

**SICKLE OR SWORD –
CONVERSION VERSUS COMPULSION
IN THE BOOK OF ALMA**

From the time of our pre-mortal existence, a war has been waged as to whether man should be compelled to obey or whether he should be converted to correct principles and then be allowed to choose for himself. In the war, Satan sought power to compel the human family to do his will by suggesting that the agency of man his freedom to choose be inoperative. President David O. McKay commented that had Satan's plan of force been accepted, "human beings would have become mere puppets in the hands of a dictator" (McKay, *CR*, April 1950, 32).

Man's freedom and agency were maintained and vindicated by the war in heaven, and man became free to choose his course through the eternities. Yet the war continues here on earth. Societies, families, and individuals are all affected by this conflict. In governments as well as homes, the battle between compulsion and conversion rages in the hearts of God's children (2 Nephi 28:20). This battle can be vividly seen in the pages of the Book of Mormon, particularly in the Book of Alma.

Many saints have wondered why the Lord inspired Mormon to include so many pages regarding war in a book which is supposed to bring men to Christ, the author and Prince of Peace (2 Nephi 19:6). Much of the book of Alma reads more like a manual for war than a spiritual record. Yet nowhere in scripture is the battle between conversion and compulsion more vividly described than in the book of Alma. It is not mere coincidence that of the 34 times in which the words "*force*", "*compel*", or "*compelled*" appear in the Book of Mormon, 30 of those are in the Book of Alma where war and bloodshed occupy many of its pages. Through its pages, the Lord teaches us the critical lesson that forced compliance is not sufficient to bring about a lasting change and a Godly character. In the midst of the great wars, we see the result of those who are compelled by force to comply, contrasted with examples of those who are truly converted to righteousness through the power of the word.

THE POWER OF THE SWORD

One of the most colorful examples of the forced compliance is found in Alma 44. Captain Moroni brought Zarahemnah to obedience at the point of a sword. Reluctantly, Zarahemnah "came forth and delivered up his sword and his cimeter, and his bow into the hands of Moroni" (Alma 44:8), but he refused to make an oath to not return against the Nephites in war. Though he had been compelled at the point of the sword to throw down his weapons, no change had taken place in his heart regarding his feelings about the Nephites and their God. Moroni returned his sword and stated that they "would end the conflict" (44:10). The battle resumed and Moroni's forces were successful in defeating the Lamanites, to the point that Zarahemnah eventually entered into a covenant of peace with the Nephites.

But the conflict did not end with that battle. Less than two years later, the Lamanites once again came out to subject the Nephites to bondage. Led this time by Amalikhiah, who had become king of the Lamanites by treachery, murder, and deceit, the Lamanites returned to wage war against the Nephites (See Alma 48:1-8). The earlier Nephite victory with the sword had proven to have a very short-term effect in maintaining peace in their land. Though the Nephites were reluctant to fight, and their cause was truly just, their righteous motives did not change the fact that victory by force had not changed the hearts of the Lamanites.

Five years later, in the twenty-fifth year of the reign of the judges, the Nephites were preparing for another attack from the Lamanites. Conflict arose within the Nephite kingdom between the kingmen and the freemen. This caused serious difficulty for Captain Moroni and his forces, so they proceeded to kill all those who would not support the cause of freedom, and the rest were "*compelled* to hoist the title of liberty" (Alma 51:20; emphasis added). Forcing the kingmen to comply would have serious ramifications to the Nephite nation in later battles.

