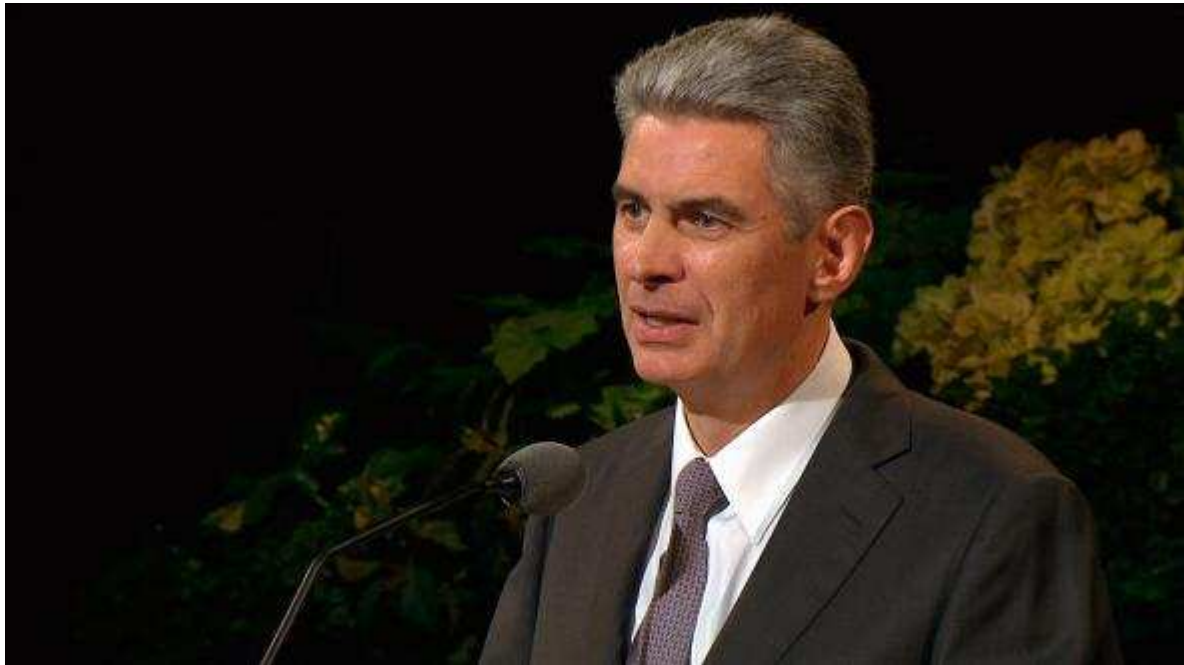


Ye Are No More Strangers

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In this Church there are no strangers and no outcasts. There are only brothers and sisters.



Most of us at one time or another have been in a situation that was new to us, where we felt strange and insecure. This situation happened to our family about five years ago after President Thomas S. Monson extended the call to me to serve as a General Authority of the Church. This call necessitated our family's move from the beautiful place we had enjoyed for more than two decades. My wife and I still remember the instant reaction of our children when they learned about the change. Our 16-year-old son exclaimed, "It is not a problem at all. You may go; I will stay!"

He then quickly resolved to accompany us and faithfully embraced this new opportunity in his life. Living in new environments over the past few years has turned out to be an enjoyable learning experience for our family, especially due to the warm reception and goodness of the Latter-day Saints. As we have lived in different countries, we have come to appreciate that the unity of the people of God throughout the earth is something real and tangible.

My calling has led me to travel to many countries and has given me the choice privilege to preside in many meetings. As I look out over various congregations, I often see members representing many countries, languages, and cultures. One marvelous aspect of our gospel dispensation is that it is not limited to a geographical area or a group of nations. It is global and universal. It is preparing for the glorious return of the Son of God by gathering “his children from the four quarters of the earth.”¹

Though the membership of the Church is increasing in its diversity, our sacred heritage transcends our differences. As members of the Church, we are admitted into the house of Israel. We become brothers and sisters, equal heirs to the same spiritual lineage. God promised Abraham that “as many as receive this Gospel shall be called after [his] name, and shall be accounted [his] seed, and shall rise up and bless [him], as *their* father.”²

A promise has been made to everyone who becomes a member of the Church: “Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God.”³

The word *stranger* comes from the Latin word *extraneus*, which means “exterior” or “from the outside.” Generally, it designates someone who is an “outsider” for various reasons, whether it be because of origin, culture, opinions, or religion. As disciples of Jesus Christ who strive to be in the world but not of the world, we sometimes feel like outsiders. We, better than many, know that certain doors can be closed to those who are considered to be different.

