

The First Vision and Religious Tolerance

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IN REVELATION BOTH ANCIENT AND modern, the Lord calls His words “sharper than a two-edged sword” (D&C 6:2; 11:2; 12:2; see also Hebrews 4:12). In modern vernacular, much of what He said would be politically incorrect. It could be considered judgmental, divisive, rigid, closed-minded, or just plain embarrassing. Yet in some instructional meetings, the teaching of ethics prevails over the teaching of doctrine, thus avoiding disagreements or the possibility of giving offense. Everyone is content to speak of God’s love; rarely is His wrath or displeasure mentioned.

In this context the reader is invited to consider three touchy or sensitive texts that stand at the very heart of our theology. These texts have been chosen to honor Joseph and Hyrum Smith, the great martyrs of our faith. They did not seal their testimony with their blood in Carthage Jail so that we may teach ethics. They did not die hoping that future generations of Latter-day

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Saints would say to the world, “Look, we are just like you.” Elder John Taylor said that in death Joseph and Hyrum sought to seal the revelations found in the Doctrine and Covenants and the Book of Mormon (see D&C 135:1). They sought neither acceptance nor approval from the historical Christian world; indeed, in all matters of faith, they sought to stand independent of that world. As ironic as it may seem to some, it was in this course and in this course alone that they and those who sustained them expected to find peace.

Each of the three texts comes from the revelations of the Restoration, and each is frequently considered offensive by those not of our faith. Even within the Church some are uncomfortable with these texts and feel a need to apologize for them.

The first text comes from the Lord’s preface to the Book of Commandments, in which He calls the Church recently organized by Joseph Smith “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth” (D&C 1:30). The second is part of the Prophet’s account of the First Vision, in which he asked the Lord which church he should join: “I was answered,” the Prophet said, “that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: ‘they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof’” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19). The third text comes from the Book of Mormon, in which Nephi prophesied that in our day there would be “save two churches only; the one is the church of the Lamb of God, and the other is the church of the devil; wherefore, whoso belongeth not to the church of the Lamb of God belongeth

to that great church, which is the mother of abominations; and she is the whore of all the earth” (1 Nephi 14:10).

Tolerance

Before addressing each of these texts, I would like to make some brief observations about the principle of tolerance. In nineteenth-century England the term *tolerance* was associated with experiments that tested the effects of drugs and poison. The idea was to see how much of a particular drug could be administered to a person without killing him. A person’s level of tolerance was measured by the amount of poison he could endure before it killed him.¹

When I was a young man, tolerance meant treating those with whom we disagreed with civility. It did not mean that we were obligated to accept their point of view. To many young people today, however, it means that we are to be nonjudgmental—holding all men and all ideas to be equal—and that it is morally wrong to say that something is morally wrong. It is not an unusual thing for people to cover willful disobedience with the blanket of God’s love and to advance the idea of a universal salvation that sounds dangerously similar to that advocated by Lucifer in the councils of heaven.

People like to equate tolerance with Christlike behavior, which is in many ways a poor fit. The appeal for Christlike behavior frequently comes from people who have no meaningful understanding of how Christ behaved and who would be greatly surprised to find out. When the dialogue between Christ and the woman from Canaan was read recently in a religion class at Brigham Young University, a number of the students were uneasy with the account of Christ’s behavior (see Matthew 15:21–28). A number

of attempts were made to excuse or justify it. One student suggested that in calling the Gentiles “dogs,” Christ was really using a term of endearment. Such an explanation does not fit well in the context of the story. Finally a young woman expressed the thought that troubled many of her classmates; with tears in her eyes, she exclaimed, “But Jesus was so unchristian!”

Isaiah said that the Christ would come as “a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence” (Isaiah 8:14). The Jesus of the New Testament is never going to fit into our society’s view of political correctness because He was not tolerant in the modern sense of the word. The modern definition of tolerance colors what some people think Christlike behavior should include.

