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From Death Unto Life: The Gospel and Therapeutic Psychologies

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Both psychological therapies and the gospel of Jesus Christ have as their primary aim "tending the soul," so that persons can live freer and fuller lives. Indeed, the primary purpose of the gospel is therapeutic—to bring "liberty and eternal life" to persons by "healing" them (2 Nephi 2:27; 3 Nephi 9:13). Quite naturally, questions have arisen in the LDS academic community and elsewhere concerning the effect of religion on mental health, and the part psychological therapies might play in furthering the gospel's therapeutic aim.

In what follows, I shall address some of these questions by doing two things. First, I will briefly present an overview—my interpretation of the gospel as a therapeutic framework. My attention will focus mainly on what healing the souls consists in; I will also consider how the gospel makes that healing possible. Despite the brevity of my discussion, I hope to expand somewhat our understanding of the therapeutic purpose and power of the gospel. Second, I will consider what roles social science might perform within the gospel framework. My central theme is that such enquiry can make an important contribution to the gospel's therapeutic aim.
The Therapeutic Purpose of the Gospel

From Death Unto Life

The gospel has its primary purpose making possible the passing from Spiritual Death to Spiritual Life. We read that “Adam fell that men might be” (2 Nephi 2:2), and Jesus came that all persons might pass “from death unto life” (John 5:24). This transformation of the person—variously described as being born of God, born of the Spirit, purified—represent that core idea of the gospel as a therapeutic system. Clarifying what passing from Death to Life involves is a major concern of this paper.

What does scripture tell us about the nature of Life and Death? In the first place, everlasting Life is humankind’s highest possibility or ultimate good (Doctrine and Covenants 14:7; Moses 1:39). Eternal Death, as the opposite of Life, is humankind’s ultimate evil. Further more, eternal life, as the ultimate potential of persons, comprehends all human good, and eternal death encompasses all human evil. In other words, Life in its “fulness” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:29-31) and being alive to all good are the same things. Likewise, to be alive to evil, or dead to good, is the same as Death. In the words of the Book of Mormon, Death is perishing “from that which is good,” dying “as to things pertaining to righteousness” (2 Nephi 2:5; Alma 2:16; 5:42). Life, as the opposite of Death, is what being alive to good things of righteousness consists in (Mosiah 4:2; Moroni 7:20-21). Accordingly, passing from Death to Life involves moving toward one’s ultimate good by awakening to all that is good, or to things of righteousness. In scripture we read that those who undergo the rebirth of moving from Death to Life have “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2).

Life and Death may also be understood as forms of love—the “love of light” and the “love of darkness.” As we know, the love of light, or divine love, comprehends all good or all righteousness. Love is the mode of being alive; all good is its object; and righteousness is divine loves realization. For this reason, divine love comprehends the whole law (Matt. 22:36-40; Gal. 5:14). Similarly, the love of darkness encompasses all wickedness, or being alive to
evil. Together the love of light and the love of darkness encompass all modes of human pursuit.

To explain further, think of the two-fold relationship between divine love and Life. First, Life is the aim or end of divine love. Divine love seeks the ultimate good of all persons, and Life in its fulness is that good (Moses 1:4). Second, Life in its fulness is divine love’s fruition as well as its end. Life in its fulness is what love constitutes when it aims properly at Life. Hence the saying of Jesus that he who loses his Life—he who loves as Jesus loves—realizes Life (Matt. 11:39).

So divine love should not be construed narrowly as one general ethical term among others, such as benevolence or beneficence. Divine love is divine agape—being alive to all good or fully righteous. We can see why, in the Book of Mormon, the “tree of life” represents both the “love of God” and “everlasting life” (Alma 32:40-41; 1 Nephi 11:22-23). Divine love and Life in its fulness, as well as being alive to good or things of righteousness, are different ways of characterizing the same thing. So to pass from Death unto Life consists in becoming a person of divine love.

What the nature of Life is can be clarified further by observing how scripture describes the experience of moving from Death to Life—of awakening to good or becoming filled with divine love. It is described as a mighty change of heart, as purification, as rebirth, as putting off one nature as a person and putting on another (Mosiah 4:2; 5:7; Alma 5:13-14; Eph. 4:22-24). Alma indicates what the experience of rebirth is like by using the analogy of the seed that grows into the “tree of life,” which represents, as we know, Life in its fulness, or God’s love (1 Nephi 11:21-23; Alma 32:40-41). The “seed” in the analogy represents “the word,” or gospel of Christ; and the growth of the seed represent how we will experience the change from Death toward Life. When “planted” in the “heart”—or innermost being—and properly “nourished,” Alma says, the word will actually “swell” within the “breast,” “enlarge” the “soul,” and “expand” the “mind,” until one reaches “everlasting life” or a never ending fulness of existence (Alma 32:41; Doctrine and Covenants 88:29-31; 76:20,71). The word’s growth in us, says Alma, will be “delicious” to us; and when
our souls are fully enlarged, and we enjoy Life in its fulness, our state of being will be "sweet above all that is sweet" and "most precious" (Alma 32:28, 42). Then we will be everlastingly "filled," and will no longer "hunger" or "thirst" for purpose or fulfillment, because we will enjoy the final aim of all we desire—fulness of Life in the highest degree (Alma 32:41-42; Doctrine and Covenants 13:7; 88:29-31; 76:71).

