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## **Introduction, Volume 6 The Modest But Important End of Apologetics**

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## Introduction, Volume 6

### The Modest But Important End of Apologetics

*Daniel C. Peterson*

I first became involved in apologetics because I wanted to defend the truth of beliefs that are important to me and to defend the character of leaders for whom I have great respect, even veneration, against attack. I'm offended by falsehoods, prejudice, and injustice. I wanted to help faltering members who were sometimes besieged by intellectual challenges for which they had no adequate response. I also desired to assist interested observers to see sufficient plausibility in the Gospel's claims that they would be able to make its truth a matter of sincere and receptive prayer. My hope was to clear away obstacles that might obscure their recognition of truth. These continue to be my motivations, and I expect that others who are engaged in apologetics feel much the same way.

Recently, though, I've read a book by an Anglican minister in Canada who believes that "apologetics is a very serious threat to Christian faith."<sup>1</sup> "I am against apologetics," writes Myron Penner in *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context*, "because its modern forms undercut the very gospel it wishes to protect."<sup>2</sup>

Plainly, Dr. Penner's volume is a sharp challenge to the legitimacy of Christian apologetics in general, and, as such, it merits attention from reflective Latter-day Saint apologetists.

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1 Myron Bradley Penner, *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 76 (emphasis deleted).

2 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 73.

The Interpreter Foundation and this, its journal, are, in part though not entirely, apologetic enterprises. Thus, it seems clear to me that the book deserves some consideration in these pages. Perhaps, too, since I've been publicly associated with Mormon apologetics over the past nearly twenty-five years, it's worthwhile for me to put on record something of my own personal reaction to Dr. Penner's book.

As might be expected from a self-described postmodernist, Penner tells several stories—"narratives," if you prefer—in his book. I'll consider two of them here. The first comes from his days as an undergraduate student:

One of the popular forms of modern apologetic discourse is the academic debate. My initiation into apologetic debates happened during my first year at university. A Christian apologist, who was touring university campuses, was invited by my university's chapter of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF) to debate the resident atheist in our philosophy department. This particular atheist professor had banished belief in God as a rational thought from countless freshmen philosophy students' minds and had planted seeds of doubt in the hearts of many a fervent member of our IVCF group...

So a good number of us were elated to learn that an expert in Christian apologetics was coming who would definitively prove to everyone at our university that belief in God is rationally superior to atheism—and that we Christians are not as naïve and asinine as we are often made out to be.<sup>3</sup>

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3 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 47-48.

The latter goal, of proving “that we Christians are not as naïve and asinine as we are often made out to be,” strikes me as entirely legitimate, since the conviction that Christians hold their beliefs out of naïve asininity would probably deter an outsider from giving the claims and attractions of Christianity serious consideration. In this regard, apologetics serves a defensive function.

I’m reminded of a comment from the great English apologist C. S. Lewis: “Good philosophy,” he said, “must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered.”<sup>4</sup> And I also think of Lewis’s good friend, the Oxford theologian and New Testament scholar Austin Farrer. At least until last year, a statement of Rev. Farrer’s, much beloved of Elder Neal A. Maxwell, served as something of an unofficial motto for the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and then for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship:

Though argument does not create conviction, the lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.<sup>5</sup>

Challenges need to be answered. If they are not, they can block sincere seekers from finding the truth. I’m somewhat less urgently concerned, I confess, about demonstrating that one belief is superior to another, though sometimes that, too, is important, and it can often be valuable and helpful. I’m interested in defense, but I have little interest in offense and

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4 C. S. Lewis, “Learning in War-Time,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 58.

5 Austin Farrer, “Grete Clerk,” in Jocelyn Gibb, ed., *Light on C. S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1965), 26.

rarely if ever engage in it. I have no desire to attack other worldviews, let alone other religious faiths; I'm far more inclined to proclaim and advocate my own.

But back to Dr. Penner's story:

To make the conclusion unambiguous, the audience would be polled to determine the winner... In the end, the Christian apologist was the winner with about 80 percent of the popular vote. The result was decisive, we felt, and it was regarded as a triumph for the cause of Christ. I remember being a little uneasy, though, as I looked around the room and noted that about 80 percent of the people in the room were people I knew from IVCF (or their guests).<sup>6</sup>

Implicit in Penner's uneasy reminiscence is the suspicion that, very possibly, the whole effort was in vain, pointless: Those who went into the debate as convinced Christians left as convinced Christians, while those who rejected Christianity before the program presumably still rejected it after the lights of the room were turned off.

