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Author(s): Nathan B. Oman

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WELDING ANOTHER LINK IN WONDER'S CHAIN: THE TASK OF LATTER-DAY SAINT INTELLECTUALS IN THE CHURCH'S THIRD CENTURY

Nathan B. Oman

Abstract: *This is a challenging moment for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Both its efforts at retention and missionary work are less effective than they have been in the past. At this moment, what is the most important task facing Latter-day Saint intellectuals? In contrast to those who argue that faithful thinkers and writers should focus either on defending the faith or providing criticisms of the Church's failings, this essay argues that the Latter-day Saint clerisy should focus on celebrating the Restoration and finding new language in which to express what makes the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ a compelling and attractive force in people's lives. The language which we have used in the past no longer seems to be as compelling as once it was. This is unsurprising. The history of the Church shows a cyclical pattern focused on missionary work, with seasons of harvest giving way to fallow times and seasons of planting. However, over time the Church tends to transform itself in the image of its most successful messages for proclaiming the Gospel. Latter-day Saint intellectuals have an important, albeit subordinate, role in finding such messages. Pursuing the project of celebrating the Restoration need not involve either usurping the prerogatives of Church leaders nor compromising one's intellectual integrity. In this moment in the history of the Church, it is the most important project to which Latter-day Saint thinkers can turn their attention.*

Welding another link in wonder's chain,
 Writing new chapters of a story strange,
 God's dealings with to-day...

— Orson F. Whitney¹

The present is a difficult moment for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As it approaches the end of its second century, there is much to be worried about. After two generations of exponential growth, the Church's missionary program has stalled. Despite a dramatic increase in the number of serving missionaries, the number of convert baptisms is down.² Likewise, the Church's admirable ability to retain those born into active Latter-day Saint families, long the envy of other denominations, seems to be atrophying. More Latter-day Saint youth are abandoning the Church as they make the transition to adulthood.³ There is also a sense of anxiety over the Church's place in society, particularly in the United States. For much of the 20th century the saints thought of themselves as within the cultural mainstream, the exemplars of a widely shared commitment to the benignly patriarchal nuclear family. In the wake of the triumph of same-sex marriage and the proliferation of sexual identities in the opening decades of the new millennium, the ideal Latter-day Saint family has gone from being seen as a paragon to being seen by many as reactionary and threatening.⁴ Similarly, the Church's all-male priesthood increases the distance between Latter-day Saints and the sexually egalitarian societies in which they often live, generating angst and alienation within the Church's own ranks, particularly among

1. Orson F. Whitney, *Elias: An Epic of the Ages* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1904), 119.

2. See Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Mormon Growth Rate Falls to Lowest Level in 80 Years, but Ups and Downs Vary by Region," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, July 7, 2017, <https://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=5381411&iotype=CMSID>.

3. See Jana Riess, *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 4–7.

4. See "Attitudes on Same-Sex Marriage," *Religion & Public Life* (blog), *Pew Research Center*, May 14, 2019, <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/09/24/graphics-slideshow-changing-attitudes-on-gay-marriage/>; Tom Rosentiel, "Public Opinion About Mormons," *Pew Research Center* (blog), December 4, 2007, <http://www.pewresearch.org/2007/12/04/public-opinion-about-mormons/>; *Pew Research Center*, "Public Expresses Mixed Views of Islam, Mormonism," *Religion & Public Life* (blog), *Pew Research Center*, September 26, 2007, <http://www.pewforum.org/2007/09/26/public-expresses-mixed-views-of-islam-mormonism/>.

the young.⁵ Finally, the Church as a hierarchical religious institution faces increased suspicion and hostility in a society where organized religion no longer commands widespread trust or respect and where the ranks of the “spiritual but not religious” are on the rise.⁶

What is the task of Latter-day Saint intellectuals in this moment? By intellectuals, I don't mean scholars working in “Mormon studies,” although the groups will overlap. Nor do I mean those with ecclesiastical authority, although again the groups may overlap. Rather, I mean committed Latter-day Saints who for whatever reason feel called on to publicly discuss the course of the Restoration⁷ and the place of the Church in the world. These are public discussions of the Gospel, the Church, and the Latter-day Saint tradition that are both explicitly self-reflective and self-consciously religious. In short, I am talking about what might be thought of as the role of the Latter-day Saint clerisy as opposed to academics on one hand and those charged with ecclesiastical authority on the other. What is the most important challenge facing Mormonism's chattering class?

My answer is simple: Finding new language in which to celebrate the Restoration.

This answer will strike some readers as strange. I imagine that a certain kind of intellectual is likely to respond by insisting that his or her role is to think critically. Surely, what we need is a clear-eyed

5. See Riess, *The Next Mormons*, 91-108.

6. See “Public Sees Religion's Influence Waning,” *Religion and Public Life* (blog), *Pew Research Center*, September 22, 2014, <https://www.pewforum.org/2014/09/22/public-sees-religions-influence-waning-2/>; Alan Cooperman and Gregory A. Smith, “The Factors Driving the Growth of Religious ‘Nones’ in the U.S.,” *FactTank* (blog), *Pew Research Center*, September 14, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/14/the-factors-driving-the-growth-of-religious-nones-in-the-u-s/>; Michael Lipka and Claire Gecewicz, “More Americans Now Say They're Spiritual but Not Religious,” *FactTank* (blog), *Pew Research Center*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>.

