element

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SOCIETY FOR MORMON PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

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The Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology brings together scholars and others who share an interest in studying the teachings and texts of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It facilitates the sharing and discussion of work by sponsoring an annual conference, and publishing a journal entitled *Element: A Journal of Mormon Philosophy and Theology*. Its statement of purpose reads as follows:

"The purpose of the Society is to promote disciplined reflection on Latter-day Saint beliefs. Its aims include constructive engagement with the broader tradition of philosophy and theology. All its publications, conferences, and other forums for discussion will take seriously both the commitments of faith and the standards of scholarship."

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Jurisprudence and the Problem of Church Doctrine

by Nathan B. Oman

Mormons frequently refer to "Church Doctrine" in their theological discussions. For example, Sister Smith might express her belief that the earth is no more than five or six thousand years old and that the theory of evolution is a Satanically inspired plot. Brother Young responds by noting, "Those are just your opinions. That is not Church Doctrine." Whatever else the term Church Doctrine might mean in this exchange, it is clearly functioning as a theological authority, delineating those beliefs that have a claim on Brother Young from those that do not. Like most Mormons, Brother Young seems to be conceptualizing Church Doctrine as some set of authoritative teachings promulgated by the Church[1] that it is possible to identify. Yet how we differentiate between Church Doctrine and mere opinion is unclear. I argue that we can analogize the problem of "What is Church Doctrine?" to the jurisprudential problem of "What is the law?" The answers offered by the philosophy of law to the second of these questions illuminates the sorts of answers that we can give to the first. Ultimately, I conclude that we discover Church Doctrine not by application of any hard and fast rule that allows us to identify it but rather through a process of interpretation. This approach to Church Doctrine, in turn, throws new light on two persistent issues in Mormon thought: the relationship between authority

and independent moral judgment, and the way in which Mormons interpret their own past.

Consider the example of the Roman Catholic Church. Like the Church, Roman Catholicism has an integrated ecclesiastical structure with a strong emphasis on authority. Were one interested in the "Church Doctrine" of Roman Catholicism, one would consult the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. This is a volume of 864 pages promulgated in 1992 by Pope John Paul II which sets forth the official doctrine of Roman Catholicism.[2] The Church has no analogous volume. In the nineteenth century, John Jacques attempted to synthesize Church Doctrine into a Mormon catechism, but his work did not survive and has garnered few imitators in the century or more since it was published.[3] More recently, Elder Bruce R. McConkie attempted a complete synthesis of Church Doctrine in his book *Mormon Doctrine*, but the only thing that seems clear about the doctrinal status of that work is that it is not official Church Doctrine.[4]

In an age of correlation, we seem to have an easy solution to the problem of what is Church Doctrine. Church Doctrine is simply whatever is published by the Church, perhaps subject to the caveat that it has been properly correlated. Let's call this the correlation argument. This is where our first analogy from the philosophy of law appears. During the first half of the twentieth-century a group of American thinkers known as the legal realists adopted a similarly functional answer to the question, "what is the law?" As one representative scholar in the movement wrote:

> [D]oing something about disputes . . . is the business of law. And the people who have the doing in charge, whether they be judges or sheriffs or clerks or jailers or lawyers, are officials of the law. *What these officials do about disputes is, to my mind, the law itself.*[5]

Hopefully the analogy to the correlation argument is clear. Just as in the realist view law is simply what the judges do, in the correlation argument Church Doctrine is simply what correlation says. The correlation argument, however, suffers from precisely the same problem as the realist conception of law. One cannot say that the law is simply what the judges do, because the judges themselves look up the law and try to follow it in rendering their decisions. Accordingly, law as what the judges do runs into a hopeless problem of circularity. The problem with the correlation argument – and with most other arguments that seek to identify Church Doctrine as

simply "what X person says" – is that those on the correlation committees (and others who speak for the Church) look to Church Doctrine as the governing standard of what they are doing. In other words, in the best of all possible worlds correlated Church statements are not Church Doctrine because they are correlated. Rather they are correlated to conform with Church Doctrine. This assumes, however, that Church Doctrine exists as some body of identifiable, authoritative teachings *independent of correlation or whoever else is expounding it*. My point is not that Church Doctrine doesn't exist or that it somehow lacks authority. Nor is my point even that we are incapable of identifying clear instances of Church Doctrine. The claims that Jesus Christ is the savior of mankind and that good Latter-day Saints should not drink coffee are both uncontroversial instances of Church Doctrine. My point is that identifying the full contours of Church Doctrine presents a puzzle; a puzzle that legal philosophy can assist us in untangling.

JURISPRUDENTIAL SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM OF CHURCH DOCTRINE

Jurists and political philosophers tend to ask different questions about the law. Political philosophers are largely concerned with justification. They tend to assume that the question of what the law is is relatively simple, and they want to spend their time thinking about what sorts of laws are justified. Jurists, in contrast, know from experience that the contours of the law are frequently unclear and determining what the law is can be as difficult as determining whether it is justified. Ultimately, the jurists' questions are of more use for thinking about how we discover Church Doctrine than the political philosophers' questions. This is because rather than seeking to determine the extent to which the law's authority is justified, the jurists seek to determine how far the law's claim of authority extends. It is this focus on form over substance that makes the juristic arguments useful for thinking about Church Doctrine. This is because the question of how we identify Church Doctrine is a formal question rather than a substantive question. We are not interested in what Church Doctrine ought to be but rather in what it actually is. Consider analogies to three jurisprudential theories: natural law, legal positivism, and law as integrity.

The idea of natural law makes its entrance into legal philosophy in the work of the ancient Stoics, and since that time the term has followed so many twists and turns and taken on so many different meanings and nuances that it is dangerous to speak of *the* natural law account of the law. Forced to hazard a brief definition, however, I think that the core of natural law can be stated as the claim that law is defined in terms of what is actually morally justified. Perhaps more importantly, natural law involves a very strong negative claim, namely that a command or rule that is immoral, no matter how official looking, is not law. Suffice it to say that this is a gross over-simplification, and that natural law does not simply identify law and morality. Natural law thinkers acknowledge that law has certain social and institutional aspects – for example enforcement – but what they deny is that it can be defined purely by reference to its social aspect.

What would an analogous theory of Church Doctrine look like? Joseph Smith once declared, "One of the grand fundamental principles of 'Mormonism' is to receive truth let it come from whence it may,"[6] and Brigham Young taught, "'Mormonism' embraces all truth that is revealed and that is unrevealed, whether religious, political, scientific, or philosophical."[7] Brigham, I take it, is making a claim about the contours of Mormonism properly understood, rather than about the status of the society of Deseret in the nineteenth century (or the society of the Wasatch Front in the twenty-first century, for that matter). Mormonism, on this view, is co-extensive with truth. Applying this notion to Church Doctrine, we would say that Church Doctrine is that which is true. In other words, truth acts as our criteria for identifying Church Doctrine. Just as natural law identifies law with morality, a natural law approach to the question of what is Church Doctrine identifies it with truth. There is an appealing audacity and expansiveness to this approach, but unfortunately it suffers from some basic problems.

Saying that Church Doctrine is simply coextensive with what is true cannot make sense of some very basic ways in which the concept is used. Consider, once more Sister Smith's claims about the age of the earth. Imagine that Brother Young's reaction – "That is just your opinion. It is not Church Doctrine" – is prompted by the fact that he is uncertain about the age of the earth. There would be nothing shocking about Brother Young's invocation of Church Doctrine in such a situation. Faced with a doubtful situation, he is using Church Doctrine to confirm the legitimacy

of his doubt. He is not required by its authority to assent to Sister Smith's position. Furthermore, it is precisely because Brother Young seems to know the contours of Church Doctrine that he knows that he is under no obligation to accept Sister Smith's claims. Yet if Church Doctrine were truth, in identifying its contours he would necessarily have laid to rest any doubts as to Sister Smith's position. Indeed, placing it outside of Church Doctrine would be tantamount to claiming that it was false. Yet this is precisely what our doubtful Brother Young refuses to do.

The problem of Church Doctrine as truth is further undermined if we believe – as I think we are required to do – that there are issues about which Church Doctrine is silent. For example, I take it to be fairly uncontroversial that there is no Church Doctrine on the precise location of Williamsburg, Virginia. Somewhat more controversially, one can plausibly (and correctly in my view) claim that there is no Church Doctrine on the truth or falsity of the theory of evolution.[8] No one could plausibly argue, however, that because of this, no statement about the location of Williamsburg, Virginia (or the theory of evolution) could be true or false. The statement that "Williamsburg, Virginia is located on the banks of the Potomac River" is clearly false, the silence of Church Doctrine notwithstanding. Nor does it make sense of our ordinary usage of the term Church Doctrine to say, "It is Church Doctrine that Williamsburg, Virginia is on the York-James Peninsula." One might try to save the Church Doctrine as truth approach by refining it somewhat, saying that Church Doctrine is any truth that is taught by or in the Church. The refinement runs into two problems. First, it leaves unanswered the difficult question of what constitutes teaching by the Church (more on this below). Second, it still doesn't capture the way in which the concept of Church Doctrine is used. An example illustrates both points. Suppose that I am called as gospel doctrine teacher in my ward. I then begin teaching in class that Williamsburg, Virginia is located on the York-James Peninsula, including in my lesson a detailed discussion of the geography of the Virginia tidewater. My bishop then instructs me to stop, telling me that I should confine my teaching to Church Doctrine. Clearly his instructions do not do any violence to the ordinary usage of Church Doctrine, even though there is nothing false about my teachings. They do suggest, however, that Church Doctrine cannot be understood as any truth that is taught in the context of the Church.

Legal positivism provides a second possible analogy for Church Doctrine. According to H.L.A. Hart, an influential legal positivist, law is a

system of rules. Some rules govern human behavior, for example the rule that murder is prohibited. Some rules govern the promulgation and validity of other rules. On this view, law is ultimately defined by what Hart called a "rule of recognition."[9] This is a rule that allows us to differentiate those rules that are law from other rules, such as rules of manners or the rules of golf, which are not law. For example, in the United Kingdom a statute passed by the House of Commons is law. This is a rule of recognition.

Positivism provides a seemingly elegant solution to the problem of what is Church Doctrine. All that is necessary is to identify a rule of recognition for Church Doctrine. The problem is that as a matter of social understanding it does not appear that any such rule of recognition exists. It is tempting to look to the scriptures and the idea of canonization as a rule of recognition. On this view, Church Doctrine would consist of whatever the scriptures say. There are at least two problems with this approach. First, it is over- and under-inclusive. There are certain things that are very clearly Church Doctrine that cannot really be found in the scriptures. For example, our current understanding of the Word of Wisdom exceeds the text of the Doctrine & Covenants. The very fact that the Word of Wisdom is regarded today as a commandment is at odds with the text itself, which clearly states that it is not given by way of commandment (see D&C 89:2). The scriptures also contain many teachings that are not Church Doctrine. For example, certain aspects of the text of the Word of Wisdom – such as the prohibition on meat except in winter or time of famine – are not regarded as normative (see D&C 89:12-13). Likewise, Christ's prohibition on divorce in the Gospel of Mark does not seem to be Church Doctrine (see Mark 10:6-9), to say nothing of the intricate rules found in the Pentateuch.

The second problem with looking only to the scriptures for Church Doctrine is the problem of interpretation. Mormonism begins with a rejection of the sufficiency of scriptural interpretation standing alone. After finding himself caught up in a war of words between the rival evangelists in Palmyra, Joseph Smith noted that "the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to *destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible*" (JS-H 1:11-12; emphasis added). The new revelation of the Restoration came only after the sufficiency of scripture had been rejected. As it now stands, Mormons regularly invoke the concept of Church Doctrine as an aid to the interpretation of scripture. For example, should someone teach

that the text of D&C 89 requires that Mormons become vegetarians; the standard response would be, "That is just your interpretation; it is not Church Doctrine." This points, however, to an important function of Church Doctrine. It is something that we frequently use to identify which interpretations of scripture are authoritative and which are not. This means, however, that Church Doctrine necessarily exceeds the Standard Works standing alone.

Finally, one might look to the statements of General Authorities as providing a clear rule of recognition for Church Doctrine. Joseph Smith, however, insisted that a prophet is only a prophet when speaking as a prophet. What we lack, however, is a clear criterion for identifying when a prophet is speaking as a prophet. For example, should we assume that everything uttered in general conference is Church Doctrine? If so, is it because the speakers in general conference are careful to make sure that they don't say anything that contradicts Church Doctrine, or because Church Doctrine simply is what is said in general conference? Furthermore, is Church Doctrine confined to some set of public statements by high Church leaders? For example, if the General Handbook of Instructions were modified so that abstinence from coffee was no longer necessary to qualify as worthy for a temple recommend, would such a change constitute a shift in Church Doctrine, even if it was not announced from the pulpit in general conference? The fact that we do not have clear answers to these questions suggests to me that we lack a clear rule of recognition for what constitutes Church Doctrine. This does not mean, of course, that the words of scripture and modern prophets are without authority. It simply means that a statement does not become Church Doctrine by virtue of being uttered by any particular Church leader or even by virtue of being printed in the Standard Works. Nor does it mean that the various potential rules of recognition that we might propose are wrong per se. All of these rules can help to orient us toward Church Doctrine. However, they cannot provide a fool-proof way of identifying Church Doctrine in every case.

LAW AS INTEGRITY AND CHURCH DOCTRINE

"Law as integrity" provides an attractive alternative to the analogy of legal positivism. This approach begins with so-called "easy cases," situations where what the law consists of and what it demands

is more or less clear and obvious. For example, we know that the U.S. Constitution's requirement that the President be at least 35 years of age can be identified as the law without recourse to any elaborate theory of what law is. Such obviously true legal propositions abound: Lower courts are bound to apply the holdings of higher courts; the 1964 Civil Rights Act clearly forbids a Hilton from refusing to serve a patron because he or she is Black; after centuries of accumulated precedent many common-law rules, like the requirement that a will have two witnesses, are beyond serious question. The vast majority of legal disputes involve such "easy cases." We only require a theory of "what is the law?" when we are faced with what Ronald Dworkin has called "hard cases."[10] In these situations the scope of the law is unclear and we are hard pressed to identify its demands. Dworkin imagines how a perfect judge, who he names Hercules, would decide such a case.[11] According to Dworkin, Hercules would survey the vast mass of clear and easy law relating to the issue. He would then construct an account that makes sense of all of this material. Any theory of law must do this because the clear and easy law is binding, hence his interpretation must fit and justify it.

Dworkin gives the example of the English case of *McLaughlin v. O'Brian*.[12] The case involved a woman who sued a negligent driver for damages for emotional distress. The woman was not in the car accident and had not been physically injured in any way. Rather, she was called to the hospital where she learned that her husband and daughter had been killed. Previous English cases had awarded damages for emotional distress but only in cases where the plaintiff had actually witnessed the injury or had come upon a loved one's corpse at the scene of the accident.[13] The question presented by *McLaughlin* was whether or not these cases authorized damages in a situation where emotional distress was removed from the scene of the accident to the more antiseptic setting of the hospital.

In deciding a case like *McLaughlin*, Hercules does not simply decide whether he believes, all things considered, that recovery for emotional distress in this situation is a good idea. Rather he begins with the earlier cases. Suppose, for example, that Hercules believes that any recovery for emotional distress would be misguided. He thinks that it is a bad policy and that the moral arguments in favor of compensating emotional distress are weak. He cannot, however, simply apply this judgment to McLaughlin's case, because the previous decisions by which he is bound clearly reject his

position by awarding damages. Nor may he simply hold that the previous decisions were mistaken and that from now on no damages for emotional distress will be awarded.[14] Rather, Hercules must look at the previously decided cases and construct the best possible argument that he can to justify them. In justifying them, he looks not only at the outcomes in the cases, but also to the reasons offered by the previous judges. He must also account for these reasons, although in constructing the best possible justification for the previous cases he will necessarily recharacterize the reasoning of previous judges. Thus the arguments in support of the holdings evolve over time. In *McLaughlin*, Hercules would draw on the best possible understanding that he has of policy and political morality to justify the conclusion that those who witness the death of a loved one should be compensated, and he would then decide if those arguments justify giving the wife and mother of accident victims compensation when she learns of the deaths in a hospital. Hercules' interpretation involves normative judgments, but it is not simply a matter of *his* normative judgments. Rather, discovering what the law requires in a particular case is a matter of giving force to the latent normative judgments of previous, controlling precedents. Put another way, to discover the law in a "hard case" a judge creates a story that makes sense of the clearly established cases and then fits the new case into that story in a way that places the whole in the best possible light.

    In my view, thinking of Church Doctrine as an analogous kind of interpretation provides the best account of how we discover it. The advantage of this view is that it does not require that we have any clear idea about the rule of recognition. It simply requires that we have some easily identifiable core cases of Church Doctrine from which we can reason. This is precisely the situation in which we find ourselves. We can easily imagine that Brother Young and Sister Smith have very different opinions about the rule of recognition for Church Doctrine. For example, Brother Young might believe that Church Doctrine consists only of texts formally canonized by a vote in general conference, while Sister Smith might regard any public sermon by a member of the Quorum of the Twelve as Church Doctrine. Both of them agree, however, that it is Church Doctrine that Jesus Christ is the savior of mankind and that Latter-day Saints should not drink coffee. When faced with a new question about Church Doctrine, rather than trying to determine which of them has the correct rule of recognition they can simply reason on the basis of clear cases, fitting

the new question into a story that will place things in their best possible light. More importantly, I think that this is how most Mormons actually use the concept of Church Doctrine. To be sure, Latter-day Saints point to authoritative statements in support of their claim that this or that proposition or rule of conduct is Church Doctrine. However, all of these claims are made against a background of teachings, experiences, and texts that they seek to accommodate and charitably characterize. It is their interpretation of the totality that produces their conclusions about what is or is not Church Doctrine.

