

# FROM THE PULPIT

## Graduate School: A Personal Odyssey

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Approaching the end of my career as a graduate student, I find myself in quite a different situation from that of my "gentile" colleagues. A quiet despair pervades most graduate student circles today, but unlike most of my friends, I am not despondent. Our bull sessions and smokers are laced with bitterness over the depressed job market for Ph.D's, and the pitiful "five years of my life, all for nothing" has become a common and sorrowful refrain. To say that the gospel has completely insulated me from this new insecurity would be dishonest. I am worried. I am concerned. I want very much to be an historian and college teacher. But even if the structure of higher education in America prevents me from pursuing that career, I suspect that my bitterness over lost time and wasted years will be negligible. For during the years of my graduate education I first came to terms with the gospel, and out of that initial rapprochement has come an abiding sense of spiritual fulfillment.

I graduated from BYU in 1967 with a deep and fervent emotional hostility for the Church. There, in the heart of Zion, I lost my innocent testimony and convert enthusiasm. Looking back upon it all, I can locate the beginning of my "fall" to my conversion to the mid-sixty's version of American liberalism (a political persuasion which still attracts my loyalty). As has been the case several times for me, the nature of my political and social environment had exerted a great impact upon my spirituality. With the optimism, enthusiasm, and naivete so characteristic of young liberals, I began, rather innocently at first, to expound my personal discovery of poverty, discrimination, and the necessary ameliorative legislation. To my genuine astonishment, these newly acquired political attitudes were interpreted as a spiritual downfall by some faculty members at BYU and by many members of my priesthood quorums and Sunday School classes. I can even recall a visit by two very sincere home teachers who tried to show me the error of my ways, who spoke of Communism, of creeping socialism, and of the many threats to the American way of life. My astonishment quickly gave way to frustration and anger.

Gradually between 1964 and 1967 my lack of patience with the "unenlightened" brethren in my ward ballooned into a general disenchantment with the Church. I became increasingly uncomfortable and rebellious against the cultural predominance of Mormonism in Utah Valley. My frustration and anger were constantly fueled during these years. President Wilkinson's Senatorial campaign against Frank Moss in 1964 appeared somewhat unethical and vituperative for a man of his stature in the Church. A religion professor's

uncompromising stand against birth control and evolution seemed incredibly anachronistic and intellectually narrow. The now famous letter in 1965 from the First Presidency to all L.D.S. Congressmen urging them to support right-to-work laws absolutely incensed me. The ties between the Benson family and the John Birch Society were particularly disquieting. I criticized my bishop rather severely one Sunday morning when I found the ward clerk peddling copies of *None Dare Call It Treason* as he handed out tithing receipts. When President Wilkinson praised a group of BYU students in 1967 for their march down Center Street in favor of the war in Vietnam I left the George Albert Smith Fieldhouse in disgust. To say the least, I was preoccupied with the issue of the Church and politics, but what irritated me most was the attempt by so many of my brethren to equate their political and economic conservatism with spiritual orthodoxy. The more they preached, the less I wanted to associate with them.

Inevitably, I also became increasingly uneasy about the Negro doctrine. Perhaps nothing nags the spiritual conscience and inhibits the political life style of a Mormon liberal more than our theological approach to our black brethren. I was quite incapable of preaching social and political equality for the black man, while upholding the spiritual role assigned to him by the Church. Timidly at first, and then vociferously, I joined the distinct minority at BYU who denied (furtively, of course) the validity of the doctrine and accused the First Presidency of lacking the courage and spiritual certitude to overturn what had obviously been a nineteenth-century political compromise.

Two events in my last year at BYU finally confirmed my general attitudes. At a devotional address to the student body Elder Ezra Taft Benson intimated that many leading black civil rights activists might be Communists. I waxed strong in my anger and impetuosity, and two days later, in a temple recommend interview with my stake president, refused to sustain Brother Benson as a prophet, seer and revelator. (I have since regretted both my anger and obstinence.) A few weeks later, while hitch-hiking to California for a short visit with my parents, I was picked up outside of Nephi by a group of University of Utah students on their way to Los Angeles. One of them was a black student from Watts, and I immediately attempted to demonstrate my lack of prejudice by praising black leaders, upholding recent civil rights and antipoverty legislation, and by joining in their general criticism of BYU. Suddenly the black quizzically asked me if I were L.D.S. Fearing that my liberalism would be compromised or my principles appear hypocritical, I denied my membership in the Church. I recall that immaturity with amazement today, but in a very real sense, the Church had become a source of embarrassment and emotional burden to me.

My tolerance and even admiration for brethren still preoccupied by these issues is quite broad, particularly if they are able to simultaneously maintain their spirituality, their testimony, and their sense of communion with the divine. For me, however, these issues had a disastrous impact upon my spiritual life. I was incapable of being politically and socially critical of the Church and at the same time spiritually satisfied. I went through the motions and attended my meetings, but the excitement and fulfillment were no longer there. In every talk at sacrament meetings or priesthood lessons, or in addresses by General Authorities, I waited diligently for any attempt to

grant theological approval to conservative economic and political opinions. Whenever it happened, I became emotionally agitated and my irritation for the Church grew even stronger. In fact, because of my frustration, the Church had generally become more of a source of contention and division in my life and home than one of peace and unity. I will never forget an evening in March 1967 when I came home and found my wife quietly weeping in our bedroom. Personal prayer, family prayer, family night, and our daily scripture readings together, once a constant in our marriage, had gone by the board, gradually succumbing to my growing hostility. For a woman with a simple faith, it was quite distressing. She looked up at me from the pillow and softly inquired what had happened to that nineteen year old convert she had married, the boy who had taken her to the temple, who had held the General Authorities in awe, who had purchased Church books and read them with glee, and who had enthusiastically shared the gospel with all who would listen. I felt misunderstood but also very guilty.

