

You Must Needs Say that the Word is Good

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WE BEGIN, AS WE MUST, with necessity. And nothing is more necessary than humility. In Alma 32, Alma teaches the Zoramite poor about faith by distinguishing two kinds of humility. Humility, he says, may either follow from circumstances that force us to confront our insufficiencies (such as poverty) or it may follow from what Alma simply calls “the word.” These two humilities are not, however, mutually exclusive. It is not as if humility is only sometimes compelled and on other occasions, when necessity does not intervene, is freely chosen. The truth is—and this truth is essential to faith—that humility *always* imposes itself as a necessity. Faith, as a live question, is a question about how we will respond to the necessity of what is plainly and persistently obvious: we are inadequate and insufficient. In the end, faith is a being faithful to the work of not only confessing but freely affirming the joint necessity of both our humility and God’s promised magnanimity. Faith, as Alma puts it, is a willingness to say that the word is good.

I. NECESSITY AND POSSIBILITY

My reading of Alma 32 depends on one central thesis and three related premises: (1) humility is for every human being an unavoidable necessity, (2) humility is a kind of *knowledge*, a knowledge of one’s limitations, dependence, and insufficiency, (3) pride is an attempt to cover up this knowledge because we have judged our humility to be

bad, and (4) faith is an affirmation that, on the contrary, our humility is good. If we begin with the premise that humility is universally imposed, how might we read Alma's discourse on faith?

I begin with verses 24–25 of Alma 32. These verses can be read as offering a key to the rest of the discourse.

And now, my beloved brethren, as ye have desired to know of me what ye shall do because ye are afflicted and cast out—now I do not desire that ye should suppose that I mean to judge you only according to that which is true—for I do not mean that ye all of you have been compelled to humble yourselves; for I verily believe that there are some among you who would humble themselves, let them be in whatsoever circumstances they might. (Alma 32:24–25)

Here, Alma wants to reassure the Zoramite poor that he does not mean to judge them, as he puts it, “only according to that which is true” (32:24) because in the context of faith, “that which is true” is only one part of the story.¹ Alma's righteous judgment will take into account not only “the truth” but something else in addition—something supplemental and easily effaced.

What is “the truth” to which Alma here refers? He immediately supplies the reference in verse 25: the truth, he tells the poor, is that “you have been compelled to humble yourselves.” We may productively take this definition of truth as a baseline for Alma's entire discourse: the truth is the necessity of humility, the inevitability of our insufficiency. The truth about the poor is that their humility has been compelled and is not an effect of “the word” that Alma brings to them.

But what is this something else, this supplement, that Alma promises to take into account *in addition to* the truth of their compelled humility? This something else is Alma's own belief about the

1. It is plausible—and perhaps even typical—to read the “only” in this verse as meaning that Alma intends to judge the Zoramite poor “only in a way that is truthful.” However, I believe that the alternate reading I've proposed here is also plausible and, in many respects, more productive.

Zoramite poor: “I verily *believe*,” Alma says, “that there are some among you who *would* humble themselves, let them be in whatsoever circumstances they might” (32:25, emphasis mine). The bare truth is supplemented by Alma’s belief and Alma’s belief is directed toward what *would* have or *could* have been the case—were it not for the compulsion of their circumstances.

We have, here, a kind of basic schema for mapping the remainder of Alma’s discourse about faith, both in his treatment of humility and in his comparison of the word to a seed. The truth is what is actually the case: the necessity of a compelled humility in the face of inevitable insufficiency. But faith takes into account not only what is true, but what *could* have been true were it not for necessity. In sum, faith supplements the truth of what is actual with a sensitivity to what may have been (or may yet be) possible.

2. THE THREE FACES OF HUMILITY

Keeping this in mind, let’s turn our attention back to the distinction that Alma initially makes between two kinds of humility: where one kind of humility is compelled, the other is an effect of “the word.” Alma’s promise to judge the Zoramite poor not only according to the truth but also in light of what *could* have been the case clarifies the relationship between humility as a necessity and humility as an effect of the word. In what way?

The Zoramite poor are not an exception in that they have been compelled to be humble. Rather, their pronounced destitution and social exclusion only *display* to greater effect what is necessarily true of everyone in every situation: we are all insufficient and incapable of autonomy. None are righteous; no, not one. In this sense, the Zoramite poor reveal only a general truth: the actuality of humility’s compulsion.

