

Sharing the Gospel Using the Internet



With new technological tools, you can further the work of the Lord by joining the ongoing conversation about the Church.

BY ELDER M. RUSSELL BALLARD
Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

I am in my 80th year. By some accounts that makes me pretty old. Actually, some folks think some of the Brethren may be too old to know what's going on in your world. Let me assure you we are very much aware.

A Changing World

In the span of nearly 80 years, I've seen many changes. When I began my mission in England in 1948, the most common way for people to get news was through newspapers and radio.

How different the world is today. For many of you, if you read newspapers, the chances are you read them on the Internet. Ours is the world of cyberspace, cell phones that capture video, video and music downloads, social networks, text messaging and blogs, handhelds and podcasts.

This is the world of the future, with inventions undreamed of that will come in your lifetime as they have in mine. How will you use these marvelous inventions? More to the point, how will you use them to further the work of the Lord?

You have a great opportunity to be a powerful force for good in the Church and in the world. There is truth in the old adage that "the pen is mightier than the sword."¹ In many cases it is with words that you will accomplish the great things that you set out to do. And it's principally about ways to share those words that I want to talk to you.

From its beginnings, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has used the power of the printed word to spread the message of the restored gospel throughout the world. The Lord, over the centuries, has had a hand in inspiring people to invent tools that facilitate the spreading of the gospel. The Church has



Do not be afraid to share with others your experiences as a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. Telling those stories can help demystify the Church.

adopted and embraced those tools, including print, broadcast media, and the Internet.

There are perhaps few inventions that have had a greater impact on the world than the printing press, invented by the inspired Johannes Gutenberg around 1436. The printing press enabled knowledge, including that contained in the Holy Bible, to be shared more widely than ever before.

The Internet: A Modern Printing Press

Today we have a modern equivalent of the printing press in the Internet. The Internet allows everyone to be a publisher, to have his or her voice heard, and it is revolutionizing society. Before the Internet there were great barriers to printing. It took money, power, influence, and a great amount of time to publish. But today, because of the emergence of what some call “new media,” made possible by the Internet, many of those barriers have been removed. New media consists of tools on the Internet that make it possible for nearly anyone to publish or broadcast to either a large or a niche audience. I have mentioned some of these tools already. The emergence of new media is facilitating a worldwide conversation on almost every subject, including religion, and nearly everyone can participate. This modern equivalent of the printing press is not reserved only for the elite.

Now some of these tools—like any tool in an unpracticed or undisciplined hand—can be dangerous. The Internet can be used to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and can just as easily be used to market the filth and sleaze of pornography. Computer applications like iTunes can be used to download uplifting and stirring music or the worst kind of antisocial lyrics full of profanity. Social networks on the Web can be used to expand healthy friendships as easily as they can be used by predators trying to trap the unwary. That is no different from how people choose to use television or movies or even a library. Satan is always quick to exploit the negative power of new inventions, to spoil and degrade, and to neutralize any effect for good. Make sure that the choices you make in the use of new media are choices that expand your mind, increase your opportunities, and feed your soul.





HELPS FOR HOME EVENING

1. As a family, watch the video clip of Elder M. Russell Ballard's call for Latter-day Saints to share the message of the Restoration with others using the Internet. See www.youtube.com/LDSPublicAffairs. Discuss ways you can share your testimony of the gospel with others using the Internet.

2. Fill a large bowl or bathtub with water. Drop a bar of soap into the water, noticing the ripple effect of tiny waves generated from the soap falling into the water. Compare the waves to using the Internet to promote good, clean conversations about the Church. As a family, send an e-mail to a friend, telling something you love about the gospel.

As you know, the new media has already profoundly impacted the old world of newspapers and other traditional media. Once upon a time, as a Church leader I might give a newspaper interview, then wait a day or two for it to appear somewhere deep inside the newspaper. Then that newspaper was thrown away, and whatever impact it might have had dissipated rather quickly.

Now, as I am leaving one appointment to go to the next, the report of my visit or interview begins almost immediately to appear on the newspaper's Web site or on blogs, where it can be copied and distributed all over the Web. You can see how important the right *words* are today. Words recorded on the Internet do not disappear. Any Google or Yahoo! search is going to find one's words, probably for a very long time.

A case in point: In 2007, NBC television came to Salt Lake for an interview with me as part of a piece they were producing on the Church. Reporter Ron Allen and I spent an hour together in the chapel in the Joseph Smith Memorial Building. We discussed the Church at length. A few days later the story appeared, and in the four-minute segment that aired, there was one short quote of about six seconds from the one-hour interview. That was just enough time for me to testify of our faith in Jesus Christ as the center of all we believe. I repeat, just six seconds were used from a 60-minute interview. Those six seconds are quite typical, actually, for members of the traditional TV media, who think and air in sound bites. The big difference from the old days to today is that the reporter also ran 15 minutes of our interview on the *NBC Nightly News* Web site. And those 15 minutes are still there. What we say is no longer on and off the screen in a flash, but it remains as part of a permanent archive and can appear on other sites that reuse the content. People using Internet search engines to hunt for topics about the Church will come across that interview and many others.

These tools allow organizations and individuals to completely bypass the news media and publish or broadcast their messages in their entirety to the intended audiences. For instance, last year the Church Public Affairs Department conducted an interview with Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and Elder

Lance B. Wickman of the Seventy regarding the Church's position on same-gender attraction. In the old days, to communicate our message to the public on an issue like this we would have had to rely on the news media. But this probing interview was conducted by Church Public Affairs staff and posted in its entirety on the Church's Web site, unfiltered by the news media.