F. F. Bruce, in his book *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, reminds us that Christ made many enemies: “The Jesus whom we meet in the Gospels, far from being an inoffensive person, gave offence right and left. Even his loyal followers found him, at times, thoroughly disconcerting. He upset all established notions of religious propriety. He spoke of God in terms of intimacy which sounded like blasphemy. He seemed to enjoy the most questionable company. He set out with open eyes on a road which, in the view of ‘sensible’ people, was bound to lead to disaster.”²

Regarding how we as Latter-day Saints view those not of our faith and how we determine who is Christian and who is not, we choose to draw a very large and inclusive circle. Though many in the Christian world are anxious to draw a circle and exclude us, we will pray with anyone who is willing to do so. Our bookstores do not contain anti-anybody literature, we do not attack those of other faiths in our missionary lesson plan, nor do we do so in our church services or in any class sponsored by the Church. We do not give out warnings against those of other faiths, nor do we

ever forbid our membership from listening to or talking to anyone they desire.

On the contrary, we seek to treat all whom we meet with dignity and respect—heartily joining hands with all whose lives are founded on the principles of love and kindness. We esteem their religious rights as sacred, as our own, and we are their allies in the defense of the same. We have not chosen to have enemies, but some have chosen to be our enemies. We have always had them, and we always will. When we cannot befriend them, we choose to live above them.

If any man or woman professes a belief in Christ, we say, “So much to the good”; that person is at least on the road leading to gospel enlightenment. As Elder Bruce R. McConkie noted: “It is better to be a partial Christian than a non-Christian. It is better to believe some of the doctrines of Christ rather than none at all. One truth paves the way for another, and we all need to advance in knowledge and understanding.”³

We accept as a tenet of our faith that “there are many yet on the earth among all sects, parties, and denominations, who are blinded by the subtle craftiness of men, whereby they lie in wait to deceive, and who are only kept from the truth because they know not where to find it” (D&C 123:12). So it is that we send missionaries to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. Those missionaries endure all manner of insult and hardship to present our message, which they will do with remarkable patience and great love. They are the peacemakers of whom Christ spoke in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 5:9), and it is of them that Isaiah said, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation” (Isaiah 52:7).

The Ecumenical Movement

As a young man, I was commissioned as an officer in the Army of the United States and was assigned to serve as a chaplain. My first duty was to report to an officers' training school at Fort Hamilton in New York. There the chief of chaplains, a lieutenant general, told us that our commission was to be the "grassroots of the ecumenical movement." There were one hundred of us in that class, representing every major faith in our country. We were instructed to work together. We were informed that it was a violation of military law for us to proselytize for our own faith. Were I to attempt to teach Mormonism to someone who had not asked to be taught, it could have been grounds for a court-martial. Such is the cost of an ecumenical movement.

I appreciate the observation of Elder Neal A. Maxwell: "There is today more ecumenicism, but there is also more shared doubt. More and more people believe less and less—but they do believe it together. The fewer the issues, the easier it is to get agreements. The fewer standards there are, the less there is for congregations to rebel against. Since knowing is tied to doing, and doing to knowing, there is an awful cycle in all of this."⁴

By revelation, the people of the Church have been charged to stand independent of the world (see D&C 78:14). In a directive to priesthood leaders, President Boyd K. Packer stated, "It is important to maintain a cordial and cooperative relationship with the leaders and members of other denominations. Representatives of the Church should not join interfaith organizations that have as their focus ecumenical activities or joint worship services. Interfaith relationships should center on moral values and on community betterment."⁵

The One True Church Doctrine

Our story begins with the First Vision, which in turn begins with the Prophet Joseph Smith's desire to know which of all the churches was right and which he should join. Elder Orson Pratt echoed the Prophet's telling of this story in a missionary tract published in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1842. He stated the matter thus:

He [Joseph Smith] saw, that if he understood not the way, it would be impossible to walk in it, except by chance; and the thought of resting his hopes of eternal life upon chance, or uncertainties, was more than he could endure. If he went to the religious denominations to seek information, each one pointed to its particular tenets, saying—"This is the way, walk ye in it;" while, at the same time, the doctrines of each were in many respects, in direct opposition to one another. It also occurred to his mind that God was the author of but one doctrine, and therefore could acknowledge but one denomination as his church, and that such denomination must be a people who believe and teach the one doctrine, (whatever it may be,) and build upon the same. He then reflected upon the immense number of doctrines, now in the world, which had given rise to many hundreds of different denominations. The great question to be decided in his mind, was—if any one of these denominations be the Church of Christ, which one is it? Until he could become satisfied in relation to this question, he could not rest contented. To trust to the decisions of fallible man, and build his hopes upon the same, without any certainty, and knowledge of his own, would not satisfy the anxious desires that pervaded his breast. To decide, without any positive and definite evidence, on which he could rely, upon a subject involving the future welfare of his soul, was revolting to his feelings. The only alternative,

that seemed to be left him was to read the Scriptures, and endeavor to follow their directions.⁶

