

REIMAGINING THE RESTORATION: WHY LIBERALISM IS THE ULTIMATE FLOWERING OF MORMONISM

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Eugene England Memorial Lecture
Utah Valley University, March 6, 2015

*Not "Revelation" 'tis that waits,
But our unfurnished eyes.
—Emily Dickinson¹*

Tonight I want to challenge some of the conventional axioms of Mormon religion and culture and to propose a more progressive Mormonism. Let me begin, however, with a tribute to my dear friend Eugene England. In the introduction to the *festschrift* I edited in his honor titled *Proving Contraries* (which is an apt summary of Gene's life), I wrote, "Outside of some in the general Church leadership, perhaps no Latter-day Saint of our generation enjoyed such wide and deep affection and respect as Gene did."² I imagine that when some scholar writes the history of modern Mormonism Gene will be seen as one of our most enlightened and influential teacher/scholars. My hope is that what I have to say tonight illuminates some of the ideas that animated his discipleship and exemplifies some of the virtues that governed his life. It has been an enormous loss these past

1. Letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1862–63, *Letters of Emily Dickinson* edited by Mabel Loomis Todd (New York: Gosset and Dunlap, 1962), 260.

2. Robert A. Rees, ed., *Proving Contraries: A Collection of Writings in Honor of Eugene England* (Signature Books: Salt Lake City, 2005), xiv.

fourteen years to have been deprived of his intellect and spirit. Gene had a good heart. Like most liberals, it was a little to the left.

Let me also say something at the beginning about my use of the word “liberal.” It is, unfortunately, a word that has lost much of its original meaning and is most often used in a pejorative sense—even as an expletive—sometimes spit out as if it were viperous. A recent article published in a national LDS magazine titled “Are You a Liberal Mormon?” stereotypes liberals and suggests that they aren’t really very faithful and are “playing right into Satan’s hands.”³ Etymologically, however, the word has positive meanings. “Liberal,” first used in the Middle Ages, derived from the Old French *libéral*, which in turn was derived from the Latin *liberalis*, and meant “noble, gracious, munificent, generous, selfless.” During the English enlightenment, *liberal* also came to mean tolerant and free from prejudice. Unfortunately, for many on the political and religious right, “liberal” has none of these positive, salutatory connotations today. I hope what I say tonight might be instrumental in shifting some perceptions about what it means to be liberal within a Mormon context.

By “liberal” I also intend the meaning in Joseph Smith’s statement about God: “Our heavenly Father is more liberal in His views, and boundless in His mercies and blessings, than we are ready to believe or receive.”⁴ That the prophet intended the positive qualities I have just listed is evident by something else he says: “The nearer we get to our heavenly Father, the more we are disposed to look with compassion on perishing souls; we feel that we want to take them upon our shoulders, and cast their sins behind our backs.”⁵ The Prophet’s usage of “liberal” is in keep-

3. Joni Hilton, “Are You a Liberal Mormon?” Oct. 31, 2013; the original has been taken down from the *Meridian* website but is available at <https://archive.org/details/MeridianMagazineAreYouALiberalMormonMeridianMagazineLDSMormonAndLatterDaySaintNewsAndViews>.

4. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, edited by Joseph Fielding Smith (1938; repr., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 257.

5. *Ibid.*, 240–41.

ing with his dictionary, Webster's 1828, which defines "liberal" as "Of a free heart; free to give or bestow; not closed or contracted; munificent; bountiful; generous; giving largely."⁶ It is those qualities I have in mind when I say that liberalism is the ultimate flowering of Mormonism.

From everything we know of Jesus' ministry, we can conclude that that he too "is more liberal in His views, and boundless in His mercies and blessings, than we are ready to believe or receive." Examples of the Savior's liberality are found on every page of the gospels, in his disciples' words, and in the Book of Mormon. Liberality is often the theme of Latter-day prophets. The following from President Stephen L. Richards is one example among many one might cite: "When the gospel was restored in this age all the goodness and mercy of Christ was restored. . . . The essence of the . . . whole restored gospel was and is election without coercion, persuasion not compulsion, no unrighteous dominion, only patience, long-suffering, meekness, kindness and love unfeigned."⁷

My remarks today are not intended to diminish the very substantial importance of many of the Church's more conservative principles and values. In a world of often capricious change, the Church's stability is to be admired; in a world of increasing moral relativism, the Church's doctrinal consistency can be seen as a virtue; in a world of wanton disregard for standards of modesty, sexual morality, and decency, the Church's clear and certain standards offer safety and refuge; and in a world in which the family is under siege by many forces, the Church's teachings on this core institution are a great blessing to members as well as to society in general. My own life has been immensely blessed by these conservative virtues.

6. *Webster's Dictionary 1828—Online Edition*, available at <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Home?word=Liberal>.

7. Stephen L. Richards, "Truth is Neither Black nor White." Although the address was delivered in the April 1932 General Conference, it did not appear in the printed version of the proceedings. As quoted in "An Olive Leaf," *Sunstone* (Dec. 2011): 80. The full text of the address was published in the May–June 1979 issue of *Sunstone*.

As with anything, liberalism can be taken to extremes. As Christian Wiman observes, “Liberal churches that go months without mentioning the name of Jesus, much less the dying Christ, have no more spiritual purpose or significance than a local union hall.”⁸ But an excess of liberalism is not a problem facing the Mormon Church or Mormon culture at present. Were there a greater balance between liberalism and conservatism in the contemporary Church, one could argue for a sensible synthesis between the two, but the century-long imbalance toward conservatism suggests that a course correction in the direction of liberalism would be healthy for the Church because it would both help retain our more liberal minded saints and, in my estimation, attract more liberal-minded truth seekers. When Utah was vying for statehood at the end of the nineteenth century, the First Presidency argued that “the more evenly balanced the parties become the safer it will be for us [Mormons] in the security of our liberties . . . and the more evenly balanced the parties our influence for good will be far greater than it possibly could be were either party overwhelmingly in the majority”⁹ (as it is in Utah and the Intermountain Region at present).

