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## Charity in Defending the Kingdom

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# CHARITY IN DEFENDING THE KINGDOM

*Daniel C. Peterson*

## On Maintaining Fairness and Charity

With one striking exception, leaders and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are, and always have been, flawed people. (No better quality of human is available.) “We have this treasure in earthen vessels,” the apostle Paul said, referring to the gospel and its mortal ministers, “that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us” (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Although we obviously shouldn’t be surprised at it, the church’s human side is sometimes jarring and, if permitted, can cause disillusionment. It’s urgently important, therefore, even for our own sake, that we “clothe [our]selves with the bond of charity, as with a mantle, which is the bond of perfectness and peace” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:125). Failure to do so can be spiritually lethal.

“For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged,” taught Jesus, “and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again” (Matthew 7:2). Christians worldwide regularly pray, rather dangerously, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” Why is this dangerous? “If ye forgive men their trespasses,” the Savior explained, “your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:12, 14–15). And nobody is guiltless. “Use every man after his

desert,” says Shakespeare’s Hamlet, “and who should ‘scape whipping?’”<sup>1</sup>

“My disciples, in days of old,” says the Lord, “sought occasion against one another and forgave not one another in their hearts; and for this evil they were afflicted and sorely chastened” (Doctrine and Covenants 64:8).

In our dispensation, Thomas Marsh became so preoccupied with Joseph Smith’s perceived imperfections that he forfeited his apostleship and was excommunicated in 1839. This wasn’t because Joseph was perfect. “He has sinned,” the Lord flatly declared. (Fortunately, my sins aren’t announced in scripture.) But, adds the Lord, “he that forgiveth not his brother his trespasses standeth condemned before the Lord; for there remaineth in him the greater sin” (Doctrine and Covenants 64:7, 9).

Rebaptized in 1857, Marsh expressed regret for his nearly two decades outside the Church. “I got a beam in my eye and thought I could discover a mote in Joseph’s eye. . . . I was . . . completely darkened.”<sup>2</sup>

Contrast his attitude with that of the well-educated Lorenzo Snow, who boarded with the Smiths for a time: “I can fellowship the President of the Church, [even] if he does not know everything I know. . . . I saw the . . . imperfections in [Joseph]. . . . I thanked God that he would put upon a man who had those imperfections the power and authority he placed upon him . . . for I knew that I myself had weakness[es], and I thought there was a chance for me. . . . I thanked God that I saw those imperfections.”<sup>3</sup>

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1. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 2, scene 2, lines 529–31.

2. Thomas Baldwin Marsh, “History of Thomas Baldwin Marsh,” *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 26 (25 June 1864): 406.

3. George Q. Cannon Journal, 7 Jan. 1898, Church Archives, Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, UT, quoted in part in Stanley B. Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball: Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), xvn1.

“I feel like shouting hallelujah, all the time,” declared Joseph’s close friend and disciple Brigham Young, “when I think that I ever knew Joseph Smith.”<sup>4</sup> Significantly, his dying words were “Joseph, Joseph, Joseph!”<sup>5</sup>

Observing others’ weaknesses, perhaps even with sorrow, is very different from dwelling on them. Charity, wrote the apostle Paul, “rejoiceth not in iniquity” (1 Corinthians 13:6). This surely applies to our fellow members, Bishops, Relief Society presidents, and Stake presidents, and to the good but imperfect men who have been and are called to lead the Church. It also applies to those who write books for the Saints, and, yes, to those who write for and edit *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*.

A year after leaving the American presidency, Theodore Roosevelt delivered a speech in Paris entitled “Citizenship in a Republic”: “It is not the critic who counts,” he said,

not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall

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4. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:51.

5. Quoted in B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Century 1* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), 5:509.

never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.<sup>6</sup>

It would be unrealistic, though, to expect indulgent charity toward our foibles and flaws from all those outside the church. Some will grant it, surely. But some—and particularly those residing in the “great and spacious building” of Lehi’s vision (1 Nephi 8:26–28)—will certainly not.

