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Be an Example of the Believers

The story is told of a small army unit that was assigned a very difficult mission far behind enemy lines. As the unit neared its objective, opposing units became aware of its presence. Superior forces quickly encircled the group and began firing from all sides. As they found themselves surrounded and began to suffer withering fire, the members of this small army unit looked up to find their commander standing upon a rock, exhorting them.

Looking at his men, the commander yelled: “Men, we’ve got them right where we want them. You can just fire in any direction!”

You and I also have a difficult mission in today’s world. It is to teach and defend the truths contained in the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the world in which we live, I know it can be difficult to understand exactly what the best rules of engagement are, especially when you are surrounded

by so many voices willing to challenge the truth. There can often be so many barrages from so many different angles that it is difficult to know how to respond.

I want to talk about what it means to be what the Apostle Paul called “an example of the believers” (1 Timothy 4:12)—what it means to teach and defend eternal truth in the way our Heavenly Father desires while also exemplifying the respect, compassion, and deep love Christ exemplified; what it means to earnestly defend what we know to be right without just firing indiscriminately in any direction at a perceived enemy.

Indeed, it often seems that those two principles are in tension, doesn’t it? We are taught that we must fight “against spiritual wickedness” (Ephesians 6:12) in all of its forms, that we must “stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places” (Mosiah 18:9), and that we

How can you best teach and defend the doctrine of the gospel of Jesus Christ while also showing love, kindness, and understanding?

must never be “ashamed of the gospel of Christ” (Romans 1:16). Yet we are also taught that we should avoid contention and never “stir up the hearts of men with anger” (3 Nephi 11:30), that we should not just “live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12:18) but that we should also actively “follow after the things which make for peace” (Romans 14:19).



So how do we fulfill our God-given charge to stand firm in the gospel and to teach others the truth without causing contention and anger? It seems, especially in dealing with the controversial issues of the day, that saying anything at all can quickly lead to strife and contention. As you know so well, the world today seems to have little patience with anyone who wants to express a view that is not consistent with newfound trends.

When such challenges come to us, you and I tend to do one of two things: We either beat a hasty retreat, choosing not to engage in an environment that could quickly turn uncomfortable or even hostile; or we become defensive in a point-counterpoint debate that is entertaining to watch but that generates more heat than light.

It is better to study things out in our minds (see D&C 9:8) and then listen carefully for heavenly direction. Work up your courage and use the light within yourself.

May I point out a few things that will always be in play as we do our best to teach and defend the word of God while at the same time showing love and compassion to all people?

Defend the Word

First, we will have the most success when we engage others one on one. In today's polarizing culture of stinging one-liners and perpetual attempts

at one-upmanship, little is usually accomplished in group free-for-alls. That is especially true with social media, where we must be careful that our comments on a sensitive societal issue do not veer from the spirit that Christ would want us to convey.

If we allow ourselves to be limited to 140 characters online, we will often be misunderstood. Usually, much more can be accomplished one on one, face to face, as individuals come to understand each other. That is precisely the way President Thomas S. Monson has taught us we should reach out and rescue—one by one. And it is most often the way the Savior reached out and touched lives during His ministry on earth.

Second, although we would undoubtedly be overjoyed if others

would see the light immediately and agree to receive the missionaries the next day, that need not be our initial goal. Our initial goal is to understand where others are coming from—to respect them as people and to understand their views. Only then can we effectively communicate with others, getting past the sound bites of accusation and misunderstanding that too often dominate our discussions.

Third, let us look for ways we can respect differing views and still live together in society. Rather than simply living according to our own views without infringing on another's freedoms, let us try something better—something that is fundamental in a pluralistic society if everyone is to be treated fairly. We must stand up for the basic civil rights of others,



recognizing their right to express their opinions and speak up for what they believe in, if we are to expect others to stand up for our basic civil rights.

Finally, coming to understand one another rarely occurs in a single event. It is a process—one that often can take a good deal of time. Others may never accept our views, but we can strive to eliminate words like *bigot* and *hate*. Let us see each other as intrinsically good and reasonable, even if we hold basic views that others may never accept.

Act as the Savior Would Act

As you face difficult situations in which you are defending the gospel of Jesus Christ, I hope you will always remember to act as He would act. As the Apostle Paul taught, being “an example of the believers” is much more than just living the principles of the gospel for others to see. Paul tells us specifically that those same gospel principles must be part of our conversation, part of our love for others, part of the spirit we convey, and part of the faith that defines who we are (see 1 Timothy 4:12).

In the end, there really is no tension between the two great gospel principles—when properly understood—of standing up for truth while also respecting and loving others. Our strong conviction of the truth should never cause us to act in a way that is disrespectful or resentful toward

AS YOU DEFEND THE GOSPEL:

- Engage others one on one, face to face.
- Try to understand the views of others.
- Stand up for the civil rights of all.
- See others as good and reasonable.
- Show love, kindness, and understanding.

others. But at the same time, our desire to show kindness and love to everyone should never undermine our duty to stand for truth.

These two principles are really just two sides of the same coin. On one side of the coin is our duty to explain and firmly defend the doctrine of God. On the other side of that same coin is our duty to act in a Christlike way, always showing respect and love.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles put it this way:

“Our tolerance and respect for others and their beliefs does not cause us to abandon our commitment to the truths we understand and the covenants we have made. . . . We must stand up for truth, even while we practice tolerance and respect for beliefs and ideas different from our own and for the people who hold them. . . .

“This inspired caution reminds us that for persons who believe in

absolute truth, tolerance for behavior is like a two-sided coin. Tolerance or respect is on one side of the coin, but truth is always on the other.”¹

In a world that is quickly becoming more polarized and more contentious—where bullets often seem to be coming in rapid-fire staccato from all quarters—may I challenge you to examine both sides of your coin? In each circumstance that arises in your life, ask yourself how you can best teach and defend the doctrine of the gospel of Jesus Christ while also showing love, kindness, and understanding to someone who may not accept that doctrine.

As you do so, I testify that you will have our Heavenly Father’s help and guidance. You will feel Him leading you along, putting thoughts in your mind, feelings in your heart, and words in your mouth at the precise moment they are needed. His Spirit will lead and guide you, transforming you into a true “example of the believers”—not only someone who lives the gospel of Jesus Christ but also someone who defends and explains its doctrine in a firm yet loving and inclusive way. ■

From a devotional address, “An Example of the Believers,” delivered at Brigham Young University–Idaho on June 14, 2016. For the full address, go to web.byui.edu/devotionalsandspeeches.

NOTE

1. Dallin H. Oaks, “Balancing Truth and Tolerance,” *Ensign*, Feb. 2013, 28.