

Vol. 4, No. 3

July 1998

At the Press: "Losing the Sheep"

As this issue of *By Common Consent* goes to press, the *Case Reports of the Mormon Alliance*, Vol. 3, 1997, is also at the press and promised for delivery before the Sunstone Symposium begins on July 29.

"I think we set a new record for being late with this one," observes Lavina Fielding Anderson. "People have been most patient. But I hope they will also think it's been worth waiting for."

Themed "Losing the Sheep," this issue examines the much-vaunted milestone of 10 million members. President Gordon B. Hinckley has launched an initiative to retain a greater percentage of the Church's converts, but the dimensions of the problem are fuzzy. First, the most recently available Churchwide activity statistics (48.5% attendance at sacrament meeting) were published more than ten years ago in 1985. For another thing, he speaks specifically about the problems of "new members" who need "friends."

"Naturally the retention of new converts is an important subject," comments Anderson; "but an unaddressed, ignored, and invisible problem is the silent disappearance out the back door of members who have given decades of time, thousands of dollars, their best talents, and generous amounts of energy to the Church. What about the retention of long-time members who slowly discover that the Church does not value who they are?"

This volume of the *Case Reports* gives a voice to some marginalized groups. Six gay and lesbian members or former members talk about their whole-hearted efforts to find a way to accommodate their faith and their sexual orientation, often with only minimum toleration from Church leaders and finally with active repression. Five missionaries relate how their youthful idealism was exploited and crushed by mission presidents who saw their callings merely as stepping stones to higher ecclesiastical office and who

ruthlessly used the missionaries as means to that end. A series of essays on freedom of inquiry and David P. Wright's documentary history of his excommunication because he could not match his stake president's scriptural literalism examine the Church's long-standing hostility to scholars.

Some of these members have simply become inactive. Others have been excommunicated. Still others have resigned. No matter which method of exiting is selected, the Church fails to communicate either regret for the departure or good will for the individual's continued spiritual progress.

Another section explores resigning from the Church, rather than being obliged to undergo the humiliating and adversarial process of being excommunicated without wrongdoing. Resignation became an option only after the Church settled a \$10 million lawsuit filed by Norman Hancock of Mesa, Arizona, in 1985, also reported. The administrative procedure for removing one's name has been in the Church's handbook since 1989, but members have no access to this publication and often meet harassment on their way out that communicates, once again, a lack of respect for their personal choices. Three additional case reports explore the devastatingly painful process of leaving—even by one's own choice.

ERRATA

By Common Consent, Vol. 4, no. 1, published in January 1998 and headlined "Voices of the Little Ones: Readings and Discussion," appeared without the date. Vol. 2, no. 2, published in April 1998 with a headline of "Conference Critique: Come Prepared!" was published with a date of April 1997. Our apologies for the confusion caused to those orderly types who like to keep their newsletters organized.



Guest Editorial

Growing Up as a Church

Eugene England

If Mormonism is to become a genuine world religion, we must grow up in our concept of what "salvation" means. I often hear Mormons talking in Church as if their highest goal--highest conception of the purpose of life--is to be "guided by the Spirit." They seem to yearn for total dependence on some voice or feeling that will direct them totally in all actions, thoughts, and feelings. My heart sinks when I consider what a falling off is here from the grand, adventuresome, yes, tragic vision of Joseph Smith in the King Follett Discourse:

All the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement and improvement. The relationships we have with God places us in a situation to advance in knowledge. God Himself found Himself in the midst of spirits and glory. Because He was greater He saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest, who were less in intelligence, could have a privilege to advance like Himself and be exalted with Him, so that they might have one glory upon another in all that knowledge, power, and glory.

