

By Common Consent

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FOR THE LOVE OF GOD

Paul J. Toscano

An Open Letter to Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Council of the Twelve rebutting his article, "Divine Love" *Ensign*, February 2003. Published here by permission.

16 June 2003

Dear Elder Nelson,

I read with interest and dismay your February 2003 *Ensign* article "Divine Love," in which you argue that God's love is *not* unconditional. Although you supported your position with many familiar verses of scripture, your conclusion contradicts the settled doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in particular and of the larger Christian community in general.

The subject you address, divine love, is of vital importance to Latter-day Saints, to Christendom, and to many yet unconverted, seeking souls. For this reason, I am writing this open letter to suggest to all who may read your article that, on this point, you are likely quite wrong, despite your apostolic calling and the status of your article as an official pronouncement of the Church; for your conclusion, though supported by some scriptural passages, runs clean contrary to many others and to the great weight of belief and experience of the disciples of Jesus in and out of the Church.

Joseph Smith warned that great religious questions are not likely to be resolved by recourse to scripture, "for the teachers of religion of the different sects [understand] the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible" (Joseph Smith--History 2:12). It is for this reason that he sought wisdom directly from God. Though the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is founded on the principle of revelation, you do not claim that your article's conclusion was revealed; and, of course, you could not, because you are not the revelator to the Church. However, you write in a prophetic voice, and you make it clear that your conclusion is based upon your reassessment of scripture.

Because of your high calling, many Latter-day Saints will therefore assume that your conclusion is inspired. They might forget the statement of the apostle Paul that "charity [divine love] never faileth; but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part and prophecy in part.... And now abide faith, hope and charity, but the greatest of these is charity" (1 Cor. 13:8-10, 13). This scripture would suggest that it is not divine love that is conditional, but the gifts of prophesy, inspiration, and knowledge.

Moreover, it appears that you began your research with a predetermined conclusion in mind and then scoured the scriptures for proof texts, choosing only those passages that

seemed to support your novel doctrine. You defined the term “conditional,” but you failed to define the term “love.” You did not distinguish divine love from divine expectation, or blessing, or approval, or salvation. In the quoted scriptures, you mistake synonyms for divine love for conditions for divine love; and for this reason you conclude that passages like “if a man love me, he will keep my words; and my Father will love him” (John 14:23) express the idea that God’s love is conditioned on our keeping the commandments when the passage can mean that to love God is to keep his commandments.

You give equal weight to both Old and New Testament scriptures and never consider that prophetic understanding of divine love could, with the advent of Christ, have deepened over time. You do not consider the paradoxical nature of such sayings as “love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matt. 5:44) or of such parables as the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) or the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). You suggest that, because God loves conditionally, he does not love the unrighteous, and then you deny this logical conclusion from your premise.

You assume that the King James Bible accurately expresses spiritual or prophetic intent, forgetting that for Latter-day Saints the Bible is correct only so far as it is translated correctly (Eighth Article of Faith). You never state the conditions you claim for God’s love. You make “happiness” the end and divine love means in God’s plan of salvation, contrary to the teachings found in the writings of the apostles Paul and John.

You identify the doctrine of God’s unconditional love as a false teaching promulgated by the Book of Mormon apostate Nehor when that book makes it clear Nehor’s heresy was the doctrines of priestcraft and predestination (Alma 1:2-16). You see God’s salvation as a wage rather than a gift, contrary to Paul’s statement: “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). You do not explore if it is possible to love God without knowing him, without a testimony, without faith. You do not wonder if those without hope can experience God’s love. You assert that “wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10), but you do not address the question: If righteousness is happiness, why does such happiness so often elude the righteous or why do afflictions so often befall even innocent children and animals? You never grapple with the reality of the lovable prodigal and the unlovable puritan. You do not explain how a God of conditional love is holier than humans whose love is unconditional.

Your article’s chief defect is its failure to distinguish among the different meanings of the term “love.” As defined in most dictionaries, love has four basic meanings: (1) sexual attraction, (2) benevolence, (3) affection, and (4) the taking of pleasure in someone or something. Only the latter three are pertinent to divine love, which refers to God’s benevolence--that is, his desire for our holiness, happiness, and ultimate spiritual maturation and eternal well-being. Clearly, in this sense, God’s love is unconditional. God does not stop being benevolent in the face of sinning humans. He is at least as good as those human parents whose love does not diminish when confronted by prodigal children. Besides, Latter-day Saint scripture establishes the unconditional nature of God’s benevolence in passages you did not quote in your article. For example, in Moses 7:28-40, we are told of Enoch’s vision of the Lord weeping over the most wicked of his children, to whom, despite their sins, he holds out the offer of salvation through Christ’s

redemption.

