

Learn from the Stories, Pity the Prejudice

Mormons in Transition. By Leslie Reynolds (Salt Lake City: Gratitude Press, 1996).

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WHEN I SAW THE TITLE *MORMONS IN Transition*, I thought perhaps *Dialogue* had given me the book because the author intended a word-play on my *Mormonism in Transition*. I was quite mistaken. Leslie Reynolds started the research as a master's project on former Latter-day Saints who joined other churches. For this book she added other interviews, including some with marginal Mormons. She intended the "book to help former Mormons ... to heal and to help others, both Mormon and non-Mormon, gain perspective on the LDS church and their experiences with it" (4).

As I read, the thought struck me forcefully that most Latter-day Saints could learn some lessons from the personal stories. One lesson is that some members become disaffected when leaders and teachers give unnecessary offense through insisting on unorthodox doctrines or practices or punishing people for asking questions. In one of Reynolds's examples, a bishop offended a sister who sought counsel about her marital problems. The bishop appears poorly informed about Mormon doctrine and oblivious

to his responsibility to provide comforting and helpful counsel. Instead of helping to heal the woman's pain, the bishop insisted that as a "second class Mormon," she ought to obey her abusive husband. In another case, a teacher told a disappointed young woman that if she were special and holy she could expect to see an angel in the room at the time of her baptism.

In addition, the stories ought to teach us to avoid obsessions with poorly defined doctrines and the expectation of perfection among members. One member left the church because of a fixation with the plurality of gods. Some became disillusioned because they came to expect omniscience and faultless lives from other church members, especially general authorities.

Nevertheless, the text reveals a number of deficiencies in Reynolds's understanding. She glosses over the differences within what she calls "traditional Christianity," by attributing to all non-Mormon Christians doctrines accepted by some Evangelicals. Many belonging to mainline Protestant churches may find the work puzzling. It most certainly does not represent the views of Catholics. She asserts, for instance, "Since God is not only a gracious God of justice, but also a God of mercy, He sent Jesus to pay the ransom for our sins, and through believing in him, we disarm the consequences of the Fall and are

promised eternal life. Other works are not required of us" (14).

I thought that many Christians did not believe the last sentence, but I also acknowledge that my understanding might be faulty. To check my knowledge, I called Jan Shippo, a Methodist and an emeritus professor of religion. She pointed out that many Baptists preach "once saved, always saved." While the concept of grace is critically important in mainline Protestantism, repentance is an ongoing process. Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Disciples, and others seek repentance through personal prayer and meditation. Among liturgical churches such as Episcopalians and Lutherans, prayer and meditation are also important, but some turn to their pastors to confess their sins. The Catholic church expects members to confess to a priest, who mediates between humans and God, and to forsake the sin. The priest may also direct the member to say Hail Marys or to perform other actions that are considered works.

Most serious, in my view, is the faulty understanding Reynolds has of the Mormon doctrines of the Fall, sin, the Atonement, salvation, and grace. In an absolutely mindboggling assertion, she writes: "In my experience, the LDS church emphasizes neither sin nor grace, in general" (14).

As believing Mormons know, in Latter-day Saint theology baptism constitutes a covenant between faithful, penitent candidates and God. In that covenant the candidates accept Christ's atonement to cleanse all their sins. In his grace God covenants to wash away their previous sins through Christ's atonement and to forgive sins committed after baptism, provided the members repent of

them. In Mormon theology no one except Jesus Christ has the power to cleanse us of any sin. Amasa Lyman lost his church membership and his position in the Twelve in part because he preached that humans could atone for their own sins. Moreover, as a symbol of the covenant with God, of God's pace, and of Christ's atonement, each Sunday faithful Latter-day Saints take the emblems of his body and blood. In fact, on this subject Mormon doctrine is quite close to that of mainline Protestant and Catholic churches.

Latter-day Saints will also find extremely offensive her tendency to reserve the term "Christian" for those believers in Christ whom she calls "traditional historical, or evangelical Christians" (10). Though she acknowledges that "Mormons ... may be, in fact, Mormon Christians" (10), she seems uncomfortable considering them as such, since she frequently distinguishes between "Christians" and "Mormons."

Moreover, she uses Jan Shippo's work when it suits her purposes but ignores it when it does not fit her Evangelical preconceptions. Reynolds writes that she is "still emotionally offended by references to Mormonism as a cult," but she insists that "definitionally ... it is one" (97). Shippo, on the other hand, argues that Mormonism is a new religious tradition which bears the same relationship to traditional Christianity that Christianity did to Judaism.

To characterize Mormonism, Reynolds adopts Ruth A. Tucker's definition of a cult as "a religious group that has a 'prophet'-founder called of God to give a special message not found in the Bible itself, often apocalyptic in nature and often set forth in 'in-