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AFFIRMING CHURCH ACTIVITY, OR WHY THE CHURCH IS AS TRUE AS THE GOSPEL

Eugene England

I was convinced when I was a boy that the most boring meeting in the Church, perhaps in the world, was a “quarterly stake conference.” In those days stake conference was indeed held every three months. It included at least two two-hour sessions on Sunday—for everyone. And the most interesting highlights to us children were the quavery songs literally “rendered” by the “Singing Mothers” and the sober sustaining of the “Stake No Liquor-Tobacco Committee.”

But one conference, when I was twelve, was memorable for a better reason. I was sitting near the front because my father was being sustained as a high councilor in a newly formed stake, and I had turned around in my seat to tease my sister, who was sitting behind me. Suddenly I felt something, vaguely familiar, burning to the center of my heart and bones and then, it seemed, physically turning me forward to look at the transfigured face of Elder Harold B. Lee, the “Visiting Authority.” He had interrupted his prepared sermon and was giving the new stake an apostolic blessing. And I became aware, for a second and confirming time in my life, of the presence of the Holy Ghost and the special witness of Jesus Christ.

How many boring stake conferences would I attend to be even once in the presence of such grace? Thousands—all there are. That pearl is without price. And because I have since learned better what to look for and find there—not doctrinal revelation so much as understanding of and experience with the members of the Church—the conferences are no longer boring. Thus, one of the earliest and most important pillars of my faith came not through some great insight into the gospel but through an experience I could only have had because I was doing my duty in the Church, however immaturely.

Yet one of the clichés often repeated by Mormons is that the *gospel* is true, even perfect, but the *Church* is, after all, a human

instrument, history-bound, and therefore understandably imperfect—something to be endured for the sake of the gospel. I am persuaded, by experiences like that one at a stake conference and by my best thinking, that, in fact, the Church is as “true,” as effective, as sure an instrument of salvation, as the system of doctrines we call the gospel—and that it is so in good part because of the very flaws, human exasperations, historical problems, etc., that occasionally give us all some anguish about the Church.

But sometimes that anguish becomes so intense it is emotionally destructive. It may lead Mormons to seek professional help or at least it may be a significant part of the pain and troubled behavior that counseling is designed to heal. In the following essay I wish to provide counselors of all kinds some ideas, based on my own experiences as a branch president, bishop, teacher and advisor to students, etc., that may help us understand and respond in more helpful ways to the conflicts and pain that church activity seems to bring many people. My fundamental conviction is that it is unhelpful, indeed rationally impossible, to deny or simply palliate those inner and outer conflicts: They are, I believe, intrinsic to the nature of the Church. Instead, I believe it is possible to help people see and experience the conflicts in more positive ways, to affirm them as essential to the Church’s saving role—the way it teaches us unconditional love. The key seems to be to change our basic orientation from consumers (“What has the Church or sacrament meeting or the bishop or my Sunday School class done for *me* lately?”) to contributors (“How am I using my membership in the Church, with its many opportunities for association and service, to give to others in that community of my time, means, love, talents, insight, patience?”). Then we need to realize that conflicts will inevitably arise when we try to work with, serve, be taught by people we might not have anything to do with given our own choice. The conflicts need not be a cause for alienation and guilt but, using the basic principles of honest confrontation based in both courage and charity that are outlined in Doctrine and Covenants 121:36–46, can be the basis of increased understanding and acceptance, despite real and painful differences.

I know that those who use the cliché about the gospel being more “true” than the Church want to mean by the gospel a perfect system of revealed commandments based on principles which infallibly express the natural laws of the universe. But, in fact, even revelation is merely the best understanding the Lord can give us of those things. And that human understanding, as God himself has clearly insisted, is not perfect. As he reminds us in the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants:

Behold, I am God and have spoken it; these commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding.

And inasmuch as they erred it might be made known.

(vv. 24–25)

This is a remarkably complete and sobering inventory of the problems involved in getting God's knowledge of how the universe works into human language and then of having it understood. It should make us careful about claiming too much for our understanding of "the gospel," which as we have seen is not the same as the perfect principles or natural laws themselves—or God's perfect knowledge of those things—but is merely the best human language version that inspired but limited mortals can express.

