Possibly no institution is more preoccupied with family than the LDS Church. In 1995 Church leaders issued the document “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” That document does what others have found difficult: it defined marriage and family, as well as specifying the responsibilities of father (provider) and mother (nurturer). The proclamation warns “that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.” And it calls upon citizens and governments to “maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of government.”

Alas, the family is in trouble. In the April 2008 General Conference, Elder Russell M. Nelson reminded his listeners, “Throughout the world, the family is increasingly under attack.”

The phrase family “under attack” did not originate with him; it has been embedded in Church leaders’ sermons and Church publications for at least a quarter century. For example, back in 1981, Elder Hartman Rector, Jr., was convinced that not since the days of Noah have families been “under a more serious attack.” President Howard W. Hunter in his Bountiful Utah Temple dedication reminded the Lord that the “family unit is under attack.” This is an age, Elder Arthur R. Bassett noted, “when family values often come under attack.” When asked why “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” was written, the late President Gordon B. Hinckley said, “Because the family is under attack. All across the world, families are falling apart.”

But what do the Brethren mean by “under attack”? Do they mean a physical attack meant to destroy, as when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor? Or do they mean a verbal attack, with the intent to demean the family? Who is attacking and what weapons are they using? Are all families under attack, or just certain families? And what is the intended outcome of these attacks on the family?

Church leaders aver that it is Satan attacking the family. “We know, without question, Lucifer is the enemy of the family,” says Elder M. Russell Ballard. Satan is masterminding what Elder Ballard calls a relentless assault on the family. Satan is smart enough to realize “that the surest and most effective way to disrupt the Lord’s work is to diminish the effectiveness of the family and the sanctity of the home.” Satan does this by producing discord between parents, who then neglect family home evening and proper gospel instruction of their children. Family prayer slides, as does temple attendance, along with family scripture study. “That’s all it takes,” says Elder Ballard, to retard the Lord’s work.

Elder L. Tom Perry says that Satan is masterminding the “decay” of the family and that Satan is out to “destroy” the family. Elder Perry’s take is that Satan’s target is the father. He says, “Satan, in his carefully devised plan to destroy the family, seeks to diminish the role of fathers.” Elder Russell M. Nelson, on the other hand, sees mothers as Satan’s target. “Because mothers are essential to God’s great plan of happiness, their sacred work is opposed by Satan, who would destroy the family and demean the worth of women.”

This then is the picture preached from the LDS pulpit. The family is under attack by Satan who wishes to “destroy” or, to use the language of the Proclamation, “disintegrate” the family. What I am hearing is that Satan wishes to eliminate
families—not some families, but all families. One of the ways he is doing this, according to Elder Ballard, is by redefining family in ways contrary to God’s eternal plan for the happiness of his children.10

Other “proofs” of Satan’s attack on family, according to an article in the Liahona, include: “Adultery, divorce, cohabitation, child and spouse abuse, homosexuality, abortion, teen pregnancies, pornography, disobedient children, economic struggles, [and] an increasing unwillingness among married couples to bear and rear children.”11

Elder Nelson’s April 2008 General Conference sermon further cautioned, “If families fail, many of our political, economic, and social systems will also fail.”12

My first response was that it would be good if some of these systems failed. But then my superb Brigham Young University training kicked in, and I realized that often families fail as a result of inadequate and corrupt political and economic policies and systems.

As for social systems, families are a social system embedded in the larger social system. In short, the failure of families, like the failure of a building in an earthquake, is often the result of political and economic decisions that impinge upon the social system, or the communities in which families exist. For example, if the Church, which itself is a social system, places extraordinarily high expectations on individuals, that pressure in turn will reverberate within the family. In a Saturday evening session of stake conference that I attended, the visiting General Authority told us of a couple to whom he was related who divorced. He was convinced, he said, that they had had too many children too fast, trying to live up to what they perceived as Church expectations.

The Proclamation states, “Further, we warn that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.” It seems to me that the Church would regard anything that results in the disintegration of a family as a calamity. And, in fact, calamities, be they social, economic, or physical—whether a hurricane or a bomb—do bring about the disintegration of many families.

Is THE FAMILY actually under attack? Is there an organized campaign with the goal of destroying or disintegrating the family?

When Church leaders lament that the family is under attack, they often mean that their concept of marriage is under attack. The confining of marriage and family can easily be seen in the Church’s resistance to same-sex marriage. In the eyes of the Brethren, allowing same-sex couples to have a ceremony pronouncing them “married” will somehow contribute to the weakening, or disintegration, or destruction of “the family.”

