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**D&C 21, George Albert Smith,  
and Hugh B. Brown:  
A Fresh Look at Three Incidents in Church  
History**

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**D&C 21, GEORGE ALBERT SMITH,  
AND HUGH B. BROWN:  
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CHURCH HISTORY**

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**Duane Boyce**

***Abstract.** When discussions arise about the relationship between Church members and the prophets who lead them, certain episodes in Church history often appear. These include the Lord's words about "all patience and faith" in Doctrine and Covenants 21:4–5, as well as incidents involving George Albert Smith and Hugh B. Brown. On the surface, such episodes might seem to raise doubts about the reliability of the presiding Brethren in representing the Lord or to minimize the importance of Church orthodoxy itself. A closer look shows such interpretations to be a mistake, however. When we clarify the record, we see that these episodes do not support the conclusions that are sometimes drawn from them. Examining these incidents also permits making a point about so-called "blind obedience."*

There are a number of dots to connect in trying to reach a thoughtful perspective on the relationship between members of the Church and the prophets who have been called to lead them. It is only natural that members do this in different ways and therefore reach disparate conclusions on the matter.

One way to try to reduce this disparity, at least to some degree, is to make sure we are thoughtful about the dots themselves. Some items of evidence might be so widely understood in a particular way or to have been part of the conversation for so long that we haven't actually examined them in a while. When that is the case, it can pay to step back and take a fresh look.

Three incidents in Church history seem ripe for such reinspection. One of these is the Lord's 1830 instruction that we are to follow prophets "in

all patience and faith” (D&C 21:4–5). A second is George Albert Smith’s famous disavowal of the claim that “when our leaders speak, the thinking has been done” in 1945. And a third is Hugh B. Brown’s remarks about “heterodox” thoughts to a BYU audience in 1969.

It is not unusual for these episodes to arise in discussions about the relationship between the presiding authorities of the Church and the members they lead. The episodes regarding D&C 21 and George Albert Smith come up (at least in conversations I am involved in) because both the Lord and a prophet are thought to urge caution about the trustworthiness of the presiding councils in representing the Lord. And the episode with Hugh B. Brown comes up because he is thought to minimize the actual importance of Church orthodoxy and to believe that thinking *per se* is what really matters. Since these incidents have taken on such importance over the years (decades even), it seems worthwhile, as I said, to pause, reexamine them, and see if they actually have such meanings. To this end I will revisit each of the episodes, taking them up in historical order.<sup>1</sup>

### “In All Patience and Faith” — The Lord in D&C 21:4–5

On April 6, 1830, at the organization of the Church, the Lord said this regarding Joseph Smith in Doctrine and Covenants Section 21: “Wherefore, meaning the church, thou shalt give heed unto all his words and commandments which he shall give unto you as he receiveth them, walking in all holiness before me (v. 4); for his word ye shall receive, as if from mine own mouth, in all patience and faith” (v. 5).<sup>2</sup>

Naturally, this statement is understood to refer to all prophets, not just Joseph, and in interpreting it, the *prima facie* reading would be that the Lord is telling us that following prophets is not easy: doing what the Lord wants, as revealed through his prophets, often requires faith, sacrifice, and perseverance.

But the passage is not always read this way. Sometimes readers focus on the phrase “in all patience and faith” in verse 5 and conclude from it that prophets must make errors, both many and large, since otherwise there would be no need for exercising “all patience and faith” in following them. For the sake of convenience, let’s call this the “prophets’ errors”

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1. Again, I am responding to my experience of how these incidents are understood and used. My remarks might not apply to all the ways different individuals use them.

2. The wording in the current edition of the D&C is identical to the original. See *The Joseph Smith Papers*, Revelation Book 1, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-book-1/2#full-transcript>.

interpretation of this passage: the verses are about prophets' human weaknesses, which is why they talk about patience and faith in following these leaders. Both Patrick Mason and Terryl Givens, among others, adopt this reading of the passage, and both have given it a prominent place in their discussions about following prophets.<sup>3</sup>

### Why the Passage is Easy to Misread

If we focus on verse 5, it is easy to see why one might reach the “prophets’ errors” interpretation of this passage. The problem arises when we notice that verse 4 actually provides the context for verse 5. There the Lord tells us that we are to give heed to the prophet’s words specifically “*as he receiveth them.*” This makes clear that the Lord is talking in this passage about prophets’ revelations — not about their human weaknesses or about just any words they happen to say.

Recognizing this explicit context radically affects our understanding of verse 5. It makes clear that in talking about patience and faith, the Lord (just as the *prima facie* reading has it) is talking about what is required to follow his *revelations*. It has nothing to do with human errors.

Nor, in saying that we are to receive prophets’ words “as if from mine own mouth,” is the Lord merely saying that prophets possess divine authorization — i.e., that they are officially authorized to represent him despite the serious errors they make. To the contrary, verse 4 tells us specifically what we are to receive “as if from mine own mouth”: the Lord’s *revelations* to his prophets. To think the Lord is making a point about delegation to mortals — that he is authorizing them to represent him despite their errors and that he is telling us to be patient with them because of their errors — is a clear misapplication of these verses.<sup>4</sup>

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3. See Terryl L. Givens, “Letter to a Doubter,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 4 (2013), <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/letter-to-a-doubter/>; Terryl L. Givens and Fiona Givens, “On Delegation and Discipleship: The Ring of Pharaoh,” in *The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014); Marc Bohn, “Terryl Givens on What It Means to Sustain,” *Times and Seasons*, February 3, 2016, <https://www.timesandseasons.org/harchive/2016/02/terryl-givens-on-what-it-means-to-sustain/>; and “In All Patience and Faith,” in Patrick Q. Mason, *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015).

