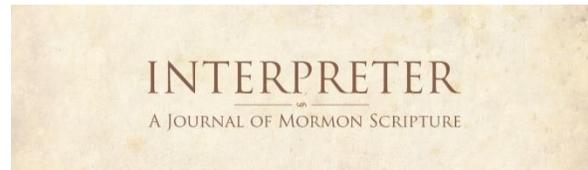




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On Being a Tool

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Daniel C. Peterson

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ON BEING A TOOL

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: Members, missionaries, and apologists must never lose sight of the fact that the gospel isn't merely about abstractions and theoretical principles. It's also, and most importantly, about people, about people with their own life stories, fears, hopes, and questions. Thus, if we want to be optimally effective, we must listen to people, understand them, and craft our message to reach them individually, where they are. The Interpreter Foundation is committed to helping with this task, but it cannot replace personalized instruction and caring.

Sean McDowell, a son of the well-known Evangelical apologist Josh McDowell (author, among many other books, of the popular 1972 volume *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* and 1977's *More Than a Carpenter*) and himself an assistant professor in the Christian apologetics program at southern California's Biola University, tells a helpful story at his own expense.¹

He was, he says, visiting the ski resort town of Breckenridge, Colorado, when he decided to have his hair cut. When his turn came, the young hair stylist who was working on him noticed that he had been reading a Christian book. Hair stylists often make small talk with their clients while they're at work, but she had a rather serious topic that she wanted to raise. Would he mind if she asked him a question about God that she'd been pondering?

"Of course I said yes," recalls McDowell, "relishing the opportunity to talk about theology. After all, I had been studying apologetics and

¹ The story appears in Sean McDowell, "Introduction: A New Kind of Apologist," in *A New Kind of Apologist*, ed. Sean McDowell (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2016), 11–13. I've retained the italics of the original. All paraphrases and quotations from McDowell, unless specifically indicated otherwise, come from these pages.

was ready with all the right answers. *Bring it on*, I thought, smiling to myself.”

She hesitated for just a moment, and then plunged into her concern. “Why,” she asked, “does God allow so much evil and suffering in the world?”

“*Really, that’s all you got?*” thought McDowell to himself.

It’s one of the most oft-asked questions in apologetics, and I was ready with the classical free-will defense — emphasizing that God desires a relationship with us, which is possible only if we have free will. I made the point that evil can exist only if there is first a standard of objective good, and there can be good only if there is a God. In other words, her very question, I pointed out, presupposes the existence of God.

This led to more questions, and I found I could answer each one pretty easily. She’d ask a question, and I had an answer ready at hand.

His reading and study were bearing fruit. McDowell thought that he was doing very well with his slam-dunk arguments “until she paused for a long moment, lifted the scissors away from my head, and then began to cry. She stepped back from cutting my hair and said in a quavering voice, ‘This is a bunch of bs! You’ve got an answer for everything. It *can’t* be that easy. You just don’t understand.’”

He was stunned. What he thought had been going so very smoothly had, in fact, been a disastrous failure. He hadn’t helped her at all, hadn’t brought her closer to untroubled faith in God and Christ, and hadn’t represented Christianity very well at all.

A few minutes later, outside the hair salon, he turned to a friend who had been there with him and heard the exchange, asking what had gone wrong. Or, more precisely, he asked why “she had been so defensive.”

“Well,” his friend replied after a careful pause, “do you have any idea how arrogant you were toward her?”

McDowell was shocked. And, very likely, he was more than little defensive himself.

But as we walked along the streets of Breckenridge, I thought about the encounter and realized he was absolutely right. Rather than really listening to her, asking questions, and trying to learn from her, I was more interested in scoring points and winning the argument. My replies had come across as prepackaged sound bites rather than compassionate

and respectful responses. What I saw, maybe for the first time, is that truth must be wedded to grace, and that what we say is important ... but *how* we say it is equally critical.

He hadn't, according to his own account, been in any way abusive of the young woman. Still, in reflecting upon the story now, he thinks of Paul's second letter to Timothy, which I quote here in the King James translation familiar to English-speaking Latter-day Saints:

And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient,

In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;

And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.²

This seems to me precisely right. But I would add more. Many years ago, before I was even married or had received my undergraduate degree, I was impressed by an address given by Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone during the October 1976 general conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Elder Featherstone's remarks were entitled "The Impact Teacher," and a very specific passage from them has remained with me ever since.

