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from the desk of Denver Snuffer

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Friday, August 15, 2014

Sunstone Q&A;

Below is a transcription of the Q & A from Sunstone. It will make more sense if you have read the paper first (which is on Scrib'd and titled *Cutting Down the Tree of Life to Build a Wooden Bridge*) because the questions were provoked by the presentation. These questions were asked and these answers given immediately following the paper and response:

Cutting Down the Tree of Life to Build a Wooden Bridge Question & Answer - Sunstone Symposium 8-2-14 Denver Snuffer

[NOTE: This is the question and answer period that was held following Denver Snuffer's talk and after Dan Witherspoon's rebuttal. I chose not to transcribe Dan's rebuttal because I do not have his permission to do so and therefore leave it out. I insert some clarifying words in brackets to make what was meant more clear.]

Tim Malone: Dan, thank you for focusing on the fruit of the Tree of Life. I was looking for that in Denver's remarks, but let me ask this question of Denver. My take away is that you stated that the LDS Church has changed fundamental doctrine, is changing, and will continue to change because of submission to social and governmental pressure for fear of losing tax status. Is that a correct take away?

Denver: The definition of fundamental doctrine is not something that I applied to the Church, it's what the Church has advocated (or defined) on its own (and for itself). I'm contrasting what the Church said at one time was fundamental doctrine, with what it has done to abrogate, denounce, renounce and even condemn unequivocally out of their own mouth, their prior practice. Their motivation for accomplishing that transition was the focus of the paper. I'm not trying to make a moral judgment. I'm trying to understand the events against the backdrop of why the events took place. Why change when they said it would be right or wrong (to do so), when they said it in the name of Jesus Christ, like the comment of Brigham Young that I read. I read his claim on purpose because he was stating, "I'm telling you this as my status as a prophet of God. I'm telling you this in the

name of Jesus Christ, and I'm telling you this will never change," and (it has been subsequently) changed. And now the Church, after making the changes, has turned around and said, "We unequivocally condemn that." That's the purpose of the paper and also to highlight the fact that institutionally, this is a problem. The problem is that truth and love and purity does exist, but it exists primarily in a form that is not (and cannot be) institutional. According to the scriptures, there are only two ways, "there are save but two Churches only." And one church, if it's going to subject itself to institutional control, vagaries of the law, the pressure of the tax code, and everything else; that church will necessarily become sullied and soiled, tossed and pulled, and ultimately wind up contradicting itself. But there is another church that can remain pure, unsullied, untouched, untaxed, and unregulated. That purity can exist in your heart. That purity can be found between you and God. I think any institution is going to suffer the exact same history.

Voice: My question is, if the fruit of the Tree of Life is not available to homosexuals and to women once they are embraced within the Church, what will they find instead?

Denver: The problem addressed in the paper, and the turf upon which I feel very comfortable discussing, is the problem of Church doctrine, with fundamental positions being taken as if they were out of the mouth God Himself, and then contradicted (by church presidents) later. That is done to illustrate the problem of the institution. I don't think that I can, or ever should, have looked for institutional approval for my relationship with God. There was a time I did. There was a time I cared a great deal about that. But the institution has rendered that now an impossibility, because I can't serve within the church. That hasn't done a thing to deter my conviction, my relationship, my fidelity to God. Likewise, I think in every individual's life, this world is a terrible place, and this world is a wonderful place. It is precisely wonderful because it is so terrible. It doesn't matter what circumstances you find yourself in, everything down here is going to pull away at you. Eventually everything is going to wear out, and break down. There are going to be disappointments, challenges, disagreements and arguments. The comfort that you find, like Joseph Smith in Liberty jail, "Peace my son, this is only going to be for a small moment, and if you endure it well your going to be rewarded on high." I don't think that an institution can embrace with love, everyone, because some of us hate some others of us, and the institution would like to (claim that it) love(s) us all. And those who get control, get to use the bully pulpit for their purposes, and those that don't have it, get to resent it. I don't think, ultimately, that the fix will be institutional. I think it will be personal, and I think it will be individual, and I think there will be a gathering, and that gathering will be called Zion, and it will happen because the prophecies foretell it. But I don't think it's going to be after the fashion of something that can regulate or take control of others, because anytime you manage to get control, you wind up in politics and economics.

