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THE ETERNAL IMPORTANCE OF Family

Temples are very important to Latter-day Saints because in them, couples are married for time and eternity, not just till death do they part. As the Church proclaimed in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” 23 years ago, “Marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and . . . the family is central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children.”¹

This doctrine explains our strong position on the family. We also believe we are to reach out to all people with understanding, love, and compassion. My remarks will first focus on the doctrinal reasons that traditional families play such an important role in our Church. Second, I will explain the relationship between religious sensitivities surrounding the family and religious freedom. Finally, I will suggest some guiding principles on reaching out to those around us, despite any misunderstandings or disagreements.

In his address delivered during the ninth World Congress of Families in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA, Elder M. Russell Ballard said that those who believe in traditional marriage must rally all the support they can to strengthen and protect their faith, family, and freedom.

The Church’s Beliefs on the Family

To provide context on our Church’s beliefs on the family, I would like to quote lyrics from a song frequently sung by our children called “I Lived in Heaven.” This song outlines where we came from, why we are here, and where we are going. It is what Latter-day Saints call the plan of salvation—an eternal plan of our Heavenly Father.

*I lived in heaven a long time ago, it is true;
Lived there and loved there with people I know. So did you.
Then Heav'nly Father presented a beautiful plan,
All about earth and eternal salvation for man.*

*Father said he needed someone who had enough love
To give his life so we all could return there above.
There was another who sought for the honor divine.
Jesus said, "Father, send me, and the glory be thine."*

*Jesus was chosen, and as the Messiah he came,
Conquering evil and death through his glorious name,
Giving us hope of a wonderful life yet to be—
Home in that heaven where Father is waiting for me.²*

With this song in mind, let me explain a few important elements of the plan of salvation that will emphasize our immortality and eternal nature and that of our families.

Before this life, we lived with God, who is our Heavenly Father. He is the literal Father of our spirits, and we are His spirit children. Therefore, all who are born into this life are spiritual brothers and sisters.

"God's whole purpose—His work and His glory—is to enable each of us to enjoy all His blessings." Our choice to obey or disobey His commandments determines our eternal destiny. "Jesus Christ is central to God's plan. Through His Atonement, Jesus Christ fulfilled His Father's purpose and made it possible for each of us to enjoy immortality and eternal life."³ Marriage and family ties are bound by priesthood authority to endure beyond the grave if we are married "for time and for all eternity" in the temple (D&C 132:7).

I hope this brief overview will help you understand how completely linked our theology is to the traditional family. Society, law, and popular opinion may change, but society's version of the family cannot and will not substitute for God's purpose and plan for His children.

In today's world, where marriage and children are increasingly marginalized, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not stand alone in identifying the

traditional family as one of its most important doctrinal elements.

Pope Francis has said, "He [God] made men and women for happiness, to share their journey with someone who complements them, to live the wondrous experience of love: to love and to be loved, and to see their love bear fruit in children."⁴

The Southern Baptist Church proclaims: "Marriage is the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime. . . . The husband and wife are of equal worth before God, since both are created in God's image."⁵

Our doctrinal beliefs about the eternal family and statements by other prominent Christian leaders make it easier to understand why we are so dedicated to nurturing, protecting, and promoting traditional families.

Secular Support for Religious Views

There are those who think that such doctrine and statements are irrational religious voices. However, the U.S. Supreme Court went out of its way in June 2015 to acknowledge that sincere and reasonable people could hold a different opinion, even when recognizing same-sex marriage:

"Marriage is sacred to those who live by their religions. . . .

". . . There are untold references to the beauty of marriage in religious and philosophical texts spanning time, cultures, and faiths, as well as in art and literature in all their forms. It is fair and necessary to say these references were based on the understanding that marriage is a union between two persons of the opposite sex. . . .

". . . Marriage, in their view, is by its nature a gender-differentiated union of man and woman. This view long has been held—and continues to be held—in good faith by reasonable and sincere people here and throughout the world."⁶

The Supreme Court correctly recognized that many sincere and reasonable people in the world continue to recognize traditional marriage.



Faith, Family, and Freedom

Understanding that reasonable and sincere people may view marriage as only between individuals of opposite gender, the public square must accommodate, and religious freedom must protect, such views. Indeed, because religious beliefs can affect how believers view the very purpose of life, such views will inform how they interact with society.

I am reminded of the news story about young children whose schoolteacher read a story to them about two princes falling in love. The teacher presented this material with no warning or notification. When parents asked to be notified if this story was to be read again in the future, the school refused.⁷

Would it really have harmed school administrators to let parents withdraw their children when the material being taught was contrary to their beliefs? The school's decision seems like a direct assault on the role of parents in raising their children.

We live in a time of extremes. Often compromise seems difficult and distant. We hear stories of people who have tried to be true to their standards, only to be accused of bigotry or intolerance or to be punished on a seemingly unreasonable scale.

Most of the world's nearly 200 nations, including the United States, acknowledged parents' prerogative in teaching their children when they signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 18 of this treaty states, "The . . . Parties . . . undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents . . . to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions."⁸

This international human rights protection is consistent with the Church's position, which states in the family proclamation: "Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness . . . and to teach them to love and serve one another, [and] observe the commandments of God. . . . Husbands and wives—mothers and fathers—will be held accountable before God for the discharge of these obligations."⁹

It may feel like the tide is against us, but we have plenty of support to continue holding our views of traditional marriage. I have identified only a few sources. Many more exist.

