

# The Doctrine of Belonging

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The doctrine of belonging comes down to this for each of us: I am one with Christ in the gospel covenant.

I would like to speak about what I call the doctrine of belonging in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This doctrine has three parts: (1) the role of belonging in gathering the Lord's covenant people, (2) the importance of service and sacrifice in belonging, and (3) the centrality of Jesus Christ to belonging.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in its early beginnings was made up largely of white North American and northern European Saints with a relative handful of Native Americans, African Americans, and Pacific Islanders. Now, eight years away from the 200th anniversary of its founding, the Church has greatly increased in numbers and diversity in North America and even more so in the rest of the world.

As the long-prophesied latter-day gathering of the Lord's covenant people gains momentum, the Church will truly be composed of members from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people.<sup>1</sup> This is not a calculated or forced diversity but a naturally occurring phenomenon that we would expect, recognizing that the gospel net gathers from every nation and every people.

How blessed we are to see the day that Zion is being established simultaneously on every continent and in our own neighborhoods. As the Prophet Joseph Smith said, the people of God in every age have looked forward with joyful anticipation to this day, and "we are the favored people that God has made choice of to bring about the Latter-day glory."<sup>2</sup>

Having been given this privilege, we cannot permit any racism, tribal prejudice, or other divisions to exist in the latter-day Church of Christ. The Lord commands us, "Be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine."<sup>3</sup> We should be diligent in rooting prejudice and discrimination out of the Church, out of our homes, and, most of all, out of our hearts. As our Church population grows ever more diverse, our welcome must grow ever more spontaneous and warm. We need one another.<sup>4</sup>

In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul declares that all who are baptized into the Church are one in the body of Christ:

“For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.

“For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. ...

“That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another.

“And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.”<sup>5</sup>

A sense of belonging is important to our physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Yet it is quite possible that at times each of us might feel that we don't fit in. In discouraging moments, we may feel that we will never measure up to the Lord's high standards or the expectations of others.<sup>6</sup> We may unwittingly impose expectations on others—or even ourselves—that are not the Lord's expectations. We may communicate in subtle ways that the worth of a soul is based on certain achievements or callings, but these are not the measure of our standing in the Lord's eyes. “The Lord looketh on the heart.”<sup>7</sup> He cares about our desires and longings and what we are becoming.<sup>8</sup>

Sister Jodi King wrote of her own experience of past years:

“I never felt like I didn't belong at church until my husband, Cameron, and I began struggling with infertility. The children and families who had typically brought me joy to see at church now started causing me grief and pain.

“I felt barren without a child in my arms or a diaper bag in hand. ...

“The hardest Sunday was our first one in a new ward. Because we didn't have kids, we were asked if we were newlyweds and when we planned on starting a family. I had gotten pretty good at answering these questions without letting them affect me—I knew they weren't meant to be hurtful.

“However, on this particular Sunday, answering those questions was especially hard. We had just found out, after being hopeful, that we were—yet again—not pregnant.

“I walked into sacrament meeting feeling downtrodden, and answering those typical ‘get to know you’ questions was hard for me. ...

“But it was Sunday School that truly broke my heart. The lesson—intended to be about the divine role of mothers—quickly shifted gears

and became a vent[ing] session. My heart sank and tears silently flowed down my cheeks as I heard women complain about a blessing I would give anything for.

“I bolted out of church. At first, I didn’t want to go back. I didn’t want to experience that feeling of isolation again. But that night, after talking with my husband, we knew we would keep attending church not only because the Lord has asked us to but also because we both knew that the joy that comes from renewing covenants and feeling the Spirit at church surpasses the sadness I felt that day. ...

“In the Church, there are widowed, divorced, and single members; those with family members who have fallen away from the gospel; people with chronic illnesses or financial struggles; members who experience same-sex attraction; members working to overcome addictions or doubts; recent converts; new move-ins; empty-nesters; and the list goes on and on. ...

“The Savior invites us to come unto Him—no matter our circumstances. We come to church to renew our covenants, to increase our faith, to find peace, and to do as He did perfectly in His life—minister to others who feel like they don’t belong.”<sup>9</sup>

Paul explained that the Church and its officers are given by God “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.”<sup>10</sup>

It is a sad irony, then, when someone, feeling he or she doesn’t meet the ideal in all aspects of life, concludes that he doesn’t or she doesn’t belong in the very organization designed by God to help us progress toward the ideal.

Let us leave judgment in the Lord’s hands and those He has commissioned and be content to love and treat each other the best we can. Let us ask Him to show us the way, day by day, to “bring in ... the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind”<sup>11</sup>—that is, everyone—to the great feast of the Lord.

A second facet of the doctrine of belonging has to do with our own contributions. Although we rarely think about it, much of our belonging comes from our service and the sacrifices we make for others and for the Lord. Excessive focus on our personal needs or our own comfort can frustrate that sense of belonging.

We strive to follow the Savior’s doctrine:

“Whosoever will be great among you, shall be your *minister*. ...

“For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”<sup>12</sup>

Belonging comes not as we wait for it but as we reach out to help one another.

Today, unfortunately, consecrating oneself to a cause or sacrificing anything for anyone else is becoming countercultural. In a piece for *Deseret Magazine* last year, author Rod Dreher recounted a conversation with a young mother in Budapest:

“I am on a Budapest tram with a ... friend in her early 30s—let’s call her Kristina—while we are on the way to interview an older [Christian] woman who, with her late husband, withstood persecution by the communist state. As we bump along the city’s streets, Kristina talks about how hard it is to be honest with friends her age about the struggles she faces as a wife and mother of young children.

