The word “heresy” stands like bookends bracketing a shelf of my seven years in the Church. When I contemplated joining, late in 1973, my stern Baptist father handed me a worn booklet titled Heresies Exposed. Mormonism, of course, was the subject of a lengthy and not-too-kind chapter. As that chapter did not deter me, I found myself in 1980 privileged and perhaps a little disturbed to hear a fireside address by Elder Bruce R. McConkie called “Seven Deadly Heresies.” In that now well-known talk he referred to certain theological concepts which, if a man believes them, might establish him as a heretic. The differences in perspective between that old booklet and the fireside talk are plain enough. But the word fascinates. Used in countless other polemics than these I have mentioned, it professes to identify error. Yet as a concept in the latterday Church it seems foreign, out of place.

In the earliest sense a “heretic” was merely one who “chose” his beliefs carefully, then adhered to and defended them (from the Greek hairesin, to choose to take upon oneself). There was no pejorative sense to the term. A heresy (hairesis) to the Greek mind was simply a school of thought, one mode of belief as opposed to another. A hairesis was usually a non-exclusive philosophy, a system of belief that made no claim to a monopoly on truth. The Greek, after all, professed to seek truth from many sources. He was reluctant to brand a man, willing at the most to label him: Stoic, Epicurean, Christian. It is with this sense that the New Testament writers inherited the word. Thus, in Luke’s account, Paul explains he was a member of the hairesis of the Pharisees. Later, he says, he converted to the hairesis of the Christians.1

But, as we know, some New Testament writers began infusing the word with negative connotations. Paul himself includes hairesis, or “sectarianism,” in his list of fleshly works.2 On another occasion he writes that it is inevitable, or perhaps even necessary, for heresies (opposing schools) to appear in the Church so that those which are approved may be made manifest.3 Peter also, president of the Church, prophesies that some men will infest the Church with “damnable heresies” or factions.4 It seems clear from the linguistics and context of these passages that what was, in fact, considered “damnable” about a heresy was not what a man believed but his insistence on it as the only authoritative theological position. The real sin of heresy was in division,
the sin of hairesis was in full bloom: regardless of who was right in opinion, such men were wrong in their tactics. They had become factious, sectarian—that is, heretical.

The conditions that brought about this change are evident. The Church in its infancy needed and desired to overlook internal differences of opinion for unity's sake. The common causes of overthrowing a degenerate Judaism and proselyting among the heathen, not to mention the immense labor of mere survival amid persecution, did not allow for the sense of orthodoxy (from ortho and doxa, i.e., “right opinion”) as opposed to heterodoxy. The early Christians were spiritual mavericks bucking the overwhelming trends of the old orthodoxy. When the clamor of persecution waned, once the Church was secure in its social status, that maverick fervor turned inward. Without a feeling of saint-against-Jew, or saint-against-Rome, the trend turned to saint-against-saint.

In such times each among many sides proclaims that it alone holds the orthodox—or in our day, “fundamental”—doctrines of the gospel and that all other opinions are heretical. The move toward this state of affairs is always subtle. To understand its subtleties in our time we must first examine a related term, “apostasy.” The latter word refers to a falling away from the truth and usually an open opposition to it. The apostate is a once-believer become unbeliever. The heretic, on the other hand, is at worse a misbeliever.7 The danger of such disbelief was not originally thought to be in theological deviance per se but in the practices it might encourage. Thus, Justin complains that heretics teach people to “do and say blasphemous things in the name of Christ.”8

Consider a modern example of this very idea: in the fireside address on heresies, Elder McConkie attacks the Adam-God idea not from a theological stance but on the grounds of unauthorized practices associated with that doctrine:

Those ensnared by [the Adam-God doctrine] reject the living prophet and close their ears to the apostles of their day... And having so determined, they soon are ready to enter polygamous relationships which destroy their souls.9

It is well to note the real argument here. In this, as in the early branding of heretics, belief is not attacked as dangerous in and of itself, but is rebuked for the context in which it most frequently appears. It is for this reason that unorthodox ideas are rarely called just “false” but almost invariably “pernicious,” “damnable,” or “deadly.”10

