

# THE UNENDING CONVERSATION

For *Dialogue's* Jubilee Celebration

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*Life can only be understood backwards: but it must be lived forwards.*

—Søren Kierkegaard

Looking back with the perspective of fifty years, I can see (and feel) a sustaining philosophy that has guided *Dialogue* through its amazing half-century tenure, more than a quarter of the entire history of the LDS Church.

In the initial discussions about this fledgling idea for a journal, all voices were heard—Gene England's, Wes Johnson's, Joe Jeppson's, Paul Salisbury's, and mine. Gene's voice was foundational, and I can still hear his philosophy, his faith, running through these past 200 issues of *Dialogue*. Its volume fades in and out, of course, but it is still always there.

This philosophy treasures the collective wisdom as well as the diversity of Church members while reaching out to voices with different perspectives, experiences, and knowledge. This philosophy cries out: Save us from an unexamined faith. Save us from false certainty and narrowness. Celebrate our arts and letters. Puzzle over old and new ethical dilemmas. Champion the value and necessity of free agency. Stay committed to inquiry, the duty to seek truth. Be ever skeptical of absolute claims to truth. Remind us that we are committed to staying in relationship, living in tension, struggling and rejoicing with the ultimate mystery of God. Always be vigilant of our blind spots. Shape us into a community of trust. Announce that we are ready to talk, to “dialogue.”

Five decades ago, I doubt any of us *Dialogue* founders could have predicted the massive changes that have occurred in society and in

the Church—in large part due to the information made available and democratization of voices that have come about through the internet. With its rise, and in its free-for-all nature, we are today constantly forced to bring the past and the present together in dialogue. The internet’s widely tilted unbalance of reactions more than analysis, with its appeal to ever-shortening attention spans, must be complemented (even anchored) by the kinds of reflections offered in *Dialogue*. And may *Dialogue* never fail to include perspective-shifting and soul-enlivening offerings from our very best artists, poets, storytellers, essayists, and musicians (and occasionally our humorists).

Ten years ago, I wrote a reflection for *Dialogue*’s fortieth anniversary celebration titled “A Forty-Year View: *Dialogue* and the Sober Lessons of History.”<sup>1</sup> I concluded that piece with a plea: “*Dialogue*, don’t lose your nerve!” My plea was partly a caution about the squelching impact of the move toward formal and heavy correlation of materials and programs that the Church hadn’t yet implemented at the time of *Dialogue*’s founding, and partly a reminder that we need, constantly, to examine and re-examine teachings and ideas as they reveal themselves to be harmful, or at least less and less relevant, in a world informed by science and new discoveries from all fields. Urging *Dialogue* not to lose its nerve was my way of saying, please fight hard against complacency, please champion the philosophy that intellectual and spiritual integrity can coexist, and please remember, as my grandfather taught me, Mormons never have to believe anything that isn’t true.



I was recently asked by a friend, “What is the biggest change you have seen in LDS Church culture in the last few decades?” I answered reflexively, without thinking, “The rise in the notion of infallibility

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1. *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 88–97.

of Church leaders.” My knee-jerk response arose largely because of a relatively recent experience in which I had walked in the front door of a university LDS Institute of Religion building only to find prominent photographs of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve running the entire length of the foyer, with this quotation from Doctrine and Covenants 1:38 in large letters across the top of the pictures:

“WHETHER BY MINE OWN VOICE OR BY THE VOICE OF MY SERVANTS, IT IS THE SAME.”

A student walking into the building would immediately be given the message that the Church is (1) run by white men, and (2) what they say is the latest word from the Lord. Maybe not explicit infallibility, but certainly implicit infallibility is the message that jumped out.

This experience made me wonder if we are seeing a shift, a change since the time of President McKay and apostles like J. Reuben Clark, a shift away from an explicit repudiation of the infallibility of the prophet and apostles and toward a message that their words and policies come straight from God. I have always taken comfort in Henry Eyring’s words that “one of the wonderful doctrines of this Church is that we don’t believe in the infallibility of any mortal.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, here we are today experiencing a slowly creeping notion of infallibility, that perennial temptation (and downfall) of religious leaders throughout the ages. This may sound overblown, perhaps advancing age is making me a tad cranky, but I find it disquieting. The great strength of the Mormon doctrine of change, of fallibility, is that it accepts the complexity of the world and the limitations of our understanding and puts a responsibility for discernment upon individual members. In short, it is a doctrine that *invites* dialogue.

All of us understand that the Church evolves and changes as the times change, and as I reflected on the question I was asked, other shifts came to mind. One dramatic change happened when the Church moved away from the doctrine of a literal gathering of Zion for all members

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2. Henry Eyring, *The Faith of a Scientist* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1967), 52.

in preparation for the last days to a metaphorical understanding of what the gathering was to be: a spiritual gathering, a gathering across continents and around the world. (Let me be perfectly clear: this shift occurred *before* my time!)

