

Insights on Church Leadership

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Love Unfeigned

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught under inspiration that the righteous exercise of power or influence by virtue of the priesthood can be achieved only through the fulfillment of certain requirements¹, and love unfeigned was one of them. Now, what is this love? How is it manifested? The adjective "unfeigned" means "sincere; genuine," suggesting that it is not enough just to say that we have love for each other; we must also feel that love and express it in a manner appropriate to our circumstances.

The scriptures provide great examples of this type of love. The greatest of all was given by the Savior. His atoning sacrifice is incomparable; no mortal person will ever match the magnitude of the love demonstrated by Jesus when he, by his own free will, suffered the infinite agony caused by the penalty for our sins. His sinless life and his acts of service (preachings, healings, etc.) are also incomparable because they were performed perfectly. And yet, even though we, as mortals, cannot match the perfect and infinite love Christ had towards his children, we can ask the Lord through the prayer of faith to help us develop this feeling; our part of the partnership² will require us to strive to emulate those acts performed by the Lord.

Both Paul and Mormon described the way Christ expresses his love for his people. Both taught, and Mormon specifically clarified, that "the pure love of Christ" is called charity³. Mormon's words also imply that charity is a spiritual gift. He taught: "... pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he has bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ ...⁴". Mormon's use of the words "... love, which [the Father] has bestowed ..." suggests something greater than a simple process of internal development of this love; he clearly says that this love comes from on high, from the Father. His use of the words "... all energy of heart ..." suggests to my mind that "prayer of faith" that we have already discussed.

¹ D&C 121:41

² See chapter 2 for a discussion on the prayer of faith as a partnership between the Lord and us.

³ Moroni 7:47

⁴ Moroni 7:48

Acquiring Love

Just like the process of developing faith explained by Alma⁵, acquiring love unfeigned (or charity) starts with a desire⁶ to have it, and Mormon gave us a very good reason to have this desire: "... if ye have not charity, ye are nothing, for charity never faileth. ... cleave unto charity ... for all things must fail--But charity ... endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him."⁷

Our desire to acquire this love will lead us to receive a manifestation from the Lord--a testimony, if you will--that our desire is acceptable before him⁸. The next step is to emulate the actions that will make this desire become a reality⁹. The actions to be emulated are those we learned from the Lord and from his prophets. Then, the Spirit of the Lord will "solidify" those actions in us, so that they will become a natural part of our character¹⁰. At this point those actions will have become "genuine" or "unfeigned." We will then be performing those actions because we will savor that "sweet feeling" that comes every time we perform acts of service towards others without any concern with potential rewards.

This process should not to be confused with deceit. Deceit occurs when someone emulates qualities to cheat or manipulate others, motivated solely by self-interest. When we develop godly virtues, we start with emulation to obey the Lord's will. By and by we begin to experience the sweet fruits of that "seed" we planted; and if we use our free agency correctly by deciding to remain that way, thus incorporating those virtues into our character, we will be giving glory to our Heavenly Father¹¹.

Both Paul and Mormon wrote about the outcomes of charity, or the pure love of Christ. I will not explain their writings, since many authors have already done that. But I still want to emphasize three effects of this pure love that I believe are most significant for church leaders, since they are closely related with the duties to be performed in our callings: compassion, forgiveness, and patience. Without these three qualities we may find ourselves not satisfying the needs and at times even inflicting pain on our brothers and sisters, children of our Heavenly Father whom we have been called to serve.

