

Taking Things Seriously
Paul D. Durham
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I'm cutting my talk in half so you can thank me later. Everyone here has a story to tell—a compelling story. As a small expansion of my introduction, I will tell you a little bit about myself.

In a family of seven children I was number five. My mother was of good Southern stock; she was from Georgia. Born and raised in the church,¹ she met my father on his mission and when his mission concluded, he sent for her. In those days it was a four-day continental trip by rail, and upon her arrival to the valley, the Salt Lake temple president opened an otherwise closed temple on Christmas eve and they were married.² I think it was on the train that she lost her Southern accent.

My father taught Seminary and Institute for close to 30 years and was competent in a dozen languages. When BYU acquired the Mercer Egyptological collection, he was invited to pursue further studies at BYU. Samuel Mercer is the one you might remember, who in 1912, along with other prominent Egyptologists lambasted Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of Abraham by saying that Joseph's explanations [were] "absurd" and "the work of pure imagination."³ Mercer could have given his valued collection to any great institution around the world, but maybe out of guilt or remorse bequeathed it to a school out West that at the time really had a limited, but expanding library.⁴ My Dad arrived at BYU in the midst of a bit of campus chaos and turmoil, the faculty taking sides on fundamental issues regarding doctrine and freedom of speech. Brother Nibley had recommended that my Dad become the editor for a publication called *BYU Studies* and was turned down by President Wilkinson. This is the time when Nibley said that he had received notice from a fellow BYU professor, who coincidentally was in our ward in Provo, who told him that since Nibley "believe[d] the Book of Mormon [he] was not really qualified to teach history. He was informed that while he claims to "know the truth, the gentlemen of the History Department, like true scholars, claim only to be searching for it."⁵ It wasn't too much later that my Dad was also informed by a future general authority, that since my Dad believed in the Book of Mormon he too was unfit to teach at the Institute level of the church. Those were fun times! And these are fun times too!

Why am I here? Because I was asked. I've never turned down an invitation to speak. I am pleased to be here and I thank you for the opportunity. I'm nothing special. My only hope is to please God today.

This is what I intend to tell you today. I will provide you with one quick example of how we can help ourselves succeed in this test we call life, and then I want to show you how it ties into the theme of this conference, which is the doctrine of Christ. And then I'll conclude with my testimony. I'm reminded of what Malcom Gladwell once said, that we think with our eyes, but we feel with our ears.⁶ I'm hoping that you will feel what you hear today!

Now for the example: I've had some extraordinary relationships in my life, some of which have changed my life and its meaning—forever. One is an almost 40 year friendship with Hugh Nibley. One of the many stories that he told me, and upon which he has also written, is the wonderful apocryphal story of the debates between the two Simons—Simon Peter, the apostle, and Simon Magus, the Magician or Sorcerer.⁷ Apparently these two celebrated contestants engaged in all kinds

of public debates. It's reminiscent of the famous debates that we have in our own American history: Lincoln and Douglas; Hamilton and Burr; Nixon and Kennedy, and William F. Buckley Jr. and Gore Vidal.⁸ Anyway, Saint Peter and Simon Magus, the two heavyweight contenders, would debate publically, and I guess, usually in the streets, and according to Clement of Rome and Brother Nibley, the chief apostle—maybe not known for his skill with a sword, but definitely for his skill with a word—would sometimes lose. Yes—you heard me right—lose. Nibley said that it didn't bother the saints that Peter would occasionally be defeated, because they did not rely on Peter for their faith and for their testimony. Their testimony was rooted in the same place that Peter's was. "Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto [them], but [their] Father which is in heaven." (Matthew 16:17)

Now the interesting part in the debate for me is something that Peter tells the Magician: People either take themselves or the gospel seriously—nobody ever takes *both* seriously.⁹ What do you and I take seriously? That is one of the tests, in fact it is the supreme test. We're told that to test anything—whether a piece of metal, or a structure, or someone's knowledge, or the strength of an athlete, or a relationship, or a testimony, or someone's commitment, or someone's faith—it must be tested to the limit. No holding back. Anything less leaves the answer in doubt. As Nibley tells us: "Don't expect an easy test."¹⁰ Whatever you set your heart on, that's what you take seriously. As we are told, eternal life is not cheaply bought. Our biggest test may be an open book exam because the Lord has provided us with the scriptures, but it is not an easy test. I submit that if you substitute *anything* for the gospel, that *you* are taking *yourself* seriously, and some would say *too damn* seriously! If on the other hand, you take the gospel seriously, you are putting off the natural man and making the required sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit. (See 3 Nephi 9:20, Ether 4:15, D&C 59:8)

