The Ambiguous Gift of Obedience

Lavina Fielding Anderson

IT STRIKES ME THAT MORMON INTELLECTUALS, possibly excluding those occasions when Orson Pratt may have had lunch with B. H. Roberts, now constitute a genuine subculture within the larger host culture of Mormonism. We have our own heroes, mentors, and martyrs. We have our own publications. The Sunstone Symposium, the Association for Mormon Letters, and the Mormon History Association constitute, if not general conferences, at least specific conferences. Many of us assume a minimum number of common beliefs — for instance, that a search for the truth does not simultaneously preclude a search for the facts and that loving the Church and living within it do not eliminate either freedom or the pain and joy that result from exercising that freedom. No doubt the Society for the Sociological Study of Mormon Life will more fully explore the fascinating relationship between this intellectual subculture and the larger host culture, but it is a relationship that is now and has for some time been tension-fraught and painful to many.

That is why the issue of obedience is so unquestionably timely and why I want to reflect in a personal way on what obedience means to people like me. I am assuming, for the purposes of these remarks, that you are also people like me: that at some point, in the temple, you made a covenant of obedience that moves the whole question beyond the simple level enjoined in the scriptures upon any Christian, a covenant that you renew from time to time and that perhaps comes to your mind with particular force when particular events occur. I think, for instance, of the obedient silence of a Gene England on a topic which, to him, lies at the heart of the gospel's power. You are, no doubt, familiar with others.

Examples like this seem to pose the dilemma of obedience most clearly to people like me. As cases, they have the virtue of being behavioral: you can tell

---

LAVINA FIELDING ANDERSON is an associate editor of DIALOGUE. *This essay was originally presented as part of a* DIALOGUE*-sponsored panel at the Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City, Utah, 24 August 1985.*

if Gene is being obedient by what he actually does. Clearly we do not come up with those particular behaviors on our own; we are being obedient to an external requirement. These imposed requirements have prompted the indignant question from some friends: "Why do you put up with that?" Such a question carries with it the clear implication that the questioner would simply remove himself or herself from the situation in which such a requirement might be made.

There is a great deal of talk about "unrighteous dominion," integrity, and violations of free agency when such occasions arise. The situation is, of course, more complicated than that. I have found it helpful to recall, in addition to scriptures on unrighteous dominion, other scriptures fraught with equal ambiguity: God's patience with what clearly seems to be Gideon's sign-seeking using bedewed and dry fleeces (Judges 6) and his seeming impatience with the quite natural question of Zacharias in the temple about his future fatherhood. I remember the terrible test of Abraham's obedience where Abraham and Isaac together, willing to fulfill God's commandment, found instead a ram in a thicket. I contrast that with Jephtah, judge of Israel, who vowed to sacrifice the first thing that met him on his return from what he hoped would be the deliverance of his people. When that thing was his daughter—his only child—and when she was willing, like Isaac, that the vow be fulfilled, there was no ram in the thicket for her (Judges 11). What do these examples tell us about obedience?

One observation forced upon us by the ambiguity of experience is that there are always two points of view in play. Michael Quinn talks about "God's truth," the truth upon which "man's truth" must break if there is a conflict (Quinn 1985b). His splendid essay on authorized post-Manifesto marriages documents in painful detail the breaking of one truth against another (Quinn 1985a). I think of Nephi and his rebellious brothers — Nephi who was always right, obnoxiously right; his brothers who were — granted — snivellers, selfish, and small-minded but who also had some justification for feeling "oppressed" by a brother who wished to dominate and rule over them, always getting his own way. Despite the numerous debates that Nephi himself records of their two positions, it is Father Lehi who is most enlightening for me: "Ye have accused him," he tells his two elder sons, "that he sought power and authority over you; but I know that he hath not sought for power nor authority over you, but he hath sought the glory of God, *and your own eternal welfare*" (2 Ne. 1:25; italics added). Could it be that the person we perceive as oppressing and dominating us is really actuated by concern for our eternal welfare?

