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Elder Ronald A. Rasband

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Religious Freedom and Fairness for All

BY ELDER RONALD A. RASBAND

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Elder Ronald A. Rasband was a member of the Presidency of the Seventy when he gave this address at Brigham Young University on September 15, 2015.

One of my Church assignments is to serve on the Public Affairs Committee of the Church. This is a First Presidency–directed committee, and I am very honored to serve under their leadership. The chairman over the committee is a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. In my tenure, those chairmen have been Elder L. Tom Perry and, before him, Elder M. Russell Ballard. Elder D. Todd Christofferson is currently the acting chairman. It is with the assistance of the Public Affairs Committee that I speak to you on an important topic that is attracting more and more public attention, and that is the subject of religious freedom.

Because you are a sophisticated and intelligent audience, I plan to speak with you with the candor that your generation craves. I suspect that for some of you the phrase “religious freedom” feels more like “freedom to discriminate.” I want to talk with you about this view and help you understand what the Church means when it talks about religious freedom and why it is

so vitally important for your future and for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I also plan to address some misgivings and misunderstandings some of you may have when it comes to religious freedom.

Some of you might struggle with an understanding of religion's role in society, politics, and civic issues. Some in your age group wonder why religious groups are involved in politics in the first place, and they are often skeptical of the motives of religious people when they do so. In recent years the collective voice of groups who feel that religion should not play a role in political deliberation has grown louder.

The opportunity to be involved in the political process is a privilege given to every citizen. Our laws and legislation play an important teaching role in shaping our social and moral culture. We need every individual in society to take an active role in engaging in civic dialogue that helps frame laws and legislation that are fair for everyone.

Freedom for All

What are we talking about when we refer to religious freedom? I am going to tell you the stories of two people who may be just a little older than you, and, as I do so, I would like you to think about how you would feel if you were one of these individuals.

The first story is about someone I will call Ethan. He had recently started his job in a career he had longed for, and he wanted to make a good impression. He came early to work and stayed late. He picked up extra projects and did excellent work. He was well liked by many of his colleagues and was enjoying his job. One day at lunch with a couple of coworkers he felt comfortable telling them that he was gay. An awkward silence developed because no one knew how to respond and the work environment was quite conservative. Ethan was disappointed by their cold response and felt hurt and rejected. He began to feel vulnerable at work and less valued.

After that lunch meeting, things became increasingly awkward for Ethan at work. He found himself excluded from large projects and social activities after work, and his productivity began to suffer, as he felt he did not belong and was not wanted. After a few months he was let go because his boss felt he was not keeping up. Despite all the claims to the contrary, Ethan knew he had been fired for being gay.

Now I want to tell you about Samantha. Samantha had just started work in the administrative offices of a local university. She was excited to work in

a stimulating environment full of diverse thoughts, ideas, and backgrounds. One day at work a coworker approached Samantha and said she had heard that Samantha was a Mormon and asked if that was true. Samantha cheerfully responded that it was, but the question that followed brought her up short.

“So why do you hate gays?” her coworker asked. Samantha was surprised by the question but tried to explain her belief in God and God's plan for His children, which she believed included guidelines on moral and sexual behavior. Her coworker countered by telling her that the rest of society had progressed beyond those beliefs. “And besides,” she said, “history is full of people using religious teachings to wage wars and marginalize vulnerable groups.”

Samantha restated her convictions and her understanding of God's love for all people and then asked for her coworker to respect her right to believe. The coworker felt compelled to tell other employees about their conversation, and over the next few weeks Samantha felt increasingly isolated as more and more coworkers confronted her with questions and attacks.

Samantha's boss, seeing the increase in religious conversations in the workplace, cautioned Samantha against proselytizing in their work environment or her job would be in jeopardy. Her work, like Ethan's, began to suffer. Rather than risk being fired, Samantha started to look for another job.

Now, these are hypothetical stories, and yet they are not. There are many Samanthas and Ethans. However we choose to live and whatever choices we make, we all share a common humanity and desire for fairness and kindness. Ethan should not have been fired for being gay and Samantha should not have been intimidated for being religious. Both were wrongly criticized, judged, and retaliated against.

In today's society it is politically correct to empathize with Ethan's situation but less so with Samantha's. Ethan may find his case picked up by an advocacy group as yet another example of anti-gay discrimination. And, indeed, he does deserve protection.

But what about Samantha? Who will defend her right to religious conscience? What about her right to live authentically as a person of faith, committed to loving and serving everyone but also with the right to choose what is right and wrong and to live her life accordingly?

Fairness for All

Our society has become so blinded by its quest to redress wrongful discrimination against one class of people that it is now in danger of creating another victimized class: people of faith, like you and me.

Already some religious schools are being questioned because they require students and faculty to adhere to an honor code that requires fidelity and chastity. CEOs of large companies have been marginalized or forced to resign because their personal religious views are no longer politically acceptable. And some businesses have been forced to close because their owners have spoken their conscience.

