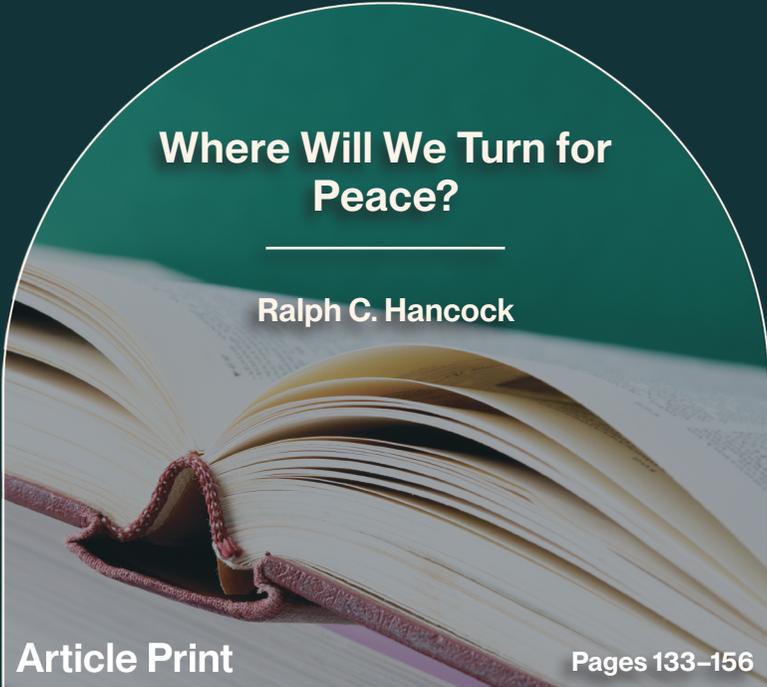


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Where Will We Turn for Peace?

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Where Will We Turn for Peace?

Ralph C. Hancock

Review of Patrick Q. Mason and J. David Pulsipher, Proclaim Peace: The Restoration's Answer to an Age of Conflict (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021). 290 pages. \$19.99 (paperback).

Abstract: *Proclaim Peace is a very timely and serious engagement with questions of peace. Consisting of roughly equal parts challenging scriptural exegesis, well-documented historical research, and earnest social activism, it may be taken as exemplary of current LDS academic opinion and institutional action on the interface between religion and politics. This work compels us to consider a critical question: Do we interpret the core meaning of peace as a temporal project of seeking justice? Or do we understand, contextualize, and moderate our passion for temporal justice relative to a promise of eternal peace? If we are intent on unifying heaven and earth, we should be careful from which direction we are working.*

Patrick Mason and J. David Pulsipher's *Proclaim Peace*¹ is a very timely and serious engagement with questions of the greatest importance: What is peace? How does the imperative of peace stand in relation to our most fundamental concerns as human beings, as citizens, and especially as Christians and Latter-day Saints? Mason and Pulsipher's impressive scholarly contribution and earnest personal reflections challenge us to consider carefully the implications of our

1. Patrick Q. Mason and J. David Pulsipher, *Proclaim Peace: The Restoration's Answer to an Age of Conflict* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, Brigham Young University [BYU]; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021).

most basic religious commitments for our deepest ethical and political views — and, I dare say, vice versa.

Our recently deceased prophet and Church President Russell M. Nelson, in recent addresses to the Church,² elevated the duty of peacemaking to new prominence, and Mason and Pulsipher's work aligns admirably with the prophet's call, as they offer an original reflection on a perennial theme of philosophy and theology. Their work rests upon a very ample and challenging, albeit contestable, examination of and engagement with scripture and other texts that hold authority for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This is a well-documented and carefully argued book, and all readers interested in the interface between the teachings and practices of the Church and our obligations and beliefs as members of political societies — including those readers who, like me, finally disagree with critical assumptions and interpretations within the book — will benefit from the authors' conscientious and intelligent research and writing.

This work also deserves attention for the influence it is exerting in the Church community. The authors' timely and serious treatment of the imperative of peacemaking has been well received among Latter-day Saint scholars and thinkers. The book is a joint publication of BYU's Maxwell Institute and the Church's Deseret Book, and a draft of the book was the focus of a two-day retreat whose sponsors included the Maxwell Institute and the History Department of BYU-Idaho. More recently at BYU's Provo campus, both the College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences and the Wheatley Institute featured *Proclaim Peace* in official efforts to highlight "work related to peacebuilding, bridge-building, depolarization practices, civil discourse and dialogue, community engagement and social cohesion."³ Consisting of roughly equal parts serious and challenging scriptural exegesis, well-documented historical research, and earnest social activism, the Mason-Pulsipher approach to the meaning of peace and to the task of peacemaking may thus be taken as exemplary of current LDS academic opinion and institutional action on the subject.

Mason and Pulsipher's book is as much a work of theology as

2. Russell M. Nelson, "Peacemakers Needed," *Liahona*, May 2023, 98–101, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2023/05/47nelson.

3. Mason was the keynote speaker for a BYU event (Peacemaker Fair), held on 10 September 2025, under the title: "The Fourth American Revolution: Peacemaking in Polarized Times." See socialsciences.byu.edu/peacemaker-fair-2025-09-10.

of social theory. In keeping with a project that positions itself within the LDS community and its basic teachings, the authors are careful to deny that they intend any doctrinal innovation. Instead, they reassure the reader that everyone can participate in the work of theology, which is simply "reasoned reflection" on doctrine (p. xx). At the same time, they consider theirs an interfaith effort, and it is not always clear how the authors' ecumenical sensibilities (including, notably, explicit affinities with intellectuals identifying with the Community of Christ, pp. x, 225–26) stand with respect to their commitments to teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They do not wish to be seen as radical innovators, it seems, and yet they invite us "to see sacred texts with new eyes" (p. xix). In any case, there are no obvious limits to how far the academic enterprise of theology can shape a person's understanding of the settled doctrine expressed by scripture and by Church authorities that we are supposed to share. It is fair to say, as we will see in examples referenced below, that Mason and Pulsipher are theologians who are far from satisfied with received understandings of LDS teachings. They show how much can be accomplished by independent initiative in theology without frontally challenging authoritative doctrine.