We can see, then, what the word’s Life-giving growth is like, and what it is not like. For one thing, it is not a peak spiritual experience in which a person briefly but profoundly experiences full and transcendent humanity. Much less is it the feeling of a burning bosom, which may confirm, for example, a critical life decision during a moment of prayer or meditation (Doctrine and Covenants 9:8-9). Rather, a person experiences the word’s growth as a profound change in the innermost being or heart, which increasingly animates existence and transforms human nature until that person enjoys a permanent degree of human flourishing without equal. As Alma teaches, the word develops in the individual as a seed grows into a great tree, enlarging the soul with Life as it matures, until a lasting fulness of existence is reached. When a person fully embodies the word—when the tree of Life is fully grown and bears its fruit—he or she enjoys, as a permanent mode of being, that fulness of existence which is God’s greatest gift to humankind (4 Nephi 5:36; Doctrine and Covenants 14:7). That is what it is like to be filled with God’s love or to be alive, much like God, to all that is good (Moses 2:31). It is, as scripture sometimes refers to it, a state of “eternal happiness” (Alma 3:26; Mosiah 2:41) or “the fulness of the Father” (Doctrine and Covenants 76: 20, 71).

The Deep Structure of Human Existence

One might think that Life and Death are categories peculiar to the gospel. If this were so then the gospel’s therapeutic aim—to make it possible for persons to pass from Death to Life—would be one view of human well-being among others. It would then be necessary to show, if possible, why we should prefer the gospel’s therapeutic purpose to other views of healing the soul. But Life and Death are not categories peculiar to the gospel. According to
scripture, Life and Death help form the deep structure of human existence everywhere. As overall human possibilities, they help constitute the natural frames of ways to live in all cultures. This means that the therapeutic aim of the gospel is rooted in human existence itself.

That this is so comes out in the Book of Mormon account of the beginnings and foundations of earthly existence. Consider first the story of the fall. This narrative reveals that, as far as earth experience is concerned, persons first came into existence as human agents—as beings with the power to choose and act—in relation to the grand alternatives of Life and Death. Symbolized by “the tree of life” and “the tree of knowledge of good and evil” (Moses 3:9), Life and Death made possible human agency in the “state of innocence” which defined the human situation before the fall. We read that without the opposition between Life and Death, “man could not act for himself”—human agency would not have been possible in the state of innocence—and hence, we may conclude, human beings would not have existed (2 Nephi 2:14-16).

The fall not only marks the beginning of human existence as we now experience it, but establishes the ongoing basic structure of that existence as well. Though transformed by the fall, the human situation everywhere is still one in which persons exist as agents in relation to the possibilities Life and Death, although now they face these grand alternatives in a state marked by the ways of Death rather than in a state of innocence. As Lehi says, all humankind in all times and places are “free according to the flesh” to choose “eternal life” or “eternal death” (2 Nephi 2:27).

Alma, in his teaching on the restoration of all things, also teaches that Life and Death help from the structure of human existence everywhere. In the resurrection and final judgment, he tells us, “all things” will be “restored” to their “natural frames” or “natural states.” As for humankind, the “soul” will be restored to the “body,” as will every “limb” and “joint;” “even a hair of the head shall not be lost” (Alma 40:23). Furthermore, persons shall be restored to the sort of persons they had become, the kind of lives they had lived, while in mortality. If, Alma says, the “works” of persons were “good in this life,” and “ the desires of their hearts
were good,” then they shall, “in the last day, be restored unto that which is good.” But “if their works were evil, they shall be restored to that which is evil” (Alma 41:3-4). Being restored to good or evil means that persons enjoy either Life or suffer Death. As Alma puts it, they will receive “according to their desire, whether it be unto life or unto death” (Alma 28:4-5; 41:10-11). We should here bear in mind Alma’s teaching, considered earlier, that Life comprehends being alive to good, or things of righteousness, and Death is perishing to good or righteousness (Alma 5:42; 2 Nephi 2:5).

So as we can see, Alma teaches that good and evil, Life and Death, help order the “natural states” of persons, just as “limb” and “joint” help form the human body’s “natural frame.” This is true of all persons everywhere, since the restoration of people to their natural states includes members of all cultures. All persons, whenever and however they live, face Life and Death as overall possibilities intrinsic to their natural state as human beings.

