

Differing Views
Interview with Brad Wilcox
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Sherrae Phelps: There are those who walk away from their beliefs because they are trying to love someone and show compassion for them. And it may seem that they have to choose between their beliefs and the relationship, and so they sacrifice their beliefs for the relationship.

And there are those who are trying to stand faithfully in their beliefs, and as a result, they turn their backs on those they love and sacrifice the relationship for their beliefs.

Must we choose between sacrificing our beliefs for a relationship or a relationship for our beliefs? I don't think we need to sacrifice our beliefs to be able to show love, respect, compassion, and understanding. And I don't think we need to sacrifice our relationships to hold integrity for our beliefs and values.

One theme I've noticed in the Book of Mormon is this constant confrontation between traditions and beliefs, and typically it's between the Lamanite traditions and the Nephites traditions. There are Nephites approaching the Lamanites saying "Your traditions are wrong." And there are Lamanites approaching the Nephites saying "Your traditions are wrong."

What if you were a Lamanite living in your little Lamanite community and everything is going along fine. And then one day a Nephite comes along and suggests that what you think is right really isn't right. And vice versa. What if you're a Nephite and you have someone coming to you suggesting that your beliefs that you've been taught your whole life are wrong.

Regardless of if that is a religion situation, or a situation within your marriage, your family, or at work; when someone is coming to you suggesting that you may not be seeing things as clearly as you think you are, or that your view might be off, that's not an easy thing to digest and work through.

I'd like to hear your thoughts on how you keep yourself open to seeing the whole picture but not vulnerable to being deceived and just going along with the most persuasive voice out there.

Brad Wilcox: I think that Stephen Covey gave some wonderful advice when he said: "Seek first to understand and then be understood." It's important that we listen to other people's opinions and beliefs and not jump too quickly to the defense of our own.

One bad example would be the kid on a playground, that I heard about, at Christmas time, whose friend told him that there is no Santa Claus. And the kid punched his friend when he told him. I think of another negative experience in our own family when my young son came home and said, "Dad did you know the tallest building in the world is the Empire State Building?" to which his brother responded by saying, "No it's not, you're so stupid. I can't believe you said that because that's not the tallest building." When my younger son was attacked like that, then he didn't say, "Oh enlighten me older brother. Please tell me which is the tallest building." Instead, he got defensive, and he clung to his belief, whether it was right or wrong. He clung to it even tighter just like the kid on the playground who punched his friend when he said there is no Santa. We all do the same thing and cling to our beliefs at times when they attacked.

So I think a better way is to make sure we listen and try to understand others. That doesn't mean we have to accept what's being said. It simply means that we have to seek to understand FIRST. Then we have to present evidence so that the person can understand why we think differently. Even if he doesn't accept our beliefs, he will at least understand why we believe that way.

So I said to my son, "I'm so glad you're interested in tall buildings. That is wonderful. And I think that for a long time the Empire State Building was the tallest building. But let's look at the copyright date in the book that you got from the library. Let's see when that was published. And then let's just look on the Internet and see if there have been some buildings built after that date. That may give us more information." In that kind of setting, my younger son was willing to look at the evidence which allowed him to compose a new belief in his mind. And I think that that's an important thing that we can do when trying to help others understand us.

When we attack someone's belief or when someone attacks our belief, then the initial reaction is to get into an argument: "Is too! Is not! Yes, it is. No, it isn't.." And that doesn't get us anywhere. What we've got to look at is evidence.

Jesus said, "By their fruits, ye shall know them." I think that doesn't just apply to judging prophets, but also ideas. We can judge them by their fruits as well. Incorrect ideas are often supported by very shallow evidence, and it's easy to see through that evidence quickly. But when we deal with correct ideas and when we deal with absolute truth, then we've got a deep foundation of evidence and witnesses, and that evidence multiplies the more we investigate it.

We might ask, "When is it valuable to listen to opposing views and when is it wise to stay away from them?" And I think that's especially important when it comes to religious belief and faith because there are wolves in sheep's clothing who have the motive and intent to simply destroy faith without replacing it with anything better. And so we must look at that evidence. We have to consider our experiences, our study, and the presence or absence of the Spirit. Does it bring light or darkness?

There is nothing we can learn about church history and about the gospel doctrine that is scary if we study and examine it in depth. Polygamy, seer stones, women in the priesthood, blacks and the priesthood, multiple versions of the first vision. If we study these issues in depth, then there's much to learn. The problem is that people settle for quick sound bites and the pop psychology that's dished out on the Internet in blog-length posts or Instagram messages.

I think one of the tragedies of the CES letter that started floating around the Internet is that it made claim after claim after claim but gave no evidence or documentation to support them. People just assumed the claims were accurate. But if someone takes the time to investigate those claims in depth (and entire books have been written by Latter-day Saint scholars in response to that letter), then they start realizing that there's not a lot of evidence supporting those claims or they can recognize them as the exaggerations and unsupported generalizations they are. They can see that many of the statements made have been taken completely out of the context in which they were given.

I don't care about somebody studying anything that seems controversial as long as he or she studies it in depth and looks at Latter-day Saint sources rather than just what is written by outsiders. I think the problem is that we will grab one little phrase or one little idea, and take it as the fact. We look at the opinion of someone who has written something on the Internet as if that person is qualified, and we don't remember that anybody, qualified or not, can post whatever he wants on the Internet. And so I think we have to be able to look deeper and do exactly what Jesus said to do: judge by the fruits. That is hard because it takes time and people just aren't used to having to take time to think in our information-saturated world where we expect answers to come in an instant.