Nevertheless, I don't think the conclusion follows, from Dr. Penner's impression that few if any changed teams as a result of the debate, that the exchange was without value.

First of all, it may well be the case that some of the attendees who were associated with the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship had been wavering in their convictions as a result of intellectual concerns raised by that atheist professor, but that they left the debate that evening with their faith strengthened. They may not actually have changed their votes, but the conviction behind their votes may have been more firm, less troubled. From the standpoint of Christian commitment, this would be no small thing.

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6 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 48

Second, the two occurrences of the word “about” in Dr. Penner’s story (“about 80 percent”) are not insignificant. In political campaigns, what happens to the undecided middle is often of crucial importance. While the “base” of each rival candidate may be firm, so that virtually nothing would be able to change their allegiance and their vote, a small shift in the inclinations of the less firmly committed voters in the center can make or break a candidacy. More significantly still, even the conversion of a single person is, or should be, of great value to believing Christians, as it undoubtedly is to God himself:

Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God;... And if it so be that you should labor all your days in crying repentance unto this people, and bring, save it be one soul unto me, how great shall be your joy with him in the kingdom of my Father! (Doctrine and Covenants 18:10, 15)

According to data presented by the Latter-day Saint social scientist Gary Lawrence in his important 2008 study *How Americans View Mormonism*, five percent of Americans say they would be willing to seriously investigate the Church.<sup>7</sup> On one level, this seems very bad news. Only five percent? That means that fully 95% apparently *wouldn't* be willing to seriously consider the claims of Mormonism. We could certainly wish the facts otherwise, but we shouldn't overlook the good news: Five percent of Americans—which translates, given current figures, into something on the order of sixteen million people—would be willing, or so they say, to give real attention to the question of whether Mormonism is true if those claims were presented to them in an adequate manner. In other words, “the field is white already to harvest” (Doctrine and Covenants 4:4).

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<sup>7</sup> Gary C. Lawrence, *How Americans View Mormonism: Seven Steps to Improve Our Image* (Orange, CA: The Parameter Foundation, 2008), 97.

My own father joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, relatively late in his life, partly because of his exposure to apologetic arguments. (I baptized him when he was nearly sixty years old, on the night that I was set apart as a missionary.) He had married a semi-active member of the Church, my mother, and had long been supportive of ward activities even though he rarely attended worship services. Years after his baptism, he explained to me that one of the factors leading to his becoming a Latter-day Saint was picking up a volume—I don't recall which it was—by Hugh Nibley. As he read, he found himself asking the question “Could this stuff actually be *true*?”

Apologetics was far and away not the only thing contributing to his conversion. Years and years of experience with Latter-day Saint friends, discussions with his wife and his two sons, and admiration for the general values of Mormonism also played important roles, and my imminent departure for two years in Switzerland plainly forced the issue. But Hugh Nibley's apologetic writing was an important catalyst, and I can say with absolute confidence that apologetics proved its value to our family, at least, and made a profound difference for the good.

The second story from Dr. Penner's book that I wish to consider here comes from later in his life:

John is a self-described atheist-Roman Catholic. He earned a PhD in philosophy at an Ivy League university and is a philosophy professor at a small, prestigious college in the United States. We met several years ago at a research center, and I noticed a deep spiritual hunger in him. John was fascinated by my faith and confided in me that although he felt he no longer had faith, he nevertheless experienced this as a profound loss. John confessed that he desperately wished he could believe



in God again and had even spent time in two different monasteries hoping to reignite his faith or find some deeper spiritual reality in which he could believe.

During our second week at the center, John and I were joined by two graduate students from a nearby seminary who had come to research for their master's theses. Our new friends informed John and me that they had just completed a modular course on Christian apologetics with one of the leading contemporary apologists. Jokingly, they related how the apologist described himself as "the hired gun" who rode into town to shoot down the bad guys (atheists) and their arguments and make the streets safe again for Christians.

It did not take our budding apologists long to clue into the fact that John was not a professing Christian. And despite John's protestations that he was not interested in arguing about faith, what he did or did not believe, or how far his beliefs were or were not justified, our two apologists went to work. They took aim and started to shoot holes in the reasonableness of John's beliefs with their shiny, new apologetic six-guns.

