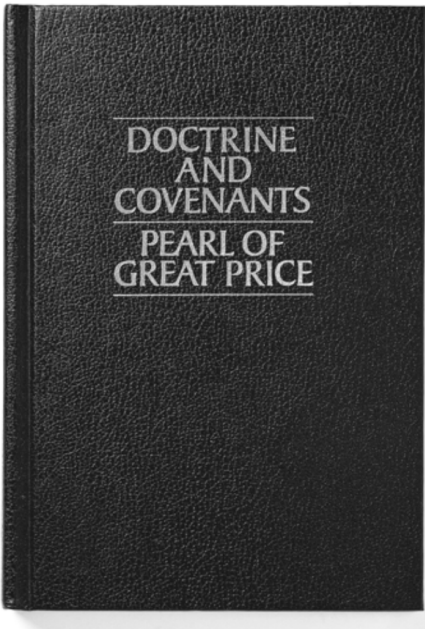


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The term “reproving with sharpness” is found in D&C 121:43.
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Reproving with Sharpness—When?

Robert L. Millet and Lloyd D. Newell

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Many years ago, a middle-aged couple sat across from me (Millet). She had her head bowed, and he busily eyed my office. Before I had the chance to ask why they had sought marriage counseling, Sister G. raised her head, revealing numerous bruises around the eyes and cheeks and an upper lip severely swollen. My question was an obvious one: “What happened to you?”

She started to answer but was quickly interrupted by an anxious husband: “We have just had a family disagreement. But then, that’s beside the point—let’s talk about why we are here!”

Brother G. went on and on about how his “needs” were going unmet, how he felt ignored and slighted in the home, and how his family had failed to recognize him as the head of the household. After a few minutes, I interrupted as I pointed to his wife’s bruises: “Brother G., did you do this to your wife?”

“I certainly did,” he retorted in a somewhat proud fashion.

“Why?” I asked, almost dumbfounded.

He paused for a few seconds, smiled, and then reached across my desk and grabbed my triple combination. “I have only done,” he replied, “what the Lord said fathers and priesthood holders should do when leading the Church or their families.” He read and commented:

“‘Reproving betimes with sharpness. . . .’ You see, the Lord says we need to be *sharp* in our reproof or corrections.” He pounded my desk in synchrony with the word *sharp*. “I am only trying to establish myself as the head of my home, the patriarch.” He smiled again, confidently.

I stared in amazed stupor for what must have seemed like minutes. Surely, I thought, no member of the Church could be so perverse in judgment as to justify spouse abuse through the very section of the Doctrine and Covenants that warns harshly against the evils of unrighteous dominion. Or could he or she?

Moved upon by the Holy Ghost

Granted, this particular man’s problem was overly extreme—far more exaggerated than the problems of average members of the Church. But his basic misunderstanding and his misguided abuse of priesthood authority and scriptural injunction centered around a vital principle of relationship building that is internalized far too infrequently in the homes of Latter-

day Saints. To uncover this true and timely principle, we need always to include additional words from the verse Brother G. cited, placing the emphasis where it belongs—at the end of the expression. Note these additional words: “Reproving betimes with sharpness, *when moved upon by the Holy Ghost*” (D&C 121:43; emphasis added).

Too often, we reprove for inappropriate or unjustified reasons. Elder Neal A. Maxwell has confirmed that the correct manner and motivation for reproof are indicated in this vital verse. “In practice, however, when we undertake to reprove we frequently are prompted not by the Holy Ghost but by ego. Moreover, we often fail to reprove ‘betimes,’ meaning speedily and *early on*. Time can harden feelings as surely as the sun bakes wet clay.”¹

Our pride may prompt us to lash out and reprove harshly. Our own insecurity and fear may precipitate unkind responses. Possibly, we may truly misunderstand or have a stilted notion of reproof. Perhaps we have let it fester until the situation has become much larger than it warrants. Reproving with sharpness does not merit callous disregard for the sensitivities of the other person or heartless actions that demean.