This being the case, it is natural and inevitable that all persons desire Life over Death. As we observed earlier, Life in its fulness consists in having a fully enlarged soul and expanded mind, being alive to good, enjoying a human flourishing that is “most desirable above all things” and “most joyous to the soul” (1 Nephi 11:21-23; Alma 32:28, 40-42; 5: 42). Whereas Death as the opposite of Life consists of having an impoverished soul and mind, a state of having perished to all good, a human misery that never dies and is the “gall of bitterness” (Alma 41:11), so no one can desire Death alone for its own sake. For anyone to have such a desire seems unintelligible. In fact, we should not wonder that persons everywhere typically “hunger” and “thirst” for Life, and Alma implies when he says that only “the word” can fully and lastingly satisfy the universal desire for Life (Alma 32:41, 43). Indeed, given the picture of human situation revealed in the story of the fall, the very point of human existence is to pass from Death unto Life.
The Light of Christ and Degrees of Life

The deep structure of human existence being what it is, it follows that Life must serve as the universal measure of human good; so whether a way to live, or a therapeutic psychology, is good depends on its power to give Life and to avoid Death. That Life does serve as the universal standard of good comes out in Alma’s teaching on the Universal “experiment” by which everyone can evaluate the adaptability of any way to live—or for that matter, a psychological therapy.

In teaching the gospel to the poor among the Zoramites, Alma uses the language of “experiment” to answer “the great question” in their “minds” concerning how they can know “whether the word be in the Son of God” (Alma 34:5; 32:26). In response to that question, Alma explains how anyone can discover that “the word,” or gospel of Jesus Christ, is “good or true” by comparing it to “the seed” which grows into “the tree of Life” and thereby fully satisfies the measure of truth or goodness that applies to any way to live considered as “a seed” (Alma 32:28-33). He says that if any word about how to live gives Life (Alma 32:40)—if it enlarges the soul and expands the mind when planted and nurtured properly (Alma 32:28-29, 34), then it is good. But if it does not give Life under those circumstances, then it is not good. In Alma’s words, “therefore, if a seed growth it is good, but if it growth not, behold it is not good, therefore it is cast away” (Alma 32:32). So clearly, as Alma indicates, Life is both sufficient and necessary as a measure of how best to live. He tells the Zoramite poor that if they experiment upon the word using this universal measure, they will come to know that the word is good above all ways of living. For the word, and only the word, makes possible “everlasting life” (Alma 32:41)—or fulness of Life in its highest degree (Doctrine and Covenants 88:29-31)—Life that is “most precious” and “sweet above all that is sweet” (Alma 32:42).

We can see, then, what form the experiment takes by which anyone can know how best to live. It consists of determining the truth or goodness of any way to live, notably the word in Christ or
his gospel, according to its power to produce fulness of Life and thereby satisfy the universal measure of what is true or good.

The idea that Life constitutes the universal measure of good, because of how it helps from the deep structure and defines the point of human existence everywhere, explains how “the light of Christ” enlightens “every man that comes into the world” so he can discern good from evil. Consider further Alma’s teaching on the universal experiment. Alma understands, as Book of Mormon prophets before and after him do, that the “light of Christ” is “given to every man” so that he “knows good from evil” (Moroni 7:16, 19; Mosiah 16:9; Alma 38:9; 28:14). Now as Alma teaches, a person knows good from evil by means of Life as a measure of good. This means that the light of Christ, insofar as it enlightens humankind so that they can discern good from evil, must be Life (Alma 28:14). As Alma says, the word’s growth is good both because it produces “everlasting life” (Alma 32:41) and because it is “light” (Alma 32:35). His teaching here appears later in John, who says of Christ, “in him was life; and the life was the light of men” (John 1:4). By that “light”—by that universal “measure” of good (Eph. 4:13)—every person may “lay hold on every good thing” and “be raised to eternal life” (Moroni 7:16:25, 48; Alma 32:32, 41).

Because Life through the light of Christ enlightens every person who comes into the world, Alma says that anyone will naturally “know” the word is “good” when it grows in him and gives him Life. Indeed, if a person completes the experiment upon the word, he will have a “perfect knowledge” of the word’s goodness because the word fully satisfies the measure of good within. As Alma puts it, the goodness of the word disclosed by its growth will be “real”—an undeniable actuality—for anyone who experiences it “because it is light”—because it fulfills the standard of good that helps form his or her very being. The text here is worth quoting in full:

O then is not [the word’s Life-creating growth] real? I say unto you, yea, because it is light and whatsoever is light, is good, because it is discernible, therefore ye must know that it is good. (Alma 32:35)
Alma means that the realness of the word's goodness in indisputably discernible and therefore knowable by anyone because it fulfills the light, or Life, as the measure of good, by which all persons by nature "lay hold upon every good thing" (Moroni 7:16, 20:25; Alma 28:14; 38:9; 32:33-34, 41).

It is important to emphasize that Life as the measure of good is pluralistic as well as universal. What makes Life pluralistic is that it admits many degrees. This means that many ways to live—and perhaps many therapeutic psychologies as well—may have the means to give Life, though only the word can create Life in its fulness. Through modern revelation we know of three degrees of glory; and within the lowest degree there exist further degrees as numerous as the stars of heaven (Doctrine and Covenants 76:98). Yet all three degrees of glory are organized according to whether they make possible a higher or lower degree of "fulness" (Doctrine and Covenants 88:29-31), meaning fulness of Life. All other ways to live—those whose purposes are evil—bring Death, or the denial of Life. Together the many degrees of Life and ways of Death, ordered as they are by the universal measure of good, encompass all possible natural states of persons now and in eternity.