There are obviously important ways in which Church Doctrine as integrity is different than law as integrity. A judge faced with a case does not have the luxury of not resolving the question presented. Once the parties have concluded the litigation, the judge is required to declare one of the parties a winner. In centuries gone by a judge could rule *dubitante*, simply declaring that the law was unclear and leaving the case undecided, but this is no longer allowed. Accordingly, a jurisprudential theory requires that the law be complete in the sense of providing some definitive answer to any case that can be posed to it. Even in hard cases there are answers, and the law is without gaps. Church Doctrine, however, doesn't labor under the same institutional imperatives as the law. Sometimes – often – the best interpretation of Mormon texts, practices, and history will be *dubitante*: We simply don't know. Even here, however, the process of interpretation will discipline our ignorance. Mormon texts, practices, and history will foreclose certain answers even while they make other answers more likely, all the while not definitively laying the matter to rest. Hence, on some questions – such as the location of towns in the Virginia tidewater – Church Doctrine is simply silent. On other questions, however, the answer might be something like, "Well, under Church Doctrine there are a couple of possible answers…"

For example, the precise meaning of the term "intelligence" as it is used in the scriptures is notoriously vague. Bruce R. McConkie suggested that "intelligence" consisted of some sort of pre-sentient stuff from which spirits are organized.[15] B. H. Roberts thought that "intelligences" were the eternal, self-existent, self-aware core of the spirit that could neither be created nor destroyed.[16] Perhaps most esoterically, Orson Pratt suggested that "intelligence" was an elemental fluid of divinity that pervaded to a greater and lesser extent the entire universe.[17] (Blake Ostler has recently articulated a philosophically sophisticated modern version of

Pratt's position.[18]) I take it that none of these positions can be identified as the authoritative approach of Church Doctrine to the question. They all fit and justify Mormon texts, practices, and history to a greater or lesser extent. On the other hand Church Doctrine *does* foreclose certain theories of intelligence. For example, the consistent rejection of the doctrine of ex nihilo creation by Mormon scriptures and authorities would foreclose the idea that Church Doctrine can accommodate the view that "intelligence" refers to some spirit substance created from nothing by God through an act of divine fiat.

The question of whether Diet Coke is prohibited by the Word of Wisdom provides an example of how we discover Church Doctrine. We start with the brute fact that we all agree that the Word of Wisdom is Church Doctrine and that it forbids drinking coffee, tea, and alcohol. What would be the best story that one could tell about this? One story would be to say that it is a health code designed to prohibit the ingestion of bad substances.[19] Thus we look at alcohol and caffeine and use them as touchstones for Word of Wisdom compliance. On this view, chocolate and Diet Coke, both of which contain caffeine, are out. There are a number of problems with this interpretation. For example, the schedule of prohibited substances is strangely random from a purely health-oriented point of view. Why condemn excessive meat consumption but not excessive sugar consumption? Why explicitly include relatively harmless substances like tea or coffee but not narcotics? One might offer the argument that in the nineteenth century when Section 89 was given they didn't have such drugs. This, however, is historically inaccurate. The nineteenth century was well acquainted with narcotics like opium. Furthermore, the current interpretation of "hot drinks" as meaning tea and coffee (but not herb tea) didn't gel until the twentieth century, so it is not clear why nineteenth-century practice should control. Given these difficulties, one could conclude that the bad-substances interpretation doesn't provide the best account of the rules. A better account is that the prohibition is meant as a reminder or symbol of the covenant that I make with God and an open-ended admonition to be healthy. This explains the seemingly arbitrary schedule of prohibited substances. As symbols they are arbitrary in the same way that using the shape "A" to designate the sound "ahhh" is arbitrary. It also explains the rise of the Word of Wisdom as a central part of Mormon identity in the 1930s. As outward reminders of Mormons' status as a "peculiar people" in the form of

things like polygamy or the United Order retreated in the face of intense outside pressure, the Word of Wisdom provided a workable mark of the covenant. On this reading, however, the prohibition on hot drinks cannot be reduced to a prohibition on caffeine that then extends to Diet Coke. It does suggest, however, that one should avoid consumption – including the consumption of Diet Coke – that is bad for one's health.

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF CHURCH DOCTRINE AS INTEGRITY: HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

This interpretation of the Word of Wisdom may or may not be correct, but it does illustrate how applying an interpretive approach to the problem of Church Doctrine would work. This approach also casts light on two persistent intellectual issues within Mormonism: historical interpretation and the role of personal judgment in following Church Doctrine. The Word of Wisdom example illustrates how an interpretive approach makes sense of history and change in Church Doctrine. The notion of Church Doctrine as a story whose totality must be accounted for with a new chapter fits in nicely with Mormon ideas of continuing revelation (e.g. A. of F. 9) and with the reality of evolution in Mormon thought. [20] The requirement that the story be told in the way that places it in the best possible light also accounts for the persistent tendency of Mormons to understand their own history in the rosiest possible terms. Generally, this approach to Mormon history has been characterized as simple apologetics and chalked up to naiveté or perhaps dishonesty.[21] Seeing the discovery of Church Doctrine as an exercise in interpretation, however, suggests that the goal of much of Mormon discussion of history is neither history nor apologetics. Rather it is a search for what is normative and what is not. In seeking to understand their past in the best possible light, Mormons are trying to understand which parts of that past have a claim on them and which parts do not. The stories function less as historical explanations or even "faith promoting" narratives than as an exercise in the discovery of Church Doctrine.

This is not meant as a historical apology for traditional Mormon history. No doubt the search for the normative in Mormon history obscures a great deal and creates a distorted view of the past. If our goal is to understand fully – in so far as we are able – the nature of historical events, then we will need to consider and offer interpretations that will not fit into

the narrative of Church Doctrine. Neither historical explanations nor the doctrinal search for the normative in the Mormon past are illegitimate. They are, however, different sorts of endeavors, although Mormons are seldom clear – even in their own minds – about which exercise they are engaged in.[22] For example, the explanation for the twentieth-century rise in the importance of the Word of Wisdom offered above uses the interpretation of the past as a way of discovering the current contours of normativity. It may or may not be an accurate or compelling historical explanation. Indeed, it obscures things that a fully realized historical explanation should consider. For example, a purely historical explanation would take into account Heber J. Grant's life-long affiliation with the temperance movement and his failure to keep Utah from casting the deciding vote to repeal Prohibition.[23] It would also consider the role that the economic imperatives of pioneer Utah played in the emphasis on the Word of Wisdom.[24] And so on. However, despite superficial appearances, my interpretation of the Word of Wisdom is not offered as a historical account at all. Rather it is seeking to understand history only in a very narrow and specific way, namely as a part of the current structure of authoritative Church Doctrine. To paraphrase Dworkin:

> [The discovery of Church Doctrine] begins in the present and pursues the past only so far as and in the way its contemporary focus dictates. It does not aim to recapture, even for present [Church Doctrine], the ideals or practical purposes of the [authorities] who first created it. It aims rather to justify what they did (sometimes including what they said) in an overall story worth telling now, a story with a complex claim: that present practice can be organized by and justified in principles sufficiently attractive to provide an honorable future.[25]

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF CHURCH DOCTRINE AS INTEGRITY: OBEDIENCE AND PERSONAL JUDGMENT

This approach also provides a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between individual judgment and following Church Doctrine. To see how, we must understand that on this view Church Doctrine is inherently contestable. This doesn't mean that doctrinal questions are without correct answers.[26] Indeed the interpretive approach

necessarily assumes that many aspects of Church Doctrine are clear. Rather it means that we always can have disagreements about certain aspects of what Church Doctrine requires and that the only way of doctrinally settling these disagreements will be by resort to complex arguments about the best possible story to be told. It is important to understand that when I say that certain aspects of Church Doctrine are inherently contestable, I am not talking about disagreements over whether Church Doctrine is true or whether it should be followed. Rather I am talking about disagreements over the *content* of Church Doctrine itself. This inherent contestability is illustrated by the fact that the Church's solution to the practical problems created by doctrinal disputes is not a clear and mechanical rule for discovering what is Church Doctrine. We lack an intellectual formula for escaping the demands of interpretation. Rather the coping mechanisms are essentially moral and institutional.

Morally, we are to discuss Church Doctrine with charity and unity, avoiding "contention." In the Book of Mormon, the risen Christ teaches, "For verily, verily I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to content with anger, one with another" (3 Ne. 11:28-29). This is not a philosophical Rosetta Stone that allows us to transparently identify authoritative Church Doctrine. This fact suggests that the primary danger of the contestability of Church Doctrine is not epistemic. It is not that we will be mistaken. Rather, it is moral and social. It is the danger of rancor, discord, and a loss of unity. Accordingly, we have a solution in the form of a moral injunction about social interactions – in this case doctrinal discussions – rather than an intellectual method for resolving doctrinal disputes.

In addition to a morality of doctrinal discussion, we have institutional solutions to the practical difficulties of doctrinal disagreements. Return once again to the initial disagreement between Sister Smith and Brother Young. Imagine that Sister Smith is called as a gospel doctrine teacher and begins vociferously teaching her anti-evolution views during class. Brother Young suggests to her that she should stop teaching her opinions as Church Doctrine. Sister Smith indignantly replies that her views on the age of the earth *are* Church Doctrine, insisting that she holds them precisely for this reason. Both parties take the dispute to their bishop. He asks that Sister Smith confine her lesson more closely to the text of the assigned scriptures. Such a solution to Sister Smith's and Brother Young's

doctrinal disagreement is entirely institutional. Indeed, it needn't take a doctrinal position at all on the resolution of the dispute. The bishop's decision controls in this situation not because he has privileged access to Church Doctrine per se but simply because he is the bishop. In this sense, the hierarchy of the Church, with its accompanying notions of stewardship and jurisdiction, renders a theory that incontestably identifies Church Doctrine unnecessary.[27] The success of the ethical and institution methods of coping with doctrinal disagreement underscores the inherent contestability of Church Doctrine. Given the proper attitude and institutional structure, the contestability seems to be something that we can live with. Nevertheless, the contestability remains.

The source of this inherent contestability lies in the fact that we can only discover Church Doctrine by finding the best possible story that can be told about the texts, practices, and history of Mormonism. Not only is this process of interpretation complicated, but the principle of charity means that it necessarily involves normative judgments that are inherently contestable. This does not mean, however, that discovering Church Doctrine is a free-wheeling exercise in normative reasoning. Such a view fails to appreciate the difference between judging what would make the best story about a particular set of phenomena and simply judging what would be best. Discovering Church Doctrine requires that we make sense of clear instances of Church Doctrine and their context (contemporary and historical). This interpretive requirement forecloses certain possibilities. For example, suppose that I come to believe – after careful consideration – that the best way of memorializing gospel covenants in our lives would be to eat only white food, since whiteness denotes purity and ingestion is a powerful way of symbolizing how we take the gospel into our very being. (Something like this view was common among early Christians.) Whatever the merits of this practice, it is not Church Doctrine. It does not purport to offer an interpretation of the teachings and practices of the Church. In contrast, the interpretation of the Word of Wisdom that I offered above assumes that the Word of Wisdom is an authority that forecloses, for example, the modest and healthy consumption of wine.

The precise nature of the link between the authority of Church Doctrine and the need to tell the best possible story about it is complicated. The search for the best possible story is not offered as an account of the authority of Church Doctrine. It does not aim at fully justifying it. Such a justification must come from elsewhere, and its nature is beyond the scope

of this essay.[28] Suffice it to say that the source of the authority of Church Doctrine likely lies in covenants, priesthood power, the privileged access of prophets to the divine, and the needs of the saints as a community. These are all normative grounds separate from the particular stories that we tell about particular doctrines. (Although to be sure, the grounds of Church Doctrine's authority no doubt have their role to play in understanding this or that question about its contours.) However, the authority of Church Doctrine does require that we look at it in the best possible light. Such an approach acknowledges that Church Doctrine is something with a claim upon us, something normative.

Hence, following Church Doctrine does not constitute an abdication of independent moral judgment, as has been so often suggested. Following Church Doctrine does mean subordinating one's independent substantive judgments on an issue to which Church Doctrine speaks. Yet understanding what Church Doctrine requires is not a mechanical process. Acknowledging the authority of Church Doctrine means committing oneself to discovering its demands. Yet this process of discovery will necessarily involve making independent judgments about what provides the best possible story to be told about the totality of known doctrines. Put another way, independent of its legitimacy or justification, *discovering* the bounds of authority is at least in part a normative inquiry that requires our independent judgment. Even in obedience we "must be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Moses 4:11).[29]

CONCLUSION

My goal in this essay has not been to reform or critique the way that Mormons use the concept of Church Doctrine. Rather, I have tried to elucidate what I take to be the underlying logic of their practice. Hence, the interpretive approach that I draw by analogy from the philosophy of law is not offered as something new. Rather, I think that on this point Mormons are rather like the man who discovers that he has been speaking prose all his life. Analogizing the question of how we know if something is Church Doctrine to the question of how we know if something is law, however, does allow us to bring certain issues into sharper focus. First, it allows us to recognize that we lack a rule of recognition for what is Church Doctrine. Second, it provides us with a way of understanding why

this is not a serious theoretical objection to our current practice. Finally, by revealing the inherently interpretive nature of discovering Church Doctrine, it hopefully sheds light on some of our other institutional and theoretical practices.

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NOTES

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all references to "the Church" are to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

[2] See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

[3] See Davis Bitton, "Mormon Catechisms," *Task Papers in Mormon History no. 14* (Salt Lake City: History Division, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1976) Copy available in the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University.

[4] See Preface in Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966). ("For the work itself, I assume sole and full responsibility.").

[5] Karl Llewellyn, *The Bramble Bush: On Our Law and Its Study* (New York: Oceana Publications, Inc., 1930), 3.

[6] Joseph Smith Jr., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 313.

[7] Brigham Young, *The Discourses of Brigham Young*, ed. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1925), 2.

[8] For the record: I think that the theory of evolution is true. I do not think that there is anything in Church Doctrine *per se* that requires this view. See generally William E. Evenson and Duane E. Jeffery, eds., *Mormonism and Evolution: The Authoritative LDS Statements* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2006).

[9] H.L.A. Hart, *The Concept of Law*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 100-110.

[10] Ronald Dworkin, "Hard Cases," in *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978), 81.

[11] Ronald Dworkin, *Law's Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), 239-240.

[12] [1983]1 A.C. 410, reversing [1981] Q.B. 599.

[13] See Marshall v. Kionel Enterprises Inc., [1971] O.R. 177, Chadwick v. British Transport, [1967] 1 W.L.R. 912.

[14] This is true even though common-law courts can overrule previous decisions. The issue of overruling precedent is a complicated question beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that courts do not simply reject precedent when they disagree with it, but rather they overrule a previous case only when subsequent

decisions decided under it severely undermine its holding and rationale. For example, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which struck down racial segregation in primary-level public schools, the Supreme Court reversed its previous decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which announced the principle of "separate but equal." However, prior to *Brown* the Court had decided a series of cases – mainly striking down segregation in higher public education – that undermined *Plessy*'s holding.

[15] McConkie's views are summarized (with sources) in Blake Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-existence in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15:1 (Spring 1982): 59, 72.

[16] B.H. Roberts, "The Immortality of Man," in *B.H. Roberts Scrapbook*, vol. 2., comp. Lynn Pulsipher (Provo, Utah: Pulsipher Publishing, 1991), 21, 26.

[17] Orson Pratt, "The Holy Spirit," in *The Essential Orson Pratt*, ed. David Whittacker (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991).

[18] Blake Ostler, "Re-visioning the Mormon Concept of Diety," *Element: A Journal of Mormon Philosophy and Theology* 1:1 (Spring 2005).

[19] For an extremely influential version of this interpretation see John A. Widtsoe & Leah D. Widtsoe, *The Word of Wisdom: A Modern Interpretation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1937).

[20] See Thomas Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," in *Line Upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine*, ed. Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 53.

[21] See D. Michael Quinn, "On Being a Mormon Historian (And its Aftermath)," in *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History,* ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 69.

[22] Hence this essay.

[23] For a discussion of Heber J. Grant's involvement in temperance politics and Prohibition, see Loman Franklin Aydelotte, "The Political Thought and Activity of Heber J. Grant, Seventh President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," (Master's Thesis, Brigham Young University, 1965).

[24] See Leonard Arrington, "The Word of Wisdom: An Economic Interpretation, *BYU Studies* 1 (1959): 37. Arrington argues that Brigham Young emphasized compliance with the Word of Wisdom as a way of dealing with excessive imports of tobacco and other products from outside of Utah.

[25] Dworkin, *Law's Empire*, 227-228 (substituting the term "the discovery of Church Doctrine" for "law" and "authorities" for "politicians").
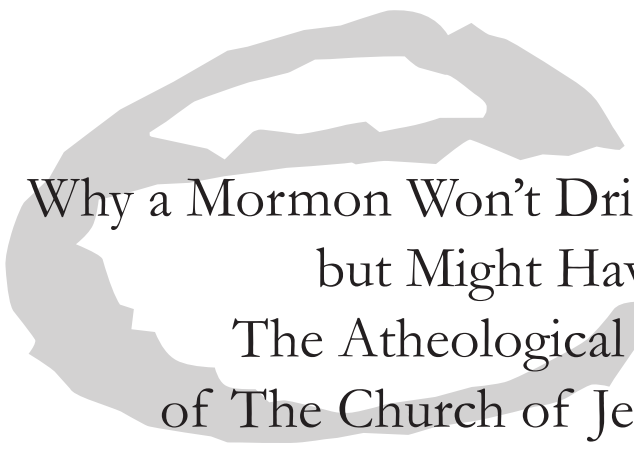
[26] Dworkin argues that there are right answers to inherently contestable legal question in Ronald Dworkin, "Is There Really No Right Answer in Hard Cases," in *A Matter of Principle* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), 119.

