

Tikkun k'nessiah: Repairing the Church

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“I believe Mormonism” . . . calls for thoughtful disciples who will not be content with merely repeating some of its truths, but will develop its truths; and enlarge it by that development. Not half—not one-hundredth part—not a thousandth part of that which Joseph Smith revealed to the Church has yet been unfolded, either to the Church or to the world.”—B. H. Roberts

The Jews have a term, “Tikkun olam,” which means “repairing the world.” It is both a statement of belief and a commitment to action by individual Jews to heal, repair and transform the world. Appropriating the concept and inspired by the Jewish passion for repairing the world, I have coined the term “Tikkun k'nessiah”—meaning repairing or healing the Church. In this paper, I hope to explore the dimensions of what *Tikkun k'nessiah* may mean to those of us who are members of the Restored Church at this critical juncture in its history.

The meaning of “tikkun olam” as it is used among certain Jews today can be traced back to the sixteenth-century Kabbalist, Isaac Luria. Luria taught that when God created the world, he sought to light it by shaping special lamps or vessels to hold his light. He explains, “But as God poured the Light into the vessels, they catastrophically shattered, tumbling down toward the realm of matter [that is, the earth]. Thus, our world consists of countless shards of the original vessels entrapping sparks of the Divine Light. Humanity’s great task involves helping God by freeing and reuniting the scattered Light, raising the sparks back to Divinity and restoring the broken world.”¹ Many Jews believe it is their duty to participate in the repair and redemption of the world by “freeing and uniting the scattered Light.” In some traditions, this is seen as the shared, sacred work of God and humans.

When I spoke at the Berkeley Institute of Religion last year, I asked the students, “Whose church is this.” They responded, “It’s the Church of Jesus Christ.” I replied, “There are two possessives in the name of the Church: it is the Church of Jesus Christ, certainly, but it is also the Church of the Latter-day Saints. It isn’t the Church of the First Presidency or the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles or the general authorities, it isn’t the church of conservatives or liberals or of any particular group, but rather the Church of all those who are or can be called saints. Thus, the Church is our joint stewardship. Ultimately, it will be no better or no worse than we ourselves choose to make it, than we ourselves choose to be.”

It is in this sense of joint stewardship that I want to say a few words about repairing and healing the Church. At the outset, I want to make it clear that I don’t consider myself a member of the

Ark Steadier's Society (whose initials are A.S.S.!) or in any way to presume to have an elevated or enlightened position or to have any special calling in relation to the Church. Like you, I am simply a member, a disciple, a follower of Christ, one of the workers in his vineyard. But as such, I feel I am called to try and help the Church more perfectly reflect the truths, glories, and beauties of Christ's gospel, to help set right, first, those things that I need to repair and heal within myself, and then, along with everyone else who feels so called, to do the same in the Church. What I am suggesting is that we could learn something important from our Jewish brothers and sisters in relation to the ethic of repairing. Perhaps like Jews, Latter-day Saints could have as part of our devotion, "the 'repairing imperative,' that things must be mended, a sense livened by the constant perception of God's presence and concern behind all things."²

Repairing the world or the Church presumes that it is in some ways and to some degree broken. As Rabbi David Wolpe asserts, "Tikkun olam presupposes that the world is 'broken' and needs to be fixed by the care and application of people working with the guidance of God."³ The same could be said of the church. Reading Church history, that brokenness is apparent; but it also apparent in our own time as the Church has grown into a world-wide faith and faces the challenge of adapting to an increasingly secular society and an increasingly complex membership. While some might consider it disloyal to speak of the brokenness of the contemporary Church, anyone who has an authentic engagement with the Church knows that invariably it is in some ways less than its promise. Saying so is to state a reality, not voice a criticism.