And even after a revelation is received and expressed by a prophet, it has to be understood, taught, translated into other languages, worked out in programs and manuals, sermons and essays—in a word, interpreted. And that means that at least one more set of limitations of human language and worldview enters in. Even simply reading the scriptures to others involves interpretation—in choosing *what* is read in a particular circumstance and *how* it is read, its tone and emphasis. Then *anything* we do beyond that becomes less and less "authoritative" as we move into explication and application of the scriptures—that is, as we teach "the gospel."

Certainly the Holy Ghost can give strokes of pure intelligence to the speaker and bear witness of truth to the hearer. I have experienced both of those lovely, reassuring gifts. But I also know that those gifts, which guarantee the *overall* guidance of the Church in the way the Lord intends and provide occasional remarkably clear guidance to individuals, still do not override individuality and agency. They are not exempt from those limitations of human language and mortal perception which the Lord describes in the passage I quoted above, and thus they cannot impose *universal* acceptance or understanding of the gospel.

This problem is compounded by the fundamentally paradoxical nature of the universe itself and thus the dilemmas posed even by the true laws and principles that the gospel uses to describe the universe. Lehi's law, "It must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things" (2 Ne. 2:11), is perhaps the most provocative and profound statement of abstract theology in the scriptures, because it describes what is most ultimate in the universe—even beyond God. In context it clearly suggests that not only is contradiction and opposition a natural part of human experience, something God uses for his redemptive purposes,

but that opposition is at the very heart of things: It is *intrinsic* to the two most fundamental realities, intelligence and matter—what Lehi calls things “to act” and things “to be acted upon.” According to Lehi, opposition provides the universe with energy and meaning, even makes possible the *existence* of God and everything else: Without it “all things must have vanished away” (2 Ne. 2:13).

We all know in our experience the consequences for mortal life of this fundamental, eternal reality. Throughout history the most important and productive ideas have been paradoxical, that is, in useful opposition to each other: The energizing force in all art has been conflict and opposition; the basis for success in all economic, political, and other social development has been competition and dialogue. Think of our government based on checks and balances and our two-party political system (which together make pluralistic democracy possible). Think of Romanticism versus Classicism (a conflict at the heart of much literature—and most literary movements), reason versus emotion, freedom versus order, individual integrity versus community responsibility, men versus women (whose differences make eternal increase possible), justice versus mercy (an opposition whose transcendence through the Atonement of Christ makes our redemption possible).

Life in this universe is full of polarities and is made full by them. We struggle with them, complain about them, even try sometimes to destroy them with dogmatism or self-righteousness or a retreat into the innocence that is only ignorance, a return to the Garden of Eden where there is deceptive ease and clarity but no salvation. William Blake, the great eighteenth-century poet, taught that “without contraries is no progression” and warned that “whoever tries to reconcile [the contraries] seeks to destroy existence” (quoted in *The Norton anthology of English literature: Major authors edition*, 1323). Whatever it means that we will eventually see “face to face,” *now* we can see only “through a glass, darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12), and we had better make the best of it.

Certainly, if we mean by “the gospel” only the good news of Christ’s redemption (as it is used often in the New Testament), or if we mean only the basic principles of salvation implied when we say, “I know the restored gospel is true,” we are talking about something fairly definite and clear. But, as we know it in human terms, the full gospel is not—and perhaps, given that paradoxical nature of the universe itself, cannot ever be—a simple and clear set of unequivocal propositions. However clear and unified our ultimate knowledge of doctrine will be, our present understanding of the gospel, which is what we actually have to deal with, is various and limited.

And that is precisely where the Church comes in. I believe the Church is the best medium, apart from marriage (which it much resembles in this respect), for helping us to gain salvation by grappling constructively with the oppositions of existence. And it can do this despite our limited and various understandings of “the gospel.” I believe that the better any church or organization is at such help, the “truer” it is. And when I call the Mormon church “the true church” I mean that it is the best organized means for providing such help because it is divinely organized and directed—and that it is made and kept effective by revelations that have come and continue to come from God, however “darkly” they, of necessity, come to our own limited and various understandings.