When we pass beyond this life and continue our eternal journey, especially as we move into the barely imagined future when we become co-creators with eternal companions of universes and spirit children to continue the grand work and glory of the gods, we will not be controlled by "the Spirit" or by mere obedience to those in

ORGANIZATIONAL STATEMENT

The Mormon Alliance was incorporated on July 4, 1992. Its purposes are to identify and document ecclesiastical/spiritual abuse, to promote healing and closure for its survivors, to build more sensitive leadership, to empower LDS members to participate with more authenticity in Mormonism, and to foster a healthier religious community. *By Common Consent* is the quarterly newsletter of the Mormon Alliance, published in January, April, July, and October. Letters, articles, and guest editorials are welcome. Subscriptions are \$30 for each calendar year and should be mailed to the Mormon Alliance, 6337 S. Highland Drive, Mailbox 215, Salt Lake City, UT 84121. At any point during the year that a subscription begins, you will receive the four newsletters of that year and the *Case Reports* volume for that year. Copies of earlier Case Reports, 1995 and 1996, are available from Signature Books for \$20 apiece (price includes shipping) at 564 W. 400 North, Salt Lake City, UT 84116. The order line is (801) 531-0164. To report cases of ecclesiastical and spiritual abuse, contact Lavina Fielding Anderson, 1519 Roberta Street, Salt Lake City, UT 84115 (801) 467-1617. Please send newsletter submissions and changes of address here as well.

authority over us, any more than God is now.

We will be informed, self-disciplined actors in the realms of eternal law and opportunity, dependent on what we have learned and our own god-like potential--just as God is now. Then, as now, it is not "meet" that God should "command in all things," for we are "agents unto [our]selves" (D&C 58:26-28).

If we are to be a mature Church, we must act like agents and expect each other to do so and teach all who will listen how to be such--that is, we must take responsibility for our own learning and decisions, listen to all "authorities" who have earned our respect and faith, including the Holy Spirit, but then act according to our best understanding and integrity and try to learn from our mistakes. We must reject all forms of the seductive notion that if we are obedient to authority, even against our convictions of truth or goodness, the authority will bear the blame.

To truly become mature--and be a mature example--in what is clearly a post-Christian if not post-religious age, we need to separate ourselves from the creeds and authoritative, deadening formulations of both traditional Christianity and traditional philosophy and embark with courage on the eternal journey of self- and mutual discovery that lies before us. . . . The gospel seems to me to call us to such a journey, even to suggest that the earth was planned specifically as a unique place to learn to walk by faith--that is, in passionate hope, not having a perfect knowledge but as Alma teaches, desiring good things we have heard about from various authorities, trying them out experimentally, casting out bad seeds and nurturing good ones--and trusting ourselves to do that testing and deciding and growing. (Excerpted from "Unto All Nations: Becoming a World Church," Spring 1997, prepared for a series on Mormon culture, typescript, pp. 18-19)

Deliberate Ignorance

Lew Wallace

By stubborn, deliberate ignorance, Mormons exercised disgraceful race prejudice against blacks for more than a century, distorting their scriptures to justify their unrighteous bias and behavior. It's a topic that's back in the news recently. We shouldn't be surprised to see it keep coming up as often as the Mountain Meadows Massacre--at least until we deal with it honestly.

What do the scriptures actually say about blacks?

In Genesis, Cain's "curse is that he would not be a good farmer (4:11-12). When Cain protested that being a "vagabond" (unprotected by clan or tribe), would leave him unprotected from anyone who met him, Jehovah pronounced a "seven-fold" vengeance curse and "set" a protective mark on him. Cain's descendants are described as cattlemen, musicians, and metal workers (4:21-23). As for the "protection," ask any black murder victim how well it works.

Noah's son Ham is supposed to be the next bearer of the curse because of his filial impiety. Yet the ludicrous account of Ham seeing his drunk, nude father and telling his blabbermouth brothers can be most easily explained as a Hebrew justification for enslaving the conquered Canaanites and looting their cities. Ham's descendants were not black, and the Hebrews were "servants" of the Canaanites about as often as the reverse.

Ignorance of human genetics, history, anatomy, and physiology enabled Mormons to concoct a nonsensical explanation that blacks were "less valiant in the pre-existence" and ignore the commandment that the gospel was for "all men," "every man," and "every creature"--"from this very hour" (Sept. 1832).

Behind this shield of ignorance, the self-righteous erect preposterous concepts, believe the literally impossible, and commit every imaginable evil while simultaneously blaming it all on God. Do we need any more reason to "seek learning even by study and also by faith" (D&C 88:118) than our own murky history?

Uncommon Dissent

Gene Mahalko

There seems to be a rather strong undercurrent in Mormonism that the true and faithful members are Republican. The more radical right people are too bizarre to be reliably under the control of the hierarchy, and the bleeding-heart liberals don't really grasp the Old-Testament nature of God.