It is possible that far too often we are “moved upon,” not by the Spirit, but by our own emotions—or even by the adversary, the author of contention. The Master taught His Nephite disciples that “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” (3 Nephi 11:29). The Holy Ghost must dictate the need for reproof to us, or else we reprove improperly and for the wrong reason. That requires the personal righteousness of the reprover, a loving and patient disposition, and a sincere desire to help rather than to harm and to bless rather than to damage.

Perhaps the following chart and discussion will be useful in pointing out differences between reproofing when divinely guided to do so and when motivated to do so for other reasons. How may we know if our reproofs are prompted by and are worthy of the companionship of the Holy Ghost?

Moved upon by the Holy Ghost	Moved upon by Other
1. The reprove is love motivated.	1. The reprove is anger motivated.
2. The reproof is necessary.	2. The reproof may be unnecessary.
3. Showing love after the reproof is natural and easy.	3. Attempts at showing love after the reproof are difficult and labored.
4. Teaching moments occur during the expression of love.	4. Bitterness often prevents teaching during the expressing of love.
5. The reproof is person centered (“save soul”)	5. The reproof is reprove centered (“save face”).
6. The bond of love is strengthened between individuals.	6. The bond of love is weakened between individuals.

1. The reprover is love motivated

Anger is a prostitution of true feelings and consequently accomplishes little of virtue or value. “The wrath of man,” wrote James, “worketh not the righteousness of God” (James 1:20). We are on the proper path when we simply reprove for the right reason—that is, when it is clear the correction is out of genuine love for the loved one. When we reprove in anger or lash out in any form of violence, our behavior is a reflection of a fault in character and a weakness in Christian discipleship.

The Holy Ghost would certainly never prompt anyone to indulge in brutality, physical viciousness, or emotional cruelty. A prompting of the Spirit would never authorize shouting, swearing, expressing feelings of hatred or discord, or exhibiting a desire to harm the other person. “A violent temper is such a terrible, corrosive thing. And the tragedy is that it accomplishes no good; it only feeds evil with resentment and rebellion and pain,” said President Gordon B. Hinckley in general conference. “Anger is not an expression of strength. It is an

indication of one's inability to control his thoughts, words, his emotions. Of course it is easy to get angry. When the weakness of anger takes over, the strength of reason leaves. Cultivate within yourselves the mighty power of self-discipline."²

When our hearts are right and our purposes pure, we will be filled with love—not anger. The Holy Ghost moves upon us when we are, and have been, in tune with the Spirit prior to the reproof. When our sincerest motive is love and our deepest intention is growth for the person receiving the reproof, our hearts will be “filled with love towards God and all men” (Mosiah 2:4). Always, the reproof will be appropriate.

2. The reproof is necessary

Some things simply don't matter. If what a loved one is doing is temporarily disturbing or inconvenient, we need to ask frequently, “Does it really matter? Do I honestly need to ‘make waves’ over this issue (or ‘make an issue’ over something that need not be taken so seriously)?” A number of years ago, my wife and I (Millet) entered into a pact that we would work together to avoid tension or contention in the home by one of us asking the other (delicately, quietly, and at the right moment), “Does it really matter?” or “Do we need to let this thing get blown out of proportion?” or “Is this really all that important?”

While making a family trip across the country one summer, I remember finding myself getting annoyed by our youngest son who was propping his feet on my tape player. “Jeff, could you move your feet?” “Move your feet, Jeffery.” “Do you hear Daddy, Jeffery? I asked you to take your feet off the tape player!” Just as I was about to raise my voice and insist upon obedience, my wife nudged me gently and responded, “Sweetheart, does it really matter?” My tendency then (and perhaps our tendency in similar circumstances) was to blurt out: “Of course it

matters! I am his father and he needs to learn to obey!” But I caught myself and suddenly realized that it “wasn’t that big of a deal,” as we say sometimes.

