
FROM THE EDITOR

THE OUTER LIMITS



By *Elbert Eugene Peck*

UNTIL THE eighteenth century, "tolerance" was only a pejorative—a lax complacency toward evil. As part of the response to the collective, Catholic world view, the idea of religious tolerance developed as an essential and creative complement to the parallel concepts of capitalism (which requires independent, competing enterprises), the scientific method (which questions fundamental assumptions), and the nation-state (which embraces different feudal communities and ethnicities under one rule of law), all of which expanded notions of the individual, conscience, and individual rights. Tolerance was championed as necessary for progress (another new notion). For those resigned to the new, chaotic pluralism, tolerance was simply an unavoidable necessity.

Tolerance acknowledges diversity, but it

doesn't necessarily celebrate the differences it allows (unlike the Apostle Paul's body-of-Christ metaphor, which glories in each member's unique gifts [1 Cor. 12]). It is a deliberate mental act, not a generous impulse of the heart. Tolerance grudgingly allows place for the other, accords it the right to think and act differently—to be "other"—while at the same time believing the other to be wrong. Yet it also possesses an often unacknowledged tentativeness about one's most absolute assumptions and beliefs.

Tolerance is usually applied between groups; when substantive differences arise within a group, schism is often the result—either individual exit or the creation of a new group. Recently and too often I've heard exit prescribed for LDS "dissidents": "Mormonism believes ____; if you don't agree, leave."

Many religions are uncomfortable with internal tolerance. In his Sunstone symposium essay, Art Bassett asked Mormons, "How Much Tolerance Can We Tolerate?" (SUNSTONE, Sept. 1987). Earlier, Elder B. H. Roberts answered with his famous maxim:

In essentials let there be unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity. . . . [S]o far as . . . absolute and positive essentials, are concerned, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints stands on very firm ground. . . . [T]hings in which the judgment of men may be exercised, and where it is merely a question, perhaps, of policy, or of administration. . . . are . . . in the realm of the non-essentials . . . where human judgment may be exercised: and where men may not be able to come to absolute unity of understanding. . . . (*Conference Report*, 5 Oct. 1912, 30–34.)

The challenge, then, is to discriminate between essentials, on which there must be unity, and non-essentials, where diversity may exist. (Elder Roberts's examples of non-essentials were primarily political issues.) Some differences are complementary, and their diversity is obviously enriching, like the colors in the rainbow. They are easy to embrace—one's artistic talent, another's scientific acumen. Other differences are, or

PAUL'S THEOLOGY OF TOLERANCE

Romans 14:1–23, Revised English Bible

Accept anyone who is weak in faith without debate about his misgivings. For instance, one person may have faith strong enough to eat all kinds of food, while another who is weaker eats only vegetables. Those who eat meat must not look down on those who do not, and those who do not eat meat must not pass judgement on those who do; for God has accepted them. Who are you to pass judgement on someone else's servant? Whether he stands or falls is his own Master's business; and stand he will, because his Master has power to enable him to stand.

Again, some make a distinction between this day and that; others regard all days alike. Everyone must act on his own convictions. Those who honor the day honor the Lord, and those who eat meat also honor the Lord, since when they eat meat they give thanks to God; and those who abstain have the Lord in mind when abstaining, since they too give thanks to God.

For none of us lives, and equally none of us dies, for himself alone. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. This is why Christ died and lived again, to establish his lordship over both dead and living. You, then, why do you pass judgement on your fellow-Christian? And you, why do you look down on your fellow-Christian? We shall all stand before God's tribunal; for we read in scripture, 'As I live, says the Lord, to me every knee shall bow and every tongue acknowledge God.' So, you see, each of us will be

answerable to God.

Let us therefore cease judging one another, but rather make up our minds to place no obstacle or stumbling block in a fellow-Christian's way. All that I know of the Lord Jesus convinces me that nothing is impure in itself; only, if anyone considers something impure, then for him it is impure. If your fellow-Christian is outraged by what you eat, then you are no longer guided by love. Do not by your eating be the ruin of one for whom Christ died! You must not let what you think good be brought into disrepute; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but justice, peace, and joy, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Everyone who shows himself a servant of Christ in this way is acceptable to God and approved by men.