Now for a quick rehearsal of the gospel that we should be taking seriously. If you would like to turn to your scriptures, my text is the 27th chapter of 3 Nephi, verses 20 and 21. After the Lord has expounded upon and told us what his doctrine is in chapter 11, He then makes another quick review with emphasis. (3 Nephi 11:32-40)

(Please note that this verse demonstrates a classic case of using the subjunctive mood which you can review on your own time.) "*Now this is the commandment:* [This is not a suggestion, a guideline, a proposition, a good idea, or just a recommendation. It is a *commandment*.] *Repent, all ye ends of the earth,* [The Lord wants *who* to repent? All ye ends of the earth. Not just the Nephites to whom he is speaking, not just those in Judea, and not just those on the "face of the earth," but he wants all ye ends of the earth to repent. Everyone. No exceptions. Everyone is invited to the party.] *and come unto me* [He wants us to come unto Him, and no one else. He wants us to come unto Him, which is to have faith in Him and to repent. This is an invitation to stop doing things our way and to do things His way. This is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. In the Wentworth Letter Joseph tells us that faith and repentance are the first ordinances of the gospel.¹¹ They are inward ordinances sealed and consecrated by the Lord Himself.] *and be baptized in my name,* [This is the first outward ordinance required of all believers in Christ.] *that ye may be sanctified by the reception of the Holy Ghost,* [This points out the process by which men and women are made clean and holy by what is referred to as the baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost. This is the point where the Lord sets men and women free from the legalistic, paint-by-number rules and allows them to live by the spirit.] *that ye may stand spotless before me at the last day.* [That is the ultimate test, to have the Lord clean us up to be able to stand and not shrink before Him. Only those who are like Him can be with Him.] *Verily, verily, I say unto you, this is my gospel.*" [The Lord concludes this paragraph by saying the word verily twice. In our day we would say *truly* or *truthfully*. He is emphasizing that this is His gospel. He is placing His

eternal word on the matter. He is sealing and binding this covenant by His word. He is truth. What He says is truth. (3 Nephi 27:20-21)

One additional point: Not all will believe. Even though an angel from heaven told them, they would not believe. (see Galatians 1:8). Don't take it personally if everyone does not believe as you do. It doesn't matter if someone questions *your* belief in the Book of Mormon, or in the gospel as you understand it, or in your faith in the Lord. Let all the debaters speak their piece. Resist the urge to classify all people into good guys and bad guys. Allow the Lord to do the judging. Be patient. He has things under control.

I'm impressed now to relate a short experience. A few years ago a friend suggested that I listen to a podcast at work. It was an interview with Father James Martin, the Jesuit priest from New York, who was a businessman working for GE Finance at the time of his conversion to God. It made an impression on me. He says, [quote] "God met me in an apartment in Stamford, Connecticut watching TV. I wasn't praying in church before a statue of Mary, saying, 'Please make me a priest.' I was tired at the end of the day, a terrible day, had just finished a bowl of spaghetti that I'd heated up, and I was watching PBS. And that's where God met me. Because that's where I was. . . . That's where Jesus met people. He meets everybody where they are."¹² [end quote] It's a fascinating story. He went on to say that your relationship with God should not be casual. It should be a close friendship. One doesn't go for a week or two without checking up on a close friend. It was while I was at work, sitting at my desk, listening to this podcast that the Lord spoke to me. He said, "Paul, it's okay if you ask me how *I'm* doing." It had never occurred to me before to ask Him: "How was *your* day?" The Lord invites conversation. He encourages communication. He declares in Section 29: "Listen to the *voice* of Jesus Christ, your Redeemer, the Great I Am, whose arm of mercy hath atoned for your sins; Who will gather his people even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, even as many as will hearken to my *voice* and humble themselves before me, and call upon me in mighty prayer." (D&C 29: 1-2, emphasis mine) He expects us to hear His voice, not just read His words. It's more than an invitation.

