

“It’s a Two-Way Street”

WM. GRANT BANGERTER

I think the setting and the atmosphere here this evening has been ideal. To enjoy the sweet strains of the music that put us in the mood of meditation is appropriate for a Sunday evening fireside. To come here and greet you, the majority assembled as students of Brigham Young University and members of the various stakes that have been organized here, makes us feel the richness of our privilege. It is a real honor to be in your presence. We see great things in you reflecting out of various experiences in our own lives and we recognize the unspent strength, the vision, the power, and the great capacity that resides in you that is now budding and blossoming and will have its fulfillment in years to come.

My remarks this evening are put together on an informal basis, and I hope that they will be blessed and touched in such a way that they can be appreciated by all. Since those who leave this university will be spreading abroad among the nations and peoples of the earth, perhaps much more so than would be expected of graduates from other institutions, there will come a need to know how to relate to those who have differences in beliefs. A principle in all human relations is to know how to interpret ourselves to other people and to help them understand and appreciate us. This is both

possible and necessary, even when we do not have complete agreement in beliefs and philosophies.

Be Prepared for Reality

It will soon become apparent, if you have not discovered it already, that everyone in the world does not look with favor upon the LDS Church. Thinking realistically, this Church and its people are still thought of as among the least desirable of religions. In fact, among certain groups, we are considered a representation of the powers of evil; there are those in the world who consider that it would be a service to God if we could be eliminated as a religion.

Quoting from the scriptures:

They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. [John 16:2]

There are, of course, many people of sound understanding who do recognize that true

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Latter-day Saints are choice people of worth and substance, having characteristics that are worthy of emulation and who represent a powerful force for good in the social order of the world. We usually seem to have an expectation that those in the world around us will look up to us in appreciation of our unity and organization, our high moral and ethical standards, our achievements in solving the social problems, and our vision of the worth of humanity.

To be realistic, however, we need to be prepared for reality and learn how to deal with it. Our people have always been subject to intense criticism, to ridicule, and to overt persecution. It was emphatically true in the days of Joseph Smith. It was true during my childhood. It is true today and we may anticipate that direct opposition will continue in the future.

How, then, do we deal with this condition? How can we explain ourselves? How can we respond effectively to the voices of opposition, ridicule, and even hatred? What answers do we have? I want you to know that there are sound and appropriate responses. They can be both effective and powerful in gaining better understanding and, ultimately, in converting others to the truth we represent. We are not interested only in having others like us—our great purpose is to help them understand God’s revealed plan and then to embrace it.

Respecting Those of Other Religions

I had a few reflections as President Hinckley was greeting a group of ministers during the open house in the Jordan River Temple several years ago. After he had welcomed them as our guests and expressed the appreciation we have for their service in bringing their people to righteousness, he invited their questions. Two or three in the group, forgetting their manners as guests in a warm and friendly situation, asked some cutting and antagonistic questions. Central to their criticism was a demand for President Hinckley to justify the declaration mentioned in Joseph

Smith’s testimony, as he beheld the Father and the Son, that those professors of religion were all corrupt. President Hinckley responded that he did not say that.

As I have pondered the same question, I wonder: Do we believe that all ministers of other churches are corrupt? Of course not. Joseph Smith certainly did not intend that. By reading the passage carefully, we find that the Lord Jesus Christ was referring to those ministers who were quarreling and arguing about which church was true—that is, the particular group with which Joseph Smith was involved. They were drawing (the Savior said it, not Joseph Smith) “near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof” (JS–H 1:19).

It is clearly apparent that there have been and now are many choice, honorable, and devoted men and women going in the direction of their eternal salvation who give righteous and conscientious leadership to their congregations in other churches. Joseph Smith evidently had many warm and friendly contacts with ministers of other religions. Quite a few of them joined the Church: Sidney Rigdon, John Taylor, Parley P. Pratt, and others in America and England. Some of them who carried the Christian attitude of tolerance did not join the Church. There are many others like them today.

