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Reflections on the Mission of The Interpreter Foundation

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REFLECTIONS ON THE MISSION OF THE INTERPRETER FOUNDATION

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: Among the covenant obligations taken upon themselves by faithful Latter-day Saints is the consecration of their talents, gifts, and abilities to the building of the Kingdom of God on the earth. Those who established and lead The Interpreter Foundation see their mission in terms of this covenant. The Foundation's goal is to foster honest and accessible scholarship in service to the Church and Kingdom of God, scholarship that will be of use and benefit to our fellow Latter-day Saints.

On the evening of 27 September 1991, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) held its annual banquet for that year. Elder Neal A. Maxwell of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was the featured speaker that night.¹ “It strikes me,” he said:

1 A full and unedited transcription of Elder Maxwell's remarks was published in Daniel C. Peterson, “Elder Neal A. Maxwell on Consecration, Scholarship, and the Defense of the Kingdom,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 7 (2013): vii–xix. (For the transcription, see specifically pages x–xix.) A somewhat revised version of Elder Maxwell's remarks had appeared more than two decades earlier as Neal A. Maxwell, “Discipleship and Scholarship,” *BYU Studies* 32/3 (1992): 5–9 (<https://byustudies.byu.edu/PDFViewer.aspx?title=6094&linkURL=32.3MaxwellDiscipleship-6381b005-43e9-44b7-b309-9ad3eff4add1.pdf>). Incidentally, a correction is required for a minor detail in my article mentioned above. My friend and former Maxwell Institute colleague Dr. Shirley Ricks, drawing from her journal, puts the embarrassing prayer incident (to which I refer on pages viii–ix) in September 1990, at our dinner celebrating the publication of John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley on the Occasion of His*

that one of the sobering dimensions of the gospel is the democracy of its demands as it seeks to build an aristocracy of saints. Certain standards and requirements are laid upon us all. They are uniform. We don't have an indoor-outdoor set of ten commandments. We don't have one set of commandments for bricklayers and another for college professors. There is a democracy about the demands of discipleship, which, interestingly enough, is aimed at producing an aristocracy of saints. The Church member who is an automobile mechanic doesn't have your scholarly skills and I'll wager you don't have his. But both of you, indeed all of us, have the same spiritual obligation, the same commandments and the same covenants to keep. The mechanic is under the same obligation to develop the attributes of patience and meekness as are you and as am I.²

Among the covenant obligations taken upon themselves by faithful Latter-day Saints is the consecration of their talents, gifts, and abilities to the building of the Kingdom of God on the earth. It's an encompassing and comprehensive commitment. Everyone is under the same obligation. There is nothing in it to suggest that it applies to money (financial capital) but not to scholarly training (intellectual capital), to the wielding of a hammer but not to the wielding of a pen, to the deployment of administrative ability but not to using a capacity for research and publication. Everything is to be placed upon the altar. And,

Eightieth Birthday (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), rather than at the annual FARMS banquet a year later. A very small thing, but a nice illustration of the historical utility of journal-keeping and contemporary documents!

2 For the transcribed original of this quotation, see Peterson, "Elder Neal A. Maxwell on Consecration, Scholarship, and the Defense of the Kingdom," xiv. Compare Maxwell, "Discipleship and Scholarship," 6. In the latter version, Elder Maxwell's wording is rather different, but his essential point remains the same.

where appropriate and when called for, potentially everything may be required.

God, who so loved the world that he gave his Only Begotten Son, expects us, too, to be willing to give.³ “I beseech you therefore, brethren,” wrote the apostle Paul, “by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”⁴

But how should it be done?

Roughly three decades ago, back in the 1980s, one of the other General Authorities of the Church strongly encouraged two early leaders of FARMS to write in a way that all members of the Church could understand, not to write over the heads of any ordinary Church members nor to offend even the least of the Saints, and to make it possible for all who were interested, even if they lacked specialized academic training, to have access to useful information.⁵

What did he mean by his counsel not “to offend even the least of the Saints”? I’m sure that he wanted us to avoid the spirit of contention, to avoid viciousness and ego-driven competitiveness. To be civil, respectful, and polite. But there’s more to the admonition than that. The salient scriptural passage, I think, is this one, as it appears in the gospel of Matthew:

And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them,

And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

3 See John 3:16. Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are from the King James Version.

4 Romans 12:1.

5 Based on a personal email communication to the author from John W. Welch (18 March 2014).

Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.

