

# FROM THE PULPIT

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## *Personal Conscience and Priesthood Authority*

L. JACKSON NEWELL

FROM THE TEACHINGS of its founder, Joseph Smith, down to the present time, Mormon doctrine has recognized two complementary, though sometimes competing, sources of authority in personal affairs. Through one source, the priesthood hierarchy, Latter-day Saints may receive guidance that pertains not only to them as individuals but to other members as well. The other source, reason or inspiration, requires that we exercise personal initiative to seek truth and to discover principles that may also elevate us towards Christian attitudes and behavior. These two foundations of religious belief and action sometimes conflict, and many Mormons are loath to trust the promptings of their consciences if they differ from instructions received through priesthood channels. Church leaders increasingly stress the importance of obedience, thus diminishing the role of independent moral judgment although our doctrine is peppered with warnings about the dangers of this imbalance.

At April Conference in 1843, Joseph Smith defended Pelatiah Brown, who was being tried by the High Council for heretical teachings:

I do 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 kicked out of their church. I want the liberty of thinking and believing as I please. It feels so good not to be trammelled. It does not prove that a man is not a good man because he errs in doctrine.<sup>1</sup>

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Although Joseph warned of preoccupations with doctrinal conformity, Brigham Young counseled the Saints on dangers to individuals and to the Church associated with blind faith. From the Tabernacle in 1862, he said

I am more afraid that this people have so much confidence in their leaders that they will not inquire for themselves of God whether they are being led by Him. I am fearful they settle down in a state of blind self-security, trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with a reckless confidence that in itself would thwart the purposes of God in their salvation, and weaken that influence they could give to their leaders, did they know for themselves, by the revelations of Jesus, that they are led in the right way. Let every man and woman know, by the whispering of the Spirit of God to themselves, whether their leaders are walking in the path the Lord dictates, or not. This has been my exhortation continually.<sup>2</sup>

And only a decade ago, President David O. McKay's First Counselor, Hugh B. Brown, was even more explicit about the need for a questioning faith. Addressing a spring convocation at Brigham Young University, he admonished the students:

You young people live in an age when freedom of the mind is suppressed over much of the world. We must preserve it in the Church and in America and resist all efforts of earnest men to suppress it. . . . Preserve, then, the freedom of your mind in education and in religion, and be unafraid to express your thoughts and to insist upon your right to examine every proposition. We are not so concerned with whether your thoughts are orthodox or heterodox as we are that you shall have thoughts.<sup>3</sup>

Each of these Mormon leaders, and many others, knew that although reasoned and reasonable obedience is essential to community, blind obedience can be perilous to individuals and dangerous to society.

Reconciling reason and faith is an age-old problem; philosophers and laymen alike have anguished over it for millenia. But the issue is a particularly poignant one at this point in Mormon history because some church leaders are placing greatly increased emphasis on institutional loyalty and priesthood authority, as illustrated by Ezra Taft Benson's February, 1980, speech at Brigham Young University. Using a military metaphor, he said

Our marching orders for each six months are found in the General Conference addresses which are printed in the *Ensign* magazine.

Elder Benson went on to explain how one should handle conflicts that might arise between the words of our present leaders and those of earlier times: "Beware of those who would pit the dead prophets against the living prophets, for living prophets always take precedence." Conflicts between temporal knowledge and spiritual knowledge were also mentioned: "The prophet is not required to have any particular earthly training or credentials

to speak on any subject or act on any matter at any time." He ended with a grave warning: "The prophet and the presidency—follow them and be blessed—reject them and suffer."<sup>4</sup>

Though we may debate the practical application of these remarks, they weigh heavily on the authoritarian side of the scale. Judgments of the institution and its leaders are to be accepted and followed by the individual. Two vital foundations for reasoning, knowledge from the past and insight arising from personal experience, are called into question. On what basis, then, or with what confidence, might today's Latter-day Saint "insist upon his right to examine every proposition," as Hugh B. Brown urged him or her to do?

