

Culture and Identity



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Chapter 7

The Gospel and Culture: Definitions and Relationships

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My dear sisters and brothers and friends, aloha! I feel both honored and humbled to be asked to share with you some thoughts about the gospel and culture. I love the many, many associations, memories, conflicts, and happy experiences that the juxtaposition of these two words—*gospel* and *culture*—sets up in my mind and probably in yours as well.

As an American of Japanese ancestry born in Hawai'i who lives on the mainland, and as a convert to Mormonism from Buddhism, I am a firm believer in diversity, in the injection of new flowers into old gardens, of many springs rising to swell the rivers and run to the sea. I love diversity. I am comfortable with it. I celebrate it and learn from it. Let me share with you two letters from children to God that deal with this theme. The first one is from eight-year-old Amanda. It reads:

Dear God,

I live in Maine. I have a lot of friends here. People here are great. Some people say we talk



Fig. 1. Chieko N. Okazaki
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funny. That makes me mad. They should talk.
They are from Boston.

Love,
Amanda

[PS] My mother's friends live in Boston.

The second letter is from ten-year-old Andy.
It reads:

God,

I know a kid at school. His name is Tom
Chen. He is Chinese. Most of us are not. Boy,
you like to have variety.

Love,
Andy¹

God *does* like diversity, and I believe that to
the extent that we try to be like Him, we will also
find new ways to enjoy and appreciate and notice
diversity. Perhaps the easiest place to start is with
the beautiful diversity of nature. Brother Ted Gib-
bons talks about his own discoveries:

Christopher, my nine-year-old son, came
home from the summer fields with closely
cupped hands and announced that he had
caught a grasshopper with blue wings. I was
skeptical. In my own youth, roaming the foothills
and farmlands of Cache Valley [in northern
Utah], I had seen grasshoppers with red, black,
yellow, orange, and transparent wings, but never
one with blue wings. "No, not blue wings," I said.
"There aren't any."

He regarded me smugly for a moment,
without speaking, and then opened his hands.
Bright, deep, metallic blue—*real* blue—flashed
in the afternoon sun. In an instant, the insect was
gone. I stared after it in amazement, then caught
my breath, glanced upward, and said very, very
softly, "Thanks."

It came to me powerfully then, as it often
has, that the beauty and variety of God's creation
are evidences of God's love for his children.

On a recent visit to Hawai'i, my wife and I
rejoiced continually at the undiluted beauty of
sea and mountain. We visited fern rainforests
and towering waterfalls and celebrated the profu-
sion of flowering plants, trees, and bushes. Our
evening and morning prayers constantly con-
tained heartfelt expressions of gratitude. But one

afternoon we visited the Volcanoes National Park
and in one area traversed a barren and desolate
landscape, almost lunar in its sterility. It occurred
to me then that a being as all-powerful as God
could have created just such a place for the test-
ing and mortal experiences of his children—a
world without the color and beauty and diversity
of life that had so delighted us—and sent us
there to work out our salvation. Instead he sent
us here, to a planet overflowing with loveliness
and variety.

Is it even conceivable that the *only* purpose
of this diversity is to maintain some precarious
ecological balance? Are grasshoppers with blue
wings necessary to preserve the earth in its orbit
and the biosphere in its function? And even if
grasshoppers are necessary, would not the red-
and orange- and black-winged ones suffice? I
confess that I do not know. I am not a scientist,
not a zoologist, certainly not a God. But I am a
child of God with eyes and a heart. I know that
grasshoppers with blue wings are surprisingly
beautiful, and I know that God made them and
that he loves me. The testimony of the relation-
ship of that love and that beauty is enough. . . .

If we will only perceive that the beauty and
variety that enfold us are nothing less than the
footsteps of the Father, the shadow of the Son—
the earthly confirmation of divine love—then we
will begin to feel . . . "the heavens declare the
glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his
handiwork" (Psalm 19:1).²

From this point on, let me share some
thoughts with you about three questions. First,
what do the scriptures tell us about culture in the
gospel context? Second, how should we deal
with cultural differences? And third, is there an-
other step we need to take to truly implement the
gospel message of equality and inclusiveness?

Culture: A Scriptural Perspective

I know that you know and love the great
foundational scriptures of equality in the gospel,
but let us review them together. Let us begin with
Acts 17:26–28, where Paul is explaining to the
Athenians that all human beings are related to
each other because God is the father of us all: "And

[God] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: for in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.”

