

Notes and Comments

ON THE CONDITIONS WHICH PRECEDE REVELATION

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A logical error is committed by so many Church members who believe they are defending the faith that the time has come to point it out. It is assumed in such *Dialogue* letters as those from William D. Callister, J. Maurice Clayton, and Doyle P. Buchanan and is stated so obviously and clearly in Sidney Sperry's response to Heber Snell's article on "The Bible in the Church" (Spring, 1967) that I quote two succeeding sentences from Sperry (numbered for future reference) to make the point.

- (1) When Joseph Smith interpreted the Scripture he was able to do so because he had been under the tutelage of heavenly messengers and was also given the power of revelation through the Holy Ghost.
- (2) Had Joseph Smith been confined to the methods of the Bible scholars of his day, how weak and pitiful would his contribution have been to our knowledge of Scripture! (p. 81.)

Setting aside a quibble in (2) arising from the fact that Higher Criticism did not become a substantial study until the latter part of the nineteenth century, I suspect that Sperry—and many other Church members—believe that (1) implies (2): Joseph Smith relied on the Holy Ghost; *therefore*, the results of human reason are unreliable. However, this is a mistaken argument which, perhaps, can be seen best by comparing both statements to what I take to be the major point in Snell's many faceted argument: the human reasoning of Bible scholars gives us reliable knowledge of the Scriptures. If we juxtapose Snell's statement to Sperry's two statement in turns we have:

Example (A): Joseph Smith relied on the Holy Ghost (Sperry); human reasoning gives us reliable knowledge (Snell).

Example (B): The results of human reasoning are unreliable (Sperry); human reasoning gives us reliable knowledge (Snell).

Example (B), of course, contains a contradiction since the reliability of human reason is both affirmed and denied. But example (A) is not contradictory *since each assertion deals with a different subject*. The assertion that one should rely on the Holy Ghost, then, does *not* imply that human reason gives us unreliable knowledge since the implication in (2) does not contain the same logical relationships as the assertion (1). Sperry's (2), therefore, does not follow from his (1); *one can believe that he receives guidance from the Holy Ghost and at the same time and without contradiction also believe that human reason gives him reliable knowledge*.

To some, the point I am making might sound like a quibble, but it has very important implications. Let me state them in terms of two current examples as well as the general principle.

In both examples I begin with the point that only the head of the Church can provide spiritual guidance for the members of the Church. But the question I want to examine is "What conditions occur *before* that guidance is given? What are the conditions *preceding* revelation?"

Apply the principle to the subject of the Snell-Sperry controversy: Higher Criticism of the Bible. The implication of Sperry's position is that when Joseph Smith began to translate the Bible he made no use of human reasoning, waiting for the Holy Ghost to enter his undifferentiated mind. This suggests that Joseph Smith did not know English, did not have a Bible to translate from, did not benefit from his conversations and studies with scholars and ministers; in short, that there were absolutely no human elements which entered into his translating efforts. And the question I would ask Sperry and others who support this view is, "What reasons, theological or logical, can you adduce to justify this claim about the conditions which preceded this revelation?" On the other hand, Snell's position is that Church members today can learn many important things about the Scriptures through their study of Higher Criticism scholarship, and that any contemporary translation of the Bible authorized by the Church leadership could profitably be preceded by an understanding of this knowledge. Who will step forward to deny this and, more importantly, for what reasons?

Or, to turn to a problem of which the membership is more acutely aware: the Negro problem. Of course, the "problem" will be "solved" only when the President of the Church announces a revelation on the subject; that procedure is well established. But to assert that point is not to assert that rational discussion by members and leaders preceding any revelation is irrelevant to the issue or, indeed, that such discussion would not be a useful, even necessary prelude. Only the failure to understand that Sperry's (1) does not imply (2) would make one dismiss such discussions as unnecessary.

To be specific, wouldn't it be useful if the President of the Church appointed a commission of distinguished Church leaders, theologians, and lay members to examine the problem, to weigh the evidence amassed by such members as Mayland Parker and William Berrett, to consider the moral qualms of many members, to examine the theological and practical implications of change? Whatever recommendations they might make are not binding on the President, of course, any more than the Pope's commission on birth control dictates the content of

the Encyclical on the subject. But such a commission could lay the ground work which will enable all Church members to consider the problem intelligently and thus prepare the way in both leaders and members for any revelatory doctrines which may follow.

After all, human reasoning is judged to be a necessary factor in many other matters in the Church. Was the Sunday School organization instituted without prior human experience and thought about the problem? And how was the Relief Society started, and the Mutual Improvement Association, and the Welfare Plan? Didn't human reasoning enter into the planning of all these institutions before they were given the sanction of the President of the Church? Are stake high councilmen not interviewed before a stake president is chosen? Have recent innovations in missionary interviewing, home teaching, university student organizations, and returned missionary retention proceeded only from the undifferentiated and unprepared mind of the President? Of course not. The fact is that the leadership of the Church relies on the products of human reason as the basis for many—if not all—the policies and practices which finally are promulgated by the spiritual authority of the President of the Church. The proposal that the Church should establish a commission to study the "Negro problem" then, is only another application of this already well-established principle.

Aside from these particular instances, the general issue I am raising concerns the nature of revelation or, in a larger sense, the relationship between reason and revelation. Is revelation given only to blank and empty minds, as some Church members seem to believe, or does human reason prepare, aid, perhaps even enhance revelation? And more importantly, what evidence, primarily although not exclusively theological, exists—or could be given—to support the answer given? Isn't this Church sufficiently viable and mature to encourage its theologians and members to try to come to grips with this, one of the most basic issues in any theology? And not merely in terms of their personal experience of reconciliation but in the context of alternatives already suggested by such distinguished Christian thinkers as Augustine, Aquinas, Channing, and Orson Pratt.

Every failure to do so simply perpetuates the fallacious argument that any assertion of the Spirit's primacy requires a denial of reason's competence, and this argument results in the growing irrationalism, to which Sterling McMurrin has called attention, among those who believe they are defending the Church's theology. Sperry's thinking (1) implies (2) is only one example of this fallacy, but it is an error so prevalent in many member's thinking that they seem to argue as though human intelligence has no place in the plan of salvation.

