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THE CALL TO Be Christlike

In the history of Israel down through the ages, when things got too sinful or society became too secular or life with the Gentiles began undermining the moral code and commandments God had given, the children of the covenant would be sent fleeing into the wilderness to start all over and reestablish Zion.

In Old Testament times, Abraham, the father of the covenant, had to flee for his life from Chaldea—literally Babylonia—in his quest for a consecrated life in Canaan, which we now call the Holy Land (see Abraham 2:3–4). But it wasn't many generations before the descendants of Abraham lost their Zion and were in bondage in far-off, pagan Egypt (see Exodus 1:7–14). So Moses had to be raised up to lead the children of promise into the wilderness again.

Not many centuries later, a story of special interest to us unfolded when one of those Israelite families, headed by a prophet named Lehi, was commanded to flee Jerusalem because, alas, Babylon was again at the door! (See 1 Nephi 2:2.) Little did they know that they were going to an entirely new continent to establish a whole new concept of Zion (see 1 Nephi 18:22–24). And little did they know that such an exodus had already happened with a group of their forefathers called the Jaredites (see Ether 6:5–13).

It is of interest to all who celebrate the Restoration of the gospel that the colonization of America was born of a group fleeing their former homelands in order to worship as they wished. A distinguished scholar of the Puritan settlement in America described this experience as Christianity's "errand into the wilderness"—the effort of modern Israelites to free themselves of Old World godlessness and once again seek the ways of heaven in a new land.¹

God is calling to Israel in these latter days to be more Christlike and to be more holy than we now are in our determination to live the gospel and establish Zion.



I remind you of one last flight. It was that of our own Church, led by our own prophets, leading our own religious ancestors. With Joseph Smith being hounded through the states of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Missouri, and finally being murdered in Illinois, we were to see the latter-day reenactment of Israel's children again seeking a place of seclusion. President Brigham Young (1801–77), the American Moses, as he has been admirably called, led the Saints to the valleys of the mountains as those foot-weary Saints sang:

*We'll find the place which God for us prepared,
Far away in the West,
Where none shall come to hurt or make afraid;
There the Saints will be blessed.*²

Zion. The promised land. The New Jerusalem. For more than 4,000 years of covenantal history, this has been the pattern: Flee and seek. Run and settle. Escape Babylon. Build Zion's protective walls.

Until this, our day.

Build Zion Where You Are

One of the many unique characteristics of our dispensation is the changing nature of how we establish the kingdom of God on earth. This dispensation is a time of mighty, accelerated change. And one thing that has changed is that the Church of God will never again flee. It will never again leave Ur in order to leave Haran in order to leave Canaan in order to leave Jerusalem in order to leave England in order to leave Kirtland in order to leave Nauvoo in order to go who knows where.

No, as Brigham Young said for us all, "We have been kicked out of the frying-pan into the fire, out of the fire into the middle of the floor, and here we are and here we will stay."³

Of course, that statement became a statement for members of the Church all over the world. In these last days, in our dispensation, we have become mature enough to stop running. We have become mature

enough to plant our feet and our families and our foundations in every nation, kindred, tongue, and people *permanently*. Zion is everywhere—wherever the Church is. And with that change, we no longer think of Zion as *where* we are going to live; we think of it as *how* we are going to live.

To frame this new task, I draw upon three incidents.

Three Incidents and Three Lessons

1. A few years ago a young friend of mine—a returned missionary—was on one of the college basketball teams in Utah. He was a great young man and a very good ball-player, but he wasn't playing as much as he had hoped he would. His particular talents and skills weren't exactly what his team needed at that stage of its development or his. That happens in athletics. So, with the full support and best wishes of his coaches and teammates, my young friend transferred to another school, where he hoped he might contribute a little more.

Things clicked at the new school, and my friend soon became a starter. And wouldn't you know it—the team's schedule had this young man returning to play against his former team in Salt Lake City.

The vitriolic abuse that poured out of the stands that night on this young man—a newlywed who paid his tithing, served in the elders quorum, gave charitable service to the youth in his community, and waited excitedly for a new baby coming to him and his wife—should not have been experienced by any human being anywhere, anytime, whatever his sport or university or whatever his personal decisions had been about either of them.

The coach of this visiting team, something of a legend in the profession, turned to him after a spectacular game and said: "What is going on here? You are the hometown boy who has made good. These are your people. These are your



friends.” But worst of all, he then said in total bewilderment, “Aren’t most of these people members of your church?”

2. I was invited to speak at a stake single-adult devotional. As I entered the rear door of the stake center, a 30-something young woman entered the building at about the same time. Even in the crush of people moving toward the chapel, it was hard not to notice her. She had a couple of tattoos, a variety of ear and nose rings, spiky hair reflecting all the colors now available in snow cones, a skirt that was too high, and a blouse that was too low.

