

listen learn & LOVE

Improving Latter-day Saint Culture



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CHaPTeR 1

IMPROVING OUR CULTURE TO BE NONJUDGMENTAL AND MORE LOVING

How can we collectively reduce judging so everyone can feel welcome in Latter-day Saint congregations and enjoy the fruits of our restored doctrine? How can we root out judgmental attitudes or comments and become more like Christ? When we look inward, what work do we each still need to do, as we try to be a loving people?

Sister McConkie urges us to see others as Jesus Christ does:

I know people who come to church every Sunday so that they can be inspired and uplifted and who just simply walk away feeling judged and unloved, unneeded, like there is no place for them at church. We need to do this differently. We need to be deeply aware of what the purpose of coming to church on Sunday is, and make sure that everyone who comes feels loved, needed, accepted, and lifted. . . .

We cannot allow judgment to dictate the way we interact with people. It's simply not right. . . . We just cannot be, or even call ourselves, a disciple of Christ if we are not helping others along that path.

The gospel of Jesus Christ does not marginalize people. People marginalize people. And we have to fix that. . . . [All] have talents and abilities and personality that is needed in the kingdom of God. And if we're going to build the kingdom of God on the earth, we need everyone to come and do their part.¹

These are powerful words: “The gospel of Jesus Christ does not marginalize people. People marginalize people. And we need to fix that.” I think about her words frequently and ask myself if my words or actions are making it difficult

for people to consider joining or continuing as a member of our restored Church. As you read this book, I hope ideas will come into your mind and heart about what you can do within your circle of influence to implement Sister McConkie's vision.

I became more aware of this topic during my Young Single Adult (YSA)² assignment. For the first time, I met with many individuals who were not regularly attending church. Before this experience, I had assumed that those not attending church did not believe in our restored doctrine. However, I soon learned that many did hold core Latter-day Saint beliefs but were not participating because they felt judged or not good enough, or they lacked a sense of belonging.

I had also supposed that those who had been hurt were simply too easily offended and they should "learn not to be offended," putting all the responsibility on their shoulders to resolve a painful experience. However, I have come to honor how people feel. Asking them not to be offended can invalidate their experience, potentially deepening the wedge between them and the Church and decreasing the likelihood they will return. Validating their feelings is often vital in helping them put difficult experiences behind them.

I have also tried to ask more often, "Lord, is it I?" as taught by Elder Uchtdorf:

It was our beloved Savior's final night in mortality, the evening before He would offer Himself a ransom for all mankind. As He broke bread with His disciples, He said something that must have filled their hearts with great alarm and deep sadness. "One of you shall betray me," He told them.

The disciples didn't question the truth of what He said. Nor did they look around, point to someone else, and ask, "Is it him?"

Instead, "they were exceeding sorrowful, and began every one of them to say unto him, Lord, is it I?" (Matthew 26:22)

I wonder what each of us would do if we were asked that question by the Savior. Would we look at those around us and say in our hearts, "He's probably talking about Brother Johnson. I've always wondered about him," or "I'm glad Brother Brown is here. He really needs to hear this message"? Or would we, like those disciples of old, look inward and ask that penetrating question: "Is it I?"

In these simple words, "Lord, is it I?" lies the beginning of wisdom and the pathway to personal conversion and lasting change.³

Elder Uchtdorf's words motivate me to reflect with an open mind and heart so that the Spirit can guide me to the changes I need to make in my attitude and behaviors. Making those changes allows me to be part of the solution.

“Is She Wearing Her Temple Garment in that Wedding Photo?”

Sister McConkie’s vision and Elder Uchtdorf’s counsel apply to an experience I had after performing a ring ceremony for a beautiful, newly married couple. I posted a photo of the event on social media, and a few days later, someone commented to me that something was missing from the photo. They gestured to the bride’s shoulder, inferring a “missing” temple garment sleeve.

That led me to write a Facebook post titled, “Is she wearing her temple garment in that wedding photo?”⁴ I talked at length about the need to not judge others. The response far surpassed anything I have ever posted by a hundredfold. It went viral with more than 5,100 comments, 22,000 likes, and 19,000 shares. The post was also shared by *LDS Living*. I say this not to bring attention to myself but to show that clearly this subject struck a nerve, with Latter-day Saints discussing how to apply the principle of non-judgment in a practical way.

