

# Dissent in the Church: Toward a Workable Definition

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THERE ARE MANY IN THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST of Latter-day Saints who believe we need a workable definition of religious dissent in order to help make way for more serious debate over its legitimacy within the gospel process. Sincere and successfully waged dissent has long been an illegitimate facet in Mormon life but appears today to be thriving as never before. It is not surprising, however, that few have tried to operationally define it.

Most persons whom I have known who have sought to reconcile what the church is in our time with more democratic principles and practices such as dissent have pulled away in frustration resolving to leave the question expectantly with others. Hence, short of clichés, there is little dialogue on dissent which is friendly to its subject and inoffensive to church members. The matter seems to be in limbo.

For reasons to do with my longing for some eventual validity of dissent in the church, I begin this essay by repeating a comment by President Joseph F. Smith published in the *Improvement Era* in December 1917: "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the most democratic institution in the world" (100). Although some subsequently have taken the position that he did not mean what he said or that he really did not know what he was talking about, the statement was published again by the First Presidency, without commentary, in the 1970-71 course of study for the Melchizedek priesthood quorums (103). In raising the issue with both my bishop and stake president at the time, I was encouraged to teach it as a literal fact to my elders quorum even under personal protest.

I have long struggled with this declaration, knowing it contradicts the generally held perception of the church as a rigidly authoritarian, contra-democratic system. But I know that the Lord has placed language completely out of context with the reality of the times in the mouth of prophets

in the past and that such language has subsequently been reevaluated as profoundly prophetic. For this reason I will take the prophet at his word, however prophetic and "yet-to-come." My essay depends on this affirmation. I believe with guarded optimism that our future church will be neither rigidly authoritarian nor culturally autocratic but truly "the most democratic institution in the world." And I believe that we must think more courageously about how this democratic church would function.

In a narrower sense then I am addressing the most universal tenet of democratic life: its commitment to free inquiry and open promotion (frequently organized) of opposing opinions. And more specifically I am addressing the legitimacy of responsible dissent in a democratic Mormon community. In this context I will attend to the value of certain democratic principles, outline how I perceive responsible dissent operating, and respond to traditional arguments (criticism) against dissenters.

I know that my statement will be received by some as frighteningly heady. This is true for those modern Mormon pioneers who are at the cutting edge of needed change, walking that delicate but precipitous fence between legitimate Mormon life and the abyss of "heresy." But such risk is inherent to the apologetics for dissent.

I willingly accept this risk. But I strongly believe as well that my simple perspectives can stimulate increasingly open debate on the question of dissent in the loving gospel kingdom. As a religious people we are maturing and growing ready for this debate. My guiding assumption is that eternal truths are more likely to be discovered by all when we tolerate diversity of opinion and rigorously respect the right of individuals and groups to express and promote their considered convictions. I also believe that unless we legitimize such dissent, real democratic processes cannot be planted or sustained in Mormon life.

#### DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

As we all know, the essence of democracy is the participation of the governed in the governing process. Whether direct or indirect, democracy is self government. Democratic participation refers to the process by which individuals and groups influence or control those who make decisions affecting them. But until World War II democracy as a way of life had existed only in a relatively small portion of the world even though democratic ideas and practices went back about 2,500 years. Democracy then can scarcely be called "natural." On the contrary, the democratic way of life is probably the most difficult and unnatural. It does not emerge spontaneously or by accident but through deliberate thought and action to correct what is all too natural in human behavior. Participating in real democratic processes can be very frightening. Participants must be informed on issues

and personally involved in community decision making, but the natural (and safe) inclination is to avoid troubling information and to insulate against spirited contentions.

Dissent is deeply rooted in the governing activity of any truly democratic community. Responsible dissenters, however few in number, know that where people are free the majority will always rule, but dissenters also know that the majority must never be allowed to silence dissenting minority voices. The protests of minorities about every conceivable subject involving administrative and program systems of a democratic community are basic to maintaining the communities' social and spiritual health. Such dissent follows from a faith that in an open marketplace of competing ideas, truth defeats error. For these reasons leaders ought to protect and encourage vigorous dissent, and legitimize and honor negotiated consensus.

