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# THE SIN "NEXT TO MURDER": AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION

*By Michael R. Ash*

**T**RADITIONALLY, LATTER-DAY SAINTS HAVE RANKED sexual transgressions as "next to murder" in order of serious sins. In 1942, the First Presidency of Heber J. Grant, J. Reuben Clark, and David O. McKay declared that "sexual sin—the illicit sexual relations of men and women—stands, in its enormity, next to murder."<sup>1</sup> "Breaking the law of chastity," wrote President Kimball, "is one of the most serious sins next to murder."<sup>2</sup> "In the category of sins," explained President Ezra Taft Benson, "unchastity stands next to murder."<sup>3</sup> Adultery, Harold B. Lee said in a priesthood address, is "one of the greatest of all the sins next to murder."<sup>4</sup>

Invariably, the scriptural support for such a claim is based on Alma 39:5, wherein Alma (the Younger) reprimands his son Corianton who, while on a mission to the Zoramites, ran off to chase a harlot:

Know ye not, my son, that these things are an abomination in the sight of the Lord; yea, most abominable above all sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood or denying the Holy Ghost?

This verse seems to be the impetus for the LDS belief that sexual transgressions are second only to "murder" in the eyes of the Lord. While this may be one valid interpretation of Alma's comments, or at least a way of "likening" the scriptures to a serious problem among God's children, I believe there is a more logical interpretation of the "sin next to murder"—a sin that doesn't involve sexual transgression.

In noting a possible reinterpretation of Alma's words, I don't want to diminish the seriousness of sexual sins. Infidelity in

marriage is one of the leading causes of divorce and the break-up of families. Adultery destroys trust, damages self-esteem, and is linked to domestic violence and suicide, as well as suicide attempts by children of divorced parents.<sup>5</sup> Pre-marital sex often results in teen pregnancies, abortions, early marriages that frequently end in divorce, disease, single parenthood, and a host of other problems. Sexual sins are serious because they damage not only a person's spiritual well-being but also because they generally damage others as well. I also don't want to moderate the very serious nature of heinous sins—many of which are sexually related—such as rape, child molestation, torture, and so on.

However, when we examine Alma's reprimand in light of the entire thirty-ninth chapter as well as in light of other scriptures, we discover that Alma's admonition may be linked to another serious sin: causing the spiritual death of others.<sup>6</sup>

Chapter thirty-nine of Alma begins with Alma's comparing Corianton's actions with those of his more righteous brother Shiblon (both of whom were missionaries to the Zoramites).

And now, my son, I have somewhat more to say unto thee than what I said unto thy brother; for behold, have ye not observed the steadiness of thy brother, his faithfulness, and his diligence in keeping the commandments of God? Behold, has he not set a good example for thee?

For thou didst not give so much heed unto my words as did thy brother, among the people of the Zoramites. Now this is what I have against thee; thou didst go on unto boasting in thy strength and thy wisdom. (Alma 39:1–2)

Shiblon was faithful and diligent and showed "patience" and "long-suffering" to the Zoramites (Alma 38:3). Alma had counseled Shiblon against boasting or relying too much on his own strength (Alma 38:11)—the very things wherein



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Corianton failed. “*This is what I have against thee,*” complained Alma. But there was more:

And this is not all, my son. Thou didst do that which was grievous unto me; for thou didst forsake the ministry, and did go over into the land of Siron among the borders of the Lamanites, after the harlot Isabel. (Alma 39:3)

In the Bible, we find that harlots were not only prostitutes, but also that the word “harlot,” and imagery associated with harlots, is sometimes used metaphorically for those who practice idolatry (Jeremiah 3:1). Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Isaiah lamented the wickedness of Jerusalem, calling her a “harlot” who had worshiped false gods (Ezekiel 16, Jeremiah 3, Isaiah 1:21). In 1 Nephi, we read that the great and abominable church would be responsible for the apostasy in the meridian of time. Both Nephi and John the Revelator refer to this group of people as the “mother of harlots” (1 Nephi 13:24; 14:16–17, Revelation 17:5).<sup>7</sup> Whereas sexual transgressors would literally leave their wives or moral values to chase after harlots, fallen members of the Lord’s people would metaphorically leave God to chase after the harlot of other gods.

Alma continues:

Yea, she [the harlot Isabel] did steal away the hearts of many; but this was no excuse for thee, my son. Thou shouldst have tended to the ministry wherewith thou wast entrusted. (Alma 39:4)

While it’s certainly possible (perhaps even likely) that it was the “hearts” of sexual desire which Isabel stole away from “many” others, it’s also possible that metaphorically she caused “many” to turn their hearts away from the Lord. In the Old Testament, the Lord strongly admonished the Israelites not to intermarry with non-Israelite women. Marriage to non-covenant women, warned the Lord, could cause their *hearts* to be “turned away” after idolatrous gods (1 Kings 11:2). King Solomon failed to heed this counsel, and eventually “his wives turned away his heart after other gods” (1 Kings 11:3).

In the Book of Mormon, “heart” is often associated with testimony. We read of hearts “pondering” the things of the spirit (2 Nephi 4:16) and groaning because of sins (2 Nephi 4:19). Hearts that are “hardened” will not enter the “rest of the Lord” (Alma 12:36). Hearts are swallowed up in pride (Alma 31:27) and set upon riches (Helaman 13:20). The righteous have changed hearts (Alma 5:7, 12–26). Alma frequently speaks of the heart. Zoram, he explains, who was the leader of the Zoramites—the very people to whom Corianton and Shiblon were sent to preach—was leading the hearts of the people to bow down to dumb idols (Alma 31:1). Likewise, Korihor preached that there could be no atonement and led “away the hearts of many” (Alma 30:18, 45).

