

Things Are Getting Better

GORDON B. HINCKLEY

My beloved brethren and sisters, my dear friends, it is a great privilege and a frightening experience to be here. You scare me just a little. You expect something, and I feel a great sense of inadequacy to give you that which you hope for. But I give you testimony, and I hope I speak out of faith and trust that the Lord will help me.

I have been assigned a subject. I always have difficulty when I am assigned a subject. In fact, I always have difficulty. The subject assigned me comes out of a symposium held on this campus with people from many parts of the world concerning the expanding Church and the problems it must meet as it moves against various cultures across the world. My assigned subject is "The Expanding Church among the Nations and Cultures of Man." I have simplified that to read: "Things Are Getting Better."

We, of course, all recognize the mandate laid upon the Church by the Lord himself. It is a mandate we cannot dodge and one from which we cannot shrink. That mandate is to teach the gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. This was the final charge given by the Lord following his resurrection and before his ascension. It was repeated with the opening of this dispensation.

Missionary Efforts Early in This Dispensation

Following the organization of the first Council of the Twelve in this dispensation, Oliver Cowdery, then a counselor in the First Presidency, delivered a charge to those men who had been selected for this sacred office. I should like to give you some of the words he spoke on that occasion:

You are called to preach the gospel of the Son of God to the nations of the earth. It is the will of your Heavenly Father that you proclaim his gospel to the ends of the earth and the islands of the sea.

Be zealous to save souls. The soul of one man is as precious as the soul of another. You are to bear this message to those who consider themselves wise, and such may persecute you. They may seek your life. The adversary has always sought the life of the servants of God; you are, therefore, to be prepared at all times to make a sacrifice of your lives, should God require them in the advancement and building up of his cause. . . .

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The time is near when you will be in the midst of congregations who will gnash their teeth upon you. The gospel must roll forth, and it will until it fills the whole earth. . . .

You have a work to do that no other men can do. You must proclaim the gospel in its simplicity and purity; and we commend you to God and the word of his grace. [Documentary History of the Church, 2:196–98]

Subsequent to that charge, the Lord delivered the revelation known as section 112 of the Doctrine and Covenants, which was a revelation to the first Council of the Twelve. In it are found these words:

Contend thou, therefore, morning by morning; and day after day let thy warning voice go forth; and when the night cometh let not the inhabitants of the earth slumber, because of thy speech. . . .

Wherefore, whithersoever they shall send you, go ye, and I will be with you; and in whatsoever place ye shall proclaim my name an effectual door shall be opened unto you, that they may receive my word. [D&C 112:5, 19]

In accordance with that charge, missionaries were sent into the surrounding areas, into Canada, and in 1837 across the sea to England.

It was in the Kirtland Temple during troubled days for the Church that the Prophet Joseph Smith approached Heber C. Kimball and said, “Brother Heber, the Spirit of the Lord has whispered to me, ‘Let my servant Heber go to England and proclaim my Gospel, and open the door of salvation to that nation.’”

I am not surprised that some sense of fear came over him. He said to himself, “O, Lord, I am a man of stammering tongue and altogether unfit for such a work. How can I go to preach in that land which is so famed throughout Christendom of learning, knowledge, and piety, the nursery of religion, and to a people whose intelligence is proverbial?” (*Life of Heber C. Kimball*, p. 104).

But he and his associates went. While the language was essentially the same as their own, many of the customs they met were different. They paid little attention to these. Their message was the gospel of salvation, and they spoke of little else. History bears remarkable testimony to the success of their labors.

In the years that followed, the work was taken to the isles of the sea, where other unique and different cultures were encountered. It was so in the lands of Europe, with new languages to be learned and new customs to be confronted. After the Saints moved west, even though they were faced with the tremendous tasks of subduing the wilderness and building a commonwealth, they never slackened their efforts to carry the gospel to the nations of the earth. For many of those years there were two great processions moving across the plains: one in the direction of these mountain valleys, bringing converts from the lands of Europe to settle here; and another of missionaries eastward bound to go into the lands of Europe to bear witness to the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the general conference held in 1852, men were called from the congregation to go not only to Europe, but also to China, Siam, India, and the islands of the Pacific. It is interesting to note that in those early pioneering days we had more missionary activity in India than we have today. I marvel at the boldness—rather, I should characterize it as the faith—of the leaders and the membership of this Church in that pioneering era to stretch the relatively small membership and the thin resources of this people so far in carrying the message of the gospel to distant lands.

