Speaking of Faith: The Centrality of Epistemology and Perils of Circularity

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Abstract: It is difficult for me to respond to David Paulsen. I am not—nor have I ever claimed to be—a theologian. I will not presume to engage many of the issues or to intrude on the conversations in his paper. I am intrigued, however, by several themes raised in his paper. I will comment, first, on the crisis of authority; second, on the centrality of epistemology and the perils of theological circularity; and third, on the quintessentially modern enterprise of apologetics.

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Randall Balmer

It is difficult for me to respond to David Paulsen. I am not—nor have I ever claimed to be—a theologian. I will not presume to engage many of the issues or to intrude on the conversations in his paper. I am intrigued, however, by several themes raised in his paper. I will comment, first, on the crisis of authority; second, on the centrality of epistemology and the perils of theological circularity; and third, on the quintessentially modern enterprise of apologetics.

The Crisis of Authority

Every religious tradition, sooner or later, has to deal with the issue of authority. Paulsen asserts that "apostolic authority is not something that can be chosen," and he goes on to review the story of Joseph Smith's calling as a prophet. Paulsen attributes the sorry history of conflict in the Christian church over the centuries to what he calls "the loss of apostolic authority and its attendant revelation."[1] This, of course, nicely sets up the case for the resumption of apostolic authority in the "latter days" in the person of Smith himself.

Paulsen rightly points out that the issue of authority has been vexing throughout Christian history. He cites the importance of Matthew 16:18–19 in the formulation of authority structures. "And I

tell you that you are Peter," Jesus says, "and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (NIV). In the various interpretations of this passage, Protestants generally say that Peter's confession itself is the rock upon which the church will be constructed. Catholics believe that Peter, the first bishop of Rome, is the rock. Finally, Latter-day Saints believe that revelation itself is the rock.[2]

These divergent interpretations, of course, have given rise to equally divergent polities and institutional structures. The Protestant embrace of confessions coupled with Luther's insistence on the priesthood of believers has produced a kind of free-for-all, a miasma of conflicting interpretations and institutional structures. Roman Catholics, employing the doctrine of apostolic succession and tracing their authority back to Peter himself, insist on the unity of the one true church. Theirs is an institutional structure whose extent and whose rigidity is virtually unrivalled.

Except, perhaps, by the Mormons. The assertion of a living prophet as the conduit for divine revelation trumps the Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican doctrines of apostolic succession. None of these traditions claims prophetic revelation, though they do insist on apostolic authority.

My own admittedly unorthodox gloss on Matthew 16:18–19 draws on distinctively Protestant sensibilities, but even most Protestants would probably consider my view heretical. I happen to believe that the Matthew passage, where Jesus affirms Peter as the rock (in a play on words: *petra* = rock), is a rare stab at humor in the New Testament. Peter, of course, can be seen as anything but solid. He was notoriously spineless and dithering, prone to making bold declarations, as when he assured Jesus that he would never deny him, and then caving like a cheap suit in the face of criticism. When Peter, full of bravado, sought to walk on the Sea of Galilee, he promptly disappeared beneath the waves, sinking like a rock. So when Jesus proclaimed Peter a rock, he was indulging in a rhetorical device known as irony. Peter, as protean as a windsock, was anything but solid—and yet, and here is the

beauty of the passage: Jesus elects to entrust his ministry and his church to fallible human beings like Peter, with all of his faults and shortcomings. If Jesus had truly wanted solidity, he should have chosen Andrew, and if he wanted authority, he should probably have pointed to John, who was forever touting himself as the disciple closest to Jesus himself. Instead, he chose Peter, the everyman of humanity and the apotheosis of fallibility.

I concede that such an unorthodox reading runs afoul of almost every Christian tradition, but such an interpretation would vitiate some of the authoritarianism of the episcopal polity in the Roman Catholic Church. The Latter-day Saints, having recognized Smith and all successors as prophets, take the notion of authority to another level altogether. But for non-Mormons, that position begs the question: Why Smith? Was it merely, as Paulsen says, that Smith claimed to be a prophet, a source of divine revelation? Why not, say, Mother Ann Lee or William Miller or Emmanuel Swedenborg or Father Divine or the Noble Drew Ali? Mormons reply that the difference lies in the fact that Smith really *is* a prophet. Paulsen himself writes: "I will discuss . . . Joseph Smith's revelations and invite everyone to examine his or her own theological world in light of these."[3] This invitation brings us face to face with the difficult issues of epistemology.

