

## CREATING A ZION CHURCH

Molly McLellan Bennion

In Jacob we read eight times the Lord lamented that it grieved him to lose the branches of his vineyard. Surely it grieves him to lose those who have left the Church today. There are no studies necessary to tell us we are missing family members and old friends. Some left for good reasons—to preserve a family, for instance. But some left with little understanding of the gospel. They know what they don't like but they don't know what they are leaving. I miss them all. I love the gospel and care deeply about the Church. I like being at Church, taking the sacrament and being among good people. You are good people. I know any organization touched by humans is flawed, but I see so much good and so much more potential for good in the Church. What I will say today is motivated by love for God, love for the Church, love for those who stay, and love for those who go.

The bishop asked me to speak about Zion. Zion is aspirational; it would require us to be better in so many ways. If we were, perhaps some of your loved ones and mine would return. Could we actually create a Zion of a Church? Maybe. It wouldn't be easy. But just trying should bring only good. Zion is not impossible. It is a lofty goal but it isn't heaven. What is it? Zion is an earthly concept of safety, both physical and spiritual. It is a place and a community. The ancient Jews tried to create Zions, walled cities on hills; the early Mormons tried to create Zions in several places. Both first sought physical safety, which is not our central concern. But both also sought spiritual safety: a safe place to know and serve God. That would be Zion.

What threats to knowing and serving God do we face? We aren't running from armies and mobs. We face insidious dangers like confusion

and soul-destroying philosophies. Dangers like ignorance of God's nature and will, narcissism, materialism, prejudice, a proclivity for ease and comfort, the degeneration of faith in basic moral and ethical values (think kindness, generosity, honesty, integrity). We face dangers like a lack of respect for others, hedonism, greed, selfishness, a lack of compassion, a lack of purpose and meaning in our lives. All exist side by side the many wonderful aspects of human life. All are real dangers to our mortal and eternal happiness just as surely as was the sword to our ancestors. All leave a trail of sorrow.

They are within our hearts and minds and they are all around us. We cannot hide from them on a hill or in the wilderness but we can combat them. Some of that work is best done in face-to-face community. What community could be more logical than the Church?

How do we start? By understanding what the gospel is and requires. How do we gain that knowledge? With heartfelt prayer and robust study. Time is short; today let's focus on study. Study is only one endeavor of a Zion, but it's a foundational one. There are many righteous people who do not know God, but knowing God makes it so much easier to be righteous.

We do a good job of teaching obedience to many wise practices, but we could do a better job teaching and learning doctrines that would bring us closer to God. We could explore many of the most profound Mormon doctrines more deeply—not just mention them more often but really study them. These few come quickly to mind:

Our God of passion and empathy is unusual in Christendom. He is approachable so it's easier to approach him. Mormon doctrine frees humans from original sin and predestination, the belief our eternal fate is sealed when we are born. In this Church, we start clean and have a chance.

Our doctrine adds meaning and justice to ordinances by providing for all. How inclusive and loving is that! I've thought any ordinance confined to the few who hear of it and accept it must be simply a prop

to strengthen those folks on earth. It would be so unjust to make, say, baptism, a requirement for the eternities, leaving out billions who couldn't possibly know of it.

We take the burden and condemnation of the Fall off women. So much of sexism stems from denying Eve the honor of her courageous and generous choice.

Would we ease the pain of sisters who feel marginalized in the Church if we openly revered our Mother in Heaven? Several years ago, *BYU Studies* devoted most of an issue to arguing there has never been a doctrinal reason not to love her publicly.<sup>1</sup> Women's place in the Church remains a challenging issue.

If truly internalized, the doctrine that we are all literally brothers and sisters would go a long way to eliminating prejudice, racism, sexism, tribalism, homophobia.

Doesn't it make it easier to look to God when we know that he did not create the evil that harms us? And that is a radical doctrine.