Let me also say a word about imagination. The Oxford English Dictionary (1971) defines “imagination” as “the creative faculty of the mind in its highest aspect; the power of framing new and striking . . . conceptions.” Imagination reveals not what is, but what is possible. Genesis suggests that before God (or in Mormon cosmology *the Gods*) created anything, they first imagined it; Christ had the most vibrant and fertile imagination in history. As I read about his life and teachings in the gospels, I picture a great and

8. Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 138.

9. First Presidency to Joseph W. Young, 29 May 1891, archives, Historical Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, as quoted in Eugene England, “Why Mormons Should Become Democrats: Reflections on Partisan Politics,” in *Making Peace* (Signature Books: Salt Lake City, 1995), 86.

fecund imagination. It isn't just the inventive language, the subtle irony and humor and the fresh metaphors and narratives that flowed from his mind and heart that make Jesus of Nazareth such a great imaginer, but, especially, his capacity to imagine each of us caught in the snares of sin, lost in temptation's tangled web, each uniquely in need of grace, mercy, and love. Beyond this was his god-like capacity to imagine each of us as glorified beings, each of our futures a reflection of his present.

I am aware of the negative ways in which "imagination" is sometimes used in scripture. It is often qualified with such words as "vain" "evil" and "foolish." Imagination can and sometimes does run in those directions, just as with all human capabilities. What I have in mind is more in keeping with the promise made to William Law in the Doctrine and Covenants: "He shall mount up in the imagination of his thoughts as upon Eagle wings" (124:9). God reveals to prophets (and others) what He imagines is possible, what He wants them and us to imagine and then do. Such is reflected in the following translation of Hosea 12:11 where God says, "In the hands of the prophets shall I imagine."¹⁰ One can argue that when God invites us to "reason together" with him he is also inviting us to imagine with him.

The astonishing revelations that began when Joseph Smith went into the woods to pray came about because he imagined some kind of an answer, but he could not possibly have imagined the dramatic, even startling way it occurred. That vision expanded his imagination exponentially and emboldened him to seek for other revelations. What flowed from those seminal revelations was the beginning of what Mormons call the Restoration. According to Harold Bloom, Smith "was an authentic religious genius and surpassed all Americans, before or since, in the possession and expression of the religion-making imagination. . . .

10. Rachael Gordon, "The Power of Imagination: A Kabbalistic Understanding," *Chabad.org* (blog) http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1449301/jewish/The-Power-of-Imagination.htm.

There had to be an immense power of the myth-making imagination at work to sustain so astonishing an innovation” as the Restoration.¹¹

The promises of that restoration are found in Smith’s personal history and in the new scriptures he introduced to the world. According to Kathleen Flake, “Smith’s narrative history of human and divine interaction was ultimately oriented *to a future time that served as a basis for acting in the present*. It provided a world of meaning by which his believing readers understood themselves existentially, including their future and not merely their past” (emphasis added). This is precisely what I am proposing—that we orient ourselves to a reimagined future by acting in the present. Flake adds, “Most fundamentally, Smith’s writings give his believing readers a different sense of what was and what will be. . . .”¹² That promised future is the subject of my remarks tonight.

According to Bloom, Smith did not live to see the full flowering of his visionary imagination. What is more, Bloom does not believe Smith’s modern and contemporary followers have completely fulfilled or continued the Prophet’s religion-making imagination. No less an authority than Elder B.H. Roberts came to the same conclusion at the end of the nineteenth century. Roberts distinguished between what he calls “disciples pure and simple— . . . whose whole intellectual life . . . consists of their partisanship . . . and mere repetition” of religious formulas and those disciples who “bring to the new teaching, from the first, their own personal contribution . . . [and] help lead the thought that they accept to a truer expression. They force it beyond its earlier and cruder stages of development.”¹³ Note his use of the word “force,” which in this context

11. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 91–92.

12. Kathleen Flake, “Translating Time: The Nature and Function of Joseph Smith’s Narrative Canon,” *Journal of Religion* 87, no. 4 (Oct. 2007): 524–25; https://my.vanderbilt.edu/kathleenflake/files/2012/01/JR-flake_translating_time.pdf

13. B.H. Roberts, *The Improvement Era* 9 (1906), 712–13.

I think Roberts intended “[to] bring about by unusual effort.”¹⁴ Roberts added, and this is the part of his essay most relevant to re-imagining the Restoration, that Mormonism “calls for thoughtful disciples who will not be content with merely repeating some of its truths, but will develop its truths; and enlarge . . . [Mormonism] by that development.” Then he states this astonishing idea: “Not half—not one-hundredth part—not a thousandth part of that which Joseph Smith revealed to the Church has yet been unfolded, *either to the Church or to the world*” (emphasis added). Pause a minute to consider the profound implications of such a statement.

Roberts continues, “The work of the expounder has scarcely begun. The Prophet planted by teaching the germ-truths of the great dispensation of the fullness of times. The watering and the weeding [are] going on, and God is giving the increase, *and will give it more abundantly in the future as more intelligent [and, one might add, more imaginative] discipleship shall obtain*” (emphasis added). Roberts added, God “will give it more abundantly in the future.”¹⁵ To some extent our present is a partial fulfillment of that “more abundant future,” but we are also charged with extending the Prophet’s vision of the Restoration into an even grander, more abundant future.

