



WHAT THE CHURCH MEANS TO PEOPLE LIKE ME

Richard D. Poll

SUNSTONE is pleased to reprint this classic description of Iron Rod and Liahona Mormons. The following sermon was first given in the Palo Alto Ward sacrament meeting in August 1967 and was subsequently printed in Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 2 (Winter 1967):107-117. Special thanks to Richard D. Poll and to Dialogue for permission to reprint and thus widen the circulation of this still timely and important message.

A natural reaction to my title—since this is not a testimony meeting in which each speaker is his own subject—might be, “Who cares?” For who in this congregation, with the possible exception of my brother, Carl, are “people like me?” I have a wife and daughter present who find me in some respects unique. And I am sure there are students at Brigham Young University who *hope* that I am unique. By the time I have finished there may be some among you who will share that hope.

Yet I have chosen the topic because I believe that in some important respects I represent a type of Latter-day Saint which is found in almost every ward and branch in the Church. By characterizing myself and explaining the nature of my commitment to the Gospel, I hope to contribute a little something of value to each of you, whether it turns out that you are “people like me” or not.

My thesis is that there are two distinct types of active and dedicated Latter-day Saints. I am not talking about

“good Mormons” and “Jack Mormons,” or about Saints in white hats and pseudo-Saints in black. No, I am talking about two types of *involved* Church members who are here tonight, each deeply committed to the Gospel but also prone toward misgivings about the legitimacy, adequacy, or serviceability of the commitment of the other.

The purpose of my inquiry is not to support either set of misgivings, but to describe each type as dispassionately as I can, to identify myself with one of the types, and then to bear witness concerning some of the blessings which the Church offers to the type I identify with. My prayer is that this effort will help us all to look beyond the things which obviously differentiate us toward that “unity of faith” which Christ set as our common goal.

For convenience of reference, let me propose symbols for my two types of Mormons. They have necessarily to be affirmative images, because I am talking only about “good” members. I found them in the Book of Mormon, a natural place for a Latter-day Saint to find good symbols as well as good counsel.

The figure for the first type comes from Lehi’s dream—the Iron Rod. The figure for the second comes also from Lehi’s experience—the Liahona. So similar they are as manifestations of God’s concern for his children, yet just different enough to suit my purposes tonight.

The Iron Rod, as the hymn reminds us, was the Word of God. To the person with his hand on the rod, each step of the journey to the tree of life was plainly defined; he had only to hold on as he moved forward. In Lehi’s dream the way was *not easy*, but it was *clear*.

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The Liahona, in contrast, was a compass. It pointed to the destination but did not fully mark the path; indeed, the clarity of its directions varied with the circumstances of the user. For Lehi's family the sacred instrument was a reminder of their temporal and eternal goals, but it was no infallible delineator of their course.

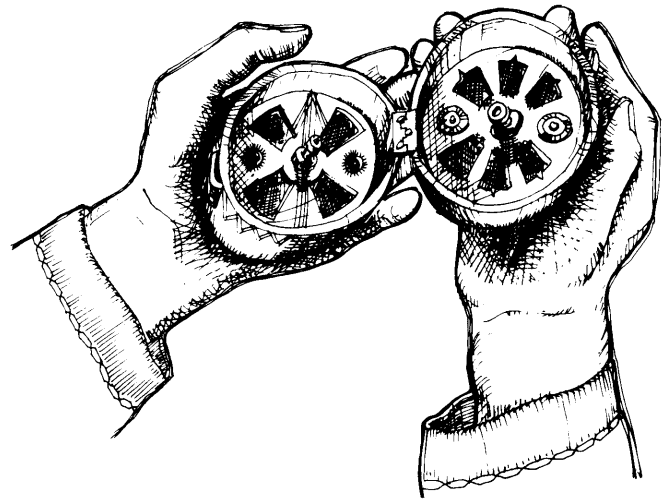
Even as the Iron Rod and the Liahona were both approaches to the word of God and to the kingdom of God, so our two types of members seek the word and the kingdom. The fundamental difference between them lies in their concept of the relation of man to the "word of God." Put another way, it is a difference in the meaning assigned to the concept "the fulness of the Gospel." Do the revelations of our Heavenly Father give us a handrail to the kingdom, or a compass only?

The Iron Rod Saint does not look for questions, but for answers, and in the Gospel—as he understands it—he finds or is confident that he can find the answer to every important question. The Liahona Saint, on the other hand, is preoccupied with questions and skeptical of answers; he finds in the Gospel—as he understands it—answers to enough important questions so that he can function purposefully without answers to the rest. This last sentence holds the key to the question posed by my title, but before pursuing its implications let us explore our scheme of classification more fully.

