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True Believers in Christ

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True Believers in Christ

NEAL A. MAXWELL

I am delighted to be with you brothers and sisters today. It is not difficult for those of us who have admired President Holland for so long to anticipate joyfully the things he will bring to this new assignment. Among them will be his personal, small-town warmth, which will shrink the size of this big campus, and I foresee that his literacy will prove to be as contagious as is his laughter. If Mark Twain, one focus of Jeffrey Holland's graduate work, could have experienced Jeffrey's effective teaching of the Book of Mormon, Twain would not have made his uninformed and unkind remark about that book. At least Jeff would not have let him start reading in the book of Ether. And perhaps Jeff could even have put Twain "under," but not in the sense Twain meant, rather in the best missionary meaning of those words.

In our time, the words "true believer" have come to mean the manipulable and mindless who are part of political mass movements, seeking to escape from the burdens of freedom. Many years ago, a similar phrase was used, but with major definitional distinctions. The Apostle Nephi, and, even earlier, Alma, wrote of the "true believers in Christ." (see Alma 46:14 and 4 Ne. 1:36.) It is a concept too precious not to bring to the fore simply because of

the current connotations of those two words. Someday, perhaps, we can rescue still other words even more sadly abused and inverted, such as "gay" and "welfare."

There are some sobering parallels between our times and these earlier groups of "true believers" in Christ who were "faithful" members of the Church, including the Three Nephites, and who had "gladly" taken upon themselves the name of Christ (see Alma 46:15). They were persecuted by the disbelievers and irreligionists of their time, but they did not retaliate because of their commitment to Christ and because of their humility (see 4 Ne. 1:29–37). Theirs, too, was a time of polarities, for there was a "great division among the people" (4 Ne. 1:35).

So much for the background of today's theme. The "true believers in Christ" will be spoken of for the sake of convenience throughout my discussion in terms of "he," but, of

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course, this group includes both women and men.

Jesus, of course, knows who His true believers are. Others may know who His disciples are by the central characteristic of love, as we were so well taught by today's lovely choral hymn, "Love One Another."

To begin with, the true believer, notwithstanding his weaknesses, is settled in his basic spirituality. He is settled, to use another of Alma's phrases, in his "views of Christ" (Alma 27:28), so his views of everything else are put in that precious perspective.

There are, of course, other kinds of believers who are not "true believers." In the parable of the seeds, one outcome was when the seed had no root, typifying those who "for a while believe" but who "in time of temptation fall away" (Luke 8:13). Alma warned us (in his own seed analogy) about the withering effect when the "heat of the sun cometh and scorcheth" the undernourished tree of shallow root (Alma 32). Other observations of Jesus add the insight about how tribulation and persecution cause the weak to be offended and to fall away (Matt. 13:6, 21).

Most of us here have had the sad experience of seeing some wither because they cannot stand the heat. They are not likely to acknowledge that as the real reason for their failures but will conveniently choose an issue over which they can become offended. Another dynamic operates, too. In racing marathons, one does not see the dropouts make fun of those who continue; failed runners actually cheer on those who continue the race, wishing they were still in it. Not so with the marathon of discipleship in which some dropouts then make fun of the spiritual enterprise of which they were so recently a part!

In the Joseph Smith translation of the Bible, Jesus comments about bearing one's cross and the demands of discipleship and then adds, "Wherefore, settle this in your hearts, that ye will do the things which I shall teach, and

command you" (Inspired Version, Luke 14:28). Being so settled is a part of becoming a true believer.

The need for such deep determination fits well with other scriptural descriptions in which words like these are used: "stablished," "settled," "grounded," "rooted." When we are so situated, then let the heat of the sun come. (see, Col. 2:7; Col. 1:23; 1 Pet. 5:10.)

Getting settled also includes achieving a comfortableness with the behavioral standards of the Savior. When we do this, said Paul in an intriguing verse, we will then know the love of Christ "which passeth knowledge" (Phil. 4:7), and we can truly "comprehend . . . the breadth, and length, and depth, and height" of things (Eph. 3:17, 18). We can size things up spiritually because added perceptivity actually comes to us when we live righteously. Should it surprise us that behaving leads to further knowing? Could the scripture about particular blessings coming from particular obedience to laws be any more plain?

