

A LENGTHENING SHADOW IS QUALITY OF THOUGHT DETERIORATING IN LDS SCHOLARLY DISCOURSE REGARDING PROPHETS AND REVELATION?

PART ONE

Duane Boyce

Abstract. Many mistakes that occur in scholarly endeavors are understandable. The truth is often difficult to discover, and this makes errors inevitable and expected. And, of course, some mistakes are so insignificant that to complain of them would be mere pedantry. But this is not true of all errors. Some are both obvious and of such significance to their topics that they are egregious. With respect to the gospel, there is reason to be concerned that this is occurring to some degree on the topic of prophets and the Lord's revelations to them. Erroneous claims and arguments are not difficult to find, including some published under the auspices of reputable and mainstream entities. Is it possible that such errors are becoming common, and commonly accepted, in Latter-day Saint scholarly discourse? To help answer this question, it is useful to consider, among others, works by Terryl Givens, Patrick Mason, and Grant Hardy. This paper will do so in three Parts.

Synoptic Introduction

My central concern is easy to state, particularly in question form: Is there a general deterioration of thought on the topic of prophets and revelation in LDS scholarly discourse, and is the deterioration worsening? Put another way: Do significant errors regarding prophets

and revelation occur, and are they becoming both common, and commonly accepted, in the rhetoric of LDS scholars?

Errors and Their Egregiousness

To explain what I mean by “significant errors” in asking this two-part question, imagine (if you have an interest in political theory) a discussion of the nature and effects of communist thought that omits the 85–100 million deaths caused by communist regimes in the twentieth century.¹ Or (in the field of Mormon studies) imagine coming across an assertion that Joseph Smith himself claimed to be the author of the Book of Mormon — *not* its translator — based on how he was designated on the title page of the 1830 edition of the book (i.e., “author and proprietor”), entirely ignoring the publication conventions of the time that thoroughly explain this peculiarity.² Or (if you have a background in philosophy) imagine a claim that a particular study provides a comprehensive treatment of Wittgenstein’s philosophical thought, only to discover that the treatise focuses exclusively on the *Tractatus* and completely ignores the *Investigations* (among other later works).³

All these errors would be (or are) egregious, partly because they are so obvious. In each of these cases the relevant facts are both easily accessible *and* important to the topic, and it would be unconscionable to overlook them. Indeed, one might say that some intellectual errors are so obvious, and so significant to their subject matter, that they amount to betrayal of the intellect itself. It is hard to imagine any justification for them.

These examples are useful because the first element of our two-part question asks whether errors of this type are to be found in scholarly gospel discussions regarding prophets and revelation. After all, it would seem that a significant number of mistaken claims and arguments have appeared on the topic in recent years. The subject is certainly significant, so the only real question is whether the errors are so obvious and so important to the topic that there is no justification for them. Do they, too, constitute a betrayal of the intellect?

Errors and Their Contamination of the Intellectual Landscape

The second element of our two-part question asks whether such errors, if they are occurring, are spreading their influence and infiltrating the thinking of LDS scholars generally. After all, it is one thing for an author to make a significant mistake in his or her own personal thinking and quite another for a respectable and mainstream venue to compound that

error by accepting and publishing it. It is still another for the error then to be widely accepted by the scholar's peers as *non-error*.

To the degree this occurs, authors' original mistakes can spread without limit, infiltrating and contaminating the conventional wisdom of scholars generally, subtly reconstituting the intellectual landscape they accept and share. False conclusions can become the new shared assumptions — never to be questioned again — and deficient patterns of thinking can become the new *norms* in argument. Intellectual standards themselves thus decline.⁴

Is this general deterioration of thought occurring in LDS scholarly discourse regarding prophets and revelation?

The Path Forward

To explore the two-part question of this paper, I will identify a number of recent mistakes regarding prophets and revelation that have been produced by LDS scholars and published in reputable venues. These errors are composed of two parts: (1) a claim that is faulty because it is either completely tenuous, implausible, or manifestly false; and (2) the errors in analysis that lie behind the faulty claim and that lead to it. Whether appearing in offhand comments or in the course of full investigations of prophets and revelation, examples of such errors do not seem difficult to find.

Because this article is lengthy, it is divided into three parts — Part One appearing here, and Parts Two and Three in subsequent issues. Since some readers will want only a headline view of the content, periodic summaries and conclusions appear along the way, including a general conclusion at the end of Part Three. The following sections appear over the three Parts:

Part One

Terryl Givens and Patrick Mason: "In All Patience and Faith"

Patrick Mason: The Lord's Guidance to the Church

Terryl Givens and Patrick Mason: The Priesthood-Temple
Restriction

Conclusion to Part One

Part Two (all sections are based on Grant Hardy's work)

Grant Hardy: Introduction

Nephi as Exclusionary and Condemning in Attitude

Nephi's Failure to Eat of the Fruit of the Tree

Nephi's Misleading Narrative Regarding Laman and Lemuel
"Another Side" to the Story Regarding Laman and Lemuel
Nephi's Omission of Lehi as a Witness of the Lord
"Irony" in Nephi's Committing the First Act of Killing in the Book
of Mormon
One Methodological Note
Conclusion to Part Two

Part Three

Terryl Givens: Abraham, Moses, and Jonah
Brief Additional Illustrations
General Conclusion: A Lengthening Shadow

Despite the length of this article, the examples I address are still just a sample of a larger pool of mistakes I have noticed, all of which could be examined in the same way. Nevertheless, the instances discussed here are at least instructive, and others can add to my list as their own time and interests permit. Together, the examples we consider will allow readers to reach their own assessment of the two-part question posed by this paper.

A final note: Although it facilitates expression to refer to well-known authors by name, this article is not a study of authors. It is a study of claims. Do the assertions we examine withstand scrutiny or don't they? The question (as always) is not whether an author is smart or famous or "faithful" (ad hominem considerations all), or even whether anything else an author has produced is cogent or even admirable. The only question is whether a *given* important claim is intellectually sound — and if it is not, the reasons it is not. That is the focus of this study.

Terryl Givens and Patrick Mason: "In All Patience and Faith"

To begin, consider a single paragraph by Terryl Givens.⁵ In it he desires to show that we should not expect moral superiority from men called as prophets — they are not "infallible specimens of virtue and perfection." As partial support for the obviousness of this claim, Givens draws attention to the Lord's statement to the infant Church, regarding Joseph Smith, that "thou shalt give heed unto all his words and commandments" and that "his word ye shall receive, as if from mine own mouth, in all patience and faith" (D&C 21:4–5). Givens quotes only the phrase "in

all patience and faith” in this passage, however, remarking that “God would not have enjoined us to hear what prophets, seers, and revelators have to say ‘in all patience and faith’ if their words were always sage and inspired.”⁶ Givens thus interprets this passage to indicate that we are to have patience and faith toward the Brethren since they are not always “sage and inspired.”

Givens has made this claim more than once,⁷ and Patrick Mason has recently made it at much greater length — devoting an entire chapter to the matter in a recent popular book.⁸

Misreading and Absurdity

Unfortunately, the interpretation Givens and Mason offer of this verse is untenable. After all, immediately prior to telling us to receive prophets’ word in patience and faith,⁹ the Lord tells us to receive that word “as if from mine own mouth.” But this creates an obvious problem. If the Lord is telling us to receive prophets’ words as if from *his own mouth*, it is not likely that he is simultaneously telling us to have patience and faith because those words might not be “sage and inspired.” Such an interpretation reduces to the claim that the Saints should recognize that the Lord’s own words are not always sage and inspired and therefore that members should be patient with *him*. This absurdity is not what Givens and Mason intend, but it is what their interpretation of the verse logically entails.

A Natural Interpretation

The Lord’s instruction to consider Joseph Smith’s words “as if from mine own mouth,” and to do so “in all patience and faith,” would more naturally be interpreted to mean something like: “Follow my servant Joseph even though you will suffer all manner of persecution and hardship by doing so” — which of course is exactly what history shows that the Saints experienced. Such a statement is hardly unique to Joseph Smith, however. The Lord could have said the same (and probably did) regarding ancient prophets like Noah and Moses. Far from encouraging his children at the time to be patient *with* these prophets (e.g., “be tolerant of Moses even though his clumsy confrontations with Pharaoh are making your lives harder day by day”), a statement of this sort would actually have meant: “Trust that Moses is following my will even though in the short term Pharaoh will make your hard lives even harder” (see Exodus 5:5–22).

The application is equally obvious in the case of Lehi. At the time they first left Jerusalem an admonition to receive Lehi's word "in all patience and faith" would emphatically not have been a command to put up with this "visionary man" who was needlessly causing everyone such sacrifice. Instead, it would have been something like: "Trust in your father even though I have not told him where you are going, how long it will take, or how hard it will be. I will provide help along the way, but fundamentally your father is doing my will in patience and faith — not knowing all the answers — and so should you."

The same point, of course, could be made regarding prophets ranging from Abraham and Daniel to Jeremiah, Abinadi, and John the Baptist. The scriptural record indicates that following each of them would have required patience and faith — not because they were mistaken, but precisely because they were *right*. Worldly elements rejected these prophets, and those who followed them risked exactly the same treatment. This seems a common element in scriptural history: The character of our fallen world (including Satan's widespread and destructive influence) all but guarantees trying circumstances, to one degree or another, for those who follow the prophets, and those circumstances guarantee the need for patience and faith. The Lord's words to Joseph Smith are entirely consistent with such a theme. Far from suggesting we need to be patient with prophets, the passage tells us we need to be patient in enduring the worldly consequences of *following* prophets. This is a scripturally consistent interpretation of the passage and, unlike the Givens/Mason reading, it does not entail absurd consequences.

A recent example of this principle is evident in the reaction to certain remarks made by President Russell M. Nelson. He spoke explicitly of the process through which the presiding councils of the Church receive revelation, and identified as revelation a specific decision made through this process (regarding children in same-sex marriages)¹⁰ — a decision that did in fact result in public criticisms of the Church, which easily found high-profile coverage.¹¹ Remarks of Elder M. Russell Ballard are also interesting in this regard. He said, "This is the Church of Jesus Christ. He is the head of it. We know His will; we fight His battles."¹² That Elder Ballard uses the term "battles" makes obvious that he sees controversy to be inevitable regarding certain decisions and actions by the presiding Brethren, and *that*, more than anything, is what would seem to require patience and faith.¹³

All this seems evident enough. Unfortunately, Givens and Mason quote only a part of the passage they cite, and this leads them into error.

They reach a conclusion about prophets that, judging by where they have presented it, has had influence among the Saints, even though it is the near-opposite of what the verse actually says and even though it entails a conclusion about the Lord that is logically absurd.

Patrick Mason: The Lord's Guidance to the Church

Consider next Patrick Mason's discussion regarding the Lord's guidance to the Church. In the course of his chapter "In All Patience and Faith,"¹⁴ Mason asserts that, just as with individuals, the Lord "intervenes occasionally" in guiding the Church.¹⁵ The rest of the time the Lord operates with the presiding councils of the Church according to the principle familiar from Joseph Smith: namely, they possess correct principles and govern themselves.¹⁶ Revelation from the Lord thus occurs on a now-and-then basis, and the rest of the time the Brethren operate according to their own judgment. That is why they can make errors — even "grave" ones — and that is why patience regarding them is required of us.¹⁷

But is "occasional" — "now-and-then" — an apt description of the extent to which the Lord provides revelation to his leaders? It is worth asking since Mason fails to account for two large considerations in making this claim. The first is a question of mere plausibility, and the second is a question of what prophets and apostles themselves have said on this topic.