Some years before, Elder Featherstone said, the president of the Boise North Stake, L. Aldin Porter, had dropped by the home of a man by the name of Glen Clayton, who was the Scoutmaster in his home ward. (President Porter would himself be called to serve in the First Quorum of the Seventy in 1987.) Brother Clayton and his son were working together, trying to repair a bicycle. President Porter stood talking with them for a few minutes and then left. After several hours, though, he returned. When he returned, he found that the father and his son were still working on that bicycle. Amused, President Porter remarked, "Glen, with the wages you make per hour you could have bought a new bike, considering the time you have spent repairing this old one." Brother Clayton's response is what has stuck with me now for the forty years since I heard it in Elder Featherstone's conference address: He stood up, looked at President Porter, and answered, "I'm not repairing a bike, I'm training a boy!"

2 2 Timothy 2:24-26.

It's easy to see why a man with such an attitude might be an exceptional leader of Boy Scouts. "That year," said Elder Featherstone, "twenty-one boys achieved the rank of Eagle Scout in Glen's troop. Impact teachers do not teach lessons, they teach souls."³

And surely that's true for teachers in church and for missionaries, as well as for parents. When we teach the Gospel, we aren't — or shouldn't be — simply endeavoring to pass on a body of facts, nor even merely one or more stellar, penetrating insights (much as I, personally, appreciate such facts and value such insights). Gospel Doctrine classes aren't solely about the dates of Ezekiel or the historical background to Doctrine and Covenants 76; they're also about appealing to the spiritual feelings of class members, building testimonies, and encouraging ourselves and others to be disciples of the Savior.

Sean McDowell's problem is obvious — to him, now, and, thanks to his honesty, to us as well: He had shown no interest in the young woman herself. To him, she had represented a problem to be addressed more than a human soul to be helped.

I'm reminded in this context of a story related to me by the wife of a longtime university colleague, whom we've known for nearly four decades. The couple had recently returned from a lengthy stay in a remote and rather backward area of the Arabian Peninsula. The wife was cooking dinner while he sat reading. When she called him to eat, he stood up and promptly collapsed. He was taken by ambulance to the nearby hospital, a research institution affiliated with a very prominent public university in the state where they were living at the time.

At one point during his stay in the hospital, she came to visit him. She was impressed to find him surrounded by doctors who were considering his case with deep interest. Suddenly, one of them turned around and said to nobody in particular, "Oh, it's just ordinary, garden-variety hepatitis." The disappointment was palpable, and the room emptied out almost immediately.

Given our friend's travel history, the medical staff had thought that they were perhaps seeing a rare (and usually fatal) disease seldom encountered by physicians in their part of the developed world. When that turned out not to be the case, however, they lost interest. As one of my own professors commented to me, after having spent some time in the same hospital following a medical crisis, the technical care in the

3 Vaughn J. Featherstone, "The Impact Teacher," October 1976 General Conference, accessed April 7, 2016, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1976/10/the-impact-teacher>.

facility was superb, but the physicians and nurses there seemed to be more interested in the disease than in the patient.

Now, nobody is more interested in having and passing on factual knowledge than I am. I expect my students at Brigham Young University to learn about the Qur'an, Form IX of the triliteral Arabic verb, the philosophical and theological arguments of al-Ghazali, the contents of the Persian *Shahnameh*, and the reasons for the rise of Egypt's Fatimid dynasty, just as other professors expect theirs to know multivariate analysis, classical Chinese syntax, the structure of organic compounds, and Kant's categorical imperative. So, too, my Gospel Doctrine classes are focused on the scriptural texts, trying to understand what they mean and how they mean it, not merely on whatever feelings and emotions can be connected with those passages. (My approach may perhaps be overly intellectual, but that's how I do it.)

Still, I recognize that more is going on in such Gospel-teaching situations — or, anyway, ought to be going on — than merely the transfer of facts or even the generation of analytical insights. And people usually come to Church, to the missionaries, and to defenders of the faith for more than merely factual information. They don't only want to be instructed. They want to be inspired, comforted, and fortified for their daily lives. Often, the most important work that needs to be done is more pastoral than it is informative.

Sean McDowell learned a lesson from his failure in Breckenridge. Now, he says,

Whenever the problem of suffering and evil come[s] up, I try to avoid simple answers. I typically respond with a question: "Of all the things you can ask about God, why that one?" Occasionally, people have a genuine intellectual issue they want to wrestle with, and I am more than happy to help. But more often than not, the intellectual question masks a deep personal wound. When I ask this question, I often hear painful stories of sickness, broken relationships, and abuse. The Christian response is not to simply give a reason, although there may come a time for that, but to "weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15) and to show comfort and care to the afflicted (Psalm 82:3).⁴

The Apostle Paul's powerful words about charity come to mind here, as they do in so many other contexts:

⁴ McDowell, ed., *A New Kind of Apologist*, 11–13.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.⁵

Such charity isn't mere teaching ability, cleverness, or intellectual agility. It might make use of one or more of those desirable qualities, but it's not reducible to any or all of them and it will often have nothing whatever to do with them. The word *agape*, translated as *charity* in the King James Version of the Bible but often rendered in other English translations simply as *love*, involves a whole-souled response to the whole soul of another. It requires taking seriously the entire personality of that other, with whatever fears, worries, concerns, and limitations that personality includes.

