

Frances Lee Menlove, "The Challenge of Honesty." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (1966): 44–53.

THE CHALLENGE OF HONESTY

by Frances Lee Menlove

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BOTH THE PROTESTANT AND CATHOLIC COMMUNITIES ARE BEING swept by a passion for honesty. They are scrutinizing centuries-old suppositions and re-examining current attitudes and goals. In the Protestant world, the writings of Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, Tillich, and of the Bishop of Woolwich are evidence of this quest. Peter Berger's indictment of the Protestant religious establishment attacks the problems of relevancy from the viewpoint of a student of social ethics.¹ Since Pope John first "opened the window to let in the fresh air," the work of self-examination and housecleaning in the Catholic Church has been going on at an amazing clip. The reader of Hans Küng's *The Council, Reform and Reunion*,² Daniel Callahan's *Honesty in the Church*,³ and the candid book *Objections to Roman Catholicism*⁴ is left with a feeling of both surprise and respect for the critical and sometimes agonizing self-examination that is taking place.

But the problem of honesty is not peculiarly Catholic or Protestant, but a problem shared by all men. Psychologists and psychiatrists have become increasingly concerned with the lack of authen-

ticity and the sham that seems at times to permeate to the very core of Western man. "Modern man is alienated from himself, from his fellow men, and from nature."⁵ As Mormons, we not only live in a society whose pressures and criteria for success and happiness can foster dishonesty and inauthenticity, but we have, we believe, a peculiar and divine mandate to seek truth and exemplify honesty. For these reasons it is crucial for Mormons to meet openly the challenge of honesty. It is the purpose of this paper to lay some groundwork for this self-examination.

HONESTY WITH THE SELF

To be honest with others and to be honest with one's self are different things. At the heart of the problem of personal honesty is the ability to confront one's own inner reality, one's convictions and feelings, openly. Personal honesty involves courageously recognizing the discrepancy between what one ought to be and what one actually is, between what one is supposed to believe and what one actually believes. The individual who does not accept this challenge, who turns away and does not face the discrepancy, consigns himself to a life of half-awareness, inauthenticity, and bad faith. He will not know what he thinks but only what he ought to think.

How free is the Mormon to confront himself? How free is he to question and analyze, to admit his strengths and weaknesses, his beliefs and doubts and problems with the Church? These questions are being silently asked by many Mormon students today. The grim jokes about "theological schizophrenia," about mental compartments labeled "Church" and "school" with impermeable walls to avoid confrontations and clashes, are evidence of friction. There seems to be a commonly held conviction that there are only two alternatives, to conform silently or to leave the Church. This, I am convinced, explains the malaise among some Mormons today. This also explains the attraction of disbelief. Disbelief becomes

. . . a promise of liberty. It is present as a call to unity, a call to whatever separates from life. It is present sometimes in the form of despair

¹ Peter L. Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1961).

² Hans Küng, *The Council, Reform and Reunion* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961).

³ Daniel Callahan, *Honesty in the Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965).

⁴ Michael de la Bedoyere, *Objections to Roman Catholicism* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1965).

⁵ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., Inc., 1956), p. 72.

but more often in the form of exaltation. This strange attraction to disbelief proceeds not from what is most base but what is most elevated in man. Now all the more or less empty traditions, all the narrowness, all the useless moralisms, all of the infantile fears of those in authority from which a religious society rids itself only with great difficulty render disbelief even more attractive.⁶

One of the factors which sometimes impede private honesty is "the myth of the unruffled Mormon." This myth is simply the commonly held picture of the Mormon as a complete, integrated personality, untroubled by the doubts and uncertainties that plague the Protestant and oblivious to the painful searching and probings of the non-believer. The Mormon is taught from Primary on up that he, unlike his non-Mormon friends, knows with absolute certainty the answers to the knottiest problems of existence, that in fact his search has come to an end, and that his main task in life is to present these truths to others so that they too may end their quests.

In reality, the Mormon is also subject to uncertainties and doubts. This fact derives inevitably from his understanding of free agency, his freedom to love or turn away, his freedom to choose this path or another one. "Lord, I believe . . . help thou my unbelief" expresses simply the profound experience of those who seek God. The man who blots out internal awareness in order to maintain to himself and to others the appearance of absolute certainty, who refuses to examine his inner life, may all too often settle for the appearance of a Christian believer rather than for its actuality. No one should doubt that in some way, or for some reason, he is also a doubter.