We are left... with the irony that in denouncing so-called heresies, or unsound opinions, we create them in the true sense by drawing lines of ideological division between the Saints.
We find an ancient example in the case of the Marchionites. Many of their views and even practices we would consider orthodox in the LDS Church. (Joseph Smith himself cited them for their belief in baptism for the dead.) Yet their doctrine was hopelessly tainted by their rejection of the ecclesiastical authority of the Twelve. This ancient example illustrates the importance of guarding against certain trends of thought, realizing that it is really the integrity of the ordinances that may be jeopardized by them. When we hear, as we frequently do, of so-called “apostate doctrine,” we must keep in mind that no theological concept can make a man apostate. Rather, apostate men, by espousing them, make certain theological concepts “apostate” in our terminology. We are left then with the irony that in denouncing so-called heresies, or unsound opinions, we create them in the true sense by drawing lines of ideologic division between the Saints.

Even beyond this, the modern epithet of heresy as disbelief preserves a fixed and stable orthodoxy by which doctrine may be tested. Has such an orthodoxy ever existed? We can only conjecture on much of the doctrine of the early Christian Church. Indeed, our Restoration scriptures insist that many “plain and precious” themes have been expunged from the records. However, we can see in the gospels and the epistles a freedom of interpretation of old prophecy, quite radical new interpretations of well-known texts, and divergent exegeses by different authors of the same Old Testament passages. We go about blithely trying to harmonize various readings and interpretations on the probably erroneous assumption that conflicting theologies were and are intolerable, even impossible. In this case we are apt to compromise a rich doctrinal heritage and to obscure what may be a healthy, fruitful tension. So doing, we manifest a kind of medieval consciousness in the worst sense: that of a body of believers who have outgrown persecution and begun to impose the narrow view of “official” interpretation—orthodoxy—on even the finest points. Such an orthodoxy was not part and parcel of the early apostolic Church, nor as we shall see, the latter-day Church.

Walter Bauer, in his essential work, has demonstrated the diversity of belief on many issues that existed among the early Christians. There were, as he sees it, no doctrinal norms whatsoever. This is a position subject to some controversy. But even Bauer’s foremost critic, H.E.W. Turner, is compelled to admit that early Church doctrine resembled a symphony composed of varied elements rather than a single melodic theme, or a confluence of many tributaries into a single stream rather than a river which pursues its course to the sea without mingling with other waters.

The theology of the young Church was an evolution, a process. Where conflict over doctrine arose, it was often the most persuasive or most respected rhetorician that prevailed in the consensus ecclesiae. Once that consensus had been reached, and the doctrines tacitly or in fact voted upon, there was no going back. In this manner some ideas we would consider more correct—like the well-known Arian concept—were rejected and reduced to heretical status, while their counterparts ascended to orthodoxy. To assure the stability of this new-found orthodoxy—a stability confessedly unknown and unneeded in earlier days—creeds were formulated, test oaths which left, as one commentator observed, a “legacy of fear” on all Christendom. By the fourth and fifth centuries these creeds promulgated in auspicious church councils were becoming proof-texts for ascertaining the orthodoxy of a man’s faith. The epitome of this insistence on an unquestioned pattern of belief is found in the Vincentian canon of the fifth century, which defines true Christian belief as “that which is believed everywhere, always, and by everyone.”

In times like these, as Canon Fairbarn put it, “all doctrines are reduced to authority and all morals to obedience.” Many of our greatest minds and spirits endured the logical consequences of such a reduction: artists were enslaved, philosophers imprisoned, scientists beheaded, reformers burned. Unfortunately, some of the so-called reformers themselves continued the strange traditions of their own persecutors. Thus Michael Servetus, the sixteenth-century Spanish heretic, escaped the inquisition in Southern France by fleeing to Calvin’s Genoa, only to be burned to death there for his misbelief. In response to Severtus’s execution, Sebastian Castellio wrote an impassioned plea for the abandonment of the common idea of heresy. He sums up the situation in his pamphlet De haereticis an sint persequeendi:

The real sin of heresy was in division, squabbling over temporarily—and perhaps eternally—moot points.

