Bringing Humanity to the Gospel

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I want to say something to promote better understandings in the Church. In so doing, my chief fear is that I myself may be misunderstood. I have never felt more the need for the aid of our Father's Spirit and the faith and sympathy of my brethren and sisters. I pray that I may have them.

As a preface to the specific things I wish to mention, I desire to set forth some fundamental principles as I conceive them.

I interpret the gospel in terms of life. It was brought to humanity; it is our duty to bring humanity to the Gospel. Election, not compulsion is the genius of Christian philosophy. Ridicule and ostracism often amount to compulsion. I deplore their existence. I fear arrogant dogmatism. It is a tyrant guilty of more havoc to human-kind than the despot ruling over many kingdoms. I have pity for the disobedient, not hatred. They deprive themselves of blessings. The disobedient punish themselves.

I believe that the dignity of the Church should be maintained, and the purity of gospel truth preserved without dilution. But man, after all, is the object of God's work. "This is my work and my glory, to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man." The Church is God's established agency to this high purpose.

Transgressions involving moral turpitude are heinous in the sight of God. Such transgressions are sinful and involve the fundamental relationships between God and man and between man and his fellow man. The Ten Commandments are comprehensive of the chief sins. They are the basis of true morality—the modernists to the contrary notwithstanding. They were not abrogated by the gospel of Jesus. "Think not that I am come to destroy the law." They were but extended and applied in a new spirit, the kind, merciful spirit of the Savior. Even some of the major sins were forgiven of Him. "Go thy way and sin no more," was His gentle rebuke. The doctrine of repentance instituted with the attestation and cleansing process of baptism was the epitome of the new Gospel. "Repent and be baptised," was the cry of Christ's first disciples. The promise of the new gospel was abundant life—more joy, more friendship, finer relations, peace on earth and eternal life in heaven.

When the Gospel was restored in this age all the goodness and mercy of Christ was restored. The Bible was accepted, the Ten Commandments were still the law, but they were to be expounded and enforced in the spirit of Jesus, and not in the rigorous, unrelenting, unmerciful spirit of those who crucified the Savior. The powers of the Priesthood were restored, but with a constitution defining the nature and
procedure of this divine authority so explicit, so kind and merciful, and so beautiful as to stamp it with the unmistakable signature of the Christ himself. The essence of the new constitution of the Priesthood, as of the whole restored gospel, was and is election without coercion, persuasion not compulsion, no unrighteous dominion, only patience, long suffering, meekness, kindness, and love unfeigned.

With the restored Gospel came also new and enlarged knowledge and conceptions of God and man. A new philosophy of life arose. Man’s place in the universe, the beginning, end, and purpose of his existence, were better understood. Some new laws were given, new ordinances and new commandments—not new in the sense that they had never existed before, but new to the knowledge of the people.

The revelations of God which restored the Gospel and breathed new life and vitality into it were exceptionally straightforward and plain, far freer from ambiguity and uncertainty than are the revelations of the Bible generally speaking. Nevertheless, the revelations of the new dispensation, as well as those of the Bible, were in the beginning and are now interpreted by men, and men interpret in the light of experience and understanding. A prophet can receive and deliver the express word of God in the precise manner in which God chooses to express himself, but the application of God’s word in the lives of men is dependent on the wisdom of men. The spirit of God will influence the judgment of a good man and augment his wisdom, but the finest of human wisdom is to be distinguished from the word of God. One may fail, the other never.

No man lives or has lived whose judgment is perfect and not subject to error. To accept the doctrine of human infallibility is to betray gross ignorance of the divine plan of human life—the fall, mortal probation, repentance, and final election. There could be no election with perfect knowledge, omniscience. We walk by faith in mortality and by faith we exercise our agency.

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The Church believes in new and continuous revelation, and ever holds itself in readiness to receive messages from the Lord. To that end the people sustain the President in particular, and others of the General Authorities, as the media through which God’s word may be delivered. A revelation to our living president would be as readily accepted and become as much a part of our scripture as the revelations given to the Prophet Joseph.