Martin Luther, with inspired perception, wrote, “Marriage is the school of love”—that is, marriage is not the home or the result of love so much as the *school*. I believe that any good church is a school of love and that the Mormon church is the best one, the “only true and living church” (D&C 1:30)—not just because its doctrines teach and embody the great and central saving principles and paradoxes but, more importantly, because the Church provides the best *context* for struggling with, working through, enduring, being redeemed by, those paradoxes and oppositions that give energy and meaning to the universe. Joseph Smith, also with inspired perception, wrote in a letter just before his death, “By proving contraries, truth is made manifest” (in *History of the Church*, 6:428). By *prove* he meant not only to demonstrate logically but to *test*, to struggle with, and to work out in practical experience. The Church is as true—as effective—as the gospel because it involves us directly in proving contraries, working constructively with the oppositions within ourselves and especially between people, struggling with paradoxes and polarities at an experiential level that can redeem us. The Church is true because it is concrete, not theoretical. And despite, even because of, all its contradictions and problems, it is as productive of good as is the gospel.

Let us consider why this is so: In the life of the true church, as in a good marriage, there are constant opportunities for all to serve, especially to learn to serve people we would not normally choose to serve—or possibly even associate with—and thus there are opportunities to learn to love unconditionally (which after all is the most important thing to learn in the gospel, the very key to our ability to accept the Atonement). There is constant encouragement, even pressure, to be “active”: to have a “calling” and thus to have to grapple with relationships and management, with other people’s ideas and wishes, their feelings and failures; to attend classes and meetings and to have to listen

to other people's sometimes misinformed or prejudiced notions and to have to make some constructive response; to be subject to leaders and occasionally to be hurt by their weakness and blindness, even unrighteous dominion—and then to be made a leader and find that we, too, with all the best intentions, can be weak and blind and unrighteous.

Church involvement teaches us compassion and patience as well as courage and discipline. It makes us responsible for the personal and marital, the physical and spiritual welfare of people we may not already love (may even heartily dislike), and thus we learn to love them. It stretches and challenges us, even when we are disappointed and exasperated, in ways we would not otherwise choose to be. Thus it gives us a chance to be made better than we might choose—but need and ultimately want—to be.

Michael Novak, the lay Catholic theologian, has made this same point concerning *marriage*. In a remarkable essay, published in the April 1976 *Harper's*, he reviewed the increasing inclination of modern intellectuals to resist, desert, and even to attack marriage. He argues that the main reason the family, which has traditionally been the bulwark of economic and emotional security, is currently “out of favor” is that many modern opinion makers are unwilling to take the risks and subject themselves to the disciplines that the school of marriage requires. But he then points out how such fears, though justified, keep them from meeting their own greatest needs. Similarly, I believe that those who resist, desert, and attack the Church fail, from a simple lack of perspective, to see their own best interest. To better understand what I mean, as you read this passage from Novak, mentally substitute “the Church” for “marriage”:

Marriage [the Church] *is* an assault upon the lonely, atomic ego. Marriage *is* a threat to the solitary individual. Marriage does impose grueling, humbling, baffling, and frustrating responsibilities. Yet if one supposed that precisely such things are the preconditions for all true liberation, marriage is not the enemy of moral development in adults. Quite the opposite. . . .

Being married and having children [being active in the Church] has impressed on my mind certain lessons, for whose learning I cannot help being grateful. Most are lessons of difficulty and duress. Most of what I am forced to learn about myself is not pleasant. . . .

My dignity as a human being depends perhaps more on what sort of husband and parent [Church member] I am, than on any professional work I am called upon to do. My bonds to [my family] hold me back (and my wife's even more) from many sorts of opportunities. And yet these do not feel like bonds. They are, I know, my liberation. They force me to be a different sort of human being, in a way in which I want and need to be forced. (Novak, 1976, 39, 42)

I bear witness that the Church can do those same frustrating, humbling, but ultimately liberating and redeeming things for us. But it can do that only if we can learn to see it as Novak does marriage, if we can see that its assaults on our lonely egos, its bonds and responsibilities which we accept willingly, can push us toward new kinds of being in a way we most deeply want and *need* to be pushed.

