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WITNESS AS WITNESSES OF GOD

As the “salt of the earth,” we Latter-day Saints must retain our savor by living our religion and by asserting ourselves as witnesses of God.

We live in a world where many deny the existence of God or the significance of His commandments. I hope what I say will help you be more effective in your duty to witness of God and to act for truth and righteousness.

I.

I begin with the first three of our Articles of Faith:

“We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.

“We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam’s transgression.

“We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel” (Articles of Faith 1:1–3).

A great Book of Mormon prophet taught these same truths:

“Believe in God; believe that he is, and that he created all things, both in heaven and in earth; believe that he has all wisdom, and all power, both in heaven and in earth; believe that man doth not comprehend all the things which the Lord can comprehend.

“And again, believe that ye must repent of your sins and forsake them, and humble yourselves before God; and ask in sincerity of heart that he would forgive you” (Mosiah 4:9–10).

In contrast, today many deny or doubt the existence of God and insist that all

rules of behavior are man-made and can be accepted or rejected at will.

Why do I speak of such basic truths as the existence of God and the reality of the absolutes of right and wrong that govern our behavior? Sometimes the most needed things we can teach are things we tend to take for granted. We can neglect simple basic truths because we assume they are understood by all, but they are not. We must stress the fundamental truths on which our beliefs are based. Ultimately, these include the existence of God and the eternal reality of the truths and the right and wrong defined by His teachings and His commandments.

II.

The denial of God or the downplaying of His role in human affairs that began in the Renaissance has become pervasive today. The glorifying of human reasoning has had good and bad effects. The work of science has made innumerable improvements in our lives, but the rejection of divine authority as the ultimate basis of right and wrong by those who have substituted science for God has many religious people asking this question: “Why [is] the will of any of the brilliant philosophers of the liberal tradition [or even the will of any branch of the United States Supreme Court] . . . more relevant to moral decisions than the will of God?”¹

Those who have used human reasoning to supersede divine influence in their lives have diminished themselves and cheapened civilization in the process.

I am grateful to know that there are two methods of gaining knowledge—the scientific method and the spiritual method, which begins with faith in God and relies on scriptures, inspired teaching, and personal revelation. There is no ultimate conflict between knowledge gained by these different methods because God, our omnipotent Eternal Father, knows all truth and beckons us to learn by them both.

Prophecies of the last days foretell great opposition to inspired truth and action. Some of these prophecies concern the anti-Christ, and others speak of the great and abominable church.

Anti-Christ

The Apostle John uses the term anti-Christ to describe one who “denieth the Father and the Son” (1 John 2:22). Today those who deny the existence of God are called atheists. Some of these ridicule the faith of those who believe in what cannot be proven, even as they aggressively deny a godly existence they cannot disprove.

We are prepared for such denials of God by the Book of Mormon’s account of a man named Korihor. In terms reminiscent of the most atheistic writings of our day, Korihor, twice called an “Anti-Christ” (Alma 30:6, 12), taught:

“Ye cannot know of things which ye do not see; therefore ye cannot know that there shall be a Christ.

“Ye look forward and say that ye see a remission of your sins. But behold, it is the effect of a frenzied mind; and this derangement of your minds comes because of the traditions of your fathers, which lead you away into a belief of things which are not so” (Alma 30:15–16).

Korihor also declared “that there could be no atonement made for the sins of men.” His description of the consequence of his rejection of the idea of sin and a Savior is strikingly similar to the belief of many in our time: “Every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and . . . every man conquered according to his strength; and *whatsoever a man did was no crime*” (Alma 30:17; emphasis added).

Moral Relativism

Today we call Korihor’s philosophy moral relativism. Two observers describe that philosophy as follows: “When it comes to moral issues there are no universally objective right or wrong answers, no inappropriate or appropriate judgments, and no reasonable or rational ways by which to make moral distinctions that apply in every time, in every place, and to every person.”²

This is the belief applied by many in the popular media and in response to peer pressure. “Break free of the old rules. Do what feels good to you. There is no accountability beyond what man’s laws or public disapproval impose



“Humanism makes a man to be god, the supreme being, and the educated human mind becomes the arbiter of all that is true, good and beautiful.”

on those who are caught.” Behind such ideas is the assumption that there is no God or, if there is, He has given no commandments that apply to us today.

Secular Humanism

The rejection of an unprovable God and the denial of right and wrong are most influential in the world of higher education. Secular humanism, a branch of humanism probably so labeled because of its strong alignment with secularism, is deliberately or inadvertently embodied in the teachings of faculty members in many colleges and universities.

For religious people, the objectionable element in the various humanist philosophies is their rejection of the existence of God and their denial of the moral absolutes rooted in His commandments. Thus, the 1973 Humanist Manifesto rejected “traditional

moral codes” and “traditional dogmatic or authoritarian religions that place revelation, God, ritual, or creed above human needs and experience.” It further declared, “We can discover no divine purpose . . . for the human species. . . . Humans are responsible for what we are or will become. No deity will save us; we must save ourselves.”³

Of course, adherents of humanism, called humanists, have made many positive contributions. For example, they have supported democracy, human rights, education, and material progress. So long as these advancements do not exclude believers, our issue with humanists is their rejection of divine authority and values.