Just after noting how Isabel stole “away the hearts of many,” Alma made his famous comment that “these things are an abomination in the sight of the Lord”—nearly as bad as murder, yet less severe than denying the Holy Ghost. “*These things*” suggests that there was more than one thing wrong with Corianton’s affair with Isabel. I believe that, perhaps, the more serious infraction was the resulting spiritual damage inflicted

upon others who had witnessed Corianton’s sinful actions.

One evidence for this claim is that if Alma’s primary concern with Corianton was sexual transgressions, one would think that most of the remainder of his discourse would focus on promiscuity. Yet immediately after noting the abominable nature of Corianton’s actions and the fact that his actions were second only to murder, which was second only to denying the Holy Ghost, Alma launches into a description of the unpardonable sin—to knowingly deny the Holy Ghost. Following this explication, Alma continues by explaining that “whosoever murdereth against the light and knowledge of God, it is not easy for him to obtain forgiveness” (Alma 39:6). Denying the Holy Ghost is unforgivable, but those who murder “against the light and knowledge of God” can receive forgiveness, albeit with great difficulty.

**W**HAT DOES IT mean to murder “against the light and knowledge of God,” and why does Alma feel the need to convey this information to Corianton at this time? Some have supposed that to “murder against the light and knowledge of God” refers to the shedding of innocent blood.<sup>8</sup> And this certainly is a possible interpretation. I believe, however, that in context of Corianton’s sin, there is a better interpretation.

In Alma 26:3, we read that some of the Lamanites, who once were “in darkness,” were “brought to behold the marvelous light of God”—in other words, they gained their own testimonies of the Gospel. When Alma relates his own conversion story, he recalls being “redeemed from the gall of bitterness and bonds of iniquity.” Where he had previously been in “the darkest abyss,” he finally beheld “the marvelous light of God” and his soul “pained no more” (Mosiah 27:29). Alma tells us that his ancestors, the Nephites, fell into transgression after having “so much light and so much knowledge given unto them of the Lord their God” (Alma 9:19). He also prophesies that four centuries after Christ would appear, the Nephites would again become iniquitous—sinning against “so great light and knowledge” (Alma 45:12). So while it’s possible that murdering against “the light and knowledge of God” could refer to shedding blood even while knowing it’s wrong, a better interpretation could be that Alma was referring to the sin—very closely related to the unpardonable sin—of killing (murdering) someone else’s testimony.

Why does Alma feel the need to share this with Corianton? In the very next verse, he says, “And now, my son, I would to God that ye had not been guilty of so great a crime. I would not dwell upon your crimes, to harrow up your soul, if it were not for your good” (verse 7). Corianton hadn’t shed innocent blood, yet Alma charges Corianton with the crime of murdering “against the light and knowledge of God.” While some may argue that this could still refer to Corianton’s moral discrepancies by nature of his *rebellious* against the things he had been taught (his “light and knowledge of God”), this verse doesn’t make such an implication. Instead, it accuses Corianton of *murder*—which generally refers to killing *someone else*—in this case, murdering someone else’s testi-



mony. Alma, as a young man (and before his conversion), had led others away from the Gospel. He was “a great hinderment to the prosperity of the church of God; stealing away the hearts of the people” (Mosiah 27:9). He confesses to Helaman that as a wayward young man, he “had murdered many of his [God’s] children, or rather led them away unto destruction” (Alma 36:14).<sup>9</sup> He now used the same terminology to note Corianton’s sin next to murder.

While Alma also counsels Corianton to “go no more after the lusts” of his “eyes” and to not let his heart be “led away” by “wicked harlots,” he explains to his son that such actions had brought a “great iniquity . . . upon the Zoramites; for when they saw your conduct *they would not believe in my words*” (Alma 39:9, 11; italics added). Corianton had indeed murdered the testimonies of numerous Zoramites. Alma continues his exhortation by noting:

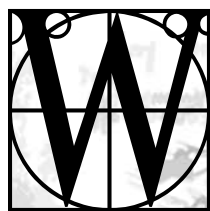
And now the Spirit of the Lord doth say unto me: Command thy children to do good, lest they lead away the hearts of many people to destruction; therefore I command you, my son, in the fear of God, that ye refrain from your iniquities;

That ye turn to the Lord with all your mind, might, and strength; that ye lead away the hearts of no more to do wickedly; but rather return unto them, and acknowledge your faults and that wrong which ye have done. (Alma 39:12–13)

Alma is very concerned that Corianton has damaged the testimony of others; because of his iniquities, he has led them away from God and to destruction. Corianton needs to repent and fix what he has done. Alma reiterates the future coming of Christ and tells Corianton that “this was the ministry unto which ye were called, to declare these glad tidings unto this people, to prepare their minds; or rather that salvation might come unto them, that they may prepare the minds of their children to hear the word at the time of his coming” (verse 16).

It appears that Alma framed his argument thusly: Corianton is guilty of leaving his mission to chase a harlot (either literally and/or figuratively). This harlot has damaged many testimonies already, and Corianton’s actions have also led some of the people to destruction instead of to God. Among Corianton’s sins is one that ranks next to the shedding of innocent blood, which ranks second only to the unpardonable sin of willfully denying the Holy Ghost. Corianton’s grievous sin, for which forgiveness is still possible albeit difficult, is murdering “against light and knowledge.” To murder or shed innocent blood (the most serious of the pardonable sins) is to extinguish someone’s life. To murder against light and knowledge is, I believe, in Alma’s logic, to extinguish someone’s testimony.

**T**HAT MURDER OF testimony ranks among the most serious of sins finds support in other scriptures as well. In Matthew 18, for instance, Jesus gathered several children to him and told his disciples that unless they were converted, humbled, and became like little children, they could not enter the kingdom of heaven (verses 1–4). “And,”



## WE WHO COMMUNICATE POTENTIALLY FAITH-CHALLENGING INFORMATION WOULD BE WISE TO EXAMINE OUR INNER MOTIVES.

Jesus continued, “whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me” (verse 5).

