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Receiving Offense Without Taking Offense: The Book of Mormon and the Power to Forgive

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RECEIVING OFFENSE
WITHOUT TAKING OFFENSE
THE BOOK OF MORMON AND
THE POWER TO FORGIVE

Keith J. Wilson

A FRIEND OF MINE CONVERTED TO THE Church as a young woman. Shortly before she was baptized, a member in whose home she had accepted baptism took her aside and gave her the following counsel, “Sooner or later you’re going to be offended by someone in the Church, perhaps even a leader. You might be tempted to stay away awhile or go inactive. But I want you to remember that you are not covenanting with that member or with anyone else, but with the Lord Jesus Christ. Your covenant is with Him.”¹ This solemn counsel echoes the Savior’s words when He told His Apostles shortly before the Crucifixion, “It is impossible but that offences will come” (Luke 17:1). The Savior knew that each of us was destined to deal with having our feelings hurt by those around us.

This reality brings with it a double-edged sword. Not only are we promised a mortality with multiple offenses, but the Lord has also required that we forgive each of those offenses in order to

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move forward spiritually (see 3 Nephi 13:15; D&C 64:10). The emotional price of this commandment to forgive can often be overwhelming. This chapter will attempt to outline some salient doctrines and examples of forgiving an offender as chronicled in the Book of Mormon.

A BOOK OF MORMON OVERVIEW: THE CONSEQUENCES OF SHUNNING FORGIVENESS

The Book of Mormon can be studied and analyzed from a score of different perspectives. Some of these include such approaches as a historical record, a doctrinal text, or a literary work. The Book of Mormon is also an account of conflicts in which the principle of forgiveness plays a pivotal role in the functioning of the people. Sadly, beginning with Lehi and ending with Moroni, the book bears its solemn witness to the consequences of failing to forgive others.

Certainly much can be gleaned from studying these failures and the harm that disregarding forgiveness can bring. However, the power of positive principles not only teaches but also lifts the soul. Accordingly, this paper will focus primarily on the positive examples. Suffice it to mention here one potent but pathetic Book of Mormon account of shunning forgiveness.

Nephi, son of Lehi, lived out his life in the shadow of his elder brothers' constant complaining and recriminations. When Nephi's life was at risk, the Lord finally counseled him to separate from his contentious siblings. He obeyed, and two nations emerged from this division. Approximately four hundred years after this occurred, a Nephite leader by the name of Zeniff recounted why the Lamanites still harbored such animus toward the Nephites. Note the generational hatred that persisted in the collective Lamanite memory: "They [the Lamanites] were a . . . blood-thirsty people, believing in the tradition of their fathers, which is this—believing that they were driven out of the land of Jerusalem because of the iniquities of their fathers, and that they were wronged in the wilderness by their brethren, and they were also wronged while crossing the sea; and again, that they were wronged while in the land of

their first inheritance, after they had crossed the sea, and all this because [of] . . . Nephi” (Mosiah 10:12–13).

After addressing more of their specific grievances, Zeniff then summarized their hatred: “And thus they [the Lamanites] have taught their children that they should hate them [the Nephites], and that they should murder them, and that they should rob and plunder them, and do all they could to destroy them; therefore they [the Lamanites] have an eternal hatred towards the children of Nephi” (Mosiah 10:17).

What a tragic aftermath of two brothers with an enlarged disposition for revenge! But even four hundred years did not circumscribe the damage of these two unforgiving brothers. Approximately one thousand years after Laman and Lemuel contended with Nephi, the prophet Mormon watched hundreds of thousands perish as those who called themselves Lamanites annihilated the entire Nephite nation. The pattern for this genocide traced itself back to a contempt for those who followed God or were the children of Nephi (see 4 Nephi 1:39). Thus, two contemptuous brothers set the pattern for almost one thousand years of conflict. It represents the ultimate example of the aphorism, “He who is offended when no offense was intended is a fool; he who is offended when offense was intended is a greater fool.”