[27] Robert Cover made an analogous legal point about the interaction of institutions and interpretation, arguing for what he called a jurispathetic theory of law. On Cover's theory, citizens produce a vast welter of interpretations about what their laws require. The role of the courts is to kill off some of these interpretations

in order to resolve concrete disputes. Ironically, Cover used – inter alia – the example of Mormon interpretations of the constitution. See Robert Cover, "Nomos and Narrative," 97 *Harvard Law Review* 4 (1983): 51 ("The long process leading up to Utah's statehood was, from the Mormon perspective, an exploration of the degree of resistance required by religious obligation and the realities of power.").

[28] See Nathan B. Oman, "A Defense of the Authority of Church Doctrine," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 40:4 (Winter 2007): forthcoming.

[29] To be clear, I do not claim that the discussion offered above exhausts the issues presented by the interaction of personal judgment and authority, or even that it answers all of the most pressing questions raised by it. Rather, my claim is that it puts to rest the notion that following Church Doctrine is intellectual or morally lazy, involving an abdication of personal judgment. Such judgment is always necessary.

Why a Mormon Won't Drink Coffee but Might Have a Coke: The Atheological Character of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints[1]

by James E. Faulconer

It is a matter of curiosity to many and an annoyance to some that it is sometimes difficult to get definitive answers from members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to what seem like straightforward questions – questions of the form "Why do you believe or do *x*?"[2] Latter-day Saints subscribe to a few basic doctrines, most of which they share with other Christians (such as that Jesus is divine) and some of which differentiate them, such as the teaching that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. They also accept general moral teachings, the kinds of things believed by both the religious and the non-religious. Apart from those, seldom can one say without preface or explanation what Latter-day Saints believe.

I will argue that this apparently curious situation is a result of the fact that, like many, probably most, other religious people (including Buddhists and Jews), Latter-day Saints are atheological[3]. In other words, they are without an official or even semi-official philosophy that explains and gives rational support to their beliefs and teachings. To make that argument, I will argue that what we say about being LDS is an expression of what it means to be LDS, but being LDS is irreducible to a set of propositions.[4] As I use the word "theology" here, it begins with belief and uses the methods of rational philosophy to give support to that belief: dogmatic, systematic, or rational theology. I recognize that it may seem a bit out-

dated to criticize rational theology since there are also several other kinds of theology such as narrative, liberation, liturgical, and feminist theologies. Nevertheless, since rational theology is what most Latter-day Saints first think of when they think of theology, since dogmatic (in other words, church-sanctioned) theologies, are rational, and since I think at least some of what I say of rational or systematic theology may also apply to other theologies, I think it reasonable to focus on rational theology.

In describing the LDS Church as atheological I intend to explain why the Church neither has an official theology, explicit or implicit, nor encourages theological speculation. My explanation will be that the absence of theology reflects the LDS understanding of religion as a set of practices, beliefs, and attitudes, and that such an understanding is fundamental to LDS religion.

Of course, the absence of theology is also characteristic of many non-creedal denominations (and of many theologians). And, of course, some Latter-day Saint leaders and thinkers have devoted considerable energy to formulating theologies of various kinds. Nevertheless, none of those efforts have come to fruition (none has been accepted as official by the Church, and non has articulate a theology exclusively accepted or adopted by authorities or members), and I think none will.

To argue that the LDS religion is atheological I will look at it as it has, in my experience, come to be in LDS practice, and I will use the Word of Wisdom as my basic example. I think it will give us a foothold on which to rest a discussion of the place of theology in Mormon belief and practice. In February of 1833, Joseph Smith, received a revelation that said, among other things: "Strong drinks are not for the belly . . . . And again, hot drinks are not for the body or belly" (Doctrine and Covenants 89:5-9), and Smith clarified that "hot drinks" meant coffee and tea.[5]

Latter-day Saints often speak of the Word of Wisdom as a health law, and there is evidence for that way of understanding it. Nevertheless, there is no official explanation of its prohibitions and there is anything but a universal practice, especially regarding, for example, the consumption of caffeine. There is little consistency among LDS practices regarding caffeinated drinks and no more consistency regarding the explanations of those practices. Consider that many LDS abstain from all caffeinated drinks, presumably believing that it is the caffeine in coffee that makes it forbidden; and thus, other drinks with caffeine are also forbidden. However, few of them who abstain from caffeinated drinks in general

will drink decaffeinated coffee, though consistency would dictate that decaffeinated coffee is not prohibited.

The difficulties we encounter in explaining the ways in which LDS practice the Word of Wisdom are illustrative of the difficulties we encounter with other LDS beliefs and practices. There are few explanations of such things on which all Latter-day Saints agree.[6] As mentioned, there are basic beliefs, doctrines, and practices about which there is wide-spread and even universal agreement. Among these is the central doctrine that Jesus is the Messiah – that his life, suffering, death, and resurrection were literal – and other teachings, such as that Joseph Smith was the prophet through whom Jesus worked the restoration of his ancient gospel, that the Book of Mormon is a record of an ancient people, and that all human beings must be baptized. It is difficult, to the point of being inconceivable, to imagine the LDS Church abandoning these. Nevertheless, though it clear that such foundational beliefs and teachings exist, there is no official list of them.

Though it is easy to say that there must be foundational beliefs and it is easy to point to beliefs that appear to be among them, if we look closely at any particular belief, it isn't difficult to imagine changes in that belief that could come through the prophet and result in quite different practices and beliefs.

Beyond whatever foundational beliefs Latter-day Saints hold, there are many other beliefs that are generally though not universally held, such as the belief in the doctrine of eternal progression;[7] and there is considerable disagreement among those who do hold such beliefs as to what they mean or imply. Further, whether we are talking about foundational or other beliefs, there is little thought about how to make those beliefs and practices a rational whole and even less agreement about whether to do so.

Thus, relatively few of what are often described as the beliefs and teachings of the LDS Church are required of its members, and even fewer beliefs have a generally agreed upon rational explanation or description. Yet most Latter-day Saints are not bothered by the absence of official theology—and the leadership of the Church seems not to be looking to fill in that absence.

Joseph Smith's anti-creedal feelings may be the origin of the continuing LDS suspicion of theology. He said "The Latter-day Saints have no creed, but are ready to believe all true principles that exist, as they are made manifest from time to time"[8] and "the truth of the system, and power

of God" had been "bound apart by cast-iron creeds, and fastened to set stakes by chain-cables, without revelation."[9] Though creed and theology are not the same, it is easy to see that someone opposed to the first might also be opposed to the second.

The absence of official explanations and rational descriptions of beliefs and practices, and of differing and inconsistent explanations and descriptions within the membership of the Church, is what I will try to "explain." I will offer three possible responses to the question of Latter-day Saint atheology (only one of which is unique to Latter-day Saints). My responses will focus on prophets, practice, and scripture.[10]

I: PROPHETS

My first response to the question of why Latter-day Saints are fundamentally atheological is that of my hair stylist, Geoffrey Huntington, who has not only the interest in philosophy common to those of his profession, but also some academic training in philosophy. When I asked him why we believe and do what we do, his answer was, "Because the prophet said so." At first glance, this may seem to be a remark about obedience. However, I think that Huntington's response is not so much about obedience as it is about continuing revelation: if we take the idea of continuing revelation seriously, then anything we believe or do happens "under erasure," and that is especially true of any explanation of what we believe or do. As individuals, we may find a theology helpful to our understanding, but no explanation or system of ideas will be adequate to tell us what it means to be a Latter-day Saint. For a Latter-day Saint, a theology is always in danger of becoming meaningless because it can always be undone by new revelation.

My point is a logical one: To believe in continuing revelation, to believe that God can do what he did when he commanded Abraham to go to Moriah, when he challenged Peter's understanding of clean and unclean, when he ended the practice of plural marriage, and when he told President Kimball that we should begin ordaining black members of the Church, is to believe that any account of our beliefs is, logically, in danger of being undone by new revelation.

Except for scripture and what the prophet reveals, there is no authoritative *logos* of the *theos* for Latter-day Saints, and given that the prophet can and does continue to reveal things, there is no *logos* of what

he reveals except the record of those revelations, scripture that remains an open canon.[11] For LDS, the *logos* is both in principle and in practice always changing. Continuing revelation precludes an account of revelation as a whole. Thus, finally our only recourse is to the current revelations of the prophet since, speaking for God, he can revoke any particular belief or practice at any moment, or he can institute a new one, and he can do those things with no concern for how to make his pronouncement rationally coherent with previous pronouncements or practices.

Polygamy illustrates this well. Instituted by Joseph Smith, the practice of polygamy was revoked by Wilford Woodruff, the fourth prophet. Church intellectuals, some of them also prominent ecclesiastical leaders, had produced any number of theologies in which polygamy figured prominently and even centrally,[12] but with Woodruff's Manifesto,[13] those theologies became incoherent.

Of course, Latter-day Saints offer explanations for such changes in practice, and many of those explanations are quasi-theological. However, there is no more reason to think that those explanations are definitive than there was to think that the explanations given before the cessation of the practice were definitive. LDS theological explanations are provisional and, in principle, personal (even when widely shared). Thus, one reason that Latter-day Saints are generally atheological is that theology serves little purpose in the way that they come to decide doctrines and practices. As Latter-day Saints understand continuing revelation, it always trumps theology.

Let me end my first argument with a syllogism that will perhaps serve as a summary:

> 1. Theology assumes the existence of a set of beliefs that it shows to be rational and coherent.
> 2. Continuing revelation reserves the right to radically restructure the LDS belief set.
> 3. So, an adequate theology and continuing revelation are at odds with one another.
> 4. Thus, since Latter-day Saints insist on continuing revelation, they cannot have an adequate theology.

II: PRACTICE

We can also explain the absence of theology in the LDS Church by arguing that practice rather than belief is central to LDS religion. It is not uncommon to understand religion as essentially a belief content: to be LDS is to believe that *x, y,* and *z* are true. If that is the case, then the content of those beliefs can be expressed in rational terms and related to each other by reason. In other words, they can be loosed from their connection to ritual, ordinance, history, etc., and then examined without losing any meaning in the process: a fully-developed and relatively complete theology is in principle possible.

In spite of the commonness of thinking of religion as belief, particularly in Protestantism, I doubt that many would find that understanding of religion philosophically satisfactory. There are at least two problems with it. First, it doesn't accurately describe religious belief. As Paul Moyaert says, "One could not say . . . that someone is a good scientist if he does not know the basic principles of science, whereas a person who is unable to accurately explain the basic tenets of his or her religion can still be an exemplary and pious believer."[14] The proverbial farmer in Santaquin need not be able to give a proper theological account of his or her beliefs to be a good member of the Church. Indeed, that farmer need not even have a coherent set of beliefs nor must all of his or her beliefs be coherent with the beliefs of most other Latter-day Saints. A person can be a good Mormon, whether a stake president or a Primary teacher, without having a good theology or much of a theology at all.

The gospel is a divine activity, the saving activity of God. It is not the belief content associated with that activity, even though the activity of the gospel necessarily has belief content. To be a believer is to accept the gospel: it is to believe that God can save, but not merely to believe (since mere belief would not be religious belief). To be a believer is to respond to God's saving activity with repentance and in rebirth and with tokens that testify of God's saving power. One can do that and, at the same time, have some, perhaps many, false beliefs. However, if the exemplary pious person can have false beliefs about his or her religion,[15] then belief cannot define what it means to be religious. The locus of religion is practice rather than belief, though beliefs are often inseparable from practices.

Further, Latter-day Saints understand much religious practice in terms of covenant and priesthood, as in Exodus 19:5-6: "Now therefore, if

ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation." Perhaps referring to that passage, LDS revelation says:

> In the ordinances [of the priesthood], the power of godliness is manifest. And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh; for without this no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live. Now this Moses plainly taught to the children of Israel in the wilderness. (Doctrine and Covenants 84:19-24)

To be LDS is not merely to be a member of a particular community, sometimes identifiable by common beliefs or by particular habits or speech patterns or ways of organizing socially. Fundamentally to be LDS is to be one of the children of God and to serve him in formal practices, including ordinances.[16]

It is arguable that even if there were a rational account of LDS beliefs in their relation to each other, it would not be—*and could not be*—an adequate account of LDS formal practices, and thus it neither would nor could be an adequate account of LDS religion.[17] This is because arguably there is no adequate account of practices in general, and thus, no adequate account of LDS formal practices. To show that there can be no adequate account of practices one would have to show that practices exceed the possibility of giving a fully adequate account of them. One could do that by showing that it is impossible to apply a successive synthesis[18] to the phenomenon of practice in general, that it is impossible to take up and link its parts into a whole—even though a synthesis (an instantaneous rather than successive synthesis, and so knowledge) is possible. I take Jean-Luc Marion's arguments in "The Saturated Phenomenon" and in "The Event, the Phenomenon, and the Revealed,"[19] among other works, to straightforwardly imply[20] that there can be no successive synthesis of practice. If so, then practice is excessive of conceptual understanding because no successive synthesis is possible, though such a synthesis is requisite for conceptual understanding.[21] Religious knowledge and understanding are possible, but to the degree that religious knowledge is the knowledge inherent in practices, it need not be able to give a conceptual account of itself. It need be neither conceptual nor propositional. Marion's

argument excludes the possibility of an adequate, rational account of practice in general, though it leaves open the possibility of a provisional account.

However, rational theologies are not just unneeded, they are dangerous. I have no quarrel with someone who seeks a rational understanding of his or her LDS faith—*if* that seeking doesn't involve the false assumption that such an understanding is necessary to genuine, meaningful participation in LDS religion. Nevertheless, I wonder about those, like myself, who have the need for such seeking. My wonder is Nietzschean: "What motivates that search?" and my suspicion is that we implicitly make the professor's assumption that understanding requires reasoning, concepts, and propositions. The atheological character of LDS religion questions that implicit assumption, putting revelation, ordinance, scripture, history, and practice at the heart of religious understanding rather than reason and conception.

Several twentieth-century and contemporary thinkers have explicitly questioned the assumption that understanding requires concepts.[22] Rémi Brague argues that the demand for rational explanation is a result of movements in the early stages of European history, namely the novel Greek construction of the possibility of conceiving of the physical world as something in itself and present before human beings for investigation: "It was there [in Greece] and there alone, that that 'distanced' position would appear, that 'Archimedean point' from which human beings, 'conscious of being a subject (*subjektbewußt*),' would be able to submit nature to objective research."[23] Though the idea that the world is an object apart from us, lying before us for our conceptual investigation, seems intuitively obvious to us, Brague argues that it was new, created by the Greeks, and that there are both consequences to accepting that idea and alternatives to it.

Seeing the world as something in itself, something to be investigated as an object, eventually leads to an understanding of wisdom as the exercise of a power (that of critical investigation and theorizing) *over* an object. The idea of an adequate model of the world by means of which one can investigate and dominate that world symbolically is necessary to every rational, in other words, conceptual, description of the world. The idea of a world-model is at the heart of all science in the widest sense of that term, as it ought to be. This means, however, that, regardless of the motives and intentions of individual theologians, by presuming that there is, in

principle, an adequate rational—in other words scientific—understanding of God and his relation to the world and human beings, we presume also that he can be understood as part of a world-model.[24]

Brague argues that intellectual description of the world-model turns out to be, in principle, inseparable from intellectual domination, and I think his argument is cogent, though there is not room here to reproduce it. However, if he is right, then when the rational theologian gives an account of that model, he or she implicitly presumes that the theologian can intellectually dominate the religion of which he or she speaks. However, if to be religious means to be mastered by something, to be awed by it, then neither religion nor that to which religion is a response can be something over which one has mastery. The conflict between religion and rational theology is the conflict between the willingness to submit and the desire to master.

In scripture and prophetic teaching, the question is not "What can I know?" and, so, "What can I master?" but "How should I be?" and "What should master me?" In them, knowledge means being related to others and the world, in experience and acquaintance, in the right way. But, since we believe that our relation to God defines what it means to be related to others and to the world in the right way, it follows that knowledge is ultimately a religious matter, a matter of one's relation with God. For the inheritors of the Hebrew tradition, knowledge is inseparable from experience and practice. To have those experiences and to engage in those practices is to know God and to speak of that experience and practice is to testify of one's relation to God. It is not to give a list of beliefs.[25] The danger of theology is the temptation to valorize the intellect and its understanding, and to allow mere belief to displace Christian practice and testimony.

Thus I think that we can understand the LDS avoidance of theology as an insistence on practice, an effort to avoid the temptation of the intellect in its relation to God.

I offer this syllogism to summarize my second argument:

1. Religion is essentially a matter of practice rather than belief; for Latter-day Saints, the essential practices are LDS ordinances.
2. Theology cannot capture the practices of religion (because practices *per se* cannot be captured philosophically).

3. So, theology is either irrelevant, merely comforting, or useful in apologetics, but by focusing on belief rather than practice, it poses a danger to religion.

III: SCRIPTURE

My third explanation of the atheological character of LDS religion is related to my second. As I understand scriptural texts and therefore also revelation, they are not rational, conceptual texts and cannot be turned into that without changing them drastically.[26] If we read the scriptures looking for a rational justification of something, including the teachings of scripture, then we read them at cross purposes to their intentions. We can read them for conceptual understanding, in other words, as quasi-philosophical texts, but when we do, we do not read them as scripture.

I believe that the message of scripture can be summed up in Deuteronomy 6:4-7: "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart."

