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Kendall Ayres

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By our actions, our neighbors will know our commitment to Christ.

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Kindness: The Manifestation of True Conversion

Kendall Ayres

Kendall Ayres is a retired institute teacher living in Sandy, Utah.

While on my mission, I spent a week with another elder in his area of Greenville, South Carolina. He and his companion had been working with a couple who were taking the discussions and who were progressing rather well. We went to visit them late one afternoon. When we got there, the husband had just arrived home ahead of us and was about to enter the house. We had just gotten out of our car when he called down to us from the back porch that he appreciated the missionaries' interest and teachings but that he and his wife were no longer interested and did not want to continue the discussions. The man and my companion exchanged friendly commentary for a few moments and, when it became clear that we were not going to talk our way inside to pursue our teaching, we started to get back into the car. In the process, my companion invited, "Come and visit us at church sometime"—to which the man thoughtfully responded, "Thank you. You come and visit us at our church sometime." My companion, I suppose wanting to reinforce what had been taught concerning the restoration of the Lord's one true Church, rejoined with, "There's no need!" That man stood on his back porch for a moment looking down at us and, after some consideration, replied, "I'm ashamed of you."

So was I.

But I did not really understand *why* until recently. I am persuaded that there were some things about the gospel of Jesus Christ we did not yet grasp, and there may have been much that we could have learned from that man.

Avoid Self-Righteousness

President Hinckley has spoken out in a manner that suggests he may have a similar concern. He observed in a regional conference in January of 1998, “It isn’t the big things, the big doctrinal things that we fail in so much as the little things in our manner toward one another. . . . I hope there will be nothing of self-righteousness among us. I hope there will be nothing of arrogance among us. I hope there will be nothing of egotism among us. I hope, rather, that we will be looked upon as a good and a kind and a generous and wonderful people because that is what we must be if we are true Latter-day Saints.”¹ Further, he believes that we can be good neighbors and friends even in those circumstances in which we must, by reason of principle, stand independent of the pressures of popular thinking and trends. He says:

Let us not forget that we believe in being benevolent and in doing good to all men. . . . Let us reach out to those in our community who are not of our faith. Let us be good neighbors, kind and generous and gracious. . . . There may be situations where, with serious moral issues involved, we cannot bend on matters of principle. But in such instances we can politely disagree without being disagreeable. We can acknowledge the sincerity of those whose positions we cannot accept. We can speak of principles rather than personalities. . . . An attitude of self-righteousness is unbecoming a Latter-day Saint.²

In fact, President Hinckley may be giving us some of the “how-to” of a concern the Savior seems to be addressing in the Sermon on the Mount. Most of us are familiar with the Savior’s charge to be perfect found in Matthew 5:48. But if we consider the context within which He made that declaration, some specific applications become evident. In the preceding two verses, He asks: “For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?” (vv. 46–47).

The Savior chastens us for extending kindness and warmth only to those with whom we are already on good terms and who are going to be receptive to such an overture. In our case, these may be our friends and neighbors who are fellow Latter-day Saints and who share many of our perspectives and feelings on important issues. He suggests, to emphasize His point, that *even* publicans can do that. The implication is that *anybody* can be nice to those who are nice in return and that we must be aware, thoughtful, and considerate of all people under all circumstances, particularly those with whom we may have differences. Having emphatically established the concept, He *then* adds the ensuing

charge in Matthew 5:48: “Be ye *therefore* perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (emphasis added).

In other words, we ought to seek to be absolute in our ability to interact with and treat kindly and thoughtfully those who may not share our values and perspectives and who may not return the kindness. That particular perfection ought to be a primary pursuit.

A New Level

In the thirteenth chapter of John, when the Savior ate with the Apostles for the last time and began His final counsel just prior to His departure for Gethsemane, He stated that He had a new commandment to give to them: “That ye love one another” (v. 34). At this point, the Apostles may have wondered what He intended, as this commandment was not new to them. Earlier, the Savior had said to the conspiring lawyer that the second of the two great summary commandments was “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew 22:39). The centrality of the concept of loving others is unquestionable. That the Apostles knew of it is beyond discussion. Yet here is the Savior saying He has a “new” commandment for them. The new part of the commandment is revealed in John 13:34 as the Savior adds a qualification: “*As I have loved you*, that ye also love one another.” Suddenly, we have a whole new level of behavior. Previously, the charge was to love others as they would love themselves; there is nothing insignificant about that level of commitment to the task. But now He says they need to love others as the Master Himself loves them. The Apostles must love as He loves. They must love with all the perspective, wisdom, and patient kindness that Jesus Himself did. That made it a new commandment.

And then He added a fascinating identifier: “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35). The word *this* refers to loving—as He loved. So we have, as established by the Savior Himself, a barometer by which we can identify ourselves as genuine disciples of Jesus Christ. President Hinckley seems to be suggesting that Latter-day Saints ought to reflect, in an observable way, genuine discipleship to Jesus Christ, as He Himself identified it.