What Roberts emphasizes is that Mormonism’s future requires not a passive waiting for God to reveal those things yet to be revealed, but an active, energetic, imaginative seeking and working for their unfolding. He concludes, “The disciples of ‘Mormonism’ [which includes contemporary Mormons], growing discontented with the *necessarily primitive methods* which have hitherto prevailed in sustaining the doctrine, will yet take *profounder* and *broader* views of the great doctrines committed to the Church; and, departing from mere repetition, will cast them in new formulas; cooperating in the works of the Spirit, until they help to

14. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=force>.

15. Roberts, 713.

give to the truths received a more forceful expression and carry it beyond the earlier and cruder stages of its development” (emphasis added).¹⁶

Roberts’ call for “profounder and broader views” and “casting . . . new formulas” is as clear and concise an invitation to imaginative discipleship as I can conceive. Today, we have the choice to transform some of those “primitive methods” into more progressive ones. One of Mormonism’s unique doctrines is that revelation is both continuous and scattered—that it is democratically available—meaning that all have the opportunity, even the responsibility, to receive it, although, clearly, some do not realize this or act upon this principle.

Let me shift my attention to some specifics. I am a scholar and poet, not a prophet, and so what I suggest in the following is a result of my imaginative projections, the longings of my heart and the deep yearnings of my soul for a more progressive Mormonism. In the brief time I have tonight, I can only cover some of those areas I consider of the greatest importance to a reimagined Mormonism. These include: our stewardship over the natural world; the feminine goddess; the status of women; the state of those whom Jesus classifies as “the least of these”; war and peace; a more Christ-centered church; a more progressive political and social Mormonism; the importance of a liberal education; and the place of love as the essential force in making all of this a reality.

Earth Stewardship

Our imaginations should allow us to project two possible scenarios for the earth’s fate—and therefore our own fate—one is to continue on our present destructive course and the other is to act with great urgency to reverse the degradation we have set in motion—if it isn’t already too late. The latest news from climate scientists reveals glacial melting to be accelerating in both the Arctic and in Antarctica. According to *The Washington Post*, “We may have irreversibly destabilized the great ice sheet[s] of West [and

16. Ibid.

East] Antarctica” which together would cause sea levels to rise more than twenty feet.¹⁷ Imagine New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Bangkok, Calcutta, Amsterdam and many other great cities and rural areas under water! What we may have unleashed is a slow-motion flood of biblical proportions.

Some scientists predict that humans will become the sixth extinction in world history.¹⁸ No responsible Christian contends that Christ will rescue us from the consequences of our own folly. In fact, I think Christ intends for us to read Matthew 25:40, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me,” not just in terms of the past and present, but also the future. In this sense, he asks us to imagine those who *will* suffer from famine, pestilence and disease because of our inaction—to imagine them as if they were Christ himself. Can we imagine being confronted over our indifference or inaction by a great-granddaughter who is starving and has no water or by a great-grandson who is being swept away in a flood or drowned by rising seas—or by Jesus who asks why we didn’t imagine him in their place? Had the people of Noah’s time been able to see their world swept violently away by water, had the Jaredites seen the reduction of their civilization to two survivors caught in an insane fight to the death, or had the ancient Nephites foreseen the fire and destruction that enveloped their nation prior to Christ’s visit, perhaps they would have repented and prevented their peoples’ destruction. The question is whether we will act more wisely.

Global warming’s effects were all too visible to a group of us from the Liahona Children’s Foundation who visited the island nation of Kiribati at the end December 2014. Kiribati, located in the middle of

17. Chris Mooney, “The Melting of Antarctica Was Really, really Bad. It Just Got Worse,” *The Washington Post*, Mar. 16, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2015/03/16/the-melting-of-antarctica-was-already-really-bad-it-just-got-worse/>.

18. Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014). See also, Thom Hartmann, *The Last Hours of Humanity: Warming the World to Extinction* (Cardiff, Calif.: Waterfront Digital Press, 2013).

the Pacific, is one of the world's poorest nations; it also happens to have a significant LDS population—some seventeen percent of the island's inhabitants are Mormon. Scientists predict that Kiribati will be the first nation to lose all of its landmass to rising seas. Everyone there will have to relocate to other nations in the next several decades. This is only one place imperiled by our folly.

In my imagination, the Mormon Church will establish Earth Stewardship as its fifth mission, realizing that fulfilling the other four major missions—perfecting the saints, preaching the gospel, redeeming the dead, and caring for the poor and needy—depends on a healed and whole planet. That is, without clean air and water, without sustainable natural resources, without the delicate balance in the atmospheric, oceanic, and biological spheres, the only growth area for the Church of the future will be work for the dead!

I believe that saving the earth is *the* moral imperative of our own and future generations. Arthur Zajonc says, “Morality concerns the nature and quality of our relationship with other people and, by extension, to the world of which we are a part.”¹⁹ I imagine the Mormon Church becoming known worldwide as a leader in a movement to redeem the living, including the living planet, for the generations who will inhabit it for the rest of this century and beyond. We need to revise the tenth Article of Faith from its present passive voice, “The earth will be renewed . . .” to “*We* will renew the earth so it can receive its paradisiacal glory.”

A Mother Here: Reimagining the Divine Mother

Our neglect of mother earth is, perhaps, tied to our neglecting the nurturing influence of our Mother in Heaven. Almost all religions began with a female deity. Over the course of Judeo-Christian history, that deity has all but disappeared. One of the most radical and revolutionary yet immensely

19. “Mind and Morality: A Dialogue with Arthur Zajonc and Michael McCullough,” *On Being with Krista Tippett*, Mar. 12, 2015, <http://onbeing.org/programs/arthur-zajonc-michael-mccullough-mind-and-morality-a-dialogue/>.

appealing and consoling doctrines revealed to Joseph Smith is that we have both a Father *and* a Mother in heaven, and, further, as a foreshadowing of what God wishes as a model for our marital relationships, they are equal in knowledge, power, and glory. Calling her “this Mother of all creation, this mistress of light and space,” I once wrote, “All that we know of her from modern revelation, all of the images we find of her in other traditions, all the ways in which our imaginations reach out to her, make the idea of heaven more inviting.”²⁰ But it is also true that her absence has made human history more tragic. Imagine how different the world would be if over the centuries—or even since the Restoration—we had had the wisdom of her voice, the deep and tender whisperings of her heart.