If there is truth in the notion that religion needs most and suffers most from institutionalization, then there may also be some value in considering a corollary: The individual needs most and suffers most from the church organization. This corollary could just as well be stated in reverse: The individual needs most and suffers most from the quest for personal identity.

However we state the dilemma, the idea remains the same and the principle is hardly new. What is new is new only at the personal level. Each of us must reckon afresh with the basic conflict: as a social creature I need ties and affiliations with others, and as an individual I need freedom to express my unique aims and talents. Within the Mormon culture, the dilemma is sharpened by explicit encouragements to conform to group norms on the one hand, and to multiply our talents and realize our unique personal potential on the other. Small wonder that many thoughtful members of the LDS Church struggle so valiantly to find peace with themselves and with the Church.

The quest to balance personal needs and beliefs with church loyalties is not always waged with success. Some surrender to the institution, whether from faith or exhaustion, and find contentment in the obedient life while memories of the encounter fade dimly from view. Others opt for freedom in personal expression and abandon ship—eventually dissolving their ties with organized religion in favor of less constraining social groups. But there are others who, for one reason or another, refuse to allow either social needs or personal needs to predominate. Within this group, too, a simplified view suggests two extremes: the *unconscientious resister* (the foot dragger)<sup>5</sup> and the *conscientious critic* (the loyal opposition). Although the former give every appearance of conformity, they make private accommodations of one kind or another. One common example is the member who accepts a calling from a sense of duty and then proceeds half-heartedly with the responsibilities. This approach is perilous to self-esteem and paralytic to community and institutional life. In the short run, however, it appears to be the route of least resistance, so its path is both well known and frequently trodden.

Conscientious critics pursue a healthier course. They give honest but appropriate expression to their personal views, seeking changes they believe would strengthen the Church and culture but remain committed to the institution and the way of life. Conscientious critics walk a tightrope, however, because both their motives and their ideas are regarded with suspicion by

highly orthodox members as well as foot draggers. What are some of the factors, then, that make it possible for conscientious critics to exercise independent moral judgment and still enjoy institutional and cultural acceptance?

It is my belief that Mormons have more freedom of expression and more latitude in behavior than most of them use. Local ward and stake attitudes and levels of tolerance do vary, but this statement seems to be true more often than not. A few members, however, make a show of their differences with the Church, or with orthodox members of it, simply to satisfy their own needs to be seen as independent-minded. Consciously or unconsciously, some seek to be ostracized. This behavior is regrettable because it intimidates some who would otherwise enjoy greater freedom within the faith. Even so, others may hold the same ideas, but will express them without threatening or offending fellow members. We are all aware, however, that this is not always the case.

Foolish consistency, it has been said, is the hobgoblin of little minds. We needn't reconcile all that is currently known, both from reason and from revelation, into one consistent whole. As Edward Lueders expressed so effectively in *The Clam Lake Papers*,<sup>6</sup> we should resist the temptation to reject a promising new idea simply because it appears to contradict an established notion or an existing truth. Perhaps a fuller understanding will someday reveal the unity we fail to perceive now. In the meantime, as the 13th Article of Faith suggests, let us embrace all that is of merit—without fretting over the compatibility of one idea with another. Why, for instance, must our knowledge of geological antiquity cause us to deny God's role in the creation of the earth, or why should evidence of evolutionary processes rule out our current (or eventual) likeness to the Creator? If we must demand consistency, must we insist on it *now* at our present level of comprehension?

While few would consciously deny that the purposes of religious activity are individual lives of integrity and service, in the LDS Church we are especially prone to make strict judgments about the means and the personal regimens leading to these ends. Any large organization is tempted to standardize procedures at the expense of individual needs. As a large institution, the Mormon Church is no exception. General Authorities, Correlation Committee members and others assume that a prescribed, highly structured set of activities will advance every member equally along the pathway to a life that is disciplined and humane. The list of expectations is now so staggering that few have the energy, time, or will to measure up completely. Many grapple with their consciences as a result. Worse still, we are all in danger of substituting performance of tangible duties for genuinely Christian character development as we assess our worthiness before both man and Maker.