Plausibility

Think of the matter first from the standpoint of plausibility. Consider, to begin, Russell M. Nelson's experience, prior to joining the Twelve, of a vision he received during the course of performing heart surgery. The vision showed him how to proceed to solve a valve problem that had not yet been medically discovered, and that resulted in his patient's recovery.¹⁸ Consider also the report of President Gordon B. Hinckley announcing from the pulpit that the Lord had just revealed to him the man who should be called as patriarch in a different but related stake — an account similar to examples shared by President Thomas S. Monson, among others, in calling stake patriarchs.¹⁹ Note also the public report that Harold B. Lee, following his death, visited with Hugh B. Brown from the spirit world incident to the dedication of the Washington, D.C. Temple.²⁰ Note, as well, President Nelson's experience of contact from two sisters beyond the veil — contact that eventually led to significant

spiritual accomplishment by their family members on this side of the veil.²¹ Also relevant is the experience of Bruce R. McConkie, who, in a vision, saw Joseph F. Smith and others from the spirit world who were in attendance at the funeral of Joseph Fielding Smith.²² And consider as well the direction given to Dallin H. Oaks as he left the presidency of BYU. He was choosing at the time between pursuing possible nomination to the Utah Supreme Court and several much more lucrative positions in the legal profession. He received the specific direction: “Go to the Court and I will call you from there.”²³

These experiences — and there are far more that could be cited — are useful to consider for two reasons. First, they are interesting because their scope is so limited. Hugh B. Brown enjoyed a through-the-veil experience that enriched him but no one else. Presidents Hinckley and Monson (and others) experienced revelations regarding patriarchs, one stake at a time, and President Nelson had a through-the-veil experience that blessed a single family. And Bruce R. McConkie similarly enjoyed a vision that directly blessed no one but himself. Such experiences indicate the Lord’s willingness to provide revelation on matters of limited scope, and this at least suggests that he would be willing to provide it on matters of much wider consequence — matters of importance to the entire Church, not to mention the world.

Second, it is relevant that Russell M. Nelson and Bruce R. McConkie had the visions mentioned above prior to their callings to the Twelve, and that Dallin H. Oaks received specific direction from the Lord in discrete and exact words before he was likewise called as an apostle. Such experiences indicate these individuals’ openness to the Spirit, and it seems reasonable to suppose their capacity would not diminish after being ordained prophets, seers, and revelators. This supposition, combined with the first point — that the Lord is probably willing to give revelation on a range of matters, including important ones — makes plausible the idea that he *does* give revelation on a range of matters, including important ones. This is not dispositive, of course, but it is clearly suggestive that revelation is more common than the “occasional” or “now-and-then” revelation that Mason supposes.

Prophets and Apostles on Revelation

But plausibility is not the only issue. In claiming that revelation to the presiding Brethren is only “occasional,” Mason also fails to address multiple direct declarations by prophets and apostles that contradict his

view — and that would therefore seem to require discussion by him. Speaking as the prophet, for example, President Kimball said:

We testify to the world that revelation continues and that the vaults and files of the Church contain these revelations which come month to month and day to day. I know the Lord lives and I know that he is revealing his mind and will to us daily, so that we can be inspired as to the direction to go.²⁴

President Harold B. Lee spoke similarly:

I bear you my solemn witness that it is true, that the Lord is in his heavens; he is closer to us than you have any idea. You ask when the Lord gave the last revelation to this church. The Lord is giving revelations day by day, and you will witness and look back on this period and see some of the mighty revelations the Lord has given in your day and time. To that I bear you my witness.²⁵

President Gordon B. Hinckley also reported:

There has been in the life of every [prophet and apostle I have known] an overpowering manifestation of the inspiration of God. Those who have been Presidents have been prophets in a very real way. I have intimately witnessed the spirit of revelation upon them. ... Each Thursday, when we are at home, the First Presidency and the Twelve meet in the temple, in those sacred hallowed precincts, and we pray together and discuss certain matters together, and the spirit of revelation comes upon those present. I know. I have seen it.²⁶

These are expressions from three men who served as prophets: “He is revealing his mind and will to us daily,” “the Lord is giving revelations day by day,” and prophets possess “an overpowering manifestation of the inspiration of God.” Few would employ the concept of “occasional” to summarize what such statements indicate about the degree to which prophets receive revelation from the Lord.

But of course these declarations are far from the only descriptions of revelation in the presiding councils of the Church. Elder Boyd K. Packer, for example, also spoke of recorded but unpublished revelations: “Perhaps one day other revelations which have been received and have been recorded will be published.”²⁷ Of his own experience as a member of the Twelve and the First Presidency, President James E. Faust said, “I can testify that the process of continuous revelation comes to the Church

very frequently. It comes daily.”²⁸ Speaking similarly, President Howard W. Hunter said that “there is an unending stream of revelation flowing constantly from the headwaters of heaven to God’s anointed servants on earth.”²⁹ And Spencer W. Kimball once reported of President McKay that he was “responsible for ... more revelations in his fifteen years of leadership than are in all the Doctrine and Covenants.” He added:

I could take time to tell you of these revelations — temples that have been appointed, people who have been called, apostles who have been chosen, great new movements that have been established, great new eras, great new challenges. ... They came by revelation.³⁰

Speaking specifically of their callings as seers, President Boyd K. Packer said of those who lead the Church that “it is their right to see as seers see” and, based on what they see, “it is their obligation to counsel and to warn.”³¹ And Elder Dallin H. Oaks observed, “Visions do happen. Voices are heard from beyond the veil. I know this.” He added that most revelation, however, “comes by the still, small voice,” and then said, “I testify to the reality of that kind of revelation, which I have come to know as a familiar, even daily, experience to guide me in the work of the Lord.”³²

In this connection President Boyd K. Packer’s declaration is noteworthy. He said that experiences such as “dreams, visions, visitations, miracles” are present in the Church, and added, “You can be sure that the Lord can, and at times does, manifest Himself with power and great glory.”³³ On another occasion he said, “He lives now, directing personally the operations of His Church upon the earth and manifesting Himself personally to His servants.”³⁴ He also remarked, “Revelation continues with us today. The promptings of the Spirit, the dreams, and the visions and the visitations, and the ministering of angels all are with us now.”³⁵

Of the revelatory powers that occur in the Church, Elder James E. Faust shared the experience enjoyed in President Kimball’s first temple meeting with all the general authorities following his ordination and setting apart as President of the Church. Elder Faust reported that President Harold B. Lee, who had just passed away, was present and that “the spirit of President Lee bore witness to us — that we should support and sustain President Spencer W. Kimball, and that everything that has been done is in accordance with the mind and the will of the Lord.” Elder Faust added that they felt the presence of other prophets as well,

including “President Smith, President Grant, President Taylor, President Snow, the Prophet himself, and even the Savior Jesus Christ.”³⁶

Speaking similarly, President Boyd K. Packer reported the presence of Brigham Young, Lorenzo Snow, and Elder Rudger Clawson at the dedication of the Brigham City temple,³⁷ and, at the solemn assembly in which he was sustained as President of the Church, Harold B. Lee spoke of the presence of “personages,” some of whom were unseen and some of whom were “seen.”³⁸

Elder David B. Haight publicly shared one experience in which he “was shown a panoramic view” of the Lord’s earthly ministry. Elder Haight saw the Lord’s baptism, his teaching, his healing of the sick, his mock trial, and his crucifixion and resurrection. He viewed such scenes “in impressive detail, confirming scriptural eyewitness accounts.” Elder Haight said, “[I] was taught over and over again the events of the betrayal, the mock trial, the scourging of the flesh of even one of the Godhead,” and witnessed his “struggling up the hill in His weakened condition carrying the cross.” He also saw the Savior stretched upon the cross, the nailing of his body to it, and his hanging on the cross “for public display.” “The eyes of my understanding,” Elder Haight remarked, “were opened by the Holy Spirit of God so as to behold many things.”³⁹

In this connection it is relevant that Boyd K. Packer could say of the Lord that “I know Him when I see Him, and I know His voice when I hear Him.”⁴⁰ This report bespeaks a familiarity with the Lord that completely belies Mason’s view. The same is true of Elder Richard G. Scott’s declaration: “I bear solemn witness that He lives. I know He lives because I know Him.”⁴¹ President Packer also referred to the words exclaimed by Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon following their joint vision of the Savior: “This is the testimony last of all which we give of him: That he lives! For we saw him” (D&C 76:22–23). President Packer’s comment was simply, “Their words are my words.”⁴² And, after remarking that many witnesses saw the Lord shortly following his resurrection, President Ezra Taft Benson added, “There have been many in this dispensation who have seen Him. As one of those special witnesses ... I testify to you that He lives. He lives with a resurrected body.”⁴³ President James E. Faust spoke similarly. Bearing witness of the Savior “as one of the special witnesses,” he said, “I know that He is close to the leadership of the Church ... He *lives*.” He added, “I can testify with the same conviction and sureness as the brother of Jared. As he saw the finger of God, it is written, ‘he believed no more, for he knew.’ I *know*.”⁴⁴

Speaking in the same general vein, President Marion G. Romney once remarked:

I think that the witness that I have and the witness that each [of the apostles] has, and the details of how it came, are too sacred to tell. I have never told anybody some of the experiences I have had, not even my wife. I know that God lives. I not only know that he lives, but I know him.⁴⁵

Speaking of this topic generally, Elder McConkie declared that modern apostles “are expected, like their counterparts of old, to see and hear and touch and converse with the Heavenly Person, as did those of old.”⁴⁶ He said that apostles have the obligation to see the Lord — indeed, that they “are entitled and expected to see his face, and that each one individually is obligated to ‘call upon him in mighty prayer’ until he prevails.”⁴⁷

Finally, it is important to note President Boyd K. Packer’s testimony that although the beginning of the Church was initiated “by the veil parting and visitations from beyond the veil,” such experience “if anything, has been intensified in our generation. I bear witness to that.”⁴⁸ On another occasion, he remarked, “There has come, these last several years, a succession of announcements that show our day to be a day of intense revelation, equaled, perhaps, only in those days of beginning, 150 years ago.”⁴⁹ And on yet a third occasion, he reported that “we now live in a more intense period of revelation” than in the early days of the Restoration. “The Lord is close to us and is revealing Himself to us as the great work of the Restoration moves forward.”⁵⁰

An apt summary of all that we have considered is President Harold B. Lee’s statement to members that “the measure of your true conversion ... is whether or not you are so living that you see the power of God resting upon the leaders of this Church and that testimony goes down into your heart like fire.”⁵¹ In President Lee’s view, the degree to which the power of God rests upon his leaders is significant enough, and apparent enough, that he equates appreciation of this with conversion itself.

All these statements are consistent with the expression of one Book of Mormon author who reported that “there are many among us who have many revelations.” He said that “as many as are not stiffnecked and have faith, have communion with the Holy Spirit, which maketh manifest unto the children of men” (Jarom 1:4). To Jarom, communion with the Spirit should be more than merely periodic for everyone.

