

# A Response to Paul Toscano's "A Plea to the Leadership of the Church: Choose Love Not Power"

*Elbert Eugene Peck*

WHEN I FIRST READ PAUL TOSCANO'S JEREMIAD I thought it was too harsh and angry. But on revisiting it three years later I say, "Yes!" to many of his points; for the ones I quibble with I am grateful for the fresh examination they elicited in me.

In the spirit of Isaiah and Ezekiel, Toscano's essay is a prophetic call to all of the church—members and leaders—to repent. There are many provocative and constructive ideas and insights. Toscano is a creative theologian who calls us to revisit old values in new ways that disturbingly rearrange our theological systems and religious traditions. This is a helpful, if one-sided, treatise. It demands us to confront some of the troubling contemporary issues that challenge the church. I hope individuals photocopy and discuss this paper in study groups because it will engender a lively discussion of crucial issues concerning institutional abuse, Christian leadership styles, and the dynamic among one's individual spiritual life, the community, and the church, and it will make you feel guilt over your past organizational sins. Few works on church government do all those things, the closest being perhaps Hugh Nibley's "Leaders and Managers."<sup>1</sup>

Toscano's is a wild, passionate thought piece, not a systematic church government manual. Some points that struck me include:

\*The destructiveness of labelling Saints into acceptable and unacceptable classes, when we should love all into a supportive community.

---

1. Hugh Nibley, "Leaders to Managers: The Fatal Shift," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 16 (Winter 1983): 12.

\*The elitist use of titles versus the call to esteem others as ourselves in "mutual and reciprocal" and equal relationships.

\*Priesthood authority can become an idol that keeps us from Christ.

\*The democratic equality of members and leaders: leaders must listen, adopt, and repent in their roles as leaders as well as counsel, rebuke, and proscribe; empowered members can act with the Spirit within church channels but also independent of the hierarchy.

\*Anger must have place in the community and in spirituality.

\*False unifiers (righteousness, authority, scriptural interpretation, doctrine) are exclusive and can create schism in the body of Christ. Love is the true unifier.

\*The need to avoid alienating others by withholding love and acceptance until they change their behavior.

\*Our weaknesses and strengths are the same things.

\*The church may have too much of a stake in the world and its things and customs.

\*The hierarchy should be open and accountable to the general membership.

Toscano's use of scripture is exciting and occasionally creative. Since he frequently refers to scripture as the authority for his positions, it would have been helpful had he cited in the text even the ones to which he briefly alluded. On numerous occasions I took the time to locate a scripture reference and read it in its context. In addition to this stylistic criticism, there are also points with which I disagree. Here is a brief list of some:

\*If one of the lamentable effects of contention is the polarization that results in hardened positions and a decrease in ability to communicate, then Toscano's choice to address his paper to the Brethren is ill-advised because of its us/them dichotomy. Truly the faults described here are in all of us, not just the Brethren, for almost all members succumb to the same temptations when placed in similar circumstances. A more inclusive indictment would have been more helpful.

\*Toscano is obsessed with the entrenched, upper hierarchy of the church, when in fact the church most experienced by members is the local ward community. There most find loving support from rotating member-leaders and little excommunication or censure. In fact, within wards the most inclusive, unconditional-loving individuals are often bishopric members and Relief Society presidents, and frequently the most destructive judging and exclusion come from *other* Saints.

\*Toscano needs to better separate outcome from intent, a process that allows increased charity. Almost all leaders who succumb to temptations of their office are well-intentioned individuals who try their best to serve God with their finite abilities and often are not aware of the unintended and harmful consequences. For example, a more charitable and genuine

explanation for the church's extensive real and monetary resources is the Lord's command for the church to "stand independent above all creatures" (D&C 78:14), a command LDS leaders take seriously. I agree with Toscano's assessment that we as a church are too caught up in the praise of the world, but the diagnosis and remedy is more complicated than the simple sin of fear. To a large extent, charity means a patient, engaged relationship with another based on an understanding of how a person's life is constrained by his or her intentions, limited choices, experiences, education, weaknesses, disabilities, cultural categories, and world view. In this essay, Toscano doesn't work very hard to understand where the Brethren are coming from; indeed, the opposites of charity that he cited could apply to this paper—unkind, envious, strutting, rude, self-serving, easily provoked, and malicious. In a call that extols love, Toscano is often not charitable or understanding of church leaders' intentions and limitations. Incredibly, he accuses them of not noticing the poor, and also asks, "Do you Brethren believe the golden rule applies to you?" Of course they care about the poor and apply the Golden Rule to themselves as well as any of us do.