True, in your article, you admit that divine love is perfect, infinite, enduring, and universal, but then announce that it is also conditional. This is no paradox. It is an outright contradiction. What you grant with one hand you take away with the other. How can God's love be infinite if it is bounded or limited by conditions? How can God's love be enduring if it cannot endure sin or disobedience? How can it be universal if it excludes those you don't approve of? How can it be perfect if it is less reliable than the love of good children for abusive parents or that of good parents for errant children?

There is a way, of course, in which God's love is conditional. One of the meanings of love is to take pleasure in someone or something. Naturally, God does not take pleasure in us when we cause each other needless suffering, when we are greedy, power-hungry, selfish, narcissistic, and especially when we withhold love from each other. Divine love turns to divine indignation in the face of these sins. But divine love and divine indignation are one and the same; both are derivatives of divine benevolence. God's rewards and punishments flow from God's benevolent desire to save us all from the narrow prisons of our egos, our opacity of mind, our fears, and our selfishness. Divine love is expressed both as comfort and rebuke. We are enjoined to rebuke "betimes with sharpness" so long as afterwards we show forth afterwards "an increase of love" (D&C 121:43), which is what I am imperfectly attempting to do in this letter with respect to your well-intentioned but dangerously incorrect discussion of divine love.

In your article, those quoted passages of scripture that show that God's love is conditional are all about God's taking pleasure in us. Obviously, he doesn't if we are deliberately doing our worst, and obviously he does when we are doing our best. But this aspect of God's love is only part of God's unconditional, enduring benevolence for his creations, which he desires to save at all costs to himself. You fail to distinguish God's benevolence for all his creatures from his taking pleasure in his good children. But this is your job, your duty, your calling. It is unseemly that I, an excommunicant with only the barest thread of any remaining faith, should like Balaam's ass (Num. 22:13-35) have to bray all this to you, an apostle, with the full spiritual and temporal resources of the Church at his disposal. But such, I suppose, are the ironies of God.

The rest of your speech is a restatement of the usual confusion of Church leaders over whether we are saved by works or grace. All I can do in response is to repeat Paul's teaching in the epistle to the Romans that people who attempt to claim salvation on the strength of their good works are doomed to failure. The works that save us are not ours, but those done by Jesus Christ in Gethsemane and on Calvary. The commandment is for us to accept those works as having been done vicariously for us. By accepting his works as our works, we accept the gift of God's divine love that alone can transform us from sinners into Saints. It is not what we do that makes us righteous, for doers can be hypocrites. It is the love of God dwelling in us that makes us righteous (Moro. 7:47-48). The Church cannot dispense this love. It comes only through the Spirit by the grace of the living God. Your article does not make this clear; rather, while dispiriting its members, your article justifies the corporate Church in its emphasis on judgment and punishment at the expense of tolerance and forgiveness.

Years ago, Church President Harold B. Lee, in a private interview, cautioned me not to accept any new teaching from any Church leader, even the president of the Church,

unless it met four tests. President Lee said such a teaching must be (1) consistent with scripture, (2) consistent with the teachings of the prophets living and dead, (3) consistent with the promptings of the Holy Ghost, and (4) consistent with human experience. I fear that your new teaching that God's love is conditional passes none of these tests. It is not consistent with the teachings of the prophets because no Latter-day Saint has ever before heard any Church leader assert that God's love is conditional. The doctrine is inconsistent with the Holy Ghost that has prompted numerous Latter-day Saints in both talks and testimonies to bear witness of God's unconditional love. And the doctrine does not accord with the experiences of the vast majority of the Saints of the Church and the people of the Lord everywhere.

If God's love were conditional, then the righteous would always be blessed and the wicked always punished. But this is not how the world is. The sun shines and the rain falls on the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45). One reason why people become atheists or agnostics is that on earth the guilty triumph and the innocent suffer. The Book of Mormon teaches that this is so because mortality is a probationary state in which we must choose good over evil, despite the absence of immediate reward (Alma 12:24).

Elder Nelson, is it probable that God would have created such a probationary state if his love were conditional? Is it probable that God would so love the world that he would send his Son into it to die for it if his love were conditional? Is it probable that God would have endured all the long, troubled centuries of violent human history, or have bargained to save wicked Sodom and Gomorrah, or have visited the spirits in prison and freed them, or have ordained a universal resurrection, or have saved virtually every one of his children in a kingdom of indescribable glory, or decreed the automatic salvation of children who die without reaching the age of accountability if God's love were conditional? Is it probable that God would have restored the gospel, the priesthood, the ordinances, and the Church in the last days if God were a God of divine, conditional love? Isn't it far more probable that God's love is unconditional and that it is the love of the Church and its leaders that is conditioned upon the unquestioning obedience of even the most loyal of the Saints?

