AN ESSAY ON TRUTH AND DISCIPLESHIP

THE SPIRIT OF CONTENTION AND THE DUTY TO WITNESS

A Doctrinal Essay on Confrontation, Cowardice, and True Peace

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Introduction

Among covenant people, few ideas are more spiritually necessary than peace. The Savior blessed the peacemakers. He commanded His disciples to love one another. He warned against anger, reviling, and the spirit that turns brother against brother. No Saint who takes the doctrine of Christ seriously should make light of contention.

And yet the very seriousness of that doctrine requires carefulness. A true principle can be weakened not only by neglect, but also by misuse. When a commandment is torn from its doctrinal setting and made to do work the Lord did not give it to do, it can become a tool of distortion. That is especially true of the Savior's words in 3 Nephi 11:29:

For verily, verily I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another.

The verse is true. It is not qualified by culture, office, temperament, personality, or circumstance. The spirit of contention is not of Christ. The desire to conquer another soul through anger is not of Christ. The appetite to humiliate, dominate, accuse, or prevail by force of personality is not of Christ. Such a spirit belongs to the adversary.

But the verse does not say that all disagreement is evil. It does not say that all confrontation is contention. It does not say that every conflict reveals unrighteousness in the one who speaks. It does not say that moral discomfort is proof that the Spirit has departed. It condemns the spirit by which men contend with anger one with another.

That distinction matters.

If the distinction is lost, Saints may begin to call courage contention, discernment disloyalty, warning harshness, reproof pride, and silence peace. In that condition, a scripture given to restrain the devil's spirit may be turned into a sword against the very Saints who feel constrained to stand as witnesses of God.

Contention Is a Spirit; Confrontation Is an Act

Contention, confrontation, and conflict are related, but they are not the same. Contention is a spirit. Confrontation is an act. Conflict is often the condition that arises when truth meets resistance.

The Lord condemns contention because contention is animated by anger, pride, resentment, vanity, contempt, and the desire to defeat. Confrontation, however, may be righteous or unrighteous depending on the spirit, purpose, authority, and charity by which it is carried. Conflict may be needless

and destructive, but it may also be the unavoidable consequence of truth entering a room that has made peace with falsehood.

The scriptures do not present righteousness as a life without confrontation. Moses confronted Pharaoh. Nathan confronted David. Abinadi confronted King Noah and his priests. Alma confronted priestcraft and hypocrisy. Samuel the Lamanite cried repentance from a wall. John the Baptist rebuked sin in high places. Paul withstood Peter when conduct and doctrine were out of alignment. The Lord Himself confronted wickedness openly.

If all confrontation were contention, the prophetic pattern would collapse. Prophets would become contentious by definition. The Savior's own ministry would become impossible to understand. Therefore the doctrine cannot be that Saints must avoid every hard word, every unsettling witness, or every act of correction. The doctrine must be that Saints are forbidden to act in the spirit of the devil while doing the work of God.

This is why the inner spirit matters so much. The same sentence may be spoken from pride or from love. The same warning may be animated by self-righteousness or by trembling fidelity. The same confrontation may be a performance of ego or an act of rescue. The Lord is not deceived by tone alone, nor by volume alone, nor by the mere appearance of civility. He discerns the thoughts and intents of the heart.

The opposite of contention is not silence. The opposite of contention is charity.

Repentance Requires Confrontation

The gospel itself rests upon confrontation. Repentance begins when truth confronts the soul. No man repents of a sin he refuses to see. No woman yields a weakness she will not name. No disciple grows into Christ while treating every inward disturbance as an attack.

Alma's questions to the people of Zarahemla are not gentle evasions. They are searching confrontations of the soul: Have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts? Could ye say, if ye were called to die at this time, that ye have been sufficiently humble? (Alma 5). These are not the questions of a culture afraid of discomfort. They are the questions of a prophet who understands that salvation requires awakening.

The Lord's declaration in Ether 12:27 is equally direct. He gives men weakness that they may be humble, and if they humble themselves and have faith in Him, He will make weak things become strong unto them. But weakness cannot become strength while remaining unnamed. To be sanctified, the natural man must be exposed, resisted, and yielded to Christ.

If a Saint treats confrontation itself as contention, he may begin to resist the very medicine by which Christ heals him. He may call conviction negativity. He may call correction judgment. He may call discomfort darkness. He may preserve his own sense of peace by refusing the disruption required for repentance.

