

The Goodness of the Church

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“The roots of all goodness lie in the
. . . of appreciation for goodness.”

--Dalai Lama

Attending sessions of general conference with my wife in April 2007, I was reminded in many ways of the goodness of the Church. Joining fellow saints flowing into the Conference Center on a bright Sunday morning, I was aware that I was part of a body of believers whose collective faith and devotion constitute a vital force in the world. I was reminded of this goodness recently while watching the October 2007 general conference on television. The music for the Saturday afternoon session was performed by a chorus of young women in their mid-teens all wearing brightly colored blouses. As the camera swept over that garden of bright, beautiful faces, I was impressed by what they represented of the three great human quests—Truth, Beauty and Goodness—the fusion and harmony of which, as Wayne Booth argues, constitute God.¹ Their faces, the words spoken during the conferences, the music, and the feelings all of these things engendered in my heart a remembrance of the ways the goodness of the Church has touched my life over the years.

That goodness is not always apparent and it has to be seen in the broader context of what in reality is a much more complex and complicated picture of the Church. As someone who has experienced that goodness but who has also spent his mature life challenging those things about the Church that are less than good, I don't want to give the impression that I think that all is well in Zion. What I do propose is to focus on what I consider the real benefits and blessings of belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I do this because I feel that often such positive attributes are overlooked or diminished by those who criticize the Church. This essay therefore is an attempt to balance what is often an imbalanced view of the Church by its critics.

I want to make clear that my observations in this paper are not intended in any way to diminish in importance of legitimate issues that some may have with the Church or to gloss over the limitations, shortcomings and failures of the Church as an institution. I find myself somewhere in the middle between the apologists and the critics, both of whom are highly selective in what they count as the truth about the Church and both of whom tend to filter out those aspects of the Church that don't conform to their particular view. I don't believe it serves the Church well to pretend that

all is well in Zion when it isn't. Conversely, I don't believe it serves anyone well to deny the goodness of the Church or to devalue or diminish its considerable strengths and accomplishments. In reality, we should distrust those who present an image of the Church as a perfect, seamless embodiment of the Kingdom of God, just as we should distrust those who see it merely as one more flawed human-inspired institution.

Complaints about institutional limitations and failings are common to all faiths. In the interfaith work in which I have been engaged for the Church, I have found that most churches experience the same kind of discontent among a portion of their constituencies that the Mormon Church does. Perhaps another way to put this is that it is the nature of all institutions, including those whose business is God's work, to fall short of their own ideals and thus to disappoint some of their members.

One of the reasons some find fault with the Church is that it claims to be the Kingdom of God on earth or, as Mormons testify, "The One and Only True Church." As such, many assume that there is little margin for mistakes or imperfections. Like children who idealize their parents, we often expect, perhaps even demand, of the Church what it, by its very nature, cannot be. In other words, there is an inevitable difference between The Church as It Is and The Church as It Should be. The one exists as a divine or platonic ideal; the other is the one in which we live and work out our salvation with fear and trembling. It is impossible for the latter to conform perfectly to the former. For example, in an ideal church, all leaders and members would be constantly worthy of the Holy Ghost and therefore all decisions would be in accord with the will of heaven. In the real world, in the Church As It Is, decisions are made by inspiration part of the time, which means that some decisions are not inspired. In an ideal Church, we would all respond with perfect generosity, even before needs arose, and give all that we have to sustain the poor and to build up the Kingdom of God. In the Church As It Is, it is necessary for us to pay tithes and offerings so that the work of the Church can go forward and the needs of the poor met.

The fact is, it is impossible for the Church to perfectly reflect what each of us expects it to be. We all want the Church to be in our image, to reflect our values, to respond to our issues, to fight our battles. During the sixties I knew people who left the Church because of our practice of denying priesthood ordination to Blacks. In an ideal Church, I believe that such a practice would never have become part of the fabric of our ecclesiastical life. But, for a set of complex reasons, it did. There were a number of us who felt that this practice was not inspired and that, in spite of official justifications and rationalizations, it should never have been instituted. We didn't leave the Church over this issue because we knew that the Church as an institution doesn't always perfectly reflect the teachings of the gospel and because we felt the immense good that the Church did was not negated because it failed in this particular instance.