In responding to Joseph Smith's question as to which church he should join, the Lord told him that he should "join none of them, for they were all wrong." According to his own testimony, he "was hated and persecuted" for persisting to tell this story, but he refused to desist, for such a course, he said, "would offend God" and bring him "under condemnation" (Joseph Smith—History 1:19, 25). Once, in a hard lesson, Joseph Smith made the mistake of "fear[ing] man more than God," setting "at naught" the counsels of God, and, as the Lord put it, "despis[ing] his word," which resulted in his having the gold plates taken from him (D&C 3:7).

After restoring the Church, Joseph received the following revelation: "And also those to whom these commandments were given, might have power to lay the foundation of this church, and to bring it forth out of obscurity and out of darkness, *the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth*, with which I, the Lord, am well pleased, speaking unto the church collectively and not individually" (D&C 1:30; emphasis added). Joseph Smith stood by this doctrine, often at the peril of his life. We do so often at the peril of social acceptance, but surely we can stand as tall as Joseph. We are not insensitive to the fact that declaring the "one true church" doctrine can generate resistance and observations that we are unchristian, narrow, and bigoted. "Should we not then make one accommodation and set this doctrine aside?" asked President Boyd K. Packer in a general conference address. "Would it not be better to have more accept what would be left of the gospel than the relatively few who are converted now? . . . Some have recommended that we confine ourselves strictly to evidences of the gospel: happy family life, and temperate living, and

so on. Could we not use the words *better* or *best*? The word *only* really isn't the most appealing way to begin a discussion of the gospel." President Packer continued:

If we thought only in terms of diplomacy or popularity, surely we should change our course. But we must hold tightly to it even though some turn away. . . .

We know there are decent, respectable, humble people in many churches, Christian and otherwise. In turn, sadly enough, there are so-called Latter-day Saints who by comparison are not as worthy, for they do not keep their covenants.

But it is not a matter of comparing individuals. We are not baptized collectively, nor will we be judged collectively. Good conduct without the ordinances of the gospel will neither redeem nor exalt mankind; covenants and the ordinances are essential. We are required to teach the doctrines, even the unpopular ones.

Yield on this doctrine, and you cannot justify the Restoration. The doctrine is true; it is logical. The opposite is not. . . . I find it so interesting that those who condemn us reject the parallel path philosophy themselves when it comes to non-Christian religions. For if they do not, they have no reason to accept the Lord as our Redeemer or regard the Atonement as essential . . . (Mark 16:16). While the converging path idea is very appealing, it really is not reasonable.

Suppose schools were operated on that philosophy, with each discipline a separate path leading to the same diploma. No matter whether you study or not, pass the tests or not, all would be given the same diploma—the one of their choice. Without qualifying, one could choose the diploma of an attorney, an engineer, a medical doctor. Surely you would not submit yourself to surgery under the hands of a graduate of that kind of school! But it does not work

that way. It cannot work that way—not in education, not in spiritual matters. There are essential ordinances just as there are required courses. There are prescribed standards of worthiness. If we resist them, avoid them, or fail them, we will not enter in with those who complete the course.

Do you realize that the notion that all churches are equal presupposes that the true church of Jesus Christ actually does not exist anywhere?⁷

Given that salvation cannot be found in both truth and error, let us ask a few simple questions. Is there a law in the universe that governs all things? If there is, do we have to obey that law to obtain the desired results in all fields of activity? In the field of mathematics, is it possible for ten people to add the same column of figures and come up with ten different answers and all of them be correct? Can a group of chemists set out to make a given substance, all using different materials or using materials in different portions, and still arrive at the same results? Can we drop a weight from a high tower expecting a different result each time we drop it?

Knowing that laws govern all that we do in this temporal world, can we not suppose that laws in like manner govern all that happens in the eternal world? Can there be existence of any kind without laws? And if such laws exist, can we suppose that we may lay claim to the blessings of heaven while disregarding the laws of heaven? If such laws declare that no unclean thing can enter the presence of God, can we justifiably suppose that we can enjoy His presence in a state of filthiness or rebellion?

