

Engaging Without Being Defensive

M. RUSSELL BALLARD

As I look at you graduates, tender feelings well up inside me. While it is not possible for me to shake hands with each of you and look you in the eye personally, I want you to know that you are precious in the sight of your Heavenly Father. He loves you. The leaders of the Church love you.

I also want you to know that you have an exciting and meaningful service to the Lord ahead of you. I recognize that years of sacrifice by your parents, as well as by each of you, have helped you become who you are. Today I look at you and recognize your own years of commitment to the Church and to nourishing your own testimonies through study and application of gospel principles. I look at you and see the future of the Church—not just the future bishops, stake presidents, mission presidents, and auxiliary leaders but the great ranks of future mothers and fathers, Primary and Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, home teachers, visiting teachers, Scout leaders, choir directors, and countless others who will serve the Lord in the 21st century.

It will be a different century than the one that has just passed. In some ways it will be better; in other ways it will be much more difficult for you and for your children. But one thing is inescapable: it will be *your* century—

one in which you have the opportunity to leave your mark for good or otherwise. You will try to influence others, and others will try to influence you. Either you will share and promote your core values, rooted in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, or you will allow others to define your values for you and your posterity.

Communication in the future will continue to change through Internet and new media technologies. Your world of cyberspace—cell phones that capture video downloads, iTunes, social networks like Facebook, text messaging, blogs, Twitter, handhelds, and podcasts—is just the beginning of what is yet ahead for you in the remarkable expansion of technology. It makes me wish I had been born 20 years later so that I could figure out how to run my iPhone when it doesn't behave, which is quite often.

We are in a titanic struggle, my young brothers and sisters. From the dawn of mankind's history it has always been so. Good and evil have always been with us, and so has the right

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to choose between them. For the time I have with you today, I want to share some thoughts about standing firm for the truth.

Recently I saw some research about how other people see members of the Church. I have long been interested in this subject because I have had somewhat to do with missionary work in my Church assignments. Knowing how people see us is an important part of understanding how best to explain ourselves. This particular piece of research made an interesting observation. It suggested that members of our Church can sometimes appear very defensive to those who are not members of the Church. One respondent went so far as to say that when Mormons are explaining their beliefs, they speak in terms that suggest they are expecting criticism.

This was not the first time I have heard that kind of observation. But the more I have thought about it, the more I understand how easy it is, if we are not careful, to convey a sense of defensiveness in our communications with others.

I think I understand something of the reasons. From the time Joseph Smith walked out of the Sacred Grove in the spring of 1820, there have been those who have reacted negatively, even with hostility, to our message. Joseph tells us in his own words that the first time he attempted to share what he had seen with someone outside the family, it wasn't a pleasant experience. The Protestant minister with whom he shared his message told him that it was "all of the devil" (JS—H 1:21) and that there was no such thing as visions and revelations anymore. If Joseph thought that was bad, it was because he hadn't yet realized the relentless power of the adversary. The more the Church grew, the more it seemed to attract hostility. The small band of faithful Saints was driven from one place to another. It must have seemed to Joseph that it could not get much worse than the terrible suffering at Liberty Jail followed by the governor of Missouri issuing

the extermination order against members of the Church. Of course it did get worse, and Joseph and Hyrum paid for their work, testimonies, and faith with their lives. That was the final act that launched the great trek west led by Brigham Young, bringing us to this American wilderness, a place of refuge in the Rocky Mountains for the members of the Church.

That is now an indelible part of history. You have heard the stories of hardship and sacrifice since you were a small child. Even converts to the Church who had no ancestors who survived those times embrace the people and the events of our early history as part of their own heritage. The stories both inspire and motivate us, as they should, and I hope and pray that in our relative comfort we will never forget those sturdy and faithful Latter-day Saints and the lessons we can learn from them.

And yet "this isn't 1830, and there aren't just six of us" anymore (Harold B. Lee to Boyd K. Packer; as retold in Boyd K. Packer, "The Standard of Truth Has Been Erected," *Ensign*, November 2003, 26). Could part of the defensiveness that others sometimes see in us suggest that we still expect to be treated as a disliked minority, forced to flee to the West? In our interactions with others are we expecting always to have to defend ourselves? If so, I think we need to make a course correction. Constantly anticipating criticisms or objections can lead to an unhealthy self-consciousness and a defensive posture that doesn't resonate well with others. It is inconsistent with where we are today as a Church and as a great body of the followers of Jesus Christ.

As in all things, we can look to the Savior as our Exemplar. He faced tremendous hostility from the outset of His ministry. When He first preached in the synagogues at Nazareth, some wanted to throw Him off a cliff. Yet He did not allow Himself to be intimidated. He knew that for the most part He would be misunderstood. Yet He was fearless in declaring His gospel,

using such phrases as “some say unto you” followed by “but I say unto you.” He knew what He wanted to say, and He said it without apology. As the scriptures say, “He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matthew 7:29; see also Mark 1:22).