The scriptures, revelations, and ordinances call us to hear, to hearken—not to understand, at least not if the word *understand* is taken to mean "understand conceptually."[27] Of course, scripture does not preclude understanding. Neither do scripture, ordinance, and revelation forbid our conceptual understanding. However, for the most part conceptual understanding is irrelevant to their purposes.[28] Like the prophets, the scriptures call to us, asking us to listen, bearing witness of who we are and who we ought to be, bearing witness of our separation from God and his ability to overcome that separation. The scriptures seldom explain to us. Instead, they testify and ask us also to testify with our lives. To be religious is to hearken to that testimony and to respond.

The command to hearken implies that I have not yet heard, so if I take that command seriously, then I must continue to wonder whether I've heard as I should: at the heart of the religious experience of reading scripture is the experience of being questioned, of being brought up short by something rather than explaining it. Philosophical/theological questions like "Why does God allow evil?" can be interesting and they have their place, both in apologetics and in strengthening faith.[29] Nevertheless, they also may interfere with understanding scripture as divine call, in this

case the call to avoid doing evil and to ameliorate its effects in the world. Philosophical and theological reflection seek for intellectual understanding and, thus, they run the risk of turning the scriptures into resources for conceptualizing. But the scriptures do not ask for our intellectual understanding; they ask for our repentance.

As a result, I believe that, whatever the arguments for or against theology, for many religious people, including the Latter-day Saints, ultimately the only possible *logos* of the *theos* is that which occurs in response to revelation and scripture. That *logos* is produced in welcome and response, in repentance and rebirth, and in testimonies of that repentance and rebirth, rather than in sets of beliefs or intellectual distancing and questioning.

Thus, a final summarizing syllogism:

1. We encounter the essence of religious faith in scripture and prophetic revelation, but that essence is not a set of propositional beliefs, it is a testimony and a questioning that calls us to new life through repentance.
2. Theology aims to understand propositional beliefs and their ordered relations.
3. Therefore, theology does not deal with what is essential to religious faith.

WHAT WILL BECOME OF ME?

Given these points about prophets, practices, and scripture, what will become of me? If I have successfully explained why Latter-day Saint religion is essentially atheological, I have also raised questions for people like myself who have an inclination toward theology. Given the difficulties to which I have pointed, one can reasonably ask what kinds of provisional accounts are possible.

First note that reasons why the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has neither a dogmatic theology nor an informal theology—and is unlikely to—are not reasons for avoiding theology. That it is not necessary does not mean that it is something to be avoided. Nor does my argument imply that Mormons ought never to do systematic theology. Nevertheless, I believe my arguments suggest that some kinds of theology are more useful for Latter-day Saints than are others.

The parallel between religious knowledge and ethico-political knowledge suggests that Aristotle provides a clue for one way to do theology, one way that allows the door to remain open and more easily avoids the danger of theology. Presumably there are also others.[30] Aristotle distinguishes between the kinds of things we know epistemically and the kinds of things we know in ethics and politics and, at least in the early part of *Nicomachean Ethics,* he argues that the latter are not reducible to the former. Scripture treats religious matters as Aristotle treats ethical matters, as things known *in* experience with them and, so, as things that Aristotle argues are not knowable epistemically. In Marion's terms, scripture deals with matters known in an instantaneous synthesis, rather than as the objects of an epistemic intention requiring a successive synthesis. So when philosophy makes religion its object, it may find a model in the way that Aristotle deals with ethics and politics, rather than in his metaphysics: *phronēsis* rather than conceptual intellection would be our goal.

Several contemporary philosophers, such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, follow up on Aristotle's insight and provide possibilities for a theology on that model. These philosophers argue that human understanding is fundamentally hermeneutic—interpretive. Rational, conceptual knowledge is an outgrowth from and abstraction of hermeneutic understanding. But because it is interpretive rather than rational, a hermeneutic theology would necessarily be provisional, escaping one danger of rational theology.

Historical narrative shows the advantage of a hermeneutic approach. Historical narratives are essential to Christianity because Christianity is revealed in those narratives. Without Jesus in history—God incarnate in the world—Christianity itself evaporates. Latter-day Saints recognize this by insisting not only on the historicity of the Bible, but also on the historicity of Joseph Smith's first vision and the historicity of the Book of Mormon.

This insistence on historicity goes against a common understanding of truth. We commonly assume that a narrative can be an important illustration of a truth, but not its essential revelation. That is because truth is commonly assumed to have a universality that can be illustrated by the particularity of a historical narrative but cannot be equal to that particularity. On this view, truth—as universal—necessarily remains above, beyond, or other than, the particularity of history. Thus, since theological truth, like its sister philosophical truth, requires universality, it follows that

theological truth is fundamentally incompatible with scriptural truth, with truth that reveals itself in the particularity of history[31]—*unless* scriptural truth is reduced to allegory or illustration, ways that philosophers have often dealt with scripture. Particularity is a scandal to conceptual thought, but Judeo-Christian religion (at least) never gets away from the particular, whether the particularity of its narratives, the particularity of its associations and habits, the particularity of its formal practices, or the particularity of the incarnation of Jesus and his life at one moment of time rather than another, in a physical, particular body.[32] There is a fundamental incompatibility between the particularity of religion and the aim for universality that we find in any philosophical discipline like theology.[33] The incompatibility is not insurmountable, but it must be addressed.

Hermeneutics shows a way out of this problem: it does not require that we reduce the truth of religion to metaphor or example. If it thinks hermeneutically, philosophy can think the particularity of historical phenomena, like religion, religious experience, and scripture, and avoid the scandal of particularity. Hermeneutics is one of perhaps several ways that we could do provisional theology more adequately.

In the end, however, any theology worth its salt, whether hermeneutic or not, must remember that testimony is central to both religious speech and religious ritual. Both testify of that which exceeds one's conceptual grasp but is nevertheless known. Theology can use the tools of philosophy to reflect on the claims and practices of religion, but if it is true to the object of its reflection, it will conduct its reflection in a way that continues to testify. To the degree that a theology does not testify, it divorces itself from that which it purports to explain, and I think that systematic theology is more likely to make this divorce than are some of the alternatives.

To conclude by returning to the example of the Word of Wisdom: There is no rational account of the Word of Wisdom; no systematic theology will explain it adequately. I might offer a provisional, rational explanation of how I observe that commandment, and my explanation could serve an apologetic or heuristic purpose, but that is the *most* that it could do. For example, I could say that, though the Word of Wisdom is not an ordinance, it is a formal practice of Latter-day Saints, a sign and reminder of my membership in the Church. Since the scriptural text that establishes the Word of Wisdom says nothing about caffeine nor has

the Prophet made a declaration against caffeine, I can have a Coke if I wish though coffee is forbidden. But the Prophet could declare caffeine forbidden tomorrow. Even if he does not, I have no grounds for believing that my explanation of the commandment and my observation of it does any more than give me a way, for now, of understanding my own practice, a practice whose *primary* function is to testify of my being in the Church, of my relation to God, to the Church, and to fellow Latter-day Saints.

If I wish to explain the Word of Wisdom theologically, no way of doing of theology is excluded, but some may be more useful than others. In particular, historical, narrative and any other hermeneutical theologies stand out as possibilities. However, whatever theology I take up, like that which it seeks to explain, my theology must testify of Christ. The testimony inhering in revelation, LDS practices and ordinances, and scripture must be part of any explanations of those revelations, practices, or scriptures or it will be untrue to them.

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NOTES

[1] The original version of this paper was delivered to a conference, "God, Humanity, and Revelation: Perspectives from Mormon Philosophy and History," Yale University, 29 March 2003.

[2] Occasionally that annoyance becomes a charge of duplicity or of an esoteric doctrine. Though I think the charge is seldom justifiable, I understand its origin and have some sympathy for those who make it.

[3] I agree with Rémi Brague, who says "The project of a rational elucidation of divinity . . . is specific to Christianity." (The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007. 6)

[4] For purposes of this paper, I distinguish, roughly, between a provisional account (one that is adequate for its purposes, but provisional) and an adequate account (an account that can be submitted to the critical demands of reason without remainder). I deny LDS theologies that claim (usually implicitly rather than explicitly) to be adequate rather than provisional, though that may be to deny the exception rather than the rule.

[5] Latter-day Saints have not always taken the Word of Wisdom to be binding on them as a commandment, though now they do.

[6] I say "few" to be safe. I can think of none.

[7] The belief is that we continue to progress after this life until, eventually, we are deified. Early Latter-day Saints were more clear about what deification means than are contemporary LDS. For those mid- to late-nineteenth century LDS

who considered the topic, it was clear that deification meant becoming like God the Father and creating worlds of one's own. Many Latter-day Saints continue to believe that, but there is also a number for whom the concept of deification is more ambiguous (see, for example, "Kingdom Come," *Time*, 4 August 1997, 56) or more in line with standard Christian doctrines of *theosis*. And, though they are a small minority, there are LDS in good standing who do not at all believe in progression to deification.

[8] Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, vol. 5, edited by B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1950), 215.

[9] *History of the Church*, vol. 6, 75.

[10] I recognize that theologians and philosophers of religion are likely to find nothing new in what I say, and to know of more nuanced and informed discussions of these matters in other places. Given my lack of training in either area, that is not surprising. Nevertheless, I believe that what I say here gives reasonable explanations for the absence of theology among Latter-day Saints. It is at least a place from which one could begin talking about that absence.

[11] I think this helps explain the unusual interest in history among LDS.

[12] For a representative claim, see Joseph F. Smith's statement that plural wives are necessary for a fullness of glory and joy in the celestial kingdom (*Journal of Discourses* 20:28-31, especially 30).

[13] See "Official Declaration 1" in the Doctrine and Covenants for the announcement of the prohibition of polygamy.

[14] Paul Moyaert, "The Sense of Symbols as the Core of Religion: A Philosophical Approach to a Theological Debate," in *Transcendence in Philosophy and Religion,* ed. James E. Faulconer (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2003), 54-55.

[15] Defending an older man who had been accused of preaching false doctrine, Joseph Smith said "It dont [sic] prove that a man is not a good man, because he errs in doctrine" (*The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, Utah: Grandin, 1994), 184).

[16] Scholars speak of these as "cultic practices." However, given the abuse that the word "cult" has taken and the misunderstandings that word may engender among some readers, I prefer to speak of the formal practices of a religion. I do not think that all formal practices are ordinances. The Word of Wisdom is a formal practice that is not an ordinance. I mention ordinances particularly because they are unambiguously formal practices.

[17] It is important to remember that "adequate account" means "an account that can be submitted to the critical demands of reason without remainder."

[18] Kant uses the term *synthesis* to mean what, following Jean-Luc Marion ("The Saturated Phenomenon," in Dominique Janicaud, Jean-Francois Courtine, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, and Paul Ricœur, *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate* (New York: Fordham UP, 2000), 199), I am calling a "successive synthesis": "But if this manifold [of space and time] is to be known, the spontaneity of our thought requires that it be gone through in a certain

way, taken up, and connected. This act I name *synthesis*" (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1929), A77/B102.

[19] In Faulconer, *Transcendence in Philosophy and Religion,* 87-105.

[20] In the first of these, Marion argues that there are phenomena, which he refers to as "saturated," for which there can be no successive synthesis. In the second, he argues, among other things, that events are saturated phenomena. It requires almost nothing to expand that argument so that it applies also to practices.

[21] See Marion, "The Saturated Phenomenon," 176-216.

[22] See, for example, Michael Polanyi's *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966) as well as Hubert Dreyfus, "Understanding," in *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's "Being and Time," Division I* (Cambridge: MIT, 2001), 184-214.

[23] Rémi Brague, *The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought*, trans. Tersa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: U of Chicago, 2003), 14. Translation modified.

[24] One need not assume the classical understanding that God is outside of being in order to doubt that he can be understood as part of a world-model. It is enough that he is a person to make that assumption dubious.

[25] Ricoeur reminds us that testimony is "an assurance always bound to acts" (*Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 117).

[26] Ricoeur has discussions of the issue in several places, for example, it appears in general terms in *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols., trans. Kathleen McLaughlin & David Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1984, 1985, 1988); and it is more clearly religious in his essays on the Bible, written with LeCoque (André LeCocque & Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1998)); and in his essay in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn."* Alain Badiou has argued that at least some scriptural texts, specifically Paul's letters, are anti-philosophical (and, so, anti-theological) as well as anti-rhetorical: *Saint Paul, La fondation de l'universalism* (Paris: PUF, 1997).

[27] Notice that the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants, written in 1831 as a preface to the book as a whole, begins with the word "hearken": "Hearken, o ye people of my church, saith the voice of him who dwells on high and whose eyes are upon all men; yea, verily I say: Hearken ye people from afar; and ye that are upon the islands of the sea, listen together."

[28] To point out something in scripture that we cannot make rational sense of may only be to point out that it doesn't serve the same purposes as do texts meant to give rational understanding.

[29] For an excellent example of a religious *and* philosophical response to this question, see Paul Ricœur, "Evil, A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology," *Figuring,* 249-261.

[30] For example, "radical orthodoxy" may offer another alternative. (See John

Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999).) The work of Marion, to which I referred earlier, may also. Both ask about transcendence, the latter by arguing that it makes itself known in phenomena, the former by arguing that it makes itself known in Platonic participation. Though there is considerable overlap between these two views, they are not the same. Of the two, I prefer Marion's approach because it does not require creation *ex nihilo* (though I am sure he accepts that orthodox Roman Catholic teaching), and I think his approach is compatible with what I will describe.

[31] It is important to note that by "history" I do not mean "historiography." For an explication of this difference and my understanding of how it applies to scripture, see my "Scripture as Incarnation," in Paul Y. Hoskisson, editor, *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center Brigham Young University, 2001), 17-61.

[32] LDS belief puts particularity at the core of what-is by insisting that even God is embodied: nothing breaks free from particularity, so the conceptual is always an abstraction in the root sense of that term, "something that pulls away."

[33] As Nietzsche, says: "A historical phenomenon, known clearly and completely and resolved into a phenomenon of knowledge, is, for him who has perceived it, dead" (*Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 67). Christianity in general and Mormonism in particular are historical phenomena.

The Hope for
Universal Salvation

by Sheila Taylor

U pon hearing that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God," the disciples of Jesus ask him in astonishment, "Who then can be saved?" (Matt. 19:24-25) In this paper I will consider, in the context of two different traditions, the possibility that salvation could be universal. I will first look at the work of two influential twentieth-century Roman Catholic theologians, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Though the two disagree on a number of theological issues, their approaches to the question of universal salvation are in many respects strikingly similar, and both hold out hope for an empty hell.[1] I will explore selected themes in their work, and then consider possible applications of these themes in the context of Latter-day Saint scripture and thought.

One of the key theological problems of the Christian tradition involves the interplay of grace and freedom. Related questions, such as whether grace is irresistible, and whether humans can do anything to contribute to their own salvation or it is entirely the work of God, have been the subject of some of the most intense debates in Christian theological discourse. The question of universal salvation is closely tied up with this grace/ freedom dialectic, for to ask whether all will be saved involves asking whether human freedom can ultimately resist the salvific will of God. Rahner and Balthasar both emphasize the central role played by human

freedom. They see the possibility of hell as grounded not in some kind of divine decree, but in the real possibility that humans could choose to reject the divine. "God does not damn anyone," explains Balthasar; instead, "the man who irrevocably refuses love condemns himself." Sin is "the free turning away – and consequently the fateful state of being turned away – of humankind from God."[2] Likewise, Rahner distinguishes between punishment in the human sphere, which involves consequences which are imposed from the outside, and divine punishment, which is not something extra added by God but rather arises naturally from guilt.[3]

RAHNER'S UNDERSTANDING OF FREEDOM

What is the nature of this freedom which can potentially opt out of salvation? An important philosophical debate about free will deals with the question of whether it should be understood in compatibilist or libertarian terms. A compatibilist approach refers to a model of freedom which is consistent with determinism. Compatibilism accounts for human action in terms of the causal chain which produced it, and understands freedom as the absence of external coercive forces. Libertarians, by contrast, argue for an understanding of freedom that rejects determinism, and assert that humans have the ability to choose contrary to any causal factors which might exist in a given situation. A compatibilist view would therefore account for human rejection of God in terms of prior causes (such as, for example, a fallen human nature that desires sin). A libertarian model, on the other hand, would argue that such causal factors are not sufficient to explain the decision, and would emphasize the choice made by the individual to turn away from the divine in spite of the real possibility of doing otherwise.

Rahner does not frame his thought in terms of this particular debate, but similar issues arise in the distinction he makes between the *transcendental* and the *categorical*. The former has to do with the structures of human nature which allow for knowledge and action, while the latter refers to the actual concrete world in which we live. Rahner describes transcendental freedom as a basic characteristic of being human which exists prior to its realization in the categorical world. Specific choices occur in the realm of the categorical, and can therefore be potentially explained by the empirical sciences; as our transcendental freedom is realized in categorical actions, it is influenced by things like biological and sociological factors.