Only a very simple creature would conclude that sinners could be motivated to repent before a God of conditional love. Such love would turn sinners to despair while filling the self-righteous with arrogance and authorizing the powerful to further dominate the meek. Sinners will turn to God only if they have faith and hope that God's charity truly never fails (1 Cor. 13:8).

Please understand that I believe it is no sin to err in doctrine and recognize that it is I who may be wrong. But for both our sakes, I hope that I am not and that God's love will prove more certain than my faith or your opinion. And though we disagree and speak from vastly different experiences in Mormonism, I sincerely hope that God will love and forgive us despite our failings.

Yours sincerely, Paul Toscano

KNOWING AND NOT KNOWING

Jackson Waite

One of my fine mentors often advised: "When two person cannot find common ground in their dialogue, the discussion is over before it begins." This creates a problem in all organized religion that will be with us until "time is no more." As the U.S. Supreme

Court cannot get too far ahead of the masses without having its own authority disdained, so the Mormon First Presidency and Twelve cannot get too far ahead of the masses and still retain power and control. To remain faithful to the masses, they, of necessity, must betray the intellectual community, being the few. This condition places a gulf between those Mormons fortunate enough to have gained a liberal education and the great mass of the Church membership which has not been appreciably affected either by high culture or by a liberal education.

Shortly before this mentor died in his mid-nineties, we had breakfast together in Salt Lake City. Like Socrates, the weather-beaten old sage who had to admit that perhaps he was indeed the wisest man in Athens because he seemed to be the only person he knew who knew that he knew not, my friend distilled the wisdom of a lifetime into one sentence: "The longer I live, the less sure I am of anything I ever thought I ever knew for sure."

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes penned in a famous case that all through history "we have been cocksure of a multitude of things that were never so." We have a multitude of teachings on God's will in Mormonism that were never so, yet we hide all these from our people lest faith be damaged.

Our own history makes it abundantly clear that, in Judge Learned Hand's words, "The values of one generation are frequently the rejects of the next." Yet Mormons as a group do not believe it. Brigham Young, with his beard, would be shocked to learn that he cannot register at the university that honors his name; he would be further shocked to find himself excommunicated for his views on polygamy, and again shocked to learn that he could not pay his tithing in kind with a "Niger" slave, as he allowed with no disturbance of conscience. The John Taylor revelations that are missing from our current priesthood and Relief Society manual perhaps did more than anything anyone else has ever done to assure the existence of some 30,000 polygamists in Utah culture today. Today Catholicism teaches that the Pope is incapable of error, and the Catholic membership does not believe it. Today Mormonism teaches that our prophets are not infallible, but the Mormon membership does not believe it.

Mormon leaders in the white power structure of South Africa, when the tough general Louis Botha ran the show, were all given temple recommends while participating in apartheid, one of the most evil repressions of the human spirit since Joseph Stalin. Those brave souls who had the courage to stand up to them could be excommunicated from Mormonism with impunity. What do we do to ourselves when we blindly honor priesthood leaders doing the work and policies of Satan while they are blinded to the light and life of Christ? What does it mean that we persecute true heroes while they are alive and build monuments to them a century later when we see that they were right and we were wrong?

We cannot rely on authority. Too often it leads us astray. We cannot rely on revelation alone. It is received, interpreted, and implemented by human beings with all their fallibility. It is an act of both faith and humility to engage in the work of Socrates with his own humility. The challenge was never put better than as Judge Learned Hand told the Research Institute of America on 27 April 1960: "We shall succeed only so far as we continue that most distasteful of all activity, the intolerable labor of thought."

The greatest obstacle to discovery is not ignorance. It is the illusion of knowledge.... I have observed that the world has suffered far less from ignorance than from pretensions to knowledge. It is not skeptics or explorers but fanatics and ideologues who menace decency and progress. No agnostic ever burned anyone at the stake or tortured a pagan, a heretic, or an unbeliever. ..Daniel J. Boorstin

ALLIANCE AT SUNSTONE

The Mormon Alliance is sponsoring the Thursday evening plenary session at the Sunstone Symposium, 14 August, 8:00 p.m., Salt Lake Sheraton City Centre, 150 West 500 South.

The September Six--Mormon scholars and feminists disciplined ten years ago--will share where their spiritual paths have taken them in the last ten years. No two of the six have ended up in the same place, but all have significant stories to tell.

They are Avraham Gileadi, who will be represented on the panel by his biographer, Brian Stuy, Lynne Kanavel Whitesides, D. Michael Quinn, Paul James Toscano, Maxine Hanks, and Lavina Fielding Anderson.

ORGANIZATIONAL STATEMENT

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