

Grappling constructively with the frustrations of Church activity.

WHY THE CHURCH IS AS TRUE AS THE GOSPEL

By Eugene England

I WAS CONVINCED WHEN I WAS A BOY THAT THE most boring meeting in the Church, perhaps in the world, was a quarterly stake conference. In those days, they were held every three months and included at least two, two-hour sessions on Sunday. The most interesting highlights to us children were the quavery songs literally “rendered” by the “Singing Mothers” and the sober sustaining of the stake No Liquor-Tobacco Committee.

But one conference was particularly memorable. I was twelve and sitting near the front because my father was being sustained as a high councilor in a newly formed stake. I had just turned around in my seat to tease my sister, who was sitting behind me, when I felt something, vaguely familiar, burning at the center of my heart and bones and then almost physically turning me around to look at the transfigured face of Apostle Harold B. Lee, the “visiting authority.” He had suddenly interrupted his prepared sermon and was giving the new stake an apostolic blessing. And I became aware, for a second and confirming time in my life, of the presence of the Holy Ghost and the special witness of Jesus Christ. How many boring stake conferences would I attend to be even once in the

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presence of such grace? Thousands—all there are. That pearl is without price. And because I have since learned better what to look for and find there—not doctrinal revelation so much as understanding of and experience with the members of the Church—the conferences are no longer boring. Thus, one of the earliest and most important pillars of my faith came not through some great insight into the gospel but through an experience I could only have had because I was doing my duty in the Church, however immaturely.

Yet one cliché Mormons often repeat is that while the *gospel* is true, even perfect, the *Church* is, after all, a human instrument, historybound, and therefore understandably imperfect—something to be endured for the sake of the gospel. Nevertheless, I am persuaded by experiences like that one at a stake conference and by my best thinking that, in fact, the Church is as “true,” as effective, as sure an instrument of salvation as the system of doctrines we call the gospel—and that is so in good part because of the very flaws, human exasperations, and historical problems that occasionally give us all some anguish.

I know that those who use the cliché about the gospel being more “true” than the Church want the term *gospel* to mean a perfect system of revealed commandments based in principles that infallibly express the natural laws of the universe. But even revelation is, in fact, merely the best understanding the Lord can give us of those things. And, as God himself has clearly insisted, that understanding is far from perfect. He reminds us, in the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants, “Behold, I am God and have spoken it; these commandments

are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding. And inasmuch as they erred it might be made known" (D&C 1:24–25). This is a remarkably complete and sobering inventory of the problems involved in putting God's knowledge of the universe into human language and then having it understood. It should make us careful about claiming too much for "the gospel," which is not the perfect principles or natural laws themselves—or God's perfect knowledge of those things—but is merely the closest approximation that inspired but limited mortals can receive.

Even after a revelation is received and expressed by a prophet, it has to be understood, taught, translated into other languages, and expressed in programs, manuals, sermons, and essays—in a word, interpreted. And that means that at least one more set of limitations of language and world-view enters in. I always find it perplexing when someone asks a teacher or speaker if what she is saying is the pure gospel or merely her own interpretation. *Everything* anyone says is essentially an interpretation. Even simply reading the scriptures to others involves interpretation, in choosing both what to read in a particular circumstance and how to read it (tone and emphasis). Beyond that point, anything we do becomes less and less "authoritative" as we move into explication and application of the scriptures, that is, as we teach "the gospel."

Yes, I know that the Holy Ghost can give strokes of pure intelligence to the speaker and bear witness of truth to the hearer. I have experienced both of these lovely, reassuring gifts. But such gifts, which guarantee the overall guidance of the Church in the way the Lord intends and provide guidance,

often of a remarkably clear nature, to individuals, still do not override individuality and agency. They are not exempt from the limitations of human language and moral perception that the Lord describes in the passage quoted above, and thus they cannot impose universal acceptance and understanding.