As former BYU philosophy professor Chauncey Riddle has written, “Humanism makes a man to be god, the supreme being,



Nephi was told by revelation that there were only “two churches”: “the church of the Lamb of God” and “the church of the devil.”

and the educated human mind becomes the arbiter of all that is true, good and beautiful.” He also reminds us that humanism “enjoys good press in the world today because most of the writers, publishers, scholars and media people are of this persuasion.”⁴

Many who deny or doubt the existence of God would probably disclaim the philosophy of moral relativism. They would see themselves as having some external standards of right and wrong, though absolute standards not based on belief in God are difficult to explain. Secular humanists, who formally reject “traditional religious morality” and declare their reliance on “the tests of scientific evidence,”⁵ seem to fulfill a Book of Mormon prophecy of those “who live without God in the world” (Mosiah 27:31).

The Great and Abominable Church and Other “Churches”

Book of Mormon prophecies describe the “great and abominable church of all the earth, whose founder is the devil” (1 Nephi 14:17). This “church” is prophesied to have

“dominion over all the earth, among all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people” (1 Nephi 14:11). Called “most abominable above all other churches,” this church is also said to act “for the praise of the world” in bringing “the saints of God . . . down into captivity” (1 Nephi 13:5, 9).

Because no religious denomination—Christian or non-Christian—has ever had “dominion” over all nations of the earth or the potential to bring all the saints of God down into “captivity,” this great and abominable church must be something far more pervasive and widespread than a single “church,” as we understand that term today. It must be any philosophy or organization that opposes belief in God. And the “captivity” into which this “church” seeks to bring the saints will not be so much physical confinement as the captivity of false ideas.

Nephi was told by revelation that there were only “two churches”: “the church of the Lamb of God” and “the church of the devil” (1 Nephi 14:10; see also 13:4–6).

This description suggests the contrast between those who believe in God and seek to serve Him according to their best understanding and those who reject the existence of God (see 1 Nephi 14:10).

Other teachings in the Book of Mormon also use the word *church* to signify belief or nonbelief in God. The final chapters of 2 Nephi prophesy that in the last days the Gentiles will build up “many churches” that will “put down the power and miracles of God, and preach up unto themselves their own wisdom and their own learning, that they may get gain” (2 Nephi 26:20). They tell of “churches which are built up, and not unto the Lord” (2 Nephi 28:3), which will “teach with their learning” and “deny the power of God” (2 Nephi 28:4, 5). They will “say unto the people: Hearken unto us, and hear ye our precept; for behold there is no God today” (2 Nephi 28:5).

In the Savior’s ministry among the Nephites, He warned against a church that is not “built upon my gospel, [but] is built upon the works of men, or upon the works of the devil” (3 Nephi 27:11; see also the teaching about the “great and spacious building” in 1 Nephi 8:26–33; 11:35; and 12:18). These warnings are not limited to religious organizations. In the circumstances of our day, they include a multitude of secular philosophies and activities.

III.

Many people who believe in God and the right and wrong that exists because of His commandments experience scorn and mocking from worldly teachings and denial of God that occur in many organizations, including educational institutions and media. Such prophesied challenges are faced by the diminishing numbers of God-fearing people who share our belief in God and the right and wrong that exist because of His commandments. This only repeats what existed at the time of the Savior.

Even as we are “troubled on every side,” we are “not in despair” (2 Corinthians 4:8). We know that our spiritual growth requires “an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11). We also know that the Lord “seeth fit to chasten his

people; yea, he trieth their patience and their faith” (Mosiah 23:21). But the scriptures also teach that He will deliver those who put their trust in Him (see 1 Samuel 17:37, 45–46; Psalm 34:22; Proverbs 3:5–6; Alma 36:27; 38:5).

I will now suggest three kinds of things we can do in response to current conditions, beginning with what is easiest. All of these respond to a great Book of Mormon teaching that we should “stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that [we] may be in, even until death” (Mosiah 18:9).

Honor the Name and Influence of God

We are taught to “believe in Christ, and deny him not” (2 Nephi 25:29); to “look unto [Christ] in every thought; doubt not, fear not” (D&C 6:36); and to “talk of Christ,” “rejoice in Christ,” and “preach of Christ” (2 Nephi 25:26). Two ways we can do this are in our private prayers and in our personal greetings.

In our private and family prayers, we should ask God to help us and our neighbors and leaders recognize God our Creator and the right and wrong established by His commandments. We should do this for the good of His children everywhere.

We should also assert ourselves against the current trend to refrain from religious references even in private communications. In recent years the inclusion of religious symbols and reverent words in Christmas greetings and sympathy cards has almost disappeared. When we make choices about these kinds of communications, we should not participate in erasing sacred reminders from our personal communications. As believers, we have a duty to preserve the name and influence of God and Christ in our conversations, our lives, and our culture.

Publicly Recognize the Blessings of God

Support public recognition of the blessings of God. This seeks to counter the diminishing mention of religious faith and references to God and His blessings in our public discourse. Contrast, for example, current public documents and rhetoric of government leaders in the United States with similar documents and words of leaders during America’s

first two centuries. In that contrast you will have evidence of deliberate efforts to edit out references to God and the influence of religion in America's founding and preservation.