I propose a careful reading of *Proclaim Peace* as a case study in the challenge of (1) understanding and heeding what our faith teaches on this subject while (2) seeking ways to engage most constructively with the larger moral and political world in which we live.⁴ We will see that the question of peace is necessarily bound up with the question of justice. Both *peace* and *justice* can be interpreted in a more spiritual or more temporal sense, but certainly Mason and Pulsipher are right that these meanings are always, to some extent, intermingled. Still, it is of the greatest importance to attend carefully to the ways we situate and prioritize eternal concerns on the one hand and social and political concerns on the other.

As we shall see, a pivotal question that arises from this study in elite LDS discourse on peacemaking is this: Do we interpret the core meaning of *peace* as a *temporal* effort, as an outgrowth of a project for justice? Or do we understand and, in fact, contextualize and moderate our passion for temporal justice in light of a promise of *eternal peace*?

4. For a review of Mason and Pulsipher's book that considers its lack of interaction with just-war ethics, see Morgan Deane, "Rich Vein or Fools Gold?," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 51 (2022), 181–98, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/rich-vein-or-fools-gold.

Peace and Social Justice

How can Jesus Christ heal our fallen world? It is from this perspective that Mason and Pulsipher take up the question of peace. Healing the world is not, for them, an “otherworldly aspiration” but a project achievable in this world “if we embrace love, equality, justice, and peace as a way of life” (p. xvii). The authors do not regard this worldly endeavor as distinct from a properly religious understanding of peace. On the contrary, their project is, in a sense, very inward or spiritual, since it hinges on putting the “power of the word” over that of the sword. This verbal power is supported by a firm confidence that God is on our side in the pursuit of love, peace, and justice in this world. At the same time, it is very practical, and, it is fair to say, political, since it is based on the creation of “social and economic conditions that would allow all of God’s children to flourish and maximize their full potential” (p. xviii). The authors’ practical, temporal focus is also clear in their warning that the alternative to peace is “extinction” (p. xix).

What it means to *flourish* and to *maximize full potential* is left unclear, presumably because it would not be consistent with the equality of “all of God’s children” to privilege one substantive idea of flourishing over another. In their use of the most general and inclusive language to define what they see as the essential pre-conditions of peace, we can already start to sense the risk of the authors’ secular project setting the tone for and decisively determining the content of their religious vision.

What is meant by *peace*? Mason and Pulsipher’s conception is nothing if not capacious. They begin, as becomes authors addressing a religious public, with the idea of personal, inner peace. But their focus is certainly not on spiritual exercises or devotional practices that attune the soul to some higher reality. Nor is it centered on sacred covenants that mark the path and point the way to eternal life. Their inner peace is rather the peace that comes “when a person lives in accordance with moral law and ethical principles” (p. xxi), and therefore with interpersonal peace and intercommunal peace. To speak in classical terms, we can say that, for the authors, the order of the city is prior to the order of the soul. That is, the conception of social and political peace determines the content of inner peace—as it must, surely, if the meaning of *flourishing* or *maximizing full potential* are left open to individual definition.

The authors’ definition of inner peace is very closely tied to their conception of social peace, and therefore to their idea of justice, which

is decidedly social. For them, peace depends upon "a state of affairs in which justice, equity, and an abiding commitment to the common good is built into the very structure of society."⁵ Inner peace expresses itself definitively in the quest for social justice. Thus, our authors adopt as their standard the term *Justpeace*,⁶ which is very far from any conventionally modest effort to achieve an absence of violence, generally called *negative peace* by scholars (p. xxii). Mason and Pulsipher's aim is much larger. Their *Justpeace*, which they equate with a Latter-day Saint Zion, envisions "new relations [of] equality and fairness according to dictates of human dignity and the common good" (p. xxii). (The terms *human dignity* and *the common good* are just as nebulous and undefined as those of *flourishing* or *maximizing full potential*.)

Mason and Pulsipher's positive view of peace is thus tied to an idea of justice that is quite vague but clearly very demanding. *Justpeace* requires not only the elimination of war and criminal violence, but of structural and cultural violence. Naturally, all of us love the concept of justice as well as the idea of peace, and so the fusion of these notions can be attractive. Few will object to the ideals of *equality* (or *equity*), *fairness*, and *human dignity*, especially when they are used abstractly, unmoored from any political and philosophical content. It should not be necessary to point out the almost infinite elasticity of these terms. Indeed, it seems that the most sublime and spiritual ideal, human dignity, is the most elastic.

Do we intend by *equality* some understanding of equal opportunity to make ourselves fit to receive specific moral and spiritual goods, or do we mean *equity* in such a way as to categorize all unequal outcomes as proof of oppressive injustice? (The authors largely and prudently avoid the clearly ideologically charged term *equity*, but in their concluding paragraph they practically identify distributing "the world's wealth and resources more equitably" and overcoming "debilitating cultures of racism or sexism or classism" with building Zion [p. 214].)

Do we associate *dignity* with moral accountability and defined potential for practical achievement or even exaltation? Or do we understand it as consistent with a flattening secular gospel of relativistic

5. John Paul Lederach and R. Scott Appleby, "Strategic Peacebuilding: An Overview," in *Strategies of Peace: Transforming Conflict in a Violent World*, ed. Daniel Philpott and Gerard F. Powers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 23–24, as quoted in Mason and Pulsipher, *Proclaim Peace*, xxii.

6. The authors' choice of this term is interesting, as it is also the name of a non-governmental organization (NGO). For more information, see justpeace.ngo.

“love,” according to which individuals claim dignity as a reward for expressing or asserting their self-conceived identity? The term *dignity* now appears as the core of a non-partisan ethical consensus, but this rather muddy consensus covers up the vast difference between an idea of human worth that is grounded in an understanding of God and the virtues that lead us to godliness, and one that traffics in the notion of ever-expanding rights, including the right to an “equal dignity” with no basis but human assertion and no substantive moral content.

