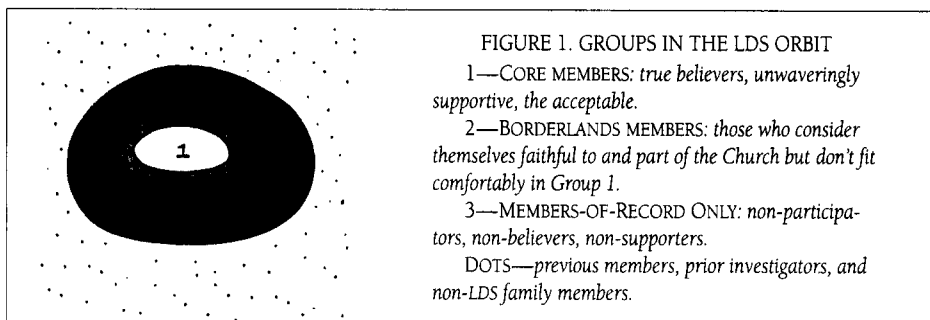


TEMPTATION AND THE KNOWLEDGE CLASH

By D. Jeff Burton



IN THIS COLUMN, I touch on the impact on Borderlanders of two issues: temptation and what some call the “knowledge clash.” I have garnered many of the ideas and thoughts I share here from several sources.¹

TEMPTATION

SEVERAL puzzled people have asked me about the two “Wormwood” columns (SUNSTONE, November 2006 and December 2005). Apparently some Borderlanders have not had the delicious experience of reading C.S. Lewis’s *The Screwtape Letters*. The book is based on the very clever premise of an “advanced” devil of Satan’s underworld (Screwtape) instructing his novice devil nephew (Wormwood) how to tempt mortals into sinful behavior. My two “Wormwood” columns are an attempt to show how Satan’s minions might tailor traditional Christian temptations to Mormons, enticing us into less-than-wholesome thinking, attitudes and behaviors.

Coincidentally, President Faust wrote a piece about Satan and temptation in the January 2007 *Ensign*. Among other things, he suggests that Mormons do not always recognize temptation. Certainly Latter-day Saints recognize oft-mentioned and uniquely Mormon temptations such as skipping church, having a latte, skimping on their tithing, not doing their home or visiting teaching, or ignoring the counsel of Church leaders. But some Saints are less inclined,

perhaps, to recognize the more subtle kinds of temptations described in the Wormwood columns that relate to Jesus’ teachings about moral living.

Borderlanders also recognize the typical Mormon temptations, and most of us have no special advantage over core members—e.g., immunity from temptation or unique insights into temptation. Indeed, we may sometimes excuse ourselves and our behaviors as having “moved beyond organized religion and its silly rituals and rules.” Some of us rationalize our way into behaviors, attitudes, and thinking that may actually put us on the “road to below.” Recognizing these attitudes in ourselves is another theme I was attempting to wrestle with in the Wormwood columns. Even Borderlanders who have progressed into more deeply felt and peaceful spiritual stages need to be ever vigilant to avoid the subtle but advanced temptations of modern life.²

Now my challenge: Think deeply and critically about Jesus’ basic teachings, and then make a serious commitment to identify times and places when you feel tempted to diverge from one of his principles. (Be sure to start with just one principle.) For example, try adhering faithfully to the most basic of all, the principle of *honesty*. In every discussion, transaction, communication, and issue that faces you in the next month, try to make yourself become aware of when you are being tempted to be less than totally honest. It will be an exhilarating (and very often troubling) experience with temptation.³

I CAN touch on only one or two aspects of this broad (and maybe overworked) subject. I’ll start by summarizing a recent review by Trent D. Stephens of Duwayne R. Anderson’s new book, *Farewell to Eden: Coming to Terms with Mormonism and Science*.⁴

Stephens begins his review by observing that at some time in their lives “almost all thinking persons”⁵ experience a “clash” between their religious faith and beliefs and what they perceive as “the facts.” Most Borderlanders will recognize this “clash” experience. To an unsuspecting, young, naive, or inexperienced intellectual, it can be devastating.

During his early twenties, Anderson’s clash was precipitated by his reading of the Old Testament and his discovery there of what he calls the “most unimaginable inhumanity and violent crime.” Anderson found his subsequent experiences with his family, bishop, and stake president very troubling. Stephens describes how shortly thereafter, Anderson, unable to resolve his concerns, drifted away from the Church, explored anti-Mormon websites and anti-Mormon literature, and so forth. Stephens avers that Anderson is one who now believes that the only people who remain active in the Church are either “liars or idiots.”

Like most of us when we hear of these sad tales, Stephens had his heart broken as he read Anderson’s story—a young intellectual trying to know the truth and then futilely trying to get help as the clash escalated into an explosion. Stephens closes his review with the lament that “there goes another fine young intellectual from the Church.”

