioned for her to proceed. Then came the revelation!

With gentle firmness, she said: “Dear sister, we’d like not to take care of the exception first. We will take care of the rule first, and then we will see to the exception.” She continued to explain what a Relief Society should be.

Later I told her I would be quoting her all over the world. And so I have. In many challenging moments, some very tense, I have quoted the revelation that came to that sweet, little Relief Society president.

Today I will speak of the rules first and later consider the exceptions.

I see in the tender hearts of women transcendent power. Listen to these words written by William Ross Wallace more than 125 years ago. They speak of you, and I agree with what they say:

Blessings on the hand of women!
Angels guard its strength and grace,
In the palace, cottage, hovel,
Oh, no matter where the place;

Would that never storms assailed it,
Rainbows ever gently curled;
For the hand that rocks the cradle
Is the hand that rules the world.

Infancy's the tender fountain,
Power may with beauty flow,
Mother's first to guide the streamlets,
From the souls unresting grow—
Grow on for the good or evil,
Sunshine streamed or evil hurled;
For the hand that rocks the cradle
Is the hand that rules the world.

Woman, how divine your mission
Here upon our natal sod!
Keep, oh, keep the young heart open
Always to the breath of God!
All true trophies of the ages
Are from mother-love imperaled;
For the hand that rocks the cradle
Is the hand that rules the world.

Blessings on the hand of women!
Fathers, sons, and daughters cry,
And the sacred song is mingled
With the worship in the sky—
Mingles where no tempest darkens,
Rainbows evermore are hurled;
For the hand that rocks the cradle
Is the hand that rules the world.¹

That is far more than just a poetic compliment. Later I will speak of an uncertain future in which mothers will be our protection.

President J. Reuben Clark Jr. described a pioneer family. Always last into camp at night, the wife was about to be a mother, the husband taking such care as he could to ease the jolting of the wagon. Then the baby came:

“Morning came when from out that last wagon floated the la-la of the newborn babe, and mother love made a shrine, and Father bowed in reverence before it. But the train must move on. So out into the dust and dirt the last wagon moved again, swaying and jolting, while Mother eased as best she could each pain-giving jolt so no harm might be done her, that she might be strong to feed the little one, bone of

her bone, flesh of her flesh. Who will dare to say that angels did not cluster round and guard her and ease her rude bed, for she had given another choice spirit its mortal body that it might work out its God-given destiny?"²

The rules and principles are in the scriptures. The revelations make it very clear that mankind is the offspring of Heavenly Parents. We have in God our Father and a Heavenly Mother the pattern of our parentage.

After being away four years, I came home from World War II and wanted, even yearned, to be married. In the years during the war, I became mature enough to realize that rather than making a list of specifications by which to measure a future companion, I should concentrate on what I myself must do. How could I be worthy of and able to fulfill the dreams of one with enduring values centered in home and family who would want to be my companion?

After more than fifty years, I am still trying to be worthy of her and good to her.

We were in school and had little material things to offer one another. We had our love and our faith and a determination to live the principles of the gospel—all of them, the difficult ones as well as the easy ones. We planned our life together and determined that we would accept each child born to us.

I remember clearly this incident: We had three small children. I had a very modest income. The bishop's wife, who was close to Donna's family (Donna's father was a counselor to the bishop), came to see her mother and said, "I've cried all morning. I heard that Donna is expecting again." We would not trade the child that came (it was our first girl) or the six that followed after, for anything you can imagine.

Once we said: "Perhaps if we plant a tree each time a child is born and pass that tradition to the coming generations, we may live in a small forest."

Now fifty-eight years later, it has come to pass in our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, who now number one short of 100. We live in a house that the real estate agents describe as old, sheltered under the trees at the end of a lane that reminds you of a forest.

I pay tribute to my wife. Now, I am bound to tell the truth. (I am on Church property!) I have without hesitation described her as being perfect. And so she is! She has borne each of our ten children; each is a child of God. And now they and their partners to whom they are sealed, and the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren that have come, all honor her.

We got by during difficult years because my wife, in matters of food and clothing and shelter, was able to make something good and usable out of very little—sometimes out of almost nothing at all.

We are all children of God. It is just as simple as that! We are, in fact, children of God.

Some years ago, I returned home to find our little children were waiting in the driveway. They had discovered a newly hatched batch of chicks under the manger

in the barn. When they reached for them, the mother hen, as mothers do, protected her brood. So they had come for reinforcements.

I soon gathered a handful of little chicks for them to see and to touch. There were black ones and yellow ones and brown ones and gray ones.

As our little girl held one of them, I said in a teasing way, “That little chick will make a nice watchdog when it grows up, won’t it?” She looked at me quizzically, as if I didn’t know much. So I changed my approach: “It won’t be a watchdog, will it?”