John objected to this treatment. What bothered him, he said, was the impersonal way both he and his beliefs were being treated—as if they were abstract entities (like propositions) instead of reflections of spiritual realities with which he personally struggled. John told the apologists he found what they were doing offensive. Undaunted, our defenders of the faith assumed the apologetic right-of-way and continued with their inquisition in the name of unloading their

responsibility for John's errors into God's hands—informing John at one point that it was necessary so that his “blood would not be on their heads” (actually citing Ezekiel 3:18). Needless to say, this did not make a positive impression and did nothing to *show* John the truth of Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

Few of us have much difficulty, I expect, in grasping part of the point of this story. These two clueless Christian apologists should have been more sensitive to John as a person. They shouldn't have been so manifestly at ease with offending him in the name of Jesus. Such ham-fistedness is wrong on every level—and, of course, is ineffective. Nobody had appointed them as inquisitors. It's very difficult and perhaps altogether impossible to entirely avoid giving offense—some people, indeed, seem oddly eager to take it—but these two aggressive evangelists pretty obviously didn't care, and there's no justification for such an attitude.

Apologetic arguments, says Oxford University's Benno van den Toren, “when used as a ‘battering ram’... will only force people to barricade their door stronger, notwithstanding its cracks and even because of its cracks, as long as they feel that they have no valid escape.”<sup>9</sup> As the old saying goes, “A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.”<sup>10</sup>

But Myron Penner is making a deeper point, I think, than merely the obvious one that we should be nice.

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8 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 77-78 (emphasis in the original).

9 Benno van den Toren, “Challenges and Possibilities of Inter-religious and Cross-cultural Apologetic Persuasion,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 82/1 (2010): 50-51.

10 This statement has been ascribed to various writers, including Benjamin Franklin and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, but may go back to Samuel Butler's seventeenth-century poem *Hudibras*, which reads, in part, as follows: “He that complies against his will/ Is of his own opinion still/ Which he may adhere to, yet disown,/ For reasons to himself best known” (III.iii.547-550).

I'm quite familiar with the kind of Christian apologist who had trained these two. And, in fact, although I don't know who he is, there's a reasonable chance that I've met the very person in question or at least read some of his writing. I'm guessing that he's an Evangelical Protestant. (And, obviously and unsurprisingly, he's male. Christian apologetics is overwhelmingly dominated by men. We could speculate as to why this is so, and some critics of apologetics will have obvious answers that fit their agenda, but such speculation is beyond the scope of this little essay.)

I've noticed, with such apologists, what sometimes strikes me as astounding overconfidence in the power of reasoned argument and evidence to effect conversion. The presumption seems to be that, if you will simply attend to the evidence and the logic that is being set before you, you will, if your intellectual and moral faculties are properly functioning, necessarily recognize the truth of Christianity.

I reject that presumption. The Evangelical apologist Paul Feinberg observes that "a demonstrably sound argument is coercive in the sense that anyone who wants to retain rationality must accept the argument."<sup>11</sup> But I don't believe that any such arguments *exist*—*demonstration* is to be understood here as a technical philosophical term—for basic questions such as the existence of God. I don't believe that God *seeks* our coerced acquiescence, in *any* form. What Latter-day Saints call the "veil of mortality" is essential to the divine plan.

(Curiously, some critics of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints seem to make an analogous but mostly opposed assumption: To them, the facts disproving the claims

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11 Paul D. Feinberg, "Cumulative Case Apologetics," in Steven B. Cowan, ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 248. As I read him, Feinberg likewise denies the existence of such arguments, though he believes (as I do) that a good cumulative case can be made in support of the plausibility of the existence of God, etc.

of Mormonism are so undeniably obvious that failure to accept their force and to act accordingly can only be the result of stupidity, ignorance, or intellectual dishonesty. I reject this assumption, as well.)