In the current LDS worldview, a family comes into existence when a man and a woman marry under the mandate to multiply and replenish the earth. That is the default version of family, the one ordained of God, “to be perpetuated beyond the grave.”

Let me step into the abyss and say that it isn’t at all clear to me that God has ordained a particular family type. As far as I can tell, God didn’t define family in the Old Testament, New Testament, or Book of Mormon. And the type he sort of defined in modern revelation to Joseph Smith isn’t the type the Church endorses today.

What Jesus does say about family is this: “There came then his brethren and his mother, and standing without, sent unto him, calling him. And the multitude sat about him, and they said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren without seek for thee. And he answered them, saying, Who is my mother, or my brethren? And he looked round about on them which sat about him, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother” (Mark 3: 31–35).

That’s an awfully wide definition of family Jesus casts. Instead of dwelling on the nuclear, the polygamous, single-parent, or even dysfunctional family, Jesus’ definition emphasizes the relationship between individuals, families, communities, and God. It seems to me that this new definition is more applicable now than ever. For one thing, it invites individuals into the family.

Even though the Proclamation calls the family the fundamental unit of society, the individual is actually the basic unit of society. Families are not some aberration of Siamese twins where everyone is physically connected and every member of the family looks alike and thinks alike. The family is the unit where individual talents are developed and where the individual is not only allowed but encouraged to explore his or her individuality.

In 1971, the First Presidency, with Joseph Fielding Smith as President, issued a statement explaining the relationship between family and the individual. “The forces of evil attack the individual by tearing away at his family roots . . . . There may possibly be a few very strong individuals, who can survive without the support of a family, but more of us need the love, teaching, and acceptance that comes from those who care very deeply.”13 As that era’s First Presidency acknowledged, the family’s role is to support and strengthen the individual, and while the family, as a social system, is vulnerable, it is how the stress on the family affects the individual that is of equal concern.
HERE IS AN eddy of madness encircling our world. That madness, like a creeping viper, wounds us. Those wounds affect the nature of all our interpersonal relationships, within the family and between families.

Speaking of family relationships, have you considered your relationship to the frog family? When we were children we sang, “Froggy went a courtin’ and he did ride.” These days Froggy is riding right off into the dark night of oblivion. It appears that a third to half of frog species have become extinct or are on the verge of extinction. Scientists are alarmed at this devastation occurring in the frog families of the world. However, not one of them, as far as I can determine, has blamed it on Satan. Instead they say such things as:

“Amphibians are severely affected by habitat loss, climate change, pollution, and pesticides, introduced species, and over-collection for food and pets.”

Many of the factors that are stressing frogs—frog by frog, and frog family by frog family—leading to their extinction, are affecting humans too—person by person, family by family, community by community. Satan indeed may be the culprit, but we will do better if we can identify his agents and the sources of stress on the family.

It appears to me that Satan, like the Lord, speaks and works through men and women. Just as we often do the Lord’s work, fulfilling his purposes unawares (consider Joseph sold into Egypt), we can also aid Satan unawares. That is, the Lord’s work is not always done by good people, and Satan’s by evil people. For example, Jesus commended Peter on many occasions, but on one occasion he condemned Peter, even calling him Satan (see Matthew 16).

I BELIEVE THAT the viper is seen most clearly in economic practices. Every time a family business closes due to the unfair competition of megacorporations, a family is endangered. Every time a family farm is lost to agribusiness, families suffer. As the nation becomes more urban and directed by monolithic corporations, small towns and communities suffer, businesses close, and towns dwindle. As they suffer, so do the families of those communities. The face of America changes and values shift as our lives are controlled by big business and government’s preferential treatment of megacorporations. Those are forces that pull first at individuals, affecting their relationships with others, eventually stretching many families to the breaking point.

“Families are either supported or destroyed by the social and natural environments around them,” writes Susan Griffin in an Orion review of the documentary Darwin’s Nightmare.
The film “shows how the destruction of Lake Victoria’s ecology by the experimental introduction of predator perch, which proceeded to eat all the other fish, has resulted in the dissolution of the lives of those who have lived around the lake for generations. As fishermen are dying or abandoning their families in great numbers, women turn to prostitution to feed their children, and as these women die of AIDS in great numbers, the gangs of homeless orphans living around the lake grow.”

