

Notes and Comments

Edited by Joseph Jeppson

MORMONISM AND REQUIRED ACCEPTANCE

Robert Herold

Robert Herold of Falls Church, Virginia, has asked himself the question, "Just what does a Mormon have to accept?" Perhaps another way of asking the question is "What doctrine is CORE in the present Mormon world?" Do the thirteen "Articles of Faith" still constitute the CORE beliefs and practices?

Today the Church finds itself in an environment far different from that of fifty years ago. Gone are the simple orthodoxies of the nineteenth century which included the literal interpretation of the Bible and the glorification of the simple rustic existence. Much as some Mormons hate to admit it, the Church must function in a twentieth century environment which shows contempt for those naïve enough to believe that Jonah was really swallowed by a whale — or, more seriously, that Christ was divine; an environment which reveals urban problems not comprehended by those of earlier years. Today's environment is highly secular and critical. God, as known in the nineteenth century, simply doesn't relate to twentieth century needs. How should the Church adjust?

Let us at the outset state that unlimited adjustment of the Mormon Church is not possible. The Church cannot become totally pragmatic if it is to maintain its claims of divinity. Certainly there are principles which it cannot compromise. This we take as quite evident. The Church can, however, carefully examine its inventory of principles, dogmas, programs, practices, and even folklore so as to provide better definition of just what those unalterable truths are. Once this is accomplished, the potential adjustment

to the new environment could, in turn, be defined. In short, let us separate essentials from non-essentials lest we find ourselves not responding to twentieth century reality because the necessary response appears to violate some myth not at all essential to the Church.

This essay includes some ideas concerning Church essentials and what those essentials require of the membership by way of acceptance. This is important, for unless essentials are translated into some level of required acceptance, our exercise becomes merely academic. This we want to avoid.

Acceptance may take one of two forms. First, acceptance may be solely an act of faith. In this case it matters not whether the essential involved makes sense, for here acceptance is not at all based upon "sense"; it is based on belief. Certain essentials require this form of acceptance. It is important that these be identified, for it is here that the Church may not adjust to the new environment. It matters not if one can "explain away" these essentials, for they are justified by faith alone and faith must stand in the face of evidence to the contrary. By carefully identifying these essentials, we might assure ourselves that the conflict is both necessary and worthwhile.

There is a second form of acceptance. Here a degree of acceptance may be based solely upon faith as with our first form; but unlike our first form, acceptance may and, indeed, should include reason. More specifically, we should define our level of acceptance through faith and then apply our reasoning powers in order that the essential in question may have meaning in our lives. Here the Church may adjust to the new environment and do so without fear of compromising its important claim to divinity.

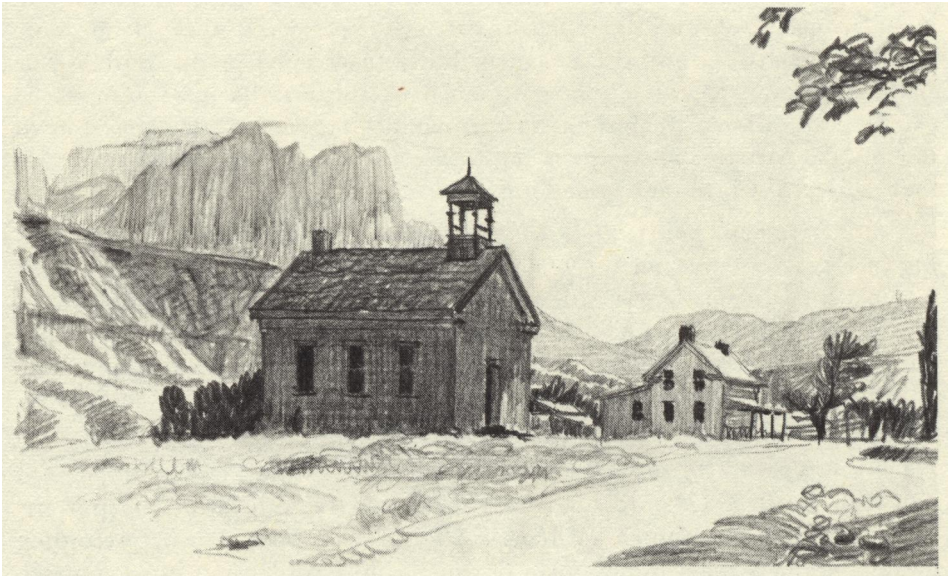
One more word of introduction is in order. When we use the word "acceptance," we don't mean that doubt vanishes. Rather we mean a tacit commitment to a principle even in the face of some doubt. To demand more would limit acceptance to those so naïve as to comprehend or those so dishonest as not to care.

