

A QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

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I was baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on September 25, 1993, almost immediately after Lavina Fielding Anderson was forced out of it.¹ Her stake disciplinary council had convened on September 23 to determine her fate, and she learned of the council's decision on the morning of September 24 via a letter from her stake president. "You are outside of the principles of the gospel and are leading others with you," he wrote. And then the icing on the cake: the excommunication, he insisted, "has been done out of love and concern for you."²

The good Lord must have a sense of humor, or perhaps there is a subtle Principle of the Conservation of Feminists at work in the Church, because the date of my own baptism is almost too bizarre for me to think of it as a mere coincidence. It had taken me more than two years of studying what Mormons call the restored gospel before I was ready to join the Church. At the time, I was living far from Utah in Princeton, New Jersey, but I was aware of the unsettling purge that was unfolding in the Church since it made the *New York Times*.³ I did

1. Portions of this essay were previously published as the foreword to Lavina Fielding Anderson's memoir *Mercy without End: Toward a More Inclusive Church* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2020). I'm grateful to Matt Bowman, Amanda Hendrix-Komoto, Benjamin Knoll, David Howlett, Melissa Inouye, Laurie Maffly-Kipp, and Patrick Mason for their valuable feedback in expanding this essay.

2. Anderson, *Mercy without End*, 53.

3. "Mormons Penalize Dissident Members," *New York Times*, Sept. 19, 1993, Section 1, 31, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/09/19/us/mormons-penalize-dissident-members.html>.

not know Lavina Fielding Anderson at the time, but I understood that the church I was about to join was in the process of excommunicating individuals who sounded a lot like me, and I was afraid. This is, I think, part of the point of any excommunication: to strike fear in the heart of anyone who questions, doubts, or dares to be different.

Anderson's excommunication was the last of the six disciplinary actions that occurred in the LDS Church in September 1993, but in many ways, hers was the most revealing. While others among the September Six were disciplined for supporting feminism (Maxine Hanks, D. Michael Quinn, Lynne Kanavel Whitesides, Paul Toscano), Anderson was excommunicated for that *and* for striking a blow at the heart of the Church's hierarchical leadership structure. In her *Dialogue* article "The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology," she documented the "accelerating tensions" between the institutional Church and scholars.⁴

Her chronology gave dates and names. It dared to use the word "abuse" to describe how some Church leaders had treated members who dissented openly. And it clearly showed a push-comes-to-shove relationship between the public actions of dissident members and the public reactions of Church authorities: for example, ERA activist Sonia Johnson was excommunicated in December 1979, and just over two months later, Elder Ezra Taft Benson gave his infamous talk "Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophet."⁵ Although Benson did not mention the ERA by name, he affirmed that the LDS prophet had a right to "be involved in civic matters," including political issues, and that any Church members who rejected the teachings of the prophet

4. Lavina Fielding Anderson, "The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 7–64.

5. Anderson, "LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership," 13.

and his counselors would pay a price: “Follow them and be blessed; reject them and suffer.”⁶

In 1980, when Benson gave this speech, there seemed to be no end to the optimism about the Church’s future. Membership growth was brisk in the late 1970s and early 1980s, averaging 5 or 6 percent a year. This prompted one sociologist to predict that Mormonism would be the world’s next major religion, with “a worldwide following comparable to that of Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, [and] Hinduism.”⁷ By 1993, when the September Six were on their way out of the Church and I was on the way in, growth had cooled slightly but was still vigorous at 3 to 4 percent. The Church was looking to its past as it celebrated the centennial of the Salt Lake Temple and to its future as it opened new missions in once-undreamt-of regions that had been off-limits for decades under Soviet rule.⁸

In short, from the perspective of Church leaders, things were going according to plan. To them, the excommunications of the September Six were not even the most important news item that month. The biggest highlight was the warm welcome the Church had received at the 1993 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago, where it

6. Ezra Taft Benson, “Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophet,” devotional address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, Feb. 26, 1980, available at <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/ezra-taft-benson/fourteen-fundamentals-following-prophet/>.

7. Rodney Stark, “The Rise of a New World Faith,” *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (Sept. 1984): 18–27.