Consider the father who decides he “needs” his rest on Sunday afternoon but is unexpectedly disturbed by a little one landing on his stomach. Does the father leap from the couch and spank the child, or does he smile and move to the floor to play also? Instead of a thoughtless reaction, stopping to consider whether the reproof is really necessary can save some hurt feelings. What is a response of love? President Hinckley counseled in general priesthood meeting:

You men who are husbands and fathers should have had kindled in your hearts . . . a resolve so to conduct yourselves in your homes as to be worthy of the love, the respect, the honor, the companionship of your wives and your children. Holding the priesthood does not give any man the right to domineer over those for whom he should show the greatest of love and the greatest of consideration. Each of us should go home this night with a stronger resolve in our hearts to live worthy of the companionship of those who love us most and whom we should love and honor and respect without reservation.³

Some things are better left unsaid; some actions may be better off ignored. Of course, that doesn’t mean that children should be left without discipline or that others in our circle of influence should be left uncorrected. But wisdom is knowing *when* to act, *how* to act, and *why* you should or should not act. Brigham Young gave a key to making righteous reproof possible: “If you are ever called to chasten a person, never chasten beyond the balm you have within you to bind up. . . . When you have the chastening rod in your hands, ask God to give you wisdom to use it, that you may not use it to the destruction of an individual, but to his salvation.”⁴ If we use correct governing principles and strive for personal righteousness, answers will come, the prompting of the Spirit will be our constant companion, and our dominion will be everlasting (D&C 121:46).

3. Showing love after the reproof is natural and easy

We are not justified in flying off the handle in a burst of anger. Further, we can do much to prevent any resentment and alienation resulting from the reproof by reinforcing the other person with “an increase of love.” When parents reaffirm sincere love for their children and confidence in them after the reproof, the relationship is strengthened; and meaningful lessons beyond the reproof are internalized. Some of a family’s closest and most spiritual moments can occur at such times. We all make mistakes. We overreact from time to time. But we can show forth greater love every time. We can admit error when it is made; we can repent and improve. And we can explain our reproof with kindness, gentleness, and love unfeigned. This is a crucial teaching moment for children—a moment that transcends the reproof. It’s a time for parents to model gospel principles enacted in loving reproofs.

Part of the scriptural mandate is to reprove promptly—without harboring ill will or bitterness. We follow reproof with more love; and the love should come on the heels of the reproof—not after hours or days of the “cold shoulder” or silent treatment. This reassurance should be repeated often so the reproof does not become a barrier to a continuing, nurturing relationship.⁵

President Harold B. Lee counseled us to temper criticism with love:

During my lifetime I have learned much about reproofing with sharpness, “when moved upon by the Holy Ghost” (D&C 121:43). And I have learned something else: that the higher the position or duty of the stewardship, there is the greater danger of wounding sensitive souls. We must always reach out for the wounded soul whom we may have offended, and unintentionally in some cases, lest he esteem us to be his enemy. I have learned that sincere appreciation for accomplishment should always precede any supposed criticism. . . .

I recall an incident in my own family where one of my young granddaughters was being criticized by her father for not properly taking care of her room, making her bed, etc., etc. And then with considerable feeling she said, “Well, Daddy, why do you only see the thing to criticize and never see the good things that I do?” This brought the father to some serious reflections, and that night he placed under her pillow a letter of love and understanding telling her of all the things that he

admired in her, and thus began to bridge over the hurt that had been implied by his constant criticism with no approval for the good things. . . .

There are times when we need to reprove, but even when we must correct those who need reproof, they hear what we say to them more clearly and lasting if they know that we love them and honor them and respect them in their callings.⁶

4. Teaching moments occur during the expression of love

Showing love after the reproof is critical. It is during such expressions of love that the parent is able to make those difficult discriminations for the child between “I love you” and “I don’t love or appreciate what was done.” If the parent is truly love motivated, the love will flow during and after the reproof. Godly sorrow is born of love. So when parents are sensitive and tender during teaching moments (for example, “You know, when I was your age . . .” or “Some things are kind of hard to understand, aren’t they? Let me explain. . . .” or “I want you to understand that the reason I have taken this disciplinary action is because I love you. . . .”), the love they exhibit will more readily create a repentant attitude in the child.