But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!

Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire.

And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire.

Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.

For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost.

How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray?

And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray.

Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.⁶

But isn't this passage literally only about children? No. No more than it is literally about sheep. It "concerns the attitude and conduct of the leaders of the community to their flock," says a Catholic biblical commentary.⁷ But there was no separate clergy in the earliest Christian community, so it would be safer to say that it concerns the attitude and conduct of all Christians toward those who are or may be vulnerable (which probably includes all of us, at one time or another):

"Child" here [Matthew 18:5] is possibly not meant in its literal sense.... [T]he word may designate the simple who become disciples and who already have that simplicity that Jesus states as the condition of membership. With these "little ones" Jesus identifies himself.... By a change from "child" to "little ones" [in Matthew 18:6-9] the association is retained, but the little ones become more clearly the simple disciples "who believe."... The sayings on scandal are addressed to the entire group of disciples.... The saying is addressed to all members.⁸

"The change from 'child' to 'little ones' suggests," an Evangelical commentary concurs, "that we are dealing both

6 Matthew 18:2-14.

7 Reginald C. Fuller, Leonard Johnston, and Conleth Kearns, eds., *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1975), 935-936.

8 Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 2:94-95.

with children and those that have become childlike.”⁹ “By ‘little ones,’” explained Theodore of Heraclea (d. ca. AD 355), “he means those imperfect in their knowledge or those recently baptized. He does not want these to be looked down upon as ignorant in his teaching.”¹⁰ They are, says Chromatius (fl. AD 400), a contemporary and friend of St. Jerome, “humble people in the laity who simply and faithfully believe in the Son of God.”¹¹ “These instructions about children and the subsequent teaching about ‘little ones’ (18:6-14; cf. 10:40-42) implicitly identify the disciples with these ‘children,’ as do later references to the disciples as ‘least’ (25:40, 45).”¹²

What is signified in the passage by the recurring verb *to offend* and its various derivatives? Consider an alternative rendition of a portion of Jesus’s discourse as it’s recorded there, in which the “offenses” of the King James Version become occasions of “stumbling”:

If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come! If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is

9 F. F. Bruce, ed., *The International Bible Commentary* (Basingstoke and Grand Rapids: Marshall Pickering/Zondervan, 1986), 1140.

10 As cited in Manlio Simonetti, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, New Testament Ib, Matthew 14–28 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 73. “A child is used to symbolize a new convert to Judaism in the rabbinic writings,” according to Fuller, Johnston, and Kearns, *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, 936. Compare also Bruce, *The International Bible Commentary*, 1140

11 Cited in Simonetti, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, 74.

12 James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson, eds., *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003), 1040.

better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.¹³

The relevant words here are variants of the Greek verb *skandalizo* and the Greek noun *skandalon*, each of which is obviously related to the English words *scandal* and *scandalize*. In both the Old Testament and the New, a *skandalon* “is an obstacle in coming to faith and a cause of going astray in it.... The force of the verb [*skandalizo*] is even stronger than that of the noun [*skandalon*]” because it refers to “the causing of a fall.”¹⁴ It means “to cause loss of faith.”¹⁵

Thus, Christians are to do nothing, whether by commission or omission, by activity or neglect, that would lead to a loss of faith in a fellow disciple.

The apostle Paul clearly understood this principle. Thus, when he was faced with the question of whether it was appropriate for a Christian to eat meat that had been offered or consecrated to a pagan idol, he took a very practical approach out of concern for the possibly weak faith of his fellow disciples:

As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one....

13 Matthew 18:6–9 (New International Version).

14 Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 7, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 345. I have transliterated the Greek.

15 Kittel and Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 7:351.

Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.

But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse.

But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak.

For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols;

And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?

But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ.

Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.¹⁶

“Take heed,” exhorts the Savior, “that ye despise not one of these little ones.” “See that you do not disdain one of these little ones,” says the New English Translation.¹⁷ The Greek verb translated as “to despise” or “to disdain” is a form of *kataphro-*

16 1 Corinthians 8:4, 7–13.

17 Matthew 18:10 (New English Translation).

neo, which is roughly equivalent to the English “to despise,” “to disparage,” “not to be concerned about.”¹⁸

A critic of the traditional FARMS approach told me, a couple of years ago, that the organization didn’t and shouldn’t exist “to serve some old high priest in Ogden.” But, in my view, the hypothetical old high priest in Ogden was very much part of the audience that FARMS was intended to serve. And he is very much in the minds of those of us who work with The Interpreter Foundation.

“The lost sheep represents erring fellow Christians,” the commentary produced by the Society of Biblical Literature explains with regard to the passage from Matthew that I’ve been discussing. “When such a one goes astray (apostatizes), the community must expend every effort to get that person back into the fold.”¹⁹ Says another commentary, “The parable of the lost sheep mandates that community members make every effort to bring back those who are losing heart and leaving the community because of scandal or ... ‘stumbling blocks.’”²⁰

Note the recurring phrases: “The community must expend every effort to get that person back into the fold.” “Community members” should “make every effort to bring back those” who are leaving or have left. There is nothing in either commentary to suggest that the passage mandates such exertions only on the part of clergy or ordained leaders, and nothing to indicate that “every effort” means “every effort except persuasion” or “every effort that doesn’t involve writing, the marshaling of evidence, and the deployment of logical arguments.”

“Therefore,” said the Lord in a revelation given in February 1829, “O ye that embark in the service of God, see that ye serve

18 Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 631.

19 James L. Mays, ed., *Harper’s Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 971.

20 Dunn and Rogerson, *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, 1040.

him with all your heart, might, mind and strength, that ye may stand blameless before God at the last day.” And, since February 1829 was well over a year before The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized, that revelation cannot have been addressed only to ordained Church leaders or, as it is often understood today, to formally set-apart missionaries. “Therefore, if ye have desires to serve God ye are called to the work.”²¹

But need we wait until people have actually left before we “make every effort”? Shouldn’t we already be working hard to build and maintain faith—or, perhaps more exactly said in the case of evidence and rational arguments and persuasion, to create the space in which faith can take root and flourish and to defend that space against the encroachment of threatening weeds? Or, to vary the metaphor, if I’m holding a life preserver and I see a swimmer about to drown, am I not obliged to use it?

Many years ago, while I was spending a summer at Princeton University in New Jersey, my family and I took the opportunity to attend the Hill Cumorah Pageant. I knew that the place would be ringed with anti-Mormons holding placards and handing out leaflets, and I had resolved that I was not going to be distracted by them. As I was about to enter the pageant grounds, though, I noticed one of the protestors who was haranguing a pair of teenage Mormon boys. I listened for a while, and swiftly realized that they were on the ropes, unable to answer him, and that the issue was one that, for particular reasons, I could answer very easily. I hesitated for a while; I really hadn’t wanted to get involved. And, as it turned out, the exchange was quite unpleasant. (The man was rude and insulting.) But it seemed to me to be my duty to help out fellow Latter-day Saints when I could—and it still seems so to me today.

21 Doctrine and Covenants 4:2–3.

The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose
 I will not, I cannot, desert to his foes;
 That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
 I'll never, no never, no never forsake!²²

I was fortunate, as I see it, to have grown up in a very non-academic family. My father had managed to get some North Dakota forestry school and a bit of California junior college under his belt before heading into the U.S. Army for World War II and then spent most of his life running a southern California construction company. My mother never went beyond high school. My uncles worked in construction, insurance, truck driving, and farming. I myself worked construction most summers through graduate school. I count myself lucky because I always valued those members of my family and, by extension, others working in largely blue-collar jobs. I knew at firsthand the goodness, intelligence, and worth of people beyond campuses, laboratories, and think tanks—something often forgotten among the intellectual elite. I suspect that I would have been much more snobbish than I am about schooling and degrees and academic prestige had I not been so firmly grounded outside of academia.