As I suggested at the outset, I find Iron Rods and Liahonas in almost every L.D.S. congregation, discernible by the kinds of comments they make in Gospel Doctrine classes and the very language in which they phrase their testimonies. What gives them their original bent is difficult to identify. The Iron Rods may be somewhat more common among converts, but many nowadays are attracted to the Church by those reasons more appropriate to Liahonas which I will mention later on. Liahona testimonies may be more prevalent among born members who have not had an emotional conversion experience, but many such have developed Iron Rod commitments in the home, the Sunday School, the mission field, or some other conditioning environment. Social and economic status appear to have nothing to do with type, and the rather widely-held notion that education tends to produce Liahonas has so many exceptions that one may plausibly argue that education only makes Liahonas more articulate. Parenthetically, some of the most prominent Iron Rods in the Church are on the BYU faculty.

Pre-existence may, I suppose, have something to do with placement in this classification, even as it may account for other life circumstances, but heredity obviously does not. The irritation of the Iron Rod father confronted by an iconoclastic son is about as commonplace as the embarrassment of the Liahona parent who discovers that his teen-age daughter has found comfortable answers in seminary to some of the questions that have perplexed him all his life.

The picture is complicated by the fact that changes of type do occur, often in response to profoundly unsettling personal experiences. The Liahona member who, in a context of despair or repentance, makes the "leap of faith" to Iron Rod commitment is rather rare, I think, but the investigator of Liahona temperament who becomes an Iron Rod convert is almost typical. The Iron Rod member who responds to personal tragedy or intellectual



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shock by becoming a Liahona is known to us all: this transition may be but is not necessarily a stage in a migration toward inactivity or even apostacy.

My present opinion is that one's identification with the Iron Rods or the Liahonas is more a function of basic temperament and of accidents than of pre-mortal accomplishments or mortal choices, but that opinion—like many other views expressed in this sermon—has neither scriptural nor scientific validation.

A point to underscore in terms of our objective of "unity of the faith" is that Iron Rods and Liahonas have great difficulty understanding each other—not at the level of intellectual acceptance of the right to peaceful co-existence, but at the level of personal communion, of empathy. To the Iron Rod a questioning attitude suggests an imperfect faith; to the Liahona an unquestioning spirit betokens a closed mind. Neither frequent association nor even prior personal involvement with the other group guarantees empathy. Indeed, the person who has crossed the line is likely to be least sympathetic and tolerant toward his erstwhile kindred spirits.

I have suggested that the essential difference between the Liahonas and the Iron Rods is in their approach to the concept "the word of God." Let us investigate that now a little.

The Iron Rod is confident that, on any question, the mind and will of the Lord may be obtained. His sources are threefold: Scripture, Prophetic Authority, and the Holy Spirit.

In the Standard Works of the Church the Iron Rod member finds far more answers than does his Liahona brother, because he accepts them as God's word in a far more literal sense. In them he finds answers to questions as diverse as the age and origin of the earth, the justification for capital punishment, the proper diet, the proper role of government, the nature and functions of sex, and the nature of man. To the Liahona, he sometimes seems to be reading things into the printed words, but to himself the meaning is clear.

In the pronouncements of the General Authorities, living and dead, the Iron Rod finds many answers, because he accepts and gives comprehensive application to that language of the Doctrine and Covenants which declares: "And whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be the word of the Lord, shall be the voice of the Lord, and the power of God unto salvation" (68:4). This reliance extends to every facet of life. On birth control and family planning, labor relations and race relations, the meaning of the Constitution and prospects for the United Nations, the laws of health and the signs of the times, the counsel of the "living oracles" suffices. Where answers are not found in the published record, they are sought in correspondence and interviews, and once received, they are accepted as definitive.

Third among the sources for the Iron Rod member is the Holy Spirit. As Joseph Smith found answers in the counsel of James, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God . . .," so any Latter-day Saint may do so. Whether it be the choice of a vocation or the choice of a mate, help on a college examination or in finding "Golden Prospects" in the mission field, healing the sick or averting a divorce—in prayer is the answer. The response may not be what was expected, but it *will* come, and it will be a manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

Implicit in all this is the confidence of the Iron Rod Latter-day Saint that our Heavenly Father is intimately involved in the day-to-day business of His children. As no sparrow falls without the Father, so nothing befalls man without His will. God knows the answers to all questions and has the solutions to all problems, and the only thing which denies man access to this reservoir is his own stubbornness. Truly, then, the person who opens his mind and heart to the channels of revelation, past and present, has the iron rod which leads unerringly to the Kingdom.

Do the revelations of our Heavenly Father give us a handrail to the kingdom, or a compass only?

The Liahona Latter-day Saint lacks this certain confidence. Not that he rejects the concepts upon which it rests—that God lives, that He loves His children, that His knowledge and power are efficacious for salvation, and that He does reveal His will as the Ninth Article of Faith affirms. Nor does he reserve the right of selective obedience to the will of God as he understands it. No, the problem for the Liahona involves the adequacy of the *sources* on which the Iron Rod testimony depends.