Those, however, who "for a while believe" never have these adventures which are reserved for the "true believers of Christ." Those who "almost" believe will never know these joys, for they are far too easily satisfied. Those who believe for a while make only a brief tour in the kingdom, though, thereafter, they often feel qualified to inform those who know even less about the Church; but the fact is they were really only tourists—not natives who really knew the kingdom's countryside.

The true believers are helped in keeping the basic commandments by gladly performing their specific duties in the kingdom. These duties, brothers and sisters, are usually measurable and straightforward. They include: partaking of the sacrament, receiving the gospel ordinances, attending meetings and the temple, praying, fasting, studying the scriptures, rendering Christian service, attending to all family duties, being involved in missionary work and reactivation, doing genealogical

work, paying tithes and offerings, and being temporally prepared. The true believer willing does these things because he sees their clear connection to keeping the commandments. For instance, proper participation in the Lord's welfare program carries with it this significant blessing: *"For the sake of retaining a remission of your sins from day to day, . . . I would that ye should impart of your substance to the poor"* (Mos. 4:26; italics added).

These duties are practical and specific expressions of keeping the first two great commandments—the love of God and the love of neighbor. Clearly, we cannot become true believers in Christ merely by keeping the sixth commandment—"Thou shalt not kill."

Discipleship, therefore, means being drawn by seemingly small and routine duties toward the fulfillment of the two great and most challenging commandments.

Of the Ten Commandments, *as originally given*, eight were stated as "thou shalt not" and two were required affirmations. (See Ex. 20, Deut. 5, but also Lev. 19:18.) Jesus' later statement cast the two great commandments as grand affirmatives (see Matt. 22:34–40). Brothers and sisters, our duties involve implementing ways of keeping the two great commandments because they require us to "do" rather than to merely "abstain." Abstentions do not necessarily move us on to affirmative actions, and our duties constitute the "thou shalt" in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

True enough, the highly developed disciple will have no difficulty translating his devotion to the Savior into loving his neighbor; he will find a hundred quality ways to implement the truths in today's choral hymn, "Love One Another," but most of us need specific steppingstones.

While we resist being driven by quotas into doing temple work or scolded into achieving convert baptisms, at the same time, reminders are relevant. As we grow and develop, a

particular reminder may become necessary—but only "in that thing."

Moreover, the duty least enjoyed by us, like the doctrine least understood, may be the one we need the most. Furthermore, our reminders to do these specific duties are often a call to an unkept rendezvous, to an experience we would not want to miss. The true believer understands this; he does his duties even though they are seemingly repetitious, but he is never surprised if duty develops into a new adventure.

Great care must be exercised, however, so that in all of this, we do not pass off our personal preferences as the Lord's program; we must not confuse our personal religious hobbies with His orthodoxy. Nor must we ever pass off a personal obsession as a spiritual impression.

Because true believers are "meek and lowly of heart," they are ready to be taught things they "never had supposed" as was Moses, the most meek man upon the earth (see Moses 1:7–11; Num. 12:3). Let the intellectually proud pace up and down in their tight conceptual cells if they choose, but the humble find such too confining.

Two other virtues of the meek are that they are not easily offended and they do not resist counsel. Nor are these lowly in heart inclined to see themselves as being "above" all the seemingly routine duties of discipleship. Duties are not to be rejected on the basis of "I've done all that before," as if God were required to supply us with new thrills. Mortality has been described by the Lord as being like working in a vineyard—never as an afternoon at a carnival. Besides, how could we pretend to be true believers of Christ, if we shunned the chores of the kingdom!

Furthermore, brothers and sisters, we will find that when we have personal spiritual experience—which keep us close to the Lord—these will almost always occur in the course of our carrying out the specific duties named

earlier, since it is not enough for us to have once been close to the Savior. (So was Sidney Rigdon.) Alma said, if we have once “felt to sing the song of redeeming love,” can we “feel so now?” (Alma 5:26). Dutiful discipleship creates many happy memories, but it does not make nostalgia a substitute for fresh achievement.

Instead of having a “woeful countenance,” the true believer in Christ has a *disciplined enthusiasm* to work righteousness. As, week after week, he tries to help people who “droop in sin” (see 2 Ne. 4:28), the electricity of his enthusiasm for righteousness helps to brace and to straighten the sad.