The fact is, those of us who are members have been called to be a part of the Church during what some consider the most wicked time in history. It is a Church which

doesn't have the luxury to withdraw from the world into some desert place. It is a Church which has been asked to play an essential role in the great winding up of things, to be in the world but not of the world. And we all know how difficult that is! I am intrigued by the Lord's description of the Church as not only true, but also living (D&C 1:30). If it is living, it is also evolving, just as we are.

I often ponder where I would be were it not for the Church. It is by no means a stretch of the imagination to think I might be in prison. Much in my early life pointed in that direction. I don't wish to be overly-dramatic, but I have a cousin and a sister who did go to prison. I have a nephew who has been in prison for thirty years. Collectively, members of my extended family have committed every major crime, broken all of the Ten Commandments, and been guilty of all of the cardinal sins. Everyone in my immediate family is or was an alcoholic.

I escaped essentially because of the Church. When I was seven, my father joined the Navy and went to fight the war in the South Pacific. Before he did so, he sent my brother and me to Durango, Colorado to live with my mother, our half-sister, and our stepfather. While my father was in the service, our mother abandoned my brother, my sister and me. When the war was over my father, who had been converted by a miraculous priesthood blessing, taught me the gospel and took me to church—a little branch that met in the basement of the high school in Wickenburg, Arizona. Although I was only ten, I somehow felt at home. I felt safe in the church and loved by the people there. When I was fifteen and my father was again divorced and he and my brother inactive in the Church, every Sunday I got up and rode the bus to church by myself—this time to the Long Beach First Ward. There too, as I have in wards and branches I have attended in various parts of the world, I found love. Much of what I am I owe to the Church. It has provided me with innumerable opportunities to grow—to evolve from that broken and disadvantaged early environment to a place where I hope I am able to demonstrate a mature discipleship.

Consider what we as members of the Church enjoy, not just through the gospel, but through one of the earthly institutions Christ has chosen in which his gospel is to be lived. Because we are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints:

--We have a clear understanding of our true identity—not as drops of water in a great ocean of spirit; not as automans controlled by forces outside ourselves or as animals driven inexorably by our desires; not as sinners in the hands of an angry God (as the seventeenth-Century cleric Jonathan Edwards would have called us), not as lonely creatures in a barren landscape waiting for a God or Godot who will never appear, not as existential beings trapped in a room with no exit—but rather as literal sons and daughters of loving heavenly parents, the most precious things in all their creation. In the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, we are Christ's "choice and worthy the winning."²

--We have a understanding of the true nature of God—not, as one of Emily Dickinson’s poems calls him, as “A distant, stately lover”³; not as deus absconditus, a God who wound up the clock of the world and then went off to more important things; not as a draconian judge who is as pinched and narrow as one of Moliere’s or Dickins’ divines; not as a Jaubert or government official who pursues us through the dark and into our dreams—but as a tender, loving parent, one who heals broken hearts and wipes tears from off all faces, who has designed all creation so that we may find our way back to his presence, and who has given his only son so that we might find eternal joy.

This God is the one seen in the vision of Dame Julian of Norwich: “There is no creature that can know how much and how sweetly and how tenderly our maker loves us. And therefore we can with his grace and his help continue in spiritual beholding, with everlasting wonder at this high, overpassing, unmeasurable love that our lord has for us in his goodness.”⁴

--Our true understanding of divinity includes the knowledge that we have a Mother as well as a Father in heaven. While the Church has yet to fully understand or appreciate this glorious doctrine, we have the privilege of calling her into our spiritual imaginations. As I once expressed it, “If everything here is, as the scriptures say, a type of what exists in the eternal worlds, then God the Mother’s brightness, inventiveness, and creativity, to say nothing of her love and compassion, must equal in magnitude those of the Father.”⁵ How wonderful to know that she was part of our beginning, that she will be there to greet us in her royal home on high, and that she will be part of our eternal continuing.

Because we are members of this Church:

--We have an understanding of what it means to be exalted—to become holy, glorified beings like God—that is to become gods ourselves. This doctrine, which other believers find blasphemous, is in fact the most glorious of all the doctrines of God, for in it we are promised everything. Nothing of knowledge, of beauty, of power, of intelligence, of creation, of glory will be withheld from us, but in fact will flow unto us “without compulsory means” (D&C 141:26). In the words of the Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood, “And he that receiveth my Father receiveth my Father’s kingdom; therefore all that my Father hath shall be given unto him.” (D&C 84:38). There is no way to exaggerate this profound and astonishing teaching or to discount the Church’s role in helping to bring it to pass.

