



Criticizing the Brethren

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Hugh W. Nibley

This is a talk on criticizing the brethren, and I have decided to let Joseph Smith do most of the talking. After all, criticism of the Church and its leaders has always centered around him. It began before the Church was founded, and to this day he is still the main object of attack. The astonishing fulfillment of Moroni's prophecy to a country kid living out in the backwoods, that his name would be known for good and evil among men everywhere, is enough in itself to prove that Joseph Smith was a true prophet. Critics attacking the Church still assail Joseph Smith with a sort of private vindictiveness, as if he personally were responsible for their own woes and frustrations. Remember the great contempt he met with from the ministers when he was but fourteen and fifteen years old? The report of his first vision says that it "excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion and was the Cause of great persecution."¹ Before the Church existed, not only Joseph, but his brethren, were under heavy attack. The *Painesville Telegraph* reported the shocked and scandalized neighborhood, and described the family of Smiths as rude, ignorant, simple-minded, gullible, superstitious, and of course sly, scheming, prevaricating, and immoral. It was rich soil for rural gossip, but why the passionate and relentless attacks on Joseph Smith? And why do they continue to this day?

It was mostly Moroni's fault. The night he visited Joseph Smith, he widened the yawning gulf which the First Vision had placed between Joseph and normal people, and removed him from the sphere of established theology and rational thinking. Henceforth, if Joseph was right, the world was in total darkness: "This world is a very wicked world; . . . the world grows more wicked and corrupt."² Joseph took an uncompromising position, for the Lord had told him: "Behold the world lieth in sin at this time and none doeth good no not one, . . . and mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit them according to th[e]ir ungodliness."³ He adopted the frame of mind of one who, after a glimpse into yonder heavens, once and for all took the measure of the world. While he was still a child, he said: "My mind become exceedingly distressed [*sic*]."⁴ When he viewed the yawning gulf between the world which God had given men, he said, "The earth also upon which I stood and the beast of the field and the fowls of heaven and the fish of the waters and also man walking forth upon the face of the earth in ma[j]esty and in

This Sunstone Symposium talk was given in Salt Lake City at the University of Utah, on August 26, 1989. A similar talk was delivered earlier at the Church Educational Symposium at Brigham Young University on August 18, 1989.

1 Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Joseph Smith's First Vision* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971), 164.

2 Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1974), 196.

3 Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1984), 6.

4 *Ibid.*, 5.

the strength of beauty”;⁵—he compared that with the shambles men had made of it—the “contentions and divi[si]ons [and] the wicke[d]ness and abominations and the darkness which pervaded the minds of mankind . . . and I felt to mourn for my own sins and for the sins of the world.”⁶ He saw that gulf ever widening: “I behold the manifest withdrawal of God’s Holy Spirit, and the veil of stupidity which seems to be drawn over the hearts of the people.”⁷ “Mankind will persist in self-justification until all their iniquity is exposed.”

When he first tried to tell his story, he found all communication severed. “My soul was filled with love, and for many days, I could rejoice with great Joy and the Lord was with me. But [I] could find none that would believe the he[a]venly vision.”⁸ As one tutored from above, he reached a conclusion: “The opinions of men, so far as I am concerned, are to me as the crackling of the thorns under the pot, or the whistling of the wind.”⁹ What he had done was to reintroduce a new dimension into the world, or rather as Eduard Meyer so impressively sets forth, he reintroduced the very same universe of discourse which had existed in the days of the apostles and prophets. It was no mere rhetoric when he said, “No man knows my history. . . . I don’t blame any one for not believing my history. If I had not experienced what I have, I could not have believed it myself.”¹⁰ “Have we increased in knowledge or intelligence? . . . Our nation, which possesses greater resources than any other, is rent, from center to circumference, with party strife, political intrigues, and sectional interest. . . . Our tradesmen are disheartened, our mechanics out of employ, our farmers distressed, our poor crying for bread, our banks are broken, our credit ruined.”¹¹ “What is the matter? Are we alone in this thing? Verily no. . . . The world itself presents one great theater of misery, woe, and ‘distress of nations with perplexity.’ All, all, speak with a voice of thunder, that man is not able to govern himself, to legislate for himself, to protect himself, to promote his own good, nor the good of the world.”¹²

It was not a speculative religion that Joseph brought; like John, he spoke only of what he had seen with his eyes, heard with his ears, and felt with his hands. In contrast to that, the whole Christian doctrine, as Brigham Young put it, “simmered down into a snuff box, but when I found Mormonism, it was higher than I could reach, deeper than I could comprehend, calculated to expand the mind from truth to truth, from light to light, to become associated with the gods and

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 13.

8 Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet’s Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 6.

9 Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comp. and ed., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 205.

10 Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 361.

11 Ibid., 249.

12 Ibid., 250.

angels.” In 1831 Joseph reported: “The conference voted that they prize the revelations to be worth to the Church the riches of the whole earth”;¹³ the Book of Mormon and the revelations are worth the riches of eternity. In short, as Joseph put it, “The difference between the Saints and the world is that the Saints know, and the world does not.” To say the least, that attitude is going to invite criticism.

The word *criticize* is from the same root as the Latin *cerno*—“to sift, separate, decide”—and the Greek *krino*—“to separate, decide, judge.” The Latin *discerno* means “to distinguish between two things exactly alike.” The Latin *inter-legere*, from which we get our word “intelligence,” is the power to distinguish or judge between two or more things (it’s the binary process; in fact, *bayana*, *bîn*, etc., is the Semitic form).

It may seem surprising that the critics from the beginning to the present did not attack Joseph Smith on moral grounds—that would have been counterproductive; naughty boys were a dime a dozen, and scandal-mongering works both ways. The stock phrases from Hurlbut and Howe, down to Brodie, were *lazy*, *indulgent*, *money-digging*, *superstitious*. The specific attacks of the superoffender were, and still are, all on intellectual grounds. This is only fair. He saw them behind a “veil of stupidity.”

Webster defines criticism as “the art of evaluation or analyzing with knowledge and propriety, [the beauties and faults,] works of art or literature, . . . [of] moral values or the soundness of scientific hypotheses and procedures.”¹⁴ Notice “with knowledge and propriety”: the critics necessarily assume intellectual and moral superiority to the things they’re criticizing. As Aristotle says, the observer feels superior to the observed, even, we might add, when the observer is the cat and the observed is the king. Since Joseph frankly stated that because of his family’s indigence, he was denied the advantages of an education, the critics have rejoiced to find themselves holding all the cards, under no obligation to pay serious attention to anything that an ignorant farmer might say.¹⁵ To this day, they have worked their alleged intellects to advantage for all they were worth.

Critics within the Church have done the same thing; they still take the position of high academic advantage. There were always those among the Brethren themselves who, resenting Joseph Smith’s towering ascendancy in view of his limited education, tried to bring him down with terrible affidavits, which they later admitted were false. “Some of the first elders of the Church,” reported Brigham, “said that Joseph did not understand temporal matters. The first bishops of the Church said they believed with all their heart that they understood the temporal

¹³ Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 8.

¹⁴ Philip B. Gove, ed., *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam Webster, 1986), 538.

¹⁵ Faulring, *Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, 4.

matters far better than the Prophet Joseph.” “I have seen men belonging to this kingdom who really thought that if they were not associated with it, it could not progress.” So the critics magnanimously volunteer their superior intellectual powers and put them at the disposal of the Church.