Latter-day Saints Uniquely Positioned

And there *we* stood, representatives of the Savior—charged and sent forth by His prophet to be such—being gently schooled in Christianity by one who did not understand the Apostasy or the Restoration but who understood the Restorer. I have wondered if there may have been Another who was ashamed of us that day.

Elder Carl B. Pratt has pointed out that as members of the Lord's true Church, "we have the richest blessings that God can give to His children. We have the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We ought to be the most open, friendly, happy, kind, considerate, thoughtful, loving people in the whole world." Elder Pratt encourages self-examination, saying, "Now, we do pretty well at fulfilling callings, at going to meetings, at paying our tithing; but have we learned to truly live the second great commandment: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself?' (Matthew 22:39)." He then adds, "This is not something that can be assigned to the elders quorum or to the visiting teachers; this has to *spring from the heart of every true disciple of Christ*, a person who will look automatically and without being asked for opportunities to serve, to uplift, and to strengthen his fellowman."

Having now gotten our attention, he alludes to the Savior's measure of discipleship in John 13:35 and then goes straight to the heart of the matter: "We are reminded of the Savior's words, 'By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another' (John 13:35). Will nonmembers, new converts, and visitors to our chapels *recognize us* as His disciples by the warmth of our greeting, by the ease of our smiles, by the kindness and genuine concern that shine in our eyes?"³

Now I certainly recognize that we are "developing disciples," as Elder Maxwell might put it, but sometimes I fear that we may mistake Church "busyness" and doctrinal awareness for gospel progress. I wonder if, when we speak of the restored gospel, we might not be better served as individuals to emphasize a *restored* concern for others as well as the restoration of sacred truths and divine authority. Bishop Richard C. Edgley says that we may be doing most of the standard things that Latter-day Saints do, but he then asks, "Are we becoming a friend? . . . We must live of Christ, for it is by our own personal, everyday living that the Savior will determine whether we are one of His true disciples, a friend."⁴

True Conversion

Further, Elder Marvin J. Ashton observes, "The way we treat each other is the foundation of the gospel of Jesus Christ." He then makes the following request of us: "Would you consider this idea for a moment—that the way we treat the members of our families, our friends, those with whom we work each day is as important as are some of the more noticeable gospel principles we sometimes emphasize. . . . Once again may I emphasize the principle that when we truly become converted to Jesus Christ, committed to Him, an interesting thing happens: our attention turns to the welfare of our fellowman, and the way we treat others

becomes increasingly filled with patience, kindness, a gentle acceptance, and a desire to play a positive role in their lives. This is the beginning of true conversion.”⁵⁵

Why is this the beginning of true conversion? I believe that it is because “conversion” means conversion to Jesus Christ, which implies a desire to assimilate the principles He taught and personified. That means being converted necessitates living life as He lived it. It means becoming like Him. As He treated others with patience, kindness, and gentle acceptance, being truly converted to *Him* means we do the same—anything else is a facade.

We find this response clearly demonstrated by Enos, who, having prayed for hours and having his sins forgiven, declares, “When I had heard these words I began to feel a desire for the welfare of my brethren, the Nephites; wherefore, I did pour out my whole soul unto God for them” (Enos 1:9). His focus shifts from himself to his fellow Nephites. Several verses later, we find that he is so overcome with Christlike tendencies that he “prays with many long strugglings” (Enos 1:11) for his Lamanite brethren, who considered him to be their sworn enemy. Did Enos believe in Jesus Christ when he began his prayers at the beginning of that long day? Of course he did, or he wouldn’t have prayed to Him. At the end of the day, was he converted? I am persuaded, and Elder Ashton would agree, that he was beginning to be. Are we converted? We will each have to make that judgment for ourselves, but there seems to be a measure by which we can calculate our progress: we simply need to apply it.

Symbol of Our Worship

Another way of putting it is to suggest that our lives, as members of the Lord’s true Church, ought to mirror Him. President Hinckley related an experience he had in 1975 that illustrates this. Following the renovation of the Arizona Temple, he was asked to host a special session for visiting clergymen during the open house that preceded its rededication. At one point, he was asked by a Protestant minister why there were no crosses in the temple or on any Latter-day Saint chapels. He answered, “For us, the cross is the symbol of the dying Christ, while our message is a declaration of the living Christ.” The minister then asked, “If you do not use the cross, what is the symbol of your religion?” President Hinckley responded, “*The lives of our people* must become the only meaningful expression of our faith and, in fact, therefore, *the symbol of our worship*.”⁵⁶ The lives of our people are the symbol of our worship! What could be more definitive? The lives we

live, our everyday conduct, our moment-to-moment treating of each other—that is how we demonstrate that we are members of Christ’s true Church. That is the encapsulated, observable indicator of who we are, what we believe, and what we aspire to become.