Becoming a true believer, however, means trusting not only in the Lord’s plan for all of mankind but especially trusting in His unfolding and particularized plan for each of us. This means much more than merely acknowledging that God is in charge. Alma’s warning that living without God in the world is “contrary to the nature of happiness” (Alma 41:11) was not just for agnostics but also for passive believers. Putting first things first is vital, as these eloquent words of Malcolm Muggeridge attest:

*When I look back on my life nowadays, which I sometimes do, what strikes me most forcibly about it is that what seemed at the time most significant and seductive, seems now futile and absurd. For instance, success in all of its various guises; being known and being praised, ostensible pleasures, like acquiring money or seducing women, or traveling, going to and fro in the world and up and down in it like Satan, exploring and experiencing whatever Vanity Fair has to offer. In retrospect all these exercises in self-gratification seem pure fantasy, what Pascal called “licking the earth.” They are diversions designed to distract in this world, which is, quite simply, to look for God, and, in looking, to find Him, and, having found Him, to love Him, thereby establishing a harmonious relationship with His purposes for His creation. [Thomas Nelson, *A Twentieth Century Testimony* (New York, 1978)]*

Our fully “harmonious relationship” with God must also reckon, however, with the episode of the young man who told the Savior that he had kept all the commandments from his youth. Jesus then gave him a very customized challenge: to go and sell all that he had, giving the proceeds to the poor and then taking up the cross and following the Savior. Doing so, indicated the Savior to the young man, would take care of the “one thing thou lackest” (Mark 10:21). The good and decent young man went away sorrowing because he could not meet that customized challenge; he was clearly an admirer of Jesus, but not a true believer in Christ. Nor are we, if we shrink from our customized challenges.

Indeed, would that some of us, like the young man, lacked just one thing. But having a healthy awareness of that which we yet “lack” can be a needed spur. We may have proved, for instance, that we can play checkers, but are we now ready to play chess? Are we willing to let the Lord lead us into further developmental experiences? Or do we shrink back? The things which “greatly enlarge the soul” inevitably involve stretching.

Tactical tests to help us measure how we are doing in developing the spirituality that characterizes the true believers in Christ might include the following:

1. The true believer has struck a balance between being too content with himself and being caught up in the equally dangerous human tendency of wishing for an enlarged and more important role. Alma said, “I ought to be content with the things which the Lord hath allotted unto me” (Alma 29:3). Often ignored is the tutoring sixth verse which follows: “Now, seeing that I know these things, why should I desire more than to perform the work to which I have been called?” To develop careful contentment by using our existing opportunities is obviously one of our great challenges, particularly so when we seem to be

in a “flat” period of life. We may feel under-used, underwhelmed, and underappreciated, even as we ironically ignore unused opportunities for service which are all about us.

2. The true believer has some Jethros in his life to give him needed and sometimes hard counsel.

And Moses’ father in law said unto him, The thing that thou doest is not good.

Thou wilt surely wear away, both thou, and this people that is with thee: for this thing is too heavy for thee; thou are not able to perform it thyself alone. [Ex. 18:17–18]

Do we have Jethros who can speak to us with that kind of directness and yet be humbly received by us?

Furthermore, since a Jethro may be anywhere, do we listen “down” and “sideways” as well as “up”?

And [Naaman’s] servants came near, and spake unto him, and said, My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? How much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean? [2 Kings 5:13]

Naaman, fortunately, decided not to overlook “underlings.” Notably, though Naaman expected a dramatic display of healing, he was cleansed by doing a seemingly routine thing.

3. The true believer has a sense of proportion so that Martha-like anxieties do not crowd out the Mary-like choices.

And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou are careful and troubled about many things:

But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her. [Luke 10:41–42; see also verses 38–40]

Martha was not the last conscientious Church member who was confused about priorities.

4. His personal prayers are not the easy, casual petitions—like the one of which the Lord said, “Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me” (D&C 9:7). The true believer’s prayers, at least some of the time, are *inspired* petitions.