One cannot read Parley P. Pratt’s account of his travels to the islands of the Pacific and then down to Valparaiso on the west coast of South America in Chile without recognizing with gratitude the courage and the faith of those of early days, who took with seriousness the charge to carry the gospel to the nations of

the world. You and I, my brethren and sisters, who sit here in comfort this night are the beneficiaries of their faithful service; for our forebears, those of many of us, heard the gospel in those lands and emigrated to these valleys.

The long journeys across the seas were made under extremely adverse circumstances, many of them in sailing vessels. When those missionaries stepped ashore, there was neither friend nor companion to meet them. They had no briefing concerning the conditions they were to meet, no knowledge of the languages of the people among whom they were to labor. Many of them sickened as their bodies struggled to adapt to the food and other strange circumstances of living. But again they were possessed with a sense of mission driven by a charge to take the gospel of salvation to the peoples of the earth. I should like to suggest to you that this great effort has been one of the remarkable miracles of our time.

It has been my privilege to visit and in most instances to work in nearly all of the places where our missionaries have served. My own mission was to the British Isles. I have had the responsibility for two or three years for the work in Europe, for three years for the work in South America, and for nine years for the work in the Far East. In accumulated time I have lived for more than three years in Asia. I have recently returned from visiting in Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, and Singapore. In a few days we shall go again to Japan, thence to Taiwan, the Philippines, and Hong Kong. I am at least superficially acquainted with some of the problems encountered by our missionaries incident to our carrying out the program of the Church where there are marked differences between our culture and the cultures of the people of those lands. But I feel these differences are of minor importance in comparison with the great burden of our responsibility to teach the gospel of the Master and that alone.

Shrinking Cultural Barriers in Modern Missionary Work

I should also like to suggest that in comparison to the problems encountered and dealt with by those early men of great faith, ours are of relatively small significance. Hence the title I have given this talk: "Things Are Getting Better." There are many reasons for this. We ought to be doing better than we are doing. In the first place, we live in a rapidly shrinking world. Weeks and even months were once required to travel across the Pacific; today we board a luxurious 747 aircraft in San Francisco at nine o'clock in the evening, and nine or ten hours later we pass through immigration and customs formalities in Tokyo, having enjoyed a good meal en route. We cannot dismiss lightly the importance of the vast traffic constantly crossing the trade routes of the world and the sublimating effects of such intercourse among nations insofar as cultural differences are concerned.

Secondly, as the educational level rises throughout the world, there is a concomitant factor of greater understanding of the ways and customs of other people. There is so much of information now available to anyone who wants to visit a foreign land that he need not go in ignorance of what he will find there. International newscasting of the great news services of the world has brought Peking into our living room. We are made almost instantly aware of happenings in New Delhi in almost as great detail as events reported from New York.

The third factor is increasing knowledge of languages among the peoples of the earth. One of the great opportunities given our missionaries is that of teaching English in foreign lands, especially in the lands of Asia, where people hunger for a knowledge of this language. A giant step forward in facilitating the teaching of the gospel in other lands is the establishment and enlargement of the Language Training Mission. The great facility which is

being constructed here will be, when completed, without equal anywhere in the world. This facility should make for an improvement of an already outstanding program which makes it possible for our missionaries to arrive in the field ready to go to work immediately, able to converse in the languages of the people and with some acquaintance of their cultures. President Kimball told us the other day of sitting next to the American ambassador in Finland. The ambassador, speaking of the Finnish language, said, "There are only two groups of people who can learn this difficult language—babies and Mormon missionaries."

Another factor which substantially diminishes the culture shock the missionaries might experience is the men we have presiding over the missions of the world. This is a great corps of selected, able, faithful leaders, who almost without exception have served in their younger years as missionaries in the places in which they now preside. They are not novices; they are men of broad experience and tremendous understanding of the land, the people, the cultural elements, and the languages. They stand as fathers to the young men and women who serve under them.

Finally, I might mention the tremendous erosion of strong cultural patterns in many parts of the earth. Insofar as I am concerned, the people in the lands of Asia to me look little different from and act just as people do everywhere else. They dress much the same; they have the same interests; they have the same capabilities. People are essentially the same everywhere, all over the earth. Husbands love wives, and wives love husbands. Parents love children. An appreciation for beauty in whatever form it may take is found among people everywhere. They also have a concern with suffering, the ever-present conscience, the sense of right and wrong, and the universal recognition of a higher power to whom men may appeal for help, who sits in judgment

upon us, and to whom, someday, each of us must make an accounting.

Years ago I was asked whether we use a different set of lessons in the Orient from those used in the so-called Christian countries. I responded that we use the same lessons because we teach the same kind of people, whose hearts are touched by the same eternal truths. I stated further that the people of Asia are the children of God as certainly as are the people of America. Because we all come of the same parentage, we all respond in the same way to the same truths. The fact that a man's skin may be of a slightly different shade, the fact that his eyes may have a slightly different set, and the fact that he may wear a different type of clothing do not in any sense make of him a different kind of individual. Men the world over respond in the same way. They seek warmth when they are cold, they all know the same kinds of pain, they experience sadness, and they know joy. Everywhere they look to a superior power.

