

A “Fountain of Filthy Water”

I am pleased to return to Sunstone and to see it again exists in the form we took for granted before Covid-19. I feel more welcomed here among you intellectuals, doubters, apostates, and seekers than I do now among the active Latter-day Saints. Like many of you, I see gaps, contradictions and falsehoods in the claims made by the LDS church. But I also see many gaps, contradictions and falsehoods in the critics of the LDS church. I’m a believer in Mormonism as Joseph Smith defined it: “One of the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may.” When it comes to Mormonism, renegade apostates are often that because they have discovered some new, unpleasant truth about the LDS church. These disappointed former saints are not evil and do not deserve being branded as ‘apostate’—but are in reality practicing a more correct form of Mormonism by accepting more truth.

The theme discussed by this year’s Symposium presenters is “(Main)Streaming Mormonism”—an effort by the LDS church to accomplish that objective is certainly underway. But if you define “Mormonism” as Joseph Smith did; that is: “One of the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may.” Well, then all of you who welcome the truth are Mormons. Even if that search has alienated you from the LDS church, or (in my case) alienated the LDS church from you. If you seek for truth then you are companions with Joseph Smith and “Mormons” as he defined it. [More on that later.]

As for the LDS church, the hope to mainstream their organization has resulted in two things happening simultaneously: First, the original form of Mormonism is being abandoned. Second, political, social, economic and moral trends of modernity are replacing it. Considering many of the titles chosen by presenters at this Symposium, it should be apparent to us all that the present-day LDS church is both threadbare and foolishly attempting to put patches of new cloth on an old garment.¹ The ‘traditional’ believer’s voices no longer dominate LDS meetings, conferences and lessons.

But this is getting ahead of the matter. I should start with another part of this story that requires me to clarify some matters about which many of you will hold very contrary views. I am not going to defend my position on foundational matters. I’ve already done that in some 38 volumes currently in

¹ Compare KJV Luke 3:36 (NC Luke 4:14).

print. This is an hour-long talk, so here is a list of things I believe, but won't be defending here:

- First, that Joseph Smith was in contact with God and used by Them to accomplish a Divine work.
- Second, that Joseph Smith was a devoted monogamist, faithful to his only wife, Emma. Emma had the stronger personality and better formal education of the two.
- Third, that Joseph Smith opposed plural wivery, did what he could to discover it and eradicate it from Nauvoo, and believed that these secret adulterous crimes would lead to the destruction of the church.
- Forth, that it is wise, noble and virtuous to follow Joseph Smith's example and counsel, and foolish to hold him in derision and attribute wickedness (including adulterous plural wivery) to him. Ultimately, those who believe and trust lies regarding him will have reason to mourn.²
- Fifth, while Joseph Smith was at the head Mormonism was optimistic, utopian, revolutionary and innovative. It was intent on reshaping the world into a better, more egalitarian place.³
- Finally, Joseph Smith was not understood by the majority of those living in Nauvoo during his lifetime.⁴ Once Brigham Young ascended to control over the LDS faithful, he implemented a different (although arguably still utopian) form of Mormonism than what Joseph Smith and God intended to accomplish with the restoration.

² "The ends of the earth shall inquire after your name, and fools shall have you in derision, and hell shall rage against you, while the pure in heart, and the wise, and the noble, and the virtuous shall seek counsel, and authority, and blessings constantly from under your hand. And your people shall never be turned against you by the testimony of traitors, and although their influence shall cast you into trouble, and into bars and walls, you shall be had in honor. And but for a small moment, and your voice shall be more terrible in the midst of your enemies than the fierce lion, because of your righteousness, and your God shall stand by you for ever and ever." (Letter from Liberty Jail, found in D&C 122:1-4; and T&C 139:7.)

