

The Three A's: Atonement, Agency, and Accountability

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This pleasant introduction reminds me of some of the things I've been up to over the vanished years. I heard recently someone say that nostalgia is a wonderful thing, but what good is it if you can't remember anything? We have very happy memories, and some of them relate to these folks sitting behind me for whom I have the highest and most sincere regard. These kind words also reaffirm the feeling that I had when I gave an answer to a bubbly young woman who detached herself from a handsome boyfriend at the entrance of the Salt Lake Temple and walked over to shake my hand.

"Didn't you used to be Elder Hanks?" she asked.

I said, "Yes, I used to be, still am, and hope to be in the future Elder Hanks."

I remember when I came here as a substitute for a General Authority who fell ill at the last moment, and I stood in his place. I recalled an experience of Dr. Hashimoto, a revered and respected professor at the University of Utah, when he faced his class the day after Pearl Harbor. (He was an authentic American with ethnic roots.) He stood before his class that morning and quietly said, "Don't blame me, I'm Irish."

Well, this young lady's question—though it did in fact amuse me—indicated that, like many others, she probably doesn't really understand what a General Authority emeritus is. She, however, is a step ahead of another bright young person who confronted me after a wedding I had performed, looked up into my face intently, and said, "Who are you?" As to what an emeritus is, I don't really know either, but as one who started obviously very young, some things have happened in this change of status. It has not yet meant quick eradication or annihilation, but it has offered some relief from basketsful of meetings and travel so consistent and relentless that it became less than looked forward to: so many postponed dreams of family associations and participation on occasions like Mother's Day, which I missed consistently through my years of service. These postponed dreams have been revived and realized. We do still travel together occasionally to various parts of the world on humanitarian projects that have

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brought us great joy and satisfaction. We are deeply grateful for that.

In the Pacific Islands just a few weeks ago, Maxine and I listened to the chatter of myna birds in their incessant, four-syllable, two-word message. They speak it constantly, with no variation in melody. At first when I heard them, “Beep-beep, beep-beep,” I said to my wife that America’s enterprising commercial entity has reached clear across the world and what they’re saying is, “Pizza-pizza, pizza-pizza.”

She said, “No, no. They’re further ahead than that. They have the political message of the current time: they’re saying, ‘Veto-veto, veto-veto.’”

Well, I’m very grateful for this visit with this student body. A lot of our happiest memories occurred in relationship to this institution, which neither of us was privileged to attend in World War II times. But all of our five children have attended this great school, and all but one of the choice people they’re married to—well, nobody’s perfect! We did serve on the governing board of BYU for years and had committee assignments that permitted us close association regularly in that time. Our grandchildren will likely have a little different diversity being from other places and parts, but I’m sure most or all would like to be here. Peter, who offered the invocation today, has a sister Kristy who just departed from BYU for a mission in Barcelona, and their cousin Kara—also a student here—is now in the Missionary Training Center preparing to go to the Philippines. Peter and Kristy have a younger brother who left for South America just a couple of weeks ago.

I want to mention the 50,000 missionaries and the students here and many others elsewhere who have the capacity and, I pray, who will have the wisdom and the will and the courage and the faith and the intelligence to change the course of this country and the societies in which they live across the earth. Things

are happening of great promise and encouragement, along with much that is distressing. I never could personally imagine living long enough to see, for instance, the breakdown of the Berlin Wall and the communist monolith behind it. We traveled through checkpoints along that wall many times, and were there as it was being dismantled. I would not have hoped realistically to see an alliance for peace between the United States and Russia or the unification of West and East Germany. We had adventures there that were amazing. But, it has all happened. Maybe even more incredible, in a sense, are the developments in South Africa, which did not seem likely in our time. And you, I hope, bright as you are, will be constant in your attention to current affairs—will be thinking and praying and learning about major developments in the Middle East and the fragile balance there that hour by hour seems in jeopardy. We pray that that will be resolved the way God wants it resolved.

There have been major developments in the Church also. I will mention one or two of them. In 1976, twenty years ago—and I’ll confine these developments to that brief period—the First Quorum of the Seventy was organized, having not been in existence in any effective way since the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph. Now there are no more seventies in wards or stakes, but there are two strong Quorums of the Seventy at Church headquarters that supply major support across the earth. The building of temples worldwide had significant impetus in the same period, and so did the expansion of Church education in the colleges and the seminaries and institutes.

