

The War in Heaven Revisited: Agency vs. Compulsion

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In author Philip Pullman's adolescent fantasy trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, the heroine, a 10 year-old girl named Lyra, turns out to be a key figure in a second War in Heaven. As the books unfold, the reader gradually comes to realize that the protagonists, the good guys, are preparing to go to war against God. As a school librarian, who had just placed these highly recommended books in a junior high school library, I read them with a gradually increasing concern that they might be subversive. At the same time, however, I read with great enjoyment, for these books are intelligent, well written, and full of adventure.

Now, please understand, as a librarian I have no problem with a little subversion now and again. It has been said that a well-stocked library should have a little something to offend just about everyone. A public library should provide a wide range of informational and recreational reading, but it should not dictate to the public what they *should* read.

Of course, the focus of a school library is a bit narrower than that of a public library. For example, the school librarian tries to select materials that are age appropriate and that support the curriculum. However, this does not preclude the inclusion of controversial materials in the library. In the selection of library materials, the goal is not to avoid controversial issues, but rather to provide balanced, accurate information on both sides of a given issue.

The question for me was whether a work of fiction that casts God as a "bad guy" was "age appropriate" for junior high students. Actually, to be honest, I was really concerned about potential political fallout from the community in which our school is located. Actually, to be even more honest, I was uncomfortable because the books challenged, and forced me to reexamine, my own religious beliefs.

The paragraph that really disturbed me, and set me to thinking, is near the end of the second book, *The Subtle Knife*. In the scene, a shaman is explaining to his son Will, the 12-year-old hero of the series, what the situation is. This is what he said:

"There are two great powers, " the man said, " and they've been fighting since time began. Every advance in human life, every scrap of knowledge and wisdom and decency we have has been torn by one side from the teeth of the other. Every little increase in human freedom has been fought over ferociously between those who want us to know more and be wiser and stronger, and those who want us to obey and be humble and submit."

(Philip Pullman, *The Subtle Knife*, p. 320)

This paragraph had a powerful effect upon me. It entered my heart with great force. It brought, and can still bring, tears to my eyes. It haunted me for days. This paragraph led directly to my writing this essay.

I believe these words move me so deeply because I accept them completely. I believe these words affect me emotionally because they clearly describe the stakes in the battle that I have been helping to fight my entire life. As a teacher, a union leader, a

librarian, and even as an Elder's Quorum instructor, I have constantly worked to help people "know more and be wiser and stronger."

In each of these areas, my professional life, my political life, and my religious life, the struggle was, and is, against "those who want us to obey and be humble and submit."

In education the struggle is between those who teach children, and those who teach "subjects." The enemy is high-stakes multiple-choice testing, politically imposed so-called "standards," and finger pointing "accountability" that seeks to assign blame rather than to support success. The heroes are those teachers who ignore the crap and concentrate on providing good learning experiences for kids. In educational parlance, the fight is between the constructivists and the behaviorists. The constructivists are badly outnumbered, and their victories are small and personal. They work harder, risk more, and "buck the system," because they care about their students.

In my union work the struggle is between teachers who want a better life for themselves and better schools for their students and those who believe that teachers should be humble, submissive, and thankful for their jobs. The enemy consists of politicians who would rather spend money on concrete than on kids. The heroes are the increasing number of voters who realize that our children are our future.

In library work the struggle is between those who believe in free open access to information, and those who believe in censorship. Censorship can be accomplished directly, through book banning (or burning) or Internet filtering, or indirectly, by under funding public and school libraries. Either way, the effect of censorship is the same; ideas are restricted by a minority. Those who want us to obey and be humble assert control over those who want us to know more and be wiser.

In my professional and political life I know clearly where I stand. Promoting knowledge, seeking wisdom, and empowering people have been and are the purposes of my life. It is in my religious life that this paragraph from a book of fiction raises questions. Clearly to have knowledge, wisdom, and strength is good, but can obedience, humility, and submission, be bad? If so, how, and under what circumstances?

Book one of the trilogy, *The Golden Compass*, is set in a world like ours, but different. The antagonists serve an evil church that somewhat resembles the Catholic Church during the Inquisition. In this world, science is known as "experimental theology" and every college, laboratory, observatory, and expedition must have a representative of the Church on staff to watch out for "heresies."

