

# Bring Them Unto Christ<sup>1</sup>

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IT WAS MIDNIGHT, AT A FAST-FOOD BARBECUE near Oxford, Mississippi. I was driving from New Orleans to Lamoni with two colleagues on the Lamoni School Board, returning from a national convention. We were driving straight through the night, a 20 hour drive, and we were hungry, so we got off Interstate 55 near Oxford, Mississippi, to get something to carry out.

My two colleagues and several other people were in line ahead of me. As I stood and watched the clerk wait on them, I was struck by her forlorn countenance. As I looked at her sad face, I speculated about what kind of life she might be living. She was about 35 years old. I suspected that she probably had children, but here she was at midnight on a week-night. She was working, probably out of necessity, rather than being at home with her children. It was a low paying job. She was black. And this was Mississippi. While many fine people have grown up in Mississippi, the state has not been known as a good place for black people.

As I looked at her forlorn countenance, I thought about the long history of the enslavement of her people, and the Jim Crow segregation that followed the end of slavery, and the fact that being black and being a woman can mean two strikes against a person. I felt I could make a reasonable guess as to why she had such a sad face. I realized there was not much I could do to help her. I was just passing through the state on the way home to Iowa. But she was providing me with food when I was hungry, and I was grateful for that. I recalled the words of Jesus, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink." (Matt. 25:25 NRSV) And I thought about how often we take persons like this for granted and don't show them the respect and appreciation that we should.

So when she handed me my carryout sack, I looked her in the eye, smiled appreciatively, and said something simple like "Thank you very much."

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<sup>1</sup>A sermon given at the Lamoni, Iowa RLDS Congregation (now Community of Christ) on February 20, 2000, on the theme recommended for that Sunday by the general church.

I will never forget the instant transformation of her sad face into a bubbly smile and a friendly "thank you" in reply. I was stunned then and have since thought about that brief exchange many times. It makes me ask myself, how often, in my encounters with other people, whether it be a brief moment like this one or a longer interaction over time, I show respect, appreciation, and love for the other person?

Am I sensitive to others, to the life situations they find themselves in, or do I view most of my interactions simply in terms of what's in it for me? Do I leave that low-paid clerk on the midnight shift with the impression that I was hardly aware of her existence as a human being? Or do I make her feel appreciated and respected?

If the life of the carpenter from Nazareth was a revelation of the kind of lives God would have us live, then we extend the witness of that incarnation when we show respect, appreciation, and love for other people. We sometimes think that the essence of Christianity is believing the proper doctrines or the proper forms of worship or of church organization and priesthood, etc. And while I don't deny that these things can be useful, I believe that it is clear that love is the core of the gospel.

If we look at the writings of the Apostle Paul, I can think of two kinds of Christians that he had conflict with. On the one hand, there were those Christians who held that strict obedience to the scriptures was the essence of the gospel. Paul got so upset with them that he once declared that the law is a curse, meaning the Mosaic Law, the Torah, the first five books of the Bible—the heart of the scriptures as they existed in that day. He wrote to the Galatians, "All who rely on the works of the law are under a curse. . . Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law" (Gal. 3:10, 13 NRSV).

On the other hand, Paul also got upset with those Christians who seemed to think that their gifts of tongues and prophecies were the essence of the gospel. To them he declared in one of his four surviving letters to the Corinthian saints: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (I Cor. 13:1-2 NIV).

I sometimes wonder what Paul would have to say about religious fundamentalism, Christian or otherwise. I grew up thinking that the essence of the gospel was believing in the right doctrines and belonging to a church that had the right priesthood offices and ordinances. I was fascinated by numbers and always got my best grades in math. I recall thinking, as a lad of about ten, how lucky I was to have been born into the "one true church on the face of the earth." I calculated that a person born here in the United States had about a 1/1000 chance to be born into the RLDS church. How incredibly lucky I was! Then I would calculate

the chances worldwide and it was something like 1/20,000. It was staggering to my mind as I considered my good fortune. As an adult I began to doubt that idea. In the mid-1960s I was a young assistant editor of the RLDS missionary magazine *Restoration Witness*. I recall getting tired of editing articles that explained how the writer had once been a Methodist or Baptist or Catholic or whatever but had found the true church that had the proper church organization and sacraments and, therefore, had joined our church. I recall getting so tired of this kind of article that I wrote a letter to my bosses—the First Presidency—suggesting that we discontinue publishing the *Restoration Witness*.

When I read the letter F. Henry Edwards of the First Presidency sent in reply, it became clear that they were not going to take their young editor's advice! Meanwhile a 1970 article by Donald D. Landon helped me understand more clearly what our priorities should be. Landon wrote in the first issue of the little known and long forgotten journal called *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought and Action* that scriptures and doctrines and ordinances are means to an end—and not the end itself. The end is discipleship. But too often we make the means the end itself, Landon said. Thus, we sometimes considered it more important to hold the right beliefs than to be disciples of the humble carpenter who taught that love is the essence of the gospel. We bring people to Christ most of all when we love them. We can never do that by preaching alone or expounding theology although these things might sometimes help.