As noted in John Gill’s *Exposition of the Bible*, “one such little child in my name” is meant to be understood metaphorically—that is as this child.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, the “child” refers to a disciple who has humbly converted and become as a little child in Christ. Therefore whoever receives the follower of Christ, likewise receives Christ himself.<sup>11</sup> As Christ, in a different instance, said of his disciples: “He that receiveth you receiveth me” (Matthew 10:40). Of course the corollary is also true. “He that despiseth you despiseth me” (Luke 10:16). With this in mind, we turn to the next verse in Matthew 18 wherein Christ is counseling his disciples to become as little children: “But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (verse 6).

While Latter-day Saints and other Christians have often interpreted (or at least “likened”) this verse as a warning against harming a child,<sup>12</sup> in context, “these little ones which believe in me” refers to those who have become as children in Christ—humble followers of Christ.<sup>13</sup> The word the King James scholars translated as “offend” comes from the Greek *skandalizo* which means metaphorically “to put a stumbling block or impediment in the way, upon which another may trip and fall” or to cause someone to “fall away.”<sup>14</sup> The *New Living Translation* of the New Testament renders this verse as follows: “But if anyone causes one of these little ones who trusts in me to lose faith, it would be better for that person to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around the neck.”

Thus, Christ seems to be warning those who might destroy the testimony of others. They would be better off dead than being the cause of someone else’s loss of testimony. Christ must have viewed such a sin as extremely serious.

Interestingly, in the Doctrine and Covenants we read a similar warning about offending little ones, but in a context that doesn’t relate to actual children. As the prophet Joseph Smith lay confined in the jail at Liberty, Missouri, depressed about the trials that he and his followers had endured, he prayed for relief from suffering, both for himself and his fellow Saints, and asked the Lord to take vengeance on their enemies. The Lord responded with a message of peace and comfort, assuring the prophet that the trials would be “but a small moment” (D&C 121:7). Speaking of those who had brought pain and suffering to the Saints, the Lord said:

And they who do charge thee with transgression, their hope shall be blasted, and their prospects shall melt away as the hoar frost melteth before the burning rays of the rising sun. . . . Also because their hearts are corrupted, and the things which they are willing to bring upon others, and love to have others suffer, may come upon themselves to the very uttermost. . . .

Cursed are all those that shall lift up the heel against mine anointed, saith the Lord, and cry they have sinned when they have not sinned before me, saith the Lord, but have done that which was meet in mine eyes, and which I commanded them.

But those who cry transgression do it because they are the servants of sin, and are the children of disobedience themselves. And those who swear falsely against my servants, that they might bring them into bondage and death—Wo unto them; because they have offended my little ones they shall be severed from the ordinances of mine house.

Their basket shall not be full, their houses and their barns shall perish, and they themselves shall be despised by those that flattered them. . . . It had been better for them that a millstone had been hanged about their necks, and they drowned in the depth of the sea. (D&C 121:11–22)

Here we see that those who “offend” Christ’s people—“my servants” (whom the Lord calls “my little ones”)—will be “severed” from the everlasting ordinances performed in the temple. Such punishment speaks to the severity of the sin.

Others have also recognized that Jesus’ admonition about “offending” his “little ones” refers to destroying testimonies. Harold B. Lee declared:

The Lord issued a warning to those who would seek to destroy the faith of an individual or lead him away from the word of God or cause him to lose his grasp on the “iron rod.”

Then quoting Matthew 18:6, President Lee continues, “The Master was impressing the fact that rather than ruin the soul of a true believer, it would be better for a person to suffer an earthly death than to incur the penalty of jeopardizing his own eternal destiny.”<sup>16</sup>

The grievous view that Christ takes of those who cause believers to stumble lends support to the re-interpretation of Alma 39 I’ve undertaken here. Corianton’s sin-next-to-

## INFORMATION INOCULATION: HELPFUL OR HARMFUL?

**M**ANY YEARS AGO, I concluded that fewer members would be shocked out of the Church if they were taught the stickier issues of LDS history in faithful settings or from faithful literature. When members are introduced to peculiar or unconventional aspects of LDS history from LDS-critical sources, the natural inclination for some is to assume that the Church has “covered up” or “lied” about its past.

From my more than two decades of dealing with “ex” (or struggling) Mormons, I’ve found that feelings of betrayal and being lied to are the most frequent emotions felt by those who leave the Church for “intellectual” reasons. When feelings of betrayal overpower belief, faith is often lost and the original challenging discovery is no longer the issue; the greater issue becomes the feelings of infidelity and deception—feelings that are not easily overcome, even if serious answers are forthcoming later on. A testimony lost at this stage can be hard to restore. What might have been sufficient answers earlier become insufficient once resentment—as a result of presumably being deceived—replaces faith. As LDS scholar Kevin Barney once remarked to me, “People can absorb hard facts when presented in a context of faith. But they can’t absorb the feeling of being lied to.”<sup>1</sup>

Other LDS scholars, including D. Michael Quinn, have also noted the potential power of “inoculation” against these stickier issues. While I don’t completely agree with all points in Quinn’s important essay, “On Being a Mormon Historian,” I do agree that Latter-day Saints will encounter—even more so in today’s Internet age—the problematic issues from “other sources.” Mormon historians would be better off “seek[ing] to write candid Church history in a context of perspective in order to inoculate the Saints against the historical disease germs that apostates and anti-Mormons may thrust upon them.”<sup>2</sup>

LDS historical inoculation is analogous to viral inoculation both in immunizing subjects against more serious harm by exposing them to smaller doses of the virus in a controlled setting, as well as the potential risk from the inoculation itself. For example, while those who contract smallpox typically have a 20 to 40 percent mortality rate, those who are inoculated against smallpox have a mortality rate of 2 percent or less.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, it is unfortunate, but unavoidable, that some Latter-day Saints will lose their testimonies following LDS history inoculation or because of the actual inoculation. From my experience, however, those who survive inoculation with contra-conventional LDS information, generally preserve their testimonies when later faced with LDS-critical material.