Because we are members of this Church:

--We have a true understanding of the eternal nature of marital love as promised in the New and Everlasting Covenant of marriage. Among all the believers in the world we are unique in having a specific doctrine promising that these most intimate of bonds are not ephemeral but eternal. Is it possible to fully appreciate the realization that those

we embrace here with physical and spiritual intimacy we will so embrace in the resurrection?

--Which leads to another blessed understanding—that the love which continues beyond the grave is not only platonic, fraternal, and charitable, but romantic and erotic as well. Again, such a teaching is scandalous to other believers, but to Latter-day Saints it is part of the promise that all good things in mortality can be eternal in nature if we live worthy of them.

Because we are members of this Church:

--We have a true understanding of the atonement of Jesus Christ and of its saving and sanctifying power to all who have ever lived, who now live, or who ever shall live. Among Christian believers, we alone fully understand the connection between Gethsemane and Calvary.

--We have access to hundreds of additional words spoken by Jesus. A number of years ago, the radio commentator, Lowell Thomas, was asked what would be the most significant discovery that humankind could make. He responded, "Finding additional words spoken by Jesus of Nazareth." In the Book of Mormon we have such words—powerful and touching teachings of the Lord, including his blessing of the children in the New World.

--We also have the witness and teachings of additional prophets. Think of how much richer and deeper our understanding of the gospel is because we have Lehi's Dream, King Benjamin's Address, Alma's great discourse on faith, the missionary experiences of Alma the Younger and the Sons of Mosiah, and Moroni's profound teaching on the pure love of Christ.

Because we belong to this Church we have a greater chance that:

--we will live healthier and longer lives.

--our marriages will not end in divorce, especially if they have been solemnized in the temple. (According to a recent article in the Salt Lake Tribune, "Mormons are least likely of all Americans to get divorced"⁶).

--we and our children will not be subject to the devastating effects of drugs and alcohol.

--we will be well educated.

--we will be happy. Nephi says of his people, "We lived after the manner of happiness" (2 Nephi 5:27), a condition that still characterizes the essential mode of living among Latter-day Saints.

What is right with the Church? Not everything, certainly, but a great deal.

--What is right with the Church is its stability in a world of moral relativity and rapidly changing values. For example, the Church takes a strong and certain position on pornography at a time when this evil invades almost every corner of our society, when millions of people are addicted to pornography on the Internet, when pornography robs many adults of the opportunity for true intimacy and increasing numbers of children of their innocence.

--What is right with the Church is that it requires of us a number of small sacrifices that have the power to sanctify our souls. Latter-day Saints who live the law of the fast, who pay their tithes and offerings, who give of their time and energy in church service, who do missionary work, who do work for the dead, are constantly blessed with opportunities to go outside themselves and thus to grow spiritually.

--What is right with the Church is its missionary program. I don't believe there is any way to truly calculate the great blessings and benefits that accrue to individuals, to families, to the Church, and to society from those who fulfill full-time missions. Where else in the world is there an organization that produces an army of 60,000 young people in their late teens and early twenties who sacrifice two years at the prime of their lives? Many go to another country, learn a foreign language, sometimes suffer persecution, take leadership positions, and give dedicated humanitarian service. In what other organization do so many senior couples give service to others in such a sustained way?

--What is right with the Church is that it uses its institutional power to bless those in need. As an institution, the Church is able to accomplish our collective will in a way that otherwise would not be possible. Many of us, for example, might wish for some way to help the people ravaged by hurricanes in Guatemala and Honduras, to help the refugees in Darfur, to assist AIDS orphans in Africa, or to support the education of poor saints in the developing world. The Church, acting on our behalf, has sent millions of dollars worth of aid to relieve the suffering of such peoples. As the Director of Humanitarian Services for the Baltic States Mission, I was able to see first-hand many instances in which the generosity of the Saints, channeled through Deseret Charities, blessed orphans, the disabled, the sick, and the needy in Eastern Europe. I can still see the look of delight on the face of a severely disabled child who was able to walk better because of a pair of crutches donated by someone in the Church.