Freedom to dissent thus occupies an exalted position in democratic life because of high service given. Airing ideas and opinions releases pressures which otherwise might become destructive. Full and free discussion even of ideas we hate encourages a testing of those prejudices and preconceptions and tends to liberating the creative mind. Such release and testing mechanisms keep a society from becoming stagnant and unprepared for the stresses and strains working to tear all human groups apart. Not surprisingly then full and free discussion has been the first article of American democracy. We in the United States have founded our political system on such discussion. We have counted on it to keep us from embracing what is corrupt and crude. We have trusted the common sense of our people to choose the doctrine true to our needs and to reject the rest.

This tradition of dissent and discussion has made American institutions the prime symbol of freedom and equality. We have thus deemed it more costly to liberty to suppress universally despised minorities such as the American Nazi Party and the Ku Klux Klan than to let them vent their anger. We have above all else feared the political censor. We have wanted a land where our people can be exposed to all the diverse creeds, ideas, and cultures of the world and can then select those truths which are most workable in our hearts, lives, and living systems.

As real democratic societies are characterized by a considerable dispersion of power, no single clique would have the exclusive right to define the common social good or to determine what methods should be used to achieve it. Conflicting opinions, appropriately negotiated, enable people to clarify issues and to support proposals for change. Without the liberty to dissent, most are powerless to produce change, and special advantages of the dominant few become more deeply entrenched. When relevant information is freely disseminated and inequities are revealed, positive conflict surfaces and pressures for needed action. The function of dissent then is not so much to directly produce change (or keep it from happening) but to

enable a community to recognize new social realities and address those conditions which are often accepted as unalterable.

This would also be true in the church. It is ironic that today's church exists in an environment where democratic groups thrive because of intelligent dissent. Many Latter-day Saints seem ill prepared to understand or accept such dissent or to cope with it in ways maximizing the values of a free and pluralistic people. We think of dissent as inherently destructive and hold up conformity and sameness as hallmarks of the good society. However, dissent is not our problem but rather our inability to accept dissent as inevitable and essential to free religious practice.

Still a growing if small number of Latter-day Saints knows that major change within the church rarely appears without dissent of some sort. Major change is caused. It comes through the tireless efforts and courageous commitments of church members willing to risk themselves, to strain at the paralyzing chains of conformity and sameness, to embrace innovative action as essential to addressing our many festering issues. Without these dissenters the majority would resist change until "history" moved rudely in upon their world, damaging spiritual underpinnings and precious souls.

#### DEFINING DISSENT

Responsible dissent within our church might be defined as individual or organized group effort to bring about change or to prevent change through education and intelligent pressure on behalf of objectives believed by the individual or group to be socially and spiritually desirable. In other words an individual or group might propose change or resist such a proposal. Dissenters make their own decisions about goals, objectives, and strategies accepted as desirable and effective. This attempt to convert, persuade, or pressure someone believed to have the power to effect change can be lovingly waged in accord with the higher principles of the gospel. Responsible dissent does not include violent physical coercion or compulsion, although violence may be enacted upon the dissenters by the larger system. Indeed dissenters are always at risk of being injured, perhaps even excommunicated, dropped from membership in the church.

For committed Latter-day Saints, dissent never seeks to destroy or destabilize the church but rather to consolidate a base of influence and to employ this influence to promote democratic change. The primary functions of dissent are always educative ones. Responsible dissent is seldom a negative phenomena. Its corollary will normally be growth. However, gains are rarely made without the pressures of confrontation. Dissent seeks to dramatize those selected issues which cannot be ignored and to establish

creative tensions requiring church administrators to honestly confront the issues.

### TACTICAL FOCUSES OF EFFECTIVE DISSENT

The dilemma for faithful but seriously disappointed Latter-day Saints is always how to target a campaign of dissent at church leaders. How do we wage effective dissent, and how do we prevail? Specific tactics of dissent must necessarily remain unique to the shifting facts of each situation and encounter. But theories focusing on the broader issues engaged when crafting tactics have been around for decades.

The first principle of dissent is the hardest psychological hurdle for most Latter-day Saints: no one can negotiate in confrontations with church administrators without the power to negotiate. You do not negotiate "by permission" but from a base of influential power. Operating out of a posture of compliant goodwill rather than from a base of powerful influences and incentives rarely works. A deeply entrenched bureaucracy will always act in its own biased self-interest. Dissent means conflict, often public confrontation of competing powers. Thus issues of conflict must be carefully selected and developed.

