

A Forty-Year View: *Dialogue* and the Sober Lessons of History

Frances Lee Menlove

I well remember the spring and summer of 1965 when Gene England, Wesley Johnson, Paul Salisbury, Joseph Jeppson, and I got together to explore the idea of an unofficial Mormon publication. There were lively conversations culminating in a meeting at the Johnson home on July 11, where we voted to incorporate as a non-profit under the laws of Utah. The History Department at Stanford allowed us to use a portion of Wes's office as our base—no rent, no utilities to pay. *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* was the result. A lot has been written about that early history.¹ However, there are a couple of things I see now that I didn't clearly grasp then. First, I, for one, was a thoroughly pre-correlation Mormon. Second, the Church is not immune from the sober lessons of history.

Let me explain. The Correlation Committee was started in 1961 and “encompasses a philosophy—one might even say, a theology—of Church governance, in which LDS doctrines about priesthood and prophetic authority are synthesized with strategies for organizational efficiency drawn from the world of business. This philosophy sets a premium on strong central authority, uniform procedures, and unified discourse. . . . One of correlation's several objectives is to preserve purity of doctrine in Church discourse, which is to say that correlation acts as a mechanism to police and promote orthodoxy.”²

“Uniform procedures” and “unified discourse” were not part of my Church upbringing. I have two stories to illustrate just how uncorrelated my formative years were.

When I was a young teenager in the 33rd Ward in Salt Lake City,

our Sunday School class decided that we wanted to learn about other religions. And so, every two or three weeks, we would load into cars and attend other Sunday services in Salt Lake City. They knew we were coming, and we had been briefed on good manners, so we filed into the Unitarian or Catholic or Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints services and watched and listened. I remember a leader of the Reorganized Church met with us after the service to answer questions. Well, there was one glitch. The girls didn't have head coverings on the Sunday we visited the Cathedral of the Madeleine, so after some hurried whispers, we were led, as a group, to the front row, making it clear that we were visitors. Our Sunday School teacher that memorable year was the same Joseph Jeppson (aka Rustin Kaufmann) mentioned above.

The second story, which I love to tell, is about my grandfather, another pre-correlation Mormon. He was also a bacteriologist and a dedicated empiricist. Like Henry Eyring he liked to say, "In this Church we don't have to believe anything that isn't true." Granddad went to see the bishop one Sunday and explained to him that he knew Sister Brown had tuberculosis, and besides who knows what other diseases were running around the ward? Even without these known ailments, the practice of passing one large sacrament cup down the row with each person taking a sip was unsanitary in the extreme.

"Brother Greaves," the bishop huffed, "do you really think that God would allow his sacred water, which has been blessed by the priesthood, to cause disease, to make people sick?"

"Bishop," my grandfather replied, "do you really think that God would have given us brains if he didn't expect us to use them?"

The bishop suggested he go home and repent.

My grandfather's reply to that suggestion was "Horse feathers!"

My grandfather helped get the practice changed. My memory is that Elder John A. Widtsoe, another scientist, was his ally. The moral of this story was this: "See, even though Church authorities sometimes act like jackasses, the Church has a way of righting itself." Granddad had a little of J. Golden Kimball's salty style.

Part of the orthodoxy of that time, at least around me, was openness and a deep trust in the vastness of the gospel. As for questions, considering that we live in a universe more immense than any human comprehension and more wondrous than any human imagination, asking questions seemed like a natural, even reverent, thing to do. "Wouldn't it be strange,"

goes the old quip, "for a church which claims to have all the answers not to allow questions?"

With ideas like these, it was easy to stay uncorrelated at Stanford during the 1960s. "Uniform procedures" and "unified discourse" had not yet grown roots.

In February of 1965, Paul Tillich, one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, gave a two-day seminar at Big Sur in California. I attended and was intrigued by his understanding of faith as "ultimate concern." Later that year, when it was my turn to teach the adult Sunday School class in the Stanford Ward (we rotated teaching among about ten of us), I spent two or three Sundays on the theology of Paul Tillich. No problems, no hassles. A resident in psychiatry gave a few lessons on demons, epilepsy, and miracles in the New Testament. Again, no problems, no hassles. Gene England taught an Institute class on Mormon splinter groups. This was the first time I had ever heard of the Strangites or the Godbeites. I took a religion class from Robert McAfee Brown, a prominent theologian teaching at Stanford University, and wrote my term paper on United Order experiments in communalism in early Utah.