If we want to be respected today for who we are, then we need to act confidently—secure in the knowledge of who we are and what we stand for—and not as if we have to apologize for our beliefs. That doesn’t mean we should be arrogant or overbearing. Respect for others’ views should always be a basic principle for us—it’s built right into the Articles of Faith. But when we act as if we are a persecuted minority, or as if we expect to be misunderstood or criticized, people will sense it and respond accordingly.

I invite those of you who are returned missionaries to be especially sensitive to this. You spent two years knocking on doors and dealing with every conceivable question and objection. It is easy in your conversations to think you are still knocking on doors. You’re not. If you are in a position to share what you believe, there’s no need to tread so carefully that you look like you are being evasive or anticipating criticism. The Apostle Paul said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of [Jesus] Christ” (Romans 1:16)—neither should any of us be. I look forward to and greatly appreciate every opportunity I have to share my testimony of the marvelous message of the Restoration. And I cannot ever remember offending anyone in the process.

One of the reasons why this subject is relevant to you today is because the Church is getting stronger. In the United States, we are now the fourth-largest church. Latter-day Saints are everywhere, in communities from coast to coast, north to south. While our numbers may be more concentrated in the West, it is becoming more and more common for people in the country to know a Latter-day Saint personally. In addition, many members of the Church have achieved social prominence. A

recent *Time* magazine article about the Church noted this fact and ran several photographs of prominent Latter-day Saints. (See “The Storm over the Mormons,” *Time*, 22 June 2009, 48–53; also, online revised title, “The Church and Gay Marriage: Are Mormons Misunderstood.”)

This prominence alone ensures that the Church is going to be talked about more and more and that Latter-day Saints are going to find themselves in more and more gospel discussions. That’s why I have chosen this subject. You need to be honest, open, forthright, engaging, respectful of others’ views, and completely nondefensive about your own.

I’m going to give you two suggestions for how to engage in conversations nondefensively.

The first suggestion: Don’t let irrelevant issues drown out the more important subjects.

Our Church members have too often allowed others to set the conversational agenda. An example is polygamy. This ended in the Church as an official practice in 1890. It’s now 2009. Why are we still talking about it? It was a practice. It ended. We moved on. If people ask you about polygamy, just acknowledge it was once a practice in our Church but is not now and that people shouldn’t confuse any polygamists with our Church. In ordinary conversations, don’t waste time trying to justify the practice of polygamy during Old Testament times or speculating as to why it was practiced for a time in the 19th century. Those may be legitimate topics for historians and scholars, but I think we simply reinforce the stereotypes when we make it a primary topic of conversations about the Church.

I realize that sometimes these conversations are triggered by stories that appear in the media. That doesn’t change anything. Earlier this year a TV cable network series about polygamists depicted the sacred temple ceremony. That portrayal caused great concern among Church members, which is understandable. We were all offended by it. But I refer you to an article in response that was placed by the

Public Affairs Department of the Church on its Newsroom Web site at that time. As I quote from it, listen to the tone. There is nothing defensive about it, yet it was responding to an inappropriate portrayal of one of our most sacred religious ceremonies:

Like other large faith groups, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sometimes finds itself on the receiving end of attention from Hollywood or Broadway, television series or books, and the news media. Sometimes depictions of the Church and its people are quite accurate. Sometimes the images are false or play to stereotypes. Occasionally, they are in appallingly bad taste.

As Catholics, Jews and Muslims have known for centuries, such attention is inevitable once an institution or faith group reaches a size or prominence sufficient to attract notice.

The article then goes on to discourage the idea of an organized boycott of the network or affiliated businesses, which was being actively promoted on the Internet among some of our members. Continuing the Newsroom quote:

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as an institution does not call for boycotts. Such a step would simply generate the kind of controversy that the media loves and in the end would increase audiences for the series. . . . Latter-day Saints should conduct themselves with dignity and thoughtfulness.

Not only is this the model that Jesus Christ taught and demonstrated in His own life, but it also reflects the reality of the strength and maturity of Church members today. . . .

If the Church allowed critics and opponents to choose the ground on which its battles are fought, it would risk being distracted from the focus and mission it has pursued successfully for nearly 180 years. Instead, the Church itself will determine its own course as it continues to preach the restored gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world. ["The Publicity Dilemma," March 9, 2009; <http://>

newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/commentary/the-publicity-dilemma]

Let me give you another example in recent memory. A year or two ago, an independent film group made a movie about the Mountain Meadows Massacre. To describe this as a really bad B movie would be generous. Frankly, it was just awful—even the Hollywood critics panned it. The promoters did everything they could to provoke the Church into making it a major topic of conversation. In fact, we completely ignored it. We refused to allow them to set the agenda. The result: a big flop at the box office and presumably a lot of red ink in the promoter's bank account. Meanwhile, we continue to respond to and reach out in constructive and intelligent ways with the descendants of those who were involved in those terrible events at Mountain Meadows. Recently the Church has published a well-researched book titled *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* that documents the facts surrounding this tragedy (see Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley, Jr., and Glen M. Leonard [Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008]).

