

# “COOPERATING IN WORKS OF THE SPIRIT”: NOTES TOWARD A HIGHER DIALOGUE

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“The word is near you: it is upon your lips and in your heart.” (Romans 10:8, NEB)

Communication is a matter of infinite hope. It is the emotion we feel when we send these fragile words however tentatively or forcefully out to others. Even those who write secret diaries, shrouded in cryptic codes, or who shout anonymous messages on subway walls, or who carefully hide parchment and golden plates in caves to come forth several millennia later all do so with the same expectation: that someone, somewhere will read and understand.

The model for our communication, like the model for all human behavior, is found in the interactions between Christ and the Father and in their interactions with us. From the beginning God taught Adam and Eve a pure language and gave them the gift of the Holy Ghost that He might communicate with them and they with Him. “All things were confirmed unto Adam” by the Holy Ghost and “it was given unto as many as called upon God to write by the spirit of inspiration” (Moses 5:58–59; 6:5–6).

God invites us to “reason together” with Him, and the scriptures indicate that He is anxious to enter into dialogue with us; He wants us to understand Him as He understands us. He invites us to “pray continually”—in our closets and in our fields, at our morning rising and our evening repose. He welcomes our joyful expressions as well as our heaviness of heart. He speaks as we are capable of hearing, sometimes with the voice of thunder and at others with a quiet stillness. It is only in modern existential literature that God is a deaf mute, a Godot for whom men must endlessly be waiting, a silent god hiding behind a white or a painted mask. Obviously, such concepts come from those who have never felt the confirming joy of the Spirit as it brings the heart and mind of man in harmony with God.

The corruption of true communication as it was revealed to Adam began with Cain, who “listened not any more to the voice of the Lord.” Cain lost the power of discernment and the gift of the Spirit and became the “father of lies,” thereby introducing into human discourse deception and guile. This was the beginning of the secularization of dialogue.

In its corrupt forms dialogue is not a means to understanding but a weapon whereby we can outwit or best an opponent by superior rhetoric and logic. It is a device to force others to listen to our point of view. As Kees Bolle has recently written, “‘Dialogue’ was all the rage in Christian circles in Europe after the second World War. And that rage has convinced me that dialogue can turn stale. A student of theology could grab you by the collar while you were on an innocent stroll and say: Now, let’s have a dialogue. He, and many others at the time, assumed that if you engaged in dialogue, the truth would emerge automatically.”<sup>1</sup>

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I think that was the assumption I labored under most of the six years I edited this journal. I felt that if we could just get Mormons to talk and listen to one another we would come to a common understanding of those things that divided us; if we published sincere scholarly and personal expressions, then intellectuals and non-intellectuals, conservatives and liberals, Mormons and non-Mormons would be helped in coming to a unity of the faith. To some extent I think that has happened, and I am reluctant to abandon my belief that when people speak and listen honestly and openly to one another, the truth, however private and elusive it sometimes is, will emerge.

But this does not always happen because not all of those who speak and listen (or who refuse to) are interested in truth. Sometimes we deliberately talk past the understanding of others, or as Paul says, we “talk into the air,” or we listen to the sound of our own voices, pleased with the logic of our arguments and with the beauty of our language. It was evident during those years that some who submitted manuscripts were less interested in dialogue than in proving a point, in convincing others that they had found *the* truth, or in revealing someone else’s ignorance or

On the other hand, there were those who refused even to read *Dialogue*, who dismissed out of hand what was, at least in its best moments, a desire by some Latter-day Saints to communicate with their fellow Saints about matters of ultimate concern. There were also those who refused to publish in *Dialogue* even when they had something important to say.

Both those who have defended *Dialogue* and those who have criticized it have tended to label one another. On the one hand there has been the tendency to see those associated with the journal as “intellectual” and “liberal.” Conversely, *Dialogue* supporters sometimes see those who are against the journal as “anti-intellectual” or “close-minded.” Again quoting Kees Bolle: “‘Dialogue’ became a weapon [among Christians]. With ‘dialogue’ you could make a clear distinction between those who were *in* and those who were *out*. It provided an easy labelling technique.”<sup>2</sup> Such labelling has led, I believe, to a hardening of feelings, a solidifying of positions, an intellectual pitting of Saint against Saint.