“Rational coercion,” Dr. Penner says,

attempts to leverage others into a position in which they do not wish to be and to accept beliefs they do not see as contributing to their own interests as persons. They are forced to acknowledge priorities and values that are not their own.... And so, when I try to coerce or force unbelievers to accept my Christian witness through cleverly devised apologetic arguments and brilliantly devised pieces of rhetoric, I often compel them to believe me *despite* themselves.<sup>12</sup>

As Dr. Penner expresses the view that his postmodern perspective seeks to replace, given

the modern epistemological paradigm, that human beings are essentially epistemological entities—“things that think”—whose most basic need is to accept the right propositions, then it is easy and perhaps even natural to assume that the best thing I can do for an unbeliever is to reason with them [*sic*] militantly in such a way as to win the argument and force my conclusion. It is “true,” after all, and I am right! My focus will be on *what* I argue about—the conclusions and propositions, the facts and the evidence to support them, and whether my opponent and I believe them—not *how* I engage another *person*. And, in the end, it will be difficult to escape the conclusion that my primary objective in an apologetic encounter is winning the argument. I may further believe people with beliefs

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12 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 145 (emphasis in the original).

different than mine are morally suspect, since there might not be another explanation for why they refuse to accept my rational conclusions.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, Dr. Penner believes in a distinctly limited but still important role for reason: “Human beings,” he writes, “are not adequate, in and of ourselves, to discover the most important truths about ourselves, others, God, or the world we inhabit.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, “faith is not a matter of settling all the issues first, or rationally justifying all our beliefs before we accept them.”<sup>15</sup> “Reason’s function,” he says, “is not to ground our truths but to explain them. Reason depends on a (logically) prior Truth to situate it.”<sup>16</sup>

I suspect that Latter-day Saints will be inclined to agree with Penner on this point. We don’t believe that faith or a “testimony” comes principally or even at all by means of syllogistic reasoning from a starting point in indisputable axioms. Rather, it comes by revelation, as taught in Moroni 10:4-5 at the close of the Book of Mormon.

With that in mind, Penner says, “we will need to shift from an epistemological approach to something like a hermeneutical one,” with hermeneutics being defined as the discipline of textual interpretation.<sup>17</sup> (The text, or revelation, is already given before hermeneutics comes into play.) “Hermeneutics... does not focus on abstract philosophical problems or on establishing an epistemological ground zero from which to launch an absolutely certain body of knowledge or to guarantee the rationality of belief.”<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, Penner contends,

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13 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 143.

14 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 67.

15 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 73.

16 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 170.

17 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 67.

18 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 70.

The Judeo-Christian tradition is... hermeneutical in the philosophical sense. It has its origins in *revelation* — with an event expressed in language (text) that is interpreted within the tradition and not by means of rational “first principles” (Greek philosophy). Ours is the God who *speaks* and *reveals*. The first moment of critical reflection in this tradition then is to wait and listen— to *hear* from God. Subsequently, the Judeo-Christian “logos” (word, reason) is one that always exhausts human reason and always comes to us from the outside.<sup>19</sup>

“The revelation is proclaimed,” Penner continues, “and it is ours to *understand* and *interpret*, but not to justify or rationalize directly in the sense of establishing its legitimacy.”<sup>20</sup> “If,” he says, “the modern epistemological paradigm is focused on the question, ‘Is it (belief about the world/reality) true and justified?’ the hermeneutical paradigm I want to replace it with puts at the center of its inquiry the question, ‘Is it *intelligible* and *meaningful*?’”<sup>21</sup>

Now, I happen to believe that those are very important questions. Furthermore, as it turns out, many if not by far most of the articles that have appeared and will appear in *Interpreter* focus less on demonstrating Latter-day Saint scriptures to be true than on attempting to plumb their depths, to exhibit their richness, to demonstrate them to be both “intelligible” and extraordinarily “meaningful.” (Viewed through Dr. Penner’s lens, *Interpreter* seems a very appropriate name for this journal.)

Christianity isn’t merely a set of propositions or a system of doctrines, Penner correctly insists. It’s a way of life.<sup>22</sup> “The

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19 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 70.

20 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 71-72. I’ve corrected the punctuation slightly for clarity.

21 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 67.

22 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 68.

reason I accept Christian faith,” Penner writes, “is it enables me to interpret my life fruitfully and the world meaningfully through the practices, categories, and language of Christian faith, so that I have a more authentic understanding of myself and a sense of wholeness to my life.”<sup>23</sup>

Still, it seems to me that the actual truth of the scriptures and the legitimacy of Mormon doctrine are worth defending when they’re under attack. Mormonism, like Christianity more generally, isn’t merely a matter of propositions and intellectual assent, but such propositions and assent are an essential part of it. I cannot imagine the restored Gospel providing full satisfaction to the soul under a conviction that its central claims are, in fact, false. This is where I part ways with Dr. Penner’s postmodernism because I don’t believe that modernism in his sense is entirely dead. (And I’m not sure that it should be.) Most people—certainly those outside of the postmodern academy—still need to believe that the fundamental claims upon which they construct their lives are true, and truth claims sometimes need to be defended, not merely asserted.