This brings us to a fundamental issue. The Prophet’s advantage over the world lay of course in revelation; but in the Church, every follower has an equal right to revelation. How could the Prophet stand up and be the leader, when everyone could have his own claim to revelation? They immediately started doing it as soon as they joined the Church. It was Joseph himself who insisted most emphatically on everyone’s right to *inspection*! He said, “Search the scriptures—search . . . and ask your Heavenly Father, in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, to manifest the truth unto you; . . . you will then know for yourselves and not for another. You will not then be dependent on man for the knowledge of God; nor will there be any room for speculation.”¹⁶

This is a point upon which the Prophet Joseph himself placed the greatest emphasis. No office or calling in the Church qualifies its holder as an official interpreter of the scriptures; that’s the prerogative of a conventional priest or minister who has been to college and studied for the ministry. The boast of the Latter-day Saints is that they have no professional clergy, even in matters of doctrine. Joseph said, “It is the privilege of every elder to speak of the things of God.” Joseph reported that “the Lord had declared . . . that the people should each one stand for himself and depend on no man or men, . . . that righteous persons could only deliver their own souls. . . . If the people departed from the Lord, they must fall—that they were depending on the prophet [and] hence were darkened in their minds [in consequence of neglecting the duties evolving upon] themselves.”¹⁷

“Fellow sojourners upon the earth, it is your privilege to purify yourselves, to come up to the same glory, and see for yourselves, and know for yourselves. Ask, and it shall be given you.”¹⁸ Let us recall that the scripture which put Joseph’s feet on the path was the statement in James, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” (James 1:5). God won’t rebuke you for asking. “God hath not revealed anything to Joseph,” he said, “but he will make it known unto the Twelve, and even [to] the least Saint.” They may know all things as fast as they are able to bear them. For the day must come when no man need say to his neighbor, “Know ye the Lord?” for “all shall know [him], . . . from the least unto the greatest” (D&C 84:98). How is this to be done? By the sealing power and the other comforter spoken of, which would be manifest by the revelations. But wouldn’t that sort of thing lead people to all sorts of confusion, all kinds of crazy ideas, and the

16 Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 11-12.

17 Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 120.

18 Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 13.

like? Of course it did; right from the first we had crazy ideas, but we don't preach them. Joseph said you do not do that. When old Brother Brown was brought up before the High Council, Joseph said no.

I never thought it was right to call up a man and try him because he erred in doctrine; it looks too much like Methodism and not like Latter day Saintism. Methodists have creeds which a man must believe or be kicked out of their church. I want the liberty of believing as I please, it feels so good not to be trampled. It don't prove that a man is not a good man, because he errs in doctrine. The High Council undertook to censure and correct Er Brown because of his teachings in relation to the beasts [in Revelation], and he came to me to know what he should do about it.¹⁹

Joseph Smith said that Brother Brown's teachings were absolutely ridiculous. He could not keep from laughing at his ideas. But Brother Brown had a right to them, and the elders shouldn't attack Joseph for defending him. He said, "I . . . qualify my declaration which I am about to make so that the young Elders who know so much may not rise up and choke me like hornets."²⁰ The elders liked to dictate doctrine to each other, and he didn't reserve to himself even the mysteries. He said, "There is no salvation in believing an evil report against our neighbor— [instead of criticizing], I advise all to go on to perfection and search deeper and deeper into the mysteries of Godliness."²¹

"It has always been my province to dig up hidden mysteries—new things—for my hearers."²² "I never hear[d] of a man being damned for believing too much; but they are damned for unbelief."²³ But let us always bear in mind that a mystery, by definition, is something that you keep to yourself; the Greek *muō* means "to shut up." A mystery is something you've been initiated into, and you don't convey that to the general public:

We deem it a just principle . . . that all men are created equal, and that all have the privilege of thinking for themselves upon all matters relating to conscience. Consequently, then, we are not disposed, had we the power, to deprive any one of exercising that free independence of mind which heaven has so graciously bestowed upon the human family as one of its choicest gifts.²⁴

"If others' blessings are not your blessings, others' curses are not your curses; you stand . . . agents unto yourselves, to be judged according to your works. . . . Every man lives for himself."²⁵ This applies in politics and everything else:

19 Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 183-84.

20 Ibid., 184.

21 Ibid., 365-66.

22 Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 364.

23 Ibid., 374.

24 Ibid., 49.

25 Ibid., 12.

I have not come to tell you to vote this way, that way, or the other in relation to National matters; I want it to [go] abroad to the whole world that every man should stand on his own merits. The Lord has not given me Revelation concerning politics.—I have not asked the Lord for it.—I am a third party and stand independent and alone—I desire to see all parties protected [under the laws]. . . . I utterly forbid these pol[i]tical demagogues from using my name hereafter forever.²⁶

Parties were doing just that. “If 10000 men testify to a truth you know would it add to your faith? No, or will 1000 testimonies destroy your knowledge of a fact? No.—I do not want anyone to tell that I am a prophet or attempt to prove my word.”²⁷ He says, quite strongly, with regard to elections, “Some say we all vote together . . . as I say. But I never tell any man how to vote or who to vote for. . . . Joseps Duncan said if the people would elect him he would exterminate the mormons & take away their charters. As to Mr Ford he made no such threats.”²⁸ In such a uniquely clear-cut case, open and shut, there was no need for Joseph or anybody else to give advice. In all other cases Joseph absolutely refused to, and so he wrote in a letter to the editor of the *Wasp*: “My feelings revolt at the idea of having anything to do with politics. I have declined in every instance in having anything to do on the subject. I think it would be well for politicians to regulate their own affairs. I wish to be let alone, that I may attend strictly to the spiritual welfare of the church.”²⁹ That was another arena, another ball game, another area of experience in power that has nothing to do with the eternities. For Joseph, it was a distraction he was pushed into; he did not like it. Government was never by compulsion; even in the Church no man is forced against his will. He said,

People acting together are the foundation of the authority of the church. I inform the people that in the government of the church and in business transactions, every man should have a voice in the matter as if the whole responsibility were on his shoulders. When everyone shall see for themselves and prophesy for themselves and have vision for themselves, only then will they have undivided feelings and be able to dispense with present teachers because they'd all have the same visions then. But for themselves, even when they act with such unity, every man must act according to the wisdom he can command. No man can be condemned for voting in the negative.

One can see that this new-found freedom was bound to go to the heads of some people. Until they became Mormons they never dreamed of such a prospect for advancement. Pioneer types were always looking for the big bonanza. New members of the Church almost overnight would start having dreams of personal glory and claiming authority of personal revelation. When

26 Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 236-37.
 27 Ibid., 237.
 28 Ibid., 228.
 29 Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 275.

Brother Joseph put restraints on their claims and their plans, they would often declare him a fallen prophet and offer their own revelation as the way to go.