The problem is in perceiving the will of God when it is mediated—as it is for almost all mortals—by "the arm of flesh." The Liahona is convinced by logic and experience that no human instrument, even a prophet, is capable of transmitting the word of God so clearly and comprehensively that it can be universally understood and easily appropriated by man.

Because the Liahona finds it impossible to accept the literal verbal inspiration of the Standard Words, the suf-

ficiency of scriptural answers to questions automatically comes into question. If Eve was not made from Adam's rib, how much of the Bible is historic truth? If geology and anthropology have undermined Bishop Ussher's chronology, which places creation at 4000 B.C., how much of the Bible is scientific truth? And if our latter-day scriptures have been significantly revised since their original publication, can it be assumed that they are now infallibly authoritative? To the Liahona these volumes are sources of inspiration and moral truth, but they leave many specific questions unanswered, or uncertainly answered.

As for the authority of the Latter-day prophets, the Liahona Saint finds consensus among them on Gospel fundamentals but far-ranging diversity on many important issues. The record shows error, as in Brigham Young's statements about the continuation of slavery, and it shows change of counsel, as in the matter of gathering to Zion. It shows differences of opinion—Heber J. Grant and Reed Smoot on the League of Nations, and David O. McKay and Joseph Fielding Smith on the process of creation. To the Liahonas, the "living oracles" are God's special witnesses of the Gospel of Christ and His agents in directing the affairs of the Church, but like the scriptures, they leave many important questions unanswered, or uncertainly answered.

The Iron Rod proposition that the Spirit will supply what the prophets have not gives difficulty on both philosophical and experimental grounds. Claims that prayer is an infallible, almost contractual, link between God and man through the Holy Spirit find Liahona Mormons perplexed by the nature of the evidence. As a method of confirming truth, the witness of the Spirit demonstrably has *not* produced uniformity of Gospel interpretation even among Iron Rod Saints, and it is allegedly by the witness of that same Spirit—by the burning within—that many apostates pronounce the whole Church in error. As a method of influencing the course of events, it seems unpredictable and some of the miracles claimed for it seem almost whimsical. By the prayer of faith one man recovers his lost eyeglasses; in spite of such prayer, another man goes blind.

All of which leaves the Liahona Mormon with a somewhat tenuous connection with the Holy Spirit. He may take comfort in his imperfect knowledge from that portion of the Article of Faith which says that "God will yet reveal many great and important things . . ." And he may reconcile his conviction of God's love and his observation of the uncertain earthly outcomes of faith by emphasizing the divine commitment to the principle of free agency, as I shall presently do. In any case, it seems to the Liahona Mormon that God's involvement in day-to-day affairs must be less active and intimate than the Iron Rod Mormon believes, because there are so many unsolved problems and unanswered prayers.

Is the Iron Rod member unaware of these considerations which loom so large in the Liahona member's definition of his relationship to the word of God? In some instances, I believe, the answer is yes. For in our activity-centered Church it is quite possible to be deeply and satisfyingly involved without looking seriously at the philosophical implications of some Gospel propositions which are professed.

In many instances, however, the Iron Rod Saint has found sufficient answers to the Liahona questions. He sees so much basic consistency in the scriptures and the teachings of the latter-day prophets that the apparent errors and incongruities can be handled by interpretation. He finds so much evidence of the immanence of God in human affairs that the apparently pointless evil and injustice in the world can be handled by the valid assertion that God's ways are not man's ways. He is likely to credit his Liahona contemporaries with becoming so preoccupied with certain problems that they cannot see the Gospel forest for the trees, and he may even attribute that preoccupation to an insufficiency of faith.

As a Liahona, I must resist the attribution, though I cannot deny the preoccupation.

Both kinds of Mormons have problems. Not just the ordinary personal problems to which all flesh is heir, but problems growing out of the nature of their Church commitment.

The Iron Rod has a natural tendency to develop answers where none may, in fact, have been revealed. He may find arguments against social security in the Book of Mormon; he may discover in esoteric prophetic utterances a timetable for that Second Coming of which "that day and hour knoweth no man . . ." His dogmatism may become offensive to his peers in the Church and a barrier to communication with his own family; his confidence in his own insights may make him impatient with those whom he publicly sustains. He may also cling to cherished answers in the face of new revelation, or be so shaken by innovation that he forms new "fundamentalist" sects. The Iron Rod concept holds many firm in the Church, but it leads some out.

The Liahona, on the other hand, has the temptation to broaden the scope of his questioning until even the most clearly defined Church doctrines and policies are included. His resistance to statistics on principle may deteriorate into a carping criticism of programs and leaders. His ties to the Church may become so nebulous that he cannot communicate them to his children. His testimony may become so selective as to exclude him from some forms of Church activity or to make him a hypocrite in his own eyes as he participates in them. His persistence in doubting may alienate his brethren and eventually destroy the substance of his Gospel commitment. Then he, too, is out—without fireworks, but not without pain.