³ As part of his presidential platform Joseph Smith proposed selling public lands to raise the money to purchase slaves and free them from slavery. Had this been the course followed by the United States the Civil War would have likely been averted, and the south would not have been bankrupt from the emancipation of slaves. Capital would have allowed former slaves to be employed and paid, making 'share-cropping' and the ensuing impoverishment of freed black manual laborers a chapter of our history that never happened. The Civil War legacy led to carpetbaggers from the North exploiting the impoverished South. Query whether the "War on Poverty" in the 1960s would have been needed if freed African slaves could have been gainfully employed following their emancipation. The Bureau of Land Management might not exist now, or would control far less Federal land. We just do not know how great a price the United States has paid for rejecting Joseph Smith.

⁴ As Joseph said to the Nauvoo crowd during the King Follett Sermon on April 7, 1844: "You don't know me; you never knew my heart. No man knows my history. I cannot tell it: I shall never undertake it. I don't blame any one for not believing my history. If I had not experienced what I have, I could not have believed it myself."

Joseph was constantly adding to the breadth, depth and width of a religion he understood to have been both ancient and lost. He claimed to be a restorer, not an inventor. When the text of Genesis says that man was formed “in the image of God, male and female...” it only hinted at the truth Joseph would add about mankind: “You have to learn how to be Gods yourselves, and be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done before you, namely by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one: from grace to grace from exaltation to exaltation until you attain to the resurrection of the dead.”⁵ Joseph taught we have not only God’s “image” but also Their potential. Joseph held a much more elevated view of mankind than did Christianity of the 1800s.

I prefer the optimistic, self-confident, revolutionary Mormonism of Joseph Smith over the devolving form it has since assumed. The deformities have multiplied and it now is lurching forward toward an unrecognizably abominable form.⁶

LDS Mormonism has not seen such radical changes as Russell Nelson’s since Brigham Young’s reign. At one point Brigham Young’s agenda brought Utah’s Mormonism into a violent, downward spiral that the US Army was sent to dethrone him as governor. President Young hoped to employ Native Americans as the “battle axe of the Lord,” but that came to nothing. A few years later the Blackhawk War from 1865 to 1872 proved that ‘battle axe’ was the Lord’s, and He wielded it against the Mormons rather than the gentiles. Brigham Young did not take the hint when removed as Governor, and he ignored the slap when the Natives made war against the Mormons. Likewise, Nelson is ignoring the tremendous outflow of disaffected LDS now underway. Instead of radically adopting bad ideas, the LDS church should just be truthful.

Truth need not destroy faith in God, in Joseph Smith, or in Mormonism. Once the varnish is removed, keep digging and remove the veneer also. What you will find is that the LDS church has warped even Joseph Smith as part of their false narrative. There is sturdy lumber lying beneath the marketing veneer of corporate LDS-ism.

⁵ King Follett Sermon, April 7, 1844.

⁶ The term “abomination” is defined in the Glossary of the Restoration Scriptures edition as: “The use of religion to suppress truth or impose a false form of truth. It involves the religious justification of wrongdoing. That is, something becomes abominable when it is motivated out of a false form of religious observance or is justified because of religious error.” I use it in that sense.

There is a vast library supporting institutional LDS historical claims. The LDS church has always been prolific-propagandists, whose effort to claim historical support for themselves has been enthusiastic and overeager. It was, after all, the saints who threatened to “exterminate” the Missourians first, but church apologists have preserved that memory only in the form of a cruel order by Missouri Governor Lilburn Boggs. He was only a reactionary.

There were LDS apostles who strayed into bigamy and ‘spiritual wifeism’ in England years before it became something they attributed to Joseph Smith.⁷ The LDS reliance on William Clayton’s Journal is misplaced.⁸

The Church History Library withholds many original resource materials, including contemporary journals, diaries and letters from the public. Interesting materials are becoming increasingly available that provide a valuable peek inside censored, authentic LDS history.⁹

Woodruff’s Official Declaration 1 was a lie, and the “Manifesto” was only to mislead the ‘gentiles’ long enough to get statehood for Utah. The document remains part of the LDS scripture canon as if it were an authentic renunciation of plural marriage.

