Freedom of Conscience: A Personal Statement

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[Editors' note: The following essay is drawn from remarks at a prayer service held at the White Memorial Chapel in Salt Lake City on 22 September 1993 and from a presentation prepared for a panel discussion on "Humanist and Mormon Views on Freedom of Conscience," 24 September 1993, also in Salt Lake City. Lavina Fielding Anderson was excommunicated from the LDS church for "apostasy" on 23 September 1993.]

WITHIN THE LAST MONTH, six Latter-day Saint scholars in Utah, representing both liberal and conservative ends of the spectrum, have been served with notices by their ecclesiastical leaders to appear before church courts, called "disciplinary councils," to answer to charges of apostasy or conduct unbecoming a member of the LDS church. Within the last two weeks, beginning on 14 September 1993, one of the six has been disfellowshipped, four have been excommunicated, and the sixth court is scheduled for the morning of the 26th. The church denies that it is conducting a purge.

I am one of these September Six. The issue over which my disciplinary council was held could have been history, as it will be in the case of D. Michael Quinn, or feminism, as it was in the cases of Maxine Hanks and Lynne Kanavel-Whitesides, though probably not theology, as in the cases of Paul Toscano and Avraham Gileadi. Instead, the cause of action happened to be ecclesiastical abuse—church leaders who exercise unrighteous

dominion over members. If I may appropriate a phrase from another context, let me provide, as a thumbnail definition of ecclesiastical abuse, what Paul Edwards terms the Sumo Wrestling School of Administration, which he defines as "throwing your weight around while trying to cover your rear."[1]

Ecclesiastical abuse occurs when a church officer, acting in his calling and using the weight of his office, coerces compliance, imposes his personal opinions as church doctrine or policy, or resorts to such power plays as threats and intimidation to insure that his views prevail in a conflict of opinions. The suggestion is always that the member's faith is weak, testimony inadequate, and commitment to the church lacking.

Seven factors characterize most abusive encounters:

1. A difference of opinion is not simply a difference of opinion but is treated as a revelation of moral inadequacy on the part of the member. If the difference of opinion stems from scholarship on the member's part or the application of professional tools to an aspect of Mormon studies, the officer seldom has the technical expertise to discuss the point at issue. Frequently he shifts the grounds of the discussion to the dangers of promulgating any perspective but the traditional one and insists that there is something bad or wrong about holding alternative views.

2. A request for help on the part of a member is seen as an invitation to judge the member's worthiness on the part of the officer.

3. No matter what the content of the initial issue, *any* issue can escalate with terrifying quickness into a power struggle in which the ecclesiastical officer demands compliance because of his office and accuses the member of not sustaining his leaders and/or of apostasy. These charges, in turn, lead to threats to confiscate temple recommends, to release the member from callings, and to conduct disciplinary councils.

4. If the member protests such actions and refuses to yield to the officer's power, then the very act of protest or the expressed desire to continue the discussion is seen as evidence of the charges. The officer feels justified in refusing to explain the reasons for taking the action and unilaterally terminates the discussion by citing his authority. The member, rather than having a problem, has become the problem.

5. If another ecclesiastical leader, such as a stake president or an area president becomes aware of and involved in the situation, the original leader almost always controls the flow of information to this second leader. The opportunities to present biased information, reframe the issue as one of disobedience, and portray the member as a trouble-maker are

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1. Paul M. Edward, "A Comment on the Writing of Ethics," *Distinguished Author Lectures: 1988-1989, Volume I, 1988-89*, ed. Roger Yarrington (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1989), 13.

legion. The first leader seldom suggests a group discussion or meeting that involves a mediator or a referee; rather, he is usually able to use the weight of the second officer's office and power to reinforce his own in the effort to force the member's capitulation.

6. The member feels unjustly treated. Feelings of helplessness, betrayal, anger, and depression frequently follow. Expressions of "increased love" seldom if ever follow "rebukes" from abusive ecclesiastical officers, only additional warnings about conformity that increase the sense of unfairness and powerlessness.

7. If the member in pain withdraws from church activity to protect himself, herself, and/or the family from this assault upon their spiritual well-being, the withdrawal is seen as evidence of the member's lack of worthiness, not as a cry for help or as a symptom of abuse in the system.