CATEGORY ONE (*Faith is sole justification*)

1. *Acceptance of God.* Acceptance of God is defined as belief in a creator who exists in time and space and is anthropomorphic in nature. Quite obviously this statement falls far short of completely defining God. What are his powers? What is his personality? These and other questions remain to be answered. It is this writer's opinion, however, that required acceptance doesn't extend beyond the above. A reasoned approach should be employed in any discussion of the power and personality of God. There is an unfortunate dearth of systematic studies explaining the Mormon concept of God. All too often, Latter-day Saint writers define God in such unrelated detail as to totally obscure that which is truly important. As an example, let us turn to James E. Talmage. He describes God as a "personal being, possessing a definite form with bodily parts and spiritual passions."¹ He further states that "we know that both the Father and the Son are in form and stature

¹James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1949) pp. 41, 42.

perfect men; each of them possesses a tangible body, infinitely pure and perfect and attended by transcendent glory, nevertheless a body of flesh and bones.”² Talmage then relates that God is omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent.³ Each of these adjectives is virtually pregnant with meaning. What, for instance, does the term “transcendent glory” mean? Does God’s personality assume a dimension incomprehensible to mortal man because he is glorified? Talmage doesn’t say. The subjectivity of the word is obvious.



The use of the word omnipotent is also debatable. Talmage states, “Whatever his wisdom indicates as necessary to be done God can and will do.”⁴ This would seem to contradict the Latter-day Saint argument that God operates in accordance with eternal laws which exist independent of Him and preceded Him. In Section 82:10 of the *Doctrine and Covenants* is found the statement, “I the Lord, am bound when ye do what I say, but when ye do not what I say, ye have no promise.” This suggests that God indeed recognizes some law, in which case his omnipotence may be questioned. Our point is not to berate Talmage but rather to illustrate that, in my opinion, one of the most authoritative of Mormon authors, in a book of major importance, failed to define God in such a way as to give the reader an understanding of just exactly what it is he is supposed to believe concerning God.

2. *Literal Acceptance of Christ’s Resurrection.* The Latter-day Saint is required to accept the story of Christ’s resurrection as written in the New

²*Ibid.*, p. 42.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 42–44.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 44.

Testament, disregarding theories which claim to explain away the resurrection: the theory that the impact of Jesus' personality was so powerful and real that his followers sensed that death had not separated Him from them and that he was still present in their midst; the position which states that the resurrection was invented to enable Christianity to compete more effectively with other religions that worshiped a risen God; the theory that the wrong tomb was opened. For some, the most convincing argument is that the empty tomb was a psychological symbol making external and concrete the inner experiences of the resurrection that had come to the apostles and other witnesses of the Risen Christ. These experiences, they claim, were wholly subjective, growing from an inability to accept Christ's death.⁵ The Latter-day Saint may attack these arguments as historically inaccurate, or he could use the Book of Mormon to corroborate the New Testament. But in the ultimate sense, the Mormon must base his acceptance of the reality of the resurrected Christ only upon faith.