Another more intangible and more insidious obstacle may also impede the quest for inner honesty. To the extent that the Mormon assumes the values and goals of secular society, to the extent that the radical and revolutionary Gospel of Christ becomes indistinguishable from current social norms, Christianity becomes largely irrelevant and this irrelevance tends to dissipate the impetus for self-examination and to blur the issues relating to it. What I am pointing to is the fact that in some crucial areas Mormons have ceased to remain in a state of tension with secular society. When living the Gospel becomes synonymous with social progress or mental health, when the amassing of wealth or power becomes an acceptable goal, when the Church as a group becomes irrelevant as a force for peace and human brotherhood, then the individual's

⁶ Christian Duquoc, "The Mission of the Laity," *Perspectives*, IX (July-Aug., 1964), p. 116.

need to examine his own commitments to God and the Church and the society in which he lives loses much of its urgency. If there are no real discrepancies or conflicts in these commitments, then there is no real need for agonizing self-examination. As Mormons, we would do well to listen to Dan Wakefield's comment about Protestant Christianity:

. . . they [the religious leaders] have dressed Jesus Christ in a grey flannel suit and smothered his spirit in the folds of conformity. The new slick-paper Christianity cheerily rises in the midst of a world seeking answers to survival, and offers an All-Methodist football team.⁷

The Church and its members must never take for granted that they are serving God but must continually ask themselves if, in fact, God is not being made to serve them.

While the myth of the unruffled Mormon makes honest self-examination appear dangerous and identification of God's way with our own way makes it appear irrelevant, many of our educational practices make it practically impossible. Teachers and parents who explicitly or implicitly encourage the child who has doubts or problems or personal anguish to turn away from them is training the child in self-deceit. When a Sunday School teacher states or implies to a child that his question is bad, or threatening, or a manifestation of his own personal failure or immaturity, he is erecting a barrier between the child's public behavior and private world, between his need for love and acceptance and his personal integrity, just as the mother does who tells her terrified son that "boys aren't afraid" or her screaming daughter with the scraped knee that "it doesn't hurt." In short, the individual may come to believe that any questions or problems or inner discomforts he may experience are symptoms of defects in his own character. Personal doubts and uncertainties are seen as temptations rather than as challenges to be explored and worked through. The individual conscience and the weight of authority or public opinion are thus pitted against each other so that the individual either denies them to himself at the expense of personal honesty or hides them from others and lives in two worlds.

There is another kind of inner deception. That is the danger to which the religious liberal is especially vulnerable. The religious liberal is generally thought of as one who examines his religious life and his Church frankly and openly, recognizes the weaknesses and incongruities where they exist, and comments freely on his observa-

⁷ Dan Wakefield, "Slick-Paper Christianity," in Maurice Stein *et al.* (eds.), *Identity and Anxiety* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960), p. 41.

tions. He is often able to be candid in his criticism and zeal for change while at the same time remaining active in the Church organizations and maintaining a respected place in the Mormon community. The potential for inner deception here lies in the possibility that he will use his candidness, his frank and often entirely justified criticisms and demands for change, as a smoke screen for his more basic religious problems. He may be using his dissatisfaction with particular organizational procedures, or manifestations of authority or theological interpretations, as scapegoats to help him avoid facing the issues that are of real concern to him: perhaps about the very nature of the Church organization, or the legitimacy of *any* expression of authority, or the validity of the basic theology. The individual is thus relieved from coming to terms with himself.

Similarly the religious conservative has his particular pitfalls. In his desire to preserve and protect he may become indiscriminate and fail to make important distinctions between historical accidents and timeless truths. He may defend with equal vigor anything that is blessed with age, effectively freezing the form in which the Gospel may be expressed. The particular type of personal dishonesty that is possible here is that the conservative may be acting not from faith and love but from a basic lack of interest. He may simply not want to go to the trouble of questioning and sorting. Behind the mask of fanatical preservation may be the real fear that the truth of the Church is too fragile to tamper with, that an honest and open examination may destroy his faith or his way of life. Thus, the religious conservative may also be hiding from himself a basic lack of faith.

Both the religious liberal and the religious conservative might profit from the words of Josef Ratzinger:

. . . we must take into consideration the brother weak in faith, the unbelieving world surrounding us, and, too, the infirmity of our own faith, so capable of withering once we retreat behind the barrier of criticism and of deteriorating into the self-pitying rancor of one misunderstood.

On the other hand, however, there exists in contrast to discretion, another factor which must be taken into consideration. Truth, as well as love, possesses a right of its own and over sheer utility takes precedence — truth from which stems that strict necessity for prophetic charisma, and which can demand of one the duty of bearing public witness. For were it necessary to wait for the day when the truth would no longer be misinterpreted and taken advantage of, we might well find that it had lost all effect.⁸

⁸ Josef Ratzinger, "Free Expression and Obedience in the Church" in *The Church, Readings in Theology* (New York: P. J. Kennedy, Inc., 1963), p. 213.