It should not be necessary to say that the pursuit of a utopian idea of perfect universal justice, of a society that would somehow recognize as equal all rights-claims, tends to fuel the radical rejection of all existing moral and political standards. Far from favoring peace, such rejection of existing standards in the name of radical “equal dignity” — or unconditional deference to victim-coded “identities” and the promise of liberation from all “oppression” including all perceived “unfairness” and “inequality” — ultimately portends revolutionary violence.

Mason and Pulsipher’s framework of peace activism is aimed, beyond a minimal absence of war and direct violence (“negative peace”), at the possibility of a pure peace based upon a perfect justice. This framework is heavily indebted to the acknowledged father of the academic peace-studies movement, Norwegian professor Johan Galtung, who founded the *Journal of Peace Research* in 1964. Galtung’s career illustrates the hazards of binding the pursuit of political and international peace, as well as the LDS aspiration of building Zion, to an ultimately secular utopian project of justice, understood as liberation from all social and cultural inequality. According to Bruce Bawer, while Galtung is “invariably portrayed in the media as a charismatic . . . champion of decency, [he] is in fact a lifelong enemy of freedom” who praised Stalin’s USSR, Castro’s Cuba, and above all Mao’s China while identifying capitalism with imperialism and condemning the West’s “structural fascism.”⁷

As Bawer notes, “Galtung’s use of the word ‘peace’ to legitimize totalitarianism is an old Communist tradition.” My point here is not to accuse Mason and Pulsipher of any deliberate Communist sympathies. I do not know whether it would be more damning for their argument to surmise that they know—but choose to pass over in silence—the ideological roots of the peace-studies movement in which they position themselves, or to suggest that they have not even

7. Bruce Bawer, “The Peace Racket,” *City Journal* (New York), Summer 2007, city-journal.org/article/the-peace-racket.

begun to scrutinize the ideological resonances of their project. The latter would be unsurprising, alas, since it is all too common for LDS academics to celebrate unawares a political agenda and a philosophical worldview alien to what we say we believe. A certain leftish progressivism so permeates the mostly implicit worldview — a secular religion of egalitarian progress — of mainstream higher education (at least in the humanities and social sciences) that few seem even to raise the question of any tension or contradiction between that worldview and Restoration essentials.⁸

Since I have written the word *secular*, we should pause to consider the problem of the temporal and the eternal in relation to the project of *Proclaim Peace*. Mason and Pulsipher understandably draw upon the Restoration’s distinctive emphasis on the continuity between this world and the next, and thus on the integration between our practical efforts to improve our moral and material condition and our hope for a final Kingdom of God over which Christ will reign. I agree with the authors on the need to work towards our integration of fundamental concerns, both temporal and eternal. They are right, I think, to argue that our view of *private* salvation must be coordinated with some understanding of the good of our community (pp. 22–23). As the ancient political philosophers taught, the questions of the good of the soul and of the city cannot be severed. But much depends upon whether we tend to absorb our practical, secular concerns within a fundamentally spiritual and religious perspective, or whether we proceed in the opposite direction and read a secular project into the religious framework of the Restoration. Mason and Pulsipher tend heavily to the latter. It seems that, for them, an understanding of the whole meaning of our religion can dispense with any reflection on the actual content of exaltation and eternal life. Instead, they focus on the promotion of Zion, understood according to the canons of secular equality or social justice.

In keeping with their temporal, mortal perspective on the ultimate meaning of *peace*, the authors thus argue that Jesus Christ’s ministry was by no means non-political, but rather that it represented a

8. I have previously addressed the LDS intellectual community’s untroubled embrace of Jonathan Rauch’s appropriation of the LDS concept of “agency.” See Ralph Hancock, “Moral Agency and Sustainable Liberalism: Rauch’s Proposed Liberal-Christian Alliance,” Part I, *Public Discourse*, 4 June 2025, thepublicdiscourse.com/2025/06/98066/; and Ralph Hancock, “A New Political Theology of ‘Agency,’” Part II, *Public Discourse*, 5 June 2025, thepublicdiscourse.com/2025/06/98068/.

different way of pursuing political ends. They avoid choosing or balancing between immediate political and social concerns and eternal concerns by positing that these can be joined seamlessly together. There is no need to choose between actual, temporal power and eternal principles of love, because “principles of love and truth . . . exert actual power in this world” (p. 16). Apparently, there is no need to choose between or to balance social justice activism and spiritual discipleship, because “we can transform the world with love” (p. 42). (The authors see no need to distinguish between humanitarian “love” and the divine love offered in the gospel and its covenants. There is no need to choose between the “nonviolent vulnerability” of Jesus Christ and Caesar’s greater coercive power, because nonviolence is, or can be, effectively powerful here and now, socially and politically in the present world. [p. 36]) “Love your enemy” is not only the immense and sublime challenge at the heart of Christ’s gospel, but also a winning political strategy! “The Power of Assertive Love”⁹ is not a mere spiritual power but a *winning* strategy, here and now, in this world.

Scripture, Prophecy, and Peacemaking

A close reading of scripture, and especially of the Book of Mormon, is central to Mason and Pulsipher’s argument, and occupies the larger part of *Proclaim Peace*. They propose a scriptural hermeneutic or interpretive scheme that serves the purpose of their Justpeace project. All students of the Book of Mormon will benefit from engaging the reading offered here. It is serious and intelligent, although at times almost charmingly tendentious, as the authors do not hide their efforts to produce an understanding of the scriptural text that suits their purposes. In introducing their nonviolent reading, they have to admit that God can use violence—he drowned Pharaoh’s army in the Red Sea after all—but they ask us to concede that such violence is not his standard operating procedure.