7. According to the official style guide of the Church:

The term “Mormonism” is inaccurate and should not be used. When describing the combination of doctrine, culture and lifestyle unique to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the term “the restored gospel of Jesus Christ” is accurate and preferred.

“Style Guide — The Name of the Church,” newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org, April 9, 2019, <http://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/style-guide>. In this essay, I use the term “Restoration” in this sense as synonymous with the “combination of doctrine, culture and lifestyle unique to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”

assessment of the Church's weaknesses and failures. Only by being honest about such things can we hope to gain the trust of the suspicious outsider and the alienated member. Furthermore, isn't it vital to expose the faults and failures of the Church so they can be corrected or – failing that – so intellectuals can at least enjoy the peace of mind (and emotional frisson) that comes from “speaking truth to power”? Another kind of intellectual will respond that mere celebration is a feckless endeavor at a moment when the Church is beset by enemies and critics from both within and without. What is needed is a defense of the Church and its doctrines. Latter-day Saint intellectuals should concentrate their efforts on constructing a rational defense of the Restoration, one that will reassure the faithful, reclaim the doubter, and refute the scoffer. Precisely because of the difficulty of this moment in the history of the Church, so goes the argument, it is more important than ever that we increase the quality of our apologetics to meet the challenges we face.

I am sympathetic to both of these responses. I think faithful critics can serve an important role in the life of the Church. Likewise, intellectual challenges to the veracity of the Restoration must be met. Faith is unlikely to flourish in a world where people are told they must crucify their minds in order to believe.⁸ However, with all due respect to the skillful practitioners of both genres, I do not believe that either of them represents the most important challenge facing Latter-day Saint intellectuals. This doesn't mean these activities should cease, but it does mean that such projects should be pursued only if we are confident that the far greater challenges of celebrating the Restoration in new language has been met. Ideally both tasks should be embedded in that larger project of celebration.

Understanding why requires that we see the history of Restoration through the lens of missionary work and the absolutely central role of proclaiming the Restored Gospel to everything else that happens within the Church.

Proclaiming the Gospel and the Arc of Latter-day Saint History

In February, 1829, Joseph Smith received one his earliest recorded revelations in what has since been canonized as Doctrine & Covenants section 4. There, the Lord declares, “Now behold, a marvelous work is about to come forth among the children of men” (v. 1). Speaking to those “that embark in the service of God,” (v. 2) he says, “For behold the field is white already to harvest Ask, and ye shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (v. 4,5). This is the familiar injunction to proclaim

8. I borrow this image from conversations with Daniel Petersen.

the Gospel. The timing of the revelation testifies to the centrality of this charge within the Restoration. This came before the publication of the Book of Mormon, the organization of the Church, or the elaboration of any priesthood hierarchy. In a very literal sense, the Restoration simply was people telling other people about the “marvelous work” of the Lord. From that time to the present, the work of proclaiming the Gospel has dominated the evolution of the Restoration. Repeatedly over the nearly two centuries of its life, the Church has remade itself in the image of its most effective way of articulating the “marvelous work and a wonder” (2 Nephi 26:27) of the Lord’s latter-day dispensation. This has not been the only force in Latter-day Saint experience, but over the long arc of history, it has been the most potent.

We are inclined to think of history in linear terms. We move from the distant past to the near past, to the present, and on into the future. The linear view of history lends itself to stories of progress or decline. We are either marching toward the millennium, or we are marching toward the apocalypse. One can see this in the current position of the Church. For those who grew up in the 1970s, the 1980s, and the 1990s, the dominant perception of the Church was of self-confident growth. We were expanding at a spectacular rate. Branches, wards, stakes, and temples were sprouting across the globe in places a generation or two before would have been unimaginable to a typical Latter-day Saint. Sociologists were predicting that in the coming century there would be tens of millions of Latter-day Saints, if not more.⁹ The line of history pointed toward progress. Today, however, many Latter-day Saints are haunted by a declension narrative: The growth of previous years was often hollow. Baptisms are dropping. Disaffection grows. The future is bleak.

The reality is that often the history of the Church has been more cyclical than linear. During the first generation of the Restoration, missionaries reaped a massive harvest of converts in the United States and Europe, especially the British Isles and Scandinavia.¹⁰ Those converts gathered to Zion, first in Jackson County and Nauvoo and

9. See Rodney Stark, “The Rise of a New World Faith,” *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (September, 1984): 18–27, <https://rsc.byu.edu/es/archived/latter-day-saint-social-life-social-research-lds-church-and-its-members/1-rise-new-world>; Rodney Stark, “So Far, So Good: A Brief Assessment of Mormon Membership Projections,” *Review of Religious Research* 38, no. 2 (December, 1996): 175–78.

