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A Mormon Approach to Politics

Thomas B. Griffith

This address was delivered November 13, 2012, in Washington, D.C., at the tenth anniversary of Brigham Young University's Milton A. Barlow Center. Thomas B. Griffith is a circuit judge on the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit.

I am a native Washingtonian. My mother's family—the Bealls—settled in nearby Montgomery County, Maryland, in the second half of the eighteenth century. My father's family—the Griffiths—came to Washington, D.C., in the 1830s. And we have been here ever since. I grew up just across the Potomac River in McLean, Virginia. From that heritage, I developed one loyalty, one bias, and a life-long interest. The loyalty: I am a Redskins fan. The bias: I detest the Cowboys.

But more germane to our gathering this evening, I grew up with a deep interest in American politics. It was part of the air we breathed and the water we drank. I remember watching President Kennedy throw out the first pitch on opening day in 1962. I stood along Constitution Avenue with my family and watched his funeral cortege a year later. I lived a short distance from the home of Robert F. Kennedy, whose eleven children were everywhere in McLean. I went to school and played sports with the children of congressmen, senators, cabinet secretaries, presidential aides, and Supreme Court justices. I worked on Capitol Hill during summers in high school. Nothing unusual about that. Everyone did.

I joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a junior in high school in a ward that was filled with political figures. To me, there was nothing unusual about practicing politics while pursuing discipleship of Christ.

I saw many in my ward who did. It wasn't until serving on my mission in southern Africa that I learned there were some in the Church who thought there might be a tension between the two. My mission president frequently told me that he thought my interest in politics odd for someone devoted to building the kingdom. Many years later, as general counsel of BYU, I discovered that my mission president's view was shared by some senior General Authorities. On the one hand, there seemed to be a fascination with Washington, D.C. Given my background, I benefited from that interest. On the other hand, there was a wariness about D.C., a distrust that is understandable given the way the federal government has interacted with the Church in the past. Given my background, I was viewed by some with suspicion.

The Milton A. Barlow Center represents a decision by the Church to encourage young Latter-day Saints to fully engage with the American political system. I heartily endorse that engagement. Your presence suggests you do, too. But over the years, I have gained a greater appreciation for my mission president's concern and the suspicion of others. There are high spiritual risks that accompany the practice of politics in a fallen world. Tonight I will speak about how to practice politics without losing your soul.

N. T. Wright, the Anglican cleric who is also one of the foremost New Testament scholars, wrote a book last decade titled *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*.¹ This volume is Wright's effort to provide a defense of Christianity in the tradition of C. S. Lewis's masterpiece *Mere Christianity*. Wright begins, as Lewis did, by arguing that evidence for the existence of God is found in the fact that almost all humans agree upon a common set of moral principles. The first principle upon which Wright relies for his argument that there is a God is what he calls "our passion for justice."² That strikes me as an interesting place to begin. Is that where Latter-day Saints would start? How many of us think of a "passion for justice" as a religious impulse? My guess is that we think of religious imperatives differently. We are more likely to think of our religious life in terms of that from which we abstain. I wonder if we are missing something fundamental about the religious life. Are we missing the big picture by focusing on some comparatively insignificant corners of the canvas?

I begin my remarks here because the thrust of my argument is that politics is, for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, a religious activity. Properly understood, politics should be pursued to satisfy our "passion for justice," which comes from God. But, as I have already suggested, the practice of politics poses grave risk to our spiritual well-being. It is through politics that communities decide the rules that govern society. Because so much is at stake when rules are being made about security, liberty, and

wealth, politics inevitably attracts many who are drawn to power. And the pursuit of power as an end in itself is sinful. The Savior warned us about this. Remember what he told his disciples about the rich? “I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, ‘Who then can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible’” (Matt. 19:23–26, NIV). Lest you feel too comfortable by assuming the Savior’s dire warning is better targeted at those in the business world, it was C. S. Lewis’s view that the “riches” referred to by the Lord cover more than wealth. He believed “it really covers riches in every sense—good fortune, health, popularity, and all the things one wants to have.”³ If I may be allowed to add my own gloss on Lewis, “riches” covers power, too—civil and ecclesiastical.⁴ So be careful. The pursuit of politics poses real danger to your spiritual welfare.