Both kinds of Latter-day Saints serve the Church. They talk differently and apparently think and feel differently about the Gospel, but as long as they avoid the extremes just mentioned, they share a love for and commitment to the Church. They cannot therefore be distinguished on the basis of attendance at meetings, or participation on welfare projects, or contributions, or faithfulness in the performance of callings. They may or may not be hundred percenters, but the degree of their activity is not a function of type, insofar as I have been able to observe. (It may be that Iron Rods are a little more faithful in genealogical work, but even this is not certain.)

Both kinds of members are found at every level of Church responsibility—in bishoprics and Relief Society presidencies, in stake presidencies and high councils, and even among the General Authorities. But whatever their private orientation, the public department of the

General Authorities seems to me to represent a compromise, which would be natural in the circumstances. They satisfy the Iron Rods by emphasizing the solid core of revealed truth and discouraging speculative inquiry into matters of faith and morals, and they comfort the Liahonas by resisting the pressure to make pronouncements on all subjects and by reminding the Saints that God has not revealed the answer to every question or defined the response to every prayer.

As I have suggested, the Iron Rods and the Liahonas have some difficulty understanding each other. Lacking the patience, wisdom, breadth of experience, or depth of institutional commitment of the General Authorities, we sometimes criticize and judge each other. But usually we live and let live—each finding in the Church what meets his needs and all sharing the Gospel blessings which do not depend on identity of testimony.

Which brings me to the second part of my remarks—the part which gives my talk its title: What the Church Means to People Like Me. Although I have tried to characterize two types of Latter-day Saints with objectivity, I can speak with conviction only about one example from one group. In suggesting—briefly—what the Church offers to a Liahona like me, I hope to provoke all of us to reexamine the nature of our own commitments and to grow in understanding and love for those whose testimonies are defined in different terms.

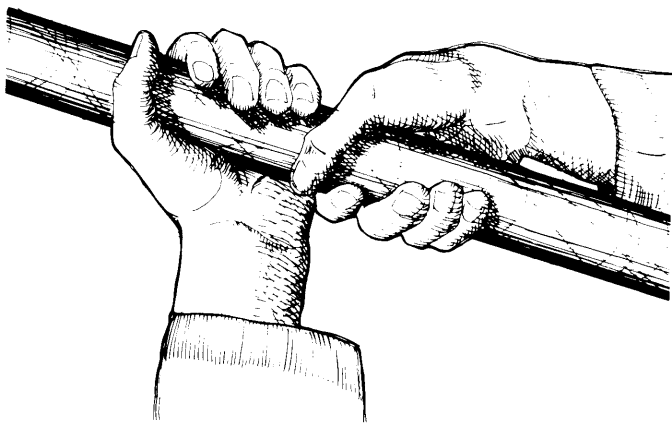
By my initial characterization of types, I am the kind of Mormon who is preoccupied with questions and skeptical of answers. I find in the Gospel—as I understand it—answers to enough important questions so that I can function purposefully, and I hope effectively, without present answers to the rest.

The primary question of this generation, it seems to me, is the question of meaning. Does life really add up to anything at all? At least at the popular level, the philosophy of existentialism asks, and tries to answer, the question of how to function significantly in a world which apparently has no meaning. When the philosophy is given a religious context, it becomes an effort to salvage some of the values of traditional religion for support in this meaningless world.

To the extent that existence is seen as meaningless—even absurd—human experiences have only immediate significance. A psychedelic trip stands on a par with a visit to the Sistine Chapel or a concert of the Tabernacle Choir. What the individual does with himself—or other "freely consenting adults"—is nobody's business, whether it involves pot, perversion, or "making love, not war."

For me, the Gospel answers this question of meaning, and the answer is grandly challenging. It lies in three revealed propositions: (1) Man is eternal. (2) Man is free. (3) God's work and glory is to exalt this eternal free agent—man.

The central conception is freedom. With a belief in the doctrine of free agency I can cope with some of the riddles and tragedies which are cited in support of the philosophy of the absurd. In the nature of human freedom—as I understand it—is to be found the reconciliation of the concept of a loving God and the facts of an unlovely world.



In Lehi's dream the way was not easy, but it was clear.

The restored Gospel teaches that the essential stuff of man is eternal, that man is a child of God, and that it is man's destiny to become like his Father. But this destiny can only be achieved as man *voluntarily* gains the knowledge, the experience, and the discipline which godhood requires and represents. *This* was the crucial question resolved in the council in heaven—whether man should come into an environment of genuine risk, where he would walk by faith.