Recently I saw a quotation circulating online that is attributed to the late Hugh B. Brown, who served as an apostle in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from April 1958 until his death at the end of 1975, and in the Church’s First Presidency from 1961 until the death of President David O McKay in 1970. His was a beloved voice of my own youth. “We don’t need to ‘defend’ the gospel in a military sense,” he’s quoted as saying. “Rather, we should do with religion as we do with music, not defend it but simply render it. It needs no defense.”

As nearly as I can determine, here is how his actual statement reads, in its original context:

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23 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 76.

There are altogether too many people in the world who are willing to accept as true whatever is printed in a book or delivered from a pulpit. Their faith never goes below the surface soil of authority. I plead with everyone I meet that they may drive their faith down through that soil and get hold of the solid truth, that they may be able to withstand the winds and storms of indecision and of doubt, of opposition and persecution. Then, and only then, will we be able to defend our religion successfully. When I speak of defending our religion, I do not mean such defense as an army makes on a battlefield but the defense of a clean and upright and virtuous life lived in harmony with an intelligent belief and understanding of the gospel. As Mormons, we should do with religion as we do with music, not defend it but simply render it. It needs no defense. The living of religion is, after all, the greatest sermon, and if all of us would live it, we would create a symphony which would be appreciated by all.<sup>24</sup>

The quotation seems to be seen, by at least some of those who have hailed it, as validating a denial of the value or even of the religious appropriateness of apologetics. A defense of one's religious beliefs, on this view, is only necessary where religion isn't being lived or "rendered." Indeed, engagement in apologetics could be seen in this light as ipso facto evidence that the apologist isn't living his or her religion but has put some secular, idolatrous substitute in its place.

I suspect that Dr. Penner would agree with such a reading, but I cannot. Let me grant, up front, that quietly living our faith, acting it out in love and service, is and will always be the best way of advocating it.

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24 Edwin B. Firmage, *An Abundant Life: The Memoirs of Hugh B. Brown* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 135-136.



Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.

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. (Matthew 5:13-16)

“I would like to distinguish between theology and religion,” President Brown also said.

Religion is my preference. Someone has said, “I hate botany, but I love flowers.” I would say that I do not care for theology, but I love religion.... The Mormon church has a religion aside from its theology.... The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has this practical view of religion: that religion should help us here and now.... So the religion of the Latter-day Saints is not just theory from a book or taught in church.<sup>25</sup>

But President Brown plainly wasn't saying that there is no propositional or intellectual content to Mormonism, or that such content is unimportant. His insistence, above, on getting past superficial understanding and driving down to the bedrock of truth, and on “intelligent belief and understanding,” should make that clear enough. Nor was he denouncing defense of the Church, as such. “I should like to see everyone prepared to defend the religion of his or her parents,” he said, “not because

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25 Firmage, *The Abundant Life*, 136-137.

it was the religion of our fathers and mothers but because they have found it to be the true religion.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, he himself provides a very simple example, from his days as a Canadian army officer, of his own defense of the Church on the matter of plural marriage.<sup>27</sup> And one of his best known personal stories is in a very definite apologetic vein: “The Profile of a Prophet.”<sup>28</sup>

And how could it be otherwise? There is, in most normal people’s lives, no area in which it’s considered a virtue to offer no reasons for one’s beliefs and behavior, and a violation of the spirit of religion to do so. If missionaries are told, as I was more than once in Switzerland, that the Bible never mentions baptism for the dead, it would be rather strange to refuse to point to 1 Corinthians 15:29. In view of the most recent attempt to explain the Book of Mormon away by means of the wearisomely-familiar theory of the Spalding Manuscript, was it inappropriate and somehow unchristian for the editors of the late *FARMS Review* to commission responses?<sup>29</sup> If you’re asked why you’ve chosen restaurant A over restaurant B, or invited to justify your decision to pursue this marketing plan rather than that one, or requested to explain your preference for one candidate instead of another or your enthusiasm for Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, should you virtuously decline to give any reasons? But even a simple justification or defense is, in the strictest sense of the word, an apologetic.

But how, in Penner’s view, should such defense be conducted (assuming that, against his apparent wishes, we’re determined still to engage in such defense)? “A hermeneutical

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26 Firmage, *The Abundant Life*, 135.