The second scripture is in Galatians 3:28–29, where Paul is explaining to these new converts that their faith has given them a new family—they are children of God because they believe in Jesus and because their baptism has welcomed them to this family. Let us begin with verse 28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

The third foundational scripture of equality in the gospel appears in Ephesians chapter 4, where Paul repeats his beautiful vision of the unity of the Saints. Let us start on verse 4: “There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ” (Ephesians 4:4–7).

And now, turn over two epistles to the book of Colossians: “Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all” (Colossians 3:11).

I have saved my very favorite scripture on equality for last. It is in 2 Nephi chapter 26, where there is such a beautiful description of how Jesus Christ loves and cares for all of us. Verse 33 reads, “For none of these iniquities come of the Lord; for he doeth that which is good among the children of men; and he doeth nothing save it be plain unto the children of men; and he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake

of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile.”

Brothers and sisters, it thrills me to the soul to hear this testimony in the words of the scriptures about our kinship to all other human beings and of the essential equality we find in the gospel. This is an ideal. I do not think that very many of us have achieved it yet, but it is a beautiful goal to strive for.

I would like to share one more passage of scripture that I think will lead us into the discussion of how to deal with differences in culture: “For it shall come to pass in that day, that every man shall hear the fulness of the gospel in his own tongue, and in his own language, through those who are ordained unto this power, by the administration of the Comforter, shed forth upon them for the revelation of Jesus Christ” (D&C 90:11). One leader, after quoting this verse, made a very profound and very thoughtful comment:

I do not think I am treating this text irresponsibly to suggest that we might well include the language of children, of youth, of the poor, of the affluent, of the educated and uneducated, and of any other group whose language is their gateway to hearing and understanding. Although the in-house vocabulary of [Mormonism] may fall easily from our lips, we will do well to remember that such language may serve as a barrier rather than a gateway. Many of us, then, will need to become bilingual in this broader sense if we are to communicate to the populations who are as yet relatively untouched by our witness.³

Marian Wright Edelman, a powerful advocate in the United States for children, observes: “When Christ told His disciples to let the little children ‘come unto me,’ He did not say rich children or white children or smart children or nondisabled children. He said let the children come unto me. And so must we.”⁴

Will we learn to look beyond the simple barriers of culture, nationality, and class to see that we are all precious and valuable to God? I believe we must.

Dealing with Cultural Differences

Now, let us talk about the practical problems of dealing with cultural differences. It is easy for us to relate to Brother Gibbons's joy in the beauty and diversity of the natural world, but often we find that diversity among individuals and cultures scares us. It seems unnatural, wrong, even bad. Let us talk now about how to deal with cultural differences as Latter-day Saints. In one culture, parents may slap or spank their children but would never think of sending them to a different room out of the family circle. In another culture, parents would never strike their children but will isolate them in their rooms for long periods of time. Is one system right and the other wrong? I believe that both methods can be effective forms of discipline but that both methods can also be abusive, and a great deal depends on the motivation of the parents.

The scriptures were written out of a very specific culture and during a very specific time period. Many of the rules laid down for their cultures simply do not apply to us anymore. For instance, the Old Testament forbids the eating of pork. If we felt that rule applied to us, could we ever eat *kālua* pig at a *lū'au*? As another example, the New Testament says that it is shameful for a woman's hair to be uncovered in church. Well, just look around at a Latter-day Saint Church meeting.

Instead of focusing on these rules that no longer make sense in our own culture, we focus on the principles: eat healthy food and dress modestly. The parts of the scriptures that have remained constant, whose messages are still new for us today, are timeless principles, coupled with stories that show people struggling to make correct decisions, striving to be righteous, and living with the consequences of their decisions.

Both the New Testament and the Doctrine and Covenants talk about the importance of Church members being "of one heart and of one soul" or of "one mind" (see Acts 4:32; see also D&C 45:65–66). Sometimes we think that this means that we have to look alike, sound alike, talk alike, dress alike, and have the same number of children. I think what it means, above all, is that we need to love the Savior with all our hearts. At that point, we will have the "mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16) to unite us in soul with others. As we think about situations and problems, the answers to frustratingly complex ethical and moral dilemmas will become clearer and simpler because we will know what Jesus would do in that case. Then we can do what He would do, just as He was able to do what the Father would have done in His place. I think rules confuse; principles clarify.