I mention this to underscore the fact that I do not regard academic work as more honorable than honorably driving a nail, caring for a baby, repairing sprinklers, or paving a street. Even though those of us who are involved with The Interpreter Foundation can handle the hammer of academic writing reasonably well, that doesn't mean that everything is a nail to which that hammer is suited. In fact, the most important things very seldom are.

In the Kingdom of God, there is, and is necessarily, a diversity of gifts.²³ All are essential to its proper function and

22 "How Firm a Foundation," LDS Hymnal, #85.

23 See Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 12, as well as Doctrine and Covenants 46:7–26.

flourishing. “And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.”²⁴

Each of us places on the altar, for the building of the Kingdom and the welfare of the Saints, whatever he or she is able to give.

The principles laid out by that General Authority thirty years ago—to write accessibly, not merely for scholars, and to both commend and defend the faith—helped to shape the policies and procedures followed by FARMS, and they strongly inform the approach of The Interpreter Foundation.

That’s why we have a blog. It’s why we record roundtable discussions on the scriptures that are aligned with the Church’s Gospel Doctrine curriculum. It’s why we’ve put up resources for teachers and students of the scriptures, and will be publishing yet more of them, and why we’ve begun to sponsor public symposia. It’s why, to the maximum extent possible, we make our materials available at no charge.

Our journal and our books are intended to be as academically rigorous and defensible as we can make them—we will not pander to our audience nor engage in disingenuous arguments designed to score merely rhetorical points—but they will also, to the extent that we are able, be accessible. (Some articles will, inevitably, be more technical than others.) And they won’t soar into the ether in pursuit of issues of no importance to real, living, Latter-day Saints and religious seekers. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has no distinct professional clergy, and it also has no separate scholarly caste, hermetically sealed off from the life of its members. We are or have been bishops, Relief Society sisters, home teachers, parents, Young Women leaders, and scoutmasters as well as scholarly readers of the scriptures. The Interpreter Foundation

24 1 Corinthians 12:21.

doesn't exist in a vacuum, quarantined from the concerns and interests of Latter-day Saints, devoted merely to the hobbies of ivory tower academics.

President Boyd K. Packer told a story, years ago, of being invited to lunch with a group of academics at a very prestigious institution on the east coast. They were hoping, given the fact that he was both a General Authority (an Assistant to the Twelve, at the time) and the holder of a doctorate, that he would contribute to a new publication they were launching:

I listened to them very attentively but indicated at the close of the conversation that I would not join them. I asked to be excused from responding to their request. When they asked why, I told them this: "When your associates announced the project, they described how useful it would be to the Church—a niche that needed to be filled. And then the spokesman said, 'We are all active and faithful members of the Church; however, ...'" I told my two hosts that if the announcement had read, "We are active and faithful members of the Church; therefore, ..." I would have joined their organization. I had serious questions about a "however" organization.²⁵

The difference is crucial. "The LDS scholar has his citizenship in the Kingdom," Elder Maxwell used to say, "but carries his passport into the... world—not the other way around."²⁶ He was also fond of a statement from the eighteenth-century English clergyman William Law: "If you have not

25 Packer, Boyd K. "The mantle is far, far greater than the intellect." *BYU Studies* 21, no. 3 (1981): 10.

26 Maxwell, Neal A. "Some thoughts on the gospel and the behavioral sciences." *BYU Studies* 16, no. 4 (1976): 589.

chosen the kingdom of God first,” said Law, “it will in the end make no difference what you have chosen instead.”²⁷

Those who established and lead The Interpreter Foundation understand this. The Foundation’s goal is to foster honest and accessible scholarship in service to the Church and Kingdom of God, scholarship that will be of use and benefit to our fellow Latter-day Saints. Nothing less. We cannot do all things, but this we can and will do.

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²⁷ Maxwell, Neal A. *The Smallest Part* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 1. Cf. C. S. Lewis, “A Slip of the Tongue,” *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*. (New York City: Macmillan, 1980), 131.