There is another library, not quite so prolific, written by LDS naysayers. They, too, have been enthusiastic if not overeager. After reading both libraries, I’ve reached the conclusion that both overstate their cases and wind up distorting

⁷ Brigham Young, Williard Richards and Wilford Woodruff said they got a “testimony” of plural wives while missionaries in England. The origin of polygamy is far more likely from the Cochranites of Saco, Main. Jacob Cochran thought “seven women shall take hold of one man” authorized sexual license, and he disregarded traditional marriage as unnecessary. Nine of the twelve LDS apostles served missions among these people. This, however, is beyond the scope of this talk.

⁸ For example, one critical passage originally read: “Gave instructions to try those persons who were preaching, teaching, or practicing the doctrine of plurality of wives; no man shall have but one wife at a time.” But was edited to instead read: “Gave instructions to try those persons who were preaching, teaching, or practicing the doctrine of plurality of wives; **for, according to the law, I hold the keys of this power in the last days; for there is never but one on earth at a time on whom the power and its keys are conferred and I have constantly said** no man shall have but one wife at a time, **unless the Lord directs otherwise.**” The edited version has been used by the LDS church without disclosing these edited insertions, until the *Joseph Smith Papers* project disclosed a facsimile of the original.

⁹ See, e.g., *A Ministry of Meetings: The Apostolic Diaries of Rudger Clawson*, Signature Books in association with Smith Research Associates, Salt Lake City 1993; *Candid Insights of a Mormon Apostle: The Diaries of Abraham H. Cannon, 1889-1895*, Signature Books in association with Smith-Pettit Foundation, Salt Lake City 2010; *In the President’s Office: The Diaries of L. John Nuttall, 1879-1892*, Signature Books in association with Smith-Pettit Foundation, Salt Lake City 2007, among others.

who and what Joseph Smith was. As a result, I do not fit into the LDS church and they properly excommunicated me. As they define “apostasy” I did that. I apostasied. They have every right to define the terms for continuing membership in their religious club, and I violated their terms. However, I do not hold a virulent view of Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, or whether God was up to something beginning in the early 1820s. I believe that something resulted in an inspired renewal of God’s commitment to help mankind. For that reason many of you also have strong disagreement with me.

I doubt anything I have to say will be welcome on either side of the ‘pro vs. con’ LDS divide. But at least my voice is heard and even welcomed here. Sunstone is still a valuable meeting ground for Mormons of every stripe.

As LDS Mormonism undergoes another metamorphosis, one question I think should be asked is, ‘what is the role of religion’ any religion, in any society, at any time in history—what role does it serve? To me the answer is to preserve proven or traditional values, to stabilize society against rapid and often disruptive change. Religion impedes new ideas from diverting society into a potentially unwise detour from traditions that have provided stability. Correspondingly, the greatest criticism of religion is that it interferes with adopting fashionable, new ideas. It is inevitable that when “old flattop” comes “grooving up slowly” with “hair down to his knees”¹⁰ he challenges the status quo, and provokes a chorus of churchgoing criticism.

“Changes” require you to “turn and face the strange,”¹¹ often leading to an uncertain, unpredictable outcome. The voices urging change offend the religions, all religions, because they oppose social stasis. A good lyricist has put the matter both clearly and persuasively:

Come mothers and fathers throughout the land
And don’t criticize what you can’t understand
Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command
Your old road is rapidly aging
Please get out of the new one if you can’t lend your hand
For the times, they are a-changin’¹²

Because LDS Mormonism is teetering on this brink, the Sunstone Symposium this year is timely. It comes when most of you are cheering on this current

¹⁰ *Come Together* by John Lennon and Paul McCartney.

¹¹ *Changes* by David Bowie.

¹² *The Times They are a-Changin* by Bob Dylan.

metamorphosis of LDS Mormonism. LDS leaders have made more changes since Russell M. Nelson ascended to the top at any other time, excepting only Brigham Young. Nelson embraces change, even advising his followers to “eat their vitamins”¹³ so they can keep up with his aggressive agenda. His wife, Wendy Nelson, said his elevation would now “unleash” the changes he always aspired to adopt.¹⁴

All the recent LDS policy changes tell us where the leadership’s heart lies: The church longs to be far more “woke”¹⁵ and popular, urging its adherents to prize a “living prophet” and neglect the dead ones. Dead ones said things unsuitable (or at least very uncomfortable) in the Brave New World where LDS Mormonism awakens. And so we have Elder Haynie of the first quorum of the seventy, telling the LDS faithful in General Conference, “unlike vintage comic books and classic cars, prophetic teachings do not become more valuable with age.” Elder Haynie added, “we should not seek to use the words of past prophets to dismiss the teachings of the living prophets.”¹⁶ That turns things onto its head but will be necessary because LDS “living prophets” contradict and ignore past prophets and even scripture.

