

UNITY IN CHRIST

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Salt Lake Winder Stake*

I take my invitation to speak to you today very seriously. I give this message motivated by love and concern and hope for all of us, and I ask you to accept these words in the same way.

At the beginning of World War II, the famous British poet W. H. Auden wrote one of his most well-known poems entitled “September 1, 1939,” a poem about fear and uncertainty in the world. The poem closes with the famous line “We must love one another or die.” Years later, Auden disowned the poem, saying that it was too sentimental, too naive, and too simplistic to describe what he intended. He especially hated that final line, “We must love one another or die,” because it didn’t make sense in a worldly context.

We are encouraged to view our existence in an eternal perspective, to think celestial. In this context, the line that Auden came to hate so much actually fits perfectly, meaningfully paraphrasing the message and life of our Savior Jesus Christ.

I was asked to speak about unity with one another during challenging times. The ultimate unity we hope for is unity with our Heavenly Parents and the Savior Jesus Christ.

I am of the opinion that we should not avoid discussing important topics simply because they are hard. I am not going to avoid some of the proverbial elephants in our chapels that are often uncomfortable to address. The world in general and our society in particular are full of contention. This week was a contentious election that elicited (and will continue to elicit) strong emotions. I have spoken with many people in

various circumstances of life this week who are afraid for their safety because of recent developments as many in society have felt empowered to promote fear and violence. The vile, hate-filled, and incendiary political rhetoric espoused in our world is not congruent with the gospel of Jesus Christ. No earthly organization is a stand-in or surrogate for the gospel of Jesus Christ. The scriptures and prophetic counsel are clear: we must have faith in Christ, not institutions, idols, or false prophets.

Elder Dale G. Renlund said, “If we are unable to place our discipleship to Jesus Christ above personal interests and viewpoints, we should reexamine our priorities and change.”¹

In addition to these areas of contention, the “whole Earth groans under the weight of its iniquity” (D&C 123:7). Wars rage across the world, and natural disasters are becoming more frequent and more deadly. Spiritual corruption and unrighteous dominion over others are rampant. Eternal principles are sold for filthy lucre in the name of economic growth. As prophesied, in the last days, men’s hearts are failing them (D&C 88:91) and the very elect are being deceived (JS Matthew 1:22). It is important to recognize that this includes many of us.

We have many issues in our society and in our church that are contentious. Things such as women’s equality, abortion rights, and LGBTQIA+ issues. I have strong feelings and opinions about many of these things, as do many of you; these are important issues that should bring strong opinions. There is disagreement on these issues by many of us. I consider many of you here today to be good friends who just happen to think differently about these issues, just as I know you do me. I submit to you right now that we can be united as a people no matter what each of us thinks about societal issues, as long as we love one another unconditionally. Unity in the gospel surrounds our faith

1. Dale G. Renlund, “The Peace of Christ Abolishes Enmity,” Oct. 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2021/10/43renlund?lang=eng/>.

in Jesus Christ and how we treat each other. But if we let our opinions get in the way of Christlike love for others, then we need to repent.

We are all siblings in Christ. We can still be unified if we want to be, despite our differing backgrounds and opinions. We cannot let differences of opinion promote contention. The Savior taught us to “be one; and if ye are not one, ye are not mine” (D&C 38:27).

In the period shortly after the Savior’s appearance in the Americas, there were no “-ites,” or separate groupings of people. We are told “that there was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people” (4 Nephi 1:15). I can guarantee that there were some differing opinions on important topics among the people, but they did not boil over into contention. They were unified in Christ. And as such, “there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God” (4 Nephi 1:16).

It’s also important to remember that these people were not perfect. They lived in great unity and harmony despite each having their own weaknesses and sins. I am willing to bet that some were annoying to others in the society. But a people unified in Christ are ones who are committed to continual repentance and loving everyone unconditionally.

Scriptures discuss unity most often in relation to love, having no contention, and having no poor among them. In the first eighteen verses of 4 Nephi, the phrase “no contention” is used four times. Mormon is really trying to drive home what unified the people—they didn’t contend with one another.

