

‘What does it mean to be the ‘Salt of the Earth’?’ LeGrand Baker

***Ensign*, April 1999, p. 53-54.**

Response by LeGrand L. Baker, curator Wells Freedom Archives, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, and a member of the Cherry Hill Ninth Ward, Orem Utah Cherry Hill Stake.

The scriptural phrase "salt of the earth" has come to mean many things. In likening the scriptures unto ourselves (see 1 Ne. 19:23), we may sometimes overlook the author's primary intent and the key points of comparison in his use of metaphor. A full understanding and appreciation of a given passage of scripture may thus elude us. [I was especially pleased that sentence got in unchanged.]

That sometimes appears to be the case with the metaphor of salt. Perhaps we have observed that just as salt enhances the taste of certain foods, so we must be as salt, living our lives to bless and enhance the lives of others and make the gospel palatable to them. We may have also noted that salt is a preservative not unlike the preserving influence of righteous Saints who uphold gospel ideals in a world of shifting values.

While such applications are relevant and meaningful to Latter-day Saints worldwide, to the ancients the central figurative meaning of salt had to do not with taste but with smell.

When sacrifices were offered upon the altars of ancient Israel, the Israelites did not give the Lord the flesh of the animal, the fruit of the ground, or the ashes or smoke of such sacrifices. The acceptable part of the offering presented to the Lord was the smell, "a sweet savour unto the Lord" (Lev. 1 17).

In the Bible, the word savour most often refers to the pleasant smell of burning sacrifice in the temple. To ensure that the smell would be sweet, the Mosaic law required that the offering be liberally sprinkled with salt.

The scent of an unsalted burnt offering would be the stench of scorched flesh. But if the meat were generously salted, the odor would be quite different, due to the reaction of the salt upon the cells that compose animal flesh. Under high-salt conditions, cellular fluid rapidly escapes the cells to dilute the salts outside cell membranes. When accentuated by heat, these fluids cause a sweet savor to emanate.

The Lord's requirements concerning their offerings was clear. Referring to "the salt of the covenant," the Lord instructed ancient Israel, "With all thine offerings thou shalt offer salt" (Lev. 2:13). Flavius Josephus, the ancient Jewish historian, explained how that was done. He wrote that the priests "cleanse the bodies [of the sacrificial animals], and divide them into parts, and salt them with salt, and lay them upon the altar, while the pieces of wood are piled one upon another, and the fire is burning.... This is was the way of offering a burnt offering" (*Antiquities of the Jews*, trans. William Whiston [1875], 3:9:1).

The purpose of the law of performances and ordinances given to the children of Israel through Moses was to point their souls to Christ and to bear witness of His gospel. The atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ perfectly fulfilled the law of Moses and ended blood sacrifice. The

resurrected Lord explained the new law of sacrifice to His followers on the American continent: "Ye shall offer up unto me no more the shedding of blood; yea, your sacrifices and your burnt offerings shall be done away...."

"And ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit. And whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, him will I baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost" (3 Ne. 9:19-20).

In this context the charge to be the "salt of the earth" takes on marvelous significance. The Lord said, "I give unto you to be the salt of the earth; but if the salt shall lose its savor wherewith shall the earth be salted?" (3 Ne. 12:13). The Savior's audience no doubt understood the law of Moses and the close connection between salt and acceptable sacrifice.

It is clear that under the new covenant the followers of Christ, as "salt," are responsible for extending gospel blessings to the whole earth. "When men are called unto mine everlasting gospel, and covenant with an everlasting covenant," the Lord explains, "they are accounted as the salt of the earth and the savor of men" (D&C 101:39). It is our privilege and blessing to lovingly lead our brothers and sisters to Christ, helping them receive their covenant blessings. As we do so, we become the figurative salt that makes it possible for them to offer the acceptable sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit. In addition, our own covenant sacrifice of time, talents, and means is pleasing to the Lord.

This tremendous responsibility of helping bring salvation to others is coupled with caution: "But if the salt shall lose its savor wherewith shall the earth be salted? The salt shall be thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out and to be trodden under foot of men" (3 Ne. 12:13). Salt used anciently for sacrifice could easily lose its savor, and always for the same reason – impurity. If such impure salt was heated, the combination of impurities and salt can result in an unpleasant odor. It was therefore discarded, lest its use desecrate the sacrifice and offend the Lord.

Likewise, we are displeasing to the Lord to the degree that we are impure and ineffective "not the saviors of men," but instead "as salt that has lost its savor" (D&C 103:10).

So how do we become the salt of the earth? The Apostle Paul points out that charity is a key to this process: "Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children;

"And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour" (Eph. 5:1-2). We must seek to love others purely, as the Savior loves us. It is through this love that we can help bring souls to Him, that they and we might be found acceptable – "unto God a sweet savour of Christ" (2 Cor. 2:15).