In the Book of Mormon, Mason and Pulsipher are immediately confronted with the violence that Nephi ultimately inflicted upon the drunken Laban. They grant that Nephi succeeds in acquiring the brass plates through violence and deception, but regard this action as a mistake; they present the reasoning Nephi gives in 1 Nephi 4:10–18 as merely his self-justification (pp. 49–52). More generally, the authors continue a recent trend in the most venturesome Book of Mormon

9. The title of chapter 5, emphasis mine.

scholarship to give the benefit of the doubt to Nephi's wayward brothers rather than to the prophet and king. It is Nephi who wronged his brothers by lording it over them; it is he who somehow "came to believe that the mantle of leadership had bypassed his older brothers and rested on him" (p. 79), and so it seems we should find their attempts to murder him understandable. Nephi repented, but it was too late, as he had already alienated his brothers. Sadly, his unpeaceful attitudes contributed to the destruction of Nephite civilization. Such, for Mason and Pulsipher, is Nephi's "ambivalent legacy" (p. 62). To be sure, the Lamanites were no paragons of pacifism, but it takes two to tango, and thus we should be cautious in accepting the Nephite version of the conflict. Mason and Pulsipher rightly warn us against accepting at face value every Nephite characterization of their Lamanite enemies. At the same time, it is possible to go too far in holding both sides in a conflict equally responsible.

Unsurprisingly, our authors have little patience for "one of the primary heroes" of the Book of Mormon narrative, namely, the Nephite military captain Moroni. They are willing to accuse this would-be hero of unprovoked "ethnic cleansing," and thus consider him a forerunner of the modern age's much derided "settler colonialism" (p. 81). Their expansive theological interpretation allows them to sidestep Mormon's description of Moroni as a man not only of strength but of "perfect understanding," one "that did not delight in bloodshed" and "whose heart did swell with thanksgiving to his God" (Alma 48:11–12). It takes a lot of confidence in the ideology of Justpeace to disqualify the prophet Mormon's remarkable praise: "I say unto you, if all men had been, and were, and ever would be, like unto Moroni, behold, the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever; yea, the devil would never have power over the hearts of the children of men" (Alma 48:17).

The Anti-Nephi-Lehies provide *Proclaim Peace* its best scriptural example of the approach of "sanctifying nonviolent resistance" that is central to its thesis. Mason and Pulsipher understandably hold them up as "godlike" for their willingness to give up their lives rather than take up the sword, an act that "captures the inherent power of nonviolently loving our enemies" (p. 97). Conceding little to the specific context of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies' magnificent gesture—that is, their contrition for their "many sins and murders" and their fear of relapsing into the same sin (Alma 24:7–17)—Mason and Pulsipher hold them up as a generally applicable example of regarding their would-be enemies as brethren (p. 98).

Such a shallow reading of the scriptural account can be used to justify unilateral surrender as a means of securing peace. The authors' attempts to cite modern examples of this strategy do little to enhance their argument. Their proposal of Costa Rica (which abolished its military in 1948 to secure civilian control of the country) as a general example to the nations of the world is hardly plausible (p. 118). And their quotation of Abraham Lincoln's appeal to "the better angels of our nature" in his first inaugural address overlooks the obvious and inconvenient fact that Lincoln led a war that cost hundreds of thousands of lives to preserve the Union. Further study of Lincoln's second inaugural address (which the authors briefly reference on p. 188) is recommended.

To their credit, Mason and Pulsipher acknowledge that non-violence does not always dominate the Book of Mormon narrative: "The text extols *both* nonviolence and just warfare, without explicitly resolving any apparent contradictions, and holds them in perpetual tension" (p. 90). Is it not fair to ask whether Mason and Pulsipher might have shown more respect for the tension inherent in the sacred narrative? Instead, they make use of a "full range of interpretive resources" to privilege those texts that favor their quasi-pacifist position (p. 168). At least they are willing to admit that "at times we might actually be justified in responding to violence with violence, but such responses will ultimately never heal or transform our conflicts into opportunities for creative growth. Only love can do that" (p. 93). The reader can surely agree with that judgment while doubting the authors' interpretation of love according to their Justpeace agenda.

To be clear, Mason and Pulsipher do not espouse a position of pure pacificism. In chapter 6 they allow that, while God requires patience and forbearance, he does justify or at least excuse self-defense under certain rigorous conditions: violence must be a last resort, legitimate only after many attempts of self-sacrificing peacemaking, and followed by "an increase of sanctifying love." This represents a higher standard, they rightly note, than the Christian just-war tradition (pp. 134–44).

Mason and Pulsipher offer a challenging and well-documented examination of the Latter-day Saint "political theology of friendship" (chapter 8) in relation to the United States of America and its Constitution. Their reading of the LDS perspective on the Constitution is notably nuanced. They grant that the Constitution may be considered "inspired," but only insofar as it aims, according to Doctrine and Covenants 101:77, to guarantee the "rights and protection of all flesh,"

and certainly not only of the flesh of the privileged few who happen to live within the boundaries of the United States. The authors do not mention that the purpose of the Constitution is "that every man may act in doctrine and principle pertaining to futurity, according to the moral agency which I have given unto him, that every man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment" (Doctrine and Covenants 101:78). Rather than personal moral accountability, they prefer to emphasize "that individual moral responsibility is interwoven with social moral responsibility" (p. 202), and "sinful structures of injustice, inequality, and exploitation" (p. 203). They propose a distinctly minimalist interpretation of the Saints' "befriending" of the "constitutional law of the land" (Doctrine and Covenants 98:6), a bargain devised by Oliver Cowdery that may be said to have worked out reasonably well, but at the cost of the Church's subjection to a nation-state predicated on violence (p. 184).

Regarding "temporal laws and governments" as mere "placeholders" for the Justpeace of Zion they envision, the authors concede the very minimum to "Caesar's claims to territory, lordship, or sovereignty" (p. 180). (They do not mention any objection to the federal government's coercive imposition of monogamy on the Saints.) *Proclaim Peace* thus rests upon a quite remarkable demand for the autonomy and ascendancy of religious over political authority. They propose a complete "restoration political theology" (p. 190) recognizing "God is the true and sole sovereign" (p. 191) and based upon confidence that "the kingdom of Christ is real and coming" (p. 191). They grant that "Christ's disciples are citizens of nations" (p. 191), and "encourage friendship toward political regimes" as long as they "promote individual freedom and human rights, protect vulnerable populations, and cultivate human dignity" (p. 191). Again, they affirm that "secular political communities deserve active friendship and loyalty" (p. 192).¹⁰ Their ideal of a nation sets a very high standard ("when the nation is predicated on care rather than violence"), but they grant that "Christians should not withhold their friendship simply because no current political community perfectly embodies the ideals of Zion" (p. 193).