10. See generally James B Allen, Ronald K. Esplin, and David J Whittaker, *Men with a Mission, 1837-1841: The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in the British Isles* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Co., 1992); William Mulder, *Homeward to Zion:*

later in the Great Basin kingdom of Deseret. However, over time this first great harvest of converts tapered off. The ferment of the Second Great Awakening and the missionary opportunities created by the early industrial revolution waned. Polygamy and theocracy placed the Church at war with American society and the federal government.¹¹ By 1901 when Lorenzo Snow, the last President of the Church who personally knew Joseph Smith,¹² died, the Church's position in the world looked very different than it had when the Lord gave the revelation launching latter-day missionary work in February 1829. Convert baptisms had slowed to a trickle.¹³ While polygamy had been publicly discontinued, it had not yet been abandoned, and it would take the better part of the next decade to finally lay to rest the saints' conflict with American society.¹⁴

The Church that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century looked like an institution whose most dynamic days were behind it.¹⁵ To be sure, the growth of population in the Intermountain West led to a steady if modest growth in the Church, which soon spilled beyond the borders of Deseret as young Latter-day Saints migrated to the Pacific coast and further afield in search of jobs. Missionary work continued, but it cannot be said that it was particularly successful. When compared to the dramatic mass baptisms witnessed during the 1830s and 1840s

The Mormon Migration from Scandinavia (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957).

11. See Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Edward Leo Lyman, *Political Deliverance: The Mormon Quest for Utah Statehood* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

12. Joseph F. Smith met his uncle Joseph Smith, Jr. as a very young child in Nauvoo. Lorenzo Snow, however, was the last President of the Church who knew the Prophet as an adult.

13. In 1901, the year of Lorenzo Snow's death, Elder Rudger Clawson reported in General Conference that the Church had 310,000 members and that in the previous year it had added 20,000 members, a number that presumably included both convert baptisms and children of record. See "72nd Semi-Annual Conference October 1901," *Conference Reports of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, The Internet Archive, updated October 12, 2011, <https://archive.org/details/conferencereport1901sa/page/2>.

14. See Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

15. The best scholarly treatment of the Church in this period is Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-Day Saints, 1890-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

by Heber C. Kimball in Manchester, England or Wilford Woodruff in Preston, missionary work seemed almost moribund. An observer of the Latter-day Saint scene in the 1920s or the 1930s could be forgiven for thinking that the Church, if not in actual decline, could at best look forward to a static future.¹⁶

Then rather suddenly after World War II, something remarkable happened. What could be seen as a sleepy American denomination flung itself dramatically outward.¹⁷ In the early 20th century, Church leaders had counseled the tiny branches of saints beyond the United States not to gather to Utah, but in 1945 there were still no non-American wards or stakes other than in the Latter-day Saint colonies of southern Alberta and northern Mexico.¹⁸ In the second half of the century, however, Church leaders began establishing overseas stakes.¹⁹ Missionary work was re-emphasized, becoming a standard male rite-of-passage in a way that it had not been previously. For the first time, the Church poured money into permanent buildings beyond the United States, most dramatically with the new temples in New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland.²⁰ Missionary discussions were standardized.²¹ Language

16. For a beautifully written portrait of the Restoration at this moment by a sympathetic non-member, see Wallace Stegner, *Mormon Country*, ed. Richard W. Etulain, 2nd edition (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 2003). Stegner's book was originally written in the 1930s as part of the Works Progress Administration.

17. Despite the fact that the international growth of the Church after 1945 is perhaps the most influential factor on the shape of the modern Church, there are no good synthetic histories focusing on this period. Much of the story can be found in the excellent biographies of David O. McKay and Spencer W. Kimball. See Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005); Edward L Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005); see also Patrick Q. Mason and John G. Turner, eds., *Out of Obscurity: Mormonism since 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). For a succinct summary, see Nathan B. Oman, "International Legal Experience and the Mormon Theology of the State, 1945-2012," *Iowa Law Review* 100 (2015): 719–23.

18. See, e.g., James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc., 1965), 4:165 (a 1907 Christmas letter from the First Presidency counseling the Dutch saints to stay in their own country); Clark, 5:199-200 (a 1921 letter from the First Presidency counseling the British saints to remain in the United Kingdom).

19. See Oman, "International Legal Experience," 721.

20. See Prince and Wright, *David O. McKay*, 206-9.

21. This was first done Church-wide in 1961. See "History of Missionary Work in the Church," www.newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org, June 25, 2007, <http://www.newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/history-of-missionary-work-in-the-church>.

instruction for missionaries was professionalized and centralized.²² In fits and starts, through a combination of inspired vision from above and percolating trial-and-error from below, the Church developed a new model of what it meant to be a Latter-day Saint.