In that post, I explained that as a YSA bishop, I officiated at many ring ceremonies that took place after temple sealings. The purpose of a ring ceremony is to bring families and friends together in celebration of a couple making commitments and covenants with each other. After posting a photo of a ring ceremony, I received questions like, “Did you notice what was missing in that photo?” and “What was missing below her shoulder straps?” It was disappointing that this was the focus that some chose to discuss, rather than the goodness and beauty of that wonderful couple. It gave me a better understanding of why some in our church feel marginalized and withdraw.

I reflected on that ring ceremony. I never noticed that her garment may have been missing—it never entered my mind. All I saw was the beauty of that young couple coming together to be married, her tender-hearted father walking her down the aisle to join her new husband. Was she possibly wearing her own mother’s wedding dress? Could they be new converts and their families were not members? Could this wonderful woman be a recent convert without a lifetime of instruction on and preparation for this issue?

The garment represents a covenant between the individual and Heavenly Father.⁵ But that personal covenant is not to be used as a measuring stick to

judge others' commitment to *their* personal covenants. Some people may need time to figure out wearing the garment, and each will come to their own conclusions with their Heavenly Parents about what is right for them. Deciding what is right for me does not give me permission to project my choice onto other people.

In saying this, I am not endorsing a casual approach to temple commitments or wearing the garment. My garment reminds me of the Savior, His sacrifice for me, and my temple covenants. There is power in those covenants that gives me great spiritual strength.

But this is not about the temple garment! Rather, it illustrates a broader challenge in the Church: the culture of judging based on appearance and sometimes shaming others. As I meet with so many on the fringes of the Church, I learn that it is often this culture—not the doctrine or the commandments—that causes them to withdraw. They feel judged. Instead of coming to church to enjoy the Savior's healing touch where everyone is loved and accepted, with friends walking with them as they move forward in life, they feel critical eyes and judgmental attitudes.

Do we have thoughts like these?

- That skirt is too short.
- Is that a double pierced ear?
- Why are they home from their mission early?
- Why are they in that political party?
- Are they acting on their same-sex attraction?
- Why didn't they take the sacrament?
- Why aren't they dating anyone?
- Why didn't their marriage work?
- I'm not sure about her working outside the home.
- Why is he not wearing a white shirt?
- Why do they have tattoos? Don't they know their body is a temple?
- I heard they messed up at school.
- Why haven't they submitted their mission papers yet?
- Why didn't they serve a mission?
- Why did they march for that cause?
- I wonder why they go skiing (play sports, eat in restaurants) on Sunday.

- Why haven't they had kids yet?
- What's going on with that bishopric member with a goatee?

Do we ask newly engaged couples which temple they will be sealed in, partly as a way to assess their worthiness? Do we do the same when reading a wedding invitation?

We sometimes extend this type of seeing to social media posts. Do we see that outdoor activity photo collage and notice that it was posted on a Sunday? Do we look at that glass in a restaurant photo and wonder what is in it? Do we notice that swimsuit and rate its modesty based on our own family rules?

Does this focus on appearance and behaviors actually add to our own mental load and increase the burden to fit in and be the “perfect” Latter-day Saint ourselves? By enumerating the ways that others fall short, is our inner voice turning to criticism of ourselves as well?

I don't want to be too negative, as many individuals and congregations are doing a great job with welcoming all, but there is room for improvement.

I invite everyone to keep the commandments and enjoy the blessings that follow. One of the most important commandments was named by the Savior: to love one another (see John 13:34). We need to retrain our brains and eyes to stop focusing on others' possible shortcomings. After meeting with so many on the margins and hearing their stories, I now “see” how our church culture looks through their eyes, and it has changed my heart and feelings toward these good people. I now try to understand everyone as my equal—a daughter or son of loving Heavenly Parents, trying to do their best as they move forward in life, measured by their own yardstick and not my yardstick for them. I look for their Christlike attributes, talents, the way they are contributing to society, and what I can learn from them. I seek to see them the way I believe our Heavenly Parents see them. I accept them where they are and extend my love, understanding and encouragement.