Continuing, Griffin says, “The film gives us a harrowing glimpse into what superpower technocracies are doing to places and people all over the world. At Lake Victoria, the connection to militarism is not abstract. Following a common trend, the perch from the lake are not eaten locally. Instead, they are processed, frozen, and then flown to the Ukraine. But the plot thickens. The planes that take the food away do not arrive empty. They are filled with weapons that will be used in other regions in Africa, where bloody conflicts, including genocide, are occurring on an incomprehensible scale.”

Since I haven’t seen the documentary Darwin’s Nightmare, I can’t attest to Griffin’s summary, nor do I know that the documentary is balanced and fair in regards to what is happening at Lake Victoria. Even if it isn’t, Griffin is on target when she calls our attention to “what superpower technocracies are doing to places and people all over the world.” What they are doing to individuals, they are also doing to the individuals family relationships.

If you wish to observe the literal disintegration of families, focus on war. Haifa Zangana reports in her book City of Widows that in Iraq, ninety or more women daily become widows. “The Ministry of Women’s Affairs says that there are at least three hundred thousand widows in Baghdad alone, and a further one million throughout the country, and that the numbers are rising daily as men continue to disappear. Families are left without support. Widows have few resources at their disposal.” That is only one aspect of the war that lays families to waste.

But let’s not talk about war and how it squeezes the life out of families; let’s talk about something sweeter, like bananas. Why do you suppose those wonderful yellow bananas, shipped from Central America and elsewhere (so useful for making banana nut bread to share with non-member neighbors) generally cost less than locally grown apples? In the tale of what has become America’s favorite fruit, you can be certain the plot contains greed and exploitation. Here is one small chapter in the story.

In 1993, the European Union implemented a quota system...
giving preference to small banana farmers in the Caribbean, attempting to provide economic support to the communities and islands so that they could emerge from poverty. In other words, a policy designed to strengthen families. Chiquita found its European sales slipping, so its officers went directly to the Clinton administration, which, sympathizing, protested to the E.U. that the “European regulations were both unfair and illegal under World Trade Organization rules, a case of government policy mandating preferential treatment to specific companies in what was supposed to be an open market.”

Raising bananas is the primary source of income for the small farmers of the islands. Even though Chiquita controlled some fifty percent of the banana market in Europe and the small farmers eight percent, Chiquita essentially wanted to eliminate them from the market. “I really do not see why it is in the interest of the United States that poor countries in the Caribbean and elsewhere, which are not able to do anything other than grow bananas, should be driven into more dangerous economic activity such as drug trafficking.” commented E.U. Trade Commissioner Sir Leon Brittan.

The E.U. made concessions in favor of Chiquita, and finally, in 2001, the Bush administration lifted the 191 million dollars worth of trade sanctions the United States had imposed on the European Union. Who suffered from all of this? Not U.S. farmers, not U.S. merchants who sell bananas, and not U.S. consumers of bananas, and certainly not Chiquita’s CEO whose compensation package was nearly five million dollars. The victims were the small farmers and their families in the Caribbean.

That is only one small chapter in the banana story. The other chapters include the exploitation of people and lands in Central America, with the U.S. government heavily involved in making sure American-owned fruit companies got their way, at the expense of the local people.

At this point I am wondering if the Proclamation includes the families of Lake Victoria, the Caribbean, and Central America as “families under attack.” When the Proclamation calls for governments to support families, does it have in mind the question Rebecca Solnit asks: “What [economic] model explains the hundred-foot yachts and fifth homes U.S. captains of industry accumulate while hunger, homelessness, lack of access to medical care, and general precariousness overtake more and more of the population?”

Church leaders thought it important that members “study and use” the Proclamation. Consequently a series of guides was published for that purpose. The following statement appears in one of those guides. “The family, the most fundamental institution of society, is under attack from all sides. Adultery, divorce, cohabitation, child and spouse abuse, homosexuality, abortion, teen pregnancies, pornography, disobedient children, economic struggles, an increasing unwillingness among married couples to bear and rear children—all these and more are proof that the adversary understands very well the central role the family plays in the destiny of God’s children.”

Rather than being simply one “proof” among many that families are under attack, “economic struggles” can in fact fuel nearly everything else in the list above: divorce, cohabitation, abuse, abortion, and so on. At times I have the sense that in the Church, “economic struggles” is code for irresponsible management of personal finances. But there is literally a world full of people whose “economic struggles” have nothing to do with imprudent spending on credit and everything to do with exploitation and injustice, leaving desperate individuals and disintegrating families in their wake.