This problem is compounded by the fundamentally paradoxical nature of the universe itself and thus of the true laws and principles that the gospel uses to describe the universe. Lehi's law, "It must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things" (2 Ne. 2:11), is perhaps the most provocative and profound statement of abstract theology in the scriptures, because it presumes to describe what is most ultimate in the universe—even beyond God. In context, it clearly suggests that not only is contradiction and opposition a natural part of human experience, something God uses for his redemptive purposes, but also that opposition is at the very heart of things; it is intrinsic to the two most fundamental realities—intelligence and matter, what Lehi calls "things to act and things to be acted upon." According to Lehi, opposition provides the universe with energy and meaning, even makes possible the existence of God and everything else: Without it, "all things must have vanished away" (2 Ne. 2:13).

We all know from experience the consequences for mortal life of this fundamental, eternal truth about reality. Throughout history, the most important and productive ideas have been paradoxical; the energizing force in all art has been conflict and opposition; the basis for success in all economic, political, and other social development has been competition and dialogue. Think of the U.S. federal system of checks and balances and a two-party political system (which together

make pluralistic democracy possible), or of Romanticism and Classicism, reason and emotion, freedom and order, individual and community, men and women (whose differences make eternal increase possible), justice and mercy (whose opposition makes our redemption through the "At Onement" possible). Life in this universe is full of polarities and is made full by them; we struggle with them, complain about them, even try sometimes to destroy them with dogmatism or self-righteousness, or retreat into the innocence that is only ignorance, a return to the Garden of Eden where there is deceptive ease and clarity but no salvation. William Blake, the prophetic poet, taught that "without contraries is no existence," and warned that "whoever tries to reconcile [the contraries] seeks to destroy existence." Whatever it means that we will eventually see "face to face," now we



"Not to worry—I happen to know God doesn't recognize ordinances performed without authorization of the proper priesthood line of authority."

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can see only “through a glass, darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12), and we had better make the best of it. So, as we know it in human terms, the “gospel” is not—and perhaps, given the paradoxical nature of the universe itself, cannot ever be—a simple and clear set of unequivocal propositions.

And that is where the Church comes in. I believe it is the best medium, apart from marriage (which it much resembles in this respect), for grappling constructively with the oppositions of existence. I believe that the better any church or organization is at such grappling, the “truer” it is. And I believe we can accurately call the LDS church “the true Church” only if we mean it is the best organized method for doing that and is made and kept so by revelations that have come and continue to come from God, however “darkly” they of necessity emerge.

Martin Luther, with prophetic perception, wrote, “Marriage is the school of love”—that is, marriage is not the home or the result of love so much as the *school*. I believe that any good church is a school of love and that the LDS church, for most people, perhaps all, is the best one, the “only true and living Church” (D&C 1:30)—not just because its doctrines teach and embody some of the great and central paradoxes but, more important, because the Church provides the best context for struggling with, working through, enduring, and being redeemed by those paradoxes and oppositions that give energy and meaning to the universe. Just before his death, Joseph Smith, also with prophetic perception, wrote, “By proving contraries, truth is made manifest.”¹ By “prove” he meant not only to demonstrate logically but to test, to struggle with, and to work out in practical experience. The Church is as true—as effective—as the gospel because it involves us directly in proving contraries, working constructively with the oppositions within ourselves and especially between people, struggling with paradoxes and polarities at an experiential level that can redeem us. The Church is true because it is concrete, not theoretical; in all its contradictions and problems, it is at least as productive of good as is the gospel.

WHY OPPOSITIONS IN THE CHURCH ARE PRODUCTIVE

They push us toward a new kind of being.

LET us consider why this is so. In the life of the true Church, there are constant opportunities for *all* to serve, especially to learn to serve people we would not normally choose to serve—or possibly even associate with—and

thus opportunities to learn to love unconditionally. There is constant encouragement, even pressure, to be “active”: to have a calling” and thus to have to grapple with relationships and management, with other people’s ideas and wishes, their feelings and failures; to attend classes and meetings and to have to listen to other people’s sometimes misinformed or prejudiced notions and to have to make some constructive response; to have leaders and occasionally to be hurt by their weakness and blindness, even unrighteous dominion; and then to be made a leader and find that you, too, with all the best intentions, can be weak and blind and unrighteous. Church involvement teaches us compassion and patience as well as courage and discipline. It makes us responsible for the personal and marital, physical, and spiritual welfare of people we may not already love (or may even heartily dislike), and thus we learn to love them. It stretches and challenges us, though disappointed and exasperated, in ways we would not otherwise choose to be—and thus gives us a chance to be made better than we might choose to be, but ultimately need and want to be.

