

The Possibilities of Dialogue

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First published in Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 9, no. 3 (Autumn 1974): 4-5.

The most important thing about a man is what he thinks; the next important, his contact-giving and taking-with the thoughts of others. —Hugh Nibley

In a remarkable essay entitled “Beyond Politics” in a recent issue of *BYU Studies*, Hugh Nibley makes an exciting observation: God not only desires a free discussion with [his children], he encourages it. Further, it is an essential part of his *modus operandi* for our return to his presence. In his own translation of John 1:1, Nibley illustrates how indispensable this concept was to the very order of things: “In the beginning was the *Logos* [counsel, discussion], and the *Logos* was in the presence of God, and all things were done according to it . . .”¹

Nibley then points out that Satan was not cast out of heaven for disagreeing with God, but for refusing to continue in a free discussion and examination of ideas and by resorting to violence in an attempt to get his own way and enforce his ideas on others. Nibley contrasts Satan with such prophets as Abraham and Enoch who entered into vigorous dialogue with God over things they did not understand or thought unfair. He says, “God did not hold it against these men that they questioned him, but loved them for it: it was because they were the friends of men, even at what they thought was the terrible risk of offending him, that they became the friends of God.”²

It is clear from the scriptures that God not only invites our free discussion with him (“Come now, and let us reason together,” he says [Isa.

1:18)), but expects us to enter into free discussion with one another, especially on those subjects which are of ultimate concern to us.

It was in the belief that such discussion was vital to Mormonism that *Dialogue* was established in 1966. As Wesley Johnson said in his introductory editorial in the first issue, one of the purposes of *Dialogue* was "to help Mormons and their neighbors develop understanding and concern for each other through an exchange of ideas; and perhaps most important of all, to help Mormons develop their identity, uniqueness, and sense of purpose by expressing their spiritual heritage and moral vision to the community of man."³

Dialogue is committed to the belief that where people have an opportunity freely to enter into discussion with one another, where ideas can be presented and challenged without fear of reprisals or intimidation, where brothers and sisters as well as friends and neighbors can talk and listen to one another, not only is there a greater opportunity for increased understanding, but also for new discovery. Such dialogue has the possibility of expanding our minds and spirits, of enlightening us.

To be fearful of such dialogue is to be fearful of ourselves, and yet it is clear that many in the Mormon community have such fear. A good illustration of this fact was the experience we had with the special issue of *Dialogue* dealing with the LDS Church's banning men of African descent from being ordained to the priesthood, which included Lester Bush's important historical study documenting that this policy developed, not from a specific revelation, but from a variety of social and personal forces after Joseph Smith's death.⁴ When we were planning that issue, there were those who felt that the material to be included in it should not be published. One prominent Mormon scholar remarked that, while the material was factual, it would be better if people did not know of it. Some warned that there could be dire personal consequences for those of us involved in the editing and management of *Dialogue* if we proceeded with publication.

The issue was handled, we feel, openly and responsibly. Prior to publication Bush showed his article to two General Authorities, discussed it with them, and told them of his plans to submit it to *Dialogue*. In addition, he furnished them and the Church Historian's office with a compilation of all his research and background material. Mormon historians who saw the article in draft form praised its thoroughness and objectivity. The fact that it shared the Mormon History Association's prize for the best article

published in 1973 (as well as *Dialogue's* first prize for Social Literature) speaks well of its soundness.

We did not print Bush's article because we agreed or disagreed with it, but rather because we felt it was an extremely important piece of historical research on a subject of great moment. Due to the controversial nature of the subject matter and in keeping with our general editorial philosophy, we invited three scholars to respond to Bush. The exchange is, we feel, the most significant public discussion of this subject in the history of the Church.

The effect of our publishing this exchange was to clarify many points of misunderstanding and dispel much of the myth that has circulated in the Church regarding the Negro doctrine, and, further, to put the discussion of this subject on a more rational (and hopefully more spiritual) level. Hugh Nibley, who was one of the respondents to Bush, defended the discussion in these words: "Though the mind of the Lord is confirmed by an imponderable feeling, one is required, before asking of the Lord and receiving that feeling, to exercise his own wits to the fullest, so that there must be place for the fullest discussion and explanation in the light of the Scriptures or any other relevant information."⁵

We rehearse all this here because it illustrates *Dialogue's* *raison d'être*. We are committed to the proposition that by reasoning together we have nothing to lose and much to gain, that where free discussion abounds truth will be better served. *Dialogue* exists as a forum with possibilities for enlightenment. Those possibilities are enhanced when there is an unconstrained climate for expression and exchange of ideas and feelings. We are committed to the belief that one of the chief responsibilities of the gift of free agency is that we use our minds and spirits to search for and embrace truth. This involves responsibly questioning, exploring, and challenging—ourselves, each other, and, perhaps at times, even God.

Notes

1. Hugh Nibley, "Beyond Politics," *BYU Studies* 15, no. 1 (Autumn 1974): 5; brackets his.

2. *Ibid.*, 6.

3. G. Wesley Johnson, "Editorial Preface," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1966): 7.

4. Lester E. Bush Jr., "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview," 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 11-68. See also his own account of this experience: Lester Bush, "Writing 'Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview'

(1973): Context and Reflections, 1998," *Journal of Mormon History* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 229-71.

5. Hugh Nibley, "The Best Possible Test," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 74.