“Kristina’s difficulties are completely ordinary for a young woman learning how to be a mom and a wife—yet the prevailing attitude among her generation is that life’s difficulties are a threat to one’s well-being and should be refused. Do she and her husband argue at times? Then she should leave him, they say. Are her children annoying her? Then she should send them to day care.

“Kristina worries that her friends don’t grasp that trials, and even suffering, are a normal part of life—and maybe even part of a good life, if that suffering teaches us how to be patient, kind and loving. ...

“... University of Notre Dame sociologist of religion Christian Smith found in his study of adults [ages] 18 to 23 that most of them believe society is nothing more than ‘a collection of autonomous individuals out to enjoy life.’”<sup>13</sup>

By this philosophy, anything that one finds difficult “is a form of oppression.”<sup>14</sup>

By contrast, our pioneer forebears derived a deep sense of belonging, unity, and hope in Christ by the sacrifices they made to serve missions, build temples, abandon comfortable homes under duress and begin again, and in a multitude of other ways consecrate themselves and their means to the cause of Zion. They were willing to sacrifice even their lives if necessary. And we are all the beneficiaries of their endurance. The same is true for many today who may lose family and friends, forfeit employment opportunities, or otherwise suffer discrimination or intolerance as a consequence of being baptized. Their reward, however, is a powerful sense of belonging among the covenant people. Any

sacrifice we make in the Lord's cause helps to confirm our place with Him who gave His life a ransom for many.

The final and most important element of the doctrine of belonging is the central role of Jesus Christ. We don't join the Church for fellowship alone, important as that is. We join for redemption through the love and grace of Jesus Christ. We join to secure the ordinances of salvation and exaltation for ourselves and those we love on both sides of the veil. We join to participate in a great project to establish Zion in preparation for the Lord's return.

The Church is the custodian of the covenants of salvation and exaltation that God offers us through the ordinances of the holy priesthood.<sup>15</sup> It is by keeping these covenants that we obtain the highest and deepest sense of belonging. President Russell M. Nelson recently wrote:

“Once you and I have made a covenant with God, our relationship with Him becomes much closer than before our covenant. Now we are bound together. Because of our covenant with God, He will never tire in His efforts to help us, and we will never exhaust His merciful patience with us. Each of us has a special place in God's heart. ...

“... Jesus Christ is the guarantor of those covenants (see Hebrews 7:22; 8:6).”<sup>16</sup>

If we will remember this, the Lord's high hopes for us will inspire, not discourage, us.

We can feel joy as we pursue, individually and communally, “the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”<sup>17</sup> Despite disappointments and setbacks along the way, it is a grand quest. We lift and encourage each other in pursuing the upward path, knowing that no matter tribulation and no matter delays in promised blessings, we can “be of good cheer; [for Christ has] overcome the world,”<sup>18</sup> and we are with Him. Being one with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is without doubt the ultimate in belonging.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the doctrine of belonging comes down to this—each one of us can affirm: Jesus Christ died for me; He thought me worthy of His blood. He loves me and can make all the difference in my life. As I repent, His grace will transform me. I am one with Him in the gospel covenant; I belong in His Church and kingdom; and I belong in His cause to bring redemption to all of God's children.

I testify you do belong, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. See Revelation 5:9; see also 1 Nephi 19:17; Mosiah 15:28; Doctrine and Covenants 10:51; 77:8, 11.

2. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith (2001)*, 100.
3. Doctrine and Covenants 38:27.
4. One perceptive observer noted:

“Religion that is merely a private affair has been, until our time, unknown in the annals of mankind—and for good reason. Such religion quickly diminishes into an indoor pleasure, a kind of hobby of one or more individuals, like reading a book or watching television. So it is not astonishing that the search for spirituality has become so fashionable. It is what individuals, liberated from religion, desperately seek as a substitute.

“Spirituality is indeed an integral part of all religions—but a minor part, and it cannot be a substitute for the whole. Religion is not some kind of psychic exercise that occasionally offers a transcendental experience. It either shapes one’s life—all of one’s life—or it vanishes, leaving behind anxious, empty souls that no psychotherapy can reach. And for religion to shape one’s life, it needs to be public and communal; it needs to be connected to the dead and the unborn” (Irving Kristol, “The Welfare State’s Spiritual Crisis,” *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 3, 1997, A14).
5. 1 Corinthians 12:12–13, 25–26.
6. See Russell M. Nelson, “Perfection Pending,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 86–88; Jeffrey R. Holland, “Be Ye Therefore Perfect—Eventually,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2017, 40–42.
7. 1 Samuel 16:7.
8. As expressed by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, “‘Come as you are,’ a loving Father says to each of us, but He adds, ‘Don’t plan to stay as you are.’ We smile and remember that God is determined to make of us more than we thought we could be” (“Songs Sung and Unsung,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2017, 51).
9. Jodi King, “Belonging in the Church through the Lens of Infertility,” *Ensign*, Mar. 2020, 72, 74–75; *Liahona*, Mar. 2020, 46, 48–49.
10. Ephesians 4:12–13.
11. Luke 14:21.
12. Mark 10:43, 45; emphasis added.
13. Rod Dreher, “A Christian Survival Guide for a Secular Age,”

*Deseret Magazine*, Apr. 2021, 68.

14. Dreher, “A Christian Survival Guide for a Secular Age,” 68.
15. See Doctrine and Covenants 84:19–22.
16. Russell M. Nelson, “The Everlasting Covenant,” *Liahona*, Oct. 2022, 6, 10.
17. Ephesians 4:13.
18. John 16:33.
19. See John 17:20–23. “And now, I would commend you to seek this Jesus of whom the prophets and apostles have written, that the grace of God the Father, and also the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost, which beareth record of them, may be and abide in you forever” (Ether 12:41).