Is payment of ten percent of our increase to the Church a duty mindlessly performed? An organizational necessity? Or an act of conscious caring that stimulates further generosity of both substance and spirit? If it is not the latter, then a religious means has become an end in itself. If tithing becomes an end for me, and I am *less* generous and *less* caring with the ninety percent that remains, then the practice of tithing may have become *antithetical* to its real purposes and to my development as a Christian.

I am not suggesting that we stop paying tithing even if it has become a routine matter with us because there are other reasons for doing it and others who benefit, but I *do* think each member should keep for himself or herself the responsibility to decide what practices and beliefs will produce a life of greatest integrity and service. Put differently, as an institution the Church appears to assume that a given set of means will produce similar ends for all persons. As individual members, however, we bear responsibility for our own progress. There is no substitute for introspection, at regular intervals, to sort out means and ends and measure our progress against the example of Christ. So long as our ends are truly His, we should not be timid about selecting from among, or substituting for the institutionally prescribed means for advancing us towards the ideal.

By placing so much responsibility with the individual, I am aware that my argument can easily be used to rationalize a variety of compromises with church doctrines and practices. This is a danger, but acceptance of responsibility for one's own moral progress is the key here, and maintenance of standards at least equal to those suggested by the Church is essential to prevent abuse of the principle.

Whether in the Church or out, personal ambition requires sacrifice. One of the chief sacrifices made by those who aspire to leadership in the LDS Church, either consciously or unconsciously, is a degree of personal freedom. Because of the premium placed on obedience, orthodoxy in manner, dress, speech and thought is rewarded. One can advance an hypothesis, therefore, that the degree of freedom a member enjoys (while remaining within the fold) is inversely related to his or her need for status in the priesthood or organizational hierarchy. One who aspires to become a general authority or auxiliary president, for example, has comparatively little latitude when compared with those who seek no more than to contribute to religious community life within their own ward through teaching a Sunday School class or working with the youth. In 1980 terms, for instance, the latter has the option to support the Equal Rights Amendment, while the former does not.

Another constraint related to ambition is employment. Those who seek or hold employment with the Church must accept the fact that they will be judged more strictly, other things being equal, than other members. No Coca-Cola is sold in the Church Office Building. No beards are allowed at Brigham Young University.

Conscientious critics need support from and association with others of like mind, not so much to bolster their strength as to nourish their commitment—to the Church. While that statement may have the ring of paradox, it sets forth a principle I have experienced and observed. When I was a young college professor in the mission field fifteen years ago, *Dialogue* saved my faith. I needed to know that other Latter-day Saints had the same frustrations and had experienced the same intellectual dilemmas as I.<sup>7</sup> And I needed to see that others could wrestle with the same doubts I had and could remain committed. Reading *Dialogue* under trees bedecked with Spanish moss in South Carolina, I observed through the vicarious example of others that being half-sure didn't have to mean being half-hearted.

Responsible critics are encouraged, in both their responsibility and their faith, by contact with each other. *Dialogue*, *Sunstone*, *Exponent II* and similar publications play an important role here, as do Sunstone's Theological Symposia and study groups of thoughtful and open-minded people.

Another function of these periodicals and friendships is to provide healthy, constructive avenues for the expression of ideas arising from personal frustrations with the church organization or with Mormon culture. It is better to ventilate anger than to suppress it, and it is better, far better, to propose solutions and to seek alternatives than to lash out with bitter criticism.

E. E. Cummings is supposed to have said that most people can be put in one of two categories—those who define themselves primarily by what they are against and those who define themselves primarily by what they are *for*. Well-educated people, thinking people, often fall into the first group, and they make good critics because they have been schooled in analytical methods. But they are too seldom *constructive* critics and when they are not, they are notoriously ineffective in the Church. Those who genuinely seek the "space" to be intellectually honest in the Church will have a wider berth if they are of the second, positive type.