Two keys to this paradoxical power in the Mormon church are first that it is, by revelation, a *lay* church—radically so, more than any other—and second that it organizes its congregations geographically, rather than by choice. I know that there are exceptions, but the basic church experience of almost all Mormons brings them directly and constantly into very demanding and intimate relationships with a range of people and problems in their assigned congregations that are not primarily of their own choosing; but those relationships are profoundly redemptive in potential, in part *because* they are not consciously chosen. Yes, the ordinances performed through the Church are important, as are its scriptural texts and moral exhortations and spiritual conduits. But even these, in my experience, are powerful and redemptive mainly because they embody profound, life-giving oppositions and work harmoniously with those oppositions through the Church structure to give truth and meaning to the religious life of Mormons.

Let me illustrate: In one of his very last messages, during the Saturday evening priesthood session, 5 October 1968, President David O. McKay gave a kind of final testament that was a bit shocking to many of us who are conditioned to expect that prophets have no trouble getting divine manifestations. He told how he struggled in vain all through his teenage years to get God “to declare to me the truth of his revelation to Joseph Smith.” He prayed, “fervently and sincerely,” in the hills and at home, but had to admit to himself constantly, “No spiritual manifestation has come to me.” But he continued to seek truth and to serve others in the context of Mormonism, including going on a mission to Britain; he did these things mainly because of trust in his parents and the goodness of his own experience. Finally, as President McKay put it:

The spiritual manifestation for which I had prayed as a boy in my teens came as a natural sequence to the performance of duty. For, as the apostle John declared, “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself” (John 7:17).

Following a series of meetings at the conference held in Glasgow, Scotland, was a most remarkable priesthood meeting. I remember, as if

it were yesterday, the intensity of the inspiration of that occasion. Everybody felt the rich outpouring of the Spirit of the Lord. All present were truly of one heart and one mind. Never before had I experienced such an emotion. It was a manifestation for which as a doubting youth I had secretly prayed most earnestly on hillside and in meadow. . . .

During the progress of the meeting, an elder on his own initiative arose and said, "Brethren, there are angels in this room."

Strange as it may seem, the announcement was not startling; indeed, it seemed wholly proper, though it had not occurred to me there were divine beings present. I only knew that I was overflowing with gratitude for the presence of the Holy Spirit. (McKay, 1968, 85)

I have had many confirmations of President McKay's prophetic witness in that sermon. Most of my profound spiritual manifestations, those that have provided the rock-bottom convictions I have about the reality of God and Christ and their divine work—as well as my most troubling, soul-stretching moral challenges, my most maturing struggles with the great human issues of personal integrity versus public responsibility, loyalty to self versus loyalty to community, redemptive freedom versus redemptive structure and order—all these have come, as President McKay affirms, "as a natural sequence to the performance of duty" in the Church.

I know God has been found by unusual people in unusual places—in a sudden vision in a grove or orchard or grotto, or on a mountain or in a closet, or through saintly service to African lepers or Calcutta untouchables. But for most of us, and most of the time, I am convinced he can be found most surely in the "natural sequence to the performance of the duty." And I mean especially the duties God has given us that *all* of us (not just the unusual) can perform in our own homes and neighborhoods—and that the Church, in its unique community, imposed as well as chosen, can best teach and empower us to perform.

I have come to an overwhelming witness of the divinity of the Book of Mormon, such that the Spirit moves me, even to tears, whenever I read any part of it, and I came there by teaching it at church. One Sunday when I was a bishop, as I tried to help a young woman who had attempted suicide a number of times, once just recently, and who was feeling the deepest worthlessness and self-rejection, I was moved to merely read to her some passages from the Book of Mormon about Christ's atonement. I am convinced that book provides the most comprehensive "Christology"—or doctrine of how Christ saves us from sin—that is available to us on earth and that the internal evidences for the divinity of the book entirely overwhelm the

evidences and arguments against it, however troubling. But more important to me than all of those things is that as I read those passages to that desperate young woman and bore witness of their truth and power for me in my own times of despair and sin her lips began to tremble with new feelings, and tears of hope formed in place of those of anguish.

In moments such as these, I was able, through my calling as bishop, to apply the atoning blood of Christ, not in theory but in the truth of experience. In addition, I have come to know the ministering of angels because I have done my duty in temple attendance and have gone whenever possible to temple dedications. And I have found that we mortals do indeed have the power to bless our oxen and cars as well as people because I was a branch president and was pushed to the limits of my faith by my sense of responsibility to my brothers and sisters in that little branch.