8. R. Scott Lloyd, “1993: The Year in Review: Temples Were Focus of Church Events,” *Church News*, Dec. 25, 1993, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/1993/12/25/23257625/1993-the-year-in-review-temples-were-focus-of-church-events/>. The year 1993 saw the Church donating more than sixteen tons of clothing and shoes to Saint Petersburg, Russia; dedicating former Soviet-bloc countries like Belarus, Lithuania, and Latvia for the preaching of the gospel; and opening new missions in Romania, Latvia, and Ukraine, among other areas.

distributed hundreds of copies of the Book of Mormon. At the Parliament a century before in 1893, the Church had been deliberately excluded from the list of invited religions and was not permitted to have an official exhibit—a snub it did not soon forget.⁹ In 1993, by contrast, Elder Russell M. Nelson was invited to be one of approximately 170 featured speakers from religions around the world.¹⁰ So whatever issues Mormonism was having internally with challenges from those whom apostle Dallin Oaks had labeled “alternate voices,” they did not appear to be slowing the church down at all in its mission.¹¹

In the intervening thirty years, that has changed. Authority issues are now central to the way Latter-day Saints are viewed by the rest of the world, and not generally in a positive way. Examining the news stories about Mormonism over the last several years, many observers and Church members are critical of actions by high-ranking LDS leaders, as the institution of the Church is called into account for its vast wealth, its lack of support for victims of sexual abuse, its centralized and inscrutable hierarchy, and its treatment of women, the LGBTQ community, and people of color. The question of authority lies at the heart of all of these conflicts, just as it did in 1993. But two things have changed in the decades since.

The first is simply that the Church no longer has any hope of fully controlling its own narrative. It seems almost quaint now to read Elder Oaks’s 1989 talk on “alternate voices” and see him noting that such

9. Reid L. Neilson, *Exhibiting Mormonism: The Latter-day Saints and the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

10. Gerry Avant, “Event Is ‘Greatest Gathering of Religious Leaders in History,’” *Church News*, Sept. 11, 1993, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/1993/9/11/23258001/event-is-greatest-gathering-of-religious-leaders-in-history>.

11. Dallin H. Oaks, “Alternate Voices,” Apr. 1989, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1989/04/alternate-voices?lang=eng>. Significantly, Oaks called “alternate voices” the ones that spoke out on various subjects “without calling or authority.”

voices might be heard in magazines, newspapers, and lectures. Today, every member of the Church is a potential content creator, to say nothing of every outsider who has an opinion about the institution's doings. There are Reddit pages devoted to how, when, and whether to wear temple garments and Pinterest boards on "how to look cute" while wearing them. Temple endowment rituals are available for viewing on YouTube, thanks to hidden cameras various members have smuggled in. There are countless blogs, vlogs, podcasts, Twitter accounts, TikTok creators, and Instagram accounts that deal with aspects of Mormon and post-Mormon life. As cultural critic Chuck Klosterman has noted, the 1990s were the last decade in American history "when we controlled technology more than technology controlled us. People played by the old rules, despite a growing recognition that those rules were flawed."¹²

All of this makes me wonder about the timing of the September Six members' discipline. In literary works of tragedy, timing is always critical: Romeo, for example, doesn't get the memo in time that Juliet's seemingly fatal poison was just a sleeping potion, so he kills himself moments before she wakes up. I think historians of the future will see the timing of the September Six's discipline as tragic. Anderson was punished in 1993 for raising a flag, for blowing a whistle, for being a harbinger. Documenting events that the Church wanted buried was enough of a sin to be worthy of excommunication for either "apostasy" or "conduct unbecoming a member" (Anderson's stake president claimed both as reasons). Calling out ecclesiastical wrongdoing in a public way was simply not done in 1993. In fact, even its handling in the Church's judicial system had recently become more draconian. In the Church's 1985 *General Handbook of Instructions*, "apostasy" was briefly listed as a condition in which a Church court "may be convened," though apostasy went largely undefined except for the problem of

12. Chuck Klosterman, *The Nineties: A Book* (New York: Penguin Press, 2022), 4.

“associating with apostate cults and advocating their doctrines.”¹³ In the 1989 version of the handbook, however, apostasy had been upgraded to the category of transgressions for which “a disciplinary council *must* be held,” being listed just under murder and incest as an excommunicable crime. The 1989 version included a three-part definition to eliminate the previous edition’s ambiguity about what might constitute apostasy: apostates were defined as people who “1) repeatedly act in clear, open, and deliberate public opposition to the Church or its leaders; 2) persist in teaching as Church doctrine information that is not Church doctrine after being corrected by their bishops or higher authority; or 3) continue to follow the teachings of apostate cults (such as those that advocate for plural marriage) after being corrected by their bishops or higher authority.”¹⁴ Historically, the 1989 handbook set the stage for the September Six to receive the maximum penalty in a way they likely would not have only a few years earlier.

So the September Six were too late, but they were also too early. I wonder how differently their story would have played out if the conflict had occurred just ten years later, when the internet was a reality, personal blogs had begun to proliferate that sometimes criticized the Church or its leaders, and it was no longer possible for the centralized institution to control the flow of information. The September Six suffered from a perfect storm of bad timing, being called in shortly after the Church had stiffened its disciplinary response to “apostasy” but just before it lost the ability to quell the tide of people speaking out.