I have a friend who emailed me this week, saying she has never felt more alone, more hopeless and that the heavens seem to have been closed to her, and she needs to know God has not turned His back on all of us in these evil times. She yearns for communication from heaven. I testify that the Lord has not forgotten her and has not left any of you alone. He will not and cannot forget you. He has graven each of you into the palms of His hands. You are written into His hands. (Isaiah 49:16)

Let me now end. I know that the Lord has restored His gospel and has begun a new dispensation. I bear witness that Joseph had a real experience in a grove that became sacred and that he actually recovered gold plates from a mound that is called Cumorah. Angels have been ministering among us; the Holy One of Israel and keeper of the gate has been ministering among us. Our challenge is to take the word of the Lord seriously, to take the word of His servants seriously, and to take His gospel seriously. He is real. This is not a delusion. This is not a game. Our eternal lives are at stake. The Lord has sent his message and messenger into the world, not just to convert, but to convict—to see what we will take seriously. "In every dispensation the world must be left without excuse."¹³ To quote someone with authority, "God is behind the last-days effort to vindicate His word. Whether we like who He sends, or believe what He is doing, or even recognize His involvement, it is nevertheless the case that God is involved very directly in bringing about the accomplishment of His foretold latter-day work." I bear witness that the Lord Jesus Christ has set forth His hand the second time in our day to recover His people. His people will know and recognize Him because they have

been prepared by Him. They are making a connection with the only One who matters; the only One who saves. They will figuratively write His name into their hands and their hearts. He intends to recover all those who are willing to hear His voice and to take Him and His gospel seriously.

In the Name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹ Her baptismal certificate bears the signature of the mission president, LeGrand Richards, who later became Presiding Bishop as well as member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

² Marriage performed by Nicholas G. Smith, one of the first five Assistants to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

³ Rev. Prof. Samuel A.B. Mercer, Ph.D., Western Theological Seminary, as cited in Rt. Rev. F.S. Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., As a Translator, An Inquiry Conducted*, (Salt Lake City: Arrow Press, 1912), 29. See

<https://ia802605.us.archive.org/3/items/josephsmithjrast00spala/josephsmithjrast00spala.pdf>, (accessed March 3, 2017).

⁴ To give you an idea of the limited classical library, in 1946 BYU had “just one Greek book (Homer) and one Latin book (Manilius) and nobody in Provo could read a line of either one.” See Hugh Nibley, *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley: Vol. 17*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 133.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁶ Malcolm Gladwell, “I Just Want to Explain Things to People,” *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, air date August 4, 2016, <http://www.cbs.com/shows/the-late-show-with-stephen-colbert/video/B796C29C-94F4-88E1-4E80-580ED48C43AA/malcolm-gladwell-i-just-want-to-explain-things-to-people/> (accessed March 20, 2017).

⁷ Cf. Acts 8:9-24

⁸ Of course there are other famous debates, but there was no need to list any others. I particularly enjoyed the televised sparring between Buckley and Vidal during the 1968 national party conventions. Buckley was my favorite at the time and a few years later I had the opportunity to meet him personally. See Morgan Neville and Robert Gordon, “Best of Enemies: Buckley vs. Vidal,” documentary, Tremolo Productions, July 31, 2015; and also PBS, air date October 3, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/films/best-of-enemies/> (accessed March 20, 2017).

⁹ Nibley, *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple*, 25, 126. Cf. *Recognitions of Clement* 2.17, 3.62.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 266.

¹¹ Joseph Smith, “Church History,” *Times and Seasons*, March 1, 1842, 706-710.

¹² Fr. James Martin, “Finding God in All Things,” *On Being with Krista Tippett*, Dec. 17, 2014; <http://onbeing.org/programs/james-martin-finding-god-in-all-things/> (accessed March 12, 2017).

¹³ See Hugh Nibley, *History of the Bible, Address to Seminary and Institute Faculty*, BYU, June 16, 1956, mimeograph copy in my possession, p. 16.