Let us, then, pursue the things that make for peace and build up the common life. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. Everything is pure in itself, but it is wrong to eat if by eating you cause another to stumble. It is right to abstain from eating meat or drinking wine or from anything else which causes a fellow-Christian to stumble. If you have some firm conviction, keep it between yourself and God. Anyone who can make his decision without misgivings is fortunate. But anyone who has misgivings and yet eats is guilty, because his action does not arise from conviction, and anything which does not arise from conviction is sin. . . .

seem to be, between light and dark, right and wrong, good and evil. Even a tolerance for them in the community is sin and apostasy.

When we use the word diversity in the Church, especially concerning its international growth, we often mean differences in dress, skin color, language, class, customs, and education (but not, according to Elder Dallin Oaks, music)—superficial things—not substantive differences in world views, perspectives, approaches, practices, and beliefs. But there are in fact genuine, core differences among us, and they will inevitably increase with our growth, making the essential/non-essential line even harder to determine. Even now, very good Saints differ on what they see as essentials.

For example, is explicating the nebulous LDS belief in Mother in Heaven a non-essential area where we can allow diversity? How about praying to our Heavenly Parents? What about using different Bible translations? Or discussing nineteenth-century elements in the Book of Mormon? Or just having a non-fundamentalistic approach to scripture? Or a very fundamentalistic approach to scripture? Or to revelation? Or a human view of Church leaders and policy? Along with homosexuals, feminists, and so-called scholars and intellectuals, the list of members with deviant beliefs embraces almost all to some degree. At present, we seem to be enforcing a more rigid orthodoxy, and in that line-drawing we must ask, what are the outer boundaries of Mormonism and the concomitant roles of tolerance and diversity?

The early Christian Church confronted similar diverging issues. The Jewish Christians accepted the testimony of Jesus as Lord and lived it in part through keeping the Law of Moses. Their world view demanded a detailed array of Hebrew practices, beliefs, assumptions, diets, and holy and feast days. In contrast, the Gentile Christians embraced the testimony of Jesus but not the Jewish traditions, which were silly to them. Could two separate religious traditions exist in one religion? Their differences make many of today's controversies seem trivial.

In his missive to the Saints in Rome, Paul preached a tolerance that welcomed all true believers of Christ into the Church, but counseled against debating their differences there: "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations." (Rom. 14:1.) Paul's "weak" Saints were the Jewish Christians who clung to their old habits; conversely, the Jewish Christians thought Paul was the weak one who watered down the received word of God. In contrast to Roberts's essential/non-essential distinction,

the key boundary determinant for Paul was whether your act was motivated by faith; if it was, you were acceptable. Although Paul allowed for two radically different religious traditions to co-exist, he would not allow Jewish Christians to demand that other Christians keep their practices, especially circumcision (a core belief many Jews considered as essential as baptism); likewise, he counseled the "stronger" Gentile Christians not to flaunt their liberty in Christ by doing things that hurt the weak. Faith in Christ and love for others were Paul's essentials; most doctrinal points were non-essentials.

If a first-century Christian community could embrace a phylactery-adorned, Leviticus-quoting, orthodox Jew; a free-thinking, Greek intellectual; a simple, ethical living slave; a wealthy Roman slave owner—all of whom Paul saw in faithful relationships to God—perhaps a twenty-first-century LDS ward can make room for a working, Mother-in-Heaven feminist, a polygamist patriarch (and his wives), a humanist intellectual, and a correlated CES administrator. If Paul could embrace Moses-following Jews, surely we can allow those who religiously follow the dead prophets, Brigham and Joseph. Why must we enforce with violence one program, one orthodoxy, when the slightest observation reveals different in perspectives that are inherent in our humanness, evolve over time, and often have little to do with faithfulness or righteousness? Nevertheless, Paul's tolerance within the community did not extend to unrepentant sinners—fornicators, blasphemers, hedonists, covetors, gossipers, abusers, etc. There are boundaries—not anything goes!—and they must be maintained to preserve the community.