The statements we have considered also put one in mind of President Boyd K. Packer's remark regarding those who disagree with decisions that are made and who point to their disagreement as "evidence that the leaders are not inspired." He said, "It has always been so. Helaman described those who 'began to disbelieve in the spirit of prophecy and in the spirit of revelation; and the judgments of God did stare them in the face' (Helaman 4:23)."⁵² On another occasion President Packer spoke of the sadness this entails. "To see clearly what is ahead and yet find members slow to respond or resistant to counsel or even rejecting the witness of the apostles and prophets brings deep sorrow."⁵³

All the statements we have considered are relevant to Mason's view that revelation in governing the Church is "occasional." Individually, and certainly as a whole, these declarations contradict Mason's claim. Moreover, all these statements appear in prominent places and are completely accessible — *and* there are a lot of them. Though Mason does not do so, it would seem incumbent on anyone who asserts "revelation is only occasional" to address them.

An Important Proviso about Revelation: Degrees of Importance and Degrees of Control

In light of so many statements regarding the ongoing nature of revelation in the presiding councils of the Church, it is important to note that just because revelation occurs frequently, even daily, does not mean it is constant and that the Lord gives revelation on every matter faced by the presiding Brethren. The Lord did not always direct Joseph Smith on the endless array of issues that came before him but left him to his own judgment. "Speaking of revelation," it is reported, "he [Joseph Smith] stated that when he was in a 'quandary,' he asked the Lord for a revelation, and when he could not get it, he followed the dictates of his own judgment. ..."⁵⁴

This is easy to understand, both in the Prophet's day and in ours. The current Brethren deal with an enormous number of matters, and they vary widely in importance. On this topic Elder Dallin H. Oaks remarked (regarding the experience of all members) that "we are often left to work out problems without the dictation or specific direction of the Spirit. That is part of the experience we must have in mortality." Thus, he said, "revelations from God ... are not constant. We believe in continuing revelation, not continuous revelation." But, he added:

Fortunately, we are never out of our Savior's sight, and if our judgment leads us into actions beyond the limits of what is

permissible and if we are listening ... the Lord will restrain us by the promptings of his Spirit.⁵⁵

President Packer taught the same principle. He said that “you cannot make a mistake, any mistake that will have any lasting consequence in your life, without having been warned and told not to do it.”⁵⁶

Although Elder Oaks and President Packer are speaking of members and leaders generally, there is every reason to suppose that is how the Lord often leads the Church itself. Although direct guidance is felt frequently (as mentioned earlier, Elder Oaks reports in this same talk that he experiences it “daily”), personal judgment also plays an important role in many dimensions. Often, on matters the Lord leaves to his leaders’ judgment in governing the Church, any number of options might be acceptable. Even though the alternatives might still vary in quality, they are all sufficiently satisfactory that he would actually restrain none of them. Nevertheless, there are always limits to what the Lord will permit — options that would *not* be acceptable — and thus, even on matters primarily left to mortal judgment, he prevents what goes beyond those limits. This would seem to be the purport of the remarks of Elder Oaks and President Packer as applied to the Church.

It is easy to imagine that the Lord exercises such varying degrees of direction and control based on the importance of the issues under consideration. Sidney Rigdon, for example, was directed by the Lord on two occasions to do as “seemeth him good” regarding certain particulars (D&C 41:8; 58:50–51), and other brethren were also told to decide a given issue on their own because, the Lord told them, that particular issue “mattereth not unto me” (D&C 60:5). In multiple other places the Lord speaks similarly — giving direction by the Spirit but leaving certain details for members to decide for themselves (e.g., D&C 38:37; 48:3; 61:35; and 62:7–8).

The scriptural record thus supports what would seem to be common sense: some issues matter a great deal, some matter to a small extent, and, comparatively speaking, some matter very little if at all, and the Lord exercises direction and control commensurate with such varying degrees of importance. Surely this reality explains why President J. Reuben Clark could remark that “we are not infallible in our judgment, and we err,”⁵⁷ while President Gordon B. Hinckley could say that “the Lord is directing this work, and He won’t let me or anyone else lead it astray”⁵⁸ (and President Uchtdorf could similarly say that “God will not allow His Church to drift from its appointed course”⁵⁹). The difference in such

statements would seem to stem naturally from a difference in the issues each has in mind and in their relative importance.⁶⁰

A Well-Known Statement by B. H. Roberts

In light of all this, it is useful to note a statement by B. H. Roberts, quoted both by Terryl Givens and more fully by another recent author, Roger Terry.⁶¹ Terry, in particular, seems to use the statement to support a view like Mason's regarding revelation to the Church. He quotes Elder Roberts as follows (emphases by Terry):

There is nothing in the doctrines of the Church which makes it necessary to believe that [men are constantly under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit], even ... men who are high officials of the Church. When we consider the imperfections of men, their passions and prejudices, that mar the Spirit of God in them, happy is the man who can *occasionally* ascend to the spiritual heights of inspiration and commune with God! ...

We should recognize the fact that we do many things by our own uninspired intelligence for the issues of which we are ourselves responsible. ... He will help men at need, but I think it improper to assign every word and every act of a man to an inspiration from the Lord. Were that the case, we would have to acknowledge ourselves as being wholly taken possession of by the Lord, being neither permitted to go to the right nor the left only as he guided us. There could then be no error made, nor blunder in judgment; free agency would be taken away, and the development of human intelligence prevented. Hence, I think it a reasonable conclusion to say that *constant, never-varying inspiration is not a factor in the administration of the affairs of the Church*; not even good men, though they be prophets or other high officials of the Church, are at all times and in all things inspired of God. It is only occasionally, and at need, that God comes to their aid.⁶²

Here Elder Roberts seems clearly to support Mason's view regarding the periodic nature of revelation (the subject we are considering in this section). But while Elder Roberts' statement no doubt serves a useful purpose in denying exaggerated claims and expectations regarding those who hold the apostleship — including its highest office — it also presents us with a false choice. After all, from the fact that prophets

are not inspired “at *all* times and in *all* things” it hardly follows that revelation is therefore only *occasional*. As we have seen at some length, the Brethren’s own statements identify the truth as falling somewhere between “constant” and “occasional,” and thus there is no justification for making these the only options. Indeed, Elder Roberts’ own reference to “need” suggests this: by his own account, if “need” is frequent, then inspiration too should be frequent. This, perhaps, is what we learn from the Brethren’s own declarations regarding the degree of guidance they receive: since they do not report receiving revelation “at all times and in all things,” but *do* report receiving it far more frequently than “occasionally,” the *need* for guidance would therefore itself seem to be more than occasional.

It is instructive to notice the false choice in this instance because Mason offers the same kind of faulty alternatives in his discussion. He positions his view of revelation-as-occasional specifically in contrast to this hypothetical: “If God were to dictate every decision and forcibly instigate every policy, if he refused to allow his Church leaders, from prophets to Primary presidents, to ever make mistakes or commit sin, he would be defeating his own purpose: to help us learn to use our moral agency to develop our divine nature and become like he is.”⁶³ The problem with this statement is that it is so exaggerated, it loses meaning (e.g., “every decision,” “every policy,” “every Church leader, from prophets to Primary presidents,” “ever make mistakes,” “ever commit sin,” “dictate,” and “forcibly instigate”).⁶⁴ As we have seen, there are more options for the Lord’s guidance than “every decision” and “occasional.” Thus, to create a choice where an extreme view like this is one of the alternatives, and where “occasional revelation” is the other, is, again, to create a false choice.

What all this demonstrates is the inherent risk in taking, as a starting point in one’s thinking, a position so extreme that it is obviously false. It is hard, for example, to imagine any thoughtful person who believes the Lord dictates “every decision” and prevents every mistake, or that “every word and every act” of anyone, in *any* position, is due to “inspiration from the Lord.” The fact that presiding *councils* govern the Church — not individuals (even prophets) acting on their own — is enough to disprove any notion of this sort.⁶⁵ In addition to its obvious inaccuracy, however, the risk in starting with an extreme view of this kind is that it can beguile us into thinking that when we deny it, we automatically embrace its opposite. In other words, it is easy to suppose that if revelation is not constant, then it must be infrequent — merely occasional. But this is

mistaken. If I deny the statement “revelation is received at all times and in all things,” all I assert is simply: “revelation is *not* received at all times and in all things.” I do *not* assert “revelation is only occasional.” That is more than a denial of the first statement: whether I am aware of it or not, it is a new contention, all its own. Unfortunately, it is easy to overlook this and thus to fall into the trap of manufacturing one extreme position *out of* another and then presenting the two of them as if *they* were our only alternatives. They’re not.⁶⁶

Summary

Multiple public reports by those holding the apostleship appear to be straightforward contradictions of Mason’s claim about revelation. We have considered close to forty such declarations, some regarding guidance to the Church per se and some regarding personal spiritual manifestations (including examples prior to their callings to the Twelve). Whereas it would be unreasonable to expect Mason to address all these statements, it is incumbent on one asserting that revelation is only occasional to address at least some of them — or, for that matter, others like them.⁶⁷ Unfortunately, Mason does not do so and thus does nothing to show how his view is to be reconciled with these contrary statements. Moreover, while it is possible to cite remarks by B. H. Roberts to support a view like Mason’s, that statement, due to its own weaknesses, actually fails to provide any such support.

Terry Givens and Patrick Mason: The Priesthood-Temple Restriction

In further exploring errors regarding revelation and prophets, it is useful to consider the priesthood-temple restriction removed in 1978. Both Givens and Mason make comments regarding this matter, and both suggest the original restriction was a mistake.⁶⁸ Much regarding this restriction remains a mystery, of course (a major reason for this will be discussed in due course), and thus it is important to avoid adding to the mystery by making important errors when discussing it. Unfortunately, both Givens and Mason make such mistakes in their respective treatments. Errors include severely misconstruing, overlooking, and mis-reporting statements by Spencer W. Kimball; omitting consideration of relevant statements about previous prophets’ concern with the priesthood restriction; failing to address public statements made by

apostolic witnesses who participated in the change; and overlooking a key distinction in the pattern of revelation in the Church.

Spencer W. Kimball: The Priesthood Restriction an Error?

In the course of discussing the imperfection and fallibility of Church leaders, Givens tells us that Spencer W. Kimball, as an apostle, “referred as early as 1963 to the priesthood ban as a ‘possible error’ for which he asked forgiveness.”⁶⁹ He is referring to this statement by Elder Kimball in a letter: “I know the Lord could change his policy and release the ban and forgive the possible error which brought about the deprivation.”⁷⁰

Patrick Mason cites the same statement in his own discussion of prophetic action.⁷¹ Like Givens, he takes the statement as evidence that prophets can make serious mistakes in guiding the Church, and asks: “Can I forgive prophets for their faults, even their occasionally severe ones, and be patient with my brothers?”⁷²

Radical Misinterpretation

Unfortunately, this is another case (as in their discussion of D&C 21:4–5)⁷³ where Givens and Mason both misread the very statement on which they rely. They take Elder Kimball to say that the priesthood-temple ban might have been a mistake and that the Lord could forgive the Church leaders who made it — all leading to the ultimate release of the restriction. But in reaching this conclusion, they completely overlook Elder Kimball’s explicit reference to the priesthood ban as *the Lord’s* policy. He says, “I know the Lord could change *his* policy and release the ban.” Then he speaks about forgiving the “possible error” that brought about the restriction in the first place. But Elder Kimball obviously cannot be speaking of the restriction itself as an error because he has already identified it as the Lord’s policy: he cannot be saying both that it is the Lord’s policy *and* that it is an error. And for the same reason, when Elder Kimball speaks about forgiveness, he cannot be speaking about forgiveness for the *policy*: since he has already identified the restriction as the Lord’s doing this would amount to saying that the Lord might forgive himself — which of course would be absurd.