Today, in our post-correlation world, officially visiting other churches or exploring the theology of a prominent Protestant in a Mormon Sunday School class would be all but unthinkable. But not then. Hugh B. Brown underlined this theme. He was first counselor in the First Presidency when he told a BYU audience: "One of the most important things in the world is freedom of the mind; from this all other freedoms spring. . . . Preserve, then, the freedom of your mind in education and in religion and be unafraid to express your thoughts and to insist upon your right to examine every proposition. We are not so much concerned with whether your thoughts are orthodox or heterodox as we are that you shall have thoughts."³

In short, I was the product of an open, optimistic, pre-correlation world view. I was taught that the gospel was not fragile, that it didn't need protection from outside ideas, from science, or from its own history. Furthermore, it was the Church that educated me to think this way. And that made all the difference.

The title, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, reflects this open, optimistic worldview. *Thought* as in "you shall have thoughts" and *Dialogue* as in discourse within Mormonism, between Mormonism and other religions, and between Mormonism and the secular world—in sum, between

Mormonism and all human experience. The first issue explained: "*Dialogue* is not a journal of conservative opinion or a journal of liberal opinion, an evangelical journal or a journal of dissent; it is a forum for [the] exchange of research and opinion across a wide spectrum."⁴

As I look back on the last forty years of *Dialogue* issues and forty years of Church history, I discern a lesson. The lesson is this: The Church is not immune from the sober lessons of history. This is a lesson that underscores the consequential role of *Dialogue* for the last forty years, and for the next forty years.

I'll ease into this with some Catholic examples. We all know that the Roman Catholic Church has been buffeted around a bit by its history. In 1610 Galileo published *Sidereus Nuncius* (*The Starry Messenger*), endorsing the Copernican view that the earth moves around the sun and Jupiter is circled by moons. He was assailed with abuse and tried for heresy since these ideas clearly contradict the holy scriptures, and furthermore, it was impious to look through a telescope, and besides the so-called moons are delusions of the devil. In 1999, almost four hundred years later, Pope John Paul II acknowledged that the church had wronged Galileo. In this instance, bending observed truth to the form of revealed truth failed. But it took a bit of time to fess up publicly.

In the nineteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church told women they were not to use anesthesia during childbirth, since that would clearly be against God's will. "In pain you shall bring forth children" (Gen. 3:16). To use anesthesia is to defy God's judgment.

Can you hear the history lesson, the sober history lesson? The Bible hasn't changed. It still describes the earth at the center of the universe, with heaven just above the sky, and it still attests to the inevitability of pain at childbirth. Nevertheless we are all taught about our heliocentric solar system, and it is difficult to find anesthesia on any list of sins. Churches change. Understandings change. New practices and understanding don't automatically indicate apostasy or heresy, even if they contradict scripture. Interpretations change in light of new experiences and new challenges. "Why did God give us brains if He didn't expect us to use them?" Why was the Holy Spirit promised to all? Why do we need continuous revelation if answers are set in concrete?

Timeless truths and historical accidents have a way of getting mixed up. Every group participates in the life and history of the culture in which it finds itself. Every church must employ contemporary images, view-

points, and language forms in order to be understood. When these viewpoints and assumptions become fused with the gospel message, the results can be grotesque. Remember that slavery was accepted as a fact of life in both the Christian and Hebrew scriptures.

Now some Mormon examples. Brigham Young said about slavery, "We consider it of Divine institution, and not to be abolished until the curse pronounced on Ham shall have been removed from his descendants."⁵

In 1965 Apostle Ezra Taft Benson announced in general conference that Communists were using the civil rights movement to eventually take over the country. "When are we going to wake up?"⁶ In the spring of 1966, a national committee aligned with the John Birch Society announced its intention of nominating Benson as its presidential candidate with Strom Thurman, a strident segregationist vehemently opposed to the civil rights acts and voting rights acts, as his running mate. In February of 1967 George Wallace, the segregationist governor of Alabama, formally wrote to President McKay asking his "permission and blessings" for a "leave of absence" for Benson to be his vice-presidential running mate in his third-party candidacy. Permission was denied.⁷ The widespread paranoia and political passion of the 1950s and 1960s gradually waned; and when Benson became Church president in 1985, this ardent affair with the far right seemed almost irrelevant.⁸

President Spencer W. Kimball, speaking at October 1960 general conference, endorsed the idea that Indians would become white when they took up Mormonism: "The day of the Lamanites is nigh. For years they have been growing delightful, and they are now becoming white and delightful, as they were promised. In this picture of the twenty Lamanite missionaries, fifteen of the twenty were as light as Anglos. . . . The children in the home placement program in Utah are often lighter than their brothers and sisters in the hogans on the reservation. . . . These young members of the Church are changing to whiteness and to delight-someness."⁹

The beginning of the recovery from this troubling history began with the announcement on June 9, 1978, that the priesthood ordination was now available for worthy black men.¹⁰ Recovery is still an ongoing issue, but it is progressing. There was rejoicing at the announcement and at the underlying message—the message that the Church could change, that

the Church had not succumbed to one of the greatest temptations of all, the temptation of certitude.

