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Robert L. Millet

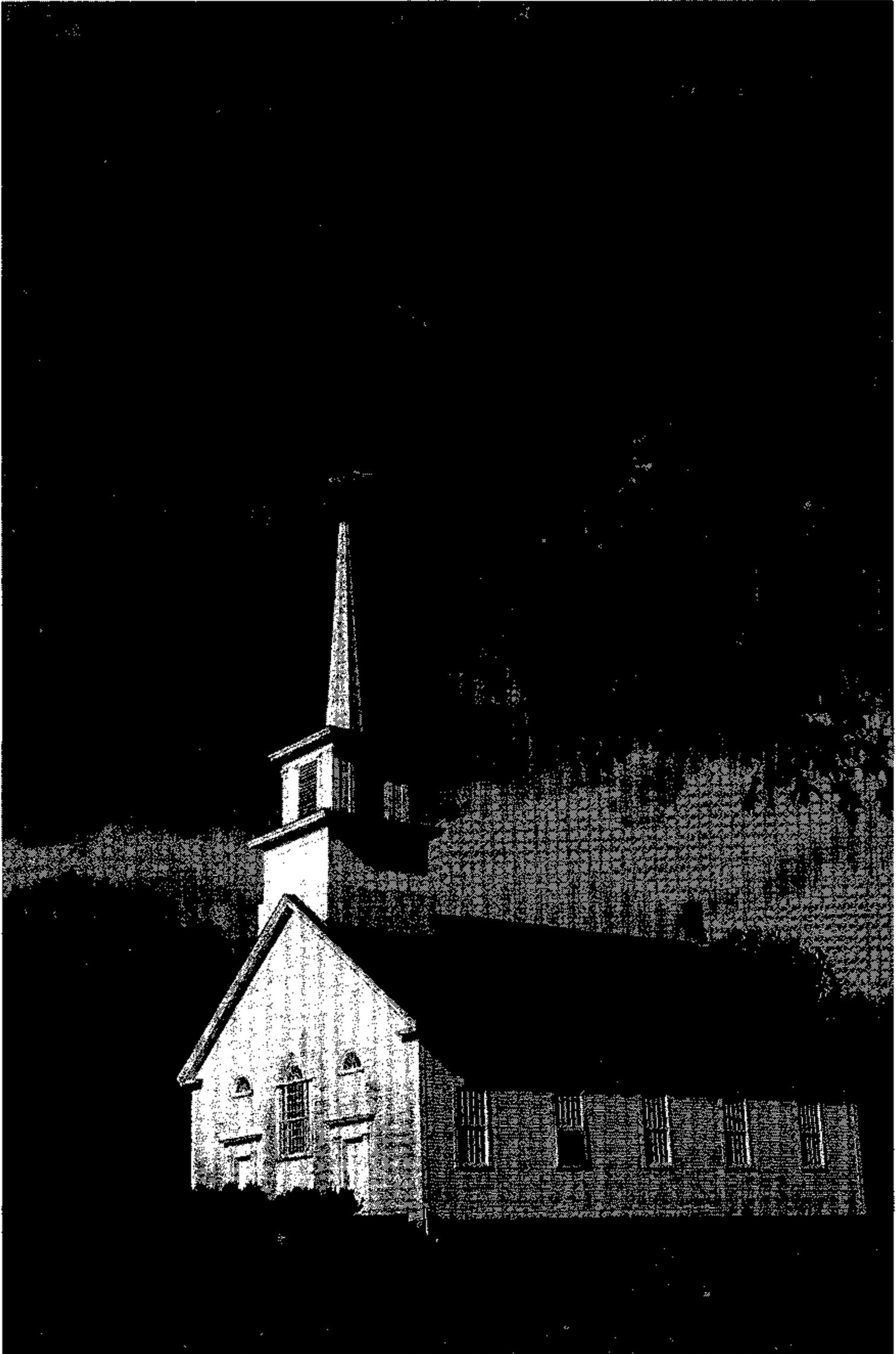
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*"In the spirit of Christian brotherhood and sisterhood, is it not possible to lay aside theological differences long enough to address the staggering social issues in our troubled world?"—Robert L. Millet*

# Outreach: Opening the Door or Giving Away the Store?

*Robert L. Millet*

*Robert L. Millet is the Richard L. Evans Professor of Religious Understanding and former dean of Religious Education at BYU.*

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We are called to be holy, to stand as lights in a darkened world, to be different in order to make a difference. And yet we live in the world. We do not attend church every day of the week, nor do many of us associate only with persons of our own faith or moral persuasion. We have been called to come out of the world in the sense that we are to forsake the ways, whims, voices, and values of the world and the worldly. In speaking of His chosen Twelve, Jesus prayed: “I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because *they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil*” (John 17:14–15; emphasis added).