I can discern other shifts, far more recent. It appears to me that the notion of the United Order, of the Saints having all things in common—something that I was taught while living in Utah and attending Church history classes was God’s ideal economic order—has faded out and morphed into a full embrace of free-market capitalism, and American-style capitalism to boot. It is as though we look through the lens of our culture (what else can we do?), but then take another step and announce it as normative for everyone everywhere. To me, the notion of this marriage of Christianity and unleashed capitalism is unsettling. Whereas the philosophy behind the United Order tilted the perennial tension between individualism and the common good toward the latter, now the tilt is firmly in the other direction. While writing about the United Order, Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton noted that “[t]he ideal remains a part of twentieth-century Mormon awareness.”<sup>3</sup> While true of the previous century, these echoes seem almost undetectable to my ears today.

Another trend, a positive one, in the last several years has been the greater openness of Church historical records and artifacts, along with an incredible blooming of first-rate scholarship by Mormons (and others) on our history, theology, and sociology. This has nudged along a movement away from unrealistic and unhistorical idealizing of the early restoration Church toward a more nuanced and historically anchored acknowledgment of complexity, with warts here and there. As William

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3. Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 126.

Sloane Coffin once wrote: “In other words, religious folk, all our lives, [we] have both to recover tradition and to recover *from* it!”<sup>4</sup>

LDS scholars are also immersing themselves in contemporary historical methods to study the Bible (and its multiple translations) and early Christianity. They are studying ancient manuscripts with the lens of modern linguistics and ethnographic scholarship, overturning centuries-old fictions about the early followers of Jesus. Scholars are discovering that women played a much larger leadership role in early Christianity than we have been taught. Hopefully these studies will spur a faster (and overdue) movement toward true gender equality and discipleship.

I see the abandonment of the priesthood and temple ban against blacks as well as their increasing assimilation into the Church (both in the United States and around the world) as one of most positive, wonderful changes in these last few decades. The ban had institutionalized whiteness as both normative and superior, and surely the time has come to undo both understandings. Lest we forget, *Dialogue* played an important role in this transition. One such contribution was Lester Bush’s powerful (and at the time very controversial) article detailing the role of blacks in the early Church and the eventual rise of the ban.<sup>5</sup> The Church’s Gospel Topic essay on race and the priesthood, recently published on its official website, is also helping to accelerate this continuing progress.<sup>6</sup>

While we are praising *Dialogue*, let’s also not forget how it was an early leader in publishing about the translation of the Book of Abraham

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4. William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 9.

5. Lester E. Bush, Jr., “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 11–68.

6. “Race and the Priesthood,” Gospel Topics, <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

(the mismatch between the scrolls and the text), as well as its theology, including now-suspect views on patriarchal priesthood.<sup>7</sup>

Latter-day Saints have faced some significant ethical dilemmas during this first half-century of *Dialogue*. Gene England wrote about what he considered his top three: “Withholding the priesthood from blacks, participation of Mormons in war, and our view of the roles of men and women.”<sup>8</sup> Clearly the issues of war and peace and justice, males-only priesthood, and gender equality are still on the short list, but for many (my grandkids, for example) the issue of climate change, how we fulfill our sacred obligation to care for our fragile planet, deserves top billing. Earth stewardship is a profound religious obligation, a moral obligation that could use some strong prophetic leadership.

In this fiftieth year of *Dialogue*, we are experiencing a grim new moral problem, one that none of us could have imagined during *Dialogue*’s inauguration. This, of course, is the November 2015 altering of the *Church Handbook of Instructions, Vol. 1* with respect to our LGBT brothers and sisters and the children of same-sex couples. It is a very dark and backward twist in the generally forward-moving path of the Church. This policy (or is it a revelation?)<sup>9</sup> labels as “apostate” any same-sex married LDS couples, says *no* to an infant’s naming and blessing if

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7. The Summer 1968 issue of *Dialogue* (volume 3, no. 2) contains a section called “The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri,” which is comprised of five different examinations of various aspects of the source material for the Book of Abraham. An important essay in the history of sorting out the Book of Abraham’s teachings about race and priesthood is Armand L. Mauss, “The Fading of the Pharaoh’s Curse: The Decline and Fall of the Priesthood Ban Against Blacks in the Mormon Church,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1981): 10–45.

8. Eugene England, *Dialogues with Myself: Personal Essays on Mormon Experience* (Midvale, Utah: Orion Books, 1984), ix.

9. Russell M. Nelson, “Stand as True Millennials,” *Ensign*, Oct. 2016, 29, available at <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2016/10/young-adults/stand-as-true-millennials?lang=eng>.

that child's parents are in a same-sex relationship, *no* to the priesthood ordinance of baptism of eight-year-old children if their parents are in a same-sex relationship, *no* to the priesthood ordinance of confirmation and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost if a child's parents are in a same-sex relationship. Of course, the Church says this is not a forever banning of these children from Church blessings and the special guidance granted through the gift of the Holy Ghost. When these children reach eighteen, they may choose baptism and receiving the other ordinances if they move out of their parents' home and disavow their parents' lifestyle.

