

bandana from Willard Richards's walking stick and descended from Ensign Peak. That bandana, waved aloft, signaled the great gathering which had been prophesied in ancient and modern scriptures.

We speak of the Church as our refuge, our defense. There is safety and protection in the Church. It centers in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Latter-day Saints learn to look within themselves to see the redeeming power of the Savior of all mankind. The principles of the gospel taught in the Church and learned from the scriptures become a guide for each of us individually and for our families.

We know that the homes we establish, and those of our descendants, will be the refuge spoken of in the revelations—the “light,” the “standard,” the “ensign” for all nations, and the “refuge” against the gathering storms (see D&C 115:5–6; Isaiah 11:12; 2 Nephi 21:12).

### Jesus Christ is our ensign

The ensign to which all of us are to rally is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only Begotten of the Father, whose Church this is and whose name we bear and whose authority we carry.

We look forward with faith. We have seen many events in our lifetime, and many will yet occur that will tax our courage and extend our faith. We are to “rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great [will be our] reward in heaven” (Matthew 5:12).

Willingly defend the history of the Church, and do “not [be] ashamed of the gospel of [Jesus] Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Romans 1:16).

We will face the challenges, for we cannot avoid them, and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ and teach of Him as our Savior and our Refuge, our Redeemer.

If a well-worn yellow bandana was good enough to be an ensign to the world, then ordinary men who hold the priesthood and ordinary women and ordinary children in ordinary families, living the gospel as best they can all over the world, can shine forth as a standard, a defense, a refuge against whatever is to be poured out upon the earth.

“We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins” (2 Nephi 25:26).

This Church will prosper. It will prevail. Of this I am absolutely certain. I bear this testimony in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

### NOTES

1. See Journal of Wilford Woodruff, July 26, 1847, Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; see also B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church*, 3:270–71.
2. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 102.

## Elder David A. Bednar

This afternoon I pray that the Holy Ghost will assist me and you as we review together important gospel principles.

### Visits to less-active members

One of my favorite activities as a priesthood leader is visiting members of

the Church in their homes. I especially enjoy calling upon and talking with members who commonly are described as “less active.”

During the years I served as a stake president, I often would contact one of the bishops and invite him to prayerfully identify individuals or families we could

visit together. Before traveling to a home, the bishop and I would kneel and petition our Heavenly Father for guidance and inspiration, for us and for the members with whom we would meet.

Our visits were quite straightforward. We expressed love and appreciation for the opportunity to be in their home. We affirmed that we were servants of the Lord on His errand to their home. We indicated that we missed and needed them—and that they needed the blessings of the restored gospel. And at some point early in our conversation I often would ask a question like this: “Will you please help us understand why you are not actively participating in the blessings and programs of the Church?”

#### **“I was offended by . . .”**

I made hundreds and hundreds of such visits. Each individual, each family, each home, and each answer was different. Over the years, however, I detected a common theme in many of the answers to my questions. Frequently responses like these were given:

“Several years ago a man said something in Sunday School that offended me, and I have not been back since.”

“No one in this branch greeted or reached out to me. I felt like an outsider. I was hurt by the unfriendliness of this branch.”

“I did not agree with the counsel the bishop gave me. I will not step foot in that building again as long as he is serving in that position.”

Many other causes of offense were cited—from doctrinal differences among adults to taunting, teasing, and excluding by youth. But the recurring theme was, “I was offended by . . .”

The bishop and I would listen intently and sincerely. One of us might next ask about their conversion to and testimony of the restored gospel. As we talked, eyes often were moist with tears as these good

people recalled the confirming witness of the Holy Ghost and described their prior spiritual experiences. Most of the “less-active” people I have ever visited had a discernible and tender testimony of the truthfulness of the restored gospel. However, they were not presently participating in Church activities and meetings.

And then I would say something like this: “Let me make sure I understand what has happened to you. Because someone at church offended you, you have not been blessed by the ordinance of the sacrament. You have withdrawn yourself from the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost. Because someone at church offended you, you have cut yourself off from priesthood ordinances and the holy temple. You have discontinued your opportunity to serve others and to learn and grow. And you are leaving barriers that will impede the spiritual progress of your children, your children’s children, and the generations that will follow.” Many times people would think for a moment and then respond, “I have never thought about it that way.”