Sherrae Phelps: I want to talk about what it means to be open-minded and what it means to be steadfast in your beliefs. Dallin H. Oaks said, "Like the Savior, his followers...[who] hold out for right and wrong...as they understand it...[are] sometimes called bigots and fanatics."

What's the difference between being a bigot and a fanatic verses standing steadfastly for your beliefs?

Sometimes we justify our poor behavior when we are standing up for our views, not just religious views, but any of our views and opinions. It's as if we are telling

ourselves, "I'm justified to act this way, and I'm justified to do this because I'm holding to my views and I'm being firm and steadfast in my beliefs." But in doing so, we become jerks or bigots about it. But at the same time, there are those who are being firm and steadfast in their beliefs in a respectful way but are still be accused of being bigots.

What are your thoughts on the difference between being steadfast and having integrity for your belief and being a bigot with your beliefs?

Brad Wilcox: I think that when people throw out those words, they are basically saying this person agrees with me, or this person doesn't agree with me. And I think we have to remember that sometimes that kind of name calling and labeling says more about the person who's doing it than it does about the person who's being attacked.

Think about it like this: A guy breaks up with a girl and he says he's being cautious and careful, but she says he's a jerk. It kind of depends on the perspective.

You'll hear someone say, "You're not tolerant. I hate you because you're not tolerant." Well, let's look at those words for a minute. Isn't the person accusing someone of being intolerant being intolerant? It's kind of like the kid who gets mad at his brother or sister for not closing his or her eyes during a prayer. I mean, how does that kid know that if his own eyes were not open? We have to really back away from the emotions that provoke the name-calling, and we have to really look at the situation more carefully.

When people say to me, "You hate this person, or you hate that person because he or she is different from you." I say, "No I don't hate anyone, but I'm not going to say that what that person is saying or doing is always a good thing."

A good example is the word of wisdom. Years ago everybody believed that smoking was healthy for you. But today we know that it is not a healthy choice. Now I can accept my neighbor who is a smoker. I can say, "Hey, he's got agency, and he can make that choice if he wants to." And I can love him and befriend him and have a great relationship with him, but it doesn't mean I'm going to start smoking. And it doesn't mean I'm going to start teaching my children that smoking isn't a dangerous choice.

And so I think we need to love and accept people and understand differences even learn from those differences. However, I can do all of that without accepting their beliefs.

Sherrae Phelps: There is this idea that if you are willing to embrace and support different views and willing to cheer these people on, then you must be a good person because you have the ability to make room for other people's different

beliefs. It's like we measure how accepting, loving, and compassionate we are based upon the degree to which we validate beliefs even when they conflict with our beliefs. If you are able to say "I agree with your belief as much as you do," then you are more loving, compassionate, and empathic than those who don't agree with that belief. But I don't think you have to value, and validate, and agree with someone's view to show respect for their views, and to feel love, compassion, empathy, and understanding.

Brad Wilcox: Yes. Go back to the Word of Wisdom example. Some people think they are showing love if they pick up the cigarette and start telling everyone, "This is great." That is not the case. We can love somebody who smokes without accepting or promoting that choice.

I realize that is easy to see in the case of cigarettes because it's kind of clear cut because society sees smoking as wrong, but with other issues, like homosexuality for example, it doesn't seem as clear cut because society sees it as right. Nevertheless, think back to when Joseph Smith first revealed the Word of Wisdom. It went against society and yet Joseph Smith was right even when society said he wasn't. And that's the position we're in now. Sometimes we have to say, "We're going to trust the word of God more than we are going to trust public opinion."

We could ask, "When do you know that you're not just grabbing hold of a new idea or holding onto your old beliefs out of weakness?" I think that question is the very reason that we have something called the standard works.

The standard works have that title because they become the standard by which we judge truths and opinions and politically correct attitudes. If they match our standard, the standard in the scriptures and the standard put forth by prophets, then yes we can accept them. But if it doesn't meet the standard, then we have to be willing to say no. We can't lower our basketball hoop or raise our basketball hoop every game. The basketball hoop has got to remain standard. Some members of the church are raising or lowering the basketball hoop according to public opinion rather than saying there is a standard and there's a reason for that standard and I am going to trust that God knows best.

President Monson was crucified in the New York Times after his death for being so out of touch with women's issues and out of touch with gay issues. I had friends who were furious about that the New York Times was so critical of him and they were saying we need to sign a petition and ask the New York Times to retract that. And I said no we just have to be grateful that they're proving that President Monson was a good prophet. Since when are prophets politically correct? And since when are prophets popular? If a prophet is popular, then we have to start doubting whether he's really standing up for God or seeking the praise of men. Since when has Christ and the gospel ever been popular or socially accepted? It's always required people, whether it was in the Old

Testament, the New Testament, the Book of Mormon, or our times, it's always required people to swim upstream.

Sherrae Phelps: I think the majority of the people have good intentions, but it can be hard to navigate differing beliefs especially when they contradict and can be so controversial. It's a struggle to figure out how to navigate that, and it's conflicting. We need more discussion about how we can have integrity for our beliefs and how to develop more respect for the differing beliefs of others.

Brad Wilcox: So we're not asking people to accept our beliefs. We're simply saying, please understand why we must believe this way. Please understand that our doctrine binds us to certain beliefs and if we throw that out then we throw out our doctrine. Then we are just raising and lowering our basketball standard based on whatever winds happen to blow.

I remember in the 70s when zero population was a big issue. Everyone seemed to be mad at member of the Church because many have big families. How times have changed! Now governments across the world are begging people to have children. Popular opinion changes. We can't be overly influenced by it.

We're not asking everybody else to say, okay we agree with you, but we're asking for the same understanding and tolerance that they are asking for.