A surprising number of people follow that course today. You would think this would put the Church at a terrible risk. In fact, it would have destroyed any man-made organization many times, and indeed scores of defectors have loudly proclaimed that their newly discovered evidence and powerful arguments would once and for all bring Mormonism down in ruins. Hurlbut and his disciple Brodie made that very same boast. When the great theologian Krister Stendahl, now Lutheran Bishop of Lund, was in Provo, I had a conversation with him. He was very much upset with Joseph Smith's statement, "I never hear[d] of a man being damned for believing too much; but they are damned for unbelief."³⁰ But if you're damned for believing too much, I argued, then we are all damned. For all of us believe things that aren't true, things that will be proven false in time to come. Scientists Galileo, Newton, Heisenberg, Planck, Hawking, and Penrose all had differing beliefs about the very nature of our existence, the most fundamental doctrines of reality. Einstein used to bring God into it. But they all respected each other and didn't damn each other for wrong ideas. Yet throughout history, men have damned and persecuted and banished and imprisoned and burned others on a vast scale, not for any crimes they committed, but purely for having the wrong ideas. The only crime for which persons were brought to trial during the inquisition was heresy. Joseph said, "If any man is [authorized] to take away my life who say I am a false teacher, so I [should] have the same right to all false teacher[s] & [then] where [would] be the end of the blood & there is no law in the heart of God that [would] allow any one to interfere with the rights of man; every man has the right to be a false as well as a true prophet—If I [show] verily that I have the truth of God & [show] that ninety nine of 100 are false [prophets], it [would] deluge the whole world with blood."³¹

That's exactly what it has done. Consider the Christians and Muslims of Lebanon, for example, living together for centuries with each other, sharing the same customs and values. Each knows the other not as a bad person, yet for years they've been slaughtering each other purely for having the wrong beliefs; and within that group, the Sunni and the Shiites are both good Muslims who disagree on but one point of tradition, and for that the car bombs and artillery fire have reduced their beautiful city to rubble.

How should one deal with unbelievers, critics, and heretics? Joseph Smith wrote the book on that. The Book of Mormon sets all forth in exceeding plainness. In the reign of King Mosiah, after the time of prosperity, a rising generation could not understand the words of King Benjamin. The resurrection especially they found incomprehensible and unbelievable (as do most Christians),

³⁰ Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 374.

³¹ Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 349.

because they would not make an effort to believe. Benjamin had said they could not understand, and so their hearts were hardened. They used that as an excuse, of course, for escaping the moral restraints on their behavior, a behavior which the gospel required. They adopted their own lifestyle, "and they were a separate people as to their faith ever in their carnal and sinful state" (Mosiah 26:4). They embraced a much more permissive moral doctrine, which became very popular. The popularity of that easygoing church, the religion of Nehor, made it the dominant religion almost to the end of the Book of Mormon. This is no wonder since it allowed them, as we're told, to live in a "carnal and sinful state."

The numbers of dissenters grew, due to criticism within the church. There were dissensions among the brethren, while the outsiders kept working on the members to accept the new moral emancipation (Mosiah 26:1-6). What was to be done? Members of the church who had begun to make trouble were brought by local members before local priests and teachers; but those officers didn't know what to do, except to send the culprits on to Alma, since Mosiah recognized Alma as the head of the church, the high priest (Mosiah 26:7). He felt it should be his problem, but Alma didn't know what to do either. In fact, he had no idea of what had been going on. That's very interesting: Alma, the head of the church, hadn't heard of it at all. He was the only one who didn't know.

Couldn't Alma be criticized for that? Remember, Moroni criticized Pahoran unfairly because he didn't know the score, and he didn't know the score because Pahoran hadn't told him the bad news, lest it discourage the soldiers at the front. Who was to blame in a case like that? As to the new subversives, Alma, we're told, was troubled in his spirit, and he referred the matter back to the king (Mosiah 26:10-11). The immoral conduct of certain members of the church was confirmed and admitted by them. They had no intention of repenting: Civil law could only punish them only "according to their crimes" (Mosiah 26:11). Couldn't this disruption of the church by making sport of peoples' beliefs be punished? Mosiah washed his hands of it. He said, "Behold, I judge them not," and tossed the hot potato right back to Alma: "I deliver them into thy hands to be judged" (Mosiah 26:12).

Alma was helpless. He "was again troubled and he went and inquired of the Lord" (Mosiah 26:13), and the answer was clear and explicit: "He that will not hear my voice, the same shall ye not receive into my church" (Mosiah 26:28). Excommunication was the limit of their authority and is the only power to punish which the church has ever had. It is not the same power of excommunication claimed by the Roman church, where excommunication means the same as damnation. It is for God alone to judge and pronounce a sentence of eternal salvation or damnation, and that only when the time comes, as the Lord told the disciples at Capernaum (cf. Mark 3:29-31). The Lord told Alma that after being cut off from the Church, any who confessed and repented were to be forgiven out of hand, even as often as they repented (Mosiah 26:30-31).

After that they were not to be judged or criticized by other members of the Church for what they had done.

Then something much worse happened. Alma's eldest son and four of Mosiah's sons rebelled. One gets the feeling that Alma had been perhaps too strict. Extreme severity with youth doesn't go over well in prosperous times, as leading lights among the young, like Alcibiades (a fourth-century B.C. Athenian), or the Algonquin crowd (a group of New York intellectuals who met at the Algonquin Hotel in the 1920s) when I was young, have shown. The younger Alma, an impressive and persuasive personality, as we learn from his later career, became all the rage with the youth, making fun of their beliefs, deriding them for the old-fashioned ways of their parents. With their public showing off, they mixed private parties and conclaves, deliberately seeking to break down the church and the government (cf. Mosiah 26:10).

We know it took an angel to stop them. But their fathers were the monarch himself and the head of the church. Why didn't they do more? Why didn't they simply lock up the troublemakers until they learned to behave? It was because the young protestors were making a religious statement, however offensive and negative. The king had laid down the law: No persecution either of believers by unbelievers, of unbelievers by believers or of believers by other believers, or unbelievers by other unbelievers (cf. Mosiah 27:1-3). In short, there was to be no persecution, and the purpose of all this was so that "there should be an equality among all men" (Mosiah 27:3). When one group can bring social pressure one against another, you do not have equality. Just imagine the king and the high priest both allowing criticism, dissension, and propagandizing to go on and on, doing nothing about it until the lax and easy church of the dissenters became Nehors and began taking over everything. The fact that the dissenters far outnumbered the regular church members before long, and the fact that the young men behaved so insolently, certainly suggest that they had been either somewhat spoiled, overdisciplined, or neglected. Remember, Alma didn't know what was going on.

Nevertheless, obnoxious as they made themselves, they were within their rights. They were making a religious statement, and no one could deny them that privilege. Why not? "For it was strictly contrary to the commands of God that there should be a law . . . against a man's belief" (Alma 30:7, 11), including atheism, whose believers are often as fervid as any fundamentalist. We are told in Alma, "If a man desired to serve God, it was his privilege, . . . but if he did not believe in him, there was no law to punish him" (Alma 30:9). It was under the protection of this Bill of Rights that the infamous Korihor was able to carry on with perfect impunity. Only a miracle stopped him, and the only punishment he received was at the hands of a Zoramite mob when he left the country (Alma 30:59). Korihor had been brought before Ammon, the high priest at Jershon (Alma 30:19-20), who passed him on to Giddonah, the high priest in the land of Gideon, who sent him on to Alma at Zarahemla (Alma 30:21-30). What, were all those

leading authorities so helpless? They couldn't abridge the right of free speech and freedom of religion as laid down by the commandments of God. These are the words of the Book of Mormon. There was punishment for crimes, of course, and the crimes are listed. "Nevertheless, there was no law against a man's belief; . . . therefore all men were on equal grounds" (Alma 30:11). No one was subject to any social pressure or group disapproval. If you did not want to participate in public prayer, for example, or if you agreed with Isaiah (cf. Isaiah 1:13) that such displays of piety were usually an abomination before God, that was your privilege. Only God is in a position to say which nations are really under God and which are not.