She shook her head, “No, Daddy.”

Then I added, “It will be a nice riding horse.”

She wrinkled up her nose and gave me that “Oh, Dad!” look, for even a four-year-old knows that a chick will not be a dog or a horse or even a turkey; it will be a chicken. It will follow the pattern of its parentage. She knew that without having had a lesson or a lecture or a course in genetics.

No lesson is more manifest in nature than that all living things do as the Lord commanded them in the Creation. They reproduce after their own kind (see Moses 2:12, 24–25). They follow the pattern of their parentage. Everyone knows that. Every four-year-old knows that! A bird will not become an animal nor a fish. A mammal will not beget a reptile, nor “do men gather . . . figs of thistles” (Matthew 7:16).

In all that you do as women, do not forget that we are all children of God. If you get that doctrine in place, with that rule established, it will serve you well in times when you are confronted with those who equate humankind with animals.

I had another lesson from a child. Two of our little boys were wrestling on the rug. They had reached that pitch—you know the one—where laughter turns to tears and play becomes strife. (I see you do know!) I worked a foot gently between them and lifted the older boy (then just four years of age) to a sitting position on the rug, saying, “Hey there, you monkey! You had better settle down.”

He folded his little arms and looked at me with surprising seriousness. His little-boy feelings had been hurt, and he protested, “I not a monkey, Daddy. I a person!”

It is just that simple! I thought how deeply I loved him, how much I wanted him to be “a person,” one of eternal worth, for “children are an heritage of the Lord” (Psalms 127:3). Each is a child of God. He is not a monkey; neither were his ancestors.

I have often thought that much of what I know that is most worth knowing I have learned from our children.

In the very beginning, God created both man *and* woman. He said, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18; Moses 3:18; Abraham 5:14) and “they twain shall be one flesh” (Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:8; D&C 49:16).

Our destiny is so established that man can only find complete fulfillment and fill the divine purpose for his creation with a woman to whom he is legally and lawfully married. The union of man and woman begets babies that are conceived and cross that frail footpath into mortality.

This divine pattern was planned and the gospel designed from “before the world was” (D&C 49:17). The plan provides for us to come to the world into a mortal body. It is “the great plan of happiness” (Alma 42:8). We did not design it. If we follow the pattern, happiness and joy will follow. The gospel and the moral standards are set to prevent us from straying into unworthy or unnatural behavior that will result in disappointment and unhappiness.

The virtue of tolerance has been distorted and elevated to a position of such prominence as to be thought equal to and even valued more than morality. It is one thing to be tolerant, even forgiving of individual conduct. It is quite another to collectively legislate and legalize to protect immoral conduct that can weaken, even destroy the family.

There is a dangerous trap when tolerance is exaggerated to protect the rights of those whose conduct endangers the family and injures the rights of the more part of the people. We are getting dangerously close to the condition described by the prophet Mosiah, who warned:

“Now it is not common that the voice of the people desireth anything contrary to that which is right; but it is common for the lesser part of the people to desire that which is not right; therefore this shall ye observe and make it your law—to do your business by the voice of the people.

“And if the time comes that the voice of the people doth choose iniquity, then is the time that the judgments of God will come upon you; yea, then is the time he will visit you with great destruction even as he has hitherto visited this land” (Mosiah 29:26–27).

Tolerance can be a dangerous trap.

The Prophet Joseph Smith said to the first Relief Society, “There must be decision of character, aside from sympathy.”³

It suits the purpose of the Almighty to let it be that some will not have a marriage or find it broken through death or mischief. Some have great difficulty having any children, and some will not have children of their own—that is, it will not happen in mortal life. But in the eternal scheme of things, it will happen as surely as the commandments are kept. Those yearnings unfulfilled in mortality will be filled to overflowing in the life beyond where there is eternal love and eternal increase.

The Lord has spoken to His servants, and they have framed “The Family: A Proclamation to the World”:

“The first commandment that God gave to Adam and Eve pertained to their potential for parenthood as husband and wife. We declare that God’s commandment for His children to multiply and replenish the earth remains in force. We further declare that God has commanded that the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife.

“We declare the means by which mortal life is created to be divinely appointed [not to be redefined or rearranged]. We affirm the sanctity of life and of its importance in God’s eternal plan.

“Husband and wife have a solemn responsibility to love and care for each other and for their children. ‘Children are an heritage of the Lord’ (Psalms 127:3). Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs, to teach them to love and serve one another, to observe the commandments of God and to be law-abiding citizens wherever they live. Husbands and wives—mothers and fathers—will be held accountable before God for the discharge of these obligations.

“The family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan. Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity.”⁴

These lines from “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” to me have taken on the stature of scripture.