I love what Elder Uchtdorf said about judging others:

Stop it! It's that simple. We simply have to stop judging others and replace judgmental thoughts and feelings with a heart full of love for God and His children. God is our Father. We are His children. We are all brothers and sisters. I don't know exactly how to articulate this point of *not judging others* with sufficient eloquence, passion, and persuasion to make it stick. I can quote scripture, I can try to expound doctrine, and I will even quote a bumper sticker I recently saw. It was attached to the back of a car whose driver appeared to be a little rough around the edges, but

the words on the sticker taught an insightful lesson. It read, “Don’t judge me because I sin differently than you.”⁶

Do I need Elder Uchtdorf’s counsel? Yes, absolutely! Do you need this counsel? I will leave that up to you. The only person in a Latter-day Saint congregation who has any right to judge is the bishop, and that is *only* in a private and thoughtful visit to discuss temple worthiness, help someone return to full church participation, or explore a specific calling.

At the same time, don’t we each have a duty as a member of the Church to “warn our neighbor”? Yes, but I believe the principle behind this concept is love. In my mind, I replace “warn” with “love our neighbor.” When our neighbor feels our genuine love for them—meaning we will walk with them and our friendship is not conditional on any specific outcome (like commandment keeping or joining the Church)—then our ability to lift, build, and help them increases. They trust us. They know we did not befriend them as a Church assignment or to fulfill a quota, but because we truly care and see them as an equal daughter or son of Heavenly Parents.

After that loving and trusting relationship has been built, I might feel impressed to visit with them in a quiet moment about an item or two on the previous list. I may ask, “Do you want to talk about your feelings about coming home from your mission early?” or “How do you feel about the temple?” Or you might say, “I am here if you want to talk about (fill in the blank).” You might gently ask them the story behind that tattoo and discover that sharing the story brings you closer together. These questions should be asked only from a position of love and friendship, and not judging their actions. People need trusted friends to process the experiences behind those questions, and those conversations are often both helpful and healing. I am not suggesting that we avoid sensitive subjects entirely, but wait to open that door until love and trust are established. In addition, our friends who are not members of our Church—on the receiving end of love without an agenda—might feel safe opening up to us about their faith-related questions and open to invitations on how our church might be their path. I am honored to have walked several into our church over the past few years.

If we truly listen to those on the margins, we might be surprised to learn their true feelings and feel their pure hearts. They are some of the finest people

I know. They are *not* on the margins because they are weak or because Satan has got hold of them, or they are not reading their scriptures. They are often there because others put them there. One good young man articulated it this way: “I don’t feel Mormon enough to belong.” Yikes! Everyone should feel “Mormon enough” to be welcomed, valued, and loved in our congregations.

Elder Uchtdorf taught, “The Church is a home for all to come together, regardless of the depth or the height of our testimony. I know of no sign on the doors of our meetinghouses that says, ‘Your testimony must be this tall to enter’.”² Bishop Gérald Caussé of the Presiding Bishopric added, “In this Church there are no strangers and no outcasts. There are only brothers and sisters. . . . Our wards and our quorums do not belong to us. They belong to Jesus Christ. Whoever enters our meetinghouses should feel at home. . . . Unity is not achieved by ignoring and isolating members who seem different or weaker and only associating with people who are like us.”⁸

It is true: “Our wards and quorums do not belong to us. They belong to Jesus Christ.” And when He was on earth, how wide did He open the doors to those wards and quorums? Here are His instructions to the Nephites:

[Do] that which ye have seen me do. And ye see that I have commanded that none of you should go away, but rather have commanded that ye should come unto me, that ye might feel and see; even so shall ye do. If ye know that a man is unworthy to eat and drink of my flesh and blood ye shall forbid him. Nevertheless, ye shall not cast him out from among you, but ye shall minister unto him and shall pray for him unto the Father, in my name; and if it so be that he repenteth and is baptized in my name, then shall ye receive him, and shall minister unto him of my flesh and blood. But if he repent not he shall not be numbered among my people. Nevertheless, ye shall not cast him out of your synagogues, or your places of worship, for unto such shall ye continue to minister; for ye know not but what they will return and repent, and come unto me with full purpose of heart, and I shall heal them; and ye shall be the means of bringing salvation unto them (excerpts from 3 Nephi 18:24–5, 29–32).