--What is right with the Church is that it is one of the institutions in the world that upholds standards of decency, modesty and morality, that takes a strong and certain stand against sexual immorality and violence. In a world of decaying moral standards, increasing crudeness and indecency, and wanton sexual permissiveness, the Church calls its members to live lives of holiness, to "come out from the wicked . . . and touch not their unclean things" (Alma 5:57). The Church's emphasis on purity of thought and action, on pre-marital chastity and marital fidelity is a blessing to those who honor it—and to society in general.

--What is right with the Church is that it has an optimistic, coherent, thoughtful, and soul-satisfying, religious philosophy. Such concepts as free agency, eternal intelligences, humans being the literal offspring of Deity, exaltation, salvation for the dead, the continuation of family relationships in eternity, and the degrees of glory constitute one of the most enlightened views of humans and gods in the history of humankind. As Joseph Smith remarked in his King Follett Discourse, such doctrines “taste good.”⁷

Latter-day Saints believe in a God earnestly engaged in history, one who is concerned about our temporal as well as our spiritual welfare, one who regards us as a loving parent regards his children. As in the Old and New Testaments, in the first years of the Restoration one finds God pleading with the saints to catch the vision of what the Church could be; God chastising the Church leaders who at times seemed more interested in their own welfare than that of the Church; God waiting through the fits and starts, the wrong turns, the bungled decisions, the stumbling through the lower law, until the Restoration was complete.

In the contemporary Church we see the same process at work. At times those who are called to act for God make mistakes. (I certainly made my share as a bishop and as a counselor in a fulltime mission presidency.) At times decisions made in the name of the Church reflect the limitations and even the prejudices of those who make them. Anyone who has lived very long knows that on the local as well as on the general level certain decisions are made that later are reversed or changed. We all know of instances in which the Church as an institution has made decisions that are unfair or unjust to certain members. And anyone who reads Mormon history knows that there have at times been strong disagreements among the leading brethren as to doctrine, policy and practice. And yet, in spite of these limitations, the Lord continues to sustain those whom he has called to lead the Church and, I believe, expects us to sustain them as well.

Because of the Church I have learned how to be a better human being—a more loving husband, a more nurturing father and grandfather, a more faithful friend, and, hopefully, a more dedicated disciple of Jesus Christ. As I partake of the sacrament each week I am challenged to repent of my sins, to be less selfish, to give more of my goods to the poor and needy, to give more of my time to build Christ’s kingdom. The possibilities for my personal spiritual evolution are magnified because of the discipline the gospel imposes and the opportunities the Church offers.

And so I say to myself, “If God can live with the imperfections of his Church, can’t I?” And, more to the point, “If God can live with my imperfections, can’t I live with the Church’s?” To put it another way, the Church is one of the landscapes in which we are called to follow Christ. My friend Barry Lopez writes of an experience he had on the

barren tundra of northern Alaska. As he walked that stark landscape, he was struck by “the contemplation of human messes, the sentimental pessimism about human failure the Germans call *welschmerz*.” He writes, “As I pursued a looping hike that day across the shallow ridge-and-swale of damp tundra, a phrase hung before me: peccata mundi, the sins of the world.” Thinking of the difficulty of forgiving the gross sins and injustices of our time, he concludes that somehow he must forgive: “To condemn what individual human beings perpetrate but to forgive humanity, to manage this paradox, is to take on adult life. Staring down peccata mundi that day on the tundra, my image of God was this effort to love in spite of everything that contradicts that impulse. When I think of the phrase ‘the love of God,’ I think of this great and beautiful complexity we hold within us, this pattern of light and emotion we call God, and that the rare, pure ferocity of our love sent anywhere in that direction is worth all the mistakes we endure to practice it.”⁸

I contend that one of the directions in which we are called to send the “pure ferocity” of our love is the Church itself. We shouldn’t feel that we need to choose between the Church As It Is and the Church As It Should Be. In reality, it is important that we live in both worlds—that we accept the Church as it is with love and forgiveness and at the same time work to make the Church more as it should be. We can do this with grace and generous charity as we remember that this is exactly what the Lord does with us.