Compassion Leading to Miracles

Compassion, as exemplified by the Lord Jesus Christ implies not only a feeling of pity, but a drive to act promptly using the priesthood and the gifts of the Spirit to bless and comfort those in need. In the scriptures we find the following events related to the Lord's compassion:

"And Jesus went forth, and saw a great multitude, and was moved with compassion toward them, and he healed their sick."¹²

⁵ Alma 32:28-43

⁶ Alma 32:27

⁷ Moroni 7:46-47

⁸ Alma 32:28-30,33-36

⁹ Alma 32:37-39

¹⁰ Alma 32:41-43

¹¹ Matthew 5:16; Moses 1:39

¹² Matthew 14:14

"And Jesus ... saw much people, and was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd: and he began to teach them many things. And when the day was now far spent, his disciples came unto him, and said, This is a desert place ... Send them away, that they may go into the country round about, and into the villages, and buy themselves bread: for they have nothing to eat. He answered and said unto them, Give ye them to eat. ...¹³"

"Then Jesus called his disciples unto him, and said, I have compassion on the multitude, because they continue with me now three days, and have nothing to eat: and I will not send them away fasting, lest they faint in the way. ... And he took the seven loaves and the fishes, and gave thanks, and brake them, and gave to his disciples, and the disciples to the multitude ... four thousand men, beside women and children.¹⁴"

From these scriptures we see that compassion must be one of the motives behind the use of the power of the priesthood. But far from simple pity--that may produce a feeling of powerlessness--compassion, as exemplified by the Lord, can lead us to understand the current needs of those under our responsibility, to conceive solutions to satisfy those needs, and to use the authority we have received to implement those solutions.

In the scriptures we just read, the Lord healed those afflicted with diseases; he understood and cared for the temporal needs of those who followed him; he also preached the "... pleasing word of God ... the word which healeth the wounded soul¹⁵" to those who had no one to reveal to them the joy of their redemption¹⁶ and the hope of returning to the presence of their Heavenly Father. In two occasions he fed the multitude, or stating in another way, he assumed the responsibility for the welfare of those persons who probably had abandoned their daily tasks (and who might even have lost their wages on those days) to listen to his preaching.

Evidently, we should not forget that the use of the priesthood to bless others is based on our personal righteousness and faith; since none of us is yet perfect in deeds or in faith, the Lord's grace is another element upon which the use of the priesthood is based. In His ministry among those Nephites and Lamanites who were righteous enough to behold his presence¹⁷, the Lord made that fact clear:

"And he said unto them: Behold, my bowels are filled with compassion towards you. Have ye any that are sick among you? ... Bring them hither and I will heal them, for I have compassion upon you; my bowels are filled with mercy. ... for I see that your faith is sufficient that I should heal you.¹⁸"

¹³ Mark 6:34-37

¹⁴ Matthew 15:32,36,38

¹⁵ Jacob 2:8

¹⁶ Moses 5:10-12

¹⁷ 3 Nephi 9:13

¹⁸ 3 Nephi 17:6-8

Forgiveness: An Exercise in Godliness

While serving in leadership callings we should never act as taskmasters or executioners. Forgiveness is one of the channels through which charity operates. In the scriptures we find the Lord saying this: "... he who has repented of his sins the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more."¹⁹ Now, if the Lord Almighty does not remember past sins of which we (or others) have repented, why should *we* remember them? If he who is perfect and has all power to create worlds without number and govern them all forgives our sins and forgets them, who are we, imperfect mortal creatures to dare to say that we will not forgive our brothers and sisters--or even ourselves?

By saying that we can't forgive we may be, in a certain way, denying the power of Christ's atonement; we may be saying that we don't believe in the gifts of repentance and remission of sins. Unforgiveness can be another way to express the false doctrine that says that man is and will forever be evil; we may be denying others the opportunity to change--as if we had the power to revoke a God-given law.

President Spencer W. Kimball taught that unforgiveness is sin: "The lesson stands for us today. Many people, when brought to a reconciliation with others, say that they forgive, but they continue to hold malice, continue to suspect the other party, continue to disbelieve the other's sincerity. This is sin, for when a reconciliation has been effected and when repentance is claimed, each should forgive and forget, build immediately the fences which have been breached, and restore the former compatibility."²⁰

Some may argue that God can forget past sins because he has all power, and that since we are mortals we are not able to do it as he does. In response we can say that although we will never forget so completely as he does, we can still do a lot in that regard, by not allowing mistrust and prejudice to influence our future relations with the repentant individuals. The important point here is that forgetting past sins requires an increased power of mind, increased self-control. Since we will have to exercise and increase our own power, in the process we may become more similar to our Father in Heaven, and acquire a measure of one of his divine powers--the power to forgive.