What Enoch revealed about the nature of God the Father is by extension also true of the Mother: she too weeps over the bent and broken world, is heavy with lamentation over her lost and wandering children. Like the Father, her heart is broken, not only by our transgression but by our pride and indifference and by the way we treat her children, especially her daughters. In reimagining the Restoration, we can bring her to life not only for ourselves but also for the entire world, for, consciously or not, the world yearns for the divine mother. The poet Alicia Ostriker says, “What I really believe is that we can all be midwives of the Divine Female; can help her be born into the world again. . . . We also have to imagine her.”²¹

O Daughters of Zion: Imagining the Whole Mormon Woman

Speaking of her daughters, I believe one of our most important tasks in reimagining the Restoration is to picture a Church and a world in which all women, the daughters of Zion and all their sisters throughout the world, truly feel equally valued—not solely for their roles as wives and mothers, but as fully-fledged children of God, joint heirs of not only

20. Robert A. Rees, “Our Mother in Heaven,” *Sunstone*, Apr. 1991, 50.

21. “God the Mother,” in *A God in the House: Poets Talk about Faith* edited by Ilya Kaminsky and Katherine Towler (North Adams, Mass.: Tupelo Press, 2012), 143–44.

some far other-worldly kingdom, but of the one here in which we live and move and have our being. For all of our rhetoric to the contrary, the reality is that many women do not feel equally important, valued, or loved, either in the Church or in the world, essentially because they are not. Consider the following grave statistics:

Currently, an estimated 160 million females are “missing” worldwide due to infanticide and femicide. “This is the equivalent of an entire generation of girls being wiped from the face of the earth.”²²

Rape continues to be widespread, and is an egregious form of violence against girls and women. In many countries rape is endemic. According to the World Health Organization (2013), “more than a third of all women are victims of physical or sexual violence.” That’s over one billion women—or more than three times the entire population of the United States.²³

Add to this list honor killings, genital cutting, child marriages, dowry deaths, and other forms of abuse and violence, and one can only conclude that as far as women and girls are concerned, we live in a brutal, barbarous, uncivilized world.

Neither the Church nor individual Mormons can hope to solve all of these problems, but we could all imagine and work for a world in which the girls and women within our families, congregations, and communities are accorded full respect, dignity, and equality. In 1978 women were allowed to pray in sacrament meetings; in 1985 they were allowed to speak in general conference; and in 2013 they were allowed to pray in general conference. Wow! Who knows what other amazing advancements await Mormon women in the future! Our imaginations

22. Jimmy Carter, *A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence, and Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 116.

23. Roni Caryn Rabin, “Nearly 1 in 5 Women in U.S. Survey Say They Have Been Sexually Assaulted,” *The New York Times*, Dec. 14, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/15/health/nearly-1-in-5-women-in-us-survey-report-sexual-assault.html?_r=0.

will fail us if we don't consider the possibility that many of "the great and important things pertaining to the kingdom of God" (D&C 97:14) we are encouraged to seek and work for concern women—their full citizenship in the Church and their equal humanity in all spheres. It is, I believe, what our Mother in Heaven wants. It is what she imagines us imagining.

The Least of These: Poor Wayfaring Men and Women

Women's status is not all that needs to be re-imagined. We must also re-imagine the place of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, as well as those considered inferior because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, economic, or social status or any other kind of "otherness" that prevents us from seeing them as fully human and equal citizens of society and of Christ's kingdom. I believe that Jesus' statement, "The poor you have always with you" (Matthew 26:11) is a condemnation rather than a statement of inevitability, especially knowing that the City of Zion had no poor among them. As a religious community, we Latter-day Saints are known for our generosity. In fact, because we are tithe payers, our per capita charitable giving is larger than any other religious group in the United States, and yet many of us live far beyond our needs while many of our brothers and sisters live in extreme, even grinding poverty, poverty that could be significantly ameliorated by even modest additional giving on our part.

In an article titled, "Feed My Lambs," I argued that Jesus' question to Peter is also directed at us, "Lovest thou me more than these [meaning materials things]?" I wrote:

To those of us living in the modern, developed-world church, I think Jesus is saying . . . , "I have blessed you with enormous wealth. You live in large houses more spacious than you need and often some of your bedrooms lie empty; you drive expensive cars and pass by the poor on roads and byways. You eat three meals (or more) a day and your larders and pantries are fully stocked. . . . You have more of everything than

you actually need and have more luxuries than any previous generation in history. What do you intend to do with all of these things? Do you love me enough to follow me and give generously to the poor?”²⁴

During the Great Depression President Heber J. Grant *said that he would go so far as to “close the seminaries, shut down missionary work for a period of time, or even close the temples,” rather than “let the people go hungry.”*²⁵ More recently, Bishop David Burton underscored this by saying, “No matter how many temples we build, no matter how large our membership grows, no matter how positively we are perceived in the eyes of the world—should we fail in this great core commandment [and] . . . turn our hearts from those who suffer and mourn, we are under condemnation and cannot please the Lord.”²⁶

Jesus was the Lord of everyone, but particularly of the poor. He cannot be pleased with the enormous gap between the rich and the poor in this generation where the top one percent possess seventy-five percent of the nation’s wealth and also earn twenty-five percent of the annual income.²⁷ Just as startling, the top one percent own nearly four times as much as the bottom eighty percent—a startling statistic. The consequence is that even in this, the richest nation in history, there is grinding poverty, hunger, despair, and unnecessary death—and a rapidly disappearing middle class.