Let me insert a quotation from a news dispatch of a couple of years ago. "In Charlottesville, Virginia, at the National Council of Boy Scouts of America, a local scout official has ruled that a youth who does not believe in God must be expelled from the organization. Paul Trout, 15, was denied a Life Scout promotion several months ago when he said he didn't believe in a supreme being. Now [he] will be forced to leave the organization, following the ruling by the national scout leaders, an official said Friday." And we call that religious freedom? Equality?

Going back to the Nephites again: "If a man did not believe . . . there was a law to punish [him]. . . . Therefore all men were on equal grounds" (Alma 30:9, 11). No one will deny that the smart aleck criticism of Alma and his friends was bad, unfair, foolish, and injurious. What could be done about it? The answer is always the same. One replies by preaching the gospel with increasing fervor, and that is what the young Alma learned for himself. "Don't you wish you had some power to pinch their ears. Do you not wish you had power to stop them in their mad career. Let the Lord almighty do this. You think his eyes are not upon the work of his hands? His ears are open to the prayers of his children. He will hear their prayers. He will answer their desires and, when we as a people possess the abundance of that patience, that long-suffering and forbearance that we need to possess the privilege and power the Lord has reserved for his people, he will receive it, we will receive it to our utmost satisfaction. We shall not have it now."

Now, suppose that we were to issue our edicts to the whole world of mankind for them to obey the Gospel we preach, and had the power to compel them to obey, could we do it according to the dictates of our religion? We could not. We could invite them, and could tell them how, but we could not say, and maintain the faith that we have embraced, you must bow down and profess our religion and submit to the ordinances of the kingdom of God.³²

There is a principle as strong as that of free agency itself, and it exists from eternity to eternity. We read about that principle in the third chapter of Abraham—*There is a head*. There must always be a head: "In the spirit of my calling and in view of the authority of the priesthood which has been conferred upon me, it would be my duty to reprove whatever I esteem to be

32 *Journal of Discourses* 14:94.

wrong.” Joseph did not hesitate to cut off the highest authorities in that capacity. Would any impostor have dared to excommunicate such powerful and ambitious men as William E. McLellin, Thomas B. Marsh, David W. Patton, William W. Phelps, John Whitmer, Orson Hyde, and others—men who knew all about the personal affairs of Joseph and whether there had been any serious transgressions in his past? He said, “We do not consider ourselves bound to receive any revelation from any one man or woman [everybody has a perfect right to revelation—all he wants] without his being legally constituted and ordained to that authority, and giving sufficient proof of it.”³³ Many should take this to heart today. Many a character has come up to me and said, “Brother Nibley, the Lord has revealed to me that you should give me an ‘A’.” Well, all I have to say is that we do not feel bound by any such revelation. “No member of the Church has any right to publish any doctrine of the Church.” You can have all the ideas you want but may not publish them as doctrines of a church without first submitting them to the leaders for their approval. This does not cramp anyone’s style. “Any person,” Joseph Smith said, “can ask the Lord for a witness concerning himself and get an answer, but not to lead the Church.” That belongs to the head of the Church. This doesn’t make a tyrant of the leader. The keys of the priesthood were committed to Joseph to build up the kingdom, but when he was called to preside over the Church, it was by the voice of the people. This is strong stuff. According to Brigham Young, “Leaders are not to be blindly followed. Suppose the people threw the whole burden of leadership upon the Prophet, saying, ‘If the brethren who take charge are satisfied, we are satisfied.’ This would *not* be pleasing in the sight of the Lord.” Nothing is automatic. The spirit must always lead.

In recent years, one frequently hears (especially in testimony meetings) such things as, “We are thankful for having a Prophet who can tell us exactly what we have to do and think every moment of the day.” The Prophet is a convenient time and trouble saver. Actually, people pester him to death for these things (they always have), as someone ready to bail you out no matter what silly things you’ve done or what a fool you’ve made of yourself. Well, you’re not going learn anything that way. Let us recall Joseph’s warning the people who were depending on the prophet, hence “darkening their minds, and neglecting the duties devolving upon themselves” as much as the prophet; but he was not to be called on for every emergency. “It is a great thing to inquire at the hands of God, and we feel fearful to approach him, especially about things which men should obtain in all sincerity for themselves by humility and prayer.” Don’t ask me for revelation. You have just as much right to it, he says.

Joseph was not told everything. He said the three things he wanted to know more than anything else were withheld from him, and he said regarding the Missouri affair, “I dare not

³³ Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 21.

advise, not knowing what shall befall us as we are under very heavy serious threatenings from a great many people in this place.”

“Did the people believe Joseph Smith, Jr. to be a prophet? Yes, and every man who has a testimony of Jesus.” When Brigham Young was asked in an interview with a newspaper, I think the *New York Herald*, “[Do] you, like the old prophets, receive direct revelation from God?” He answered, “Yes, and not only me, but my brethren also.” “Does that extend to all the Church without reserve or rank?” “Yes, and it is just as necessary for the mother to possess this spirit in training and rearing her children as for anyone else.” “It is not absolutely necessary, then, that each person receive revelation through you?” “Oh, no; through the spirit of Christ, the Holy Ghost; but to dictate the Church is my part of it.”³⁴ What the Brethren say is the word and the will of the Lord (cf. D&C 84), but only, as President Clark pointed out no less than twenty-seven times in a speech on the subject, when they are so moved upon by the Holy Ghost. “How can we know that?” asked Brother Clark. By following the oft-repeated principle that everyone must so live that the Holy Ghost will reveal to him whether the others are speaking by the spirit or not. “Do you know whether I am leading you right or not? Do you know whether I dictate you right or not? Do you know whether the wisdom and the mind of the Lord are dispensed to you correctly or not? . . . I have a request to make of each and every Latter-day Saint, or those who profess to be, to so live that the Spirit of the Lord will whisper to them and teach them the truth. . . . In this there is safety; without this there is danger, imminent danger [you otherwise get a tyrant or a dictator]; and my exhortation to the Latter-day Saints is—Live your religion [and you’ll know for yourself].”³⁵ Does this fit us in the position of critics, then? Yes, critics of our own behavior. Before I question another or make a direct appeal to God, I must be perfectly sure of my own purity and integrity, because what I’m asking for is the same revelation.

For myself, there’s where the real criticism starts. This is the paradox of freedom of the individual in society. The first check on criticism is this: “Be [not] so certain that you comprehend the things of God when all things with you are so uncertain.”³⁶ That’s the first step: You don’t know so damn much. In fact, you don’t know anything. That is true. This is something the *New York Herald* reported. Brigham Young, at a dance, was amused. The *Herald* said he couldn’t get away with it: “From his position as a leader, such familiarity would, in most cases, be fatal to great claims. . . . Strange world, strange folks.”³⁷ “A wonderful man, Brigham. No other man dared to speak to such men as he did. Yet they took it in good part.” Talking of the brethren, he said, “They wince under it at the time, but once chastened they are even more devoted than ever.”

34 “Interview with Brigham Young,” *Deseret News*, 23 May 1877.

35 *Journal of Discourses* 17:51.

36 Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 238.

37 *Millennial Star* 22 (3 November 1860): 701.

