The Dangers of Superficial Church Membership

President Ezra Taft Benson

Heed the Lord’s counsel to the Saints of this dispensation: “Prepare yourselves for the great day of the Lord” (D&C 133:10). This preparation must consist of more than just casual membership in the Church. You must learn to be guided by personal revelation and the counsel of the living prophet so you will not be deceived. (“Prepare Yourself for the Great Day of the Lord,” New Era, May 1982, p. 50)

Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin

Many years ago, large packs of wolves roamed the countryside in Ukraine, making travel in that part of the world very dangerous. These wolf packs were fearless. They were not intimidated by people nor by any of the weapons available at that time. The only thing that seemed to frighten them was fire. Consequently, travelers who found themselves away from cities developed the common practice of building a large bonfire and keeping it burning through the night. As long as the fire burned brightly, the wolves stayed away. But if it were allowed to burn out and die, the wolves would move in for an attack. Travelers understood that building and maintaining a roaring bonfire was not just a matter of convenience or comfort; it was a matter of survival. (See Mary Pratt Parrish, Ensign, May 1972, p. 25.)

We do not have to protect ourselves from wolf packs as we travel the road of life today, but, in a spiritual sense, we do face the devious wolves of Satan in the forms of temptation, evil, and sin. We live in dangerous times when these ravenous wolves roam the spiritual countryside in search of those who may be weak in faith or feeble in their conviction. In his first epistle, Peter described our "adversary the devil, as a roaring lion [that] walketh about, seeking whom he may devour." (1 Pet. 5:8.) The Lord told the Prophet Joseph Smith that "enemies prowl around thee like wolves for the blood of the lamb." (D&C 122:6.) We are all vulnerable to attack. However, we can fortify
ourselves with the protection provided by a burning testimony that, like a bonfire, has been built adequately and maintained carefully.

Unfortunately, some in the Church may believe sincerely that their testimony is a raging bonfire when it really is little more than the faint flickering of a candle. Their faithfulness has more to do with habit than holiness, and their pursuit of personal righteousness almost always takes a back seat to their pursuit of personal interests and pleasure. With such a feeble light of testimony for protection, these travelers on life’s highways are easy prey for the wolves of the adversary. ("Spiritual Bonfires of Testimony," *Ensign*, Nov. 1992, p. 34)

**Elder Neal A. Maxwell**

*From Men and Women of Christ:*

If we enlist and take the Savior's yoke upon us we "shall find rest unto [our] souls" (Matthew 11:29). If we are only part-time soldiers, though, partially yoked, we experience quite the opposite: frustration, irritation, and the absence of His full grace and spiritual rest. In that case weaknesses persist and satisfactions are intermittent. . . Actually the partially yoked experience little spiritual satisfaction, because they are burdened by carrying the awful weight of the natural man -- without any of the joys that come from progressing toward becoming "the man of Christ." They have scarcely "[begun] to be enlightened" (Alma 32:34). The meek and fully yoked, on the other hand, find God's reassuring grace and see their weakness yielding to strength (see Ether 12:27).

Strange as it seems, a few of the partially yoked, undeservedly wearing the colors of the kingdom, are just close enough to the prescribed path and process to be able to observe in others some of the visible costs of discipleship. Sobered by that observation, they want victory without battle and expect campaign ribbons merely for watching; but there is no witness until after the trial of their faith (see Ether 12:6).

These same Church members know just enough about the doctrines to converse superficially on them, but their scant knowledge about the deep doctrines is inadequate for deep discipleship (see 1 Corinthians 2:10). Thus uninformed about the deep doctrines, they make no deep change in their lives. They lack the faith to "give place" (Alma 32:27) consistently for real discipleship. Such members move out a few
hundred yards from the entrance to the straight and narrow path and repose on the first little rise, thinking, "Well, this is all there is to it"; and they end up living far below their possibilities. While not as distant as those King Benjamin described "For how knoweth a man the master whom he has not served, and who is a stranger unto him, and is far from the thoughts and intents of his heart?" (Mosiah 5:13) -- these people are not drawing closer either. (Men and Women of Christ. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991, pp. 2-3)

From "Overcome ... Even As I Also Overcame":

Events and circumstances in the last days make it imperative for us as members of the Church to become more grounded, rooted, established, and settled (see Col. 1:23; Col. 2:7; 2 Pet. 1:12). Jesus said to His disciples, "settle this in your hearts, that ye will do the things which I shall teach, and command you" (JST Luke 14:28). If not so settled, the turbulence will be severe. If settled, we will not be "tossed to and fro," whether by rumors, false doctrines, or by the behavioral and intellectual fashions of the world. Nor will we get caught up in the "talk show" mentality, spending our time like ancient Athenians "in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing" (Acts 17:21). Why be concerned with the passing preferences of the world anyway? "For the fashion of this world passeth away" (1 Cor. 7:31). . . .

Some Church members, alas, are neither reconciled to the will of God nor are they sufficiently settled as to their covenants. . . .

Some give of their time yet withhold themselves, being present without giving of their presence and going through the superficial motions of membership instead of the deep emotions of consecrated discipleship.

Some try to get by with knowing only the headlines of the gospel, not really talking much of Christ or rejoicing in Christ and esteeming lightly His books of scripture which contain and explain His covenants (see 2 Ne. 25:26).

Some are so proud they never learn of obedience and spiritual submissiveness. They will have very arthritic knees on the day when every knee shall bend. There will be no gallery then to play to; all will be participants!
Maintaining Church membership on our own terms, therefore, is not true discipleship.

Real disciples absorb the fiery darts of the adversary by holding aloft the quenching shield of faith with one hand, while holding to the iron rod with the other (see Eph. 6:16; 1 Ne. 15:24; D&C 27:17). There should be no mistaking; it will take both hands! ("Overcome ... Even As I Also Overcame," Ensign, May 1987, p. 70)

**Joseph Smith**

The things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity--thou must commune with God. How much more dignified and noble are the thoughts of God, than the vain imaginations of the human heart! (History of the Church 3:295)

**W. H. Auden**

O God, put away justice and truth for we cannot understand them and do not want them. Eternity would bore us dreadfully. Leave Thy heavens and come down to our earth of waterclocks and hedges. Become our uncle. Look after Baby, amuse Grandfather, escort Madam to the Opera, help Willy with his home-work, introduce Muriel to a handsome naval officer. Be interesting and weak like us, and we will love you as we love ourselves. (For the Time Being)

**Thomas Pain**

What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: Tis dearness only that gives everything its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods. (The American Crises, p. 1)