Dan: His (Denver's) fear of institutions, I argue the same sort of thing. But it's important that we work these things out in community with each other. So the fact that we have an institution that provides the buildings, that provides some of the structures in which we meet and interact with each other and learn from each other, to me, shouldn't be outweighed simply by this. But again, I think both of us would be in agreement, no matter what is said there, it's you and your relationship with God. It's you and your relationship with the fire yourself, that has to be able to drive it, to not be simply interacting with it so far down the mountain where it's cooled, and that you can hardly tell that's it's there. So I do want to shout out that it's important that the primary actors in the world are not institutions, the primary actors in the world are people, and we're complex, and we go forward and we go backwards, and we halt and we run fast, and we stumble. When I see an institution changing the way the Mormon Church is, even though it's frustrating that it's not changing anywhere near the direction I want, and when they say stupid things that just make me want to go crazy, I still see it as an advance, because we as people are advancing. We are meeting each other, we are learning from each other, we're engaging, we are understanding what's going on, and this is sure revelation. This is sure revelation simply unfolding in a messier way. So again, I want to get us together as often as possible.

Voice: I think we can learn a lot from the community process, and discuss things, but that's not revelation. My question is, usually the best we can do with personal revelation, whether it is lay members or leaders, is a yes or no, magic eight ball kind of a thing. And I don't want to denigrate that, I'll take what I can get, but how do you move from that, to getting a complete sentence out of the Lord? [laughter]

Dan: I don't think it's possible. I don't think the Lord speaks in sentences. Seriously. Every powerful spiritual experience I've had has been so overwhelming, so much bigger, and beyond any kind of language. It's the downhill, it's the explaining it to you, to my friend, to my congregation or something, is where we put the words on it. And that's why it's so important to go back and constantly do the dialog. I honor Isaiah, I honor Abraham, and I admire them because they're examples to us of going straight to the Lord and having that face-to-face relationship that Genesis describes Adam had with God in the Garden. I'm with that process, but just as I don't accept the cosmology of a flat earth, sitting on waters below and a firmament held up by the pillars of heaven, I don't except Abraham's pronouncements on cosmology. I don't feel the need to honor everything that they say. I honor their interaction with God, and I try to look at that as a model for my own life. And even in an institutional setting, we have to remember this, we have to go straight to the source.

Denver: You know, I was raised by a Baptist mother and got Bible verses read at me every morning before I went to school throughout my childhood. When Mormon missionaries came and told me about the Joseph Smith story, and when Mormon missionaries assured me that Joseph saw God, and that, if you follow James 1:5 and you ask God, He will give you an answer, and if you will pray about *the Book of Mormon*, God will make it known to you whether it's true or not. I accepted that. I was young, I was still a teenager, but I accepted that as literal. I accepted that as possible. I had faith that that could happen. I'm not a theologian, but I do believe God not only talks in sentences, but can make himself known to man. Literally! I believe all that. I believe that God did appear to Joseph. I believe that He did appear to Isaiah. So having that understanding, I did not think that there was anything unusual when an angel appeared to me, because an angel did appear to me. I thought that was the normal, usual, every day way that Mormon religion was practiced. Sitting in a Ward as a teenager, looking out at all these experienced Mormons, listening to the General Authorities, I thought they all were talking to God in the temple every Thursday. I thought this was common, ordinary stuff. I presumed that was what everyone (experienced and therefore) walked around with (as their religion). It took a long time before I mentioned anything about any of the experience that I had had, before I realized that that's not usual, that's not normal, and that's not customary. And so, I'm (now) trying to make it usual, I'm trying to make it customary, I'm trying to say, Yes God is real! Because if I have seen Him, I think you can see Him, and (likewise) ought to. I think everyone should make the fiery ascent to God's presence. I think it should not be limited to an occasional "here," or an occasional "there." I think we should have an abundance of witnesses. And the prophecy that Moroni spoke to Joseph Smith, that the time is going to come when no one needs to say to anyone else, "Know ye the Lord, for they shall all know Him," needs to be fulfilled. It is lying dormant (still and should not be). [applause]

Dan: You can go with your symbol system, you are going to go with your expectations. A Buddhist will never have the experience with the angel, with Jesus, and things like that. What Denver is having is not the same experience as what Hershel had, what Mohammed had, and things like this. And so when we talk about whether God speaks in sentences, what language does He speak in? He speaks in the systems of ours that open up to this sort of level of presence. A deep dive through one symbol system is wonderful and it's pretty hard to get out of it, but I think we need to stay aware that there are so many people diving and meeting God, meeting the divine and so many other different ways. I honor Denver's experience, but I can't limit God to that single system. I'm with Mormonism's expensive views.

