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An International Perspective in Teaching Church History and Doctrine and Covenants

Donald Q. Cannon

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Recently the *Religious Educator* asked me to consider three provocative questions: (1) What have you learned through studying and teaching about the international Church? (2) How does this learning alter the way you might teach a Church history class? (3) How would this knowledge affect the way you teach a course on the Doctrine and Covenants? In this article, I respond to those questions and offer practical suggestions for other teachers.

A New Perspective

Studying the events related to the international expansion of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has indeed been a great learning experience. Just the factual knowledge alone concerning the history of the Church's expansion outside of North America is both extensive and meaningful. My studies have taught me that the Church is indeed a global religion, a worldwide organization. It started as an American religious movement but over time has become a truly international institution.

Studying and teaching about the Church in its international setting have helped me understand how changes occur and why conditions are not static but are very fluid. Great Britain, for example, produced a huge number of converts in the early nineteenth century, but relatively few new converts are being made there today. Not only has the number of conversions changed greatly in the British Isles but also the environment has altered dramatically. Immigration and emigration have created a new population base, especially in England itself.

International expansion has brought the Church face to face with the issue of culture. Is there a distinctive Latter-day Saint culture? If so, does this culture conflict with national cultures? What is the relationship between general Latter-day Saint culture and the culture of a given country? Noel B. Reynolds addressed some of these questions in a paper presented at BYU in 1976 at a symposium on the expanding Church and later published in a book entitled *Mormonism: A Faith for All Cultures*. His main thesis is that “the gospel is subversive of worldly cultures.”¹ By this he means that people in all nations who embrace the gospel must conform any cultural concepts that conflict with gospel principles to the concepts inherent in the gospel culture. As this interaction between gospel and national culture plays out, value conflicts sometimes emerge. For example, priesthood holders are taught to treat their wives as equal partners and typically display affection by kissing their wives as they leave for work, but this practice is not always accepted in some cultures.²

Nearly twenty years later, Elder Spencer J. Condie addressed the issue of culture. In a keynote address given in August 1995 at the Sixth Annual Conference of the International Society, he asked, “How much of a country’s culture can a Christian convert keep?” He answered the question by citing scriptures from the New Testament and the Book of Mormon (Galatians 3:28 and Mosiah 3:19) that explain how we become one with Jesus Christ by yielding to the influence of the Spirit. He then went on, in a very direct manner, to explain exactly what could be retained and what should be discarded:

If I read King Benjamin correctly, the northern Europeans are welcome to bring their industriousness, orderliness, and punctuality with them into the kingdom, but their brusqueness must give way to “gentleness, . . . meekness, and . . . love unfeigned” (D&C 121:41). The peoples of the Mediterranean and Latin America are enjoined to bring their warmth and love of family and friends with them into the kingdom, but intrigue and lust must be left behind. The inhabitants of the isles of the seas are welcome to bring with them their faith and meekness but not their immodesty. Americans, saturated with smugness from living in the promised land, must leave behind their materialism, pride, and cutthroat competitiveness and become as little children if they are to enter the Kingdom of God.³

Both Condie and Reynolds recommend surrendering customs that run against the grain of the gospel while allowing people to retain distinctive features that are not counter to gospel truth. For example, the Church does not dictate American politics to members of the Church in other countries, nor does it require converts to adopt new cultural

practices to be accepted into the Church. It does, however, encourage universal obedience to the commandments. As Elder Condie said, “It is my humble view that while the restored gospel requires *conformity* to the commandments, covenants, and ordinances, the gospel does not require *uniformity* in all areas of endeavor.”⁴

Many observers outside our faith have described Mormonism as unique and have recognized its authentic international character. In their insightful book *Mormon America*, Richard and Joan Ostling wrote, “The Mormon people are multidimensional and entering the third millennium as full-fledged citizens of an important new world religion.”⁵ If others see us as an important new world religion, it seems to me that we ought to view ourselves in the same way. A friend and colleague who taught the course on the international Church believed his study increased his tolerance and broke down prejudice. In other words, he learned to respect the cultures and beliefs of others.⁶ Some of the things we learn as a result of studying the Church in its worldwide setting are very similar to the kinds of things we learn through a study-abroad experience. As some experts on study abroad have expressed it, “Students in this way become, it is said, more mature, sophisticated, hungry for knowledge, culturally aware, and sensitive.”⁷