We wince and squirm at the stories of Galileo and no anesthesia, at Native Americans becoming more “white and delightsome,” and at Ezra Taft Benson as the running mate of George Wallace. Just as the Catholic Church was on the wrong side of history with Galileo, so were the Mormons with respect to racism and civil rights. Sometimes Mormons seem to solve the problem of change by simply denying it, a kind of faith-based ignorance. The subordination of truth to power doesn’t work any better for General Authorities than it does for Catholic popes.

Times change. Understandings change. However, a little historical empathy is in order. Cultural blindness becomes obvious with hindsight, but it is more difficult to recognize in the present, when we’re immersed in our own time and culture. Have no doubt. In forty or a hundred years, our descendants will wince and marvel at the assumptions we now live by. Neither the Church, nor any one of us, is exempt from the sober lessons of history. Even Jesus had to learn this. Remember early in his ministry, he was so convinced that his message was only for the Jews that he told the Canaanite woman whose daughter was tormented by a demon that he was “sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” and furthermore, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (Matt. 15:21-28, New RSV). By the end of his ministry, he sent the disciples out to bring the good news to all people.

That is the lesson. Churches change. Understandings change. The blessing, which is the corollary to this lesson, is that the Church at its core understands this. The foundational principle undergirding the need for continuing revelation is that times change and that what is needed changes.

Is the Church on the wrong side of history concerning homosexuals? In 1981 President Kimball wrote: “The unholy transgression of homosexuality is either rapidly growing or tolerance is giving it wider publicity. . . . The Lord condemns and forbids this practice. . . . ‘God made me that way,’ some say, as they rationalize and excuse themselves. . . . ‘I can’t help it,’ they add. This is blasphemy. Is man not made in the image of God, and does he think God to be ‘that way?’”¹¹ And then in softer terms: “After consideration of the evil aspects, the ugliness and prevalence of the evil of homosexuality, the glorious thing to remember is that it is curable and forgivable.”¹²

Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong would say, "Yes," the Mormon Church is on the wrong side of history concerning homosexuality:

What the heretic was in the Middle Ages, the black in the days of slavery and segregation, and the Jew in Nazi Germany, the homosexual has become in the religious hysteria of our day. . . . Ten years from now this phase of our religious history will surely be over. The contemporary scientific and medical data that suggests [sic] that homosexuality is a perfectly normal but minority aspect of humanity, that it is a given and not a chosen aspect of life, will have challenged these prejudices so deeply as to make them seem not only quaint but ignorant.¹³

I agree with Bishop Spong. The Church is on the wrong side of history on this issue. I also believe that God has not mandated a males-only priesthood. And, if I had to guess what will dismay our descendants, it will be our failure to take seriously the sacred obligation of environmental stewardship and the resultant irreversible environmental destruction.

Preach My Gospel, the new missionary guide, represents all human history from Adam to Joseph Smith as a cycle of apostasies and restorations. This sounds like a cousin to Martin Luther's famous dictum *Semper Reformanda* ("always reforming"). The Church is always reforming. The Reverend William Sloan Coffin puts it another way: "It is bad religion to deify doctrines and creeds. While indispensable to religious life, doctrines and creeds are only as signposts. Love alone is the hitching post. . . . Moreover, doctrines can divide while compassion can only unite. In other words, [we] have both to recover tradition and to recover *from* it!"¹⁴

Hugh B. Brown on February 26, 1962, reinforced this idea: "This Church is not committed to any formal, inflexible creed, but its members are taught to believe in and live by the revelations of the past and the present and thus prepare themselves for revelations yet to come. Our concepts and even our faith must be held subject to new light."¹⁵ Dallin H. Oaks, as president of BYU, further stated: "Rigorous standards in any intellectual discipline are not at odds with faith and devotion unless we make it [sic] so by a dogmatic certitude."¹⁶

Thankfully, the Church has escaped the inerrancy trap that equates our tiny understanding of truth with the truth of God. Certitude is built on the assumption that the truth of God has been captured for all time. This is the place where destructive religious arrogance and the sin of idolatry take root. This is the foundation of the inquisitor. It is the "My truth is the only truth" mentality that fuels witch trials and suicide bombers.