If discussions (disputations) of our differences should be left outside the chapel (perhaps implying supplementary organizations for the different perspectives), what should happen inside? Well, the true essentials we have in common. First, the celebration of the testimony of Christ through the sacrament and the sharing of experiences in carrying his cross that encourage, give hope, and build faith. Next, caring for the spiritual and physical needs of our sisters and brothers. "Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock . . . in his brother's way," Paul counseled. "For the kingdom is not meat and drink [non-essential practices]; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men. Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things

wherewith one may edify another." (Rom. 14:13, 17–19.) That's putting orthopraxy (right living) over orthodoxy (right thinking) and is in harmony with Christ's description of the heaven-bound: not those who say "Lord, Lord . . ." but those who do the ethical practices preached in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:21–24)—the naked clothiers, the hungry feeders, the stranger welcomers, and the imprisoned visitors. (Matt. 25: 34–46.)

In that light, the thought-police who assault the gospel doctrine teacher for quoting the New Jerusalem Bible seem petty and falsely righteous. What has happened to Mormonism? We judge and exclude incredibly decent individuals for a few aberrant thoughts or non-essential acts. And conservatives have no monopoly on such intolerance. Liberals use their theologies to judge and reject good souls in the name of righteousness just as much as do clones of Elder Packer. (In an ironic twist on the American terms where conservatives are the *laissez-faire* individualists and liberals approach problems through legalistic social programming, Mormon conservatives are often the ones imposing non-essential organizational strictures while liberals assert their individualism often to the harm of the communal life, too.) Theologies should empower us to live better, connected, spirit-filled lives, not be clubs to beat each other with. Tolerance *between* groups can be an atomistic, live-and-let-live philosophy, but *within* a group, tolerance has to be a communal theology.

We need more tolerance in Mormonism. But does a tolerance for others whose views you strongly and even morally oppose mean that you don't work to reform the world and the kingdom according to your understanding? No, not only do we then get that especially Mormon dysfunction of polite niceness that pushes out real love, but then our tolerance is moral laxity. For example, as a feminist I deeply believe in the social, spiritual, and religious equality of the sexes and speak and work for those truths, especially within the religious community that I most care about. But, at the same time, I still must be willing to love, serve, and worship with other Saints whose beliefs and acts I think harm, subordinate, and oppress women. That duality is hard to attain, but is essential if we don't want to reject those whom God accepts. Consider healing, closing scene in *Places of the Heart* where Sally Field takes the Lord's Supper alongside all her friends and opponents; the net of God's kingdom gathers all kinds of fish. That kind of tolerance does not pronounce judgment on individuals, but

loves the alien other, "your enemies" (Matt. 5:44), while at the same time engages them over core differences. It can be sustained only with a spiritual knowledge of the love of God for oneself and one's opponents. It is an act of the heart more than of the mind. In an earlier time, could (should?) a slave owner and an abolitionist kneel together in love at the same sacrament table with no hard feelings toward each other? To do so requires a trust in God's judgment that transcends our human ability to reason.

Not all differences are as black and white as slavery, but many current strong positions are alien to others and will not be resolved in this life. Our task is to turn that unavoidable tension into a creative dynamic. The collaborative tradition where different parties don't try to remake the other into their own position was expressed in *First Things*:

To say that our [magazine] is a Christian-Jewish enterprise does not mean that it is some hybrid "Third Way" called Jewish-Christian, distinct from the ways of Judaism and Christianity. As we understand it, the Christian-Jewish partnership requires that Jews be Jews and Christians be Christians. . . . "True pluralism, as we intend never to tire of saying, is not pretending that our differences make no difference. True pluralism is honestly engaging the differences that make a very great difference in this world, and perhaps in the next." (the editors, "Christians, Jews, and Anti-Semitism," *First Things*, Mar. 1992, 9.)

While some differences require different churches or traditions, others can be embraced within the same tradition or church. Can the boundaries of Mormonism be expanded to a place where believing Saints—who put the religious puzzle together in dramatically different ways—can engage each other in honest discussion without judgment and name-calling? Is that level of open acceptance even desirable, or would Mormonism lose its forceful drive that in part comes from its zealous fundamentalism? I am skeptical whether Paul's vision for a church that embraces such broad diversity is humanly possible. Certainly, the Jewish Christians (Peter, James, and John) were reluctant to acknowledge Paul's revisionist theology (perhaps only because of the success of his missions). Similarly, after Elder Roberts's conference address, Church President Joseph F. Smith counseled about the dangers from the liberty Roberts celebrated.