At the center of this message was the family. In a surprising move, Latter-day Saints took the theology of sealing, which had been at the center of plural marriage and the Church's grueling conflict with the federal government, and reinterpreted it in terms of the nuclear family of the 1950s. In the rapidly changing post-war world, which saw the fracturing of older models of extended family and community across the globe, this proved a potent message. Ultimately, the Church remade itself in the image of this message. The standardized teaching model that proved so successful for missionaries became a model for the correlated curriculum. The necessarily slimmed down Church program in the expanding international stakes of the Church increasingly exerted its pressure on the institutional structure of the Church, which simplified and centralized to conserve resources. And everywhere, the nuclear family – the heart of the Church's successful missionary message – became the center of the Church.

After a half-century of success, the model developed after World War II has largely run its course. What had proven successful in the past no longer seems to be delivering the same results. This is unsurprising. It has happened to the Church before. Periods of relative stasis and retrenchment don't mark the beginning of decline today any more than they did in the 1920s. History in this sense isn't linear. Periods of harvest give way to fallow years, which will be followed by planting and harvesting in the future. However, it is unlikely the message of those future harvests will be the same one around which the Church organized itself in the second half of the 20th century.

Consider the message that Joseph Smith articulated in his 1838 account of the First Vision. After describing the religious revivals of his youth, he wrote:

22. Efforts to train missionaries go back to the School of the Prophets in the 1830s. In 1925, the Church established the "missionary home" in Salt Lake City where missionaries received brief instruction prior to being sent to their fields of labor. In 1961, the Church established the Missionary Language Institute in Provo, Utah, which was eventually renamed the "Missionary Training Center." See Richard O. Cowan, "Missionary Training Centers," in *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992).

In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it? (JS-H 10)

While the First Vision did not figure prominently in 19th century missionary work, Joseph was articulating a set of questions of existential importance to his contemporaries.²³ Priesthood authority from heaven and the revival of spiritual gifts spoke powerfully to these concerns. They were pressing questions to which the Restoration was an answer. They were also, however, very historically contingent questions. For most of human history and for most of humanity, the sectarian choice between competing Christian denominations has not been an existentially important choice. Indeed, even in Joseph Smith's time, it was only an important question in North America, where religious freedom and the second Great Awakening had unleashed a torrent of sectarian diversity, and on the fringes of Protestant Europe, where such controversies retained some salience. It was not, for example, a burning question to French peasants in the mid-19th century.²⁴ It meant nothing to the farmers of Burma or Japan. Indeed, even within Britain, Joseph's questions were vital mainly among the dissenting sects of Scotland, Wales, and the Midlands. The Twelve and other early missionaries, for example, had very little success in London or the home counties, where the established Church of England was stronger and the diversity of dissenting sects was less salient.²⁵ Today, this question is largely dead. Outside of a few tiny and ever shrinking corners of American Christianity, very few people regard sectarian choice as an existentially important question.²⁶

23. The First Vision did not become an important feature of Church teachings until the administration of Joseph F. Smith. See Kathleen Flake, "Re-Placing Memory: Latter-Day Saint Use of Historical Monuments and Narrative in the Early Twentieth Century," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 13, no. 1 (2003): 69–109.

24. See Samuel W. Taylor, *The Last Pioneer: John Taylor, a Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 146–58.

25. See Thomas G. Alexander, *Things in Heaven and Earth: The Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, a Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 96–97.

26. As one convert to the Church in the 1960s wrote:

Because of what I'd learned from the missionaries' lesson about the First Vision, I recognized that these age-mates of mine were trapped in a nineteenth-century worldview. They thought that the "one true question" was "which church is true?" and that all the denominations

Increasingly, the post-war Church's message of traditional nuclear families is becoming as attenuated as Joseph's answer to the question of which church is right. It is not that concerns underlying such questions and answers are gone. People today are still interested in connecting with loved ones and forming strong families. Likewise, the sense of making one's way in a world glutted with existential options remains, even though people today do not articulate this concern in terms of sectarian choice. The language of the past, however, no longer speaks to these concerns in the way it once did. Indeed, to many that language increasingly seems alien, threatening, and distasteful. "The one true church" is a concept that appears to them as at best a gauche and flimsy response to the cafeteria of existential meaning on offer in modernity. At worst, it appears dangerously retrograde. Likewise, the benignly patriarchal Mormon family of the mid-20th century appears naïve, reactionary, and, in a world of heightened concerns about LGBT suicide and female empowerment, positively threatening to many. Something must change if the Church is to thrive in its third century.

We can already see changes, changes that not coincidentally began in the Church's missionary program. The canary in the mine came in 2004 when the Church scrapped the standardized discussions that had been the backbone of its successful post-war expansion. In its place the *Preach My Gospel* manual provided a much more flexible model for proclaiming the messages of the Restoration.²⁷ It did not, however, dramatically change the content of what the missionaries ultimately tell investigators. In the long view, *Preach My Gospel* was the beginning rather than the end of a process of finding a new model to carry the Restoration forward. We are now in the midst of that process. As it did after World War II, the Church will proceed in fits and starts as it looks for a new model of missionary success, and as in the post-war process, the messages will likely come from a combination of direction from above and trial and error from below. If we take history as our guide, however, once we find those messages they will transform the Church in their own image.²⁸

were clawing at each other with different interpretations. They somehow had been freeze-framed into Joseph Smith's era.