Forgiving Those Who Apostatize

In our administration of quorums, organizations, wards or stakes, we should keep in mind that whatever wrong actions our brothers and sisters have performed in the past must be completely forgotten as soon as they have truly repented of those actions. We should also receive them not with accusations, but with open arms, in true love.

The Prophet Joseph Smith provided a good example when he received brother William W. Phelps back into the church. Brother Phelps had been accessory in one event that brought a great deal of suffering to the saints, and was excommunicated in 1839. He later repented and in 1841 asked to be readmitted into the church. The words the Prophet wrote him in reply were a model to be followed:

"You may in some measure realize what my feelings, as well as Elder Rigdon's and Brother Hyrum's were, when we read your letter--truly our hearts were melted into tenderness and compassion when we ascertained your resolves. I can assure you I feel a disposition to act on your case in a manner that will meet the approbation of Jehovah, (whose servant I am), and

¹⁹ D&C 58:42

²⁰ The Miracle of Forgiveness, p.284. See also Amos 1:11, where the Lord implies that unforgiveness is a transgression. In chapter 17 I will quote President Heber J. Grant's account of an experience he had with President John Taylor that illustrates this principle.

agreeable to the principles of truth and righteousness which have been revealed; and inasmuch as long-suffering, patience, and mercy have ever characterized the dealings of our heavenly Father towards the humble and patient, I feel disposed to copy the example, cherish the same principles, and by so doing be a savior of my fellow men. ... It is true, that we have suffered much in consequence of your behavior--the cup of gall, already full enough for mortals to drink, was indeed filled to overflowing when you turned against us. ... Believing your confession to be real, and your repentance genuine, I shall be happy once again to give you the right hand of fellowship, and rejoice over the returning prodigal.²¹"

Elder Phelps was restored to full fellowship in the church, and later served as a special messenger of the Prophet Joseph Smith to the Governor of the state of Illinois and to other state officials²².

Forgiving Those Who Repeat the Same Sins

We occasionally may feel frustrated when some individuals under our responsibility consistently make the same mistakes, or deliberately procrastinate their repentance. In such cases some have resorted to the following passage to justify actions against them: "They were slow to hearken unto the voice of the Lord their God; therefore, the Lord their God is slow to hearken unto their prayers, to answer them in the day of their trouble. In the day of their peace they esteemed lightly my counsel; but, in the day of their trouble, of necessity they feel after me."²³ But in their concern (and sometimes haste) to execute judgment, they forget to read the next verse in the same section of the Doctrine and Covenants, where the Lord says: "Verily I say unto you, notwithstanding their sins, my bowels are filled with compassion towards them. I will not utterly cast them off; and in the day of wrath I will remember mercy."²⁴

Later, in that same revelation, the Lord commanded us to do something completely different than to condemn the sinner: "Pray ye, therefore, that their ears may be opened unto your cries, that I may be merciful unto them, that these things may not come upon them."²⁵ Above all, we must remember that the Lord commanded the following: "Wherefore, I say unto you, that ye ought to forgive one another; for he that forgiveth not his brother his trespasses standeth condemned before the Lord; for there remaineth in him the greater sin. I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men. And ye ought to say in your hearts--let God judge between me and thee, and reward thee according to thy deeds."²⁶

When we have unfeigned, or genuine love for our fellow beings, we will only want to bless them. We have been called to bring souls unto Christ²⁷. However, because of free agency²⁸ some individuals will come unto Christ faster than others. As far as our responsibilities are concerned, what really matters is to see that those under our care do come unto Christ, or to see that they at least keep looking and moving towards Christ.

