

Creating and Conveying a Christlike Culture: More Than a Job

DALE G. RENLUND

Thank you, Sister Johnson, Sister Evans, and Sister Haws for singing and accompanying the hymn “Savior, Redeemer of My Soul.”¹ I am here to declare what Sister Johnson just sang, those remarkable words by Elder Orson F. Whitney: that our Savior and Redeemer is the only One whose mighty hand can make us whole. He is the only one who can fill with sweet a bitter cup. Our united prayer is that we all can come to be in perfect harmony with Him and be fit for the life above. That is what I would like to talk about.

I am delighted to be with you today. I am so grateful for what you do and for the effect that you have on Brigham Young University students and the Church. My wife and I meet former Brigham Young University students all over the world. They create admirable families, contribute meaningfully to their communities, and serve ably in the Church. On behalf of the Lord and His Church, I thank you for your faith and faithfulness, for your dedication and diligence, and for your caring concern for Heavenly Father’s children.

The Gathering of Israel

As teachers, administrators, and employees of every stripe, whatever your job may be at Brigham Young University, you are participating in one of the reasons for the gathering of Israel, creating an environment for a special type of education. The education available at Brigham Young University prepares students to “go forth to serve” as disciples of Jesus Christ. But this special kind of education depends on all who are employed here to consistently strive to create and convey Christlike attributes. Yes, you have more than a job. You are fulfilling one of the important purposes for the gathering of Israel. Let me explain.

Few prophets in this dispensation have spoken more about the gathering of scattered Israel in preparation for the Second Coming of the Savior than President Russell M. Nelson. President Nelson told the Church that the gathering is

the greatest challenge, the greatest cause, and the greatest work on earth. . . .

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. . . There is **nothing** happening on this earth right now that is more important. . . There is **nothing** of greater consequence. Absolutely **nothing**.²

The gathering involves inviting all of Heavenly Father's children to "know that the Lord is their Savior and their Redeemer, the Mighty One of Israel,"³ to anchor themselves to the Savior, and to be propelled along the covenant path that is explicit in Heavenly Father's plan.

But scattered Israel must be gathered to a place, to a physical location. Why? As the early leaders of the Church were encouraging members to gather to a central location, Heber C. Kimball explained that

*as the branch of the vine cannot gather sap and nourishment from the body when separated from it, so the members of the church abroad, when commanded to gather to the body, cannot receive life and **intelligence** away from it, nor grow in the things of the kingdom of God.*⁴

To acquire both intelligence and knowledge of the kingdom of God are reasons God commanded a gathering. In fact, early Church leaders said:

Intelligence is the great object of our holy religion. . . . Intelligence is the result of education, and education can only be obtained by living in compact society. . . .

*One of the principal objects then, of our coming together, is to obtain the advantages of education; and in order to do this, compact society is absolutely necessary.*⁵

The compact society that we call Brigham Young University fulfills a key role in furthering the great objective of our religion: acquiring intelligence.

Intelligence, once attained in this life, "will rise with us in the resurrection" and provides advantages to the individual in the hereafter.⁶ It is more important than the alphabet and astrophysics; it is more important than multiplication tables and the periodic table; it is more important than Aeschylus and Euripides and brushing up on our Shakespeare. This kind of teaching and learning is

not limited to classrooms; it is taught by administrators and cooks, librarians and facility engineers. It can occur in a classroom even when you teach partial differential equations or poetry. The unique teaching available at Brigham Young University stems from the character and attributes of individuals who work here. It derives more from who you are than from what you do or can explain or what you know. For this reason your role at Brigham Young University is more than a job.

Teaching by Personal Example

Each employee at Brigham Young University contributes to the Christlike culture of this campus. Lest you think I exaggerate, consider what your impression is of the finest physician in the world if he or she is surrounded by people who are grumpy, sarcastic, and unempathetic. Your impression of your medical care and the doctor's advice will be difficult to separate from the environment in which that medical care is provided.