The Lord could not be any clearer: He wants us to welcome ALL through our chapel doors and into our hearts.

Some have used the terms “big tent” or “the gate is wide” to describe their vision for Latter-day Saint congregations. The big tent view is that our congregations are safe, welcoming, loving, and healing for everyone who considers our Church their spiritual home—all those who still want to “give it a go” and try to make it work. They may not fit the cultural mold, they may have work-in-progress testimonies, they may be working hard to keep the

commandments. But they may want to attend to feel the Spirit, worship their Savior, take the sacrament, and hear uplifting talks and music. They need to feel the support of other members, figuratively putting their arms around them and saying, “You are welcome. I am your friend: no ifs, ands, or buts.” They also may want to provide that support for others in a mutually uplifting environment. Christ practiced big tent Christianity during His ministry as He reached out to those on the margins of society, spent time with them, served them, talked about their goodness, and invited them to join Him. Likewise, Christ wants our congregations to be welcoming for all God’s children.

While the gate is wide at the congregational level, the temple is different as the gate narrows with belief and behavior requirements discussed in a temple recommend interview. Our congregations should be a safe place to help more people toward the temple. Let’s be careful not to use the temple recommend questions to decide if others (or ourselves) should feel welcome in our congregations (or homes). As Elder Uchtdorf taught, there is no measuring stick to attend our wards and branches.² Let’s follow what Christ taught, making our congregations and our families judgment-free zones, where the path is wide and everyone feels welcome.

Unfortunately, some Latter-day Saints do not feel that home or church are safe places for them. Some have shared with me this painful scripture that prophesies of the Savior but also resonates with them: “And one shall say unto him, What are these wounds in thine hands? Then he shall answer, Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends” (Zechariah 13:6).

This scripture is profoundly heartbreaking, both for the Savior and for anyone who has been wounded. The safest place of all should be at our parents’ house—both our earthly and Heavenly Parents’ houses. Our congregations should also be a deeply safe place for everyone, where the cares of life are left behind as we seek the Savior’s healing. No matter who we are, where we are, or what road we are walking, when we come to church, I hope we do not feel judgment, only love.

I believe deeply in our church! My purpose in discussing this issue is to make the Church work for more of our dear sisters and brothers, leading to more partaking of the fruits of our restored doctrine. Becoming less judgmental and more accepting is essential to people feeling welcome and like

they belong within the Church. This encourages them to contribute to our wards and stakes, bringing us more fully together to create Zion.

“All God’s Critters Got a Place in the Choir”¹⁰

Without everyone’s voices, we are all impoverished, both in our own lives and as a church. As we become more Christlike in our attitudes and abandon judgment to make others feel more welcome, we are all enriched. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland’s memorable talk “Songs Sung and Unsung” illustrates how this works:

I would ask us, especially the youth of the Church, to remember it is by divine design that not all the voices in God’s choir are the same. It takes variety—sopranos and altos, baritones and basses—to make rich music. To borrow a line quoted in the cheery correspondence of two remarkable Latter-day Saint women, “All God’s critters got a place in the choir.” When we disparage our uniqueness or try to conform to fictitious stereotypes—stereotypes driven by an insatiable consumer culture and idealized beyond any possible realization by social media—we lose the richness of tone and timbre that God intended when He created a world of diversity.