A second observation is that whenever an organization exists, this same ambiguous question of obedience will also exist. Part of growing up is learning to accept this ambiguity. Peter and the other apostles boldly declared before the Sanhedrin: "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). There is wonderful clarity in seeing the angel yourself, hearing the voice yourself, receiving the vision yourself. But whenever the word of God is transmitted through another, we must decide as individuals whether he or she is telling the

truth — God's truth, not just wishful thinking or self-deception. Whenever the word of God is transmitted through an organization, the question will inevitably arise: Am I obeying God or rather am I obeying men? Without going through the arduous process of seeking revelation for ourselves upon the point in question (which we all are enjoined to do) and receiving confirmation (which rests in God's good pleasure and which we may not control), we cannot be sure whether the ultimate source of a particular commandment is in fact God or rather men.

We can explore questions of obedience, not only in the scriptures but also within our own history as an organization. In so doing, we must observe that the social context in which our obedience is asked for and given has changed dramatically. I'd like to label the difference in these two changes prompt obedience and informed obedience. Prompt obedience does not mean that questioning does not accompany a command or that it is not obeyed without pain. Such questionings and pains are, however, private. The process of prompt obedience does not acknowledge them or allow for their incorporation into the process of obeying the directive. This type of obedience is sometimes called blind obedience, but I regret the negative connotations it has acquired and prefer an alternative appellation.

The illustrations of this principle may seem stereotypical, but that is because they have entered our folk culture as symbols, rather than as specific events. We hear stories of how Brigham Young would have a list of names read from the pulpit in conference; and whatever their private situations and feelings, a score of men would leave their families for missions. A brief conversation with another family and they would leave their home and farm for a new settlement. We look at such manifestations of obedience and wonder, "Would I have done that? *Could* I have done that? Should *they* have done that?" Was Brigham Young arbitrary? Were the Saints mindless sheep? The questions come close to the bone as we remember Mountain Meadows.

In asking such questions, we stand clearly in the late twentieth century, not the nineteenth. We forget the kind of personal relationship that existed between Brigham Young and his people. This kind of intense intimacy no longer exists between General Authorities, let alone the prophet, and the mass of Saints today. It is hard to analogize the same fealty Brigham's people must have felt for him and the union they felt with him — feelings which I believe he reciprocated — when most of us can no longer even name all of the General Authorities, let alone recognize them, remember conversations with them, or even recall memorable sermons from each. We relate to an image — in many cases a polished and conventional image — reflected by the official publications and the careful formality of general conferences. The Public Relations Department speaks for the Church, and the realm in which General Authorities express opinions in public is a narrow one. The Church is too big, its bureaucracy is too big, for the trust that comes from personal relationships.

We also need to accept that much of the functioning of the Church is the functioning of a bureaucracy. Why, then should we be surprised when it acts like a bureaucracy? Joseph Smith announced an essential principle when he

explained that a prophet is a prophet only when he is acting as a prophet. Similarly, General Authorities who are also managers of departments are apostles or seventies only when they are acting as such, and that does not necessarily include all of the times they are acting as managers. The same can be said of stake presidents and bishops. Sometimes they act as administrators and sometimes as stewards. I feel that being able to separate the two functions is extremely useful.

Furthermore, our segment of the twentieth century is characterized by a mistrust of organizations and institutions. We think of Huebner, standing against the great betrayal of the Third Reich, of Nixon's betrayal of the American presidency. There is less trust in doctors, judges, policeman. In some ways, this is good because people must take responsibility for thinking through issues and making informed decisions.