The same is true for students at Brigham Young University. The entire university environment contributes to the learning that occurs here. Everyone matters in this educational enterprise. While "no unhallowed hand can stop the [Master Physician's] work from progressing,"⁷ hallowed hands or employed hands can impede it.

I would like to take Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's teachings as he was speaking about parents and children and apply them to Brigham Young University employees and students. To any employees "who may be given to cynicism or skepticism, who in matters of whole-souled devotion always seem to hang back a little . . . , please be aware that the full price to be paid for such a stance does not always come due" during the time of your employment. No student at Brigham Young University "should be left with uncertainty about" your "devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Restoration of His Church, and the reality of living prophets and apostles." If you are a little off center, you may inadvertently lead a student "away from faithfulness, away from loyalty and bedrock belief." Elder Holland went on: "In matters of religion a skeptical mind is not a higher manifestation of virtue than is a believing heart.

. . . And such a deviation from the true course can be deceptively slow and subtle in its impact.”⁸

Let me illustrate. I will use an optical example. Consider a beam of light that originates at the left of a diagram. In the center of the diagram is a concave lens. At the right of the diagram is a target. If the beam of light strikes the lens off center, the beam diverges and will not hit the bull’s-eye. The more off center the beam hits the lens, the farther away from the bull’s-eye the beam ends up. Only when the beam of light hits the lens right in the center will it pass through the lens and hit the target at the bull’s-eye. Like the light and lens, your attitude, your speech, and your empathy create a beam that can center on the Savior or miss the Master altogether.

I realize it is not always easy to be cheerful and empathetic. We all have off days or off weeks as we deal with our own trials and difficulties. But no matter what, no matter when, no matter where, the Lord expects us to live the gospel to the best of our ability and unwaveringly keep the covenants we have made.

All Brigham Young University employees are

to help other people become “true followers of . . . Jesus Christ” (Moroni 7:48). To do this, [you] first strive to be the Savior’s faithful disciples. . . . Then [you] can help others develop strong testimonies and draw nearer to Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. . . .

*[You] can best teach others how to be “true followers” by [your] personal example.*⁹

Francis of Assisi once directed those who joined his order of monasteries that, regardless of whatever else they were doing, “all the friars, however, should preach by their deeds.”¹⁰ This is what you do: you preach by your deeds.

Mastering the Quality of Self-Discipline

The lifelong quest to develop Christlike attributes is challenging, and we are most challenged in manifesting those attributes when we experience stress in our lives. While serving as an Area Seventy, I accompanied a General Authority to organize the first Saratoga Springs Utah Stake in 2001. One of the high councilors we interviewed

was a rancher. When we asked him for a recommendation for stake president, he suggested, among others, Brother Roger E. Rees, a large-animal veterinarian.

When we asked why, the rancher responded, in a drawling Utah accent, “Well, Doc Rees come over to help me with one of my sick horses. And while he was doing that, the horse up and kicked him right in the thigh. And Doc Rees didn’t even cuss. It takes an awfully good man to not cuss when a horse kicks him in the thigh.”

Incidentally, Brother Rees was called to the stake presidency.

My wife and I have debated whether not cussing when kicked in the thigh by a horse is a divine attribute.¹¹ We ended up with a split vote. But we agree that the ability to refrain from coarse or inappropriate speech does take self-discipline. Mastering the quality of self-discipline is manifest most clearly in times of stress or difficulty.

I would like to confess a time when I flunked. I had just finished my intern year in internal medicine at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. I was a new resident and was working with a challenged intern. It was 2:00 a.m., and the intern was incapable of obtaining intravenous access for a critically ill patient. The intern had gone to bed and did not stay up to help. I meticulously placed a central line into the subclavian vein under the left collar bone.

After placing such a line, it is standard practice to obtain a chest X-ray to make sure that the procedure has not caused a complication. As the X-ray technician walked away down the hall after getting the X-ray, I checked on the patient before going downstairs to review the X-ray. To my horror, I saw that the central line that I had just so carefully placed had been ripped out of the patient as the technician had manipulated the hospital bed to get the X-ray.