Now, this is not to say that everyone in this divine chorus can simply start shouting his or her own personal oratorio! Diversity is not cacophony, and choirs do require discipline [or] discipleship—but once we have accepted divinely revealed lyrics and harmonious orchestration composed before the world was, then our Heavenly Father delights to have us sing in our own voice, not someone else’s. Believe in yourself, and believe in Him. Don’t demean your worth or denigrate your contribution. Above all, don’t abandon your role in the chorus. Why? Because you are unique; you are irreplaceable. The loss of even one voice diminishes every other singer in this great mortal choir of ours, including the loss of those who feel they are on the margins of society or the margins of the Church.¹¹

I have heard lovely solos in my life. I also appreciate beautiful harmonies with every voice singing out. We need to follow Elder Holland’s words to bring individuals from the margins into the center of our fellowship so *they* can help *us* become better followers of Christ. Their participation and inclusion in our congregations strengthens everyone, and the Church itself. Creating an environment of inclusion allows everyone to stay comfortably in the choir and gives them courage to sing out. We all are needed.

Insights from Al Carraway

One of my favorite Latter-day Saint authors is Al Carraway. This remarkable convert to our church shares her journey as a new member in her best-selling book, *More than the Tattooed Mormon*.¹² Sister Carraway has several tattoos and shares some painful situations when she was judged because of them. I am guilty of this same kind of judging. Fortunately, she was able to navigate those difficult comments and remains a committed Latter-day Saint. This book and her other excellent books are eye-opening.

Sister Carraway's honest blog post, titled "Nothing about this woman is Mormon anymore," was written in March 2020, ten years after her baptism. It is deeply moving and causes me to look inward and examine how I may be adding to others' burdens. She said:

PERMISSION?

STOP— just stop scrolling for a sec to read this.

Ten years. It's been 10 years and still this morning I woke up & the first thing that happened was I ended up in tears. Multiple comments from multiple members of our church, and those who chose to hit the follow button on my Instagram, creating a long strand of how disgusting I am.

NO, no, this had nothing to do with my tattoos— they mentioned specifically my weight & the color of my hair????

They all quite literally said "nothing about this woman is Mormon anymore." (Apparently spirituality is based on that?????)

10 years I've been a member. TEN YEARS straight I have been told by ONLY members of my church that for every reason you can THINK of, (probably ones you wouldn't believe), that no matter what I'm doing or how I dress or look, or what I write:

That I'm doing it wrong.

Y'all have been extremely creative through these 10 years to find the most bizarre reasons to tell me that I do not belong.

Only members of my church have told me, still, for 10 years straight, word for word, that God does not love me.

As a convert from the east coast, "Brothers & sisters" is a literal term. Church family is quite literally family. In every way. Ooooooh how ignorantly excited I was to follow the spirit away from my small east coast branch knowing where I was going completely by myself, abandoning literally everything to follow my new-found God, I would still have "family" there for me.

TEN YEARS and it's my "family" that are the only ones that continuously cause unexpected tears in the morning right when I wake up. How ironic this all has been to me, because I thought we were all supposed to be in this together? Why is it people are so set on driving people away?

Nothing I hate more than when my integrity and intentions are assumed and exploited by people I'll never meet. Nothing worse than your entire character and SOUL destroyed by people who I thought were in this together with me, because there will always be someone waiting to get offended by something because they hold the world to their own personal expectations.

But here I am, 10 years later & through it all—the hurt, the tears, the confusion, the loneliness, the judgment—

I really like me. I reaaally truly like me.

And when you have found contentment and love in yourself THERE IS POWER that comes to you & protects you.

The power to keep going. The power to move past it. The power to show up still. The power to laugh minutes after tears during breakfast with your husband.

I'm not letting anyone turn me away from a REAL God and I hope everyone invests to get to that point, too.

LISTEN—PLEASE, LET GO of any hurt or weight caused by others. Who is anyone to say you don't belong here or part of this church? Who is anyone to tell you that God is not your Father & you are not His???

LISTEN—PLEASE, please please please, with ALL THAT I HAVE LEFT IN ME—

INVEST in taking the time to learn how to like yourself.

PLEASE, plllleaaaasseeeee invest in being able to see yourself the way that God sees you.

THERE IS A PROTECTING POWER that comes— there is a contentment & happiness that comes—

And wow does life blossom when you invest in building and knowing in what really matters.

It's God that matters. it's your SOUL that can never die that matters. It's taking advantage of every second we have to LIVE on this planet, in this phase of life we will never have again, that matters. It's you that matters. It's how God sees us is what matters. And He sees us as someone capable of becoming like Him.¹³

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