Denver: This much I know: The angel said, "On the first day, of the third month, in nine years, your ministry will begin, and so you must prepare." Those are the words! I can quote them still. He spoke in a sentence.

Voice: The more these situations are going on, I feel so strongly, more and more, I just keep getting that this is all about unity, and it's an opportunity for us. And if unity is about "agreeing" then frankly God did a terrible job. So the more I see of this, what I keep going to is, the quest for Zion seems to me, to be the quest for open heartedness, and charity, and unity. And so when I see one side that says, An actively gay person will never come into the presence of God. This person will go to hell. And then on the other side, I see a person who is an active Mormon, or a person who doesn't approve of homosexuality, who is an awful person because he's a hater. And I see those two things. And I see Christians say that Mormons are going to hell. It seems to me that we more dig our feet in and say, I'm right, and I'm trying to push this agenda...we are working away from God, and away from Zion. More and more I think that if we could say, This is my experience, this is what I believe, and let me hear where you are, and what you believe, and let's talk and consider. I think that's great. Even though I may disagree with you and think you're wrong, I trust God to lead you to what is right, and I trust the atonement of Christ to take care of whatever you've got wrong, just like I trust that for me. I think that truth exists, but I think when we all know all truth, we'll all agree. And in the meantime we are trying to find a way. So my question is, first of all, is that possible? I mean do you agree?

Denver: I agree very much. In the first book I wrote I said, "Religion was intended to be applied internally only."

Voice: Thank you. My other question is, my theology for the issue of our day, homosexuality, is that I believe that homosexuals are a gift to us, to teach us great things. I think we need to learn charity. I also believe that God does have a standard, but I want to know if those two things can coexist. Can we say, I truly love you, I'm thankful for you, I accept you, but this is my theology and morality. Can we be in this place where we love each other and seek unity without agreement?

Denver: I grew up in a little town in Idaho. Homosexuality in the 1960s was almost a nonexistent issue (and even though it existed, it was not a source of fighting). There was a restaurant in Mountain Home, Idaho that was owned by a gay man and his boyfriend, who lived together (in a house about two blocks away from my parents' home). Everyone knew that they were "funny." They were comfortable living in a community that was full of a bunch of retired military and active military people in Idaho in the 1960s, where I suppose, they were just as Republican then as they are in Idaho now. It was known, it was not talked about, I mean there might be a passing reference, but that was it. I worked in those guys' restaurant. One of my first jobs was washing dishes in a restaurant owned by a gay fellow and his live-in lover. It was no big deal. There was no politics involved, there was no agitating on the issue.

One of my law school classmates is here. A few years ago he wound up on a drive (to a business meeting in) Idaho with a fellow who was gay. (The gay fellow) announced (to my classmate) that he was attracted to him. It was one of those awkward moments. [laughter]

When (he and I subsequently talked about it), we kind of chuckled about it. But the fact of the matter was that both he and I had a business relationship with that fellow and (his announcement) was essentially a nonevent. It was strange. It was, (however, merely) "Thanks, but no."

I think we ought to be ginger about the way in which we deal with one another's weaknesses and problems. I think we ought to be firm in what we believe, and apply it rigorously internally, and then have compassion on every idiot you are going to meet-- because we are all idiots, myself included. I agree with you.

Dan: I agree with you too, but where you pushed to be a little too far is when you said, "I love you but these are my standards" To me, I'm simply willing to say, I'm going to hear you, I'm going to be with you, I'll see as much of your life as you will show to me without trying to have a resolution. When I talked about the Hegelian dialectic, it's a process, and I'm completely fine for it taking forever in my own heart.

Cathleen Gilbert (Moderator): We are out of time. Thank you to Denver Snuffer and Dan Witherspoon.
[Applause]

Denver Snuffer at 1:45 PM

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