On that hospital floor, at that time of night, there were just patients, several night nurses, and me. I let slip an expletive. One of the night nurses, Mrs. Paulee, who I did not know well, was shocked and said, in her quaint Baltimore accent, “Doctor Renlund! I never heard you cuss even when you were an intern.”

Well, that stung. After redoing the central line and reviewing a correctly obtained X-ray, I sought out Mrs. Paulee. I apologized and promised she would never again hear me cuss.

Without cutting me much slack, she simply said, “Well, I should hope not.”

Propagating Christlike Influence into the Future

Jesus Christ’s invitation to “follow me”¹² is an invitation to join Him in His work and to follow His example to become like Him. Always acting in a Christlike manner requires help from the Holy Ghost, a lot of patience with yourself, and a lot of work. Overcoming the spiritual inertia that is referred to as “the natural man”¹³ requires effort. Otherwise, nothing changes.

It is worthwhile to look at Christlike attributes one by one, study them one by one, and work on them one by one. But please remember that these characteristics do not function separately or autonomously any more than a perfect carburetor is all that is needed to complete a motor. Nevertheless, generally an auto mechanic will work on the carburetor and then move to another part of the motor for the engine to work effectively and safely.

We cannot acquire Christlike attributes by ourselves. We develop His attributes only with His help and through the power of His Atonement. Ultimately, Christlike attributes are gifts we receive. We need to yearn for them, but, in the end, we do not earn them.

Developing Christlike attributes does not happen in a vacuum or by isolating ourselves. It does not happen by metaphorically cloistering ourselves in monasteries and chanting mantras. That is not the purpose of compact societies. Christlike attributes come to us as we serve God and our fellowman. The gospel purpose is to produce people of perfect character whose actions are motivated by the pure love of Christ.

To help Him, you cannot lead students off target by sowing seeds of doubt or behaving in ways that are self-serving. Your collective consistency in creating and conveying Christlike attributes is essential to positively influence Brigham Young University students and propagate that influence into the future.

I would like to make another optical analogy. I have a penlight and I have a laser pointer. Both are powered by two AAA batteries. When I turn on the penlight and point it over there, I can illuminate my wife, Elder Johnson, and others, but as I try to illuminate farther back, the light dissipates and doesn’t illuminate beyond thirty or forty feet. On the other hand, if I use a laser pointer, it will propagate light for a long way. It will propagate up in the ceiling. If I pointed it at you, it could scorch some retinas. So I will not do that.

So why do these lights work differently? The light from the penlight is called “incoherent.” The light emitted is of different frequencies, and the waves are out of phase with each other. Conventional light sources are incoherent sources. On the other hand, light from the laser pointer is both coherent and monochromatic. The laser light has the same frequencies, and the waves are in phase one with one another. Even in the absence of increased power, the light from the laser propagates much, much farther.

The Lessons Linger

I would like to share an example of a brief but significant incident in which a positive cultural influence affected attitudes immediately as well as for decades to follow. This incident occurred at Johns Hopkins Hospital. The episode occurred in the emergency room. Three individuals were involved; I was just an observer. The three were a patient named Ben, a resident named Dr. Cohen, and a new intern, Dr. Jones. Ben was well known to the medical staff. He was an alcoholic and had been admitted numerous times for alcohol-related diseases. He was a kind, pleasant man. He was courteous and considerate of the medical staff. He was well-liked. But once again Ben was in the emergency room, this time with alcohol-induced pancreatitis (or inflammation of the pancreas) severe enough to be admitted.

Dr. Cohen was the resident taking care of Ben in the emergency room. Dr. Cohen was a resident who the other interns and residents admired and looked up to. He was brilliant, hardworking, and exemplary in every way. He had made the determination that Ben needed to be admitted.