There is another dangerous trend as mothers, sometimes beyond their control, are being drawn out of the home. What could a mother possibly bring into the home that can equal her being at home with the children while they grow and mature?

We may learn from events of the future that “the hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world.”

Recently there was printed in an international publication an article under the strange title of “Babies Win Wars.”⁵ It chronicled several centuries of the history of countries that lost population. When they had difficulty in sustaining their population and themselves, they became vulnerable to invasion and occupation.

Now the birthrate is declining in every country in the world. In order for a nation’s population to remain stable, the birthrate must be just over two children per woman of childbearing years.

In more than thirty countries in Europe, the birthrate is below the replacement rate. In several, it is hovering barely above half that replacement rate. The population of some countries is declining at an alarming rate.

The United States is barely above the replacement rate. Only because of immigration and the higher birthrate among the Hispanic people do we maintain our population.

All East Asian countries are currently below the replacement rate.

Latin America has witnessed a dramatic decline in birthrate in the past thirty years.

Virtually every social security and medical system in the developed world is facing bankruptcy. An aging population can neither work to sustain the people nor fight to protect them.

That trend is seen in the Church. Worldwide, the birthrate among members married in the temple is notably higher than in the world, but this rate too has been

declining. In one European country with a sizeable population of Church members, for example, the birthrate among temple-married members, although higher than the national average, is below the replacement rate. Worldwide, the birthrate of Church members is only slightly higher than the world at large.

Like the rest of the population, members of the Church must suffer the consequences of these trends. We face a particular set of issues because the pool from which missionaries are drawn is in steady decline.

The First Presidency has written, “Marriage is ordained of God, and the paramount purpose of this sacred principle is to bring into the world immortal spirits to be reared in health and nobility of character, to fill the measure of their mortal existence.”⁶

Mankind has gotten into an almost impossible predicament. In the ordinary home and the ordinary family, in almost every conceivable way, the destroyer leads humanity carefully away from the source of all happiness. The prophecy is now being fulfilled of wars and rumors of wars and plagues and pestilence (see Matthew 24:3–8).

Teach the children the plan of salvation, the sacredness of the body, the supernal nature of the power to give life. Mothers, guide them, warn them against misusing those sacred powers in your gentle way. The future of the family depends on how those powers are protected.

The devil has no body. He and his angels try to possess the bodies of mankind.

When the sacred power to give life is used immorally, unnaturally, or in perversion, one stands in jeopardy of failing the test of mortality. Even then, through true repentance, the mercy of the Holy One has power to reclaim and to heal.

“The hand that rocks the cradle [does rule] the world.”

“The plan of redemption, which was prepared from the foundation of the world, through Christ” (Alma 22:13), was unfolded in the Creation. In the very beginning, man was created, and because “it is not good that the man should be alone,” the Lord created a wife, “an help meet for him” (Genesis 2:18). In the scriptures, the word *meet* means *equal*. Man and woman are separate but equal, complementary to one another. Both the equal and the separate natures are essential to the onrolling of the great plan of happiness.

Do not envy a man his manhood or his priesthood. Foster and encourage, in every way you can, his role and the role of your sons in the destiny ordained for them.

To women is given a most supernal part of the plan of redemption. “And Adam called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all living; for thus have I, the Lord God, called the first of all women” (Moses 4:26). Foster in yourself and in your daughters the exalted role of the woman, the incomparable gift of creation that attends motherhood.

The man was given to provide and protect; the woman was given to make it all worthwhile.

The ultimate end of all activity in the Church is that a man and his wife and their children can be happy at home, sealed together so that the family can continue throughout eternity.

I invoke the blessings of the Lord upon you, dear sisters, and all who are across the world. The future of the Church depends upon you and upon the spiritual power that you by nature have.

This is the Church of Jesus Christ. He presides over it. His doctrines will lead us safely through all the difficulty and shadows that are ahead.

I bless you and your families—your companions in life, your children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren—that you will understand the doctrines of the Church and be determined to live them, all of them. I promise you that you will be blessed, that you will be rewarded, and that you will be redeemed.

Those who are limited in this life have a greater joy beyond the veil to find that all will be added upon you in that existence.

I bear this witness and invoke this blessing upon you as a servant of the Lord and in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

¹ William Ross Wallace, “The Hand that Rocks the Cradle Is the Hand that Rules the World,” in Poems that Live Forever, sel. Hazel Felleman [New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965] 149–150.

² J. Reuben Clark Jr., “They of the Last Wagon,” *Improvement Era*, Nov. 1947, 705.

³ Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:570.

⁴ “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 102.

⁵ Gunnar Heinsohn, “Babies Win Wars,” Wall Street Journal, March 6, 2006.

⁶ First Presidency letterpress copybooks, May 1, 1939, Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.