There is a fine line here. While on the one hand, the Saints of the Most High are to eschew all forms of evil and reject every effort to dilute the divine or corrupt the truth, yet we are commissioned to be a leavening influence among the people of the earth. We cannot make our influence felt if we completely avoid the troublesome issues in society and insulate ourselves and our families from today’s challenges. President Howard W. Hunter explained that “the gospel of Jesus Christ, which gospel we teach and the ordinances of which we perform, is a global faith with an all-embracing message. It is neither confined nor partial nor subject to history or fashion. Its essence is universally and eternally true. Its message is for all the world, restored in these latter days to meet the fundamental needs of every nation, kindred,

tongue, and people on the earth. It has been established again as it was in the beginning—to build brotherhood, to preserve truth, and to save souls.”<sup>1</sup>

As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we have a responsibility to love and care for our neighbors and make a difference for good in their lives. Perhaps they will join our church, but perhaps they will not. Whether they do or not, we have been charged by our Lord and Master, as well as by His chosen spokesmen, to love them, to serve them, and to treat them with the same respect and kindness that we would extend to people of our own faith. Unfortunately, religious discussions with those not of our faith too often devolve into debates or wars of words as a result of defensiveness over theological issues. This need not happen when men and women of goodwill come together in an attitude of openness and in a sincere effort to better understand and be understood.

There is a very real sense in which the Latter-day Saints are a part of the larger “body of Christ,” the Christian community, whether certain groups feel comfortable with acknowledging our Christianity or not. Given the challenges we face in our society—fatherless homes, child and spouse abuse, divorce, poverty, the spread of crime and delinquency, spiritual wickedness in high places—it seems so foolish for men and women who claim to believe in the Lord and Savior, whose hearts and lives have been surrendered to that Savior, to allow doctrinal differences to prevent them from working together. Okay, this person believes in a triune God, that the Almighty is a spirit, and that He created all things *ex nihilo*. I believe that God is an exalted Man, that He is a separate and distinct personage from the Son and the Holy Ghost. She believes that the Sabbath should be observed on Saturday, while her neighbor does not believe in blood transfusions. This one speaks in tongues, that one spends much of his time leading marches against social injustice, while a third believes that little children should be baptized. One good Baptist is a strict Calvinist, while another tends to take freedom of the will seriously, and so on, and so on. Do we agree on the problems in our world? Do we agree on the fact that most all of these ills have moral or spiritual roots?

President Gordon B. Hinckley pleaded with us:

We must not become disagreeable as we talk of doctrinal differences. There is no place for acrimony. But we can never surrender or compromise that knowledge which has come to us through revelation and the direct bestowal of keys and authority under the hands of those who held them anciently. Let us never forget that

this is a restoration of that which was instituted by the Savior of the world. It is not a reformation of perceived false practice and doctrine that may have developed through the centuries.

We can respect other religions and must do so. We must recognize the great good they accomplish. We must teach our children to be tolerant and friendly toward those not of our faith. We can and do work with those of other religions in the defense of those values which have made our civilization great and our society distinctive.<sup>2</sup>

In the spirit of Christian brotherhood and sisterhood, is it not possible to lay aside theological differences long enough to address the staggering social issues in our troubled world? My recent interactions with men and women of various faiths have had a profound impact on me; they have broadened my horizons dramatically and reminded me—a sobering reminder we all need once in a while—that we are all sons and daughters of the same Eternal Father. We may never resolve our differences on the Godhead or the Trinity, on the spiritual or corporeal nature of Deity, or on the sufficiency of the Bible, but we can agree that salvation is in Christ; that the ultimate transformation of society will come only through the application of Christian solutions to pressing moral issues; and that the regeneration of individual hearts and souls is foundational to the restoration of virtue in our communities and nations.

It is my conviction that God loves us, one and all, for I believe that He is our Father in Heaven and that He has tender regard for us. I also feel strongly that, in spite of growing wickedness, men and women throughout the earth are being led to greater light and knowledge—to the gradual realization of their own fallen nature and thus of their need for spiritual transformation. C. S. Lewis once stated that there are people “who are slowly becoming Christians though they do not yet call themselves so. There are people who do not accept the full Christian doctrine about Christ but who are so strongly attracted by Him that they are His in a much deeper sense than they themselves understand.” Lewis went on to speak of people “who are being led by God’s secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it.”<sup>3</sup>

I am fully persuaded that we can be committed Latter-day Saints and that we need not compromise one whit of our doctrine or our way of life; indeed, our strength, our contribution to the religious world, lies in our distinctiveness. We are who we are, and we believe what we

believe. At the same time, we can and should build bridges of friendship and understanding with those of other faiths. I believe this is what our Master would do, He who mingled with all elements of society and whose gaze penetrated the faces and the facades of this temporal world.