The intern next up in rotation was Dr. Jones, the new intern. Dr. Jones had gone to a prestigious medical school, was brilliant in her own right, and was just beginning her own postgraduate education. The training for interns was brutally hard, high pressured, and associated with constant sleep deprivation. That probably led to the response Dr. Jones had to this, her fifth admission of the night. She vocally and loudly bemoaned the fact that she would have to take several hours now to care for Ben, who had in fact brought on his own plight. She made her feelings clear to Dr. Cohen.

Dr. Cohen's reprimand to her was concise, spoken in almost a whisper: "Dr. Jones, you became a physician to care for people and work to heal them. You didn't become a physician to judge them. If you don't understand the difference, you have no right to train at this institution."

Chagrined, Dr. Jones provided Ben great care on that and subsequent hospitalizations. Ben has since passed, and both Dr. Jones and Dr. Cohen went on to exemplary, compassionate, and successful careers, but the lesson lingered.

The training culture at Johns Hopkins was that physicians would provide great care in a nonjudgmental way. Those new to the institution needed to learn this culture, because it was not "natural" or inherent in trainees right out of medical school. Dr. Cohen had already internalized this culture and in this brief but significant moment taught Dr. Jones a proper attitude toward those who were to be helped and healed. Having overheard the conversation, the point was not lost on me. It had taken years for this culture to become ingrained. But it also needed to be conveyed. That is what Dr. Cohen did.

Brigham Young University employees have frequent opportunities to convey BYU's Christlike culture in brief but significant moments. Students will greatly benefit from these short encounters. Additionally, students will watch you for years, even decades. They will hear about you from future students. They will hear about you from other academics. They will hear about you from your children and grandchildren. But be assured, they will watch. And you will have the

opportunity to teach them by the example of your life.

The Impact Is Long-Lasting

That long-term impact is something I would like to share. I served as a missionary from 1972 to 1974 in Sweden under two mission presidents and their companions. Both of the mission presidents have now passed on. During their missions and over the years since then, I saw these two mission presidents' wives experience heartache, heartbreak, loss, betrayal, and other challenges. These faithful women faced each trial with faith, patience, compassion, love, selfless service, and forgiveness.

After I was called to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, I felt a distinct impression that we should visit both Sister Spencer, then age eighty-seven, and Sister Folkersen, then age eighty-six. As my wife and I visited, I expressed to each of these sisters how she had influenced me over the years. Their Christlike example and influence had been long-lasting, extending way beyond my mission. There were times when I could have made different choices than I did. But the thought of disappointing either of these saintly women gave me pause. To avoid disappointing them, I made better choices than I otherwise would have made. Without their influence, my life would have been different.

So as we visited, I informed each sister that she had either inspired or haunted me for more than forty-two years. These women had been spiritually born of God. They had received the Savior's image in their countenances. They had experienced that mighty change of heart described in the scriptures.¹⁴ They had qualified for and received the spiritual gifts to become like the Savior. Their influence encouraged their missionaries—all of them—to seek for the same gifts, to become like the Savior. I know my wife is grateful for the effect these two women have had on me.

With Sister Spencer's permission, I would like to tell you more of her story, the story we learned as we visited her in October 2015, right after my ordination as an apostle. Years after the Spencers had returned from their mission, President

Spencer developed some health challenges that affected his personality. He became infatuated with another woman, lost his membership in the Church, divorced Sister Spencer, and married the other woman.

Sister Spencer was heartbroken. She moved away from the community in which she lived. She used her time to raise her five children and her grandchildren. She served four additional missions. Meanwhile, her former husband, President Spencer, once again became a member of the Church and had his priesthood and temple blessings restored. That is the part of the story my wife and I knew.

The part we learned only while visiting Sister Spencer was that after twenty-nine years of marriage, wife number two divorced President Spencer. At age eighty-six, he found himself alone, impoverished, and in failing health.

In an incomprehensible act of forgiveness, compassion, and love, and to the delight of their five adult children, Sister Spencer remarried President Spencer. She explained to us that their temple sealing was still intact and that he was temple worthy, so she saw no barrier to marrying him again. Despite it all, she had never lost her love for him.

