

# Speeches of the Year

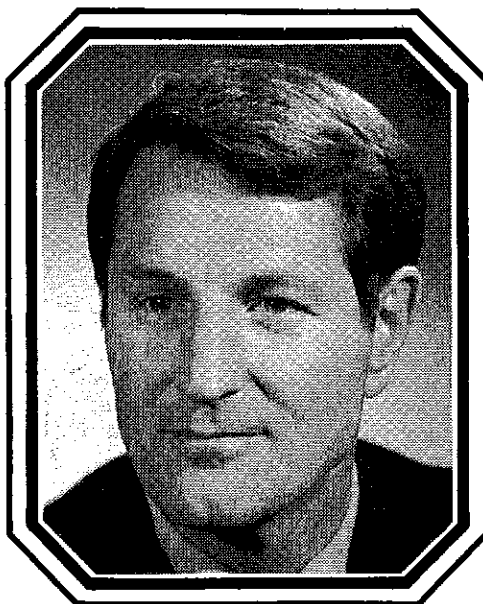


FREEDOM:  
A "HARD DOCTRINE"

NEAL A. MAXWELL  
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Neal A. Maxwell  
Commissioner of Education  
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints  
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*Neal A. Maxwell was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, on 6 July 1926. He earned both his bachelor's and master's degrees in political science at the University of Utah. He was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Laws degree by that same institution in 1969 and a Doctor of Letters by Westminster College in 1971.*

*Brother Maxwell has served as executive vice-president of the University of Utah and has been active in numerous civic organizations. He is the author of three books, A More Excellent Way, For the Power Is in Them, and A Time to Choose.*

*He was called as a Regional Representative of the Council of the Twelve in 1967, and in 1970 was appointed Commissioner of Education for the Church. In this position, he supervises BYU, all Church colleges, schools, seminaries, and institutes.*

*Married to the former Colleen Hinckley, he is the father of four children.*

## Freedom: A "Hard Doctrine"

This is always a sobering assignment, brothers and sisters. No one should come to this pulpit lightly. It is not simply the size of the audience; it is also the questing and quality of what is here, whether it is in your music, your prayers, or the high level of listening that this group reaches, which constitute a major challenge for any speaker. I would certainly like to congratulate the recipients of your outstanding professor awards. I appreciate more than I can say my collegueship with your president. I want you to know how pleased and delighted I am and the Board is with his presidency here. We could not be more exhilarated by his association or more respectful of his counsel. His impact has already moved beyond the borders of this campus in terms of the advice and counsel he gives us concerning all of the Church educational system. The Lord's work is work, but that duty can also be a delight, as it is when one can be associated with men like President Oaks.

There is abroad in the land, brothers and sisters, a kind of distorted fascination with freedom which obscures the limitations of freedom, when freedom is pursued blindly and for its own sake. Few of us fail to respond emotionally, as well as intellectually, when the word *freedom* is used, and our attachment to this concept is properly strong and deep, but words mean different things to different people in different settings.

God has never questioned man's right to make his own decisions—it is really He who has made that possible. But, since this is not a "toy world," and since our choices really do matter, God has almost constantly had to question the wisdom of many of man's decisions. In 1831 the Lord observed of mankind:

*They seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own God. . . . (D&C 1:16.)*

Walking in our "own way" does not necessarily make us free anymore than freedom is merely the absence of authority. In fact, only the all-pervasive perspectives of the gospel (walking in the bright light of full truth about man and his place in the universe) can make us "free"; for to achieve real perspective one must not only "keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through" his mind but also those teachings which transcend time. Morris West observed in a moving passage what can happen when one moves outside the framework of faith:

*Without the Faith, one is free, and that is a pleasant feeling at first. There are no questions of conscience, no constraints, except the constraints of custom, convention and the law, and these are flexible enough for most purposes. It is only later that the terror comes. One is free—but free in chaos,*

*in an unexplained and unexplainable world. One is free in a desert, from which there is no retreat but inward toward the hollow core of oneself. (The Devil's Advocate, Morris West.)*

When freedom is used, brothers and sisters, to disengage from the divine, it seems to cause some to grasp for an "idea-god." More and more, one sees sincere, idealistic men and women who live out their lives in "the clean, well-lit prison of one idea," in the celebration of a single concept or a single majestic solution for all that is wrong in the world. Karl Marx was not alone in his naïveté in proposing a single explanation and a simplistic cure for human failings.

Plastic freedom—the sense of ersatz emancipation which some seem to crave so deeply—and naïveté about human nature produce such profound miscalculations in prescribing for man that one can only be appalled. Today we see some who propose the publicly supported distribution of heroin in order to solve the problem of heroin addiction. Some would sanction predatory peer sex in order to "free" men from the alleged imprisoning inhibitions that surround them. Some would dissolve the family in order to create a sense of belonging. The harsh unreality of such schemes, no matter how sincerely proposed, would have been laughed off the human stage in times past; now they are taken altogether too seriously. There is scarcely an idea, however false, that does not have someone raising funds to promote it or someone sponsoring legislation to support it.

