

Loving Our Neighbor: Tolerance and Acceptance as We Come Together in Knowing Christ

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I was 38 years old when I joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. When I tell people that, I always notice a hint of satisfaction in my voice. Being aware of that sense of gratification has led me to reflect on why I think it is significant that I am a convert and that I was an adult when I was converted. I've come to realize that being a convert at age 38 signifies several things to me.

First, my age at conversion signals to me that I was mature enough to make the decision despite pressure from others to reject the Church and its teachings. I was raised Catholic and practiced Catholicism until I was in college. I didn't join the LDS Church because it was the accepted thing to do. I had participated in an active search for truth, and I was able to think and reason for myself as I did so. With the help of the Holy Ghost, I was tenacious in figuring out what was right for me. I was open-minded enough to consider the possibility that what some considered an unusual religion could be true and of great worth to me. The Spirit converted me, but I needed to be the one taking charge of the exploration.

Second, my conversion reminds me that the Lord knew who I was. My conversion came after a long painful time in my life, brought about by having rejected what I had learned

about God as a child, including His guidelines for our safety and peace. The conversion process told me that although I had rejected religion, God hadn't forgotten about me. He knew where I was in my journey, and He loved and cared about me even when I wasn't living according to His teachings. He led me to where He wanted me to be.

Third, the time that I had lived away from God prior to my conversion taught me that all experience has value. Some of us do learn from our mistakes and, through the gift of the Atonement, can be led to a better place because of them. One of my favorite scriptures is "All these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good" (D&C 122:7). Some experiences lead us away from God, and some bring us toward Him. But even the separation experiences can eventually bring us to a place where we desire peace, comfort, and greater understanding of the purpose of life.

Experiencing another religion, living for a time without religion, and exploring other faiths broadened my perspective on other people's lives, giving me a deeper appreciation for

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people whose faith, background, current standards, and mistakes are different from mine. Today I want to speak of the importance of understanding, accepting, and respecting those who may be on paths different from our own.

To introduce the importance of valuing other backgrounds, I would like to tell you about experiences I have had with family members and friends. I draw on my personal experiences to share with you how important I think it is to acknowledge, accept, and love people who are of a different religion, culture, or background. Reflecting on my life and my conversion process, I have been able to identify some principles about tolerance and acceptance that have been significant to me. While I am going to emphasize religious tolerance, these principles apply to the acceptance of cultural and experiential differences as well.

1. Look for Commonalities

I often hear members emphasize in testimonies or lessons how very different our church is from others. Sometimes the way that we state that we have *the* truth implies forcefully that other churches don't have any truth. When I hear this exaggerated, I become a bit saddened. Other religions have many aspects of truth.

In 1986 my brother was ordained to the Catholic priesthood. His life is very different from mine and from yours, but I have great respect for his faith and his dedication to it. As pastor of a church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, he is devoted to his parishioners, programs, and school. As I attend Catholic services when I visit my brother, I see more similarities than differences in our religions. He has a deep love for the scriptures, and I am always touched when I hear him talk about his love for the Savior. I recall Elder M. Russell Ballard's statement that "all of us, regardless of race, color, or creed, belong to the family of our Heavenly Father" ("How Is It with Us?" *Ensign*, May 2000, 32), and I know that the Lord receives my brother's love and blesses him for it.

2. Accept People Where They Are

There is a traditional saying that we judge others based on their actions but we judge ourselves based on our intentions. If we were to give others the benefit of the doubt by looking at their intentions, our lives would be much richer and we would be more tolerant.

My father is an example of someone who does not have the benefits of the restored gospel in his life, but the purity and strength of his intentions have made him a powerful example to me. My father lives a very spiritual life. He goes to mass every morning and reads the priest's prayers morning and night. My father also says heartfelt personal prayers with a reverence like no other I have experienced. In his talk "Building Bridges of Understanding," Elder Ballard advised, "All of our interpersonal relationships should be built on a foundation of mutual respect, trust, and appreciation" (*Ensign*, June 1998, 62). I know God loves and admires my father's loyalty and dedication to Christianity. My father lives according to the light he has, and he does it well.

3. Reflect on the Goodness in Other Religions

My mother, who passed away in 1992, was outstanding in her ability to reflect on and accept the goodness in other religions. Although she, like my father, had been raised a Catholic, my mother had more ecumenical leanings than my father, as her father had been a Lutheran. But she accepted the good she found in the Catholic Church and faithfully practiced Catholicism. Her father had converted from Lutheranism to Catholicism in order to marry my grandmother. He stopped attending the Lutheran Church, but he maintained his deep faith, believed in the Bible, and longed for his own religion. Because of my grandfather's goodness and the strength of his desire to worship according to the dictates of his own conscience, my mother and grandmother softened on their stance that Catholicism is the only true religion

and accepted the good in his former religion as well.