I published a long article in the spring 1993 issue of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* documenting over a hundred cases of ecclesiastical pressure directed primarily at scholars and historians. Since then, over a hundred ordinary members of the church have come forward with their own experiences of injustice, usually suffered in silence, bewilderment, and anguish. Ecclesiastical abuse is not a social or a political problem for me. It is a spiritual one—a matter of conscience. I consider myself to be a believing and orthodox Mormon. Hence, I speak from the center of my religious tradition, using the language of my religion. Two scriptures have run repeatedly through my mind: "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not" (Isa. 53:3). That is what has happened to so many of the people I have talked to—decent, ordinary members of the church have been despised and esteemed not. And the second one, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40). Ecclesiastical abuse spoke directly to my conscience and I answered it.

It is a topic I have thought about carefully and prayerfully for two years, ever since the statement of the joint council of the First Presidency and Twelve against symposia. I certainly knew it was risky, since the church has a long history of shooting the messenger that brings unpleasant news. I never received any spiritual guarantees that I would be safe or that the church would welcome the news and change quickly, but I did receive over and over again the assurance that it was the right thing to do. That assurance has been the single most important factor in the strength I have felt at every step of this process. It has been striking to me that in the scores of letters I have received expressing love and support, the person who spoke most directly and most insightfully to the issue of conscience was not a Mormon at all, but a Catholic friend, who said: "I have in my life done

a few costly things for the sake of my conscience, and I am proudest of them. May it be so for you."[2]

As I gathered with a few friends on the evening of 23 September 1993, while my disciplinary council was underway without me, we ate popcorn and guacamole dip, exchanged the latest rumors and news, and watched *A Man for All Seasons.* Fred Buchanan, who had been working in his yard and felt compelled to join us, drove over to the house and walked in, his face pale and stricken with sadness. As he tried to express his sympathy for me, I said, "How many times in our lives do we get to take a stand on a question of conscience? So much of what we do is choosing degrees of political correctness or balancing ethical standards against social constraints, or being 'reasonable' or 'realistic.' I feel *lucky.* This is a privilege that doesn't come to everyone." I did not realize, until I said that words, how deeply I meant them and felt them. I also did not realize until I received the notice of excommunication the next morning that, no matter how well prepared I was or how carefully chosen my commitment, the blow would be so heavy.

I believe that the issue is a struggle for the soul of Mormonism. Against a religion that has increasingly become a multiplication of forms and observances, catechisms and orthodoxies, the exuberant expansiveness of Mormon theology pits itself with vitality and vigor. Both the gospel of Jesus Christ and Mormon doctrine teach love as the basis of human relations, liberation from limitations of all kinds, and an absolutely irreducible respect for human dignity and freedom. Ecclesiastical intimidation, silencing, and punishment violate these principles in every way. And it is the principles that will ultimately triumph—cracking, crumbling, and sweeping aside practices that have their basis in fear, not love.

I have been thinking lately about metaphors for the church. I am becoming increasingly uncomfortable with military metaphors that compare the church to an army, with corporate views, or with the mechanical model that treats a member like a defective toaster that can be unplugged and thrown away while a new one is plugged in. I prefer different metaphors—the church as community, as family, despite its dysfunctional moments.

I find myself returning with new appreciation to the apostle Paul's metaphor in 1 Corinthians of the church as a body. I have always thought of this metaphor in the simple, straightforward, seminary way where the body is diversity, not only diversity in the callings we have in the church but also diversity in our personalities and gifts. I have been thinking lately of what the body does for a member in pain. A couple of weeks ago, when

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2. Freda M. De Pillis to Lavina Fielding Anderson, 20 Sept. 1993.

I started to pick up a hornet on the window-sill that I thought was dead and it pointedly remarked that it was not, for instance, my body did not say, "Boy, what a stupid finger. Chop it off! We'll have to get a new one." No, my body gave that finger top priority and immediate attention. The feet carried that finger to the sink and the other hand poured ammonia over the sting. The eyes were stinging in sympathy. I would have been on my way to the refrigerator to make lunch, but my stomach suspended all distress calls for the next few minutes to give full attention to the finger. And then, a few minutes later when the crisis was over, both hands, even the still-shocked finger, helped make the sandwich that the stomach wanted. Even though the crisis was over, there was still a tender place on the finger, and the other fingers returned to it frequently during the day to rub it and make it feel better.

And even if a member of the body is so damaged, so diseased that it must be amputated to save the life of the body, and even if the body compensates by learning extra dexterity and skills, the body still goes throughout the rest of its life acknowledging its crippledness, mourning its incompleteness.