The second principle requires involving church members (and where appropriate the larger public) in the issues at hand. Leaders of the church strive to create the impression of mass unanimity; no real legitimate opposition to their example exists in the church. The more this impression appears true, the less worthwhile it seems to growing numbers of church members to cherish even the thought of opposition. In other words the normative objective of church leadership is to create a climate where individuals have no choice but to conform. This means then that no reform can come without developing strong public and systemic issues. Unless open controversy exists, church members will not be concerned enough to act. The first step is capturing their empathetic attention.

The aggressive Mormon dissenter raises issues, interprets and promotes them vigorously, stirs up and personally involves other church members. A sense that a genuine opportunity to act for change exists must come first before people can think in terms of success, become optimistic, band together, seek special information, look for ways and means, act.

The third principle requires that successful Mormon dissenters start where the church is and not from where they believe the church should be. That we accept the church as it is does not weaken our desire to change a part of it into what we believe it should be. But accepting the church means working as a catalyst for encouraging change within the system and at its own pace or cadence.

For example, if you are one who advocates bestowing priesthood on

worthy female members, you would probably begin by encouraging their admission without priesthood to bishoprics, stake presidencies, high councils, and other administrative bodies of the church, where women's talents will prove that they can lead as effectively as men. Since female temple workers already receive a dispensation of priesthood in order to administer temple ordinances to their own gender, a precedent has been established which may some day allow for greater dispensation of priesthood.

A fourth principle of dissent dictates that all issues need to be morally polarized. One acts decisively in the conviction that all the good guys are on one side and all the rogues are on the other (however irrational such a conviction may ultimately be). Therefore, the real target of action will be a specific person or group who has the power to make change happen. Appropriate personalities must be specifically identified then for successful dissent. Their vulnerable statements and positions on the targeted issues coupled with countering arguments would be publicized widely in order to legitimize allegations and goals of dissenters.

The fifth principle, probably the main premise for strategic tactics in dissent, requires developing operations which maintain intense and constant pressure on the opposition, remembering that power is not only what you have but what the opposition thinks you have. In the extremes of encounter, the threat of a successful tactical action is often more terrifying to church leaders than the thing itself. It is when the other party feels substantially troubled that he or she will appropriately listen. In the arena of action, an independence becomes almost a precondition to communication. This is particularly so when the encounter places at risk the church's public image (its "Achilles Heel") or appears to threaten its growing economic power.

The sixth principle: real action is often in the opposition's reaction. Properly manipulated and guided in its reaction, the opposition can frequently be the dissenter's major strength. The opponent's reaction may deliver the variable tactics for the dissenters' campaign. This means tactics require flexibility enough to move and change with action which may be unpredictable from one day to the next. After a well-crafted campaign of dissent is launched, most day-to-day pressure tactics will be determined after considering the new movements of the opposition. Long-range tactical planning is of little value after initial campaign thrusts.

Good campaign tactics will be among those behaviors fellow church members can enjoy. But dissenting organizers must never go outside of the experience or ethical commitments of their supporters as this will lead to confusion, fear, and retreat. On the other hand they would gleefully try to go outside the experiences and anticipations of their religious opponents. Here they want to cause grave concern, willingness to honestly listen, and



desire to negotiate, and they may effectively do so if what is performed tactically has not been experienced before by church administrators.

Seventh. To win in the end, responsible dissent needs to be ethical. That is, whatever is done will always be appropriate to the intelligent and just requirements of its unique situation. The practical rule connecting ethics, means, and ends in dissent is that you do what you can with what you have and clothe it all with genuine ethical garments. Ethical rationalism is indispensable at all times of action. Workable means require the passport of ethics: you do what you do because you can ethically justify it.

Means and ends are viewed in pragmatic and strategic terms—of ends, only whether they are achievable and worth the cost; of means, only whether they will work and are legitimate to the ends. In the special case of Mormon dissent, the facts of any campaign or encounter must conform to the ultimate values and purposes of the gospel. Even so dissenters will need to prepare themselves for painful allegations from church leaders (and members) that they are out of step.