Michael Novak, the lay Catholic theologian, has made this same point concerning marriage. In a remarkable essay published in the April 1976 *Harper’s*, he reviewed the increasing inclination of modern intellectuals to resist, desert, and even to attack marriage, arguing that the main reason the family, which has traditionally been the bulwark of economic and emotional security, is currently “out of favor” is that many modern opinion-makers are unwilling to take the risks and subject themselves to the disciplines that the school of marriage requires. But he then points out how such fears, though justified, keep them from meeting their own greatest *needs*. Similarly, I believe that those who resist, desert, and attack the Church often fail, from a simple lack of perspective, to see their own best interest. As you read this passage from Novak, substitute *the Church* for *marriage*:

Marriage [the Church] is an assault upon the lonely, atomic ego. Marriage is a threat to the solitary individual. Marriage *does* impose grueling, humbling, baffling, and frustrating responsibilities. Yet if one supposes that precisely such things are the preconditions for all true liberation, marriage is not the enemy of moral development in adults. Quite the opposite.

Being married and having children [being active in the Church] has impressed on my mind certain

lessons, for whose learning I cannot help being grateful. Most are lessons of difficulty and duress. Most of what I am forced to learn about myself is not pleasant. . . . My dignity as a human being depends perhaps more on what sort of husband and parent [Church member] I am, than on any professional work I am called on to do. My bonds to my family [my church] hold me back (and my wife even more) from many sorts of opportunities. And yet these do not feel like bonds. They are, I know, my liberation. They force me to be a different sort of human being, in a way in which I want and need to be forced.

I bear witness that the Church can do those same frustrating, humbling, but ultimately liberating and redeeming things for us—if we can learn to see it as Novak does marriage, if we can see that its assaults on our lonely egos, and the bonds and responsibilities that we willingly accept, can push us toward new kinds of being in a way we most deeply want and need to be pushed.

Two keys to this paradoxical power in the LDS church are, first, that it is, by revelation, a lay church and radically so—more than any other—and, second, that it organizes its congregations geographically, rather than by choice. I know that there are exceptions, but the basic Church experience of almost all Mormons brings them directly and constantly into potentially powerful relationships with a range of people and problems in their assigned congregation that are not primarily of their own choosing but are profoundly redemptive in potential, in part *because* they are not consciously chosen. Yes, the ordinances performed through the Church are important,

as are its scriptural texts and moral exhortations and spiritual conduits. But even these, in my experience, are powerful and redemptive because they embody profound, life-giving oppositions and work harmoniously with those oppositions through the Church structure to give truth and meaning to the religious life of Mormons.

Let me illustrate: In one of his very last messages, during a Saturday evening priesthood session, Church President David O. McKay gave a kind of final testament that was a bit shocking to many of us who are conditioned to expect that prophets have no trouble getting divine manifestations. He told how he struggled in vain all through his teenage years to get God “to declare to me the truth of his revelation to Joseph Smith.” He prayed “fervently and sincerely,” in the hills and at home, but had to admit to himself constantly, “No spiritual manifestation has come to me.” But he continued to seek truth and to serve others in the context of Mormonism, including going on a mission to Britain, mainly because of trust in his parents and in the goodness of his own Church experience. Finally, as President McKay put it,

the spiritual manifestation for which I had prayed as a boy in my teens came as a natural sequence to the performance of duty. For, as the apostle John declared, “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself” (John 7:17).

Following a series of meetings at the conference held in Glasgow, Scotland, was a most remarkable priesthood meeting. I remember, as if it were yesterday, the intensity of the inspiration of that occasion.