This being so, Elder Marlin Jensen of the Second Quorum of the Seventy gave a remarkable interview (*Salt Lake Tribune*, May 3, 1998) in which he announced that not having two viable political parties was not good for the state. We need competing ideas, a fuller discussion of issues, and more checks on legislative power than we get with a one-party system.

He is right, of course. But hearing it from a general officer in an organization famous for its aversion to open debate of issues and to checks and balances on its own power makes me smile--and feel encouraged.

I moved to the Salt Lake Valley in 1991 from eastern North Dakota. People there generally considered God to be a Democrat--if he was considered to be in favor of any party at all. In fact, the official name

there is the Democratic Farmer-Labor Party, which makes him a supporter of the working class.

It is interesting to contrast the results of these two outlooks. The North Dakota state income tax is about half of the Utah rate. The tax form is a 5x8 card: "What was your federal tax liability this year? Send us 15% of that. Thanks." The Utah form is a nightmare of gibberish and special clauses. North Dakota also has no personal property tax.

Up until 1991, North Dakota still had Sunday--closing laws for most stores. The laws were repealed three times in about 1986, 1988, and 1991. All three times, the citizens of the state got enough petition signatures to put the repeal on the ballot, and the first two times, they voted to reinstate Sunday closing laws. The third time, the legislature finally got around the people by allowing the stores to open before the reinstatement could be voted on, then scheduled the vote on Sunday closing for the presidential primary election of 1991. This weakened the opposition vote enough to keep the malls open.

So for all the years I lived there, the stores closed on Sunday, and the public libraries remained open. In Utah, most of the libraries close, the stores open. Go figure.

Furthermore, only one citizen initiative has ever been passed in Utah, an anti-fluoridation bill back in the 1970s. In spite of that, Utah legislators a few months ago made it even more difficult to get a citizen initiative on the ballot. They apparently think the general citizenry is not fit to second-guess their inspired leadership.

There are more examples, but you get the picture. God is a Republican? I have my doubts.

Bright Day of the Soul

Troy Williams

Last week a young LDS friend from England phoned me in despair. During a recent visit to Utah he began exploring his Mormon roots with an intensity beyond the average Saint. He spent hours in the BYU library digging into Mormon history and unearthed more questions than answers. His faith was shaken by the details associated with polygamy, Adam-God, political kingdoms, Danites, etc. Sound like a familiar story? Sound like yours?

This young man returned to England needing to discuss his findings with family and local ecclesiastical leaders. He was rejected, kicked out of his home, and threatened with Church discipline if he continued discussing the above topics with local Saints. Sound like a familiar story? Sound like yours?

In our phone conversation he told me that he didn't believe in Mormonism anymore, in fact, he didn't even

know if he believed in God. He became polarized by what looked like all-or-nothing choices. He felt anger, betrayal, despair, loneliness, frustration, and anxiety.

I told him he could stop asking these questions, accept the counsel of his leaders, and put this nonsense behind him. "I can't!" he declared. "Welcome to the dark night of the soul." I responded, "Hope you enjoy the experience!"

There is something about entering the Wilderness of Faith that I believe is an essential element to our spiritual journeys. When we truly accept the call to come unto Christ, the excursion may take us on the most unexpected of detours. The Cambellian hero/heroine journey gives us the three-stage model of separation, initiation, and return--an excellent place to begin exploring our personal "dark nights."

First, separation. To become independent children of God we first separate from the tribal group-think. We must develop a faith and spirituality that comes not from our tribe, but from our own individualized experience. This is perhaps the hardest part of the journey, because we often feel abandoned. Like Jesus, our friends may sleep, and betray us into the hands of unfriendly and unsympathetic forces.

Second, initiation. The road of trials. This is the part of the journey where all that is not of God collapses. Institutions, doctrines, and beliefs that once sustained you will fail. You may feel like crying, as Jesus did on the cross, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" In reality, if we don't reject them, our Heavenly Parents are never closer. This is when we discover God for ourselves, relying alone on Their power to sustain us.

Third, the return. When all that is not God is revealed as dross, we can connect and be atoned with that which will redeem our soul. The old you, with your former beliefs and attitudes, has been crucified, but is now reborn and resurrected into a new, living entity. You return, not as you left, but as a "master of both worlds." You have now become the authority of your own life. You and God are the grand creators of your destiny.