This is not spiritual maturity. It is spiritual self-protection. The gospel does not merely soothe the natural man. It crucifies him. It teaches us to put off the natural man and become Saints through the atonement of Christ the Lord (Mosiah 3:19). That sacred process requires truth to enter places where the natural man would rather remain undisturbed.

The Savior Was Without Contention, Yet Full of Moral Courage

No example is more decisive than the Savior Himself. Jesus Christ never possessed the spirit of contention. He never acted from vanity, resentment, insecurity, or a lust to win. His zeal was pure. His judgment was righteous. His love was perfect. Yet His ministry cannot honestly be described as a ministry of mere pleasantness.

He rebuked hypocrisy. He exposed religious vanity. He warned against blind guides. He pronounced woes upon leaders who appeared righteous outwardly while inwardly harboring hypocrisy and iniquity. Matthew 23 is not the language of a man afraid to disturb a room. It is the language of divine truth confronting religious corruption.

He cleansed the temple. John records that He found His Father's house being used as a house of merchandise. He made a scourge of small cords, drove out the animals and money changers, poured out the changers' money, overthrew the tables, and declared, 'Make not my Father's house an house of merchandise' (John 2:16). His disciples remembered the scripture, 'The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up' (John 2:17).

Was the Savior contentious? God forbid. But He was confrontational. He was not governed by anger in the devilish sense. He was governed by holiness. He did not confront to protect ego. He confronted to defend the sanctity of His Father's house. He did not rebuke because He delighted in accusation. He rebuked because truth, mercy, and judgment demanded it.

The Savior therefore stands as the perfect refutation of two counterfeit extremes. He refutes the harsh soul who imagines that truth excuses cruelty. He also refutes the fearful soul who imagines that love requires silence. In Christ, perfect love and perfect courage are one.

Christ was never contentious. Christ was never cowardly.

The Counterfeit Peace of Avoidance

The scriptures warn not only against open rebellion, but also against religious sleep. Nephi saw a latter-day condition in which the devil would pacify and lull people away into carnal security, saying, 'All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well' (2 Nephi 28:21). This danger is subtle because it does not always look like hostility to religion. It may look like calmness. It may sound like loyalty. It may clothe itself in pleasant words.

The adversary is not limited to stirring men up to anger. He can also lull them into passivity. He can inflame some and sedate others. He can tempt one man to rage and another to cowardice. He can make one soul harsh and another unwilling to act. Both conditions serve him if both keep men from the doctrine of Christ.

Jeremiah condemned those who healed the hurt of the daughter of the Lord's people slightly, saying, 'Peace, peace; when there is no peace' (Jeremiah 6:14). That phrase is searching. It reveals a kind of religious treatment that soothes the surface while leaving the wound untreated. It names peace while avoiding the repentance that true peace requires.

False peace is not the peace of Christ. False peace is the quiet of rooms where truth is unwelcome. It is the stillness produced by fear. It is the calm that comes when the wounded learn not to speak. It is the unity of people who agree not to notice what must be noticed. It is the comfort of those who would rather preserve appearances than bear burdens.

True peace is different. True peace is not merely the absence of visible conflict. It is the presence of righteousness, truth, charity, repentance, mercy, protection, and holiness. True peace may require disruption before it can be established. A surgeon disturbs a wound in order to cleanse it. A prophet disturbs a people in order to awaken them. A disciple may disturb a false calm in order to become an instrument of real peace.

The Baptismal Covenant and the Burden of Witness

At the waters of Mormon, Alma taught a covenant far more demanding than social pleasantness. Those who desired to come into the fold of God were willing to be called His people, to bear one another's burdens, to mourn with those that mourn, to comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things and in all places, even until death (Mosiah 18:8-10).

To stand as a witness of God cannot mean merely to speak when speech is convenient. Witness is most meaningful when truth is costly. A witness who speaks only when the room agrees is not yet much of a

witness. A witness who refuses to speak because truth may be labeled contention has misunderstood the covenant.

The covenant to mourn with those that mourn also requires more than sentiment. It requires sight. It requires willingness to behold suffering that may implicate the comfort of the group. It requires the courage to name burdens rather than explain them away. It requires Saints to sit with pain long enough to understand it before rushing to counsel, correct, or spiritualize it.

There is an order to faithful response: name, witness, understand, then counsel. When that order is reversed, help can become injury. To counsel before witnessing is often to place a spiritual conclusion upon a wound that has not yet been seen. To redirect before mourning is often to protect the comfort of the helper rather than the soul of the wounded.

The baptismal covenant therefore stands in tension with cowardice. It does not authorize angry contention. But neither does it permit Saints to avoid the burden of witness by mislabeling faithful confrontation as contentiousness. Covenant people are not called merely to keep rooms calm. They are called to bear burdens, mourn truthfully, comfort deeply, and witness faithfully.