So what can Elder Kimball mean in speaking of “possible error” and of “forgiveness”? In addressing this matter it is important to consider the circumstances. At the time Elder Kimball wrote this letter (1963) the priesthood-temple restriction had long been in place, and yet there was no universally accepted explanation for the restriction. As will be discussed later, the Lord regularly gives instructions without

explanations, and that often leaves all members (including leaders) on their own in trying to understand what the reasons might be in one case or another. (For example, why did the Lord restrict the priesthood to the tribe of Levi in the time of Moses? Why did he begin directing his work on earth through apostolic quorums after so many centuries of directing it through a system of patriarchs? If he is no respecter of persons, why, in the meridian of time, did God follow a sequence of presenting the gospel first to the house of Israel and only afterward to the gentiles? And so forth.) In such instances, some are entirely content to recognize that the Lord has left important questions incompletely answered (or, in some cases, not answered at all) and to leave the matter at that. Others pursue a different path and try to draw the best inferences they can from whatever evidence seems to apply. Those in the second category can be influenced by any number of factors, from cultural realities at the time to seeming hints appearing in scripture. At the time Elder Kimball wrote this letter, for example, one theory (advanced at the time by Joseph Fielding Smith and since explicitly disavowed by the Church) was that the restriction might have been due to lack of faithfulness in the pre-earth life. This theory is what Elder Kimball appears to have in mind in speaking of “possible error” and “forgiveness.” He seems to be saying something like this: “The priesthood ban is the Lord’s policy, but he could change it. *If* the restriction is due, as Joseph Fielding Smith (and some others) have thought, to error committed in the pre-earth existence, perhaps the Lord could forgive that error and release the restriction.” In nothing he says does Elder Kimball *endorse* this explanation, of course. (And again, the Church has explicitly disavowed it.) He obviously does not claim to know the reason for the restriction and thus speaks only hypothetically, mentioning nothing more than “possible” error. Nevertheless, as discussed above, Elder Kimball clearly identifies the restriction as the Lord’s policy and thus *cannot* be speaking of the policy itself as an error and as in need of forgiveness. He is conspicuously not saying what Givens and Mason represent him to be saying.

Ignoring a Relevant Statement

This becomes the more obvious when Elder Kimball goes on to say, in the same paragraph of the letter, that those who were pressing for change in the policy were bringing “into contempt the sacred principle of revelation and divine authority.”⁷⁴ He would have little reason to say this if he hadn’t thought the policy *was* a matter of revelation and divine authority — particularly since he has just explicitly identified it as *the Lord’s* policy.

This sentence about revelation simply assumes and reinforces the earlier sentence about whose policy it was. Unfortunately, Givens and Mason both fail to consider this part of Elder Kimball's letter, in addition to completely misreading the part they do consider. As a result, Givens and Mason both reach a conclusion about Spencer W. Kimball that is the opposite of the truth. And they both reach it in the same way: through misreading one part of Elder Kimball's letter and through omission of another part of the same letter.

Overlooking Obvious Counterevidence

But there is an additional problem, beyond such misreading and omission. After all, Givens takes Elder Kimball's statement from a source in which the following declaration appears within centimeters of what he quotes. It is Spencer W. Kimball again, speaking as President of the Church, in response to a question about the priesthood restriction:

I am not sure that there will be a change, although there could be. We are under the dictates of our Heavenly Father, and this is not my policy or the Church's policy. It is the policy of the Lord who has established it, and I know of no change, although we are subject to revelations of the Lord in case he should ever wish to make a change.⁷⁵

"This is not my policy or the Church's policy ... it is the policy of the Lord who has established it." This declaration is impossible to miss, appearing on the very page from which Givens quotes the earlier statement from Elder Kimball regarding "possible error" and "forgiveness."⁷⁶ It is additional evidence that Givens and Mason are inaccurate in their treatment.⁷⁷ Such a statement would be included and carefully considered in any adequate study of Spencer W. Kimball on this topic, and yet both authors fail to consider it altogether.

This is the third mistake in these authors' treatment of Elder/President Kimball (in addition to radically misinterpreting one of his statements — leading to a logically absurd consequence — and overlooking another). As a result, nothing in their efforts supports the view that Spencer W. Kimball thought the priesthood-temple restriction might have been an error and hoped that it could be forgiven. If the priesthood ban was really a mistake, as Givens and Mason suppose, it is at least clear that Spencer W. Kimball did not think so, and thus it is inaccurate at best and disingenuous at worst to use his words to further their contention.

Spencer W. Kimball: Personal Prejudice?

But there is yet an additional problem regarding the treatment of Spencer W. Kimball. In discussing President Kimball's persistent plea to the Lord regarding the priesthood-temple restriction, Mason reports the following: "Kimball had to struggle and fight — mostly, he admitted, against himself, and against the prejudices [presumably, the racist sentiments] natural to a white man born in America in 1895."⁷⁸

But notice what President Kimball *actually* said on this matter:

I had a great deal to fight ... myself, largely, because I had grown up with this thought that Negroes should not have the priesthood and I was prepared to go all the rest of my life until my death and fight for it and defend it as it was.

And:

I have always prided myself on being about as unprejudiced as to race as any man. I think my work with the minorities would prove that, but I am so completely convinced that the prophets know what they are doing and the Lord knows what he is doing, that I am willing to rest it there.⁷⁹

So President Kimball "admitted" nothing like Mason reports. Instead, he stated the exact opposite — that he was actually *free* of the prejudice Mason attributes to him and that what he had to "fight" was simply the psychological momentum created by his defense of the restriction over a lifetime. After all, once the responsibility fell upon him, as President, to lead in receiving the Lord's revelations on important matters, he could no longer merely defend others as he had done throughout his ministry. Since, if the Lord changed his policy (as had been promised) it would be led through President Kimball, it now became President Kimball's responsibility to ask independently, just as other Presidents before him had asked. It was a "fight" to shift from a longtime attitude of defense to an attitude of such openness to change should the Lord desire it, but this fight was *not* against "the prejudices natural to a white man born in America in 1895," as Mason contends. That is actually the opposite of what President Kimball "admitted" about himself.⁸⁰

Did the Lord Have to Wait on His Prophets?

It is also relevant to note this remark by Mason:

Some assume that for many decades prophets had patiently waited on God to reveal if and when the policy should change.

Based on Kimball's self-assessment, perhaps it was the case that God was patiently waiting on his prophets.⁸¹

The hypothesis Mason floats here overlooks significant evidence. For one thing, in addition to being radically mistaken about "Kimball's self-assessment," it overlooks President Kimball's own report that "his predecessors had sought the Lord's will concerning the priesthood policy, and for whatever reason 'the time had not yet come.'"⁸² Since President Kimball had himself worked intimately with five of these predecessors over his decades in the Twelve, he can be considered a reliable source. Mason's comment also overlooks Leonard Arrington's report regarding President Lee's fasting and prayer on the topic.⁸³ In suggesting that prophets were casual about the subject of the priesthood-temple restriction, it would seem that Mason should acknowledge and address such reports — particularly President Kimball's own.⁸⁴

In addition, Mason's conjecture about the Lord waiting on his prophets also overlooks one report regarding President David O. McKay. According to the account, President McKay reported that he had "inquired of the Lord repeatedly" regarding the restriction on blacks holding the priesthood. In his latest inquiry, he said, "I was told, with no discussion, not to bring the subject up with the Lord again; that time will come, but it will not be in my time, and to leave the subject alone."⁸⁵ This is consistent with other statements regarding President McKay, including the report by Elder Marion D. Hanks that President McKay "had pleaded and pleaded with the Lord but had not had the answer he sought."⁸⁶

Also relevant on this issue is the report of Elder Boyd K. Packer, who was concerned about President Kimball's inability to let the matter rest. He asked: "Why don't you forget this?" But then, we are told, he "answered his own question, 'Because you can't. The Lord won't let you.'"⁸⁷ To Elder Packer's mind President Kimball wasn't focused on the priesthood-temple restriction purely as a matter of personal interest or simply as a function of his personality. To some significant extent it was *the Lord* making him restless and guiding him to deep pondering and preparation on the matter. Contrary to his workings with President McKay, now the Lord *wouldn't let* his prophet leave the subject alone. All this, of course, is exactly what one would expect if the time had finally arrived for the change — as previous prophets had taught would come⁸⁸ — and the Lord was now preparing for that transformation.

All these matters are relevant to Mason's suggestion about the Lord's "waiting patiently on his prophets." In making this type of suggestion,

one would hope that Mason would acknowledge and account for such statements by and about leaders of the Church (e.g., President Lee, President McKay, and Elder Packer), and particularly by President Kimball himself about past prophets. Unfortunately, Mason considers and addresses none of them.

Failure to Address Relevant Public Statements

In addition to the specific instances of error we have seen in the approach Givens and Mason take toward the priesthood-temple restriction, a general mistake is their failure to address the statements made by those present when the policy was actually changed. Elder Bruce R. McConkie, for instance, reports that in the very meeting where the revelation was received, President Kimball explicitly referred to the priesthood restriction as something the Lord had “theretofore directed.”⁸⁹ This report, of course, is completely consistent with President Kimball’s earlier statement as President, cited above: “This is not my policy or the Church’s policy ... it is the policy of the Lord who has established it.” Following the change, President Gordon B. Hinckley also said of the restriction: “I don’t think it was wrong ... [V]arious things happened in different periods. There’s a reason for them.”⁹⁰ Elder McConkie spoke similarly, as did President Boyd K. Packer.⁹¹ No one present and who has spoken publicly of the experience, has ever said the revelation was a correction of error. And for that matter, neither does the official statement of the revelation recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants (Official Declaration 2).

This pattern is consistent with the report we saw earlier regarding President David O. McKay, who, it is said, was told that the time for the change would come but that it would simply not come in his time.⁹² It is also consistent with President Kimball’s report, to the same effect, regarding other prophets.⁹³

All these reports are relevant to the view held by Givens and Mason. They seem clear in suggesting that the priesthood-temple restriction was a mistake and that the 1978 revelation was a correction of that error. This is not an uncommon view. However, since each of the leaders mentioned above was intimately involved in apostolic discussions preceding the change, and since each was present when the change was actually made, *and* since each believed the change was *not* a correction, Givens and Mason need to supply an argument for why all of them were wrong. Unfortunately, both fail to consider the matter.

Overlooking a Key Distinction: Instructions vs. Explanations

In addition to the errors we have just reviewed, Givens and Mason also overlook a key distinction in understanding the pattern of revelation, both generally and in this dispensation. Although multiple scriptural principles pertain to revelation and sustaining the Brethren in general — most of which I have discussed elsewhere⁹⁴ — one is particularly important regarding the priesthood-temple restriction. It is the distinction between instructions and explanations, a matter briefly mentioned earlier, that is pertinent to thinking about this subject. Elder Dallin H. Oaks said on this topic:

If you read the scriptures with this question in mind, “Why did the Lord command this or why did he command that,” you find that in less than one in a hundred commands was any reason given. It’s not the pattern of the Lord to give reasons. We [mortals] can put reasons to revelation. We can put reasons to commandments. When we do, we’re on our own.⁹⁵

Elder Neal A. Maxwell emphasized the same point when he remarked: “I have found that the Lord gives more instructions than explanations.”⁹⁶ Thus, while it is tempting to think that the Lord gives full light on everything he directs, this is actually not his pattern. When it comes to reasons and explanations, he often leaves mortals in the dark.