“Most of the Elders who preach in this stand ought to be kicked out of it, and then kicked into it again, until they overhaul themselves and find out what is the matter with them.”³⁸ That’s criticism, but it’s constructive criticism. He wanted them kicked out, but then kicked back again. That was the paradox.

Of course, one can’t be certain about anything. Joseph said that “we . . . live in a devilish and wicked world where men busy themselves watching for iniquity,”³⁹ and what is to be gained by it? The spirits of good men cannot interfere with the wicked beyond prescribed bounds. For Michael said, “Michael, the archangel dared not bring a railing accusation against the devil, but said, the ‘Lord rebuke thee Satan’ ” (cf. Jude 1:9).⁴⁰

A characteristic and familiar situation occurred in the year the Prophet was martyred.

An individual who abhorred evil joined the Church. He set himself on watch to detect the failing of others, deeming that he was doing God a service by being so employed; and thus he was decoyed into the occupation of the great Master of Evil to be the accuser of his Brethren. And during the time thus occupied, he considered himself actuated by the purest motives, arising from a detestation of sin. Yet mark the subtlety of Satan is leading men into a false position. Such a course in the first place probably arose from the purest of motives, and perhaps the individual was instrumental in rectifying some error. He felt satisfied for having done so. His self-esteem gratified, he sought another opportunity to do the same, continuously setting himself up as being capable of sitting in judgment on others and rectifying by his own ability the affairs of the kingdom.

Joseph said, “The eagerness to accuse is from the devil.” But Joseph recognized that at all times the defects of the church are the same we find today. But that’s not the point. “Notwithstanding this congregation professed to be Saints. Yet I stand in the midst of all characters and classes of man. Yes, I am standing in the midst of all kinds of people. Search your hearts and see if you’re like God.” This is from a new book by Scott Faulring, *An American Prophet’s Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, being circulated by Gerald and Sandra Tanner, as an anti-Mormon book as if that passage damned the Church. It’s actually a very strong defense of Joseph Smith. He was a realist. He recognized the truth when he saw it. “Search your hearts and see if you’re like God.” I have searched mine. I hope the book circulates far and wide. It testifies to the absolute honesty of Joseph Smith.

“We have thieves among us, adulterers, liars, hypocrites. . . . As far as we degenerate from God, we descend to the devil and lose knowledge, and without knowledge we cannot be saved, and while our hearts are filled with evil, and we are studying evil, there is no room in our hearts for good, or studying good. . . . The Church must be cleansed, and I proclaim against all

38 *Journal of Discourses* 3:223.

39 Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 315.

40 Elden J. Watson, *Manuscript History of Brigham Young 1801-1844* (Salt Lake City: Smith Secretarial Service, 1968), 44.

iniquity. A man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge.”⁴¹ Hence, “we need revelation to assist us and give us knowledge.” We are helpless otherwise. “Ignorance,” Joseph said, “superstition, and bigotry placing itself where it ought not, is oftentimes in the way of the prosperity of this Church.”⁴² Why don’t the Church’s enemies circulate Brother Joseph Fielding Smith’s *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* as an anti-Mormon book? It has such strong statements in it.

What would Joseph Smith do about evil? He didn’t worry, because God was in charge. “Notwithstanding we are rolled in the mire of the flood for the time being, the next surge peradventure, as time rolls on, may bring to us the fountain as clear as crystal, and as pure as snow.”⁴³ With that perfect confidence, he never panicked, he never worried. As Eduard Meyer said, he never showed a moment of doubt, as every other religious leader necessarily must. After his vision, he never showed any signs of doubting where it all would end. Though Thomas B. Marsh was president of the Twelve, still he was told, “Therefore, see to it that you trouble not yourselves concerning the affairs of my Church in this place [it wasn’t his business], . . . but purify your hearts before me and then go ye into all the world and preach my gospel.”⁴⁴ Heber C. Kimball, when he visited Kirtland after the debacle, found it a bleak and doleful prospect. He said, “But the faults of our bretheren is poor entertainment for us. We have no accusation to bring, for the Lord has shown us that he has taken the matter into his own hands.”⁴⁵

During the past two weeks, the beginnings of phenomenal spread of religious scams throughout the country, a major item in national news, has been traced to Utah. So what else is new? Ever since Moroni told Joseph Smith that greedy men would be after the plates and that he, too, would be tempted, the problem of exploiting the Church and the gospel has been with us. “There have been frauds and secret abominations and evil works of darkness going on, leading the minds of the weak and unwary into confusion and distraction, and all the time palming it off upon the Presidency,”⁴⁶ Joseph Smith reported. “Where a crowd is flocking from all parts of the world of different minds, religions, &c, there will be some who do not live up to the commandments; & there will be designing characters who would turn you aside & lead you astray, speculators who would get away your property.”⁴⁷ This is nothing new. Therefore it is necessary that we have an order, and it is the heads of the Church who are best qualified to advise us. “Many, when they arrived here, were dissatisfied with the conduct of some of the Saints, because everything was not

41 Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 217.
42 Ibid., 138.
43 Ibid.
44 Faulring, *Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, 208.
45 Ibid., 189.
46 Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 127-28.
47 Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 191.

done perfectly right, and they get angry, and thus the devil gets advantage over them to destroy them. . . . But if they would bear with my infirmities and the infirmities of the brethren, I would likewise bear with their infirmities.”⁴⁸

Men whose questionable business prospects he rebuked would go over and find allies among the mob. Joseph Smith was never safe a moment. When he gave a speech to some newly arrived immigrants who had just come to Nauvoo very much impressed, he ended by saying, “I told them it was likely I would have again to hide up in the woods, but they must not be discouraged.”⁴⁹ He had come out of the woods to preach, and he would have to hide up in the woods. This is a man who was not going to get a big head. “The First Presidency returned at Evening all sound and well. . . . They were chased some 10 or 12 miles by some Evil designing persons, but escaped out of their hands.”⁵⁰ Such were the special privileges of the President of the Church—hiding out in the woods and being chased. What a business!

Franklin D. Richards reported Joseph Smith as saying that “He intended to do his duty before the Lord and hoped that the brethren would be patient as they had a considerable distance [to go]. . . . Until we have perfect love we are liable to fall. . . . God had often sealed up the heavens because of covetousness in the Church. . . . And except the Church receive the fulness of the Scriptures, . . . they would yet fail.”⁵¹

Isn't this exactly the situation today? President Benson pleads with us to read the scriptures, so we gingerly pick our way through the Book of Mormon, as if we were tiptoeing through a minefield instead of taking each passage to heart. What a trial it must have been for one who had conversed with angels and with the prophets of old to find himself surrounded by a bunch of yahoos who considered themselves very important. In the 1840s, important men swarmed on the frontier; everybody seemed to be a “botanic” doctor who either prescribed calomel or lobelia (those were the two schools of medical thought); or a general, someone who had mustered troops at one time or another, or you were a judge, someone who had read the law sometimes. Joseph Smith said, “All ye doctors who are fools, . . . stop your practice. And all ye lawyers who have no business, only as you hatch it up, would to God you would go to work or run away!”⁵² Joseph was surrounded by such men. How could he get through to them? How could he get them to react? “How vain and trifling have been our spirits, our conferences, our councils, our meetings, our private as well as public conversations—too low, too mean, too vulgar, too condescending for the dignified characters of the called and chosen of God.”⁵³

48 Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 268.