A new view of financing has been adopted that most of you would not recognize as a major change, but we do who were privileged to build buildings by contribution. Now a different approach is taken. Very important efforts in Christian service have been induced. One day, if God wills it and we are willing, there may in fact be a reunion of the Savior

with those who follow him and are able to hear him say, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren [and my sisters], ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40). We say that periodically and we love it at Christmas—but we ought to believe it every day. We ought to understand the significance of that special time when the Lord—concluding a magnificent ministry—gave the three parables that ended with the one where the goats were on the left hand and the sheep were on the other. Those represented by the sheep on his right hand were invited to be with him in “eternal life”; those on the left were assigned “eternal damnation.” *The distinction had to do with the way they had behaved toward their fellowmen.*

I’m deeply impressed with this particular parable and offer to you as a testimony and witness that though there are no mentions in that beautiful parable in Matthew 25 of sinfulness of the kind all of us are acquainted with, every sin noted is a sin of omission. So in fact does a major part of the scripture have to do with sins of omission. Please be aware of this and do not resist directions for changes that come from the president of the Church. Change goes on regularly as the inspiration and revelation of the Almighty directs it, so you need not worry about that. You may not understand it all or have the roots to know out of what it came, but it happens. I have watched it long enough to have great confidence in the process and the product of the revelation and inspiration available to those who preside in the Church.

I want to mention my appreciation for this school, which I think will produce, as it has in the past, people of such quality that, were we not confident in your generation, would make us nervous indeed. Speaking of nervousness, I was thinking as I put these notes together of our only son, who, when he was being ordained a deacon, stood up with the bishop by invitation. By special arrangement I, too,

was able to be there—rarely was I able to be with him or with his sisters at good moments during their lives. Our son stood up there and was authorized by the vote of the congregation to become a deacon. His sisters asked him afterward at home during lunch if he was nervous standing up there. He answered that he was nervous standing alone by the bishop until he looked down, saw the voters, and noticed that Dad’s hand was higher than all the rest. That, in fact, is true. I held it as high as I could hoist it because that’s how I felt—about him and his sisters and their generation and now about another generation.

It is important that you have some sense of how high the hands are raised in your behalf. Some of you may be disquieted by this regulation or that, but you should be reassured by—if you could hear it—the consistent support given you and your leaders and your staff and faculty by those who provide the authenticity and support of this institution. So I thank you for what you are and for what I hope and pray and believe will be.

I need to thank you for something else in which you had no part and for which you really aren’t responsible. The invitation to spend these few minutes here set me off a few weeks ago in a program of search and ponder. I’ve been searching and pondering the scriptures, and it’s been a blessing and a delight. I’ve spent concentrated hours, which are not really typical of the schedule we’ve been trying to keep, that have brought wonderful and sweet feelings—no new or different or theologically innovative things, just the warmth and the spirit that come from searching the scriptures.

Do you remember in the very first chapter of the Book of Mormon (after the words everybody can cite about Nephi’s parentage) that there was a vision reported? One descended “out of the midst of heaven” followed by twelve others, and the first paused before Father Lehi and gave him a book and bade

him read. The record says that as he read he was filled with the Spirit of the Lord (see 1 Nephi 1:8–12). I think that’s the best way yet—that and on your knees and in the bosom of the family whom you love and whose lives are all tied up with your own.

So I’ve surveyed some larger fields, and I could begin to cultivate here, if there were time available, intuitions and inspirations that have been revisited from memory. I’ve enjoyed enough exaltation of spirit to proclaim as did little Dennis the Menace to his mother something in a cartoon we read in Hawaii recently. Dennis looks up into her face and says, “I’ve never had so much fun as I’m going to have tomorrow.” Think on that—that’s how I think.

Well, the scriptures have provided inspiration again this last little while. A couple of weekends ago, we had a conference where a propitious culmination to my study season was enjoyed. I sat in conference listening and approving and nodding my head and ready to raise my hand as high as I could get it if I had a chance, because I know the men who were on the stand. I know them as well as I know now two of the men who sit on this stand in that circumstance and would raise my hand as high as I could get it for them.

Each worshipper at the conference could extract their own personally satisfying and needed messages from the talks, but I got mine in three words that took me back to a previous time. A young man whose beginnings in the Church had not been auspicious or helpful and who said he knew nothing about the gospel had been sent to me for help in learning about it. I asked him how he would like to go about learning or where he would like to start. He said that he didn’t know enough to know, so how about starting with the alphabet. I said, “Okay, we’ll start with the *A*’s.” And in the conference this time, those three *A*’s that I talked to him about came immediately to the fore: *atonement*, *agency*, and *accountability*.

Without the Atonement we could not have what we have of assurance, and we could not have the wonderful privilege of responding through our *agency*, moral agency, which is not only our privilege but our inescapable responsibility to carry and respond to.

God said he gave agency to his children in the Garden of Eden. And in two magnificent places in the scriptures (in 2 Nephi 2 and Deuteronomy 30), it is written that this agency and our use of it is of such immense consequence that we cannot imagine. It means either life or death, exaltation or damnation. So with that atoning blessing there comes the responsibility that is sacred and serious and inescapable. We may talk about it in academic circles and defend positions vigorously—whether or not it actually exists and how much of it is there when we live in a society of agents—and afterward everybody will leave the meeting and just go on out and continue to make choices. And so we will and so we must.