Even the vocabulary of “living prophets” was an innovation during the presidency of David O. McKay. Before then, the LDS leader was called “President” and not “Prophet.” Opinion polling showed that LDS members responded more readily when the word “Prophet” was used, and therefore it got adopted in February 1955 by the LDS *Deseret News* and has continued in use ever since.¹⁷ Query whether now an ‘LDS Prophet’ could implement female ordination by fiat—or if past teachings would prohibit such a change? It

¹³ “If you think the Church has been fully restored, you’re just seeing the beginning. There is much more to come. ... Wait till next year. And then the next year. Eat your vitamin pills. Get your rest. It’s going to be exciting.” LDS Newsroom, 2018, *How Did the Church Change This Year?*

¹⁴ “I have seen him changing in the last ten months,” said Sister Nelson. “It is as though he’s been unleashed. He’s free to finally do what he came to earth to do. ... And also, he’s free to follow through with things he’s been concerned about but could never do. Now that he’s president of [the Church], he can do those things.” LDS Newsroom, 30 October 2018, *Latter-day Saint Prophet, Wife and Apostle Share Insights of Global Ministry*.

¹⁵ The term originated in the US black population and was adopted in general use following the Black Lives Matter movement in 2014. The *Miriam-Webster Dictionary* now defines it as a slang word meaning: “aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice).”

¹⁶ *A Living Prophet for the Latter Days*, Elder Allen D. Haynie, LDS General Conference talk, April 2023 General Conference talk.

¹⁷ See D. Michel Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power*, Salt Lake City, Signature Books, 1997, p. 363. For an extended discussion of the matter see my book, *Passing the Heavenly Gift*, Salt Lake City, Mill Creek Press, 2011, chapter 13, *Correlation: Controlling and Curtailing*, pp. 347-375.

probably comes down to when Baby Boomer tithe payers will poll in favor of making the change.¹⁸

The Community of Christ has ordained women since 1984, and today five of their twelve apostles are women. The LDS organization appears, from the symptoms of recent behavior, to look with envy on that achievement. The overtures are there: Russell Ballard's May 1, 2015 talk at BYU (*The Essential Role of Women*) mentioning how women have been allowed to weigh in on church councils, from wards to the highest levels of church administration. Then rewriting the temple endowment to put Eve into direct rather, than indirect, contact with Elohim. The LDS patriarchy glacier clearly wants to melt and run rapidly downhill, freed from the icy prison of its past. Homosexuality is no longer grounds for excommunication.¹⁹ Some homosexuals serve in local leadership positions.²⁰

In a gesture that was likely intended to keep more traditional Baby Boomer believers to 'hold fast', Dallin H. Oaks spoke to the LDS youth in May 2023. His talk was reported by Peggy Fletcher Stack on May 21, 2023. She reported his talk included this advice:

“Marriage is central to the purpose of mortal life and what follows,” said Oaks. “We are children of a loving Heavenly Father who created us with the capacity to follow his commandment to multiply and replenish the earth.”

The power of creation is “one of the most precious gifts we have in mortal life,” he said, but “central to that gift is the law of chastity, the commandment that our powers of procreation be expressed only within marriage between a man and a woman.”

¹⁸ See, e.g., Jeffrey Holland's October 2006 LDS General Conference talk, *Prophets in the Land Again* in which he refers to their focus group testing and opinion polling with these words: “I testify that the grasp this body of men and women have of moral and societal issues exceeds that of any think tank or brain trust of comparable endeavor of which I know anywhere on the earth.”