Speaking in alignment with the best thinking of the scientific community, Dr. William Bradshaw, retired BYU professor of microbiology, states that being gay is "not a pathology, a disease, an illness, a disorder, a weakness, a susceptibility, an inclination, a temptation. It is not learned; it is not a passing phase; it is not a perversion; it is not an addiction; it is not communicable."<sup>10</sup> Our LGBT brothers and sisters are fully human manifestations of God's creation, images of God. To me, this new policy shows a startling lack of faith in God. The God it imagines is too small, and this policy is inflicting spiritual pain on the Mormon LGBT community, on their families, on their neighbors, and on all of us who stand by and watch and feel and hear.

The moral distress reverberating through the Church because of this new policy is as wide and deep and painful as anything I can remember since the issue of the ban on blacks in the priesthood during the height of civil rights movement in the 1950s through the 1970s. To me it is pure hubris to believe that our understanding of the next life is clear enough and specific enough to trump basic Christian principles: love, empathy, compassion. Imagine being told not to worry about being marginalized in this life because it will be fixed in the next life!

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10. William Bradshaw, interviewed by Dan Wotherspoon, "309: Making Sense of the Research on Homosexuality—Biological Factors, Part 2," *Mormon Matters*, podcast audio, Nov. 23, 2015.

Recall Paul's reminder that we see through a glass darkly (1 Corinthians 13:2). We are called to imitate Jesus. We are all under the judgment of the love commandment. The November changes formalized a theology of exclusion. But Paul, again, has the corrective in his beautiful articulation of the "body of Christ" and the folly of saying, "I have no need of you" to any who wish to serve and belong (1 Corinthians 12:12–31). When compassion and love contradict policy, something is wrong—and the error is never found on the compassion and love side of the dilemma. A definition of "apostasy" might be Church policies/practices that mandate/require its members to act in an un-Christlike manner. Here and now is our canvas. It is time to recognize all people as God's children. The policy will change. The question is whether it will be a soft landing or a hard one.



So what about the next fifty years? Will *Dialogue* embrace the role destiny has assigned to it? Can we, in its pages, tell the truth about the difficulties of reality? As the past has taught us, as human knowledge about the world advances, some religious beliefs fall naturally by the wayside: sun worship, witch hunts, the divine as sanctioning slavery, no priesthood or temple worship for blacks, systemized gender inequality. It is challenging when scientists tell us sex and gender are not immutable. Wait until we are asked to wrestle with our ethical obligations to robots that are able to feel and think!

The philosophy and the grounding principles of *Dialogue* have served us well. The initial brochure we sent out soliciting subscriptions said:

*Dialogue* is not a journal of liberal opinion. Nor of conservative opinion. Nor an evangelical journal. Not an official publication of any organization. It is a forum for discussion of all points of view on the encounter of faith and reason, on the relation of religious values to contemporary experience and learning. The editorial position of the journal is merely



that a dialogue on these matters is possible and valuable. That men and women can talk to each other about their faith and experience in a way that can bring some pleasure and some truth to all involved. That men and women need not relinquish their faith to be intellectually respectable nor their intelligence to be faithful. But rather, that they can refine and deepen their faith through intelligent examination and can bring their faith and its moral power into mutually rewarding dialogue with the secular world.

Remember ours is a young religion, not yet 200 years old.

*Dialogue* is made for such times as these. In their recent book *Church Refugees*, sociologists Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope summarize their findings about why people are leaving churches: “We found time and again that people were leaving not because they couldn’t find agreement, in fact, many were leaving because they couldn’t find disagreement.”<sup>11</sup> We who read *Dialogue*, just like those Packard and Hope describe, are looking for community where convictions can be explored, not merely expounded.

*Dialogue* has demonstrated irrefutably that discussions about religion in general, and Mormonism in particular, don’t have to be a game of “gotcha.” *Dialogue* is a place where conversation can run deep, a place where we aren’t afraid to ask questions because we don’t know the answers. It is a place where we can tell the truth about the difficulties of reality, a place where we don’t need to section off the realm of reason from the realm of revelation. John Dominic Crossan, a famous Christian theologian and the featured speaker at the 2015 Salt Lake Sunstone symposium, shares this fundamental conviction: “Reason and revelation or

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11. Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People are DONE with Church but Not Their Faith* (Loveland, Colo.: Group Publishing, 2015).

history and theology *or* research and faith—by whatever names—cannot contradict one another unless we have one or both wrong.”<sup>12</sup>

Gene England believed we all have gifts worth sharing, and church is the space in which we share our lives. *Dialogue* facilitates this very human and essential activity of our lives as humans.

I have hope, and hope means the future is not yet written.

Marcus Borg, citing literary theorist Kenneth Burke, invokes the metaphor of a parlor conversation that reminds me of the hosting role *Dialogue* has been playing for this past half-century:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns herself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.<sup>13</sup>

This is the “unending conversation” that has been going on since the beginning of human history and that we join at the moment of our birth and leave at the moment of our death.

*Dialogue*, you are a gift to the Church.

*Dialogue*, don't lose your nerve.

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12. John Dominic Crossan, *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian: Struggling with Divine Violence from Genesis through Revelation* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 4.

13. This passage is quoted in Marcus J. Borg and Tim Scorer, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 4. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 110–11.