I have rarely heard these seminal doctrines explored in Church. Even such key doctrines as the atonement are treated in generalities about following the Savior and loving God. Perhaps we should get in the weeds to think through the doctrine of the atonement. A friend who has spent his life as a bishop, stake president, or patriarch told me he's concluded we do a lousy job of teaching the atonement because he has tried to help so many who gave up any hope of salvation after a first serious sin. He's been surprised that so many had no faith in the atonement. One sin and they felt doomed. One strike and you're out. Scripture posits numerous theories of the atonement. Some are hard to accept. For instance, would God really have so little power over evil that he would have to ransom our souls with an innocent life? Furthermore, the theories ignore the incompatibilities or treat the atonement as a given we are just supposed to accept without reason. Most of us like ideas to make sense.

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1. David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, "A Mother There?: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 70–97.

My favorite atonement theory was suggested by Gene England and gleaned from the totality of the scriptures rather than any one section. Gene suggested an innocent Christ had to die not just any death but a particularly brutal death to get our attention. We are jaundiced and skeptical. Gene suggested we might be more inclined to dismiss Christ but for his voluntary submission to one of the most horrific deaths possible. The shock of the cross forces us to put aside our rationality and consider Christ's message of his love and God's love. We can't imagine such love. It gets our attention. We are drawn to it. We begin to glimpse the truth that love is God's power and our goal. And that love is the key to understanding the character of God. He is not an arbitrary source of human misery but a loving Father, mourning with us, hoping for us, helping us where he can within the limitations of free agency and its essential consequences. The work of fellow Mormons like Gene would enrich our study immeasurably.<sup>2</sup>

Today as we study, we often proof-text the scriptures, mining them for little gems we think we understand. We look for a few words we can lift from the text to prove what we already know rather than approach the scriptures with open minds. This year we study the Old Testament. Have you considered scholar David Bokovoy's conclusion that the Old Testament is not a book but a library and as such does not have a single perspective on any topic of importance? That changes our reading. Have you thought of taking a look at newer translations with more accurate renditions of ancient Hebrew? Do you know Joseph Smith saw weaknesses in the King James version, the product of a committee 400 years ago, that he didn't finish his attempt at a retranslation and that he favored a German bible? Have you read the work of Mormon Old Testament scholar Ben Spackman? How seriously would you like to study the Old Testament?

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2. Eugene England, "That they Might Not Suffer: The Gift of the Atonement," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1966): 141–55.

To know God is to love him. To know God is to know that we can only show our love for him by loving and serving each other. The City of Enoch got it. It was called Zion because “they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them” (Moses 7:18). They must have pondered God seriously. And I doubt they all agreed on every point. All we know of human history says that Zion cannot be an island of sameness surrounded by a sea of pluralism. It’s not just that pluralism would seep and press in. It’s that sameness would be so boring, so limiting. What would be left to learn and what hope would we have of learning it in a cookie cutter world of imperfect clones? We’d just keep reinventing our mistakes. I know I need your study, your thoughts, your great examples of Christlike love to reach anywhere near my potential.

So what does it mean to be of one heart and one mind with diverse people in a pluralistic world, say, in a ward like ours?

Let me say again: Zion is not a concept of sameness but of safety for all God’s diverse family to seek and serve him. There cannot be one way to feel or one way to think. There can be and there are ultimate truths, but God allows for different personalities and talents to adopt them. One heart is a group of hearts open to each other. One mind is a group of minds open to each other. The walls of the hearts and minds of Zion are porous and receptive, without borders, separate but connected.

A Zion church would be a place where those hearts and minds are engaged in honest, vigorous, and humble truth seeking by thought and deed. Hugh B Brown said that “Neither fear of consequence or any kind of coercion should ever be used to secure uniformity of thought in the church. People should express their problems and opinions and be unafraid to think without fear of ill consequences. . . . We must preserve freedom of the mind in the church and resist all efforts to suppress it.”<sup>3</sup>

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3. Hugh B. Brown, “An Eternal Quest—Freedom of the Mind,” *BYU Speeches*, May 13, 1969, [https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/hugh-b-brown\\_eternal-quest/](https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/hugh-b-brown_eternal-quest/).