4. Dividing the scriptures into verses offers many advantages. One of the disadvantages is that it requires us to look more carefully for context: a new verse is very often *not* the start of a new thought. That is the case here. Modern editions of the D&C make obvious that verse 4 is the context for verse 5, but for some readers it might be even clearer without versification, as it appeared when first recorded. See

This means that, however well-intentioned, the “prophets’ errors” interpretation of this passage is mistaken. But it also has a further consequence: applying it to these verses generates what seems very much like an absurdity. After all, if we read both verses, this interpretation requires us to imagine (1) receiving from a prophet a statement that is based on revelation from the Lord, (2) receiving it as if we were hearing it directly from the Lord’s own mouth, and (3) *at the same time thinking the statement is wrong and to be summoning patience to obey it*. In other words, we are required to imagine both that the message came from the Lord and that the message could well be wrong. Although unwitting, this is the position we are logically committed to if we think these verses are telling us to be patient because of mistakes. Since the passage is about revelation to prophets and about our receiving such revelation as if from the Lord’s own mouth, if the passage is about mistakes, it would seem to be about mistakes that stem from *him*.

The central problem with the “prophets’ errors” interpretation of this passage, then, is that it fails to be informed by verse 4. This oversight leads to a misinterpretation of the phrases “in all patience and faith” and “as if from mine own mouth.” And these misinterpretations, in their turn, logically commit us to a view of the Lord that, as I said, seems very much like an absurdity.

### Arguments that Might Seem to Get Around the Problem

Two views about revelation might seem to avoid this problem with D&C 21, so it is worth having a look to see if this is the case.

#### The “Infrequency” of Revelation

The first claim is that prophets receive revelation only occasionally. This is a view relied on to an important extent by Patrick Mason and, in a different context, by Roger Terry.<sup>5</sup> The claim is relevant because, if sound,

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again *The Joseph Smith Papers*, Revelation Book 1, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-book-1/2#full-transcript>. I am indebted to Allen Wyatt for this point.

5. Mason says that the Lord’s intervention is only occasional, both in individual lives and in the Church, and that for the most part the Lord teaches correct principles and requires mortals then to govern themselves — again, both in individual lives and in the Church. See Mason, *Planted*, 108. Roger Terry advances the idea of infrequent revelation at greater length, relying in large part on a quotation by B.H. Roberts that revelation occurs “occasionally.” See 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/>

it would follow that “all patience and faith” is required in following prophets because they will obviously be prone to making human errors (including grave ones) if they aren’t receiving revelation.

There are three matters to notice about this claim of infrequent revelation, however.

The first and most important is this: it contradicts what prophets, seers, and revelators themselves say about their experience. These leaders report that revelation attends them and that it is actually experienced not “occasionally” but daily. Such is the public report of Harold B. Lee, Spencer W. Kimball, James E. Faust, and Dallin H. Oaks.<sup>6</sup> President Russell M. Nelson spoke of communication from the Lord coming to him with “great intensity”<sup>7</sup> and also declared that “when we convene as a council of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve, our meeting rooms become rooms of revelation. The Spirit is palpably present.”<sup>8</sup> As I have discussed at some length elsewhere, there are multiple additional statements indicating the same thing, and it leaves a gaping evidentiary hole to assert that revelation is infrequent without

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articles/Dialogue\_V46N01\_427c.pdf. Givens refers to the same quotation by B.H. Roberts, and thus might feel similarly. See *Crucible of Doubt*, 77. Although he quotes only the part stating that the Brethren do not receive revelation in everything — a veritable truism that is very different from saying they receive it in few things — he still calls the statement “sobering.” Since truisms are not typically sobering, it seems possible that Givens is thinking of the whole statement by Elder Roberts, rather than just the part he quotes. I show the flaws in relying on Elder Roberts’ statement in “A Lengthening Shadow: Is Quality of Thought Deteriorating in LDS Scholarly Discourse Regarding Prophets and Revelation?” Part One, *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 26 (2017): 15–17, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/a-lengthening-shadow-is-quality-of-thought-deteriorating-in-lds-scholarly-discourse-regarding-prophets-and-revelation-part-one/>.

6. See Harold B. Lee, “Admonitions for the Priesthood of God,” *Ensign* 3, no. 1 (January 1973), <https://www.lds.org/study/ensign/1973/01/admonitions-for-the-priesthood-of-god>; Spencer W. Kimball, “Revelation: The Word of the Lord to His Prophets,” *Ensign* 3, no. 5 (May 1977), <https://www.lds.org/study/ensign/1977/05/revelation-the-word-of-the-lord-to-his-prophets>; James E. Faust, “Come Out of the Darkness into the Light,” CES Fireside for Young Adults, September 8, 2002, <https://www.lds.org/media-library/video/2002-09-05-come-out-of-the-darkness-into-the-light>; Dallin H. Oaks, “Teaching and Learning by the Spirit,” *Ensign* 27, no. 3 (March 1997), <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1997/03/teaching-and-learning-by-the-spirit>.

7. See “President Nelson: Brilliant Mind, Gentle Heart,” KSL News Documentary, April 1, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKiYPK\\_rEPk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKiYPK_rEPk).

8. Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” *Ensign* (May 2018), <https://www.lds.org/study/ensign/2018/05/sunday-morning-session/revelation-for-the-church-revelation-for-our-lives>.

addressing contrary claims by those specifically charged with receiving that revelation.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, these authors do not do this. Much less do they demonstrate how their claim of revelatory infrequency can actually accommodate these contrary reports.