However, Rahner is primarily interested in transcendental freedom, which exists outside of, and prior to, that which can be empirically studied, and which cannot be explained in terms of other causes. Empirical science, he argues, may be useful in explaining bits of human behavior, but it cannot explain the original human person who is doing the explaining. [4]

Since Rahner is concerned with this underlying transcendental freedom, he does not conceptualize freedom in terms of isolated, individual acts. Freedom, he explains, is our ability to choose to dispose ourselves as whole beings. It is concerned with our entire lives. It is not about what we do so much as who we are. It is our most basic attitude toward existence. He emphasizes that this freedom is closely tied to responsibility; we cannot escape the fact that we are ultimately responsible beings. "Freedom," he explains, "is something that has to be realized, and as such is not a fact, but a demand."[5]

An important characteristic of this freedom is that it aimed at creating something lasting. It cannot infinitely revise its choices. Rahner makes the analogy that freedom is "not like a knife which always remains the same in its capacity for cutting, and in cutting always remains the same knife."[6] Rather, in our freedom we create something which endures, something final. And freedom attains this finality through death, for in death we enter into eternity. Rahner understands this not as a continuation of time, but as a liberation from it; eternity consists of a different mode of being. It is therefore in death itself (and not in some afterlife) that human existence and freedom attain their ultimate actualization.[7]

Furthermore, human freedom is inherently related to God's grace. Rahner understands freedom in terms of a basic decision for or against God, often referred to as a "fundamental option." We are all confronted with the offer of grace, and it is in our response to this call that we make the ultimate decision about ourselves and who we are. Rahner emphasizes that the option of rejecting God is a real one, for he sees this as essential to what freedom means. The potential to sin remains with us as a real possibility presented to our freedom throughout our existence in this earthly life; we cannot escape from it.[8]

However, it is not clear that the choice to reject God can be seen as having the same force as the choice to accept him. This is because of the nature of human freedom, which is fundamentally grounded in God. Freedom has a teleological quality, as humans are created for the express purpose of being with God. It is therefore oriented toward that particular

end. It is not neutral, not equally directed both toward and away from God. Rather, the purpose of freedom is to enable the good, and when it rejects this, it "fails also to attain itself."[9] This means that a "no" to God cannot be seen as equivalent to a "yes." If freedom rejects God, it rejects its own ground, its own source of being. While a yes to God enables freedom to realize its purpose, a no is inherently "self-destructive and self-contradictory."[10]

The fact that these choices are not equally balanced raises some serious questions about the ability of human freedom to finally and ultimately turn against God. John Sachs spells out what he sees as the universalist implications of Rahner's view, noting that a decision against God leaves one in "something like a state of lasting indefiniteness or nondefinitiveness." To say "no" to God is to continually resist the invitation of God's love; and one can remain in such a state only through constant effort. Unlike a "yes", a negative response does not produce a final, actualized state of freedom. Ron Highfield makes a similar point, maintaining that since a "no" cannot establish something definitive, and freedom is the ability to create something definitive, a "no" appears to be inherently less free.[11]

THE SALVIFIC WILL OF GOD

Let us turn now from the question of human freedom to the other half of the dialectic, the work of God. If we accept that humans were created for the purpose of being with God, the very possibility of hell raises challenging questions about divine love and justice. Could an all-loving God damn people to hell for eternity? Even if hell is understood in terms of human choice rather than God's arbitrary punishment, "how could a loving God create a world in which human freedom has the capacity to damn itself eternally?"[12] What does it mean to take the salvific will of God seriously?

Rahner and Balthasar take similar approaches to this issue. Both emphasize that the gospel is not a gospel of damnation, pointing out that God is not in the work of punishment; he is fundamentally a saving God. The message of the Christian faith is one of victory over sin and death, not one of uncertainty. The good news of Christianity is that grace is triumphant. We are not in the dark about whether or not God will finally defeat sin; we already have certain knowledge of how things will ultimately turn out. Eschatology, Rahner stresses, deals with God's *salvific*

action, which means that "the eschatology of salvation and of loss are not on the same plane." Balthasar points out that "in the Church's creeds, only redemptive events have a place."[13] This means that we can talk about salvation with confidence, as something which will surely happen, while damnation remains no more than a *possibility*. This is reinforced by the fact that while the Roman Catholic Church identifies a number of individuals known to have been saved, it does not specifically identify anyone as having been damned; Balthasar notes that even a figure like Judas is not definitively placed in such a category.[14]

It is for this reason that universal salvation arises as a serious possibility, for grace might well have the final word. At first glance, this notion might seem to contradict a number of scriptural passages. Balthasar calls our attention to the internal biblical tension on this matter, observing that there exist two sets of scriptural statements: "the first speaks of being lost for all eternity; the second, of God's will, and ability, to save all men." We cannot synthesize these in a way that negates one in favor of the other, but must rather hold on to both messages.[15] In our current situation it is important to maintain awareness of the fact that we are under judgment, but we can also place our hope in God's will to save all.

In dealing with these two themes, Rahner proposes the use of a particular hermeneutic to make sense of scriptural statements about eternal punishment. Eschatological assertions are not meant as a foretelling of what is to come, he explains, but "are a transposition into the future of something which a Christian person experiences in grace as his present." They are thus focused on a person's situation in the here-and-now. This means that statements about hell should not be read as statements of future facticity, but about the reality "that a person has to reckon with the possibility of eternal loss."[16] They are intended to push a person into seriously considering her current situation. In a similar vein, Balthasar notes that those have reported visions of hell do not despair as a result of them; rather, the sight "fires their resolve to resist it more strongly than ever."[17] These visions serve as a warning, as a call to repentance. Scriptural discussions of hell function in a similar way.

Both Rahner and Balthasar, however, explicitly reject any definitive or absolute assertion that all will in fact eventually be saved, pointing to the inescapable uncertainty surrounding the topic. Whatever hopes might be raised about ultimate salvation, we should not lose sight of the fact that we live with the possibility of eternal loss. In Rahner's approach to freedom,

because our original choice for or against God is always actualized in the categorical world and therefore influenced by other forces, we can never know with certainty whether we have said "yes" or "no." Balthasar similarly posits a situation of ambiguity, asking, "Which man knows whether, in the course of his existence, he has lived up to God's infinite love, which chose to expend itself for him?"[18] This is therefore not a question about which we should be thoughtless or untroubled, for we can never be complacently sure that all is well with us, that our basic decision has been in the right direction.

Rahner also emphasizes that eschatology is both individual and collective. When we talk about the end of history, we are talking about both the human race as a whole and the individual histories of particular individuals. Whatever assurances we might have regarding collective eschatology, any particular individual has an open future in which she may or may not choose to accept God. The possibility of hell, explains Rahner, is therefore something we must take seriously in our current existence. Even if it is unclear whether our freedom can in fact ultimately reject God, we cannot escape the prospect that it might.[19] Balthasar likewise comments that "even if someone could know himself as being in the 'certainty' inherent in Christian hope, he still does not know whether he will not transgress against love and thereby also forfeit the certainty of hope."[20]

Both thinkers stress that this uncertainty should be applied, however, only to a person's thinking about her own situation. She should resist any temptation to speculate about where others might end up, and should instead actively hope that all will ultimately be saved. Such hope for universal salvation is in fact a Christian duty.[21] For Balthasar, this hope is an aspect of what it means to have charity, for love "cannot do otherwise than to hope for the reconciliation of all in Christ."[22] In this way, the hope for universal salvation, far from being a justification for complacency, is actually an ethically demanding way to live, as it does not allow us to give up on any human being. As long as our charity does not falter, neither can our hope.

FREEDOM IN AN LDS CONTEXT

What are the implications of these questions for Latter-day Saints? LDS theology strongly emphasizes the freedom side of the grace/freedom dialectic; a tradition that teaches that a premortal war was fought

to preserve agency, after all, is going to require a soteriology in which human freedom plays an essential role. But what kind of freedom is expressed in LDS scripture, and how does it compare with the model described above?

It is interesting to note that the Book of Mormon in several places describes something that sounds like a "fundamental option" view, in which freedom refers to a basic decision for or against God. Lehi's oft-quoted blessing to Jacob, for example, explains that humans are "free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil." (2 Ne. 2:17) Indeed, Lehi defines freedom as being dependent on these two opposing choices, saying that "man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other." (2 Ne. 2:16)

Yet LDS eschatology nuances this choice beyond a simple "yes" or "no" to God in that it moves beyond the binary concept of heaven and hell and instead posits multiple kingdoms of glory, or degrees of salvation. It is not clear that a simple acceptance or rejection of God is the only available choice. The three kingdoms could be seen as different levels of a "yes," or all who fail to make the celestial kingdom could be considered to be at different levels of a "no." Whether LDS soteriology is seen as having a strong universalist flavor depends to a large degree on one's perspective on this matter.

We must first explore, however, the issue of whether a "no" to God is even a real possibility. As was discussed earlier, the approach one takes in answering this question depends on whether one assumes compatibilist or libertarian freedom. In a compatabilist model, one would search for the causes, such as original sin, which might lead a human to reject the divine. If LDS freedom is best understood as libertarian,[23] and the possibility of saying "no" is explained in terms of the free act of the individual, the question of whether or not we can definitively reject God's call must have something to do with the nature of freedom itself. This brings us back to some of the issues raised by Rahner's approach. As was discussed earlier, turning against God is problematic in a Rahnerian framework, not because of the existence of deterministic factors which constrain our freedom, but because of the very *nature* of freedom. It is not that the choice to say "yes" or "no" is not truly free (in the sense that it is the product of, or can be ultimately explained by, factors other than human

agency); the problem is that the "no" is self-defeating, and is therefore an ultimately untenable choice.

Could a similar dynamic exist in the Latter-day Saint notion of freedom? An LDS approach comes at this question with some significantly different assumptions than those held by Rahner, particularly those related to anthropology. In the Catholic understanding, humans are created *ex nihilo*, and human freedom can therefore unambiguously be understood as the creation of God. This premise is basic for Rahner. He sees God not as one being among others, but as the very ground of being, and argues that not only is all freedom ultimately grounded in God, but individual free acts exist only in relation to God; every categorical decision includes an implicit "yes" or "no" to God on the transcendental level. It is therefore impossible to discuss human freedom without reference to God.

In the LDS scheme, on the other hand, humans are ultimately uncreated. Doctrine and Covenants 93:29 states that "man was also in the beginning with God," as intelligence "was not created or made, neither indeed can be." Though it is difficult to precisely define what constitutes an "intelligence," it is evident that some aspect of the human person is eternal and co-existent with God. This raises some fascinating and difficult questions about human agency. Is agency, like intelligence, self-existent and somehow independent of God? What are the implications of this question for the concept of agency in mortality? There exists some ambiguity on this matter. On the one hand, agency is scripturally described as a gift of God; for example, in the book of Moses the Lord notes that "in the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency" (Moses 7:32). Yet agency clearly existed before the Garden of Eden, since the Doctrine & Covenants explains that in the premortal life, the devil turned away a third of the host of heaven "because of their agency" (D&C 29:36). One way to read such statements about agency in mortality is to understand them as assertions that God has created an environment in which already-existent human agency could be developed, rather than claims that God created freedom in the first place.

And since LDS theology does not understand God as the ground of all ontological being, it is difficult to see how God could be the basis of freedom in the way that Rahner maintains. Likewise, if human freedom is not ultimately created by God, it does not necessarily have the teleological nature (that is to say, the oriented-toward-God quality) described earlier. In other words, from an LDS perspective, unlike a Catholic one, an individual

who rejects God is not a creature rejecting the Creator who is the very ground of her being, and therefore the source of even her freedom to say no. The theodicy question also becomes less of an issue, for if humans are ultimately uncreated, one has less trouble untangling the question of how a loving God could have created beings that could choose to freely damn themselves. For these reasons, I would argue that the rejection of the divine is stronger in an LDS framework than in a Catholic one.

However, even in an LDS context it is worth noting that choices in the direction of damnation are ultimately self-defeating, in that they lead to less and less freedom. Hell is spoken of as a place of limited freedom, a place marked by "the captivity of the devil" (1 Ne. 14:7). Those who achieve the celestial kingdom, by contrast, are distinguished by having the fewest limitations in terms of their ability to develop their potential. A "yes" to God leads to a flourishing of freedom and possibility, whereas a "no" leads to a narrowing of it. Greater degrees of salvation and greater freedom go hand in hand; damnation is not some kind of alternative actualization of human freedom, but rather a reduction of it. Freedom is therefore not some kind of capacity that remains the same regardless of how it is used—the choices one makes determines its future shape. This is not dissimilar to Rahner's comment that freedom is not like a knife which keeps on cutting in the same way regardless of its past decisions.

Might it then be possible that Rahner's argument about these two choices not being parallel holds true in a Latter-day Saint context as well, since freedom erodes its own existence by choosing evil? Another relevant point has to do with the LDS belief that humans are the literal children of God, with the potential to become like him, and that the purpose of earth life is to facilitate this development. This suggests that human freedom, at least in the context of this world, has quite a definite orientation and purpose: to allow us to move in the direction of becoming more god-like. The LDS view of freedom therefore arguably exhibits a teleological component. Given this, rejection of God in an LDS context might not be the near impossibility it is for Rahner, but it is not without a certain degree of self-contradiction nonetheless.

Another issue related to freedom is the question as to whether or not it creates something definitive and lasting, as in Rahner's view, or whether the choices made in this life can be later revised. Since LDS teachings allow for the possibility of accepting God after death, Rahner's idea that freedom is somehow finalized through death is clearly unworkable in the context

of LDS thought. Joseph Smith commented, "it is no more incredible that God should save the dead, than that he should raise the dead. There is never a time when the spirit is too old to approach God."[24]

This does not necessarily mean, however, that human choices in this life can be completely revised. According to D&C 138:32, the gospel is "preached to those who had died in their sins, without a knowledge of the truth, or in transgression, having rejected the prophets." In other words, it goes to both those who did not have a chance to hear the gospel, and those who rejected it. But while both of these groups are given an opportunity to rectify this situation, there are indications that the two groups are not in identical positions. In the vision recounted in D&C 137, Joseph Smith learns that "all who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God" (D&C 137:7). Those who died in a state of rebellion, on the other hand—those "who received not the testimony of Jesus in the flesh, but afterwards received it"—are described in D&C 76 as members of the terrestrial kingdom (D&C 76:74).

The question arises: even if one's free choices do not become definitive through death, is there nonetheless some point at which the decisions of freedom become irrevocable, from which there is no turning back and all future options are circumscribed by one's earlier choices? In the situation I just described of the gospel being preached to the dead, it seems that if such a moment exists, it does not matter whether it occurs in this life or the next; rather, the crucial point is that all individuals are confronted with a genuine opportunity for decision. Their response to this then shapes the possibilities open to that individual from that time forward, in this life as well as in the next. In other words, one possible way to understand freedom from an LDS perspective is that it creates something eternal and lasting not through death, but through a crucial moment of decision.

Yet such a model raises numerous questions. Even if death does not make the choices of freedom definitive, does it nonetheless affect freedom in some significant way? In other words, is the freedom of the next life qualitatively different from the kind of freedom we experience here? In this life, after all, our free choices can in fact be revised; those who repeatedly reject God may still at some point have a change of heart. They are not locked into the eternal consequences of earlier decisions to turn away from God. Is the situation in the next life different? Does freedom necessarily lead to some point from which there is no going back?

These questions open up rich possibilities for further exploration. The problem of when and whether freedom can be used to create something definitive and irreversible is clearly key in any discussion of the possibility of universal salvation.

THE LDS APPROACH TO SALVATION

Let us now turn our attention to the other side of the dialectic: the universal salvific will of God. It is worth noting here that the idea that God actively desires and works toward the salvation of all is one strongly reinforced by LDS scripture. God's very "work and glory," after all, is "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39). The God portrayed by LDS teachings is not one who is neutral or passive about human destiny, a kind of detached researcher observing his children to see where we will end up; this is a God whose very business is human salvation. As much as human agency is emphasized in LDS thought, I think it important to keep in mind that we are also here talking about the work of God.

Salvation is a somewhat ambiguous term when used by Latter-day Saints. It refers to both a broad sense of deliverance from hell and subsequent life in a kingdom of glory, and to a more narrow sense of attaining the highest degree of glory, or exaltation. How does the grace/freedom dialectic play out in this framework? There is a way in which grace could be seen as irresistible, or at least nearly so.[25] Regardless of individual choices, all are rescued from the effects of the Fall, resurrected from physical death, and at least temporarily brought back into the presence of God—and almost all end up in a kingdom of glory. In this way, LDS theology could be seen as skirting dangerously close to universalism.

Things become a bit murkier, however, once one considers the different degrees of salvation. One possible way to approach this is to see the atonement as providing a kind of universal baseline of salvation (at least for all who do not commit the unpardonable sin), while further degrees of glory are largely dependent on human choice; in other words, to emphasize the role of grace in salvation, and the role of freedom in exaltation.[26] Yet such an approach runs the risk of evading salvation-by-works only to fall into a kind of exaltation-by-works.

Though LDS theology has largely managed to escape the problem of how a good God could damn people to never-ending torment, I

sometimes wonder if we have simply articulated a kindler, gentler version of Augustine's *massa damnata*, in which the masses are not damned but are simply refused the best of all possible worlds. If it would be unjust to doom people to endless torment for even the most awful choices in this relatively brief period of mortality, would it not be equally unjust to eternally damn them in the sense of placing irrevocable limits on their progress? Even if the situation is somewhat less horrific-sounding than an eternity of fire and brimstone, the problem of a mismatch between infinite punishment and temporal sin remains. There are possible ways of making sense of this theologically, such as through the approach mentioned earlier in which freedom by its nature creates something definitive and irreversible. However, the point I wish to make here is that the Mormon question which most closely parallels the traditional Christian question of universal salvation, at least in terms of the problems it raises, is not that of universal salvation per se, but rather that of universal exaltation.

Can and should Latter-day Saints hope for universal exaltation? I should first note that one cannot discuss universalism of any form in an LDS context without at least acknowledging that numerous Book of Mormon passages contain sharp warnings about its dangers. Nehor, who is described as being in opposition to the church of God, expounds the view that "all mankind should be saved at the last day . . . for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life" (Alma 1:4). Nephi warns of those in the last day who will say "if it so be that we are guilty, God will beat us with a few stripes, and at last we shall be saved in the kingdom of God" (2 Ne. 28:8). One of the devil's strategies, he cautions, is to deny his own existence, to claim that there is no hell, and to thereby seduce people into captivity (2 Ne. 28:22). One might also remember that the original architect of a plan for universal salvation was none other than the devil.