So as we might imagine, within this legion of possible ways to live there is room for many different therapeutic psychologies, some that may promise some degree of "fulness," and others that may actually help bring Death. However, it is important to emphasize that the many degrees of Life made possible by different ways to live, and perhaps different psychological therapies, form a hierarchy in which the highest degree of Life—Celestial "fulness" or "fulness of the Father" (Doctrine and Covenants 76:71; 88:29-31)—is made possible only by "the word."

Healing Awareness of the Word

I have briefly reviewed the two basic aspects of the gospel as a therapeutic system. Its therapeutic aim—to enable persons to pass from Death unto Life—involves the purpose of human existence itself. And the gospel's power to realize that aim resides ultimately in the fact that it can enlarge the soul until a person is alive to all good and enjoys Life in its highest degree of fulness. The question
remains how that transformation comes about. The familiar answer is that the person must have faith in Christ, repent of sins, and be born of water and of the spirit. Then that person must continue in obedience to God as a reborn person. Though much could be written about how gospel principles and ordinances make possible the mighty change of self that constitutes rebirth, I will emphasize the special healing awareness that motivates and gives context to the process.

One does not put off the old person and put on the new merely through disciplined study and conscientious practice. We may be very good students of the scriptures, and diligently keep the commandments, finding a certain peace and satisfaction in doing so, and still remain unhealed and without much fulness to our lives. In fact, typically “the word” must break through our habitual and ordinary ways of interpreting and living its precepts in order for it to work the “mighty change of heart” that heals us. For most of us, as I want to illustrate, that breakthrough typically begins when one profoundly and personally experiences one's human situation—that is, experiences movingly the way in which that person fails to promote Life, and participates instead in the ways of Death, suffering deeply from their effects, while at the same time realizing that becoming a being of divine love and enjoying its fulness lie open through the word.

Consider the rebirth of King Benjamin's people recorded in the *Book of Mormon*. As prophet, Benjamin labored many years in the hope that his people might be made whole through the gospel (Words of Mormon 1:12-18; Mosiah 1:1). No doubt, because of his many years of teaching them, there was much about the gospel which the people, as he himself says, had “been taught” and “knew” (Mosiah 2:34-36). Indeed, just three years before Benjamin died, he described his people as “a diligent people in keeping the commandments” and a “highly favored people of the Lord” (Mosiah 1:11-13). Because of their obedience, the people “prospered” and their “enemies” had “no power” over them (Mosiah 2:31; 1:7). We can imagine that many among the people may have thought they were already enjoying the blessings of well-being promised by the gospel in this lifetime.
But as Benjamin knew, and his people needed to discover, they had not yet undergone the rebirth that marks the passage from Death to Life as part of earth experience. Though they had been taught the word and had conscientiously obeyed its precepts, their current understanding and obedience had not, and could not, give them that fulness of existence which the gospel promises even in this lifetime and which is “sweet” and “precious” (Alma 32:42; Mosiah 2:41). Before the word could truly transform them, they had to reach a new healing awareness of it—a heart-felt understanding that revealed their situation in relation to Life and Death.

As a result of his last address to them, King Benjamin’s people finally reached that awareness. They awakened to the fact that, despite their diligent obedience and prosperity (Mosiah 1:11-13), they were still in a “carnal state,” in which they now viewed themselves as “even less than the dust of the earth” (Mosiah 4:2). It was then that they “cried aloud with one voice” to be made whole. The “spirit of the Lord” then “wrought a mighty change” in their “hearts,” that they had “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 4:2; 5:2). As we see, they were transformed by being made alive to good, or, in other words, by being “filled with the love of God” (Mosiah 4:12).

People reach a healing awareness of their situation in relation to Life and Death and awaken to good, in the words of Alma, when they let “the justice of God,” and his “mercy,” have “full sway” in their “heart” and come “down to the dust of humility” (Alma 42:30; Mosiah 4:11; 3 Nephi 12:2). This first moment of humility—the first moment people understand with their “heart” where they stand before the requirements of justice and let God’s saving love enter the “heart”—marks the first moment in the passage from Death to Life.

Consider further the healing experience of King Benjamin’s people. To move beyond carnal obedience and become pure in heart, King Benjamin’s people had to be brought down to humility by experiencing their own “nothingness” and “unworthiness” in light of God’s “power” and “goodness” (Mosiah 4:4-6, 11). They awaken to their own nothingness and unworthiness when they realize they cannot as carnal persons redeem or sanctify them-
selves—they cannot by themselves, through their own works, satisfy
the demands of divine justice and change themselves from a carnal
to a spiritual state. At the same time, they experience within their
hearts that they mean everything to God, and that he reaches out
to them with pure love, through Christ’s atoning sacrifice and the
healing power of the Spirit, to justify and transform them (Mosiah
3:16; 4:2; 5:2).