The answer, of course, is not to avoid politics. That is, in my view, an unacceptable response for those who have been called to be the “salt of the earth” (Matt. 5:13, KJV), a powerful image that assumes we are deeply involved in a society larger than our family and ward. Although spirituality begins with allowing the effects of Christ’s atoning sacrifice and his awe-inspiring grace to heal the wounds that sin inflicts on our broken hearts, we learn from scripture, the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, and the temple endowment that the highest form of spirituality is most powerfully expressed when we work to make the effect of the Atonement radiate beyond ourselves and our families to create communities: our ward, our town, our nation, the world. I believe that the work of community building is the most important spiritual work to which we are called. All other work is preparatory.

But how do we engage in politics and build community without losing our souls? That is where Wright’s insight may be helpful. Our involvement in politics *must* be an expression of our God-given “passion for justice.” Remember Jacob’s teachings? “Before ye seek for riches, seek ye for the kingdom of God. And after ye have obtained a hope in Christ ye shall obtain riches, if ye seek them; and ye will seek them for the intent to do good—to clothe the naked, and to feed the hungry, and to liberate the captive, and administer relief to the sick and the afflicted” (Jacob 2:18–19). According to Jacob, God will only aid those who pursue riches “for the intent to do good.” Recognizing no doubt that what it means to “do good” is so vague that the qualification hardly places any limits on our motives, Jacob makes clear what he means,

and the force of his teaching is a slap in the face to those of us who are comfortably secure in the prosperity of the North American middle class in the twenty-first century. God will only aid those who pursue riches “to do good” for very particular purposes: “to clothe the naked, and to feed the hungry, and to liberate the captive, and administer relief to the sick and the afflicted.” As Jesus would later do, Jacob is teaching us that we must expend our best efforts to provide help and succor to those who have been pushed to the margins of our society, to those who have been left out and left behind. Remember that Jesus taught that it was those considered the “least” in the eyes of the world who were, in truth, his “brethren” (Matt. 25:40, KJV).

Over forty years ago, Robert F. Kennedy expressed a secular version of this idea during his visit to a South Africa in the grips of racial segregation. Although some of the examples Kennedy used in his speech at the University of Capetown are dated, his call to pursue a “passion for justice” is timeless:

There is discrimination in New York, the racial inequality of apartheid in South Africa, and serfdom in the mountains of Peru. People starve to death in the streets of India; a former prime minister is summarily executed in the Congo; intellectuals go to jail in Russia; and thousands are slaughtered in Indonesia; wealth is lavished on armaments everywhere in the world. These are different evils, but they are the common works of man. They reflect the imperfections of human justice, the inadequacy of human compassion, the defectiveness of our sensibility toward the sufferings of our fellows; they mark the limit of our ability to use knowledge for the well-being of our fellow human beings throughout the world. And therefore they call upon common qualities of conscience and indignation, a shared determination to wipe away the unnecessary sufferings of our fellow human beings at home and around the world.⁵

In our time, Mitch Daniels, a conservative politician, has reminded us that this impulse is not partisan: “Our first thought is always for those on life’s first rung, and how we might increase their chances of climbing.”⁶

I am arguing today in favor of a Mormon approach to politics. Let me make clear, however, that I am not saying you will have certain views about marginal tax rates or the best way for a nation to conduct its foreign affairs by virtue of the fact that you are a Latter-day Saint. In fact, I am quite uncomfortable with those who maintain that the principles of the restored gospel not only inform but somehow compel their partisan political affiliations. Fortunately, we seem to be moving beyond that narrow and mistaken view.

What I am urging is that there should be a Mormon way of engaging in politics, and, like every other activity in which Latter-day Saints participate, our involvement in politics should be a result of what we understand from

the restoration of the gospel about the Atonement of Christ. We know from the story of Adam and Eve that Satan's objective in the Garden of Eden was to divide men from women. A casual glance at the history of the world reveals that Satan's chief tactic is to divide people one from another. The fault lines he uses are gender, wealth, race, religion, culture, and the list goes on. Wherever we see division and animosity, we see the handiwork of Satan.