My second suggestion: Emphasize that Latter-day Saints follow Jesus Christ and what He teaches—that we try to follow Him in all we do.

When all is said and done, the most important thing about you and your testimony is that you base your beliefs on what Jesus Christ taught and that you try to follow Him by living your life in a way that is acceptable to our Heavenly Father and to the Lord.

This is your foundation. It was Joseph Smith's foundation. He said:

The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it. [HC 3:30]

Whenever you are having a conversation about the Church, you should try to make this a point. We follow Jesus Christ. We try to live as He taught. That's the basis of our faith and our lives. This is the strongest nondefensive position you can take. You don't have to defend or justify anything when you are basing your position on the teachings of the Son of God and the fact that you are doing your best to keep His commandments.

It is a great blessing to have the doctrines of Jesus Christ, which are clear to those who study the scriptures and embrace His teachings. As we follow the doctrine of the Lord Jesus Christ, we come to know that all of us are the children of God and that He loves us. By following Christ we know where we came from before we were born, we know our purpose for being here on the earth, and we know where we will go when we leave this earth life. The plan of salvation is clear; it is God's plan for the eternal happiness of His children.

There are commandments that God has given for men and women to live by. They are His commandments, and no one is authorized to change them except it be by direct revelation to God's chosen prophet.

People throughout the world are drifting further and further away from the teachings of the Lord toward a secular society that the Apostle Paul described:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth. [2 Timothy 4:3-4]

Today is the day and the time Paul saw. There is an ever-growing number of people who believe that there is no God, no Christ, no plan of redemption, no Atonement, no repentance, no forgiveness, no life after death, no resurrection, no eternal life, and no eternal families sealed together forever.

How empty life must be without the blessings of the fulness of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ!

Now, my brothers and sisters, we follow Jesus Christ. We know the plan of happiness, the great plan of redemption through the Lord Jesus Christ. You graduates know the doctrines of Jesus Christ. You must strive now and always to live by them. Upon your generation will rest the responsibility to teach the doctrines of the Lord and to know how to build up His Church. Please remember that you do not need to feel like you must justify your beliefs; you simply need to explain them in a spirit of love and kindness. The truth always prevails when true doctrine is taught.

Here are just a few examples:

1. We follow Jesus Christ's doctrine of service to our fellow man. We serve both our members and those who are not members. The great work we do in humanitarian service throughout the world relieves suffering and hardship. We do all we can by sharing our resources of time and money to meet the needs of both our members and those of other faiths, recognizing that "inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40).

2. We follow Jesus Christ's doctrine of striving to live the Word of Wisdom, which is a sound way to enjoy a healthy physical body. We avoid drug abuse of all kinds, because our bodies house our eternal spirits and because happiness in this life is obtained by being spiritually strong and physically healthy.

3. We follow Jesus Christ by living the law of chastity. God gave this commandment, and He has never revoked it nor changed it. This law is clear and simple. No one is to engage in sexual relationships out of the bounds the Lord has set. This applies to homosexual behavior of any kind and to heterosexual relationships

outside of marriage. It is a sin to violate the law of chastity.

4. We follow Jesus Christ by adhering to God's law of marriage, which is marriage between one man and one woman. This commandment has been in place from the very beginning. God said, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). God instructed Adam and Eve that they were to "be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). Modern-day prophets and apostles reaffirmed this command in "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," issued in 1995. It reads:

God has commanded that the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife. . . .

The family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan. ["The Family: A Proclamation to the World," Ensign, November 1995, 102]

5. We follow Jesus Christ and teach the first principles of the gospel and all of the other wonderful doctrines of the Restoration that, when embraced and lived, bring peace, joy, and happiness to the sons and daughters of God.

Brothers and sisters, you wonderful graduates, it is just this simple. May God bless you as you now leave this university and go out into the world and fulfill your pursuits, finding happiness and knowing that by following the teachings of Jesus Christ you will have peace, joy, and happiness in your lives.

I want to leave you my testimony. I bear witness to you that Jesus is the Christ. He is the Son of God. He does live. This is His Church. We are on His errand. He has given us teachings and commandments. We should understand them and teach them with love, power, and spiritual strength.

I invoke a blessing upon you that our Heavenly Father will enlighten you and bless you in every way when you have the opportunity to explain to the world the marvelous message of the Restoration and that as you explain to those who are not members of the Church that you may be blessed, that you may have heavenly direction, and that you may stand positive in your own feelings, never feeling that you need to be on the defensive being a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. May God grant you every blessing and righteous desire of your heart as you leave this university is my humble prayer. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.