3. *Literal Acceptance of Joseph Smith's Vision and Mission.* While praying in a grove of trees in the hope of receiving guidance concerning church membership, Joseph Smith tells us he saw God and Christ. In his words, "I saw two personages, whose brightness defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me calling me by name and said, pointing to the other, 'This is my beloved Son. Hear Him'." Required acceptance precludes all psychological or motivational explanations.

4. *Acceptance of the Church as a Divinely Instituted Organization.* On Tuesday, April 6, 1830, Joseph Smith met with five others for the purpose of establishing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. According to the prophet, the Church was "organized in accordance with commandments and revelations given by Him to ourselves in these last days, as well as according to the order of the Church as recorded in the New Testament."⁶ He based his authority for this upon the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods. Priesthood thus became the authority for decision making within the Church. The Latter-day Saint is required to accept this authority as truth and hence to accept as divine Joseph Smith's formation of the Church. This does not mean that a rational apology should not be developed, nor does it mean that the subject of Priesthood should not be analyzed and explained. It does mean, however, that ultimately the member will have to admit that his position is grounded on faith, not reason.

5. *Necessity of the Church Sacraments (e.g., Baptism, Temple Work, Sacrament of the Lord's Supper).* The Latter-day Saint is required to admit the necessity of Church sacraments. He may reasonably explain his sacraments, but as in the above cases, faith is the only justification. While the term "admit the necessity" does not imply "partake," it can be asserted that

⁵Howard C. Kee, and Franklin W. Young, *Understanding the New Testament* (Englewood cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1957), p. 180-81.

⁶"Joseph Smith's Testimony" as published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

if a Latter-day Saint ceased participating in these sacraments, the result would be the same as not admitting the necessity.

6. *Acceptance of that which the President officially proclaims as revelation.* Because the President of the Church is accepted as prophet, seer and revelator, he is solely responsible for imparting new revelations to the general membership. Acceptance of revelation by faith alone is required. But how does the membership recognize a revelation? Obviously, the President does not utter eternal truths each time he speaks. For any pronouncement to be considered as a revelation, the President must so specify. The fact that the President speaks from the pulpit is not alone sufficient to bind the membership. He must make clear his intent to proclaim new doctrine or commandments. Once he has so specified, the membership must decide whether or not to accept the revelation as binding. This is in accordance with the law of common consent found in the *Doctrine and Covenants* 26:2. It states, "And all things shall be done by common consent in the Church by much prayer and faith. . . ." In 1831 all revelations to date were assembled and compiled into what was called the *Book of Commandments*. The book was accepted in general Church conference on November 1, 1831. By August, 1835, the collection of commandments had again been brought up to date and presented to the general assembly of the Church as the *Book of Doctrine and Covenants*. "Subsequent revelations, accepted by the vote of the Church were added to later additions until the book reached its present proportions."⁷ It is important that the Church membership recognize the President as the only official source of revelation in the Church. A most devastating disruption would occur if a part of the membership decided to accept others besides the President as a source of revelation. This would be a breakdown in required acceptance and would cause such instability and uncertainty that the Church as now structured would almost certainly change. On the other hand, a more stable situation exists when a large majority of the Church accepts as required only that which the President has specifically proclaimed as revelation.

CATEGORY TWO (*Faith must be supplemented by reason if benefit is to be received*)

1. *The importance of applying scriptural ideas to our individual behavior* (e.g., (1) *Efficaciousness of prayer*, (2) *The importance of individual growth*, (3) *Acceptance of love as an ideal*). While the scriptures are essential, Latter-day Saints must utilize them in a reasonable manner if they are to have any value. The use obviously will vary from person to person but would be of no consequence insofar as the Church and required acceptance are concerned.

2. *Necessity of giving at least tacit approval to official Church programs which are specifically promoted and approved* (e.g., *Welfare program*, *Word*

⁷William E. Berrett, *The Restored Church* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1954), p. 139.

of Wisdom). It is essential that those in authority be able to effectively prescribe policies and programs in their various areas of responsibility. In this the Church is not unlike many other organizations; political, governmental or private. The membership is required to give tacit support to official Church programs and policies. It should be pointed out, however, that tacit support does not mean that members must believe the program to be inspired nor does it mean that the members need even be enthusiastic in their support. It only means that dissent, while appropriate, must not be obstreperous.