Everybody felt the rich outpouring of the Spirit of the Lord. All present were truly of one heart and one mind. Never before had I experienced such an emotion. It was a manifestation for which as a doubting youth I had secretly prayed most earnestly on hillside and in meadow. . . .

During the progress of the meeting, an elder on his own initiative arose and said, “Brethren, there are angels in this room.” Strange as it may seem, the announcement was not startling; indeed, it seemed wholly proper, though it had not occurred to me that there were divine beings present. I only knew that I was overflowing with gratitude for the presence of the Holy Spirit.²



“Well, they’d better study it out in their own minds because there’s not going to be any visitation today.”

IN THE CHURCH, THOSE WITH THE GIFTS OF VULNERABILITY, PAIN,
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EVEN PREJUDICE AND SIN CAN BE ACCEPTED, LEARNED FROM, HELPED,
AND MADE PART OF THE BODY.

I have had many confirmations of President McKay's prophetic witness in that sermon. Most of my profound spiritual manifestations, those that have provided the rock-bottom convictions I have about the reality of God and Christ and their divine work, as well as my most troubling, soul-searching moral struggles with the great human issues of personal integrity versus public responsibility, loyalty to self versus loyalty to community, redemptive freedom versus redemptive structure—all these have come, as President McKay affirms, "as a natural sequence to the performance of duty" in the Church.

I know God has been found by unusual people in unusual places—in a sudden vision in a grove or orchard or grotto, or on a mountain or in a closet, or through saintly service to African lepers or to Calcutta untouchables. But for most of us, most of the time, I am convinced he can be found most surely in "the natural sequence to the performance" of the duties he has given us that all of us (not just the unusual) can perform in our own homes and neighborhoods and that the Church, in its unique community, imposed as well as chosen, can best teach and empower us to perform.

PERSONAL EXAMPLES

In our response to other, exasperating Saints lies salvation.

IHAVE come to an overwhelming witness of the divinity of the Book of Mormon, such that the Spirit moves me, even to tears, whenever I read any part of it, and I came there by teaching it at church. I am convinced that book provides the most comprehensive "Christology"—or doctrine of how Christ saves us from sin—available to us on earth and that the internal evidences for the divinity of the book entirely overwhelm the evidences and arguments against it, however troubling. One Sunday last summer, as I tried to help a young woman who had attempted suicide a number of times, once just recently, and was feeling the deepest worthlessness and self-rejection, I was moved to read to her some passages from the Book of Mormon about Christ's atonement. As I read those passages to that desperate young woman and bore witness of their truth and power in my own times of despair and sin, her lips began to tremble with new feelings, and tears of hope formed in place of those of an-

guish.

In moments such as these, I was able, through my calling as a bishop, to apply the atoning blood of Christ, not in theory but in the truth of experience. In addition, I have come to know the ministering of angels because I have done my duty in temple attendance and have gone whenever possible to temple dedications. And I have found that we mortals do indeed have the power to bless our oxen and cars as well as people because, as a branch president, I was pushed to the limits of my faith by my sense of responsibility to my branch.

Before I was a branch president, I served in the bishopric of the Stanford Ward in the mid-1960s and taught religion at the Institute to bright young students. At the same time, I was doing graduate work in English literature and trying to come to terms intellectually with modern skepticism and relativism and the moral dilemmas of the civil rights and anti-war movement as well as the educational revolutions of the time. I tended to see religion very much in terms of large moral and philosophical issues that the Church did or did not speak to. In 1970, I accepted a position as dean of academic affairs at St. Olaf, a Lutheran liberal arts college in the small town of Northfield, Minnesota, and within a week of arriving was called as president of the little Mormon branch in that area. I suddenly entered an entirely different world, one that tested me severely and taught me much about what "religion" is. At Stanford, much of my religious life had been involved with understanding and defending the gospel—and had been idealistic, abstract, and critical. In Northfield, as branch president for twenty families scattered over seventy-five miles and ranging from Utah-born, hard-core inactives with devastating marital problems to bright-eyed converts with no jobs or with drunken fathers who beat them, I soon became involved in a religious life that was practical, specific, sacrificial, exasperating—and more satisfying. And I saw, more clearly than before, how true the Church is as an instrument for confronting all kinds of people with the processes of salvation, despite—even because of—its management by imperfect instruments like me.