It may be argued that we do not have the truth, that we do not possess the plan of salvation or the authority of the priesthood, but to argue that such a plan and the necessary priesthood do not exist anywhere is to argue against the existence of God. It is an argument of despair. It is to say

that there are no laws by which we might obtain the blessings of heaven. It is to concede that there is no sure path that we can follow in an attempt to obtain the treasures of heaven. It is to liken the plan of salvation to a lottery.

Would the people who claim that all churches (except ours) are true be willing to take any randomly selected combination of drugs to cure them when they are sick? Or to administer the same combination of medicines to their children? Would they substitute sand for flour when baking bread, arguing that as long as they sincerely desire to make bread the ingredients could not possibly make any difference? Would they fill their gas tank with water, arguing that it too was a liquid that had the material properties to make their car run and that all liquids are the same?

Let us consider why the doctrine of one true church is so offensive to some. If we start with the premise, as the traditional Christian world does, that God is incomprehensible—that no one can know anything about Him with certainty—then everyone could be tolerant with all manner of views about God irrespective of their relative truth. The only view that could not be tolerated on this premise would be one of certainty—that is, saying that the plan of salvation is certain and is not a matter of speculation, that God can be known, that He does speak, and that there is a sure path that He has marked out for us to follow. Those declaring such a doctrine would not win friends. If they were right, everyone would have to repent; everyone would have to conform their thinking, their faith, and their lives to accord with the will of God. Be assured that anyone not interested in conforming must necessarily be offended by the very idea of such a path's existence.

When we Latter-day Saints say that we belong to “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth” (D&C 1:30), we are simply saying that we have been

entrusted with the knowledge of those laws or truths by which salvation comes. We do not pretend to be better than any one else except as those laws make us better, and we seek to share those laws.

Missionaries do not tell people that they have to surrender particular truths in order to be baptized into the Church. On the contrary, missionaries teach people to hold as tenaciously as they can to anything they have that is “virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy” (Articles of Faith 1:13)—to bring it with them to be added upon by the Church but never to be taken away. By contrast, I have talked to many missionaries from other faiths who sought to put a torch to the house of my understanding as a Latter-day Saint. Having burned my belief system to the ground, they have precious little to offer in its stead. To join this church is to gain truth. To leave it is to lose truth. There are no exceptions. Indeed, there is not a truth in all the eternities that we cannot enjoy in its fulness as Latter-day Saints. One of those truths is that all souls born into this world come with the Light of Christ and that following that light will lead them to God and the covenant of salvation (see D&C 84:45–48).

No good thing goes unnoticed by God, whose right it is to judge both men and organizations. He found it necessary to call upon Joseph Smith to organize His Church anew on the earth. He did not do so because there was no redeeming value to be found in the Christian world—quite to the contrary. He did it because there was sufficient goodness to justify reestablishing His Church. We do not need to trip over the matter of God’s love or the goodness of people throughout the world. It was because of that love and because of the goodness of many that He restored His Church and invited the Christian world to be the first to join it.

Thus, nothing in our message is more important than the announcement that there is a sure path—one true and living church. There is not a more positive message we can take to the world. Let us not obstruct that message.

Creeds an Abomination

The second text is Joseph Smith's record of the Lord's instruction to him in the First Vision that "all their creeds were an abomination in his sight" (Joseph Smith—History 1:19).

While I presided over the mission in Scotland, one of the prominent ministers in the city of Edinburgh came to my office seeking answers to questions about Mormonism. He said, "I have some tough questions to ask, and I cannot get straight answers from your missionaries." I promised him straight answers and spent a couple of hours responding to his questions. I then said, "Now it is my turn. I have some tough questions to ask you." I asked how he justified the Christian creeds. He buried his head in hands and was silent for a matter of minutes. Then he raised his head and said, "Our creeds are responsible for the dark ages."

He was a good man, an honest man, who always treated our missionaries with respect. I told him what it meant to have living prophets and that one of them was my great-grandfather from whom I received my name. I told him that my great-grandfather had received revelations from the Lord. He said he would like to see them. I read the Vision of the Redemption of the Dead to him from beginning to end without a word of commentary. It was as if a rushing of mighty wind filled my office. He wept as I read the revelation, and I wept with him. When I finished, he said that he could not say that what I had read was not a revelation.