Once again, the people of the covenant have been charged to be “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that [we] should shew forth the praises of him who hath called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). Our religion is more than wearing dark suits and white shirts and attending meetings, more than external trappings or successful activities. What we are, deep down to the core, is so much more important than what we are doing or what we may appear to be. Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught: “In the final analysis, the gospel of God is written, not in the dead letters of scriptural records, but in the lives of the Saints. It is not written with pen and ink on paper of man’s making, but with acts and deeds in the book of life of each believing and obedient person. It is engraved in the flesh and bones and sinews of those who live a celestial law, which is the law of the gospel. It is there to be read by others, first, by those who, seeing the good works of the Saints, shall respond by glorifying our Father in heaven, and finally by the Great Judge to whom every man’s life is an open book.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Blessings and Challenges of Outreach**

When I was appointed dean of Religious Education in 1991, I encouraged some of our teachers of world religion classes in their desire to visit Asian countries and become more personally acquainted with the people, the varying religions, and their ways of life. We began to rethink the role of the Richard L. Evans Chair and undertook a major reorganization. Competent and energetic scholars like David Paulsen, Darwin Thomas, Larry Porter, and Roger Keller were appointed as Evans professors. I found myself spending more and more time attending conferences, delivering lectures, and meeting religious leaders and academicians from religious schools. And, concurrently, I began a reading program (books, journals, magazines) that was broad and extensive, in terms of Christian doctrine and practice. I sensed I would not be in a position to carry on meaningful conversations with these people if I did not understand their backgrounds, their vocabularies, and even some of the crises in their respective traditions.

Understanding is a wonderful thing, especially among people of goodwill, among people who are open and teachable. Over the years, I have developed some remarkable friendships with people of many

faiths, but for some reason I have been especially attracted to Evangelical Christians. Maybe it has something to do with my own upbringing in Louisiana. Many of my cousins were Pentecostal Holiness, and a few of them are ministers today. I know something about their goodness, their devotion to Jesus Christ, and their desire to live for Him. I would have to be honest and admit that not every interaction with Evangelicals has been sweet and satisfying; I think Stephen Robinson could affirm, with me, that our encounters with some of the leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention were anything but warm and inviting. But on the whole, our meetings have been cordial, and I have almost always sensed at the conclusion of our gathering that both groups were different somehow—they were just a bit less suspicious of us, and we were slightly less critical of them.

There have been some unanticipated blessings associated with outreach and with interfaith dialogue. Some of these people have become my friends—my *friends*. I have grown to appreciate them, admire them, and look up to them. On certain occasions, I have felt the pure love of Christ toward them. This feeling attests to me that God loves them and that what we are about is the result of neither accident nor coincidence.

I must say at this point that there is a world of difference between being able to teach the doctrines of salvation to those of our own faith and being able to do the same to those not of our faith. Our backgrounds and vocabularies are so different that I have been required to bend and stretch and reach for clarity of expression. Let me illustrate. It is not uncommon to have one of my Christian friends, particularly one who knows me well and senses my commitment to the Savior, ask me, “Bob, if you sincerely believe in the ransoming power and completed work of Jesus Christ, why do you as a people build and attend temples? Is salvation really in Christ, or must you enter the temple to be saved?” This is an excellent question, one that has forced me to ponder carefully upon the place and meaning of temples in Latter-day Saint theology.

I sat at lunch a few years ago with a dear friend of mine, Pastor Greg Johnson, who happens to be an Evangelical minister. We have met on many occasions to chat, to reflect on one another’s faith, to ask hard questions, to seek to better understand each other’s beliefs. On this particular occasion, we were discussing grace and works. I had assured my friend that Latter-day Saints do in fact believe in, accept, and rely upon the saving mercy of Jesus. “But Bob,” he said, “you folks believe you have to do so many things to be saved!”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Well,” he continued, “let’s just take baptism, for example. You believe that baptism is what saves you.”

“No, we don’t,” I responded.

“Yes, you do,” he followed up. “You believe baptism is essential for entrance into the celestial kingdom.”

“Yes,” I said, “while baptism or other ordinances are necessary as channels of divine power and grace, they are not the things that save us. *Jesus* saves us!”

My response about baptism to my colleague is also applicable to temples and temple work. While Latter-day Saints believe and teach that the highest form of salvation or exaltation comes to those who receive the blessings of the temple (see D&C 131:1–4), we do not in any way believe that it is the temple, or the ordinances contained there, that saves us. Salvation is in Christ. We believe the temple makes us eligible to receive the covenants and ordinances that open the door to greater truths; it is a house of learning, of communion and inspiration, of covenants and ordinances, of service, and of personal refinement. We believe that the temple is the house of the Lord. But it is not the Lord. We look to Christ the Person for salvation. I doubt that I would ever have come to those conclusions had I not been challenged by my friends of other faiths regarding the place of Christ in our temple worship.

Now, to be sure, there have been a host of challenges to this work of outreach. Some have asked: “Why are you doing this? Do you really think you will convert that person to our way of thinking? How can you justify the time and expense required of such efforts?” Others are forever suspicious that any person who wants to build relationships with us must have some malicious motive. The greatest source of frustration I have felt in this work—and the one that has brought me to the brink of turning in my badge and resigning from my professorship—has not been unsuccessful encounters with other Christians but rather with misunderstanding and occasionally outright unkindness on the part of Latter-day Saints. In some cases, I suppose it is simply a matter of their questioning my motives or wondering how it is possible to make progress in interfaith dialogue without some form of doctrinal compromise. I am persuaded that too often such suspicion comes from plain old ignorance, from a lack of the love of God in the heart, or simply from a lack of perspective about the bigger picture.