Despite what you may have heard or read over the years, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has stood consistently for freedom of choice and conscience. Many years ago the Prophet Joseph Smith wrote, “We believe . . . that all men are created equal, and that all have the privilege of thinking for themselves upon all matters relative to conscience.”¹

He later went on to say, “If . . . *I have been willing to die for a ‘Mormon,’* . . . I am just as ready to die in defending the rights of a Presbyterian, a Baptist, or a good man of any other denomination; for the same principle which would trample upon the rights of the Latter-day Saints would trample upon the rights of . . . any other denomination who may be unpopular and too weak to defend themselves.”²

So what is the position of the Church on religious freedom? I can assure you that apostles and prophets, under the inspiration of heaven, have given significant consideration to this issue. We believe in following the commandments of God, which are designed to secure our eternal happiness. However, “God will force no man to heav’n.”³ We believe in creating a space for everyone to live their conscience without infringing on the rights and safety of others. When the rights of one group collide against the rights of another, we must follow the principle of being as fair and sensitive to as many people as possible. The Church believes in and teaches “fairness for all.”⁴

Protecting conscience is about safeguarding the way someone thinks and feels and their right to act on those beliefs. I am talking about someone telling you that the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs you have are not allowed, valued, or acceptable because your views are not popular. A war in heaven was fought for agency, and it is a gross violation of that agency to force someone to betray their conscience because their views do not align with the crowd.

Please do not misunderstand me here. When I speak of us being authentic, the Lord does not give us a free pass to live any way we choose without consequences. We are still accountable to Him for our choices. He has said, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”⁵ The commandment to seek after perfection implies that we start where we are and seek the Lord’s help to lift us to where He wants us to go. Being true to our authentic self requires continual effort to increase our light, knowledge, and understanding.

Your generation is the most “wired” in history. You are always connected. And you know that everything on the Internet is always, perfectly 100 percent accurate, right? All right then. So do not believe everything you have heard on the Internet about the Church and its position on gay rights.

A recent example of this “fairness for all” approach occurred in January of this year when we held a press conference with three apostles and a member of the Young Women general presidency to remind our members, the community, and the state legislature that the Church favors a balanced approach that secures the rights of all people.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks expressed the following at that press event: “We call on local, state, and the federal government to serve all of their people by passing legislation that protects vital religious freedoms for individuals, families, churches, and other faith groups while also protecting the rights of our LGBT citizens in such areas as housing, employment, and public accommodation in hotels, restaurants, and transportation—protections which are not available in many parts of the country.”⁶

With the passage of protections for both LGBT and religious people six weeks later, our Church leaders and others congratulated the LGBT community. It was encouraging to see them protected across the state against eviction, housing discrimination, or being fired from a job because of their sexual orientation. We also congratulated our religious friends of other denominations, seeing them similarly protected in the workplace and in the public square.

Utah—and the Church—received national news coverage and praise for such a historic compromise. Now, note that no doctrinal or religious principles were sacrificed. No changes were made to God’s moral law or to our belief that sexual relations should only occur within marriage between a man and a woman. The outcome was fair to all and reflected a consistency in moral standards and teachings and in respect for others.

A Message of Fairness

Not many of us will play prominent roles in government and lawmaking, so you may be wondering how this topic pertains to you personally in your day-to-day life. I would like to talk with you now about three things you can do—each one of you—to support and promote a message of fairness.

First, try to view others through a lens of fairness. To do this requires you to first acknowledge that Heavenly Father loves all of His children equally. He has said, “Love one another; as I have loved you.”⁷ There is no choice, sin, or mistake that you or anyone else can make that will change His love for you or for them. That does not mean He excuses or condones sinful conduct; nor do we, in ourselves or in others. But that does mean we reach out in love to persuade, to help, and to rescue.

When you feel completely and perfectly loved, it is much easier to love others and to see them the way the Savior does. Please turn to our Savior in prayer and ask to receive His pure love both for yourself and for others. He has promised that you will feel His love if you ask in faith.

Being filled with this pure love will guide your thoughts and actions, especially in a political arena that can at times be very contentious. Tensions can flare easily when discussing politics, and especially when discussing religious freedom. If we allow these moments to get the better of us, we will appear very unchristian to our family, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. Remember how the Savior handled tough questions and challenging viewpoints. He remained calm, He showed respect, and He taught truth, but He never forced anyone to live the way He taught.

Second, let fairness guide your treatment of others. Jesus Christ looked past people’s ethnicity, rank, and circumstances in order to teach them simple truth. Remember the Samaritan woman at the well, the Roman centurion, and the unpopular publican. The Lord has commanded us to follow His example, saying, “Ye shall observe to do the things which ye have seen me do.”⁸ Do not judge people or treat them unfairly because they sin differently than you, or we, do.