Obsessions do not make us free. Do we really think that there can be a private immorality that does not damage other men, any more than there can be a private smallpox or a cloistered cholera? The unloved, undisciplined soul set forth in the stream of humanity can be more dangerous

than raw sewage. John Lukacs wisely observed:

*The profoundest problems of morality involve, after all, what people do (and how they think) with their own selves: in other words, what people do privately (or whether they approve of their own acts). It is therefore that the problem of sexual, that is, of carnal morality is at the center of the moral crisis of our times; it is not a mere marginal development. (The Passing of the Modern Age, John Lukacs.)*

Lukacs calls our attention to the fact that unchastity does affect self-esteem, and self-esteem problems touch us all. A cycloptic, one-eyed vision, will end up in the same bleak way that Social Darwinism did, having missed the point. For one-eyed vision can see the edge of what appears to be a mere hill, but which is really the lower slopes of Mount Everest. Lukacs observed of our fascination with freedom and its interplay, the social justice, the following:

*Our world has come to the edge of disaster precisely because of its preoccupation with justice, indeed, often at the expense of truth. It is arguable, reasonably arguable, that there is less injustice in this world than a century ago. But only a vile idiot would argue that there is less untruth. We are threatened not by the absence of justice, we are threatened by the fantastic prevalence of untruth. . . . Truth responds to a deeper human need than does justice. A man can live with injustice a long time, indeed, that is the human condition; but he cannot long live with untruth. (The Passing of the Modern Age, John Lukacs.)*

My brothers and sisters, it seems to me that we have some serious and sober obligations concerning the spreading of truth that are perhaps even more significant than we realize. There is a desperate need for mankind to put things in full perspective. Only

the full truth about who we are can underwrite the harsh demands of real brotherhood. When one listens to Korihor expressing a kind of darwinistic, heedless, selfish freedom, he reads:

*And many more such things did he say unto them, telling them that there could be no atonement made for the sins of men, but every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength; and whatsoever a man did was no crime. (Alma 30:17.)*

Whenever individuals believe that there are no absolute values, there are, ultimately, no sin and no crime; if there is no cosmic yardstick by which we can really measure things, how then can we punish people for falling short by feet or inches? Dostoevsky predicted that the sages of our time would say in fact there is no crime, there is no sin, there is only hunger!

Adrift in the "gulf of misery"—at the confluence of ethical relativism and false freedom—are many disturbed and profoundly lonely individuals in our time. It really is not too difficult to determine who the architect of this outcome is, for the adversary "seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself." The adversary finally betrays his followers for he cannot deliver on his promises. "And thus we see . . . that the devil will not support his children at the last day . . ." (Alma 30:60.)

That perverted, bright being who deserts his disciples is filled with enormous self-hatred! It is because of that same fatal self-renunciatory pattern that shows up in his ethical relativism that, again and again, the human race is led into conceptual cul-de-sacs. Freedom alone is not enough. Man cannot be happy if he is simply free "from" being "acted upon," for his happi-

ness depends also upon his acting wisely, in choosing liberty and eternal life instead of captivity and death. Indeed, so far as our choices are concerned, "our future is our past."

Of course we are all affected by some of the events and tides of our time. Of course we need to be concerned with avoiding unnecessary political restraints upon our free agency, but those "givens" should never be confused with the conceptual caresses which could entice us to plunge into a freedom which is a bottomless, dark pool of misery.

Closely allied with the myopic fascination with freedom is a growing surge of approbation, of lionizing, of not only the works, but the disordered lives, of creative individuals, almost as if disorder were a causal necessity for creativity. I am not speaking of non-art which is, as C. S. Lewis observed, "not work at all . . . [but] mere puddles of spilled sensibility or reflections," but I am speaking of real art. There is no question but that some of our great creative geniuses in the field of music and the arts have been flawed personalities, but one can still appreciate their works without approving of their lives. But the harsh single standard of the gospel raises some uncomfortable questions, some irrepressible issues with which each of us must deal, and the artist is responsible for his personal life as much as anyone else. Besides, in a situation of comparable talent, better living produces better art!

A terse comment in the Book of Mormon concerning the political record of Morianton reads: "And he did do justice unto the people, but not unto himself because of his many whoredoms . . ." (Ether 10:11.)

Men can do some good for others, can produce some artistic works in spite of

their flaws, but the gospel raises harsh questions about the trade-offs between Bohemian behavior which is punctuated with some creativity and the inevitable long-term eternal consequences of that behavior. How many symphonic strains must a great musician produce in order to drown out the muffled cries of a sobbing child or wife who were devastated by the errant behavior of that creative genius? How many soul scars does it take to overshadow the value of some brilliantly placed patches of paint?

Art is expression arising from the realm of feelings, but real art requires discipline and clarification before it can be shared. When creative geniuses share their expressions with us, following such discipline and clarification, we rejoice; but the relapses in their behavior before, or after, those creative moments is something for which they are just as accountable as all of us are for our failures. There is a danger, therefore, not only in our succumbing to the fashionableness of disordered lives, but also to the tendency toward the adulation of disorder.