Some questions leapt to my mind: Was this woman a struggling soul not of our faith, who had been led—or even better, had been brought by someone—to this devotional under the guidance of the Lord to help her find the peace and the direction of the gospel she needed in her life? Or was she a member who had strayed from some of the hopes and standards the Church encourages for its members but who was still affiliating and had chosen to attend this Church activity that night?

3. While participating in the dedication of the Kansas City Missouri Temple, Sister Holland and I were hosted by Brother Isaac Freestone, a police officer by profession and a high priest in the Liberty Missouri Stake. In our conversations he told us that late one evening he was called

to investigate a complaint in a particularly rough part of the city. Over the roar of loud music and with the smell of marijuana in the air, he found one woman and several men drinking and profaning, all of them apparently totally oblivious to five little children—about two to eight years of age—huddled together in one room, trying to sleep on a filthy floor with no bed, no mattress, no pillows, no anything.

Brother Freestone looked in the kitchen cupboards and in the refrigerator to see if he could find a single can or carton or box of food of any kind—but he could find nothing. He said the dog barking in the backyard had more food than those children had.

In the mother’s bedroom he found a bare mattress, the only one in the house. He hunted until he found some sheets, put them on the mattress, and tucked all five children into the makeshift bed. Then, with tears in his eyes, he knelt, offered a prayer to Heavenly Father for their protection, and said good night.

As he arose and walked toward the door, one of the children jumped out of bed, ran to him, grabbed him by the hand, and pled, “Will you *please* adopt me?” With more tears in his eyes, Brother Freestone put the child back in bed, found the stoned mother (the men had long since fled), and said to her: “I will be back tomorrow, and heaven



help you if some changes are not evident by the time I walk in this door. And there will be more changes after that. You have my word on it.”⁴

What do these three incidents have in common? They give three tiny, very different real-life examples of Babylon—one as silly as deplorable behavior at a basketball game, one more cultural and indicative of one-on-one challenges with those who live differently than we do, and one a very large and very serious matter.

Lesson 1: Never Check Your Religion at the Door

First, let’s finish the basketball incident. The day after the game, when there was some public reckoning and a call to repentance over the incident, one young man said, in effect: “Listen. We are talking about basketball here, not Sunday School. If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. We pay good money to see these games. We can act the way we want. We check our religion at the door.”

“We check our religion at the door”? Lesson number one for the establishment of Zion in the 21st century: You *never* check your religion at the door.

That kind of discipleship cannot be—it is not discipleship at all. As the prophet Alma taught, we are “to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that [we] may be in” (Mosiah 18:9)—*not* just some of the time, in a few places, or when our team has a big lead.

Whatever the situation or provocation or problem, no true disciple of Christ can check his or her religion at the door.

Lesson 2: Be Compassionate but Be Loyal to the Commandments

That leads me to the young woman at the devotional. However one would respond to her, the rule forever is that our behavior has to reflect our religious beliefs and our gospel commitments. Therefore, how we respond in any situation has to make things better, not worse. We can’t act or react in such a way that we are guilty of a greater offense than, in this case, she is.

That doesn’t mean we don’t have opinions, we don’t have standards, or we somehow completely disregard divinely mandated “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not.” But it does mean we have to live those standards and defend

those commandments in a righteous way to the best of our ability, the way the Savior lived and defended them. And He always did what should have been done to make the situation better—from teaching the truth to forgiving sinners to cleansing the temple.

So with our new acquaintance, we start, above all, by remembering she is a daughter of God and of eternal worth. We start by remembering that she is someone's daughter. We start by being grateful that she is at a Church activity, not avoiding one. In short, we try to be at our best in this situation in a desire to help her be at her best.

We keep praying silently: What is the right thing to do here? What is the right thing to say? What *ultimately* will make this situation and her better? Asking these questions and really trying to do what the Savior would do is what I think He meant when He said, "Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment" (John 7:24).

This Church can never dumb down its doctrine in response to social goodwill or political expediency or any other reason. It is only the high ground of revealed truth that gives us any footing on which to lift another who may feel troubled or forsaken. Our compassion and our love—fundamental characteristics and requirements of our Christianity—must *never* be interpreted as compromising the commandments.

When we face such situations, it can be very challenging and confusing. Young people may ask, "Well, we don't believe we should live or behave in such and such a way, but why do we have to make other people do the same? Don't they have their free agency? Aren't we being self-righteous and judgmental, forcing our beliefs on others, demanding that *they* act in a certain way?"

In those situations you are going to have to explain sensitively why some principles are defended and *some* sins opposed *wherever they are found* because the issues and the laws involved are *not* just social or political but eternal in their consequence. And while not wishing to offend those who believe differently from us, we are even more anxious not to offend God.