As I have studied and evaluated hundreds of research papers concerning the international Church, many interesting facts and ideas have surfaced. I have become more familiar with certain key players in the Church, individuals who have played a crucial role in either establishing or furthering the Church in foreign lands. Sometimes these people are residents of a given foreign country, but sometimes they are expatriates, perhaps Utah Latter-day Saints whose careers have taken them abroad. Examples of natives of foreign lands who have played such a role are Kresimir Cosic in Croatia, Augusto A. Lim in the Philippines, Karl G. Maeser in Germany, Masao Watabe in Japan, and Helvecio Martins in Brazil. Examples of expatriates are Arwell Pierce in Mexico, Maxine Grimm in the Philippines, William Fotheringham in Chile, and Frederick S. Williams in Uruguay.⁸

From my research and from the findings of my students, I have learned that teaching English has been one of the most successful techniques for finding people to hear the gospel. English classes have been taught by missionaries during most of the history of the Church. Latter-day Saint missionaries have taught English all over the world since the 1840s. Classes have been offered in at least fifteen different nations. In fact, in some places such as Mongolia, teaching English constitutes the majority of the total missionary effort.

Certainly there are other things I have learned and continue to learn through my study of the Church in its global setting, but the foregoing examples sufficiently illustrate how a better understanding of the international Church has changed my overall perspective. As the Church continues to grow throughout the world, its membership becomes more and more diverse. Adaptation and open-mindedness are critical to continued growth.

Applying the New Perspective to Church History

Although the learning and understanding gained through studying the international Church is useful by itself, it also has great implications for teaching a conventional Latter-day Saint Church history class. Above all, I believe it makes teachers more aware of the feelings and needs of foreign students who might enroll in their classes. Knowing something about these students' countries and understanding how the Church has developed there help sensitize instructors to their points of view.

Of course, we should also try to help students see the history of the Church in a broader framework and perspective. Students need to understand that this church is no longer merely an American church and, in fact, that Joseph Smith never intended it to be. It began in New York, but it has now spread around the world. In a real sense, the history of the Church is the story of its development in each country around the world. There are interesting parallels between the American segment of the story and events in other parts of the world. For example, Joseph Smith's desire to find the only true church has been mirrored in the experience of others. Like Joseph Smith in America, Emmanuel Kissi searched for the true church in Ghana.⁹

Furthermore, the story of the early pioneers has parallels across the world. In a very real way, there are other pioneers—pioneers in every nation. In an excellent book titled *Pioneers in Every Land*, some of these international pioneers have been described. The international pioneers whose stories are included in this book are Pornchai Juntratip of Thailand, Kresimir Cosic of Yugoslavia, Charles O. Card of Canada, Rhee Honam of Korea, Gottfried Schoenhardt of Germany, Milton and Irene Soares of Brazil, Giuseppe Taranto of Italy, Anthon H. Lund of Denmark, Masao and Hisako Watanabe of Japan, Ketan Patel of India, and Emmanuel Kissi of Ghana. Each of these international pioneers has a wonderful and inspiring story.¹⁰

It is important for students of Church history to be familiar with these stories, just as converts in other countries come to know and love the American pioneers. Many people who have joined the Church in

foreign lands have “adopted” nineteenth-century Mormon pioneers as their own spiritual ancestors. Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf had this to say about the pioneers:

I have no ancestors among the 19th-century pioneers. However, since the first days of my Church membership, I have felt a close kinship to those early pioneers who crossed the plains. They are my spiritual ancestry, as they are for each and every member of the Church, regardless of nationality, language, or culture. They have established not only a safe place in the West but also a spiritual foundation for the building of the kingdom of God in all the nations of the world.¹¹

In an article on the nineteenth-century pioneers, Eric Eliason has shown how receptivity of that story may be conditioned somewhat by local traditions. As he put it: “It may be that LDS people who live in cultures and regions that have their own sense of pioneer heritage are often more enthusiastic about the story of the LDS pioneers than LDS people in areas with no such tradition. For example, LDS Afrikaners already understand the pageantry of covered wagons and can relate both to the Great Trek and the Mormon trek.”¹²

In some countries, Pioneer Day celebrations have been regularly held, even though they have no historical precedents. In Germany, for example, where my grandfather, father, and I all served, such celebrations occurred on schedule each July 24. Writing about this experience, Walter Krause, the patriarch assigned to Eastern Europe, explained, “Pioneer Day stirs us up so that we become pioneers ourselves.”¹³ Certainly, Walter Krause was a genuine pioneer.