But know this, it shall be given you what you shall ask. [D&C 50:30]

He that asketh in the Spirit asketh according to the will of God; wherefore it is done even as he asketh. [D&C 46:30]

The Lord said commandingly to a true believer in another age:

And now, because thou hast done this with such unwearyingness, behold, I will bless thee forever; and I will make thee mighty in word and in deed, in faith and in works; yea, even that all things shall be done unto thee according to thy word, for thou shalt not ask that which is contrary to my will. [Hel. 10:5; emphasis added]

5. The true believer has both right conduct and right reasons for that conduct. He is so secure in his relationship with the Lord that his goodness would continue even if he were not seen of men. He would fill his role in the Church even if there were no mortal taking of the roll:

Take heed that ye do not alms before men, to be seen of them. [Matt. 6:1; emphasis added]

We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. [Rom. 15:1; emphasis added]

Not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. [Eph. 6:6; emphasis added]

6. When professionally, associationally, or even in Church service, he may seem to have been “put out to pasture,” the true believer can

still say of the Lord (and mean it), “He maketh me to lie down in green pasture” (Ps. 23:2).

7. When he is misrepresented, misquoted, or misused, he still loves and prays sincerely for those who despitefully use him.

8. When someone seems to surpass him spiritually and does his “thing” even better than he, he genuinely rejoices and gives them heartfelt and sincere praise. He never regards colleagues as competitors.

9. The true believer remembers that forgetting is a dimension of forgiving. It is Lordlike: “I [will] remember [their sins] no more” (D&C 58:42). He really helps others to get deservedly reclassified, and, like the Lord, does not “mention” their past mistakes to them (Ex. 18:22).

His generosity reassures the repentant and also beckons the almost-repentant who warily probe the possibility of both fellowship and forgiveness.

He can, to use Alma’s phrase, “give place” for the spiritual growth of others. He is truly ready to receive not only the repentant but to recognize the frail who have, happily, grown strong. He knows that in the City of Zion there will be many “new kids on the block.”

10. The true believer is careful about giving offense or causing others to stumble.

In writing about the City of Enoch a few years ago a true believer was used to say these things about how shortcomings beget shortcomings:

*How often the weakness in one man becomes a temptation to another man! My desire for wealth and gems can cause another man’s envy; my temper has at time, dissolved your patience. One man’s incontinence destroys what little is left of a righteous woman’s resolve. One person’s lust becomes another’s way to wealth. A man’s drunkenness becomes another man’s excuse for Sabbath-breaking to enlarge his vineyards. [Neal A. Maxwell, *Of One Heart* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1975), p. 28]*

11. The true believer insists that within deprivation there may be opportunity. He can wait for the unfolding of opportunity hidden within tragedy, as did Joseph anciently. When in their later Egyptian rendezvous, Joseph lovingly reassured his anxious brothers, “But as for you, ye thought evil against me, but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive” (Gen. 50:20). So often, before we can save others, however, we must first be shaped and refined.

12. The true believer is growing in his patience, including being patient in following the living prophets. He knows that trying to get ahead of the Brethren is a sure way of falling behind.

13. He is ready to follow the Lord into soul-stretching experiences even if it means enrolling the schooling of suffering and paying his tuition.

These words from a sobering, sweet letter written to me by a gallant, but modest, student now at BYU attest to a significant spirituality in one so young—one who rejoices in the many blessings he now has without brooding over those that are temporarily withheld from him.

I have now had leukemia diagnosed for fifteen months, although few people even know about it. My goal has been to lead as normal a life as is possible; hence, the subject rarely gets mentioned because most people I have encountered, doctors, included, tend to treat it as a tragedy rather than as an incentive to get one’s affairs in order promptly.

My parents took the news quite hard, perhaps because my brother died unexpectedly eleven years ago of undiagnosed causes. Most people are pessimistic; however, I have failed to see how pessimism would help me make the best use of my time which is of unknown length, not only for me, but for everyone.

Against medical and parental advice, I have since been married and am at BYU and we’re expecting a baby in July. I feel great and am truly enjoying the blessings that are coming from being

married in the temple, studying the scriptures, working hard in school, and living each day rather than simply waiting to die.

Fifteen months ago, my then fiancée and I thought that if I could live long enough for us to be sealed, that would be all we would ask for.

Therefore, we consider everything since then as a great gift from the Lord. We still dream and plan for a long family life together, and it gives us a certain comfort to know that our situation is in the Lord's hands and is not bound by man's limitations.

Like Job, this remarkable young man has avoided the usual human tendency when under stress to charge God foolishly (see Job 1:22).

Along with the attributes already noted in the tests cited, the true believer in Christ may be further characterized.

He is innocent as to sin, but he is not naïve about worldly things. He is kind but he is candid. He is harmless because he keeps the second commandment. But he is powerful because his righteousness permits him access to the powers of heaven, which cannot be handled in any other way.