The battles between Amalikhiah and Captain Moroni continued for several years. Following numerous battles and much bloodshed, Teancum, a faithful Nephite captain, tried to put an end to the conflict by killing Amalikhiah (Alma 51:33-37). This proved ineffective. Though he had killed the torchbearer, the flame of hatred continued to burn in the hearts of the Lamanites. All of the war, bloodshed, defeat, and death had not changed their hearts; nor had it softened the hearts of the kingmen who now waged their own war deep in the center of the Nephite kingdom. While they had complied with the law when compelled by Moroni, they turned and fought against their own people when the threat of their own destruction appeared to have been removed. Now with the Lamanites keeping the main armies of the Nephites occupied, they proceeded to take control of the city of Zarahemla (Alma 61:2-8). Eventually they were defeated by Moroni and were forced once again to comply with the rule of law and fight for freedom (Alma 62:1-11).

In each of the above instances, force and compulsion seem to have been the only methods available to the Nephites in defending their people. They did not glory in the use of the sword, but were compelled to do so by those who were in opposition to their freedom. Captain Moroni epitomizes this attitude regarding the use of force and compulsion when he cried to Zarahemnah, "We do not desire to be men of blood. Ye know that ye are in our hands, yet we do not desire to slay you. Behold, we have not come out to battle against you that we might shed your blood for power; neither do we desire to *bring anyone to the yoke of bondage*. But this is the very cause for which ye have come against us" (Alma 44:1-2; emphasis added). Later in the book of Alma, Mormon describes Moroni as "a man of perfect understanding; yea, a man that did not delight in bloodshed; a man whose soul did joy in the *liberty and the freedom* of his country, and his brethren from *bondage and slavery*" (Alma 48:11; emphasis added).

Captain Moroni did not desire to use force and compulsion to bring about compliance, yet he himself was compelled to defend his people. While ineffective in changing the hearts of their enemies, the use of force by the Nephites did prove effective to deter the aggression and

disobedience of their foes for a short period of time. Ironically, the only way the Nephites had to maintain their freedom was to use force and compulsion upon their enemies and dissenters. President David O. McKay stated that "force emanates from Satan," but also admits that "force rules in the world today; consequently, government must keep armies . . . to protect itself from threatened aggression of a nation which seems to listen to no other appeal but compulsion" (McKay, *CR*, April 1950, 34).

While there may be times when force and compulsion are the only recourse for a society to maintain its freedoms, no enduring society of peace can be established upon the principle of force. Ernest L. Wilkinson, a former president at BYU stated,

. . . no great society can ever be created by political action; . . . it must be founded upon religious premises and conviction. The one emanates from the power and compulsion of Caesar; the other is premised on the love and voluntary action of Christ. (Introduction, *BYU Speeches*, March 1, 1966, 1; emphasis added)

Though the Nephites were compelled to defend their freedom by force, it becomes evident from the Alma account that force is not effective in bringing about lasting change and a society of peace. In his epistle to Captain Moroni, Pahoran, the chief judge, offers an appropriate pattern for bringing people to obedience.

"Therefore my beloved brother, Moroni, let us resist evil, and *whatsoever evil we cannot resist with our words*, yea such as rebellions and dissensions, let us resist them with our swords, that we may retain our freedom, that we may rejoice in the great privilege of our church, and in the cause of our Redeemer and our God" (Alma 61:14; emphasis added).

THE POWER OF THE WORD

Pahoran understands that the first line of defense for preserving freedom and bringing about obedience is through the word of God. Just as the Lord uses the book of Alma to show the ineffectiveness of compulsion as a method of bringing about long-term change, He uses the same book to show the lasting effect that is wrought by the power of His word.

Alma the Younger knew and understood the power of the word in bringing about a change in people when he went to teach the apostate Zoramites. Fearing that the Zoramites would "enter into a correspondence with the Lamanites, and that it would be the means of great loss on the part of the Nephites," Alma thought "that it was expedient that they should try the virtue of the word of God", as the "preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just -- yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword or anything else" (Alma 31:4-5). Rather than turn to the sword to force the Zoramites into compliance, Alma understood that a more permanent and inward change could be brought about through the teaching of the gospel. Those Zoramites who listened to the word were converted and remained faithful to the cause of freedom, while those who refused to listen were eventually destroyed when the Lamanites invaded their land. Without the change of heart, the people perished by the sword.