Another challenge with outreach is simply being able to respond to difficult questions that come from those of other faiths. Most of the

doctrinal or historical queries are handled easily enough. But there are some particularly sensitive topics—for example, God was once a man; how Jesus is literally the Son of God; what it means for man to become like God; women and the priesthood; priesthood restriction until 1978; plural marriage; and so forth—topics that tax the soul, causing one to wonder how little or how much to say. Little is generally better than much, and “I really don’t know” works quite well too. The other thing I have begun to stress with groups is that the “doctrine of the Church” today has a rather narrow focus and direction; central and saving doctrine is what we are called upon to emphasize, not tangential and peripheral doctrines. Not everything that was ever spoken or written by a Church leader in the past is necessarily a part of the doctrine of the Church today. Ours is a living constitution, a living tree of life, a dynamic Church (see D&C 1:30). We are commanded to pay heed to the words of living oracles (see D&C 90:3–5).

### **A Broader Perspective**

Outreach requires a broader perspective on how God is working throughout the earth through men and women of all types and attitudes and religious persuasions. Five years ago, I read the autobiography of Billy Graham, entitled *Just As I Am* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997). It was a life-changing experience for me. I had, of course, grown up in the South watching Billy Graham revivals and thus was not completely ignorant of his prominence in the religious world. But I was not prepared for what I learned. His influence for good among rich and poor, black and white, high and low—including his service as spiritual adviser to several presidents of the United States—was almost overwhelming to me. The more I read, the more I became acquainted with a good man, a God-fearing man, a person who had felt called to take the message of Christ to the far parts of the earth. I remember sitting in my chair in the living room finishing the last page of the book. No one else was in the house except for my wife, Shauna, who was also reading. As I laid the book down, I let out a rather loud “Wow!” Shauna responded with “What did you say?” I replied: “Wow! What a life!” I remember being very emotional at the time, sensing deep down that God had worked wonders through this simple but submissive North Carolina preacher.

Not long after I had read the Graham autobiography, one of our faculty drew my attention to a general conference address by Elder Ezra Taft Benson given in April 1972. “God, the Father of us all,” Elder Benson said, “uses the men of the earth, especially good men, to

accomplish his purposes. It has been true in the past, it is true today, it will be true in the future.” Elder Benson then quoted the following from a conference address delivered by Elder Orson F. Whitney in 1928: “Perhaps the Lord needs such men on the outside of His Church to help it along. They are among its auxiliaries, and can do more good for the cause where the Lord has placed them, than anywhere else. . . . Hence, some are drawn into the fold and receive a testimony of the truth; while others remain unconverted, . . . the beauties and glories of the gospel being veiled temporarily from their view, for a wise purpose. The Lord will open their eyes in His own due time.” Now note this particularly poignant message: “*God is using more than one people for the accomplishment of His great and marvelous work. The Latter-day Saints cannot do it all. It is too vast, too arduous for any one people. . . . We have no quarrel with the Gentiles. They are our partners in a certain sense.*”<sup>5</sup>

In June of 1829, Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer were instructed, “Contend against no church, save it be the church of the devil” (D&C 18:20). Elder B. H. Roberts offered this insightful commentary on this passage:

I understand the injunction to Oliver Cowdery to “contend against no church, save it be the church of the devil” (D&C 18:20), to mean that he shall contend against evil, against untruth, against all combinations of wicked men. They constitute the church of the devil, the kingdom of evil, a federation of unrighteousness; and the servants of God have a right to contend against that which is evil, let it appear where it will, in Catholic or in Protestant Christendom, among the philosophical societies of deists and atheists, and even within the Church of Christ, if, unhappily, it should make its appearance there. But, *let it be understood, we are not brought necessarily into antagonism with the various sects of Christianity as such. So far as they have retained fragments of Christian truth—and each of them has some measure of truth—that far they are acceptable unto the Lord; and it would be poor policy for us to contend against them without discrimination. Wherever we find truth, whether it exists in complete form or only in fragments, we recognize that truth as part of that sacred whole of which the Church of Jesus Christ is the custodian; and I repeat that our relationship to the religious world is not one that calls for the denunciation of sectarian churches as composing the church of the devil.*

Elder Roberts added this statement that demonstrates the kind of breadth necessary in reaching out and understanding our brothers and sisters of other faiths: “All that makes for untruth, for unrighteousness constitutes the kingdom of evil—the church of the devil. *All that makes*

*for truth, for righteousness, is of God; it constitutes the kingdom of righteousness—the empire of Jehovah; and, in a certain sense at least, constitutes the Church of Christ. With the latter—kingdom of righteousness—we have no warfare. On the contrary, both the spirit of the Lord’s commandments to his servants and the dictates of right reason would suggest that we seek to enlarge this kingdom of righteousness both by recognizing such truths as it possesses and seeking the friendship and cooperation of the righteous men and women who constitute its membership.”<sup>6</sup>*