²¹ TPJS, p.165, July 22, 1840

²² Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia, 3:692

²³ D&C 101:7-9

²⁴ D&C 101:9

²⁵ D&C 101:92

²⁶ D&C 64:9-11

²⁷ D&C 15:6

²⁸ D&C 93:30-31

Forgiving Those Who Oppose the Church

Another good example of the principle of forgiveness can be found in the prayer offered at the dedication of the Kirtland temple. Instead of asking the Lord to bring "fire and brimstone" upon those who were engaged in spreading false rumors against the church, the prophet Joseph Smith only asked that they be confounded, astonished and ashamed--if they did not repent--and that the effect of their works be nullified. The Prophet wrote this:

"We ask thee, Holy Father, to confound, and astonish, and to bring to shame and confusion, all those who have spread lying reports abroad, over the world, against thy servant or servants, if they will not repent, when the everlasting gospel shall be proclaimed in their ears; And that all their works may be brought to naught ... that there may be an end to lyings and slanders against thy people.²⁹"

Concerning those who do not know the gospel, the Prophet asked the Lord to spare them for a while:

"And whatsoever city thy servants shall enter, and the people of that city receive their testimony, let thy peace and thy salvation be upon that city; that they may gather out of that city the righteous, that they may come forth to Zion, or to her stakes, the places of thine appointment, with songs of everlasting joy; And until this be accomplished, let not thy judgments fall upon that city. And whatsoever city thy servants shall enter, and the people of that city receive not the testimony of thy servants, and thy servants warn them to save themselves from this untoward generation, let it be upon that city according to that which thou hast spoken by the mouths of thy prophets.³⁰"

The reason for these requests was explained as follows: "O Lord, we delight not in the destruction of our fellow men; their souls are precious before thee³¹". Even those who violently harassed the saints received a word asking for mercy if they would repent:

"Have mercy, O Lord, upon the wicked mob, who have driven thy people, that they may cease to spoil, that they may repent of their sins if repentance is to be found; But if they will not, make bare thine arm, O Lord, ... may thine anger be kindled, and thine indignation fall upon them ... But inasmuch as they will repent, thou art gracious and merciful, and wilt turn away thy wrath when thou lookest upon the face of thine Anointed.³²"

Persecution has been a heritage of the saints in any dispensation of the gospel, and it is not different in our days. However, we have been commanded to love our enemies and pray for them³³; therefore, we will not respond to them in a violent manner. We will seek whatever protection is available under the law of our countries, and if that is not available then we can be sure that the Lord himself will fight

²⁹ D&C 109:29-30

³⁰ D&C 109:39-41

³¹ D&C 109:43

³² D&C 109:50-53

³³ Matthew 5:44-45

for us³⁴. And when that day comes we will not rejoice over the defeat of those who consider themselves as our enemies because they will still be our brothers and sisters, precious children of our Heavenly Father³⁵.

Forgiving Those who Fail in Their Callings

All service rendered in the Church of Christ is voluntary. We can very appropriately consider service in the kingdom as an offering to God. As such, one engage in hasty judgments of others' performances. Those who serve in any capacity in the church are offering something of themselves to the Lord. President Ezra Taft Benson taught: "This is the Lord's organization through which we operate. We are dealing with voluntary workers--our Father's children whom He loves, regardless of their mistakes and weaknesses. There must be no force, coercion, or intimidation in our delegation."³⁶

As leaders, especially while serving as members of presidencies, we should have in mind that when persons fail in their assignments they are letting the Lord down, not us; we should not take their actions personally.

Let me share another idea about this matter. First, let us consider that "failure" can be a subjective concept. What can be considered as a failing performance from one person, can also be considered a major accomplishment when made by another³⁷. We must improve our individual performance continually, but always remember that judging others' performance according to our personal measure is not part of our callings. Instead of doing so, we would better judge our own performances as trainers of those we are serving with as presidencies, as President Spencer W. Kimball suggested:

"Unlike the world, when we supervise, it should not be out of a need for status or need to control, but out of the desire to serve others and to help them in a way that increases their righteous capacity. Too often in the past we have called individuals, giving them little or no orientation and little or no supervision. We must begin to do otherwise, if we desire to lengthen our stride in the management of the kingdom at all levels of its operation. ... This means each of us must be more willing to expend more of our time, talent, and means in providing leadership training in the broadest sense of that concept.