Daniel Peterson, writing in a public forum, shared the following about a lecture he’d attended by the late Stanley Kimball regarding the complexity of LDS history.

He [Kimball] spoke of three levels of Mormon history. Level A, he said, is the Sunday School version.

Everything on Level A is obviously good and true and harmonious. Level B, however, is the anti-Mormon version of the same story. . . . On this level, everything that you thought was good and true and harmonious actually turns out to be evil and false and chaotic.

[Kimball] noted that the Church typically seeks to keep its members on Level A or, at least, feels no institutional obligation to bring them to a deeper level. Why? Because souls are lost on Level B. And, though Level C might be academically more desirable, it cannot be accessed without at least some exposure to Level B. Were he in a leadership position, [Kimball] said, he would probably make the same decision.

Once members of the Church have been exposed to Level B, though, he said, their only hope is to press on to the richer, more complicated version of history that is to be found on Level C—which, he contended and I agree, turns out to be essentially, and profoundly, like Level A. The only cure for bad historiography is better historiography. The only remedy for bad anti-Mormon arguments is better counterarguments. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Although inoculated Saints may retain their testimonies when confronted with contra-conventional information, most who are exposed to challenging issues emerge with slightly differing views than unexposed members have. An inoculated member may still believe in all the basic Mormon tenets but will generally reject naïve assumptions such as infallible prophets, error-free scripture, or other absolutes that lack clear revelation (all of which, I believe, are superior understandings about prophets and scripture). Some inoculated members may fit more closely in less-orthodox categories of belief such as “Liahona Saints”<sup>5</sup> or “Borderlanders.”<sup>6</sup>

It is important to consider the source from which one is introduced to challenging issues. In his perceptive book, *That Noble Dream*, Peter Novick argues that an absolutely objective history is an impossible ideal.<sup>7</sup> David Hackett Fischer, professor of history at Brandeis University, likewise argues, “The Baconian fallacy consists in the idea that a historian can operate without the aid of preconceived questions, hypotheses, ideas, assumptions, or general presuppositions of any kind.”<sup>8</sup> Both believing and non-believing historians who write Mormon history face not only their own biases but are also challenged at every turn with decisions about what information to present or withhold (or at least they must decide about what perspective to take on the information they present, or how they want to emphasize or de-emphasize it).

Non-believing historians are forced to deal with evidence that supports the traditional view of the supernatural beginnings of Mormonism. As Dan Vogel recently explained, for those (like himself) who do not believe in a historical Book of

Mormon nor the existence of Nephites, “then one is obliged to explain the plates and witnesses” with a theory “consistent with that conclusion.”<sup>9</sup>

For believing LDS scholars and historians, the challenge is often how to introduce inoculatory information into works written for LDS readers. As a participant in two different LDS-apologetic websites—[www.MormonFortress.com](http://www.MormonFortress.com) and [www.FAIRLDS.org](http://www.FAIRLDS.org)—which explore critical claims,<sup>10</sup> I’ve seen occasional emails from members who are shocked that there are so many arguments criticizing LDS claims, or express discouragement when they stumble upon rebuttals to topics they didn’t know were controversial. Other LDS apologists and I recognize that, for some members, just discovering that there are answers to troubling questions may be akin to opening a can of worms. But we also realize that by not addressing sticky issues, the Church runs the greater risk of appearing deceitful (even if by omission) as well as allowing critics the first opportunity to expose and set the tone for the challenging issue.

Believing historians face similar challenges. Richard L. Bushman, a believing historian, explains that most historians who believe in Mormonism’s faith claims are “dialogic”—“they are engaged in constant internal dialogue. They know how their story looks to the faithful, and they also know how it looks to the skeptics. The debate over credibility is waged in their own minds, not just in scholarly debate.”<sup>11</sup> He notes the difficulty of writing history for both believers and skeptics and that histories written for both (including those he’s written) sometimes seem a “trifle emaciated.”<sup>12</sup>

Writing for one audience alone—either believers or skeptics—permits you to make claims that simply won’t hold water if you write for both. A story that seems plausible to a secular audience falls apart when you tell it to Latter-day Saints.<sup>13</sup>

While Bushman doesn’t offer a solution for this dilemma, he does offer insight and advice. Dialogic historians, he explains, often have the advantage of being more aware of “the plight of readers and feel compelled to empathize with their predicaments.” As an example, he notes how Fawn Brodie’s “brilliant study . . . had no sympathy for the Mormon reader” as her book “mowed down the faithful with her account of Joseph Smith.”

More important she felt no need to address the objections that Mormon scholars might raise. She was on her way out of the faith and wanted to address the larger world. She played to its prejudices while disregarding believing scholarship. Some believing writers do the opposite. They play to Mormon prejudices while rejecting the larger world.<sup>14</sup>

From my experience, more member testimonies are shaken when challenging information is introduced from critical sources, who as Bushman notes, rarely “feel compelled to empathize” with the believing reader, than those who are introduced to the same information from faithful sources. Bushman advises believing scholars: “We need historians who

will mourn the failings of the Saints out of honor for God instead of relishing the warts because they show the Church was earthbound after all.”<sup>15</sup>

The ideal would be to see inoculation introduced in official Church venues—although arguments could be made that such a program is not pragmatic. Despite the fact (and contrary to the claims of some critics) that many unconventional LDS topics have been discussed in LDS literature—including Church magazines, *BYU Studies*, and even, in some cases, Sunday School School manuals<sup>16</sup>—the purpose of Church curriculum is to support the mission of the Church: to bring people to Christ, to help members draw closer to God, seek the Spirit, and understand gospel principles. Thousands of virtually untrained volunteer members (with varying degrees of gospel and historical knowledge) endeavor to bring the Spirit into the classroom so that class members can be spiritually edified. Certainly, some Gospel Doctrine teachers are knowledgeable enough to share detailed historical information, but manuals generally give basic historical outlines that specifically relate to a lesson that focuses on one or more gospel principles. Church is a place for worship, spiritual edification, and enlightenment, not for in-depth historical lessons. And while the *Ensign* can, and has, dealt with troubling issues, its primary goal is to enhance members’ understanding of gospel principles and provide articles on how to implement those principles into everyday lives.