It was not hard for me as a reader to accept this fictional church as evil, because, after all, it was not *my* church, and because the Inquisition was, indeed, a very dark side of Christian history. I could accept the idea that a church could be evil.

It was much harder for me to accept, even in the context of fiction, the idea that God could be evil. As sophisticated as I like to think I am, I discovered that I still have a very strong, even simple, belief in a generous, loving, Father God. These books were unsettling to me because I simply had no framework, even for the sake of a philosophical discussion, for the idea that perhaps the wrong side had won the war in heaven.

Still, the ideas and questions raised by this work of literature are very much worth thinking about--not because literature should inform our theology, but because the religious questions raised in literature can cause us to reexamine our theology and, perhaps, define it more precisely.

The war in heaven is described in the book of Revelation.

And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels,
And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven.

And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. (Revelation 12:7-9)

These verses tell us four things: 1. There was a great conflict in Heaven, 2. Michael and Satan were the leaders of the two sides, 3. Satan and his followers lost, and 4. The losers were cast out of Heaven and sent to the Earth. There is no indication of what the fight was about except for the reference to Satan being a deceiver.

More information is given in Isaiah:

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!

For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north:

I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High.

Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.

(Isaiah 14:12-15)

In these verses Isaiah is clearly emphasizing the hubris Lucifer demonstrated in those pre-earth councils by thinking he had a better plan than the Father. But what was it about Lucifer's plan that was so enticing that it drew the support of one-third of the hosts of heaven? Consider that those who were cast out were spirit brothers and sisters of ours. Presumably they had the same opportunities and information that we had. Yet they made a choice that resulted in their being cast out of Heaven. What could they possibly have been thinking?

Fortunately, as Latter-day Saints, we have additional scriptural information about the issues of that time. The book of Moses gives us the details of Satan's plan.

And I, the Lord God, spake unto Moses, saying: that Satan whom thou hast commanded in the name of mine Only Begotten, is the same which was from the beginning, and he came before me, saying – Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor.

But, behold, my Beloved Son, which was my Beloved and Chosen from the beginning, said unto me – Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever.

Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto

him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down;

And he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto my voice. (Moses 4:1-4)

Clearly, these were dramatic times. Mormonism teaches that we were all premortal spirits at the time, and that we were all present and participated in the discussions at a great council in Heaven regarding the creation of the earth. In Sunday School we teach our children that Lucifer was cast out because he disobeyed the Father, and that Jesus was selected to become the Savior because he agreed with the Father's plan. This teaching is literally and completely true. However, the scriptures regarding the war in heaven have much more to teach us than a simple story of the good guys defeating the bad guys.

Lucifer was cast out of Heaven because he rebelled against God, but in Moses Chapter 4 verse 3 we are told the precise nature of his rebellion. Lucifer's rebellion centered on two issues. One, of course, was Lucifer's hubris, or pride. As Isaiah pointed out, Lucifer sought to become God. Interestingly, however, Lucifer's hunger for power is given as the second reason he was cast out. The first reason given is that Lucifer "sought to destroy the agency of man."

Ironically, or perhaps insidiously would be a better word, the being who would have denied free agency to everyone on Earth made full use of his agency, and the agency of his pre mortal brothers and sisters, to enlarge the scope of his rebellion and to lead others away from God.

This is described in the Doctrine and Covenants:

And it came to pass that Adam, being tempted of the devil-for, behold, the devil was before Adam, for he rebelled against me, saying, Give me thine honor, which is my power; and also the third part of the hosts of heaven turned he away from me because of their agency;

And they were thrust down, and thus came the devil and his angels.
(D&C 29:36)

These verses make it very clear that those who followed Satan out of Heaven did so by choice. Still, it is difficult for those of us struggling in a Telestial world, who hope for heaven some day, to understand how anyone *already in heaven* could turn their back to God and give everything up. Since we have some experience with Satan in this world, we have some idea how appealing he can make his lies appear, and we know he is a master of persuasion, but what alternative could he possibly have offered to the Plan of Salvation as presented by Jesus and supported by God the Father?

I believe the key words are in Moses Chapter 4 verse 1 when Lucifer says, "I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost." Let's look at the context of when he said those words to try and understand how very tempting they were.

The Book of Abraham describes the council in heaven as follows:

Now the Lord had shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones;

And God saw these souls that they were good, and he stood in the midst of them, and he said: These I will make my rulers; for he stood among those that were spirits, and he saw that they were good; and he said unto me: Abraham, thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born.