However, taking a similar tack to that of the aforementioned Catholic theologians, I would argue that in these passages the underlying concern is actually with the danger of complacency. The problem is not located in the notion that all will be saved, but in the resulting indifference about one's own actions, the attitude of "eat, drink, and be merry" (2 Ne. 28:8). Satan's plan was not rejected for its aim of saving all, but rather for its method. Latter-day Saints do not frame the gospel as a message about equivalent options, but rather as a message of salvation; we do not, after all, refer to it as the Plan of Salvation and Damnation. And while LDS

scripture, like the New Testament, paints a picture of future judgment in which some fall eternally short, such passages could plausibly be read in the way Rahner proposes, as expressions of one's current situation and choices, as opposed to absolute and definitive descriptions of the future—especially as they are often given in connection with a call to repentance.[27] The approach of Alma in particular supports such a read. In speaking of eternal judgment, he calls on his listeners to individually imagine what it would be like to meet God in their current state. "Can you imagine to yourselves that ye hear the voice of the Lord, saying unto you, in that day: Come unto me ye blessed?" he asks. Or conversely, "can ye imagine yourselves brought before the tribunal of God with your souls filled with guilt and remorse?" (Alma 5:16, 18).

But even if one reads the scriptures this way, is there any room in LDS theology for the possibility of universal exaltation? Joseph Smith left it an open question: "How many will be able to abide a celestial law, and go through and receive their exaltation, I am unable to say, as many are called, but few are chosen."[28] Whether or not those in lower kingdoms are eternally stuck there likewise remains ambiguous; the question of progression between kingdoms is one about which influential church leaders (such as James E. Talmage and Bruce R. McConkie) have disagreed, [29] and the church has no official position on the subject. And while much LDS discourse on the subject gives the impression that only a small minority will achieve exaltation, it is worth noting that no one speaks in terms of absolute certainty on the question of people being damned.

This uncertainty can be found in the writings of Mormon, for example, who describes his soul as "rent with anguish" as he views the slain of his people, and he wishes, "O that ye had repented before this great destruction had come upon you." Nonetheless, he leaves their fate to God: "the Eternal Father of heaven, knoweth your state; and he doeth with you according to his justice and mercy" (Morm. 6:22). In recounting the history told in the book of Alma, he contrasts those who view their dead and "rejoice and exult in the hope, and even know, according to the promises of the Lord, that they are raised to dwell at the right hand of God, in a state of never-ending happiness" with those who "have reason to fear, according to the promises of the Lord, that they are consigned to a state of endless woe" (Alma 28:11-12). Though this fear is real, only the first group is said to *know* anything. Additionally, while visions name

a number of individuals who have made it to the celestial kingdom (for example, Joseph Smith seeing his parents and his brother Alvin there in D&C 137:5), as is the case in the Catholic tradition, I am unaware of anyone who is specifically identified in LDS revelation as being anywhere else.

I have to qualify this statement, however, as I have thus far neglected to mention what might be a rather major exception. We do in fact know of one group which has already decided against God: the devil and his followers who were cast out in the premortal life. The loss of a third of God's children prior to mortality casts a bit of a shadow over the optimistic, almost universalistic, understanding of salvation which comes into play for those born on this earth, and poses arguably the greatest challenge to any kind of LDS universalism. The very existence of this group shifts the possibility that humans can reject God from the realm of the hypothetical to the actual. Little is revealed about their final situation; according to the Doctrine & Covenants, "the end thereof, neither the place thereof, nor their torment no man knows" (D&C 76:45). However, though the outlook sounds dark, it is worth noting that even here some ambiguity remains as to their final end.

Coming back to the question of universalist hope, is Balthasar correct in saying that charity necessitates such hope? When Mormon speaks of "being without hope" for his people, I am not sure it is fair to read this as a failure of charity on his part (Morm. 5:12). I am also sobered by the passage in the Doctrine and Covenants which states that "thou shalt live together in love" and therefore mourn when someone dies, "more especially for those that have not hope of a glorious resurrection" (D&C 42:45). Are there situations in which hope is no longer even a possibility?

Yet in contemplating this question, we might also be reminded of the sons of Mosiah who "could not bear that any human soul should perish; yea, even the very thought that any soul should endure endless torment did cause them to quake and tremble" (Mosiah 28:3). I believe this is the kind of thing which Balthasar is getting at when he speaks of hope for universal salvation as the necessary stance of the Christian. Hope in this sense is not so much a cognitive matter, but a way of living which profoundly informs the ways in which we relate to others. I would argue that Latter-day Saints both can and should live out such a hope for the salvation, and even exaltation, of all God's children.

The possibility of such universal exaltation may appear remote, a kind of naïve dream. Yet I conclude by returning to the question posed at the beginning of this paper: "Who then can be saved?" Jesus responds to his disciples, "With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26).

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NOTES

[1] In holding this view, Rahner and Balthasar are typical of contemporary Catholic thought on the subject. John Sachs observes that "virtually all Catholic theologians who have recently written on these themes" agree on five points: first, "hell is a real possibility" because humans have the freedom to reject God; second, hell is "the self-chosen state of alienation from God" rather than "an additional punishment inflicted by God"; third, nothing in scripture or church teaching definitively indicates that anyone will be ultimately lost; fourth, God's saving will for humankind means that hell and heaven "are not to be considered equally possible outcomes"; and fifth, while we cannot be certain about how things will turn out, we should hope for salvation for all. (John R. Sachs, "Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell," *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 233-241)

[2] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved" with a Short Discourse on Hell*, trans. David Kipp and Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 165; Balthasar, *The Von Balthasar Reader*, ed. Medard Kehl and Werner Löser, trans. Robert Daly and Fred Lawrence (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 414.

[3] Karl Rahner, "Guilt—Responsibility—Punishment Within the View of Catholic Theology," *Theological Investigations,* Volume VI, trans. Karl H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), 214-15.

[4] Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity,* trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 35-39.

[5] Rahner, *Grace in Freedom,* trans. Hilda Graef (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 230.

[6] Rahner, *Foundations*, 95.

[7] Ibid., 437.

[8] Rahner, *Grace in Freedom,* 209; Rahner, *Foundations*, 104.

[9] Rahner, "Guilt," 210.

[10] Rahner, *Foundations*, 102.

[11] Sachs: 248; Ron Highfield, "The Freedom to Say 'No'? Karl Rahner's Doctrine of Sin," *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 489.

[12] Sachs: 236-7.

[13] Rahner, "The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions," *Theological Investigations,* Volume IV, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 338; Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 174.

[14] Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 187.

[15] Ibid., 29, 44.

[16] Rahner, *Foundations,* 433, 443.

[17] Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 216.

[18] Ibid., 13.

[19] Rahner, *The Christian Commitment: Essays in Pastoral Theology,* trans. Cecily Hastings (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 58; Rahner, *Foundations,* 435.

[20] Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 85.

[21] Ibid., 212.

[22] Ibid., 13.

[23] For a discussion of libertarianism and compatibilism in an LDS context, see chapter 7, "Divine Foreknowledge and the Mormon Concept of Free Agency," in Blake Ostler's book *Exploring Mormon Thought, Volume I: The Attributes of God* (Salt Lake City : Greg Kofford Books, 2001). Ostler argues in favor of a libertarian model, positing that "human free will be viewed as a creative synthesis of the causal influences that act on agents together with the organizing input from the agent." (238)

[24] Joseph Smith Jr., *Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Alma P. Burton (Salt Lake: Deseret Book Company, 1965), 110.
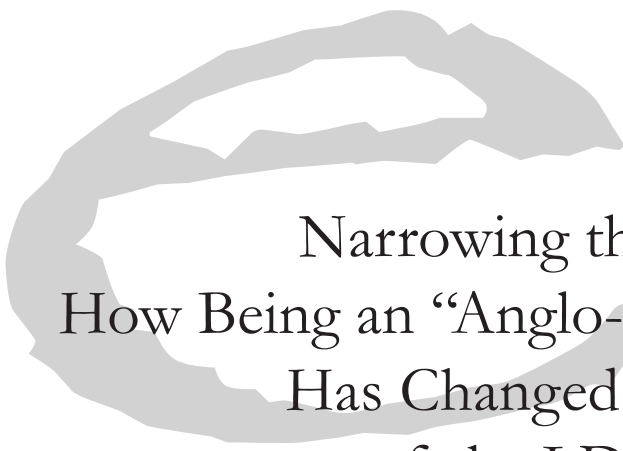
[25] "Irresistible grace" is one of the five points of Calvinism. According to this teaching, if God chooses to offer grace to an individual, the person is incapable of rejecting it.

[26] Douglas Davies takes this approach in explaining the role of grace and works in LDS theology, arguing that "Mormon theology came to possess a theological place for both grace and works: grace related to resurrection-salvation, and works to exaltation." (Douglas J. Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), 165)

[27] The prophet Abinadi, for example, explains in detail the situation of those who are in bondage to the devil, and then exclaims, "ought you not to tremble and repent of your sins?" (Mosiah 16:13)

[28] Smith, *Discourses,* 112.

[29] In the first (1899) edition of *Articles of Faith*, James E. Talmage speculated that "in accordance with God's plan of eternal progression, advancement from grade to grade within any kingdom, and from kingdom to kingdom, will be provided for," while Bruce R. McConkie denounced the idea of progression between kingdoms as heresy number five in his 1980 "Seven Deadly Heresies" talk. (James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake: Deseret News, 1899), 421; Bruce R. McConkie, "The Seven Deadly Heresies, address given at Brigham Young University 1 June 1980.)

Narrowing the Divide: How Being an "Anglo-Catholic" Has Changed My View of the LDS Church

by Paul L. Owen

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I want to discuss how my movement into High Church Anglicanism (since 2005) has affected my perspective on various topics integral to the ongoing conversation between Latter-day Saints and traditional Christians.[1] The suggestions outlined here are not final answers to anything, but only initial explorations put forth in the hopes of stimulating further discussions—discussions which I hope may break out of some of the boxes of typical Mormon-Evangelical dialogue.

SOLA SCRIPTURA AND CHURCH AUTHORITY

The LDS Church has a robust view of ecclesiastical authority in matters of doctrine which makes most evangelicals feel that the sole authority of the Bible is threatened. In LDS ecclesiology, the canonical texts themselves are taken to be binding precisely because they have been voted upon and accepted in the general conference of the church.[2] In stark contrast, Evangelicals have a doctrine of the sole authority of Scripture which I now believe undermines the Church's proper role as the authoritative keeper and interpreter of Holy Writ. This neglect of Church authority in evangelical ecclesiology has been the subject of considerable

scrutiny in the writings of men like Keith Mathison and D. H. Williams.[3] However much certain sentiments expressed by various divines in the Reformation and Post-Reformation periods may have prepared the way for these excessive views in modern-day evangelicalism (especially as they took shape in the later Puritan movement), the Anglican Church, like the Church Fathers in general, has from the beginning held to a balanced perspective on the matter of scriptural and ecclesiastical authority.

It is true that the 39 Articles of the Church of England (p. 1571) do have a strong statement on the sufficiency of Holy Scripture in article 6: "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith." The Church Fathers of the first five centuries, and even many Roman Catholics today, would have no problem affirming such a statement.[4] However, this statement assumes something that modern evangelicalism is unable to put into practice—namely that the Church *does have a real authority* to bind the conscience of a man to affirm certain articles of the Faith.[5] The content of the Faith is not dictated by the content of personal opinion or conviction; it is dictated by what that Church can prove on the basis of what is contained in Holy Scripture.

The evangelical model of biblical authority places no authoritative, interpretive arbiter between the individual conscience and the Bible. The Bible alone has the authority to bind the conscience; and a person is obligated to believe a doctrine only *if* she can find it in Holy Writ. In the Anglican model, the task of doctrinal arbitration is taken out of the hands of the individual and placed squarely in the lap of the Church. It is the Church who is accountable *to God* to base any article of the faith on the Bible. The individual Christian is not given the power or the responsibility to determine what the content of the Faith is, or whether or not *it is* contained in Holy Scripture. What this article simply means is that it is an abuse of the Church's God-given authority when she requires a man to believe something as an article of the Faith that cannot be found in nor proved by Holy Scripture. But that she *has* the authority to require such an assent of faith from the Christian body is a given.

This impression is buttressed by article 20 on the Authority of the Church: "The Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority in Controversies of Faith: and yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God's word written, neither may

it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another. Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and a keeper of Holy Writ, yet, as it ought not to decree anything against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce anything to be believed for necessity of Salvation." If one should expand the definition of "Holy Writ" to include the Book of Mormon, D&C, Pearl of Great Price, and other official statements of the first presidency sustained by vote in general conference, there is nothing in that statement of Church authority which the saints of the Restoration could not affirm.

However, this article causes serious problems for evangelicalism, which has largely lost its roots in Catholic ecclesiology, and been swept away by Anabaptist anarchy which encourages suspicion of ecclesiastical authority, and exalts the power of private judgment: 1) It assumes that the Church has a power and authority in matters of doctrinal dispute that the individual Christian does not possess; 2) It assumes that the Church, not the individual, has the power to ordain teachings and expound Holy Scripture; 3) It assumes that the Church is the witness and keeper of Holy Writ, and as such has the power to enforce what is to be believed for the salvation of the faithful.

It is precisely because the Anglican divines recognized, in keeping with Catholic ecclesiology, that the Church has these powers, that these statements were made. It only makes sense to warn a party of their abuse of power if one assumes that they actually possess those powers. For evangelicals, the power to decree, ordain, and enforce belongs only to God, and is stated in the Bible, to be directly accessed by the individual Christian—which is a very different model of biblical authority indeed.[6] This difference is also seen in the matter of the canon of Scripture itself. For evangelicals, there can ultimately be no truly authoritative list of canonical books, for the authority of God's word cannot be suspended upon the fallible judgments of the Church.[7]

All evangelicals can do is offer a list of reasons why the commonly accepted list of canonical books has the weight of rational argument in its favor. Not so in Anglican ecclesiology. We are told in article 6: "In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church." Although this is certainly an overstatement with respect to books like Hebrews, James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation (concerning which there was some dispute),[8] the principle it establishes

is one in which the functional authority of Holy Scripture is in a real way dependent upon the judgments of the Church.

In this whole matter, it seems to me that Anglicans and Mormons have the New Testament on their side. Paul affirms that the "the oracles of God" were committed to the Jewish Church under the Old Covenant (Rom. 3:1), which surely implies that the scriptures of the New Covenant have been committed to the care of the Christian Church. *It is the responsibility of the Church to determine the shape and contents of the canon, without corrupting or substantially altering the content of the original prophetic and apostolic writings.* The faithful administration of this responsibility is tacitly granted within the LDS Standard Works themselves, which continue to employ the King James Version for use in the Restoration communities.[9]

In 1 Corinthians 11:16, Paul appeals to the universal "custom" of the churches as a basis for directing the Corinthians on how women ought to adorn themselves in the assembly; and in 11:23, the shape of Eucharistic liturgy is based on Church authority, not on scriptural texts (since there is no appeal here to the synoptic renditions of the Last Supper). Likewise the practice of "all the churches" is what determines the order of worship services in 14:33. These examples show that in matters of Church order or discipline, the lines of acceptable practice are determined by ecclesiastical authority. The application of biblical principles to matters of worship and liturgy resides in the judgment of the whole Church, and congregations which break from these patterns are guilty of the heresy of schism of which Paul accuses the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:10-17).

It is for this reason that Paul calls the Church, not the Bible, the "pillar and ground of the truth" in 1 Timothy 3:15. And it is why he tells the Thessalonians to "hold to the traditions which you were taught" (2 Thess. 2:15), and to reject anyone who walks "not according to the tradition which he received from us" (3:6). "Tradition" is the equivalent of authoritative Church teaching, which expounds the meaning of scripture with respect to the content of the Faith, and applies and stays accountable to the spirit of scripture in matters pertaining to order and discipline. But neither in matters of doctrinal controversy nor in matters of liturgy and custom is the judgment placed in the hands of the individual Christian, held accountable only the direct revelation of God in the Bible.

BAPTISMAL GRACE

Another area where my thinking has changed considerably in recent years is in the area of baptismal efficacy. In evangelicalism, the standard view is that baptism is merely an outward sign of God's inner work on the soul. God does not need to operate through the instrumentality of Church sacraments and ordained ministries. He simply acts directly upon the hearts of the redeemed in the application of redemption. Debates between evangelicals and Latter-day Saints have been waged for years over the question of baptism and salvation. The LDS view of course is clear. 3 Nephi 11:34 states: "Whoso believeth not in me and is not baptized, shall be damned." And Mormon 7:10 states: "If it so be that ye believe in Christ, and are baptized, first with water, then with fire and with the Holy Ghost . . . it shall be well with you in the day of judgment."

The Fourth Article of Faith tells us that baptism is "for the remission of sins." William W. Phelps is told in D&C 55:1: "after thou hast been baptized by water, which if you do with an eye single to my glory, you shall have a remission of your sins." And Enoch preaches with great clarity in Moses 6:59: "By reason of transgression cometh the fall, which fall bringeth death, and inasmuch as ye were born into the world by water, and blood, and the spirit, which I have made, and so became of dust a living soul, even so ye must be born again into the kingdom of heaven, of water, and of the Spirit, and be cleansed by blood, even the blood of mine Only Begotten; that ye might be sanctified from all sin, and enjoy the words of eternal life in this world, and eternal life in the world to come, even immortal glory."

I would now have to say that the LDS come out on top in these debates, with little real difficulty.[10] There was a time when, as an evangelical committed to a purely symbolic significance of water baptism, I had great difficulty with these kinds of statements. But as an Anglican, whose theological framework is informed by the broader Catholic tradition, I can see that there is very little difference between us. Article 27 in the 39 Articles states: "Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are distinguished from others that be not christened, but it is also a sign of Regeneration or New-Birth, whereby, *as by an instrument*, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church." Of the sacraments generally, article 25 tells us that they are "*effectual* signs of grace . . . *by the which* he doth work invisibly in us,

and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him."