Before I was a branch president, I served in the bishopric of the Stanford Ward in the mid-sixties and taught religion at the Palo Alto Institute to bright young students. At the same time, I was doing graduate work in English literature and trying to come to terms with modern skepticism and relativism and the moral dilemmas of the Civil Rights and anti-war movements and the educational revolutions of the time. I tended to see religion very much in terms of large moral and philosophical issues that the gospel did or did not seem to speak to.

In 1970, I accepted a position as dean of academic affairs at St. Olaf, a Lutheran liberal arts college in the small town of Northfield, Minnesota, and within a week of arriving was called as president of the little Mormon branch in that area. I suddenly entered an entirely different world, one that tested me severely and taught me much about what “religion” is. At Stanford much of my religious life had been involved with understanding and defending the gospel—and had been idealistic, abstract, and critical. In Northfield, as branch president for twenty families scattered over seventy-five miles, ranging from Utah-born, hard-core inactives with devastating marital problems to bright-eyed converts with no jobs or with drunken fathers who beat them, I soon became involved in a religious life that was practical, specific, sacrificial, exasperating—and more satisfying and redemptive. And I saw, more clearly than before, how true the Church is as an instrument for confronting all kinds of people with the processes of salvation despite—even because of—its management by imperfect instruments like myself.

I think of a young man in that branch who had been deeply injured socially by some combination of mental and family problems.

It was difficult for him even to speak a word in a group or to organize his life productively. He joined the Church before I arrived, and I was able to see him grow, as we gave him increasing responsibilities in our branch and supported him with much love and patience while he struggled to work with others and express himself, into a fine leader and confident husband and father. I think of a woman whose nonmember husband made her life a hell of drunken abuse, but who patiently took care of him, worked all week to support her family, and came to church each Sunday in drab but jaunty finery and with uncomplaining determination. She found there, with our help, a little hope, some beauty and idealism, and strength not only to endure but to go on loving what was unlovable. The Church blessed us all by bringing us together.

During the five years I served them, there were, among those seventy to one hundred members, perhaps four or five whom I would have normally chosen for friends when I was at Stanford—and with whom I could have easily shared my most impassioned and “important” political and religious concerns and views, the ones that had so exercised me before. But with inspiration far beyond my usual less than good sense, I did not begin my tenure as branch president by preaching about my ideas or promoting my crusades. I tried very hard to see what the immediate problems and concerns of my flock were and to be a good pastor, one who fed and protected them. And a remarkable thing happened. I traveled hundreds of miles and spent many hours—helping a couple who had hurt each other into absolute silence learn to talk to each other again; seeing a student through drug withdrawal; teaching a somewhat domineering man to work cooperatively with his counselors in the Sunday School presidency; blessing a terribly sick baby, aided by its father, who was weak in faith and frightened; comforting, at a hospital at four in the morning, parents whose son had just been killed by his brother driving drunk—and then helping the brother forgive himself. And I found, after six months, that my branch members, initially properly suspicious of an intellectual from California, had come to feel in their bones, from their direct experience, that indeed my faith and devotion to them and to what mattered to them, was “stronger than the cords of death.” And the result promised in Doctrine and Covenants 121:44–46 followed: There flowed to me “without compulsory means” the power to talk about *any* of my concerns and passions and to be understood and trusted, even if not agreed with.

Now this may all sound a bit selfish, even obsessive about the Church’s contribution to my own spiritual maturity. But what was

happening to me was happening to others. A young couple who had lived abroad, where there was no organized Church, for a year right after the wife had been converted and they had married, came to the branch. Their church experience, especially hers, had been essentially gospel-oriented, deeply felt and idealistic but abstract, involving very little service to others. She was a dignified and emotionally reserved woman, bright, creative, and judgmental—and thus afraid of uncontrolled situations or emotional exposure. He was meticulous, intimidating, somewhat aloof. I called them—despite some resistance—into positions of increasing responsibility and direct involvement with people in the branch and saw them, with some pain and tears, develop into powerfully open, empathetic, vulnerable people, able to understand, serve, learn from, and be trusted by people very different from themselves. And I saw them learn that the very exposures, exasperations, troubles, sacrifices, disappointments, etc., that characterize involvement in a lay church like Mormonism—and that are especially difficult for idealistic liberals to endure—are a main source of the Church's power to teach us to love. They are now teaching others what they have learned.