Eighth and finally. Every effort should be made through the use of comic satire to cause church administrators to live up to their own book of rules. It is almost impossible to counteract well-placed satire, particularly when most of its elements are true and onlookers know it. Dissenters should carry a keen sense of humor into all their skirmishes and dealings. When humorously prodded by knowledgeable dissenters, the larger system can no more obey its own book of rules than a fish can turn into a bicycle. Satirizing an obstinate and headstrong opposition is especially devastating (and fun) because of the broad inconsistent gap between the soaring religious platitudes and the primitive and raw authoritarianism of statements to dissenters and the public.

#### ANSWERING CRITICISM AGAINST DISSENT

I now want to address some of the general criticism we hear so frequently lodged against dissenters in the church. These allegations or criticisms seem almost universally held in one form or another by those who would suppress dissent. However, the first criticism is fairly unique to Mormonism, although I have seen it in other religious movements claiming to be led by a person who speaks directly to God.

*First criticism:* How can you justify dissent in the church when faithful members know that God speaks directly to the prophet at the head of the church in important matters of church policy? Doesn't the dissenter believe that the president of the church is a prophet of God?

*Response:* Committed Latter-day Saints who wage responsible dissent certainly do believe a prophet of God stands at the head of their church. In their dissent they strongly rely on that belief. In fact their religious convic-

tions are often deeper and more profound than are those who criticize them. But what of their dissent? How is it justified?

I think it is logical to believe that within the present design of things, the Lord in his unconditional grace can seldom overstep or outdistance our readiness for social and religious change without usurping to some degree and in some significant nature our inherent free agency. To force change on an organized group of people who are not ready to receive it has always been to threaten the destruction of the group.

So the Lord waits. He waits until we are ready to change.

In this sometimes lengthy process, there are always those few who clearly sense the need for change or the coming readiness for it and who speak out on behalf of it as if the issue was a special internal calling which they cannot deny or surrender. They are those who see and feel important truths "before their time," who acquire the enthusiasm for these truths early on and aid us to hear, feel, and see them empirically before they become popular.

Generally it is found that these "John the Baptists" are well qualified to be at the cutting edge of the issues they embrace. They become the advance guard in the church for new consciousness and sensitivities. They define the need and give examples of leadership necessary to mass awareness of the new truths straining to be born. In looking back through Mormon history, one is easily impressed with the fact that their dissenting function generally preceded and became critical to the success of new revelations.

When their work is done and church members see and feel the inevitability of change, the Lord then moves officially through the prophet and in the hearts of the members so they will know the necessity of the change and pursue it with great resolve and application. There is in this process no real gap between God, prophet, and disciples. God is not a fascist, and we his followers are always required to use our own intellect, intuition, and drive in quest of truth. New revelation from a perfect administrator would come this way. It has in the past and will continue to do so today and into the future.

But God help the dissenters, the lonely forerunners, in all their hang-ups and human frailties, who herald the need for change, giving example and leadership. For within the sound of their lonely voices, there will probably be few around at the beginning who will know and support what is happening.

*Second criticism:* The practice of dissent defeats its own purposes. Even when its goals are honorable, the deliberate contention it causes creates in the minds of onlookers a widespread feeling of resentment and anger. By making enemies rather than friends and by causing people to become upset,



the dissenter produces an adverse reaction to her quest and undermines larger objectives.

*Response:* The claim that dissent defeats its own purpose must be examined with a clear understanding of what the dissenter hopes to accomplish through her actions. She does not normally expect the immediate enactment of the change she seeks. In the purist sense her strategy is not aimed at making friends or causing people to like or admire her and thereby coaxing them into giving her their support. Her track is an entirely different one.

Her immediate objective is to force public attention to what should be a grave concern of church members. She may accomplish that objective regardless of the ensuing attitude of members to her person. Even a wave of resentment may do more to raise social and religious consciousness than can anything else. She may reason, perhaps correctly, that the only hope for a long-term remedy is group action arising out of reflection.

Moreover, the dissenter may further her long-range objectives even while becoming herself despised, if in doing so she also forces her opponents to acknowledge their support of an injustice or a religious anachronism. The dissenter cannot by herself effect the desired change. But she may succeed in exposing the need for change, identifying those who seek to block such change and their questionable reason for doing so.