27 Firmage, *The Abundant Life*, 136.

28 Hugh B. Brown, *Eternal Quest* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 127-135.

29 See, for example, G. Bruce Schaalje, Matthew Roper, and Paul J. Fields, “Examining a Misapplication of Nearest Shrunken Centroid Classification to Investigate Book of Mormon Authorship,” *FARMS Review* (23/1): 87-111; Matthew Roper and Paul J. Fields, “The Historical Case against Sidney Rigdon’s Authorship of the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Review* (23/1): 113-125.

approach,” he writes, “is better construed in terms of the metaphors of conversation and dialogue, as opposed to the epistemological model of trial and debate.”<sup>30</sup> Or, as Austin Farrer puts it, “Religion is more like response to a friend than it is like obedience to an expert.”<sup>31</sup>

We don’t, and almost certainly can’t, act or make our most fundamental, life-orientational decisions on the basis of pure reason or purely intellectual considerations. (“Thou believest that there is one God,” says James 2:19, “thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.”)

Faith is a matter that involves the whole soul, not merely the intellect, and whether or not we believe in the first place depends upon the response of our entire souls. Prophets don’t argue that their message is rationally justifiable or that it represents clever analysis or that it should be accepted because they hold special secular credentials. They invite their audience to accept it because it comes from God.<sup>32</sup>

The contexts in which we accept beliefs (or have faith) vary widely and are utterly personal, and they rarely fall entirely, or even largely, under our direct, conscious, rational control.<sup>33</sup> Thus, “Joan N.,” commenting on Amazon.com with regard to Dr. Penner’s book, asks

Do we really come to faith as a result of rational persuasion (modern apologetics)? Or do we come to faith in the context of living life? Do we witness because we hold rationally proven beliefs or because we have heard God speak?

She is precisely right. And yet, although humans aren’t purely rational logic machines, reason is one of our principal

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30 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 68; compare 83.

31 Austin Farrer, Ann Loades, and Robert MacSwain, *The Truth-seeking Heart: Austin Farrer and His Writings* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006), 183.

32 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 82-86.

33 See Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 78-79.

gifts—and a healthy faith clashes with reason only when that’s absolutely necessary. Thus, I have fundamental reservations about the overall position argued by Myron Penner in *The End of Apologetics*.

“Christians should be against apologetics,” writes Dr. Penner,

at least of the modern variety. I am against the apologetic culture of experts that is funded by the modern secular condition, with its assumption that genius is the highest authority for belief and the reasonability of a belief—and my ability to demonstrate it — is the only thing that makes something worthy of my acceptance. I am also against the notion that our task as Christians is to demonstrate the intellectual superiority of Christian belief—as if we are Christians by dint of our genius. And finally, I am against the apologetic mind-set that sets “us” against “them” and then proceeds to try to win the marketing and merchandising race so that “our” superiority is thereby unquestioned.<sup>34</sup>

I agree wholeheartedly with Myron Penner on these points. But I don’t agree that apologetics as a whole is entirely illegitimate. I cannot see that his reasons here entail its total rejection.

Apologetics, properly done, can help. I know this, among many other things, from the personal experience of my father and my family.

But apologetics is limited, both in appeal and in scope. Most people aren’t interested in it or in the issues with which it deals, and many (for those or other reasons) don’t need it. We should be modest about what apologetics can do. Our arguments, no matter how learned and no matter how sound, can’t force belief. We can’t reason people into faith. Reasoned

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34 Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 72.

argument can nourish and protect a seed and can even prepare the soil for the sowing of a seed, but it can't cause a seed to germinate where none has been planted.

Faith isn't purely intellectual and, for many people, it's not an intellectual matter at all. Moreover, it's ultimately a gift. (See, for example, 1 Corinthians 12:8-9). But sound apologetic arguments can perhaps help clear away objections that interfere with faith in both believers and unbelievers. They can persuade investigators or wavering members of the Church to regard the claims of Mormonism as what William James called a "live option" rather than a dead one—in other words, to give faith serious consideration. This is a relatively humble role—a modest "end" or *telos*—but it can, for at least some, be vital.

And, even more broadly, faithful scholarship can explain the value and richness that believers see in the Gospel, the depth and insight that are to be found in the scriptures, the meaning that a life of discipleship confers. This journal, *Interpreter*, was established slightly more than a year ago to further those aims. I'm grateful for all who have contributed to its launch and who have made its continued flourishing possible.

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