And there stood one among them that was like unto God, and he said unto those who were with him: We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an Earth whereon these may dwell;

And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them;

And they who keep their first estate shall be added upon; and they who keep not their first estate shall not have glory in the same Kingdom with those who keep their first estate; and they who keep their second estate shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever.

And the Lord said: Whom shall I send? And one answered like unto the Son of Man: Here am I, send me. And another answered and said: here am I, send me. And the Lord said: I will send the first.

And the second was angry, and kept not his first estate; and, at that day, many followed after him. (Abraham 3:22-28)

We Mormons understand the phrase "intelligences that were organized" in verse 22 to mean the begotten sons and daughters of God who had bodies of spirit matter. Jesus, the one that was "like unto God," announced that an Earth was going to be created, and that all the spirit sons and daughters of God had the opportunity to go there. The purpose of the plan was to further our personal growth and advancement, to prepare us to live like our Heavenly parents, to qualify us for a kingdom of glory.

I like to call this plan, wherein we received bodies and came to Earth to learn and be tried, the Plan of Advancement. It was simply not possible for us as spirit beings to become more like our parents without receiving a physical body and leaving the presence of God for a time. (I like the metaphor comparing this life to "going away to school.") The test involved in keeping one's "First Estate" was in deciding to accept the Plan of Advancement – to be willing to leave heaven and come to Earth under the conditions of free agency complicated by the loss of our pre-Earth memory.

Now, from our current perspective, the idea of coming to Earth is a very attractive one. Certainly few of us are in a big hurry to leave! We like our bodies, and the sensations and experiences they allow us to have. We like the material world with its sights and its sounds, its joys and its toys. It takes serious mental effort to try to picture the situation we were in at that time and the difficulty of the decision we had to make.

You see, to accept the Plan of Advancement was extremely risky. We had to leave Heaven, and the presence of our Heavenly parents, and a very large number of us were *never coming back*. When you think about that situation it is easy to imagine some one or two (or more!) of our brothers and sisters saying, "What kind of crazy plan is that? You expect us to just give up all memory of everything, and wake up totally helpless in a strange place, in a body we can't control, and just hope everything works out?"

Picture a crowd just starting to murmur this kind of fear and uncertainty when one of our well-known, and always well-spoken, elder brothers steps forward and reassures everybody that there is nothing to be worried about. He will volunteer (with the appropriate recognition of course!) to administer the plan and will guarantee that no one will be lost.

What a relief! The crowd starts to relax. Lucifer will take care of us. It won't be so risky after all. We can have the joys of the flesh without the risks. The crowd smiles and starts to leave when the Father announces, "No Lucifer. I will send Jesus."

As I picture the scene in my mind, the uproar started right there. Lucifer and his entourage stomped out of the meeting in anger. The crowd broke up in loud confusion; and Michael, Gabriel, Enoch, Joseph Smith and handful of others gathered around Jesus to figure out how to explain the plan calmly to everyone when they knew Lucifer would be going around stirring up fear, anger, and jealousy.

The final picture I imagine in this drama is of a loving Father, having already delegated important responsibilities, withdrawing quietly from the scene. He looks knowingly at His wife and says, "Thus it begins."

Now it is very important at this juncture that we have a clear understanding of the critical issues of that time. It is my belief that we still face the very same issues today—not just out in the lone and dreary world, but also within the Church itself.

The big theological issue present in the War in Heaven was the question of agency versus compulsion. This is the same question advanced in the literary quotation I referred to at the beginning of this paper. Does Mormonism want people to "know more and be wiser and stronger?" Or does Mormonism want people to "obey and be humble and submit?" What about Lucifer? Did he want us to be wiser and stronger, or did his plan require us to be humble and submit?

I believe that since Satan "sought to destroy the agency of man," (Moses 4:3) it is *his* plan that requires us to be humble and submit. Remember, since we live in a Universe that operates according to fixed laws, Lucifer's premortal plan to save everyone could not magically save us no matter what we do on Earth. His plan, of necessity, would have had to either *force* us to remain sinless, or if he provided a Christ-like universal sacrifice for sin, he would have had to *force* us to repent. Anything other than these two unpleasant options could not have brought about his promised outcome of saving everyone.

In contrast, the Lord told Joseph Smith as he arrived in Missouri:

For behold, it is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward.

Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness;

For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves.
(D&C 58:26-28)

This life isn't like some kind of all or nothing, pass or fail, final exam. It is more like an internship, a practical, hands-on, experience with the physical world. The challenge is whether we can learn to consistently sift the wheat from the chaff and choose

long-term happiness over short-term pleasure. God isn't interested in controlling us. He sent us here "to see" (Abraham 3:25) what we will choose to do with our agency. He has given us laws, not as some arbitrary loyalty test, but in order to bless us.

As Joseph Smith taught:

... when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated. (D&C 130:21).

Agency is a necessary precondition to obedience. Obedience cannot occur where there is no choice. Any attempt to place obedience ahead of agency, or, in other words, to compel righteousness, is to implement the premortal plan of Lucifer. The same plan which the Father rejected.

This raises the question of whether the church should focus its energies on combating disobedience or on dispelling ignorance? Is the role of the church to be the enforcer of righteousness or the bearer of the good news of the gospel? Clearly both impulses are present in the Church today. My contention is that they are mutually exclusive. The police officer cannot assume the responsibilities of the physician, and the physician is ill suited to the job of policeman.

Though the role of prophets is clearly to call people to repentance, it seems to me that prophets rarely call down fire upon the wicked. Much more often they are found pleading to God to spare the people in their weakness and give them more time to repent. The Gospel is not intended as a wrathful condemnation of the wicked, but a blessed relief – good news for the afflicted.

One of the "missions" of the Church is to "Perfect the Saints." I believe this mission is a process of education, not a process of enforcement. Given the fact that there is sin, temptation, and misunderstanding in the world, there are two methods one can use to protect oneself: quarantine or inoculation. You can either hide from the world or learn how to function safely within it.

Quarantine is an act of deliberate isolation. On the personal level, it often takes the form of "avoiding the very appearance of sin." This phrase is commonly heard in church sermons, but I have never heard it quoted from its original scriptural source. It comes from a prayer by Nephi in which he was grieving over his personal weaknesses.

O Lord, wilt thou redeem my soul? Wilt thou deliver me out of the hands of mine enemies? Wilt thou make me that I may shake at the appearance of sin? (2 Nephi 4:31).

The interesting thing here is that Nephi is not asking the Lord to make him appear righteous, he is asking to feel fear and revulsion whenever temptation arises. Nephi doesn't want to avoid the appearance of sin; he wants to avoid sin whenever it appears. This distinction is critical because it is the distinction between righteousness and hypocrisy.

Avoiding all sin is, of course, the desire of every righteous person. With years of determined practice it is even possible to approach this ideal. Joseph Smith taught "the nearer man approaches perfection, the clearer are his views, and the greater his enjoyments, till he has overcome the evils of his life and lost every desire for sin." At the

very same time, he taught "that this is a station to which no man ever arrived in a moment." (History of the Church 2:8). And, of course, the Lord's Prayer reminds us that we cannot do this without His help. "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (Matthew 6:13).

However, avoiding the "appearance" of sin has two problems. The first problem, as mentioned above, is the potential for hypocrisy. It is entirely possible, indeed common, for a sinner to maintain the "appearance" of righteousness. Over time, the natural human tendency to hide our sins can become a carefully maintained, smoothly polished veneer of "respectability." Respectability has everything to do with image and nothing at all to do with righteousness. This is what Jesus was referring to when he called the Pharisees "whited sepulchers" (Matthew 23:27).

The other problem with avoiding the "appearance" of sin is that it can lead to a rather nasty form of judgmental, self-righteous isolationism. Non-Mormons in Utah often complain about this. They feel that their Mormon neighbors won't socialize with them because Mormons believe they are morally superior to non-Mormons. In many cases this feeling is justified by the actions, and even the words, of some Mormons. Again, Jesus warned us against this tendency with the parable of the Good Samaritan. We are not to become so obsessed with purity that we become uncivil to our fellow human beings. The commandment to "love thy neighbor as thyself" is far more important than the Pharisaical obsession with personal purity.

On the organizational level, the quarantine approach is paternalistic. It implies that "we" the organization know what is best for "you" the individual. We will protect you from the evils of liquor by the drink, the Equal Rights Amendment, same-sex marriages, etc. by making them illegal. You won't have to decide how you feel or what to do about these issues because we have decided for you and we have taken steps to keep them away from you.