One might ask whether a community that depends purely on "care"

10. Mason and Pulsipher never address what "active friendship" toward a community or nation should look like. Does active friendship mean helping the government achieve their political goals even if those goals don't mesh well with a vision of Zion? If a Christian lives in Iran or Somalia, what should such friendship entail when the political regime is seeking to kill you for your beliefs?

and in no way on “violence,” or the coercive force of law, would even be a *political* community. Mason and Pulsipher’s “restoration political theology” is not, in fact, a political theology — a reflection on the inherently tangled relationship between political and religious authority. Nor is it a reflection on the problem, older than St. Augustine, of reconciling the imperfect earthly presence of the Church — the City of God — with the natural necessity of the City of Man. *Proclaim Peace* is, rather, an expression of very robust confidence in the proximate possibility of Zion, a project for achieving a post-political society governed wholly by sacrificial Christian love. This is interpreted, of course, in alignment with Justpeace and its essentially liberationist understanding of equal human dignity.

To be sure, all Latter-day Saints who hunger and thirst after righteousness must long for the coming of Zion, but just how do we understand Zion? How do we understand the ultimate and highest meaning of peace, and how can we help bring it about? Mason and Pulsipher’s project is, in one sense, an adamantly *religious* project, very optimistic about the effectual power of sacrificial peace, here and now. Yet, in another sense, it is a very *secular* project, one that appeals ecumenically to other Christians and to non-Christians who share a certain idea of peace. They are very eager to join efforts with seekers of peace of all religious or non-religious persuasions who understand peace as the overcoming of all violence, including, notably, structural and cultural violence.

The authors’ idea of violence is measured against the ideal of a society defined by equal human dignity, a notion of Christian origin that has certainly traveled far from its doctrinal context. This idea of equal human dignity has no specifically religious content. It refers in no way to covenants, to moral and spiritual discipline, to the difficult task of achieving a Godlike character through the Atonement of Christ and by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel. Detached from a religious and moral context, “equal dignity” is open to indefinite ideological expansion and, thus, to the increased use of state power to validate the claims of recognized victims to be liberated from structural or cultural authority that, to them, violates a dignity severed from all parameters of moral responsibility.¹¹ The logic of Mason and Pulsipher’s Justpeace project leads to boundless utopian demands on governmental powers from intersectional coalitions in search of an

11. To their credit, Mason and Pulsipher do endorse “a robust sexual ethic” as integral to “a commitment to peacebuilding” (p. 126).

undefinable equity. The resolute, anti-political religiosity of *Proclaim Peace* risks fueling irresponsible activism that demands the growth and exercise of oppressive structural authority.

The authors might understandably insist that, in good Latter-day Saint fashion, they reject any dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, the eternal and the temporal. And they are certainly right that our conceptions of heaven and earth must be integrated, that our exercise of moral agency during our mortal probation is integral to our celestial exaltation, where we will enjoy "that same sociality which exists among us here" (Doctrine and Covenants 130:2). But let us not forget what scripturally follows: "only it will be coupled with eternal glory." Does Mason and Pulsipher's peace, their understanding of perfect communion, recognize the necessity of eternal glory? Or do they replace the properly religious ideas of sanctification and exaltation with an understanding of peace correlated with a secular and ideological notion of equal human dignity?

If we are intent on unifying heaven and earth, we ought to be careful from which direction we are working.

Religion and Politics, and the Two Great Commandments

To understand the dynamic of the argument of *Proclaim Peace*, it is important to note that they begin conceptually by radically separating religion from politics, and then conclude on what is, in fact, a fusion of religion and politics. Religion, for them, is a non-violent commitment to the dignity of every person; it envisions a society of perfect unity and equality. Politics, or Caesar's realm, is the fallen world of violence, coercion, and hierarchy. But the authors end by radically fusing their idea of a religious Zion with a liberationist and secular-humanitarian understanding of the human person and the good community. They tend to reduce the Church's ends and means to just one more effort of supposedly pure human benevolence of hope and change. They imagine that an alliance with secular Justpeace activists can motivate sacrificial non-violence and transform the world. But Mason and Pulsipher's inclusive universalism effectually makes the Church a subsidiary of a globalist activism, blind to the more modest but essential purposes of nation states with their own laws and borders. They want to recommend "active friendship and loyalty" (p. 192) to existing political entities, but they set aside Christ's limited deference to Caesar ("everything is God's" [p. 180]) and emphasize that "God is the true and sole sovereign" (p. 191). They are willing to grant that the U.S. Constitution is

inspired, but only insofar as it guarantees the “rights and protection of *all* flesh” (their emphasis) and does not limit its protection to the privileged few who happen to live in the United States (p. 181). This ignores the question of whether one could embrace the Constitution without embracing the defense and the common good of the actual country and the people for whom it was framed. They seem to grant the legitimacy of “active friendship and loyalty” to real political communities, but then they effectively undermine all such loyalty by stipulating that all influence must be based on care rather than violence.

It is a sad reality of our fallen world that there are no political entities whose authority is not ultimately backed up by coercive power. There are no nation-states that satisfy the standard of care the authors espouse — the renunciation of all forms of violence (direct, structural, and cultural) — meaning the legitimacy of all possible claims of equal dignity. These realities mean that Mason and Pulsipher effectively dismiss all existing national loyalties as inherently idolatrous. The only justice that meets their standard is an imaginary global, borderless Justpeace of miraculously self-sacrificial bearers of unlimited rights of dignity and subjective fulfillment. This fusion of religion and politics falsifies the nature of each. Mason and Pulsipher argue, citing Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, that “the gospel of Jesus Christ holds the answer to every social and political and economic problem the world has ever faced.”¹² But in their hands the effectual truth of that argument is reversed: for them, the answer to every social and political and economic problem — Justpeace — is the true meaning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The same sort of reversal can be traced in the way the authors conceive of the relationship between the inward and the outward, that is, between an inner, spiritual peace and an external, social-political peace. In one sense, their argument is deeply, exorbitantly inward and spiritual: they ask every Saint and citizen immediately to embrace the example of Christ and of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies by a readiness to sacrifice their lives for their fellow humans, even for those who aim to destroy them.