... A prudent leader will not complain at the weakness or the inefficiency or the lack of interest of those with whom he works until he is certain that he has presented the program fully, concisely, thoroughly, and understandably, and that he has followed through to keep the matter fresh in their minds, being sure that they understand the program and go forward. He should evaluate his performance before he criticizes others in theirs. His success will be measured not by his brilliance, nor by how much he knows about the program, but by how well he can transmit the knowledge and enthusiasm to others. When one person speaks the people say, 'How eloquent,' but when another finishes speaking, they say, 'Come, let us march.' We who pretend leadership must set on fire those whom we would lead.³⁸"

³⁴ D&C 105:14

³⁵ In Obadiah 1:10,12-13 the Lord chastises the Edomites because they rejoiced in the downfall of Judah. And in D&C 76:26 we learn that when Lucifer was thrust down after rebelling against God, "the heavens wept over him."

³⁶ Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson, p.379

³⁷ See chapter 6 for further ideas on the nature of perfection.

³⁸ Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, p.485-486. October 18, 1967.

Interceding in Favor of the People

Moses offered an excellent example of how we should deal with the Lord in regard to the people we have been called to serve. Once again referring to the occasion when the people failed in their devotion to the Lord by building a molten calf, Moses said:

"And I fell down before the Lord, as at the first, forty days and forty nights: I did neither eat bread, nor drink water, because of all your sins which ye sinned, in doing wickedly in the sight of the Lord, to provoke him to anger. For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure, wherewith the Lord was wroth against you to destroy you. But the Lord hearkened unto me at that time also. And the Lord was very angry with Aaron to have destroyed him: and I prayed for Aaron also the same time.³⁹"

Although I would not recommend anyone to fast for 40 days, still, pleading with the Lord in favor of those we serve is part of our calling as leaders. We occasionally hear reports about individuals who, when asked about the problems being faced by those they had been called to serve, state something similar to this: "What can we do? They are in sin and will not accept our visits. Some of them are even attending other churches. They are all condemned."

Moses had another experience that serves as a good example. This time the people rebelled and did not believe that the Lord would give them victory in their battles; in their desperation they came close to stoning Joshua and Caleb, who insisted that they should go forward. The Lord spoke to Moses and said that he would reject the people and that he would raise from Moses and his descendants a mightier nation. Instead of accepting the Lord's alternative plan, Moses acted the role of the savior and pleaded with the Lord in our behalf⁴⁰. He wrote:

"Thus I fell down before the Lord forty days and forty nights, as I fell down at the first; because the Lord had said he would destroy you. I prayed therefore unto the Lord, and said, O Lord God, destroy not thy people and thine inheritance, which thou hast redeemed through thy greatness, which thou hast brought forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Remember thy servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; look not unto the stubbornness of this people, nor to their wickedness, nor to their sin⁴¹".

Other prophets have also dealt in a christlike manner when faced with the possibility of having their people destroyed. In the Book of Mormon we find Lehi and Enos, for example praying in behalf of others:

"... my father, Lehi, ... prayed unto the Lord, yea, even with all his heart, in behalf of his people.⁴²"

"... I began to feel a desire for the welfare of my brethren, the Nephites; wherefore, I did pour out my whole soul unto God for them. And while I was thus struggling in the spirit, behold, the voice of the Lord came into my mind again, saying: I will visit thy brethren according to their diligence in keeping my commandments. ... And after I, Enos, had heard these words, my faith began to be

³⁹ Deuteronomy 9:18-21

⁴⁰ D&C 29:5; 38:4. See also Jacob 5:26-28,49-51

⁴¹ Deuteronomy 9:25-27. I quoted this passage of scripture in chapter 2, as an example of a prayer of faith.