In light of such suffering and need, it is obscene to speak disparagingly about the redistribution of wealth or to try and deny health care to those who cannot afford it. According to researchers at the Harvard

24. Robert Rees, “‘Feed My Lambs’: Jesus’ Last Great Teaching,” *Meridian Magazine*, Dec. 15, 2014, <http://ldsmag.com/feed-my-lambs-jesus-last-great-teaching/>.

25. As quoted by H. David Burton, “The Sanctifying Work of Welfare,” April 2011, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2011/04/the-sanctifying-work-of-welfare?lang=eng>.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Jill Lepore, “Richer and Poorer: Accounting for Inequality,” *New Yorker* Mar. 16, 2015, 26.

Medical School, “45,000 people die in the United States annually because they lack health insurance.”²⁸ That’s one person every twelve minutes. There is something morally wrong about a nation that has a military budget greater than the next eight nations combined and yet does not provide basic health care for all its citizens.

I don’t wish to preach a Jeremiad, but I cannot see anything but disaster coming from an economic system so severely imbalanced in favor of the rich. As Hugh Nibley warned, “The calamitous effect of wealth, according to the Book of Mormon, is the inequality it begets.”²⁹ Such inequality has a negative impact on the Church itself. As we read in Third Nephi, because of “a great inequality in all the land . . . the church began to be broken up” (3 Nephi 6:14). Some economists predict that unless it becomes less severe, this level of inequality could lead to significant political and social unrest. I remember a visit Gene England and I made to see Elder Hugh B. Brown when he was in the hospital. Referring to the Civil Rights Movement, Elder Brown said to us, “remember, my young friends, at the heart of every revolution there is an important truth.”

As with the poor, so is it with others whom we consider least. I am haunted by a story Elder Marion D. Hanks told me about a black man he had converted to the Church while serving as a young missionary in Ohio. Against Elder Hanks’ advice, this man and his family moved to Utah, where they were subject to significant racist treatment by their fellow Latter-day Saints. Wanting the full blessings of the gospel and believing skin color was a result of a preexistent transgression, this good brother said to Elder Hanks, “I would strip every inch of black skin from my body if I could hold the priesthood.” Similar sentiments have been spoken by countless gay, lesbian, and transgender Latter-day Saints who, having been taught

28. Susan Heavey, “Study links 45,000 U.S. Deaths to Lack of Insurance,” *Reuters*, Sept. 17, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/09/17/us-usa-healthcare-deaths-idUSTRE58G6W520090917>.

29. Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah: The Book of Mormon in the Modern World* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 394.

that their sexual orientation or gender identity was their own fault, made valiant efforts to rid themselves of what they were told was a detestable crime against nature. In despair, many such Latter-day Saints have taken their lives. Jesus teaches us that we collectively bear responsibility for such suffering and death. Likewise, as Francisco Goldman says, “The great metaphor at the heart of the Gospel According to Saint Matthew is that those who suffer and those who show love for those who suffer are joined through suffering and grace to Jesus Christ.”³⁰

In the future church I imagine, I see gay and lesbian couples and their children sitting comfortably in our congregations. I see transgender saints who are not ridiculed. I see people of all colors, nations, backgrounds, and personalities sitting peacefully together. What I see reminds me of the final scene in the movie *Places in the Heart* as described by Dan Wotherspoon: This “depression era film in which Sally Field portrays a widow struggling to keep her land and succeeding through the aid of an unlikely group of friends, family and strangers, ends with a scene in church in which the bread and wine are passed from congregant to congregant (including some not physically present in the meeting but somehow shown as being so, such as her deceased husband and the young black boy who killed him and who was then lynched by town members). As they partake of the emblems of Christ’s sacrifice, we see them reconciling with each other as they softly speak the words, ‘peace of God’ before drinking the wine.”³¹

“Study War No More”: Blessed are the Peacemakers

Perhaps nothing will require a greater re-imagining than for us to imagine a Mormon culture that is not as war-like as is our present one. In 1976

30. Francisco Goldman, “Introduction,” *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pocket Canon Bible (New York: Grove Press, 1999), xv.

31. Daniel Wotherspoon, “All Truth is Encompassed in One Grand Whole,” manuscript in my possession. The essay will appear in the second volume of *Why I Stay* that is projected to be published by Signature Books in 2018.

President Spencer W. Kimball asserted, “We are a warlike people.” That he was referring to the Latter-day Saints is evident by what he says next, “[We are] easily distracted from our assignment of preparing for the coming of the Lord.” Speaking of Americans in general, but by implication Church members as well, President Kimball was even more specific, “When enemies rise up, we commit vast resources to the fabrication of gods of stone and steel—ships, planes, missiles, fortifications. . . . When threatened, we become anti-enemy instead of pro-kingdom of God.”³² President Kimball’s words echo First Presidency statements at the beginning of both the First and Second World Wars.³³

Our consistent, even enthusiastic support of war is in direct opposition to the Lord’s commandment in the Doctrine and Covenants that we “renounce war and proclaim peace and seek diligently to turn the hearts of the children to their fathers [and mothers], and the hearts of the fathers [and mothers] to the children” (98:34). As Hugh Nibley elaborates: “‘renounce’ is a strong word: we are not to try to win peace by war, or merely call a truce, but to renounce war itself, to disdain it as a policy while proclaiming . . . peace without reservation.”³⁴ Significantly, this commandment links renouncing war and establishing peace with intergenerational healing: turning the hearts of parents and children to one another.