For example, we accept the Word of Wisdom in principle because it is scripture. We accept specific rules based on the principle as binding because they have been so defined by the President. We apply reason because we want the principle to have dynamic meaning in our lives.

It can be argued that the principles in Category Two necessarily exist as a result of the principles in Category One. For instance, because of our acceptance of a Supreme Being, scriptural ideas become important. Because of our acceptance of the Church as a divinely instituted organization it is necessary that we give at least tacit approval to official Church programs. Furthermore, no conflict can exist between categories or within categories. No conflict exists as the categories are now structured, and change can only come about through additional revelation. Since we are required to accept that which the President of the Church officially proclaims as revelation, all of the other essentials are dynamic, which is to say that existing essentials must change as new revelation is added. It is possible that required acceptance could be expanded by the President. The point is, however, that in the absence of any expansion, open discussion and interpretation are necessary. Opinion, from whatever source, makes neither revelation nor scripture.

In order properly to incorporate new demands of required acceptance, mental discipline is required. A particular thought process must be employed when any policy, program, or principle is brought into question. First, we must determine whether the point in question is opinion. It may be considered opinion unless specifically defined as revelation or is a policy which has been implemented through official decision making channels. This certainly does not mean that we necessarily reject what comes down as opinion. It means that we need not accept opinion without question.

A determination that the point under consideration is other than opinion means that the degree of required acceptance must be determined. The value of Category One principles is to remind us that under certain circumstances the degree of required acceptance may be absolute. Realistically, required acceptance is not usually absolute. The degree of required acceptance lies usually somewhere between the extremes of opinion and revelation; between no acceptance and total acceptance. In this vast area a reasoned approach must be introduced so as to complement the degree of required acceptance based solely upon faith.

Precise definition of Church essentials and required acceptance will result in their limitation. Certainly we operate at present with no clear definition of what is and what isn't essential. Unfortunately, because of the

present state of affairs, a reasoned (some say intellectual) approach to personal, Church, and social problems exists under a pale of suspicion. This shouldn't be so. All too often this has resulted in needlessly inflexible behavior when current problems cry for imagination. Sadly we are engulfed in an avalanche of Mormon lore somehow defined as doctrine.



THE JOSEPH SMITH PAPYRI

Benjamin Urrutia, p.i.t.a.p.

*Why do the gentiles rage,
And the people imagine a vain thing?
(Psalm 2, verse 1)*

The Summer and Fall issues of DIALOGUE (1968) contained certain articles on papyrus scrolls purchased by the Church from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in late 1967.

Some evidence has been advanced to show that "The Breathing Permit of Hôr" (one of the scrolls, sometimes called "small sensen") was used by Joseph Smith in translating the Book of Abraham. Translations of this scroll by Egyptologists Richard Parker and Klaus Baer indicated that the "Breathing Permit" scroll was written about the time of Christ and that the message of this scroll is not that of the Book of Abraham; they are saying that if Joseph Smith thought that a correct translation of "Breathing Permit" was the Book of Abraham, he was mistaken.

Professor Hugh Nibley countered with several alternate hypotheses, including one to the effect that "Breathing Permit" was written in code, which code has not as yet been broken by the Egyptologists. What follows, by Benjamin Urrutia, is an argument in support of the "code" theory.

Benjamin Urrutia, a recent convert to the Church from Guayaquil, Ecuador, was a Freshman this past year at the University of New Mexico. His study of the Joseph Smith Papyri has led him to plan to begin a major in archaeology at Brigham Young University this fall.

INTRODUCTION

Of the subject of my study, only fragments and copies of fragments are left. These are "Joseph Smith's Egyptian Papyri" numbers 1, 10 and 11, and