From the beginning, God has known that any earthly manifestation of his Son's Kingdom on earth would be imperfect because we who constitute the body of the Church as well as those he calls to lead it are imperfect. Both Jesus' parables and Paul's sermons (as well as those of Nephi, Moroni, Joseph Smith, Brigham Young and a host of other latter-day prophets), are directed at repairing the brokenness of the church. Throughout scriptural history, we read of God pleading, persuading, cajoling, at times even bribing his children to take ownership of the Church (however it was defined in different dispensations), to build and magnify it, to expand its borders of thought, imagination and action. I think it is safe to say that at times we have broken God's heart over our reluctance to better shape ourselves and therefore the Church to the ideal and standard to which he has called us.

Instead, we have insisted on building golden calves, of wandering in the desert, of going a-whoring after strange gods, of being drunk on the nectar of the world and in love with our own narcissism. At times, the Israelites, Jaradites, Nephites, early Christians, and modern Mormons—have all let the Church to one degree or another fall into disrepair. At times we have come to our senses (assisted by famine, persecution or temporary withdrawal of the heavens) and repaired or renewed the church, whether in the wilderness, in small enclaves of

righteousness, in the Great Basin Kingdom, or in great communities like the city of Enoch and land of Bountiful following Christ's visit to the New World.

In practical terms, how does one go about repairing the Church? As I said at the outset, it should begin by one doing (and maintaining) a thorough inventory of one's intention, motives, and integrity. Next one should carefully consider how and under what conditions to participate in the work of repairing. Most Latter-day Saints I know would immediately shift their attention to the leaders of the Church, but before focusing on them, we should consider reform and repair among the membership. Where to begin? For me, the following suggests brokenness among the body of the saints and represent opportunities and challenges for grass-roots repair: It is my observation that as a body of believers:

- We are more interested in answers than in questions.
- We are more comfortable with certainty than doubt.
- We are more inclined to surrender responsibility to those in authority than to trust the integrity of our own thoughts and inspiration.
- We seem more interested in being right than in being good.
- We are more focused on obedience than on love.
- We are more interested in the next world than in this one.⁴
- We are more inclined to trust our feelings over our thoughts.
- We are more focused on ourselves than on others and, thus, we have a tendency toward cultural egoism.

Each of these might be a virtue, but I contend that in their extreme expressions they all constitute brokenness. I believe that repairing the Church means that individually and collectively we need to address these cultural characteristics which essentially prevent change and retard progress.

This means that some of the most important work of repair begins at the local level. That is, the work of *tikkun k'nessiah* begins with oneself and in one's family, ward and stake. It begins by being willing to accept callings and then magnifying them, by volunteering to do something that needs doing, some small thing that might make a small difference.

Sometimes the work of repairing requires one to stand up for principle, as a number of California Latter-day Saints did during Proposition 8. I heard of one bishop who refused to follow instructions about asking members of his congregation to contribute to the effort to enact the proposition. He said to the stake president, "This is not something I feel I can do. If you need to release me, then I will understand." The stake president excused him from the assignment.

There is immense pain in the Church. Addressing that pain depends on our individual acts of courage, of sacrifice, and especially of love. It is in that realm where much of the most important work of repairing is to be done. But there is also the larger realm, the Church beyond the individual broken heart, beyond the sin and insensitivity with which each of us must contend, beyond the madness and mystery of trying to make the gospel and the Church work in our lives, families and congregations. It is in that realm, the macrocosm of the institutional Church, where the work of repair also is required, even though it is more daunting and more difficult because it is largely beyond one's control. And yet it is also part of our individual and collective stewardship.

Based on my nearly seventy years as a member of the Church, the following is my personal list of things that might constitute as needing repair. It is because I believe the ultimate mission of the Church would be enhanced by intelligently and compassionately addressing such matters that I risk listing them here (and, based on my experience, doing so is a risk):