But if we are all perpetually compelled to be humble, then what of the other kind of humility? In light of necessity, what room is there

for humility to be alternatively an effect of the word? Humility, as an effect of the word, does not preclude its already imposed necessity. Rather, as Alma indicates, it arrives as a supplement to this necessity. The actuality of a compelled humility is necessarily the case, but a humility of the word adds to this necessity not only what is true but the possibility of what could have been (or may yet be) true. Faith adds to the fact of this necessity what it has to say about possibility.

An additional question then arises: if humility is universally imposed as a necessity, then why isn't everyone humble?

Though Alma discusses only two kinds of humility, his discourse is embedded in a narrative that distinguishes three faces of humility: (1) the faithful, (2) the poor, and (3) the rich.

In the first case, we relate to the necessity of humility by adding to it the word. To do so is to have faith. On the other hand, as in the second and third cases, we might experience the necessity of our insufficiency as pure compulsion. However, we might bear this un-supplemented suffering of necessity in one of two ways. We might bear it as do the poor, who are confronted by their insufficiency with such brutal directness that they cannot even pretend to be other than humble. Or, we might bear it as do the rich, who, when confronted by their insufficiency, cloak this necessity with "their costly apparel, and their ringlets, and their bracelets, and their ornaments of gold, and all their precious things [with] which they are ornamented" (3 1:28).

3. BELIEF AND HUMILITY

What, then, of the faithful? Alma uses the words "faith" and "belief" synonymously in Alma 3 2. (See, especially, verse 18 for a clear equation of faith and belief.) Granted their substitutability, the chapter's most productive definition of faith may come in verse 16 rather than in verse 21. There, Alma says:

Therefore, blessed are they who humble themselves without being compelled to be humble; *or rather, in other words*, blessed is he

that believeth in the word of God, and is baptized without stubbornness of heart, yea, without being brought to know the word, or even compelled to know, before they will believe. (Alma 32:16, emphasis mine)

The verse breaks in two around the “or rather, in other words” that sets up the first phrase as equivalent to the second. The basic equivalence (leaving baptism aside for the moment) is this: humbling oneself without compulsion = believing in the word of God. Or, more simply: *faith is humility without compulsion*.

Note that Alma is, in this verse, emphatic about the importance of this subtractive “without.” The experience of faith is so intertwined with this “without” that he repeats it three times in just this sentence. Further, it is particularly important to note that faith subtracts compulsion from humility precisely because it bears a certain relation to the word of God. Faith, because it supplements necessity with the word, is able to subtract from that necessity the experience of it as a compulsion. Conversely, we might say that a compelled humility is a humility whose necessity is not supplemented by a faithful relation to God’s word.

Faith is a kind of free affirmation of that humility which is, in the end, unavoidable. And, through this affirmation that subtracts compulsion, faith is able to recover from necessity a dimension of possibility that a compelled humility effaces. Without the subtraction of compulsion, faith is unable to reveal in necessity the promise of what could be. It is left only with “that which is true.”

4. GOD’S WORD OF MERCY

We have, to this point, left unaddressed what Alma means by “the word of God.” Alma most succinctly addresses what he means by “the word” in verse 22: “And now, behold, I say unto you, and I would that ye should remember, that God is merciful unto all who

believe on his name; therefore he desireth, in the first place, that ye should believe, yea, even on his word.” This verse is especially helpful because it does not speak of “*the* word” but “*his* word.” Alma says: God desires that we believe on “his” word. Here, the weight of the possessive pronoun shifts the primary sense of the phrase away from the abstract register of doctrine and toward the concrete register of a personal promise so that we might read “God’s word” as primarily having the sense of “giving one’s word.” To believe on God’s word is to put our faith in the trustworthiness of his promise.

What, then, is the promise? God desires that we should believe and remember that he “is merciful unto all who believe on his name.” The content of the word is God’s promise of mercy.

Why would the faithful addition of *this* word to the necessity of our humility subtract compulsion? The connection of this particular word (God’s promise of mercy) with the problem of humility and compulsion is quite exact. Humility is unavoidable because we are, each and every one, perpetually insufficient. We continually fail in our attempts to be independent, autonomous, and self-sufficient. In other words, we continually find ourselves in open need of others. Mercy, on the other hand, is nothing other than the willing extension of the help we perpetually need. We are compelled to be humble because we are in need of mercy. It is our lack of self-sufficient independence that marks our dependence on God.