As an opinion columnist for a national outlet, I am keenly aware that I’m able to persist as a progressive Mormon because Anderson and other pioneers made it possible for me to do so. Yes, I get hate mail from total strangers, but I have never been excommunicated or disfellowshipped for anything I have written in my Religion News Service

13. “The Church Judicial System,” *General Handbook of Instructions*, Oct. 1985, 8–1.

14. “Church Discipline,” *General Handbook of Instructions*, Mar. 1989, 10–3.

column or said on a podcast. That's not due to any virtue on my part but simply because the times have changed, and the September Six were among those whose precedent helped to bring about that change. The tragedy is that their Church membership was needlessly, senselessly, accepted as collateral damage in that process.

It's noteworthy that the three highest-profile excommunications that have occurred in the last decade have all been of LDS Church members who started organizations. Denver Snuffer, excommunicated in 2013, started the Remnant Fellowship, with dozens of house churches and claims to prophetic authority. Kate Kelly, excommunicated in 2014, founded Ordain Women and organized peaceful protests in Temple Square, attracting media attention to the limited roles women were permitted to play in Church leadership. And John Dehlin, excommunicated in 2015, not only criticized the Church but founded Mormon Stories, an organization that has produced podcasts, held conferences, and offered support and resources to members undergoing a faith crisis. What ties these excommunications together is that all three members began movements or rival institutions that the Church regarded as a threat. Meanwhile, many other Latter-day Saints have publicly criticized the Church in language more pointed and strident than what was said by the September Six, and the vast majority have not been disciplined at all. Crushing these members' faultfinding in any kind of systematic way would be exceptionally difficult since it would require keeping tabs on thousands of people.¹⁵

15. The LDS Church is not alone in this approach. Political scientists who analyzed more than one hundred thousand randomly selected social media posts from citizens of the People's Republic of China discovered that criticism alone was not enough to trigger the government's robust censorship program. It was posts with "collective action potential"—such as organized protests, riots, or meetings—that were swiftly removed or shut down. Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (May 2013): 1–18.

This leads to my second point, which is that younger generations of Church members appear to have a different sense of authority than older members do, at least in the United States. The 2016 Next Mormons Survey (NMS), a nationally representative survey of current and former members, found that among Latter-day Saints in the United States, younger members did not possess the same levels of default obedience that older ones did. Among all respondents, millennials had the lowest rate of affirming that organized religion was a “great force for good,” believing that obeying leaders was essential to being a good Mormon, or thinking that “having a prophet on the earth today” was one of the most positive aspects of belonging to the Church. They also demonstrated the lowest percentage of any generation to agree with the statement “Good Latter-day Saints should obey the counsel of priesthood leaders even if they don’t necessarily know or understand why.”¹⁶

In the 2022 version of the survey (NMS2), the sample as a whole showed some of the tendencies that had in 2016 characterized younger respondents. This shift is likely a combination of cohort replacement (older respondents becoming less dominant in the sample population, giving greater prominence to younger adults) and attitudinal changes among all respondents, including older ones, who have changed their minds.¹⁷ In the 2016 NMS, 63 percent of LDS respondents of all generations said that obeying the prophet and other general authorities was “essential” to being a good Latter-day Saint, while in the 2022

16. Jana Riess, *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), chap. 11.

17. Social change is caused by a combination of factors, but cohort replacement is one of the most important. In a 2008 study of Californians’ growing support for same-sex marriage, cohort replacement explained slightly more than half of the growth in support. Gregory B. Lewis and Charles W. Gossett, “Changing Public Opinion on Same-Sex Marriage: The Case of California,” *Politics and Policy* 36 (Jan. 2008): 4–30.

NMS2 that declined to 54 percent.¹⁸ As well, slightly higher numbers of respondents said they were troubled by “the Church’s emphasis on conformity and obedience” (50 percent) than had indicated that concern in 2016 (47 percent), though that difference of three points is within both surveys’ margin of error.

Significantly for considering the fallout of the September Six, Mormons also seem to be liberalizing on gender issues, albeit belatedly compared to the general population. Slightly greater numbers of Latter-day Saints in 2022 reported being troubled by the fact that the priesthood was reserved only for men, with 51 percent saying it was at least “a little troubling.” In 2016, that was 47 percent. Also, the Church’s gold standard of traditional marriage seems to have lost some of its appeal. In 2016, 61 percent of respondents preferred a marital arrangement “where the husband provides for the family and the wife takes care of the house and children,” while just 39 percent viewed the ideal marriage as “one where the husband and wife both have jobs and both take care of the house and children.” In 2022, the egalitarian model was nearly equal in popularity to the traditional one, with 49 percent of US Mormons upholding it as their preference compared to 51 percent who preferred the traditional division of labor. That is a ten-point drop in US Church members saying that the ideal marriage is one in which women stay home. (The 2022 data did not, however, indicate a mad rush of LDS women into the workplace; just 34 percent of them reported being employed full-time in 2022, compared to 36 percent in 2016.)