I think of a young man in that branch who had been made a social cripple by some combination of mental and family problems: He was unable to speak a word in a group or to organize his life productively. As we gave him in-

creasing responsibilities in our branch, supported him with much love and patience while he struggled to work with others and express himself, I was able to see him grow into a fine leader and confident husband and father. I think of a woman whose husband made her life a hell of drunken abuse but who patiently took care of him, worked all week to support her family, and came to church each Sunday in drab but jaunty finery and with uncomplaining determination. She found there, with our help, a little hope, some beauty and idealism, and strength not only to endure but to go on loving what was unlovable. The Church blessed us all by bringing us together.

During the five years I served, there were, among those seventy to one hundred members, perhaps two or three whom I would normally have chosen for friends—and with whom I could have easily shared my most impassioned and “important” political and religious concerns and views, the ones that had so exercised me at Stanford. With inspiration far beyond my usual less-than-good sense, I did not begin my tenure as branch president by preaching about my ideas or promoting my crusades. I tried hard to see what the immediate problems and concerns of my flock were and to be a good pastor, one who fed and protected them. And a remarkable thing happened. I traveled hundreds of miles and spent many hours—helping a couple who had hurt each other into absolute silence learn to talk to each other again; guiding a student through drug withdrawal; teaching an autocratic military man to work cooperatively with his counselors in the elders quorum presidency; blessing a terribly sick baby, aided by its father, who was weak in faith and frightened; comforting, at a hospital at four in the morning, parents whose

son had just been killed by his brother driving drunk—and then helping the brother forgive himself. And after six months, I found that my branch members, initially properly suspicious of an intellectual from California, had come to feel in their bones, from their direct experience, that indeed my faith and devotion to them was “stronger than the cords of death.” And the result promised in Doctrine and Covenants 121:44–46 followed: There flowed to me “without compulsory means” the power to talk about *any* of my concerns and passions and to be understood and trusted, even if not agreed with.

Now that may all sound a bit selfish, even obsessive, about the Church’s contribution to my own spiritual maturity. But what was happening to me was happening to others. A young couple who had lived in Spain for a year right after the wife had joined the Church came to the branch. Their Church experience, especially hers, had been essentially gospel-oriented, deeply felt, and idealistic but abstract, involving very little service to others. She was a dignified and emotionally reserved woman, bright, creative, and judgmental—and thus afraid of uncontrolled situations or emotional exposure. The husband was meticulous, intimidating, somewhat aloof. I called them—despite their resistance—into positions of increasing responsibility and direct involvement with people in the branch, and I saw them, with some pain and tears, develop into powerfully open, empathetic, vulnerable people, able to understand, serve, learn from, and be trusted by people very different from themselves. And I saw them learn that the very exposures, exasperations, troubles, sacrifices, and disappointments that characterize involvement in a lay church like Mormonism—and that are especially difficult for idealistic liberals to endure—are a main source of the Church’s power to teach us to love. They are now teaching others what they have learned.

This lesson—that the Church’s characteristic “problems” are among its strengths—has been continually confirmed as I have served as bishop of a ward of young married students at BYU. The two most direct, miraculous, and ultimately redemptive blessings the Lord gave us when the ward was organized were having as members a spastic quadriplegic child in one family and seriously handicapped parents in another. I had known the crippled child’s mother for nearly a year. After I had spoken on the Atonement at her sacrament meeting, she had come to me for counsel and help with her

son had just been killed by his brother driving drunk—and then helping the brother forgive himself. And after six months, I found that my branch members, initially properly suspicious of an intellectual from California, had come to feel in their bones, from their direct experience, that indeed my faith and devotion to them was “stronger than the cords of death.” And the result promised in Doctrine and Covenants 121:44–46 followed: There flowed to me “without compulsory means” the power to talk about *any* of my concerns and passions and to be understood and trusted, even if not agreed with.