The second matter to notice is that arguing for the infrequency of revelation — even if one could do so successfully — would still do nothing to salvage an appeal to *this* passage. The Lord’s instruction in D&C 21:4–5 specifically refers to instances of prophets’ genuine revelations from God, which means it says nothing about potential errors that can occur in the *absence* of revelation — the passage is simply not about that. Thus, although Mason displays this passage prominently, it is actually irrelevant to what he attempts to say about prophetic errors.

The third matter to notice is that D&C 21:4–5 is largely irrelevant *in general* if revelation occurs infrequently. After all, since this passage is about cases in which the Lord reveals his will, and since, according to this claim, he doesn’t reveal his will very often, it follows that this passage doesn’t actually apply very often. Thus, although the Lord gave this instruction on the day the Church was first organized and although it concerns both revelation and following prophets — *and* although it continues to be cited by prophetic leaders<sup>10</sup> — if the “infrequent” view of revelation is correct, it is actually of little importance. The Lord might have spoken about revelation on this particular occasion, but he hasn’t actually delivered much of it, and this means that what he said about it actually has little practical significance. That is the consequence of this view.

## The “Uncertainty” of Revelation

Another possible claim to make about revelation is that it is less reliable than we might think. This is an approach Terryl Givens takes in his popular book.<sup>11</sup> (Permit me to note here that some thought I was unfair to Givens in an earlier paper where I briefly identified the central problem in his appeal to D&C 21 — i.e., the apparent absurdity mentioned above — in an article he

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9. See Boyce, “A Lengthening Shadow” Part One: 7–13.

10. For example: Russell M. Nelson, “Sustaining the Prophets,” *Ensign* (November 2014), <https://www.lds.org/study/ensign/2014/11/sunday-morning-session/sustaining-the-prophets>; M. Russell Ballard, “Precious Gifts from God,” *Ensign* (May 2018), <https://www.lds.org/study/ensign/2018/05/saturday-morning-session/precious-gifts-from-god>; Quentin L Cook, “Give Heed unto the Prophets’ Words,” *Ensign* (May 2008), <https://www.lds.org/study/ensign/2008/05/give-heed-unto-the-prophets-words>.

11. Givens, “On Delegation and Discipleship.”



had written.<sup>12</sup> Some complained that I failed to take up the larger argument that appears in his book — an argument that seems to complete and rescue what he says in his shorter article. This complaint is meritless, however. Since Givens' article was written as a stand-alone piece, I addressed it as a stand-alone piece in Part One of my paper. I then addressed his book at length in Part Three of the same paper, where I showed that the book's more detailed treatment does not salvage his article's argument.<sup>13</sup> Contrary to the objection, Givens' full thinking was given full consideration.)

Givens quotes the Anglican scholar Austin Farrer to the effect that revelation is always fuzzy — that it is incapable of really capturing the divine “blueprint.” This inherent unreliability is the reason Givens focuses on prophets' divine authorization rather than on their status as revelators: they are the Lord's authorized servants, but, because revelation is an uncertain process, they are still able to make serious mistakes.

If this is right, it might be thought that we can get around the problems with D&C 21 by saying something like this: *Yes, D&C 21 refers to revelation. However, since revelation is inherently uncertain, prophets will make errors even when they receive such direction. This passage is thus about revelation **and** about human mistakes. Because of the unreliability of spiritual communication, we need patience and faith in following prophets **even when** they are speaking based on revelations they have received.*

The problem with this approach, however, is that it fails to notice the actual import of the phrase “as if from mine own mouth.” After all, if the Lord thought he could not communicate clearly with his prophets (if *he* thought the revelatory process was so uncertain), and if he thought prophets could not then communicate the clear revelation to the people, it seems unlikely that he would tell us to heed what prophets say as if we were hearing it from *his own mouth*. His instruction to receive prophets' revealed words in this way *presupposes* that he communicates clearly with them (and they, subsequently, with us).

The same presupposition by the Lord is evident elsewhere in scripture. For example, he explicitly directed Oliver Cowdery to be obedient to the revelations he gave to Joseph Smith (D&C 28:6) — a direction he could not give if he thought he couldn't communicate clearly with the Prophet

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12. Boyce, “A Lengthening Shadow” Part One: 5–7, regarding Givens' “Letter to a Doubter.”

13. Boyce, “A Lengthening Shadow” Part Three: 102–10, <https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/a-lengthening-shadow-is-quality-of-thought-deteriorating-in-lds-scholarly-discourse-regarding-prophets-and-revelation-part-three/>.

(and that Joseph couldn't then communicate clearly with Oliver). And of course the same presupposition is evident when the Lord declares that "whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same" (D&C 1:38). It could not be "the same" if the Lord were unable to communicate clearly with his servants and if they were then unable to communicate clearly with others. Indeed, the presupposition of clarity appears elsewhere in the same section, when the Lord says that those who will not "give heed to the words of the prophets and apostles, shall be cut off" (D&C 1:14). Such individuals could hardly be punished if those prophets and apostles were not accurately learning the will of the Lord and then delivering that will accurately to them. And this is true every time the Lord declares punishment for those who disobey: such declarations by the Lord presuppose that he communicates clearly with his prophets — those who disseminate his commandments — and that they in turn communicate clearly with others. In all these ways the Lord presupposes precisely what this view of revelation denies: that he can communicate unambiguously with his prophets.

The central problem with this view of revelation, then, is that it appears to contradict the Lord's view of revelation.