Discernment Is Not the Same as Condemnation

Another reason Saints may avoid confrontation is the fear of judging. That fear is not without doctrinal foundation. The Savior warned against hypocritical judgment. He commanded His disciples to cast the beam out of their own eye before attempting to remove the mote from a brother's eye. The warning is real, and it should make every disciple humble.

But the commandment not to judge unrighteously is not a commandment not to discern. Moroni taught that the Spirit of Christ is given to every man that he may know good from evil, and that every thing which inviteth to do good and to love God is inspired of God, while that which persuadeth men to do evil and deny Christ is of the devil (Moroni 7:15-17). That doctrine requires moral discernment. It does not permit a Saint to pretend that good and evil cannot be distinguished.

The difference is vital. Condemnation seeks to place a soul beyond mercy. Discernment seeks to see truly. Condemnation delights in another's guilt. Discernment grieves over harm and seeks redemption. Condemnation is often eager, final, and self-exalting. Discernment is sober, humble, and accountable to God.

A culture that refuses discernment in order to avoid judgment does not become more charitable. It becomes less able to protect. It may leave the vulnerable exposed while congratulating itself for being nonjudgmental. It may permit repeated harm because no one wishes to name what is plainly before them. That is not charity. Charity rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth (Moroni 7:45).

Righteous discernment therefore belongs inside covenant life. It must be governed by humility, repentance, and love, but it must not be abolished. Without discernment, Saints cannot identify false doctrine, recognize priestcraft, protect the weak, receive correction, or repent. A people without discernment may avoid the appearance of contention while slowly losing the power to distinguish true peace from comfortable avoidance.

When Silence Becomes a Failure to Warn

There are times when silence is wise. The Savior Himself was silent before accusers when speech would not have served the Father's will. There are sacred moments when restraint is strength, when patience is commanded, and when the Spirit forbids speech. No faithful essay on confrontation should ignore that truth.

But there are also times when silence becomes a failure of witness. Isaiah was commanded, 'Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression' (Isaiah 58:1). Ezekiel was given the image of a watchman who must warn when the sword comes; if he sees danger and does not blow the trumpet, blood is required at the watchman's hand (Ezekiel 33:6). The imagery is severe because the duty is serious.

The point is not that every Saint is authorized to speak every warning in every setting. Order matters. Stewardship matters. Wisdom matters. But the scriptures do not permit a covenant people to make silence the universal rule of righteousness. If warning were inherently contentious, the Lord would not command it. If plain speech were inherently unchristlike, prophets could not fulfill their ministries.

The moral question is therefore not merely, 'Will this create conflict?' Sometimes truth does create conflict. The better questions are: Is this mine to say? Is it true? Is it charitable? Is it necessary? Am I moved by the Holy Ghost or by my own anger? Am I willing to show forth an increase of love afterward? Am I also willing to be corrected by the same standard?

When those questions are honestly brought before God, confrontation may become an act of discipleship rather than an act of contention. It may be the trembling duty of a witness, not the indulgence of an accuser.

Doctrine and Covenants 121: The Pattern of Righteous Reproof

Doctrine and Covenants 121 gives one of the clearest revealed patterns for the exercise of influence among the Saints. It warns that when men suppose a little authority gives them license to exercise control, dominion, or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, the heavens withdraw themselves and the Spirit of the Lord is grieved. It condemns unrighteous dominion at its root.

Yet the same revelation does not forbid correction. It commands the manner in which correction must occur:

Reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reproved, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy.

This doctrine judges both extremes. It judges the man who reproves from pride, anger, control, and impatience. It also judges the man who refuses all reproof because he wants the appearance of peace more than the work of holiness. The Lord does not say, 'Never reprove.' He says that reproof must be moved upon by the Holy Ghost and followed by an increase of love.

The word sharpness can itself be misused. It does not grant permission for cruelty. It does not sanctify venting. It does not excuse a harsh temperament. But neither does it permit the Saints to pretend that all divine correction is soft, vague, and indirect. There are moments when the Spirit requires plainness. There are moments when love must be more serious than soothing.

The test is not merely whether the correction felt uncomfortable. Correction often does. The test is whether it was governed by the Holy Ghost, whether it was aimed at redemption rather than victory, whether it was followed by increased love, and whether the speaker remained willing to stand under the same doctrine he spoke to another.