Studying the growth of the international Church increases our understanding of the Prophet Joseph Smith. From the international vantage point, Joseph Smith is not just an American church leader. On the contrary, he was directly involved in the globalization of Mormonism. Joseph Smith impacted the globalization of Mormonism in at least three ways: first, he prophesied about the international Church; second, he sent missionaries to foreign lands; third, he served as a missionary himself in a foreign country, namely Canada.¹⁴

As we teach a conventional Church history class, bringing in an international perspective enables us to help our students to be more tolerant. Recognizing that the gospel is for every nationality helps them to see that members may embrace many different political systems, social structures, and economic organizations. Furthermore, this perspective provides students with a deeper appreciation for the faith of modern pioneers and a greater understanding of Joseph Smith’s original vision of the international mission of the Church.

A New Approach to Teaching the Doctrine and Covenants

A greater understanding of the international nature of the Church should also lead to approaching a Doctrine and Covenants class from a different angle. Beginning with section 1, it is obvious that the revelations contain a universal message—they are for all mankind, not merely for members of a strictly American church. The Lord desires to speak to all of His children, no matter where they reside. In other words, the message of the gospel is universal and must be preached to every one of God’s children everywhere.

A study of the international Church helps us to understand the doctrine of gathering. This doctrine is taught in our revelations. For example, in Doctrine and Covenants 29:1–2, 7–8, we read of the Lord’s desire to gather His children from all nations:

Listen to the voice of Jesus Christ, your Redeemer, the Great I Am, whose arm of mercy hath atoned for your sins;

Who will gather his people even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, even as many as will hearken to my voice and humble themselves before me, and call upon me in mighty prayer. . . .

And ye are called to bring to pass the gathering of mine elect; for mine elect hear my voice and harden not their hearts;

Wherefore the decree hath gone forth from the Father that they shall be gathered in unto one place upon the face of the land, to prepare their hearts and be prepared in all things against the day when tribulation and desolation are sent forth upon the wicked.

Through the study of international Church history, we learn that the gathering for early converts meant leaving their native land, friends, and family and immigrating to America. This was a geographical gathering. There are wonderful stories of Latter-day Saint converts who traveled to Zion. In his comprehensive research, my colleague Fred E. Woods has documented the chronicles of gathering. For example, in his book *Gathering to Nauvoo*, Woods tells the story of such emigrants as Thomas Callister, Priscilla Staines, Robert Pixton, George Cannon, Robert Reid, Mary Ann Weston Maughan, and Ann Pitchforth. Let us consider the experience of Priscilla Staines:

I left the home of my birth to gather to Nauvoo. I was alone. It was a dreary winter day on which I went to Liverpool. The company with which I was to sail were all strangers to me. When I arrived at Liverpool and saw the ocean that would soon roll between me and all I loved, my heart almost failed me. But I had laid my idols all upon the altar. There was no turning back. I remembered the words of the Saviour: “He that leaveth not father and mother, brother and sister,

for my sake, is not worthy of me,” and I believed his promise to those who forsook all for his sake; so I thus alone set out for the reward of everlasting life, trusting in God.¹⁵

Some who gathered sacrificed their very lives. Such was the case with Ann Quayle Cannon, who died and was buried at sea. She sacrificed all so her family might gather to Zion.¹⁶

In the twentieth century, the doctrine of gathering remained in force, but the practice or application changed. I usually use the example of missionary service in our family to illustrate this point. When Quayle Cannon, my grandfather, served as a missionary in Germany in the late nineteenth century, he was still preaching the geographical gathering. However, when my father, Quayle Cannon Jr., served in Germany in the 1920s, he encouraged people to stay in their own country to build up the Church there. Then, when I served in Germany in the 1950s, we told people that they should not leave Germany and that they had a sacred responsibility to stay there and build God’s kingdom in that part of His vineyard.