⁴² 1 Nephi 1:5

unshaken in the Lord; and I prayed unto him with many long strugglings for my brethren, the Lamanites. And it came to pass that after I had prayed and labored with all diligence, the Lord said unto me: I will grant unto thee according to thy desires, because of thy faith.⁴³"

Mormon provides a touching example of a prophet interceding in favor of his people. Even knowing that the Nephites were doomed he still pleaded with the Lord in their favor:

"Behold, I had led them, notwithstanding their wickedness I had led them many times to battle, and had loved them, according to the love of God which was in me, with all my heart; and my soul had been poured out in prayer unto my God all the day long for them; nevertheless, it was without faith, because of the hardness of their hearts."⁴⁴"

Again, notice the choice of words to describe the quality of prayers offered: "with all his heart," "pour[ed] out my whole soul," "struggling in the spirit," "many long strugglings."

Patience and Courtesy

At times many of us may lose our patience with other persons. That may very well happen because each one of us seems to have an individual scale of priorities. We have full agendas, several meetings to attend, decisions to make, and we feel that we just don't have time to spend with those persons that will come to us with those same old problems that never change. Other times we may get angry when we are approached by persons who, in our judgment, have made no effort to solve their problems, despite our counsel.

At times some may get carried away in the idea that their managing the affairs the kingdom will "make the church grow", which idea I consider in part wrong. Why? Because in my understanding the real growth of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the sum of the individual growth of each of its members, and the members' growth comes in and out of the power of the atonement of Jesus Christ, not through any mortal and imperfect managerial skill. The Apostle Paul clearly stated his role and importance as a priesthood leader:

"Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase."⁴⁵"

As the Lord's agents, endowed with his authority, we represent the Lord--but we are not the Lord. The Lord can make the church grow in these last days even without our efforts; however, he decided to call us to work for and with him, and if we labor diligently we will receive our reward as faithful servants⁴⁶.

We must take time to listen to the people, paying careful attention to their words. We must take time to pray together, and to rejoice together by receiving the "... pleasing word of God, yea, the word that

⁴³ Enos 1:9-12

⁴⁴ Mormon 3:12

⁴⁵ 1 Corinthians 3:5-7

⁴⁶ Matthew 25:23; Jacob 5:75

healeth the wounded soul.⁴⁷" In times of distress--which may occur several times in our mortal journey--any person may feel weak; he or she may feel an aversion to prayer or may think that the Lord is not listening. During times like these, that person will go to church looking for a sign from heaven, a word of relief, a testimony that the Lord is near and that everything will be resolved for the better. Those in leadership capacities must be sensitive to the promptings of the Spirit in order to perceive those experiencing such feelings and to determine how use the power of the priesthood and other church resources to help them. This sensitivity is not automatic; although we may be blessed with the right to receive revelations pertaining to our callings, we only receive them after fervent prayer and by carefully exercising our minds so that we can place ourselves in tune with the Spirit of the Lord⁴⁸.

In a revelation through the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Lord taught President Frederick G. Williams, a member of the First Presidency, about some of the responsibilities of his calling as a church leader: "Wherefore, be faithful; ... succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees."⁴⁹

Serving With No Concern For Rewards

Helping others through humble service must be our sole purpose in the kingdom of God. The word "humble" means that we recognize our dependence on God⁵⁰, and if we have any other selfish purposes we may very well fail, even if one of these purposes is to get an eternal reward. We should frequently ask ourselves these questions: "What if there were no rewards involved? Would I be faithful out of pure love for God and his gospel?" The prophet Lehi said that we would not be able to exercise free agency without opposition⁵¹ (in this case, rewards opposed to punishments.) I believe in Lehi, but I still ask myself: should I exercise my free agency based solely on those two possibilities--eternal life versus eternal punishment? President Brigham Young declared his personal feelings about this matter:

"... my heart has been set in me to do the will of God, to build up his Kingdom ... to establish Zion ... and to save the people; and I can say, truly and honestly, that the thought never came into my mind, in all my labors, what my reward will be, or whether my crown would be large or small, or any crown at all, a small possession, a large possession, or no possession. I have never had any thoughts or reflections upon this ...

