

# INTERPRETER

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A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 28 · 2018 · Pages vii-xiv

## The Word and the Kingdom

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)  
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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# THE WORD AND THE KINGDOM

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Daniel C. Peterson

**Abstract:** *Members of the Church have been charged since ancient times with the covenant need to share the Gospel message with those around them. In more recent times, this has been described as a need for “every member” to be a missionary. There are many ways that we can do so through the use of modern technology and the dedication of our talents. The “ministry of the word” beckons each of us onward.*

Acts 6:4 describes the ancient Christian apostles as engaged, shortly after the death and resurrection of Jesus, in the “ministry of the word [*diakonia tou logou*].”<sup>1</sup> But, evidently, it wasn’t only the apostles who were so engaged. Acts 8:4 suggests that other early Christian disciples “went every where preaching the word [*ton logon*].” The New International Version (NIV) rendering of the passage puts it slightly differently, saying that those who had been scattered by early anti-Christian persecution that broke out in Jerusalem “preached the word wherever they went.”

Since ancient Greek manuscripts lack capitalization in the sense that English uses it, there’s a possibility that when these scriptural passages describe the early apostles and other Christians as “preaching the word,” they’re referring to “the Word” — or, to express it another way, to the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, whom John 1:1 terms “the Logos.” (Indeed, in one sense, that is inescapably and necessarily what they were doing.)

I doubt very much, however, that the distinctively Johannine use of the Greek term *logos* is relevant here. Instead, I’m inclined to think that

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1. Unless indicated otherwise, English biblical quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible. Acts 6:2 uses similar language to describe the apostles’ reluctance to abandon “the word of God” (*ton logon tou theou*) in order “to wait on tables” or “to serve tables” (*diakonein trapezein*). The noun *diakonia* and the infinitive verb *diakonein* are both related to the English word *deacon*.

the text simply means they were out speaking with non-Christians about the message of Christianity — they were using words.

In 1 Peter 4:10–11, the chief of the apostles (or someone writing on his behalf) counsels his early fellow-disciples in the following manner:

As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If any man speak [*lalei*], let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister [*diakonei*], let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever.

Perhaps, though, it might be helpful to see this same passage in more modern language. I turn, once again, to the NIV:

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves [*diakonei*], they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever.

Let’s look more closely at the sentence, “If anyone speaks [*lalei*], they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God [*logia theou*].”

The NIV’s translation of *logia theou* as “the very words of God” is far superior to the King James rendering “as the oracles of God” — far less confusing, anyway, for modern readers. It makes clear that early Christians weren’t merely preaching the Word but that, unsurprisingly because unavoidably, they were communicating the Christian message in words.

Let’s go just a little bit further, though. The word used in 1 Peter 4:11 for “speaking” is the Greek verb *laleo* or (in its infinitive form) *lalein*. It’s the same verb used, in its appropriate conjugation, for the religious teaching of Jesus at Matthew 12:46, for the Savior’s speaking in parables at Matthew 13:10, and for Paul’s preaching at 2 Corinthians 12:19. But it’s also the word employed for ordinary daily speech among ordinary people. It’s used, for example, to refer to idle or careless speaking at Matthew 12:36 as well as for talking with neighbors at Ephesians 4:25 and for general daily conversation at James 1:19.

I want to suggest here, therefore, that the “ministry of the word” doesn’t pertain only to formal sermons. It doesn’t belong only to ordained apostles and Church leaders or to full-time missionaries. I contend that it pertains to all members of the Church, to every Latter-day Saint — and that it can

include not only preaching in sacrament meeting but teaching in Sunday school and in seminary and institute classes. Beyond that, though, it can include teaching in families and even blogging or writing or discussing the Gospel and its principles with friends, neighbors, and acquaintances.

During his concluding remarks at the April 1959 General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, President David O. McKay said something that has reverberated ever since that day.

In 1923 in the British Mission there was a general instruction sent out to the members of the Church advocating ... “Throw the responsibility upon every member of the Church that in the coming year of 1923 every member will be a missionary. Every member a missionary! You may bring your mother into the Church, or it may be your father; perhaps your fellow companion in the workshop. Somebody will hear the good message of the truth through you.”