To me, this prerequisite for exaltation explains the apparent remoteness of God from many aspects of the human predicament—my predicament. My range of freedom is left large, and arbitrary divine interference with that freedom is kept minimal, in order that I may grow. Were God's hand always upon my shoulder, or his Iron Rod always in my grasp, my range of free choice would be constricted, and my growth as well.

This view does not rule out miraculous interventions by our Heavenly Father, but it does not permit their being commonplace. What is seen as miracle by the Iron Rod Saints, my type tends to interpret as coincidence, or psychosomatic manifestation, or inaccurately remembered or reported event. The same attitude is even more likely with regard to the Satanic role in human affairs. The conflict between good and evil—with its happy and unhappy outcomes—is seen more often as a derivative of man's nature and environment than as a contest between titanic powers for the capture of human pawns. If God cannot, in the ultimate sense, coerce the eternal intelligences which are embodied in His children, then how much less is Lucifer able to do so. We may yield to the promptings of good or evil, but we are *not* puppets.

There is another aspect of the matter. If, with or without prayer, man is arbitrarily spared the consequences of his own fallibility and the natural consequences of the kind of hazardous world in which he lives, then freedom becomes meaningless and God capricious. If the law that fire burns, that bullets kill, that age deteriorates, and that the rain falls on the just and the unjust is sporadically suspended upon petition of faith, what happens to that reliable connection between cause and consequence which is a condition of knowledge: and what a peril to faith lies in the idea that God *can* break the causal chain, that he frequently *does* break it, but that in *my* individual case he may not *choose* to do so. This is the dilemma of theodicy, reconciling God's omnipotence with evil and

suffering, which is so dramatically phrased: "If God is good, he is not God; if God is God, he is not good."

From what has been said, it must be apparent that Liahonas like me do not see prayer as a form of spiritual mechanics, in spite of such scriptural language as "Prove me herewith . . ." and "I, the Lord, am bound . . ." Prayer is rarely for miracles, or even for new answers. It is—or ought to be—an intensely personal exercise in sorting out and weighing the relevant factors in our problems, and looking to God as we consider the alternative solutions. (Many of our problems would solve themselves if we would consider only options on which we could honestly ask God's benediction.) We might pray for a miracle, especially in time of deep personal frustration or tragedy, but we would think it presumptuous to command God and would not suspend the future on the outcome of the petition.

This is not to say that Liahonas cannot verbalize prayer as proficiently as their Iron Rod contemporaries. One cannot be significantly involved in the Church without mastering the conventional prayer forms and learning to fit the petition to the proportions of the occasion. But even in the public prayers it is possible, I believe, for the attentive ear to detect those differences which I have tried to describe. To oppose evil as we can, to bear adversity as we must, and to do our jobs well—these are the petitions in Liahona prayers. They invoke God's blessings, but they require man's answering.

To this Liahona Latter-day Saint, God is powerful to save. He is pledged to keep the way of salvation open to man and to do, through the example and sacrifice of His Son and the ordinances and teachings of His Church, what man cannot do for himself. But beyond this, He has left things pretty much up to me—a free agent, a god in embryo who must learn by experience as well as direction how to be like God.

In this circumstance the Church of Jesus Christ performs three special functions for me. Without them, my freedom might well become unbearable:

In the first place, the Church reminds me—almost incessantly—that what I do makes a difference. It matters to my fellow men because most of what I do or fail to do affects their progress toward salvation. And it matters to me, even if it has no discernible influence upon others. I reject the "hippie" stance, not because there is something intrinsically wrong with beards and sandals, but with estrangement and aimlessness. Even though life is eternal, time is short and I have none to waste.

In the second place, the Church suggests and sometimes prescribes guidelines for the use of freedom. The department standards of the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, the rules for mental and physical wellbeing in the Doctrine and Covenants, the reminders and challenges in the temple ceremony—these are examples, and they harmonize with free agency because even those which are prescribed are not coerced.

There is a difference here, I think, between the way Iron Rods and Liahonas look at the guidelines. Answer-oriented, the Iron Rods tend to spell things out; Sabbath observance becomes no TV or movies, or TV but no movies, or uplifting TV and no other, or no studying, or studying for religion classes but no others. For Liahonas like me, the Sabbath commandment is a reminder of the kinship of free men and a concerned and loving Father.

What is fitting, not what is conventional, becomes the question. On a lovely autumn evening I may even, with quiet conscience, pass up an M.I.A. fireside for a drive in the canyon. But the thankfulness for guidelines is nonetheless strong.

In final place comes the contribution of the Church in giving me something to relate to—to belong to—to *feel* a part of.

Contemporary psychology has much to say about the awful predicament of alienation. "The Lonely Crowd" is the way one expert describes it. Ex-Mormons often feel it; a good friend who somehow migrated out of the Church put it this way the other day: "I don't belong anywhere."