\*When Toscano asks the Brethren not to be judgmental—to abandon schism-making fixations on doctrine, practice, interpretation, and behavior—and to just cultivate inclusive love, he adopts the dangerous position that potentially sets himself to be a law unto himself in these areas that apparently are now off-limits to the Brethren. He becomes independent of the standards of the community and leaders.

\*Finally, who really argues that prophets and other church leaders cannot be wrong?

My primary response to Toscano's essay is that at the same time it makes and misses a central point in church governance. He accurately notes that we are "all subject to the seduction to control" through unrighteous dominion, that the Brethren are "as contentious as anyone else," and that "you leaders are really not better than we Saints." But his solution seems to set aside this fact of our near universal sinfulness and demand the Brethren to be better than the rest of us—he wants them to love us as Christ loves us, unconditionally, with no strings attached. Toscano asks too much of our leaders; he wants them to truly be the superhumans that their false image claims. Only superhumans can possess all the Christ-like attributes Toscano asks of our leaders. In truth, the church will never be much better than its members, almost all of whom will at least sometimes, because of expediency, greed, or vanity, choose power over love. While we should hold up Toscano's democratic ideals to every Saint, both leader and member, the organization should not be so constructed as to *assume* their possession. Given the ubiquitous and inevitable human desire to control, a more realistic solution would be to lower the expectations of

leader-Saints to the average church-involved member and reform our organizational procedures to check the inevitable unrighteous dominion and to compensate for the human limitations, some of which Toscano proposed.

Part of the cause of Toscano's intense frustration (and also of his insights) is that his expectations equal his ideals, and when they are unrealized he is angry. Occasionally, there is a tone in the paper that echoes a teenager's impatience with his parents' injustice, favoritism, ignorance, or lack of understanding. Teenagers often expect their parents to be perfect, are disturbed when they are not, and blame their parents for their own mistakes. It seems to me that part of becoming an adult is learning to forgive one's parents for not being perfect, to acknowledge that they were doing the best that they knew how as they tried to be adults and parents for the first time, and to develop an adult relationship with them that acknowledges their strengths and weaknesses and celebrates and compensates for them. Sometimes parents do not let their children grow into adulthood. They continue to treat their adult-children as children, thus causing friction between the insisting adult-child and the reluctant, overly protective parent. Nevertheless, the task for the adult son or daughter is to love their parents, engage in a healthy relationship with them, and yet determine their own lives.

Our relationship to the church is similar. It is not solely out of respect that Catholics refer to their church as their mother; the same parent/child-adult dynamics apply to the relationship between individuals and our church. Sometimes our expectations of the nurturing ability of the church and its leaders are too high. We become insistent and angry at the church for being something it can never be. Other times we experience the church as too paternal and demand that it treat us as mature spiritual adults. The task for the adult Saint is similar to that of the adult son or daughter toward their parents: to love and forgive the church and its leaders; to be engaged in a permanent, productive, mature relationship of mutual growth; to have realistic expectations of what it can and cannot (and should not) provide; and to assume responsibility for one's own spiritual life.

Hence, the first check on organizational abuse is to empower individuals with the responsibility and the ability to say "no," to regulate their relationship and involvement with the church, and to transcend the organization. That will not only prevent some organizational abuse, but will make members actual citizens in the household of God whose participation matters (citizens vote!), and that participation will bring increased spirituality. That attitude involves both accepting personal responsibility and lowering expectations of church leaders. As Brigham Young University professor of organizational behavior J. Bonner Ritchie constantly affirms, ultimately "you cannot make any organization safe, you can only prepare

people so they can safely function in the organization."<sup>2</sup> Sometimes Toscano seems, naively, to want to make the church safe for individuals.