My conclusions are both theological and personal. My thesis is that Mormon doctrine includes both a Catholic and a Quaker strain. We share with Catholics a *hierarchal* belief in a divinely-guided priesthood organization with authority passed down from a leader who is commissioned by the Lord himself. We share with Quakers a *democratic* belief that the Lord may speak *directly* with each of us, and that our salvation depends on our personal relationship with deity, not on human intermediaries. Much of the strength and beauty of LDS theology arises from the creative tension provided by the juxtaposition of these concepts—concepts that are considered mutually exclusive by most of the Christian world. I believe priesthood authority and personal inspiration are necessary countervailing forces. One assures the survival of the Church, the other affixes responsibility for moral action (and salvation) upon the individual. The Church is properly concerned with doctrine, but each of us will ultimately be judged by what we do. Our deeds will tell the tale.

As a convert to the Church, I was attracted by the compelling power of these gracefully balanced assumptions. Now as a member of nearly two decades, I am troubled because that balance appears to be threatened. Fortunately, our doctrine and our history both speak to the issue. But a cattleman from Dixie may have said it as well as any. Noting her tendency to question, Juanita Brooks' father philosophized:

My girl, if you follow this tendency to criticize, I'm afraid you will talk yourself out of the Church. I'd hate to see you do that. I'm a cowboy, and I've learned that if I ride *in* the herd I am lost—totally helpless. One who rides counter to it is trampled and killed. One who only trails behind means little, because he leaves all responsibility to others. It is the cowboy who rides the edge of the herd, who sings and calls and makes himself heard who helps direct the course. Happy sounds are generally better than cursing, but there are times when he must maybe swear a little and swing a whip or lariat to round in a stray or turn the leaders. So don't lose yourself, and don't ride away and desert the outfit. Ride the edge of the herd and be alert, but know your directions, and call out loud and clear. Chances are, you won't make any difference, but on the other hand, you just might.<sup>8</sup>

Fixing our eyes on truly Christian objectives and committing our energies to things we can humanely influence, let us affirm within the LDS Church each other's right to independent moral judgment based on personal inspiration.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Latter-day Saints Millennial Star*, Vol. 20 (1858), p. 774. It appears, incidentally, that the Methodists and Mormons have switched sides on this issue since Joseph offered this sentiment.

<sup>2</sup>*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 9, p. 150.

<sup>3</sup>*Church News*, 24 May 1969. This issue contains the complete text of President Brown's memorable address.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted from the press copy release, "Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophets," BYU Devotional Forum, 26 February 1980.

<sup>5</sup>For a thoughtful discussion of the foot dragger type, see K-Lynn Paul's "Passive Aggression and the Believer" *Dialogue*, 10 Autumn, 1977, pp. 86–91. In addition to foot draggers and conscientious critics, of course, there are classic hypocrites, who conform in public expression but dissent in private behavior, and the nominal members, or Jack Mormons, who ignore or reject the doctrines of the Church but maintain some ties with the culture.

<sup>6</sup>Lueders, Edward. *The Clam Lake Papers*. New York: Harper and Row, 1977.

<sup>7</sup>One frequent source of frustration and confusion among members is haggling over fine points of doctrine. If a woman is widowed with several children after a Temple sealing, and later marries a widower and they have children who will the children of this new union "belong to" in the hereafter? Such questions may be good teasers to forestall senility, but to me they always have an unreal quality. Do we know enough about the hereafter to reach our grim conclusions? Can't a loving, omnipotent Father somehow find a solution more satisfying than our fledgling attempts? My preference is to trust in God to provide appropriate reward for those who, despite seeming historical or theological quirks, competently and gracefully handle that which falls within their realm of influence.

<sup>8</sup>"Riding Herd: A Conversation with Juanita Brooks." *Dialogue* 9 Spring, 1974, p. 12.