That done, she may rely on the conscience of the church at large, suffering quietly the harsh ridicule and harassment that may befall her as a result of her efforts to stir this conscience. When the dissent is direct, the infraction nonviolent, and its consequence involves little injury, the general reaction of church members is likely to be one of reflection, making the probability of success in achieving a worthy objective reasonably high.

The long-range goal of Mormon dissenters is the achievement of needed action brought about by arousing the conscience of the larger system. To this end they dramatically exhibit their own deep personal concerns and their moral repugnance toward a continuing or pending injustice. Open dissent may be reasonably effective in communicating this concern and repugnance and in prodding others until they also share those feelings (providing that the depth and sincerity of a dissenter's commitment is beyond doubt or dispute). Demonstrating a deep commitment may bring an apathetic church, or part of it, to begin to reflect about the issues at hand and to act on the basis of this new awareness.

*Third criticism:* A church member who openly dissents is acting out of his own selfish and insensitive interests with a callous disregard for the interest of other church members.

*Response:* This criticism assumes the act of legitimate dissent to have a character it does not have. It supposes that the dissident church member does not really care what the church and the Lord require of him, when in

fact he usually cares very much. It also suggests that the dissident hopes to defy the rules without punishment if he can get away with it—which is false. Real dissent is always a public and sacrificial act.

Mormon dissidents place most of their private interests on the line in the course of their actions. They do not further their private interests at all. In fact many of their immediate private interests are seriously damaged.

They are publicly condemned and embarrassed by church leaders. Their daily lives within the church are thrown into turmoil. They cannot be given responsibilities of trust since they are “out of step.” Certain of their customary privileges may be officially withdrawn or denied. Their families can be seriously disrupted. They become alienated from other church members and experience the withdrawal of some of their closest friends.

They are besieged with feelings of guilt, fear, depression, and grief. Worst of all, their personal convictions may cost them their membership in the church and the daily pleasures and fulfillments built on that membership. If not ostracized completely, it is probable they will never again be included in the inner circles of intimacy and trust. For throughout their lives they will be required to carry a permanent burden of a questionable record and be obliged to explain the penalties and indignities laid on them and their families.

These are the probable consequences of an effective protest, and informed Mormon dissidents understand them very well. It would be far safer to personal interests to remain quiet and in conformity with established expectations of the church.

*Fourth criticism:* The general authorities have instructed us that there is no legitimate place in the church for nonobedience to their direction, that to publicly promote dissenting religious opinion is tantamount to waging war on God and the church, and that dissenting “alternate voices” may even be regarded as enemies. It is morally wrong for individual members to decide for themselves which procedures and policies of the church they can accept. To dissent is to take the law of the church into your own hands and to undermine God’s work on the earth.

*Response:* Essentially this argument denies the claim that a church member has under any circumstances the right to personally choose to obey or disobey the established practices of the church. To permit such choice, it is held, is to give so much power to rank-and-file members that all church authority will be undermined. But this is false.

If every edict must be emphatically obeyed in every situation, without exception, the principle of obedience is then changed. True obedience is an informed, reflective, and deliberate act of loving conscience. One obeys because he or she knows that obedience supports a higher principle of the

gospel. Conversely to obey only because one is commanded to obey generally destroys the inner commitment to moral and ethical life.

If millions of Mormons obey only because they are commanded to obey, then there is religious life without a reasoned moral or ethical core, and something is terribly wrong.

To demand blind and unquestionable obedience in given situations is to drastically reduce the sphere of genuinely Christian behavior within the church, to create human beings who have little inner capacity for moral decision making and who have a diminished social conscience (a thing for which Mormons have historically been criticized).

Church authority should be obeyed only because one understands the results of that obedience and regards it as Christ-like. To do differently is to compromise one's sacred personal integrity. In actuality Mormon dissidents seek to change certain codes and practices of the larger system which they regard as unethical, irreligious, harmful, or impractical. They are not selfishly striving to arbitrarily exempt themselves from the enforcement of these codes and practices.

*Fifth criticism:* Dissent with the church implies personal contempt for the church.

*Response:* Although the posture of some Mormon dissenters is certainly defiant, their dissent is more a manifestation of respect for the church than of contempt for it. Realizing that the rules and conventions they bridge apply equally to them, they violate them knowingly in an effort to correct what they believe to be a wrong in the church infinitely worse than the commotion committed through their dissent. They understand that such deliberate violation of established norms will be met with punishment, and generally they do not seek to evade that outcome. Purposeful dissent is essentially a process aimed at effecting or blocking changes through deliberate public sacrifice.