By contrast, the most fundamental work of Christ is to bring people together. His Atonement has a vertical component, to be sure. Christ will unite us with God. But his Atonement has a horizontal component that is just as important. Christ will unite us with other humans. Joseph Smith called this the "sealing power," and he made clear that the great objective of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ was to seal together all humankind.⁷ "Friendship is one of the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism," he taught; "[it is designed] to revolutionize and civilize the world, and cause wars and contentions to cease and men to become friends and brothers."⁸ When he announced his candidacy for the presidency, Robert F. Kennedy said, "I run for the Presidency because I want . . . the United States of America to stand . . . for [the] reconciliation of men."⁹ The word "reconciliation" conveys the sense of bringing together things that have been separated.¹⁰ In his 1526 translation of the New Testament, William Tyndale employed a recently created English word to capture the concept of reconciliation between God and humankind, which the King James translators later adopted: "at-one-ment" or "atonement."¹¹

I have two ideas about how Latter-day Saints can make the Atonement of Christ part of the way we practice politics. First, we must always keep firmly fixed in our minds that the Lord's primary vehicle to bring about reconciliation in a fallen world is the restored Church and not any particular nation, party, movement, or leader. Your best efforts should be directed at building the kingdom of God on earth by being fully engaged in church work. You already know the importance of family devotional activities. But you must always keep in mind that your home and visiting teaching assignments and the other duties that come from your membership in the Church are *far* more important than your political work. Moments before he was executed, Thomas More, the patron saint of lawyers and politicians, uttered these words, which provide the right view of our priorities: "I die the King's good servant but God's first."¹² This idea is captured in the British anthem "I Vow to Thee My Country." I will spare you the pain of listening to me sing this majestic hymn. In my view, it gives the proper perspective on our loyalties to God and country:

I vow to thee my country, all earthly things above,
Entire and whole and perfect, the service of my love;
The love that asks no question,¹³ the love that stands the test,
That lays upon the altar the dearest and the best;
The love that never falters, the love that pays the price,
The love that makes undaunted the final sacrifice.

And there's another country, I've heard of long ago,
Most dear to them that love her, most great to them that know;
We may not count her armies, we may not see her King;
Her fortress is a faithful heart, her pride is suffering;
And soul by soul and silently her shining bounds increase,
And her ways are ways of gentleness, and all her paths are peace.¹⁴

Second, we must treat our political opponents in a fashion that reflects our understanding that they, like we, are children of God for whom the Savior suffered, bled, died, and lives today. This may be the point at which the call to practice a Mormon approach to politics presents the greatest challenge. It seems that as part of our headlong rush to be embraced by American society, we cheer when any of our number achieves some measure of success in politics, with little regard to how that success is achieved. Thirty years ago, Robert Bellah, the renowned sociologist and scholar of religious life in America, sounded a warning while visiting BYU that we would do well to consider:

Perhaps the Mormon experience, which was in its initial phase a protest against the world of harsh, capitalist individualism, but then through much of [the twentieth] century became an increasingly close adaptation to that world which was originally rejected—perhaps that experience could give food for thought not only for Mormons but for all of us who live in this nation. Mormons often criticize the larger society in which they live and contrast it to their own vigorous community. How many of them realize that their own current social, economic, and political views and actions may contribute to the wasteland that they see around them, or that their own experience as a people might suggest a very different course for America today?¹⁵

We seem to have a tacit understanding that it is permissible for us new kids on the block to play by the age-old rules of politics—rules as old as civilization itself. We embrace tactics of personal attack and resort to plays upon passions and biases rather than treat our opponents with respect. C. S. Lewis avoided politics, but an insight from his essay “The Weight of Glory” offers a sobering perspective that serves as an indictment of the way the world does politics:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk

to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship. . . . It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. . . . Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.¹⁶

As far as I can tell, Lewis's challenge has gone untested in politics. Why can't Latter-day Saints, knowing what we do about the worth of each soul and the price that was paid by God for each person, be the ones to take up that challenge?

A story from *Slate* gives us an inkling of what such an approach to politics might mean. It relies upon a passage from a 1997 *New York Times Magazine* profile of John McCain. It takes a few minutes to read, but I think it worth the effort. (I also offer this story because it involves the legendary Mo Udall, who was my neighbor in McLean when I was a teen and was my first boss and mentor.)