In many ways, the unforgivable crime of the September Six was to be out of sync with their time—“getting in front of the Brethren,” as the saying goes. In 1993, for example, Maxine Hanks and D. Michael Quinn aimed to recover the history of women giving priesthood blessings, which was simply not countenanced in the most orthodox circles of the Church. In 2019, prints of the oil painting *Relief Society Healing*,

18. NMS topline data analyzed by Benjamin Knoll, Jan. 2023.

which depicts Nauvoo-era women praying for a sick sister and anointing her head with oil, became available for sale at Deseret Book, the Church's official publishing house.¹⁹ In explaining his artistic choices in creating the painting, Brigham Young University professor Anthony Sweat explained that "something is stirring in the collective consciousness of the Church about women's divine role and influence," citing both general conference talks and a recent flowering of scholarship on women and priesthood power.²⁰ "To be clear, I am not advocating any particular position regarding women and priesthood ordination with this painting, nor a return to women performing healing blessings," he wrote.²¹ And yet the image itself testified to a power that in 1993 had been taboo even to discuss.

On the other hand, a colleague who read an early version of this essay pointed out to me that as of January 2023, that image is no longer for sale on the Deseret Book website, even though there is still a listing for it that is accompanied by the message "Sorry, we no longer sell this product." It would seem that a historical representation of women anointing one another with oil and giving blessings for healing remains controversial.

It's unclear what will happen next as the Church continues to develop. On the one hand, small concessions to women (e.g., that they can be witnesses at baptisms and that the temple ceremony was overhauled to remove language about women hearkening to their husbands or needing men as intermediaries between them and God) may suggest a less reactive environment when it comes to the gender issues that were important in several of the September Six disciplinary cases.

19. See product listing for Anthony Sweat, Relief Society Healing at Deseret Book, <https://deseretbook.com/p/17x23-relief-society-healing-framed-textured-paper>.

20. Anthony Sweat, *Repicturing the Restoration: New Art to Expand Our Understanding* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2020), 183.

21. Sweat, *Repicturing the Restoration*.

On the other hand, recent clampdowns at Brigham Young University's campuses have highlighted a new area of strain: LGBTQ issues. As of 2022, BYU employees' annual ecclesiastical endorsement must affirm that they "have a testimony of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and of its doctrine, including its teachings on marriage, family, and gender."²² Another change is that new hires no longer have a right to ecclesiastical confidentiality; if they mention to a bishop that they support LGBTQ equality, even if they never discuss that support at BYU in the context of their jobs, that information will not be granted the privilege of clergy confidentiality. Also in 2022, two BYU-Idaho faculty members reported that their employment contracts had not been renewed even though their bishops had signed their ecclesiastical endorsements; in both cases, the professors believed they had lost their jobs because of their LGBTQ advocacy.²³

What relevance does this have to understanding the September Six? It's notable because events at BYU prior to 1993 were the proverbial canary in the coal mine. Tensions at BYU over women's roles and academic freedom, including several high-profile faculty dismissals, had erupted in 1991. In 1992, historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, the recent recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for her book *A Midwife's Tale*, found herself caught in the crossfire. She discovered after the fact that her name had been considered when selecting a keynote speaker for the BYU Women's Conference and then rejected, presumably because of feminist pieces she had written for *Exponent II*. She learned about this blocklisting through the grapevine and then learned that her bishop

22. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Ecclesiastical Leader Questions for New CES Hires," Newsroom, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/ecclesiastical-leader-questions-new-ces-hires>. Note that these are for use beginning Mar. 23, 2022.

23. Colleen Flaherty, "A Chill at BYU," *Inside Higher Ed*, Nov. 30, 2022, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/12/01/new-church-office-cutting-faculty-members-brigham-young>.

had indeed received a call from someone in Salt Lake asking if she was “a member in good standing” because she was being considered to speak at BYU.

At no point did a General Authority or BYU administrator directly tell Ulrich what had happened and why. “I’m quite sure that I was caught up in the middle of a situation at BYU, but I’m [also] quite sure my name is on those lists,” she said in a 1993 interview conducted just two months after the September Six disciplinary actions.²⁴ At the close of the interview, Ulrich was asked to reflect on what she thought would happen next and what effect the September Six would have on those who wrote about the Church. “I don’t know,” she said. “What I *hope* is going to happen is that Mormon feminists and intellectuals will do what they have said they will do . . . which is to continue to speak, and write. . . . I think the worst possible fallout of this is that people will run for cover and be afraid.”²⁵ Thirty years later, that still seems like excellent counsel.

24. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich interview with Jana Riess, Nov. 12, 1993, Burlington, Mass. Transcript in Jana Riess, “September’s Significance: Contemporary Mormon Feminists and the Redefinition of Authority in the LDS Church” (MDiv thesis, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1994), Appendix 1, 106–107.

25. Ulrich interview.

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