PRECISELY IN THE STRUGGLE TO BE OBEDIENT WHILE MAINTAINING INTEGRITY, TO HAVE FAITH WHILE BEING TRUE TO REASON, TO SERVE AND LOVE IN THE FACE OF IMPERFECTIONS AND OFFENSES, WE CAN GAIN THE HUMILITY TO ALLOW DIVINE POWER TO TRANSFORM.

anger, guilt, and loss of faith as she tried to understand the failure of hospital care that had made one of her twins into a desperate physical, emotional, and financial burden, one that had ended her husband's education and intended profession, severely tested their marriage and their faith as priesthood blessings seemed to fail, and left her close to breakdown and apostasy. Now, as I prayed for guidance in organizing a new ward, I felt clearly as I ever had those "strokes of intelligence" Joseph Smith described, telling me that I should, against all common sense, call her as my Relief Society president. I did, and despite being on the verge of moving away, she accepted. She became the main source of the unique spirit of honest communication and sense of genuine community our ward developed. She visited all the families and shared without reserve her feelings, struggles, successes, and needs. Together with her husband, she spoke openly in our meetings about her son, his problems, and hers, asked for help and accepted it, and all the while did her duty and endured. We have all learned from them how to be more open, vulnerable, gracious, persistent, to turn to each other for all kinds of help and not to judge.

I first met the handicapped couple wandering through the halls of our ward house on our first Sunday. They were not looking for our ward; in fact, they lived just outside our boundaries, but I am certain the Lord sent them. They have required a major expenditure of our ward resources—time, welfare aid, patience, tolerance—as we worked to get them employed, into decent housing, out of debt, capable of caring for their bright, energetic child, and tried to help them become less obtrusive in meetings and less offensive socially. And I have learned two lessons. First, the Church structure and resources (which are designed for voluntary, cooperative but disciplined effort with long-range, essentially spiritual goals) have been ideally suited to building the necessary support system for them, one that may yet succeed in keeping the family together and may even bless them with more progress. Second, the blessings have come to the ward as much as to them as we have learned to expand greatly our ideas about "acceptable" behavior and especially our own capacities to love and serve and learn from people we would otherwise never know. One woman called me to report on her efforts to teach the woman some housekeeping and mothering skills, confessed her earlier

resentments and exasperations, and told me in tears how much her heart had softened and her proud neck had bent as she had learned how to learn from this sister so different from herself.

These are examples, I believe, of what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 12, the great chapter on spiritual gifts, where he teaches that all the parts of the body of Christ, the Church, are needed for their separate gifts—and, in fact, that those with "less honorable" and "uncomely" gifts are *more* needed and more in need of attention and honor because the world will automatically honor and use the others. It is in the Church especially that those with the gifts of vulnerability, pain, handicap, need, ignorance, intellectual arrogance, social pride, even prejudice and sin—those Paul calls the members that "seem to be more feeble"—can be accepted, learned from, helped, and made part of the body so that together we can all be blessed. It is there that those of us with the more comely and world-honored gifts of riches and intelligence can learn what we most need—to serve and love and patiently learn from those with other gifts.

But that is very hard for the "rich" and "wise" to do. And that is why those who have one of those dangerous gifts tend to misunderstand and sometimes disparage the Church—which, after all, is made up of the common and unclean, the middle-class, middle-brow, politically unsophisticated, even prejudiced, *average* members. And we all know how exasperating *they* can be! I am convinced that in the exasperation lies our salvation, *if* we can let the context that most brings it out—the Church—also be our school for unconditional love. But that requires a change of perspective, one I will now summarize.

TRUTHS, AUTHENTICITY, EXPERIENCE
Ordinances are "dead works" unless they express both our integrity and our solidarity with others.

THE Church is as true as—perhaps truer than—the gospel because it is where all can find fruitful opposition, where its revealed nature and inspired direction maintain an opposition between liberal and conservative values, between faith and doubt, secure authority and frightening freedom, individual integrity and public responsibility,