Steven C. Harper et al., "Round Table: Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days," *Journal of Mormon History* 45, no. 2 (April 2019): 54.

27. See Benjamin Hyrum White, "The History of Preach My Gospel," *The Religious Educator* 14, no. 1 (2013): 129–58.

28. Indeed, to a certain extent this is already happening. It is not accidental that after *Preach My Gospel* introduced a more flexible model of preaching the Gospel,

The Task of Latter-day Saint Intellectuals

Verbal agility is not necessary to the living of a good life. There is no special moral or spiritual virtue in being articulate. However, like any other gift, articulateness can be consecrated to the Lord and his kingdom. Latter-day Saint intellectuals ought to seriously consider how they can effectively consecrate their linguistic talents. The biggest challenge the Church faces today is to articulate what makes the Restored Gospel worth having in one's life, both for its members and for the world in general. We can no longer answer that question by saying "It reveals which church is true" or "It provides a successful way of creating a 1950s-style nuclear family." At the very least, we cannot rely on those answers if we hope to reach the majority of young Latter-day Saints and the wider world to which the Lord has commanded that we proclaim his "marvelous work." We need answers that are both compelling and comprehensible in our current historical and cultural situations.

Finding such answers is not solely or even primarily the task of Latter-day Saint intellectuals. However, for those Saints who wish to consecrate their intellectual ruminations the most important work they can do is to find new language in which to celebrate the Restoration. To celebrate something is to render it attractive and important. The new language is required to make that celebration effective in a world where the power of old sermons and practices has atrophied. This is the most important thing that Latter-day Saint intellectuals today can do. It is important because it speaks to the central challenge facing the Church. In a sense, this is the challenge that has always been at the center of the Restoration: How does one become converted to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and endure to the end? It is also the most consequential project in which Latter-day Saint intellectuals can engage because ultimately the Church will be reshaped around the successful missionary messages of the future.

What exactly might this project look like? The aim of this essay is to articulate tasks and questions, rather than any particular solution or answers. However, we have been in this position before and can look to historical analogies. In the opening decades of the 20th century, Latter-day Saints were casting around for new language in which to convey the message of the Gospel. In the 19th century, the most influential articulations

the Church's Sunday school, youth, priesthood, and Relief Society curriculums followed suit, providing a much looser framework for teachers at the ward and branch level. One suspects that the newly shortened Sunday meeting schedule was also driven in part by pressure to further simplify Church programs and ease the burdens on members beyond the thickly-membered Latter-day Saint heartland.

of the Restoration had been offered by the Pratt brothers, particularly Parley P. Pratt's wildly successful *Voice of Warning* and *Key to the Science of Theology*.²⁹ However, by the Progressive era the cultural situation had shifted, and the Pratts' writings had lost much of their power and saliency.

During this period three Latter-day Saint thinkers sought to offer new articulations of the Gospel. The most ambitious of these was B.H. Roberts, a polygamous general authority who came of age during the white-hot confrontations between the saints and the federal government in the 1880s. Rather than simply refighting the lost battles of the 19th century, however, Roberts embraced the task of articulating the post-polygamous meaning of the Restoration.³⁰ In the early 20th century, he sought to present the Gospel as a complete intellectual system that could accommodate modern philosophies such as Herbert Spencer's modernism and Darwinian evolution.³¹ At the time, these were seen as vital currents of thought that could give the Restoration saliency to his readers. During the same period two younger writers, John A. Widtsoe and James E. Talmage, pursued similar projects. In his *Rational Theology*, published in 1915, Widtsoe presented the Restored Gospel as a scientifically friendly system of religion that encouraged human improvement, potent themes during the Progressive era.³² Writing a few years later, Talmage produced *The Vitality of Mormonism*, a series of essays designed to restate the basic teachings of the Gospel.³³ Writing at the end of World War I, he also emphasized improvement and advancement. In addition, Talmage linked the Restoration to the

29. See Terry L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow, *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6 ("Pratt's writings, which deeply influenced other Mormon authors, particularly his equally prolific younger brother, Orson, not only helped convert thousands to Mormonism but also shaped the Mormon theological system"); see also Breck England, *The Life and Thought of Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1985).

30. Although in fairness I must note that in his multivolume history of the Church produced for its centennial, Roberts was more than willing to refight the battles of the Raid in print, defending the Latter-day Saint position. See B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, 6 vols. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1930).

31. See B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, The Way, The Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1994).

32. See John A. Widtsoe, *Rational Theology*, Reprint edition (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998).

33. See James E. Talmage, *The Vitality of Mormonism: Brief Essays on Distinctive Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Boston: The Gorham Press, 1919).

struggle against tyranny and the unfolding of human freedom, while at the same time deploring the violence and destruction of war.³⁴ All these are themes that would have been very much on the mind of readers who had just suffered through the Great War.