I share this story because I think it is an important response to the matter of how we handle hard questions. Unique strength and power are found in standing on our own ground.

Are not the creeds spoken of in the First Vision simply a refill of the same prescription that killed the Church in the meridian of time? In a great revelation on the priesthood the Lord states, “After they [the Apostles] have fallen asleep the great persecutor of the church, the apostate, the whore, even Babylon, that maketh all nations to drink of her cup, in whose hearts the enemy, even Satan, sitteth to reign—behold he soweth the tares [the philosophies of men]; wherefore, the tares choke the wheat and drive the church into the wilderness” (D&C 86:3). Experience suggests that the corruption of scripture by incorporating the philosophies of men is as dangerous individually as it is collectively. The fruits of this union do not engender the faith known to our forefathers, and, in the words of the Savior, “every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up” (Matthew 15:13).

“Two Churches Only”

If we are concerned about not offending the world, the first thing we ought to do is reject the Book of Mormon. It is full of difficult doctrine and hard sayings, including the angel’s declaration to Nephi that “there are save two churches only; the one is the church of the Lamb of God, and the other is the church of the devil; wherefore, whoso belongeth not to the church of the Lamb of God belongeth to that great church, which is the mother of abominations; and she is the whore of all the earth” (1 Nephi 14:10).

The Book of Mormon is uncompromising where breaking the laws of God are concerned. It teaches that the effects of sin are eternal and that the laws of God are abso-

lute. Its prophets testify that Christ's Atonement extends the hope of salvation to you and me by answering the ends of the law. Christ atoned to preserve the truth. To deny those truths is to deny Christ and the Atonement. The anti-Christ's in the Book of Mormon all struck out against the law and in doing so denied the need for the Atonement (see Alma 1:4; 30:16–17). If the truths of salvation were not absolute, there would have been no Atonement; there would be no right, no wrong, no broken law, and no law to be mended. There would have been no Christ, no plan of salvation, and, for that matter, no God (see 2 Nephi 2:11–13; Alma 34:15–16; 42:11–25).

Is it a surprise that a book teaching such principles would, in describing the events following the Restoration of the gospel, contain a statement to the effect that “there are save two churches only,” the one being the church of the “Lamb of God, and the other being the church of the devil” and that everyone belongs to one or the other? In his instruction to Nephi, the angel of the Lord chooses the most emphatic language at his command to teach the most fundamental principle of the Christian faith. We are all subject to the Fall of Adam and are thus citizens of the kingdom of the devil. The Fall demands that we be born again, that we put off the natural man, and that we become Saints through the Atonement of Christ (see Moses 6:59; Mosiah 3:19). The Fall lays claim to all who have been born. Christ lays claim to those who have been born again. It is only by putting off the natural man that we become “saints,” or the “covenant people of the Lord.” Only then can we be numbered among the “church of the Lamb” (1 Nephi 14:14). The issue is one of citizenship, not of judgment. No one will be judged until he has had the opportunity to accept or reject the true and living Christ of whom the Book of Mormon is a witness.

People can criticize the Book of Mormon, but they cannot say that it lacks plainness or that they cannot figure out where it stands in relation to Christ and His gospel. On such matters it is plain, clear, and bold; its writers did not intend to be misunderstood. Some may try to gloss over its assertions, but they cannot hide them. It is a theological Everest and a public relations nightmare.

Why the Lord made it this way, we do not know. But this much we do know: it is philosophically impossible to “reject truth without accepting error,” to shut out light without being immersed in darkness, to reject “true teachers without cleaving to false ones,” to reject the true Christ and His prophets without “giving allegiance to those who follow the other Master.”⁸ We cannot march with both the Israelites and the Philistines. Light and darkness will never meet. Christ and Satan will never shake hands. As to Christ and His gospel, there can be no middle ground, no neutrality. You stand with the prophets or against them.