Let me pose three questions—questions I propose we have not pondered or probed enough. What was the Great Apostasy? What was lost? What was *not* lost? We know from the Book of Mormon and from modern scripture that following the time the gospel was delivered to the Gentiles, plain and precious truths, as well as many covenants of the Lord, were taken from or kept back from the Bible and from the gospel of Jesus Christ (see 1 Nephi 13; D&C 6:26; 8:11; Moses 1:40–41). We know that with the deaths of the Apostles, the keys of the kingdom of God—the directing power, the right of presidency—were lost. Those apostolic keys had been conferred in order to direct the work of the ministry (including overseeing and performing the sacraments or ordinances) and also to assure the correctness of doctrine and Church practice within and among the branches of the Church. The truths and covenants that were lost surely included the teachings and ordinances of the temple and the nature of exaltation; the destiny of man (including his premortal existence); the nature and personality of God and the Godhead; life and labors in the postmortal spirit world; three degrees of glory in the heavens hereafter; and so forth.

Over the decades, in an effort to satisfy the accusations of Jews who denounced the notion of three Gods (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost) as polytheistic and at the same time to incorporate ancient but appealing Greek philosophical concepts of an all-powerful moving force in the universe, the Christian Church began to redefine the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Centuries of debate on the nature of the Godhead took place at Nicaea (A.D. 325), Constantinople (A.D. 381), Ephesus (A.D. 431), and Chalcedon (A.D. 451), resulting in creedal statements that became the walk and talk of Christian doctrine. Men sought to harmonize revealed doctrine with Greek philosophy, which resulted in the corruption of fundamental and foundational truths.

As one writer not of our faith has observed, “The classical theological tradition became misguided when, under the influence of Hellenistic philosophy, it defined God’s perfection in static, timeless terms. All change was considered an imperfection and thus not applicable

to God.”<sup>7</sup> Further, “since Plato, Western philosophy has been infatuated with the idea of an unchanging, timeless reality. Time and all change were considered less real and less good than the unchanging timeless realm. . . . This infatuation with the ‘unchanging’ unfortunately crept into the church early on and has colored the way Christians look at the world, read their Bibles, and develop their theology.”<sup>8</sup>

I have wrestled for years with the meaning of certain verses in the Book of Mormon. The allegory of Zenos (Jacob 5) seems to divide the history of the world (and of God’s patient workings with His covenant people) into distinct time periods. My understanding is that beginning in verse 29, after “a long time had passed away,” we have moved through a universal apostasy into the dispensation of the fulness of times. Thus, verses 29 through 77 are devoted principally to the Holy One of Israel’s dealings with the posterity of Jacob from the time of the call of Joseph Smith until the end of the Millennium. After the Lord of the vineyard and His servant return to the mother tree, they discover that it has produced wild fruit, “and there is none of it which is good” (v. 32). This language is reminiscent of the words of Joseph Smith regarding what he was taught in his First Vision: “I was answered that I must join none of them [the churches of his day], for they were all wrong” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19).

In the allegory of Zenos, the Lord of the vineyard asks what should be done to the tree in order to produce and preserve good fruit. Notice the servant’s answer: “Behold, because thou didst graft in the branches of the wild olive-tree they have *nourished the roots, that they are alive and they have not perished; wherefore thou beholdest that they are yet good*” (Jacob 5:31–34; emphasis added). What are the roots that are alive and “yet good”? When I first came to BYU, I was informed by one of the senior faculty that the roots were the blood of Israel, and I think there is much to recommend this idea. I would like to suggest another, perhaps related, interpretation. What if the roots are remnants of Christianity, pieces and parts and principles of the original gospel of Jesus Christ that have survived the centuries through the teachings or practices of both Protestant and Catholic churches? It is as though the servant is saying to his Master: “Look, we have a foundation upon which to build, an ancient archetype of the full gospel that rests deep within the souls and minds of good people throughout the earth. We can begin the final work of gathering Israel, and we can restore and replace and rebuild upon those fundamental verities of the primitive gospel.” Discussing the passing of the primitive Church and the flickering and dimming (not dousing) of the flame of Christian faith,

President Boyd K. Packer stated: “But always, as it had from the beginning, the Spirit of God inspired worthy souls. We owe an immense debt to the protesters and the reformers who preserved the scriptures and translated them. They knew something had been lost. They kept the flame alive as best they could.”<sup>9</sup>

President Hinckley made this observation: “Reflect upon it, my brethren and sisters. For centuries the heavens remained sealed. Good men and women, not a few—really good and wonderful people—tried to correct, strengthen, and improve their systems of worship and their body of doctrine. To them I pay honor and respect. How much better the world is because of their bold action. While I believe their work was inspired, it was not favored with the opening of the heavens, with the appearance of Deity.”<sup>10</sup>

It is but reasonable, therefore, that elements of truth, pieces of a much larger mosaic, should be found throughout the world in varying cultures and among diverse religious groups. Further, as the world has passed through phases of apostasy and restoration, relics of revealed doctrine remain, albeit in some cases in altered or even convoluted forms. President Joseph F. Smith had much to say to those who seek to upstage Christianity. Jesus Christ, he taught, “being the fountain of truth, is no imitator. He taught the truth first; it was his before it was given to man. . . . If we find truth in broken fragments through the ages, it may be set down as an incontrovertible fact that it originated at the fountain, and was given to philosophers, inventors, patriots, reformers, and prophets by the inspiration of God. It came from him through his Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost, in the first place, and from no other source. It is eternal.”<sup>11</sup>