The world is awash in lethal religious certitude. Injustice is masked as God's will. God is shrunk to fit the preconceptions of the moment, and the transitory is made sacred. In our country we even have a tendency to equate God's interests with the interests of the United States. "The greatest threat to civility, and ultimately civilization," commented columnist George Will, "is an excess of certitude."¹⁷

The temptation of certitude, I believe, is as old as the temptation of Jesus by the devil. It is the temptation of the human need for power and control. Understanding this grave human temptation is the insight behind Luther's insisting on *Semper Reformanda*, on Reverend Coffin's reminding us that we are always both recovering our traditions and recovering from them, and Hugh B. Brown's insistence on openness and thoughtfulness. And of course there is Joseph Smith's often quoted statement in defense of freedom of thought and belief: "It looks too much like the Methodists, and not like the Latter-day Saints. Methodists have a creed which a man must believe or be asked out of their church. I want the liberty of thinking and believing as I please. It feels so good not to be trameled."¹⁸

The temptation of certitude is real. The need to both recover and be recovering from the faith tradition is real. Or, as my grandfather would say, the Church must continually find ways to "right itself." This we know: The Church has changed its mind many times and will do so again. Jesus showed us the way.

And all of this brings us back to *Dialogue*. In my observation, *Dialogue* has been, over the last forty years, a great gift to the Church. The Church is indebted to *Dialogue*. *Dialogue* has helped the Church avoid the sin of self-idolization, the temptation of certitude. How? I'll let Martin Marty, distinguished professor of Christian history explain it. Interviewed by Peggy Fletcher Stack for *Sunstone*, Professor Marty said:

First no people, agency, institution, nation, or cultural entity can resist idolatry, self-idolization, unless there is pressure and motive to engage in constant self-examination. I can't point to an institution in world history that renews itself unless there is a built-in mechanism for calling things into question.

Second, I don't think that usually occurs because of the pressures from without. In fact, outside pressure tends to create an inbred defensiveness and, if anything, one is less free to break ranks while the group is under attack. So any mechanism for preventing self-idolization has to be from within, from those who share the presuppositions of the larger group. For

example, the Hebrew prophets sometimes look like dissident agitators for the minority party out of power. At their best they take the covenant that the community is not living in the light of the covenant. My hunch is that the kind of dissidents who might serve for [the] revitalization of Mormonism would be those who know the tradition, selectively take it seriously, and then throw it up in the face of the present.¹⁹

In short, because the Church is not immune from the sober lessons of history, *Dialogue* and a variety of other unofficial publications are indispensable to the Church's sacred mission. The Holy Spirit, which we know blows where she will, may well be speaking through the uncorrelated voices that are not bound by "uniform procedures" and "unified discourse," voices that help the Church resist self-idolization, help resist the temptation of certitude and thus foster renewal. Since they are unofficial, they can do for the Church what the Church cannot do for itself—namely, give nuanced voice to a multitude of ideas and issues at the intersection of Mormonism and all of human experience.

Dialogue has now been in existence for 23 percent of the Church's entire history. Forty years of *Dialogue* thriving. Forty years of struggling. Forty years of tiny miracles. The *Dialogue* story is now part of the ongoing Mormon story. I imagine Gene England smiling down.

As *Dialogue* walks into the future, I offer an ancient prayer and a final plea. First the prayer:

From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth,
From the laziness that is content with half-truths,
From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth,
O God of Truth, deliver us.

And the plea: *Dialogue*, don't lose your nerve!

Notes

1. Devery S. Anderson "A History of Dialogue," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 32 (Summer 1999): 15–66.

2. John Charles Duffy, "The New Missionary Discussions and the Future of Correlation," *Sunstone*, No. 138 (September 2005): 28–29.

3. Hugh B. Brown, "An Eternal Quest—Freedom of the Mind," address to the BYU student body May 13, 1969, <http://www.unicomm.byu.edu> (accessed January 27, 2006).

4. "Editor's Preface," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1966): 2.
5. "Two Hours with Brigham Young, Salt Lake City Utah," July 13, 1859, interview reprinted in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, August 15, 1993, [onlineresources/sermons](#) (accessed January 15, 2006).
6. Quoted in D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 81.
7. *Ibid.*, 93-99.
8. *Ibid.*, 111.
9. Spencer W. Kimball, *Improvement Era*, December 1960, 922-23.
10. Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy*, 870.
11. Spencer W. Kimball, *President Kimball Speaks Out* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 10-12.
12. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (1969; Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997 printing), 82.
13. John Shelby Spong, *Question and Answer with John Shelby Spong* (weekly newsletter), December 7, 2005, 5.
14. William Sloan Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 9.
15. Hugh B. Brown, *Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1963), 9.
16. Both quoted in Gary James Bergera and Ronald Priddis, *Brigham Young University: A House of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1985), 34.
17. George Will, "Commencement Address," quoted in *Context*, August 2005, Part B, 3.
18. Alma P. Burton, comp. and ed., *Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1968), 106-7.
19. Peggy Fletcher Stack, "It Finally All Depends on God: A Conversation with Martin Marty," *Sunstone* 11, no. 2 (March 1987): 46-48.