It seems that King Benjamin’s people thought they must and
can, through their diligent obedience, repay or merit God’s saving
blessings. But King Benjamin makes plain to them that, when all
is said and done, they cannot “say aught” of themselves in this
regard. In the first place, he reminds them, God created them and
granted them their lives (Mosiah 2:23). He preserves them from
day to day by “lending” them “breath” and supporting them “from
one moment to another” (Mosiah 2:21). All their riches of every
kind come from him (Mosiah 4:19). Indeed, all they “have” and
all they “are,” that is good, they owe to him (Mosiah 4:21). Even
their very lives, and the “dust” out of which their bodies were
made, “belong to him” (Mosiah 2:25; 4:24). So they are, says
King Benjamin, “still indebted unto him, and are and will be,
forever and ever” (Mosiah 2:24). “Therefore,” he goes on, “of what
have ye to boast?” He asks: “can ye say aught of yourselves? I
answer you, Nay” (Mosiah 2:24-25).

Finally the people awaken, in a way that results in a “mighty
change of heart,” to the deeper message of King Benjamin’s
address. They discover their divine worth and identity as subjects
of God’s love. For one thing, it finally becomes apparent to them
that God is not interested in coming out ahead or in breaking even
in an exchange of his blessings for their obedience. Nor is he
interested in keeping them in debt so that they remain unworthy
of his goodness to them. All that is beside the point. The point
simply is that God loves them.

Implicit in God’s love for them is a deeper message still. The
people discover, in light of their nothingness and unworthiness,
that the origin and purpose of their very existence, with all its
everlasting possibilities, are grounded in the pure love of God.
They finally understand, with their innermost being that they have
come to be through divine love—that through divine love they were created, that love arranged the fall for their progression, that it made the great atoning sacrifice to quiet justice, and that it made possible as its greatest gift: Life without end in its fulness. Once they conceive themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth, and earnestly desire the Spirit to purify them (Mosiah 4:2), through the healing power of the Spirit they are “filled with the love of God” (Mosiah 4:12), and become alive to good (Mosiah 5:2), and enjoy a new fulness of existence (Mosiah 2:41).

It seems that unless, in our carnal state our being nothing and unworthy before God’s goodness fully dawns on us, the sense in which we are everything in light of God’s love eludes us, fulness of life cannot be ours. In our carnal state, and in light of divine justice and God’s love, we awaken to good through personally experiencing the contrast between the way of Death and the possibility of Life. We grasp the nature of pure love as the ground and purpose of our very existence, and view our carnal ways as without worth. The basic insight is that God’s creating us and granting us our lives, his supporting us from moment to moment, his opening eternal Life to us—all flow freely, without cost, from his perfect caring for us. We need not, and indeed cannot, earn our being everything to him. We need not and cannot make ourselves “worth” of our supreme worth as persons and the supreme value that our fulness of life without end has. Our life and personhood simply do have supreme value and worth. Our worth and value are a given, wholly unearned and without price, in view of divine love.

Once we fully grasp, through awareness of divine love, that in our carnal state we are nothing and yet everything, unworthy and yet of supreme worth, then we grasp the meaning of divine love and being alive to good; and if we fervently desire to become persons of divine love, the Holy Spirit will purify us (Mosiah 4:2). Then we love even as God loves—without charge, freely, purely (John 4:7-8). We do the works of righteousness he commands us to do, no longer in a carnal way but spiritually (Mosiah 1:11; 5:5). We become a people pure in heart and partake of fulness of Life.
King Benjamin warns his people that to remain pure in heart they must never lose the healing awareness of divine love that their own nothingness and unworthiness before God made plain to them. He told them they must "remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, unworthy creatures, and humble yourselves even in the depths of humility" (Mosiah 4:11). They must, in other words, always remember that divine love is the origin and grounding of their own existence. If "ye do that," he says to them, then "ye shall always rejoice, and be filled with the love of God" (Mosiah 4:12). The healing understanding that God's love and his justice awakens in them must always have full sway in their hearts if they are to remain pure in heart and alive to good.

So as mentioned earlier, planting and nourishing the word in a way that truly heals and gives life are different from ordinary ways of learning and knowing by which we master various theoretical or practical subjects. And, in summary, I repeat, we do not put off the natural person and become saints merely through study and disciplined practice. We may be very good students of the scriptures, and diligently keep the commandments, finding a certain peace and satisfaction in doing so, as King Benjamin's people no doubt did, and still remain unhealed and without much fulness to our lives. In fact, usually the word must break through our habitual and ordinary ways of interpreting and living our lives according to the gospel in order to create a "mighty change of heart" that heals us. This is because the tendency of the natural man, even one who knows about the word and diligently keeps the commandments while still in a carnal state (Mosiah 2:34; 1:11; 4:2), is to "resist" a mighty change of self (Alma 32:28; Doctrine and Covenants 108:2).