- 1) The Church, as a large bureaucracy, is less flexible, less open, less efficient and less effective than one would wish. As a general authority friend said to me a couple of years ago, "We can't get anything done in the Church! I'm not complaining, but I am lamenting." In many ways, the Church has adjusted well to its rapid growth and increasing complexity, but there are problems, one of which is related to what my friend, Truman Madsen, used to call the "Church Social Service," Church employees who are more afraid of making mistakes than making decisions. This is true of any bureaucracy, of course, but likely more true of a Church whose volunteer leaders and employees are aware that those who give them direction are sustained as "prophets, seers and revelators."⁵ That is, such an administrative culture, one in which taking independent initiative or engaging in imaginative problem solving might be seen as disrespectful or in which questioning the judgment of leaders might be seen as "evil speaking against the Lord's anointed," could inhibit the very kinds of actions that might constitute the work of repairing or healing.
- 2) The Church's method of choosing its president might be improved by instituting a method of succession based on a different principle than longevity of service. While the present system produces a certain stability and continuity, it also produces significant periods in which the Church is in a sort of limbo because the prophet is cognitively diminished or incapacitated. Having a more open and flexible system might open the way for the kind of change one currently sees in the Catholic Church under Pope Francis. At the least, given the miracles of modern medicine in keeping people alive into their eighties and nineties, expanding the status of "emeritus" to the Quorum of the Twelve might be a step in the right direction.

- 3) The Church is, at least to some in its liberal/progressive wing, too imbalanced toward conservatism and, in some regions, even toward fundamentalism. While a certain degree of conformity in terms of politics and culture is desirable, some observers contend that the degree of conformity in the center stakes of Zion constitutes a barrier to reform and renewal. Many have the perception that, for example, Mormons in the heartland (Utah, Idaho and Wyoming) have more in common politically and ideologically with non-Mormons in the South than with their fellow Mormons on the Coasts. I'm not sure what, if anything can be done about this, but I think it is an example of a less diverse and coherent and therefore more broken culture. Although some would argue that the Church's conservatism is its strength, I contend that a Church that is too conservative can be as problematic as one that is too liberal (although, to work toward some kind of balance, I wouldn't mind seeing the latter experimented with for a century or so!).
- 4) Related to and reflective of this imbalance is the perception that the dominant culture influencing the Church on matters of war and peace, the environment, social justice, politics, and Church polity is the Intermountain (especially) Utah culture. For an international church, this can be a significant liability. One of the challenges for the future of the Church is the degree to which it can shed its more provincial, U.S.-centric image. As John Sorenson observed many years ago, "When the time comes that Mormons in the central homeland come to the realization that they too are constrained by cultural ways which have nothing directly to do with the gospel they espouse, the result could be a kind of Copernican revolution with attendant new insights into the Church and the scriptures and the meaning of life."⁶ I say, let the revolution begin!
- 5) Although the Church has made some positive steps toward finding a more favorable balance in terms of gender and racial equality, currently the situation is less than ideal. The Church has not yet figured out what to do with women, especially young, faithful, and progressive women who have less patience with a male-dominant, patriarchy-centered Church culture. Since women once played a more prominent role in the Church, there is precedent for reviving some past practices that might help repair the estrangement that many women, especially Millennials, are experiencing.
- 6) Lack of financial transparency. Because the Church does not disclose its finances, there is inevitable speculation about how much money the Church takes in in tithes and offerings (an estimated \$7 billion annually⁷) and how much it has in assets (estimated \$35 billion⁸) and therefore how and where and on what it spends members' tithing and other contributions. While disclosing financial data is risky, many feel that a more transparent system would diminish both speculation and criticism. As contributors and

share-holders, many individual Latter-days Saints feel they have a right to an accounting of Church finances.

- 7) Adjusting to social change. While some argue that the reluctance and slowness of the Church's willingness and ability to change is what leads to its stability, there is also the sense that the Church is often significantly late in adjusting to social issues that could have a positive impact on its mission. The question of blacks and the priesthood is a dramatic example.
- 8) Dealing with questions, challenges and dissent. In other words, the heart of the Mormon Faith Crisis. One of the more complicated problems for the Church is how, in the age of the Internet, to deal with dissent and criticism as well as open hostility. These kinds of issues are difficult for any organization, but especially so for one that has an ultimate claim to truth and legitimacy. The modern Church has a history of responding to criticism by not responding, by being defensive, and sometimes by retaliating against those who criticize. The steps the Church has taken in the past several years in publishing the Joseph Smith Papers, underwriting white papers on various controversial subjects, and openly admitting past errors have all helped repair the Church, but additional work is needed.