The Centrality of Epistemology and the Perils of Circularity

In addition to authority, epistemology (how we know) is another of the perennial themes surrounding the study of religion. Christianity has traditionally spoken of God's revelation to humanity and has generally divided revelation into two categories: general revelation, or the way that God reveals himself in creation, and special revelation. This latter category has been a source of contention. Most Christians would agree that God's primary vehicle for special revelation was Jesus: God become man. The other source of special revelation, of course, is the scriptures. But what counts as scripture? Judaism recognizes the Hebrew Bible as Yahweh's special revelation to humanity; Christians add the New Testament, generally agreeing that the canon was effectively closed "by the late 4th and early 5th centuries";[4]

Muslims (ostensibly, at least) acknowledge both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, but they add the revelations to the prophet Muhammad contained in the Qur'an. Although Joseph Smith once referred to himself as the "second Mohamet,"[5] Smith's Mormon followers accepted the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as divinely inspired revelation, but they rejected the Qur'an. More important, Mormons added the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price, and continuing revelations to the prophet and president of the church, from Smith himself all the way down to the current president, Gordon B. Hinckley, and presumably) to future presidents.[6]

All of this complicates the question of epistemology. How does one know what is and is not scripture, God's special revelation to humanity? The early church settled the issue of canonicity through a kind of emerging consensus, codified finally in various church councils. But Paulsen raises an important question: Does this mean, as most Christians believe, that the canon was necessarily closed?[7] The followers of Joseph Smith obviously think not.

But how do we know anything? What is the basis for our epistemology? Here we encounter the perils of circularity. "Joseph's most fundamental challenge . . . to those who deny the possibility of extrabiblical revelation is not based on argument," Paulsen writes; "it is grounded in his testimony of receiving of direct revelations from God."[8] Paulsen then proceeds to the familiar story of what he terms the "canonized account" of Smith's First Vision. He hails Smith as the person who "revealed much about God's kingdom and his purposes for humankind, apostolic authority, ancient scriptures, the divine church, the temple, temple ordinances, and theology." Because of Smith, Paulsen writes, "the Latter-day Saints have greatly enlarged the Christian canon, adding 'plain and precious' gospel truths not found in the Bible."[9]

Here, the logic behind Paulsen's paper becomes circular. It is one thing to state with clarity and zeal the doctrines taught by Joseph Smith or anyone else; it is another thing to know whether those assertions or their inferences are true or not. We know the answer to this, Paulsen in effect says, because Smith's revelations tell us so. Paulsen

cites Smith's ninth Article of Faith: "We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God."[10] As for breaking out of the restraints of a closed canon, Paulsen cites two justifications. First, he rightly states that the New Testament itself makes no mention of a closed canon. Fair enough, though it's not clear to me how or in what context such a statement might ever have appeared. Would we expect Paul to insert a postscript at the conclusion of his second letter to the Thessalonians and say, "This is it; I've given you the last word, and the canon is hereby closed"? By the time Paulsen adds another element to his argument against a closed canon, however, the circularity becomes dizzying. How do we know that revelation is still open and that the Book of Mormon is inspired scripture? We know, Paulsen insists, because the Book of Mormon tells us so. He cites as evidence passages from Mormon 9.[11]

In fairness, many non-Mormon Christians also engage in the same kind of circularity, the serpent devouring its own tail, when talking about the inspiration of the Bible. Many Christians, Evangelicals in particular, quote the Bible in defense of the Bible. Paul writes: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16–17, NIV). If this is as far as one's argument extends, circularity leaves such assertions unsupported, which casts doubt on the enterprise of apologetics itself.

Apologetics as a Modern Enterprise

Paulsen's paper, despite its merits, ultimately fails to persuade, due to this circularity of argumentation. The difficulty lies not so much with the author's reasoning as with the enterprise itself, relying as it does on the canons of Enlightenment rationalism. At least since the Civil War, much of conservative Christian apologetics in America has sought to vindicate the claims of the faith by means of various proofs and proof texts. The arguments include the numberless cosmological

and ontological arguments for the existence of God. These theologians also sought to marshal empirical evidence for the historicity of the resurrection. One of the nineteenth-century battles that extended well into the twentieth century concerned the reliability of the Bible itself. In order to counter the assaults of Darwinism and higher criticism, the nineteenth-century Princetonians constructed the ultimate Enlightenment redoubt: the inerrancy of the Bible in the original autographs, neglecting to mention that they were no longer extant. (That is not so much circular reasoning as evasive reasoning!)