In the absence of direct communication from heaven, however, the Church and its people must be guided by the revelations already given and the wisdom and inspiration of its leadership. I have great confidence in the wisdom of the presiding authorities in all departments of church service, first, because they hold the Holy Priesthood, and second, because I know them to be good men. There is virtue in the endowment of the Priesthood. It brings to men who receive it and appreciate it an enlarged conception of life and an altruism that is Christlike in character. It brings spiritual knowledge and power, and the judgment of a presiding officer holding the Priesthood is generally an inspired judgment. It is the product of noble motive and fervent prayer.

In matters of church government and discipline, and judgment of presiding officers is mandatory and controlling. In matters of individual guidance to members, their counsel is directory and persuasive only. In the interpretation of scripture and doctrine, they are dependent on their knowledge and experience and inspiration.

I make this frank avowal of my own personal understanding of these fundamental principles as a premise to certain observations and conclusions I desire to present.

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First, I hold that it is entirely compatible with the genius of the Church to change its procedure and interpretations as changes in thought, education and environment of people from time to time seem to warrant, provided, of course, that no violence is done to the elemental concepts of truth which lie at the basis of our work. I would not discard a practice merely because it is old. Indeed, I believe that one of the tests of worth is the test of time. But on the other hand, I would not hang on to a practice or conception after it has outlived its usefulness in a new and ever-changing and better-informed world.

Old conceptions and traditional interpretations must be influenced by newly discovered evidence. Not that ultimate fact and law change, but our understanding varies with our education and experience. One man sees the meaning of a scripture so clearly and definitely that he exclaims with contemptible depreciation of a contender’s view, “Why, it’s as plain as the nose on your face,” and the other replies, “It is silly and foolish.” Both are sincere. Who is right? What position does the Church take? Generally, I think, the Church takes no official position and ought not to, in the large majority of mooted questions. Men are permitted to hold individual views and express them with freedom so long as they are not seditious to the basic doctrines, practices, and establishments of the Church. When men lose their regard for the Church, of course, they are no longer entitled to place and influence in it.

I believe it to be a generally accepted proposition in our church that no man’s standing is affected by the views which he may honestly hold with reference to the beginning of man’s life on the earth and the organization of the universe, or the processes employed in the working of the miracles of the Bible. Personally, I find more peace of mind and comfort in what may seem a rather lazy disposition to attempt no explanation of these seemingly inexplicable matters. But if anyone holds views and gets satisfaction from them, I say let him have them, and for one I won’t abuse him for them.

I do think, however, that one who has real affection for the church and regard for its members will never urge views which may tend to undermine the faith of members, particularly the young, in the fundamentals. I regret deeply that there are, in some of our schools, professors and teachers who take advantage of their positions to project their theories upon young, unseasoned minds, in total disregard of the effect on the religious faith of these students, and in some cases I fear with malignant intent to
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years. In some instances they have considerably disturbed some members of the Church. I am sure that the concern and alarm so created have been unwarranted. The critics have failed to recall that the items which have been modified were originally interpreted and adapted by good men occupying the same ecclesiastical positions and endowed with the same power as the good men now occupying these positions. Personally, I highly approve of the changes that have been made, and I hope and believe that the presiding authority will be led to make other changes along various lines that will advance the cause we represent. I am not afraid of change: it is the mother of growth.

But even more important than change of conception, form and procedure in our church as in any society, is change of attitude. How do we feel about things? Have more education, more knowledge, and wider experience broadened our sympathies or contracted them?

In application of this question, I must mention some delicate matters. I call them delicate because I run a great hazard of being misunderstood when I discuss them. Take smoking for instance. Is there more or less tolerance for the user of tobacco by the Church, as represented by its officials and the faithful membership, than there was twenty-five or fifty years ago? I cannot say. I have no way of knowing. We feel that it is wrong and we inveigh against it. Men often construe the Word of Wisdom as a commandment against it and invest the practice of it with the stigma of sin. I think my own preaching against it may be so construed. Am I right? Are all of us right? Have not some of our people failed to distinguish between the offense and the offender?