Our uneasiness with religious diversity is because tolerance implies change and tentativeness, and churches are designed to conserve and provide certainty. We create them to preserve and pass on the received truth through traditions. That is why the Enlightenment idea of progress, the discovery of new, assumption-breaking ideas, has never been enthusiastically embraced by those religions that feel they already possess the truth that just needs to be lived. Therefore, it is hard for established churches to reform quickly, and they rarely lead social change. Hence, new ones are formed to accommodate new ideas. Given that conservative bent, can a church maintain the diversity and openness that the early Christian Church preached, and still keep its vibrant identity that comes from asserting its truth-claims?

Because of the destruction of the Jewish Christian Church in 70 A.D., the subsequent Christian history is relatively free of its Jewish roots, and that Pauline experiment in tolerance was aborted. Yet even freed of its Jewish wing, much of Christian history is the continued enforcement of a narrowing orthodoxy: excommunicating heretics, pronouncing doctrinal creeds crafted to work out picky theological differences, policing inquisitions, and purifying purges.

Still, within many Christian religions today, especially those with decentralized authority, a form of tolerance has developed among their different local congregations where some are relatively liberal and others conservative; together they allow for some difference in approaches in religion under the same church banner. That arrangement allows easy exit from one group by moving to a congregation that emphasizes different non-essentials while still affirming the church's core beliefs. In Mormonism, however, with its centralized, hierarchal structure and uniform congregational model, exit is far more difficult for non-mainstream believers because they have no other place to go, and they find themselves in strained relationships. That monopoly calls Latter-day Saints to expand our limits of tolerance as wide as possible in order not to harm the spiritual health of members by coercing conformity to non-essentials.

But unity is an important Mormon value, too: If we are not one, we are not God's people. (D&C 38:27.) The establishment of Zion has focused my theological ponderings about the institutional Church and my personal life. Just what does it mean to be "of one heart and one mind, and dwell[] in righteousness; and [have] no poor" among us? (Moses 7:18.) Without humans becom-

ing an entirely different species, to become "of one mind" cannot mean everyone arrives at the same intellectual conclusions; but we can unite our differing minds to the common work of doing God's will on earth, work which Paul described as peace-making and service. "One heart" can mean that our love of God grows so that we love each other in spite of differences.

I think of my experience with Ron Craven at the Missionary Training Center where we taught a pilot class. He was the spit-and-polish, rule-preaching, quintessential Iron Rod elder; I was the khaki, sockless, unshined weejun-wearing, stereotypical Liahona. On the last day when the missionaries asked Ron for parting words, he said, "Keep the rules"; I said, "Follow the Spirit." Yet in spite of our differences in theology, in approach to mission life and missionary work, a bond of affection formed between us that was evident to the missionaries. Even now, as I think about Ron, my eyes mist. Perhaps the best lesson we taught was the example that two very different individuals who felt a deep love for each other had place in the Church. With the Spirit, we can become one in our hearts, even if we think and act differently.

From other experiences, I believe the quickest route to such a diverse, spiritual unity is in exalting the poor, which Paul said was appropriate inside the Church. Work for social justice (which is often what the Bible means by righteousness) breaks and bonds hearts, unites assorted individuals, puts our intellectual speculations in their correct perspective (next to nothing), and focuses our souls on the important matters at hand.

How much tolerance can Mormonism tolerate? A lot, if we center on following Jesus, however different the paths, "for thus alone can we be one" ("Come, Follow Me," *Hymns*, 116). Not much, if we coerce compliance to a human-drafted creed. And the irony is that in allowing diversity, we must turn to the Spirit to attain unity or break apart as a people; but in enforcing one program, we can maintain the institution through conformity to its rules yet never achieve the call to Zion. Can we as a Church and a people ever make that live-or-die leap of faith? That's an even harder question.

Let's welcome all believers into the Church, keep doubtful disputations outside the chapel, and together celebrate Christ and the diverse members of his body, all of whom need succor and support. There are many members, some "less honorable," yet one body (1 Cor. 12:20, 23); for "the truth is that we neither live nor die as self-contained units." (Rom. 14:7, Phillips trans.)