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Three Degrees of Gospel Understanding

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THREE DEGREES OF GOSPEL UNDERSTANDING

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: Few fireside talks outlive the week in which they are given. But Professor Stanley Kimball's remarks, offered one evening long ago in southern California, have stayed with me for nearly three and a half decades. In my view, they offer a key to surviving challenges or even what have come to be called "faith crises" — and, indeed, a key not only to surviving them but to thriving spiritually by having overcome them.

A little learning is a dang'rous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring;
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
and drinking largely sobers us again.

—Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, Part 2.

More than three decades ago — I was still in graduate school, so it must have been in the first half of the 1980s — my wife and I attended a gathering in southern California where the late Stanley Kimball, a professor of history at Southern Illinois University and a former president of the Mormon History Association, was the speaker. His remarks have stayed in my mind ever since. Unfortunately, I've never seen (nor heard of) a written version of what he had to say, so I'll be going from memory here. (If anybody knows where a written text of the speech can be found, I would be delighted to see it.)

Professor Kimball explained what he called the "three levels" of Mormon history, which he termed Levels A, B, and C. (Given my own background in philosophy, I might have chosen G. W. F. Hegel's terminology, instead: *thesis*, *antithesis*, and *synthesis*.)

Level A is the Sunday school version of the Church and of its history. It's the kind of simple story that we tell in missionary lessons and in the Church's visitors' centers. Virtually everything connected with the

Church on Level A is obviously good, beautiful, true, and harmonious. Ordinary members may occasionally make mistakes, but leaders seldom, if ever, do.

It's difficult for somebody with a Level A understanding to imagine why everyone else doesn't immediately recognize the obvious truth of the gospel, and opposition to the Church seems flatly Satanic.

Level B — what I call the *antithesis* to Level A's *thesis* — is perhaps most clearly seen in anti-Mormon versions of Church history. In its purest and most extreme form, everything (or virtually everything) that Level A declares to be good, beautiful, true, and harmonious turns out actually to be evil, ugly, false, and chaotic. Latter-day Saint leaders at the general and sometimes even the local levels are viewed as deceitful and evil. They consider the Church's account of its own story a complete fabrication, and some exceptionally antagonistic anti-Mormons even claim the general membership often misbehaves very badly.

It's difficult for somebody solidly embedded in Level B to understand how anybody can fail to see the manifest evil and transparent falsehood of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and of the claims of the Restoration. Disagreement with them is the result either of some combination of ignorance and stupidity or, if that explanation can't be made to work, of flat-out dishonesty.

In my view, the inadequacy of both Level A and Level B for any reasonable and realistic adult ought to be immediately obvious. Nothing involving humans is purely good and without flaw, just as, so far as I can tell, nothing involving humans is entirely evil and without some trace of good. For example, I'm told that Mafiosi often care intensely about their children, and I've also seen photographic evidence that Adolf Hitler loved dogs. Each level is simplistic and a caricature of reality.

But one needn't read anti-Mormon propaganda to be exposed to elements of Level B that seem to be true and that can't quite be squared with an idealized, Level A portrait of the Restoration. In other words, it rapidly becomes obvious to people who read Mormon history or who experience it directly in the congregations of the Saints that Level A isn't entirely accurate and that Level B isn't entirely false. Some claims on Level B *are* true, at least to some extent, although many are wholly or largely false or are so taken out of context that they are *effectively* false. Most of the Witnesses to the Book of Mormon fell away at some point, though some did later return to full fellowship, and none of them ever denied their testimonies. Members of the Church did lead and carry out the Mountain Meadows Massacre, though Brigham Young certainly

didn't order it. There have even been disagreements — and at times sharp divisions — within the presiding quorums of the Church, though the areas of agreement are far, far more significant than the areas of dispute.

Whether newly converted or born in the covenant, maturing members of the Church will inevitably discover, sooner or later, that other Saints, including Church leaders, are fallible and sometimes even disappointing mortals. There are areas of ambiguity, even unresolved problems, in Church history; there have been disagreements about certain doctrines; the archaeological evidence for the Book of Mormon doesn't yield decisive proof of its authenticity; and some questions don't have immediately satisfying answers.

Eliza R. Snow, a plural wife to both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young — and, thus, someone who knew them both personally and who was directly involved in what is almost certainly the most controversial practice in Mormon history — sought to caution new converts against starry-eyed naiveté back, already, in the nineteenth century:

Think not when you gather to Zion,
 Your troubles and trials are through,
 That nothing but comfort and pleasure
 Are waiting in Zion for you:
 No, no, 'tis designed as a furnace,
 All substance, all textures to try,
 To burn all the “wood, hay, and stubble,”
 The gold from the dross purify.

Think not when you gather to Zion,
 That all will be holy and pure;
 That fraud and deception are banished,
 And confidence wholly secure:
 No, no, for the Lord our Redeemer
 Has said that the tares with the wheat
 Must grow till the great day of burning
 Shall render the harvest complete.¹

Lorenzo Snow, who was Eliza's brother and the fifth president of the Church from 1898 to 1901, was the last high Church leader who knew Joseph Smith well as an adult. “I saw Joseph Smith the Prophet do things,” he recalled in 1898,

1 Eliza R. Snow, “Think Not, When You Gather to Zion,” *Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), Number 21.

which I did not approve of; and yet ... I thanked God that He would put upon a man who had these imperfections the power and authority which He placed upon him ... for I knew I myself had weaknesses and I thought there was a chance for me.²

“Now, was not Joseph Smith a mortal man?” asked George Q. Cannon, who had known the Prophet personally in Nauvoo and who, by the end of his life, had served as a counselor in the First Presidency to Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and Lorenzo Snow.

