

# One Man's Definition of LDS Membership

Larry N. Jensen

SOME THIRTY YEARS AGO MY FAITH in the Mormon church changed forever. I was twenty-eight years old, a husband, father, school teacher, high priest, and a highly idealistic and credulous young Mormon. Looking back, I had complete faith in the religious belief of others, my universe was ordered, and I was happy. I was also a student/scholar and was beginning to assume the mantle of an intellectual. I was changing in the way I viewed the world.

In the summer of 1969, while working on a Master's degree at the University of Utah, I met two other teachers doing the same thing. As we came to know each other, our religious affiliations came up. They were Mormons but were troubled in their membership. After some prodding, they confided that they had come into some knowledge about the claim that the Pearl of Great Price contained an authentic translation of the Book of Abraham. The church says that Joseph Smith translated the book from ancient Egyptian papyri. They were anguished in their knowledge that this was not true and were further distressed that the authenticity of Joseph Smith as a prophet was in question because of what they knew. As a believing Mormon, I challenged them, arguing that such a discovery was impossible. They asked me to read what they had discovered and judge for myself. I accepted. My credulous faith in the church was assailed and my ordered universe began slowly to tumble.

The source of their enlightenment was a package of essays entitled "The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri" in the periodical *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, volume 3, issue 2. The gist of these articles noted the recent recovery of the lost papyri used by Joseph Smith to create the Book of Abraham, a canonized book of scripture in the church. The authors argued convincingly that these papyri were authentic and the exact ones used by Joseph. Additionally, several Egyptologists reported examining copies of the papyri and, with minor variations, translated them as por-

tions of a Book of the Dead, a common funerary artifact that accompanied Egyptian mummies. This analysis provided a basis for comparing the modern translation and that produced by Joseph Smith 140 years earlier. The difference was indisputable. No instance of agreement between the two translations was found. The conclusion was inescapable: the Book of Abraham was fiction, Joseph Smith's perfidy was exposed, and the foundation of my belief in the church and its leaders was permanently shaken.

The effect on me was not immediate; in fact, it took years to adjust to my knowledge. I was a member of the Mormon community and in the beginning tried to test my new-found knowledge on other Mormons. I found myself stonewalled; to try to talk about it was to be dismissed. The only ones willing to discuss my discovery were outside the church, but I was interested in accommodating what I knew within the church. In the intervening years such an accommodation has been impossible. Only through silence have I preserved my church membership. I valued the community of Mormonism for my family and also for the impact the church has had on me as a young person. I needed the Puritan ethic as practiced in Mormonism to help me raise my children. So I opted for an alliance of expediency. My active involvement in the church ebbed and settled on the backwater of activity, but my family remained immersed in the Mormon community.

Quite incidentally, over the years other sources of trouble for the believing Mormon have come my way. I will mention two in the following paragraphs.

The historical biography, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, by Fawn M. Brodie, was helpful in understanding the historicity of Joseph Smith. He was indeed a man for his time; a bright, intelligent, industrious, creative, imaginative, and visionary leader who was also a dishonest scoundrel. After reading this excellent scholarly work, I was persuaded by her conclusion, that the Book of Mormon is fiction. It was exciting for me that the book, when viewed from the historical context of the times, including an understanding of the surrounding social, political, and economic milieu, now made sense. While Joseph's claim that the book was an authentic revelation/translation from ancient golden plates by the power and will of God may be abhorrent to some, his life and the way he died creates for millions of members an authenticity to his claims that historical and other facts cannot dissuade. His book is saga, his life epic, and his theology a modern religion.