Applied to the Church, it produces what I call "informed obedience." In the Church context, however, it has mixed results. Let me tell you two stories. A friend of mine in the Pacific Northwest told me recently that his elders' quorum president had advised quorum members to sign up for a service project. They would be gone from their homes from Friday afternoon until late Saturday and were to bring hammers, saws, screwdrivers, and other construction tools. He would give them no other details. My friend wanted to know more: What was the project? Where was it? Who was it for? Did it involve just their quorum or other quorums in the stake? Was this the quorum president's idea or was he acting on instructions from someone else? My friend explained, "I work about sixty hours a week. I have a wife and a new baby. If the Church wants my whole weekend, I have a right to know why." He also mentioned that he had been involved in service projects before that had been unnecessary: repairing homes for people whose monthly incomes exceeded his own, helping move people who did not require it and had not done any planning so that many hours were wasted, etc. The quorum president refused to respond to these questions or those of the others in the group. There was considerable confusion and resentment. My friend did not sign up.

This situation raises some questions. Should my friend have swallowed his questions and decided that the quorum president would be responsible for his resentments? Should he have prayed until he felt better about accepting the assignment? What is the responsibility of leaders in such cases?

The second story shows a useful contrast, I feel, in demonstrating the operating style of Cathy Stokes, president of the Hyde Park Ward Relief Society in Chicago. A relatively recent convert, she said she was surprised to call women up for compassionate service assignments and have them agree to anything. As she describes it: "I mean, the washing machine is running over, Jeremy is gouging out his brother's eye, her husband left Tuesday with the car payment and hasn't been back, and she's caroling, 'Why, I'd be happy to take a casserole over to Susi.' Because I'm the Relief Society president, right? Now, before I ask anybody to do anything, I kind of visit and find out where they are in their lives and what's going on — to see if maybe they need some help before I start asking them to help someone else."

Informed obedience is, obviously, very time-consuming. It will probably never be very popular with highly bureaucratized organizations if they have a choice because it replaces a focus on rapid and efficient task performance by basically interchangeable workers with a focus on understanding and owning the process. This means that leaders cannot simply concentrate on end products but must spend a great deal of time promoting the process of understanding, allowing experimentation and even mistakes, and honoring the process itself as important. My mission president once said that he felt his primary purpose was to send every missionary home with a testimony; convert baptisms were secondary. He had based this decision on appraising the results of previous mission presidents whose emphasis had been on the baptisms, but it meant that he was sometimes seen as out of step by his own superiors. Convert baptisms are quick and easy to count. The faith of a returned missionary who goes back to raise her five children to be spiritually healthy and happy or to serve as a sensitive and loving elders' quorum president can be fully appraised only years later and then usually indirectly. Then too, many people who are asked for reasons and information when they have asked for obedience become frustrated and impatient. "It would be so simple just to do it and get it over with rather than carp and niggle," they think. "And besides that, I don't know the reasons myself."

If we make due allowances for the limitations of our own point of view and accept the built-in conflicts involving obedience that come with any organization, we still need to decide what to do about it. Prompt, unprocessed obedience is probably not possible for intellectuals on a very wide range of issues because it counters their personality and training. For that reason, informed obedience is a much better operational strategy. Still, I think a much more worthwhile goal is mature obedience, consecrated obedience.

I like to hear children sing, "I Am a Child of God." I don't like to hear adults sing it. I'm sorry it's in the new hymnal. *Everybody*'s a child of God. All you have to do to be a child of God is to be born. Big deal. The hard part is to become an adult of God. Most of us get stuck in being an adolescent of God. We whine. We sulk. We have spurts of devotion and conformity followed by either rebellion or terminal sloth. We are dependent, frightened, arrogant, insecure. We want someone to tell us what to do and get mad when they do it.

The adolescent model is, it seems to me, instructive for another reason. Jean Baker Miller's psychological work attacks the whole way we have viewed the task of growing up for the past hundred years. For me, the parallels with becoming spiritual adults is inescapable.

> From Erik Erikson to Daniel Levinson, psychological models of human development posit that the truly well-integrated and functioning human being is the person who has "gone through a series of painful crises by which the individual accomplishes a sequence of allegedly essential separations from others and thereby achieves an inner sense of separated individuation. [Finally] when the individual arrives at the stage called 'Intimacy,' he is supposed to be able to be intimate with another person(s), having spent all of his prior development geared to something very different." . . .