As President Uchtdorf stated, "... as good as our previous experience may be, if we stop asking questions, stop thinking, stop pondering, we can thwart the revelations of the Spirit. ... How often has the Holy Spirit tried to tell us something we needed to know but couldn't get past the massive iron gate of what we thought we already knew?"<sup>4</sup>

This is a golden age of Mormon history and theology; we have no shortage of great study sources. Classes could be meaty and relevant. Unanswered questions and differences of opinion would send us to research and prayer, not to condemnation or fear. My friend, Mike Austin, wrote of this challenge: "We must find ways to disagree with each other about things that are very important to us while remaining a people of one heart and one mind. This is hard because human beings are spectacularly bad at disagreeing without being disagreeable. Our evolutionary programming works against us. ... when somebody disagrees with us, we feel personally attacked, and our fight-or-flight kicks in. We have an overwhelming desire to run away or to lash out and label offending individuals as 'them.' But there can be no 'thems'... Everybody is 'us' or it isn't Zion."<sup>5</sup> In other words, it's safe for everyone who wants to be here or it isn't safe.

An LDS doctor serving lepers in India drew an analogy in a recent *Dialogue* article. Leprosy nerve damage to arms and legs causes the tissue to be reabsorbed into the body but nails still grow. They turn black and must be cut. One day, Dr. Long set his cutting tool on what he thought was a black nail and just as he was to cut it off realized it was in fact healthy

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4. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Acting on the Truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," Worldwide Leadership Training, Feb. 2012, *Church News*, <https://www.ldschurchnews.com/archive/2012-02-11/president-dieter-f-uchtdorf-acting-on-the-truths-of-the-gospel-of-jesus-christ-38107>.

5. Michael Austin, "Can I Mourn with Those that Mourn Even If They Are for Gay Marriage?," *By Common Consent* (blog), Nov. 5, 2013, <https://bycommonconsent.com/2013/11/05/can-i-mourn-with-those-that-mourn-even-if-they-are-for-gay-marriage/>.

toe tissue the body needed. We must take care to create a welcoming, loving community for we need everyone to unite the human family for God. We must take care not to cut off the healthy tissue of the Church, even that that might at first look a little weak.<sup>6</sup>

The Zion I see is “a community of Saints who have . . . the habits and attitudes that make Zion possible.” As I said earlier, it won’t be easy. Mike Austin also has some practical ideas of habits and attitudes to make our study together fruitful.

We must understand that people disagree with each other because we all see the world through different filters and assumptions and not because we are crazy, stupid, or evil.

We must care more about human relationships than about winning arguments.

We must try to understand each other.

We must recognize our own biases.

We must forgive.

I would add to Mike’s list: We must recognize Church policies and practices have continually changed throughout the history of the Church. There is no reason to think they will not continue to change. Consequently, it seems foolish not to embrace each other despite disagreement over a current position. And it seems potentially foolish to leave the Church over disagreement over even important issues before weighing the rich doctrines unique to our faith. In all honesty, I joined the Church in 1967 praying for major change, particularly that Blacks would receive the priesthood and that things would improve for women.

Both have happened, though I still feel a need to pray for more change on both those issues and others. And I don’t feel any less a Mormon than anyone who has no prayers for change. Nevertheless, I

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6. Lon Young, “That’s Where the Light Enters,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 50, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 139–46.

have watched countless friends leave the Church or be told to leave over these disagreements. One friend was excommunicated for publishing the same documents of women's history you can now find on the Church's website. (I'm happy to say my friend is back in the Church researching women's history.) I miss all who are not back, those with whom I generally agreed and those with whom I didn't.

What would be our personal experience in this would-be Zion ward? Exciting. Thirty years ago I asked my Church hero, scholar and humanitarian, Lowell Bennion, how to deal with the frustration of shallow Church study. A convert, I wanted more help learning. Lowell said I would have to study on my own, but that I could look to the Church to serve and bless and be served and blessed. The serving and blessing part is brilliant but three decades later I have seen too many leave us for want of understanding of basic doctrine. We must find a way to explore those doctrines together. In our Zion, I think we could be learning and serving on steroids. No one would lazily leave the study and service to others. And because we would better understand God, we would better respect and care for each other. We would better understand the power of love. We would do nothing that would make it harder for anyone seeking God to be with us. When we learned we can only show our love for God by feeding his sheep, we would make sure that all have meaningful opportunities to serve in and out of our Zion. We would be more righteous, like the city of Enoch. We would be happy. Some people would see our new grasp of truth and goodness and want to be with us again. We would be so strong.