Fortunately, the Book of Mormon is not only about failing to forgive others. Within its pages are numerous accounts of those who understood and applied the balm of forgiveness. Four positive examples will serve the purposes of this analysis. They are Lehi, Nephi, Pahoran, and the risen Lord.

LEHI AND SARIAH: RESPONDING WITH LOVE

Almost unnoticed in the story of the Book of Mormon is the relationship between Lehi and Sariah. As this couple heeded the Lord’s will to leave Jerusalem, tremendous pressures were placed upon their marriage. In one case these pressures boiled over, and Sariah gave Lehi a terse tongue-lashing.

Nephi recorded this difficult exchange: “For she had supposed

that we had perished in the wilderness; and she also had complained against my father, telling him that he was a visionary man; saying: Behold thou hast led us forth from the land of our inheritance, and my sons are no more, and we perish in the wilderness. And after this manner of language had my mother complained against my father” (1 Nephi 5:2–3).

With the pressure that Lehi felt, Sariah’s attack was undoubtedly searing and painful. A likely response would have been to lash back and “put her in her place.” Of all people, she should have known better. She had watched as the people of Jerusalem sought his life. She would have known of his heavenly vision that had occurred as he lay upon their bed, a vision that had included even the Savior Himself. She had been willing to leave their possessions behind and set out into the wilderness. And now she had abruptly turned on Lehi, accusing him of false visions and misleading their family. Such were the grounds for Lehi to take offense.

Yet Lehi did not recriminate or even denigrate his faltering spouse. Rather, Lehi took upon himself the responsibility of the situation, saying, “I know that I am a visionary man; for if I had not seen the things of God in a vision I should not have known the goodness of God, but had tarried at Jerusalem, and had perished with my brethren.” After acknowledging the awkwardness of their circumstances, this husband then encouraged his wife with the power of his testimony, “Yea, and I know that the Lord will deliver my sons out of the hands of Laban, and bring them down again unto us in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 5:4–5).

The account does not specify how soon thereafter Sariah accepted his consoling words. It is clear that upon the return of their sons, she rejoiced and retracted her criticisms. What is also evident from these events is that Lehi did not harbor ill feelings toward his wife. Instead, he stopped, listened to her concerns, and responded lovingly to her. He chose to sidestep the offense, forgiving Sariah for her indiscretions and lovingly seeking to lift her sagging spirits and faith. Lehi was a great example of forgiving a faltering or insensitive spouse.

NEPHI WITH LAMAN AND LEMUEL:
FORGIVING FREELY AND COMPLETELY

Perhaps Nephi learned about this ability to forgive from his father because he certainly displayed it as he interacted with his two older siblings, Laman and Lemuel. He was told early in the Book of Mormon record that he would be a ruler and a teacher over them (see 1 Nephi 2:22). But he appears to have been unprepared for how often they would malign and abuse him. One of the first recorded abuses was during the initial return trip to Jerusalem as the brothers went seeking the plates. After their second unsuccessful and life-threatening experience, Laman and Lemuel began to beat Nephi and Sam with a rod. An angel intervened and castigated them with the message that Nephi had been chosen to rule over them because of their iniquities. Even though an apology was beyond their ability, they did capitulate and follow Nephi back to Jerusalem, albeit somewhat reluctantly. In spite of their resistance, Nephi was still able to secure the plates and return to their base camp.

The saga of Nephi's brotherly ordeal continued as he was instructed to return to Jerusalem and convince Ishmael and his family to accompany them into the wilderness (1 Nephi 7). He and his brothers were successful, yet on their return trip Laman and Lemuel again rebelled against Nephi. Nephi begged them to remember the Lord, their experience with the angel, and the impending doom of the city of Jerusalem. They would have none of his exhortations and became so angry with Nephi that they bound him and left him as bait for wild animals. Miraculously, the Lord loosened Nephi's cords. As Laman and Lemuel were about to overpower him a second time, members of Ishmael's family interceded and convinced the brothers to reconsider. Subsequently a wave of remorse engulfed the brothers, and they did an emotional turn-about. With remorseful hearts they begged for Nephi's forgiveness.