The very next verse in the revelation to which we have referred states: “That he may know that thy faithfulness is stronger than the cords of death” (D&C 121:44). There must be no question in the mind of a child, for example, as to how the parent stands on matters of good and evil and right and wrong. The reproved one must know that the other’s faithfulness to God and His laws is genuine and deep. But the child should also sense that the relationship matters and that the mother’s (or the father’s, wife’s, husband’s, bishop’s, teacher’s, etc.) love is constant. The essence of the “great plan of mercy” is love and forgiveness (Alma 42:31). The child should come to feel, through the experience of divine reproof, that the parent’s faithfulness to her or him (the child) is pure and certain—literally, what has been done was for the child’s best good.

Elder Maxwell has stated: “If we seek to administer reproof properly, we must also be willing to listen and to respond after we have issued our reproof. The receiver will often need

some time to test the accuracy of our reproof and the implications of that reproof. He needs to reassure himself that we care for him, that he is still safely within our circle of concern.”⁷

On occasion, when it has been necessary to correct one of my children, I (Newell) have learned that, more often than not, what they wanted was to be noticed, appreciated, and loved. They’ve needed a hug, a quiet moment together, and a little more attention and concern. I have also learned that we must be willing to be taught, corrected, and even reprovved by our children. Once when I didn’t handle a discipline situation with my five-year-old son very well, my seven-year-old daughter calmly said (words she had heard my wife and I say to our children), “You surely could have handled that better.” She was right. I asked for forgiveness, learned a valuable lesson, grew as a person, and improved as a father.

President Hinckley has given specific insight on what it means to reprove with sharpness when moved upon by the Holy Ghost. Some years ago, he spoke of a boy who visited him in his office and detailed a story of a troubled life. The boy spoke of his father who had an uncontrolled temper:

Whenever he disciplined his children, he lost control and destroyed both them and himself.

As I looked across the desk at that trembling, broken young man, estranged from a father he considered his enemy, I thought of some great words of revealed truth given through the Prophet Joseph Smith. They set forth in essence the governing spirit of the priesthood, and I believe they apply to the government of our homes. Let me read them to you. [p.90]

“No power or influence can or ought to be maintained . . . , only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned;

“By kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy and without guile—”

I believe those marvelous and simple words set forth the spirit in which we should stand as [parents]. Do they mean that we should not exercise discipline, that we should not reprove? Listen to these further words:

“Reproving betimes with sharpness [When? While angry or in a fit of temper? No—] 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;

“That he may know that thy faithfulness is stronger than the cords of death” (D&C 121:41–44).

This . . . is the key to government in the home directed by the Holy Spirit.⁸

5. The reproof is person centered

Our concern must be to “save souls”—not to “save face.” When we deeply understand that “the worth of souls is great in the sight of God,” we do all we can to increase feelings of self-worth in others, engender self-confidence, teach others to live and grow in meaningful ways, and sincerely strive to build and bless others (D&C 18:10). As President Spencer W. Kimball reminds us:

Jesus lived and taught the virtues of love and kindness and patience. He also taught the virtues of firmness and resolution and persistence and courageous indignation. These two sets of virtues seem to clash with each other . . . , yet both are necessary. If there were but one, love without discipline, love without deep conviction of right and wrong, without courage to fight the wrong, such love becomes sentimentalism. Conversely, the virtues of righteous indignation without love can be harsh and cruel.⁹

If our concern is for “the other” and not for ourselves, we’ll be more likely to reprove appropriately and with the Spirit; we’ll be more inclined to be both loving and firm. If our reproof has been preceded “by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; by kindness and pure knowledge” (D&C 121:41–42), it will be difficult to not be wholly motivated by love for the other, and, in large measure, to forget ourselves. It will help to shift the focus from our needs, our frustrations, and our desires and to concentrate more on

questions such as the following: What does this child need to learn and grow? or How can I best help her learn a crucial gospel principle? or When would be the most effective time to talk to him? or How can I prepare for the reproof so as to be spiritually strengthened? This inventory will help to purify our motives and concentrate our attention on “the other.”