What does this mean for us? Let me use an example from my own life. My family is Buddhist. My mother and my brothers are still Buddhist. I am the only Christian and the only Latter-day Saint among my family. My mother respects my religious beliefs. Because I have the fullness of the gospel, does this mean that I should not respect *her* religious beliefs? No. As you probably know, much of the practice of Buddhism takes place in the home with daily prayers and small offerings of food and flowers before a household shrine. It is a time to acknowledge the existence of God and to feel a connection and concern for the dead in the family. Do I acknowledge the existence of God in my life? I certainly do. Do I feel a connection with and a concern for the dead? I certainly do. Do I believe in prayer? Absolutely. Am I thankful for the bounties of the earth with which the Lord has blessed us? No question about it. So can I pray with my mother at her household shrine when I visit her? Of course I can. My prayers are addressed to my Father in Heaven, not to Buddha. I also understand that the sealing ordinances of the temple link families together eternally, but it seems to me that both rituals turn the hearts of the children toward their

parents in a beautiful way. I believe that God has found a way to teach this principle in three different cultures: in the Old Testament culture of Malachi, the prophet who tells us about turning the hearts; in the culture of Buddhism; and in the culture of modern Mormonism.

Perhaps when you are struggling with ways to make traditional culture and gospel culture come together in a way that helps you as an individual and blesses your family, you could ask yourself these questions:

First, what is the principle behind this traditional practice?

Second, do I believe this principle?

And third, how can I show my support for this principle and participate in this practice without violating a gospel standard?

In the family of my husband, Ed, Sundays were a time for the entire family to gather at the home of his widowed mother to talk, to laugh, to play cards, to gamble a little—never very much—to eat a big meal, to play the guitar and sing, and to drink a few beers. After we got married, we were living on Maui near Ed's mother, so I was included as part of the family in these Sunday gatherings. Because I went to Sunday School in the mornings and sacrament meeting in the evening, it meant that Ed and I came a little later than some of the other siblings and in-laws and left a little earlier. I always gave him his choice about going earlier or staying later, but he decided it was important for us to be together, so his family adapted to this slight change in schedule and still made us feel welcome.

Because I was a Mormon, I would not drink coffee, and I had never drunk beer, but it was no big deal. There were plenty of other things to drink. So that was not a difficulty. But ten months after we were married, Ed studied the gospel and joined the Church. My mother-in-law was not pleased. Mormons were not as respectable as Congregationalists (that was the church Ed had been raised in), and besides that, she thought that a wife should adopt the religion of the husband—not the other way around. Also, Ed

stopped gambling during the card games, passed up the coffee at dinner, and drank water instead of beer. These were differences that his brother and sister noticed and teased him about, but he just smiled and took the teasing good naturedly. Thus, even though Ed's mother disapproved of his conversion, Ed stayed focused on the principle behind the family gatherings—that it was a time to be together and involved in each other's lives, to show that we loved each other and enjoyed being together.

What would have happened if we had stayed away? Or if we had gone and delivered long lectures about the evils of gambling or about the importance of keeping the Word of Wisdom? This behavior would have violated the principle of family unity that we were trying to sustain and uphold. It was no trouble to take hot water instead of tea. And best of all, Ed's brother also later joined the Church.

So this is the first point I would like you to remember. Before you dismiss any cultural practice, think about the principle behind it, decide if this principle is one you also believe in, and see if you can find a way to participate in it in a way that honors that principle.

Religious Exclusivity

Now, I want to flip the problem over and look at it from the other side. I want to raise the possibility that we may erase our old national and cultural "tribes" only to replace them with a new tribalism—the tribalism of religious exclusivity based on our membership in the Church.

What do I mean by new tribalism? How is it possible to go too far in feeling brotherhood and sisterhood within our wards and stakes? Is it wrong to be able to erase national and political enmities, some of which have endured for many centuries between different groups, by passing over the bridge of the gospel into a true ability to see each other as children of God and as each other's eternal brothers and sisters? No, it is not wrong. But it can *become* wrong if our ability to

see another as a brother or sister stops at the door of the ward meetinghouse and if we save our love and our friendship and our acceptance only for other Mormons.

I want to warn us all against this new tribalism, a way of seeing the world that still divides people into “us” and “them.” Yes, it is wonderful progress for a Japanese person and a Korean person to transcend the traditional enmities of their respective national tribes as they both find themselves reborn as new creatures in Christ. They have taken down one of the walls around them that kept them safe but that also kept them confined. However, it is of no advantage to use the same stones to build another wall in a new place.