Numerous LDS-related publishers, however, have blessed thousands with inoculatory writings, as have LDS websites and a growing number of Mormon blogs and message boards.<sup>17</sup> The recent publication of Richard Bushman’s *Rough Stone Rolling*,<sup>18</sup> and the forthcoming Church-initiated book on the Mountain Meadows Massacre,<sup>19</sup> all indicate that believing scholars recognize the need to deal with challenging historical issues.

As an Internet-active LDS apologist, I’ve read emails from members whose testimonies have been shattered by challenging material. I’ve also read emails from members whose faith has been enriched by pro-LDS material that candidly discusses the same challenging issues. Like never before, the Internet affords the average member access to once-obscure sources and information on Mormonism and LDS origins. Those members who take seriously the Lord’s counsel to learn by “study” as well as by “faith” (D&C 88:118) have a growing number of articles, books, and websites—both faithful and hostile—that offer contra-conventional or ancillary data about the Church and its history.

With the growth and popularity of the Internet, the Church may soon be forced to take a more proactive role in inoculating its members “against the historical disease germs that apostates and anti-Mormons may thrust upon them.”<sup>20</sup> Personally, I would welcome greater candor in the history articles and books published by the Church.

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murder was most likely that he led people away from Christ. If our joy will be great because we, after all our labors, bring a single soul to Christ (D&C 18:15), it stands to reason that our anguish will be just as great if we lead a single soul away from Christ.

**H**OW MIGHT SOMEONE destroy a testimony, create a stumbling block, or lead others away from Christ? I see at least two possibilities of which we must be mindful. First, like Corianton, we members of the Church might lead others away through our unrighteous or careless actions. For example: some of the early Christians were eating meat from the non-Christian temples. This wasn't against Christian doctrine, but some of those members who had converted from Judaism were bothered by it. Paul advised those members to "be careful . . . that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak."

For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall. (1 Corinthians 8:9–13, NIV)

Likewise, most of us have heard stories of non-members who have been offended by a holier-than-thou Latter-day Saint. As M. Russell Ballard notes, "I have heard about narrow-minded parents who tell children that they cannot play with a particular child in the neighborhood simply because his or her family does not belong to our Church. This kind of behavior is not in keeping with the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>17</sup> If our careless actions result in driving others away from the gospel, how severely do we suppose the Lord would look upon such actions?

We members of the Church often live in "fishbowls" and are frequently the subjects of close monitoring and inspection. If we set bad examples and commit serious offenses—such as Corianton's moral transgression—we may cause others to turn away from the gospel and the missionaries.

Second, some people intentionally lead others away from the gospel by the things they do, say, or write. Some critics, ex-members, and even borderland members<sup>18</sup> seem to take great joy in shocking less-informed members with some of the stickier parts of early LDS history or scriptural difficulties. One critical member, for instance, recently wrote to other disaffected members:

I would like to see . . . [the Church] come crashing down, but sooner rather than later. . . . I propose, and this is what I do, that those of you who know you are being lied to and who are fed up with it actively work to undermine it from within. Start doing something about it. Fight back. Many of you cannot leave the church because of family or other very real reasons. . . .

If you're in the church, start taking active steps to bring it down from within. . . . If you teach or are being taught, start asking a few difficult questions. . . . There are many other ways of bringing this church down; use your own imagination and creativity.<sup>19</sup>

Informed Latter-day Saints know the issues which can and have contributed to deconversion. And because we all have biases and approach topics with preconceived assumptions, these same challenging issues are often presented with drastically different spins. While faithful or apologetic LDS scholars may see a challenging historical event as evidence of the human nature of prophets, those who are critical of LDS claims often see the same event as evidence of fraud or pious fraud.

In 1981, Elder Boyd K. Packer gave a talk to Church educators entitled, "The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect." His presentation was directed primarily to Seminary and Institute instructors—instructors who, on the Church payroll, are entrusted with increasing the faith of young students of the gospel. He counseled these instructors to give milk before meat:

Teaching some things that are true, prematurely or at the wrong time, can invite sorrow or heartbreak instead of the joy intended to accompany learning. . . . It matters very much not only what we are told but when we are told it. Be careful that you build faith rather than destroy it. . . . A destroyer of faith—particularly one within the Church, and more particularly one who is employed to specifically build the faith—places himself in great spiritual jeopardy.<sup>20</sup>

Elder Packer's talk has received criticism from a variety of members, non-members, critics, and even believing scholars. Some of his comments have been construed as encouraging censorship or hiding unsavory aspects of Church history. While I share Elder Packer's concern that tithing-funded instructors build faith rather than destroy it, I also sympathize with D. Michael Quinn's observation that some LDS histories have avoided "difficulties of the Mormon past" and have, instead, "offered to the Saints. . . a mixture of platitudes, half-truths, omissions, and plausible denials."

Such a public-relations defense of the Church is actually a Maginot Line of sandy fortifications which "the enemy" can easily breach and which has been built up by digging lethal pits into which the Saints will stumble. A so-called "faith-promoting" Church history which conceals controversies and difficulties of the Mormon past actually undermines the faith of Latter-day Saints who eventually learn about the problems from other sources.<sup>21</sup>

I'm a firm believer that sunshine is the best disinfectant.<sup>22</sup> Exposing difficult issues often has inoculatory power. (See sidebar, pages 38–39.) Having said this, however, I also recognize that some members or investigators can stumble when confronted with untraditional information, wherein no blame can be laid upon the messenger. Some have claimed, for example, that Richard L. Bushman's *Rough Stone Rolling*—which

# HOW CAN WE KNOW WHO IS EXPOSING TROUBLING ISSUES WITH AN OBLIGATION TO BUILD TRUTH INSTEAD OF A DESIRE TO DESTROY TESTIMONY?

candidly discusses many untraditional and often challenging issues—has supposedly caused at least a few members to leave the Church.<sup>23</sup>

Joseph Smith also had members desert the Church when they stumbled over untraditional teachings.