War begets war, violence breeds violence. We have every reason to be repulsed and appalled by the rise of the Islamic State, but to a large

32. Spencer W. Kimball, “The False Gods We Worship,” *Ensign* (June 1976), 4.

33. See Joseph F. Smith, “Our Duty to Humanity, to God, and to Country,” *Improvement Era* 20, no. 7 (May 1917): 645–56 and “Message of the First Presidency,” Report of the Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Apr. 6, 1942 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, annual), 88–97

34. “Renounce War!” *Daily Universe* (BYU), Mar. 26, 1971, in Hugh Nibley, *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, vol. 13 of The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley (Salt Lake: FARMS/Deseret, 1994), 267.

extent ISIS is a monster of our own creating. One can draw a straight line from our deliberate and disastrous disenfranchising the Sunni Baathists when we invaded Iraq and the rise of ISIS. This disenfranchisement unleashed the floodgates of Shia revenge that has magnified the enmity between these opposing branches of Islam and caused it to metastasize into a barbaric caliphate,³⁵ one funded by our Gulf Ally, Saudi Arabia, which dramatically illustrates the insanity of war. In other words, we have sown the winds of war and inherited the whirlwind of an even wider, more violent war, the end of which it is impossible to predict but horrible to contemplate.

In contrast, the Lord speaks of the saints being gathered to Zion, which will “be called the New Jerusalem, a land of peace, a city of refuge, a place of safety for the saints of the most high God” (D&C 45:66). This is a pre-millennial city, where, we are told, the wicked will not come (D&C 45:67) and where those who will not take up their swords (or their guns!) against their neighbors will “flee for safety.” Further, we are told that “there shall be gathered unto it out of every nation under heaven; and it shall be the only people that shall not be at war one with another” (D&C 45:68–69). Consider the implications: the *only* place in the entire world where there will be no war will be among the saints. That certainly couldn’t happen in the Mormon heartland today! In fact, one could argue that someone proclaiming peace among the Mormons today might be regarded with suspicion if not derision (and likely labeled a Liberal!).

We can begin to re-imagine our attitude about war with the following statement from the First Presidency’s 1981 Christmas message: “To all who seek a resolution to conflict, be it a misunderstanding between individuals or an international difficulty among nations, we commend the counsel of the Prince of Peace, ‘Love your enemies, bless them that

35. Jason M. Breslow, “How Saddam’s Former Soldiers Are Fueling the Rise of ISIS,” *Frontline*, Oct. 28, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/iraq-war-on-terror/rise-of-isis/how-saddams-former-soldiers-are-fueling-the-rise-of-isis/>.

curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; [in order] That you may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.' . . . This principle of loving one another as Jesus Christ loves us will bring peace to the individual, to the home and beyond, even to the nations and the world."³⁶ This indeed is radical theology. Do we believe it?

In an article titled, "Can Nations Love Their Enemies? An LDS Theology of Peace," Eugene England argued that "LDS theology offers a guide to better conduct. I believe its fundamental message is that 'effective pacifism'—even unilateral disarmament if accompanied by massive efforts to extend intelligent, creative, tough-minded but loving help to other nations . . .—is the ideal solution, the only one that could make our enemies no longer enemies. . . ."³⁷ This seems to be in accord with Jesus' call for a non-violent, but nevertheless assertive response to injustice. Biblical scholar, Walter Wink, calls this "Jesus' Third Way," which is neither passive acquiescence nor violent confrontation.³⁸

What I imagine in the future is a Mormon Church that deliberately, consistently, and systematically sues for peace, works for peace, and establishes peace—a sort of Quaker church on steroids, if you will. Think of what it would mean for preaching the gospel if Mormons were known all over the world for their anti-war, pro-peace ethic. That would clearly create a climate in which people might indeed say, "Let us go up to Zion."

Toward a More Liberal Political and Social Mormonism

Earlier, I mentioned that when Utah was vying for statehood, in an attempt to prevent the majority of Mormons from gravitating en masse

36. *Church News*, Dec. 19, 1981, 2.

37. Eugene England, *Dialogues with Myself: Personal Essays on Mormon Experience* (Salt Lake: Orion Books, 1984), 148.

38. Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 98–111.

to the Democratic Party, which had been much more sympathetic to the saints than the Republicans, Church leaders divided towns and congregations right down the middle, with half going to the Republicans and half to the Democrats. That most Mormons identified with the Democratic Party can be seen by the fact that eighty-two percent of Utah citizens voted for Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryan in the 1896 presidential election. What we have today in the intermountain area is almost a complete reversal, with Utah and Idaho leading the nation in voting Republican. This is why Gene England argued that some Utah Mormons should consider becoming Democrats.³⁹ As a life-long Republican, he was serious, because he knew that supermajorities inevitably infringe upon the rights of minorities. Lest you think Gene was being unfair or unreasonable, he also proposed that more Mormons on the coasts should become Republican.

Nevertheless, it isn't the shift to the right among their fellow Mormons that many liberals find disturbing, but rather a shift of many Latter-day Saints to the far right, even to a fundamentalist ideology, one that demonized former-President Obama; that sees the Democratic Party as Socialist (without fully understanding what that word means); that bemoans so called "welfare queens" while increasing corporate welfare; and that sees capitalism as the greatest economic system the world has ever known (which would be news to Jesus, the people of Enoch, and those who practiced the United Order in early Utah).

It is far too easy to confuse partisan political ideologies with gospel principles. Such confusion, I contend, is destructive to Mormonism's ultimate mission. The extent to which a dominant far-right ideology is identified in the public mind with Mormonism undermines Church growth and status, leading many outside the Church to regard Mormonism as rigid and regressive, as anti-science and anti-intellectual,

39. Eugene England, "On Saving the Constitution, Or Why Some Utah Mormons Should Become Democrats," *Sunstone*, May 1988, 22–30. Available at http://eugeneengland.org/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/1988_e_004.pdf.

as insular and narrow-minded, and as favoring the rich over the poor. Such individuals are likely to hold the worst stereotypes of Mormons, thus leaving them blind to the truly remarkable truths of the Restoration and the very substantial gifts of Mormonism. Separating right wing (or left wing) politics from the gospel could aid us in a more expansive reimagined Restoration.