If a man should devote himself to trying to provide a white robe—that is, to live an innocent life—all the rest band together against him, if he differs from them in a single point. They set upon him and denounce him as a heretic. . . They charge him falsely with crimes he never even though of. They so slander and smear him before the public that it is considered sinful even to listen to him. They work themselves up into such a fury with these slanderers that they are angry if he is strangled first, and not burnt alive over a slow fire.

The reductio ad absurdum of the whole affair, says Castellio, is that “Christians are at odds with Christians about Christ.”

Less than three hundred years later, Joseph Smith made his great inquiry concerning orthodoxy only to be informed in vision that allexisting creeds were corrupt and erroneous. But perhaps paradoxically, from this first vision onward, Joseph evolved an all embracing policy of tolerance toward many divergent beliefs. He rebuked sectarianism, to be sure—heresy in its true sense—and he was ever prompt to defend his restored authority to administer saving ordinances. Yet he refused to establish a pattern of orthodox belief for latter-day saints. Why? Because, as he said, “creeds set up stakes, and say, ‘Hitherto shalt thou come, and no further’; which I cannot subscribe to.” As for misbelief, he insisted: “I never hear of a man being damned for believing too much; but they are damned for unbelief.”
Joseph was compelled to take such a stance, for he himself witnessed from day to day a divine interchange of ideas that led his doctrinal thought from something akin to Campbellism to a revolutionary spiritual and communal philosophy that forever qualified Mormons for unquestionably heretic status in the minds of most Christians.

The most extensive of Joseph's references to this subject was in a discourse given at general conference, April 8, 1843. Pelatiah Brown had been dragged before the High Council for preaching his interpretation of John's Revelation. Joseph was not impressed with their attempt to censure Father Brown. His objection to their action had nothing to do with whether or not the council was able to provide Father Brown with the correct interpretation. Joseph admits he doesn't care either way, adding that "correct knowledge on the subject is [not] so much needed at the present time." The only reason he consents to explain the subject at all is to prevent contention and do away with division, i.e., heresy in the original sense. He rebukes the council:

I did not like the old man being called up for erring in doctrine. It looks too much like the Methodist, and not like the Latter-day Saints. Methodists have creeds which a man must believe or be asked out of their church. I want the liberty of thinking and believing as I please. It feels so good not to be trammelled.

We have reached a stage in our history where the requisite careful and critical thought seems burdensome to many. People join the ranks of the Kingdom expecting "the last word on the subject"—on every subject.

He then calmly rebuffs the myth of the deadly heretic: "It does not prove that a man is not a good man because he errs in doctrine."10

Joseph's aversion to a sense of orthodoxy is further suggested in the fact that the only "creed" he ever devised came in response to the badgering of easterners for a statement of belief from the Church. I refer, of course to the Articles of Faith. The breadth of this quasi-creed is amply shown in the first article, wherein a potentially complex theology of the Godhead is reduced to "We believe in God the Eternal Father, and in His Son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost." Within that basic belief, some have speculated on the possibility of God's progression in knowledge and power, on the identity of the Father, on the nature of the Holy Ghost, and so on. But the article itself still reads as it stands. Because this and all the articles are so broad, it should not surprise us that Joseph's colleagues and immediate successors found little use for them. They almost never referred to them, favoring instead the so-called "Mormon Creed," presumably devised by Joseph himself, which states simply, "Let every man mind his own business."11

The objection can be and has been raised that the LDS rule of faith must consist in the idea of the Standard Works. Indeed, in some contemporary attacks on heresy in the Church we are told:

We have accepted the four standard works as the measuring yardsticks, or balances, by which we measure every man's doctrine.21

One of the reasons we call our scriptures The Standard Works [is that] they are the standard of judgment and the measuring rod against which all doctrines and views are weighed, and it does not make one particle of difference whose views are involved. The scriptures always take precedence.22

Such an approach sounds reasonable, at first hearing, but as the early Christians learned, it is fraught with ambiguity. Given the fact that the young apostolic church considered "the scriptures" to refer to the Old Testament and that even in the oldest manuscripts we possess there is a dearth of "plain and precious" Christian teaching, we must look elsewhere for early Christian doctrinal sources. What were those sources? Contemporary works: the teachings of Jesus in various accounts and commentary on the Old Testament by apostles and other church writers. These commentaries were absolutely essential to the faith of the Saints; to merely have told these early brethren that "the scriptures always take precedence" would have left them at worst hopelessly entrenched in theological misconceptions and outworn covenants and at best as muddled and helpless as perhaps some of us find ourselves when reading an Isaiah or Ezekiel. All this is not to mention the problem of whose canon to accept. Should a preeminently gentile church subscribe to the exclusivity and bias of the councils of scribes and Pharisees?