It is wonderful when a Tongan sister and a Samoan sister and a Tahitian sister can all serve together in a Primary presidency or a Relief Society presidency, drawing on the strengths of their own cultures to find creative and loving ways to serve the sisters. It is wonderful when they see in these cultural differences not a source of hostility or suspicion, but a source of delight and affection. However, if they ignore certain needs within their ward boundaries because the house with the neglected children is not a Latter-day Saint home, or because the woman who is being beaten by her husband has not been baptized, or because the pregnant fourteen-year-old does not want to talk to LDS Social Services, then a new wall has been erected. Now instead of belonging to the Tongan or the Samoan or the Tahitian tribe, they belong to a Latter-day Saint tribe.

Perhaps it will help to think of ourselves as growing like a tree, from the center out, in concentric rings of concern and acceptance for others. It is right and appropriate that the first circle of concern should be for ourselves. If we do not have a strong and healthy relationship with our Heavenly Father, if we do not have our own individual testimonies of the Savior, then we are a tree without heartwood. We are brittle. We will snap easily. Others cannot lean on us for support.

The next circle is our family of origin, those who have given us life and the stories that connect us to the past. This is the bond of blood. We

do not choose these families—our parents, our grandparents, our brothers and sisters, and aunts and uncles. We love them because we belong together. We love them because we spend time together. We love them because we share space and food and stories about our lives.

The next circle is the family we choose and make. This is the circle where we choose to marry and bring children into the world. We get to choose our spouses but not our children—as you may have noticed! And for some, marriage does not happen, and for other couples, children do not come. But the circle is still one of choice. We choose to stay involved with our families of origin or to get involved in new ways with them.

And, whether married or single, all of us choose our circle of friends, ranging all the way from soul brothers and sisters who are as close to us as members of our genetic families, to acquaintances that we associate with for a few weeks or a few years until work, moving, ward boundaries, or different interests imperceptibly cause us to drift apart. For most of us, other members of the Church are in this category. They become a sort of ready-made family as we move from place to place. We share so much because we are all Latter-day Saints.

You all remember that very powerful lesson Jesus taught the people when He was encircled about by a multitude and His mother and brothers came to see Him. When He learned that they had arrived, people expected Him to call them in or go out to them. Instead, He said, “Whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Matthew 12:50). Does this mean that we should abandon our families for the service of God? Is it really God’s will that we should ignore and not recognize our families? Not at all. In Jesus’s culture, where the family was of such preeminent importance that few other social bonds even registered, He was saying, “Enlarge your circle. Include in your familial love and esteem people outside your family but who believe the same way. Faith is a bond that can create a family feeling

too.” Don’t you think this is the real reason we call each other “brother” and “sister”?

Yet, should our concern stop there? Should we not care about others who believe differently? If that were not also true, then Paul would never have become the Apostle to the Gentiles, and Peter would never have had the vision that taking the gospel to the Gentiles was God’s will.

Most of us have a circle of love for created nature: the sea, the forests, the mountains, the animals—whether furry or finned, tame or wild, bird or insect. Most of us have special places to which we are attached by memories and affection or a special sense of beauty. Most of us also have circles of love and concern where we feel connected to people we do not actually know personally—the leaders of our Church, the leaders of our country, inspirational figures like Mother Teresa, tragic figures like Princess Diana, or sports heroes. I think our circles should keep expanding, that we should never draw lines where anyone or anything in creation is outside our area of concern.

Please do not misunderstand me. It is appropriate that we think clearly about where our highest priorities of concern and responsibility lie. I think most of us do this instinctively. Any mother can pick out the sound of her baby crying from among a dozen other wailing infants. Any brother can look over a whole field of soccer players and instantly identify which nine-year-old is his sister, even though the uniforms are all alike. But we need to be able to say, “I know you. I love you. We belong together in certain ways,” without also sending the opposite message: “I don’t know you. I hate you. I will try to keep you away from me, and maybe I will even try to destroy you.” It is right for the Church to be profamily, and it is right to stress the importance of motherhood and fatherhood, but it is not right to exclude or shun those who have not experienced the blessings of parenthood. It is right for the Church to stress the importance of education without communicating that the uneducated are despicable. It is right that our missionaries should try to bring the beauties of the gospel to

all, but it is not right for them to feel contempt or condescension toward other religions.

