

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. Roberts¹

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 essay, 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

1. B. H. Roberts, *Improvement Era* 9 (1906): 713.

to Divinity and restoring the broken world.”² Many Jews believe it is their duty to participate in the repair and redemption of the world by “freeing and reuniting 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 several years ago, 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 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 presume to have an elevated or enlightened position or to have any special calling in relation to the Church. Like other Latter-day Saints, 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 to 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

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

sense livened by the constant perception of God's presence and concern behind all things."³

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."⁴ The same could be said of the Church. Reading Church history, that brokenness is apparent; but it is also apparent in our own time as the Church has grown into a worldwide faith and faces the challenge of adapting to an increasingly secular society and an increasingly complex and diverse 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 Christ 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.

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

4. Wolpe, *Healer of Shattered Hearts*, 65.

Instead, we have insisted on building golden calves, on wandering in the desert, on, as the scriptures say, “going a-whoring after strange gods” (Deut. 31:16), on being drunk on the nectar of the world and in love with our own narcissism. At times, the Israelites, Jaredites, Nephites, early Christians, and modern Latter-day Saints have all, to one degree or another, allowed the Church to 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 the land of Bountiful following Christ’s visit to the New World.

In practical terms, how do we go about repairing the Church? As I said at the outset, it should begin by each of us doing (and maintaining) a thorough inventory of our intentions, motives, and integrity. Next, we 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 in our individual lives and among the membership. Where to begin? For me, the following suggests brokenness among the body of the Saints and represents opportunities and challenges for grassroots repair: It is my observation that as a body of believers, we are more . . .

interested in answers than in questions.
 comfortable with certainty than doubt.
 inclined to surrender responsibility to those in authority than to trust
 the integrity of our own thoughts and inspiration.
 interested in being right than in being good.
 focused on obedience than on love.
 interested in the next world than in this one.⁵

5. 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.”

inclined to trust our feelings over our thoughts.
committed to the values of our political parties than to those of the
gospel.
focused on ourselves than on others and, thus, we have a tendency
toward cultural egoism.

Many of these might be considered virtues, but 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 impede 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 ourselves and in our families, wards, and stakes. It begins by being willing to accept callings and then magnifying them, by volunteering to do something that needs doing—small things that might make a small difference.

Sometimes the work of repairing requires us 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. Others were not treated so charitably but nevertheless were willing to suffer censure and ecclesiastical discipline out of love for the Church.

There is immense pain in the Church today. 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, and 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 any one person's control. And yet it is also part of our individual and collective stewardship.

Based on my more than seventy-five years as a member of the Church, the following is my personal list of things that might be considered in need of 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 indeed a risk):

- 1) As a large bureaucracy, the Church 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":⁶ Church employees who are more afraid of making mistakes than decisions. This is true of any bureaucracy, of course, but likely more true of a church whose leaders and employees are aware that those who give them direction are sustained as "prophets, seers, and revelators."⁷ 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.

6. Personal conversation with the author.

7. 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 is not pleasing to those very authorities.

- 2) The Church's method of choosing its president/prophet 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.⁸ Having a more flexible process for prophetic succession 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 areas, perhaps 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, Saints in the Latter-day Saint heartland (Utah, Idaho, Arizona, and Wyoming) have more in common politically and ideologically with non-Latter-day Saints in the US South than with their fellow members 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, less coherent, and therefore less dynamic, productive, and effective 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, immigration, politics, and Church polity is the culture of the Intermountain West, especially Utah. 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

8. See Gregory A. Prince, Lester E. Bush, Jr., and Brent N. Rushforth, "Gerontocracy and the Future of Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 49, no. 3 (Fall 2016).

more provincial, US-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.”⁹ The dynamism of twenty-first-century Mormonism depends on the Church’s success in truly becoming intercultural and international.

- 5) Although the Church has made some positive steps toward finding a more favorable balance in terms of gender 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, patriarchal 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.¹⁰
- 6) The same could be said of other kinds of inequity and injustice.
- 7) 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 annually¹¹) and how much it has in assets (estimated at \$35 billion¹²) and therefore how and where and on what it spends members’ tithing and other contributions. While disclosing financial data might be considered risky by some, many feel that a more transparent system would diminish both speculation and criticism. As contributors and shareholders, many individual Latter-day Saints feel they have a right to an accounting of Church finances.

9. John Sorenson, “Mormon World View and American Culture,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1973): 17–29.

10. See Jana Riess, *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

11. Esther Zuckerman, “The Mormon Church Takes In \$7 Billion a Year,” *The Atlantic*, Aug. 14, 2012, <http://www.thewire.com/global/2012/08/mormon-church-gets-7-billion-year/55755/>.

12. Zuckerman, “Mormon Church Takes In \$7 Billion a Year.”

- 8) Adjusting to social change. While some argue that the reluctance and slowness of the Church's willingness and ability to change is what creates 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 issue of Black members and the priesthood is a dramatic example. It took 125 years for the Church to change its policy on the denial of priesthood and temple blessings to Black members and another forty years to admit that the scriptural and other justifications for the policy were wrong.¹³
- 9) Dealing with questions, challenges, and dissent. In other words, the heart of the Latter-day Saint 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 makes 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 over 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 the 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 it should be done. This is a critical question, if for no other reason than that 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 (tenderly calling us his "little flock"), he says, "The kingdom is *yours* until

13. See "Race and the Priesthood," *Gospel Topics Essays*, available at <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

I come.”¹⁴ 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 in world history. Being a General Authority, from all I can gather, requires both broad administrative skills and deep spiritual sensitivities. They must 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 Church leadership to distinguish between those who have a genuine desire to effect change and those who may have a frivolous intention, personal grievance, or sinister agenda. Obviously, the General Authorities 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,

14. Doctrine and Covenants 35:27 (emphasis added).

by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; By kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile.”¹⁵ Especially by “love unfeigned.” Whatever we do, however we do it, the important thing is 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. 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.”¹⁶ And, one might add, there never will be.

To illustrate 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 lifetime, 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 handyman, 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.

15. Doctrine and Covenants 121:41–42.

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

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 had a couple of rental properties and my experience is that renters tend not to have the same sense of obligation or care that a homeowner does. The worst renters seldom take pains to fix things and often complain that the owner hasn't created a perfect house for them to live in. Some "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.¹⁷ Some of these Saints are like those Elder Uchtdorf characterized as "sleeping through the Restoration."¹⁸

17. To be fair, one might also argue that the Church at times can seem like a landlord who doesn't fix things that are broken or in need of repair or who raises the rent without making any improvements!

18. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Are You Sleeping through the Restoration?," Apr. 2014, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2014/04/are-you-sleeping-through-the-restoration?lang=eng>.

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 to 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"¹⁹ will be revealed to those who leave the Church.

Latter-day Saints 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 a tool to "true" a piece of lumber so as to make it fit. Thus, as individual members, we can help "true" the Church by aligning our own devotion and behavior with what we understand 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 "great" commandments, I

19. Articles of Faith 1:9.

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.”²⁰ Let's begin!

20. “Tikkun Olam: The Spiritual Purpose of Life.”

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