Many men will say, “I will never forsake you, but will stand by you at all times.” But the moment you teach them some of the mysteries of the kingdom of God that are retained in the heavens and are to be revealed to the children of men when they are prepared for them they will be the first to stone you and put you to death.<sup>24</sup>

I have tried for a number of years to get the minds of the Saints prepared to receive the things of God; but we frequently see some of them, after suffering all they have for the work of God, will fly to pieces like glass as soon as anything comes that is contrary to their traditions: they cannot stand the fire at all.<sup>25</sup>

Some believers even left Christ himself when he taught things that were too difficult for them to accept.

Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father. From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him. (John 6:65–66)

If believers can be offended, stumble, or lose their testimonies simply because of the information they encounter, how can the person who disseminates this information be guilty of “offending such little ones” or committing a sin next to “the shedding of innocent blood”? Like most other righteous and unrighteous acts, I believe it’s relative to the intent of one’s heart. As Paul wrote to Timothy:

I thank Jesus Christ our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly because of unbelief. (Timothy 1:12–13)

Elder Packer, I believe, correctly pointed out that the “historian who delights in pointing out the weakness and frailties of past or present leaders destroys faith,”<sup>26</sup> and that for some historians, “the motive” to publish a warts-and-all history “is to destroy faith, if they can, and the Church, if they are able.”<sup>27</sup>

In a 1984 general conference address, Elder Dallin H. Oaks observed that there are at least six reasons why people perform righteous acts such as service. Some of the motives, however,

are less than stellar. The least desirable motive for serving is the “hope of earthly reward.” Those driven by such a motive seek prominence, honor, wealth, or power.

The scriptures have a word for gospel service “for the sake of riches and honor”; it is “priestcraft” (Alma 1:16). Nephi said, “Priestcrafts are that men preach and set themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of the world; but they seek not the welfare of Zion” (2 Nephi 26:29).<sup>28</sup>

Other non-ideal motives for service include “fear of punishment,” “a sense of duty or out of loyalty to friends or family or traditions,” and “hope of an eternal reward.” While all of these motives are valid reasons why people serve in the Church, they all, notes Oaks, are still motivated with *ourselves* in mind. The greatest reason to serve, explains Elder Oaks, is out of “charity” or “the pure love of Christ” (Moroni 7:47): “Our service should be for the love of God and the love of fellowmen rather than for personal advantage or any other lesser motive.”<sup>29</sup>

Logically there must be similarly good and bad motives for those who communicate potentially testimony-damaging information. So how can we know who is exposing troubling issues with an obligation to build truth instead of a desire to destroy testimony? We can’t know with any certainty. Occasionally we may be able to infer hypothetical motives from an author’s actions or past efforts, but since we are unable to see into another’s heart, we leave judgment to him who knows the thoughts and the intents of our hearts (D&C 6:16).

Personally, I choose to believe that the majority of Mormon scholarship (from both “orthodox” scholars and “revisionist” scholars)<sup>30</sup> is probably produced with integrity and an honest desire to convey issues and events according to each scholar’s interpretation of the evidence.<sup>31</sup> I suspect, however, that there are genuine instances of “wolves in sheep’s clothing”—critics who engage in subterfuge, enticing believers by deliberately masking their expositions as faithful formulations. Instead of faithful interpretations, however, such critics would, instead, paint their accounts with a patina of iconoclasm in order to crack the foundations of faith and to incite deconversion.

We who communicate potentially faith-challenging information would be wise to examine our inner motives. If our intentions are pure, I believe we will stand guiltless in regard to those who stumble over their own false or naïve assumptions. About those who have intentionally malicious motives, however—those who intend to “offend” and kill testimony—it seems that Alma and other prophets, and even the Lord him-



self, regard such an offense as nigh unto murder, and such perpetrators would metaphorically be better off with a millstone around their necks and drowned in the sea.<sup>32</sup>

## NOTES

1. "Message of the First Presidency," 3 October 1942, as quoted in *Messages of the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, comp. James R. Clark, 6 vols., (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75), 6:176.
2. Spencer W. Kimball, "Do You Remember Me?" *Tambuli* (June 1978), 49.
3. Ezra Taft Benson, "The Ten Commandments," *New Era* (July 1978), 37.
4. Harold B. Lee, "President Harold B. Lee's General Priesthood Address," *Ensign* (Jan. 1974), 101.
5. See <http://www.divorcereform.org/phys.html> (accessed 28 June 2006).
6. After I had written and submitted this article for publication, I discovered that I was not alone in this interpretation of Corianton's sin. See, for example, G. St. John Stott, "The Economics of Sin: Sexual Morality in an Ethos of Civic Republicanism," *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal*, 24 (2004): 57–73; B. W. Jorgensen, "Spiritual Chastity Lessons: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife, Corianton and the Harlot Isabel," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 7–34; and Richard C. Russell, "That's Not What It Says: Part II," presentation at the 2006 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium (tape/CD/download SL06325).
7. While some Latter-day Saints have perpetuated the myth that these verses refer to the Roman Catholic Church, such a belief is largely influenced by earlier Protestant views and does not reflect official LDS doctrine. See Stephen E. Robinson, "Warring against the Saints of God," *Ensign* (Jan. 1988), 34–40; Stephen E. Robinson, "Nephi's 'Great and Abominable Church,'" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* (1998), 7:1, 32–39; and Michael R. Ash, "Mormon Myths: Great and Abominable Church," at <http://www.mormonfortress.com/ga.html> (accessed 5 July 2006).
8. See, for example, [http://www.answerbag.com/q\\_view.php/21209](http://www.answerbag.com/q_view.php/21209) (accessed 13 July 2006).
9. Both of these scriptural supports are included in Jorgensen, "Spiritual Chastity," 27.
10. See <http://bible.crosswalk.com/Commentaries/GillsExpositionoftheBible/gil.cgi?book=mt&chapter=18&verse=5> (accessed 8 July 2006).
11. *Ibid.*
12. See, for example, Boyd K. Packer, "Little Children," *Ensign* (November 1986), 16; Joel Marcus, "The Millstone," *The Christian Century* (13 September 2000) at <http://www.highbeam.com/library/docFree.asp?DOCID=1G1:65702746> (accessed 13 July 2006).
13. See, for instance, "Introduction to Matthew's Gospel," in *Footnotes to the New Testament for Latter-day Saints*, ed. Kevin L. Barney. Commenting on verse 6