These works all repay careful reading, but inevitably they are products of their time. Some of their arguments and interpretations no longer seem plausible, while others simply feel dated. That, of course, is the point. The Restoration must be taught anew to each generation, and each generation will bring different concerns and language to the Gospel. Each generation will find new insights and miss certain teachings they would have done better to emphasize. Roberts, Widstoe, and Talmage each recognized that it was not enough to simply repeat what Parley P. Pratt had taught a generation or two earlier. Each, in his own way, sought to remain faithful to the Restoration. They used some language that seems familiar to a modern Latter-day Saint reader and no doubt would have seemed familiar to a mid-19th century reader. But they also spoke in ways distinctive to their times and audience. No doubt each of these works was inadequate in various ways in making the Gospel live in the lives of its readers. Indeed, B.H. Roberts' speculations were so exuberant that ultimately the Church declined to publish them.³⁵ For our purposes, however, what is important is their willingness to engage in the central task of finding new ways of presenting the Gospel message for a new historical situation.³⁶

34. For example, he wrote:

I cannot look upon the frightful carnage and inhuman atrocities of the world war as a manifestation of the direct will of God. This dreadful conflict was brought on through lust of power and greed of gain. It sprang from an unholy determination to rob mankind of God-given rights, and to subject the race to autocratic domination. It is a repetition of the issue at stake in the primeval struggle, when Michael, the champion of free agency, led his hosts against Lucifer's myrmidons, who sought to rule by might. Talmage, 316-17.

This is a careful blending of Gospel and current situation designed to appeal both to the person horrified by the destruction of the war and to the one indignant at a once aggressive and now defeated Germany.

35. See James B. Allen, "The Story of 'The Truth, The Way, The Life,'" *Brigham Young University Studies* 33, no. 4 (1993): 690-741.

36. One might note that all three of these works were produced by general authorities. This is not quite true, as *Rational Theology* was written while John A. Widstoe was still a professor at Utah State University. All three of these works, however, were written either at the instigation of the Church or for Church

The process of celebrating the Gospel today will undoubtedly look different than it did at the beginning of the 20th century. We will use different language and even different genres. Still, the fundamental task facing Latter-day Saint intellectuals today is essentially the same as that facing B.H. Roberts in the 1920s. For example, shortly after I became a professor, I was invited by Richard Bushman to participate in a series of private meetings of Latter-day Saint academics outside of Utah interested in the Church. In those meetings, he challenged us to identify that aspect of the Restoration we found most compelling. He then suggested that we try to articulate this in language for someone completely unfamiliar with the language of the Church. I don't think much came from our discussions, but Bushman's challenge has stuck with me over the years.³⁷ It strikes me as a useful exercise for any Latter-day Saint intellectual who is serious about confronting the challenges the Church faces today. It is unlikely, of course, that any such writings in themselves would matter very much, but a literature of celebration could become a resource for Latter-day Saints and something that could be part of enticing others to consider the Restored Gospel.

To celebrate the Restoration in new language today does not mean we offer some facile bit of triumphalism or a mechanical translation of common Latter-day Saint tropes into more accessible language. Triumphalism will not render the Restoration existentially important. It will not explain to the unconvinced why they would want it in their lives. What is needed is a message that makes the Church and its teachings compelling. This means its failures and faults will have to be acknowledged and charitably dealt with. No one is interested in marble perfection. Such perfection is neither believable nor compelling for many in modern society. Fortunately, the world can be generous and open to an account of the Restoration that is willing to find the divinity within its often-broken humanity. Likewise, hostile attacks and objections to the Church and the Gospel must be met. We cannot avoid responding

publication. They were all, in that sense, "official" publications. That said, in an era before correlation the boundaries between official and unofficial publications were more porous than they are today. Intellectually, all these works are trying to articulate the Gospel for a contemporary audience, and none of them purport to speak authoritatively on behalf of the Church as an institution.

37. I did ultimately write a personal essay in response to Bushman's challenge. See Nathan B. Oman, "A Local Faith," *Brigham Young University Studies* 49, no. 2 (2010): 163–72.

to hard questions for which reasonable people can expect an answer.³⁸ Celebration may require defense as well as concession.

Truly celebrating the Restoration will require more than simple translation for two reasons. First, simple translation is impossible. Every retelling of a story changes the story slightly. This isn't pernicious; it is inevitable. However, we need to be conscious of the ways in which we are telling our stories about the Gospel. Are we introducing changes that are both compelling responses to the challenges of the modern world and faithful to the divinity of the Restoration? This is a difficult process, one in which people are going to make mistakes. This need not be a problem, so long as we carry out our project of celebration with charity and humility. Indeed, the more Latter-day Saint intellectuals who are involved in this project, the less important and salient the inevitable individual errors become.