He moved into her home, and they enjoyed a time together when his health was stable. President Spencer's health again began to decline, and it soon became apparent that more medical care was required than could be provided in the home. Sister Spencer had President Spencer admitted to a nearby care center so that she could visit him daily. She paid for his care with money she had carefully saved.

When we learned that President Spencer was in a nearby facility, we asked Sister Spencer if we could go with her to see him. We got in the car and drove to the facility to visit. It was obvious that he was suffering. I took the opportunity to give my beloved mission president one of my first apostolic blessings. President Spencer passed away two days later.

Forty-three years after my mission, Sister Spencer's demonstration of Christlike attributes inspires me. It is hardest to be Christlike when you have been wronged, when you have every

right to hold a grudge, when your own resources are small, or when your heart has been broken. But, being Christlike, Sister Spencer forgave her husband, found solace in her temple blessings, and was charitable. She acquired Christlike attributes as she lived the gospel each day and extended love to all. Her example says more about developing Christlike attributes than any speech or sermon ever could. I love her for that! I am blessed to be her former missionary.

Help Students Come to a Knowledge of Their Redeemer

Brothers and sisters, you have more than a job. You are participating in fulfilling one of the purposes of the gathering of Israel. You do so as you teach knowledge and help others gain intelligence. Most important, you help students come to a knowledge of their Redeemer. Your example and choices influence them. God has blessed us with a compact society called Brigham Young University. Thousands upon thousands have contributed over the years to the creation of a Christlike culture. Your God-given task is to convey that culture. It is more than a job.

So let us cheerfully go forward and do all things that lie in our power to convey this Christlike character, this Christlike attribute, this milieu that is Brigham Young University, so that all who enter here can sense that the Savior is the Redeemer of their souls. I know that He is. I know that He loves these students. I know that He loves you. I pray God's richest blessings to be on you, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. A musical performance preceded Elder Renlund's remarks: Korianne Orton Johnson, soprano; Donni Evans, violin; Dorie Haws, piano: "Savior, Redeemer of My Soul" (2001); music by Rob Gardner and words by Orson F. Whitney; see also original version in *Hymns*, 2002, no. 112.

2. Russell M. Nelson, in Russell M. Nelson and Wendy W. Nelson, "Hope of Israel," worldwide youth devotional, 3 June 2018, churchofjesuschrist.org/new-era/2018/08-se/hope-of-israel?lang=eng; emphasis in original.

3. 1 Nephi 22:12.

4. Heber C. Kimball, "Extract from Elder H. C. Kimball's Journal," *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 2 (1 December 1842): 24; emphasis added. Quoted in Terryl L. Givens, *Feeding the Flock: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Church and Praxis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 37.

5. First Presidency message, "To the Saints Abroad," *Elders' Journal* 1, no. 4 (August 1838): 53; quoted in Givens, *Feeding the Flock*, 37. A subsequent reason to physically gather members of the Church was to have enough collective resources to construct temples, as stated by Terryl L. Givens: "Though it was not entirely clear in the first years, the temple and the full range of sacraments that would eventually be administered therein would become by the 1840s the very *raison d'être* of the Restoration" (*Feeding the Flock*, 38).

6. D&C 130:18–19.

7. Joseph Smith, letter to John Wentworth, "Church History," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (1 March 1842): 709; also HC 4:540 and Joseph Smith, "The Wentworth Letter," *Ensign*, July 2002.

8. Jeffrey R. Holland, "A Prayer for the Children," *Ensign*, May 2003.

9. *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010), 3.1 (p. 12).

10. Francis of Assisi, Orthodox Order of Friars Minor, First Rule (1221; also called Earlier Rule or Regula non Bullata), "Of Preachers," section 17. The expression "Preach Jesus, and if necessary, use words," is widely attributed to Francis, but no published source has been located prior to the early 1990s. Variants of this theme also exist.

11. See 2 Peter 1:4.

12. Luke 9:23, 59.

13. Mosiah 3:19.

14. See Alma 5:14; Ezekiel 36:25–27.