This was the crucial question resolved in the council in heaven—whether man should come into an environment of genuine risk.

For the active Latter-day Saint such alienation is impossible. The Church is an association of kindred spirits, a sub-culture, a "folk"—and this is the tie which binds Iron Rods and Liahonas together as strongly as the shared testimony of Joseph Smith. It is as fundamental to the solidarity of L.D.S. families—almost—as the doctrine of eternal marriage itself. It makes brothers and sisters of the convert and the Daughter of the Utah Pioneers, of the Hong Kong branch president and the missionary from Cedar City. It unites this congregation—the genealogists and the procrastinators, the old-fashioned patriarchs and the family planners, the eggheads and the doubters of "the wisdom of men."

This sense of belonging is what makes me feel at home in the Palo Alto Ward. Liahonas and Iron Rods together, we are products of a great historic experience, laborers in a great enterprise, and sharers of a commitment to the proposition that life is important because God is real and we are His children—free agents with the opportunity to become heirs of His kingdom.

This is the witness of the Spirit to this Liahona Latter-day Saint. When the returning missionary warms his homecoming with a narrative of a remarkable conversion, I may note the inconsistency or naivete of some of his analysis, but I am moved nevertheless by the picture of lives transformed—made meaningful—by the Gospel. When the Home Teachers call, I am sometimes self-conscious about the "role playing" in which we all seem to be engaged, yet I ask my wife often—in our times of deepest concern and warmest parental satisfaction—what might our daughters have become without the Church. When a dear friend passes, an accident victim, I may recoil from the well-meant suggestion that God's need for him was greater than his family's, but my lamentation is sweetened by the realization of what the temporal support of the Saints and the eternal promises of the Lord mean to those who mourn.

For this testimony, the Church which inspires and feeds it, and fellowship in the Church with the Iron Rods and Liahonas who share it, I express my thanks to my Heavenly Father in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, Amen.

Richard Sherlock

The Gospel Beyond Time:

Thoughts on the Relation of Faith and Historical Knowledge

Editors' Note

This paper was given at SUNSTONE's 1979 Mormon Theological Symposium.

In the last quarter century we have witnessed a remarkable renaissance of scholarly study of the Mormon faith and experience. Several disciplines have contributed to this blossoming but none as profoundly as the study of Mormon history. Given the Mormon propensity for record keeping, for genealogy, and for family history, this emphasis is hardly surprising. But study of history potentially poses profound questions for a community of faith, and no other liberal arts study is as likely to necessitate serious reevaluation of our self-image as a people.¹

My thesis is simple: The study of history raises questions that Mormons have yet to seriously consider. In this paper I will first discuss some of these problems and then offer some suggestions about how we might face the difficulties posed by the scholarly examination of our past.

Better than a decade ago James Allen published a path-breaking essay on Joseph Smith's first vision as a historical event. Allen made two important points concerning the experience. He pointed out that the version we have in our Pearl of Great Price is not the only, nor is it even the earliest, such account. It is a rather late version, and, unlike some others, it was not written in Joseph's own hand. Secondly, he called attention to the fact that in the earliest days of the Church the story was largely unknown and therefore not used for missionary purposes. When it did become known and widely quoted in the Church, it was not used for the missionary or devotional purposes we use it for now.



Later research has confirmed these conclusions. We now know that there are eight separate versions of the First Vision. We know that the canonical version is one of the latest. Most significantly, we know that all eight versions differ in ways that are highly significant and sometimes theologically crucial. We also know that the early Church was largely ignorant of any of these versions. It was not until the publication of the canonical account in 1838 that any attention was paid to the experience. Even after that time it was used to buttress Joseph's prophetic authority and not, as presently, to demonstrate the existence of God and Christ as separate material beings.

Given so many primary sources, the historian does not, of course, throw up his hands in disgust. He analyzes each document to see if it is obviously spurious. He checks the handwriting. Is it Joseph's or that of a known and trusted scribe or simply that of someone to whom Joseph told the story? Are some versions more accurate in describing confirmable details than others? Are others less so?

The critical question, however, is where does such study lead? It leads finally to a probable conclusion about the precise character of the event. The historian gives *his best judgment* that one of the versions is better than another, that there are irreconcilable differences among them, etc. His judgment is based on skill, training, and experience, but it is, nevertheless, a human judgment. No matter how certain he may be, he cannot declare one of these versions to be definitive in the life and faith of the Church.

The potential problem lies in the tentative quality of the historian's conclusions. The historian operates on the basis of presuppositions (impartiality, evidentiary relevance and persuasiveness) that are incapable of leading him to the kinds of conclusions accepted by the Church. Even the most certain conclusions of the researcher are probable, certain only in the most human of ways and justified only by the skill and diligence of the researcher and the availability of evidence.