In order for the necessity of humility to be experienced as something other than a compulsion, we must believe in God’s promise of mercy. We must believe that our interdependence is not a mark of failure to be suffered only because it is required but, instead, nothing other than mercy and redemption itself. We must believe and affirm and repeat that the necessity of our humility *is* the unconditionality of God’s mercy. Our insufficiency and God’s mercy are two sides of the same coin: faith is the willing affirmation of this identity. To refuse our humility and despise its necessity is to reject God’s mercy and choose, instead, the compulsion that is damnation.

5. COMPARE THE WORD TO A SEED

These themes come to a head in Alma's comparison of the word to a seed. The opening verse is especially rich:

Now, we will compare the word unto a seed. Now, if ye give place, that a seed may be planted in your heart, behold, if it be a true seed, or a good seed, if ye do not cast it out by your unbelief, that ye will resist the Spirit of the Lord, behold, it will begin to swell within your breasts; and when you feel these swelling motions, ye will begin to say within yourselves—it must needs be that this is a good seed, or that the word is good, for it beginneth to enlarge my soul; yea, it beginneth to enlighten my understanding, yea, it beginneth to be delicious to me. (Alma 32:28)

Note, first of all, that Alma is comparing a seed to the word, not faith. This word, like a seed, must be planted, but it must be planted in our hearts. This image resonates with what we have said thus far.

First, the image of a seed being planted in our hearts requires that we abandon, right from the start, any conception of our “selves” as self-sufficient, whole, or independent. The image moves us to consider ourselves as bearing, from the inside out, something more than and other than ourselves. In our beating hearts, at that most intimate center of who we are, we must give place for a word whose promise is that the necessity of our insufficiency can bear the fruit of mercy and love.

Further, we do not plant this seed. The seed *is* planted (note the passive construction) and it swells and grows without our intervention or control. Our task is to simply “give place” to something other than ourselves. We must overcome the temptation to reclaim our lives as our own by resisting the word or casting it out.

Notice also how the agricultural image of a seed being planted slips easily into the register of parenthood and pregnancy: having had a seed planted in our hearts, this seed will begin to swell and grow inside of us, filling us with a life and light that is not our own, like a child

growing in the womb. The result, Alma says, will be the enlargement of our souls. With a seed that is not our own growing inside of us, swelling and pushing us away from the center of our own lives, we will find our souls stretched and pressed right out beyond the rims of our bodies and into the world. What is other than us will grow in us and we will be pushed out into the world beyond us. The outside will be inside, and the inside out.

Out beyond ourselves, our understanding will be enlightened and we will see that our humility is not a curse to be endured but the mark of our interconnectedness with God and our openness to the world. Here, suddenly, what we feared as most distasteful—the necessity of humility, the abandonment of our “autonomy”—will begin to be delicious to us.

6. YOU MUST NEEDS SAY

However, in and of itself, the growth of the word is insufficient. Words are meant to be spoken. It is not sufficient to discover that the word is true. Truth bears only the necessity of our actual insufficiency. We must add to the truth our faithful saying that this word is *good*. Our humility must be *affirmed* in order to subtract the dimension of compulsion from its necessity.

Alma is very clear about this. Already in verse 28 he pointed out that “when you feel these swelling motions, ye will begin to say within yourselves—it must needs be that this is a good seed, or that the word is good.” Thus, the swelling of the word will produce one effect in particular: it will move us to *say* something. It is with respect to this “saying” that faith either will or will not intervene. Verse 30 emphasizes this point:

But behold, as the seed swelleth, and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow, then *you must needs say* that the seed is good; for behold it swelleth, and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow. And now, behold, will not this strengthen your faith? Yea, it will strengthen your faith:

for ye will say I know that this is a good seed; for behold it sprouteth and beginneth to grow. (Alma 32:30, emphasis mine)

Twice in this verse Alma stresses the importance of our saying. When the seed begins to swell and grow, “then you *must needs say* that the seed is good.” Without this saying, faith cannot add to necessity the supplement of possibility. We must give birth to the word that is swelling in us by giving voice to the promise that it contains. Will not this saying strengthen your faith, Alma asks? Yea, he answers, it will strengthen your faith “*for ye will say* I know that this is a good seed.” Why is our faith strengthened? *Because* we gave voice to the word within us.