49 Ibid.

50 Faulring, *Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, 204.

51 Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 9.

52 Ibid., 329.

53 Ibid., 137.

But because people have faults, we do not rebuke them unless some good can come of it. What we call “constructive criticism,” meaning approval, is not criticism at all. To be constructive, criticism must reach the person for whom it is meant and, of course, he must have a chance for him to reply—but that is discussion, not criticism. “They frequently accused the brethren, thus placing themselves in the seat of Satan, who is emphatically called ‘the accuser of the brethren.’”⁵⁴ The word *devil* derives from the Greek *diabolos*, which simply means “accuser,” and there are many tales of how Satan goes before the Lord bringing accusation against his erring children. The interesting point is that Satan does not make *false accusations*—he doesn’t need to with men behaving the way they do; it is for making these *real* accusations that the Lord rebukes and dismisses the devil from his presence.

We can always count on the critics: “False and wicked misrepresentations by members have caused thousands to think they were doing God’s service when persecuting the Church of God.” The splinter group was another phenomenon that began with the Church itself and is still flourishing. The leaders of such, who go off by themselves to live the gospel in its purity, as they think, have discredited the church their cause by breaking the basic rule on which the Church is founded: “No man who has the liberty to lead away people into the wilderness.” There were various Rekhabite departures in the Book of Mormon, and such defections are still going on, always based on someone’s personal revelation.

People must be proven guilty by positive evidence, or they stand clear. Let no one presume to say this or that General Authority is fallen, or anything else. “No man is capable of judging a matter, in council, unless his own heart is pure; . . . we frequently are so filled with prejudice, or have a beam in our own eye, that we are not capable of passing right decisions.”⁵⁵ “Every man, before he makes an objection to any item, . . . should be sure that he can throw light upon the subject rather than spread darkness.”⁵⁶ Joseph set forth to the people “the evils that existed and would exist by reason of hasty judgment upon any subject given by the people or in judging before they had heard both sides of the question.” “If I esteem mankind to be in error, shall I bear them down? No. I will lift them up, and in their own way too, if I cannot persuade them my way is better; and I will not seek to compel any man to believe as I do, only by the force of reasoning.”⁵⁷ No matter what the provocation, “Let the Elders be exceedingly careful about unnecessarily disturbing and harrowing up the feelings of the people. . . . Avoid contentions and vain disputes with men of corrupt minds, who do not desire to know the truth. . . . If they

54 Ibid., 212.
 55 Ibid., 69.
 56 Ibid., 94.
 57 Ibid., 313.

receive not your testimony in one place, flee to another, remembering to cast no reflections, nor throw out any bitter sayings.”⁵⁸

“Leave the kingdom alone. The Lord steadies the ark. If it does jostle and appear to need steadying, if the way is sometimes a little side-long, or something to all appearance threatens its overthrow, be careful how you stretch forth your hands to steady it. Let us not be too officious in meddling with that which does not concern us. Let it alone; it’s the Lord’s work. I know well enough to let the kingdom alone and do my duty. It carries me; I do not carry the kingdom.” It’s interesting that people who do this do not want to be excommunicated. They’d lose their clout with the Gentiles if they were not members of the Church, and of course if they were excommunicated they wouldn’t carry much weight in the Church anyway. “Many who have left this Church have tried the experiment of building up the Kingdom of God by their learning, saying when we have established our Church, it will then be the kingdom of the Lord.” So what do you do if you see folly and error all around you? You continue to think for yourself. That’s the first rule, which means to think *to* yourself. Thought is an inner process. It never reaches finality. “Theories can’t be proved,” says Hawking, the eminent physicist of our time.⁵⁹ Joseph said, “We build our own Kingdoms and obtain by our own faithfulness our own crowns that will exactly fill us.”

So it is with Brother Joseph’s advice on the subject. “Let us be faithful and silent, brethren, and if God gives you a manifestation, keep it to yourselves. . . . Do not watch for iniquity in each other, if you do you will not get an endowment, for God will not bestow it on such.”⁶⁰ In an organization made up so largely of nonconformists, conflicts are inevitable, and the leader told them this was one of the ways in which they were being tested. “His personal presence we have not, therefore we have need of greater faith, . . . and I am determined to do all that I can to uphold you, although I may do many things inadvertently that are not right in the sight of God.”⁶¹ Within the Church itself, said Joseph, “Indeed, the adversary is bring[ing] into requisition all his subtlety to prevent the Saints from being endowed by causing division among the 12 [Apostles] also among the 70 and bickerings and jealousies among the Elders and official members of the Church.”⁶² So he covenanted with the Twelve: “I will not listen to nor credit any derogatory report against any of you nor condemn you upon any testimony beneath heavens, short of that testimony which is infal[l]ible, untill I can see you face to face and know of a surity. . . . I ask the same of you[!]”⁶³ This was a peculiarity of Joseph Smith—to love and esteem people

58 Ibid., 43.

59 Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam, 1988), 167.

60 Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 91.

61 Ibid., 90.

62 Faulring, *Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, 94.

63 Ibid., 110.

deeply, but at the same time be perfectly aware of all their terrible faults. “Brethren, I am not a very Pious man,” he said. “I do not wish to be a great deal better than any body else. If a Prophet was so much better than anybody else was he would inherit a glory far beyond what anyone else would inherit and behold he would be alone, for who would be his company in heaven.”⁶⁴ Then he added, “Righteousness is not that which men esteem holiness. That which the world call righteousness I have not any regard for. To be righteous is to be just and merciful. If a man fails in kindness justice and mercy he will be damed.”⁶⁵

Joseph never said an unkind thing about anyone. He gave an example of Brother Sidney: “Brother Sidney is a man whom I love”⁶⁶—but in his terrible faults, and after Joseph protested, he had spread darkness rather than light. Then a conference by a vote of the Church restored him without further confession. Joseph took him back and said, “Notwithstanding these things, he is a very great and good man.”⁶⁷ A typical example appears in two successive days in Joseph Smith’s journal. One day several elders united with Joseph Smith and prayed “that the Lord would grant that our Brother Joseph [Smith] might prevail over his enemy, even Doctor P[hilastus] Hurlbut, who has threatened his life.”⁶⁸ The very next day, “Doctor P[hilastus] Hurlbut came to my house. . . . He was ordained to the office of an Elder in this Church. . . . I heard him say . . . that if he ever became convinced that the Book of Mormon was false, he would be the cause of my destruction.”⁶⁹ And he tried to prove that the rest of his life, with false affidavits, etc. Notice that Joseph always gives the enemy, the other person, the benefit of the doubt. How could he meet such depravity, as in the case of his brother William?

A final point: The main object of jealousy and rivalry in organizations is rank and office:

Let the Twelve be humble, and not be exalted, and beware of pride, and not seek to excel one above another, but act for each other’s good, . . . and . . . [honorably make] mention of his [our brother’s] name [in our prayers before the Lord and before our fellow men], and not backbite and devour our brother. . . . Must the new ones that are chosen to fill the places of those that are fallen, of the quorum of the Twelve, begin to exalt themselves, until they exalt themselves so high that they will soon tumble over and have a great fall, and go wallowing through the mud and mire and darkness, Judas-like, to the buffetings of Satan, as several of the quorum [of the Twelve] have done.⁷⁰

Joseph said that from the commencement of this work, he had to surmount difficulties in consequence of aspiring men. “Great big elders,” as he called them, “caused him much trouble.

