Cultivating Tolerance, Appreciation, and Respect for Others Bringing the Gospel into Classroom Instruction

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“The people of the earth are all our Father’s children and are of many and varied religious persuasions. We must cultivate tolerance and appreciation and respect one another. We have differences of doctrine. This need not bring about animosity or any kind of holier-than-thou attitude” (Gordon B. Hinckley, emphasis added).

I would like to introduce my essay using an actual event reported to me by one of our students. A BYU–Idaho instructor began class with a prayer and a scripture. The instructor next showed a youtube.com video of a (supposedly) Muslim suicide bomber, including a graphic and deadly explosion and bloody aftermath. The instructor then began teaching the lesson for that day—which had nothing to do with Muslims, or with violence, or with suicide bombings. The video was gratuitous and unrelated to content or course objectives. This student was deeply shocked and felt violated for having been exposed to graphic violence without warning. Upon reflection, the use of the video appears wonton, designed to propagate hatred, to increase fear, to denigrate Islam and Muslims—anything but to teach the subject at hand or to bring the gospel into the classroom. In this sequence of prayer/scripture/suicide bombing/teaching course content, which activities brought the gospel of peace into the classroom, and which activities brought in an anti-gospel of hate? Does this story incorporate the counsel of President Hinckley and actively cultivate tolerance, appreciation, and respect for individuals of other faiths?

This sort of event is, hopefully, rare. I have reason to believe, however, that analogous events still happen, and that they negatively impact a number of our students. Furthermore, students who have confided this and similar stories to me see this for what it is: anti-gospel indoctrination. They are not only confused, but in some cases become suspicious of the motives behind such a rhetoric of hate. Additionally, our student body is
increasingly international, and many of our students now have more sustained and direct experience with Muslims than nearly all of our faculty members. These students have gone on missions where they interacted positively with Muslims and where they learned to distrust media bias and anti-Muslim hatemongering. Other students count Muslims among their best friends and cherish their interfaith friendships. These students know differently, and are dismayed when professors teach anti-Muslim hate in the classroom. This raises important questions regarding how we may be succeeding or failing to bring the gospel into our classroom instruction.

Whose “Gospel” Are We Bringing Into Our Classroom Instruction?

I am now in my twenty-fifth year at Ricks College / BYU–Idaho, and on several occasions I have asked our presidents and other administrators, our faculty, and our students what it means to “bring the gospel into the classroom.” With little variation I have been told that bringing the gospel into the classroom means enforcing the dress code, holding a devotional at the beginning of class sessions, or including a scripture or two in the lesson. While these activities are laudable at BYU–Idaho and hopefully help create a class culture in which bringing the gospel into our instruction is more likely, I wonder if our instructional commitment shouldn't go deeper, shouldn't be more organic and less formulistic. Once the devotions and scripture reading are over, what happens next? Do some of us continue to teach in ways that are anti-gospel? How might we evaluate how well we bring the gospel into our classroom instruction after the devotional has ended?

There are numerous scriptural examples of how we, as Christians and as Latter-day Saints, should teach about the other. We are not taught to seek for that which is tawdry, calumnioues, denigrating, or demeaning in others, but to instead seek for what is “virtuous, lovely, or of good report, or praiseworthy” (Article of Faith 13). We are taught to do unto others as we would have done to ourselves, or as I put it in an inter-faith context, howsoever you would that others speak of your religion, speak so even of theirs. Nowhere are we commanded to hate, despise, vilify, or dehumanize others or their beliefs. Instead, we are taught to allow all people to “worship how, where, or what they may” (Article of Faith 11). Turning to the methods of our master, Jesus’s use of those individuals who were defamed by his own culture as ideal protagonists provides a model for gospel instruction in our classrooms. Jesus critiqued, criticized, and, in some cases condemned, his own culture, and, sought for and praised the virtues found in persons from other cultures. He often made them the heroines and heroes of his teachings, exemplars of virtue and good works. We should do no less in our courses and in our personal lives. In so doing we may bring his gospel of peace more completely into our classroom instruction.

Critiquing Our Own Culture

We are each raised in a culture—the environment that trains us how to value or devalue the persons, things, faiths, or viewpoints around us. We often accept our culture’s values unquestioningly, folding them into our version of the gospel in ways that may prove contrary to Jesus’s version. Our scriptures, however, warn us repeatedly about unquestioningly accepting our culture—often referred to scripturally as the “traditions of the fathers.” The scriptures likewise illustrate the influence such traditions may exert both positively and negatively upon living the principles of the gospel. Too often our culture and traditions become
standards by which we evaluate and implement the gospel, rather than the gospel becoming a fixed moral and spiritual point of departure from which we evaluate our culture.