This is not the only difficulty, however. There is also a large amount of evidence indicating that revelation to prophets is amply clear, much of which I have discussed elsewhere in responding to these claims — from the First Vision, to Russell M. Nelson's detailed vision showing him how to perform a surgical procedure, to the 250,000 words in the Book of Mormon itself — with numerous additional instances in between.<sup>14</sup> And of course we could add other examples to these, including the Prophet's significant report that there was "no error" in the revelations he taught — a reality that would not be possible if revelation itself were inherently as uncertain as this view supposes.<sup>15</sup>

It is well-known, of course, that the Prophet revised his language, both in his revelations and in the Book of Mormon. But these are not indications of *error*. The revisions are minor and do not call into question the Prophet's understanding of what he received. They are simply improvements in *expressing* the understanding he had received. One instance of the general pattern is the Prophet's remark, after referring to Malachi 4:5–6, that he could have rendered a plainer translation,

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14. Boyce, "A Lengthening Shadow," Part Three: 106–10.

15. "Joseph Smith's Feelings about His Prophetic Mission," in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, <https://www.lds.org/manual/teachings-joseph-smith/chapter-45>.

but that it was nevertheless “sufficiently plain to suit my purposes” (D&C 128:17–18). Just so, while one can make the theoretical argument that no revelatory experience is perfect in its verbal or written expression, it does not follow that revelations are not completely acceptable to *the Lord* — i.e., that they are not sufficiently plain to suit his purposes. Every indication is that they are.

What all this would seem to show is that without additional argument, a claim about the uncertainty of revelation is wholly unpersuasive. One can certainly appeal to the views of a learned Anglican scholar to argue for this perspective on revelation, but it is hard to see why that authority, in speaking about prophets, would outweigh the declarations of authorities who actually are prophets.

Yet considering the one and neglecting the other is the actual purport of this approach. As a result, it would seem that the argument from lack of revelatory clarity does not resolve the contradiction involved in a faulty reading of D&C 21. A tangled conclusion about that passage is not removed by adding an inadequate and unpersuasive conception of revelation to it.

### **D&C 21: General Summary**

In the end, it is difficult to see how the Lord’s words in D&C 21:4–5 can be used to indicate that prophets require patience and faith because of their human errors. In the first place, the passage is specifically about prophets’ revelations, not about human weaknesses or about just any words prophets happen to say. In the second place, the options we have considered that might try to get around this problem (denying the frequency of revelation and asserting the unreliability of revelation) fail to make any dent in the difficulties — each for its own reasons. One can appreciate authors’ good intentions and still recognize where their arguments fail.

It does not follow from any of this, of course, that *other* arguments can’t be attempted to indicate prophets’ serious errors and to suggest that they must be followed with caution. All we have seen is that D&C 21 itself seems dramatically unsuited for such efforts; it actually seems to backfire on them.

If we want a scriptural passage that teaches that prophets are unreliable and cannot be followed with confidence, it seems we will have to look elsewhere to find it.

## **“The Thinking Has Been Done” — President George Albert Smith**

In one month in 1945 the message (for what was called “ward teaching” at the time) emphasized the importance of following the prophet. It included the line: “When our leaders speak, the thinking has been done.” It is well-known that George Albert Smith, who was President of the Church at the time, explicitly disavowed this statement in a letter to a prominent non-member who asked him about it.<sup>16</sup>

This historical event has taken on importance because of what some, in my experience, have concluded from it: namely, that President Smith saw the Brethren’s reliability in representing the Lord as somewhat tenuous. The logic in appealing to this episode seems to be, at least implicitly, if the prophet is saying that members must do their own thinking, it is likely because the Brethren themselves aren’t fully trustworthy in reflecting the Lord’s will.

### **The Basis of President Smith’s Disavowal**

This view of the incident might seem plausible if we know only of President Smith’s disavowal. It is not plausible, however, when we read his whole statement and actually hear his reason for the disavowal. He said, for example:

Even to imply that members of the Church are not to do their own thinking is grossly to misrepresent the true ideal of the Church, which is that every individual must obtain for himself a testimony of the truth of the Gospel, must, through the redemption of Jesus Christ, work out his own salvation, and is personally responsible to His Maker for his individual acts. The Lord Himself does not attempt coercion in His desire and effort to give peace and salvation to His children. He gives the principles of life and true progress, but leaves every person free to choose or to reject His teachings. This plan the Authorities of the Church try to follow.<sup>17</sup>

There are three significant matters to note in these remarks. The first is that President Smith equates members doing their own “thinking” with

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16. A rehearsal of the relevant details, including the ward teaching message and President Smith’s letter correcting it, can be found at: <https://www.fairmormon.org/archive/publications/when-the-prophet-speaks-is-the-thinking-done>.

17. *Ibid.*

(1) gaining a spiritual testimony and (2) being personally responsible for their individual acts, including working out their own salvation.

Second, he specifically contrasts members' gaining their own testimonies and being personally responsible for their acts, with *coercion*. He observes that the Lord does not exercise force over his children — but permits them to choose whether or not to follow him on their own — and says that Church leaders try to follow the same pattern.

Third, by analogizing to the Lord, the purport of President Smith's message is that the thinking is not "done" even when *the Lord* speaks. President Smith emphasizes that we do not face coercion under any circumstances, even with regard to the Lord's personal teachings. He "gives the principles of life and true progress," but even in this case the thinking is not done: independence and personal responsibility still require us to gain our own spiritual testimonies of these principles and to choose on our own to follow them. That, he says, is the Lord's way regarding his *own* teachings.

Emphasizing personal responsibility and the absence of coercion, President Smith adds in his letter, "The Prophet Joseph Smith once said: 'I want liberty of thinking and believing as I please.' This liberty he and his successors in the leadership of the Church have granted to every other member thereof." And:

Again, as recorded in the History of the Church (Volume 5, page 498 [499]) Joseph Smith said further: "If I esteem mankind to be in error, shall I bear them down? No. I will lift them up, and in their own way too, if I cannot persuade them my way is better; and *I will not seek to compel any man to believe as I do, only by the force of reasoning*, for truth will cut its own way." (emphasis in original)

President Smith concludes: "I cite these few quotations, from many that might be given, merely to confirm your good and true opinion that the Church gives to every man his free agency, and admonishes him always to use the reason and good judgment with which God has blessed him."<sup>18</sup>

Now, in light of all this, remember where we started. It was with the assumption that President Smith's emphasis on the need for members to do their own thinking likely indicates some doubt on his part about the Brethren's reliability in representing the Lord. After all, why would members need to do their own thinking if they didn't really need to — if the Brethren themselves were reliable?