The distance between the historian and the naive believer is immense at this point. It cannot be swept away with the facile observation that historical study usually ends up supporting the claims of the Church. That may be true, but it is irrelevant. The issue is really one of method, not conclusions. By his very method, the historian is committed to a process of inquiry whose results are always open-ended. Even the most dedicated defender of the faith, Hugh Nibley, is committed to a method of inquiry that could produce conclusions utterly worthless for apologetic purposes. As Nibley himself is fond of pointing out, there are enormous gaps in our knowledge of ancient times. The filling in of just one of these gaps could destroy his whole defense.

A believer is not comfortable with this possibility. Men and women do not become believers and remain faithful Saints for a tentative, probably true gospel. Tentative conclusions lead to a tentative faith and eventually to no faith at all. To put it rather bluntly, religious man seeks what no mortal can give him—a certainty that is beyond dispute. He longs for the sure knowledge that his

|| The truth of scripture lies in its relationship to faith not history. ||

view of man, world, and cosmos is true beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he has grasped the iron rod and is justified in his religious life by a power beyond the flux of human history and human knowledge.

The historian's knowledge cannot lead the religious man to that certain path. To put it more directly, the honest historian cannot say whether Joseph Smith saw one being or two on that spring morning in 1820 (he cannot even say that Joseph Smith thought he saw two). Our canonical account speaks of two, as do most of the others, but the earliest account, the one closest in time to the event, speaks of only one being. Of course it may be argued that two is more likely: most of the accounts, including the one published by Joseph, which he never repudiated, describe two beings. Unfortunately, such reasoning misses the point. On historical grounds we cannot say with the certainty of the faithful that one of these versions is the truthful record of the past. To do so would be to forsake the pursuit of human truth, retreating into the comfortable irrationality that leads to an incoherent faith and an incomprehensible God. Mormons have always been wary of religious questioning that yields inscrutable mysteries.

But can't we believe in the 1838 account without forsaking historical knowledge? Perhaps we cannot prove that the canonical version is the best account, but then we cannot show that it is not the best account either. Another example will prove the shallowness of this response. Consider the book of Daniel in the Old Testament, supposedly a record of the experiences of an individual of considerable importance in the political affairs of one of the chief empires in the Near East during the first millenium B.C. The earliest texts we have are dated several hundred years after the events supposedly happened (copies of copies of copies), but this does not affect the fact that the text claims to record actual events. For the faithful historian this claim poses both a problem and an opportunity. Because the Babylonian empire was so important, many decipherable archeological records have survived. Thus we may check Daniel's history against records unquestionably dating from the precise period in question—a test that any good historian would apply. Unfortunately, the book of Daniel comes off rather badly. It makes documentable errors which would be similar in magnitude to claiming that George McGovern won the 1972 presidential race. Now, either Daniel is right, and all the tablets, epigraphy, and King lists are wrong, or Daniel is wrong. And if he is wrong in these verifiable political details, why should we trust the historical truthfulness of the rest of the story about the lion's den, the fiery furnace, and other events?

To maintain that Daniel is right is to grasp at unconvincing straws and to give up any rational demand for evidence—retreating to the nihilistic irrationality of the

fundamentalist. It would require that we abandon the merging of reason and faith, which the Church has implicitly supported through its higher education system and which many individual Saints have proclaimed in their pursuits of knowledge, for a know-nothing response, hiding our heads in the sands of faith.²

So far we have assumed that faith is necessarily dependent on history, or rather on a particular view of past events. But perhaps we have built our dilemma on a false set of presuppositions. Unless we assume that any particular view of the past is necessary for faith, the problem is itself non-existent. Do we really need to assume this? To do so simply buys into the world view of the Protestant fundamentalist concerned with preserving a most un-Mormon, errorless Bible.

We may further see the falsity of assuming that faith is dependent on history by considering what we call "testimony." The experience of "testimony" is one of the distinguishing marks, if not the distinguishing mark, of the Church. In a testimony meeting we do not hear about events in the past but rather about the present acts of God and about our relationships with him (and that of the Church with him through the prophet). We do not preach that the dead Jesus is the head of the Church but rather the living Jesus Christ who rules now.

Observations about the primacy of current religious realities over historical ones lead to the following question: Is there any conceivable fact or set of facts that might be discovered about Joseph Smith that would cause you to lose your faith in the Church? If the answer to that question is yes, then I submit that you have placed your faith in hock to the historian, that you are willing to believe the Church is true only to the extent that you have not found any human evidence that it is not true. It seems to me that such a faith is hardly worth having. Furthermore, this is an entirely un-Mormon way of looking at faith. If we have seen God at work in our lives and in the Church, then any particular fact about the past will be irrelevant insofar as the commitment we have to the gospel is concerned. Faith comes from the present reality of God, not from remote events whose meaning is inevitably colored by the language and perceptions of those who recorded those events and those who present them to us today.

