

# Life in Zion after Conversion: Hazed or Hailed?

Toward a More Mature View

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WHEN WE IMMIGRATED TO UTAH IN 1967, Elder Mark E. Peterson said to my husband, "I hope you won't be like so many converts who come to Zion. They think we should be perfect, and when they find we are human, they become disenchanted, often go home, and sometimes leave the Church." We knew there was some truth in what he was saying. Converts in foreign missions tend to think that a Mormon community will resemble the City of Enoch, an illusion sometimes fed by Church publications. Although during our thirty-two years in the Church we have never entirely believed that myth, we have experienced disillusionment and disappointment.

Much has been written about the loss of innocence all humans experience as they mature, but I have seen few references to the similar growing-up experience, the spiritual loss of innocence, that many converts face after the euphoric rebirth of the spirit at baptism. Ironically, that loss often becomes keener as one nears the centers of Zion.

My pain has not stemmed from acquaintance with imperfect saints, as Elder Peterson feared. In Utah I have met some wonderful, "imperfect" members of the Church, many of whom I admire and love. Nor has my faith been assaulted by the skeletons in Mormonism's historical closet. I have always believed that even prophets are human. Flaws that threaten and put some members on the defensive only help me identify with people in their struggles. Nor has the gospel itself become less important in my life.

My loss of innocence has resulted from a growing awareness of the many conflicts, large and small, that emerge between the Church as an institution and the gospel of Jesus Christ. This discord was not at first apparent to us in

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the mission field, but it began to dawn on us as our area grew into a stake directed from a central bureaucracy. I now realize that this means-and-ends dilemma is a universal one that confronts all institutions. However, the problem is especially acute when a religious institution must compromise the very principles it preaches. This not-so-simple paradox in a worldwide church operating within a variety of cultural value systems represents an ongoing, complex balancing act.

Compromise itself is not necessarily bad and may sometimes be required by higher law. As Justice Learned Hand said of compromise, "He who would find the substitute [for victory] needs an endowment as rich as possible in experience, an experience which makes the heart generous and provides the mind with an understanding of the hearts of others" (Barzun and Graff 1977, 44). So, while I try to discover the values that determine the choices in our institutional balancing act, honestly seeking some virtue in them, my heart aches for the damage to faith inflicted by policies that grow from some of those choices. My concern, I suppose, is similar to that of a nineteenth-century woman preacher, Jarena Lee, who said, "Oh, how careful we ought to be lest through our by-laws of church government and discipline we bring into disrepute even the word of life" (in Zikmund 1981, 213). Church government and discipline are the very areas in which we have suffered disillusionment.

For example, when we first came to Utah, we encountered much kindness from our new ward members, which softened some of the cultural dissonance inevitable in moving to a different land. Hence, we were totally unprepared for the insensitivity that assaulted us in our most vulnerable spot — our children. Our daughter and two of our sons (our eldest boy was still attending London University) had been in the center of a very active Church youth group in England. In Utah they were suddenly regarded as less-than-worthy members. Lynda's skirts were too short and the boys' hair was too long. By today's standards they would be considered entirely respectable. When other boys (who called their mothers "cows," electrocuted grasshoppers, and had a stack of *Playboy* pictures hidden in their rooms) were considered worthy simply because their hair was cropped short, our two sons lost respect for the Church. Our daughter, who was older, weathered the trauma better than our highly vulnerable, transplanted, thirteen- and sixteen-year-old sons. At the time I tried to explain that this rather narrow-minded response to their appearance was only the overzealous reaction of a recently reactivated bishop, but later events caused me to doubt the validity of my assessment.

An English convert friend, a faithful member of the Church now living in California, is married to a wonderful man, a recent convert. He is a mature, responsible person, good-looking, smart, impeccably groomed. Called to a stake position, he was told, in accordance with Church policy, that he would have to shave off his moustache if he accepted the call. His wife was dismayed but joked, "But I've never seen you without a moustache. I may not like you without it." He was obedient, however, and when he shaved it off, he warned her of the change before entering the room. It was several seconds before she dared look at him. Of course, she still loved him, but the demand seemed so

petty; the moustache was totally unrelated to her husband's worthiness. Another member who had a moustache most of his adult life also was required to shave it off before becoming a counselor in a bishopric. A newly called bishop was told he should not wear colored shirts when he assumed office, and a young, newly ordained deacon was not allowed to pass the sacrament one Sunday because he did not have a white shirt. Even in the service of the institution I fail to see what benefits accrue from all those shaved-off whiskers and white shirts. Even as a test of obedience these requirements seem rather frivolous. I wonder how Jesus would fare in our midst. Would he be deemed acceptable?