I do not mean to say that I doubt the wisdom of the Word of Wisdom. I know that it contains God’s wishes and direction for the welfare of His children, and I am sure that those who fail to heed the teaching of it will lose blessings of great worth, but I am not sure that we have not estranged many from the Church or at least contributed to their estrangement by attributing to violation of our standards of health, harmful as it may be, a moral turpitude and sinful magnitude out of proportion of the real seriousness of the offense. Maybe I am wrong. I do not claim that my analysis is correct, but I think it worthy of your attention.

I am sure that many young people feel themselves ostracized from the Church by reason of the emphasis and the somewhat intolerant attitude some of us have shown toward the user, not the use, of tobacco. I believe there are some good people in the Church to whom the use of tobacco is so repugnant and who are so offended by those who use it that they may actually develop a feeling akin to hatred toward the smoker. This state of mind, to my thinking is regrettable and dangerous—dangerous to the individual who harbors such thoughts because it tends to make him illiberal and intolerant, dangerous to the unfortunate who succumbs to a bad practice in that he instinctively sets up a resistance to the man who dislikes him, and dangerous to the church because such people characterize it with a reputation for dogmatic intolerance that weakens its influence with its members and in the world.

In lesser degree the same attitude is manifest toward those who use tea and coffee and other harmful beverages, and toward those who play cards, pool, billiards and some other games which have contributed to bad associations and undesirable practices. I heartily approve of the church counsel that has long been given regarding these matters. I believe it is sound and amply sustained by long experience. But I am not sure that I accord with the attitude of mind toward and treatment of these subjects which have in some instances been manifested in the Church. I think that these items have been invested not infrequently with a morally-degrading character which has been responsible for irritated feelings, strained and unpleasant relations, and a lack of respect for ecclesiastical authority. This lack of respect has been the underlying cause of many a spiritual downfall, for no one can maintain the true spirit of a Latter-day Saint without a wholesome respect for our leaders.

It is difficult for many to understand how a diversion so apparently innocent as a game of cards or a game of pool seems to be, can take on the aspect of moral delinquency merely by church pronouncement. In fact, many do not accept such doctrine, with the result that with them, all pronouncements of the Church are deprecated, and they find themselves out of harmony with the Church and its leadership. When they reach such a conclusion, their activity in the Church is immediately affected and their faith begins to wane.

But, dear young friends, do not think your church will disown you.

Perhaps I overdraw the picture. It is difficult for me to get the facts. I find that the people express themselves more freely among themselves than to their leaders. I am sure, however, there is enough of truth in it to warrant our consideration.

Now someone naturally asks, "What are you going to do about it? If the situation is as represented, would you abandon the campaign against cigarette smoking, tea and coffee drinking, and withdraw counsel against card playing, pool and billiards?" My answer is, "No, certainly not." The Church is far too interested in the temporal salvation of its members to pass by these items. But I would surround the campaign and the counsel with safeguards which I think have often been lacking.

I would like the church to continue to say to its young people: "Boys and girls, don’t smoke. If you do you will bring great injury to yourselves. Your bodies are the tabernacles of your spirits. You cannot take poison into your bodies knowingly without weakening them and offering affront to your God, who is the father of your spirits. So you will hurt
yourselves physically and spiritually. You injure your chances for success in life. You commit an economic wrong. You spend for something worse than useless. You weaken your moral fiber and decrease your power of resistance. You become slaves to a habit; you are not free. You hazard the best and safest companionships. You sadden the hearts of your parents, to whom you owe your life and opportunities. You are ungrateful. You put yourselves out of harmony with the counsel of those whose love you most—your parents, your church, and its leaders.

These things you do if you smoke. But, dear young friends, do not think your church will disown you. Your church sympathizes with you in your weakness. It recognizes the courage and resistance you require to withstand the tremendous temptations to which you are subjected—the appeal of brilliant, seductive advertising, the universality of the practice, the ridicule you must endure to stand out almost alone. Your church understands, boys and girls, and it wants to help you. It invites you to come to its sunday schools, its mutuals, its sacrament and other meetings, to take part in its activities and share in its spirit. Don't stay away because your fingers are stained and your breath smells. You may still enjoy brotherhood and sisterhood in the Church. You have deprived yourselves of some personal blessings, but you may still regain them, and when you do you will be happy indeed. We all need to repent of something, and we can help each other. Remember there is always a welcome for you."