How hard would it have been for Nephi to grant them forgiveness? Nephi had endured one painful moment after another with these calloused brothers. They envied and despised him so

thoroughly that they repeatedly sought his life. And then when the Lord intervened with angels and other miracles, they routinely brushed it aside in favor of more hatred and abuse. To this mountain of offense, Nephi responded with forthright forgiveness. His own firsthand account simply reads, “And it came to pass that I did *frankly forgive them* all that they had done, and I did exhort them that they would pray unto the Lord their God for forgiveness. And it came to pass that they did so” (1 Nephi 7:21; emphasis added). This account makes it apparent that Nephi cared nothing for revenge. He looked beyond their malice and concerned himself with his need to forgive and their need to be forgiven of the Lord. Too many of us only partially forgive, or as President Gordon B. Hinckley has warned, “So many of us are prone to say we forgive, when in fact we are unwilling to forget.”² In contrast, Nephi’s forgiveness came without strings or conditions. His was a forgiving soul, worthy of emulation.

PAHORAN AND CAPTAIN MORONI

Another quiet and yet marvelous example of forgiveness in the Book of Mormon record surfaces during the war years following Alma’s ministry. This often-overlooked account involves a government leader who was responsible for supporting the great Nephite leader, Captain Moroni. Pahoran might well represent those whom President Howard W. Hunter once referred to as “no less serviceable” (Alma 48:19) in the eyes of the Lord.³

Pahoran had the civic assignment to support Captain Moroni’s war efforts. Pahoran was the son of Nephihah, who was Alma the Younger’s successor as the Nephite chief judge. During his time as the chief governing officer, an uprising developed among the Nephite upper class. Pahoran called upon Moroni for support, and the insurrection was quelled (see Alma 51). The Nephite armies continued to battle the Lamanites on a number of fronts while depending heavily on Pahoran and his citizenry to sustain and support them.

Unbeknown to Captain Moroni, a second uprising erupted at

home, crippling Pahoran and his government. The situation became so dire that Pahoran and his loyalists were forced to abandon their city and flee. While hiding from his traitors, Pahoran received a scathing letter from Captain Moroni.

The letter accused Pahoran of gross indifference to Moroni's urgent request for additional supplies. As Moroni continued, he made threats of returning to accost those government leaders who were responsible. His accusations became bolder, and by the end of his letter he was threatening Pahoran's life. Among his accusations against Pahoran were such statements as:

"Can you think to sit upon your thrones in a state of thoughtless stupor?" (Alma 60:7).

"Ye . . . are seeking for authority. . . . Ye are also traitors to your country" (60:18).

"Ye are surrounded by security" (60:19).

"Your iniquity is for the cause of your love of glory and the vain things of the world" (60:32).

"The blood of thousands shall come upon your heads for vengeance" (60:10).

"And it is because of your iniquity that we have suffered so much loss" (60:28).

Thus, Moroni caustically attacked Pahoran's character from almost every angle.

As hard as these character accusations might have been for Pahoran, a much deeper wound must have occurred as Moroni intimated that he was acting under divine direction. In the following passages he essentially indicted Pahoran by virtue of a revelation from God on traitorous charges: "It is my God whom I fear; and it is according to his commandments that I do take my sword to defend . . . and it is because of your iniquity that we have suffered so much loss" (Alma 60:28).

"Ye know that ye do transgress the laws of God, and ye do know that ye do trample them under your feet. Behold, *the Lord saith unto me*: If those whom ye have appointed your governors do not repent of their sins and iniquities, ye shall go up to battle against them" (Alma 60:33; emphasis added).

Not only was Moroni claiming that Pahoran was lazy, selfish, greedy, and proud, but now he was implying that God's inspiration was directing him in his criticism of Pahoran. This divinely underwritten accusation comes into even sharper focus as one considers the stature of Moroni within the Nephite community.