If these are indeed some of the areas in which some work of repairing could be done, the question for individual Latter-day Saints, especially the vast majority without any significant power or position, is when, by whom, and by what means such work should be done. This is a critical question if for no other reason than many would consider it presumptuous for any individual to feel that he or she could help repair the Church when the consensus is that such work is "best left to the brethren." But, as I have tried to argue, this is the work of all who have covenanted to build and expand Christ's kingdom. It is also the charge the Lord gives us in the Doctrine and Covenants where, speaking to all members (calling us tenderly his "little flock"), he says, "The kingdom is yours until I come." In other words, he is entrusting the Church to the collective care of the saints and, I believe, will hold us accountable for whatever condition the Church is in, not only when he comes, but each step along the way.

I have immense respect for those in authority. I have always gladly sustained the general authorities. I do not envy anyone who has the onerous responsibility of governing such a large and diverse church during such a complex period of the history of the world. Being a general authority, from all I can gather, requires both broad administrative skills and deep spiritual sensitivities. It requires one to handle on a daily basis the complexities of a large and growing organization while also being ready to respond to a saint somewhere in the world who wants a miracle performed on the spot. Judging from what I have been told by the few general authorities I have known personally, I also sense that it is difficult at times for the brethren to distinguish between those who have a genuine desire to help and those who may have a

frivolous intention or a sinister agenda. Obviously, the brethren can't have a completely open-door policy as far as such issues are concerned, otherwise they wouldn't have time for anything else. It is extremely challenging for people in such positions to constantly be in the public eye, to always be spiritually in tune, and to be called upon to make Solomonic decisions on a daily basis. Probably the last thing a general authority wants to hear is how he might do his job better!

At the same time, if one has made a covenant to consecrate all that one has to the Church for the building up of the Kingdom of God on earth and the establishment, strengthening, enhancement and enlargement of Zion, then repairing the Church is a sacred obligation—albeit one that must be discharged with all of the virtues of the priesthood (which apply equally to men and women): “by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; By kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul[, and] without hypocrisy, and without guile (D & C 121:41-42). Especially by “love unfeigned.” Whatever we do, however we do it, the important thing to believe we can make a difference.

I'm aware that to want, out of love, to repair the Church, to hope for change is not easy. Believe me, I know. Nevertheless, if we don't do this work, who will? As Annie Dillard writes, “There is no one but us. There is no one . . . on the face of the earth, or in the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, . . . and our children busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse, and the tangled comfort of pleasure and grown exhausted. . . . But there is no one but us. There never has been.”⁹ And, one might add, there never will be.

To understand the concept of repairing the Church, I would like to use the metaphor of repairing or renovating a house. Having owned several houses in my life, all of which needed continuous repair and sometimes major renovation, I know something of what it takes to make a house work for those who live in it. I'm not very skilled as a carpenter, electrician or plumber, although I have done such repairs on my homes. Mainly I am a handy man, one who is continually solving small problems and calling on more skilled craftspeople for major, more complicated tasks. I have always felt a sense of satisfaction when I have been able to fix a leaky toilet, a broken window, a jammed garbage disposal, or a faulty electrical junction. I also work on the outside when necessary, but I do so with a familiarity and knowledge of what's on the inside.

What I have learned is that almost all repairs have to be made from inside the house. Most of the time, one has to climb into the attic or crawl under the sink, raise floorboards or replace light switches. The same is true for the house of my faith: to have any chance of repairing this house, I have to live in it. I can stand outside and criticize or complain about it, but that's not

very useful or very rewarding--and the house doesn't get fixed. Abandoning the Church because of something broken in it is like leaving a house because the plumbing isn't working well.