In this sense, they seem to honor Ezra Taft Benson’s counsel that a truly Christian approach to social problems must work “from the

12. Jeffrey R. Holland, “A Handful of Meal and a Little Oil,” *Ensign*, May 1996, 31, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1996/05/a-handful-of-meal-and-a-little-oil.

inside out,” whereas “the world works from the outside in.”¹³ But in the final analysis their understanding of personal or inner peace is wholly subordinated to a project that aims not to transform the human heart and to strengthen the accountable moral agent, but to bring about “a state of affairs in which justice, equity, and an abiding commitment to the common good is built into the very structures of society” (p. xxii). Spiritual peace and moral agency are thus defined in terms of the ideological project of Justpeace, with its boundless ambition to liberate every individual from all inequalities, including structural or cultural norms that some will invariably and inevitably experience as oppression.

By making social change the decisive factor in attaining spiritual peace, Mason and Pulsipher, in effect, prioritize the love of neighbor—or, rather, of the person claiming equal dignity—over the love of God. The authors would do well to attend to Elder Christofferson’s counsel regarding the necessary priority of the first great commandment over the second:

First is the foundational nature of this first commandment. Wonderful and essential as the second commandment is, it does not provide the necessary foundation for our lives, nor is it intended to. Obeying the second commandment makes us nice people, but to what end? What is the point of our existence? For purpose, direction, and meaning, we must look to the first and great commandment. . . .

Second, ignoring the first commandment, or reversing the order of the first and second commandments, risks a loss of balance in life and destructive deviations from the path of happiness and truth. Love of God and submission to Him provide checks against our tendency to corrupt virtues by pushing them to the extreme. Compassion for our neighbor’s distress, for example, even when the suffering is brought about by his or her own transgression, is noble and good. *But an unbridled compassion could lead us, like Alma’s son Corianton, to question God’s justice and misunderstand His mercy.*¹⁴

13. Ezra Taft Benson, “Born of God,” *Ensign*, July 1989, 4, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/ce29dd5d-a8dd-4018-ac84-2dd4a07c9184/0/5.

14. D. Todd Christofferson, “The First Commandment First,” (devotional address, BYU, Provo, UT, 22 March 2022), speeches.byu.edu/talks/d-todd

In *Proclaim Peace*, a passion or ambition to pursue social justice, to eliminate all inequalities declared by certain classes of victims to be systemic or structural (or, in Elder Christofferson’s terms, to make us “nice people” according to a dominant understanding of “compassion”) leads to a quite marked subordination of the question of our ultimate “purpose, direction, and meaning” to an ideological project that is widely embraced, without objection or reservation, by the secular religion of American higher education.

Mason and Pulsipher rightly reject what they describe as a “moral passivity” that defers all resolution of injustice to some other world (p. 41). But here they produce a straw man argument that allows them to avoid reflection on the imperative of fairness in the present life. We are not forced to choose between complete passivity relative to social and political problems and Mason and Pulsipher’s complete embrace of a social-justice interpretation of the gospel. It is sufficient to consider the contrast between the argument of *Proclaim Peace* and that made by Elder Renlund in his April 2021 General Conference address.¹⁵ Elder Renlund begins with a story that makes it clear that claims of injustice or unfairness are often motivated by envy and selfishness. Inequality of material advantages may be the result of “diligent choices” that some make and others forgo in their pursuit of “immediate gratification.” Beyond the need for reasonable skepticism regarding egalitarian claims, Elder Renlund simply acknowledges the necessary limits of fairness in this life:

Some unfairness cannot be explained; inexplicable unfairness is infuriating. Unfairness comes from living with bodies that are imperfect, injured, or diseased. Mortal life is inherently unfair. Some people are born in affluence; others are not. Some have loving parents; others do not. Some live many years; others, few. And on and on and on.¹⁶

In response to the unfairness inherent to some degree in our mortal condition, Elder Renlund does not propose an agenda of social justice that would promise to transform that condition, but instead points to a remedy that operates on another plane: “Jesus Christ,” he teaches,

-christofferson/the-first-commandment-first/, emphasis added. Very similar counsel has been prominent in recent General Conference addresses as well.

15. Dale G. Renlund, “Infuriating Unfairness,” *Ensign*, May 2021, 41–44, church ofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2021/05/25renlund.

16. Renlund, “Infuriating Unfairness,” 42.

"both understands unfairness and has the power to provide a remedy. Nothing compares to the unfairness He endured."¹⁷ Thus, in a gesture that, for Mason and Pulsipher, would be classified as "moral passivity," Elder Renlund responds to the endemic character of unfairness in the human condition by promising that "*in the eternities*, Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ will resolve all unfairness."¹⁸ Without denying that we "approach others with compassion and try to alleviate unfairness where we find it; we can try to make things right within our sphere of influence," he makes it clear that the ultimate answer to the problem of injustice is faith that "Jesus Christ will consecrate the unfairness for our gain."¹⁹

Elder Renlund's response to the claims of those "infuriated" by injustice, either real or perceived, is consistent with the broader perspective of the Restoration as well as a broad and deep Christian tradition. This teaching situates our ultimate peace in a better world whose realization depends upon religious faith, hope, and charity and cannot be achieved by social activism motivated by the secular energy of equality understood as liberation from all oppressive social norms. Mason and Pulsipher have proposed a theological reinterpretation of the Restoration. Clearly a very strong reinterpretation is needed in order to yield the Justpeace activism they promote.