This, as suggested by both Elder Oaks and Elder Maxwell, seems to apply to every level of the Lord’s kingdom. Incidents in the lives of Abraham, Moses, Lehi, Nephi, Mormon, Joseph Smith, and others all demonstrate that prophets often follow the Lord’s direction without knowing why. Such precedents should lead us to *expect* that the Lord will not typically reveal the reasons for his decisions and that those reasons may not even be evident in our lifetimes.⁹⁷

The Inevitability of Incomplete Understanding, Even by the First Presidency

This reality can leave even the First Presidency, just like earlier prophets, in the position of knowing by the Spirit a certain course to take without understanding exactly *why* it is the course to take. Given the Lord’s pattern, such incomplete understanding seems inevitable. Indeed, as Elder Maxwell said on one occasion: “There will be times when we follow the prophets even as they are in the very act of obedience themselves;

they will not, in fact, always be able to explain to us why they are doing what they are doing — much as Adam offered sacrifices without a full understanding of what underlay that special ritual.”⁹⁸ In a similar vein, President George Q. Cannon once said of the First Presidency that “we can see a certain distance in the light of the Spirit of God as it reveals to us His mind and His will, and we can take these steps with perfect security, knowing that they are the right steps to be taken.”⁹⁹ But, he added, the Brethren do not know the result that will come from these steps. Nor, as Elders Maxwell and Oaks have said, are the reasons for the instruction necessarily clear. It is relevant, therefore, that President Cannon remarked: “It is just as necessary that the Presidency and the Apostles should be tried as it is that you should be tried. It is as necessary that our faith should be called into exercise as that your faith should be called into exercise.”¹⁰⁰

Appreciating the reality and scope of such incomplete understanding is central to understanding revelation itself. Mason reports that it can be “painful and disorienting” to consider that multiple prophets over this dispensation continued to withhold temple blessings and the priesthood from blacks even though we do not have a clear understanding as to why they did so.¹⁰¹ This claim of anxiety due to such lack of understanding is no doubt true. But it would seem equally true of the prophets withholding those blessings: they did not have a clear understanding as to why they were doing so, either. This reality would appear to instantiate the general pattern of how the Lord works with mortals: he provides instructions, but he typically does not provide explanations, even to his prophets. To *expect* explanations, therefore, is to ignore centuries of precedent. This is the message of Elder Oaks, Elder Maxwell, and numerous scriptural incidents, and it was precisely Elder Kimball’s position regarding the priesthood restriction itself. He once expressed the wish that the Lord had provided “a little more clarity in the matter” — nevertheless, he said, “for me, it is enough.”¹⁰²

Non-Authoritative Attempts at Explanation

As briefly mentioned earlier, even when the Lord does not provide explanations for the direction he gives, members and leaders might still try to reason from the scriptures to determine what the explanation might be. Unless otherwise explicitly so declared, however, these explanatory efforts do not enjoy the same official status as the action itself. This is true regardless of whom the speaker(s) might be.

Elder Oaks' statement perfectly expresses this point. Following his remark that we are on our own when we try to explain the reasons for commandments, he adds (specifically regarding the priesthood-temple restriction):

Some people put reasons to the one we're talking about here, and they turned out to be spectacularly wrong. There is a lesson in that. ... I decided a long time ago that I had faith in the command and I had no faith in the reasons that had been suggested for it."¹⁰³

Here Elder Oaks relies on the distinction between instructions and explanations, accepting the priesthood-temple restriction itself as the correct action but simultaneously rejecting the various explanations that had been offered for it. The same distinction is evident in the Church essay regarding the priesthood. That essay disavows past explanations for the restriction, but (though it sets out at length the historical setting of the time) it does not disavow the restriction itself.¹⁰⁴

This distinction between instructions and explanations highlights a general pattern in this dispensation: the Lord laid the *doctrinal* foundation of the Church essentially through revelations to Joseph Smith (expressed in the standard works),¹⁰⁵ and he has subsequently provided revelation to prophets, seers, and revelators not in order to reveal new doctrine but specifically to direct the ongoing *work* of the Church.¹⁰⁶ Doctrinal — explanatory — matters are therefore the exclusive province of the scriptures. This is why Joseph Fielding Smith himself (who expressed the idea that the priesthood-temple restriction resulted from behavior in the pre-earth existence) emphasized that if his own doctrinal explanations “do not square with the revelations, we need not accept them.” He added: “If Joseph Fielding Smith writes something which is out of harmony with the revelations, then every member of the Church is duty bound to reject it.”¹⁰⁷ Similarly, Bruce R. McConkie taught that even if a President of the Church teaches a doctrine out of harmony with the scriptures, “it is the scripture that prevails” and, he added, “it does not make one particle of difference whose views are involved. The scriptures always take precedence.”¹⁰⁸

All this emphasizes the point made by Elder Oaks: the Lord (as we saw in the previous section) provides direction on an ongoing basis to guide the affairs of the kingdom, but he typically does not provide the doctrinal foundation or explanation for what he directs. Those who seek to provide explanations are thus “on their own,” and what they say in that domain is not authoritative if it contradicts or exceeds the clear teachings

of scripture.¹⁰⁹ Significant and impressive men of God have done this regarding the priesthood-temple restriction, of course — including Brigham Young, Joseph Fielding Smith, and Bruce R. McConkie — but, for the reasons we have seen, their explanations are not authoritative, and they never have been.

This distinction, then — between revelatory (and thus authoritative) instructions and non-revelatory explanations — seems pertinent to considering matters surrounding the priesthood-temple restriction. It is a distinction that applies to revelation generally, and it would seem important, therefore, to consider it in thinking about the priesthood-temple restriction specifically. Elder Oaks certainly does so. Unfortunately, Givens and Mason do not consider this matter in their respective comments on the subject, much less does either demonstrate why the distinction would be inapplicable in this case. Mason, for example, specifically refers to the Church essay regarding race and the priesthood¹¹⁰ and appears, at least tacitly, as if he might suppose this official disavowal of past explanations for the restriction is tantamount to disavowal of the restriction itself. But this view is persuasive only if one considers the distinction between instructions and explanations in the first place and then shows why it doesn't apply in this particular circumstance. Mason does not do this. (In addition, of course, he also fails to account for the reports, which we saw earlier, of multiple leaders — including President Kimball — who participated in the change and who manifestly did not believe the change was a correction of previous error.) Indeed, both Givens and Mason overlook the distinction between revelatory (and thus authoritative) instructions and non-revelatory explanations altogether and thus both fail to account for the issues it raises for their thinking about the priesthood-temple restriction.¹¹¹

Summary

The assertions we have considered by Givens and Mason regarding the priesthood-temple restriction are flawed. Both appeal to Spencer W. Kimball in multiple ways to indicate the possibility that the priesthood ban was a mistake and that the 1978 revelation corrected the error. However, although this does not seem to be an uncommon attitude — and although it is logically possible that this view of history is accurate — none of their appeals to Spencer W. Kimball actually supports it. Indeed, all their appeals to him backfire and, if anything, actually support the opposite of that position (including their oversight and/or avoidance of a statement by President Kimball that explicitly

states the opposite of that position). Both also fail to address and account for public statements by apostolic witnesses who participated in the 1978 revelation and who contradict the idea that the change was a correction of error. Finally, as we have just seen, they both overlook — and therefore fail to consider — the distinction between revelatory (and thus authoritative) instructions and non-authoritative explanations. This is a key distinction in understanding the Lord's general pattern in his dealings with mortals, including with the prophets and apostles he has chosen to represent him. As such it would seem to be a key distinction to understanding the priesthood-temple restriction as well.

As I said at the beginning, a good deal of mystery surrounds the priesthood-temple restriction, and that is why the topic generates so much discussion. The only point here is that consideration of this topic is not helped by the kinds of mistakes and oversights we have seen — errors in analysis that are both significant and avoidable and that therefore reduce clarity instead of increasing it.

Conclusion to Part One

As mentioned at the beginning, the motivation for this paper is to examine whether serious errors are occurring — and even increasing — in LDS scholarly discussions of prophets and revelation.

Although we are only partway through consideration of the matter, it is significant that we have already identified multiple errors on the topic in reputable sources. We have seen five important claims that prove to be faulty — either because they are implausible, completely tenuous, or manifestly false¹¹² — and we have also seen eleven fundamental errors in analysis that lead to these faulty claims. These errors range from severely misinterpreting a verse on “patience and faith” and overlooking numerous (and public) first-hand apostolic declarations regarding revelation, to misreading, omitting, and mis-reporting statements by Spencer W. Kimball as well as failing to appreciate a key distinction in understanding the Lord's pattern of revelation to mortals.

The errors we have seen do not appear to be trivial. While one can understand failure to consider one public statement or another on a particular topic — or perhaps even a handful — when those statements are so central and so numerous, it is difficult to understand overlooking them all.¹¹³ Moreover, while it is also possible to appreciate how one can overlook a particular passage of scripture in forming one's conclusions, it is difficult to justify taking a single scriptural phrase completely out

of context and using it to promulgate a conclusion that is both highly significant *and* the near-opposite of what the passage actually says. It is even more difficult to justify this when the resulting misinterpretation also entails an absurdity. It is similarly hard to justify reporting an apostle's comment to be stating the exact opposite of what it actually says (especially when the misinterpretation results in another absurdity) as well as to excuse omissions of other statements by that leader that subvert the claim one is making. And so forth. It is hard not to see such matters as serious.

It is also worth noting that although we have examined some of the material from Mason's chapter, "In All Patience and Faith," more in that chapter regarding prophets and revelation calls for similar commentary.

This is still only the beginning, however. Part Two will consider additional claims and analyses that, to all appearances, are just as faulty as those we have seen here. These will be drawn from Grant Hardy's discussion regarding Nephi. Part Three will then address a potpourri of further examples, as well as provide a general conclusion regarding the subject of this study.

Duane Boyce received his academic training in psychology, philosophy, and the clinical treatment of families. He received a PhD from Brigham Young University and conducted his postdoctoral study in developmental psychology at Harvard University. He was a member of the Moral Studies Group at BYU and served on the faculty there. He is a founding partner of the Arbinger Institute, a worldwide management consulting and educational firm, and is the author or coauthor of five books. He has published academic essays on scriptural topics in *BYU Studies*, *The FARMS Review*, *Religious Educator*, *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, and *the Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture*. He is author of the recent book, *Even unto Bloodshed: An LDS Perspective on War* (Kofford, 2015). Among other callings, he has served as a bishop and a stake president.

Endnotes

1. See, for example, Stéphane Courtois, *et al.*, eds. *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1999). I give a brief treatment of the grisly reality, with

additional sources, in my *Even unto Bloodshed: An LDS Perspective on War* (Salt Lake City: Kofford, 2015), 194–97, 206–9.