Warner Woodworth, professor of organizational behavior at Brigham Young University, states on his website that the First Presidency of the LDS Church is concerned with “growing inequality between rich and poor, exorbitant corporate profit, unethical executives, and, as President Spencer W. Kimball put it, the need for business owners to not pay as little as they can get away with, but to ‘pay top dollar’ to one’s employees.”

I have somehow missed the talks wherein the Brethren expressed these concerns. I wish they expressed them more frequently and with the same intensity and forthrightness as Professor Woodworth does. “In spite of our professed religious and ethical values,” he says, “BYU is about the last university in the country to hold [a globalization symposium] for raising awareness of multinational corporation abuses, exploitation of Third World workers, unsafe working conditions, child abuse, etc.” Woodworth speaks openly and publicly about the tyranny multinational corporations wield through their excessive power. He speaks out against the sweat shops, the exploitation of labor, third world debt, and unequal societies. He speaks about the increase in poverty, which he correlates with growing globalization, where billions of people live on less than two dollars a day. Those are the very practices—evils, let’s call them—which contribute to disintegration of families.

If the Church is going to call on governments to support and maintain families, maybe it should also be bold enough to point out the things governments do that weaken families. Aren’t we embarrassed to say that in the last fifty years there have been only two political issues with moral consequences that the Church felt the need to speak out against? As Marcus Borg has said in his book The Heart of Christianity, “We are all called to be political in the broad sense of being aware of the impact of systems on people’s lives and God’s passion for those who are disadvantaged and victimized by systems.”

We Mormons have proclaimed to the world how important the family is. Now, are we prepared to listen to the Catholic who says: “Okay, you’re for the family, what do you do about it? If we have a whole bunch of young men who’ve grown up in broken families, in violent neighborhoods, and end up in prison, how is that going to help strengthen the family? There is a moral basis for a healthy family, but there’s also an economic basis for the healthy family.”

And then the Reverend Jim Wallis: “When will we understand that goals such as universal health care, affordable
housing, and living-wage incomes are pro-marriage and family programs?26

I also add the voice of novelist, poet, professor, and farmer Wendell Berry: “The most forceful context of every habitat now is the industrial economy that is doing damage to all habitats. We can’t preserve neighborliness or charity or peaceability or an ecological consciousness, or anything else worth preserving, at the same time that we maintain an earth-destroying economy. Nothing ultimately flourishes in our present economy but selfish aims, and these are often mutually contradictory. We have to have a sort of pity for . . . those who are sure that ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ but who forget that it takes a local culture and a local economy to raise a village.”27

Tracy Kidder, in his powerful biography of the medical doctor Paul Farmer, who has spent much of his life in Haiti establishing and running a medical clinic, writes the following. “Now the United States was leading a concerted effort to block aid to Haiti’s government—not just American aid but also grants and loans from other sources, including loans from an international agency that would have financed an increase in the supplies of potable water and improvements in roads, education, and the public health system. The stated reasons probably included long-standing institutional fear and distrust of Aristide, a hope that Haitians might blame him for the country’s continuing decline, and general weariness with Haiti’s problems. Farmer wrote to me, about the blocked loans: ‘I think, sometimes, that I’m going nuts, and that perhaps there is something good about blocking clean water for those who have none, making sure that illiterate children remain so, and preventing the resuscitation of the public health sector in the country most in need of it.’”28

Who will tell the truth about those systems that are tearing families apart? Who will speak for justice? We have to have a sort of pity for . . . those who are sure that ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ but who forget that it takes a local culture and a local economy to raise a village.”

And Jesus said: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised” (Luke 4:18).

NOTES

1. Google “family definition” or one of its permutations and you will get thousands of hits reflecting the various definition of family. A legal definition of family differs from a medical definition. A religious right definition of family will differ from a Mormon Nauvoo era definition of family. Stephanie Coontz says, “Almost every marital and sexual arrangement we have seen in recent years, however, startling it may appear, has been tried somewhere else.” (“The New Fragility of Marriage, for Better or for Worse,” The Chronicle Review, 6 May 2005.) With that, she is also implying family configurations as well. And for those who maintain that “traditional marriage” is the ideal model, the one endorsed by God, should read Coontz’s book The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

16. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
27. Wendell Berry, The Way of Ignorance: And Other Essays (Berkeley: Shornaker and Hoard, 2005), 76.

NECTARINE

The nectarine—
pale purple-pink
with springtime sheen—
seems to wink
its blossom-eyes
while carefree larks
assert the lie
of winter’s dark

—MICHAEL R. COLLINGS