The true believer is serious about the living of his life, but he is of good cheer. His humor is the humor of hope and his mirth is the mirth of modesty—not the hollow laughter or the cutting cleverness of despair. Unlike those of a celebrated “devil-may-care” lifestyle, his is the quiet “heaven-does-care” attitude.

He understands the difference between ends and means and sees that some Church aids are, in a sense, scaffolding for the soul, which scaffolding one day will be removed—like waterwings or training wheels.

He is humble enough to “serve tables” but is sensible enough to share his time and talents on the basis of priorities—doing the “things of most worth.”

Like his Master, the true believer loves his life but is willing to lay it down or to see it slip slowly away through affliction. If he is given a

“thorn in the flesh,” he does not demand to see the rose garden.

Let the kaleidoscope of life's circumstances be shaken, again and again, and the “true believer of Christ” will still see “with the eye of faith” divine design and purpose in his life.

There is a quiet regalness about the true believer in Christ, however humble in appearance he may be. Hence, the true believer's light has become more than a little one; however, he is apt to be quite innocent of his growing incandescence. The true believer's “*cris de coeur*,” or “cry of the heart,” is heard—not always over tragedy as the world measures tragedy—but when observing the tragedy of sin; for in seeing “things as they really are,” he also sees what might have been.

Being settled in his soul, he has a serenity even in the midst of war and tumult. If he lives, he lives unto the Lord, if he dies, he dies unto the Lord, just as President Brigham Young said:

I say to the brethren who are leaving home . . . when you pray for your families . . . you must feel—if they live, all right; if they die, all right; if I die, all right; if I live, all right; for we are the Lords' and we shall soon meet again. [Journal of Discourses 6:273]

The true believer can read the depressing signs of the times without being depressed because he has a particularized and “perfect brightness of hope” (2 Ne. 31:20). He knows that “Christ will lift [us] up” (Mor. 9:25). He does not naively depend on mortal rulers, assemblies, congresses, or parliaments to lift him up, though he is genuinely grateful for any true success by these. Rather, he has the precious perspective of Joseph Smith who observed:

The laws of men may guarantee to a people protection in the honorable pursuits of this life, and the temporal happiness arising from a protection against unjust insults and injuries; and when this

is said, all is said, that can be in truth, of the power, extent, and influence of the laws of men, exclusive of the laws of God. [Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1972) p. 50]

Besides, the true believer knows that in the awful winding-up scenes human deterioration will be finally and decisively and mercifully met by divine intervention. He understands, therefore, that in such conditions the sooner he renounces the world, the sooner he can help to save some souls in it.

Let us, brothers and sisters, seek to become such true believers in Christ. Let us make our way, righteously and resolutely, notwithstanding our weaknesses, to the beckoning City of God. There, the sole and self-assigned gatekeeper is Jesus Christ. He awaits us at the gate not only to *certify* us—but because His deep, divine desire brings Him there to *welcome* us. “He employeth no servant there” (2 Ne. 9:41). If we acknowledge Him now, He will lovingly acknowledge us then.

May God bless you as a generation with a continuing sense of impending rendezvous with tasks you know not of yet, but for which you must be prepared. I see you, frankly, as a generation further along the path than your parents’ generation was at your same age, settling in sooner on the way to becoming “true believers in Christ.” I see you as a generation

fitted before you came here, measured for the challenge to be given to you, and as adequate for all that you will be asked to do. I plead with you, therefore, with some sense of trembling and awe for you collectively, in anticipation of that which you will be called upon to do. My pleading is that you determine to settle in spiritually—even more so by moving along in the pathway to becoming “true believers in Christ.” Then as the heat comes, having been established, settled, grounded, and rooted in Christ, you can withstand the heat of the sun when it comes to scorch; you can be of good cheer and lift others up. Such can be your blessings, such are surely your promises, for the fulfillment of which I pray in love as I once again bear my witness to you as to the validity of the work in which we are engaged.

Nothing else is even in the same solar system of significance. God bless you to keep your rendezvous, to be true believers in Christ, and to be so settled that others can look to you for constancy amid turmoil and for truth amid falsehood. And in the powers of my office I bless you so that you shall be accelerated in this quest and do so, knowing of my accountability for that which I have said to you this day, but knowing also of your accountability for what has been said to you. All of which I say humbly, but most importantly, in the holy name of Jesus Christ. Amen.