Scriptural prophecies seem to indicate that, while the restored gospel will spread throughout the earth, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will always be a minority.<sup>7</sup> Which is to say that the majority of humankind will continue to be either ignorant of or indifferent toward the Church’s claims, or, as depicted in Lehi’s vision, will sneer at them and find them (and us) ridiculous.<sup>8</sup> We should not be dismayed when we encounter such reactions. They were predicted many centuries ago.

Sometime in the Fall of 1974, I read an article in the Georgetown University newspaper about the open house for the newly built Washington D.C. Temple. I particularly remember its mockery of the temple’s new president, a retired Singer Corporation executive whose hand the author had shaken during a press reception. It was a hand, the article sneered, that had undoubtedly demonstrated and sold many sewing machines in its time.

Georgetown is a Catholic school, and I recall wondering whether the article would have been as contemptuous toward Peter, whom Catholics revere as the first pope but whose hands had, undoubtedly, mended and cast a great many fishing nets in

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6. Theodore Roosevelt, “Citizenship In A Republic,” (speech, The Sorbonne, Paris, France, 23 April 1910, <http://www.theodore-roosevelt.com/images/research/speeches/maninthearena.pdf>).

7. 1 Nephi 14:12; Matthew 24:37–41; Luke 17:31–36.

8. 1 Nephi 8:26–28; 11:35–36.

his earlier years. Or, even, toward Jesus himself, whose youthful hands, we're told, were busy in his father's workshop.

Ironically, such smug elitism would have been quite congenial to those who eventually killed Jesus. In the Gospel of John, for example, the leaders of the Jews send officers to arrest the Savior, but their plans fail: "Then came the officers to the chief priests and Pharisees; and they said unto them, Why have ye not brought him? The officers answered, Never man spake like this man. Then answered them the Pharisees, Are ye also deceived? Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him? But this people who knoweth not the law are cursed" (John 7:45–49).

Today some secular critics find American Mormons culturally unfashionable because, among other things, we're overwhelmingly middle class, which simply isn't cool. (By contrast, such critics sometimes romanticize poverty.) In that light, it has amused me to notice, while rereading Peter Brown's classic *The World of Late Antiquity*, how often Brown refers to the "middle class" character and the "middlebrow" culture of Christianity during that period.<sup>9</sup>

"By 200," he writes, "the Christian communities were not recruited from among the 'humble and oppressed'; they were groupings of the lower middle classes and of the respectable artisans of the cities. Far from being deprived, these people had found fresh opportunities and prosperity in the Roman empire."<sup>10</sup> (It's debatable, by the way, whether even the earliest Christians were truly poor; Peter owned his own fishing boat, and his house in Capernaum was fairly substantial.)

Brown's description recalls nineteenth-century English Mormon converts, who were primarily craftsmen and industrial laborers, not the desperately poor. Charles Dickens

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9. Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150–750* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 62, 64, 86, etc.

10. Brown, *World of Late Antiquity*, 62.

noticed this when, in June 1863, he visited the London docks to watch eight hundred Latter-day Saints board an emigrant ship for America:

“I should say,” he wrote, “that most familiar kinds of handicraft trades were represented here. Farm-laborers, shepherds, and the like, had their full share of representation, but I doubt if they preponderated.” “To the rout and overthrow of all my expectations,” he reported, the emigrants were “the pick and flower of England.”<sup>11</sup>

Another point of elite criticism focuses on Mormonism’s simple teachings, sometimes dismissed as shallow, and the absence of trained theologians among its lay leaders. Listen again, however, to Peter Brown on ancient Christianity:

“Already, some writers looked down from the high battlements of their classical culture at the obscure world pressing in upon them.” Yet the second-century physician and philosopher Galen “noticed that the Christians were apparently enabled by their brutally simple parables and commands to live according to the highest maxims of ancient ethics. The Christian Apologists boasted of just this achievement. Plato, they said, had served good food with fancy dressings, but the Apostles cooked for the masses in a wholesome soup-kitchen!”<sup>12</sup>

But now, with all this in mind, is there any place in the Kingdom for such a publication as *Interpreter*?