It is a fact, however, that Joseph Smith was roughly handled by the members and ministers of various prominent religions, who tarred and feathered him, took up arms against him and his people, imprisoned him, and finally instigated his murder and martyrdom. Some of them still follow a similar course of ridicule and active antagonism. This condition must not warp our own understanding and conduct.

Are ministers of other churches inspired of God? Of course they are if they are righteous and sincere. Do they accomplish good? Certainly. In his journal, Wilford Woodruff

records this incident before he ever heard about the Church.

The people of Connecticut in those days thought it wicked to believe in any religion, or belong to any church, except the Presbyterian. They did not believe in having any prophets, apostles, or revelations, as they had in the days of Jesus, and as we now have in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

There was an aged man in Connecticut, however, by the name of Robert Mason, who did not believe like the rest of the people. He believed it was necessary to have prophets, apostles, dreams, visions and revelations in the church of Christ, the same as they had who lived in ancient days; and he believed the Lord would raise up a people and a church, in the last days, with prophets, apostles, and all the gifts, powers and blessings, which it ever contained in any age of the world.

The people called this man, the old prophet Mason. . . .

*This prophet prayed a great deal, and he had dreams and visions, and the Lord showed him many things, by visions, which were to come to pass in the last days. [Wilford Woodruff, *Leaves from My Journal* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1882), pp. 1–2]*

Can ministers of other churches call forth blessings from God upon their people? Most assuredly they can and do. We revere the effort and service of such great men as John and Charles Wesley in the forefront of the Methodist movement, Martin Luther, John Huss, John Wycliffe, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and many others who were moved upon by the Spirit of God to bring light and truth to a world in spiritual darkness.

We know from chapter 13 in 1 Nephi that Columbus was touched by God’s power to accomplish a work of discovery to which he was foreordained and prepared. A fundamental point in our doctrine is that “for this purpose,” said the Lord, “have I estab-

lished the Constitution of this land, by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose” (D&C 101:80). And the Lord did all this before the days of Joseph Smith.

Does the Spirit of God bless people who are not members of the Church? Of course, when they seek him in faith and righteousness. “For,” as our doctrine states, “the word of the Lord is truth, and whatsoever is truth is light, and whatsoever is light is Spirit, even the Spirit of Jesus Christ. And the Spirit giveth light to *every man* that cometh into the world; and the Spirit enlighteneth every man through the world, that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit” (D&C 84:45–46; emphasis added). Does the Lord answer prayers of nonmembers? Millions have given testimony that he does.

It is instructive for us to remember, however, that the history of religion has been controversy. Differences in religion have brought forth as many evils as have differences in politics. Acting, as they have often declared, in the name of God, religious proponents have killed the Savior and many of his prophets and apostles, tortured and martyred the Christians, conquered and destroyed nations in the name of Mohammed by the sword, fought the bloody wars of the Reformation.

It is said that by 1648 at the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years War between the Catholics and Protestants, Germany was a wasteland and that no more than half of her people survived. In the name of religion, and invoking the name of God, priests and ministers launched the Catholic Inquisition against heretics—meaning those who did not accept the leadership of the church in Rome.

The story of religion, which should be the good news, the glad tidings of great joy and peace, has often been a horror story of hatred, torture, persecution, war, and holocaust. From the pages of the Old Testament, the Book of Mormon, as well as from secular history, we find that mankind has not changed very much

in the way he justifies his ungodly actions in the name of religion.

From his second inaugural address we have these wise observations of Abraham Lincoln on the attitudes of people during the American Civil War.

Both [the peoples of the North and South] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other. . . . The prayers of both could not be answered—that of neither has been answered fully.

The Almighty has his own purposes. [Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years—IV*, vol. 6 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), p. 92]

An acceptable standard of conduct in our social order is typified in the description of General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson, an upright and very religious man. “Jackson’s reverence for the Sabbath went so far,” it is said, “that he would not mail his wife a letter to be carried in the mails on a Sunday. Nor would he open a letter received from her on a Sunday. But, with the blessing of an ever kind Providence, as he put it, he would fight, slay, and deliver doom to the enemy if on a Sabbath the enemy looked ready for punishment.” Thus we justify what we do in our religion.