Joining the Conversation

There are conversations going on about the Church constantly. Those conversations will continue whether or not we choose to participate in them. But we cannot stand on the sidelines while others, including our critics, attempt to define what the Church teaches. While some conversations have audiences in the thousands or even millions, most are much, much smaller. But all conversations have an impact on those who participate in them. Perceptions of the Church are established one conversation at a time.

The challenge is that there are too many people participating in conversations about the Church for our Church personnel to converse with and respond to individually. We cannot answer every question, satisfy every inquiry, and respond to every inaccuracy that exists. We need to remember that there is a difference between interest and mere curiosity. Sometimes people just want to know what the Church is. And some who seek answers want them to come directly from a member of the Church. They appreciate one-on-one conversation.



All of you know that members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are reminded and encouraged continually to share the gospel with others. The Church is always looking for the most effective ways to declare its message. Preaching the gospel of the Restoration has always been special to me. I loved being a missionary in England. I loved being a mission president in Canada. And I love my present calling, which allows me opportunities to share the message of the Restoration of the gospel to the world and to testify that God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1820. Through Joseph, the gospel that Jesus established in New Testament times was brought back. It had been lost with the deaths of the Apostles of old. I can share with the world the knowledge that priesthood authority, the doctrine, and the ordinances of the New Testament Church are once again on the earth. This is the most important work that we can participate in.

Now, may I ask that you join the conversation by participating on the Internet to share the gospel and to explain in simple and clear terms the message of the Restoration. Most of you already know that if you have access to the Internet you can start a blog in minutes and begin sharing what you know to be true. You can download videos from Church and other appropriate sites, including newsroom.lds.org, and send them to your friends. You can write to media sites on the Internet that report on the Church and voice your views as to the accuracy of the reports. *This, of course, requires that you understand the basic principles of the gospel.* It is essential that you are able to offer a *clear* and *correct* witness of gospel truths. It is also important that you and the people to whom you testify understand that you do not speak for the Church as a whole. You speak as one member—but you testify of the truths you have come to know.

Far too many people have a poor understanding of the Church because most of the information they hear about us is from news media reports that are often driven by controversies. Too much attention to controversy has a negative impact on peoples' perceptions of what The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints really is.

**You too can
share your story.
Talk honestly and
sincerely about the
impact the gospel has
had in your life.**

I know it may seem strange to believe that an angel appeared to a teenage boy and gave him golden plates. Sometimes that seems strange to me too. But I have received a witness that the Book of Mormon that was on these plates really came from God. Don't take my word for it. You can receive this same witness for yourself. Would you like me to send you a Book of Mormon so you can read it and sincerely ask God if it is true?

Recently a columnist writing in a major U.S. newspaper was irresponsibly inaccurate in his description of the Church and our beliefs and practices. Dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of Church members and others who understand our beliefs commented on the newspaper's Web site, correcting the misconceptions he was spreading and calling for accuracy.

Examples of What You Can Do

Let me give you a few other examples of how Church members are using the new media.

A Church member living in the Midwest of the United States makes a concerted effort to share the gospel every day, in person. He then writes a blog about his daily endeavors to share the teachings of the Book of Mormon and to give pass-along cards to all he meets. His effort to share the gospel so diligently is admirable, and his further effort to write about it no doubt inspires many others to do the same.

Others have recorded and posted their testimonies of the Restoration, the teachings of the Book of Mormon, and other gospel subjects on popular video-sharing sites. You too can tell your story to nonmembers in this way. Use stories and words that they will understand. Talk honestly and sincerely about the impact the gospel has had in your life, about how it has helped you overcome weaknesses or challenges and

helped define your values. The audiences for these and other new media tools may often be small, but the cumulative effect of thousands of such stories can be great. The combined effort is certainly worth the outcome if but a few are influenced by your words of faith and love of God and His Son, Jesus Christ.

The Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ has no doubt had a powerful impact on your life.

It has, in part, shaped who you are and what your future will be. Do not be afraid to share with others your experiences as a follower of the Lord Jesus

Christ. We all have interesting stories that have influenced our identity. Sharing those stories is a nonthreatening way to talk to others. Telling those stories can help demystify the Church. You could help overcome misperceptions through your own sphere of influence, which ought to include the Internet.

Things to Avoid

Every disciple of Christ will be most effective and do the most good by adopting a demeanor worthy of a follower of the Savior. Discussions focused on questioning, debating, and doubting gospel principles do little to build the kingdom of God. The Apostle Paul has admonished us to not be “ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation” (Romans 1:16). Let us all stand firmly and speak with faith in sharing our message with the world. Many of you are returned missionaries and can carry on a meaningful conversation in the language you learned on your mission. Your outreach can be international.

As you participate in this conversation and utilize the tools of new media, remember who you are—Latter-day Saints. Remember, as the proverb states, that “a soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger” (Proverbs 15:1). And remember that contention is of the devil (see 3 Nephi 11:29). There is no need to argue or contend with others regarding our beliefs. There is no need to become defensive or belligerent. Our position is solid; the Church is true. We simply need to have a conversation, as friends in the same room would have, always guided by the prompting of the Spirit and constantly remembering the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ, which reminds us of how precious are the children of our Father in Heaven.

May the Lord bless each of you that you will have a powerful influence on those you come in contact with. As I said in the beginning, the power of words is incredible. Let your voice be heard in this great cause of the gospel of Jesus Christ. ■

Adapted from a commencement address given at Brigham Young University–Hawaii on December 15, 2007.

NOTE

1. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Richelieu* (1839), act 2, scene 2; in John Bartlett, comp., *Familiar Quotations*, 14th ed. (1968), 601.