Some critics of the Church remind me of those who come into a house and see only what's wrong with it, but don't volunteer to fix it. They run their fingers over the mantel to see if it is dusty, they complain about the color of the carpet, they make disparaging comments about the smallness of the rooms, and they comment about how poor it is in comparison with their or someone else's house. Others, remind me of renters. I have a couple of rental properties and I can assure you that renters almost never have a sense of obligation or care that a homeowner does. They seldom take any pains to fix things and often complain that the owner hasn't created a perfect house for them to live in. Renters in the Church are those who come but don't really participate, who don't really feel the house of the Lord is their house, who don't show up on Saturday mornings to clean it for Sunday services or on Tuesday evenings to work with the youth. Some of these saints are like those President Udchtdorf characterized as "sleeping through the Restoration."

I don't want to sleep through the restoration or even stroll through it. Its blessings are too great and its promises too grand for me to consider doing so. The Restoration is not an event or series of events that happened in the nineteenth century; it is a process, a continual unfolding. There are many great and important truths yet to be revealed, some of them by ordinary saints, and I don't want to miss any of them. My guess is that not many of these "great and important things pertaining to the kingdom of God" will be revealed to those who leave the Church.

Mormons speak of the Church being true but I would like to consider how a deeper, wider understanding of that word might be instructive in considering how one might repair the Church. Generally, we use "true" as an adjective, as when we speak of "the true Church" (especially if we add the qualifiers "one and only"), by which we mean the one that most conforms to or accords with the primitive church. But "true" can also be a noun, a verb and an adverb. It is as a verb that I think it has the most relevance to the concept of repairing the Church because in this sense it means to bring something into adjustment as with a carpenter using an instrument to "true" a piece of lumber so as it make it fit. Thus, as individual members, we can help "true" the Church by aligning our own devotion and behavior with what we understands the Lord would like.

As I said at the outset, I have no authority beyond the authority of my own conscience or power beyond that of my own mind, voice and spirit; I have no knowledge beyond that of an ordinary person who has lived long enough to have learned a few lessons, including, especially, from his own mistakes and misdeeds; I have no calling beyond that which Christ calls all of his followers to fulfill—to love him and the father with all our heart, might , mind and strength, and to love others as we love ourselves. Embedded in those two commandments I believe is another

commandment that involves both Deity and humanity—to love the Church enough to try and change it, even if that means risking the displeasure of the Church.

This is Christ’s church and it is our church. It is the House of God to which we all belong. In repairing the Church with God’s help, we too can be, as Isaiah says, healers of shattered hearts. That’s the place I want the Church to be for everyone, including you and me—and all of those currently outside the house of the Church, those who have left or are undecided if they want to be inside this house, and those who do not yet know this house. I see our great united charge, our sacred and holy calling as “helping God by freeing and reuniting the scattered Light, raising the sparks back to Divinity and restoring the broken [church and the broken] world.” Let’s begin!

¹ “Tikkun Olam: The Spiritual Purpose of Life,” <http://www.innerfrontier.org/Practices/TikkunOlam.htm>

² *The Healer of Shattered Hearts: A Jewish View of God* (Henry Holt: New York, 1990), 93.

³ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴ The Jews Have a saying, “Just one world at a time please. God has presently placed me upon planet earth and I want to be here 100% so I can accomplish the reason for my being.”

⁵ A friend who worked for the Church (Bonneville International) told me of several examples of mission presidents not reporting accurately on conditions in the mission field for fear of being blamed. Everyone is familiar with leaders who seem hesitant to take problems to a higher level as well as those who have an unrealistic idea as to the inerrancy of general authorities, something I imagine that is not pleasing to those very authorities.

⁶ “Mormon World View and American Culture,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8:2 (Summer, 1973), 17-29.

⁷ Esther Zuckerman, “The Mormon Church Takes In \$7 Billion a Year,” <http://www.thewire.com/global/2012/08/mormon-church-gets-7-billion-year/55755/>

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (Harper & Row: New York, 1977), 56-57.