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18. Ibid.

But now we see there is no reason to make this assumption. In the first place, President Smith explicitly *gives* us his reason for insisting that members do their own thinking — and it is not that he questions the reliability of the Brethren. It is simply that members have agency and thus have the personal responsibility to gain testimonies for themselves and to choose for themselves whether or not to follow: there is no coercion.

In the second place, the fact that President Smith analogizes to the Lord makes it evident, by itself, that reliability is not his concern. After all, he is obviously not concerned about *the Lord's* reliability — and yet he speaks of members exercising their agency and gaining their own testimonies even here. Clearly, this is not because President Smith thinks the Lord's teachings might not be true. It is because members must exercise agency and personal responsibility, and gain testimonies for themselves, *even though* they are true.

So attributing to President Smith a possible concern about the Brethren's reliability is a mistake. We don't have to attribute anything to him or intuit his meaning because he actually tells us his concern — and it is a concern that has everything to do with members' agency, personal responsibility, and testimony, and nothing to do with a lack of confidence in the Brethren themselves.

### **Additional Considerations**

Three other matters help us round out our thinking about President Smith's remarks.

#### **President Smith's Views on Following the Brethren**

Although it is clear that President Smith is not making a point about a lack of confidence in the Brethren in this episode, it is worth noticing what he might have thought in general about this topic. It is relevant, therefore, that he said on one occasion:

There is only one pathway of safety for me in this day and that is to follow those whom the Lord has appointed to lead. I may have my own ideas and opinions, I may set up my own judgment with reference to things, but I know that when my judgment conflicts with the teachings of those that the Lord has given to us to point the way, I should change my course.<sup>19</sup>

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19. George Albert Smith, in "Sustaining Those Whom the Lord Sustains," in *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: George Albert Smith*, <https://www.lds.org/manual/teachings-george-albert-smith/chapter-6>.

He also said:

I stand here to plead with you, my brethren and sisters, not to permit words of criticism or of unkindness to pass your lips about those whom the Lord has called to lead us. Do not be found in the companionship of those who would belittle them or weaken their influence among the children of men. If you do, I can say to you that you will find yourselves in the power of the adversary. You will be influenced by him to go as far as possible from the pathway of truth, and if you do not repent you may find when it is too late that you have lost the “pearl of great price.” Because of your selfishness and your blindness you will have been led away, and your loved ones ... will be sorrowing on the other side of the veil because of your weakness and your folly.<sup>20</sup>

Not only, then, does President Smith do nothing in this particular episode to suggest lack of confidence in the Brethren, but it is obvious what he thinks about someone who would inculcate such an attitude toward them.

### **A Sliding Scale in the Lord’s Direction of His Kingdom**

This doesn’t mean that George Albert Smith thought members of the First Presidency (for example) were flawless or that they made no errors. He said that they are still “men with human frailties” and “they will make mistakes.”<sup>21</sup>

This range in President Smith’s remarks on Church authorities — along with other evidence — suggests, as I have discussed elsewhere,<sup>22</sup> that something like a sliding scale operates in the Lord’s direction of his kingdom: he doesn’t provide equal direction on all matters that face the Brethren but instead provides revelation commensurate with the importance of an issue to him at a given time. This means there are different *degrees* of revelation, ranging across the entire spectrum of matters the Brethren must deal with in administering and growing the Lord’s kingdom. Thus, on many incidental or secondary matters that are less central to his plan, it would seem that the Lord leaves decisions

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20. George Albert Smith, in “Sustaining.”

21. Ibid.

22. Boyce, “A Lengthening Shadow,” Part One: 13–15 and Duane Boyce, “Sustaining the Brethren,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 14 (2015): xxvii–xxviii, <https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/sustaining-the-brethren/>.

largely to the collective judgment of Church leaders — and this can obviously lead to less-than-perfect decisions. On matters of much greater importance to his plan, on the other hand, the Lord would seem to lead the Brethren's decisions through clear and direct revelation to them. And of course there are many degrees in between. The interaction between human judgment and the Spirit stretches across the entire spectrum of issues (with the Spirit exercising increasing influence as the issues grow in importance), and this is why George Albert Smith could speak of errors while also expressing supreme confidence in the Brethren's direction. The attitude seems to be: whatever the mistakes, they are inconsequential; what matters are the issues important to the Lord at a given time and the Brethren's trustworthiness on those.

### **President Smith's Personal Spirituality**

It is also useful to think about President Smith himself. When he was a boy, George Albert received a blessing from the venerable Zebedee Coltrin prophesying that he would become “a mighty Apostle” and “a mighty prophet.” He also declared that none in George Albert's family would “have more power with God than thou shalt have, for none shall excel thee.” This was an interesting prophecy in light of George Albert's father later serving in the First Presidency himself. All of these prophecies were fulfilled, as we know, and that makes it interesting to note what else Elder Coltrin prophesied regarding him. He said that “the angels of the Lord shall administer to you,” “thou shalt be wrapped in the visions of the heavens,” “thou shalt be clothed with salvation as with a garment,” “thou art destined to become a mighty man before the Lord,” and “thou shalt become a mighty man of faith before the Lord, even like unto that of the brother of Jared.”<sup>23</sup>

Given Elder Coltrin's other prophecies, it is plausible that these blessings were fulfilled as well, and this is at least relevant in imagining what President Smith thought about the presiding Brethren's reliability in representing the Lord. His confidence, so it would seem, would not be low, but high.

