

BURBANK BLVD.

A LESSON IN UNIMPORTANT DIFFERENCES

BY J. ROBERT NELSON

When I was growing up in California's San Fernando Valley, Burbank Boulevard was a dividing line. To the north lay hundreds of post-World War II tract homes. They were small and tightly bunched with virtually identical architecture. In contrast, the streets south of the boulevard were lined with large oak trees. Citrus groves and large lawns surrounded sprawling homes. The demographics of the two areas also were different. North of Burbank Boulevard was mainly a blue-collar area. The homes to the south were occupied by the more affluent.

Burbank Boulevard was also a dividing line of sorts for me personally. I didn't venture across the line very often. The school I attended, the stores I frequented, the parks in which I romped, and the friends with whom I associated were all in my immediate vicinity. Although our ward encompassed both sides of Burbank Boulevard, I had few associations with members "across the line" other than in meetings on Sundays. Even then, the contacts seemed forced—with one significant exception. My best friend happened to live on the other side of the boulevard. There were differences between us. He was a recent convert. I came from pioneer stock. One of our homes was quite lavish. The other was very basic. But when we would participate together in athletics, discuss gospel subjects, contemplate our eagerly anticipated missions, and reflect on whether we would serve in the Vietnam War, Burbank Boulevard was not a dividing line. Nearly 40 years later, I reflect on that friendship and the large hole that was left in my life when my best friend failed to return from the battlefields in Southeast Asia.

Since the days of my youth I have moved from coast to coast and have been a member of many different wards. Each ward has had its own Burbank Boulevard. In some it has been an actual geographical dividing line. In others it has been a dividing line of ethnicity, family background, socioeconomic status, political preference, or affluence.

Dividing lines are nothing new. The scriptures are replete with examples. The Book of Mormon chronicles the division between Nephites and Lamanites. For hundreds of years, that division was marked by physical separation, prejudice, and conflict. The Book of Mormon also illustrates what happens when people put aside divisions and related preconceptions and prejudices. In particular, the account of the Lamanites who took upon them the name Anti-Nephi-Lehies is instructive (see Alma 24–27). These Lamanites fled their own people and took refuge with their former enemies, the Nephites. The backgrounds and traditions of these two peoples could not have been more different. They undoubtedly came to their union with certain prejudices. But from every indication, these two groups lived together harmoniously, the Nephites providing protection to their Lamanite brothers and sisters, and the Lamanites helping sustain their Nephite protectors with a portion of their crops and, more important, with the strength of their conversions and convictions.

There certainly was no Burbank Boulevard for the Savior. His message was for saint and sinner, rich and poor alike. The men He chose as Apostles had diverse backgrounds. In His parable of the good Samaritan (see Luke 10:30–37), His refusal to judge the woman taken in sin (see John 8:3–11), and His blessing for the servant of a hated Roman centurion (see Matthew 8:5–13), the Savior was a powerful example of love and acceptance, particularly for those who take upon them His sacred name. There are and always will be differences in our skin color, our nationalities, our careers, our houses, and our material possessions. A fundamental message of the Savior, however, is that these

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Left to right: Ginger Daines; Walter Stranding, the author's best friend who died in the Vietnam War; Dianne Whitelock; and Jeff Willardson, 40 years ago at the author's postmission celebration.

are differences without substance.

Not long ago my work took me for a year to New York City. There is arguably no more diverse city in the United States. Its five boroughs encompass such ethnically diverse elements as Little Italy, Chinatown, an orthodox Jewish community, and a large group of Russian immigrants. Puerto Ricans, Jamaicans, South Americans, Asians,

and transplants from virtually every European country call New York City home. Daily I was exposed to the whole economic spectrum—from extreme wealth to grinding poverty, from fancy midtown brownstones to beggars bedding down for the night on a hard sidewalk.

The membership of our ward was as diverse as the great city in which it met. There were corporate executives, television personalities, diplomats, doctors, lawyers, teachers, students, secretaries, and salespeople. Our ward was a virtual United Nations, with members from Africa, Europe, Latin America, and Asia. Although English was the common language, conversations went on in numerous other tongues. The ward had some lifelong members. There also were converts of only a few weeks. The residences of members covered the spectrum. Some occupied luxury condominiums overlooking Central Park. Others lived in one-bedroom apartments in south Harlem. In short, the ward in Manhattan was diverse on every level. Yet I never detected division. To the contrary, the differences seemed to strengthen and unite the members who came together each Sunday morning to partake of the sacrament.

With this diversity came new and often exciting perspectives and discussions. Most important, the shared understanding of and appreciation for the restored gospel, the common commitment to its principles, the joy from learning of other members' lives, and the service we gave one another drew us together and made the obvious outward differences irrelevant. That experience was a wonderful reminder that in the Savior's Church there really is no place for Burbank Boulevards. ■



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