It is a little like a teenager saying, "Now that I can drive, I know I am supposed to stop at a red light, but do we really have to be judgmental and try to get everyone else to stop at red lights? Does *everyone* have to do what we do? Don't others have their agency? Must they behave as we do?" You then have to explain why, yes, we do hope *all* will stop at a red light. And you have to do this *without* demeaning those who transgress or who believe differently than we believe because, yes, they do have their moral agency.

There is a wide variety of beliefs in this world, and there is moral agency for all, but no one is entitled to act

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as if God is mute on these subjects or as if commandments matter only if there is public agreement over them. In the 21st century we cannot flee any longer. We are going to have to fight for laws and circumstances and environments

that allow the free exercise of religion and our franchise in it. That is one way we can tolerate being in Babylon but not of it.

I know of no more important ability and no greater integrity for us to demonstrate in a world from which we cannot flee than to walk that careful path—taking a moral stand according to what God has declared and the laws He has given but doing it compassionately and with understanding and great charity.

Lesson 3: Use Gospel Values to Benefit Communities and Countries

Not many of us are going to be police officers or social service agents or judges sitting on a legal bench, but all of us should care for the welfare of others and the moral safety of our extended community. In speaking of the need for us to influence society beyond the walls of our own home, Elder Quentin L. Cook of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has said:



“In addition to protecting our own families, we should be a source of light in protecting our communities. The Savior said, ‘Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.’ . . .

“In our increasingly unrighteous world, it is essential that values based on religious belief be [evident in] the public square. . . .

“Religious faith is a store of light, knowledge, and wisdom and benefits society in a dramatic way.”⁵

If we don’t take gospel blessings to our communities and our countries, we will never have enough policemen—there will never be enough Isaac Freestones—to enforce moral behavior even if it were enforceable. And it isn’t. Those children in that home without food or

clothing are sons and daughters of God. That mother, more culpable because she is older and should be more responsible, is also a daughter of God. Such situations may require tough love in formal, even legal, ways, but we must try to help when and where we can because we are not checking our religion at the door, even as pathetic and irresponsible as some doors are.

No, we can’t do everything, but we can do something. And in answer to God’s call, the children of Israel are the ones to do it—not to flee Babylon this time but to attack it. Without being naive about it, we can live our religion so broadly and unfailingly that we find all kinds of opportunities to help families, bless neighbors, and protect others, including the rising generation.



Latter-day Saints are called upon to be the leaven in the loaf, the salt that never loses its savor, the light set upon a hill never to be hidden under a bushel.

Savior to say to me: “Jeffrey, I recognize you not by your title but by your life, the way you are trying to live and the standards you are trying to defend. I see the integrity of your heart. I know you have tried to make things better first and foremost by being better yourself and then by declaring my word and defending my gospel to others in the most compassionate way you could.”

He will certainly add: “I know you weren’t always successful with your own sins and with the circumstances of others, but I believe you honestly tried. I believe in your heart you truly loved me.”

I want to have something like that encounter someday as I want nothing else in this mortal life. And I want it for you. I want it for us all. “Israel, Israel, God is calling”⁶—calling us to live the gospel of Jesus Christ personally in small ways and large ways, to reach out to those who may not look or dress or behave quite as we do, and then (where we can) to go beyond that to serve in the widest community we can address.

I love the Lord Jesus Christ, whose servant I am trying to be. And I love our Heavenly Father, who cared enough to give Him to us. Regarding that gift, I know that God is calling to Israel in these latter days to be more Christlike and to be more holy than we now are in our determination to live the gospel and establish Zion. I also know that He will give us the strength and the holiness to be true disciples if we plead for them. ■

From a CES devotional address, “Israel, Israel, God Is Calling,” delivered at Dixie State University in St. George, Utah, on September 9, 2012. For the full address, go to lds.org/broadcasts.

NOTES

1. See Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956), 2–3.
2. “Come, Come, Ye Saints,” *Hymns*, no. 30.
3. Brigham Young, in James S. Brown, *Life of a Pioneer: Being the Autobiography of James S. Brown* (1900), 121.
4. Isaac Freestone, experience shared with the author, May 5, 2012.
5. Quentin L. Cook, “Let There Be Light!” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2010, 28, 29.
6. “Israel, Israel, God Is Calling,” *Hymns*, no. 7.

Reflect Your Love of Jesus Christ

Latter-day Saints are called upon to be the leaven in the loaf, the salt that never loses its savor, the light set upon a hill never to be hidden under a bushel. So start presenting!

If we do right and talk right and reach out generously with our words and our deeds, then, when the Savior cuts short His work in righteousness, says time is no more in this last dispensation, and comes in His glory, He will find us doing our best, trying to live the gospel, trying to improve our lives and our Church and our society the best way we can.

When He comes, I so want to be caught living the gospel. I want to be surprised right in the act of spreading the faith and doing something good. I want the