2. One appearance of this charge is in David Persuitte, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2000), 11. If it is possible to excuse Persuitte for committing this error in the first edition of his book (published in 1985), it is harder to do so for his repeat of the error in his second edition. Kenneth Godfrey, for one, drew attention to the mistake in his review of the book in 1986. See Kenneth H. Godfrey, “Not Enough Trouble,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19/3 (1986): 143. A few years later John Welch and Miriam A. Smith discussed it as well. See “Joseph Smith: ‘Author and Proprietor,’” in John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1992), Kindle location 2210–2243.
3. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), and *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1953). For a brief overview of Wittgenstein and of his two contrary waves of influence, see my “The Spirit and the Intellect: Lessons in Humility,” *BYU Studies*, 50/4 (2011): 84–86.
4. Here’s an example of what I mean. Harvard paleontologist and evolutionary biologist, Stephen Gould, reports that for years researchers in his discipline often failed to publish what they actually found most frequently in their field work, namely: (1) when species appeared in the geological record, they did so suddenly, without evidence of gradual evolutionary development beforehand; and (2) most species appearing in the fossil record did not exhibit observable change over time — they looked about the same when they disappeared from the record as they did when they first arrived. Thus, while transitional forms were apparent between larger taxonomic groups, they were generally lacking at the species level. Because paleontologists considered such results to depart from what evolutionary theory predicted, they did not consider such fossil studies to offer new and important evidence but instead to indicate the imperfection of the record itself: the geological record had to be incomplete because it failed to conform to what they understood from the theory must have actually happened. As a result, paleontologists were disappointed

by much of what they actually found regarding species development, and “traditional paleontology therefore placed itself into a straightjacket that made the practice of science effectively impossible” (763). Specifically, rather than relying on what they found most frequently, paleontologists came to rely instead on individual isolated examples that at least seemed to demonstrate the gradual species change they expected. These included the horse, the oyster *Gryphaea*, and the antlers of the “Irish Elk” — examples that, according to Gould, became famous and that appeared in textbook treatments of evolution (and that were then replicated in succeeding textbook treatments). Unfortunately, Gould tells us, all these famous examples were shown to be false when studied rigorously. They did not actually demonstrate the gradual species development that textbooks used them to *exemplify*. It is no surprise that when this reality finally became known, other evolutionary scholars (such as biologists) — who had relied on such famous examples as *representative* of geological findings — were “often astounded and incredulous” at learning the actual geological reality (760). For his complete discussion of the topic, see Stephen Jay Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2002), esp. 745–63. I give a more complete treatment of these and related matters in my “Of Science, Scripture, and Surprise,” *FARMS Review*, 20/2, (2008): 163–214; <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1431&index=8>.

5. See Terryl Givens, “Letter to a Doubter,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 4 (2013), 135; <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/letter-to-a-doubter/#more-2521>.
6. *Ibid.*, 136.
7. In addition to “Letter to a Doubter,” see Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2014), Kindle location 1396. See also Marc Bohn, “Terryl Givens on What It Means to Sustain,” *Times and Seasons*, February 3, 2016; <http://www.timesandseasons.org/index.php/2016/02/terryl-givens-on-what-it-means-to-sustain/>.
8. See the chapter, “In All Patience and Faith,” in Patrick Q. Mason, *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2015). Although he does not refer to this particular verse, David Bokovoy shares thoughts along similar lines in his “How to Save LDS Youth in a Secular Age,” *Patheos*, December

- 26, 2014, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidbokovoy/2014/12/how-to-save-lds-youth-in-a-secular-age/>.
9. The passage is specifically about Joseph Smith, but Givens and Mason apply its message to prophets generally. I will do the same in order to address their use of it.
10. Russell M. Nelson, "Becoming True Millennials," January 10, 2016, Young Adult Broadcast; <https://www.lds.org/broadcasts/article/worldwide-devotionals/2016/01/becoming-true-millennials?lang=eng>.
11. See, for just four examples: "New Policy on Gay Couples and Their Children Roils Mormon Church," *New York Times*, November 13, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/14/us/mormons-set-to-quit-church-over-policy-on-gay-couples-and-their-children.html?_r=0; "Mormon church labels same-sex couples apostates," *CNN*, November 7, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/06/us/mormon-church-policy/>; "New Mormon policy makes apostates of married same-sex couples, bars children from rites," *Salt Lake Tribune*, November 5, 2015, <http://www.sltrib.com/home/3144035-155/new-mormon-policy-would-make-apostates>; and "Mormon LGBT policy change triggers widespread backlash," *Salt Lake Tribune*, November 12, 2015, <http://www.sltrib.com/news/lds/3170210-155/mormon-lgbt-policy-change-triggers-widespread>. Indeed, according to one source, Facebook was also "ablaze with dismay" over President Nelson's own comments. See "Policy or Revelation?" *Times and Seasons*, January 14, 2016, <https://www.timesandseasons.org/index.php/2016/01/policy-or-revelation/>.
12. M. Russell Ballard, "To the Saints in the Utah South Area," September 23, 2015, <https://www.lds.org/prophets-and-apostles/unto-all-the-world/to-the-saints-in-the-utah-south-area?lang=eng>.
13. President Harold B. Lee spoke explicitly of the expression "in all patience and faith" in terms of what we may have to change in our lives as a result of declarations by the Brethren. He said: "You may not like what comes from the authority of the Church. It may contradict your political views. It may contradict your social views. It may interfere with some of your social life. But if you listen to these things, as if from the mouth of the Lord Himself, with patience and faith, the promise is that 'the gates of hell shall not prevail against you; yea, and the Lord God will disperse the powers of darkness from before you, and cause the heavens to

- shake for your good, and his name's glory' (D&C 21:6)." See Harold B. Lee, "Heeding the True Messenger of Jesus Christ," in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Harold B. Lee*, Chapter 9, <https://www.lds.org/manual/teachings-harold-b-lee/chapter-9?lang=eng>.
14. This chapter appears in Patrick Q. Mason, *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2015).
 15. Mason's reasons for this view are embedded in his discussion of the priesthood-temple restriction, a topic covered in the section entitled "Terry Givens and Patrick Mason: The Priesthood-Temple Restriction."
 16. Patrick Mason, *Planted*, Kindle location 2310.
 17. One of the grave errors he has in mind is the priesthood-temple restriction removed in 1978. See *Planted*, Kindle location 2345. This topic is covered in the section entitled "Terry Givens and Patrick Mason: The Priesthood-Temple Restriction."
 18. Russell M. Nelson, "Sweet Power of Prayer," General Conference, April 2003, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2003/04/sweet-power-of-prayer?lang=eng>.)
 19. See Sheri L. Dew, *Go Forward with Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1996), 379. See also: Thomas S. Monson, *Inspiring Experiences that Build Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret), 1994, 73–74; "They Pray and They Go," General Conference, April 2002, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2002/04/they-pray-and-they-go?lang=eng&r=1>; "Your Patriarchal Blessing: A Liahona of Light," General Conference, October 1986, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1986/10/your-patriarchal-blessing-a-liahona-of-light?lang=eng&r=1>;
 20. Russell M. Nelson, *The Gateway We Call Death* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1995), 100–1.
 21. Russell M. Nelson, "The Price of Priesthood Power," General Conference, April 2016, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2016/04/the-price-of-priesthood-power?lang=eng>.
 22. Joseph Fielding McConkie, *The Bruce R. McConkie Story: Reflections of a Son* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2003), 12.
 23. Dallin H. Oaks, *Life's Lessons Learned: Personal Reflections* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2011), Kindle location 788–801.

- Incidentally, as Elder Oaks remarks here, he completely forgot the notification that the Lord would “call” him from the Court. Only as he prepared to write the above book and re-read his journal did he remember all the Lord had told him and realize its meaning.
24. Spencer W. Kimball, “Revelation: The Word of the Lord to His Prophets,” General Conference, April 1977, <http://www.lds.org/general-conference/1977/04/revelation-the-word-of-the-lord-to-his-prophets?lang=eng&query=>.
 25. Harold B. Lee, “Admonitions for the Priesthood of God,” General Conference, October 1972; <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1972/10/admonitions-for-the-priesthood-of-god?lang=eng>.
 26. Gordon B. Hinckley, in *The Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1997), 71, 555.
 27. Boyd K. Packer, “We Believe All that God Has Revealed,” General Conference, April 1974, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1974/04/we-believe-all-that-god-has-revealed?lang=eng&r=1>.
 28. James E. Faust, “Come Out of the Darkness into the Light,” CES Fireside for Young Adults (8 September 2002); <https://www.lds.org/media-library/video/2002-09-05-come-out-of-the-darkness-into-the-light?lang=eng#d>.
 29. Howard W. Hunter, *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, ed., Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 196.
 30. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 447, Kindle location 6365.
 31. Boyd K. Packer, “The Snow-White Birds,” address at BYU, 29 August 1995; https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/boyd-k-packer_snow-white-birds/. It also appears in Boyd K. Packer, *Mine Errand from the Lord: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Boyd K. Packer* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2008), 458.
 32. Dallin H. Oaks, “Teaching and Learning by the Spirit,” *Ensign*, March 1997; <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1997/03/teaching-and-learning-by-the-spirit?lang=eng>. He also emphasized that those who have such experiences do not speak of them because “we are instructed not to do so (see D&C 63:64) and because we understand that the channels of revelation will be closed if we show these things before the world.”

33. Boyd K. Packer, "The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ — Plain and Precious Things," General Conference, April 2005; https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2005/04/the-book-of-mormon-another-testament-of-jesus-christ-plain-and-precious-things?lang=eng&_r=1.
34. Boyd K. Packer, "The Light of Thy Childhood Again," *Church News*, November 28, 2009; <http://www.ldschurchnewsarchive.com/articles/58265/The-Light-of-Thy-Childhood-Again.html>.
35. Boyd K. Packer, "Revelation in a Changing World," General Conference, October 1989; https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1989/10/revelation-in-a-changing-world?lang=eng&_r=1.
36. James E. Faust, "The Odyssey to Happiness," BYU Fireside, January 6, 1974; https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/james-e-faust_odyssey-happiness/. This wording is a transcription of Elder Faust's spoken words, which were recorded and made publicly available at the time. That recorded version seems unavailable currently, however, and the printed version is somewhat modified from Elder Faust's actual verbal expression.
37. See "Dedicatory Prayer," Brigham City Utah Temple, 23 September 2012; <http://ldschurchtemples.org/brighamcity/prayer/>.
38. Harold B. Lee, "May the Kingdom of God Go Forth," General Conference, October 1972; <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1972/10/may-the-kingdom-of-god-go-forth?lang=eng>. His actual words were: "There has been here an overwhelming spiritual endowment, attesting, no doubt, that in all likelihood we are in the presence of personages, seen and unseen, who are in attendance." Although President Lee, according to the command in D&C 63:64, attempts to be appropriately vague in these remarks, the reference to "personages seen" makes at least part of his meaning explicit.
39. David B. Haight, "The Sacrament—and the Sacrifice," General Conference, October 1989; <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1989/10/the-sacrament-and-the-sacrifice?lang=eng>.
40. Sarah Jane Weaver, "President Packer Shares Christmas Testimony: 'Jesus is the Christ,'" *Church News*, December 25, 2010; <http://www.ldschurchnewsarchive.com/articles/60298/President-Packer-shares-Christmas-testimony-Jesus-is-the-Christ.html>.

