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Sharing the Gospel with Confidence

We don't have to defend or justify anything when we base our position on the teachings of the Son of God and do our best to keep His commandments.

We are in a titanic struggle. From the dawn of mankind's history, it has always been so. Good and evil have always been with us and so has the right to choose between them. I want to share some thoughts about standing firm for the truth.

Recently I saw some research about how other people see members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I have long been interested in this subject because I have had a lot to do with missionary work in my Church assignments. Knowing how people see us is an important part of understanding how best to explain ourselves. This particular piece of research made an interesting observation. It suggested that members of the Church sometimes appear very defensive to those who are not members of the Church. One respondent went as far as to say that when Mormons are explaining their beliefs, they couch their

language in terms that suggest they are expecting criticism.

This was not the first time I had heard that kind of observation. But the more I have thought about it, the more I understand how easy it is, if we are not careful, to convey a sense of defensiveness in our communication with others.

I think I understand something of the reasons. From the time Joseph Smith walked out of the Sacred Grove in the spring of 1820, there have been those who have reacted negatively, even with hostility, to our message. Joseph tells us in his own words that the first time he attempted to share what he had seen with someone outside the family, it wasn't a pleasant experience. The Protestant minister with whom he shared his message told him that it "was all of the devil" and "that there were no such things as visions or revelations" anymore (Joseph Smith—History 1:21).

If Joseph thought that was bad, it was because he hadn't yet realized the relentless power of the adversary. The more the Church grew, the more it seemed to attract hostility. The small band of faithful Saints was driven from one place to another. It must have seemed to Joseph that it could not get much worse than the governor of Missouri issuing an extermination order against members of the Church, followed by the Prophet's and others' terrible suffering at Liberty Jail. Of course, it *did* get worse, and Joseph and Hyrum paid for their work, testimonies, and faith with their lives. That was the final act that launched the great trek west, led by Brigham Young, across the American wilderness to a place of refuge among the Rocky Mountains of the United States.

Latter-day Saint stories of hardship and sacrifice are now an indelible part of history. Even converts to the Church who had no ancestors who survived those times embrace the people and events of our early history as part of their own heritage. The stories both inspire and motivate us, as

they should, and I hope and pray that in our relative comfort we will never forget those sturdy and faithful Latter-day Saints and the lessons we can learn from them.

And yet this isn't 1830, and there aren't just six of us anymore. Could part of the defensiveness that others sometimes see in us suggest that we still expect to be treated as a disliked minority, forced to flee to the West? In our interactions with others, are we expecting always to have to defend ourselves? If so, I think we need to make a course correction. Constantly anticipating criticism or objections can lead to an unhealthy self-consciousness and a defensive posture that doesn't resonate well with others. It is inconsistent with where we are today as a church and as a great body of followers of Jesus Christ.

Look to the Savior's Example

As in all things, we can look to the Savior as our exemplar. He faced tremendous hostility from the outset of His ministry. When He first preached in the synagogues at

Nazareth, some wanted to throw Him off a cliff (see Luke 4:28–29). Yet He did not allow Himself to be intimidated. He knew that for the most part He would be misunderstood. Yet He was fearless in declaring His gospel, using such phrases as “Ye have heard that it was said . . . , but I say unto you . . .” (Matthew 5:21–22).

He knew what He wanted to say, and He said it without apology. As the scriptures say, “He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matthew 7:29).

If we want to be respected today for who we are, then we need to act confidently—secure in the knowledge of who we are and what we stand for and not as if we



had to apologize for our beliefs. That doesn't mean we should be arrogant or overbearing. Respect for others' views should always be a basic principle for us—it's built right into the Articles of Faith (see Articles of Faith 1:11). But when we act as if we are a persecuted minority or as if we expect to be misunderstood or criticized, people will sense it and respond accordingly.

I invite returned missionaries to be especially sensitive to this.

You spent two years knocking on doors and dealing with every conceivable question and objection. It is easy in your conversations to think you are still knocking on doors. You're not. If you are in a position to share what you

believe, there's no need to tread so carefully that you look like you are being evasive or anticipating criticism. The Apostle Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ" (Romans 1:16), and neither should any of us be. I look forward and greatly appreciate every opportunity I have to share my testimony of the marvelous message of the Restoration. And I cannot ever remember offending anyone in the process.

One of the reasons that this subject is relevant today is because the Church is getting stronger. In the United States, we are now the fourth largest church. Latter-day Saints are everywhere—in communities from coast to coast and from north to south. While our numbers may be more concentrated in the West, it is becoming more and

more common for people in the country to know a Latter-day Saint personally. In addition, many members of the Church have achieved social prominence. A recent *Time* magazine article about the Church noted this fact and ran several photographs of prominent Latter-day Saints.¹

This prominence alone ensures that the Church is going to be talked about more and more and that Latter-day Saints are going to

find themselves in more and more gospel discussions. We need to be honest, open, forthright, engaging, respectful of others' views, and completely nondefensive about our own.