And that is the message today. *Every member* — a million and a half — *a missionary!* I think that is what the Lord had in mind when he gave that great revelation on Church government, as recorded in the 107th section of the Doctrine and Covenants.<sup>2</sup>

President McKay then cited Doctrine and Covenants 107:99–100:

Wherefore, now let every man learn his duty, and to act in the office in which he is appointed, in all diligence. He that is slothful shall not be counted worthy to stand, and he that learns not his duty and shows himself not approved shall not be counted worthy to stand. Even so. Amen.

“That,” he then concluded, “is the responsibility of every man and woman and child who has listened to this great and wonderful conference.”<sup>3</sup>

Not only have our numbers vastly increased since President McKay addressed a Church membership of 1.5 million in 1959, but our capacity for being missionaries has been vastly enhanced by modern technology. And the obligation continues to rest upon every Latter-day Saint to be a missionary.

“For years,” said President Henry B. Eyring, then First Counselor in the First Presidency of the Church, during the April 2008 General Conference,

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2. David O. McKay, *April 1959 Conference Report* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) 121-22.

3. *Ibid.*

we have remembered the words of President David O. McKay: “Every member a missionary.” I am confident that the day is coming that through the faith of the members we will see increasing numbers of people invited to hear the word of God who will then come into the true and living Church.<sup>4</sup>

President McKay was merely making still more explicit the obligation that is implicit in such scriptural passages as this one from the Book of Mormon in which Alma the Younger addresses a group of new disciples:

And it came to pass that he said unto them: Behold, here are the waters of Mormon (for thus were they called) and now, as ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light; Yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God, and be numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life — Now I say unto you, if this be the desire of your hearts, what have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have entered into a covenant with him, that ye will serve him and keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon you?<sup>5</sup>

So we’re all, each and every one of us who is a baptized member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, under covenant obligation to God to sustain and defend his Kingdom and “to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death.” Surely this is at least part of what we affirm virtually every Sunday, when — in response to the recitation of a prayer handed down to us from the ancient Nephites — we testify that we will take upon us the name of the Son of God.<sup>6</sup>

The only question that remains is, “How should we do it?” And the answer is, “In every way that we can.” Via the Internet, even shy members of the Church located in the heart of “Mormon country” are now easily and inexpensively able to reach people around the planet. Moreover, where

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4. Henry B. Eyring, “The True and Living Church,” *Ensign* (May 2008): 22.

5. Mosiah 18:8–10.

6. See Moroni 4:3; cf. Doctrine and Covenants 20:77; also Doctrine and Covenants 20:37.

we've long had to seek out those who might accept the Gospel, now, via online searches, people who might receive the Gospel — even in remote locations where our missionaries have never yet penetrated — are able to seek *us* out.<sup>7</sup> And we need to be ready to help them when they find us.

I want to suggest again, though, that commitment to the Restored Gospel will be most firmly established on the basis of a conviction that its principles (along with a lifestyle based upon them) are true, good, and beautiful.<sup>8</sup>

In this regard, the great English Romantic poet John Keats may have been wrong. In 1819, he published his famous “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” (He would live only until 1821, dying of tuberculosis at the painfully young age of twenty-five.) The concluding lines (49–50) of the “Ode” assert that

”Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” — that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

But surely “goodness” belongs in the list as well — unless, perhaps, he intended to include goodness under the category of beauty, which would not be altogether wrong. It seems to me wise, though, to make the triad explicit.

In all of these respects, the Restored Gospel has always faced opposition. Its critics have long claimed, of course, that the founding claims of Joseph Smith and the Restoration are untrue. But some critics have also claimed, and in recent years have claimed very vocally, that the Gospel and the Church that teaches it are, in fact, not morally good and that the principles of the Gospel are actually ugly.

Advocates of the Gospel must, accordingly, counter such criticisms. On the affirmative side, they must demonstrate by whatever means that its principles are not only true but good and beautiful. Some of this work can and must be done by exhibiting the effects of the Gospel in the lives of the Saints:

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7. Increasingly, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints itself is using the power of the Internet — an innovation, in its way, as powerfully revolutionary as Gutenberg’s invention of movable type and probably more significant than the steam engine — to preach the Gospel. See, for example, “Mormon Missionaries Expand Online Teaching,” *Newsroom*, March 8, 2018, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/mormon-missionaries-online-teaching-expansion>.

