

Fight, Flee, or Take the Blows?

By R. Val Johnson
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I wasn't sure what to do that afternoon in my 14th year. I was backed up against the outside wall of my school, and a bully was hitting me. Since I was surrounded by half a dozen of his friends, I decided to take the blows.

He punched me, then kicked me. Many times.

Finally he and his friends left. My bus came, and I climbed aboard. I didn't raise my head until the bus pulled up to my stop. Even 50 years later, I still wonder if I acted out of cowardice or Christian forbearance.

This experience underscores some puzzling questions we face as Latter-day Saints. When our beliefs are attacked, do we fight, flee, or just take the blows?

The Savior's words seem clear: "Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matthew 5:39). I've often wondered, Was Jesus simply using a metaphor to teach His followers not to respond to insults with bloody retaliation, as was the usual practice? Perhaps.

And yet, consider the counsel in the Doctrine and Covenants.

In 1833 the Church was facing intense persecution, especially in Missouri. In defense of their lives, Church members took up arms. At that point, the Lord revealed section 98. In it, He taught them to forbear—within limits. They had a right to defend themselves, but if they refrained, He would reward them. If the offenders sought forgiveness, the Saints were to forgive "seventy times seven" (verse 40). As for going to battle, they were to first sue for peace

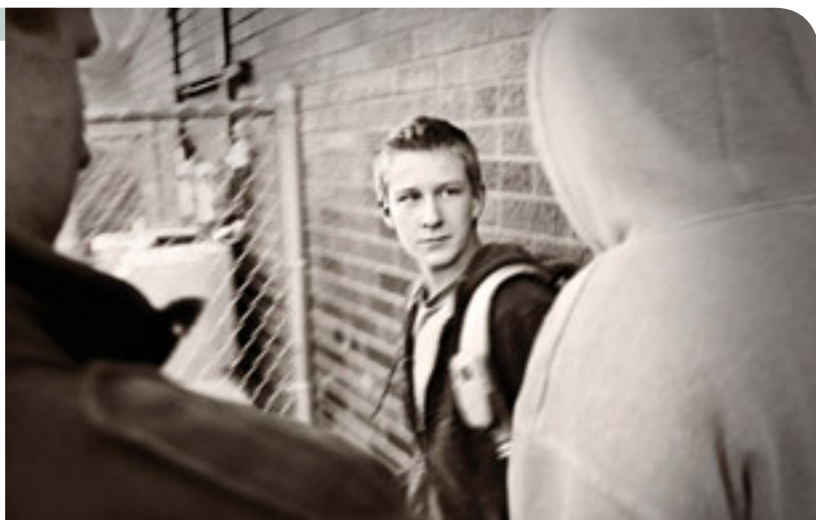


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When faced with persecution, what options do we have as disciples of Christ?

and engage only if the Lord commanded it.

Times have changed since those terrible days, but in some ways the Church remains under attack. Our doctrine is generally misunderstood. Uninformed assumptions, illogical accusations, and outright lies are passed around as truth.

What are we to do? As disciples who strive to "stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places" (Mosiah 18:9), we must do something. We can't run. So do we fight or just take the blows?

In such matters, we can look to the prophets. In recent general conferences, I've noted a number of talks explaining the Church's position on controversial issues. The speakers don't castigate, but neither do they capitulate. Often they seek common ground with those who disagree with us. They are respectful. They try to understand and be understood.¹

There may be times when the only choice is to fight, flee, or take the blows. But often we have a better option. We can reach out in love, as Jesus and His Apostles do. ■

NOTE

1. See Dallin H. Oaks, "Love and Law," *Liahona and Ensign*, Nov. 2009, 26; Jeffrey R. Holland, "Safety for the Soul," *Liahona and Ensign*, Nov. 2009, 88; Jeffrey R. Holland, "My Words . . . Never Cease," *Liahona and Ensign*, May 2008, 91; Robert S. Wood, "Instruments of the Lord's Peace," *Liahona and Ensign*, May 2006, 93.