I remember talking to a missionary in Korea who said, "When I came here it was winter, and I had a terrible time. I felt no love for the land and could feel no love for the people. One day I was walking down the street through a storm, and I saw a woman trying to seek a little shelter next to a building. She was thin, emaciated, and hungry, and she held in her arms an emaciated and hungry baby. I heard that child cry, and I knew that these were my people."

Missionary Success Aided by the Spirit of the Lord

The Spirit of the Lord will overcome the effect of any differences in culture or other situations between a missionary and those he teaches. The Lord himself made the process clear when he asked:

Wherefore, I the Lord ask you this question—unto what were ye ordained?

To preach my gospel by the Spirit, even the Comforter which was sent forth to teach the truth. . . .

Wherefore, he that preacheth [by the Spirit] and he that receiveth [by the Spirit], understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together. [D&C 50:13–14, 22]

I am satisfied, my brethren and sisters, that the Spirit of the Lord is the means of communication available to us in crossing any bridge between us and those of the world. We have all seen it in certain missionaries; occasionally, some of us have felt it ourselves in a modest measure. On such occasions all superficial differences between us and those we teach seem to fall like scales from our eyes. A warmth of kinship and understanding emerges which is marvelous to behold. We understand one another; we are edified; we rejoice together.

Truly we are engaged in a marvelous work and a wonder. We now have some 134 missions in the Church and 23,000 missionaries in the field—and that number is constantly growing. From very small and feeble and weak beginnings we have gone over the lands of North, Central, and South America; all the lands this side of the Iron Curtain in Europe; the islands of the Pacific; and for the most part among the non-Communist nations of Asia. The results have been marvelous to behold. Regardless of the nation in which they are found, our people speak with the same voice and bear testimony of the same eternal truths with the same fervency of spirit. The cost has been terrible in terms of sacrifice, devotion, and labor, but the results are a miracle to witness.

It was my privilege and opportunity to open the missionary work in the Philippines. At 6:30 on a May morning in 1961 we met in the American military cemetery because we had no other place to meet. We sang hymns together and asked the blessings of the Lord upon that which we were about to begin. We had found one native Filipino member of the

Church. He gave us his testimony of this work on that occasion. He was the only member of record then. But when we were there last August, fourteen years later, a great area conference was held. In the vast Arenetta coliseum, beneath that great roof, there were assembled some eighteen thousand members of the Church. It *is* a miracle, and it is found in many lands, with many people.

Now even greater challenges lie ahead for the future. One cannot think of the 700 millions of mainland China, the 500 or 600 millions of the subcontinent of India, the vast populations of Russia and the Middle East without wondering how it can ever be accomplished. It will be accomplished, for the Lord has given us a mandate. If we will put forth our efforts, he will open the way. The task seems formidable, but who, fifty years ago or even twenty-five years ago, would have dared to think that in 1976 we would have eleven missions and twenty-nine stakes in the islands and lands of the South Pacific; eighteen missions and twenty-two stakes in South America; in Mexico and Central America nine missions and twenty-one stakes; in the lands of Asia fifteen missions and seven stakes? The God of heaven has brought to pass this miracle, and what we have seen is but a foretaste of greater things to come.

The work will be accomplished by humble men and women, most of them young, largely inexperienced, limited in their academic learning, who will go because they are called by the spirit of revelation. They will respond, believing in the word of the Lord, who said:

And any man that shall go and preach this gospel of the kingdom, and fail not to continue faithful in all things, shall not be weary in mind, neither darkened, neither in body, limb, nor joint; and a hair of his head shall not fall to the ground unnoticed. And they shall not go hungry, neither athirst. [D&C 84:80]

They will go, relying on the promise of the Lord, who further said:

And whoso receiveth you, there I will be also, for I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up. . . .

Let him trust in me and he shall not be confounded. [D&C 84:88, 116]

With the charge divinely given, with blessings divinely promised, we shall go forward, my brethren and sisters, and the Lord will

open the way before us. The small stone cut out of the mountain without hands will continue to roll forth until it has filled the whole earth. I give you my witness of the truth of these things. I bear you my solemn testimony that God our Eternal Father lives and that Jesus Christ stands at the head of this Church, directing this work. It is his work that we do; with his blessings we shall not fail. Notwithstanding obstacles that will be raised in our way, God help us to be true to the great and sacred trust which has been reposed in us, I humbly pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.