We must rally all the support we can to strengthen and protect our faiths, families, and freedoms. Some individuals are actively trying to strip us of these rights. One news

story reported that millions of dollars have been poured into defeating religious freedom protections in the United States.¹⁰

To these kinds of threats, I believe that my colleague Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has put it best: “Even as we seek to be meek and to avoid contention, we must not compromise or dilute our commitment to the truths we understand. We must not surrender our positions or our values.”¹¹

If those who oppose us are genuine in their commitment to the values of diversity and equality, we should be able to work together to find compassion and peace. Forcing the beliefs of one onto another, as happened with the children being read material contrary to their parents’ wishes, diminishes diversity and skews the scales of equality. By engaging in compromise and extending love to all of God’s children, who are our brothers and sisters, we can create a peaceful, diverse tapestry of ideals and beliefs.

Guiding Principles on Loving One Another

Now that I have described the importance of traditional marriage and that we must defend our rights, let me explain why we should extend a hand of fellowship to those with whom we disagree. Jesus Christ commanded:

“Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;

“That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 5:44–45).

Just as we do not and should not shun family members with whom we disagree, we cannot and should not shun those who look or think or act differently than we do. We demonstrate our best humanity when we show love and kindness to all of God’s children. We demonstrate our discipleship when we refuse strident tones, when we refuse derisive labels, and when we enter the public square seeking fair outcomes through understanding and mutual respect.

The Church recently supported legislation that balanced the concerns of the LGBT community with the



concerns of those who have traditional religious sensitivities. The legislation protects LGBT people from being fired or denied housing because of their sexual orientation or identity. At the same time, religious conscience and the right to practice deeply held religious beliefs are protected by this robust legislation.¹²

None of the parties achieved all they wanted, but our work with the LGBT community and the Utah Legislature lessened the divisiveness in our communities without compromising on key principles.¹³ We can love one another without compromising personal divine ideals. And we can speak of those ideals without marginalizing others.

Jesus Christ was the ultimate example of loving others. Just hours before He began the painful process of paying for the sins of each of us, He met with His Apostles to partake of the Feast of the Passover—His Last Supper—and to give them the final instructions He would offer in mortality. Among His teachings is the stirring, life-changing declaration “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another” (John 13:34).



We can be specific and passionate about the benefits of man-woman marriage without disrespecting or injuring those who think otherwise. Regardless of belief or practice, as brothers and sisters we should strive to understand one another. Remember that in the end, married or single, we are each a unique part of God's grand plan.

Conclusion

The Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were murdered on June 27, 1844, by a mob while they were held in state custody. After their martyrdom, persecution and mobs threatened to destroy members of the Church while they were building the Nauvoo Temple. But they pressed on even while knowing they would have to abandon it. Before being driven out by mobs, they attended the temple day and night to make sacred promises that would unite them eternally as families.¹⁴

In making the trek to the Salt Lake Valley, great-grandparents on both my mother's and my father's sides paid a monumental price in suffering and privation. Pioneer families were separated by death, and despite burying children,

spouses, parents, grandparents, and friends along their barren trek west, they pressed forward.

Their faith in a divine plan designed by Heavenly Parents who love us gave them courage in the face of tremendous challenges. They sought a place where, without persecution, they could raise their families to love God and to serve Him. I thank them for leading the way.

The doctrine and theology of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints literally start and end with family. I repeat what I said earlier: we believe that we lived prior to this earth life as members of the spiritual, premortal family of God; and that as children of Heavenly Parents, we are to prepare while on earth to return to receive the blessings promised to those who keep God's commandments.

This knowledge will prepare each of us for that day when we die and then surely know, upon our return to God's holy presence, the true purpose of His plan for us. And so, as noted in the family proclamation, "We call upon responsible citizens and officers of government everywhere to promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society."¹⁵ ■

From an address delivered on October 27, 2015.

NOTES

1. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2010, 129.
2. "I Lived in Heaven," *Children's Songbook*, 4.
3. *Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service* (2004), 48.
4. "Pope Francis's Homily at the Family Synod's Opening Mass," *Catholic Herald*, Oct. 4, 2015, catholic herald.co.uk.
5. "Basic Beliefs: Family," Southern Baptists Convention, sbc.net/aboutus/basicbeliefs.asp.
6. *Obergefell et al. v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. (2015), supremecourt.gov.
7. See "Teacher, School Sued over Gay Fairy Tale," NPR, Apr. 27, 2006, npr.org.
8. "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights," Article 18, United Nations Human Rights, ohchr.org.
9. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," 129.
10. See Kevin Jones, "LGBT Grant-maker Wants to Win Religious Liberty Fight within Three Years," Catholic News Agency, July 29, 2015, catholicnewsagency.com.
11. Dallin H. Oaks, "Loving Others and Living with Differences," *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2014, 26.
12. See Dennis Rombo, "LDS Church, LGBT Advocates Back Anti-Discrimination, Religious Rights Bill," *Deseret News*, Mar. 4, 2015.
13. See "Utah Lawmakers Introduce Bill Balancing Religious Freedom and Nondiscrimination Protections," Mar. 4, 2015, mormonnewsroom.org.
14. See *Church History in the Fulness of Times Student Manual*, 2nd ed. (Church Educational System Manual, 2003), 302-04.
15. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," 129.