A Reason for Our Hope

But, we may ask, what of our charge to be a missionary Church? After all, that was the motive, and I believe it was pure, of my companion as we stood in that man’s driveway in South Carolina. Don’t we need to declare, with boldness, the Restoration of the gospel? The question is clearly rhetorical. But let us reword it. What if our task were redefined as providing, through our actions, a *reason* for our belief and the hope within us and doing so “with meekness and fear” as Peter suggested? (1 Peter 3:15). Or, it is the manner in which we respond that defines the message—not the words with which we choose to outline the concept. Indeed, two other translations of the passage seem to direct us even more pointedly toward that idea. The New International Version uses “gentleness and respect” as the operative behavior, and the New Revised Standard Version uses “gentleness and reverence” to define the approach. I suggest that Peter, the chief Apostle, intended us to understand that *the way we treat* the inquirer *is* the message—that emulating Jesus Christ causes us to have hope in His intervention in our behalf. That is the basis, indeed the very essence, of what we believe and of who we are. That is Christianity. And if we are truly His, that is who we will be.

To a great extent, this entire discussion has been a consideration of theory versus application. Germane to that perspective, I offer the thinking of a respected modern Christian scholar not of our faith, Professor John G. Stackhouse of Regent College, who has observed, “God cares about people more than he cares about ‘truth’ in the abstract. Jesus didn’t die on the cross to make a point. He died on the cross to save people whom he loves. We, too, must represent our Lord with love to God and our neighbor always foremost in our concerns.”⁷

If Professor Stackhouse is correct, and I am persuaded that he is, his counsel surely applies to Latter-day Saints, for, due to the impact of the Restoration, we ought to be Christ’s truest representatives.

Therefore, relative to our responsibility to do missionary work, I pose a question. What if, as is hoped for by President Hinckley, the world’s perceptions of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are always of a people who are actively fostering a return to kindness in a world that is becoming significantly more self-centered? What if that conclusion were the key attribute associated with the world’s awareness

of “the Mormons”—and not simply that we don’t drink coffee or that we used to have lots of wives? And what if the way we communicated our profoundly good news always reflected “gentleness and respect”? Wouldn’t those behaviors, if energetically, enthusiastically, and boldly declared through our interactions with and responses to our associates, attract the attention of others to the point of inquiry? And would we not, therefore, often find ourselves responding, “Well, since you’ve asked, let me tell you a little more about the origins of what you are observing and some of the reasons for our beliefs,” much as Peter specified? I believe that as our lives mirror Christ’s, people will seek the message of the Restoration that lies behind those lives.

The Lower Light

Let us look at it from another angle. In 1971, while traveling on assignment as a young General Authority, Elder Boyd K. Packer had to go by boat between two small South Pacific islands at night in a severe storm. The harbor of their destination was very narrow, and Elder Packer was to identify it by two lights. Elder Packer describes the circumstances in this manner: “At Mulisanua, there is one narrow passage through the reef. A light on the hill above the beach marked that narrow passage. There was a second lower light on the beach. When a boat was maneuvered so that the two lights were one above the other, it was lined up properly to pass through the reef.” However, he was unable to identify the harbor entrance and had to travel twenty additional miles around the island in the continuing storm before he reached safety. Elder Packer says, “But that night, there was only one light. Someone was on the landing waiting to meet us but the crossing took much longer than usual. After waiting for hours, watching for signs of our boat, they tired and fell asleep in the car, neglecting to turn on the lower light.” He then concludes, “I do not know who had been waiting for us at Mulisanua. I refused to let them tell me. Nor do I care now. But, it is true that without that lower light—the light that failed, we all might have been lost.”⁸

Elder Packer observes that from that time forth, the words to the hymn had a new depth of meaning for him:

Brightly beams our Father’s mercy
 From his lighthouse evermore,
 But to *us* he gives the keeping
 Of the lights along the shore.
 Let the lower lights be burning;
 Send a gleam across the wave;

Some poor fainting, struggling seaman
You may rescue, *you* may save.⁹

I suggest that perhaps the ultimate “lower light” may be our kindness to our associates. There are millions of people in the world who have a general concept of Christ’s mercy and of His love for them. They see the upper light—the one on the hill, but their comprehension is as yet too abstract for them to do much about it. When they see another such light in the life of another person (something far more concrete to them)—a life of Christlike kindness and genuine concern for others—then that second light tends to help them align themselves with the original, higher light. They are thereby able to define a course into the safety of the harbor of His ultimate atoning kindness.

I believe President Hinckley said it all when he taught, “Our kindness may become our most persuasive argument for that which we believe.”¹⁰

Notes

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, “News of the Church,” *Ensign*, April 1998, 75.
2. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 131.
3. Carl B. Pratt, in Conference Report, October 1997, 12.
4. Richard C. Edgley, in Conference Report, April 1998, 13–14.
5. Marvin J. Ashton, “The Tongue Can Be a Sharp Sword,” *Ensign*, May 1992, 20.
6. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, April 1975, 136; emphasis added.
7. John G. Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 142.
8. Boyd K. Packer, “The Edge of the Light,” Brigham Young University fireside, March 4, 1990, 12–13.
9. “Brightly Beams Our Father’s Mercy,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 335; emphasis added.
10. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, April 1998, 4.