Captain Moroni represents the paragon of righteous military leaders in the Book of Mormon. He consulted the prophet Alma regularly as to where he should attack the Lamanites (see Alma 43:23). He was described as "a man of a perfect understanding" (Alma 48:11), one whose soul did not delight in bloodshed but in liberty, freedom, and thanksgiving to God; he was "firm in the faith of Christ" (Alma 48:13) and gloried "in preserving his people" and "resisting iniquity" (Alma 48:16). Finally, Captain Moroni received the ultimate character assessment with these words, "If all men . . . were . . . like unto Moroni, behold, the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever" (Alma 48:17).

These were not idle compliments. They underscored the esteem that faithful Nephites such as Pahoran would have felt toward Captain Moroni. Yet this very respect made Pahoran emotionally more vulnerable to Moroni's reckless attack. The response by Pahoran could have been a spirited defense of his honor, integrity, and spirituality. Instead, what occurred was an incredible example of Christlike forgiveness.

In the opening stanzas of Pahoran's response, he gave Moroni an accounting of the king-men and their treasonous takeover. He apologetically explained how they seized power and sent him into exile. After explaining the situation, he turned to the subject of Moroni's spurious attack. In one verse he outlined a model response for forgiving those who offend us. His inspired words were, "And now, in your epistle you have censured me, but it mattereth not; I am not angry, but do rejoice in the greatness of your heart" (Alma 61:9). In the remainder of his letter, he reaffirmed his commitment to liberty, to trusting in God, and to resisting evil actively. But the essence of his forgiveness seemed to be couched in three essential phrases: first, "it mattereth not;" second, "I am not angry;" and

third, “I . . . do rejoice in the greatness of your heart.” These inspired rejoinders deserve deeper analysis.

“IT MATTERETH NOT”: LEARNING TO LOOK BEYOND PERSONAL ATTACKS

How is it that Pahoran could just say, “Yes, you have belittled me, assailed me, and even threatened my life, but let’s get beyond the unfounded attacks to the real issue here”? Didn’t he have any feelings? How could he just ignore such deeply personal assaults? The answer must have in part originated in Pahoran’s own feelings about himself.

Because he trusted in the integrity of his own behavior, he knew that Moroni’s charges were unfounded. As such he did not have to refute them or concern himself with Moroni’s mistakes. Truth is “things as they really are” (Jacob 4:13; see also D&C 93:24). Moroni would discover the truth soon enough. Pahoran, who did not see it as his responsibility to argue with Moroni, subscribed to the simple counsel of Elder Boyd K. Packer concerning an offense: “Leave it alone. . . . Leave it alone.”⁴ Truly Pahoran had turned it over to the Lord (see Proverbs 16:23) and was no longer concerned (see D&C 64:11). He could ignore the unfounded insults because they truly did not matter to him, and he could focus his attention on the real issue at hand: dealing with the king-men.

“I AM NOT ANGRY”: DISARMING NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

Along with sidestepping Moroni’s misplaced accusations, Pahoran separated himself from unhealthy, negative emotions. His claim, “I am not angry,” settled the issue and possibility of responding in anger. Pahoran chose to align himself with the Savior’s pattern by avoiding entirely the spirit of contention (see 3 Nephi 11:29). He internalized the concept taught by Elder Russell M. Nelson that contention is a spiritual disease: “As we dread any disease that undermines the health of the body, so should we deplore contention, which is a corroding canker of the

spirit.”⁵ For Pahoran, anger was spiritual poison, and that ended the issue.

A second way to view Pahoran’s nonemotional response is that he had the spirit of discernment. He knew through this spirit that he was in the right. This spiritual confidence disarmed any possibility of anger, but it was not enough just to be right. The Savior later confirmed this principle to the Nephites with the words, “Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another” (3 Nephi 11:30). The writer of Proverbs highlighted this truth with the counsel, “He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty” (Proverbs 16:32). It seems Pahoran’s ability to resist anger was not in the strength of his argument but rather in the knowledge of his intentions. For him anger was not an option.