> In Daniel Levinson's *The Seasons of Man's Life*, men are first supposed to move away from their mother and then, gradually, from everyone else. If they have a mentor, for example, at some point — in their thirties — they're supposed to break away from him. He calls this "becoming your own man." Of course, about ten years later, this "independent man" has a midlife crisis, and Levinson never asks why.

Miller denies that a sense of self develops through differentiation. Instead, she argues, we pass through a "stage of development she calls 'agency in community.' If, as she asserts, children develop because of their positive relationship to a caretaker, then they develop not a separate sense of self, but rather a more complex sense of self that becomes defined and refined as they enter into ever more complex relationships with others" (Miller 1985, 44).

Much of what I term adolescent behavior between people like us and the Church we love/hate seems an attempt at differentiation through separation, the classic adolescent crisis. This process nearly always involves disobedience ("I'll show you. You can't tell me what to do.") and nearly always involves pain. Pain has limited utility. I think that the circumstances which produce growth are very often and perhaps inevitably painful, but my own experience has been that growth itself is intensely pleasurable — even joyful. There is, in short, no virtue in making things difficult on purpose.

Thus, I wonder if our painful resistance of what we perceive as oppressive measures in the Church can sometimes be the wrongheaded working out of the wrong model — of the individuation-through-differentiation model that produces alienation and a lessened capacity for intimate experiences — including, I believe, a lessened capacity for intimate experiences with the Savior and the Holy Ghost. I wonder if a more fruitful path might be the model proposed by Miller, that of "agency in community," where we acquire a more complex sense of self.

I am, in my own life, struggling with an image of what consecrated obedience might be, trying to understand what the Lord, in love, is asking me to offer him in my whole life. Part of that life, that love, and that obedience is expressed through the Church. The Church shapes and colors my religious life, but it does not wholly comprise my religious life, nor does it determine the quality of my religious life. Obedience to the Church is not just a me-versus-them issue but one element in a much larger and very dynamic relationship.

Mature obedience, I feel, has to be motivated by love, not fear. It has to be deeply rooted in a testimony of the redemptive sacrifice of the Savior and a profoundly personal knowledge that he loves and values me — not my brilliant intellect, not any of the particular roles I might play, but the core-me. It is not an exchange of responsibilities and duties but the interplay, complexity, and richness of an ongoing, intimate, powerful relationship.

The questions still remain. Should we obey? Of course. But whom? and what? and when? Is disobedience justified? Of course. But to whom? and to what? and when? In hammering out answers to those questions on a daily basis within our own wards and stakes we exercise our "agency in community" and, in fact, find that we *are* agents within our community. To offer someone — whether the Lord or another fallible mortal like ourselves — blind, re-

flexive obedience is a terrible gift that can only be asked for in ignorance and given in abdication of self. To offer someone informed obedience is the act of a responsible agent, but it can produce an adversarial relationship that becomes spiritually sterile if the demands for information exceed the ability of the community to provide them — with loss to both.

To offer mature obedience is an act of loving responsibility in a dynamic where the primary tension lies, not between the individual and the community, but between the individual and the Lord. To someone holding out for fully informed obedience, mature obedience may look blind because part of the information it accepts will not be rational. To someone who wants prompt obedience, mature obedience may even look like disobedience since it will be based on principle rather than programs and practices.

If this seems ambiguous, that's because it is. Growing up spiritually is an ambiguous process. It requires accepting ambiguity. But I know of no other process that gives us power in proportion only as our love increases so that we can use power worthily. And we should never ask an organization to do our growing up for us.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Miller, Jean Baker. "Anger, Power, and Women's Sense of Self. New Thoughts on a Psychology for the Future from Jean Baker Miller." *Ms.*, July 1985, pp. 42–45.

Quinn, D. Michael. "LDS Church Authority and New Plural Marriages, 1890–1904." DIALOGUE 18 (Spring 1985a): 9–105.

———. "Quinn Responds." DIALOGUE 18 (Fall 1985b): 13.