### **George Albert Smith: General Summary**

The basis of President Smith's rejection of the ward teaching message was the importance of members' agency, personal responsibility, and individual testimonies. Nowhere in his remarks does he suggest that

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23. Robert and Susan McIntosh, eds., *The Teachings of George Albert Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), xix.



members' thinking is not done because those in the prophetic counsels are unreliable in representing the Lord. He does not even raise the topic of their reliability, much less disavow it. He simply emphasizes that members must gain testimonies for themselves and then choose for themselves whether or not to follow — just as they must with the Savior's personal teachings. We also have compelling reasons to believe that President Smith's personal confidence in Church leadership was actually high, not low, and this, too, undermines the idea that he was expressing caution about the Brethren's reliability. This confidence is clear both from what he said and from what we can conclude about his own nearness to the Lord.

It does not follow from any of this, of course, that one *can't* doubt the trustworthiness of the Brethren in following the Lord. Of course one can. One might construct any number of arguments to try to reach that conclusion. All that follows from what we have seen here is that President Smith's disavowal of the ward teaching message cannot be among them. It is not the evidence, in my experience, it is often thought to be.

### **“Heterodox Thoughts” — President Hugh B. Brown**

In speaking at BYU on one occasion, President Hugh B. Brown began by expressing dismay that “freedom of the mind is suppressed over much of the world.” He said that “we must preserve it in the Church and in America” and that protecting such freedom of thought is necessary to preserve “the liberties vouchsafed in the Constitution of the United States.” President Brown then says:

Preserve, then, the freedom of your mind in education and in religion, and be unafraid to express your thoughts and to insist upon your right to examine every proposition. We are not so much concerned with whether your thoughts are orthodox or heterodox as we are that you shall have thoughts. One may memorize much without learning anything. In this age of speed there seems to be little time for meditation.<sup>24</sup>

What seems to catch people's attention is the specific declaration that “we are not so much concerned with whether your thoughts are

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24. Hugh B. Brown, “An Eternal Quest — Freedom of the Mind,” *BYU Devotional Address*, May 13, 1969, [https://aims.byu.edu/sites/aims/files/foundation\\_documents/An\\_Eternal\\_Quest--Freedom\\_of\\_the\\_Mind--Hugh\\_B\\_Brown.pdf](https://aims.byu.edu/sites/aims/files/foundation_documents/An_Eternal_Quest--Freedom_of_the_Mind--Hugh_B_Brown.pdf).

orthodox or heterodox as we are that you shall have thoughts.”<sup>25</sup> At least in my experience, when this remark is raised the supposition seems to be that if a member of the First Presidency, no less, doesn’t care very much about “orthodox” thoughts, then orthodox thoughts can’t really be very important. It is thinking *per se* that matters.

On the surface this can seem like a reasonable interpretation of President Brown’s words. Beneath the surface, however, it proves highly implausible. This is evident from President Brown’s own talk. After all, what follows these early remarks is a celebration of the gospel, concluded by a fervent testimony of its truths and encouragement of these BYU students (1) to value “a conviction of the truth” and (2) to “take every opportunity to bear witness to that truth.” Speaking of “the truth” and encouraging his listeners to bear witness of “the truth” are not the expressions of one who sees no difference between orthodox and heterodox thoughts. Nor are they the sentiments of one who thinks orthodox and heterodox thoughts are equally valid, or who at least thinks the difference between them is unimportant. Indeed, far from expressing a tenuous attitude toward gospel orthodoxy, President Brown’s address is actually a fervid manifestation of it. And this makes the interpretation (mentioned above) of his early remark about heterodox thoughts highly implausible: that sentence cannot really be intended to discount what the rest of the talk transparently displays.

The same kind of orthodoxy is completely evident elsewhere in President Brown’s public addresses, of course. A good example is his final talk in general conference, which includes this testimony:

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25. President Brown makes reference to “orthodoxy,” but he does not define it. A suitable point of reference, however, is this official Newsroom statement: “With divine inspiration, the First Presidency (the prophet and his two counselors) and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (the second-highest governing body of the Church) counsel together to establish doctrine that is consistently proclaimed in official Church publications. This doctrine resides in the four ‘standard works’ of scripture...official declarations and proclamations, and the Articles of Faith.” (*Approaching Mormon Doctrine*, May 4, 2007, <https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/approaching-mormon-doctrine>.)

Incidentally, President Brown did not actually include this sentence about “orthodoxy” (or the two sentences that follow it) in reading his talk. They appear in the published version, however. See Gary Bergera, “Guest Post: President Hugh B. Brown’s Most Famous Statement,” *Keepapitchinin* (blog), <http://www.keepapitchinin.org/2012/02/07/guest-post-president-hugh-b-browns-most-famous-statement/>.

My brethren and sisters, I want to bear witness to you as to the divinity of this work. From the center of my heart to the ends of my fingers and toes, I know that this is the work of God. I know that the gospel has been restored. I know that the men who are leading the Church are inspired and directed by him who appointed them.<sup>26</sup>

These words could comfortably be considered a *testimony* of orthodoxy. And they are typical of President Brown's sermons.

When we read President Brown broadly, then, it is apparent that his sentence about "heterodox thoughts" is not intended to discount the official teachings of the Church. That interpretation is belied by President Brown's public addresses generally, as well as by the very talk in which it appears.

But that leaves us with a question: what does President Brown mean in his single sentence about orthodox and heterodox thoughts — when he *seems* to minimize orthodoxy?