When [McCain] was elected to the House in 1982, he said, he was "a freshman right-wing Nazi." But his visceral hostility toward Democrats generally was quickly tempered by his tendency to see people as individuals and judge them that way. He was taken in hand by Morris Udall, the Arizona congressman who was the liberal conscience of the Congress and a leading voice for reform. . . . "Mo reached out to me in 50 different ways," McCain recalled. "Right from the start, he'd say: 'I'm going to hold a press conference out in Phoenix. Why don't you join me?' All these journalists would show up to hear what Mo had to say. In the middle of it all, Mo would point to me and say, 'I'd like to hear John's views.' Well . . . I didn't have any views. But I got up and learned and was introduced to the state." . . . "There's no way Mo could have been more wonderful," he says, "and there was no reason for him to be that way."

For the past few years, Udall has lain ill with Parkinson's disease in a veterans hospital in northeast Washington. . . . Every few weeks, McCain drives over to pay his respects. These days the trip is a ceremony, like going to church, only less pleasant. Udall is seldom conscious, and even then he shows no sign of recognition. McCain brings with him a stack of newspaper clips on Udall's favorite subjects: local politics in Arizona, environmental legislation, Native American land disputes, subjects in which McCain initially had no particular interest himself. . . .

. . . In his time, which was not very long ago, Mo Udall was one of the most-sought-after men in the Democratic Party. Yet as he dies in a veterans hospital a few miles from the Capitol, [only a handful of lawmakers come to see him.] . . . McCain spoke of how it affected him when Udall took him in hand. It was a simple act of affection and admiration, and for that reason it meant all the more to McCain. It was one man saying to another, *We*

disagree in politics but not in life. It was one man saying to another, party political differences cut only so deep. Having made that step, they found much to agree upon and many useful ways to work together. This is the reason McCain keeps coming to see Udall even after Udall has lost his last shred of political influence. The politics were never all that important.¹⁷

Many have described 2012 as the “Mormon Moment,” and, truth to be told, it has been a harrowing time. It is never pleasant to have that which is most dear held up for scrutiny and sometimes ridicule. Even so, I think most of us will say, with some considerable relief, that the media and the pundits have, for the most part, been fair, if not generous or wholly accurate. But as we wince at some of the portrayals (“nice people who believe really crazy things” seems to be the consensus among some of the elite) and take stock of how we are perceived by others, what should be our hope? How do we wish to be seen? As we embrace the best that American political culture offers—a commitment to freedom and equality of opportunity that is unique in all the world—I hope we will not adopt the brand of politics that has far too often been part of that culture. I hope that we will be able to do politics differently than it has been done since King Benjamin showed us a better path. An ambitious proposal, I know.

Our discipleship must extend beyond our personal and family lives and our activity in the Church. It must move us to be involved in politics. But it should move us to serve in a way consistent with what we know and cherish about the Lord Jesus Christ and the redeeming power of his Atonement. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke record an extraordinary exchange between Jesus and his disciples. Matthew puts the story on the eve of Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Mark has it earlier, in Capernaum. Luke includes it in his telling of the Last Supper. I will use Matthew’s recounting. The mother of James and John had knelt before Jesus to ask “a favor of him.” She hoped that her sons would be able to sit at Christ’s side when he rules the earth. The mere asking of the question with its presumption that James and John might be first among equals angered the other Apostles. Matthew writes: “When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you: but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve’” (Matt. 20:24–28, NRSV).

In this regard, the men and women of the armed forces whom we honored just yesterday (Veteran’s Day) are great examples. They put themselves in harm’s way for others. To overcome the natural inclination to act

primarily in one's own self-interest and to act instead for the benefit of others is a type of love that is deeply moving. I can remember watching *Saving Private Ryan* and realizing that the men portrayed in the film, as crass, profane, and unrefined as they were, had discovered and exemplified something that my temple recommend—awarded more for the things I had not done than for any virtue I possessed—did not require. They had lived out what Christ called “my commandment”: “That ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:12, 13, KJV).

I understand that not all soldiers, sailors, and pilots understand that. And certainly neither do all politicians. But *you* should. And that understanding should be the reason that you use the lessons learned from your experience in the Church to fully engage in the life of our nation.