Then a few years ago there came a ray of light; Elder Ronald E. Poelman's wonderful, liberating talk in October 1984 general conference. Many of us were filled with joy and relief as Brother Poelman pointed out the distinctions between the gospel and the institutional Church. His message provided an oasis of truth that refreshed and comforted me to the point of tears. With bitter disappointment, I watched the oasis become a mirage. His talk was retaped in the empty tabernacle and "corrected" for publication. Because I had heard the original, however, the retaping merely served to bring the haunting suspicion that other beliefs, once accepted as true, had been mirages.

In spite of the "corrections," his talk has continued to help me, enabling me to deal with other sacrifices required at the institutional altar: the speaking ban on authors Linda Newell and Val Avery because their "Emma" book did not portray the traditional image of Joseph Smith, and the firing of an old missionary friend from his position in the Institute system after long and faithful service simply because he honored a commitment to speak at a Sunstone Symposium. The content of his talk in no way threatened the Church, but his participation was prohibited lest he, as a representative of the institution, be seen as part of a group of "faithful rebels," as Gene England once dubbed those who question. To their credit, these people remain good members of the Church, but our sacred tenet of free agency becomes a mockery in such circumstances. I believe more damage is caused by denying honest expression than by encouraging its intelligent consideration by Latter-day Saints who are divinely enjoined to think and grow.

Elder Poelman's inspired talk allowed the possibility of a reconciliation by reminding us that we are dealing with two distinct entities. On the one hand is the vehicle, the institution, with its own needs and demands and with all the frailties of the human beings who administer it. On the other hand is the gospel itself. By separating the two, Brother Poelman allowed the gospel to shine through in all its beauty. Sometimes the waters become so muddied by institutional policies (including deceptions such as the Poelman retaping) that gospel principles become confused with policies. If we cannot separate the two, then we must subscribe to the legitimacy of a religious double standard, one that requires an increasingly rigid observance of standards on a personal level while allowing elective application on an institutional level. For example, around the time that Elder Poelman's talk was being retaped in an empty tabernacle, the 1984 Relief Society manual included a lesson entitled "Teach-

ing Honesty” that demanded absolute honesty on the part of Church members. Even a white lie was not to be excused.

All of this adds up to some quite basic dilemmas, of course, ones that have been with us for centuries, including the troubling debate about means and ends. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1944) and his brother H. Richard had opposing views on this question. Reinhold, after a lifetime’s practical experience as a pastor, decided that the Children of Light had to attack the Children of Darkness on their own terms, sometimes using the methods of the Children of Darkness (but without malice) in order to defeat them. Richard Niebuhr did not agree. He said as soon as virtue adopts these means it becomes a part of the evil it is trying to overcome. This is a question each of us must confront.

My own personal dilemma causes me much pain. Because the Church was responsible for teaching me the gospel — bringing me to a deeper consciousness of God the Father and Jesus Christ and enlightening every aspect of my life — and because it gave me a chance to know many good people who love the gospel of Jesus Christ, I owe it my grateful allegiance. However, along with an aching hunger for truth and integrity, the Church has, ironically, brought me much sadness. I am sad because of some wonderful young people we have lost — some of our brightest and best who would contribute much to the Church but whose faith has withered because their enquiring young minds, transplanted into ultraconservative wards in Zion, have been suspect.

I tremble to think that a worldwide church operating in many different cultures might be governed by a bureaucratic need to preserve order and orthodoxy but which in reality may be exporting more of our Mormon culture than the gospel message. Thomas O’Dea in his insightful study, *The Mormons*, wrote, “The basic need of Mormonism may well become a search for a more contemplative understanding of the problem of God and man” (1957, 262). Such spiritual concerns transcend cultural boundaries, but we spare little time for them in our activities. When institutional directives require only routine obedience, the balancing act requiring greater sensitivity and reverence for the human condition may fail, bringing slow death to that spirit that emerges so joyfully at baptism.

I have been fortunate. Help has come from many sources, usually in unofficial gatherings. In 1966 an insightful missionary gave us a gift subscription to a new journal, *DIALOGUE*. We have subscribed ever since and will always be grateful to him. *DIALOGUE*, *Sunstone*, *Exponent II*, and the *Journal of Mormon History* have provided lifelines. Local study groups, retreats with sister-saints from all over the nation, Mormon History Association conferences, and the Sunstone Symposia have fleshed out the many kindred spirits I had met within the pages of those periodicals. All of these activities are unofficial — not exactly approved — and yet the participants, I remind myself, *are* products of the Church.

Just recently I gained some insight from the words of a lesser-known nineteenth-century writer, George B. Loring. He said,

Between the individual and his God there remains a spot, larger or smaller, as the soul has been kept unclouded, where no sin can enter, where no mediation can come,