All of this argumentation, informed by the canons of Enlightenment rationalism, was essentially modern, concerned as it was with linear thought and empirical evidence. The postmodern approach of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, however, views faith from an entirely different angle. In short, the postmodern approach to faith resorts to faith itself. That is, it seeks to vindicate the faith by invoking experience rather than argument. Not all postmodernists have abandoned apologetics, but the list of essential doctrines has been pared down. Theologically conservative Christians, following the lead of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, would insist on the Incarnation and the historicity of the resurrection—much the way, I imagine, that Paulsen and his fellow Mormons would assert their belief in the historical veracity of Smith's First Vision—but those approaching the faith in a postmodern way would view the resurrection as an article of faith rather than something to be proven by means of rational argumentation. In much the same way that New Lights in the eighteenth century prized the new birth or that pentecostals of the twentieth century sought the baptism of the Holy Spirit, so too these believers prefer experience to argument. We can celebrate or lament that development, but it points beyond the shopworn Enlightenment-inspired arguments, with all of their attendant pitfalls.

An alternative approach is illustrated by a conversation with a historian whose work I very much admire and who happens to be a Mormon. We were discussing a piece I had written about my struggles to claim for myself the Evangelical faith of my childhood. I had reflected on my own encounters with doubt and then finally

finding comfort in those remarkable words of the father of a young child in the Gospel of Mark: "I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24, ESV). I have come to believe, by the way, that doubt is not the antithesis of faith; it is, in fact, an essential component of faith, and I refuse to allow the canons of Enlightenment rationalism to be the final arbiter of truth. This Mormon scholar spoke of a similar process of faith bedeviled by doubt. In the midst of his doubts, he decided simply to embrace the faith—in his case to accept on faith the veracity of Smith's First Vision.

Richard Hughes has invited us to consider Alexander Campbell as a creature of the Enlightenment and Joseph Smith as a Romantic.[12] That may be, but it seems to me that other scholars, including Paulsen in this particular paper, list decidedly in the direction of Enlightenment reasoning. That is understandable, given the announced scholarly theological purposes of Paulsen's undertaking; and few would argue that all who are people of faith should not have a reasonable defense for what they believe (1 Peter 3:15). But an unalloyed Enlightenment approach to faith carries with it certain perils. Religious beliefs and theology in general do not readily submit to empirical scrutiny, and those who invest themselves solely in the Enlightenment enterprise must at some point deal with the maxim, "Those who live by the sword die by the sword" (see Matthew 26:52), including the criticism of circular reasoning. Some circles are tighter than others, but all propositional logic eventually turns back on itself.

As Joseph Smith taught and most Latter-day Saints realize, personal experience with spiritual truths is far more significant than logical analysis.[13] Thus, I have found the testimonies of docents at Temple Square much more compelling than theological exposition. The last time I took the official Latter-day Saint tour of Temple Square in Salt Lake City, the docent frequently punctuated her narrative with personal testimony. For example, after recounting the story of the seagulls devouring the crickets and saving the crops of the early settlers in the Salt Lake Valley, she paused to say what that story meant to her as a believer. The performance occasionally came off as formulaic, even contrived, but I found that presentation of the Mormon faith much more compelling than Enlightenment-style ratiocination.

Toward the end of his life, Karl Barth, probably the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, was traveling on a plane and fell into a conversation with a seatmate, who asked the venerable theologian to summarize his thoughts. Barth, who had filled several shelves with his ruminations about the transcendence of God and the centrality of Christ, thought for a moment. I imagine him staring out the airplane window and scratching the stubble on his chin before responding with the words of a simple Sunday-school ditty: "Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so."

Enlightenment-style theological expositions or defenses of the faith have their place, but I confess that I find them rather less than persuasive. Call me a Romantic.

Notes

1. David Paulsen, "Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World," in this volume, 175–76.

2. See John F. Hall, "Peter," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism,* ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 3:1078.

3. Paulsen, "Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World," 177.

4. Discussed by Harry Y. Gamble, "Canon: New Testament," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary,* ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:852–56, although "no *ecumenical* council of the ancient church ever undertook to define the scope of the canon" (856, emphasis in original).

5. See the sources cited in Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 352 n. 36.

6. On the Mormon concept of scripture, see the articles under the headings of "Canon" and "Scripture" in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism,* 1:254, 3:1277–84.

7. Paulsen, "Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World," 177–80.

8. Paulsen, "Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World," 180.

9. Paulsen, "Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World," 181.

10. Paulsen, "Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World," 181.

11. Paulsen, "Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World," 181.

12. Richard T. Hughes, "Joseph Smith as an American Restorationist," in this volume, 34.

13. Paulsen agrees with this primacy of personal spiritual experience, the ultimate point on which his paper ends.