So also the Anglican Catechism, dating from 1549, has this question: "What meanest thou by this word Sacrament? *Ans.* I mean an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us, ordained by Christ himself *as a means whereby we receive the same*, and a pledge to assure us thereof." This same Catechism defines the inward and spiritual grace of baptism as: "A death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness: for, being by nature born in sin, and the children of wrath, we are *hereby* made the children of grace." More generally, the Catechism identifies Baptism and the Supper of the Lord as the only two Sacraments ordained by Christ himself and thus "generally necessary to salvation."

Here once again, it seems to me that the New Testament is plainly on the side of the Catholic Church and the saints of the Restoration, against evangelical symbolism. Jesus teaches in John 3:5 that you must be born of "water and the Spirit" to enter the kingdom of God. Acts 2:38 states that baptism is for "the forgiveness of sins." Acts 22:16 teaches that it is on the occasion of baptism that the supplicant "washes away his sins." Romans 6:3-4 teaches that "through baptism" we die with Christ and are raised to newness of life. 1 Corinthians 6:11 indicates that in the waters of baptism we are washed, sanctified and justified. Titus 3:5 almost certainly has baptism in mind when it speaks of the Christian being saved "through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit." 1 Peter 3:21 flat out states that baptism "saves us." Evangelical attempts to explain away such passages no longer have the appeal to me that they once did.

PRIESTHOOD AND MINISTRY

The churches of the Restoration are characterized by a belief in priesthood authority.[11] Whereas evangelicals tend to so emphasize the priesthood of all believers that the ongoing reality of a ministerial priesthood is effectively eliminated, this is not so within the LDS faith. The LDS church recognizes three orders of priesthood: the Melchizedek, the Patriarchal, and the Aaronic. Of these three, the Melchizedek and Aaronic orders find parallels within Anglicanism and the Catholic Church as a whole. The Patriarchal order finds no direct parallel, though of course many Christians recognize the principle that the father is the ordained

head of the family, and responsible for its physical and spiritual care. I can see no reason why the carrying out of this responsibility could not be depicted as a kind of priesthood authority, in light of passages such as Job 1:5 and Proverbs 4:1-2, which depict the father as offering sacrifice and supplication on behalf of his family, and assuming the role as the teacher of God's law in the home. But let me make a few remarks about the Aaronic and Melchizedek orders, and compare them with the Anglican view of the role of deacons, presbyters and bishops.

The Book of Mormon has foundational information about the Melchizedek priesthood in Alma 4 and 13. The exercise of this ministry involves a devotion to preaching and pastoral care, as seen in Alma 4:19, where the high priest Alma assigns secular duties to Nephihah, "that he himself might go forth among his people, or among the people of Nephi, that he might preach the word of God unto them, to stir them up in remembrance of their duty, and that he might pull down, by the word of God, all the pride and craftiness and all the contentions which were among his people, seeing no way he might reclaim them save it were in bearing down in pure testimony against them." So Alma 4:20 tells us that he "confined himself wholly to the high priesthood of the holy order of God, to the testimony of the word." Those who are called to this order are identified in Alma 13 as "ordained priests" (13:1) and "high priests" (13:9). Their obligation is "to teach his commandments unto the children of men" (13:6). Apparently, these "high priests" of the order of Melchizedek are distinct from the "priests" mentioned in Mosiah 26:7 and Alma 6:1 (who are assisting priests either of the Aaronic or Melchizedek orders).

D&C 84:29 tells us that "the offices of elder and bishop" belong to this high priesthood, though their sphere of authority is not limited to these offices (cf. D&C 107:10-11). The basic responsibilities of the elders and the high priests (who may officiate in the office of bishop) are stated in D&C 107:12: "The high priest and elder are to administer in spiritual things, agreeable to the covenants and commandments of the church; and they have a right to officiate in all these offices of the church when there are no higher authorities present." The high priest may officiate in the office of bishop "when no literal descendent of Aaron can be found" according to D&C 107:17. Concerning the Aaronic priesthood, we are told in D&C 84:30 that "the offices of teacher and deacon" belong to this lesser priesthood. According to D&C 13, the Aaronic priesthood "holds

the keys of the ministering of angels, and of the gospel of repentance, and of baptism by immersion for the remission of sins."

There are some general correspondences between this polity and what we find in Anglicanism. In both cases there is a general three-fold pattern of deacons, elders and high priests (who may serve as bishops). Anglicans recognize three orders of ministry: deacons, priests or *presbyters* (from the Greek word for elder), and bishops.[12] This three-fold order is patterned after the Old Testament model of Levites, Priests, and High Priests, with the Levites corresponding to the office of Deacon, the Priests corresponding to the office of Priest or Presbyter, and the High Priests corresponding to the office of Bishop.[13] Deacons offer assistance to parish priests, and bishops provide oversight as chief pastors in the Church. Bishops ordain to Holy Orders, and administer Confirmation (of which I will speak more momentarily); priests preach, baptize, officiate during Holy Communion, pronounce forgiveness of sins, and administer pastoral care in general with the assistance of the deacons.

The most significant correspondence however is found in a more general principle, rather than in structural details. Both Anglicans (like all Catholics) and Latter-day Saints recognize that the Old Testament priesthood continues in some form through the ministry of ordained persons in the Christian Church.[14] Both agree that the ministry of Levites is continued in the Diaconate today (through LDS teachers and Anglican deacons). Both agree that the Aaronic priesthood has a form of continuation in the ministry of New Covenant priests (through LDS Aaronic priests and Anglican presbyters). Both agree that the Levitical High Priesthood has a ministerial equivalent today (through LDS bishops who preside over the Aaronic priesthood according to D&C 107:87-88, and Anglican bishops).

What binds Anglicans together with the saints of the Restoration is a way of reading Old Testament cultic patterns in such a manner that they continue to have a role in shaping the life of the Church under the New Covenant.[15] Whereas evangelicals tend to operate with a model of radical discontinuity between the covenants, so much so that the ministerial structures of the Mosaic economy become irrelevant to New Testament practice, both Anglicanism and Mormonism operate within a model of continuity, while allowing for some structural shifts in keeping with the movement of redemptive history. Anglicans and Latter-day Saints read the scriptures of Israel, and see in them patterns and pictures of the life

of the Church in every epoch, whereas evangelicals see only outmoded cultic forms that are limited in their relevance to the national identity and pre-Christian experience of ethnic Israel.

CONFIRMATION

Acts 8:14-17 records an incident in the life of the Church that is puzzling to many evangelicals, but fits neatly into the doctrinal framework of Anglicanism and the LDS Church. The deacon Philip has taken the gospel into the territory of the Samaritans, and a great number of people have believed in Christ and submitted to Christian baptism. However, there is one thing lacking. This passage tells us that the apostolic leadership in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to Samaria to pray for these new converts, "that they might receive the Holy Spirit" (8:15). And we are told that when the apostles "laid hands on them," they "received the Holy Spirit" (8:17). In LDS doctrine, the power to confer the gift of the Holy Ghost is not included in the powers of the Aaronic priesthood, but requires a person with Melchizedek priesthood authority. Given the fact that Philip was only a deacon of the Church at this time, that would provide a coherent explanation for the need for emissaries from Jerusalem.[16]

Likewise, in Anglican theology, the authority to bestow the gift of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands in Confirmation is limited to the bishops of the Church, who are viewed as the historical successors of the apostles. In the Book of Common Prayer, the following words are uttered in the context of the Confirmation rite: "Almighty and everliving God, who hast vouchsafed to regenerate these thy servants by Water and the Holy Ghost, and hast given unto them forgiveness of all their sins; strengthen them, we beseech thee, O Lord, with the Holy Ghost, the Comforter, and daily increase in them thy manifold gifts of grace: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and ghostly strength, the spirit of knowledge and true godliness; and fill them, O Lord, with the spirit of thy holy fear, now and for ever. Amen."

In evangelicalism, this passage tends to be read in one of two ways: 1) Non-charismatic evangelicals take it as an anomaly in the life of the primitive church which has no bearing upon Christian practice today; 2) Charismatic evangelicals take it as evidence of the subsequence of Pentecostal empowerment to the experience of conversion and regeneration. However, they are left without any real explanation as to

why Philip's office of deacon left him without the authority to bestow the gift of the Spirit through the laying on of hands upon these new converts—even though he had the authority to preach and baptize.

WORKS AND JUSTIFICATION

Perhaps no criticism of the LDS Church is more commonly raised in evangelical circles than the accusation of adding good works to faith as necessary for salvation. Evangelicals cite Paul's statements in Romans and Galatians; while the saints of the Restoration cite the book of James in reply. I have come to the conclusion that most of these arguments simply speak past one another, and fail to get at the heart of the real differences between the two parties. I do not believe that any Mormon, who has read his own scriptures carefully (including both the Bible and the Book of Mormon) could come to the conclusion that salvation is something that can be earned on the basis of one's own good works and merits.[17]

2 Nephi 10:24 says: "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, reconcile yourselves to the will of God, and not to the will of the devil and the flesh; and remember, after ye are reconciled to God, that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved." 2 Nephi 25:23 is equally clear: "For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do." D&C 20:30 tells us: "We know that justification through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true." And 1 Nephi 1:20 reminds us that, "the tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, because of their faith."

The idea that the LDS Church somehow denies or compromises the grace of God because it insists on the necessity of good works for eternal life is something that I have come to see as a preposterous misrepresentation. D&C 76:52, 75, 103, 111 tell us that the varying degrees of eternal glory in the next world will be dependent upon the choices and actions of people in this life. There is simply nothing inherently legalistic in such language. I would have to say that it is no different in principle from the sorts of warnings we find in passages like 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 (which warns of certain kinds of people who will not inherit God's kingdom); Romans 2:6 (which says that God will judge each person according to

their works); Romans 2:13 (which says that it is those who do the law who will be justified); Romans 8:13 (which warns Christians that if they live according to the flesh they will die); Revelation 20:12-13 (which says that the dead will be judged according to what they have done); and Revelation 21:8 (which identifies those who will be cast into the lake of fire on the basis of their conduct).

Once again, I have found that the Anglican Church strikes an important balance in this whole matter. What evangelicals will usually (though not always) admit is that good works are the inevitable outcome of a genuine faith and conversion. If God justifies a person, it is a certainty that he will go on to sanctify their life. But what they generally are unable to admit is not simply the inevitability, but the obligation and *necessity* of good works for entrance into eternal life. It is not enough simply to say that Christians *will* do good works (as though it were some sort of automatic given that the believer need not concern herself with); the New Testament warnings and exhortations require us to say that they *must* do such works, because the final judgment will ultimately be based upon them.

This note regarding the necessity of good works, which is generally absent from evangelical ethics and moral exhortation, is preserved in the 39 Articles in article 12 on Good Works: "Albeit that Good Works, which are the fruits of Faith, and follow after Justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God's judgment; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out *necessarily* of a true and lively Faith; insomuch that by them a lively Faith may be as evidently known as a tree is discerned by the fruit." Article 12 does not only say that God will ensure that a true believer will produce good works; it says that true faith *necessarily* does so. Not only *will* there be good works in the life of the Christian, there *must* be good works for God to examine and find pleasing and acceptable in his sight through Christ. The only way you can know for sure what sort of tree you are dealing with is to examine the fruit. For its identity to be valid, the tree must produce a certain kind of fruit. On the day of judgment, God will subject our lives to just such an examination, and it is *necessary* that there be the right kind of fruit presented to him as manifestation of our claim to belong to Christ. God will determine our relationship to Christ, not on the basis of what we say, or think, or believe, but on the basis of what we do. That note is what is missing in evangelicalism, but properly emphasized in the moral posture of Catholic Christianity and the churches of the Restoration.

CONCLUSION

Certainly, the other side of this equation could be further developed. How has my shift to the Anglican church brought me to a point of greater variance from what I find in the faith of the Latter-day Saints? Certainly, my convictions on infant baptism, the authority of the early Ecumenical Creeds, and the doctrinal integrity of the Catholic Church of the first five centuries pose challenges to any attempted reconciliation between the historic Church and the church of the Restoration. There remain real and serious doctrinal differences between Mormons and Catholic Christians on topics such as the extent of the canon, the nature of prophetic authority in the church today, the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, the basic nature of humankind, the relation between God and the created order, and ecclesiastical authority, priesthood and sacraments.

But we have to start somewhere. Hopefully by pointing out a few areas where considerable overlap in belief exists between Latter-day Saints and the broader Catholic tradition, which does not constitute common ground with the evangelical movement that has proven so stubbornly resistant to intelligent dialogue, a potentially fruitful new path may be explored. I am rapidly coming to the conclusion that LDS dialogue with the evangelical world can only go so far, because of the chaotic state of evangelical ecclesiology. Their lack of any centralized ecclesiastical authority makes formal attempts at the sort of reconciliation into the unity which Jesus envisions in John 17 for his Church very difficult to conceptualize. If the breach which was caused by the Restoration, and by misguided Protestant reactions to it, is ever to be healed, if Christ's followers on earth are ever to speak to the world with a common voice, proclaiming with clarity a common gospel, then there must come into being the formal structures which could make such a dream into a concrete reality.

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NOTES

[1] I should note that by "Anglo-Catholic," I mean to identify my outlook with that stream of Anglicanism which tends to emphasize the Catholic identity of the historic Church of England, as reflected in her liturgy and church polity. There are other widely recognized streams of Anglicanism that emphasize either an evangelical, or a liberal/progressive identity. See the entries on "Anglicanism," and "Anglo-Catholic Theology," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove: IVP, 1988), 21-24.

[2] See Clyde J. Williams, "Standard Works," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*.

[3] Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001); and D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition & Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmands, 1999); idem, *Evangelicals and Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005). See also John R. Franke, "Scripture, Tradition and Authority: Reconstructing the Evangelical Conception of Sola Scriptura," in *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics*, eds. Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguélez, and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 192-210.

[4] For an illustrative Roman Catholic perspective, see Louis Bouyer, *The Word, Church and Sacraments in Protestantism and Catholicism* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 10-34. On the early Fathers, see especially Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, 19-48.

[5] It is illustrative to compare the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) with the London Baptist Confession of Faith (1689) on this matter. The WCF 31.3 says: "It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially, to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience . . . which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission, not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made." This section was omitted entirely in the Baptist revision of the Confession. The mainstream Reformed view of ecclesiastical authority resonates deeply with early Catholic and Anglican views, whereas the Baptist position is much more akin to modern evangelicalism's democratic principle and suspicion of church authority.

[6] See Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, 237-253.

[7] It is revealing that in their discussion of the topic, Norman Geisler and Ralph MacKenzie say that "both the early and later church is more like a jury than a judge" (*Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 174). While the jury vs. judge image may have some usefulness in contrasting Protestant and Roman Catholic views of the nature of the canon of scripture, historic Protestantism (including the Anglican Church) does *not* give to the contemporary church the same weight as the consensus of the early Church. For modern evangelicals, the limits of the canon remains a topic for investigation by each succeeding generation of the Church.

[8] For a helpful discussion see Lee McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 137-227.

[9] Implicit in the LDS Church's continued use of the KJV is a witness to the basic reliability of the Masoretic Hebrew Text and the Byzantine Textual Form of the New Testament

[10] I would no longer disagree with the gist of Stephen Robinson's statements about the necessity of baptism for salvation in *How Wide the Divide?* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997), 145. Likewise Robert Millet, *The Mormon Faith: A New Look at Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1998), 81-83.

[11] See the entries on "Priesthood" and "Priesthood in Biblical Times" in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 3:1133-1140.

[12] I am following here The Ordinal for "Making, Ordaining, and Consecrating Bishops, Priests, and Deacons," from the 1928 Book of Common Prayer (pp. 529-559).

[13] Cf. 1 Clement 40.5: "For to the high priest the proper services have been given, and to the priests the proper office has been assigned, and upon the Levites the proper ministries have been imposed." The application of this to the Christian ministry is made clear by the following passage: "Let each of you, brothers, in his proper order give thanks to God, maintaining a good conscience, not overstepping the designated rule of his ministry, but acting with reverence" (41.1).

[14] Such a continuation is in keeping with Old Testament eschatological anticipation: "'I will select some of them also to be priests and Levites,' says the LORD" (Isaiah 66:21).

[15] Cf. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?*, (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1998), 40-42.

[16] Cf. Millet, *The Mormon Faith*, 83-84.

[17] This should be abundantly clear from reading sources such as Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?*, 143-148; Millet, *The Mormon Faith*, 69-79; and Colin Douglas, "Justification," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*.

Atonement and Testimony

by Adam S. Miller

> The basic problem we seem to be facing is that we are too involved with trying to prove something, which is connected with paranoia and the feeling of poverty.
> — Chögyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*

I. INTRODUCTION

What distinguishes asking for a testimony from seeking for a sign? What prevents a need for the one from bleeding into a desperation for the other? Why is testimony essential to godliness, while with respect to sign-seeking, as Joseph Smith so bluntly puts it, it is a principle "eternal, undeviating, and firm as the pillars of heaven" that "whenever you see a man seeking after a sign, you may set it down that he is an adulterous man"?[1] Insofar as testimony is essential to Mormonism, correctly marking this difference is a matter of some importance. This crucial distinction, however, becomes clear only when the question is framed in terms of the atonement of Jesus Christ. And, further, this difference is rendered especially sharp when the meaning of the atonement is itself articulated in terms of the category of *possibility*. In short, we may, by way of anticipation, say that the principle of distinction

is simply this: because a testimony qualifies as such only to the extent that it is an unconditional response to an unmediated experience of the atonement, testimony is never anchored in the objective mediation of signs. Whereas asking for a testimony exposes us without reserve to the potency of God's unremitting grace, sign-seeking attempts to hide from the demands of the atonement behind the ego-reassuring interposition of mediating figures.