However, the lowering of expectations can simply be a cynical response to human endeavors. Fortunately, Toscano's essay calls to the voice in me that whispers, "Yes, we can be better than we currently are, especially you, Elbert." In part, it is Toscano's idealism that engenders the sorrow and pain and occasional bitter anger in his paper. The challenge for the idealist is to keep hope in a vision of a more perfect church while not becoming disillusioned with the current situation and judgmental of God's Saints. I am not sure if Toscano keeps well that delicate balance.

Since the changes Toscano advocates will at best take a long time to be realized, individuals in pain, like himself, may be the first ones to learn how to safely function within the organization before others do, simply because they have to. That pain-based knowledge, however, can either lead to an arrogant individuality or to service within the community. Anger is a legitimate feeling; it comes from genuine pain. We should not try to act as if there never was pain, nor attempt too early to anesthetize the part of the body that is hurting. The body of Christ needs to know which members hurt and why so that it can relieve the pain and address the causes. That is one reason why this paper is important—the church hath need of every member! But the individual member who hurts should not wait for the entire body to act before it addresses its own pain. Something is wrong with a theology that makes one's peace so dependant on the uncontrollable actions of others. In prolonging your agony you dangerously separate yourself from being connected with the other members of the body. In a real sense, such continued anger prohibits one from loving others now, thus making one's own love conditional. Toscano rightly states that we must learn to love each other in our sins. Anger is a legitimate starting point for an institutional dialogue, but we must learn to move beyond it in one-to-one relationships rooted in a love that transcends organizational abuse, including unequal status. How else can one comprehend the apostle Paul's counsel to slaves to remain in their subordinate status, but to be Christian slaves. A similar message is preached in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, where the proper response to even the institutional Christian abuse of the Grand Inquisitor is simply an angerless, opposition-free kiss. Ultimately, the religious life is independent of and transcends the imposed social structure, but it is never independent of our social connectedness, for it calls us to love even our enemies.

---

2. J. Bonner Ritchie, "The Institutional Church and the Individual: How Strait the Gate, How Narrow the Way?" *Sunstone* 6 (May-June 1981): 35. See also his "Let Contention Cease: The Limits of Dissent in the Church," *Sunstone* 16 (Aug. 1992): 45-53.

Anyone who has the slightest acquaintance with church callings (or parenting) understands the temptations to misuse one's position: sometimes for simple reasons like efficiency, expediency, and rampant stupidity, and other times for the more sinister motives of vanity, pride, and selfishness (which can include the choice to grow from a worthy experience rather than to allow someone else to). For me, I have occasionally been able to transcend my organizational indiscretions with love when I have been forced by others (another reason for this paper) and my own conscience to confront and analyze my personal acts of wicked and well-intentioned unrighteous dominion. Sometimes I have also learned from observing the follies of others close to me. In those cases, I have been able to forgive the person and compensate for their misdeeds because I knew the goodness and faith of the person as well as the flaws: "Yeah, he shouldn't have done that, but, doggone it, he's a good person anyway." I have been able to not judge ("he's evil") and still honestly evaluate and act constructively. On rarer occasions, I have been able to transfer that charitable perspective to church leaders I do not personally know. It has allowed me to similarly acknowledge that they are good people who struggle to do the best with their difficult tasks and limited knowledge and abilities. That is learning to love others as you love—and forgive—yourself. Interestingly, my critique of their actions and my love of them both increase.

Obtaining this ability to individually transcend circumstances through love and forgiveness, however, does not mean that there are not serious systematic problems in church administration. Toscano pointed out some needed reforms that will reduce the temptations to unrighteous dominion, or at least check their implementation. He basically argued for increased openness and democracy in church government. I agree. This makes sense theologically (what else is a kingdom of priests and priestesses where all should be prophets but a participating group of equals) and practically (collaborative decision-making cannot only produce better decisions from more information, but through increased public discussion and involvement the deliberations boost motivation, vision, education, and implementation).