Overall, Mason and Pulsipher seem to favor a direct translation of spiritual principles into political strategies. That is, they are confident that eternal principles of love and truth can "exert actual *power* in this world," here and now (p. 16, emphasis added). "We can transform the world with love," they proclaim (p. 42). In other contexts, however, our authors are at pains to distinguish the divine and the human: "There lies an enormous gulf between imperfect mortals and a perfect God . . . 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts,' God reminds his children, 'neither are your ways my ways'" (p. 155). On the one hand, God's ways, insofar as they align with Justpeace, must be translated directly into political affairs. On the other hand, any examples of God's ways that contradict the Justpeace agenda must be safely bracketed as irrelevant to our temporal concerns. What may seem to be examples of "divine violence" must be viewed as mysterious aspects of divinity reserved for glorified and perfected beings. No such distinction between the divine and the temporal suggests to our authors

17. Renlund, "Infuriating Unfairness," 43.

18. Renlund, "Infuriating Unfairness," 43, emphasis added.

19. Renlund, "Infuriating Unfairness," 43.

any caution in applying the pure evangelical idea of peace to practical national and international problems: “The possibility and reality of force always underlies” the supposed “consent of the governed” in our present political communities (p. 173). Freely deploying a considerable “range of interpretive resources” (p. 168) in order to explain away violence that is commanded or justified in scripture, Mason and Pulsipher propose to undertake an agenda of peace and justice that will replace “the nation-state, predicated on the power of violence,” with “the kingdom of God, predicated on the power of love” (p. 173).

The Gospel’s Peace

I must pass over, for now, Mason and Pulsipher’s challenging and well-researched examination of Latter-day Saint teachings on political theology and the U.S. Constitution, from the Saints’ struggles in Missouri to twentieth-century prophetic teachings on war in official messages of the First Presidency. The readings presented in *Proclaim Peace*, like those addressing the question of violence in the Book of Mormon, certainly deserve careful consideration. At the same time, we must note the tendentiousness of the authors’ use some statements by General Authorities. They are happy to cite Dallin H. Oaks’s “prophetic critique . . . [of] genocide, war, economic inequality, corruption, and the suffering of refugees as the products of sin,” in order then to argue that “we should not stop” at the aim of fostering “personal and interpersonal peace,” but rather go further “to identify, unmask, root out, and transform structures and cultures of violence, beginning in our own communities” (p. 203). They seem not to notice that their transmogrification of Elder Oaks’s Christian counsel of peace into a boundless project of transforming structures and cultures is not at all consistent with the overall thrust of his conference address.²⁰ To find a practical touchstone of peace in the contemporary world, Elder Oaks turns to the U.S. Constitution, for which he provides a much more robust defense than the reserved and conditional friendship for the Constitution touted by Mason and Pulsipher. Rather than promoting radical structural change, President Oaks insists that “the key” to uniting a diverse and divided society “is constitutional patriotism.”²¹ Rather than disparaging the political principle of “consent” that is practically

20. Dallin H. Oaks, “World Peace,” *Ensign*, May 1990, 71–73, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1990/05/world-peace.

21. Dallin H. Oaks, “Love Your Enemies,” *Ensign*, November 2020, 29, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2020/11/17oaks.

embodied in the modern liberal-democratic nation-state as masking "the possibility and reality of force," as do Mason and Pulsipher (p. 173), Oaks declares that it is the "teachings of our Savior" that "inspired the Constitution of the United States and the basic laws of many of our countries."²²

Elder Oaks quotes Joseph F. Smith: "There is only one thing that can bring peace into the world. It is the adoption of the gospel of Jesus Christ, rightly understood, obeyed and practiced by rulers and people alike."²³ Peace, Oaks clearly states, is not the product of liberation from all structural or cultural inequalities, but can only be achieved through the "general righteousness" of the people in the nations concerned. "The Savior and his Apostles had no program for world peace other than individual righteousness."²⁴ There is no need, from this point of view, to form a new ecumenical movement of Justpeace:

Our missionaries . . . are workers for world peace . . . They are the Lord's servants, and his program for world peace depends on righteousness, not rhetoric. . . . By inviting all to repent and to come unto Christ, our missionaries are working for peace in this world by changing the hearts and behavior of individual men and women.²⁵

If this prioritizing of personal righteousness is the true and only road to peace, then the academically inspired movement of Justpeace — the tethering of peace to a radical and secular idea of social justice — is, at best, a distraction.

President Marion G. Romney's perspective on peace is even more explicit in its skepticism of peace projects not derived from the full message of the gospel:

Must the choice lie irrevocably between peace on the one hand, obtained by compliance with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and contention and war on the other hand? In answer to this question, I feel safe in saying that if there is a middle ground it is as yet undiscovered; and that, too, notwithstanding the fact that the search for it has been long and tortuous. Ignorant of, or ignoring, and without any thought of paying the price of peace, men have tried many approaches. There

22. Oaks, "Love Your Enemies," 29.

23. Oaks, "World Peace," 71.

24. Oaks, "World Peace," 72.

25. Oaks, "World Peace," 73.

was St. Pierre's project in 1713; Bentham's plan, 1780; Kant's project, 1795; there were the Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1907; and the League of Nations following World War I, to name but a few. There have been pacts, treaties and alliances, *ad infinitum*, all without success. . . .

If we would have peace, brothers and sisters, we must make up our minds to pay the price of peace. . . . We should rejoice, for to proclaim peace is the sole purpose of our life's mission. We should find no pleasure in the fact that men's strivings for peace have proved ineffectual. I wage no war against their efforts. Many of them are doing the best they can in the light they have. Nevertheless, *I can see no justification for us, who have the clear light of the revealed gospel of Christ, to spend our lives stumbling around through the mists following the uncertain glimmer of a flickering candle lighted by the wisdom of men.* Rather, we should devote our energies to spreading the true light, and leave the mists to those who do not see that light.²⁶

Mason and Pulsipher's project seems quite opposite to the Church's consistent emphasis on the priority of spiritual peace, moral accountability, and the essential tasks of living and sharing the gospel in our peacemaking efforts. The authors' program is ecumenical to the point of neglecting the distinctive resources of the Restoration and submerging our efforts as Latter-day Saints into an activist movement based on secular premises and priorities. They often cite examples from and urge us to be more like certain activists within the Community of Christ, a denomination that has largely abandoned the substance of Joseph Smith's legacy and redefined themselves as a social gospel community. Citing Rabbi Heschel, they promise to make us "relevant, ambitious, liberating, and irrepressibly meaningful" and so to save us from the prospect of becoming "irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid" (p. 231). In their final chapter, charmingly titled "Just Ward Theory," they enthuse about the example of a BYU stake president who proposed that merely participating in Sunday services was worthless in comparison with the imperative to exhibit "pure religion" by cooperating with "selected social service providers" in the effort to "constructively transform structural and cultural violence" (p. 220–21).