That a living faith is based on the experiences of living men with their God is, it seems to me, an incontrovertible point. But granting this premise still leaves many tough questions unanswered. We must still find a way to relate faith and history. The knowledge of history can no longer be decisive in determining the faith of the believer in the way we once thought.

But what of those beliefs that we as a people have about the past that seem crucial in our self-understanding and decisive in terms of our commitment

|| The distance between the historian and the naive believer is immense. ||

For the faithful historian the claim that a text records actual events poses both a problem and an opportunity.

to the Church? Can we understand how certain records of these events have become central in the life and faith of the Church without at the same time assuming that the historian must justify our faith by his research? I think we can.

The answer, it seems to me, lies in a proper understanding of "truth" and of the method by which we say that something is true for the Church, whatever conclusions seem dictated by the historian's research. Consider Jesus' parables. Are they not considered "truthful" because they reveal truths about man and his relationship to his fellows and to God. Yet none of these stories are history in any sense of that word. They are true because we recognize their truth in our lives, not because we know they actually happened at some time in the past (as when we say of a story that it "rings true" or of a writer that he has a "true feel" for Mormon life and culture). If this is a proper way of looking at truth, one which is demanded by the Mormon insistence that what matters is a living relationship with God, not knowledge of a dead and inerrant Bible, then I think we have a clue to understanding what canonization and scripture mean for the Church.

Consider the story of Joseph's first vision with which we began this essay. The Church has canonized one version of the event, but the historian cannot verify whether or not that description of the event is more or less reliable than the others. Might we not say then that the 1838 account became true for the Church not because of what happened between 1830 and 1838, or better between 1830 and 1880 when one particular version was canonized? Is it not more honest to say that this one account is true because it bears witness to the faith of the Church better than any of the others? For example, the canonical version speaks plainly of two separate material beings in hierarchical relationship to one another. Canonization thus underscored the importance of this description of man's relationship to God as it has come to be understood in the Church. Canonization is both an act of and a witness to the faith of the Church and need not be justified by the historian's research.

Understanding this process of canonization also sheds some light on the meaning of scripture. The truth of scripture lies in its relationship to faith, not history. We have been tempted to forget this because of a scientific world view that reduces meaningfulness to empirical verifiability. Once the primacy of scripture to faith is made clear, much else falls into line. Scripture is seen to reveal God to man, not man's past to himself. It provides a window through which the Divine light might shed on our lives and is thus God's word.

To see this better consider the act of Jesus in the atonement. Jesus' atonement was an actual event in the past. Making that event alive in our lives is an ongoing

process. If the primary function of scripture is to teach us about the past event, then we adopt a way of thinking which has led Protestantism to the belief that the atonement is the central fact of God's relationship to man and that the word of God is contained in a closed scriptural canon. Both of these beliefs are so alien to Mormonism that it is strange that we should ever have thought of adopting a view of scripture borrowed from this manner of theological thinking.

A remark by S. Dilworth Young distills the essence of what scripture means for the Church. He told a group of leaders to teach the youth that "every grove can be a sacred grove." The importance of the First Vision is that it teaches us this great truth. If a fourteen-year-old boy with little schooling can have that intimate relationship to God then so can we. This is the meaning of that part of our canon, and I think that a similar statement can be made about scripture in general.

I have made these points briefly; yet I hope the general tone has been clear. I have hoped to stimulate fruitful debate. If anyone can suggest a more compelling resolution to the problem, I would welcome it. But we do need to realize that there is a problem. The relationship between faith and historical knowledge constitutes *the* theological issue of our time. We cannot be satisfied with facile answers.

Notes

1. It can be persuasively argued that the issue of modern religious thought has been the problem of historical knowledge. That we have not yet confronted it is not a measure of the fact that we have solved it, merely an indication of our general lack of theological scholarship.
2. In this paper I cannot discuss historical knowledge with a degree of precision. Specifically I cannot discuss the degree to which all historical accounts are subjective in the sense of being interpretations rendered by the subjectivity of the historian. It has been argued that if this is true, then the believer's interpretation is just as valid as that of the non-believer since both represent interpretations based on mutually incompatible but non-verifiable premises. While I do believe that there is a measure of truth in this assertion about subjectivity in historical interpretation, it will be noticed that in this paper I have chosen examples that skirt this issue. The two cases I have chosen do not involve interpretation. For example, either Daniel is right in what it says about the political history of the sixth century B.C. or it is wrong. I submit that this is a question of testable fact, not interpretation. I would also argue that to believe in the absence of any evidence that something in the past happened the way that conventional stories say it happened is not a matter of justified subjectivity but simply an incoherent commitment to the irrational. If we really do accept such a commitment, then we have little basis on which to challenge equally bizarre nonsense about the past, e.g. *The Chariots of the Gods*.

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