President Reyna I. Aburto, formerly a counselor in the General Relief Society Presidency, shared in the April 2018 general conference: “The Lord’s followers were one in purpose, in love, and in works. They knew who they were, they knew what they had to do, and they did it with love for God and for each other.”²

2. Reyna I. Aburto, “With One Accord,” Apr. 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2018/04/with-one-accord?lang=eng/>.

President Russell M. Nelson counseled us in 2023 that we have the “agency to choose contention or reconciliation.” He continued: “Anger never persuades. Hostility builds no one. Contention never leads to inspired solutions . . . Contention is evil. [It] drives away the Spirit—every time.”³

It didn’t matter if those in the Americas both then and now felt others were deserving of their love and kindness, whether they “deserved” temporal or spiritual assistance, to be fed or clothed. They simply did it because they wholeheartedly embraced the two penultimate commandments—to love God and others (Matthew 22:36–40). There aren’t only some who deserve our love. Everyone deserves our love.

But we cannot have an agenda for why we love them. We don’t love others so that they will come back to church, or get baptized, or think and act the way we want them to. We love them without condition. We love them because they are God’s creation and therefore, they deserve it. The scriptures never qualify the love that the Savior has or that we are to offer. In order to be fully united, we need to see others the way Christ sees them, and then we will come to love them the way He loves them, no matter their situation in life or choices. Unity in Christ is loving everyone because that’s what Jesus does.

Our ongoing search for truth and spiritual progression through our faith in Jesus Christ is another thing that unites us. We don’t know everything. Truth is myriad, but being certain that we already have the answers to life or God shuts off understanding, faith, and revelation. We often spend too much time on religious dogma and too little on emulating the Savior and loving others. We need to avoid looking “beyond the mark” (Jacob 4:14) or focusing on the wrong things, as Jacob described the people of Jerusalem at the time of Lehi’s exodus. One of the biggest instigators of contention is certainty in our opinions and knowledge. A

3. Russell M. Nelson, “Peacemakers Needed,” Apr. 2023, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2023/04/47nelson?lang=eng/>.

fictionalized Catholic cardinal character in a recent film put it plainly and elegantly: “Certainty is the great enemy of unity . . . the deadly enemy to tolerance . . . If there was only certainty, there would be no need for faith.”⁴ We do not have all of the answers, and we deny Christ when we think that we do. There is so much more that we don’t know than what we do. We as a church do not have a monopoly on truth or righteousness. When we see eternal truths, no matter where we find them, we should embrace them and be edified.

This also means that we destroy unity when we try to force others to live in ways that we think they should. If we go through life focusing on all of the things that we think others should repent of, or their weaknesses and imperfections, then we will end up sad and hard-hearted, which will make it nearly impossible for us to feel the joy of the gospel. What we do unto the proverbial “least of [us],” we do unto our Savior (Matthew 25:40).

Elder Renlund said, “We might be inclined to say, ‘Of course we can have unity—if only you would agree with me!’ A better approach is to ask, ‘What can I do to foster unity? How can I respond to help this person draw closer to Christ? What can I do to lessen contention and to build a compassionate and caring Church community?’”⁵

Unity takes humility from us all. It takes a desire to love and continually repent. It means seeking and listening to the Spirit in our lives. It means following what my mother always taught me growing up: “It’s better to be nice than to be right.” It’s better to be like Christ than like anything or anyone else.

President Aburto, whom I quoted before, also said “Jesus Christ is the ultimate example of unity with His Father. They are one in purpose, in love, and in works, with ‘the will of the Son being swallowed up in the

4. *Conclave*, directed by Edward Berger with screenplay by Peter Straughan (FilmNation Entertainment, Indian Paintbrush, and House Productions, 2024).

5. Renlund, “Peace of Christ Abolishes Enmity.”

will of the Father.”⁶ We are commanded to be one with God and Jesus Christ. This is something we all want, by the very fact that we are here today. We do this through exercising our faith, repenting continually, making and keeping sacred covenants, and most importantly of all, loving each other.

I love you all. This is my home and I consider this ward my family. I am so blessed to be here with each of you, and I thank you for your examples to me and your love for me.

Like W. H. Auden, the poet quoted moments ago, I have fear and uncertainty for our future. But I also know in whom I have trusted (2 Nephi 4:19). “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casteth out fear” (1 John 4:18). Jesus is with us if we fight for righteousness. We must love one another or die.

6. Aburto, “With One Accord.”

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