Who is most in need of the love of Christ today? We can't really know that. The person who seems to be the happiest, most loved person, might feel miserable and unloved. But I would suggest that many of the people who most need the love of Christ are people we do not often encounter. They are not the middle class, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant Americans with whom we spend most of our time. And we tend, in fact, to arrange our lives so as to have little contact with people whom society has marginalized.

I use the word "marginalized" because I think a word like "outcast" is too strong. While there are certainly many people who do feel like society's outcasts, and certainly Jesus focused a lot of attention on them, there are also many others who may not feel cast out, but who do feel they are not accepted by leaders or opinion-makers in the community. Society has marginalized them. We don't drive them out; we just don't pay much attention to them.

When, for instance, some people fall victim to alcohol or drugs, they tend to drop out of respectable society, including the church. Some people go through divorce and do not feel as welcome in church as they once did. Even widows or widowers may find they are no longer included in the very circles where socially they were once very much at home. Our society celebrates couples and family, the "family values" thing, and so being single can mean feeling doubly isolated. In every district and stake,

it seems we have single members who do not feel as accepted as when they were married or, if never married, as when they were young enough that to be single was not yet a stigma. They tend to drop below our social horizon even though they represent a very significant and growing percentage of our total membership. It is sad when they drop out of sight in the church, but it is sadder still when they feel that we no longer care about them, that they don't belong even in the body of Christ.

There is yet another important group of people whose members may indeed feel like outcasts when they reach adolescence or adulthood and discover—as a significant number of my friends have discovered—that they are gay or lesbian and, therefore, suddenly inappropriate. This often means they drop out of church, out of the society they have known, and too often it means rejection by their own families. Or, for many, it means silence—sometimes a lifetime of silence and secrets even from family and closest friends, compelled by fear that they will be rejected as, in fact, many are.

It is usually estimated that somewhere between five and ten percent of our population is gay or lesbian. These people are about as marginalized as anyone in our society today. And I am not going to pretend that I know the answers to all of the questions that we face in this area. But I think President Grant McMurray put it well in his sermon at the 1998 World Conference when he addressed this issue, saying:

In a world that cannot come to common ground on any of the medical, psychological, cultural, and social issues that swirl around this topic, the church cannot be expected to have those ready answers.

But here is what we can expect—that every person who walks through our doors will be received with open arms. We will listen to the life stories of each person who graces our fellowship and embrace them in love. On this there can be no compromise.

I applaud those congregations in our church—and in other churches—that have publicly made it clear that all persons are welcome and loved among them.

If conversion to the church is a goal—and while that is a worthy goal, it is not the ultimate goal—then the best prospects to bring people to Christ in that sense are not the respectable members of society with whom we tend to associate. Our friends and associates are, for the most part, either settled into mainstream Christian denominations or into the comfort of their secular, un-churched ways. I suggest that neither of these kinds of people, but rather the marginalized members of our society are the ones most in need of Christ's love whether that involves bringing them into the church or not.

I think of C. H. and Hazel McKee in Tulsa, who lead our church's Contemporary Christian Center there. The McKees and their associates

have reached out to alcoholics and drug addicts and other marginalized people of all races. My wife Lois and I attended their annual retreat recently. You see a lot of people there whom you don't see in our regular services. Some of them have kicked the habits that enslaved them. Some of those have remained drug free while others have gone back to their addictions. Some of them have converted to the church. And of those, some have stayed with the church while some have not. But whether they've stayed off drugs for good or not, and whether they've joined the church and stayed with it or not, the McKees and others in our church in Tulsa have brought the love of Christ into their lives. Love, as Jesse Jackson would say, keeps hope alive. If we are going to reach out to drug addicts, we are going to spend time visiting them in prison. Our society is incarcerating addicts at a frightening rate. As the author of Hebrews wrote: "Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them." (Heb. 13:3 NRSV) And in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus is quoted as saying, "I was in prison and you visited me" (Matt. 25:36 NRSV).

Finally, I would suggest that here in southern Iowa at the present time and certainly in the near future, Mexicans coming here to work are going to be people who need to feel the arms of brotherhood and sisterhood. I feel very sad when I hear harsh attitudes being expressed toward the Hispanics who have come to work in small Iowa towns. I have heard people react to their arrival in a very ugly way, using the tired, inaccurate stereotypes and derisive names that are the stock-in-trade of prejudice.

If we as a church are to be an ensign of peace (See our Doctrine and Covenants, section 156, adopted in 1984), maybe we should be trying to find ways to welcome these strangers in our midst, to share the love of Christ with them. It is interesting that Hispanics, who overwhelmingly have been Catholic, are recently converting in significant numbers to Protestantism. Whatever other reasons may be at work, I suspect that this is happening because Hispanics feel wanted and loved in the Protestant churches that are reaching out to them. Maybe we could be a people who make the stranger welcome in our midst—as they settle in our part of the country. Maybe we could make them feel the love of Christ through us. Let's hope Jane Goddall was not too optimistic when she said at the 1999 Peace Symposium at the RLDS Temple in Independence: "We are moving toward the destiny of our species—a state of compassion and love." The Apostle Paul said it so well in Ephesians: Referring to the walls that had been built separating Jews from Gentiles, Paul said that in the body of Christ, "You are no longer strangers and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people." (Eph. 2:19 NIV) Let us make sure that no one is a stranger or alien in our midst.