All that I have had in my mind has been that it was my duty to do the will of God, and to labor to establish his Kingdom on the earth. I do not love, serve or fear the Lord for the sake of getting rid of being damned, nor for the sake of getting some great gift or blessing in eternity, but purely because the principles which God has revealed for the salvation of the inhabitants of the earth are pure, holy and exalting in their nature. In them there is honor and eternal increase, they lead on from light to light, strength to strength, glory to glory, knowledge to knowledge, and power to power.⁵²"

47 Jacob 2:8

48 Moroni 7:30; D&C 43:34; 88:69; 121:45

49 D&C 81:5

50 President Ezra Taft Benson taught that prayer is one way of acknowledging our dependence on the Lord. See Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson, p.370. April 1984.

51 2 Nephi 2:16

52 Discourses of Brigham Young, p.452. June 28, 1873.

If we have a true interest in the people, not in potential rewards, we won't be impatient with others, and when under the influence of the Holy Ghost we will always know what to do and when to do it. We will gladly spend time and pay attention to those that say the same old things every time.

I remember especially some elderly brothers and sisters that I met a few years ago. Every Sunday, when asked how they were feeling, they would repeat the same answers, and proceed to describe the same headaches, the same problems they had mentioned in all previous Sundays. After I had been ordained and set apart as their Bishop, I felt not only a great empathy and respect for those individuals, but I also understood, to some extent, their pains. No conversation was ever boring, and I tried to meet for a couple of minutes with each member every Sunday morning, just to listen to them. I realized that those conversations were not between them and Marcus Helvécio Martins, but rather between them and an authorized representative of the Lord. This reminds me of the following admonition of the Lord: "Therefore, strengthen your brethren in all your conversation, in all your prayers, in all your exhortations, and in all your doings."⁵³

Besides the elderly, we must have patience with those serving in the organizations, and a great deal of patience with the youth. We are aware of the way worldly leaders treat their subordinates when things don't happen the way they should. We are all experts in the art of reprimanding and it seems that we all hold advanced degrees in the science of "getting our point across." However, punishments and scoldings may not solve most of our problems, and in many cases may create a major problem: enmity between the person that holds the authority to lead and the member who needs a blessing through that same authority. This enmity is definitely a worse problem than whatever caused it.

We have not been called to punish anyone; in fact, I have never seen any form of punishment being prescribed in any of the church's handbooks⁵⁴. We were commanded by the Lord to testify, to counsel, and to warn. When the Prophet Joseph Smith was inspired to teach us to reprove, he also established two conditions to do so: "Reproving betimes [i.e. in good time] with sharpness, *when moved upon by the Holy Ghost*; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reproved ..."⁵⁵ In addition, the Lord commanded us to take care of these matters privately⁵⁶.

Very few times I have felt that I was being moved upon by the Holy Ghost to reprove someone with sharpness; and I have to confess that in a few occasions I was so quick to reprove that I probably did not give the Holy Ghost a chance to whisper anything in my ear. Incidentally, I have never found a leader who hasn't repented of scolding another member of the Church. President Harold B. Lee wrote:

"... I was taught ... by the late President J. Reuben Clark, Jr. ... when I made a remark in his presence that indicated that I had some lingering feelings because of some slight I had previously suffered. He said to me, very quietly, 'Yes, you now have the authority, the whip hand, but you must not use it,' for one holding a position of authority in the church and kingdom of God would

⁵³ D&C 108:7

⁵⁴ If you thought about the disciplinary councils (former church courts) as a form of punishment, hold your stones for a moment, please. I don't consider a disciplinary council as a punishment. In the sad cases of very serious transgressions, if we have to disfellowship or even excommunicate individuals we ought to do so out of a genuine concern over those individuals' eternal welfare, not out of any desire for retaliation. Our mission is not to expel them from the church, but to help them repent and reconcile themselves with the Lord. Later in this chapter I will refer to a passage of scripture from 3 Nephi chapter 18.

⁵⁵ D&C 121:43; brackets added for dictionary clarification.