Most of Toscano's reforms are changes in attitudes and social norms rather than changes in procedures. Hard things like treating each other equally, listening more, being open and receptive to criticism, not labelling and rejecting, embracing the marginal members, and confessing as well as hearing confessions—things you cannot program with a handbook. They will be difficult for us as a people to embrace, no matter how many general conference talks and *Ensign* articles preach their importance. We have a hard time with the simple observable behaviors we currently promote and monitor—the Word of Wisdom, parenting, missionary work, tithing, chastity, stopping spouse and child abuse—all of which would be enhanced by

a greater theology of equality. Nevertheless, in the short term we would have no more success in changing to Toscano's proposed attitudes and norms than we do with preachments on meekness, antimaterialism, coveting. It does not mean we should not try, just that we should not plan on it. Our collective progress will be slow.

There are, however, some specific process reforms I think we should consider to check our tendencies and to reflect Toscano's theology of openness and democracy. Overall, Mormonism would be strengthened by some *glasnost* and *perestroika* (openness and restructuring). Two concrete changes could make a lot of difference:

\*Have all major policy, program, and budget decisions on the ward and all-church levels depend upon the informed common consent of the Saints. Before each vote, have presentations and discussions of published proposals in the quorums of the priesthood and Relief Society that may refine the leadership's proposal and make for a more intelligent and whole-souled vote. This implies, as Toscano proposed, that information—statistics, budgets, minutes—be open and aggressively shared.

\*Rotate individuals through all general authority offices the way we now do the Second Quorum of the Seventy and all local offices. This reduces the abuses that come from permanency in office, which include isolation, rigidity, programmatic narrowness, and assuming that your thoughts are God's thoughts.

There is danger in these proposals, too. Primarily, in opening up church decision-making we make the human/political aspects so prominent (they always were there) that we slight the role of the Spirit and God in church ministry. We might then play church politics too much and become fractionalized in our policy debates and diverted from the spiritual values the deliberations were meant to engender. We can become so democratic that we in fact ask our leaders to abdicate their prophetic responsibilities. We will always need prophetic leaders on all organizational levels to teach, preach, propose, chastise, call to repentance, and forgive, as well to accept criticism, counsel, feedback, and anger. That no one person can flawlessly possess and minister all these attributes calls not only for collaboration at all levels (something we already value in presidencies and councils), but also calls for a check on group-think through openness and a celebration of nonhierarchical revelation.

Toscano's essay does not propose the radical exalting of an individual's charismatic gifts over the institution (and in that sense his reforms are moderate if not conservative), but these issues do raise that age-old tension between individual spirituality and the need for institutional order. In spite of the importance of individual initiative, personal revelation, and the equality of all, we also must always have authority, structure, and—gasp—some hierarchy (however benevolent). A religious institution needs some

individuals to have power or watchcare over others—there are lost and weak sheep that need shepherds. And this, unfortunately, means that many of the things that inevitably come with organizations (doctrine/policy and other community boundary issues) that Toscano laments will continue to exist to some degree however widely his reforms are instituted. I concluded this after reading Raymond E. Brown's *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*. He analyzes the texts of the New Testament gospels and epistles to gain insight into the first-century Christian communities that produced them. The predominance of Jesus' revelatory spirit within each individual over the structure and authority of the church was confronted by the community of the disciples of John, which produced both the Fourth Gospel and the epistles of John:

Perhaps the most serious weakness on Johannine ecclesiology and the one most apparent in the Epistles centers on the role of the Paraclete. The thought that there is a living divine teacher in the heart of each believer—a teacher who is the ongoing presence of Jesus, preserving what is taught but interpreting it anew in each generation—is surely one of the greatest contributions made to Christianity by the Fourth Gospel. But the Jesus who sends the Paraclete never tells his followers what is to happen when believers who possess the Paraclete disagree with each other. The Johannine Epistles tell us what frequently happens: they break their *koinonia* or communion with each other. If the Spirit is the highest and only authority and if each side appeals to him as support for its position, it is nigh impossible (particularly in a dualistic framework where all is either light or darkness) to make concessions and to work out compromises.<sup>3</sup>

Brown then chronicles the breakup of the Johannine communities evident in the epistles, each claiming to be taught by the Spirit that is "true and free from any lie" (1 John 2:27) and condemning the others, and then he noted: "In my judgment there is no way to control such a division in a Paraclete-guided community of people. The Johannine community discovered that, for it split up and went out of existence. . . . Johannine ecclesiology is the most attractive and exciting in the New Testament. Alas, it is also one of the least stable."<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the communities of John, the early Christian church that produced the gospel of Matthew recognized church authority and the power of leaders to bind on earth and in heaven, although Matthew greatly emphasizes forgiving over excommunicating to check already evident institutional abuses (see Matt. 18). Brown then concludes:

---

3. Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 121-22.