we read: "the 'little ones' refers to the disciples, esp. recent converts" (page 76, n. 995), available online at [http://feastupontheword.org/upload/7/78/07\\_Matthew.pdf](http://feastupontheword.org/upload/7/78/07_Matthew.pdf) (accessed 4 October 2006).

14. See <http://bible.crosswalk.com/Lexicons/Greek/grk.cgi?number=4624&version=kjv> (accessed 8 July 2006).
16. Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places: Selected Sermons of President Harold B. Lee* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1974), 355.
17. M. Russell Ballard, "Doctrine of Inclusion," *Ensign* (November 2001), 36.
18. This term, which describes members of the Church whose views seem to be at the "borders" of traditional LDS beliefs, was coined by D. Jeff Burton who writes a SUNSTONE column entitled, "Braving the Borderlands" (which first appeared in the April 2002 issue).
19. "Howard," posted 23 June 2006 in the thread, "Destroying the church from within," at [http://www.exmormon.org/boards/w-agera/view.php?bn=ex-mobb\\_recovery&key=1151113937&newest=115117798](http://www.exmormon.org/boards/w-agera/view.php?bn=ex-mobb_recovery&key=1151113937&newest=115117798) (accessed 25 June 2006).
20. Boyd K. Packer, "The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect," *BYU Studies* 21, no. 3 (Summer 1981), 265–66.
21. D. Michael Quinn, "On Being a Mormon Historian (and Its Aftermath)," *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History*, ed., George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 86–87.
22. It seems that this term was first coined by Supreme Court Justice, Louis D. Brandeis, who wrote in his 1914 book, *Other People's Money—and How the Bankers Use It* (New York: Stokes), "Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants." See chapter 5, "What Publicity Can Do," available on-line at <http://library.louisville.edu/law/brandeis/opm-ch5.html> (accessed 4 October 2006).
- A very powerful statement of this same principle was given by Martin Luther King Jr. in his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail." In response to the accusation that he and his cohorts were creating tension rather than helping matters, King wrote: "We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured as long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its pus-flowing ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must likewise be exposed, with all of the tension its exposing creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Letter\\_from\\_Birmingham\\_Jail](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Letter_from_Birmingham_Jail) (accessed 15 October 2006).
23. "DanseMacabre," posted 25 June 2006 in the thread, "Joseph Smith—Rough Stone Rolling, by Richard Bushman," at <http://extras.satrib.com/tribtalk/showthread.php?t=3754> (accessed 5 July 2006).
24. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 309.
25. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1978), 6:184–85.
26. Packer, "The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect," 266.
27. *Ibid.*, 269.
28. Dallin H. Oaks, "Why Do We Serve?" *Ensign* (November 1984), 13.
29. *Ibid.*, 14.
30. For an interesting discussion of orthodox scholars, revisionist scholars, and apologists, see John-Charles Duffy, "Defending the Kingdom, Rethinking the Faith: How Apologetics Is Reshaping Mormon Orthodoxy," *SUNSTONE* (May 2004), 22–55; also available on-line at [http://www.sunstoneonline.com/magazine/issues/132/Defending\\_the\\_Kingdom.pdf](http://www.sunstoneonline.com/magazine/issues/132/Defending_the_Kingdom.pdf) (accessed 11 July 2006). Duffy seems to take a humor-impaired approach to apologetic discourse. While "funny" is in the eye of the beholder, Duffy often sees "verbal aggression," "hostility" and "contempt" in writings which are generally meant to be tongue-in-cheek. Compare, for instance, some of Duffy's examples (p. 27) with those posted at <http://www.mormonfortress.com/gloss2.html> (accessed 11 July 2006). Despite this shortcoming, however, Duffy offers a valuable overview of the clash between the orthodox and revisionist scholars.
31. I'm also on record for acknowledging that

## THE FLOCK



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many of the critical arguments help to advance LDS scholarship; see Michael R. Ash, "The Impact of Mormon Critics on LDS Scholarship," at [http://www.fairlds.org/FAIR\\_Conferences/\\_Impact\\_of\\_Mormon\\_Critics\\_on\\_LDS\\_Scholarship.html](http://www.fairlds.org/FAIR_Conferences/_Impact_of_Mormon_Critics_on_LDS_Scholarship.html) (accessed 11 July 2006).

