

WORDS OF COUNSEL

APRIL 2013



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When I was twenty years old I was ordained an elder in the church, and fairly soon thereafter appointed to serve as a pastor of a small congregation.



One Saturday evening as I was preparing a sermon and wrestling with what I could say that would really be a blessing to those who would gather for worship the next day, after a time of prayer, I had a very personal experience with the pure love of God, our creator.

It is far beyond any human love. In fact, it is “other than”. It is holy love. It is love that embraces the whole realm of creation and yet is a personal love for each individual.

As I experienced the pure love of God, I was told, in my sermon to simply say this: tell my people how much I love them. It was probably the shortest sermon I’ve ever preached in my life; because that’s what I did.

I am experiencing that same Spirit, that same pure love of God, God's amazing grace, for this assembly tonight; and I just want to share with you, God says tell my people, how much I love them. And I pray that you feel that.

Its once again my responsibility to bring words of counsel to the church. I'm simply going to read what I have prepared. It will be released to the church following this service, and it will be printed in your World Conference bulletin in the morning, and in the May Herald.

I read from the preface now.

Until recently I thought words of counsel would not be given before or during the 2013 World Conference. However, over the past months, as I have prayed for the church and the world we serve, I have been surprised by regular promptings of the Spirit to offer words of counsel again.

Some themes of this counsel have been presented previously. Evidently, it is important to highlight and further clarify certain principles to advance the

response God desires. Other parts of the counsel, while clearly related to previous instruction, begin to open new horizons for living the meaning of true community in Christ.

I pray these words will serve as a pathway for those who sincerely seek to discover God's will through their own experience as we continue our faith adventure together. I do not intend to submit this counsel for inclusion in the Doctrine and Covenants now. I believe broad exploration of the spiritual concepts in this counsel should precede any formal consideration in that regard. At the same time, this counsel is shared as an expression of my calling as prophet-president of the church in response to God's gracious revealing of the way ahead for this faith movement.

To the church:

Community of Christ, a divine vision is set before you. Presented over the years through various inspired phrases and symbols, it is expressed now through initiatives in harmony with Jesus Christ's mission.

As a spiritual venture, boldly follow the initiatives into the heart of God's vision for the church and creation. Then, in response to growing insight about God's nature and will, continue to shape communities that live Christ's love and mission.

Lovingly invite others to experience the good news of new life in community with Christ. Opportunities abound in your daily lives if you choose to see them.

Undertake compassionate and just actions that seek to abolish poverty and end needless suffering. Pursue peace on and for the Earth.

Let nothing separate you from this mission.

Continue to align your priorities with local and worldwide church efforts to move the initiatives forward.

Additional innovative approaches to coordinating congregational life and supporting groups of disciples and seekers are needed to address mission opportunities in a changing world.

Free the full capacity of Christ's mission through generosity that imitates God's generosity. Discover deep joy and life's meaning by promoting divine purposes on Earth. Listen to the testimonies of those who are responding and follow your soul's yearning to come home to God's grace and generosity.

Remember, a basic discipleship principle is growing Christ's mission through both local and world mission tithes according to true capacity. Giving to other worthwhile organizations, while an important part of *A Disciple's Generous Response*, follows world and local mission tithing and should not diminish or replace it. If a law is needed to focus and balance response, then let these tithing principles serve that purpose.

Tithing is a spiritual practice that demonstrates willingness to regularly offer every dimension of one's life to God. When defined by faith, love, and hopeful planning, including resolving indebtedness, capacity to respond becomes much greater than initially assumed.

Following the approval of Doctrine and Covenants 164, I continued to prayerfully explore certain principles in it. A particular focus was paragraph 5, where the following words appear, approved by the World Conference as authoritative for our life together:

It is imperative to understand that when you are truly baptized into Christ you become part of a new creation. By taking on the life and mind of Christ, you increasingly view yourself and others from a changed perspective. Former ways of defining people by economic status, social class, sex, gender, or ethnicity no longer are primary. Through the gospel of Christ, a new community of tolerance, reconciliation, unity in diversity, and love is being born as a visible sign of the coming reign of God.

As indicated in the preface to Section 164, study of Galatians 3:27–29 was foundational to this counsel. Following the approval of Section 164, I persisted in asking God about the meaning and implications of paragraph 5 and Galatians 3:27–29. I sought additional understanding of the spiritual condition that would allow us to see ourselves and others from the changed perspective emphasized in Section 164:5. My journey continued as I was encouraged to study John 17.

John 17 conveys the prayer of Jesus for his disciples as he approaches death on the cross. As I reflected on this text, the Spirit urged me to invite the church to go much deeper in its understanding of the oneness with and among his disciples, who Jesus prayed for. Catching sight of the possible future, I marveled at the blessings that could be enjoyed by the church as we respond. I was left with two questions: “Are we willing to continue to become such a community for Christ and the cause of Zion?” And, “What will it take for us to truly be a community of oneness, mutuality, and revelation of divine love through Christ?”

The following words arose as the Spirit's voice to the church in response to that experience and those questions:

More fully accept and embody your oneness and equality in Jesus Christ, who dwells in oneness with God.

Oneness and equality in Christ are realized through the waters of baptism, confirmed by the Holy Spirit, and sustained through the sacrament of Communion. Embrace the full meaning of these sacraments and be spiritually joined in Christ as never before.

However, be aware, it is not right to profess oneness and equality in Christ through sacramental covenants and then to deny that equality by attitude, word, or action. Such behavior wounds Christ's body and denies what is eternally resolved in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

You do not fully understand many interrelated processes of human creation. Through its wonderful complexity, creation produces both

diversity and order. Be not consumed with concern about variety in human types and characteristics as you see them. Be passionately concerned about how God is revealing divine nature through sacred communities of love, oneness, and equality that embody God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

Oneness and equality in Christ do not mean uniformity. They mean unity in diversity and relating in Christ-like love to the circumstances of others as if they were one's own. They also mean full opportunity for people to experience human worth and related rights, including expressing God-given giftedness through the church community.

Regarding priesthood, God calls whoever God calls from among committed disciples, according to their gifts, to serve and reach all humankind. Priesthood policies and procedures provide a clear way for disciples to respond to calling. They also define the difference between a sense of call as potential and the need to align one's life with principles of moral behavior and relationships that promote the well-being of the church community.

Involvement in Christ's mission is enriched and focused through spiritual growth and guidance. Following direction already emerging, the presiding evangelist and the Order of Evangelists, in concert with their colleagues in ministry, should concentrate on spiritually forming communities of disciples and seekers that live deeply and generously in Christ's Spirit.

For this purpose, offer the sacrament of evangelist blessing not only to individuals and congregations, but to families, households, and groups of people seeking spiritual guidance to more completely give themselves to Christ's mission.

The presiding evangelist will provide instructions for implementation at the appropriate time. Nothing in the instruction should be construed to lessen the importance of the sacrament of evangelist blessing for individuals.

In conclusion, the following words also are shared in response to the radiant light and love of God's Spirit:

Beloved Community of Christ, do not just speak and sing of Zion. Live, love, and share as Zion: those who strive to be visibly one in Christ, among whom there are no poor or oppressed.

As Christ's body, lovingly and patiently bear the weight of criticism from those who hesitate to respond to the divine vision of human worth and equality in Christ. This burden and blessing is yours for divine purposes.

And, always remember, the way of suffering love that leads to the cross also leads to resurrection and everlasting life in Christ's eternal community of oneness and peace. Trust in this promise.

Amen.

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