Isn't it ironic that a generation so bent upon some forms of confrontation finds so many individuals unwilling to confront themselves? The unfronted individual who persists in walking after his "own way" is clearly headed toward a personality precipice. Confrontation need not always have the high drama of a Lt. Pinkerton's return in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* to see the consequences of his ethical relativism, but self-confrontation in some form is crucial if we are serious about eternal progression. Our life style must make allowance for that need to deal with reality in our own lives. In Proverbs we read:

*The ear that heareth the reproof of life abideth among the wise. He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul: but he that heareth reproof getteth understanding.*  
(Proverbs 15:31, 32.)

The disciple of Christ needs to expect the "reproof of life"—and suffering—for suffering is the sweat that comes from working out our salvation. Suffering is on the agenda for each of us. But Peter fortunately and candidly distinguishes between the significance of suffering as a result of our commitment to Christ and suffering as a result of our own folly. As with so many "hard doctrines" contained in the gospel at first, oh, how we hope a teaching is not so, and, then, oh, how our teeth chatter when that chilled surf of celestial sense washes over us, telling us it is true!

There is also a nomadic reflection of plastic freedom as seen in the anomie or drifts of our modern sophists—the intellectual guerillas who have no homeland. The sophist, who is often a carrier of cleverness, is really an intellectual guerilla, a forlorn man without a country who draws his delight and satisfaction from the process of verbal combat and encounter itself; he does not seek resolution, but disruption. Homeless, he therefore seeks always to fight his battles on the homefront of the believer. The sophist has nothing to defend. He takes no real risks because he believes in nothing. Perhaps, in a strange and twisted way, he wants to create the condition of anomie and drift that he experiences, by using the sword of speciousness to cut men away from the eternal things that anchor them.

Freedom wisely used to interact with the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ, far from producing drabness and uniformity in disciples, produces not only more significant individuals but more interesting individuals. One cannot help but wonder how visibly different Simon—later to be called Peter—was from the other fishermen who undoubtedly lined the shore of Galilee on the same day that Simon was first called. But there can be little question about how much more interesting as well as significant Peter was just several years later

on the day of Pentecost, or when he healed the lame man, or when he met his solemn rendezvous with martyrdom. There is something about the gospel that makes personality more luxuriant, whereas, as Arthur Henry King has observed, sin robs us of our individuality.

Thus, to be truly free, to be truly accountable, and to be truly sensitive of others—one must walk the strait and narrow path, which far from being confining is really very emancipating. Besides, one must wonder in the first place why some want to break their ties with the Supreme Intelligence of the universe, for God is not only omnipotent and omniscient but He is also perfect in his love—a loving Father who seeks our happiness. But men in their preoccupation push this Parent away. King Benjamin observed: “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.)

What a great adventure most men decline when they choose not to know their Father! What great folly for the amateur climbing the rugged and strait and narrow way to decline the services of such an Experienced Guide!

Brothers and sisters, men who are strangers to God will be strangers to each other. Men who do not accept God’s plan will never have a lasting sense of purpose about life. They will be free in the desert aforementioned. Men who do not have a true perspective about their relationship with God will never achieve identity. Men who navigate by their own light after their “own way” will find themselves, in Mormon’s words, “. . . as a vessel . . . tossed about upon the waves, without sail or anchor, or without anything wherewith to steer her . . .” (Mormon 5:18.)

So many seek for a form of dramatic service to their fellowmen which could be rapidly performed and in the sight of all

(service which they hope would not need to be repeated); but Christian service consists mostly of quiet, consistent, undramatic goodness which goes unrecognized. In the same way, some seek to find a shortcut to salvation—a single, sudden spectacular thing they might do or say, that would remove the necessity of their having to travel along the strait and narrow way. But there is no cable car, no aerial tram to take us quickly and effortlessly to the gate; the path is long, it is hot, and it is dusty, but “there is none other way.”

I take heart, as I am sure you will, in the words of our present prophet, President Joseph Fielding Smith, which he uttered interestingly enough almost fifty years ago when he said he had confidence in the youth of the Church as follows:

*Occasionally someone arises who feels that it is his duty to inform the world that the old members of the Church are still faithful in the doctrines that were taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith, and by President Brigham Young, but that the rising generation is departing from such things, that the children of these fathers are turning from the teachings of their fathers, as they put it. I am here to testify that this is not true. There may be, of course, and are, those among us who are not faithful, who do turn from the footsteps of their fathers. . . . But so far as the Latter-day Saints are concerned, the majority of them will not turn from the faith of their fathers . . . the gospel was restored for the last time, and that it must grow and increase and the knowledge grow and spread until it shall fill the whole earth. This is the destiny of . . . Mormonism. (Joseph Fielding Smith, general conference sermon April 1925, Conference Report, April 1925, pp. 75.)*

May we do our part to justify that confidence in the youth of the Church, that inspired vision of nearly half a century ago, by using our freedom wisely, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.