Not only had Alma experienced this kind of change of heart within himself by coming to a knowledge of Christ, he witnessed how the message of the Redeemer had changed the lives of his friends, the sons of Mosiah. These four men experienced such a change that "they could not bear that any human soul should perish" (Mosiah 28:3). They were so convinced by the power of the word that Mosiah's sons chose to go and teach the Lamanites, who were described as

a wild and a hardened and a ferocious people; a people who delighted in murdering the Nephites, and robbing and plundering them; and their hearts were set upon riches, or upon gold and silver, and precious stones; yet they sought to obtain these things by murdering and plundering, that they might not labor for them with their own hands (Alma 17:14).

Even these wild and ferocious people were "brought to behold the marvelous light of God" through the teaching of the word (Alma 26:3). When Ammon, the senior of the sons of Mosiah, taught King Lamoni and his people, "as many as heard his words believed, and were converted unto the Lord . . . their hearts had been changed; that they had no more desire to do evil" (Alma 19:33).

This same change was also experienced by the father of King Lamoni when he was taught by Aaron about the plan of redemption and the coming of the Messiah. Following his conversion, the king of the Lamanites sent a proclamation throughout all the land that the Lamanites were to allow Ammon, Aaron, and their brethren free access to their houses, temples, and sanctuaries, that "they might go forth and preach the word according to their desires", that the preaching of the word might convince the people "concerning the wicked traditions of their fathers, and that they might be convinced that they were all brethren" (Alma 23:1-3).

As a result of the teachings of the sons of Mosiah, "thousands were brought to the knowledge of the Lord" and "they became a righteous people; they did lay down the weapons of their rebellion, that they did not fight against God any more, neither against any of their brethren" (Alma 23:5-7). As a symbol of their permanent change, these people changed their names to Anti-Nephi-Lehies (Alma 23:17-18). They were no longer Lamanites, following the traditions of rebellion passed down from Laman, but they were people of God, following in the ways of Nephi and Lehi. They had not been compelled by the sword, but had been taught by the word of God that had wrought a change in their very nature. In another powerful symbolic gesture, they took their swords and all their weapons of war and buried them in the earth (Alma 24:17).

The word had indeed had power over the sword in bringing a people to peace; and the change was not just temporary. Even when threatened with death, these people would not return to their old pattern of war, hatred, and disobedience to God's commandments. Many in fact, gave their lives to seal their testimonies that they had changed; and "praised God even in the very act of perishing under the sword" (Alma 24:23). The powerful spirit of their sacrifice brought a mighty change to those who had wielded the sword of destruction upon them. "The people of God were joined that day by more than the number who had been slain" (Alma 24:26). No greater evidence could be given that the word has power over the sword.

Further evidence of the permanent nature of the change brought to these Lamanites comes to light some twenty or so years later when they still chose not take up arms against the enemy. Around the year 64 B.C., Helaman, in an epistle to Moroni, says that he has "somewhat more to say concerning the people of Ammon, who, in the beginning, were Lamanites; but . . . by the power and word of God, they had been converted to the Lord" (Alma 53:10). Helaman states that these people were moved to compassion because they were not helping the Nephites in their war with the Lamanites. Some were desirous to take up their swords to help their brethren due to the gravity of the conflict, yet because of their oath; they maintained their covenant to never return to their old ways of war.

The Lamanite conversion had lasted a lifetime, and they had instilled it into the hearts of their children. The Lamanite youth demonstrated the power of the teachings of their parents when they "did think more upon the liberty of their fathers than they did upon their lives; yea, they had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them" (Alma 56:47). They now took up arms to fight in behalf of the Nephites and the cause of freedom. They had been taught by their parents to have faith in God, and to fight for His just cause. The converting power of the word had stretched down into a second generation.