41. Richard G. Scott, "Sisters in Councils," Worldwide Leadership Training, February 2011, <https://www.lds.org/broadcasts/article/worldwide-leadership-training/2011/02/sisters-in-councils?lang=eng>.
42. Boyd K. Packer, "The Witness," General Conference, April 2014; https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2014/04/the-witness?lang=eng&_r=1&cid=GCA14-L0814-1-notePacker.
43. Ezra Taft Benson, "Jesus Christ: Our Savior, Our God," *Ensign*, April 1991; <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1991/04/jesus-christ-our-savior-our-god?lang=eng>.
44. James E. Faust, "Beginnings," CES Fireside for Young Adults, May 7, 2006; <https://www.lds.org/media-library/video/2006-05-03-beginnings?category=ces-devotionals/2006-ces-firesides&lang=eng>.
45. Marion G. Romney, in F. Burton Howard, *Marion G. Romney: His Life and Faith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 222.
46. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1978), 592.
47. *Ibid.*, 594.
48. Boyd K. Packer, in an address for a Family History broadcast, 18 November 1999; cited in *Mine Errand from the Lord: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Boyd K. Packer* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2008), 137.
49. Boyd K. Packer, "A Tribute to the Rank and File of the Church," General Conference, April 1980; <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1980/04/a-tribute-to-the-rank-and-file-of-the-church?lang=eng>.
50. Boyd K. Packer, "A Call to Faith," address at a seminar for new mission presidents, 27 June 2007; cited in *Mine Errand from the Lord: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Boyd K. Packer* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2008), 137. Some might wonder if President Packer is technically correct on this matter since it is possible he is not aware of every manifestation that occurred in the early days and therefore might not be in the perfect position to make this comparison. (For a treatment of many experiences that are not well-known, see John W. Welch, ed., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations 1820–1844*, 2nd ed. [Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: BYU Press and Deseret, 2017]). But even if

this is true — even if President Packer is comparing the current era only with experiences that are common knowledge regarding the opening of this dispensation — it is still a highly significant statement. And that’s to say the least of it. Moreover, whatever the historical record of the early days of this dispensation, no outside observer can be aware of the details President Packer has in mind in speaking so strongly of the current period. What experiences does he have in mind, over the decades of his intimate association with numerous apostles and prophets in furthering the Lord’s work, that aren’t known *at all* by the public and that will become known only in some future history? In any event, whether one imagines President Packer to be technically accurate or not, his comparison must at least be seen as inconsistent with the claim that revelation is only occasional in the Lord’s guidance of the Church.

51. Harold B. Lee, “Be Loyal to the Royal Within You,” *BYU Speeches*, 11 September 1973, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/harold-b-lee_loyal-royal-within/. President Lee quotes the similar words of an unnamed apostle and then makes those words his own in emphasizing his point on this matter.
52. Boyd K. Packer, “Revelation in a Changing World,” General Conference, October 1989; <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1989/10/revelation-in-a-changing-world?lang=eng&r=1>.
53. Boyd K. Packer, “The Twelve Apostles,” General Conference, October 1996; <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1996/10/the-twelve-apostles?lang=eng&r=1>.
54. “The Prairies, Nauvoo, Joe Smith, The Temple, the Mormons, etc.,” *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*, 15 September 1843, in *The Papers of Joseph Smith, Vol. 1: Autobiographical and Historical Writings*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1989, 443), cited in Matthew Roper, “Joseph Smith, Revelation, and Book of Mormon Geography,” *The FARMS Review*, 22/2, 2010, 83; <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/publications/review/22/2/S00003-5176a03b6d5fc3Roper.pdf>.
55. Dallin H. Oaks, “Teaching and Learning by the Spirit,” *Ensign*, March 1997, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1997/03/teaching-and-learning-by-the-spirit?lang=eng>.

56. Devotional address at BYU–Hawaii, 1 March 2005; cited in Boyd K. Packer, *Mine Errand from the Lord: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Boyd K. Packer* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2008), 131.
57. Cited in D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1997), 7, 368.
58. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Excerpts from Recent Addresses of President Gordon B. Hinckley,” *Ensign*, July 1996; <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1996/07/excerpts-from-recent-addresses-of-president-gordon-b-hinckley?lang=eng>.
59. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come, Join with Us,” General Conference, November 2013; <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/10/come-join-with-us?lang=eng>.
60. Although observers can reach different judgments on the matter, it actually does not seem difficult to imagine at least the *kinds* of issues that are of highest importance and therefore on which the Lord would likely exercise the greatest influence. It is plausible to suppose these would be matters on which First Presidencies make the most formal announcements and take the most visible action, particularly on matters that affect the most people in the most significant ways. Insistence on the centrality of the family, the importance of (and clarifications about) moral cleanliness, the cessation of polygamy, the lifting of restrictions on the priesthood, and so forth would seem to fall in this category. It would also seem to include matters of significant social and moral importance, such as gambling and lotteries, pornography, the Equal Rights Amendment, homosexual conduct, and same-sex marriage. It seems plausible that mistaken decisions on such momentous topics would fall in the category of “leading astray,” whereas mistakes regarding, say, activity days for Primary children or the awards to be earned by Priests or Laurels — or even the length of missionary service — would not. It is not hard to imagine that denials of “fallibility” apply with ease to matters of smaller important (e.g., various programmatic matters of one sort or another), while affirmations about “not leading astray” apply with equal ease to matters of significant social and spiritual importance. And of course one can imagine a wide range of issues in between. As mentioned, on many matters it would seem the Lord finds multiple options acceptable enough and simply allows his leaders to exercise their own judgment in deciding among them. In this connection,

it is relevant to note again President Nelson's explicit declaration about the receipt of revelation regarding children from the homes of gay couples. (See the subsection, "A Natural Interpretation," in the section "Terry Givens and Patrick Mason: 'In All Patience and Faith'" earlier in this Part.) A report of this sort gives a data point that helps inform us about the types of issues on which the Lord provides clear direction. It is not sufficient to provide anything like a full picture, of course, and one can expect reasonable people to disagree about particulars. Nevertheless, data of this sort — combined with the multiplicity of firsthand declarations testifying to ongoing and regular revelation — are difficult to reconcile with the claim that (as Mason asserts) for the most part the Lord simply keeps his distance and that his direction of the Brethren is only occasional.

61. See Terry Givens and Fiona Givens, *Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2014), Kindle location 1433, and Roger Terry, "Why the True Church Cannot Be Perfect," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 46/1 (Spring 2013), 94–107, https://www.dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/Dialogue_V46N01_427c.pdf.
62. B. H. Roberts, "Relation of Inspiration and Revelation to Church Government," *Improvement Era*, March 1905, 362; cited in Roger Terry, "Why the True Church Cannot Be Perfect," 105.
63. *Planted*, Kindle location 2308.
64. As another example, Mason rejects the view of "an ironclad requirement that prophets be 100 percent right 100 percent of the time" and of prophets as "incorruptible paragons of virtue whose every word comes straight like lightning from heaven and whose every action is godly in both purpose and execution" (*Planted*, Kindle location 2288). This is another example of a position so extreme that there is no significance in Mason's denying it. It is hard to imagine who *wouldn't* deny it. We have already considered a more nuanced view of revelation in this section, and additional relevant material will be discussed in the next.
65. I discuss the preeminent role that councils play in Church government in my "Sustaining the Brethren," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 14 (2015): vii–xxxii; <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/sustaining-the-brethren/>. In terms of

decisions, the highest authority in the Church is the full First Presidency, not the President alone.

66. Incidentally, this is how debates are created generally in which disputants end up defending rival positions *both* of which are false. It is impossible for either contender to win since each is defending a false claim. That is always the risk when the starting point of one's thinking is the formulation of a position so extreme that it is obviously mistaken: it easily leads to a contrary view that is just as extreme and just as mistaken. Nothing is gained by defending either position.

As a final (but smaller) point, it is also possible that revelation is genuinely more common in recent decades than in the time of Elder Roberts. If the *need* for revelation is greater now than it was then, by his own principle regarding need, the frequency of revelation would also be greater. On this very matter, Elder Neal A. Maxwell reported in the late '70s that "the volume of 'operational revelation'" is at the highest level it's ever been" (see Bruce C. Hafen, *A Disciple's Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell* [Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2002], 414), and we have already considered three remarks by President Boyd K. Packer regarding the unique intensity of revelation in recent times — well past the '70s and up to the present. (See the subsection "Prophets and Apostles on Revelation.") It is possible, therefore, that — even aside from the other problems inherent in quoting Elder Roberts' statement — it is an outdated report.

67. In an endnote (Kindle location 2481) Mason does refer to Wilford Woodruff's well-known declaration that the Lord will not permit the Church to be led astray. Mason interprets this statement to mean that the Brethren are precluded from leading the Church "entirely" astray, but that they are not precluded from making decisions that are wrong, serious, and have long-lasting negative consequences. The first thing to notice, however, is that this conception of "not leading astray" is so narrow — and permits so many serious and far-reaching errors — that meeting this standard would not require much revelation at all. Mason would not consider this a problem, of course, because that is exactly what he believes. Indeed, he believes the Church can be led significantly astray — though not entirely — precisely because he believes that revelation is only occasional. The difficulty is that Mason does not

even consider the numerous declarations of ongoing revelation that we have seen (much less accommodate them in his view), and thus he has not yet earned the right to assume this view of revelation. Indeed, there is every reason to believe Mason's view is false. But if so, it can hardly be used as a premise in any *other* argument — i.e., 'since revelation is only occasional, Wilford Woodruff must have meant only that no one can lead the Church *entirely* astray.' If Mason's premise about revelation is wrong, he can hardly claim that the conclusion he bases on it is *right*. As a further matter, Mason also overlooks a distinction that is important in understanding how the Lord works with his prophets, and this oversight, too, is instrumental in his thinking about revelation, including his view of Wilford Woodruff. This distinction will be discussed in the section entitled, "Terryl Givens and Patrick Mason: The Priesthood-Temple Restriction."

68. Givens reports that Spencer W. Kimball considered the restriction a "possible error" and he does so in his paragraph about the imperfections and weaknesses of prophets. And this comment about Elder Kimball is immediately followed by his remark about the need for patience and faith regarding prophets since they are not always sage and inspired. See Terryl Givens, "Letter to a Doubter," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 4 (2013): 135–36; <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/letter-to-a-doubter/#more-2521>. Givens would have no reason to mention the priesthood-temple restriction in the context of prophets' imperfections and weaknesses — and their inability to be always sage and inspired — if he didn't think the restriction was an illustration of those weaknesses and inabilities. It is difficult, at least, to imagine what other conclusion one could be expected to draw from his mention of the subject in this context. Mason is perfectly explicit in his view of the priesthood restriction as an error. He compares it to Lehi's "temporary lapse" in murmuring against the Lord — remarking, however, that the lapse was not equivalent to the greater problem of priesthood-temple denial and its effect over generations. He discusses the topic in the context of "human fallenness" and "sin" and, among other remarks, asks, "If I personally believe that Brigham Young erred when he instituted the priesthood ban in 1852, can I forgive him?" See Patrick Q. Mason, *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2015), Kindle locations 2408–2437

69. Givens, "Letter to a Doubter," 135.
70. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), Kindle location 6394.
71. See the chapter, "In All Patience and Faith," in Patrick Q. Mason, *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2015), Kindle location 2368.
72. Patrick Q. Mason, *Planted*, Kindle location 2396.
73. See the first section in this Part, "Terry L. Givens and Patrick Q. Mason: 'In All Patience and Faith.'"
74. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), Kindle location 6394.
75. *Ibid.*, 449, Kindle location 6393.
76. It is possible that Mason did not see this statement by President Kimball since, unlike Givens, he takes the earlier quote about "possible error" and "forgiveness" from a secondary source rather than from the actual *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Givens' source). See Note 14 in Mason's *Planted*, Kindle location 2499.
77. It would not be legitimate to argue that this statement by Spencer W. Kimball, as President, represents a change from his thinking as an apostle. As seen earlier, when we read the first statement (written as an apostle) accurately, it is perfectly consistent with the later statement made when he was President.
78. Patrick Q. Mason, *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2015), Kindle location 2374.
79. These statements are reported in Edward L. Kimball's standard history of the topic, "Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood," *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008), 48, 28–29, file:///C:/Users/Duane%20Boyce/Downloads/47.2kimballspencerb0a083df-b26b-430b-9ce2-3efec584dcd9.pdf. Mason includes the first quote in his book, though not the second. (Ellipses in the original.)
80. As an incidental matter, there are independent reasons to believe that President Kimball was free of personal prejudice. One of these is what he himself mentions: a long and well-documented ministry of service to minorities. Another is the reality of his life circumstances. From age 3 until his calling to the Twelve at

age 48, Spencer spent his life in Thatcher and Safford, Arizona — geographical areas that offered little exposure to African Americans. Personal prejudice is often born in areas where the wider community is already separated by racial mistrust and animosity, and Spencer Kimball would have experienced little of that over the first five decades of his life in those communities.