Here are two suggestions for how to engage in conversations nondefensively.

If we want to be respected today for who we are, then we need to act confidently—secure in the knowledge of who we are and what we stand for.

1. Don't let irrelevant issues drown out more important subjects.

Our Church members have often allowed others to set the conversational agenda. An example is plural marriage. This ended in the Church as an official practice in 1890. It's now 2010. Why are we still talking about it? It was a practice. It ended. We moved on. If people ask you about polygamy, just acknowledge that it was once a practice but not now and that people shouldn't confuse any polygamists with our church. In ordinary conversations, don't waste time trying to justify the practice of polygamy during Old Testament times or speculating as to why it was practiced for a time in the 19th century. Those may be legitimate topics for historians and scholars, but

I think we simply reinforce the stereotypes when we make it a primary topic of conversations about the Church.

I realize that sometimes these conversations are triggered by stories that appear in the media. That doesn't change anything. In 2009 a cable TV network series about polygamists depicted the sacred temple ceremony. That portrayal caused great concern among Church members, which is understandable. We were all offended by it.

But I refer you to an article in response to that depiction that was placed by the Public Affairs Department of the Church on its newsroom Web site. As I quote from it, notice the tone. There is nothing defensive about it, yet it responds to an inappropriate portrayal of one of our most sacred religious ceremonies:

"Like other large faith groups, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sometimes finds itself on the receiving end of attention from Hollywood or Broadway, television series or books, and the news media. Sometimes depictions of the Church and its people are quite accurate. Sometimes the images are false or play to stereotypes. Occasionally, they are in appallingly bad taste.

"As Catholics, Jews and Muslims have known for centuries, such attention is inevitable once an institution or faith group reaches a size or prominence sufficient to attract notice."

The article then goes on to discourage the idea of an organized boycott of the network

or affiliated business, which was being actively promoted among some of our members:

"The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as an institution does not call for boycotts. Such a step would simply generate the kind of controversy that the media loves and in the end would increase audiences for the series. . . . Latter-day Saints should conduct themselves with dignity and thoughtfulness.

"Not only is this the model that Jesus Christ

taught and demonstrated in His own life, but it also reflects the reality of the strength and maturity of Church members today. . . .

"If the Church allowed critics and opponents to choose the ground on which its battles are fought, it would risk being distracted

*from the focus and mission it has pursued successfully for nearly 180 years. Instead, the Church itself will determine its own course as it continues to preach the restored gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world."*²

Here's another example. In 2007 an independent film producer released a movie about the Mountain Meadows Massacre. To describe this as a really bad movie would be generous. Frankly, it was just awful—even Hollywood critics panned it. The promoters did everything they could to provoke the Church into making it a major topic of conversation. In fact, we completely ignored it. We refused to allow them to set the agenda. The result was a big flop at the box office and a lot of red ink in the producer's bank account. Meanwhile, we continue to respond to and reach out in

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constructive and intelligent ways with the descendants of those who were involved in those terrible events at Mountain Meadows.

Recently Oxford University Press published a well-researched book titled *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* that documents the facts surrounding this tragedy.

2. Emphasize that Latter-day Saints teach and live what Jesus Christ taught and that we try to follow Him.

When all is said and done, the most important thing about us and our testimony is that we base our beliefs on what Jesus Christ taught and that we try to follow Him by living our life in a way acceptable to Him and to our Heavenly Father.

This is our foundation. It was Joseph Smith's foundation. He said, "The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it."³

Whenever we are having a conversation about the Church, we should try to make this a point. We follow Jesus Christ. We try to live as He taught. That's the basis of our faith and our lives, and that's the strongest nondefensive position we can take. We don't have to defend or justify anything when we base our position on the teachings of the Son of God and do our best to keep His commandments.

It is a great blessing to have the doctrines of Jesus Christ, which are clear to those who study the scriptures and embrace

His teachings. As we follow His doctrine, we come to know that all of us are the children of God and that He loves us. By following Christ, we know where we came from before our birth, we know our purpose for being here on the earth, and we know where we will go when we leave this earth life. The plan of salvation is clear; it is God's plan for the eternal happiness of His children.

There are commandments that God has given us to live. They are His commandments, and no one is authorized to change them except it be by direct revelation to God's chosen prophet.

People throughout the world are drifting further and further away from the teachings of the Lord toward a secular society that the Apostle Paul described:

"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;

"And they shall turn away their ears from the truth"
(2 Timothy 4:3-4).