Yes. A fallible man? Yes. Had he not weaknesses? Yes, he acknowledged them himself, and did not fail to put the revelations on record in this book [the Book of Doctrine and Covenants] wherein God reproved him. His weaknesses were not concealed from the people. He was willing that people should know that he was mortal, and had failings. And so with Brigham Young. Was not he a mortal man, a man who had weaknesses? He was not a God. He was not an immortal being. He was not infallible. No, he was fallible. And yet when he spoke by the power of God, it was the word of God to this people.³

Similar quotations could be multiplied indefinitely.⁴ Although more than a few members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have mistakenly assumed a kind of inerrancy and perfection for the apostles and prophets of the Restoration — hence the well-known quip: “The Pope claims to be infallible, but no Catholic believes him; the Prophet says he’s not infallible, but no Mormon believes him” — they have never claimed those attributes for themselves.

But back to Professor Kimball’s remarks in southern California, decades ago: He observed that the Church isn’t eager to expose its members to the problems and ambiguities of its history. Why? Because souls can be lost and are lost on Level B. And anyway, the Church isn’t some sort of continuous floating seminar in historiography. Its mission isn’t primarily to teach history; it’s to preach the gospel. That humans are fallible and flawed goes without saying — or, anyway, should do so. The

2 Lorenzo Snow, cited by George Q. Cannon, in *George Q. Cannon Diary*, 7 January 1898.

3 George Q. Cannon, *Journal of Discourses* 24:274 (August 12, 1883).

4 A representative sample of them has been gathered at http://en.fairmormon.org/Mormonism_and_doctrine/Prophets_are_not_infallible/Quotations.

unique and essential message of the Restoration isn't that its apostles, prophets, and witnesses are human mortals but that — wonderful news! — some human mortals have been and are genuine, divinely called witnesses, apostles, and prophets.

Regrettably, perhaps, most Latter-day Saints — many of them far better people than I — aren't deeply interested in history and, more importantly, many other very pressing priorities demand attention, including raising families, proclaiming the gospel, training our youth, redeeming the dead, and giving service. So, if the Church doesn't go out of its way to teach them the ambiguities of its history, they're not likely to learn them. And, if they do, there is at least a fairly high likelihood that they'll learn them from a hostile, unbalanced, and sometimes, frankly, dishonest source.

Thus, in failing to “inoculate” its membership against the follies and questions and problems of its history, the Church can sometimes leave them vulnerable to faith-destroying disease.

There are no easy, black and white solutions to this problem. Interestingly, although he was a professional academic historian, Dr. Kimball remarked that, were he in a high leadership position, he would himself probably make the same decision. He would not, that is, seek to expose Church members to a “disease” that would make them stronger if they survived it but that, in fact, more than a few would find fatal.

Once members of the Church *have* been exposed to Level B, though, Professor Kimball argued, their best hope is to press on to what he believed (and I believe) to be the richer but more complicated version of history (or to the more realistic view of humanity) that is to be found on Level C. Here's a crucial point, however: He contended (and, again, I agree) that Level C — what I call the “synthesis” level — turns out to be essentially, and profoundly, like Level A. Level B is substantially and essentially wrong. Level A is correct but only as far as it goes.

This is vital to understand. For one thing, it undercuts the claim that by giving little or no attention to a “warts and all” version of Restoration history in its Sunday school classrooms, the Church is *lying* to the Saints. From the standpoint of a believer such as I am (and such as Professor Kimball evidently was), Level A is a simpler version of the truth and not in any significant sense a lie.⁵

5 For one view of this issue, drawing on examples from classical Greek, Latin, Islamic, and Chinese historiography, see David B. Honey and Daniel C. Peterson, “Advocacy and Inquiry in the Writing of Latter-day Saint History,” *BYU*

The gospel is, in fact, true. Church leaders at all levels have, overwhelmingly, been good and sincere people doing the best they can with the imperfect human materials entrusted to their charge (including themselves), according to their best understanding and under often very difficult circumstances.

But charity and context are all-important. Life would be much easier, of course, if we could find a church composed of perfect leaders and flawless members and one whose progress has been without bump or obstacle but smoothly and unerringly forward. Unfortunately, though, at least in my case, the glaringly obvious problem is that such a church would never admit one such as I to its membership.

My judgment and my conviction are that the claims of the Restoration do, in fact, stand up to historical examination, although (very likely by divine design) their truth is neither so blazingly obvious nor so indisputable as to compel acceptance — least of all from people disinclined to accept them. If I were not so convinced, I wouldn't waste my time on them. Being so convinced, however, I believe them to be worth everything — because they give worth and value *to* everything.

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Studies 31/2 (1991), 139–179. Moreover, it must be kept in mind that there is no professionally trained clergy in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. There is no fundamental dichotomy of background between the Church's leaders and the general membership of the Church from among whom they're drawn. Accordingly, knowledge of and attitudes toward Church history and doctrine in the highest echelons of the Church will approximate very closely that found among the Latter-day Saints as a whole.