Second, a compelling account of the Restoration will likely require dramatic changes. Consider the situation of David O. McKay in the early 1950s. The Church had embarked on an aggressive program of international expansion. The goal was wards and stakes beyond the United States, centered on nuclear families, bound together by the sealing power of the temple. At the time, however, this vision was in the future. Realizing it required the creation of stakes and the building of temples, remarkably enough, the Church adopted an if-you-build-it-they-will-come approach, constructing overseas temples before there were even any overseas stakes.³⁹ This move had a cascading series of consequences for the Church. Ecclesiastical authority moved from American mission presidents to local priesthood holders, who then became absolutely vital for the health of the Church. The emphasis on eternal families increased the importance of temples in the devotional lives of the saints. Both these shifts placed enormous pressure on the Church's practice of denying priesthood and temple blessings to those of African descent.⁴⁰ A quarter century after embarking on the journey charted by President McKay, the Church had been transformed, including the 1978 revelation on the priesthood. What made the post-war success of the Church possible

38. The most tangible recognition of this need by the Church is the publication of the various "Gospel Topics Essays" dealing with such controversial topics as polygamy, the priesthood and temple ban on those of African descent, and the like. See The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, "Gospel Topics Essays," <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/essays?lang=eng>.

39. See Oman, "International Legal Experience," 721.

40. See Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride*, 199–208.

was a willingness to imagine a future in which the Restoration would become compelling to a huge swathe of new people, even if doing so required massive transformations in the Church.

Latter-day Saint intellectuals, as intellectuals, lack ecclesiastical authority.⁴¹ Any future they imagine as an adjunct to their celebration of the Restoration must necessarily be left implicit or merely hypothetical. Such a faithful imagining, however, is not an invitation to simply remake the Church and the Gospel in our imaginations. The point of celebrating the Restoration is to celebrate *the Restoration*. This requires an effort to discern what is central and what is peripheral to the Gospel. The doctrine of continuing revelation always holds out the possibility of change. Indeed, just as the idea of exaltation suggests that God both loves us as we are and also desires for us a glorious transformation into something better, God can be thought of as constantly transforming the Church to better realize the Zion promised by the Lord to the saints. This, however, presents the danger to intellectuals of simply imagining a Church in our own image, one where our ideological priors are projected onto a more palatable and about-to-be-revealed version Gospel. We start as Pygmalion, falling in love with our own creation, and end in idolatry, worshipping our own graven images in a false temple. Done properly, however, imagination can be an act of faith and hope, so long as one remains open to the possibility of being mistaken and being given a very different future by the Lord.

Finally, one shouldn't overestimate the importance of the intellectual's task. First, Latter-day Saint intellectual life remains largely concentrated in the United States. This is a problem. There is the danger of mistaking the parochial concerns of American culture for more universal concerns. This is particularly important given the fact that even within the United States, Latter-day Saint intellectuals will likely skew toward affluence and high levels of education. Even when we self-consciously try to avoid this trap, American concerns inevitably occupy an outsized place in the discussions of Latter-day Saint intellectuals.⁴² Second, in the future, the Church will need a more pluralistic message. Those things compelling and existentially important to people in West Africa and East Asia are likely different from those that move

41. This doesn't mean, of course, that intellectuals cannot occupy positions of ecclesiastical authority; they can and often do. But they do not wield such authority by virtue of being intellectuals.

42. I am acutely aware that this is a criticism that could be leveled with some justice at the framing of this essay itself.

well-educated Americans. Third, while a compelling way of presenting the power of the Restoration is a necessary component of proclaiming the Gospel, it is never sufficient. Ultimately, the work of the Church belongs to the Lord. It is rightly led by His prophets and apostles, not the Latter-day Saint clerisy. In the end, God's work is carried forward more by the force of charity and the power of his Spirit than through articulate speech. At best the celebration of intellectuals can help to bring people to a place where they might be touched by those things. Without them, however, the words of Latter-day Saint thinkers will "become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal" (1 Corinthians 13:1).

Authority, Angst, and Wonder

Finally, there are those who will object that the task of celebration is inappropriate for an intellectual. On one hand, one might object that what I suggest here usurps the prerogatives of Church authorities. After all, direction of the Church lies in the hands of those who hold the priesthood keys for directing the Lord's work. In the words of the 5th Article of Faith, "We believe that a man must be called of God, by prophecy, and by the laying on of hands by those who are in authority, to preach the Gospel and administer the ordinances thereof" (Articles of Faith 5). Perhaps Latter-day Saint intellectuals celebrating the Restoration are merely steadying the ark and should instead await the words of the prophets.