This lesson—that the Church's characteristic "problems" are among its strengths—has been continually confirmed as I have served as bishop of a ward of young married students at BYU. The two most direct, miraculous—and ultimately redemptive—blessings the Lord gave us when the ward was organized were what looked only like problems: a spastic quadriplegic child in one family and seriously handicapped parents in another. I had known the crippled child's mother for nearly a year: As a visiting high councilman I had spoken on the Atonement at her sacrament meeting, and she had approached me after for counsel and help. She was feeling deep anger and guilt as she tried to understand this failure of hospital care that had made one of two twins into a desperate physical and emotional and financial burden, one which had ended her husband's education in his intended profession, severely tested their marriage and their faith as priesthood blessings seemed to fail, and left her close to breakdown and apostasy.

Now, a year later, as I prayed for guidance in organizing a new ward, I felt as clearly as ever I have felt those "strokes of intelligence" Joseph Smith described, telling me that I should, against all common sense, call her as my Relief Society president. I did, and despite being on the verge of moving away, she accepted. She became the main source of the unique spirit of honest communication and sense of genuine community our ward developed. She visited all the families and shared without reserve her feelings, struggles, successes, and needs. Together with her husband, she spoke openly in our meetings about

her son, his problems and theirs, asked for help and accepted it, and all the while did her duty and endured. We have all learned from them how to be more open, vulnerable, gracious, persistent, how to turn to each other for all kinds of help and not to judge.

I first met the handicapped couple wandering through the halls of our chapel on our first Sunday. They were not looking for our ward; in fact, they lived just outside our boundaries, but I am certain the Lord sent them. They required major expenditure of our ward resources—time, welfare aid, patience, tolerance—as we worked to get them employed, into decent housing, out of debt, capable of caring for their bright, energetic child, and as we tried to help them become less obtrusive in meetings and less offensive socially. And I have learned two lessons: First, the Church structure and resources (which are designed for voluntary, cooperative but disciplined effort with long-range, essentially spiritual goals) are ideally suited as a means in which to build the necessary support system for them, one which may yet succeed in keeping the family together and may even bless them with more progress. Second, the blessings have come to the ward as much as to that family as we have learned to expand greatly our ideas about “acceptable” behavior and especially about our own capacities to love and serve and learn from people we would otherwise never know. One sister called me to report on her efforts to teach the woman some housekeeping and mothering skills, confessed her earlier resentments and exasperations, and told me in tears how much her heart had softened and her proud neck bent as she had learned how to learn from this sister so different from herself.

These are examples, I believe, of what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 12, the great chapter on gifts, where he teaches that all the parts of the body of Christ—the Church—are needed for their separate gifts. He taught, in fact, that those with “less honorable” and “uncomely” gifts are *more* needed and more in need of attention and honor because the *world* will automatically honor and use the others.

It is in the Church especially that those with qualities (“gifts”) of vulnerability, pain, handicap, need, ignorance, intellectual arrogance, social pride, even prejudice and sin—those Paul calls the members which “seem to be more feeble”—can be accepted, learned from, helped, and made part of the body so that together it can all be blessed. It is there that those with the more comely and world-honored gifts of riches and intelligence can learn what they most need to serve and love and patiently learn from those with other gifts and thus be more meek about their own.

But that is very hard for the “rich” and “wise” to do. And that is why those who have one of those dangerous gifts tend to misunderstand and sometimes disparage the Church, which, after all, is made up of the common and unclean, the middle class, middlebrow, politically unsophisticated, even prejudiced, *average* members like most of us. And we all know how exasperating *they* can be! I am convinced that in that exasperation lies our salvation, *if* we can let the context which most brings it out—the Church—also be our school for unconditional love. But that requires a change of perspective, one that I will now summarize.