The tenth section of the Doctrine and Covenants includes instructions to the young prophet Joseph Smith regarding the loss of the 116 pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript. Toward the latter part of the revelation, the Lord speaks of the prayers of the ancient Nephites that the fulness of the gospel might be made known in a future day to people who come to America and that this land “might be free unto all of whatsoever nation, kindred, tongue, or people they may be. And now, behold, according to their faith in their prayers will I bring this part of my gospel [specifically the Book of Mormon, but also the other revelations of the Restoration] to the knowledge of my people. Behold, I do not bring it to destroy that which they have received, but to build it up” (D&C 10:49–52). This seems to be the Lord’s way of affirming that when He delivers additional light and truth to His children, even additional scripture, He in no way detracts from what has been dispensed

before. In this case, neither the Book of Mormon nor the additional revelations would lessen in the slightest the precious and distinctive contribution of the Holy Bible. The scriptures of the Restoration bear a united witness with the Bible of the divinity of Jesus Christ and, working together, confound false doctrine, lay down contention, and establish peace (see 2 Nephi 3:12).

Now note what follows in section 10: “And for this cause have I said: If this generation harden not their hearts, I will establish my church among them. *Now I do not say this to destroy my church, but I say this to build up my church*” (D&C 10:53–54; emphasis added). It is the summer of 1828, almost two years before Joseph Smith and the early Saints would gather at Father Whitmer’s home to organize the Church of Christ. And yet here the Lord seems to be saying: “I do not speak concerning the coming organization of the restored Church in order to destroy my Church, but I say this to build up my church.” Well, what was His church in the summer of 1828? The restored church, equipped with doctrine and scripture and divine authority was not yet on earth. I suggest that when the Lord in this section refers to “my church,” He is referring to Christianity in general, to the Christian world, to Christendom. This is in harmony with Elder Roberts’s earlier statement that “All that makes for truth, for righteousness, is of God; it constitutes the kingdom of righteousness—the empire of Jehovah; and, in a certain sense at least, constitutes the Church of Christ.” In short, while Latter-day Saints claim to have received angelic ministrations and divine authority, are neither Catholic nor Protestant, and thus stand independent in the religious world, we are part of a larger whole—we are what might be called “Christian, but different”—and we really need to try to view things through those lenses if we are to become effective in reaching out.

### **Relating to Those with Differences**

I am immeasurably grateful for the fulness of the gospel—for the priesthood, for living Apostles and prophets, for the ordinances of salvation, for temples and sealing powers, and for mind-expanding doctrines. But I have found myself, more and more often, looking into the eyes of those of other Christian faiths, sensing their goodness, perceiving their commitment to Christ, and feeling those quiet but profound impressions that God knows them, loves them, and desires for me to love, respect, and better understand them. Probably too often we allow doctrinal differences to deter us from fruitful conversation, enlightening discussion, and joint participation in moral causes.

This should not be. I believe with all my heart in God and in His Son, Jesus Christ. I am committed to the doctrine and practices of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; indeed, I have never been more committed to my own religious faith than I am right now. At the same time, I have never been more liberal in my views—in the proper sense of that word *liberal*, meaning open, receptive—in regard to people of other faiths, especially Christian faiths. To some extent, I am motivated in this direction by the following statement from the prophet Mormon: “For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil; wherefore, I show unto you the way to judge; for every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God” (Moroni 7:16).

So often people of different religious persuasions simply talk past one another when they converse on religious matters. They may even use the same words, but they bring a different mind-set and an entirely different perspective to the encounter. In other situations, we employ a different vocabulary but intend to convey the same message. Confusion and misrepresentation inevitably follow. If there is anything needed in this confused world, it is understanding. While Latter-day Saints readily acknowledge that not all who learn of our doctrine will accept what we teach, it is very important to us that others *understand* what we say and what we mean. Elder Neal A. Maxwell thus counseled, “It is important in our relationships with our fellowmen that we approach them as neighbors and as brothers and sisters rather than coming at them flinging theological thunderbolts.”<sup>12</sup>

Outreach is not debate. Outreach is not ecumenism. Outreach is not associated with being timid to teach or hesitant to herald the message of the Restoration. Outreach entails neither compromise nor concession. Friendliness with others does not preclude firmness in our faith. To be involved with outreach is to comply with what Elder M. Russell Ballard called the “doctrine of inclusion.” “Our doctrines and beliefs are important to us,” he taught. “We embrace them and cherish them. I am not suggesting for a moment that we shouldn’t. On the contrary, our peculiarity and the uniqueness of the message of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ are indispensable elements in offering the people of the world a clear choice. Neither am I suggesting that we should associate in any relationship that would place us or our families at spiritual risk.” Quoting the First Presidency message from 1978, Elder Ballard reaffirmed: “Our message . . . is one of special love and

concern for the eternal welfare of all men and women, regardless of religious belief, race, or nationality, knowing that we are truly brothers and sisters because we are sons and daughters of the same Eternal Father.” “That is our doctrine,” Elder Ballard concluded—“a doctrine of inclusion. That is what we believe. That is what we have been taught. Of all people on this earth, we should be the most loving, the kindest, and the most tolerant because of that doctrine.”<sup>13</sup>