Please understand that I am not being sarcastic or cynical here. No matter how one may feel about the three examples I just gave, my point is that these are recent historical issues in which the Church took a position and acted strongly on that position despite the contrary feelings of a significant number of its members.

Nor am I saying that the Church has no right to take such positions. In fact I personally believe quite the opposite. If any being has the complete and utter right to be paternalistic toward the human race, it is, by very definition, God the Father. And since ours is a revealed religion in which Prophet leaders have direct contact with the will of God (again, by definition), it is precisely in the area of "knowing what is best for us" that the Church can provide its greatest service to us.

I am merely saying that the quarantine approach is highly problematic. Carried to the extreme, the organizational use of the quarantine approach becomes cancerous to the organization itself as attempts to "root out the evil" turn into witch hunts complete with loyalty tests, hidden accusers, secret police, forced confessions, private tortures, and public executions. Lest one think I am being too melodramatic here, I remind you of the very real history of the Catholic Inquisition, and, on a much smaller level, the history of the Mormon "September Six."

Are there forces in the Church today that attempt to compel righteousness? Of course there are. Does it make a difference if these forces are motivated by love and concern for us rather than by the power-hungry pride that motivated Lucifer? I don't

think so. Another lesson we should certainly learn from the War in Heaven is that the ends cannot justify the means. If they could, then Lucifer's plan would have been the better one.

My point is that just as isolating children from the temptations, problems, and sins of the world is not the best way to help them grow into strong, caring, righteous adults, attempting to isolate God's spirit children from the tests of this life cannot help them grow toward Godhood. We are here on Earth for the very purpose of facing opposition. Those who attempt to protect us from the test are, no matter how well-intentioned, helping the adversary.

The best way to protect children from disease is an early and complete series of inoculations. Taking this metaphor back to the problem of sin, inoculation implies that one is taught early how to recognize and avoid sin and also learns how to repent and overcome the temptations that one will inevitably fall prey to. The process involves learning and applying the first principles of the Gospel: faith and repentance

I believe Joseph Smith wanted the Saints to "know more and be wiser and stronger." He taught that "It is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance" (D&C 131:6). He also said:

A man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge, for if he does not get knowledge, he will be brought into captivity by some evil power in the other world, as evil spirits will have more knowledge, and consequently more power than many men who are on the earth. Hence it needs revelation to assist us, and give us knowledge of the things of God. (HC 4:588.)

Joseph Smith did not govern the church through compulsion. When asked how he governed the increasing number of people in the church, the Prophet replied, "I teach them correct principles and they govern themselves" (Quoted by John Taylor, in *Millennial Star* 13:339 [15 November 1851].). Like the Apostle Paul and the Prophet Mormon, Joseph Smith expected his people to take responsibility for their own actions and to "work out their own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12, Mormon 9:27).

This ideal is a difficult one to maintain because, like Israel of old in demanding a King, the Latter-day Saints are forever insisting that their leaders tell them what to do. I am suggesting that it is high time the Saints stand on their own two feet, learn correct principles, and start governing themselves. I believe the major reason the LDS church seems so paternalistic is that its members, despite a century and a half of prophetic teaching, still act like adolescents.

I am not suggesting that we, as individuals, do not need the church – quite the contrary. The church is the sole source of the priesthood and ordinances we need. I am saying that we need to grow in knowledge, wisdom and strength. I am saying that we need to start serving the church instead of expecting the church to take care of us. I am saying we need to use the differing gifts and talents God has given each of us to bless others rather than to comfort ourselves. I am asking each of us to take on the responsibilities of mature faith.

My proposal is not without risks, of course. One of the important factors that led to the War in Heaven was Lucifer's pride, and clearly pride has continued to be his

relentless master since that time. Given the example of Lucifer, we all should be constantly alert to the seductive danger of pride in our lives. Even though I am suggesting that we each take greater responsibility for our own decisions, I am not suggesting that we should start considering our own limited individual judgment to be the supreme arbiter of truth. The truly wise are always willing to consider the possibility that they may be wrong. Lucifer was apparently not able to consider that possibility for himself.

Lucifer failed because he just didn't understand how the universe works. He was so caught up in his own desire for power, for glory, and for recognition, that he was blind to an understanding of why God's plan was organized the way it was. Lucifer just didn't get it. Since the purpose of the plan was to advance, and eventually to exalt, God's children, free agency was not an optional component, it was an essential ingredient. In my view, Lucifer fell not so much because he disobeyed, but because he refused to understand. His pride made him unteachable.