In her beautifully honest and touching book, Traveling Mercies, Anne Lamott tells of finding her way to God out of an atheistic upbringing and a godless world of drug and alcohol abuse by hearing singing from a black church, St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, as she stood across the street in a flea market in Marin, California. This happened at a point in her life when she felt herself “crossing over to the dark side.” For a number of Sundays she simply stood in the doorway and listened to the singing of this small black congregation. Slowly she inched her way into the church. She writes, “Eventually, a few months after I started coming, I took a seat in one of the folding chairs, off by myself. Then the singing enveloped me. It was furry and resonant, coming from everyone’s very heart.”⁹

The effect of her walking into that Church was to give her a light out of the darkness: “Something inside me that was stiff and rotting would feel soft and tender. Somehow the singing wore down all the boundaries and distinctions that kept me so isolated.” But, as she had done previously, on this particular Sunday she rushed out of the church before the sermon. A week later she stayed for the entire service, and says, “[One of the songs was] so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling—and it washed over me.” In reflecting on this experience later, she said, “When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrew

tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of home—which it's where, when you show up, they have to let you in. They let me in."¹⁰

That, among other things, is what churches are for—to create a home for us, to let us in. When they fail to let all of us in (including the homely, the heretics and homosexuals), they fail in their fundamental purpose, which is to make it possible for us to experience the love of God and the love of others in deep, intimate ways and, therefore, to feel enough love for our selves that we can allow the grace of God to work its miracle in our lives.

The Church is the joint stewardship of all its members. In a conversation I had with Karl Keller a number of years ago, I said, "The Church is like us: sometimes the Gospel works through us and sometimes it doesn't. I'll go one step further: the Church is us; it is no better or no worse than we are (and that includes you and me), for the Church is what we make it."¹¹

As I said at the outset, my observations are not meant in any way to ignore or gloss over what is wrong with the Church. Like any institution managed by humans, the Mormon Church is less than perfect both in its teachings and its practice. The extent to which the Church reflects values and perpetuates policies and practices that are too hierarchical, patriarchal, sexist, anti-intellectual, racist, homophobic, and too protective of its own image, it diminishes its power to be a force for goodness. Nevertheless, as a "living" and therefore potentially evolving institution, one would hope that its evolution is progressive rather than regressive. It is the stewardship of all the leaders and the members to ensure that it is, and this means facing honestly those things about the Church that are not reflective of the gospel of Christ as well as acknowledging and affirming those that are.

So, while there are things that are wrong with the Church, there is much that is right with it. Finally, what is right with it is that it is one of the few places where we can find holiness, where we can find manifestations of God's abundant love and his amazing grace. Not always, but often. And in an increasingly unholy world, that is no small thing. It is, I believe, for the possibility of finding such holiness that the Lord created his church, that he commands us to be engaged in its mission, and that he invites us to partake of its blessings. It is partly out of hope that I will find such holiness and perhaps in my small way make holiness happen for myself and others that I continue to go to church. In spite of occasional disagreements with practice or policy, in spite of occasional frustration and hurt, and in spite of the weekly challenges of being a liberal, intellectual Latter-day Saint in a conservative, often anti-intellectual church community, because of my wish for the Church As It Is to be more like the Church As It Should Be and because of a life-long experience of finding love and goodness there, I give the

Church my allegiance and devotion, not mindlessly but mindfully, and with full heart and voice.

¹ Wayne C. Booth, My Many Selves: The Quest for a Plausible Harmony (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2007), 303.

"As Kingfishers Catch Fire," www.bartleby.com/122/34.html. Accessed 6 October 2007

³ Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1961), 78.

⁴ The Enlightened Mind, ed. Stephen Mitchell (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 125.

⁵ Robert A. Rees, "Our Mother in Heaven," Sunstone 15:1 (April 1991), 49.

⁶ Bob Mims, "Mormons: high conservatism, low divorce, big growth," Salt Lake Tribune, 1999-MAR-6, at: <http://archives.his.com/smartmarriages/>

⁷ Joseph Smith, History of the Church, Vol. 6, p.312

⁸ Barry Lopez, Winter Dreams:

⁹ Anne Lamotte, Travelling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith (New York: Pantheon, 1999), 48.

¹⁰ Tender Mercies, 100.

¹¹ "Letters of Belief," Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 9:3 (1974), 13.