The about-face, strangely enough, came in graduate school. I had received a fellowship from the State University of New York at Stony Brook to pursue a Ph.D. in history, and once again my political and social environment were to affect my spirituality. My own political attitudes remained stable during those years, but my role in campus politics had changed dramatically. The whole political spectrum was different at Stony Brook. A liberal at BYU was almost a reactionary there. To the followers of Noam Chomsky or Herbert Marcuse (both of whom were in vogue at Stony Brook), my liberalism was responsible for most of America's domestic and international problems. It was, simply, a different political world. The question was no longer whether to attend a meeting of the Young Democrats (which at BYU in 1965 was almost a radical step), but whether to join the undergraduates in their current student strike, to grant amnesty to those who occupied the student center and then burned the campus security office, to vote for the Peace and Freedom ticket in 1968, or to demand a release of Bobby Seale from his murder trial. I opposed the student strike, favored prosecution of those who had fire-bombed the security office, voted for Hubert Humphrey, and simply suspended judgement on the Seale case until the trial had been completed. I found myself, in short, a "right-winger" on almost every issue. My enthusiasm for civil rights, anti-poverty bills, and for withdrawal from Vietnam remained unabated, but at Stony Brook these were no longer the issues which defined one's political philosophy. The crucial campus political issue had become civil disobedience, and I resisted it. My liberalism had become conservatism.

For the second time in my life, I was part of a political minority, which reinforced the minority social role I was playing. I avoided the drug scene which had involved many of my colleagues, and even at department parties my wife and I, as the only teetotalers, felt uneasy. The faculty and other students were tolerant of and unaffected about our standards, but we were still somewhat uncomfortable. Intellectually, the environment was incredibly stimulating. Never before had I been exposed to so many bright and creative people who were so deeply involved in the world of ideas. But intellectual fulfillment did not make up for a sense of social and political isolation, of a lack of community. For that sense of community, I turned to the Church.

This new commitment was certainly not predicated at first upon any personal spiritual renaissance, but simply upon a need for security and social comfort.

The nature of the Church in New York made it almost a haven for me. The branch president was tolerant, though not sympathetic with my political views, and the branch membership, mostly easterners and recent converts, were unaware of the political and social debates so prevalent among western Mormonism. The branch was a small one of less than 200 people but spread out over 1,600 hundred square miles. Because of the personnel shortages so common in "underdeveloped" Church areas, I soon found myself in a leadership position. And like most of the members of the branch, I too gradually became insulated from the political and social issues which had so agitated me in Utah. Questions about the theology of birth control and evolution, the Negro doctrine, and the Church's stand on political and social issues drifted into the background of my thought, not because they were unimportant, but because so many other problems had greater immediacy. Out of necessity I became preoccupied with problems such as whether a certain brother was becoming inactive, whether the chairs would be set up in our rented hall for priesthood meeting, whether the owners of the hall would terminate our lease, whether our only organist would show up for opening exercises in Sunday School, or how I might temper a long-standing feud between two good sisters in the branch.

At the same time the branch membership became involved in a building fund program to construct a small, single-phase chapel; the financial sacrifice required was considerable. Men took second jobs, families emptied their savings accounts, and children gave up their normal Christmas — all for the chapel. As sentimental as it sounds, two sisters even sold their engagement rings to make a contribution. I was quite deeply touched, and I found myself more caught up in the Church than I had ever dreamed possible. Family nights had begun again for us as did reading the Scriptures together, but most important during those years I had started to pray again, and I felt a real sense of communication with God. The Negro doctrine, birth control controversies, and politics in the Church seemed part of another world.

Then, in the summer of 1971, I returned to Utah and California for an extended visit. While up at the student center at the USU campus in Logan I heard talk again of prejudiced General Authorities and the reactionary and socially irresponsible Mormon Church. In a high priests' quorum in California, on the other hand, I heard radicalism denounced, Birchers praised, and Mormon "liberals" condemned. It surprised me, though it shouldn't have, that the same debates were still going on. But I was even more surprised at my own reaction. I was neither angry nor emotionally upset. I remember leaving some of my priesthood or Sunday School classes at BYU, when debates like this had been generated, nervous and physically and emotionally uncomfortable. Now, however, I felt comfortable and relaxed. It was not apathy. I joined the discussions and made essentially the same arguments I had years before; it was exciting, but I was able to maintain an emotional tranquility. Perhaps the basis of my peacefulness was a new security I felt about the gospel. I had seen it work, and I had seen people really sacrifice to make it work.

During this period the gospel had become the most important facet of

my life. My testimony was not absolute, but strong and fulfilling, and still tempered by unanswered questions. I still wonder why black men cannot hold the priesthood, don't know how to flawlessly separate opinion from revelation in a prophet's statement, and I can't say whether revelation might come through the working of social change. In fact, it appears today that I'm no closer to answering those questions satisfactorily than I was years ago. Now, however, neither my testimony nor my activity in the Church is dependent upon those answers. Graduate school, campus politics, and local branch problems helped me to envelope myself in the Church, and gradually the old enthusiasm and fulfillment returned and increased. I'm still looking for answers, but my search, now sustained by a secure knowledge that God is really there and that He really does communicate with His children, is not nearly so urgent and far more fulfilling than ever before.

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I believe in the freedom of man — in freedom of faith, freedom of ideas, freedom of speech . . . “It is for liberty that Christ has freed us.”

Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras

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