Now, I'm mindful of the fact that this evening a week ago [election day] was a joyous moment for some of you and a difficult moment for others. To the victors, I offer my congratulations. Permit me, however, to speak to your disappointed classmates for a moment. When you face a setback in politics, there are two things to keep in mind. The first is to use humor. When Mo Udall lost the New Hampshire primary during his run for the Democratic Party nomination for the presidency in 1976, he declared, “The people have spoken: the jerks!” Only he didn't use the word “jerks.” You get the point. Second, get up off the dirt and stay in the game. Politics is hardball. It's not for the faint-hearted or the thin-skinned. It's for those who have hope that their beliefs will help others, that their beliefs matter enough to be pursued. In this regard, it's helpful if you have been a committed fan of a losing team. That may be one explanation for the tenacity of politicians from Chicago. And for Latter-day Saints, whose entry into national politics has been, for the most part, a fairly recent phenomenon, it is important that, having ventured into the sometimes lone and dreary world that politics can be, we don't retreat into the comfortable and familiar confines of the chapel.

I'm reminded of the dialogue in *Chariots of Fire* between Cambridge classmates and future Olympians Aubrey Montague and Harold Abrams. Sharing their life dreams with one another as students at Cambridge immediately following the carnage of World War I, Montague, who is the very embodiment of the WASP, is surprised to hear from the politically ambitious Abrams, whose parents were Lithuanian Jews, that the corridors of power of the England he loved were guarded with jealousy, venom, and bigotry and thus closed to Jews. “So what now?” Montague asks in a tone of resignation. “Grin and bear it?” “No, Aubrey,” says Abrams. “I'm going to take them on, all of them, and run them off their feet.”¹⁸

And so I say to you my young friends: Keep running.

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1. N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (Great Britain: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2006; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2006). [^]

2. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 3. [^]

3. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1970), 51–52. [^]

4. With uncommon insight, Screwtape himself knows the church is no sanctuary from pride. In some ways, the church can be pride’s special greenhouse: “[Religion] can still send us the truly delicious sins. The fine flower of unholiness can grow only in the close neighborhood of the Holy. Nowhere do we tempt so successfully as on the very steps of the altar.” C. S. Lewis, “Screwtape Proposes a Toast,” in *C. S. Lewis Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (Great Britain: HarperCollins, 2000), 763. [^]

5. Robert F. Kennedy, “A Tiny Ripple of Hope,” Day of Affirmation Address at Cape Town University, June 6, 1966, audio file and transcribed text at <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rfkcapetown.htm>. [^]

6. Mitch Daniels, Governor of Indiana, Keynote Address at the Ronald Reagan Centennial Dinner, 2011 Conservative Political Action Conference, February 11, 2011. [^]

7. Describing the work that occupied the last months of Joseph’s life, George Q. Cannon wrote, “He also taught and administered . . . the sealing ordinances, explaining in great plainness and power the manner in which husbands and wives, parents and children are to be united by eternal ties, and the whole human family, back to Father Adam, be linked together in indissoluble bonds.” George Q. Cannon, *The Life of Joseph Smith, the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1888), 483–84, available at <http://archive.org/stream/lifeofjosephsmittocann#page/n3/mode/2up>. [^]

8. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 5:517. [^]

9. “Kennedy’s Statement and Excerpts from News Conference,” *New York Times*, March 17, 1968, 68. [^]

10. See Hugh W. Nibley, “The Atonement of Jesus Christ, Part 1,” *Ensign* 20 (July 1990): 18, explaining that the word reconciliation “means literally to be seated again with someone.” [^]

11. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 755, noting Tyndale’s use of the word *atonement*; also available at <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/12599?redirectedFrom=atonement#eid>. [^]

12. See Peter Ackroyd, *The Life of Thomas More* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 405. [^]

13. I take exception to this phrase. We *must* ask tough questions of our country. [^]

14. Cecil Spring-Rice, “I Vow to Thee My Country,” 1918, music by Gustav T. Holst, 1921. [^]

15. Robert N. Bellah, “American Society and the Mormon Community,” in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaean-Christian Parallels*, ed. Truman G. Madsen,

vol. 14 of the Religious Studies Monograph Series (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978), 11. ^

16. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 39–40, italics in original. ^

17. Michael Lewis, "The Great McCain Story You've Probably Forgotten," *Slate*, April 9, 2008, available at <http://www.slate.com/id/2188545/>, quoting Michael Lewis, "The Subversive," *New York Times Magazine*, May 25, 1997. ^

18. Hugh Hudson, director, *Chariots of Fire* (Los Angeles, Calif.: 20th Century Fox, 1981). ^