⁵⁶ Matthew 18:15

surely bring the disfavor of our Lord, in whose service we must never forget we are, as holders of the priesthood.⁵⁷"

In the Church of Christ we are not "leaders" in the sense the world uses this term. We are all fellowservants. That is the term John the Baptist, as a resurrected being, used referring to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery⁵⁸. John, the Beloved, while in the island of Patmos received revelations through glorified messengers who identified themselves also as fellowservants⁵⁹.

Above all, we received a commandment to invite all to come unto Christ. No one has authority to expel anyone from the church. The Lord was very clear about this:

"And behold, ye shall meet together oft; and ye shall not forbid any man from coming unto you when ye shall meet together, but suffer them that they may come unto you and forbid them not; But ye shall pray for them, and shall not cast them out; and if it so be that they come unto you oft ye shall pray for them unto the Father, in my name. ... And ye see that I have commanded that none of you should go away, but rather have commanded that ye should come unto me, that ye might feel and see; even so shall ye do unto the world; and whosoever breaketh this commandment suffereth himself to be led into temptation.⁶⁰"

What about those cases where we know that a person is not living according to the commandments? Even on a case like this the Lord does not allow us to expel any from his church:

"... therefore if ye know that a man is unworthy to eat and drink of my flesh and blood ye shall forbid him. Nevertheless, ye shall not cast him out from among you, but ye shall minister unto him and shall pray for him unto the Father, in my name; and if it so be that he repenteth and is baptized in my name, then shall ye receive him, and shall minister unto him of my flesh and blood. But if he repent not he shall not be numbered among my people, that he may not destroy my people, for behold I know my sheep, and they are numbered. Nevertheless, ye shall not cast him out of your synagogues, or your places of worship, for unto such shall ye continue to minister; for ye know not but what they will return and repent, and come unto me with full purpose of heart, and I shall heal them; and ye shall be the means of bringing salvation unto them.⁶¹"

As leaders in these latter days, we have not received instructions to punish, but rather to preach repentance, to help individuals reconcile themselves with the Lord and achieve the highest eternal reward from and through him. If we lose our patience and start to act harshly toward others, we will not have the Spirit of the Lord with us, because the Lord said: "Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away.⁶²"

⁵⁷ Stand Ye in Holy Places, p.253

⁵⁸ D&C 13

⁵⁹ Revelation 19:10; 22:9

⁶⁰ 3 Nephi 18:22-23,25

⁶¹ 3 Nephi 18:29-32

⁶² 3 Nephi 11:30

Since the Lord will not tolerate that we use his authority without love unfeigned, all our administrative acts, whether releases, or even church disciplinary councils, must be conducted out of love, with the sole purpose of helping the individuals come unto Christ. In those events in which a reprimand becomes necessary, we need to be sure that we are being "moved upon by the Holy Ghost;" in addition to that, we must remember to show "an increase of love towards" the person we have reproved, and that ought to be done in a way that is recognizable to that person, according to the local cultural environment.

About the Author



Marcus Helvécio Tourinho de Assis Martins is a native of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in July, 1972. In August of 1978 he became the first black member to serve as a full-time missionary for the Church in the 20th century, serving in the Brazil São Paulo North Mission.

Since then, brother Martins served as bishop, counselor in branch presidencies, member of stake high councils, stake and ward executive secretary, high priests group leader, ward mission leader, temple officiator, stake and ward sunday school president, and teacher in primary, sunday school, and institute of religion. In the early 1980's he also translated the “Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ” into Portuguese.

Brother Martins has worked over the years as a systems analyst and independent consultant for the Brazilian government and a number of private corporations. He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology of Religion, Race and Ethnic Relations, a Master's degree in Organizational Behavior, and a bachelor's in Business Management. He taught religion and sociology classes at Brigham Young University, Ricks College, and currently serves as chair of the department of religious education at Brigham Young University-Hawaii.

He and Sister Mirian Barbosa Martins, herself a native of Petrópolis, Brazil, and a returned missionary with several years of leadership experience, have four children: Flávio, Natália, Felipe, and Cristina.