I would like to say something comparable to those who have succumbed to the tea and coffee habit, and to the older folk I would add: "Brethren and sisters, be careful of your example. Remember that some boy or girl is watching you. Your actions may be the turning point in the youth's resistance. Some day in this life or the life to come he may accost you with words like these: 'I might have done great things in life. I had high ambitions, my intentions were good, but I watched you, I followed you, and you led me astray.'" Such a rebuke will not be pleasant. I trust it will not come to many.

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And even for those of maturity long confirmed in regrettable habits I wish to extend sympathy, deep sympathy, and few there are who need not repentance and forgiveness for some act either of commission or omission.

To the card players, the pool and billiard players, may not we say: "Dear friends, time is precious. It is the stuff life is made of. Waste none of it. The Church needs you, the world needs your ability. Do not squander your effort. You need diversion, you need recreation, to enhance the pleasure of living and to recuperate your strength. Let your diversions be wholesome, not sapping your strength but renewing it, not enslaving you to a habit and unprofitable pastime, but freeing your powers for worthy pursuits. Beware of cards. Of themselves they may be an innocent device for amusement, but their use is often abused and perverted to gambling and an obsession most wasteful of time and energy. You may think you will be moderate, but you may not be. Be careful. Of course, you may not have committed sin in the playing of a game of cards or a game of pool, any more than in playing a game of golf or basketball. You know when you have done wrong by gambling or wasting time. You are your own judge.” The Church has no discipline or punishment for the card player as such. The Church merely offers its warning, based on long observation, that the practice is attended with danger. It goes no further. Fellowship is not affected, nor good-will withheld.

Now, some may see in the position I have taken an undue liberalism, a retraction of long-established rules, and a letting down of standards. I have no intention to lower standards. I want only better understandings. The more sympathy and mutual helpfulness; the more true spirit of the Gospel we have, the more we approach the attitude of the Master. Jesus in his ministry forgave transgressors even of the major sins—lying and unchastity. Shall we be intolerant of those guilty of infractions of our counsel?

I want us to continue to lay emphasis on good, clean, wholesome living, but not in such a way as to in any manner obscure the primary objective of our work, which is to open the doors of the Celestial Kingdom to the children of our Father. We do not know how many will enter. We hope for all. For my part I desire to deny none entrance for weaknesses of the flesh if the spirit is willing. Yet I do not believe in indulgences. I believe that the new and everlasting covenant is inclusive of all the laws of the Gospel and that no one can be broken with impunity. Everyone who does wrong in any degree will forfeit a blessing. But God is our judge, and as I expect mercy, I want to give it.

I have been filled with trepidation as I have delivered these words, fearing that I might be misunderstood, but my resolution has been fortified by my conviction that my heart and purpose are right. I believe I do not need to protest my faith and love for this cause among my brethren and sisters here assembled. I have borne my humble testimony throughout the Church for many years. I believe that you know that I know that this is God’s work and that Joseph Smith is his prophet, and that the governing priesthood is now held by worthy successors.

I have said these things because I fear dictatorial dogmatism, rigidity of procedure and intolerance even more than I fear cigarettes, cards, and other devices the adversary may use to nullify faith and kill religion. Fanaticism and bigotry have been the deadly enemies of true religion in the long past. They have made it forbidding, shut it up in cold grey walls of monastery and nuncery, out of the sunlight and fragrance of the growing world. They have garbed it in black and then in white, when in truth it is neither black nor white, any more than life is black or white, for religion is life abundant, glowing life, with all its shades, colors and hues, as the children of men reflect in the patterns of their lives the radiance of the Holy Spirit in varying degrees.

I pray that men may understand God and the Church, and I pray that the Church may understand men and human nature. With such understandings there must come sympathy and love. Truth and love will save the world. May they ever be our portion. I ask humbly, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.