“It’s a Two-Way Street”

So how, finally, can we relate to people who are filled with bitterness and antagonism or who consider Mormons to be a weird sect, who call us a cult, who claim we are not Christian, who point to tragic episodes such as the Mountain Meadows Massacre or to apostate offshoots such as polygamist fundamentalists which have given rise to horror incidents in our own time?

I had an interesting experience many years ago as we returned from our mission in Brazil. We traveled on a ship with nine children, and the ship carried about forty passengers, so we

almost formed a majority. It turned out that there were three other ministers on board, and within a few days each of those three approached me and inquired how we could get together and visit about what the Mormons believe. They didn’t seem to be unusually interested in what each other believed, but they all wanted to know what we believe.

With a little hesitation, because my experience had not been that of having contact with ministers of other faiths, we arranged an interview where all four of us sat down together. It turned out to be very congenial and consisted primarily of them asking questions and me giving the answers. I had supposed that they would come out with strong arguments supported by scriptures that would make it difficult for me to hold my own. But in their friendly, congenial way they just asked questions and it turned out that I knew the answer to each question. I didn’t realize beforehand that I was that well informed.

Within a few minutes, as we visited, they began to turn to each other and make comments like this: “Isn’t it interesting? He has an answer for any question you can ask.” They repeated that comment over and over again, and we ended our discussion on a very friendly basis. One of these men, however, two or three days later, engaged me in conversation and said, “I have been thinking of what you told us the other day and I wonder if it is right to know everything. I think maybe you know too much. I don’t believe the Lord wants us to know it all.” I could tell that he was offended. A day or two later he spoke to me again. He said, “I’ve been considering what you told me, and I have come to the conclusion that what you teach is a very dangerous heresy.”

I wasn’t prepared, as I ought to have been, for that kind of a comment, and with something of a hurt feeling I asked him why it was that other religions didn’t seem willing to place the Latter-day Saints in the same fellowship with themselves. He turned on me almost in

anger and said, "Because I want you to know it is a two-way street." Then I caught the point. We do not fellowship them. We do not recognize them as the true church of Jesus Christ, and therefore there is offense to them in some things we teach. I don't think it should be otherwise, but he had reason for the feelings that he carried. I wasn't in a position, being unprepared, to conciliate his feelings.

What Can We Do?

What can we do in the various circumstances that bring us in contact with other people to build friendship and understanding, even appreciation and eventual acceptance of the principles that we teach?

First of all, don't act like they do. Do you get what I mean? If they are critical and antagonistic toward us, we must not respond in the same way. Over the years, in association with many missionaries, I've learned that missionaries often build up a jargon. Some are worse than others, but they have phrases that have deep meaning. In our case, being in a Latin country, whenever one of our missionaries would pass a Catholic church he would call it a "G.A. church," which some of you would understand means "great and abominable." The priests of that church were called *padres*. So the missionaries would call them the "PDs,"

To me that became offensive. I'm sure it would have been offensive to the members of that church. It wasn't Christian to make that kind of derogatory comment, regardless of what we might believe. Those people have very sincere and deep-founded beliefs and traditions.

I remember forty-six or so years ago when I was entering my first city of labor in southern Brazil, and our companions were showing us the way to our residence. We were riding the streetcar from the center of town, and they said, "We'll show you when to get off the streetcar." In those days all of the men in Brazil wore hats. So we were told, "When you see the men take their hats off the second time, you are

to get off at the next stop." What that meant was that the streetcar passed two churches. As it passed the churches, the men, out of respect, would lift their hats.