If, then, pride is a barrier to advancement, isn't humility the proper alternative? The answer is that it depends on how one defines humility. The word humility comes from the same root as humble and humiliated. Clearly it is more desirable to be humble than it is to be humiliated. The difference is that humbleness is a state that comes from within a person while humiliation is a state that is imposed upon someone from an outside force. So, too, humility should be the quiet understanding of one who knows his own weaknesses and limitations, not the frightened submission of one who is afraid of punishment.

Obedience is another term that needs to be carefully defined. Obedience is not a principle; it's an action. Agency is the condition that makes obedience possible. Laws are the mechanism by which blessings are achieved. So, agency allows us to obey laws and claim the attendant blessings.

Ultimately, our salvation is based upon obedience to Eternal laws, not obedience to human authority. We have been warned that human authority is too easily corrupted to be dependable. As Joseph Smith said:

We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion. (D&C 121:39.)

Because of this problem, we surely should not blindly obey just anyone who may have, or claim to have, authority over us. We have the obligation to learn the Truth for ourselves and to obey those laws that will bring us the blessings we seek.

Does this mean, then, that I am suggesting we should never "obey, and be humble and submit"? No, it does not. I am suggesting that we clarify our definitions and our priorities. We should dedicate our lives to knowing more – constantly seeking greater light and knowledge. We should pray for the strength to accept full responsibility for all our choices, good and bad, and for the wisdom to recognize when we need to change course and repent.

I hope that our leaders will continue to resist the pressure and temptation to quarantine us. That they will refuse to treat us as children in need of protection and instead consider us as siblings to be taught – and to learn from. I hope that we, as church

members, will stand up and use our agency wisely – to grow in knowledge and to strengthen ourselves and others.

Abraham described himself as one who desired “to be a greater follower of righteousness, and to possess a greater knowledge” (Abraham 1:2). Adam continually called upon the Lord for “greater light and knowledge.” Personally, I have struggled to find new meaning and new truths in Sacrament meetings where the same talks seem to be given on the same topics, quoting (and misquoting) the same scriptures, year after year. I find it hard to stay awake during Sunday school and quorum meetings in which we rehash the same issues from the same over-correlated lesson from the same manual that we used four (and eight) years before.

Occasionally, I have had the opportunity to be a Sunday school teacher or priesthood quorum instructor, where I have been known to heavily supplement the official lesson manual, if I used it at all. My last experience as Elder’s Quorum instructor was under the leadership of a quorum president who very much appreciated the way my lessons “stretched the minds” of the class members. However, he soon called another instructor to alternate weeks with me because quorum members complained that they didn’t want their minds to be stretched *every* week. Of course, during the entire period, I was learning more than anyone because of the study involved in preparing for the class.

Eventually, a new quorum president was called. Not long after, the new president asked me if I could stick to the manual when I taught. (It may not surprise you to know that he was an accountant!). I told him that I could not stick to the manual because God’s gift to me as a teacher was to explain and clarify deeper understandings, and that I simply could not deny my gift by teaching in a superficial way.

I did not explain to him my belief that the role of any teacher is to awaken and enlighten, not to lull and pacify. I did not remind him that every sermon and lesson given in the church should, ultimately, be a call to action. I did not tell him that it was a serious mistake to allow his quorum to go back to those drowsy, cliché, unchallenging, and repetitive lessons. Instead, I told him that I respected his new calling and that he should find an instructor that met the needs of the quorum as he saw fit. Not surprisingly, then, we both agreed that I should be released.

I tell you this story to illustrate the fact that the struggle to promote greater knowledge is a constant one. In the struggle against ignorance, evil may not be the enemy so much as inertia. Sadly, minds at rest tend to stay at rest. Each of us individually must consciously choose to pursue “greater light and knowledge” – it will not come to us simply by sitting in Sunday School.

So the challenge lies before us daily. We are called on to grow in knowledge and in righteousness in a world filled with ignorance and sin. And as soon as we begin to make a bit of progress, we are hit with the potentially fatal temptation of pride. I believe the only solution to this difficulty is to call upon the one who set all this up in the first place – our Heavenly Father. He is the one true source of all the blessings and opportunities we have in this life. And I believe He wants us to succeed.