4. *Ibid.*, 123.

To survive in the world after the death of the apostles the church has had to be a society existing among other societies. . . . The great anomaly of Christianity is that only through institution can the message of a noninstitutional Jesus be preserved. . . .

Even if that Gospel [of John] cannot be the only guide for the church catholic, and even if alongside the Beloved Disciple (and indeed over him) have been placed the apostles, such as Peter and Paul, the community of the Beloved Disciple continues to bear warning witness that the church must never be allowed to replace the unique role of Jesus in the life of Christians.<sup>5</sup>

Thus we need the institutional church to be the custodian of our faith and to pragmatically create and conservatively sustain the community that we prodigal individuals must wander from, return to, act against, and in concord with in our spiritual journeys of individuation and revelation. Inevitably, the abuses the human individuals in the organization will misuse the very powers that sustain the organization. As a compliment, we also need major and minor prophets to continually call us to the underlying life of the Spirit with its equalitarian, anti-institutional message that transcends the structure. The tension between the institution and the chaotic charisma of the individual with which Toscano dances in his essay will always exist, but it can be mitigated and made a healthy dialectic through the gift of love he celebrates.

Partly due to this paper and partly due to occurrences in the Mormon intellectual community, I have frequently pondered the relationship between power and love. As Toscano pointed out, Doctrine and Covenants 121 teaches that “no power can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood.” I assume that means you do not have control because of your position: you cannot say, “I’m the quorum president, so do it.” Priesthood (position) does not grant that kind of tyranny. Power comes only from the principles of righteousness, which seem to have a high regard for individual agency and autonomy because no power or (even) influence can or ought to be maintained except by persuasion, gentleness, long-suffering, genuine love (no gimmicky imitation), kindness, and knowledge (D&C 121:41-42). Those definitions describe an engaged relationship between leader and member, one of on-going dialogue where hearts and minds meet in order for action to occur. They call to mind the attributes of love listed in 1 Corinthians 13. Love is relationship, priesthood power is relationship. That describes God’s dealings with us—a loving, non-coerced, patient, conversational, persuasive friendship. That is how we are called to act with others. As the author of 1 Thessalonians wrote, “although as Christ’s own envoy we might have made our weight felt; but we were as gentle with you

---

5. *Ibid.*, 145, 123.

as a nurse caring for her children. Our affection was so deep that we determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but our very selves; that is how dear you had become to us!" (1:7-8, Revised English Bible) So I am saddened when general authorities instruct local leaders to chastise or discipline Saints and no relationship of persuasion, listening, or patience occurs. Whereas faith without works is dead, so is love without relationship. It is a vain love to rebuke someone and then not to engage in an intense relationship. If a leader censures you and says, "I love you," but does not continue in persuasion and discussion, it is not love. That is the hypocrisy of "courts of love" that excommunicate and diminish relationship rather than increase it. With lesser disciplines, I am sure church leaders feel that they have been very patient with some of the more vocal and public dissenters in the church, but patience and long-suffering are only truly loving virtues in the context of a relationship of face-to-face conversation; otherwise, the supposed distant patience can polarize rather than heal. Happily, many individuals who were recently called in and talked to by their stake presidents by anonymous general authority assignments report that the conversations were warm, noncoercive, and friendly and only the beginning of an on-going dialogue. Individual members and leaders can and do transcend destructive institutional systems of intimidating power through love.

This essay has called me to think about, and to more often than before choose, love as the motivation for my interpersonal and institutional actions. As a result, I have recoiled at seeing the countless innocent acts of violent domination I do daily. I hope it has the same peace-making effect on all Saints in the Latter Days who read it.