President Kimball told a story that is appropriate for this subject. He commented on a member of the Church, a woman who had been to the temple, who went to the hospital for some special treatment. She wasn't really ill, but he said when she got there she could hardly wait to remove her garments and put on her fancy negligee and lie there in what she felt was solid comfort, it being a hot day. It was a Catholic hospital, and soon one of the sisters of the Catholic church came into her room. This member of our Church said to her unthinkingly, "I don't see how you stand to wear that closed, tight, heavy clothing that you are wearing." You can all imagine how this Catholic sister might have been dressed. The Catholic lady turned to our sister and said, "Woman, I want you to know it is an honor to wear these clothes for Jesus Christ." What a lesson she taught! It ought to be a lesson to all of us to appreciate and understand other people.

Where are our manners when we think of other people who do not use good manners? The direction for Latter-day Saints is clearly spoken of in this scripture:

But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;

That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven. [Matthew 5:39, 43-45]

So don't act like they do.

Second, don't get mad. Uncontrolled anger distorts reason and cancels out wisdom. All of

us are susceptible to rising anger, but before we act we can put ourselves under control. I have often thought how low the boiling point is in a young missionary's blood when he sees something that doesn't seem to be complimentary to him or his religion. I remember serving as a young missionary when we first heard of Fawn Brodie's book *No Man Knows My History* about the Prophet Joseph Smith. As we read that book, I could feel the surge of anger and the hot blood rising in my body. We would comment to each other as we read it, "Just wait; she'll get her reward."

Remember, we can also give offense to others. Our doctrine is offensive to some people, as I remarked about the minister I met on the ship. There have been heated arguments about religion between all churches. There are ways to overcome it. Back again to the years in Brazil. Our elders in one city found that a Protestant minister had begun publishing and distributing derogatory pamphlets against the Church. It was information that would not have been accepted in the United States, because generally we have been too well known for people to believe those ridiculous stories. But the people in Brazil who read that began to get an adverse opinion about the Church, and the elders wanted to go out and do something about it.

I suggested they take a copy of the pamphlet with them and go call on the minister if they could find him. They did find him, and they said to him, after some preparation, "Are you responsible for the publication of this material?" He responded rather evasively and embarrassed. They said, "We would just like you to know that we are the representatives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and that this material is not true. This is not what we believe. We thought we should tell you that we don't appreciate having this kind of falsehood distributed about us, but we also wish to tell you that when we find people who have read it, it is easy for us to tell them the

true state of affairs, and then, of course, they get an adverse opinion about you. If you feel, therefore, that you must publish this sort of thing, go right ahead; it really doesn't hurt us that much. In many ways it helps us. But we, of course, would prefer that you don't do it." That would usually stop the process.

On another occasion two of our elders, rather young and inexperienced, had gone to a new city to open up the work. The city was almost totally Catholic and was reportedly under the domination of the Catholic bishop who resided there. As these elders went about their work, making contacts and becoming acquainted, people frequently said to them, "Does the bishop know you are here?"

They would answer, "We don't know."

"Well, it will be interesting to see what happens when he finds out you are here."

So they were "walking on eggs," so to speak, as they went about their work, wondering when the ax would fall, supposing that a powerful influence might be brought against them. One day the blow fell. A priest came to their lodging and delivered a letter. It said in substance, "We would like to know by what authority you come into this community and teach your doctrine without having first cleared it with the bishop of this area.

Therefore, we ask you, to appear at a special meeting that will be held at a certain place and time in the central Catholic church."

The elders called mission headquarters.

"President, what will we do? Can you come up and help us?"

I answered, "No, I can't come, but they have offered you an invitation to explain what we believe. That is what you are looking for, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, but how do we handle this situation?"

I said, "I'll have my assistant come and join you. Accept the invitation, but do it on two conditions. You may say, 'We'll be glad to come if we are treated with courtesy and if you will

assure us the opportunity to explain what we believe.’”

Then my assistant and I worked out a procedure concerning what they might talk about.

In the meeting, the priest in charge, without any formality, stood up and said, “These two young men are here teaching their religion and we have called you together to hear an explanation of their doctrine.” There were two or three hundred people present representing the influential people of the city. The elders were given a wide-open opportunity.