The Church is as “true” as—that is, as effective for salvation as—the gospel: The Church is where there is potentially fruitful conflict, the place where its own revealed nature and inspired direction maintains an opposition between liberal and conservative values, between faith and doubt, secure authority and frightening freedom, individual integrity and public responsibility—and thus where there will be misery as well as holiness, bad as well as good. And if we cannot stand the misery and the struggle, if we would prefer that the Church be “a compound in one” such as Lehi described (smooth and perfect and unchallenging, without internal opposition and thus “vanished away”) rather than as it is, full of nagging human diversity and constant insistence that we perform ordinances and obey instructions and take seriously teachings that embody logically irresolvable paradoxes—if we refuse to lose ourselves wholeheartedly in such a school, then we will never know the redeeming truth of the Church. If we constantly ask, “What has the Church done for me?” we will not think to ask the much more important question, “What am I doing with the opportunities for service and self-challenge the Church provides me?” If we constantly approach the Church as consumers, we will never partake of its sweet and filling fruit. Only if we can lose our lives in church and other service will we find ourselves.

It is precisely in the struggle to be obedient while maintaining integrity, to have faith while being true to reason and evidence, to serve and love in the face of imperfections, even offenses, that we can gain the humility we need to allow divine power to enter our lives in transforming ways. Perhaps the most amazing paradox about the Church is that it literally brings together the divine and the human—through priesthood service, the ordinances, the gifts of the Spirit—in concrete ways that no abstract systems of ideas ever could.

My purpose here has not been to ignore the very real problems of the Church or the power of the gospel truths. As I have tried to indicate all along, the Church’s paradoxical strength derives from the

truthful paradoxes of the gospel it embodies, contraries we need to struggle with more profoundly in the Church. And we must all engage in not merely accepting the struggles and exasperations of the Church as redemptive but in genuinely trying to reach solutions where possible and reduce unnecessary exasperations. (Indeed, it is only when we grapple with the problems, not merely as intellectual exercises but as problems in need of solution, that they prove redemptive. A good part of successful counseling, it seems to me, must come in helping people to grapple redemptively with real problems.)

But, along with our sensitivity to problems, we must also, I believe, have more respect for the truth of action, of experience, that the Church uniquely exposes us to and we must respond with courage and creativity. We must be active, critical, faithful, believing, doubting, struggling, unified members of the body of Christ. To do so we must accept the Church as true in *two* very important senses: First, it is a repository of crucial redemptive truths and of the authority to perform essential saving ordinances. Though, as I have shown, those truths are difficult to pin down to simple propositions, taken together they motivate and make efficacious the willingness to serve that creates the redemptive schooling I have described. The Mormon concept of a nonabsolute, progressing God, for instance, though not reducible to a creed or even to systematic theology, is the most reasonable, emotionally challenging but satisfying concept, ever revealed or devised—and the most powerful imaginable basis for motivating education and progression. And even though that concept is not understood by all Mormons in the same way, it remains true, as a thoughtful friend once remarked to me, that “the idea of eternal progression is so engrained in our church experience that no statement or even series of statements can root it out,” which of course supports my main point about the primary truth of the Church.

In addition, the power of ordinances, however true in form and divinely authorized, is limited by the quality of our preparation and participation. Like baptism of infants, being ordained, partaking of the sacrament; and receiving our endowments can be merely what Moroni called “dead works” (Moro. 8:23), an offense to God and valueless, if they are not genuine expressions of our solidarity with others, living and dead, and sincere responses to the communion of the Saints which is the Church.

But one essay cannot cover everything, and here I have been emphasizing how the Church is true a second way that is too much neglected: Besides being the *repository* of true principles and authority, it is the *instrument* provided by a loving God to help us become like

him, that is, to give us essential schooling—experiences with each other that *can* bind us together in an honest but loving community. And such a community is the essential nurturing place for salvation. If we cannot accept the Church and the challenges it offers with the openness and courage and humility they require, then I believe our historical studies and our theological enterprises are mainly a waste of time—and possibly destructive, merely contributors to serious mental and emotional problems. We cannot appreciate the history of Mormonism or know the truth of Christ's restored gospel unless we understand—and act on—the truth of his church. But if we can affirm church activity, with all its redemptive conflict and pain (and through example and counseling help others do the same), we can all see more clearly the soul-stirring beauty of our history and the unique intellectual and moral power of the gospel.

Eugene England, a professor of English at Brigham Young University, presented this paper, based on the first chapter of his book of essays Why the Church Is As True As the Gospel (Bookcraft, 1986) at the AMCAP Convention in Salt Lake City, Utah, 3 October 1986. It is an expanded version of an essay first printed in Sunstone.

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