While the torch of hatred seems to be passed on naturally from generation to generation by those who have been compelled to obey, the light of the gospel must be rekindled within the heart of each individual of the coming generation. Once converted, parents must teach and pass on the legacy of faith and truth to their children. Future generations of converted Lamanites learned the lesson of the power of the word even better than most of the Nephites. Several years after the battles contained in the book of Alma had ended, the Gadianton robbers came among both the Lamanites and the Nephites. It was the Lamanites who "did hunt the band of robbers of Gadianton; and *they did preach the word of God* among the more wicked part of the them, insomuch that this band of robbers was utterly destroyed from among the Lamanites" (Helaman 6:37; emphasis added). The Lamanites had learned that the word of God is more powerful than

the sword in bringing about a change to the individual hearts of men which in turn helps to shape a society. Samuel the Lamanite confirmed that "as many [of the Lamanites] as are brought to the knowledge of the truth, . . . and are led to believe the holy scriptures, . . . are firm and steadfast in the faith, and in the thing wherewith they have been made free" (Helaman 15:7-8).

A LESSON FOR OUR DAY

Modern prophets have told us that the Book of Mormon was written for our day. In a world where force and compulsion are used on every side to bring about compliance and obedience, the lesson of the book of Alma should serve to teach us a better way. The wars of the Book of Alma clearly show the ineffectiveness of force as a means of bringing about a change to an individual's heart so that they can progress to be as God. The Book of Alma also illustrates how the converted soul experiences a life-long change by recording some of the greatest conversion stories found in scripture. The Lord includes both concepts within the same setting to teach us by contrast the way to bring about change within an individual and within a society.

As the Book of Mormon continues on from Alma, the Lord shows us the power of the word to convert entire civilizations. Following the visit of the Savior, the disciples "taught and did minister one to another; and they had all things common among them" until "the people were all converted unto the Lord, upon all the face of the land". There was no contention and there "could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God" (See 3 Nephi 26:19 & 4 Nephi 1:2, 15-16). Modern prophets confirm the idea that force and compulsion will not produce a Godly person or a Godly society. The only way to bring about an enduring change of behavior in either the society or the individual is through conversion to righteous principles through the teaching of the word of God. President David O. McKay stated, "Force and compulsion will never establish the ideal society. This can come only by the transformation within the individual soul -- a life redeemed from sin and brought in harmony with the divine will" (McKay, *CR*, Oct 1962, 7-8). The conversion of the soul to

righteous principles is the key to bringing about obedience. Only as an individual understands and believes in divine truths will they use their agency to choose to be obedient without compulsion or force.

THE BATTLE IN OUR HOMES

The challenge that faces all parents is to apply these principles in the home. The battle in the home is fought on two levels. First the parents themselves must be converted to the Lord so that their obedience to Him is motivated out of love for the Lord and the principles that He taught. Second, they must teach these principles to their children so that they too become converted to doing what is right without being forced or compelled. If the parents themselves are to be converted, they must apply the power of the word in their own lives by coming to know the doctrine for themselves. Just as the converted Lamanites, parents must also listen to God's chosen servants as they teach the doctrines of the gospel by the power of the spirit. We learn from Alma, Ammon, and Aaron that we must learn, understand, and be converted to the basic doctrines of the gospel; the existence of God, the creation, the fall, the atonement, and the saving ordinances of the gospel (See Alma 18:22-40; 22:7-18; and 33:12-23).

Once converted to these principles, parents must teach them in the home to insure that the lamp of truth will light the path for the rising generation. In the Book of Mormon, it is the rising generation who strays from the inspired teachings of King Benjamin, which had been the major cause of the conversion and faithfulness of an entire generation (Mosiah 26:1). Later, after the powerful conversions of the Lamanites in Alma's record, it is the rising generation of Lamanite youth which "became for themselves" and "began to decrease as to their faith and righteousness" (3 Nephi 1:29-30).