Toward a More Christ-Centered Mormonism

While as Mormons we need to put greater distance between our politics and our religion, we need less space between our Church and the rest of Christianity. Mormons are avowedly and devotedly Christian, yet sometimes it seems we are more Mormon than Christian. By that, I mean that at times we are more focused on religious principles and practices that are more identified with our history and tradition than we are on Christ. I have been told that half of those who leave Mormonism no longer consider themselves Christian. I hope this is not the case, but if it is, it represents a colossal failure on our behalf. If our lived experience as Mormons more fully reflected Nephi's words—"We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ" (2 Nephi 25: 23, 26)—then it seems to me that those who abandon Mormonism would be much less likely to abandon Christianity. I believe we could, with little effort, make Christ more central to that sacred space we occupy in his name each Sunday, as well as to other spaces in our religious life.

One way Mormons could be more Christ-centered is by celebrating Holy Week. Except for Easter, Mormons pay almost no attention to Holy Week. I remember Arthur Henry King being shocked when he came to BYU to find his fellow Mormons playing sports, going to dances, and participating in other secular activities on Good Friday. He said with passion in his voice, "That is the day my Lord died!" Our Primary children usually have an Easter egg hunt during this season,

but my guess is that few have been taught to honor this holiest of days, called by some Christians “Great Friday.”

At least we celebrate Easter—except when it conflicts with general conference, as it will do so twenty more times this century. It is likely that the First Vision took place during Holy Week, possibly on Easter Sunday, for Easter came early in 1820 (April 2) and Joseph says he went into the sacred grove on “a beautiful, clear day, early in the spring” (JS–H 1:14). Most Mormons are unaware that when Christ and Elijah appeared in the Kirtland Temple in 1836 it was during Holy Week. Could the Lord be teaching us something about a week that one commentator has called “the most concentrated, symbol-laden, primitive, critical, foundational, animating . . . time in the Christian calendar?”⁴⁰

The Value of a Liberal Education

Finally, I believe a key to achieving a more progressive, more enlightened Mormonism is to encourage Mormons to obtain and then apply in their daily lives a truly liberal education, one that emboldens an open, informed mind and heart. A liberally educated person does not flee from either faith or doubt, honors both science and religion, and relies on the heart as well as the mind. She does not surrender her thinking or her emotions to others, particularly to the savants on cable television and talk radio. Ultimately, she does not rely on any authority that is not in accord with her own deepest sense of what is morally true and spiritually right.

The credo of the liberally-educated Latter-day Saint is President Hugh B. Brown’s 1969 address to the students at BYU called “An Eternal Quest—Freedom of the Mind.” Among other things, he said:

40. James Oregon, “Celebrating Holy Week’s Symbols,” http://www.jamesoregan.com/jamesoregan/Academic_-_Celebrating.html. See also my article “Why Mormons Should Celebrate Holy Week,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2004), 151–67.

One of the most important things in the world is freedom of the mind; from this all other freedoms spring. Such freedom is necessarily dangerous, for one cannot think right without running the risk of thinking wrong, but generally more thinking is required, and we [the First Presidency] call upon you students to exercise your God-given right to think through on every proposition that is submitted to you and be unafraid to express your opinions, with proper respect for those to whom you talk and proper acknowledgment of your own shortcomings. . . .

He continued,

Preserve . . . 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.

And then he said these astonishing words:

We are not so much concerned with whether your thoughts are orthodox or heterodox as we are that you shall have thoughts.⁴¹

Essentially, President Brown was encouraging Latter-day Saints to open their minds to the possibilities of the Restoration. In the same address, he said, “While I believe all that God has revealed, I am not quite sure that I understand what he has revealed, and the fact that he has promised further revelation is to me a challenge to keep an open mind and be prepared to follow wherever my search for truth may lead.” I think he would agree, even if that search leads, as it sometimes does, into the sometimes-treacherous territory of liberalism.

Conclusion

“Thy mind, O Man [and Woman], if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost Heavens, and search into and

41. Hugh B. Brown, “An Eternal Quest—Freedom of the Mind,” May 13, 1969, available at http://aims.byu.edu/sites/default/files/foundationdocuments/An_Eternal_Quest--Freedom_of_the_Mind--Hugh_B_Brown.pdf.

contemplate the lowest considerations of the darkest abyss, and expand upon the broad considerations of eternal expanse.” –Joseph Smith⁴²

Thirty-five years ago, Eugene England invited me to participate in a BYU Humanities Forum he was moderating on Mormonism’s contributions to the Humanities and the imaginative arts. Gene spoke of the “real and the ideal, both doing ‘the highest justice to the visible universe’ . . . and also holding up model and visions of the highest good and possibilities for man.”⁴³ That’s one of the things the imagination does. In my remarks that day, titled “The Paradise of Meaning: Imagination and the Religious Experience,” I argued that religion and the imagination “are fundamentally related and . . . touch us at our deepest center; both reveal things to us that we can’t know in other ways.”⁴⁴ While each by itself is limited, together religion and the imagination create a paradise of meaning and possibilities.

I am calling for Latter-day Saints to forge a new future for Mormonism, one that imagines a religious way of life that builds on the best of the Restoration from the past, combines it with the most enlightened ideas of the present, and projects the dawning of a brighter day through the prism of a liberal ideology—liberal in the sense in which I have tried to resurrect its original meaning and intention—combined with the best conservative principles.