In Disney's Broadway adaptation of *The Lion King*, Simba finds himself separated from his home and lost in a spiritual wilderness. In "Endless Night" (lyrics by Julie Tamor), he cries to his deceased father:

How can I find my way home?
Home is an empty dream
Lost to the night.
Father, I feel so alone.
You promised you'd be there . . .
Whenever I call your name
You're not anywhere.

The song had an emotional impact on me. It reminded me of my own "dark night," my own separation and cries to an unseen and unknown Father. My

discovery was that the grand mystery of life, one that the guardians of religion don't want us to know, is that ultimately we must become the authority of our own lives. We cannot know God through a man, or group of men, who claim this exclusive privilege. This is the lesson learned from Joseph Smith's First Vision. Even a humble farm boy can confront God in the wilderness and behold the open windows of heaven.

Simba concludes his song with an expression of faith: "I know that the night must end / I know that the sun will rise / And I'll hear your voice deep inside."

We should not fear our Dark Night, for it is in the Wilderness (in legends, myths, sacred history, and good literature) where the soul is transformed and God is revealed within and outside us. The mythic journey, as modeled by Jesus, and all of the great heroes and heroines of legend and lore, is yours as well. Accept it. Embrace it. Enjoy your journey. You will survive the Wilderness and experience the Bright Day of the Soul soon enough.

Sound like a familiar story? Sound like yours? It will be.

Conference Critique: April 1998

A new low in lethargic hymn arrangements, a certain anxiety about the summer visit of the Southern Baptists, a new "protocol" orthodoxy of quoting President Gordon B. Hinckley (in thirteen out of twenty-three talks), and the fantasy of having an interactive component to the Church's website so that listeners could vote "I sustain," "I do not sustain," or "I sustain all except these parts" by each conference talk.

These were some of the characteristics and trends noted by alert conference watchers at the semi-annual Conference Critique in April. Moderator Janice Allred noted a slight two-conference trend toward fewer "institutional" (duties of members) talks -- 13, down from 15 at the last conference, slightly more doctrinal talks (up to 5 from 3, and slightly more talks on Christian living--7 up from 5. The Proclamation on the Family received a high level of attention, being quoted at least ten times.

Conference watchers mentioned appreciatively President Hinckley's willingness to apologize to non-Mormon children who have been picked on and bullied by LDS children, and Elder Holland's encouraging talk on improving teaching. "It's been a long time since anyone has suggested that the Church has some responsibility for the quality of what members are supposed to receive at meetings," noted one.

Other high points were Elder Edgeley's willingness, when a colleague felt that Mormons were not Christians, to first ask himself if anything his behavior had given her that impression; and other was the moving enthusiasm and faith of the African members broadcast in a video documentary of President Hinckley's recent trip to Africa.

ABOUT YOUR SUBSCRIPTION . . .

Please check the mailing label on the front of this newsletter. If it says 1997, you need to renew now to receive the 1998 volume of the Case Reports and the final newsletter for 1998, which will be mailed shortly before the October 1998 Conference Critique.

Subscriptions run on the calendar year, but "we stretched 1997 subscriptions this far into 1998 because people hadn't received their 1997 volume of the Case Reports yet," commented Lavina Fielding Anderson.

The 1998 volume will be a documentary history of the 1993-97 excommunications and firings. The first part will provide narrative overview of dates, events, places--basically a summary of what happened. The second part will consist of personal accounts talking about these events "from the inside."

More than the "September Six," these reports will include the departures from BYU of Cecilia Konchar Farr, David C. Knowlton, Brian Evenson, Gail Turley Houston, and Steve Epperson, and the disciplinary actions against Lynne Kanel Whitesides, Avraham Gileadi, Paul J. Toscano, Maxine Hanks, Lavina Fielding Anderson, D. Michael Quinn, David P. Wright, Michael Barrett, Brent Metcalfe, and Janice Merrill Allred.

"Publishing two volumes in one year will (finally) get us back on schedule, but it will also strain our budget," comments Lavina Fielding Anderson. "Contributions well be more-than-ever welcome with your renewal."