64 Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 206.
 65 Ibid.
 66 Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 30.
 67 Ibid.
 68 Faulring, *Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, 19.
 69 Ibid., 20.
 70 Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 155.

He had been trampled underfoot by aspiring elders, for all were infected with that spirit. He had a subtle devil to deal with and could only curb it by being humble." "Those who want high office are like their brother, the devil, precisely. The high seats on the stand. They take that seriously. What nonsense."

"He spoke of the disposition of many men to consider lower offices in the Church dishonorable and to look with jealous eyes upon the standing of those called to preside over them. It was folly and nonsense of the human heart for a person to aspire to other stations than those which they were appointed by God for them to occupy." "Let not the head say unto the feet it hath no need of the feet" (D&C 84:109). Many already have been ordained. This personal ambition is natural, the tendency to form exclusive groups and cliques, as bestowing prestige and influence. "Concerning thy brethren, be not partial towards them in love above many others but let thy love . . . abound unto all men and unto all who love my name."⁷¹ "Personal feelings of friendship and association ought to sink into comparative insignificance and have no force in view of consequences so momentous to the people of the kingdom of God." Hence "the advancement of the cause of God and the building of Zion is as much one man's business as another's. . . . Party feelings, separate interests, exclusive designs should be lost sight of in the one common cause, in the interest of the whole."⁷² Joseph Smith did his best to invest the brethren with his own magnanimous spirit. "He addressed the Twelve against self-sufficiency, self-righteousness, and self-importance, especially teaching them to observe wisdom and love toward one another in all things and circumstances."

But all men are not alike in stature, temperament, or endowment. That's why the Lord, in the revelations, lays such emphasis on gifts. It's through the various gifts distributed among us that we are able to get into the act. We are told repeatedly both to *ask* for gifts and *seek* for gifts (D&C 42). Among the last words of the Book of Mormon are "Do not deny the gifts, do not reject the gifts" (cf. Moroni 10:8). On the other hand, we are commanded *not* to ask for or seek for *office*. Yet nobody seems particularly interested in asking or seeking for gifts, while men constantly plan, scheme, and aspire to office. Martin Harris and others actually left the Church because their services were not recognized by high office—Martin Harris, who had the privilege of standing in the presence of an angel and turning over the plates, wanted an office in the Church, something which would only be temporary and a nuisance. Why, let me talk to Moroni for five minutes and I'll give you the pleasure of sitting on the stand for evermore!

Why this craving for office? Because office necessarily has high profile and prestige. High seats in the synagogue are attended by what Shakespeare calls the "insolence of office."⁷³

71 Faulring, *Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, 207.

72 Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 231.

73 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act III, scene i, line 73.

Gifts, on the other hand, are secret and private. According to Joseph Smith, "The greatest, the best, the most useful gifts would be known nothing about by anybody but yourself." It's the gifts you should want. What does the world know about prophesying? Our gifts are to be put to the use of the Church as part of a mix (D&C 46). They're distributed and balanced among the members, and that's why the Church, with a crew of pushy and assertive people, always sails with an even keel. Plots to bring it to sudden and brilliant worldly success have been matched by equally ambitious schemes to bring it to a complete halt, to accomplish complete dissolution. What Brigham Young calls the "Good Ship Zion" has sailed on in complete disregard of both—it has neither exploded in growth nor collapsed in dissolution.

While "it is the privilege of every Elder to speak of the things of God,"⁷⁴ says Joseph, God calls or elects particular men for particular works on whom to confer special blessings. He's aware of their defects. "If others' blessings are not your blessings, others' curses are not your curses."⁷⁵ So if you think any of the Brethren seem to be underendowed in any particular gift or knowledge, know that God has chosen that brother for other gifts, and God will endow him with the gifts he needs as the occasion arises.

How often have we seen quite ordinary men called to responsibility in the Church suddenly grow to stature almost beyond recognition? They become giants, so to speak. So let the intellectuals criticize the Brethren. The critics have always been right about the lack of intellectual, artistic, and literary savvy in the Church. We have always treasured the trash and trashed the treasures in the Church. Brigham Young said, "I could weep like a whipped child when I see what fools the Latter-day Saints make of themselves. They throw away all of their blessings and they accept all that garbage."

Joseph Smith, for example, was an impassioned scholar; he hungered for learning; he revelled in it when he had a chance; and he never tired of showing and explaining the papyri to his visitors. His own curiosity was typically the most lively of all. "I . . . spent the day in translating the Egyptian records. . . . Cowdery returned from New York bringing with him a quantity of Hebrew books for the benefit of the school. He presented me with a Hebrew Bible, lexicon and grammar, also a Greek Lexicon and Webster's English Lexicon."⁷⁶ Joseph threw himself with passion into the study of ancient Hebrew writings, and he made great progress through the year 1835, especially in Hebrew. It would be easy to underestimate his progress. By the end of the year, I'm sure he certainly would have qualified for graduate in study in Hebrew. He knew much more about it than we give him credit for.

⁷⁴ Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 9.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷⁶ Faulring, *Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, 66.

Joseph Smith had good advice for scholars. He said, "I discovered in this debate . . . to[o] much zeal for mastery, to[o] much of that enthusiasm that characterizes a lawyer at the bar who is determined to defend his cause right or wrong. I . . . advise[d them] that they might improve their minds and cultivate their power of intellect in a proper manner."⁷⁷ The critics are really just showing off, which is what we do in sessions like this [the Sunstone Symposium]. The next day he said he organized the School of the Prophets as a direct result of the manuscript find. "Spent this [day] in indeavering to treasure up know[*l*]edge for the be[n]efit of my Calling."⁷⁸ "O may God give me learning even Language and indo[w] me with the qualif[*i*]cations to magnify his name while I live."⁷⁹ "At home stud[y]ing the Greek Language. . . . In the afternoon visited . . . with the relatives of Bro[*t*her] Oliver Cowdery,"⁸⁰ who were obnoxious fundamentalists.

Why have we not followed Joseph Smith's lead in this search for learning? Our naivete has brought the Church into embarrassing situations from time to time, and this is where the gifts are important. The Church is a school in which we all take the same basic courses. All are free then to branch out into specialities, which are important and necessary for some to pursue, lest we lose by default when we are noisily attacked in some directions. Joseph, had he lived, might have been a specialist. "My Soul delights in reading the word of the Lord in the original and I am determined to p[*u*]rsue the study of languages untill I shall become master of them if I am permitted to live long enough."⁸¹ Always that "if"; he knew it. He made allowance for other plans, and the Lord did have other plans. Had Joseph and the Brethren followed the line of study that fascinated him, we would be up to our ears today in hair-splitting discussions and recondite speculation.

The Brethren have their work cut out for them, and strenuous work it is. It calls for studying the gospel, and to see that the greatest possible number of people in all parts of the world get to hear the first principles. This requires constant repetition of first principles to fresh audiences wherever General Authorities go; they cannot be expected to set forth advanced ideas or front-line research. This poses a dilemma, for no men are more in touch with developments in various fields where the Church might be benefitted. On my first day in Provo, President Joseph Fielding Smith was having lunch with LeRoy Robertson at Edna Mae's [a Provo cafeteria on Fifth North and University], where I later joined them; and during the lunch, Joseph Fielding made a remark I will never forget: "We are rapidly coming to be known as a mediocre people." Since then we have made giant strides in that direction! But whose fault is that?