26. Marion G. Romney, "The Price of Peace" *Ensign*, October 1983, 6, emphasis added, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1983/10/the-price-of-peace.

Mason and Pulsipher are willing to acknowledge the relevance of missionary work to peacemaking, as long as missionaries "become more aware of the ways that the global expansion of Christianity has been historically connected with forms of structural and cultural violence such as colonialism and imperialism" (p. 222). In their view, missionaries should also not confuse the aim of being "vehicles of reconciliation that touch hearts and even transform communities" (p. 222) with the old, boring objective of getting people baptized. Naturally, what they find most promising in LDS universities includes an undergraduate major in "intercultural peacebuilding" and exposure to "theories of conflict resolution, conflict transformation, and intercultural understanding" (p. 228). And, of course, many professors and administrators agree with them. It is not the goal of forming eternal families, of building god-like characters, or of enlarging the intellect with a view to eternal truths, but the latest social-scientific strategies of "conflict resolution" that, for the project of *Proclaim Peace*, provide the actual content of BYU's declared mission "to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life."

Conclusion: In the Beginning

Mason and Pulsipher's idea of peace is decidedly secular and utopian in its description and practical implications. They associate this idea with a Christian and Latter-day Saint vocabulary of faith and love, but in order to avoid absorption into a vocabulary and a worldview of secular-rationalist derivation, such ideas—as well as those of justice, peace, flourishing, human dignity, and so on—must always be informed by some understanding of the human and divine good that is grounded in scripture and prophecy. We must always remember our ultimate nature and keep an eye on our purpose of being.

The authors do not concern themselves at any length with such questions. For the most part, they simply assume an unproblematic fit between Restoration and secular-ideological understandings of human meaning or dignity or, rather, of the optimal non-violent regulation of societies. But their mostly implicit understanding of the ultimate meaning of our humanity comes to light in their first chapter, in a discussion of our beginnings as self-existing intelligences in a pre-mortal existence (p. 4). This discussion allows us a revealing peek at Mason and Pulsipher's deepest theological and philosophical premises.

For Mason and Pulsipher, the ultimate meaning of all things, the baseline reality that obtained "before the beginning," is "a universe

populated by human souls who are truly free” (p. 4). *Freedom*, as used here, has a radical meaning. The original condition that defines all purposes and possibilities in *Proclaim Peace* is the co-existence of “independent personalities,” a kind of premortal anticipation of a modern rationalist state of nature in which “each soul chooses and acts within a universe populated with other free souls who are also choosing and acting” (p. 5). What ought these souls choose and how ought they act? For Mason and Pulsipher, there is no inherent purpose or substantive moral content to be found in this primordial condition. They acknowledge in passing that “God was and is ‘greater’ – more intelligent, more advanced, more perfect in personality and character — ‘than they all’” (p. 4), but they find no fundamental guidance, no order of goodness, no rank in states of being, in this recognition of a “more advanced” God. Rather, their very understanding of what advancement or progress could possibly mean is subordinated to the logic of the radical freedom of independent beings that “are *constantly bumping up against and influencing one another*” (p. 5, emphasis added). Their primordial intelligences operate in a moral and teleological vacuum.

Mason and Pulsipher note that their interpretation of Joseph Smith’s revelations “might seem like a libertarian paradise” (which is not a bad characterization), given that freedom, for them, is the fundamental ontological premise, one that provides no original and inherent purpose or limits. They add that this interpretation of beginnings “is in fact a web of profound interconnectivity and interdependence” (p. 5) — as if this were an alternative to the “libertarian paradise” interpretation. Extreme individualism and extreme connectivity or collectivism are two sides of the same coin. Mason and Pulsipher’s primordial “before the beginning” is the mirror of a modern secular idea of a state of nature defined by its lack of any given or inherent order or purpose.

The only ethic that can be built on this foundation is one of the instrumental value of any remedies that evolve in the “constantly bumping up against and influencing one another” of these primordial intelligences, endowed as they are only with the right to their boundless freedom and not with any guiding purpose. The secular and instrumental tendency of Mason and Pulsipher’s concept of peace, its ultimate default to the undefined claims of a human right to equal dignity, is predetermined by the priority they perceive in the realm of primordial souls — the amoral freedom of beings whose only purpose is to solve the problem of “constantly bumping up against and influencing one another.” For the authors, peace is effectively defined by social

justice. Peace is not the soul's liberation from sin to attain a higher state of being. Rather, liberation from the injustice of inequality is their most fundamental meaning of peace. The effective priority of external to internal peace, of the social and political to the spiritual or soulful, operates at the deepest level of Mason and Pulsipher's theology.

To question the priorities implicit in the project of *Proclaim Peace* is in no way to imply that there is no value in many of the efforts and strategies that Mason and Pulsipher recommend. My point is rather to underscore the importance of establishing clear priorities and of upholding the primacy of spiritual peace to social peace. The eternal peace and growth offered by the gospel's promise of salvation and exaltation, through the Atonement of Jesus Christ and by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel, must not be reduced to the service of any secular project.

As a statement of the essential priorities we must preserve in our understanding and pursuit of peace, I conclude with Elder Russell M. Nelson's words:

Now, as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, what does the Lord expect of us? As a Church, we must "renounce war and proclaim peace." As individuals, we should "follow after the things which make for peace." We should be personal peacemakers. We should live peacefully—as couples, families, and neighbors. We should live by the Golden Rule. We have writings of the descendants of Judah as now merged with writings of the descendants of Ephraim. We should employ them and expand our circle of love to embrace the whole human family. We should bring divine love and revealed doctrines of restored religion to our neighbors and friends. We should serve them according to our abilities and opportunities. We should keep our principles on a high level and stand for the right. We should continue to gather scattered Israel from the four corners of the earth and offer the ordinances and covenants that seal families together forever. These blessings we are to bring to people of all nations.²⁷



27. Russell M. Nelson, "Blessed are the Peacemakers," *Ensign*, November 2002, 41, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2002/11/blessed-are-the-peacemakers.

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