81. Patrick Q. Mason, *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2015), Kindle location 2374. The idea that God was waiting on his prophets is Mason's answer to his earlier question: "Why didn't God inspire at least one of the prophets — there were ten in that span, from Brigham Young up until Spencer W. Kimball — to make a change on such a momentous issue?" (*Planted*, Kindle location 2207).
82. See Edward L. Kimball, "Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood," *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008), 45, file:///C:/Users/Duane%20Boyce/Downloads/47.2kimballspencerb0a083df-b26b-430b-9ce2-3efec584dcd9.pdf. This study by Edward Kimball is a standard history on the subject of President Kimball and the priesthood-temple restriction, and it is one that Mason cites. That is why it is surprising that Mason overlooks an important element like this that appears in that source.
83. Cited in Edward L. Kimball, "Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood," *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008), 32 (Note 71), file:///C:/Users/Duane%20Boyce/Downloads/47.2kimballspencerb0a083df-b26b-430b-9ce2-3efec584dcd9.pdf. Again, it is surprising that Mason overlooks a matter like this since it appears in this source, which he elsewhere cites. Incidentally, L. Brent Goates, President Lee's official biographer, expressed doubt about this story. His doubt is not dispositive, however. He also doubted another story about President Lee that was actually true. This was in reference to "an alleged dream or revelation which Elder Lee was supposed to have received during the Los Angeles Temple dedicatory services." In support of his discounting of the stories, Goates quotes from Elder Lee's brief diary account — but he completely overlooks President Lee's more robust description of the event in General Conference years later. There, President Lee specifically referred to this experience as a vision, whose dimensions were multiple and profound, and about which he spoke in utmost solemnity. The experience was thus more dramatic than Goates reports and the

persons reporting it were more reliable than Goates thinks. Even meticulous biographers can be mistaken. There is thus no reason to think that the doubts Goates expressed regarding President Lee's fasting and prayer on the subject supersede Arrington's straightforward report of the matter. For the discussion by Goates, see L. Brent Goates, *Harold B. Lee: Prophet and Seer* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1985), 324. For President Lee's public account of the experience, see General Conference, April 1973, "Stand Ye in Holy Places," <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1973/04/stand-ye-in-holy-places?lang=eng>.

84. Again, all of these reports appear in a source with which Mason is familiar and elsewhere cites.
85. In Gregory A. Prince and William Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 104.
86. See Edward L. Kimball, "Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood," *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008), 22, file:///C:/Users/Duane%20Boyce/Downloads/47.2kimballspencerb0a083df-b26b-430b-9ce2-3efec584dcd9.pdf. See also p. 45 in the same monograph. This report by Elder Hanks is another statement Mason overlooks in the study by Edward Kimball that he elsewhere cites.
87. Cited in Edward L. Kimball, "Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood," *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008), 48, file:///C:/Users/Duane%20Boyce/Downloads/47.2kimballspencerb0a083df-b26b-430b-9ce2-3efec584dcd9.pdf.
88. For just one example, Official Declaration 2 itself speaks of "the promises made by the prophets and presidents of the Church who have preceded us."
89. See Mark L. McConkie, ed., *Doctrines of the Restoration: Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 160.
90. See "We Stand for Something: President Gordon B. Hinckley," *On the Record*, *Sunstone* 21/4 (December 1998): 71 [cited in Gregory L. Smith, "Shattered Glass: The Traditions of Mormon Same-Sex Marriage Advocates Encounter Boyd K. Packer" <http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1462&index=6> (accessed February 17, 2015)].

91. Regarding Elder McConkie, see Mark L. McConkie, *Doctrines of the Restoration*, 159–71; regarding President Packer, see “Lessons from Gospel Experiences,” new mission presidents’ seminar, 25 June 2008, disc 4, track 12, 0:00–0:54 (cited in Gregory L. Smith, “Shattered Glass,” footnote 42).
92. See again Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 104, and the additional reports in Edward L. Kimball, “Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood,” *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008), 22 and 45, file:///C:/Users/Duane%20Boyce/Downloads/47.2kimballspencerb0a083df-b26b-430b-9ce2-3efec584dcd9.pdf.
93. See again Edward L. Kimball, “Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood,” *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008), 45, file:///C:/Users/Duane%20Boyce/Downloads/47.2kimballspencerb0a083df-b26b-430b-9ce2-3efec584dcd9.pdf.
94. I address the majority of these in my “Sustaining the Brethren,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 14 (2015), vii–xxxii; <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/sustaining-the-brethren/>.
95. Dallin H. Oaks, *Life’s Lessons Learned: Personal Reflections* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2011), Kindle location 655–659.
96. In Bruce C. Hafen, *A Disciple’s Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2002), 413.
97. One example: The Lord instructed Mormon to include the small plates of Nephi in his record (after he had already directed Nephi to make the record in the first place), but he gave neither of these prophets any explanation for his instructions — and the (presumptive) reason did not become clear until centuries later (1 Nephi 9:5; Words of Mormon 1:6–7).
98. Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1979), Kindle location 1340. The remark also appears in Cory H. Maxwell, ed, *The Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 274.
99. George Q. Cannon, in Jerreld L. Newquist, ed., *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Zion’s Book Store, 1957), 346.
100. *Ibid.*, 346.

101. Patrick Q. Mason, *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2015), Kindle location 2345.
102. Spencer W. Kimball, *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball, (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1995), 448; Kindle location 6393.
103. Dallin H. Oaks, *Life's Lessons Learned: Personal Reflections* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2011), Kindle location 655–659.
104. See “Race and the Priesthood” at <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.
105. This doctrinal province seems, in significant part, to explain the Lord’s declaration to Joseph Smith that “this generation shall have my word through you” (D&C 5:10) — i.e., the doctrines of the Lord are located in the revelations given to Joseph. Commenting on this passage, Bruce R. McConkie said, “What this means is that if we are going to receive the knowledge of God, the knowledge of truth, the knowledge of salvation, and know the things that we must do to work out our salvation with fear and trembling before the Lord, this must come in and through Joseph Smith and in no other way. He is the agent, the representative, the instrumentality that the Lord has appointed to give the truth about himself and his laws to all men in all the world in this age.” In Mark L. McConkie, ed., *Doctrines of the Restoration: Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 19.
106. This is evident even in the major *doctrinal* pronouncements of the Church since the time of Joseph Smith: such statements have been scriptural expositions — emphasizing various passages of the existing canon — rather than pronouncements claiming to announce new doctrinal truths. Significant examples that are widely familiar and accessible include: “The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and the Twelve” (1916); “The Origin of Man” (both the 1909 and 1925 statements by the First Presidency); “The Family: A Proclamation” (by the First Presidency and the Twelve, 1995); and “The Living Christ” (by the First Presidency and the Twelve, 2000). Note 111 discusses two examples of the Lord revealing new doctrine to prophets subsequent to Joseph Smith.
107. Joseph Fielding Smith, in Bruce R. McConkie, ed., *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 3:203–4.

108. In Mark L. McConkie, ed., *Doctrines of the Restoration: Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 231.
109. The exception, of course, would be if the matter were made official by the First Presidency and the Twelve, and particularly if it were presented to the Church for addition to the canon. This was the case with the vision given to Joseph F. Smith regarding the redemption of the dead, which did establish new doctrine subsequent to Joseph Smith. This revelation achieved official status through a process of formal approval by the full First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve (later, of course, to be presented to the full Church and officially accepted into the standard works). This indicates the pattern to be followed in any presentation of new doctrine to the Church. It will not come from any individual, acting alone, but only through the official councils the Lord has established. The same principle is evident in the revelation given to Brigham Young, found in Section 136 of the Doctrine and Covenants. The revelation includes two verses that constitute new doctrine, but they are limited in scope since they refer exclusively to Joseph Smith (D&C 136:38–39). As with the vision of Joseph F. Smith, this revelation was canonized through official Church action.
110. *Planted*, Kindle location 2325.
111. In this connection it is worth noting that ambiguity is sometimes introduced into this topic by contrasting “doctrines” with “policies.” (This is a matter on which Edward L. Kimball might have written more clearly. See his “Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on the Priesthood,” *BYU Studies* (47/2) 2008, 22; <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/spencer-w-kimball-and-revelation-priesthood>.) It is easy to misinterpret a statement like “the restriction on the priesthood was a policy, not a doctrine” because we might think this means that, as a policy, it was therefore more or less man-made rather than revealed. But of course the matter of revelation applies to policies as well as to doctrines, since even a policy — a practice — can be either man-made *or* revealed. For generations God directed that the priesthood could be held only by the tribe of Levi and that only those descended from Aaron could hold the office of high priest in that priesthood. The fact that this pattern has been changed in this dispensation certainly signals that this

practice was a policy (i.e., it was not an eternal, unchangeable fact about the universe), but it does *not* signal that it was not revealed. The record clearly depicts that it was. This category of God's work — revealed *policy* — is the proper description for many activities occurring over the history of the world, including instructing Noah to build an ark, leading Abraham to the land of Canaan, leading the children of Israel out of Egypt, directing that the gospel go first to Israel and then to the Gentiles and later directing that the gospel go first to the Gentiles and then to Israel, constructing priesthood offices for the children of Israel according to lineage, identifying Salt Lake as the gathering place for Saints throughout the world and later identifying Saints' local geographies as their official gathering place, building smaller temples, and so forth. The Lord does many things on a temporary and even localized basis, often for reasons known only to him.

112. The claims are (1) that “in all patience and faith” refers to being patient with prophets, (2) that God intervenes only occasionally in guiding the Church, (3) that Spencer W. Kimball thought the priesthood-temple restriction was a possible error and asked forgiveness for it, (4) that President Kimball had to fight his personal prejudices along the way to overturning the priesthood-temple restriction, and (5) that the Lord may have been waiting on his prophets — rather than their waiting on him — with regard to removing the restriction.
113. As indicated in Note 69, this problem is not ameliorated by Mason's brief discussion of Wilford Woodruff's famous statement about leading the Church astray. Mason's interpretation assumes he is correct about the infrequency of revelation to the presiding councils of the Church, even though there is strong reason to suppose he is *not* correct about this. This assumption is exactly what is called into question by all of the reports/declarations we have considered and that Mason overlooks. That is one of the reasons his inattention to such reports is so serious: his neglect contributes to an implausible conclusion about revelation and his implausible conclusion about revelation partly determines his conclusion about what it means to “lead astray.”