Perhaps the greatest challenge in treating others fairly is in the balance required in supporting religious freedom when you have friends or family members who experience same-sex attraction or who are firm supporters of their rights. Some of you worry that you will appear intolerant or unsupportive if you seek protections to exercise your faith publicly and freely.

Again, study the life of our Savior and seek His guidance. The Savior demonstrated perfectly how to reach out in love and encouragement while also holding firm to what we know to be true. Remember that when the woman was caught in adultery, the Lord asked for anyone without sin to step forward and be the first to condemn her. When no one approached, our Savior, who was without sin, commented, “Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.”⁹ The forgiveness and kindness He showed her did not contradict His teachings that sexual intimacy is meant for a husband and a wife who are legally and lawfully married. You too can be unyielding in right and truth yet still reach out in kindness.

When Christ’s friends and followers ended their relationships with Him, He expressed sadness and pain. However, when a relationship did end, it was because they were uncomfortable with His teachings, not because He was uncomfortable with them.

As we seek to treat others fairly, we must remember the principle of agency. We must always respect the ability of others to make choices and ask that they extend to us the same courtesy. When talking with others about religious freedom, we must always remember that we can disagree without becoming disagreeable. Please do not shy away from a dialogue regarding these important issues simply because you are worried that it might be difficult or uncomfortable. We can pray for help, and we can expect that the Savior will help us speak and act in a way that is pleasing to Him.

Third, I would encourage you to stand up for fairness if you see another’s rights being impeded. Elder L. Tom Perry was a great example of someone who firmly believed in man-woman marriage, and yet he was willing to stand up for the rights of others. He left an example of ensuring that others’ rights were protected when he witnessed unfair treatment or an imbalance in our laws.

From the time of Joseph Smith to our present day, our legacy is one of reaching out to heal breaches and hurt without compromising the doctrine that is not ours to trade away.

The Need for Active Involvement

This brings me to my final point, and that is the need for active involvement from your generation on this topic. I stand with the leaders of our Lord’s Church when I say that we need your generation’s natural understanding of compassion, respect, and fairness. We need your optimism and your determination to work through these complex social issues.

We have faith that you will turn to the Savior to understand how to live a Christlike life while also showing fairness and love to others who do not share your beliefs. We know you want to be a part of something meaningful, and we know that you are resilient and collaborative.

Most important, we need you to engage in dialogue regarding the complexities of this issue and find solutions for how to best extend fairness to everyone, including people of faith. These conversations need to be occurring in our schools—perhaps right here at Brigham Young University—in our homes, and in our relationships with friends and coworkers.

When you have these conversations, please remember the principles we have discussed today, which are simply these: see others through a lens of fairness, treat them with respect and kindness, and expect the same treatment in return.

As you do these things, I want you to please report back to me. I want to hear about your experiences and the successes you are having in creating friendships with those who see life differently than you do. On my Ronald A. Rasband Facebook page, I have posted about my devotional remarks. In the next few days, will you head to my page on Facebook? I would love for you to leave me a comment about your desires for and experiences of spreading our message of fairness for all. I want to hear from you! I know some of you prefer Instagram and Twitter, but I am hoping for stories that are longer than 140 characters! Please write me.

An Increase of Love

Finally, I want to leave you with my testimony and my witness that as you follow our invitation to reach out to others in a spirit of fairness, you will feel an increase in the Savior's love for you and for all of Heavenly Father's children. Your example of respect and fairness will open doors and create meaningful friendships that you will cherish throughout your life.

I witness to you that our Heavenly Father lives, that He knows you, and that He loves you personally. He stands ready to help you during this exciting and challenging time of your life. He has revealed His plan to us not only so that we can return and live with Him forever but also that we can be blessed and be happy in this life. As you follow His teachings and as you reach out in love and consideration to others, you will feel even more His power and His love.

Of these truths I bear witness to you, as well as of my love for our Savior and my knowledge that He loves you and cares for you, each and every one. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. **RE**

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Notes

1. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 2:6; from “The Elders of the Church in Kirtland, to Their Brethren Abroad,” January 22, 1834, published in *Evening and Morning Star* 2, no. 17 (February 1834): 135.
2. Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:498; from “The Cause of the Prophet’s Success—Love for His Fellow-Man,” a discourse given by Joseph Smith on July 9, 1843, in Nauvoo, Illinois, and reported by Willard Richards.
3. “Know This, That Every Soul Is Free,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 240.
4. See BYU 2015 Religious Freedom Conference: “Fairness for All” Events, *Church News*, lds.org/church/events/byu-2015-religious-freedom-conference-fairness-for-all?lang=eng.
5. Matthew 5:48.
6. Dallin H. Oaks, quoted in Sarah Jane Weaver, “Church Calls for Laws That Protect Religious Freedom,” *Church News*, January 27, 2015, lds.org/church/news/church-calls-for-laws-that-protect-religious-freedom?lang=eng.
7. John 13:34.
8. Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 26:25.
9. John 8:11.