Another factor mitigating against personal honesty is the failure of the Church to separate the central truths of the Gospel of Christ from historical accidents or customs. It is an historical truism to state that the history of any group or movement participates in the life and history of the culture in which it finds itself. Similarly, a church must employ the images, viewpoints, and language forms which are current in a given time and place for its message to be understood. But it must never be regulated to or bound by these images, viewpoints, and expressions. The risk is always present that current expressions and concepts may become so fused with the Gospel message that they are taken, *ipso facto*, to be the word of God. Any revelation must be filtered down through the mind and intellect of the receiver, pressed and squeezed into language inadequate to handle it, and altered and changed by the boundaries of human understanding and experience. Both the fact that the Church exists and expresses itself in a particular cultural and historical context and the realization that we have only finite and limited understanding about infinite matters must be made explicit. Failure to make these distinctions accounts for some of the most acute abuses of individual conscience.

HONESTY WITH OTHERS

The failure to realize that the Mormon Church in all its manifestations, both historical and contemporary, is an intermingling of the human as well as the divine, also puts some obstacles in the way of honesty with others. In the first place, we have a proud and courageous history. Every Primary child knows the story of how our forefathers crossed the plains and made the desert bloom. Wallace Stegner calls the Mormon pioneers “. . . the most systematic, organized, disciplined, and successful pioneers in our history. . . .”⁹ But the story of Joseph Smith, the early Church, the hegira across the plains, and the consequent establishment of Zion is more than just history. It is the story of God directing His People to a new Dispensation. Perhaps because the history is so fraught with theological significance, it has been smoothed and whittled down, a wrinkle removed here and a sharp edge there. In many ways it has assumed the character of a myth. That these courageous and inspired men shared the shortcomings of all men cannot be seriously doubted. That the Saints were not perfect nor their leaders without error is evident to anyone who cares to read the

⁹ Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1964), p. 6.

original records of the Church. But the myths and the myth-making persist. Striking evidence for this is found in the fact that currently one of the most successful anti-Mormon proselyting techniques is merely to bring to light obscure or suppressed historical documents. Reading these historical documents arouses a considerable amount of incredulity, concern, and disenchantment among Mormons under the spell of this mythological view of history. That individuals find these bits and pieces of history so shocking and faith-shattering is at once the meat of fundamentalistic heresies and an indictment of the quasi-suppression of historical reality which propagates the one-sided view of Mormon history.

The relevance of this to honesty is obvious. The net result of mythologizing our history is that the hard truth is concealed. It is deception to select only congenial facts or to twist their meaning so that error becomes wisdom, or to pretend that the Church exists now and has existed in a vacuum, uninfluenced by cultural values, passing fashions, and political ideologies.

There are other temptations to public dishonesty in the Church, temptations to use pretense and distortion to forward the work of the Church. This is the dishonesty of the missionary who presents *only* those facts or arguments which tend to support his purpose or who takes a scripture out of context or distorts its meaning a little to add to the evidence marshalled for the point he is making. Invoking a higher law or greater truth can also be a form of dishonesty. This occurs when someone's views are suppressed or historical manuscripts censored, not because they are false but because they might cause dissension or disturb the faithful or imperil unity.

MEETING THE DEMANDS OF HONESTY

The very nature of the Church itself demands honesty. The demands of honesty are not imposed on the Church from the outside. It is not a demand made by secular society, by the scholarly or scientific community, or by some obstreperous apostates. The demands of honesty are inherent in the mission to seek truth. What then are the motives behind dishonesty? Perhaps the most common is the desire in everyone to protect that which they love. If one admits that the past had its disasters, its misdirections and failings, then it becomes possible to wonder if the Church is not in some way faltering now, a notion which is devastating only to those who fail to realize that the Church is made up of human beings who possess human frailties. Another motive behind some kinds of public dishonesty is the belief that the naked truth would be harmful to the simple believer. The assumption here is simply that the believer

remains better off with his delusions intact, that faith suffers when it bumps into reality. The reasoning of those who distort or suppress reality or alter historical manuscripts to protect the delusions of the simple believer is similar to that of the man who murders a child to protect him from a violent world.

The very nature of the Church demands both personal and public honesty, and the belief in the necessity of continuous revelation helps the Mormon in his quest. While truth can be considered absolute, our understanding and knowledge of this truth is always finite. From this position we can see in those who have different ideas and beliefs a means for us to grow and learn. If we believe that truth and knowledge have limitations, however sacred we hold them or however pragmatically useful we deem them to be, then we must welcome those of diverse opinions as holding out the possibility for increasing our understanding. More important, criticisms which are honestly received and scrutinized and then rejected serve to strengthen our perception of the truth of our position. Conversely, a clash of ideas may force us to abandon the notions that we find to be false when they come under attack. In either event we profit by coming close to an understanding of the truth. Tolerance is based upon the idea that a man has a right to be wrong and, as Reinhold Niebuhr says somewhere, "Many a truth has ridden into history on the back of an error."