The Book of Mormon was ordained in the councils of heaven to gather latter-day Israel and return them to Christ. Thus, there must be direction that leaves no question about where the great caravan of Israel is headed. Faith in the Restoration comes with a cost, and, as Elder John Taylor said, that cost included “the best blood of the nineteenth century to bring [it] forth for the salvation of a ruined world” (D&C 135:6). As the doctrine and spirit of the Book of Mormon are unyielding, so must be the spirit of those who accept it.

Common Ground

As a mission president I discovered that the way we present our message has a good deal to do with who accepts it and how deeply their roots are anchored in the soil

of the gospel. On this matter, some things are obvious. For instance, it is no great surprise that shallow missionaries get shallow converts. In like manner, the more direct we are, the more successful we are. There is no reason that missionaries cannot ask everyone they meet if they would like to be baptized. What came as a surprise to me, however, was that nothing chased the dark spirit of contention away as effectively as the declaration of those very texts that seemed the most contentious. Let me share an experience.

During a round of zone conferences, I challenged the missionaries to proselytize for one month without taking their Bibles with them. This meant that they had to do all of their teaching from the Book of Mormon or the Doctrine and Covenants. I told them that any principle that they could not teach from those sources they had no business teaching because it was not a part of the message that the Lord had commissioned us to take to the ends of the earth. It seemed a reasonable assumption to us that if the gospel had indeed been restored and we in reality represented a new gospel dispensation, then we could teach the message as the Lord had given it to us.

Between then and our next round of zone conferences, the reports flooded in. The missionaries spoke of a stronger spirit in their meetings, even to the point of being overwhelming. It was obvious that the Holy Ghost liked being a part of what they were doing. Their confidence increased when they knew they were standing on their own ground. Naturally, they found more people to teach than they ever had before. These things I expected, but I did not expect the report that the spirit of contention, common to many efforts to teach, was now gone. After our one-month experiment, our missionaries refused to return to their old methods. Their faith was centered in the revelations of the Restoration. They liked the spirit of the whole thing.

The missionaries conceded that they did not necessarily know any more about the Bible than did those they taught. There was no reason to argue over the meaning of Bible passages, which was not their message. Their message was that God had spoken through a living prophet, and they stuck to that message. When those they were teaching understood this, they asked questions about what God had told the Prophet about this or that, and with every question came the opportunity to open the revelations of the Restoration and let their light shine. That light carries its own spirit. One can accept it or reject it, but one cannot argue with it. Imagine arguing with Moses about whether the Lord gave him the Ten Commandments. Surely someone must have said, "Moses, I do not think you got the Ten Commandments from God; I think Aaron wrote them." Someone else must have said that Moses was just quoting from a book that was really written by Miriam. And what would Moses say to all of this? "I got them from God; if you question that, I suggest that you ask Him about it."

That's our message: ask God. The way we answer questions about our faith ought to be by finding the quickest and most direct route to the Sacred Grove. The heavens are open, class is in session, and it is time to ask questions. God gives answers, and if we do not get the answer from Him, we are not going to do very well on the test.

The Restoration began with Joseph Smith on his knees in the Sacred Grove, and that is where the testimony of all Latter-day Saints must begin, on their knees in a sacred moment, asking of God. Everything that we believe as Latter-day Saints rests on the reality of what God said that spring morning to Joseph Smith. The great irony of it all is that the harder the saying, the more offensive it seems to the world and the more peace it actually brings. It is the

very light that chases away the darkness of contention with all that are honest in heart.

No Middle Ground

Perhaps we need to rethink the idea of seeking common ground with those we desire to teach. Every similarity we identify leaves them with one less reason to join the Church. When we cease to be different, we cease to be. The commandment to flee Babylon has not been revoked, nor has it been amended to suggest that we seek an intellectual marriage with those not of our faith. The fruit of such a marriage will always be outside the covenant.

One of our great revelations on missionary work says, “Ye are not sent forth to be taught, but to teach the children of men the things which I have put into your hands by the power of my Spirit” (D&C 43:15). It is hard to imagine a vacuum salesman saying, “This vacuum is just like the one you already have, but if you buy it, your parents will disown you and everyone in the neighborhood will hate you.” One would not expect a lot of sales.