Emphatically yes!

Many years ago, during the early days of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), which would eventually become the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at Brigham Young University, a very prominent leader of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

11. Charles Dickens, “Bound for the Great Salt Lake,” in *The Uncommercial Traveller* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1869), 324, 317, 316, [http://books.google.com/books?id=t\\_5B568YPsQC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=t_5B568YPsQC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false).

12. Brown, *World of Late Antiquity*, 64.



Saints counseled one of the leaders of FARMS never to forget “the Relief Society sister in Parowan.”

It’s a principle that we who were the leaders of FARMS and then of the Maxwell Institute tried never to forget: While we certainly attempted to make our publications and arguments academically rigorous, we also strove to ensure that they were clear, and that they would, on the whole, be relevant and helpful to interested but non-academic members of the Church. We knew, for example, that a principal interest of our audience, and of our subscribers and among the donors who generously supported our work, was defense of the faith, apologetics. They cared, and we cared, about the impact of our work upon Latter-day Saints who might be challenged by seeming difficulties in Mormon history and scripture, as well as upon outsiders who might be considering the claims of the Restoration.

*Interpreter* has been founded, at least in part, to ensure that that principle, of caring not merely for professional scholars and academic libraries but for ordinary Latter-day Saints and for religiously-interested outsiders, continues to be honored. Though we hope to adhere to high academic standards, we will not forget our wider audience.

But isn’t the very act of engaging in academic disputes, and especially of writing and publishing reviews—unless, of course, they’re entirely positive, and perhaps even saccharine and fawning—an offense against charity? (*Interpreter* intends to carry on the tradition, established with the *FARMS Review*, of publishing book reviews, and sometimes very substantial ones.) How can the former editor of the *FARMS Review* (briefly, under his tenure, renamed the *Mormon Studies Review*) write about charity with a straight face?

There can be no question that scholars, and especially reviewers, who seek to be and behave as Christians, walk a very difficult line. And this is particularly true when the issues at stake involve religion, contentious, disputed matters of ultimate

concern and value. Such writers must be fair, and they must not be abusive. But they must tell the truth. And sometimes the truth is that evidence has been deliberately or inadvertently misused or misrepresented, that an argument is invalid, that a thesis doesn't hold water, that an agenda is misguided, that something is poorly written. And, if a reviewer is committed to seeking and telling the truth, such things must be pointed out where they seem to occur.

I've encountered a few people who believe that the sheer writing of a less-than-positive book review constitutes an illegitimate attack. But I can't possibly agree. Writing such a review is no more intrinsically wrong than is penning a critique of a play or a musical composition, writing a critical restaurant review, or, for that matter, assigning a less-than-perfect grade to a student paper.

Everything depends upon manner and tone, and upon fairness. Fortunately, although the *Review* enjoyed a well-earned reputation for its irony and wit, as well as for telling the truth as its authors perceived the truth to be, I can report that, in my sincere and serious judgment, those who wrote for it did a very good job, through nearly a quarter of a century, of maintaining fairness and charity.

I was very proud of the *FARMS Review* and the *Mormon Studies Review*.

And *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* is going to be even better. As is plainly evident from this first volume, it has established a high standard for itself. We pledge that we will maintain that standard.

No introduction would be complete without acknowledging the tremendous help given by so many people to make this publication possible. I am especially grateful to Don Brugger and his editing team at the Maxwell Institute who had prepared several of the pieces in this volume for publication before the *Review* was put on hold. Members of the editorial board of

*Interpreter* have put in many hours to adhere to our schedule of posting an article a week on our website, and now completing this first volume. I'm deeply, deeply grateful to all those who have contributed thus far.

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