6. The bond of love is strengthened between individuals

Parents who are preoccupied with themselves and their own needs will have more difficulty bringing and leading their children to a desired pattern of behavior and, particularly, into the realm of divine experience. We must never let our concerns for our own appearance crowd out the nobler concerns of our children. A sad commentary on a family in the Church is when a father or mother censures a young person who chooses to go to a priesthood leader to seek counsel or make proper confession. One young lady parked her car three blocks from the chapel, literally walked a half mile out of her way to get to the chapel, and then sat on pins and needles during the entire interview with her bishop. The problem? She had a matter to discuss with her church leader and knew that her parents (active members) would “badger” her about talking to other people about private matters. In contrast, young people who sense in their parents the virtues of integrity and pure faithfulness to the truth will have a deeper and more abiding love for parents and other authorities.

In marriage and parenting, a Christlike disposition, which has at heart the sincere best interests of the other person and sees the child (or spouse) as a growing, changing child of God, will strengthen bonds and inspire emulation. “Nor should we neglect the power of gentle reproof,” Elder Maxwell reminds us. “Sometimes we need not declaim the actions of others so much as remind them of who they are and what they should be.”¹⁰ A parent or spouse who humbly and in a heartfelt way lives the Golden Rule and believes with whole heart that this

child/person is a cherished child of God will do much to help create love, confidence, and goodness in the other person.

Conclusion

President Hinckley has sternly reproved those who are guilty of any form of abuse and unrighteous dominion:

It is difficult for me to understand the tragic accounts of troubled marriages that come to me. They speak of abuse. They speak of dictatorial attitudes, and of some husbands who are bullies in their own homes. They speak of violations of trust, and of broken covenants. They speak of divorce and tears and heartache. . . .

To men within the sound of my voice, wherever you may be, I say, if you are guilty of demeaning behavior toward your wife, if you are prone to dictate and exercise authority over her, if you are selfish and brutal in your actions in the home, then, stop it! Repent! Repent now while you have the opportunity to do so. . . .

The time is now for husbands and wives who may have offended one another to ask forgiveness and resolve to cultivate respect and affection one for another, standing before the Creator as sons and daughters worthy of His smile upon us.¹¹

The Holy Ghost will engender love and respect, not fear and distrust. When we give heed to the Spirit, our reproof will be motivated by love, done with meekness, and sanctioned by heaven.

Clearly, there are times when reproof is necessary and appropriate. Seeking to live righteously so as to be worthy of the influence of the Holy Ghost will do much to ensure our reproofs are inspired of heaven. The Holy Ghost can help us to know when and what the reproof should be. The sanction of the Spirit will bless the interaction, during and after the reproof.

God's love toward His children is manifest through chastening as well as commending, through reproof as well as blessing, "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth" (Hebrews 12:6; Revelation 3:19). His reproof always comes because he loves us (D&C 95:1)—and always as a

means to a greater end. The Prophet Joseph Smith said, “If I did not love men, I would not reprove them.”¹² Let us follow where the Lord and His prophets lead.

Notes

¹ Neal A. Maxwell, *A Wonderful Flood of Light* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), 113.

² Gordon B. Hinckley, Conference Report, October 1991, 71.

³ Gordon B. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 219.

⁴ *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 9:124–25.

⁵ Spencer J. Condie, “Reproving with Love,” *Ensign* 9, no. 8 (August 1979): 18.

⁶ *Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 198–99.

⁷ Neal A. Maxwell, *A More Excellent Way* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967), 94.

⁸ Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley*, 218–19.

⁹ Spencer W. Kimball, *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 245.

¹⁰ *Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book*, ed. Cory H. Maxwell (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 285.

¹¹ Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley*, 322–24.

¹² Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 6:240.