They stood up and spoke of the Apostasy, the Restoration, the need for the gospel to be restored, and then told of the Book of Mormon. Then, as they said, “Now if you people will read this Book of Mormon and pray about it, the Lord will give you a testimony,” a priest in the rear of the hall jumped up and said, “Oh, no, no, no. None of you can read that book.” Everyone laughed when he said that. So the opposition was overcome. There was no problem except that after the meeting a Seventh-day Adventist present got into an argument with one of the priests while our elders had several very pleasant conversations. From then on they had no ripples in their proselyting in that city. So don’t get mad.

Third, don’t argue. Argument is a dumb way to arrive at an understanding. It never works. I listened to President Harold Wright, recently released as president of the Mesa Temple in Arizona. He served over the years as stake president and Regional Representative, and has had many contacts with nonmembers and their religious associations in his city. He said that for years he would go to general conference and notice those people outside Temple Square passing out anti-Mormon literature. What do you do when you see that literature? Do you shut your eyes and wave them by and make sure they know you are not going to take it? Or do you accept it? President Wright noticed one man in particular who seemed to be there every time. He began to visit with

him and found that he was a minister from Los Angeles. They began to be friends and President Wright talked to him every time he came to conference. One day he said to this man, “Have you ever attended a session of general conference here?”

The man said, “No, I haven’t.”

President Wright asked, “Would you like to go in?”

The man answered, “I would very much like to go in.”

So he took the minister in and they sat through the session. President Wright said his friend felt an influence that he had never felt before in his life, and he commented on it repeatedly. As far as I know, he didn’t join the Church, but what a beautiful approach to talk to someone with a difference of opinion.

Fourth, recognize your opportunity. When you meet people who have adverse feelings about the Church, it can be a great moment. We taught our missionaries how to handle rejection. One particular circumstance would be that after they had had two or three friendly visits with a family, the father would meet them at the door and say, “We’ve decided not to discuss religion with you anymore.” Now most of you who have been on missions know that is a great disappointment.

We taught our elders to think of it as a moment of great opportunity where they could say certain things that would help them maintain their contact. They might say, “Oh, we are sorry that you have decided not to study with us anymore because we have enjoyed visiting with you and you have been very warm and friendly to us. We want you to know that we appreciate it.” The father then has to say something nice in return.

Then the elders would say, “Well, we certainly won’t force our religion on you, but could we have just a moment to step in and leave a greeting with your family? We won’t impose on you.” The man has to invite them in then.

Now the elders don't try to force another discussion, but they might say: "You have been very kind to us and we appreciate it. Before we leave, however, we need to tell you, because of our calling, what the gospel means to us." Then they explain why they believe the way they do.

"Do you remember when Joseph Smith knelt by his bedside and asked the Lord to tell him if he loved him or not and the angel appeared? The angel said, 'Joseph, I have come to you from the presence of God and he has a mission for you to perform by which your name will be known for good or evil among all men.' What did Joseph say to the angel?" (See JS-H 1:33.)

They would answer, "I guess he said 'all right.'"

"Yes, he did. He didn't say, 'Wait a minute, Mr. Angel. I didn't want to go on a mission. I just wanted to know if the Lord loved me.' You can't do that to an angel, can you? So we have to tell you that someday we will stand before God and he will ask you why you didn't listen to his message. We don't know what you will say, but we think you should not refuse the gospel until after you have knelt down and asked the Lord what he wants you to do? Will you do that?"

Many people join the Church who have decided not to hear anymore about it. It is an opportunity if you are prepared and know how to handle it. One of our elders said that he was not a member of the Church when he began dating an LDS girl. One of his first comments was "What's a nice girl like you doing by being a member of the Mormon church?" She asked him what he knew about the Church. He answered, "Well, not much."

She said, "That's kind of a stupid thing for you to say, then, if you don't know anything about it." So, because he liked the girl, he had to study it out. Partly because of her and partly because of what he learned, he joined the Church. Recognize your opportunity.