In our modern day, President Boyd K. Packer expressed concern that young people are growing up "without values on which to base their conduct." He continued, "I have long believed that the study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than talking

about behavior will improve behavior". According to President Packer, the primary doctrine of the gospel that the youth need to learn is that the influence of the Atonement of Christ is "individual, very personal, and very useful." He comments that even the beginner must learn that "an understanding of the Atonement is of immediate and very practical value in everyday life" (Packer, *CR*, April, 1997, p. 8).

What youth need to become more obedient to parents and to gospel principles is not necessarily more discipline, but more discipleship to Christ. The Savior himself was the perfect example of obedience to His Father. Without compulsion or force, He willingly submitted to the will of the Father. When faced with the agony of the garden and the cross, the will of the Son was swallowed up in the will of the Father (Mosiah 15:7). He chose not His own will but that of the Father. No one could have forced Him to perform such a task, and no one could have taken His life from Him. All this He had to do willingly. He alone had power to give His life. As He told the awe struck Nephites, "I have laid down my life, and have taken it up again" (3 Nephi 9:22). Christ emulated perfectly the words of His servant King Benjamin when he told us that we must be "*willing* to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon [us], even as a child doth submit to his father" (Mosiah 3:19; emphasis added).

In order to motivate both our youth and ourselves to willingly do that which is good and be obedient, we must learn from the Savior by studying and applying His divine truths. Truly we must become, and must help our youth to become, more obedient as a result of a higher vision of our relationship to God. The Book of Mormon is the divine source of these higher truths that will bring us closer to God than any other book. President Packer once observed,

Latter-day Saints are not obedient because they are compelled to be obedient. They are obedient because they know certain spiritual truths and have decided, as an expression of their own individual agency, to obey the commandments of God. There is an obedience that comes from a knowledge of the truth that transcends any external form of control. We are not obedient because we are blind; we are obedient because we can see (Boyd K. Packer, *Ensign*, May 1983, 66).

CONCLUSION

Through the power of the Word of God, as well as the word of God, we are able to see and understand divine truth that allows us to be obedient, not out of compulsion or external control, but out of a love for our Heavenly Father and our fellow man. It is obedience born of love that is the fruit of the converted soul. The Nephites enjoyed a blessed and happy society because of the "love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people" (4 Nephi 1:15). This is the kind of obedience that President Packer said, "transcends any external form of control" that "comes from a knowledge of the truth" (cited above).

For this reason, Moroni taught in the closing chapters of the Book of Mormon that we should "pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love" (Moroni 7:48). When we love God, we willingly perform all that He asks us to do. The Lord desires that we obey Him because we love Him; and because He loves us, He has made us free to choose. He will not force our obedience. As taught in the inspiring words of one of our hymns,

Know this, that ev'ry soul is free To choose his life and what he'll be;
For this eternal truth is giv'n: That God will force no man to heav' n.

He'll call, persuade, direct aright, And bless with wisdom, love, and light,
In nameless ways be good and kind, But never force the human mind.
("Know This, That Every Soul Is Free", Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Hymn #240)

The Book of Mormon clearly demonstrates the power of teaching correct principles to inspire obedience born of love. The Book of Alma in particular teaches us again and again to use the word of God as a means to foster obedience. Whether in dealing with a society as a whole, as Alma did in the case of the erring Nephites and Zoramites, (See Alma 4:19 and Alma 31:1-5), or in dealing with a wayward son, as in the case of Corianton (See Alma 39-42), Alma continually relied on the converting power of the word of God to change the hearts of the people so that they would seek the mighty change through the power of Christ. It is the Book of

Mormon that will bring us closer to God so that we will, out of our own agency and love, obey Him and return home to be as He is.

And now, as the preaching of *the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just* ∅ yea it had had *more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword*, or anything, which had happened unto them - therefore Alma thought it was expedient that they should *try the virtue of the word of God*.

(Alma 31:5; emphasis added)