Differences are not right or wrong. They are just differences. So often, however, we try to attach a value to the difference. Men are different from women. Does this mean they are better than women? Filipinos are different from Chinese. Does this mean they are better citizens? Some are and some are not. Republicans are different from Democrats. Does this mean that they make better politicians? It depends on the person’s character. Think about that word *better*. Do you remember learning a little poem we were taught in grade school to teach us about comparative adjectives? It went like this:

Good, better, best.

Never let it rest

Until the good is better

And the better is the best.

If we start thinking, “Being the elders quorum president is good, but being the bishop would be better,” then it is very easy to think, “And being the stake president would be the best!” Then we start aspiring, judging, comparing ourselves to others, feeling bad about ourselves if we think they are ahead of us on some scale that we have arbitrarily chosen to honor, or feeling proud if we think we are ahead of them on that scale. It is much better to say, “It is good to be a visiting teacher. It is good to be the bishop. It is good to be the Relief Society president.” I think the only time we should use *better* is when, as President Hinckley counseled us, “We should all try to *do* a little better than we have.” Did you notice that he included himself? And how can we tell if we are doing better? Only by comparison with our past, not by comparison with anyone else.

Yes, some differences will make eternal differences. Ultimately, the time will come in the history of this earth “that at the name of Jesus every knee [shall] bow . . . [and] every tongue . . . confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10–11). But does that mean we should walk around with a two-by-four whacking our neighbors behind the knees to be sure that they will bow at the right time? Not at all.

When I talk about avoiding judging and accepting differences, I am not talking about the difference between good and evil. Some things are bad all of the time or almost all of the time. Murder is always evil. Adultery is never good. If there are benefits from getting drunk, I do not know what they are. So I am not talking about the difference between good and evil behavior. All societies and all cultures have ways of controlling the powerful impulses toward violence or indiscriminate sexual expression or total self-indulgence that tears individuals, families, and societies apart. I think that there *are* lines between good and evil and that these boundaries should be diligently observed. But when it comes to good-better-best, particularly regarding our own behavior, we should concentrate on that, not on other people's behavior. And we should never, ever try to make ourselves look good or feel good by making other people look bad or feel bad.

I believe the Savior counseled us, "Judge not that ye be not judged" (3 Nephi 14:1), not just because it was a piece of good advice He was passing on, but because in His infinite mercy He was lifting an enormous burden from our backs. Judging is so serious a task in the Church that only one person in a congregation of two or three hundred is designated a judge, and then he is given counselors to advise him and ordination to possess special keys to ensure that he will judge wisely. And even then, most bishops will tell you that they still make mistakes in judgment. It is a great blessing to be commanded not to judge!

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, do you remember where we began? With children's letters to God, with eight-year-old Amanda's resentment in Maine of being accused of talking funny by people from Boston, and with ten-year-old Andy's observation that most of the kids he knew were not like Tom Chen. Let us remember what else we have learned.

First, let us remember to look for the principle behind the cultural practice. Remember me and my Buddhist mother. Remember Ed and his card-playing family.

Second, remember that the gospel is pointing us toward a time when we can see others—all others—truly as God sees us, as one blood, one flesh, as brothers and sisters. Remember that God is truly the father of us all, that in Christ the divisions and the divisiveness between men and women, between different national groups, between different economic circumstances are done away with; that all are alike unto Him; and that even those who do not know Him are known and loved by Him.

Third, remember that this acceptance must be truly universal. If the gospel gives us tools with which to take down the walls of national or cultural difference, let us not just build another wall to encircle a new Latter-day Saint tribe.

In conclusion, I ask that you follow the admonition of Paul to the Colossians, that these blessings will also be our own: "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved . . . mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another . . . even as Christ forgave you. And above all things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, . . . and be ye thankful" (Colossians 3:12–15).

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Notes

1. David Heller, *Dear God: Children's Letters to God* (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 1987), 32, 29.

2. Ted L. Gibbons, "Footsteps of the Father, Shadow of the Son," *Latter-day Digest*, December 1993, 24.

3. Geoffrey F. Spencer, "Put Out into the Deep!" *Saints Herald*, June 1992, 8.

4. Marian Wright Edelman, *Guide My Feet: Prayers and Meditations on Loving and Working for Children* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 146.