This transition from a geographical gathering to a gathering in one’s own native land has been explained this way by my late colleague Spencer Palmer:

The global expansion of the Church in recent decades has brought changes to earlier conceptions of Zion as a limited geographical entity. Zion is no longer bound by territory, culture, or nationality. Though the United States has served as a “host” nation in the process of its development, from its inception Joseph Smith emphasized that the Church “is above the kingdoms of this world,” that it is not a political entity bound to any one nation, and that it insists upon no claim to political power or secular sway. (HC 5:536.) The Church bears the name of the Lord, and the only other designation in the Church’s name is dispensational and pertains to time, not to territory.¹⁷

In an area conference held in Mexico City in 1972, Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained the new concept of gathering in this manner: “The place of gathering for the Mexican Saints is in Mexico; the place of gathering for the Guatemalan Saints is in Guatemala; the place of gathering for the Brazilian, Brazil; and so it goes throughout the length and breadth of the whole earth. Japan is for the Japanese, Korea is for the Koreans; Australia is for the Australians; every nation is the gathering place for its own people.”¹⁸ Clearly, the perspective afforded by the worldwide Church helps our students understand this important principle of gathering taught in the Doctrine and Covenants.

Awareness of the events in the international history of the Church allows teachers in Doctrine and Covenants classes to use foreign illustra-

tions in place of domestic ones. As we teach about the establishment of stakes and their purpose in the Church, we can use the organization of the Berlin Stake in addition to the Salt Lake Stake. Also, while discussing temples and temple work, we can use examples of international temples along with temples in the United States.

An understanding of the international character of the Church is certainly useful in teaching about Official Declaration 2 in the Doctrine and Covenants. Being aware of problems related to the priesthood in Brazil, for example, can help teachers set the priesthood revelation of 1978 in a more proper historical perspective.¹⁹

Missionary work is a major theme of the revelations found in the Doctrine and Covenants. Again, a knowledge of the growth and scope of the international Church facilitates an understanding of missionary work. All the prophets of this dispensation have talked about the importance of our missionary effort. From the Prophet Joseph Smith to President Gordon B. Hinckley, these men have included the international character of the Church in their teaching.

In summary, studying about the international Church has many benefits for those who teach either Church history or Doctrine and Covenants. This focus helps us relate to members of the Church everywhere, understand that our church is truly a global church, and prepare us to participate in building up the kingdom of God across the globe. **RE**

Notes

1. LaMond Tullis, ed., *Mormonism: A Faith for All Cultures* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1978), 9.

2. Tullis, *Mormonism*, 15.

3. Spencer J. Condie, *Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Conference of the International Society* (Provo, UT: David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies, 1996), 5–6.

4. Condie, *Proceedings*, 4; emphasis in original.

5. Richard K. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise* (San Francisco: Harper, 1999), xxvi.

6. James R. Christianson, “Humanity and Practical Christianity: Implications for a Worldwide Church,” *BYU Studies* 29 (Winter 1989): 36–37.

7. Craufurd D. Goodwin and Michael Nacht, *Abroad and Beyond: Patterns in American Overseas Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 12.

8. See Donald Q. Cannon and Richard O. Cowan, *Unto Every Nation: Gospel Light Reaches Every Land* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), xxv.

9. E. Dale LeBaron, “Emmanuel Abu Kissi: A Gospel Pioneer in Ghana,” in Bruce A. Van Orden, D. Brent Smith, and Everett Smith Jr., eds., *Pioneers in Every Land* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 213.

10. See Van Orden, Smith, and Smith, *Pioneers in Every Land*.

11. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "The Global Church Blessed by the Voice of the Prophets," *Ensign*, November 2002, 10.

12. Eric A. Eliason, "The Cultural Dynamics of Historical Self-Fashioning: LDS Pioneer Nostalgia, American Culture, and the International Church," *Journal of Mormon History* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 162.

13. Edith Krause, *Walter Krause in seiner Zeit* (Hamburg: Mein Buch, 2005), 148.

14. Donald Q. Cannon, "Joseph Smith and the Globalization of Mormonism," presidential address, Fortieth Annual Conference of the Mormon History Association, May 28, 2005, Killington, Vermont.

15. Fred E. Woods, *Gathering to Nauvoo* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2001), 41.

16. Donald Q. Cannon, "Angus M. Cannon: Pioneer, President, Patriarch," *Supporting Saints: Life Stories of Nineteenth-Century Mormons*, ed. Donald Q. Cannon and David J. Whittaker (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1985), 370.

17. Spencer J. Palmer, *The Expanding Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 33.

18. Palmer, *The Expanding Church*, 41.

19. Cannon and Cowan, *Unto Every Nation*, xxv.