I remember sitting in a priesthood meeting one Sunday morning in a small, struggling ward in Scotland. There were five priesthood holders present, two missionaries, an investigator the missionaries had brought, and myself. I do not remember the topic of the lesson. My thoughts were on the investigator. He was a man of fine appearance, bright, and articulate. My thoughts were a few years down the road. I could not help but think what a fine bishop he would make. The others present made a particular point to relate each principle that the teacher mentioned to some common ground between them and their Catholic visitor. When the meeting was over, he turned to the missionaries and told them not to call on him or his family again.

He said, “I see that you are a young, struggling church and that you desire to become what the Catholic Church already is. Since I already have what you are seeking, I see no reason to change.” He left, and that ended our association with him.

Conclusion

As a mission president, I was grateful for the three texts I have considered in this paper. I needed something—not from me but from the Lord—that justified the faith and sacrifice that I knew membership in the Church would require.

That such texts will give offense to some is true. Truth, however, is more important than harmony. Were that not the case, there would have been no war in heaven, no gospel of Jesus Christ, and no reason for the Father and the Son to appear to Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove. If we are to be a Christlike people, we must value truth above life itself.⁹

If we claim that our God speaks, that we have modern revelation and living prophets, we must of necessity claim that we are “the only true and living church on the face of the whole earth.” The two doctrines are as inseparable as the body and the spirit in the Resurrection. We cannot have the one without the other. If our prophets are indeed prophets and our Apostles indeed Apostles, then it is for them and them alone to mark the path that all who would return to their divine Father must follow. Claiming the authority to speak in the name of God and at the same time claiming that the heavens have been sealed since New Testament times is essentially claiming to be God’s spokesman while admitting that He has not spoken to you for two thousand years. This picture simply does not hang straight.

True, there are those who think it quite unchristian of Latter-day Saints to suggest that others cannot be saved in their errant doctrines. Yet it is these same people who hold the gates of heaven open to all who profess Christ except Latter-day Saints. Why, we might ask, is it that virtually all testimonies of Christ are acceptable in their heaven except ours? And why is it that we are labeled unchristian for not accepting them while their rejection of us is the proof they offer that they are Christian? It is their creeds that require them to respond in this manner.

To the early missionaries of this dispensation, the Lord said, "Preach my gospel which ye have received, even as ye have received it" (D&C 49:1). There is no suggestion here that they cover it with honey or put ribbons on it. A few months later, the Lord said, "What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself" (D&C 1:38). The Lord has never commissioned anyone to make excuses for Him; He has simply asked us to trust Him.

If the gospel message is true, it must by its very nature have things in it that require faith to accept. If we are going to get serious about it, we can hardly expect to find gospel truths getting along compatibly with worldly fashions, nor can we expect them to get an approving nod from those who worship at the shrine of their own intellect. The plain fact of the matter is that strong testimonies cannot be built from weak doctrine. As there is no courage without a struggle, so there can be no spiritual strength without a challenge. We may claim neither peace nor safety unless we build on a strong foundation.

Anytime we declare something to be true we challenge that which is untrue. We cannot, as President Marion G. Romney assured us, do the Lord's work without offending the devil.¹⁰ As certain as night follows day, we will never be able to declare our message without opposition or without

offending some. Moroni promised Joseph Smith that his name would be known for “good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues, or that it should be both good and evil spoken of among all people” (Joseph Smith—History 1:33). He also told Joseph Smith that “those who are not built upon the Rock will seek to overthrow this church,” and he then promised the Prophet that the church “will increase the more opposed.”¹¹

Notes

1. See *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 2075.

2. F. F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), 15.

3. Personal communication with the author.

4. Neal A. Maxwell, *Things As They Really Are* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 48–49.

5. Boyd K. Packer, Directive, May 9, 1995.

6. Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: Confirming Evidences and Contemporary Accounts*, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 170–71.

7. Boyd K. Packer, “The Only True Church,” *Ensign*, November 1985; emphasis added.

8. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah: The First Coming of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 37.

9. I was deeply impressed some years ago when some Religious Education faculty from Brigham Young University visited Plano, Illinois, and listened to a bishop of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (today, the Community of Christ), tell us that since their people left Nauvoo, they had never known a day of persecution and had lived in harmony with those of all faiths. What a telling story!

The First Vision and Religious Tolerance

10. See Marion G. Romney, "The Prince of Peace," *Ensign*, October, 1983, 3.

11. Oliver Cowdery to W. W. Phelps, in *Messenger and Advocate*, October 1835, 200.