President Kimball critiqued his culture in the essay, “The False Gods We Worship.” Written for the June 1976 volume of the Ensign magazine in the days immediately preceding the bicentennial celebration of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, readers might have expected a typical July 4th essay praising the liberties and freedoms of the United States, or the wisdom found in the doctrines of separation of powers. Instead, President Kimball delivered a perhaps unexpected critique of both American and Latter-day Saint culture:

We are a warlike people, easily distracted from our assignment of preparing for the coming of the Lord. When enemies rise up, we commit vast resources to the fabrication of gods of stone and steel—ships, planes, missiles, fortifications—and depend on them for protection and deliverance. When threatened, we become anti-enemy instead of pro-kingdom of God; we train a man in the art of war and call him a patriot, thus, in the manner of Satan’s counterfeit of true patriotism, perverting the Savior’s teaching:

“Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.” (Matt. 5:44–45.) (Emphasis added)

How might our classroom instruction concerning other cultures and peoples promote an anti-enemy—rather than a pro-kingdom of God—attitude? If we find ourselves teaching anti-gospel values of hatred, what might be done to remedy and reverse that, and bring the gospel more deeply into our classroom instruction?

We might follow the advice of Elder Richard G. Scott in his conference address, “Removing Barriers to Happiness” (Ensign, May, 1998). He pointed out that one's culture might “perpetuate patterns of life that should be set aside by a devoted Latter-day Saint.” Quoting President Howard W. Hunter, Elder Scott continued, “Measure whatever anyone else asks you to do, whether it be from your family, loved ones, your cultural heritage, or traditions you have inherited—measure everything against the teachings of the Savior” (emphasis added). Reminding us that critiquing one's own culture is challenging, Elder Scott counseled us to begin with the scriptures, followed by the counsel of prophets, and to “evaluate each part of your life and make any adjustments that are needed.”

He then identified aspects of culture that “should be set aside,” including any “heritage…that breeds conflict with other cultures.” Acting from ignorance of one's cultural faults provides no excuse: “Should you choose, even unknowingly, to follow tradition which is in conflict with the teachings of the Lord, you choose to violate the sacred covenants made at baptism.” In other words, we have an affirmative and ongoing duty to critique and to adjust our cultural heritage to conform and advance gospel standards.

In conclusion, Elder Scott instructed that, “where family or national traditions or customs conflict with the teachings of God, set them aside.” If anti-gospel cultural conflict or hatred makes its way from our personal life into the classroom, should it not also be set aside?

Finding Virtue in the Other

Whether or not one is challenged by knowingly or unknowingly teaching an anti-gospel of hatred in the classroom, there is always more room to include instruction in gospel principles regarding treatment of
the other. We can teach about virtues in other faiths and cultures, following the instructional example of Jesus: teaching about good Samaritans, about Roman centurions with faith greater than all Israel, about Publicans who were justified in their prayers, and prostitutes who loved and worshiped Jesus, washing his feet with sincere kisses and tears while anointing them with precious ointments. In our modern environment, might not Jesus have substituted virtuous Muslims for virtuous Samaritans? Might we not likewise find examples of faith, steadfastness, generosity, love, and honesty in the other, and bring those gospel-based teachings into our classroom instruction?

Joseph Smith taught that the “Great Parent of the Universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard,” and will judge each person “not according to what they have not, but according to what they have.” When we search for virtues such as love, honesty, and generosity in the other, we are judging them based upon what they have, not what they lack when compared to us. This helps us acknowledge differences while avoiding animosity or a holier-than-thou attitude, as counseled by President Hinckley.

In addition to teaching us about how the great parent of the universe judges others based upon the virtues they have, the Prophet Joseph also taught us how to end war and conflict, not with the “gods of stone and steel” President Kimball warned about, but through friendship and respect:

“Friendship is one of the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism; [it is designed] to revolutionize and civilize the world, and cause wars and contentions to cease and men to become friends and brothers...That friendship which intelligent beings would accept as sincere must arise from love, and that love grow out of virtue, which is as much a part of religion as light is a part of Jehovah.”

I invite you to join me in continually critiquing cultural influences of hatred that contaminate our spiritual life, and seek instead to identify and teach about virtues in the other. This will build a gospel vision of friendship and love that fulfills our commitment to bringing the gospel into the classroom. 

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