Save Kathy

By Darwin Richardson

In January 1976, I received a telephone call from a friend who worked for social services. He asked if my wife and I would be willing to take in a foster child. At the time we had two young children of our own, but we agreed to open up our home to 17-year-old Kathy.

Soon after arriving in our home, Kathy asked if she could attend church with us. Of course we said yes, and soon Kathy was attending church regularly. Many of Kathy's friends from her former congregation noticed her absence, and they were unhappy to find out that she was attending the LDS Church.

One day after school, Kathy told us that her former church was planning to stage a "Save Kathy" night for their youth ministry meeting. Kathy asked if I would accompany her to that meeting and help her defend the Church. I reluctantly agreed because although I didn't want to argue with her friends about doctrinal

differences, I knew that she didn't yet know enough about the Church to defend it. I decided to bring another guest, Richard Jones, who had just returned from his mission.

The day of "Save Kathy" night was a day of fasting and prayer for all of us. I prayed that the Spirit would be present at the meeting and that there would be no contention.

When we arrived at the church that evening, we sensed some animosity, but the youth minister welcomed us warmly and invited us to tell the group about the Church and our beliefs. As Richard shared what was then the first missionary discussion and taught about the Restoration, the 15 or so young people in the room listened carefully. Even the youth minister was captivated.

We then spent the rest of the evening answering questions and having a wonderful discussion about the gospel. The animosity we



Today is the time Paul saw. There is an ever-growing number of people who believe that there is no God, no Christ, no plan of redemption, no Atonement, no repentance, no forgiveness, no life after death, no resurrection, no eternal life, and no eternal families sealed together forever.

How empty life must be without the blessings of the fulness of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. As Latter-day Saints, we follow Jesus Christ. We know the plan of happiness, the great plan of redemption through the Lord Jesus Christ. We know the doctrines of Jesus Christ. We must strive now and always to live by them. Upon the Church's younger generation will rest the responsibility to teach the doctrines of the Lord and to know how to build up His Church. Please remember that you do not need to feel that you must justify your beliefs; you simply need to explain

them in a spirit of love and kindness. The truth always prevails when true doctrine is taught.

Here are a few examples:

1. We follow Jesus Christ's doctrine of service to our fellowman. We serve members of our Church as well as those who are not. The great work we do in humanitarian service throughout the world relieves suffering and hardship. We do all we can in sharing our resources of time and money to meet the needs of both our members and those of other faiths, recognizing that "inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40).
2. We follow Jesus Christ's doctrine of striving to live the Word of Wisdom, which is a sound way to enjoy a healthy physical body. We avoid drug abuse of all



had felt at first quickly subsided as we calmly explained our beliefs. There was respect on both sides. The Holy Ghost filled the room as we shared our testimonies and responded to questions.

At the end of the discussion, the minister thanked us for coming. Then, as we turned to leave, a young woman rose and said she wanted to tell us something. She said that before we came, she didn't think Mormons were Christians, but now she believed we might have been better Christians than she was.

We could not have scripted a better ending to our discussion. I know the meeting would never have gone so well if we had not fasted and prayed, pleaded for the Spirit to be present, and petitioned the Lord that there be no contention. Only with the Holy Spirit present can we be effective in sharing the gospel message.

kinds because our bodies house our eternal spirits and because happiness in this life is obtained by being spiritually strong and physically healthy.

3. We follow Jesus Christ by living the law of chastity. God gave this commandment, and He has never revoked or changed it. This law is clear and simple. No one is to engage in sexual relationships outside the bounds the Lord has set. This applies to homosexual behavior of any kind and to heterosexual relationships outside of marriage. It is a sin to violate the law of chastity.
4. We follow Jesus Christ by adhering to God's law of marriage, which is marriage

between one man and one woman. This commandment has been in place from the very beginning. God said, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). God instructed Adam and Eve to "be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28).

Modern-day prophets and apostles reaffirmed this command in "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," issued in 1995:

"God has commanded that the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife. . . .

"The family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan."⁴

5. We follow Jesus Christ and teach the first principles of the gospel and all of the other wonderful doctrines of the Restoration that, when embraced and lived, bring peace, joy, and happiness to the sons and daughters of God. It is just this simple.

May God bless us in our pursuits for happiness by knowing and following the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ and by engaging others in conversations about the restored gospel without being offensive. ■

From a commencement address delivered at Brigham Young University on August 13, 2009. For the full text in English, visit www.newsroom.lds.org (click on "News Releases & Stories").

NOTES

1. See David Van Biema, "The Church and Gay Marriage: Are Mormons Misunderstood?" *Time*, June 22, 2009, 49–53.
2. "The Publicity Dilemma," newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/commentary/the-publicity-dilemma; emphasis added.
3. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 49.
4. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Liahona*, Oct. 2004, 49; *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 102.