Throughout time the people of God have been commanded to care for all individuals who are strangers or who may be seen as different. In ancient times a stranger benefited from the same obligation of hospitality as a widow or an orphan. Like them, the stranger was in a situation of great vulnerability, and his survival depended on the protection he received from the local population. The people of Israel received precise instructions on this subject: “But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.”⁴

During His earthly ministry, Jesus was an example of one who went far beyond the simple obligation of hospitality and tolerance. Those who were excluded from society, those who were rejected and considered to be impure by the self-righteous, were given His compassion and respect. They received an equal part of His teachings and ministry.

For example, the Savior went against the established customs of His time to address the woman of Samaria, asking her for some water. He sat down to eat with publicans and tax collectors. He didn’t hesitate to approach the leper, to touch him and heal him. Admiring the faith of the Roman centurion, He said to the crowd, “Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.”⁵

Jesus has asked us to observe the law of perfect love, which is a universal and unconditional gift. He said:

“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.”⁶

In this Church there are no strangers and no outcasts. There are only brothers and sisters. The knowledge that we have of an Eternal Father helps us be more sensitive to the brotherhood and sisterhood that should exist among all men and women upon the earth.

A passage from the novel *Les misérables* illustrates how priesthood holders can treat those individuals viewed as strangers. Jean Valjean had just been released as a prisoner. Exhausted by a long voyage and dying of hunger and thirst, he arrives in a small town seeking a place to find food and shelter for the night. When the news of his arrival spreads, one by one all the inhabitants close their doors to him. Not the hotel, not the inn, not even the prison would invite him in. He is rejected, driven away, banished. Finally, with no strength left, he collapses at the front door of the town’s bishop.

The good clergyman is entirely aware of Valjean’s background, but he invites the vagabond into his home with these compassionate words:

“This is not my house; it is the house of Jesus Christ. This door does not demand of him who enters whether he has a name, but whether he has a grief. You suffer, you are hungry and thirsty; you are welcome. ... What need have I to know your name? Besides, before you told me [your name], you had one which I knew.’

“[Valjean] opened his eyes in astonishment.

“Really? You knew what I was called?”

“Yes,’ replied the Bishop, ‘you are called my brother.’”⁷

In this Church our wards and our quorums do not belong to us. They belong to Jesus Christ. Whoever enters our meetinghouses should feel at home. The responsibility to welcome everyone has growing importance. The world in which we live is going through a period of great upheaval. Because of the increased availability of transportation, speed of communication, and globalization of economies, the earth is becoming one large village where people and nations meet, connect, and intermingle like never before.

These vast, worldwide changes serve the designs of Almighty God. The gathering of His elect from the four corners of the earth is taking place not only by sending missionaries to faraway countries but also with the arrival of people from other areas into our own cities and neighborhoods. Many, without knowing it, are being led by the Lord to places where they can hear the gospel and come into His fold.

It is very likely that the next person converted to the gospel in your ward will be someone who does not come from your usual circle of friends and acquaintances. You may note this by his or her appearance, language, manner of dress, or color of skin. This person may have grown up in another religion, with a different background or a different lifestyle.

Fellowshipping is an important priesthood responsibility. Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthood quorums are to act in concert with the sisters under the direction of the bishop to

ensure that each person is welcomed with love and kindness. Home teachers and visiting teachers will be watchful to ensure that no one is forgotten or ignored.

We all need to work together to build spiritual unity within our wards and branches. An example of perfect unity existed among the people of God after Christ visited the Americas. The record observes that there were no “Lamanites, nor any manner of –ites; but they were in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God.”⁸

Unity is not achieved by ignoring and isolating members who seem to be different or weaker and only associating with people who are like us. On the contrary, unity is gained by welcoming and serving those who are new and who have particular needs. These members are a blessing for the Church and provide us with opportunities to serve our neighbors and thus purify our own hearts.

So, my brothers, it is your duty to reach out to anyone who appears at the doors of your Church buildings. Welcome them with gratitude and without prejudice. If people you do not know walk into one of your meetings, greet them warmly and invite them to sit with you. Please make the first move to help them feel welcome and loved, rather than waiting for them to come to you.

After your initial welcome, consider ways you can continue to minister to them. I once heard of a ward where, after the baptism of two deaf sisters, two marvelous Relief Society sisters decided to learn sign language so they could better communicate with these new converts. What a wonderful example of love for fellow brothers and sisters in the gospel!

I bear witness that no one is a stranger to our Heavenly Father. There is no one whose soul is not precious to Him. With Peter, I testify that “God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.”⁹

I pray that when the Lord gathers His sheep at the last day, He may say to each one of us, “I was a stranger, and ye took me in.”

Then we will say to Him, “When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in?”

And He will answer us, “Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”¹⁰

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.