### Robotic Orthodoxy

The strongest interpretation, I think, is that he is echoing a point Wilford Woodruff (among others) expressed. President Woodruff observed that "it is necessary that all the members of the Church should exercise their powers of reason and reflection" and that "[i]ntelligent obedience on the part of His Saints is desired by our Father in Heaven." President Woodruff clarifies his point by stressing that God "has given us our agency to think and act for ourselves, on our own volition, to obtain a testimony for ourselves from Him."<sup>27</sup>

"Intelligent obedience" is the obedience of those who have paid the price to gain their own testimony of the truth. And this, it would appear, is President Brown's worry. He is speaking to a very orthodox audience: they are students who have passed a bishop's worthiness interview to attend BYU, who are regularly taking religion classes, and who are attending a religious devotional at that very moment. He thus has little reason to emphasize orthodoxy to this audience, and he doesn't. Their orthodoxy can be assumed. What seems to worry President Brown instead is the *way* they might be orthodox. He seems concerned about the prospect of spiritual laziness — about the kind of obedience that is robotic and hollow rather than earnest and spiritually serious.

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26. Hugh B. Brown, "A Missionary and His Message," *Ensign* 2, no. 7 (July 1972), <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1972/04/a-missionary-and-his-message>.

27. Wilford Woodruff, in "Following the Living Prophet," in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Wilford Woodruff*, <https://www.lds.org/manual/teachings-wilford-woodruff/chapter-19>. Emphasis added.

He seems to be saying what Boyd K. Packer later taught: that members must become “*independent* witnesses” of gospel principles and truths. Rather than following leaders thoughtlessly, members are to tap the same source of intelligence those leaders are tapping.<sup>28</sup> President Packer observes that as we grow and learn we will sometimes be wrong in our conclusions (i.e., we will have “heterodox” thoughts, in President Brown’s terms), but “there is not much danger in that.” Instead, “that is an inevitable part of learning the gospel. . . . Such ideas are corrected as one grows in light and knowledge.”<sup>29</sup> If we are sincere and if we are spiritually invested, he taught, we will end up in the right place in our feelings and conclusions because we are engaging the same divine source prophets themselves are engaging. “Then,” President Packer says, “our obedience is not blind obedience. Then our agency is protected, and . . . we will do things because we know they are right and are the truth. *We will know this from our own inquiry, not simply because someone else knows it.*”<sup>30</sup>

It seems clear that President Brown is making the same point. He is speaking to an orthodox audience and he is including a warning specifically to them: orthodoxy is hollow if it is not the result of earnest seeking; the gospel is not for the unserious and lazy. Appreciating this explains why he would implore his audience to value a *conviction* of “the truth” and why he would immediately follow his famous sentence with: “One may memorize much without learning anything. In this age of speed there seems to be little time for meditation.”

President Brown, then, seems far from minimizing orthodoxy per se; he is instead simply telling his very orthodox audience that their orthodoxy is not close to sufficient. He is warning against an acceptance that is routinized and empty.

### Faux Orthodoxy

Although this type of orthodoxy seems to be President Brown’s major concern, he also seems to have a worry about *faux* orthodoxy. Only declarations of the First Presidency are authoritative and actually define the official teachings of the Church (i.e., “orthodoxy”), but there is a large literature on gospel topics as well as classroom declarations by

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28. Boyd K. Packer, *Mine Errand from the Lord: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Boyd K. Packer* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 341. Emphasis mine.

29. Boyd K. Packer, “From Such Turn Away,” *Ensign* 15, no. 5 (May 1985), <https://www.lds.org/study/ensign/1985/05/from-such-turn-away>.

30. Packer, *Mine Errand*, 341. Emphasis added.

instructors that might seem to define orthodoxy — but don't. Authors (including General Authorities) and instructors make statements based on their own best thinking about many topics — from various doctrines and practices to political issues — but much of it goes beyond what is official. To the extent they do so, their teachings are not orthodox. President Brown seems to be warning against mindlessly accepting such non-authoritative sources when he encourages his audience, including on religion, to “insist upon your right to examine every proposition.” That makes perfect sense in a world where the scriptures, and official statements of the First Presidency, are (and were in 1969) far outnumbered by non-authoritative sources on gospel topics.

So the concerns President Brown seems to have in mind regarding his BYU audience and their orthodoxy are (1) the risk of spiritual laziness and (2) the risk of counterfeit orthodoxy. What matters most for our present purposes, however, is what he does *not* have in mind. And what seems clear is that he does not have in mind a concern about the merits of orthodoxy itself.

This is not dispositive of the entire issue regarding the reliability of the prophets' teachings, of course, since one can construct many reasons for discounting the official teachings of the Church. People do this all the time. All it means is that President Brown's remarks cannot be included in those reasons. The evidence indicates that he was doing something else entirely.

## Conclusion

The relationship between members of the Church and the prophets who are called to lead them is a broad topic, with multiple dimensions, and I have attempted to identify and address some of them elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> My purpose here has been much narrower: namely, to consider just three incidents in Church history to see if they indicate what people (at least in my experience) sometimes think they indicate.

What we have seen is that (1) D&C 21:4–5 is not a passage about being patient with prophets' human errors; (2) in insisting that members think for themselves, George Albert Smith was not motivated by a lack of confidence in the Brethren's ability to accurately represent the Lord's will; and (3) Hugh B. Brown did not argue for the unimportance of Church orthodoxy. To the degree these episodes are used to make these points, they would appear to be misunderstood.

This obviously does not mean that one can't try to make the same points about prophets' errors, Church orthodoxy, and so forth in

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31. See Boyce, “Sustaining the Brethren.”

other ways. There are many arguments that might be attempted and many incidents that one might try to include. All that follows from the investigation here is that these particular incidents cannot be among them. Those who are interested in pursuing such arguments will need to look elsewhere for support.