8. For related reflections, see Daniel C. Peterson, “Making Visible the Beauty and Goodness of the Gospel,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scholarship* 17 (2016): vii–xxii, <https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/making-visible-the-beauty-and-goodness-of-the-gospel/>.

Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.

Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.<sup>9</sup>

And it shall come to pass in the last days, *that* the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.<sup>10</sup>

Some people seem to expect that the truth, in reality, must be unpleasant. Anything else, they're convinced, is mere fantasy and wishful thinking. Before he accepted the existence of God and eventually became, very arguably, the greatest Christian apologist of the twentieth century, C. S. Lewis was an atheist who was pretty much of that opinion:

The two hemispheres of my mind were in the sharpest conflict. On the one side a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and shallow "rationalism." Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought to be grim and meaningless.<sup>11</sup>

Part of the message of Christianity, though, is that the dichotomy between truth, on the one hand, and goodness and beauty, on the other, is a false one. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expresses the thought,

All creatures bear a certain resemblance to God, most especially man, created in the image and likeness of God. The manifold perfections of creatures — their truth, their goodness, their beauty all reflect the infinite perfection of God.<sup>12</sup>

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9. Matthew 5:14–16.

10. Isaiah 2:2–3.

11. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 209–10

12. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1.1.41.



According to the ancient Latin tradition of oratory or rhetoric, the three aims of a serious orator are *probare* (“to show to be real or true,” “to prove”), *delectare* (“to delight,” “to please”), and *flectere* (“to persuade,” “to stir”). Sometimes the triad is *docere* (“to teach,” “to show”), *delectare*, and *movere* (“to stir,” “to affect,” “to move someone to action”).<sup>13</sup>

These three aims seem to me to correspond reasonably well to the triad of truth, beauty, and goodness. People must be informed of the truth or must have it shown or demonstrated to them. But they must also be made to see the truth as delightful, as attractive and beautiful, as something to be desired. And, finally, they must be moved to act upon the truth, believing it to be good and worthy of action.

These are the aims of those who would help others understand and accept the claims of the Restoration. Different people will have varying capacities for doing so. Some may be better at arguing for the truth. Others will be more gifted at illustrating the goodness of the Kingdom and of lives lived in discipleship. Still others will be particularly talented at displaying to people the beauty of the Plan of Happiness and of other aspects of the Restoration. And members of the audience we are trying to reach will respond in various ways to various approaches. No single approach is optimal for all.

That’s why every one of us is needed. “And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.”<sup>14</sup>

“The Kingdom of God,” the great Reformer Martin Luther is reported to have said, “is like a besieged city surrounded on all sides by death. Each man has his place on the wall to defend and no one can stand where another stands, but nothing prevents us from calling encouragement to one another.”<sup>15</sup>

We should all step forward in the “ministry of the word,” just as the early chapters of Acts say the ancient Christians did. But we need not all do it in the same way because we’re all situated differently and equipped with different skills. For some, an important way of engaging in that ministry will be through writing, whether in scholarship or via blogs or in letters to the editor or in notes to relatives and friends.<sup>16</sup> For

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13. Thus, for example, Cicero, *Orator* 21.69, and Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 4.12, which builds on Cicero’s discussion.

14. 1 Corinthians 12:21.

15. Martin Luther, quoted in Eugene England, *Dialogues with Myself: Personal Essays on Mormon Experience* (Midvale, UT: Orion Books, 1984), 185–86.

16. See Gary E. Stevenson, “Let Us Share Our Knowledge of a Savior,” *Ensign* (April 2018): 28–35.

others, it will be by means of conversations with neighbors, co-workers, clients, patients, fellow community volunteers — the possibilities are endless. And one possibility, of course — it would be a stunning surprise if I failed to mention it, given my position — would be to support efforts such as the Interpreter Foundation, which is trying as hard as its resources will permit to contribute its “widow’s mite” to the building up, the sustaining, and the defending of the Kingdom of God.

**Daniel C. Peterson** (*PhD, University of California at Los Angeles*) is a professor of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University and is the founder of the University’s Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, for which he served as editor-in-chief until mid-August 2013. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Mormon subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur’an and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled *Muhammad: Prophet of God* (Eerdmans, 2007).