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There was general agreement that the conference was unusually positive, but opinions differed on whether this was a good thing. "I thought it was better than usual," said some. "It seemed less exhortatory." Others felt that the cheery emphasis on ideals actually sent a different and more negative message. "It seemed like a time warp to the early seventies when the Church was trying to eradicate juvenile delinquency and working women and divorce without ever actually mentioning that there was a problem," pointed out one conference watcher. "There was all this emphasis on the family, but it was always the *Ensign*-cover family. The longer they talked, the more groups got excluded."

One woman quoted her son as saying in response to the Young Women values statement (which begins, "I am a daughter of a Heavenly Father who loves me . . .") "It sounds like it's a single-parent family and that Dad got custody." Although there were many stories of mothers who had died and daughters who had taken over, there were no stories of mothers who rose to the occasion when their husbands died.

Several watchers expressed uneasiness with the unrelenting message during the Young Women's fireside that teenage girls should serve their families. "Service is a good thing," they agreed, "but there was no validation for girls who wanted to do anything else and no acknowledgement that any role besides that of service was important. What they didn't talk about got louder and louder."

"All four speakers stressed the importance of getting an education," added another, "but there wasn't a hint about what the girls were supposed to do with it afterwards. There was no acknowledgement that some will not marry, many will divorce or be widowed, and that some won't have children."

One man noted a strange double message in President Hinckley's encouragement to young men to make themselves worthy of the girl who would take a "terrible risk" in marrying him, "surrendering" even her name. "He seemed to be saying that a man is this uncivilized animal until the love of a pure woman reforms him, but afterwards, he takes over her life."

Another negative message to women occurred in President Packer's "endorsement" of the Relief Society. He had given a very similar talk in October 1980, which Mary Ellen Smoot had

quoted six months ago, promising "Your every need shall be fulfilled, now, and in the eternities; every neglect will be erased; every abuse will be corrected . . . when you devote yourself to Relief Society." Now he almost quoted himself, promising "As you give first priority to your family and serve your organization, your every need shall be fulfilled, every neglect will be erased, every abuse will be corrected."

Conference watchers, trying to hypothesize what problem this talk, with its denunciation of women's "so-called needs," was trying to solve, speculated that Relief Society attendance must have slipped sharply as women found it irrelevant to their needs. "Relief Society used to belong to the women," observed one woman sadly. "Now women belong to it."

One observer, who had been in the Tabernacle when the talk was given, commented that a ripple of laughter had begun when President Packer announced that men didn't talk about "men's issues" in quorum meetings, but it died quickly when the listeners realized that he wasn't making a joke.

Margaret Nadauld told the story of a bishop whose wife died and he called the children together to ask what their concerns were. His six-year-old daughter was most concerned about who would do her hair. The ward's Young Women taught the bishop how to curl her hair. In one way the story has a negative subtext: this "life-saving" (the bishop's word) function performed by the Young Women trivializes their contributions, but in another way the subtext was very positive: here was a father who listened to his child's concern and acquired a skill to meet the need.

ANNOUNCEMENT

On March 19, 1998, a lawsuit for damages, *Scott v. Corporation of the Presiding Bishop of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Gregory Lee Foster*, 98-366 AA, was filed against the Mormon Church in Portland, Oregon, in U.S. District Court. The suit charges that Church officials failed to warn or protect the plaintiff or the plaintiff's parents from a priesthood holder (Franklyn Richard Curtis) and youth leader whom they knew had an extensive history of sodomizing Mormon children.

The suit further accuses the Mormon Church of a pattern and practice of protecting Mormon pedophiles and other child sex offenders by failing to report incidents of child sex abuse as required by law, by discouraging victims from reporting incidents of abuse to the police, and by obstructing vigorous investigation of complaints of child sex abuse by civil authorities.

The attorney, Timothy D. Kosnoff, invites those who have personal knowledge of other incidents that would show this pattern and practice to contact him at (425) 637-3070, timkosnoff@seanet.com

Was this statement Brigham Young omitted from the Relief Society/Priesthood manual by mistake?

"I would rather be chopped to pieces at night, and resurrected in the morning, each day throughout a period of three-score years and ten, than be deprived of speaking freely, or be afraid of doing so. I will speak for my rights. 1 Aug. 1852, Journal of Discourses.

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