After I converted to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I told my mother about the restored gospel. She could see where it could be true, but she wanted to be loyal to my father, since he believed Catholicism to be the only true church. Later, after doing my mother's temple work, I strongly felt her presence with me. I am convinced that her understanding and acceptance of the restored gospel has grown on the other side of the veil. I believe that my mother's openness—and my respect for her beliefs—eventually led her to the fulness of the gospel.

4. See Differences and Weaknesses as Part of Life—Each Is a Gift and an Opportunity to Progress

My sister is a psychiatric nurse in a child and adolescent unit. Daily she deals with challenging teenagers who have made some very poor decisions in their lives. The psychiatrists help workers avoid judging their patients by reminding them that the troubled teens are often the healthiest members of their families. To help these patients improve their lives, the mental health professionals must maintain this perspective in order to have patience and compassion for the young people but still help them accept responsibility for their choices. Many of the patients emerge stronger as they learn from the mistakes they have made.

In my life I have grown and progressed from the changes brought about by poor choices and painful consequences. Doing so has strengthened my ability to view weaknesses in others with tolerance—as barriers that can be overcome. One of the things that I love about the gospel is the understanding that we will continue to progress after this life. That principle in and of itself should keep us tolerant and accepting of others, since mistakes and painful experiences may be catalysts for an individual to begin searching for, attaining,

and ultimately appreciating deeper meaning in life.

5. Value What We Can Learn from Others

My son shared with me a lesson about acceptance and tolerance that he learned while he was on his mission. He served in Mexico in an area presided over by Elder Lynn A. Mickelsen, who began conducting conferences on the topic of tolerance when he became aware that some of the missionaries were making disparaging remarks about other religions. Elder Mickelsen shared with me what he taught to his missionaries:

[Members of other religions are] *honorable people. They teach the commandments; they teach of Christ. In the seventh chapter of Moroni, Mormon refers to the Light of Christ, and he makes it clear that if people are teaching of the Christ, they are of Him. Both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young taught that we need to gather everything good we can from everyone else in the world. The goodness and teachings of other religions often become the base for preparing individuals to accept the fulness of the gospel at a later time.*

6. Serve People from Different Faiths and Backgrounds

I have learned much about tolerance, acceptance, and love from my friends both in and outside the Church. I would like to introduce you to two of them.

About two years ago MacLeans Geo-Jaja, a professor in the McKay School of Education, asked me to help with the Inner City Refugee Project, which is designed to meet the needs of refugees settling in the Salt Lake area. In the process I met Bob and Amy Wylie, humanitarian service missionaries who devote nearly constant attention to serving individuals from diverse cultures and religions.

I was so touched by what I learned of their work. While conversions to the Church do occur as a result of their efforts, Bob and Amy

follow Elder Henry B. Eyring's admonition to love and serve those who are not of our faith before we consider sharing our testimonies (see "Let Us Raise Our Voice of Warning," *Ensign*, January 2009, 5–9). Amy and Bob serve and love these refugees because they think of them as brothers and sisters who have needs. Because this is their motivation, the service is heartfelt and sincere.

President Gordon B. Hinckley often admonished us in general conferences to love our neighbors and to be accepting of those who are not members of our church—to reach out to those from different cultural and religious backgrounds. I always strongly felt the Spirit when he would deliver this counsel. I knew we were receiving prophetic advice to extend Christlike love beyond the membership of the Church. It is by our fruits (especially our love and service) that those from other backgrounds shall know that we follow Christ.

7. Give a Soft Response When Criticized

As we are careful to show respect for others, we also wish that others would show respect for our principles, our worship, and our lifestyle. When we encounter individuals who are critical of our church, we must be careful to avoid engaging them in contentious debate, which does not bring out the best in any individual or religion.

As I mentioned, one of my brothers is a Catholic priest; ironically, my other brother disregards organized religion altogether and likes to negate Christian doctrine. I'm careful in my dealings with him to avoid saying things that will drive away the Spirit or fuel the debate. I have also encountered friends who have been

critical of my beliefs. Although these kinds of criticisms cause me concern, I have been careful to respond mildly and respectfully. After several such interactions, friends have apologized for their harshness. Their hearts have been softened because of my soft response.

I began this devotional by talking about my conversion story. Many years have passed since the day I entered the waters of baptism. The passing of time has given me a greater appreciation for the good I encountered growing up in a religious home and for the good I encountered over the years in individuals from very different backgrounds and religions.

When I think back on participating in the Catholic religion as a child, rejecting a spiritual way of life during my youth, and then being led by Heavenly Father to the Church, I become weak in my knees with gratitude. I am grateful for each encounter I have had, before and after becoming a member of the Church, with individuals from different faiths and backgrounds who have enriched my life.

I am in awe as I reexamine the path that has brought me to this place. Along the way I have developed a commitment to being respectful and understanding of others. I believe that we draw nearer to Christ as we love, serve, and accept those from different religions, cultures, and experiential backgrounds, including those who have made serious mistakes or who don't practice a religion. It is my prayer that we all can have the respect our Savior would have us feel for our brothers and sisters outside of the Church—brothers and sisters He loves and for whom He atoned. I leave these things with you in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.