7. PERFECTING KNOWLEDGE

What, then, can we finally say about the relationship between faith and knowledge? Three passages in particular deal explicitly with the relationship between faith and knowledge. The first is 32:16–18:

Therefore, blessed are they who humble themselves without being compelled to be humble; or rather, blessed is he that believeth in the word of God, and is baptized without stubbornness of heart, yea, without being brought to know the word, or even compelled to know, before they will believe. Yea, there are many who do say: If thou wilt show unto us a sign from heaven, then we shall know of a surety; then we shall believe. Now I ask, is this faith? Behold I say unto you, Nay; for if a man knoweth a thing he hath no cause to believe, for he knoweth it.

Verse 18 summarizes Alma’s description of the relationship between faith and knowledge. There, he argues that “if a man knoweth a thing he hath no cause to believe.” In brief, knowledge is that which separates faith from its cause. Knowledge interposes itself between faith and its cause because unsupplemented knowledge is experienced as a compulsion. In order to believe in the word of God, in the promise of his mercy, we must believe “*without* being brought to know the word, or even compelled to know, before [we] will believe.”

Notice as well that whereas the cause of faith is the word, the cause of knowledge is the sign. The difference between faith and knowledge is concentrated in this difference between their causes: where faith follows from the word, knowledge follows from the sign.

What is the sign from which knowledge follows? What kind of knowledge are we talking about here? The knowledge in question is not only a knowledge that we all *already* share, but a knowledge that we are *compelled* to recognize: it is a knowledge, as Alma says in verse 24, of “that which is true.” We cannot avoid it, especially if we, like the Zoramite rich, deploy endless strategies of avoidance: we all know the necessity of humility. In this sense, the sign is the sign of necessity. If someone asks for a sign, the only proper response is to point out that the request is itself disingenuous. When Korihor asks Alma for a sign in 30:43, saying “If thou wilt show me a sign ... then I will be convinced of the truth of thy words,” Alma responds in the only way possible: “Thou hast had signs enough; will ye tempt your God?” (30:44).

The problem with signs is not that we have failed to receive them. The problem with signs is that they are all we have received. The signs of our insufficiency, of the necessity of our humility, are always already given. We do not lack knowledge and we do not lack signs. The acquisition of knowledge marks our entry into mortality. We become mortal only by eating its fruit.

Thus, faith does not operate as a stop-gap that tides us over until knowledge arrives. Faith is that which supplements the raw necessity of a knowledge we already have and cannot escape. Faith is not what comes in the *absence* of knowledge. Faith is what comes to supplement the raw compulsion of knowledge with the promise of mercy.

Faith is the affirmative “saying” that converts a mere sign into the promise of God’s word.

It is true, then, that “faith is not to have a perfect knowledge.” (32:21). But this is not because faith lacks knowledge. Precisely the contrary. Faith is not identical with knowledge because faith is what

comes to rescue us from the stifling weight of the knowledge we already have. Faith is not a perfect knowledge, faith is what “perfects” knowledge by subtracting from the necessity of humility its compulsory dimension. When faith arrives, our knowledge becomes “perfect in that thing” (32:34).

In short, faith subtracts compulsion from necessity. Or: faith subtracts certainty from knowledge—and thus perfects it.

In conclusion, we might summarize this point by returning to the image of the seed. If we allow the word to be planted in our hearts and do not cast it out by our unbelief, then it will begin to grow. And if we then *say* that this seed is good, it will become a tree and bear fruit. What is this tree?

The tree that grows from the seed or word is the tree of life, *not* the tree of knowledge. Our mortal condition is set in motion by the reception of knowledge, not by its lack. Adam and Eve, having eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge, are confronted with the necessity of their humility, with the fact of their limitations and insufficiency: that is to say, they are confronted with their mortality. Here, the sign of knowledge is the necessity of death. We have *already* eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

The question is whether we can learn to relate to this knowledge as something other than a compelled necessity. The question that decides the meaning of our lives is whether or not we can affirm the truth of our humility as something good. Can we swallow this word and say that it is good? Can we perfect the knowledge we already have by positively naming our insufficiency as God’s mercy? Can we affirm that this necessity from which all mankind flees is instead that “which is most precious, which is sweet above all that sweet, yea, and pure above all that is pure?” (32:42). Only in doing this will we come to see that the tree of knowledge already bears for us the fruit of the tree of life.

We do not need knowledge. Rather, we need to faithfully supplement the necessity of what we already know with the saying of a word that promises not just truth but mercy.