32. See, for instance, Matthew 18:6 and D&C 121:22.

#### NOTES TO "INFORMATION INOCULATION" SIDEBAR

1. Kevin Barney, personal communication with author, 4 February 2006.

2. D. Michael Quinn, "On Being a Mormon Historian (and Its Aftermath)," *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History*, ed., George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 88. Quinn, "On Being a Mormon Historian," 88. For additional thoughts on LDS inoculation, see D. Jeff Burton's column, "Coping with a Deadly Pandemic," in *SUNSTONE*, September 2006, 60–61; the blog post by Clark Goble, "The Value of Inoculations," at the Millennial Star Blog, 28 October 2005, at [http://www.millennialstar.org/index.php/2005/10/28/the\\_value\\_of\\_inoculations](http://www.millennialstar.org/index.php/2005/10/28/the_value_of_inoculations) (accessed 4 October 2006); and the blog post by Kevin Barney, "Missionary Malpractice, per se," at the By Common Consent blog, 14 October 2006 at: <http://www.bycommonconsent.com/2006/10/missionary-malpractice-per-se/> (accessed 17 October 2006).

3. See, "Smallpox" on Wikipedia at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smallpox> (accessed 7 October 2006).

4. Daniel Peterson, posted 9 May 2005 in the thread, "Elite Religion and Common Religion," on Times and Seasons Blog at <http://www.timesandseasons.org/archives/000739.html#011470> (accessed 17 April 2005).

5. This term was coined by Richard D. Poll, "What the Church Means to People Like Me," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 2, no. 4 (Winter, 1967): 107–118. Poll suggests that many Saints are either "Iron Rod Saints" or "Liahona Saints." "Iron Rod Saints," Poll explains, "do not look for questions, but for answers, and in the Gospel—as he understands it—he finds, or is confident that he can find the answer to every important question. The Liahona Saint, on the other hand, is preoccupied with questions and is skeptical of answers; he finds in the Gospel—as he understands it—answers to enough important questions so that he can function purposefully without answers to the rest" (108).

6. This term was coined by Jeff Burton who writes a regular *SUNSTONE* column entitled, "Braving the Borderlands." Burton's column addresses those members who seem to be at the "borders" of LDS belief—"those members who consider themselves faithful to and part of the Church" but don't fit comfortably with the unwavering core members or "true believers." See *SUNSTONE*, December 2003, 67.

7. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge University, 1988). For a review of Novick and the application of his book to the Mormon historical community, see Louis Midgley, "The Myth of Objectivity: Some Lessons for Latter-day Saints," *SUNSTONE*, August 1990, 54–56; Midgley, review of *That Noble Dream*, *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal*, 10 (1990): 102–04; and Midgley, "Editor's Introduction: Knowing Brother Joseph Again," *FARMS Review* 18, no. 1 (2006): xlv–lvi.

8. David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1970), 4.

9. Dan Vogel, posted 24 August 2006 in the thread, "Gold Plates vs Tin Plates, Can Dan Vogel be right?" on [FAIRboards.org](http://www.fairboards.org) at

<http://www.fairboards.org/index.php?showtopic=17333&st=60&entry1208014389> (accessed 25 Aug-ust 2006).

10. See <http://www.mormonfortress.com/crit-fr1.html>, [www.fairwiki.org](http://www.fairwiki.org), and <http://www.fairlds.org/apol/> (accessed 8 October 2006).

11. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, eds. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 280.

12. *Ibid.*, 281.

13. *Ibid.*, 280.

14. *Ibid.*, 281–82.

15. *Ibid.*, 11.

16. A list of challenging topics and the LDS publications in which they are addressed is included in my manuscript, "Shaken-Faith Syndrome: Resolving Anit-Mormon Difficulties," currently seeking publication.

17. I'm thinking here of magazines such as *SUNSTONE*, *Dialogue*, *BYU Studies*, and many things found under the FARMS imprimatur. Some websites which serve in this way are: [www.FAIRlds.org](http://www.FAIRlds.org), [www.MormonFortress.com](http://www.MormonFortress.com), [www.SHIELDS-Research.org](http://www.SHIELDS-Research.org), [www.FARMSresearch.com](http://www.FARMSresearch.com), <http://www.jefflindsay.com/LDSFAQ/index.html>, <http://www.lightplanet.com/response/>, <http://www2.ida.net/graphics/shirtail/mormonism.htm>, and many others. Among the better blogs that often have inoculatory writings are: [www.fairboards.org](http://www.fairboards.org), <http://pub26.ezboard.com/bpacumenispages>, [timesandseasons.org](http://timesandseasons.org), [www.bycommonconsent.com](http://www.bycommonconsent.com), [www.millennialstar.org](http://www.millennialstar.org), and [www.Sunstoneblog.com](http://www.Sunstoneblog.com).

18. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

19. See [http://experts.about.com/e/m/mo/Mountain\\_Meadows\\_Massacre.htm](http://experts.about.com/e/m/mo/Mountain_Meadows_Massacre.htm) as well as sound bites about the forthcoming book at: <http://www.lds.org/newsroom/extra/0,15505,3881-1—34-615,00.html>.

20. Quinn, "On Being a Mormon Historian," 88.



## I HAVE SET BEFORE THEE

Outside, beyond our glass doors, past the red feeder for the hummingbirds, past the patch of yard and beyond the green feeder where we've seen goldfinch and flickers and once a western tanager, and the merlin hawk, and the robins that wash in the bath in spring, and the pigeons and sparrows, past the tipping rail fence, down the hill over the big metal ears of the satellite dishes, Lake Union flutters in silver-blue, lifting off float planes, holding white sails and sometimes red, and at the Tuesday night regatta, spinnakers like halved circus balloons, and there are the big powerboats like gross slices of cake, but also lovely ones like Barrymore's old wooden yacht, cruising antique elegance. Across the lake a huge steel crane hangs over the Dry Docks, to the south "Zymergenetics" boasts fake smokestacks of the re-done utility building. Up the hill is I-5, cars in the early sun like ball bearings rolling on and on. Above the highway a fulsome basket of trees and at the top St. Mark's solid as a fortress looking down through the eye of his enormous rose window. The sun lifts higher and I think how this day has set before me the true and the made-up, the sane and the mad, the beautiful and the not beautiful, and I get to choose.

—CLIFFORD PAUL FETTERS