### Thoughts on Blind Obedience

Before ending, it is worth making another point that has emerged from our look at these historical incidents. Sometimes members are accused of following the presiding Brethren of the Church “blindly.” The idea seems to be that members follow in a robotic way — that their obedience is spiritually lazy and therefore empty.

Now the first thing to notice about this accusation is that the leaders we have seen decry the very same thing. George Albert Smith disavowed the ward teaching message specifically because it seemed to imply the acceptance of such an attitude. His whole point was that members must take personal responsibility, exercise their agency, and gain their own testimonies of what others — including the Lord — teach. We don’t even follow *him* blindly.

We saw the same thread in discussing Hugh B. Brown’s remarks. It is captured in Wilford Woodruff’s statement that “it is necessary that all the members of the Church should exercise their powers of reason and reflection” and that “*intelligent obedience* on the part of His Saints is desired by our Father in Heaven.” The Lord “has given us our agency,” he said, “to think and act for ourselves, on our own volition, to obtain a testimony for ourselves from Him.”<sup>32</sup> On another occasion he said, “It is our privilege so to live as to have the Spirit of God to bear record of the truth of any revelation that comes from God through the mouth of His prophet who leads His people.”<sup>33</sup>

It was on this basis that Boyd K. Packer explicitly rejected blind obedience. As we saw earlier, he taught that we are to tap the same source of intelligence that leaders themselves are tapping. Then we will do things because we know they are right “from our own inquiry, not simply because someone else knows it.”<sup>34</sup> When we follow this path and have our own independent testimonies, we are able to follow not because we are blind, but precisely “because we can *see*.”<sup>35</sup> Harold B. Lee

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32. Woodruff, in “Following the Living Prophet.” Emphasis mine.

33. Woodruff, in “Following the Living Prophet.”

34. Packer, *Mine Errand*, 341.

35. Boyd K. Packer, “Agency and Control,” *Ensign* 13, no. 5 (May 1983), <https://www.lds.org/study/ensign/1983/05/agency-and-control>. Emphasis mine.

once spoke of Elder Marion G. Romney facing an official statement by Church leaders that ran counter to the direction of his political party. Though loyal to these spiritual leaders, he felt that loyalty alone wasn't enough, and that he had to know for himself that they were right — so he spent a whole night on his knees to receive this witness of the Spirit.<sup>36</sup> George Q. Cannon emphasized the same principle. He said that “the people can go to God themselves, if they have doubts upon any point,” adding that “He will remove their doubts and answer their questions.”<sup>37</sup>

So the first thing to notice about blind obedience is that prophets themselves do not want it.<sup>38</sup> Are there members of the Church who do practice blind obedience? Of course there are some, but those who do so misunderstand the teachings of the gospel and Church leaders.

But a second thing to notice is that the idea of “blind obedience” is easy to mischaracterize in the first place. Receiving a spiritual testimony that something is right does not entail that one *understands* everything about it. All it means is that one knows it is right. When Lehi left Jerusalem he didn't know where his journey would lead or how long it would last. When Nephi entered Jerusalem to retrieve the plates of brass he didn't know how retrieving them was going to be possible. When Abraham was told he would have a son he didn't know how that could happen at his advanced age. When the Lord told his disciples to prepare a multitude to receive a meal — despite having only a few loaves and fishes — they didn't know how he could possibly accomplish that feat.

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36. In Clyde J. Williams, ed., *Teachings of Harold B. Lee* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 83.

37. 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), 345–46.

38. Leaders are not asking for blind obedience even when they emphasize the reliability of prophets and the importance of following them. After all, we saw a statement by George Albert Smith earlier in which he stressed the importance of following prophets, and yet he is the one who insisted that their statements do not end members' “thinking.” This should make it obvious that testimonies about prophets are not meant to suggest that they should be followed robotically. Rather, such testimonies simply provide a basis for members' own pondering and praying about the matter — a basis for seeking their own confirmation of the Spirit, independently. This is identical to the way prophets (and others) treat the Book of Mormon. When they testify that the Book of Mormon is true they are not remotely suggesting that others should simply accept their word and embrace the book because of it. Instead, testimony bearing is specifically intended to give hearers a reason to seek the Spirit and find out for themselves. So it is with any gospel topic, including, as in President Smith's case, that of testifying about the importance of following prophets.

When the Lord instructed Nephi to create the small plates — and later instructed Mormon to include them in his abridgement — he didn't tell either of them why they were doing so. And so forth.

In none of these cases were the individuals following “blindly,” however, *even though they understood hardly anything*. Because they knew that their instruction itself was divine, they didn't *need* to understand anything else. And this, of course, is actually the Lord's pattern. As we see in the scriptural incidents above, he routinely gives instructions without explanations.<sup>39</sup> He tells us what is right, but he usually does not tell us *why* it is right.

It is important, then, to avoid the mistake of thinking that members are following blindly just because they don't understand the whys, hows, whens, and wheres for everything they sustain and embrace. By that standard Lehi, Nephi, Abraham, the Lord's disciples, Mormon — and a host of others — could all be indicted for being shallow and “blind” in their obedience. As I said, that is a mistake. Members, like prophets, can hardly be indicted for doing what the Lord himself requires them to do: to follow because of what they know spiritually, even though they don't know much else.

What matters for members today is simply what mattered for these prophets in their day: a testimony that the messages they have received are divine and the will to embrace and pursue them on this basis alone. This is not blind obedience. It is obedience born of spiritual knowledge. It is obedience exactly on the terms the Lord himself requires of us.

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39. I treat this briefly in “A Lengthening Shadow,” Part One, 24, and more fully in “Sustaining the Brethren,” xxi–xxiv.



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