The bishop and I would then extend an invitation: “Dear friend, we are here today to counsel you that the time to stop being offended is now. Not only do we need you, but you need the blessings of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Please come back—now.”

#### **Choose not to be offended**

When we believe or say that we have been offended, we usually mean we feel insulted, mistreated, snubbed, or disrespected. And certainly clumsy, embarrassing, unprincipled, and mean-spirited things do occur in our interactions with other people that would allow us to take offense. However, it ultimately is impossible for another person to offend you or to offend me. Indeed, believing that another person offended us is fundamentally false. To be offended is a *choice* we make; it is

not a *condition* inflicted or imposed upon us by someone or something else.

In the grand division of all of God's creations, there are things to act and things to be acted upon (see 2 Nephi 2:13–14). As sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father, we have been blessed with the gift of moral agency, the capacity for independent action and choice. Endowed with agency, you and I are agents, and we primarily are to act and not just be acted upon. To believe that someone or something can *make* us feel offended, angry, hurt, or bitter diminishes our moral agency and transforms us into objects to be acted upon. As agents, however, you and I have the power to act and to choose how we will respond to an offensive or hurtful situation.

Thomas B. Marsh, the first President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in this dispensation, elected to take offense over an issue as inconsequential as milk strippings (see *Deseret News*, Apr. 16, 1856, 44). Brigham Young, on the other hand, was severely and publicly rebuked by the Prophet Joseph Smith, but he chose not to take offense (see Truman G. Madsen, "Hugh B. Brown—Youthful Veteran," *New Era*, Apr. 1976, 16).

In many instances, choosing to be offended is a symptom of a much deeper and more serious spiritual malady. Thomas B. Marsh allowed himself to be acted upon, and the eventual results were apostasy and misery. Brigham Young was an agent who exercised his agency and acted in accordance with correct principles, and he became a mighty instrument in the hands of the Lord.

The Savior is the greatest example of how we should respond to potentially offensive events or situations.

"And the world, because of their iniquity, shall judge him to be a thing of naught; wherefore they scourge him, and he suffereth it; and they smite him, and he suffereth it. Yea, they spit upon him, and

he suffereth it, because of his loving kindness and his long-suffering towards the children of men" (1 Nephi 19:9).

Through the strengthening power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, you and I can be blessed to avoid and triumph over offense. "Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them" (Psalm 119:165).

### A latter-day learning laboratory

The capacity to conquer offense may seem beyond our reach. This capability, however, is not reserved for or restricted to prominent leaders in the Church like Brigham Young. The very nature of the Redeemer's Atonement and the purpose of the restored Church are intended to help us receive precisely this kind of spiritual strength.

Paul taught the Saints in Ephesus that the Savior established His Church "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

"Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12–13).

Please note the use of the active word *perfecting*. As described by Elder Neal A. Maxwell, the Church is not "a well-provisioned rest home for the already perfected" (in Conference Report, Apr. 1982, 57; or *Ensign*, May 1982, 38). Rather, the Church is a learning laboratory and a workshop in which we gain experience as we practice on each other in the ongoing process of "perfecting the Saints."

Elder Maxwell also insightfully explained that in this latter-day learning laboratory known as the restored Church, the members constitute the "clinical material" (see "Jesus, the Perfect Mentor," *Ensign*, Feb. 2001, 13) that is essential for growth and development. A visiting teacher learns her duty as she serves and loves her Relief

Society sisters. An inexperienced teacher learns valuable lessons as he teaches both supportive and inattentive learners and thereby becomes a more effective teacher. And a new bishop learns how to be a bishop through inspiration and by working with ward members who wholeheartedly sustain him, even while recognizing his human frailties.

Understanding that the Church is a learning laboratory helps us to prepare for an inevitable reality. In some way and at some time, someone in this Church will do or say something that could be considered offensive. Such an event will surely happen to each and every one of us—and it certainly will occur more than once. Though people may not intend to injure or offend us, they nonetheless can be inconsiderate and tactless.