In the LDS Church we have a similar, and even greater dilemma with respect to the New Testament. We take that canon for granted, but the issue of canonicity is at the heart of the conflict between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in early Church times. I need mention only in passing the endless disputes over authorship and over the authoritative ness of this apostle's doctrine over that apostle's as well as the wild variance in the tenor of books purporting to contain the sayings or teachings of Jesus—most of which were of equally ancient date. It is important to recall that many classic New Testament books were only marginally accepted by the mass of church members for centuries. Trends in the popularity of certain texts waxed and waned. But at a given moment in history a council of theologians and priests, bent on eliminating division, fixed the canon of current acceptance and made it somehow binding for all time. How was that determination made? A strong factor was, as we have suggested, the commonality of use in the church. However, a greater factor was the need for books to fit the creeds of orthodoxy already created. The well-known Nicene Council had fixed its famous trinitarian creed in A.D. 325. The council of canonization at Carthage was not till some seventy years later.

Even by stabilizing the canon, the prevailing orthodoxy could not end heretical tendencies. In fact, with the same books accepted by all, divergent beliefs did not recede but spread because, as Lanier would so eloquently explain, the scriptures are deliberately vague. Much of their power is in allowing for variant interpretations.23 The problem on the minds of the
authorities was not really how to get members to use the authorized canon as the final doctrinal authority—for all, even the rankest heretics were doing that—but how to fix the interpretation of the scriptures. To effectively assert their desires, they joined to the scriptures two other doctrinal criteria: tradition and reason.

Tradition, “what has always been believed,” was most essential. Some men, like Chrysostom, argued tradition was more important than the scriptures themselves, for the written text would be useless, unintelligible without it. Such had little use for new exegesis or exposition. They sought only to maintain a doctrinal status quo. Reason, as one might expect, was touted more than employed. In many theological concerns, like the Trinity, it only got in the way. Still, the logical consistency of a doctrine could be used as a measuring rod of its correctness—albeit as a last resort. Quasi-rational arguments were usually saved for dealing with heretic intellectuals, who were thought to rely far too heavily on reason.

The trinity of scripture, tradition, and reason suffered its greatest affronts from the early Mormon movement. What chance did the orthodox canon and its attendant cult of tradition have in the face of new historical scriptures and daily revelations clarifying, expanding, even superceding the ancient ones. Among those revelations were sentiments like the following: “Whatsoever [the elders] shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be the word of the Lord, shall be the voice of the Lord. . . .”

The written text, then, was in no way superior to the spoken. And that Joseph did not consider the spoken or written to be fixed is evidenced by his repeated revisions of and insertions into the Bible, Book of Mormon, and contemporary revelations alike. He makes no apologies to ardent scripturalists. “I have got the oldest book in my heart,” he says, “even the Holy Ghost.” With Joseph a pattern of continual welling up and crystallization, of “line upon line” development supplanted the prevailing classical view of orthodoxy. That view, of course, insisted there was a pristine measure of doctrine buried somewhere in the dim past, but somehow preserved in the doctrinal musings of the contemporary church hierarchy.

Joseph’s chief disciple, Brigham Young, carried the Prophet’s thought to its logical conclusions:

You may read and believe what you please as to what is found written in the Bible. . . . [but] when my sermons are copied and approved by me, they are as good scripture as is couched in this Bible.

What of the majestic Genesis account? “A baby story,” is Brigham’s answer. His apparent flippancy he explains with a broad principle that extends to all scripture—even that from his own mouth.