“I . . . DO REJOICE IN THE
GREATNESS OF YOUR HEART”:

FINDING COMPASSION FOR THE OFFENDER

The final piece of Pahoran’s inspired pronouncement expressed the thought, “I . . . do rejoice in the greatness of your heart” (Alma 61:9). This was more than just flattery to divert attention from an embarrassing affront. Pahoran not only dismissed the negative, but he wisely replaced it with positive thoughts about Moroni. He understood that negative thoughts are not just to be cleared away, but that they must be supplanted as well. The Saints in 4 Nephi also attested to this principle. The account of their society mentioned the fact that they did not have any contentions whatsoever “because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people” (4 Nephi 1:15). The Apostle Paul endorsed this same idea as he taught the Saints at Ephesus to stay away from the negative and instead speak “that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers” (Ephesians 4:29). In sum, these teachings and examples remind us that one sure way to avoid the negative in forgiving an offense is to look for the positive in the offender.

There is a second motivation in looking for the good in the offender. The scriptures warn us that if we cannot forgive the offender then we are guilty of a greater sin (see D&C 64:9). This seems completely unbalanced at first glance. Is not the offender responsible for hurting us in the first place? Apparently this commandment has nothing to do with who is right and who is wrong. Instead it has everything to do with entertaining positive or negative feelings. As Pahoran was submerged by a wave of false accusations, he knew that to follow Christ he had to get beyond the initial pain of Moroni's attacks and recognize the good motives in his offender. Accordingly, he saw not only the good but also the "greatness" in Moroni.

EXTENDING FORGIVENESS TO INCLUDE "INSPIRED" LEADERS

One last aspect of Pahoran's response enhances his sterling example. When Moroni attacked Pahoran, this civilian leader had to reconcile some very difficult feelings. How could God let an inspired leader make such a blatant mistake? Does God make mistakes? Was Moroni really chosen by God to lead? These types of questions would have besieged Pahoran. Rather than confront Moroni on these issues, he chose to exercise faith in God's hand. On one occasion Joseph Smith taught this principle to a German couple who mistakenly believed that a prophet is always a prophet. He flatly contradicted this notion with the words, "I told them that a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such."⁶ Pahoran continued to believe that God was leading Moroni in spite of Moroni's human weaknesses. In his reply he reinforced Moroni's spiritual standing with such comments as, "See that ye strengthen Lehi and Teancum in the Lord; tell them to fear not, for God will deliver them" (Alma 61:21). One of the great lessons we can take from humble Pahoran's interaction with this inspirational military captain is that chosen leaders can make mistakes and that our spiritual growth depends upon our willingness to forgive and sustain them.

In summary, the Book of Mormon examples of Lehi, Nephi, and Pahoran teach us about extending forgiveness in powerful ways. However, the supreme example of forgiveness in the Book of Mormon is also our perfect Exemplar. After the destructions in ancient America, the risen Lord revealed Himself to some of the survivors and taught them firsthand of His ministry and gospel. What is often overlooked is that He came as the ultimate example of forgiveness.

JESUS CHRIST: THE ULTIMATE EXAMPLE OF FORGIVENESS

As the Savior descended upon the multitude gathered at the temple in Bountiful, He declared with great solemnity that He was Jesus Christ. Further, He added, “I am the light and the life of the world; and I have drunk out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered” (3 Nephi 11:11).

After the Savior identified Himself and His desire to do the Father’s will, His next words pointed to the atoning sacrifice and how bitter His sufferings were for mankind. The multitude fell to the ground in humility, and He then invited them to come and feel the wounds of His atonement. In essence their first contact with Him was to touch the wounds of His sacrifice.

This epiphany with the glorified Lord deeply involved the principle of forgiveness. Shortly before this event, He took upon Himself all the pain, sins, and suffering of the human family. He was deserted by all. He was wounded by all. Isaiah detailed that lonely event centuries earlier in his “suffering servant” prophecy. Inspired, he wrote about the relationship of Christ’s suffering to each one of us: “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded

for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:3–5).