We are a crippled and a crippling body of Christ, not functioning very well some of the time and apparently bound in an insane way on functioning worse. I call on us to reject this metaphor and instead think of the healthy body, in touch with all its parts and members, tending and nurturing all of its parts with the whole, in turn, being nurtured by those parts. I say that there is a place in the church for all of us because there is room in the grace of Christ for every human being in the world. Mother Teresa says that Christ would have died for you if you were the only person in the world who needed his redemption. The church may say that I am not its member, but I affirm, even in the teeth of excommunication, that it is still my church.

Paul makes another point, which I will read in the New International Version: "Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment." Being placed on probation, disfellowshipped, or excommunicated has always represented shame, separation from the body of the church, dishonor, and diminishment.

But that does not necessarily represent people's experience. For some, the severing of ties with the church represents freedom and exhilarating spiritual growth. Among such are one of my dearest friends from college and a missionary companion. I am convinced that their choices were right. For a second group, such judgment represents a a humble choice, part of a necessary repentance, like surgery to correct an infected fingernail. And

in a third group of cases, it is brutal amputation, without anesthetic, producing wounds that remain unhealed.

Some are called to judge, but thankfully that is not my job. I am through drawing lines between sheep and goats, between the clean and the unwashed, between those acceptable to God and those acceptable to the church. I am a feminist, an intellectual, and an orthodox, believing Mormon. I am not a danger to the Church of Jesus Christ. Homosexuals have long been the most stigmatized group of Mormons. I am through believing that they are. I say that there is room for all of us. Perhaps Elder Boyd K. Packer has done the church a favor by his labeling of feminists, homosexuals, and intellectuals. Perhaps the shock of such rejection from an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ will make church members realize that more likely dangers are its misogyny, anti-intellectualism, and homophobia. Perhaps we will ask even more troubling questions about its materialism and its emphasis on hierarchy.

Karl C. Sandberg points out that the terminology change from "church court" to "disciplinary council" may have unexpected significance:

> "Courts" depend on a body of law and interpretation of the law, since very few cases are exact replicas of previous ones. The law is cumbersome, but it is written down and says that like cases must be treated in the manner of like precedents. It is the ultimate protection for the individual.
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> To "discipline," on the other hand, is "to train by instruction and practice, especially to teach self-control to; to teach to obey rules or accept authority . . . ; to punish in order to gain control or to enforce obedience; to impose order on" (*American Heritage Dictionary*). . . . Every organization needs to exercise discipline (maintain order) to accomplish its purposes. The question to be raised here and to be reviewed periodically is this: does the shift away from "court" to "discipline" connote a shift away from the law, which protects the individual, to control and enforced obedience, which protect the institution? It seems to me to be an open and fruitful question.[3]

In 2 Timothy 1:7, the apostle Paul encourages the young bishop, Timothy, with these words: "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." On 23 September 1993, fifteen good and decent men, sincerely desiring to do the will of God, sat in judgement on my membership. If any of them had read this scripture, I wonder how they would have interpreted it. I know how it speaks to me. It is a call to me to behave with courage, with kindness, and with integrity.

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3. Karl C. Sandberg, "Mormonism and the Puritan Connection: The Trials of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson and Several Persistent Questions Bearing on Church Governance," 8 Sept. 1993, 12-13, privately circulated.

Yet in the case of the September Six, ecclesiastical officers have exercised, not godly power, but unrighteous dominion. Kindly and loving as individuals, they have collectively acted in punitive and unloving ways. Instead of manifesting sound judgement, they have stereotyped, demonized, and spurned.

When the histories of this period are written, I think historians will conclude that the church was wracked and rent by a spirit of fear, acting out a nightmare that took the form of scapegoating six of its own. In some ways, what is happening has very little to do with we six as individuals. Masks casting hideous shadows have been placed over our real faces. We have become monsters, externalized expressions of internal terrors. But this time will pass. The fever will break. The troubled sleeper will awake. The vitality and sanity of Mormon doctrine and theology will curb paranoid practices and work out healthier organizational forms.

I have made many mistakes of my own and have contributed to the mistakes of others, but I know in my bones that it is no mistake now to call for a return to the gospel of Jesus Christ, to call for greater love, forgiveness, and reconciliation in our community. Healing can only occur in and be extended from whole individuals, not from those who are codependent on an abusive institution. Ecclesiastical abuse must be addressed and solved. Certainly some organizational and structural changes will do much toward providing a sorely missing system of checks and balances. But the real protection of members lies in their own sense of empowerment, in an individual sense of duty to God rather than to the institution, and in the primacy of individual conscience.