Because dissent is always political (an effort to manipulate social power), dissenters may expect that punishment will be severe. Suffering this punishment, accepting humiliation and probable maltreatment, are essential parts of protest. Dissenters demonstrate respect for the church, a church they seek to improve and strengthen not subvert, a church where they choose to remain.

*Sixth criticism:* Dissent undermines respect for order in the church. It cannot be justified when "lawful" channels of communication remain open and available to anyone who feels a need to complain or advocate change.

*Response:* I am sorry, but historical evidence does not support these claims. It is true that social disorder in the church has sometimes followed or accompanied a period of dissent, but it cannot be inferred that dissent was the precipitating cause of the disorder. More likely both the dissent

and the disorder were products of social and religious conditions that for many became intolerable.

On the whole the Mormon tradition is greatly indebted to grieving members who advocated needed reforms under various circumstances and to courageous leaders who relied on such appeals to justify their legitimate contesting for a better church. In both theory and practice, responsible dissent, although sometimes badly managed, has been for the most part the instrument of persons or groups with noble and spiritually desirable objectives, objectives which in due time have been willingly embraced by the church. Dissent in these issues has most often brought not chaos but an improved social and religious order.

As for "lawful" channels for publicly promoting considered differences of opinion in the church, they rarely exist. The problem is that these channels, once so plentiful within its bosom in the early days of the church have mostly been abolished. How does a Latter-day Saint legitimately contend with leaders of his church? He does not. The democratic mechanisms are not in place.

Even if there were lawful channels for publicly registering dissent, it does not follow that using them will be (or could be) as effective as the far more dramatic protest of "illegal" dissent. Alleging that lawful protest is possible, therefore, cannot clearly establish that disobedient protest is unjustifiable. What would have to be demonstrated is that some approved format of protest would be equally effective in accomplishing objectives. Disobedient protest frequently has a spirited and public effectiveness that "approved" protest cannot match.

*Seventh criticism:* When church members do not agree with the way the church is conducted, they should get out of it and go some place else where the standards are less demanding and where they will be able to cope. If they don't love the church the way it is, they should leave.

*Response:* Let us be clear about the extraordinary claim of our church. Mormonism is not just another church, another voluntary organization where you join and participate because of the personal gratification you get. It is not a club, fraternity, or group of "good old boys." It is the very restored gospel of Jesus Christ and earthly kingdom of God. It encompasses all that exists and all that God will yet create, belonging in equal measure to each of those who love and will follow God's example.

To tell a Mormon dissident to love the church as it is or leave it would be like saying if you disagree with the way the world is today you should commit suicide. How unintelligent and insensitive. It would be as if such spokespersons do not understand the claim of the restored gospel.

If it really did not matter which religious group you belonged to, then those in dissent might be encouraged to move on to a church less at odds with their expectations. Those who stay with the church but are in some

dissident position are likely to have powerful testimonies of its divinity. They may be the most loyal to the church. Those who stay and fight for progressive change in the church may just be those who love her the most. Those who take the greatest abuse because of their nonconformity may have the greatest fidelity towards the church. Their love for the church could be the greatest of all.

#### CONCLUSION

I have tried in this brief essay to suggest some beginning perspectives toward an operational definition of dissent in the church. I intend that others may find their own relevance in these principles and arguments within both historical and contemporary contexts. The task will probably not be an arduous one for those who know their church history and have been involved in modern streams of Mormon change. There is very little written anywhere in the church on this long-standing but most contemporary phenomenon. Dissent is yet an undefined term for the Latter-day Saints, and many grieve over the fact that it is considered an inexcusable taboo rather than a force for truth seeking.

Although I cannot see it now even dimly, I want to believe with President Joseph F. Smith that our church is truly destined to become "the most democratic institution in the world." But before we even begin to perceive of ourselves as democratic, we must first prevail over this fearful mindset against dissent. To do so will take years of courageous dialogue and debate, perhaps continuing far beyond this generation of church members. What is now important is to place the issue on today's discussion agenda and to keep it there.