Fifth, be prepared. Plan ahead in knowing what to say. I think often of Brother Herschel

Pedersen, who was a basketball star here many years ago. He works at Geneva Steel. He said he was eating his lunch and reading his scriptures one day while he was on the job and a very rough individual looked in the door and said, "Oh, you're reading that stuff, are you?"

Brother Pedersen said, "Yes. What do you know about these books, anyway?"

The man said, "I know all about them."

"Oh, do you?" asked Brother Pedersen.

"Tell me, then, when the Savior comes again what color will his clothes be?"

The man said, "That's easy, They'll be white."

Brother Pedersen said, "That's not what it says in here."

"Oh, what color will they be?"

"Why don't you try to find out?"

Brother Pedersen wouldn't tell him. A week or two later he came back ready for further discussion. After some time, he said one day, "Tell me, do you think there is ever any hope for a guy like me?"

You might think of asking questions you have worked out ahead of time. What would a person who doesn't belong to the Church make of the scripture in Isaiah 2?

It shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. [Isaiah 2:2]

Now all of you know what that means. It focuses your mind on the picture of the Salt Lake Temple. But if you weren't a member of the Church, what would you make of it? You wouldn't know. You can ask that question. You might ask them to explain to you what the Savior meant in the tenth chapter of the book of John:

And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd. [John 10:16]

If you weren't a member of this Church, that would be a mystery, wouldn't it? You could ask somebody to explain that. Remember, you have the answers. You were not sent forth to be taught, but to teach.

Sixth, don't spare your testimony. If you don't know the answers, bear your testimony anyway. Maybe they won't believe it, but they will know that you are sincere.

Seventh, live your religion. How valuable that is in the life of every Latter-day Saint. That is true here at Brigham Young University in particular. Get into the pattern of living your religion so that other people will recognize you for what we stand for. If you don't live your religion, they will quickly recognize you for what you are, a vivid example of that "despised" LDS Church. It is always required of Latter-day Saints to be faithful. It says in the thirteenth article of faith, "We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men" and so forth. Don't ever fail and that influence will be felt by countless thousands over the face of the earth.

Many years ago now, when I served in the armed forces, I think I never had a close non-Mormon companion who didn't know that I was a member of the Church and who didn't know I had been a missionary. They saw that I wore the garments. Once in a while they would ask where I got the fancy underwear. I would say it was my religion. They would say, "Oh, oh, pardon me. Sorry I asked," They treated me with the utmost respect and admired my standards. I don't believe that I ever gave offense to the Church with any of those numerous companions in those years that I served.

One of those companions joined the Church. I didn't preach a word to him about the gospel. Somebody else found him and taught him, but I suppose he remembered a young fellow named Bangerter who was a Mormon and could remember the way I lived. I hope so.

We Do Not Apologize

Now, our true position—realizing that other churches don't always appreciate what we believe. Even though we do not believe the way they do, we stand firmly on the things that have been revealed to us. We do not apologize that we do not have the same doctrines and principles that other churches have. We can talk about it in a warm and friendly way but we do not apologize. We didn't initiate this restoration. God did. If others do not appreciate it, we nevertheless know it is the truth.

Some people don't want the gospel to be restored. Some people are offended that there might be prophets and apostles. Some people hate the thought that God would actually speak out of heaven again. I don't know why, but I suppose from the traditions of their fathers they have built up those attitudes to the point where it is offensive.

Nevertheless, we know what God has revealed to us—that in the last days he has brought forth the fullness of his everlasting gospel that will prepare mankind to return into the presence of God and to be exalted in his celestial kingdom. Latter-day Saints understand that. They must be true to that vision. Our testimony says that God lives, that Jesus is in reality the Savior and the Redeemer, that Joseph Smith was called as the instrument of God to bring forth the Restoration in the last days. Among the most marvelous accomplishments that he brought forth was the Book of Mormon. Something else that cannot be understood or explained other than on the basis of spiritual testimony is that the apostles and prophets exist in the Church today and that President Kimball is the Lord's representative and holds the keys of his authority to teach us the way we should go. All of this I know to be true as the Lord has revealed it to me through his Spirit. To that I testify in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.