The second source of trouble for the believing Mormon are the essays found in *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, by B. H. Roberts, edited by Brigham D. Madsen, and published by the University of Illinois Press in

1985. These show that skepticism concerning the historicity of the Book of Mormon was not ignored by Roberts, a Mormon general authority in the early 1900s. In his day reasoned debate was tolerated in the church and questions about the Book of Mormon deserved discussion. Roberts's defense of the faith is well known in church circles, but it was not revealed until 1985 that he was troubled in his attempts to explain away conflicts between modern historical facts and Book of Mormon historicity. In the 1920s, seeking enlightenment, he documented these problems, presented them to the highest church leaders, and was ignored. He was a scholar, but his love of truth and his love for his church were problematic for him, and like others he chose silence rather than confrontation. With Roberts's death, the toleration of intellectuals and reasoned debate in the church also died. A Mormon cultural tenet of anti-intellectualism emerged and remains in place today. Any Mormon who publicly questions church dogma today is summarily dismissed as a heretic subject to disfellowship or excommunication. Reason, it seems, places the very foundation of the church, the efficacy of Joseph Smith, into question. To lose him as the theological bedrock of the church would bring chaos to the organization. In reaction to this possibility, homeostatic forces within the church continually deaden reasoned intellectualism, thereby steadying the modern ark of the covenant, the LDS faith.

And if anti-intellectualism is not enough to discourage the thinking Mormon, Brodie brings to light another similar tenet in the church: the Calvinistic notion of literalism brought to the early church by Sidney Rigdon. Among other things, Mormons believe literally in Noah's flood, a 4,000-year-old earth, and a boy seeing God on a hill in New York in the early 1800s. Myth is never discussed in the church; scripture is literally true.

The intellectual Mormon usually finds a discussion with a faithful Mormon a frustrating experience. The faithful one is armed with dislike for the intellectual, a slavish belief in church dogma, logic defying circular argumentation, and is usually full of self. The intellectual is likewise full of self, and is bound by education and training to reasoned argumentation and logical rationalism. These are intellectually different worlds; productive argumentation is impossible since a common battleground does not exist. Rather than do battle, silence is the better part of valor between these two. Besides, to engage the battle is to suffer a fool too easily on either side.

Where does all this leave the thinking Mormon? Being at odds with much of church dogma is spiritually uncomfortable. Is orthodoxy all there is and is a middle ground of membership impossible? Brigham D. Madsen, in an essay published in the fall 1997 issue of *Dialogue*, used the term Partial Covenant to describe the relationship between a thinking

Mormon and the church. As I pondered what Partial Covenant membership meant for me, I needed a definition of Full Covenant membership. Since, in my limited research, no such definition exists, I decided to create one.

It seems useful here to use the term Orthodox Mormon to refer to Full Covenant membership. The term, Orthodox Mormon, characterizes a member who accepts without compromise the authority of the church and the subordination of personal freedom to that authority through purposeful religious behavior. Partial Covenant membership means something less than this but is not treasonous of church authority. A Partial Covenant Mormon practices the faith, but through a compromised acceptance of church authority consistent with personal integrity, and does so silently. A critical mass of Orthodox Mormons keeps church authority in place, but many Partial Covenant Mormons presently practice the faith.

To arrive at a satisfactory definition of Partial Covenant membership, it is may be useful to view Orthodox church authority as four interrelated precepts.

1. *The Authority of the Prophet.* The church is an autocracy. Orthodox acceptance of the prophet's authority comes from the personal conviction that he is a living oracle of God. This is the cornerstone of all authority in the church. The power of the authority of the prophet stems from Joseph Smith the person. He was the first and last public oracle of God in the church. Orthodox members affirm his authority over and over in fast and testimony meetings. While some succession of authority occurred after his death, the authority of the prophet remains historical rather than contemporary. Present-day prophets derive their prophetic authority from their position in the organization of the church. Partial Covenant members find the prophetic line of authority doubtful given Joseph Smith's history but recognize present-day presidents of the church as honorable leaders.

2. *The Authority of Scripture.* There are four canonized works of scripture in the church. These works guide members in personal everyday behavior. The theology expressed in them is powerful. The authority of scripture comes from two sources. The first is belief in the authenticity of Joseph Smith as an oracle of God. The second is acceptance of western Christian Puritan religious traditions found in eighteenth-to-nineteenth-century America. Mormonism is not a new kind of religion but is a Christian church. Through these four books, Mormonism is married to Christianity, and in particular to frontier Christianity. Through the authority of these works, the church finds its Christian theological existence, but with an imaginative spin. It is the authority of this spin that is problematic for many thinking Mormons. Belief in Joseph Smith's imaginative necromancy, not Christianity, is the problem contained in these works.