“Disagreeing with one another need not, and should not, be scary and divisive,” Gregory Boyd writes, “so long as we keep our hearts and minds focused on the person of Jesus Christ. Indeed, when our hearts and minds are properly focused, our dialogues with one another, however impassioned they may be, become the means by which we lovingly help each other appreciate aspects of God’s word we might otherwise overlook or fail to understand.”<sup>14</sup> We can possess what my friend Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, calls “convicted civility”—we can be completely committed to our own faith and way of life but also eager to learn and grow in understanding and thus treat those with differing views with the dignity and respect they deserve as sons or daughters of God.<sup>15</sup> Let me quote just a few statements from Richard Mouw’s book:

As Martin Marty has observed, one of the real problems in modern life is that the people who are good at being civil often lack strong convictions and people who have strong convictions often lack civility.<sup>16</sup>

Being civil isn’t just trying to be respectful toward the people we know. It is also to care about our *common life*.<sup>17</sup>

Christians need to be careful about seeing civility as a mere strategy for evangelism. As an evangelical Christian I want to be careful not to be misunderstood as I make this point. I want people to accept the evangel, the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. I place a high priority on the evangelistic task. But this does not mean that Christian civility is simply an evangelistic ploy—being nice to people merely because we want them to become Christians.<sup>18</sup>

The quest for empathy can be helped along by a good dose of *curiosity*. We ought to want to become familiar with the experiences of people who are different from us simply out of a desire to understand the length and breadth of what it means to be human.<sup>19</sup>

We cannot place artificial limits on how God may speak to us. This has relevance to our encounters in the public square. When we approach others in a civil manner, we must listen carefully to them. Even when we strongly disagree with their basic perspectives, we

must be open to the possibility that they will help us discern the truth more clearly. Being a civil Christian means being open to God's surprises.<sup>20</sup>

We cannot consistently develop empathy and curiosity and teachability in our relationships without the reinforcing experiences of divine grace. We can sustain open hearts toward others only because of the love that flows from the heart of God.<sup>21</sup>

[We need] to have such a total trust in Christ that we are not afraid to follow the truth wherever it leads us. He is "the true light, which enlightens everyone" (John 1:9). Jesus is *the* Truth. We do not have to be afraid, then, to enter into dialog with people from other religious traditions. If we find truth in what they say, we must step out in faith to reach for it—Jesus' arms will be there to catch us!<sup>22</sup>

I have a hunch about what is going on with some Christians who worry about being "compromised" by their involvement in non-Christian settings. I suspect they are being influenced in some *good* ways by their work, but they're nervous about how to interpret this experience.<sup>23</sup>

President Hinckley said to the Latter-day Saints: "We want to be good neighbors; we want to be good friends. We feel we can differ theologically with people without being disagreeable in any sense. We hope they feel the same way toward us. We have many friends and many associations with people who are not of our faith, with whom we deal constantly, and we have a wonderful relationship. It disturbs me when I hear about any antagonisms. . . . I don't think they are necessary. I hope that we can overcome them."<sup>24</sup>

Consider other comments from President Hinckley:

Let us be good citizens of the nations in which we live. Let us be good neighbors in our communities. Let us acknowledge the diversity of our society, recognizing the good in all people. We need not make any surrender of our theology. But we can set aside any element of suspicion, of provincialism, of parochialism.<sup>25</sup>

Are we Christians? Of course we are! No one can honestly deny that. We may be somewhat different from the traditional pattern of Christianity. But no one believes more literally in the redemption wrought by the Lord Jesus Christ. No one believes more fundamentally that He was the Son of God, that He died for the sins of mankind, that He rose from the grave, and that He is the living resurrected Son of the living Father.

All of our doctrine, all of our religious practice stems from that one basic doctrinal position: "We believe in God, the Eternal

Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.” This is the first article of our faith, and all else flows therefrom.<sup>26</sup>

We are met to worship the Lord, to declare His divinity and His living reality. We are met to reaffirm our love for Him and our knowledge of His love for us. No one, regardless of what he or she may say, can diminish that love.

There are some who try. For instance, there are some of other faiths who do not regard us as Christians. That is not important. How we regard ourselves is what is important. We acknowledge without hesitation that there are differences between us. Were this not so, there would have been no need for a restoration of the gospel. . . .

I hope we do not argue over this matter. There is no reason to debate it. We simply, quietly, and without apology testify that God has revealed Himself and His Beloved Son in opening this full and final dispensation of His work.<sup>27</sup>

Our entire case as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints rests on the validity of [Joseph Smith’s] First Vision. It was the parting of the curtain to open this, the dispensation of the fulness of times. Nothing on which we base our doctrine, nothing we teach, nothing we live by is of greater importance than this initial declaration. . . .