Stephens notes that the *Church Handbook of Instruction* provides information on how to handle marriage, abuse, and financial and legal problems but is mighty skimpy on how to handle intellectual “clashes.” He suggests that something be done—namely, that bishops and stake presidents be given a list of scientists who are strong, active members. That way, when these leaders encounter a science student who is experiencing a “clash,” they can direct the student to someone who could acknowledge and honor their journey while also assuring them that they are not alone, that others have had similar experiences, and that reconciliation with Mormon theology is possible. In short, these scientists might be able to model for or point out to the struggling person alternatives to jumping ship.⁶



"VIRGIL AND DANTE" BY GUSTAVE DORE

THE FACTS” are rarely rock-solid. There is no final point when we “understand everything,” especially pertaining to nature, religion, and God.

(3) *Reason and logic*—e.g., deductive and inductive reasoning used to discover facts independently of direct observation of all instances: things that fly have wings; birds fly; therefore, birds have wings.

(4) *Innate ideas*—e.g., truths that seem to be inborn, simply in our genetic makeup or, in LDS parlance, from “the pre-existence.”

(5) *Inspiration or indirect revelation*—e.g., insights that occur as we read scripture or that arise in conversation with friends or some other chance interaction or coincidence.

(6) *Direct revelation*—e.g., a stronger form of inspiration; knowledge or insights that come through direct answers to prayer or through visions or dreams.

I think if we were to discuss this matter on the Sunstone blog, we’d find that most of us believe, in varying degrees, that all six sources have in some way contributed to our personal beliefs and knowledge. Certainly sources 1–3 are common and well-recognized, 4 (genetics) is probable for most, and 5 and 6 (inspiration or indirect and direct revelation) are possible. We also would recognize, however, that none of the first five are fully reliable or accurate—i.e., was that comment on *Oprah* a message from God sent in answer to prayer or just good common sense? Even source 6 (direct revelation) might be questionable (when received by a schizophrenic, for example).

To a great extent, we are all scientists employing knowledge source 1. We constantly make inferences from our experiences and draw conclusions which govern our actions. When the alarm clock rings, I “know” morning has arrived. (Yet, as a natural skeptic, I confess to still looking closely at the alarm clock, then at my watch.) Inserting my key into the front door, I believe the door will open. In fact, my experience with the house keys is so successful that I “know” the door will open. I know that stepping on the brake will stop the car. I put a lot of trust in my beliefs about those brakes. The point is, we run our lives by the beliefs and knowledge developed through our sensory experiences and the subsequent *faith* that experience and knowledge engender in us.

Another common knowledge source we all rely on is the “voice of authority,” espe-

cially when we are young. Our teachers, our parents, or books we read may have told us that God would answer our prayers. The authority of those sources was strong enough for us to believe that it would happen. Our Primary teachers told us that the Book of Mormon is an authentic history of early America. And so forth.

Socrates made great contributions to our understanding of how we acquire beliefs and knowledge through logical reasoning (source 3). Logic is either deductive (starting with a general principle and applying it to particulars) or inductive (starting with facts and generalizing). Socrates’s major contribution was his suggestion that sense perception is not an infallible approach to obtaining genuine, true knowledge. Our experiences can deceive us. But if we’re not careful, logic can also fail us. (Rockets don’t have wings.)

Other Greek philosophers suggested that although beliefs and knowledge originate in sense perceptions and are refined and put to use through reason, that knowledge also depends upon the individual knower. Somehow, seemingly identical sense perceptions and subsequent reasoning can lead to different individual beliefs and “knowledge.” For example, when a Church leader speaks about the need for unquestioning obedience, it sounds very reasonable to some, suspect to a few, and quite curious or even downright baffling to others.

Plato may have been the first to suggest that the soul came to the world already equipped with certain knowledge, a suggestion many Latter-day Saints find harmonious with the gospel’s teachings about a premortal existence and eternal progression. The role of genetic factors and inherited knowledge is not clear, but they also seem likely to be sources of some types of knowledge.

During the early Christian era, Augustine taught that humans received knowledge through revelation. Revealed knowledge was necessary for “higher forms of living,” granted as a gift through faith. This led him to delineate two levels of truth: that which originates in and is upheld by experience and objective reasoning, and that which is gained by inspiration and revelation (and substantiated by faith and the authority of the church).

THIS review brought to mind the question of how young people come to understand or know the Mormon world around them—e.g., what the Book of Mormon is, the role of the Church in their lives, their relationships to God and Jesus, where they fit into the Mormon picture, and so forth. More basically, we might ask: What is knowledge? How do we come to know what we know? How do we come to believe something? And then how do we suddenly become confronted with pesky, seemingly contrary “facts”?

Scholars on both sides of the science/religion paradigm have suggested the following six sources of belief and knowledge:

(1) *Natural, sensory, empirical experiences*—e.g., information that comes through the “scientific method”: observing, hypothesizing, experimenting, drawing conclusions.

(2) *Voices of authority*—e.g., parents, teachers, Church leaders, and others whom we trust.

GIVEN this brief background on how we acquire our beliefs and knowledge, what might have happened in the development of Duwayne Anderson's Mormon religious beliefs and knowledge? Rather than speculate on Anderson's exact path, I propose the following as a fairly typical sequence for this type of struggle:

A person learns about Mormonism from source 2 (voices of authority). These authorities tell him or her that the Church is the "only true church"; that the God of the Israelites was a benevolent, loving God; that Joseph was a prophet; that the Book of Mormon was compiled by an ancient American prophet in the fifth century A.D.; and so forth.