Isaiah made it painfully clear that the Atonement was a personalized sacrifice. In the words of Elder Merrill J. Bateman, “The Atonement involved more than an infinite mass of sin; it entailed an infinite stream of individuals with their specific needs.”⁷ Furthermore, Isaiah taught that as Christ gave Himself as an offering for sin, the Lord would “see his seed” (Isaiah 53:10). With His seed hiding “as it were their faces from him,” it must have been the formula for the ultimate personal offense. Could this have been in part some of the bitterness the Savior mentioned in His opening statement to the people at the temple? Was it particularly bitter because He was rejected by those for whom He suffered?

With these issues in mind, note how the people were received at the temple that morning in the land Bountiful. He invited them personally to touch the wounds of the Atonement. They did not hug, kiss, or caress Him. Instead, each one individually came forth and touched those physical points of His wounds. And what was their response? They shouted, “Hosanna,” meaning “save now” or “grant salvation.” Why did they need the saving grace? Was it because they sensed the reality of this ultimate act of forgiveness and openly desired it?

This whole event foreshadows a future advent of the Lord in which He will identify himself to the Jews. At that event they will ask about the wounds in His hands and feet, to which He will reply, “These wounds are the wounds with which I was wounded in the house of my friends. . . . I am Jesus that was crucified” (D&C 45:52). This second event takes the forgiveness motif one step further when the Lord describes His sacrifice as occurring in the house of *His friends*. Thus, the Atonement stands as the ultimate example of forgiveness to others.

As the Savior came to the descendants of Father Lehi, He was the perfect example of a forgiving soul. Elder Neal A. Maxwell pointed to this when he stated, “Jesus partook of history’s bitterest cup without becoming bitter!”⁸ He was the pure example of the

Master in His own parable of the master and the unmerciful servant (see Matthew 18:21–35). Subsequently, the account in 3 Nephi records Him as saying, “My bowels are filled with compassion towards you. . . . And now behold, my joy is full” (3 Nephi 17:6, 20). The Lord ultimately is our quintessential example of forgiveness. While we often overlook this aspect of His atoning sacrifice, it is a fitting capstone for our discussion of forgiving others through the examples in the Book of Mormon.

FORGIVENESS: THEN AND NOW

In our day and culture, the act of forgiving others is often lost in a tidal wave of individualism, pride, and self-justification. A *Wall Street Journal* article went so far as to assert that often “forgiveness is a sin.”⁹ Our prophet, Gordon B. Hinckley, has spoken out forcefully and frequently about forgiving others. In one such talk, he couched his call for the spirit of forgiveness in singular terms: “Is there a virtue more in need of application in our time than the virtue of forgiving and forgetting?”¹⁰ He continued: “We have need of this. The whole world has need of it. It is of the very essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹¹

It seems noteworthy that a modern prophet would term forgiving others “the very essence of the gospel” and that the Book of Mormon would not only teach the doctrine but also provide powerful examples such as Lehi, Nephi, Pahoran, and the Savior. The message rings with clarity that forgiving others cannot be assumed or taken lightly. But perhaps the best reason to internalize the message of forgiveness from the Book of Mormon comes through the Lord’s own words as He taught the righteous Nephites: “And blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (3 Nephi 12:7). Who among us is not in need of such a blessing?

NOTES

1. Conversation with M. Catherine Thomas on 31 January 2003.
2. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Order and Will of God,” *Ensign*, January 1989, 5.
3. Howard W. Hunter, “No Less Serviceable,” *Brigham Young University*

1990–91 *Devotional and Fireside Speeches* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1991), 1.

4. Boyd K. Packer, “The Balm of Gilead,” *Ensign*, November 1977, 59.

5. Russell M. Nelson, “The Canker of Contention,” *Ensign*, May 1989, 68.

6. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 5:265.

7. Merrill J. Bateman, “And He did Invite Them One by One,” in *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior*, ed. Paul H. Peterson, Gary L. Hatch, and Laura D. Card (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2002), 162.

8. Neal A. Maxwell, “Enduring Well,” *Ensign*, April 1997, 7.

9. Dennis Prager, “When Forgiveness Is a Sin,” *Wall Street Journal*, 15 December 1997, 37.

10. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Of You It Is Required to Forgive,” *Ensign*, November 1980, 62.

11. Hinckley, “Of You It Is Required,” 61.