What can we do about this? First, we can set the right example in our family and Church teachings by acknowledging the blessings of the Lord in our lives and in our nations. To do this "in wisdom and order" (Mosiah 4:27), we should not seem to deny that our nations include and are blessed by citizens of Jewish, Muslim, and other non-Christian persuasions, as well as by atheists. But we should speak truthfully of the fact that, for example, the United States was founded by persons and leaders who were predominantly Christians and who embodied the principles of their faith in the Constitution, laws, and culture of the nation.⁶

A recent essay by Brother Clayton Christensen, professor at the Harvard Business School and a former Area Seventy, insists that religion is the foundation of both democracy and prosperity. He reminds us that democracy and capitalism both depend on large-scale obedience to the unenforceable and that this prerequisite depends upon religions that teach fundamentals such as "the equality of people, the importance of respecting others' property, and of personal honesty and integrity." Secularism, which aspires to displace theistic religion, has no power or program to provide what Brother Christensen calls "the requisite foundation of extensive obedience to the unenforceable."⁷

Contend for the Free Exercise of Religion

Contend for the free exercise of religion. This is more difficult because it requires cooperative action by believers of various faiths. Where government-guaranteed free exercise of religion exists, we should press government officials to honor those guarantees. Here I will emphasize only two examples of current concern.

The first involves public prayer. Prayer occurs when people address the Divine Being, whatever their concept of God and however they choose to address Him. Regardless of the content of a prayer, which will vary according to the belief of the one who prays, when a prayer is offered in a public setting, it is important as an affirmation or symbol

of a group's common dependence upon and reverence for God. This is the nature of the prayers offered at the beginning of legislative assemblies or council meetings and in oaths administered to precede court testimony or official installations. Whatever the designated pray-er's concept of God and whatever his or her religious persuasion or language of prayer, I hope we will witness our belief in God by the symbol of prayer, wisely and tolerantly administered. That is worth contending for.

Second, we should be alert to oppose government officials and public policy advocates who suggest that the free exercise of religion is limited to "freedom of worship." In the United States, for example, the guarantee of "free exercise" protects the right to come out of our private settings, including churches, synagogues, and mosques, to act upon our beliefs, subject only to the legitimate government powers necessary to protect public health, safety, and welfare. Free exercise surely protects religious citizens in acting upon their beliefs in public policy debates and in votes cast as citizens or as lawmakers.

As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said in a powerful address to a nationwide audience of Christian leaders, we Latter-day Saints are "eager to join hands . . . to guarantee the freedom of religion that will allow all of us to speak out [and act out] on matters of Christian conscience regarding the social issues of our time."⁸

We need to support the coalitions of religious leaders and God-fearing people who are coming together to defend the traditional culture of belief in God and the acknowledgment of His blessings.

IV.

In conclusion, I suggest to all believers everywhere that we have a solemn religious duty to be witnesses of God. We must affirm our religious faiths, unite to insist upon our right to the free exercise of our religions, and honor their vital roles in establishing and preserving and prospering nations.

I remind my fellow Christians of the solemn teaching of the Apostle John:



We need to support the coalitions of religious leaders and God-fearing people who are coming together to defend the traditional culture of belief in God and the acknowledgment of His blessings.

“And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world” (1 John 4:3).

The consequence of our failing to speak out as witnesses of God is evident in our Savior’s teaching about the salt that has lost its savor. Mixed with other substances—just as we can be diluted by the values of the world—it loses its unique influence on the mixture of the mass. As the Savior taught, “It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men” (Matthew 5:13).

As “the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13), we Latter-day Saints must retain our savor by living our religion and by asserting ourselves as witnesses of God. When we do so, we associate ourselves with those who will enjoy

the ultimate victory of truth and righteousness, when “every knee shall bow . . . and every tongue shall confess to God” (Romans 14:11) and to the Lord Jesus Christ, whom we worship and whose servants we are. ■

From a devotional address, “Witnesses of God,” delivered at Brigham Young University–Idaho on February 25, 2014. For the full text in English, go to www2.byui.edu/DevotionalsandSpeeches.

NOTES

1. Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (1993), 226; see chapter 11 generally.
2. Francis J. Beckwith and Gregory Kousser, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (1998), 12–13.
3. In Paul Kurtz, ed., *Humanist Manifestos I and II* (1973), 14, 15–16.
4. Chauncey Riddle, *Think Independently: How to Think in This World but Not Think with It* (2009), 120, 121.
5. In Kurtz, *Humanist Manifestos I and II*, 16.
6. See John A. Howard, *Christianity: Lifeblood of America’s Free Society, 1620–1945* (2008), 51.
7. Clayton Christensen, “Religion Is the Foundation of Democracy and Prosperity,” see mormonperspectives.com/2011/02/08/religion-is-the-foundation-of-democracy-and-prosperity.
8. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Standing Together for the Cause of Christ,” *Ensign*, Aug. 2012, 46; *Liahona*, Aug. 2012, 26.