II. ALL OTHER THINGS ARE APPENDAGES

Every testimony is necessarily centered in the atonement of Jesus Christ. This is so because the potential dimensions of any testimony are precisely co-extensive with the depth and breadth of the atonement. This is simply to say that every testimony is a testimony of Jesus Christ or it is no testimony at all. With this train of thought, Joseph Smith could not have agreed more. "Salvation cannot come without revelation," he says, and "it is in vain for anyone to minister without it."[2] This, he explains, is a consequence of the fact that "no man can be a minister of Jesus Christ except he has the testimony of Jesus; and this is the spirit of prophecy. Whenever salvation has been administered it has been by testimony."[3] The logic here is straightforward. The atonement can save only by means of revelation and the name for such an atoning revelation is testimony. Salvation is only administered by means of testimony and to have received such a testimony is to have received the atonement.

It is in this rigorous sense that it is nonsensical to talk of someone having a testimony apart from their actively experiencing the redeeming power of the atonement that must necessarily ground it. One can "have" a testimony that is disjoined from the atonement only in the sense that one can "have" an arm that has been severed from its body. Such an arm is no longer much of an arm, just as such a testimony is no longer much of a testimony. The key, here, is to see that Joseph Smith posits such a strict reciprocity between atonement and testimony because he employed the latter term only in its most vital sense. Testimony refers neither to object nor creed, but only to a living experience of that of which it bears witness. Further, this bearing witness is no accidental by-product of God's grace, but is, rather, its indispensable embodiment. It is obvious, in this light, why, according to Joseph Smith, no salvation can be administered except by means of testimony.

Granted the reciprocity of atonement and testimony, we must conclude that, in this stricter sense, it is not legitimate to have a testimony of anything other than Jesus Christ. Or, as Joseph Smith describes this reciprocity on another occasion, we must see that "the fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it."[4] Just as every doctrine or ritual pertaining to Mormonism is only an appendage of our testimony of Jesus, so too is a testimony of anything other than the atonement only a testimony in an ancillary sense.

This is surely the case with respect to any of Mormonism's claims. To claim to have a testimony of the Book of Mormon, for instance, can ultimately mean nothing other than that through it one can experience the atonement of Jesus Christ. The same follows for having a testimony of Joseph Smith, Gordon B. Hinckley, tithing, the word of wisdom, or the Church as an institution. To have a testimony of them is to have experienced the atonement in connection with them—nothing more, nothing less. No one would be more horrified by the idea of having a testimony of Joseph Smith that was ultimately something other than having a testimony of the atonement than Joseph Smith. And no one would be more horrified by the idea of people having of a testimony of the Book of Mormon that was not reducible to an experience God's intervening grace than Mormon. We may be within our rights to draw certain inferences that are more or less assured about Joseph Smith, President Hinckley or the Book of Mormon based on our experience of the atonement in connection with them, but this is not the same as having a testimony whose content refers directly to them. In any case, there can be no doubt that neither Joseph Smith, nor President Hinckley, nor Mormon has even the slightest interest in *anyone* having a testimony of *them*.

In every instance, the message and the messenger are only as effective as they are transparent. To claim otherwise is to claim for them something that they would never have claimed for themselves. To claim otherwise is to exchange a testimony for a sign. The moment in which any person, object, doctrine, or principle disjoins itself from the task of facilitating the unmediated potency of Christ's atonement is the moment in which it is transformed into a sign, a dead limb severed from the tree of life. To interpose a testimony of Joseph Smith or the Book of Mormon between

oneself and a living testimony of Christ is a futile attempt to create some distance and draw a mediating veil over one's own life and sins. If adultery is indeed the desire for sexual intimacy without the possibility of any genuine intimacy, if adultery is indeed the error of mistaking the sign of love for love itself, then Joseph Smith could not have been more correct to have claimed that every sign-seeker is undoubtedly an adulterer. To want a testimony mediated by signs is to want the idea of a thing without the responsibility of unconditionally submitting to the demands of the thing itself. It is to want "a form of godliness" while "denying the power thereof" (2 Tim 3:5). Such is the perpetual temptation of religion.

III. ARTICULATING THE ATONEMENT AS THE GIFT OF POSSIBILITY

Much becomes clear that otherwise remains obscure with respect to understanding testimony when the potency of the atonement is articulated in terms of the category of possibility. In the course of interpreting Isaiah to his fellow Nephites, Jacob explicates the power of the atonement with great enthusiasm and precision. "O how great the goodness of our God," he exclaims, "who prepareth a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster; yea, that monster, death and hell, which I call the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit" (2 Ne 9:10). The key, here, to an articulation of the atonement in terms of possibility is Jacob's use of the word death. Death, in all its manifestations, is that monster which the atonement means to confront. Death, be it bodily or spiritual, no longer reigns where the potency of the atonement holds sway. Where death leaves in its path only the mute ruin of every hope and possibility, Christ's grace works precisely to reverse this foreclosure of horizons into a future that is infinitely open in unforeseeable ways. Where sin and death reduce possibilities to brute actualities, grace unaccountably gives possibilities back again.

In these terms the essence of sin becomes apparent. Sin is nothing other than the foreclosure of positive possibilities by the objective constraints of the present situation. Sin is the rendering of our lives captive to decisions made in the past that are not freely affirmed in the present. To be captive to sin is to be without hope of anything being otherwise than it is. Sin is the death of what could have been. It is in this respect that the atonement is that which, by definition, exceeds the objective constitution of the present situation with its capacity to contravene facts and restore lost

possibilities or grant impossible possibilities. The atonement, in essence, is the divine imposition of lost possibilities on the objective recalcitrance of our present actualities.

Take, for instance, the sin of sexual immorality. Such behavior is so powerfully destructive because it so forcefully forecloses the horizons of some of life's most positive possibilities. To experience forgiveness for such a transgression is to experience the reconstitution of a lost horizon. The precise effect of the atonement is manifest in its returning to us, even despite the constraints of our actual, objective situation, possibilities that had been rendered forfeit by wrong action. The same logic applies to physical death as well. Physical death marks the maximum foreclosure of every horizon. It is the loss of possibility *per se*. For the atonement to reverse the brute factuality of one's demise is for it to confront the specter of that which lacks all possibility. Here, to confront death is to confront im-possibility itself. Thus, in the figure of resurrection the atonement of Jesus Christ asserts not only its capacity to restore lost possibilities (forgiveness of sin), but to grant that which, in itself, is an impossible possibility (life beyond death). To the latter, we may not yet be able to speak, but the atonement's potency in returning to us positive possibilities that had been foreclosed by sin gives us reason to hope for the impossible and to look beyond the limits of possibility itself.

Such an articulation of the meaning of the atonement throws the distinction between asking for a testimony and seeking for a sign into stark relief. If every testimony is, by definition, a testimony of the atonement, and if an unmediated experience of the atonement is an experience of its power to restore to us lost and impossible possibilities, then every testimony is anchored in a gift of possibilities that transforms our relation to the world as it actually is. Where a sign seeks an objective affirmation of the way things actually are, testimony seeks an experience of grace that contravenes the actual situation with the reinstallation of that which is, objectively, no longer possible. It is precisely for this reason that sign-seeking always devolves into self-serving ego-preservation. Sign-seeking is an attempt to reinforce and maintain the status of quo of both world and ego. It chooses to hide behind the mediation of objective considerations rather than submit to the relentlessly open horizon of divinely given possibilities. Sign-seeking wants to interpose a comfortably objective distance between itself and God that will allow the self to continue on it is, untouched by the responsiveness and responsibility of a testimony.

IV. PURE TESTIMONY

The difference between a testimony and a sign is, thus, the difference between an experience of the atonement and an experience of its self-serving simulacrum. The notion of testimony gains strength and intelligibility only to the extent that it is strictly distinguished from and purified of every desire for a sign. This is simply to say that a testimony is capable of purifying our hearts only to the degree that it is itself pure. It is in this same vein that, in the October 2004 General Conference, M. Russell Ballard explains with great clarity what is at stake with respect to a testimony's purity. "My experience throughout the Church," he says, "leads me to worry that too many of our members' testimonies linger on 'I am thankful' and 'I love,' and too few are able to say with humble but sincere clarity, 'I know.'" [5] This displacement of testimony, he points out, necessarily involves a displacement of the atonement.

> As a result, our meetings sometimes lack the testimony rich, spiritual underpinnings that stir the soul and have meaningful, positive impact on the lives of all those who hear them. Our testimony meetings need to be more centered on the Savior, the doctrines of the gospel, the blessings of the Restoration, and the teachings of the scriptures. We need to replace stories, travelogues, and lectures with pure testimonies.[6]

What is, here, perhaps most interesting about Elder Ballard's remarks is the way in which he delicately distinguishes a testimony from what it is not. Progressively, he strips the notion of testimony bare. A testimony, he argues, is not an expression of gratitude or love, a story, a travelogue, or a lecture. A testimony, in order to be a testimony, he argues, needs to be purified of each of these objective supports. It cannot be composed of objects, experiences, examples, stories or illustrations. In other words, a testimony cannot be based on any objective sign or manifestation. True, it is good to express love and gratitude and, true, we must have signs, objects, experiences, examples, stories and illustrations—to be entirely without them would be to leave the world altogether—but, make no mistake, these cannot anchor or constitute a testimony. On the contrary, a testimony only becomes a testimony when it has been purified of them, because the point of a testimony *is* to step beyond the given constraints

of the world. To exchange testimonies for signs is to rob a situation of its potential for change and of its capacity to have a "meaningful, positive impact on the lives of all those who hear them."

It is in this context, in the context of the atonement's power to potently and meaningfully impact the world by restoring to it the possibilities that its sins had foreclosed, that Elder Ballard notes the way in which a testimony involves the humble, sincere clarity of an "I know." A testimony must be purified of every sign precisely because a testimony expresses a kind of unconditional certainty that is foreign to every objective sign that belongs to our thoroughly conditioned world. That this is so should come as no surprise. A testimony is able to express such certainty because it involves an unmediated experience of the atonement in which the world, in its strictly conditioned chain of cause and effect, is contradicted by the unaccountably gracious restoration of lost or impossible possibilities.

Every kind of mundane experience, story, example, or illustration is necessarily both conditioned and contextualized by the weight of the world's being such as it is. This is only to say that every experience in the world is subject to conditions and mediations that exclude the kind of certainty granted only by means of testimony. Every sign belongs thoroughly to the world and every sign is a sign because it is conditioned and mediated. In short, a sign is a sign because it requires interpretation, and if there is room for interpretation, then there is no certainty, only a varying degree of probability. To base a testimony on any objective experience is to route one's testimony through a detour that robs it of its own immediate certainty.

A testimony involves the sincere clarity of an "I know" because it is, in its naked purity, subtracted from every sign or experience that is in need of interpretation. It is subtracted from every objective sign because it declares the possibility of that which the actuality of the world excludes. A testimony is, at no time, routed through the world, but comes, instead, as a bolt of lightning that splits the night in two, contravening the stubborn inertia of the world with its declarative immediacy and certainty. In the process of such a contravention, the lost and impossible possibilities revealed by a testimony will necessarily take hold of and re-shape the world, but this is decisively different from the world taking hold of and conditioning a testimony. The desire for a testimony that is conditioned by the world is nothing other than the desire for a sign. Testimonies are not essential because they reveal the way things really are in the world (this

is the task of science), but because they faithfully and persistently reveal, in light of the atonement, the way things *ought* to be.

The irony, however, is that the certainty that accompanies the sincere clarity of a testimony is of a paradoxical sort because it is achieved only by subtraction from every object in the world. In other words, the certainty of a testimony is achieved only by purifying it of the actual in favor of the previously impossible. Against the tyranny of a world broken by sin and sorrow, a testimony must unwaveringly, with infinite fidelity, maintain the certainty of its own objectless, foundationless, restoration of possibility. That is to say: a testimony, above all else, in order to be true to its unmitigated reliance upon the atonement of Jesus Christ, must accept the indefensible weakness imposed upon it by its own boundless certainty.

The sign-seeker finds this prospect of being in such a position of weakness and radical dependence impossible to accept. In contrast to the humble, self-sacrificing submission of a testimony, every search for a sign is motivated essentially by a desire for mastery. To seek for a sign is, like an adulterer, to seek to be in control. To seek for a sign is to say that one is unwilling to take the risk a testimony's objective weakness demands. It manifests an unwillingness to cede control to God. We will participate, the sign-seekers say, but only on our own terms and only if we are in control of the evidence. Sign-seeking misses not only the point of a testimony, but the whole logic of a saving relationship with God: it fails to submerse our will in his. Saving truths, insofar as they are distinct from a knowledge of actual facts, always take the form of a testimony and they are always centered on the task of bearing forth the world-opening possibilities that God wishes to bestow.

V. BEARING TESTIMONY

Signs differ from testimonies precisely with respect to the fact that signs are unwilling to bear a testimony's objective weakness. It is no coincidence, then, that whenever we speak of testimonies, we speak of *bearing* them. To have a testimony is to be willing to bear the possibilities and responsibilities that it imposes. A testimony that is not borne is no testimony at all. Boyd K. Packer, in an oft cited statement, is very clear about this reciprocity:

> A testimony is to be found in the bearing of it. Somewhere in your quest for spiritual knowledge, there is that "leap of faith". . . . It is the moment when you have gone to the edge of the light and step into the darkness to discover that the way is lighted ahead for just a footstep or two.[7]

A testimony is to be found only in the bearing of it. Because a testimony *is* its declaration, there can be no shortcut or circuitous detour through some objective sign or externally verifiable manifestation. Because every testimony refers to the subjective restoration of positive possibilities, the content of every pure testimony coincides completely with the act of bearing it or declaring it. In its subtraction from objectivity, a testimony *is* its being borne. This water-tight reciprocity is what gives a testimony its objective weakness—but it is also what gives a testimony its declarative certainty. A "leap of faith," Elder Packer calls it, because a testimony is necessarily a step beyond this world and any evidence that it could possibly offer.

This, however, appears to leave us in a difficult position. If a testimony is a step beyond this world, if it must be borne in the unverifiable weakness of its own declarative certainty, then what prevents a testimony from simply being a fabrication? If a testimony is found only in the bearing of it, then what prevents us from having a testimony of anything at all? In short, if we purify a testimony of every sign, then what separates a testimony from wishful thinking?

Again, the crucial difference to be marked concerns the atonement. A testimony is not reducible to wishful thinking precisely because a testimony is something that one literally *bears*. It is something that one undergoes. In the strict sense, we do not have testimonies, testimonies have us. We are not the masters of our testimonies—to attempt to master a testimony would be to reduce it to sign-seeking—our testimonies master us. Testimonies comes from beyond us, from beyond this world, from we know not where. We must choose to bear with fidelity the possibilities that a testimony restores to us or to shirk the responsibilities that it wishes us to undergo. But either way, despite its objective indefensibility, there is ultimately no mistaking a testimony for wishful thinking or for a simple fiction that we might ourselves have invented or imposed. In its seizing us from somewhere beyond both ourselves and this world, in the necessity of *bearing* it, a testimony leaves no such room for interpretation.

VI. CONCLUSION

Granted the coherence of the argument that we have laid out above, it should be clear that because every testimony can only be a testimony of the atonement that to bear a testimony *is* to be redeemed. To be stripped of every objective sign available in the world is to be stripped of every shred of self, worldliness, and selfishness. The work of purifying testimonies of signs is identical with the work of purifying souls. By way of conclusion, F. Enzio Busche, in the October 1993 General Conference, offered the following beautiful and harrowing description of the way in which the pure truth of a testimony and the focused potency of the atonement coincide.

> [If we are] enlightened by the Spirit of truth, we will then be able to pray for the increased ability to endure truth and not to be made angry by it (see 2 Ne. 28:28). In the depth of such a prayer, we may finally be led to that lonesome place where we suddenly see ourselves naked in all soberness. Gone are all the little lies of self-defense. We see ourselves in our vanities and false hopes for carnal security. We are shocked to see our many deficiencies, our lack of gratitude for the smallest things. We are now at that sacred place that seemingly only a few have courage to enter, because this is that horrible place of unquenchable pain in fire and burning. . . . This is the place where suddenly the atonement of Christ is understood and embraced. . . . With this fulfillment of love in our hearts, we will never be happy anymore just by being ourselves or living our own lives. We will not be satisfied until we have surrendered our lives into the arms of the loving Christ, and until He has become the doer of all our deeds and He has become the speaker of all our words.[8]

To be willing to bear a testimony in all its naked purity is to be willing to enter into the location described here as the place where we see ourselves in our own naked purity, stripped of all pride and subtracted from every sign, every self-justifying experience, every story or illustration, every objective support, bearing and borne in the all-searching eyes of a loving God. To surrender to the demands of testimony, to surrender the actuality of the world's comprehensive wickedness to the demands of God's endlessly faithful love, is to surrender our lives to the impossible possibilities he

offers us. To bear a testimony in all its weakness is to be borne ourselves, in all our weakness, beyond ourselves and into an all conquering strength that does not fear its own objective frailty.

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NOTES

[1] Joseph Smith Jr., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith,* ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 157.

[2] Ibid., 160.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., 121.

[5] M. Russell Ballard, "Pure Testimony," *Ensign,* November 2004, 40.

[6] Ibid., 40-41.

[7] Boyd K. Packer, *That All May Be Edified* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft Publishers, 1982), 340.

[8] F. Enzio Busche, "Truth is the Issue," *Ensign,* November 1993, 25-26.