3. *Priesthood Organizational Authority.* Two interrelated sources of authority exist here. One is the authority of priesthood, the other is classic organizational authority. The priesthood provides male members a place in the organization and legitimizes their membership. It authorizes active participation in church rituals such as blessings, baptisms, confirmations, and prayer. For me, the authority of priesthood enhances the practice of Christianity in the church. While it is a class system that excludes women and children, and has a hierarchy of authority, its use is not constrained by a member's position of authority in the church and allows for the free practice of Christianity through church rituals. However, the real work of the church is authorized through organization of individual neighborhood wards where the work of the organization is primarily educational with a sprinkling of compassionate service. In the ward the authority of priesthood and organization is married to do this work. All members, male and female, can find a place in the ward organization to practice their religion through this work. Orthodox Mormons accept all of this, but Partial Covenant members are selective of authority that conflicts with personal integrity.

4. *Authority of Mission.* The mission of the church is to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. Arising out of political motives, Joseph Smith imagined a real kingdom, a socialistic theocracy, that would be self-governing and apart from the government of the United States. Shortly before his death, he was appointed king of his kingdom by church leaders. While literal establishment of his kingdom died with him, establishment of a conceptual Kingdom of God remains as his legacy. Orthodox Mormons feel an obligation of membership is to build this kingdom. They believe in an afterlife in heaven where one finds favor with God by helping build his kingdom on earth. The church is the earthly kingdom that somewhat mirrors the Kingdom of God in heaven. A perfect earthly kingdom would have all people, everywhere, faithfully practicing Mormonism. Accordingly, Orthodox Mormons are evangelists. The authority for their behavior arises from a desire for heavenly salvation for themselves and anyone else they can convert. This is a powerful motive for a faithful Mormon and a pious arrogance often emerges when their message is rejected. While evangelical missionaries try to convert the living to the Kingdom of God, temple work, through genealogical research, provides salvation for the dead. In short, Orthodox Mormons bow to the authority of mission through missionary work, everyday evangelicalism, or performing vicarious rituals for the dead such as baptisms in church temples. Partial Covenant Mormons are troubled by the piety of all this and also by the nineteenth-century Masonic influence found in the temple ceremony.

For many Partial Covenant members, Mormonism is mostly an

empty vessel. The authority of the church is based on the Orthodox belief that Joseph Smith was God's living oracle. Partial Covenant members are not so sure. Without belief in Joseph Smith, the authority of the church is reduced for these members, and the practice of their faith is different from that of Orthodox members. They are not evangelists, teachers, preachers, missionaries, or temple workers. They are Christians, and find meaning in their faith by compassionate service and by practicing the Christian rituals found in the church. Being Christians, they accept the authority of the church where it does not conflict with truth. To paraphrase a popular saying in the church, Partial Covenant members are in the church but not always of it. Beyond its Orthodoxy, the church circumscribes a community culture—a shared set of Christian Puritan values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors affecting members and non-members in the community. A strong Christian Puritan ethic resides in Mormon communities. While Partial Covenant members may question most of church authority, they sustain the community culture created by it. Their personal lives mirror the Christian Puritan ethic of the church as well as Orthodox members do. Living a Mormon Christian life is not equal to Orthodoxy. In fact, practicing Mormonism in possession of the truth concerning Joseph Smith enhances the Puritanical Christian ethic that Partial Covenant members seek to live.

In summary, I am a Partial Covenant member of the church, a Christian in possession of a creed than defines my faith in God and my membership in the church.

1. I believe in God the Father, Jesus Christ his son, and in the grace of God working through the Holy Ghost.

2. I believe that practicing the principles of the gospel of Christ can lead to a worthwhile and satisfying life.

3. I believe in an afterlife, where spiritual development continues.

4. I believe that my membership in the church enhances the practice of my Christian faith.

5. I believe in doing the right thing in the circumstances of life and letting that be my legacy.

6. I believe in the right to truth, in the free expression of ideas, and in open dialogue among thinking individuals.

7. I believe in the right to dissent without prejudice.

8. Finally, I believe that family is the core of a Christian life where Christ-like love can be nurtured and understood.