

## To Heal the World

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Wounds and differences can be resolved and even healed when we honor God, the Father of us all, and Jesus Christ, His Son.

Brothers and sisters, at this glorious Easter season we are so blessed to meet and receive counsel and direction from God's servants.

Sacred guidance and teachings from our Heavenly Father help us navigate life in these perilous times. As was prophesied, "fires, and tempests," "wars, rumors of wars, and earthquakes in divers places," "and all manner of abominations,"<sup>1</sup> "plague,"<sup>2</sup> "famines, and pestilences"<sup>3</sup> are ravaging families, communities, and even nations.

There is another scourge sweeping the globe: attacks on your and my religious freedom. This growing sentiment seeks to remove religion and faith in God from the public square, schools, community standards, and civic discourse. Opponents of religious freedom seek to impose restrictions on expressions of heartfelt convictions. They even criticize and ridicule faith traditions.

Such an attitude marginalizes people, devaluing personal principles, fairness, respect, spirituality, and peace of conscience.

What is religious freedom?

It is freedom of worship in all its configurations: freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, freedom to act on personal beliefs, and freedom for others to do the same. Religious freedom allows each of us to decide for ourselves what we believe, how we live and act according to our faith, and what God expects of us.

Efforts to curtail such religious liberty are not new. Throughout history, people of faith have suffered mightily at the hands of others. Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are no different.

From our beginnings, many seeking God were drawn to this Church because of its teachings of divine doctrine, including faith in Jesus Christ and His Atonement, repentance, the plan of happiness, and the Second Coming of our Lord.

Opposition, persecution, and violence plagued our first latter-day prophet, Joseph Smith, and his followers.

Amidst the turmoil in 1842, Joseph published 13 fundamental tenets of the growing Church, including this one: “We claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may.”<sup>4</sup>

His statement is inclusive, liberating, and respectful. That is the essence of religious freedom.

The Prophet Joseph Smith also stated:

“I am bold to declare before Heaven that I am just as ready to die in defending the rights of a Presbyterian, a Baptist, or a good man of any other denomination; for the same principle which would trample upon the rights of the ... Saints would trample upon the rights of the Roman Catholics, or of any other denomination who may be unpopular and too weak to defend themselves.

“It is a love of liberty [that] inspires my soul—civil and religious liberty to the whole of the human race.”<sup>5</sup>

Still, early Church members were attacked and driven thousands of miles, from New York to Ohio to Missouri, where the governor issued an order that members of the Church “must be treated as enemies and must be exterminated or driven from the state.”<sup>6</sup> They fled to Illinois, but the torment continued. A mob murdered the Prophet Joseph, thinking that killing him would destroy the Church and scatter the believers. But the faithful held firm. Joseph’s successor, Brigham Young, led thousands in a forced exodus 1,300 miles (2,100 km) west to what is now the state of Utah.<sup>7</sup> My own ancestors were amongst those early pioneer settlers.

From those days of intense persecution, the Lord’s Church has grown steadily to nearly 17 million members, with well over half living outside the United States.<sup>8</sup>

In April 2020 our Church celebrated the 200th anniversary of the Restoration of the gospel with a proclamation to the world, prepared by our First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. It begins, “We solemnly proclaim that God loves His children in every nation of the world.”<sup>9</sup>

Our beloved prophet, Russell M. Nelson, has further expressed:

“We believe in freedom, kindness, and fairness for all of God’s children.

“We are all brothers and sisters, each one a child of a loving Father in Heaven. His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, invites all to come to Him, ‘black and white, bond and free, male and female’ (2 Nephi 26:33).”<sup>10</sup>

Consider with me four ways that society and individuals benefit from religious freedom.

**First.** Religious freedom honors the first and second great commandments, placing God at the center of our lives. We read in Matthew:

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.”<sup>11</sup>

“And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”<sup>12</sup>

Whether in a chapel, synagogue, mosque, or tin-roofed hut, Christ’s disciples and all like-minded believers can express devotion to God by worship of Him and willingness to serve His children.

Jesus Christ is the perfect example of such love and service. During His ministry, He cared for the poor,<sup>13</sup> healed the sick<sup>14</sup> and the blind.<sup>15</sup> He fed the hungry,<sup>16</sup> opened His arms to little children,<sup>17</sup> and forgave those who wronged Him, even crucified Him.<sup>18</sup>

The scriptures describe that Jesus “went about doing good.”<sup>19</sup> So must we.

**Second.** Religious freedom fosters expressions of belief, hope, and peace.

As a church, we join with other religions protecting people of all faiths and persuasions and their right to speak their convictions. This does not mean we accept their beliefs, nor they ours, but we have more in common than we have with those who desire to silence us.

I recently represented the Church at the annual G20 Interfaith Forum in Italy. I was encouraged, even buoyed up, when I met with government and faith leaders from around the world. I realized wounds and differences can be resolved and even healed when we honor God, the Father of us all, and Jesus Christ, His Son. The Great Healer of all is our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

I had an interesting moment as I closed my talk. The previous seven speakers had not closed in any manner of a faith tradition or in the name of God. As I spoke, I thought, “Do I just say thank you and sit down, or do I close ‘in the name of Jesus Christ’?” I remembered who I was, and I knew the Lord would have me say His name to conclude my message. So I did. Looking back, it was my opportunity to express my belief; and I had the freedom of religion to bear my witness of His holy name.