You and I cannot control the intentions or behavior of other people. However, we do determine how we will act. Please remember that you and I are agents endowed with moral agency, and we can choose not to be offended.

During a perilous period of war, an exchange of letters occurred between Moroni, the captain of the Nephite armies, and Pahoran, the chief judge and governor of the land. Moroni, whose army was suffering because of inadequate support from the government, wrote to Pahoran “by the way of condemnation” (Alma 60:2) and harshly accused him of thoughtlessness, slothfulness, and neglect. Pahoran might easily have resented Moroni and his message, but he chose not to take offense. Pahoran responded compassionately and described a rebellion against the government about which Moroni was not aware. And then he responded, “Behold, I say unto you, Moroni, that I do not joy in your great afflictions, yea, it grieves my soul. . . . And now, in your epistle you have censured me, but it mattereth not; I am not angry, but do rejoice in the greatness of your heart” (Alma 61:2, 9).

One of the greatest indicators of our own spiritual maturity is revealed in how we respond to the weaknesses, the inexperience, and the potentially offensive actions of others. A thing, an event, or an expression may be offensive, but you and I can choose not to be offended—and to say with Pahoran, “It mattereth not.”

## Two invitations

I conclude my message with two invitations.

*Invitation number one.* I invite you to learn about and apply the Savior’s teachings about interactions and episodes that can be construed as offensive.

“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. . . .

“For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?

“And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?

“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:43–44, 46–48).

Interestingly, the admonition to “be ye therefore perfect” is immediately preceded by counsel about how we should act in response to wrongdoing and offense. Clearly, the rigorous requirements that lead to the perfecting of the Saints include assignments that test and challenge us. If a person says or does something that we consider offensive, our first obligation is to refuse to take offense and then communicate privately, honestly, and directly with that individual. Such an approach invites inspiration from the Holy Ghost and permits misperceptions to be clarified and true intent to be understood.

*Invitation number two.* Many of the individuals and families who most need to hear this message about choosing not to be offended are probably not participating with us in conference today. I suspect all of us are acquainted with members who are staying away from church because they have chosen to take offense—and who would be blessed by coming back.

Will you please prayerfully identify a person with whom you will visit and extend the invitation to once again worship with us? Perhaps you could share a copy of this talk with her or him, or you may prefer to discuss the principles we have reviewed today. And please remember that such a request should be conveyed

lovingly and in meekness—and not in a spirit of self-righteous superiority and pride.

As we respond to this invitation with faith in the Savior, I testify and promise that doors will open, our mouths will be filled, the Holy Ghost will bear witness of eternal truth, and the fire of testimony will be rekindled.

As His servant, I echo the words of the Master when He declared, “These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended” (John 16:1). I witness the reality and divinity of a living Savior and of His power to help us avoid and overcome offense. In the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

## A. Roger Merrill

### Experience as a missionary

One morning when I was serving as a young missionary in Beaumont, Texas, my companion became ill and needed to rest. Following the counsel of our mission president for such situations, I pulled a chair up by the open window in our fourth-story apartment and began to read in the Book of Mormon.

Soon I became immersed in the scriptures, and after a time I came to Alma chapter 29, verses 1 and 2:

“O that I were an angel, and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people!

“Yea, I would declare unto every soul, as with the voice of thunder, repentance and the plan of redemption, that they should repent and come unto our God, that there might not be more sorrow upon all the face of the earth.”

As I pondered on Alma’s words, they became deeply personal. My companion

and I had knocked on hundreds of doors in Beaumont, offering to share our message, but with limited success. In my mind’s eye, I began to imagine what it might be like if I were an angel and could cry repentance with a voice to shake the earth. I looked out the window at the people coming and going on the street below. I imagined what it would be like if I were standing there shining like an angel, with my hands raised, speaking with a voice of thunder. I envisioned the buildings shaking and people falling to the earth. Under the circumstances I imagined, they might have a sudden desire to listen to what I had to say!

But then I read the next verse: “But behold, I am a man, and do sin in my wish; for I ought to be content with the things which the Lord hath allotted unto me” (v. 3).

I was humbled to realize the Lord loves all His children and has a plan for His work. My job was to do my part.

I was also humbled to realize something else. In that moment, I *knew* that