77 Ibid., 65-66.

78 Ibid., 90.

79 Ibid., 91.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid., 133.

That very same first week, I had my first meeting with some of the faculty. Some of them complained of the mediocrity of our literature and art—the Harry Anderson school in the Church. I took the liberty to point out to the speaker, one of the most eminent on the faculty, that the Brethren would have no objection at all to his writing an immortal drama or poem or even the great American novel; in fact, nothing would delight them more than to have the present company produce an outpouring of those masterpieces whose absence they so deplored. They, not the Brethren, were responsible for the famine. That was rather surprising; they had not thought about it that way. But the knee-jerk reaction was, when upset, to blame the Brethren.

Joseph Smith retained his sanity by dealing with this type of situation in high good humor. We have some examples. “Don’t be limited in your views with regard to your neighbor’s virtue, but beware of self-righteousness, and be limited in the estimate of your own virtues. You must enlarge your souls towards each other. We must bear with each other’s failings, as an indulgent parent bears with the foibles of his children.” You see, we’re at school. We must be allowed to make mistakes. “There are mistakes in the essays and the reports that are handed in,” you say. So should we disband the schools? These mistakes are the whole point of it. We’re here to search out the nitty-gritty. We need to find out where we’re wrong and why. Such a practice will prepare us for the long pull ahead in the hereafter. Overriding all else is that grand feeling of love which makes life a joy, and everything I read about Joseph Smith reflects that promise. “I see no faults in the church,” he said, “Let me be resurrected with the Saints, whether to heaven or hell.”⁸² The Church, taken as a whole, is the way things stand right now. A particular fault is neither here or there. “What do we care if the society is good? . . . Friendship is the grand fundamental principle of Mormonism, to revolution[ize and] civilize the world, [to] pour forth love. . . . I do not dwell upon your faults. You shall not [dwell] upon mine. . . . [If] Presbyterians [have] any truth, embrace that. Baptist, Methodist, &c. Get all the good in the world. Come out a pure Mormon.”⁸³

Then he gives a good description of our world: “The only polishing I get is when some corner gets rubbed off by coming in contact with something else, striking with accelerated force against religious bigotry, priest-craft, lawyer-craft, doctor-craft, lying editors, suborned judges and jurors, and the authority of p[e]rjured executives, backed by mobs, blasphemers, licentious and corrupt men and women—all hell knocking off a corner here and a corner there.”⁸⁴ Now isn’t that our society today? Yet note well what follows. “It is with difficulty that I can keep from complaining and murmuring against this dispensation; but I am sensible that this is not right.”⁸⁵

82 Faulring, *Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, 398-99.

83 *Ibid.*, 399.

84 Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 282.

85 Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 35.

Nobody had better reason for knowing what was going on than Joseph because he was the object. All the brickbats were coming his way, and he was tempted to murmur. But, "I am sensible that this is not right."⁸⁶ "The power over the minds of mankind, which I hold, . . . is . . . the power of truth in the doctrin[e]s. . . . I ask did I ever exer[c]ise any compulsion over any man. Did I not give him the liberty of disbelieving any doctrin[e] I have preached if he saw fit, why do not my enemies strike a blow at the doctrin[e], they cannot do it, it is truth."⁸⁷ Joseph showed that his power was in the doctrines that he taught. He defied all men to upset that. The Willard Richards Pocket Companion says that the "final key deliver[e]d by Joseph [was] in the following Language: It is an eternal principle that has existed with God from all Eternity that that man who rises up to condemn others, finding fault with the Church [the whole system], saying that they are out of the way while he himself is righteous, then know assuredly that that man is in the high road to apostacy and if he does not repent will apostatize as God lives."⁸⁸

You might say that that person has already apostatized if he doesn't trust God to know what God is doing. But critics don't think of it that way. They want to be *in* the Church. Interestingly, a meeting was held with Joseph. A body of such people came together. His speech was this: "These things are of too trivial a nature to occupy the attention of so large a body. I intend to give you some instruction on the principles of eternal truth. . . . Those who feel desirous of sowing the seeds of discord will be disappointed, on this occasion. It is our purpose to build up, and establish the principles of righteousness, and not to break down and destroy."⁸⁹ The case of William E. McLellin is typical. He "said he had no confidence in the heads of the Church, believing that they had transgressed. . . . Consequently he left of[f] praying [had he been praying until then?] and keeping the commandments of God and went his own way and indulged himself in lustfull desires [what he wanted to do all along—to show disapproval of them?]. . . . O! foolish Man! . . . because thou hast heard of some *man's* transgression that thou Shouldest leave *thy* God and forsake *thy* prayers."⁹⁰

This has always been the familiar scenario in the Church—people using perceived imperfections of the Church as a pretext for them to relax their own personal moral standards. The psychologists tell us regarding our own emotional feelings not to keep these feelings bottled up too tight, because it can lead to an explosion. So what should we do? Be like the importunate widow and complain. Itemize your griefs, your doctrinal objections, your personal distastes. Lay them all out in full detail and get it out of your system. (You may wonder why people see me talking so

86

Ibid.

87

Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 337.

88

Ibid., 413.

89

Ibid., 339.

90

Faulring, *Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, 182 (emphasis added).

much to myself.) With this understanding—you will do all this before the only Person qualified to judge either you or your tormentors. As you bring your complaints, be fully aware that he knows everything already—including everything there is to know about you.

I must mention reverse criticism here—flattery, which flourishes in our society. When I flatter someone, I'm telling him that he is better than I really think he is to get on his good side. There is a cynical twist to that; it's opportunistic. Actually, I am snidely mocking the man, manipulating him in my interest. I end with this admonition against flattery, lest I be accused when I say that I cannot imagine a body of men less likely to go astray or to lead anyone else astray than the present leaders of the Church.

When I first came to BYU, the Division of Religion was small, and Wilkinson's plan was to send the faculty out to stake conferences with the Brethren to recruit students for the school. I had the privilege of making a number of visits with quite a few General Authorities—S. Dilworth Young, young Milton R. Hunter, and others. How they worked their life-long assignments, living in a goldfish bowl, everlastingly meeting appointments, and carrying out routine duties. True, there is nothing like the joy of doing the Lord's work, but anyone can have that privilege anytime. Don't envy them that.

I spent a week with Apostle Spencer W. Kimball visiting his home state in Arizona. We were gone ten days. We went by train in those early days. We came back to the old Los Angeles station, and in that part of Los Angeles, there were a lot of bookstores, which I knew very well. I bought a whole set, a very rare collection, of Alfonsus De Lingorio, the seventeenth-century Redemptorist writer on probabilism, a very valuable set of ten volumes. I barely made it back to the train by running across a lot. I jumped on the train, plunked down beside Brother Kimball, who was already on the train, and staggered into the drawing room, my arms full of the complete set, which I greatly valued.

As we sat talking about the books, Brother Kimball casually took an immaculate linen handkerchief from the breast pocket of his jacket, and, stooping over, vigorously dusted off my shoes and trousers. It was the most natural thing in the world, and we both took it completely for granted. After all, my shoes were dusty in the race for the train, and Brother Kimball had always told missionaries to keep themselves clean and proper. It was no great thing—*pas d'histoire*. Neither of us said a thing about it, but ever since, that has conditioned my attitude toward the Brethren. I truly believe that they are chosen servants of God.