The Role of Social Science Enquiry in Serving the Gospel's Therapeutic End

1. Faith and Social Science Enquiry

The question I now want to address asks what role social science enquiry, of the kind typically carried out by American social
scientists, can play in serving the gospel's therapeutic aim when that enquiry is conducted from the viewpoint of the gospel itself. My own view is that although the gospel places certain limits on what that role can be, social science enquiry can and should make an important contribution in realizing the therapeutic end of the gospel.

What I mean by social science enquiry includes both its theories and methods. I have particularly in mind those theories that concern psychological therapy and the role human groups, especially religious groups, play in affecting mental well-being. The general logic of testing involved in such enquiry usually consists of setting up a hypothesis or theory, deriving empirical consequences (test implications) from it, determining by observations produced by controlled procedures whether the consequences are true or false, and concluding whether the hypothesis or theory is confirmed or disconfirmed.

One general limitation on how such enquiry can serve gospel ends seems apparent. Ideally, the pursuit of knowledge from the point of view of social science does not begin by presuming a theory to be true. A theory should remain in doubt, even when highly confirmed. But from the perspective of faith we presume the truth of the gospel with its power to heal and give Life. Indeed, the gospel's power to heal depends on our faith that it is true (Alma 32:21, 27:42). In this context, the doubt typical and otherwise appropriate to social science is not consistent with the faith required by the gospel when the gospel itself provides the purpose for the use of that science. When conducted from that perspective, social science enquiry cannot be employed to determine the truth or falsity of any of the primary propositions that form the gospel as a therapeutic system. It cannot call into question the content of the word and its power to heal. In fact, it must assume that humankind cannot reach their highest possibility of fulness except by incorporating the word of Life from the viewpoint of faith.
2. Incorporating the Word Through Words

So in order for social science to play a part in furthering the gospel's therapeutic aim, it must assume the word of Life to be true and develop and weigh theories that help make possible its healing work. But how does the gospel make room for social science theory and method to play such a role? To better see what that role might be, let me first briefly summarize the general therapeutic features of the gospel already discussed. The gospel's primary end is to heal the soul—enable the person to pass from Death to fulness of Life in the highest degree. This healing occurs through an intimate relationship between the individual person and his Father which, because it has as its purpose making the person whole, may be rightly described as a therapeutic alliance. The transformation that takes place through this alliance consists in the person becoming really alive to all that is good or righteous through the growth of divine love within him. That growth takes place when the person becomes profoundly aware of his situation in relation to Life and Death in view of divine justice and God's absolute love for him, repents of his sins through faith in Christ, undergoes rebirth; through the power of the Spirit, and expresses and nurtures the goodness awakened in him through spiritual obedience. Alma describes the healing process just summarized as an "experiment" upon "the word."

To better see what part social science enquiry might play in this healing experiment, let us consider further how this experiment works. In explaining the healing experiment, Alma implicitly distinguishes between "the word" and the "words" he uses in teaching it. He invites his people to plant and nourish the word through an "experiment"—"upon my words" (Alma 32:28, 27). He knows that the word he teaches is not his (Alma 34:6), but the words by which he makes known the word are. He called them "my words" (Alma 32:27). It does seem that throughout the Book of Mormon the particular words used to express the word are distinguished from the word itself. Accordingly, the word can be taught using different languages (2 Nephi 31:31). Some languages may become "corrupted" in their capacity to "preserve" the gospel's
saving message (Omni 1:17; 1 Nephi 3:19). Even a language that has preserved “the words” that reveal the word may be inadequate for speaking and writing some of its deeper meanings (3 Nephi 9:32). And from other scripture we learn that Adam’s language was “pure and undefiled,” thus presumably making it a perfect embodiment of the word and its healing power (Moses 6: 5-6).

But still, as Alma’s teaching implies, in undergoing the healing experiment, the word and the words used in describing it are inseparable. The word heals through the words or language of a people (Doctrine and Covenants 1:24; 29:33). The experiment upon the words (Alma 33:1; 34:4) is carried out as an experiment upon the word that present it (Alma 32:27-28). The words containing the word serve in making possible the process of incorporating it, helping to form a healing awareness of it and the power to nurture it.

An assumption underlying Alma’s teaching seems to be that a person’s world is defined and lived in language (words) from the beginnings of his postnatal existence through to his receiving fullness of life in the highest degree. It seems that persons come into existence by learning a view of themselves provided in their language, and then pass for being one kind of person into being another by embodying a new view of themselves contained in those words of their language which are enriched by the gospel. As Alma’s account of the experiment upon the word brings out, the word itself has within it a view of being alive to good, of being a person of divine love. That view of self transforms the person through faith and the power of the Spirit as he comes to have a profound healing interpretation of his situation made possible by the words through which he understands the gospel. And becoming a new person in this way itself seems to rest on the idea that he became the person he originally was by incorporating a view of personhood implicit in the language by which he understood himself in the first place. So words can form persons, and some words can heal by being used to reinterpret who and what they are—and can be—in accordance with the word of life.
3. Enriching the Word That Heals

I think a major way social science enquiry might serve the gospel's therapeutic purpose is to help make it possible for persons to experiment upon the word by enriching the words through which the word that heals and gives life. Social science theories and methods are themselves languages or words. They can, possibly, enrich the "words" that transform us by developing and confirming theories and therapeutic techniques which address the process of incorporating the word. Two kinds of social science enquiry seem especially promising. One involves developing, evaluation, and applying therapeutic theories and techniques that help open up to persons the healing and Life-giving power of the word. The other concerns the study of the effectiveness of various church programs and activities in generating mental health or human well-being in the gospel sense.