In imagining a fully realized Restoration, I am not suggesting that the Church change its essential mission or compromise its core values or principles. But history has shown that when religions have the courage to admit error, when they recognize their own fallibility and limitations, they open themselves to new ideas, new growth, and new revelations. As

42. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 137; see also Dean C. Jessee and John W. Welch, “Revelations in Context: Joseph Smith’s Letter from Liberty Jail, March 20, 1839,” *BYU Studies* 39, no. 3 (2000): 137.

43. Typescript of Gene England’s notes in my possession.

44. Manuscript in my possession.

Christian Wiman asserts, “Any belief that does not recognize and adapt to its own erosions rots from within.”⁴⁵ Again citing B.H. Roberts, in some ways and to some extent the Church needs disciples who are committed to improving it and helping it to more fully realize the promises embedded in its enlightened scriptures and radical theology. As Wiman argues, “Faith is not faith beyond some change. Faith is faith *in change*.”⁴⁶

As a Church, we need to ask ourselves if there are present teachings and practices that we will look back on in the future with regret that we didn’t challenge and change, just as we have been doing over the past several decades. The history of the Church suggests that social and spiritual evolution are to some extent inevitable. Society changes, new technology emerges, new discoveries open new vistas in many fields, and forces beyond our control dictate policy we can’t even imagine (although that’s exactly what I am urging we should try to do). Add to all this the promise that God himself has made to reveal many great and glorious truths pertaining to his kingdom and one has the expectation of an evolving Church. I have always been struck by the fact that the Lord refers to his church as both “true and living.” That organic metaphor is important for us to keep in mind as we participate in the continual unfolding of the Restoration.

I imagine the Church of the future casting a broader net, building a wider tent, teaching a more inclusive Christianity. I believe Mormonism would be more attractive to more people were we to remove the stumbling blocks to that attraction as we recently have done by openly acknowledging past mistakes and changes in both doctrine and practice. Unless we do so, we run the risk that more of our fellow saints, in the language of Jesus, will “go away” from us.

My heart breaks anew with each departed saint because I feel that each takes something vital with her- or himself and that their leaving

45. Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 111.

46. *Ibid*, 104.

diminishes us as a community. I experience each departure as a loss and I have a strong impulse to persuade all who leave to return. As Rumi says, “When one of us gets lost, is not here, he must be inside us. There’s no place like that anywhere in the world.”⁴⁷ What I am calling for is a more expansive moral imagination, one that more fully opens our hearts and minds to the profound treasures of the Restoration and then uses them to bless our own people as well as others in the wide world.

Finally, I contend that this reimagined Mormonism, which is a projection of the possibilities and promises embedded in the Restoration’s seminal revelations, can be realized only through love. We need love, that of Christ and one another, to fix the fissures in our faith community; we need love to bridge our seemingly unbridgeable differences; and we need love to heal one another’s wounded hearts.

At present the community of believers that constitutes the Mormon Church is not as unified as it could be. I believe Christ calls all of us to unify it, to harmonize our differences, to forgive one another, to enlarge the capacities of our hearts to love. It is only through the lens of love that we can see the way things truly are and understand love’s complexity and diversity as well as its enormous promises and blessings. These ways of seeing help us to understand that in every situation and context and in every relationship we are called to do one thing—the most loving thing of which we are capable.

Coda

I would like to close with a story. It isn’t necessarily a conservative or a liberal story, but it is a story that illustrates love’s power in healing divisions. Raymond Carver’s “A Small Good Thing” is a story about a couple, the Weisses, and the birthday celebration they are planning for their only son, Scotty. The mother orders a cake from the local bakery.

47. *The Essential Rumi*, translated by Coleman Barks (Castle Books: Edison, N.J., 1995), 205.

On the day of the party Scotty is hit by a car and lapses into a coma. The parents wait anxiously by the bedside day and night, but their son never awakens and, after a few days, dies. The baker, unaware of the accident, continues to call the parents to come and pick up their cake. Grieving, they do not return his calls. He continues to call and becomes abusive and threatening. Finally, one night they go to the bakery to express their outrage at the Baker's behavior. When they tell him that their son is dead, he is embarrassed and ashamed. A simple man, he does the only thing he can think of—he offers them fresh-baked bread. As they sit in the darkened bakery eating, he reveals his own lonely life, childless, working sixteen hours a day baking thousands of wedding and birthday cakes and imagining the celebrations surrounding them, none of which ever touch him personally.

Finally, he takes a fresh loaf of dark bread from the oven, breaks it open and offers some to them. “Smell this,” he says, “It’s a heavy bread but rich.” Carver writes, “They smelled it, then he had them taste it. It had the taste of molasses and coarse grains. They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread. It was like daylight under the florescent trays of light. They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving.”⁴⁸

This is a powerful story of loss, grief, death, conflict, forgiveness, and redemption. It is also a story about empathy, sympathy and compassion. The story's association of bread with light and the coming dawn reminds us of Christ who is both the bread of life and the light of the world and who is the world's greatest example of the virtues I have mentioned in this essay. Partaking each week of the bread of life, we taste of his light and his love. It is a small good thing we do every Sunday and is akin to all the other small gifts of kindness, generosity, and forgiveness we give to one another. Those acts of love, it seems to me, have their genesis in the light of Christ which is in each of us.

48. Raymond Carver, “A Small Good Thing,” *Where I’m Calling From: New and Selected Stories* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 376–405.

I said earlier that Gene England's good, thoughtful, and faithful heart was a little to the left. That is also true of all of us. It is where, in shaping our bodies and our spirits our Heavenly parents placed this powerful organ of light and love. They also have hearts, real beating and feeling hearts, and since we are made in their image, we can say with confidence and joy that their hearts too are a little to the left.