The Adversary Works in Extremes

The adversary often works by driving true principles to false extremes. He can take zeal and corrupt it into anger. He can take meekness and corrupt it into passivity. He can take loyalty and corrupt it into fear of man. He can take unity and corrupt it into enforced silence. He can take non-contention and corrupt it into moral paralysis.

This is one of his craftiest methods. He does not always need to introduce an obviously false doctrine. He can hollow out a true doctrine until its vocabulary remains but its power is gone. Paul warned of those having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof (2 Timothy 3:5). That phrase should sober any people who cherish sacred forms. The form may remain while the power is resisted.

A counterfeit gospel of confrontation says, 'Because truth matters, I may speak without charity.' A counterfeit gospel of peace says, 'Because charity matters, I must not speak difficult truth.' Both are false. One weaponizes truth against love. The other empties love of truth. Neither bears the image of Christ.

The Lord's way is narrow. It does not satisfy the natural man who wants to win, and it does not satisfy the fearful man who wants to hide. It requires boldness without pride, meekness without weakness, unity without pretense, correction without contempt, and peace without falsehood.

The adversary owns the extremes. Christ owns the narrow way.

Confronting Wickedness First Within Ourselves

Any plea for righteous confrontation must begin with self-confrontation. Otherwise, the call to courage easily becomes accusation. The disciple who wishes to speak truth must also be willing to receive truth. He must be willing to ask whether his own anger has become self-justifying, whether his own wounds have become weapons, whether his own discernment has become pride, and whether his own courage has lost charity.

The Savior's warning about the beam and the mote does not forbid discernment. It requires humility. The Lord did not say there is no mote in the brother's eye. He commanded first that the beam be cast out of one's own eye, and then one may see clearly to cast out the mote from the brother's eye (Matthew 7:3-5). The goal is not blindness. The goal is clear sight purified by repentance.

This doctrine preserves the soul from self-righteousness. It requires every witness to stand first before God. It requires the Saint to let the word of God divide asunder soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and discern the thoughts and intents of his own heart. It requires confession, humility, prayer, and a willingness to be corrected.

But self-confrontation must not become an excuse for permanent silence. If only the sinless may speak, then no disciple can ever witness. The Lord uses imperfect servants. The question is not whether the servant is flawless, but whether he is humble, repentant, charitable, and moved upon by the Holy Ghost. Awareness of weakness should govern the manner of witness, not abolish the duty to witness.

A Culture of True Peace

A covenant culture shaped by true peace would not confuse every hard conversation with contention. It would teach Saints how to disagree without anger, how to correct without contempt, how to receive correction without defensiveness, and how to protect the wounded without turning every wound into an accusation.

Such a culture would not reward cowardice with the language of virtue. It would not treat silence as automatically holy or discomfort as automatically dangerous. It would recognize that the Spirit may bring comfort, but He may also bring conviction. He may bind up the brokenhearted, but He may also cry repentance. He may whisper peace, but He may also command a witness to speak.

True peace would make leaders and members more, not less, accountable to the doctrine of Christ. It would protect both charity and truth. It would reject rage without rejecting warning. It would reject accusation without rejecting witness. It would reject pride without rejecting courage.

In such a culture, 3 Nephi 11:29 would be honored in its proper place. It would restrain anger, not truth. It would cast out the devil's spirit, not the disciple's courage. It would forbid the desire to contend with anger, not the obligation to stand as a witness of God.

Conclusion

The Savior's warning against contention is not small doctrine. It is not optional counsel. It is a commandment from the resurrected Lord. The Saints must take it seriously. They must cast out anger, pride, resentment, contempt, and the desire to conquer. They must refuse the devil's spirit in all its forms.

But they must also refuse the devil's counterfeits. The adversary can stir men up to anger, and he can lull them into false peace. He can tempt a people to quarrel, and he can tempt them to sanctify cowardice. He can make some Saints harsh in the name of truth and others silent in the name of love. Both errors injure the body of Christ.

The doctrine of Christ does not require a choice between courage and charity. It requires both. It does not require a choice between peace and truth. It requires the peace that only truth can sustain. It does not require Saints to avoid all confrontation. It requires them to confront wickedness without becoming wicked, to reprove only when moved upon by the Holy Ghost, and to show forth afterward an increase of love.

Would to God that covenant people would awaken to the difference between contention and witness. Would to God that they would discern the alternate gospel of false peace whenever it is preached in the language of the true one. Would to God that they would become a people who can speak truth in love, mourn with those that mourn, comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things and in all places.

That is not contention. That is covenant discipleship. That is the narrow way between rage and fear. That is the peace of Christ.