First, a few remarks about making therapeutic theories and techniques useful in the service of the gospel. Social science has already developed and somewhat evaluated various therapeutic psychologies. This experience constitutes a valuable resource from which to draw in deepening the words of healing by which we currently interpret the gospel. The problem—and it is a formidable one—is to select from the large number of psychological therapies in use today those that are both conceptually in harmony with the gospel and have been shown to be therapeutically effective.

The task of laying out criteria of conceptual compatibility with the gospel, and determining which psychological therapies best satisfy them, requires painstaking analysis involving both the gospel and each promising therapeutic system. But enriching the word by which to heal the soul is very serious business, and it demands that only those psychological therapies deeply in harmony with the word be used to help tap its healing power.

Psychological therapies used in the service of the gospel should also be selected for their therapeutic effectiveness. It follows from the gospel itself that only those therapies in harmony with the word can help heal and give Life in its fullest degree. But the fact that
a therapeutic psychology and the word are conceptually compatible is not by itself a sufficient reason for assuming that the therapeutic psychology will be effective. It should be shown effective through controlled investigation of the kind developed and practiced by social science for that purpose. One large problem I see in testing therapeutic theories is distinguishing between those which make possible a lower degree of “fulness” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:29-31) and those that can help produce fulness in the highest degree in this lifetime (though this fulness falls short of the “fulness of the Father” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:71) that is finally enjoyed only in eternity).

Therapeutic psychologies shown to be effective and compatible with the gospel—I will dwell only on these from here on—can help achieve the gospel’s therapeutic aim in two very closely related ways. First, they can, when necessary, help make available to the person the essential freedom to choose how that person lives. Second, they can help awaken a person to the possibility of a fuller Life and improve the capacity to plant and nurture the word when the desire is present.

We may divide the psychologies that may contribute in these ways into roughly two kinds: those that heal primarily through interpretative insight or corrective emotional experience, and those that employ primarily other approaches. As we have seen, “the word” gives life through the “words” available to a people; this helps make possible a healing awareness that can transform their natures. So the first line of therapeutic psychologies that may serve gospel ends are those that can expand the person’s ability to reinterpret who and what he is so that he can live more freely and more fully.

But some persons suffer from severe mental disorders (for example, certain psychotic character disorders) that prevent their achieving or benefitting from a healing awareness of the word, disorders that are not, at least initially, amenable to insight therapy. These persons—these brothers and sisters—must first develop the capacity to plant and nurture the word before it can be realistically offered them on a level that can heal them. Their only hope of enjoying in this life the gospel’s healing promise may be to undergo
treatment using therapeutic processes (for example, supportive forms of therapy or chemotherapy) developed through social scientific (or other) enquiry.

Other mental disorders (for example, borderline or dependent personality disorders), prevent persons from living so freely and fully as to be amenable to the healing understanding of the word. But the modes of understanding ("the word")—for example, the typical view of the simple steps involved in repentance—by which persons typically interpret how to change their lives in light of the gospel seem too impoverished to enable most of those burdened with such disorders to incorporate successfully the word. Here again the language and techniques of interpretative therapies, developed and confirmed by social science, may greatly improve the opportunity that a person with any of these disorders might have of enjoying the full Life offered by the gospel. In fact, as things stand, such therapies may be the only opportunity many of them have in this world to avoid years of suffering which accumulate in a lifetime marked by comparatively little real joy.

But those with severe mental disorders are not the only persons who might benefit from the development of effective psychological therapies. Even those classified as "normal" can be limited in their ability to experiment upon the word, because the language available to them for understanding the gospel is relatively impoverished, unable to move them through their resistance to that deep healing awareness they must reach in order to become alive by the word. They may be stuck in a cognitive grasp of the gospel which cannot open the heart and which can only produce a weighty routine of obedience that cannot give much fulness to life. Even superbly normal persons, who have an excellent theological understanding of scripture and who diligently keep the commandments, may not yet be awakened to the possibility of Life's fulness and may—for instance, through a sense of their own righteousness for which they have labored hard—resist a deeper healing awareness of the word.