Such a condition ought not to exist among those who have been given the enlightening blessings of the Restored Gospel, including, especially, the gift of the Holy Ghost. Dare I suggest that when we set out to communicate with one another, even on scholarly and secular matters, that we first prepare ourselves with fasting and prayer that we might be blessed with the Spirit to understand the hearts of those to whom we would speak? And if such spiritual preparation is necessary for those who write and speak, then it is equally so for those who read and listen.

I believe that a person who prepares himself spiritually to either give or receive communication from another will be more honest, open, humble and, most of all, more loving. He will be less likely to posture, manipulate, argue, or defend. He will not speak or listen with guile, but rather, guided by the Spirit, will understand the heart and mind, the feelings and thoughts of the other.

Once we have determined that we have something to say, and perhaps are even urged by the Spirit to say it, we must still decide, to use J. V. Cunningham’s words, “how the saying must be said.” Perhaps we can be guided by Nephi’s description of the way the Lord communicates with us: “For after this manner doth the Lord God work among the Children of men. The Lord God giveth light unto the understanding; for he speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding” (II Nephi 31:3).

Nephi indicates that even when communication is given in this manner, there is still a responsibility on those who have ears to hear. He tells of his older brothers,

Laman and Lemuel, who say that they cannot understand the words of their father concerning the olive tree. Nephi asks, "Have ye inquired of the Lord?" Their response indicates that they don't believe God can reveal this knowledge to them: "We have not; for the Lord maketh no such thing known unto us." Nephi tells them that because they have not kept the commandments, their hearts are hardened and they cannot learn from the Lord: "He hath spoken unto you in a still small voice, but ye were past feeling, that ye could not feel his words" (I Nephi 15:8-10; 17:45).

When we speak and listen by the Spirit, our communication is filled with love. Like Ammon and his brothers who go to preach the gospel to their "brethren" the Lamanites, our chief motivation in communicating with others should be to bless them. Such love allows us to accept those with whom we would communicate, no matter what their differences or their limitations. Feeling our love, the other person is not threatened and is therefore more open both to receive our expressions and to give his own in return.

The perfect symbolization of a loving dialogue takes place in the temple where, embraced by and embracing the Lord, we have a conversation that is both intimate and instructive, leading to a celestial life. If we could psychologically embrace those with whom we speak and to whom we listen, so that they could feel our fellowship, how much more open and pure our dialogues would be.

I am suggesting that we raise our dialogue to a higher, more spiritual plane, one that will distinguish it from the dialogue that goes on all around us. B. H. Roberts suggests that this is the challenge that awaits the true disciples of Mormonism. Such disciples, he says, "growing discontented with the necessarily primitive methods which have hitherto prevailed in sustaining the doctrine, will yet take profounder and broader view of the great doctrines committed to the Church; . . . cooperating in the works of the spirit they will help to give to the truths received a more forceful expression, and carry it beyond the earlier and cruder stages of its development."<sup>3</sup>

*Dialogue* has made a significant contribution to Mormon culture during its first decade. While only future historians can accurately assess that contribution, there is little question that this forum for exchange has had a positive effect on many Mormons as well as on the Church itself. The life of the mind in Mormon culture has been improved through the discourse, deliberations and dialogue on these pages, though it is evident that there is still much to be done. In its second decade perhaps *Dialogue* can have an even greater impact among the Mormons, not only on the life of the mind but on the life of the spirit as well.

I do not wish to suggest that we be any less studious, thoughtful or tough-minded in our communications. We should still strive to serve the Lord "wittily, in the tangle of our minds"<sup>4</sup> and to serve each other in the same way. Mormonism subscribes to a holistic concept of man: we are to use our hearts, mights *and* minds, in concert. The spirit serves to unify all three.

In the Celestial Kingdom we will be blessed to know all things, including, I presume, all hearts and minds. There all communication will be pure and true. We can move toward such a state by bringing the spirit of love and enlightenment into our dialogues. It is my prayer that we may do so, and I ask it in the name of the Lord of love and light. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> "The Buddhist Revolt Against Fixed Ideas," *History of Religions Newsletter*, 3 (Fall 1975), 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> "Book of Mormon Translated," *The Improvement Era*, 9 (1905-06), 712-713.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons*.