Are we Christians? Of course we are Christians. We believe in Christ. We worship Christ. We take upon ourselves in solemn covenant His holy name. The Church to which we belong carries His name. He is our Lord, our Savior, our Redeemer through whom came the great Atonement with salvation and eternal life.<sup>28</sup>

Now, brethren and sisters, let us return to our homes with resolution in our hearts to do a little better than we have done in the past. We can all be a little kinder, a little more generous, a little more thoughtful of one another. We can be a little more tolerant and friendly to those not of our faith, going out of our way to show our respect for them. We cannot afford to be arrogant or self-righteous. It is our obligation to reach out in helpfulness, not only to our own but to all others as well. Their interest in and respect for this Church will increase as we do so.<sup>29</sup>

Our membership has grown. I believe it has grown in faithfulness. . . . Those who observe us say that we are moving into the mainstream of religion. We are not changing. The world’s perception of us is changing. We teach the same doctrine. We have the same organization. We labor to perform the same good works. But the old hatred is disappearing; the old persecution is dying. People are better informed. They are coming to realize what we stand for and what we do.<sup>30</sup>

As a Church we have critics, many of them. They say we do not believe in the traditional Christ of Christianity. There is some substance to what they say. Our faith, our knowledge is not based on ancient tradition, the creeds which came of a finite understanding and out of the almost infinite discussions of men trying to arrive at a definition of the risen Christ. Our faith, our knowledge comes of the witness of a prophet in this dispensation who saw before him the great God of the universe and His Beloved Son, the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. . . . It is out of that knowledge, rooted deep in the soil of modern revelation, that we, in the words of Nephi, “talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that [we and] our children may know to what source [we] may look for a remission of [our] sins.”<sup>31</sup>

President Brigham Young explained that “*we, the Latter-day Saints, take the liberty of believing more than our Christian brethren: we not only believe . . . the Bible, but . . . the whole of the plan of salvation that Jesus has given to us. Do we differ from others who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? No, only in believing more.*”<sup>32</sup> It is, of course, the “more” that makes many in the Christian world very nervous and usually suspicious of us. But it is the “more” that allows us to make a meaningful contribution in the religious world.

The older I get, the less prone I am to believe in coincidence. Like you, I believe that God has not only a divine plan for the ultimate establishment of the kingdom of God on earth but also an individualized plan for you and me. I gladly and eagerly acknowledge His hand in all things, including the orchestration of events in our lives and the interlacing of our daily associations. I believe He brings people into our path who can bless and enlighten us, and I know that He brings us into contact with people whose acquaintanceship will, down the road, open doors, dissolve barriers, and make strait the way of the Lord.

Joseph Smith observed: “While one portion of the human race is judging and condemning the other without mercy, the Great Parent of the universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard; He views them as His offspring, and without any of those contracted feelings that influence the children of men, causes ‘His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.’ He holds the reins of judgment in His hands; He is a wise Lawgiver, and will judge all men, not according to the narrow, contracted notions of men, but, ‘according to the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil.’”<sup>33</sup> Thus, our charge, in the words of President Howard W. Hunter, is to “seek to enlarge the circle of love and understanding among all the people of the earth.”<sup>34</sup> ■

## Notes

1. Howard W. Hunter, in Conference Report, October 1991, 22.
2. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, April 1998, 3.
3. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 178.
4. Bruce R. McConkie, in Conference Report, October 1968, 135.
5. Ezra Taft Benson, in Conference Report, April 1972, 49; citing Orson F. Whitney, in Conference Report, April 1928, 59.
6. B. H. Roberts, in Conference Report, April 1906, 14–15; emphasis added.
7. Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 17.
8. Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 130; see also Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2001), 65–111; Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity, 1999), 54–57.
9. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, April 2000, 7.
10. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, October 2002, 85.
11. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 398–99; see also 31, 395, and Joseph F. Smith in *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: F. D. Richards and Sons, 1851–86), 15:325.
12. Neal A. Maxwell, *Wherefore, Ye Must Press Forward* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 127.
13. M. Russell Ballard, in Conference Report, October 2001, 44–45.
14. Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 20.
15. See Richard Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1992).
16. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency*, 12.
17. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency*, 25.
18. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency*, 28.
19. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency*, 63–64.
20. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency*, 67.
21. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency*, 69.
22. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency*, 106.
23. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency*, 112.
24. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Sheri L. Dew, *Go Forward with Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 576.
25. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, April 1997, 116.
26. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Excerpts from Recent Addresses of President Gordon B. Hinckley," *Ensign*, February 1998, 73.
27. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, April 1998, 3.
28. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, October 1998, 90–91.
29. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, April 1999, 116; see also April 2000, 110; April 2001, 4.
30. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, October 2001, 3–4.
31. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, April 2002, 107–8.
32. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 13:56; emphasis added.

33. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 218.

34. Howard W. Hunter, *That We Might Have Joy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 59.