I’d like to talk for just a few minutes about what President Hinckley said in a compelling, tender way when he bore powerful testimony of our commitment as a Church and as people to the Savior and his atoning love. He noted the sorrow that comes with every death and the mitigation of the abject sorrow that comes with every death by the certainty of the resurrection of the Son of God that first Easter morning. The pain of death, he said, is swallowed up in the peace of eternal life. Of all the events of human history, none is of such consequence as this. We know that is true individually and personally, and we thank God for the comfort and assurance that all the standard works give us about these sacred subjects.

Along with the Atonement, which in effect lays out the path and the prescriptions and the safeguards and provides the guides, is the *agency* that we often exercise by ourselves in the light or in the dark, in a classroom or in a corporation boardroom. And attached to that is *accountability*. We will not escape the relevancy

between these three words no matter what we protest or how loudly we may squeal. We are the subjects and blessed participants, if we choose, in the privileges and promises of the holy Atonement of Jesus Christ and his resurrection and all that implies. We will go on making choices, and we will regret some of them and repent of them and turn around knowing that only he among all who ever lived in this earth was sinless. We all have the need to know the processes by which we recoup what we could be and could have, had we chosen more wisely. So these are the three basics: Atonement, Agency, and Accountability—the three *A's*, as my young friend said.

We have quoted over the years a statement that says, “He who picks up one end of the stick, picks up the other. He who chooses the beginning of a road, chooses the place it leads to.” That is frightening and sobering, yet there is the magnificent assurance that “the keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel; and he employeth no servant there; . . . [and] he cannot be deceived, for the Lord God is his name” (2 Nephi 9:41). Oh, what comfort that brings me personally. Peter at Pentecost bore his testimony in these words:

Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this man [the man whom they had raised at the gate beautiful] stand here before you whole.

This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner.

Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved. [Acts 4:10–12]

Lehi taught his children the marvelous few verses recorded in 2 Nephi 2:6–9 concerning the Savior:

Wherefore, redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah; for he is full of grace and truth.

Behold he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit; and unto none else can the ends of the law be answered.

[And then this great missionary invitation:]
Wherefore, how great the importance to make these things known unto the inhabitants of the earth, that they may know that there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah, who layeth down his life according to the flesh, and taketh it again by the power of the Spirit. . . .

Wherefore, he is the first fruits unto God, inasmuch as he shall make intercession for all the children of men.

I need to conclude in deference to your classes by sharing a couple of things that have happened recently. Last Friday night a dear, longtime friend toppled over at a dinner we were attending. He was unconscious and dying—it was obvious. There were some physicians in the group, one of whom reached him immediately and quickly did what had to be done to save him from choking to death on regurgitation.

Before the 911 folks arrived with their professional skills, our friend was regaining consciousness. His first words were to ask for a blessing, and some there who loved him and were qualified knelt around and petitioned the Lord to bless him.

This sobering incident seemed to me a choice example of the blending of spiritual and temporal help in reaching to supply the needs of those in trouble. It seemed also a clear example of diversity among us in responding to our observation of a need and in our helpfulness in quickly moving to offer assistance. Many present were capable of offering the help urgently needed, but many stood or sat in apparent shock or indecisiveness while a handful

moved into action. A life was saved that it seemed certain would be lost.

The other recent thing was a telephone call from a wonderful man I met years ago. Some of the scriptures I've mentioned today had been used in answer to some questions in a priesthood leadership meeting about the Savior, the keeper of the gate, and the record of his mercy and his love—mercy “which overpowereth justice” for the truly penitent (see Alma 34:15, 42:22–24). There is such rhythm and majestic blessing in the fundamental principles of confidence in God and Christ in the plan of repentance when we have used our agency unwisely, of commitment to ordinances and principles and laws, and of the interest in keeping ourselves fit to walk by the direction of the Spirit. The man who called me said something that I would like to finish with.

He had been through family tragedies, and he had apparently taken great comfort from the scriptures quoted above and others that were that night pointed out as being helpful.

He spoke not of the anguish suffered through the problems but of the love that had been showered upon his family by thoughtful people who acted to bring comfort. Difficult as their challenges had been, the caller said, it was one of the sweetest periods of their lives. He spoke of “amazing grace” and said, “There is more *grace* than *works* in the Atonement. And that is the most sacred and serious thing that we know.”

I pray that you will think about the vital importance of using agency wisely and the inevitable experience we have ahead of answering, of standing in judgment to respond to our choices. Thank God for the great promise of mercy that “overcometh justice” if we are truly repentant. We love you, pray for you, thank God for you, and hope we are around long enough to see some other changes in this world and in the Church that are brought about because of needs you discover and which you'll help meet. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.