**Third.** Religion inspires people to help others.

When religion is given the space and freedom to flourish, believers perform simple and sometimes heroic acts of service. The ancient Jewish phrase “tikkun olam,” meaning “to repair or heal the world,” is being reflected today in the efforts of so many. We have partnered with Catholic Charities, known as Caritas Internationalis; Islamic Relief; and any number of Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, and Christian organizations like the Salvation Army and the National Christian Foundation. Together we serve millions in need, most recently by aiding refugees of war with

tents, sleeping bags, and food supplies,<sup>20</sup> and providing vaccinations, including polio<sup>21</sup> and COVID.<sup>22</sup> The list of what is being done is long, but so are the needs.

No question, people of faith, working together, can make significant interventions. At the same time, one-on-one service is often unheralded but quietly changes lives.

I think of the example in Luke when Jesus Christ reached out to the widow of Nain. Jesus, accompanied by a group of followers, came upon the burial procession of the widow's only son. Without him, she was facing emotional, spiritual, and even financial ruin. Jesus, seeing her tearstained face, said, "Weep not."<sup>23</sup> Then He touched the bier carrying the body, and the procession halted.

"Young man," He commanded, "I say unto thee, Arise.

"And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak. And [Jesus] delivered him to his mother."<sup>24</sup>

Raising the dead is a miracle, but every act of kindness and concern for someone struggling is the covenant way each of us can also "[go] about doing good," knowing "God [is] with [us]."<sup>25</sup>

And **fourth**. Freedom of religion acts as a unifying and rallying force for shaping values and morality.

In the New Testament we read of many turning away from Jesus Christ, murmuring of His doctrine, "This is an hard saying; who can hear it?"<sup>26</sup>

That cry is still being heard today from those who seek to expel religion from discourse and influence. If religion is not there to help with shaping character and mediating hard times, who will be? Who will teach honesty, gratitude, forgiveness, and patience? Who will exhibit charity, compassion, and kindness for the forgotten and the downtrodden? Who will embrace those who are different yet deserving, as are all of God's children? Who will open their arms to those in need and seek no recompense? Who will reverence peace and obedience to laws greater than the trends of the day? Who will respond to the Savior's plea "Go, and do thou likewise"?<sup>27</sup>

We will! Yes, brothers and sisters, we will.

I invite you to champion the cause of religious freedom. It is an expression of the God-given principle of agency.

Religious freedom brings balance to competing philosophies. The good of religion, its reach, and the daily acts of love which religion inspires only multiply when we protect the freedom to express and act on core beliefs.

I witness that Russell M. Nelson is God's living prophet. I testify that Jesus Christ leads and guides this Church. He atoned for our sins, was crucified on a cross, and was resurrected on the third day.<sup>28</sup> Because of Him, we can live again for all eternity; and those who so desire can be with our Father in Heaven. This truth I

proclaim to all the world. I am grateful for the freedom to do so. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. Mormon 8:29–31; see also 2 Timothy 3:1–7, 12–13; Doctrine and Covenants 45:26–27.
2. Doctrine and Covenants 87:6.
3. Matthew 24:7.
4. Articles of Faith 1:11.
5. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 345.
6. Lilburn W. Boggs letter to John B. Clark, Oct. 27, 1838, Mormon War Papers, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City, Missouri, [sos.mo.gov/archives/resources/Mormon](https://sos.mo.gov/archives/resources/Mormon).
7. See *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*, vol. 2, *No Unhallowed Hand, 1846–1893* (2020), 3–68.
8. Member and Statistical Records Department figures for 2021 year-end: 16.8 million total members; US and Canada: 7 million members; outside the US and Canada: 9.8 million members.
9. “The Restoration of the Fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: A Bicentennial Proclamation to the World,” [ChurchofJesusChrist.org](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org); read by President Russell M. Nelson as part of his Sunday morning message at the 190th Annual General Conference, Apr. 5, 2020.
10. Russell M. Nelson, “Jesus Said Love Everyone,” *Friend*, Apr. 2021, 2.
11. Matthew 22:37.
12. Matthew 22:39.
13. See Mark 10:21–22; 12:41–44; Luke 16:19–25.
14. See Luke 4:40; 8:43–48.
15. See John 9:1–7.
16. See Matthew 14:15–21; 15:32–38; Mark 6:31–44; 8:6–9; John 6:1–14.
17. See Matthew 19:13–15.
18. See Luke 23:33–34.
19. Acts 10:38.
20. See Mary Richards, “How the Church Is Helping with Humanitarian Aid in Eastern Europe,” *Church News*, Mar. 3, 2022, [thechurchnews.com](https://www.thechurchnews.com).
21. See Sarah Ferguson, “Wild Polio Eliminated in Africa: A Giant Step Toward Eradicating the Disease,” *UNICEF*, Oct. 20, 2020, [unicef.org/africa/story/wild-polio-eliminated-africa](https://www.unicef.org/africa/story/wild-polio-eliminated-africa).

Closer to Eradication," UNICEF, Oct. 22, 2020, [unicetusa.org](https://www.unicefusa.org).

22. See Peggy Fletcher Stack, "LDS Church Kicks In \$20M toward Global COVID Vaccination Push," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Feb. 26, 2021, [sltrib.com](https://www.sltrib.com).
23. Luke 7:13.
24. Luke 7:14–15.
25. Acts 10:38.
26. John 6:60.
27. Luke 10:37.
28. See 1 Corinthians 15:4.