The responsibility of the Church is to help the individual in his quest for personal honesty. The Church's leaders must demonstrate for its members the quest for honesty, exemplifying its manner and method in as pure a form as is humanly possible. Because of the tremendous power the Church has in molding and teaching its members, it has an especially sacred responsibility not to misuse this power. Each Mormon is taught the principles of the Gospel, the history of the Church, and the importance of religion in his life from the time he is a toddler. This continual and pervasive educational and social experience roots the Mormon way of life deeply in both his conscious and unconscious life. The expression "once a Mormon always a Mormon" testifies to this fact. Only the most perceptive adult, with strenuous effort, is able to look at his religion and the way of life associated with it, with anything approaching psychological freedom. The Church must, through both precept and example, teach what honesty is.

In order for it to do this, the individual Mormon must be open and direct in his motives and conduct. He must not say to investigators what he would not say to members. The appearance of the Church should never be enhanced at the expense of reality. To dis-

tort the reality of the Church as it is understood, to use tricks of manipulation or “salesmanship,” to distort arguments by taking them out of context or by skillful omissions, no matter how good the intentions or how noble the aim, is to provide the participants with practice in deception and the observers with a blueprint for dishonesty.

Secondly, the Church must avoid any discrepancy between the appearance and the reality. The human failings and occasional misdirections must not be suppressed or omitted from our books, but recognized as the manifestations of those who are less than perfect struggling within the limitations of their understanding. Not only does failure to do this provide an example of dishonesty, but when individuals discover that the Church they have been shown is not the Church as it is in actuality, they may feel that they have uncovered some dark, dangerous secret, a secret that had better be pushed to the back of the mind and forgotten — or a secret that provides evidence for abandoning their faith. There should be nothing based on fact that anyone can say about the Church that the Church has not already said about itself. Such a demand could not be made of a secular power, but then the Church is not a secular organization.

In order that what I have just said will not be misunderstood, let me dispel a common misconception about honesty. Honesty is often equated with exposé. A movie or book advertised as honest is often one that merely exposes something previously held secret or private. The notion seems to be that the one who can say the most unpleasant things is the most honest. Honesty can become a billy club, an instrument of aggression capable of destruction. It is just as dishonest to suppress or play down the positive, the hopeful, the real achievements of the self and of the Church as it is to speak only of these.

Finally, more should be said in the Church about the rights and responsibilities of individual conscience. Although it is possible for an individual to give an important insight to the Church, the individual is too often given little reason to think that this might happen through him. When doubts and problems are seen as evidence of sin, of defects of character, then it becomes dangerous for the individual to confront himself honestly. “To lean upon the authority of the Church, by way of defaulting our own responsibility to think and choose, is to run from our human dignity. To let others, whatever their stature or office, form our inner life is to abdicate our human freedom.”¹⁰ The way is then open for us to

¹⁰ Callahan, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

fool ourselves into thinking we have a relationship with God simply because we conform outwardly to certain rituals and behavioral proscriptions.

The ultimate meaning of the Christian faith lies in the personal meeting of man and God. It is not commitment to a glorious idea or set of ideals, as is characteristic of an ideology. It is not the kind of commitment which demands a communal solidarity because power in the world requires loyal men willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of the cause. Above all, it is not the kind of commitment which excuses any sort of deception and evasion as long as their purpose is a good one. To deceive others for the good of the Church, to deceive oneself for the sake of loyalty to the authority of the Church: each is still a deception and cannot be covered by euphemisms.¹¹

It is impossible for the Church to face the great problems and threats of our age without individual members being free to express to themselves and to others what they think and believe. With the almost unlimited possibility for new scientific discoveries, new sociological and anthropological insights, new ways of explaining human behavior, modern man cannot escape perplexity. "What the Church needs today, as always, are not adulators to extol the status quo, but men whose humility and obedience are no less than their passion for truth; men who brave every misunderstanding and attack as they bear witness; men who, in a word, love the Church more than ease and the unruffled course of their personal destiny."¹² The members of the Church are responsible for the Church.

The aim of both public and private honesty is to abolish dualism. There should not be two churches, one as it actually is and another that is offered to the public. There must not be two selves, one calm and unruffled, basking in the "knowledge" of the Gospel, and the other private and unexplored, pushed to the outer limits of awareness. If the individual does not have an honest relationship with himself, he cannot have an honest relationship with others. If he cannot avoid dishonesty within the Church, he will not be able to avoid it in the secular world. We must attempt to meet the challenge of honesty, realizing that our honesty is enmeshed within a whole framework of values, and that honesty, like truth, is always a partial achievement. There is only the latest word, never the last.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹² Ratzinger, *op. cit.*, p. 212.