As they grow into and through their teens, they pick up additional beliefs and knowledge about the gospel and Church history through other sources—e.g., experience of the "Spirit" at a youth trek testimony meeting; reasoning that of course the "red skin" of Indians came upon them as a curse as described in the Book of Mormon; the testimony that our warm feelings when praying are God communicating with us; and so forth.

Then comes college and adulthood. Source 1 (experience) becomes primary, and different authorities (source 2) also appear. Reason and logic (source 3) are re-explored and re-examined. New knowledge is accumulated that conflicts with existing understandings. The clash occurs.

We who want to assist young members in dealing with such knowledge clashes can intervene at any stage of development. I will explore this in future columns, but in a recent column ("Coping with a Deadly Pandemic," *SUNSTONE*, September 2006), I described an "inoculation" approach that might work for some, especially if it occurs early on. Many write me to say that they have found the first chapter of my book *For Those Who Wonder*, titled, "Helping Those with Religious Questions and Doubts," helpful.⁷

It is important to point out to our troubled friends that "the facts" are rarely rock-solid. We approach knowledge or understanding asymptotically, i.e., we never reach a perfect knowledge or understanding of anything. Science and statistics have developed elaborate methods for testing, verifying, and strengthening the evidence on which beliefs and knowledge are based, but no test produces perfect knowledge. There is no final point when we "understand everything," especially pertaining to nature, religion, and God.

Jesus' teachings were primarily per-

sonal—how to act, how to behave, how to think, what kinds of attitudes to cultivate, etc. As part of our religious lives, we are developing personal understandings of life, personal relationships with our Father in Heaven, and personal religions based on Jesus' (and the Church's) teachings. When I die and stand at the judgment-bar, I'll be answering for myself. I will be there (ideally with my spouse and family) telling the whats and whys of my actions and about my motives. Church officials won't be there to make excuses for me.

So another good early step is to help our friends define, develop, and cultivate satisfying personal religions, based on the teachings of Jesus and other worthy spiritual, moral, and ethical precepts. Joseph Smith, for example, gave us some pretty good concepts for living a good life. The Church suggests excellent principles of living. Since most of us have magnetic and sticky ties to the Church, we ought to try to make our personal religion compatible with the LDS model of a personal religion. We can be good followers of Jesus as Latter-day Saints.

THIS column has been mostly "talk." Intellectualizing. Preaching to the choir, perhaps. But let's bring this to a close at the personal level: If you are at this time experiencing a "clash," I suggest that you slow down, consider all the ramifications, and stay with us in the Borderlands at least until you can sort out the issues and make decisions which will be most beneficial for you and for those around you. ☞

NOTES

1. Whether acknowledged directly in the text or not, among the sources I've drawn insights from here are: C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (San Francisco: Harper/Vondervan, 1942); Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco: 2006); and James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995).

2. James W. Fowler describes a calm "Stage Five" faith as "alive to [accepting] the paradox and truth of contradictions," as unifying "opposites in mind and experience," as having a "commitment to justice [and being] freed from the confines of class, nation, religion, and community." He describes "Stage Six" as characterized by serenity: "[having] perfect love, lack of division, universalizing faith, being heedless of threats to self," and other idealizations. His *Stages of Faith* is one of the most insightful books ever written about personal religious development.

3. About four-and-a-half years ago, I decided to try to concentrate on a few basic Jesus-taught principles and become more aware of my behaviors.

Among these were the principles of honesty and generosity. Needless to say, I was shocked when I realized the difficulty in consistently applying these "simple" principles and recognized the temptations that so often occur to break down the most basic principles of living. I'm still struggling.

4. Trent D. Stephens, review of Duwayne R. Anderson's, *Farewell to Eden: Coming to Terms with Mormonism and Science*, by Duwayne R. Anderson, *Journal of Mormon History* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 209–13.

5. I think most readers will understand who Stephens is referring to with the term "thinking persons," but everyone believes they are "thinkers." So we might want to substitute the words "intellectuals," "skeptics," "scholars," "those who follow the scientific approach," "the science-educated" and other similar terms.

6. Trent Stephens, in an exchange of emails with me, wrote that he has an idea to start a grassroots group of people experienced in "science/religion" clashes who would provide support for people such as Anderson. If you would like to volunteer or have ideas on how to proceed with this idea, you can contact Stephens at his email address: STEPTREN@ISU.EDU. The big problem, of course, is reaching those struggling with these issues before their clashes become catastrophes.

7. Versions of Chapter 1 have appeared in the *Association of Mormon Counselors and Psychotherapists (AMCAP) Journal*; in the book *Counseling—A Guide to Helping Others*, vol. 2, eds. R. Lanier Britsch and Terrance D. Olson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; 1990); *Exponent II*; and in *This People* magazine. A copy of the latest edition of *For Those Who Wonder* (as well as past Borderland columns) is available free from WWW.FORTHOSEWHOWONDER.COM.

Please send me any of your experiences or tales from life in the Borderlands.

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