I do not even believe that there is a single revelation, among the many God has given to the Church, that is perfect in its fullness. The revelations of God contain correct doctrine and principle, so far as they go; but it is impossible for the poor, weak, low, grovelling, sinful inhabitants of the earth to receive a revelation from the Almighty in all its perfections. He has to speak to us in a manner to meet the extent of our capacities.

With scripture redefined and put in perspective and tradition breached, what of reason? Strangely, the concept of reason—or a sanctified form of it—is elevated, in effect, to the highest position. A few of Joseph’s statements on this should illustrate:

The epitome. . . insistence on an unquestioned pattern of belief is found in the Vincentian canon of the fifth century, which defines true Christian belief as “that which is believed everywhere, always, and by everyone.”
The mind or the intelligence which man possesses is coequal with God himself.

Man was also in the beginning with God [for] intelligence... was not created or made, neither indeed can be.

The Holy Ghost has no other effect than pure intelligence. It is more powerful in expanding the mind, enlightening the understanding, and storing the intellect with present knowledge.

The revelative act consists in the Spirit giving "sudden strokes of ideas" to man. Clearly Joseph did not find the rational and the spiritual to be the enemies many classical thinkers did. Nor did he merely concede them to be compatible. The boldness of his thought was to identify the two so closely as to render them virtually indistinguishable. The mind and spirit are the same eternal, uncreated entity, "co-equal" with the God whose glory is intelligence.

In such a conception, the duty of the mind is to be active, always expanding, encompassing, and embracing new things: "Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity." Thus, true orthodoxy—right thinking—consists in continual acquisition, not mere maintenance. And the real heresy, by Joseph, becomes apparent: "It is the doctrine of the devil to retard the human mind. . ."32

With Joseph a pattern of continual welling up and crystallization, of "line upon line" development supplanted the prevailing classical view of orthodoxy.

We have reached a stage in our history where the requisite careful and critical thought seems burdensome to many. People join the ranks of the Kingdom expecting, as my Sunday School teacher is wont to put it, "the last word on the subject"—on every subject. They seek the kind of cut and dried orthodoxy that the founding geniuses of Mormonism refused to succumb to. When they see doctrinal controversy these converts often turn away disheartened. The proper remedy to me seems not to squelch the dialogue, as some have suggested, but to reappraise its significance. John Macquarrie in his fine Principles of Christian Theology states it perhaps best:

The stresses and strains that go on in theology serve to remind us once more that there can be no final theology in which we can rest once and for all.33

And our own perhaps greatest theologian, B. H. Roberts, confirms this notion. After mentioning certain truths of which we may and must be certain—"the Lord is God, Jesus is the Christ, the gospel is the power of God unto salvation"—he concludes that even with the possession of [the Spirit of Truth], I pray you. . . never to look for finality in things for you will look in vain. . . Intelligence [and] truth will always be with us relative terms.34

In that light, better we take the latter-day notion of heresy with a grain or two of salt than become with Christendom pillars of salt—continually looking backward for something that isn't there.

Notes
1. Acts 26:5; 24:14
3. I Cor. 11:19.
4. II Peter 2:1.
8. Quoted in Turner, p. 98.
10. The orthodoxy, in its zeal, often carries this to extremes; the result can come in wonderfully mixed metaphors like that of Ignatius, who describes the heretics as "grievous wolves who lead captive the athletes in God's race." Quoted in Turner, p. 63.
12. They believed that when Paul warned of "false apostles" (II Cor. 11:13) he was referring to the Twelve.
15. See Machle, p. 229.
17. HC 6:57.
18. HC 6:477.
20. See statement of Brigham Young in Journal of Discourses 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854-1886), 2:92-93. There are occasional references to the "Mormon Creed" in nineteenth-century Mormonism, one of the more notable being its placement on the masthead of John Taylor's newspaper The Mormon, wherein the "creed" is attributed to Brigham Young, and reads simply "mind your own business."
25. HC 6:308.
27. JD 2:6.
29. HC 6:310; Doctrine and Covenants 93:29; HC 3:380.
30. HC 3:381.
32. HC 5:24.
34. Improvement Era 8 (1905):369-70.

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