For many of those whose testimonies need help to grow or repairs to save, there are deep existential issues that are crying out not only for answers but for relief. We misjudge them and we underserve them if, instead of the bread of life, we give them just the hard stones of a few facts or a handy rebuttal to an intellectual objection.⁶ Such cases aren't merely occasions for intellectual one-upmanship. They're not purely theoretical discussions or classroom exercises. C. S. Lewis makes an important related point:

I have found that nothing is more dangerous to one's own faith than the work of an apologist. No doctrine of that Faith seems to me so spectral, so unreal as one that I have just successfully defended in a public debate. For a moment, you see, it has seemed to rest on oneself: as a result, when you go away from that debate, it seems no stronger than that weak pillar. That is why we apologists take our lives in our hands and can be saved only by falling back continually from the web of our own arguments, as from our intellectual counters, into the

5 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.

6 See Luke 11:11.

Reality — from Christian apologetics into Christ Himself.
That also is why we need another’s continual help — *oremus
pro invicem* [‘Let us pray for each other’].⁷

I would suggest that one other reason why a doctrine might seem “spectral,” to use Lewis’s word, would be regarding it as merely a theoretical proposition to be precisely articulated and convincingly defended. We should always think of the doctrines of the Kingdom as living, spiritual realities, as truths with real implications for how we and others live and with power to help, to comfort, to inspire, and to save. We should never forget, either, that when Alma summoned those to accept baptism who had fled to the waters of Mormon with him, he didn’t tell them to accept certain propositions. Rather, he invited them to join a community of those who “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.”⁸

Bearing “witness” doesn’t stand alone in his description of this community. And “bearing witness” isn’t limited to merely passing on information or posting good academic arguments. Faith involves assent to certain propositions, but it isn’t limited to such assent. “Thou believest that there is one God,” wrote James. “Thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.”⁹

But trying to reach people where they actually are, attempting to listen to them, and to craft our responses to them according to their individual needs, is time-consuming and energy-intensive. None of us can do it for everybody, or even, unfortunately, for more than relatively few people.

And it cannot be done *en masse*. It’s an individual matter.

To put my point another way, such pastoral ministry isn’t the primary work of the Interpreter Foundation, which exists, in large part, to exhibit the richness, depth, and credibility of Latter-day Saint scripture and doctrine. The articles and books and roundtables produced by the Foundation cannot listen to the personal concerns of particular people. They cannot supplant Spirit-directed, targeted care and individualized teaching. They cannot really show compassion in any adequate way,

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 101.

⁸ Mosiah 18:8–9.

⁹ James 2:19.

although we hope that they'll be written, where appropriate, in a spirit of kindness and concern. We don't confuse what we do with the ministry of the Church.

No tool is adequate for all purposes. Hammers cannot do everything that screwdrivers can do, and screwdrivers are useless for some of the tasks that hammers do well.

We do, however, believe that we are creating a resource that can be useful for certain aspects of that ministry. If we can provide our peculiar, limited, but (we hope) valuable kind of help to teachers, students, parents, leaders who counsel, and missionaries who preach, we will consider our efforts a success. What we try to provide should be applied, with the help of the Spirit and the judgment of the individuals applying it, to the myriad of uniquely individual cases that exist and will exist at any given time. If, whether directly or indirectly, we can assist others to deepen, solidify, and enrich their testimonies, that will be more than enough reward for us.

Nowadays, at least in American English, calling someone a "tool" is a fairly deep insult. But surely there are worse things than offering oneself up as a "tool" in a worthy cause. "This is my glory," said the converted Alma the Younger, "that perhaps I may be an instrument in the hands of God to bring some soul to repentance; and this is my joy."¹⁰

The Interpreter Foundation aspires to become and to be such a useful tool in the hands of God and those who try to serve him. We're profoundly grateful to all those who have helped us to make the Foundation what it has become to this point through volunteer labor, financial contributions, writing, reviewing, editing, and the myriad of other tasks that always require attention. And we invite others to join them and us in this effort.

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

10 Alma 29:9.

on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled Muhammad: Prophet of God (Eerdmans, 2007).