Recall King Benjamin's people. I do not wonder but what there are many "normal" people in the Church today who are much like King Benjamin's people. They accept the gospel, they try hard to live it, they experience certain secondary rewards from their
diligence, but their lives lack that fulness available to them in this lifetime through a transforming understanding of the word. Like King Benjamin's people, if they could be awakened to their situation and the possibility of a much fuller Life, they, too, would "cry aloud" for it (Mosiah 4:2). I think the language of certain psychological therapies, when harmonized with the gospel and translated into ordinary language, can help clear away resistance to deeper change, open the mind to yet unexperienced degrees of Life, and prepare the heart for a healing awareness of the word and spiritual obedience to it.

The Church and Perfecting the Saints

Social science enquiry might be used in a second way in serving the gospel's therapeutic end. We know that the church's purpose is to accomplish the purpose of the gospel. This means that the church's mission includes realizing the gospel's therapeutic aim of transforming the lives of its members. But how effective are church activities and programs in realizing this aim? How can they be made more effective? I think social science enquiry can be used to help answer these questions. The following illustration indicates what the focus might be of such enquiry.

The primary point of church activities and programs is to teach the word so that persons can incorporate it into their lives. We have considered the idea that incorporating the word requires that persons reach and work through a profound healing awareness of it which enlarges their souls and brings fulness to their lives. This rebirth process occurs through an experiment upon the "words" by which a people learn "the word." So one question social science enquiry might address is how the words that present the gospel can be enriched so that they can more effectively open the heart to receive and nourish the word. For example, is it true, as I suggested earlier, that the language of certain psychological therapies—ones in harmony with the gospel—can expand and deepen the words that enable us to live freer and fuller lives?

The next question asks how the word, or the words that make it known, can best be taught. It is, of course, one thing to have a language sufficient for healing and another to create a situation of
healing. Typically, in church meetings and classes the word is taught discursively by means of formal address, lecture, or discussion. It might be wondered how effective these methods usually are for illuminating lives in a way that transforms them. Given a good teacher and eager students, a certain level or kind of knowledge of the gospel can be attained which may lead to diligence in keeping the commandments. But as in the case of King Benjamin’s people, a more profound healing experience must occur before a people can enjoy the fulness promised by the word. In fact, teaching the gospel primarily in a discursive fashion seems comparable to exposing persons, who want to live more freely and fully, to a proven psychological therapy only by having them read about it from a textbook on psychology. They may learn all about the therapy they need without benefitting much, if any, therapeutic effect from it.

The same seems to be true in learning the gospel. Years of discursive learning may result in a form of knowledge and diligent obedience devoid, however, of fulness of Life that can only be experienced when the word enlarges the soul through the Spirit and a healing understanding. Recall how King Benjamin’s people, despite their knowledge of the gospel and diligent obedience, had to reach a truly healing awareness of their relation to Life and Death before they underwent rebirth. So perhaps more experiential modes of teaching the word, ones that enable persons to use the gospel to attain deeper interpretative insight or corrective emotional experience, might be devised to support currently used discursive methods. Social science enquiry might help work out means for tapping the transforming power of the word.

Let me mention one more way that social science enquiry might contribute to the word’s healing process. The Church can help perfect its members—transform their souls through the word—only as it becomes a true human community, a community of the saints. The formal institutional church becomes a human community to the extent that persons active in it participate together meaningfully in achieving the very point of their existence as human beings and as a religious group—passing from Death into Life through the healing power of the word. In its heart, a community of the saints
is a therapeutic community. It is a safe place in which persons can share and support each other in becoming alive to good through the power of the Spirit and a healing understanding of the word.

Here social science can offer assistance by drawing on what it understands about the dynamics of human community and therapeutic processing. For instance, it can help lay out particulars of how a religious organization can better carry out its therapeutic role, how the willing and able can get through their resistances to a healing awareness of the word, how to recognize and care for those psychologically unable safely to participate in the healing process, and how to provide room and acceptance in the community for those as yet unwilling to make the necessary commitments to personal change.

A Concluding Remark

I conclude with a note of caution. A major thesis of this paper has been that social science enquiry, and particularly psychological therapies, can play an important role in serving the gospel’s therapeutic purpose. But the opportunity to serve the gospel also constitutes a possibility of corrupting it. This could happen if the words by which the gospel heals were “enriched” by concepts not in harmony with the gospel. This possibility is especially acute in light of the fact that social science theories about persons, especially theories concerned with healing the soul, can transform persons. As Alma seems to think, people come into existence by virtue of learning “theory” (a view) about himself implicit in the language (the words) by which they interpret who they are and what they can be. So a view of the person made up of social science concepts foreign to the word may deeply change the possibility of rebirth implicit in the word. A second possible kind of negative effect is for social science enquiry to introduce ineffective therapeutic procedures into the word’s healing process, thereby seriously weakening or undermining it.

In order to present or minimize these corrupting influences, it is important to keep a critical eye on social science enquiry as it serves the gospel, and its status as servant must be strictly maintained. It is particularly important that the gospel’s cloak of final
truth not be allowed to fall upon any such enquiry, however therapeutically effective and harmonious with the word it may seem to be, by reason of its association with the gospel. Of course, what is true for social science enquiry holds for any mode of thought—for example, business or law—that may enrich or corrupt the words through which we understand the word.

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