As noted above, there is a certain spiritual danger to this project. Intellectuals, like everyone else, are prone to pride and idolatry. Furthermore, it would be wrong for covenanted Latter-day Saints to arrogate to themselves priesthood or ecclesiastical authority to which they have not been formally called. That, however, is not what I am calling for here. Since the time of Joseph Smith, the saints have been taught that "it becometh every man that is warned to warn his neighbor" (D&C 88:81), and we are constantly encouraged to share the Gospel with others. That is ultimately what I am advocating. If missionary work means nothing more than awkwardly inviting our uninterested neighbor to church or preparing our children to serve full-time missions, then we are missing something. Rather, it should also mean throwing ourselves into the work of fulfilling the prophecy "that every man shall hear the fulness of the gospel in his own tongue, and in his own language" (D&C 90:11). Doing this, however, requires more than learning a foreign language and ritually repeating past sermons. We must do the hard work of articulating why the fruit of the tree of life is, to use Lehi's evocative

word, “enticing” (see 2 Nephi 2:16) and do so in language fresh and compelling to our neighbors.

There is another objection from the opposite direction. In modern societies, the intellectual is supposed to stand outside of community as a critic and a gadfly. To celebrate, we might think, is to surrender our intellectual integrity. There are at least two reasons for this stance. The first is the idea that to truly understand something, one must occupy the position of a disinterested observer. True understanding is objective, and we risk that objectivity by celebrating. This assumption, however, is a mistake. To be sure, there are often things that can be seen or understood only by virtue of a certain critical distance. However, it does not follow that only the position of the objective outsider is legitimate. There is always a bit of self-deception in such a stance, as no one is ever truly objective and outside of his or her own experiences. More importantly, however, there are certain things that can be seen and understood only from the inside. The beautiful stained-glass windows of a Gothic cathedral appear drab and colorless from the outside. Only by entering the building can their full glory be seen.⁴³

Celebration, however, may strike even more deeply at our conception of what it means to be an intellectual. Socrates, the prototypical intellectual, was forced to drink hemlock because he questioned the inhabitants of Athens too closely, and there has often been tension between intellectuals and the cultures from which they spring.⁴⁴ At least since the time of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 18th century, western culture has tended to exalt the alienated intellectual, the hero of the mind driven to see beyond the appearances of things to their inner essence and in so doing to break with the past and with convention. This stance requires a certain emotional outlook, one dominated by anxiety and estrangement from community. Often, of course, alienation gives birth to thought. It is estrangement from the familiar that causes us to reflect upon it. However, it is tempting to think that angst and hostility to community are themselves requirements of intellectual respectability. On this view, there is something intellectually embarrassing in setting out to celebrate one’s native tradition.

This reaction, however, is also a mistake. It is not true that understanding or insight must always spring from alienation. Indeed, if

43. I borrow this image from a conversation with Terryl Givens.

44. See Plato, “Socrates’ Defense” in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 3–26.

Plato's *Crito* is to be believed, Socrates drank the hemlock only because he refused to abandon his community when given the chance.⁴⁵ His fate was tragic but marked acceptance of his native home at least as much as alienation from it. There is an alternative genealogy of intellectual life that does not rest on the supposed authority of angst. On this account, the life of the mind begins not in angst and alienation but in delight and wonder. We are driven to understand from the sheer joy of questing after truth, eternally at play amidst a fascinating world. This is the sensibility that Aristotle captured with the Greek word *thaumazo*, which he suggested constituted the primal origin of philosophy.⁴⁶ In the New Testament, the word is often translated "marvel" and "wonder" (e.g., John 5:20; Acts 7:31).⁴⁷ Similarly, when Nephi quotes Isaiah to describe the Restoration itself, he refers to it as "a marvelous work and a wonder" (2 Nephi 27:26; cf. Isaiah 29:14). There is thus a deep intellectual pedigree in both scripture and philosophy for the idea that the intellectual's task is, to use Orson F. Whitney's words, the process of "[w]elding another link in wonder's chain,"⁴⁸ the phrase he used to describe the Restoration. At this moment not only is celebrating the marvelous work of God a fit task for an "anxiously engaged" (D&C 58:27) mind, it is the most important work to which such a mind could be put.

45. See Plato, "Crito," in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 27–39.

46. Aristotle writes in the *Metaphysics*:

For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin,?? and at first began to philosophize; they wondered originally at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about the greater, e.g. about the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and of the stars, and about the genesis of the universe. And a man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant (whence even the lover of myth is in a sense a lover of Wisdom, for the myth is composed of wonders); therefore since they philosophized in order to escape from ignorance; evidently they were pursuing science in order to know, and not for any utilitarian end.

Aristotle, "Metaphysics," in *Introduction to Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, trans. W.D. Ross (New York, N.Y.: The Modern Library, 1992), 261–62.

47. See Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10th edition (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 27.

48. See Whitney, *Elias*, 119.

Nathan B. Oman is Rollins Professor of Law at William & Mary Law School in Williamsburg, Virginia. He was educated at Brigham Young University and Harvard Law School. In addition to teaching at William & Mary, he has been a visiting professor at Cornell University, Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and the University of Richmond. He has published on Latter-day Saint history and intellectual life in *BYU Studies*, *Dialogue*, *FARMS Review*, and *The Review of Mormon Studies*. He has served in the Church as a teacher, young men's president, bishop's counselor, and coordinating council director of public affairs. He lives in James City County, Virginia, with his family.