¹⁹ See, e.g., Russell Ballard's talk, *The Lord Needs You Now!* “Let us be clear: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believes that ‘the experience of same-sex attraction is a complex reality for many people. The attraction itself is not a sin but acting on it is. Even though individuals do not choose to have such attractions, they do choose how to respond to them. With love and understanding, the Church reaches out to all God's children, including [those with same-sex attraction]” (*Ensign*, Sept. 2015, 29), quoted on the LDS website (<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/topics/gay/individuals?lang=eng>) in the answer to the question “Is feeling same-sex attraction a sin?”

²⁰ See, e.g., <https://religiondispatches.org/openly-gay-mormon-appointed-to-lds-church-leadership-position/> which discusses the call of a gay man to serve as ward executive secretary in a San Francisco congregation.

Delaying childbearing, he said, “means fewer children born to grow up with the blessings of the gospel.”²¹

There’s more than a little common sense to that advice. Catholicism has lasted for two millennia in part because, although its clergy is celibate, its members are traditionally quite fecund. Catholic teachings oppose abortion and birth control, and emphasize having large families. The result is that over the generations, Catholic membership numbers exceed 1 billion.

The one thing that almost all varieties of homosexuality fail to produce is children. Homosexuality does not result in pregnancy and/or children. Transsexuals do not reproduce. It will take only one generation of such sexual non-productivity to “leave them neither root nor branch.”²² Those Biblical words are genealogical terms, and in context mean without descendants or posterity. It is not a matter of ‘go woke, go broke’ but instead a matter of ‘empty wombs leaves only tombs.’ Any church, including the LDS, which wants to survive the next century, will need a birth-rate well above the mortality rate.

The theme that worldly popularity is antithetical to godliness appears early in the Book of Mormon. Lehi saw but failed to notice, and Nephi both noticed and described the meaning of filthy water:

And the angel spake unto me, saying, Behold the fountain of filthy water which thy father saw, yea, even the river of which he spake; and the depths thereof are the depths of hell. And the mists of darkness are the temptations of the Devil which blindeth the eyes and hardeneth the hearts of the children of men and leadeth them away into broad roads, that they perish and are lost. And the large and spacious building which thy father saw is vain imaginations and the pride of the children of men. And a great and a terrible gulf divideth them, yea, even the sword of the justice of the Eternal God and Messiah who is the Lamb of God. (1 Ne. 3:17.)

Broad roads and large, spacious buildings are symbols of worldly success, acceptance, popularity and vanity. Pretty much what we get in the values

²¹ *Stop delaying marriage and start having kids, Dallin Oaks urges Latter-day Saints*, report of Peggy Fletcher Stack in Salt Lake Tribune on the youth fireside talk by Dallin H. Oaks.

²² OC-Malachi 1:10; NC-3 Ne. 11:4; T&C 58:8.

advocated by mass media, entertainment, current fashion and now well represented in opinion polling among those aged 18-35.

In contrast, as Joseph Smith taught, there is a narrow pathway that runs contrariwise and is to be preferred:

[I]f one man cannot understand these things but by the spirit of God, ten thousand men cannot. It is alike out of the reach of the wisdom of the learned, the tongue of the eloquent, the power of the mighty. And we shall at last have to come to this conclusion, whatever we may think of revelation, that without it we can neither know nor understand anything of God, or the Devil; and however unwilling the world may be to acknowledge this principle, it is evident from the multifarious creeds and notions concerning this matter that they understand nothing of this principle, and it is equally as plain that without a divine communication they must remain in ignorance. The world always mistook false prophets for true ones, and those that were sent of God they considered to be false prophets, and hence they killed, stoned, punished, and imprisoned the true prophets, and they had to hide themselves *in deserts, and dens, and caves of the earth*, and though the most honorable men of the earth, they banished them from their society as vagabonds, while they cherished, honored, and supported knaves, vagabonds, hypocrites, impostors, and the basest of men. (T&C 147:6, italics in original.)

Joseph Smith was killed by the conspiracy of adulterous insiders, jealous politicians, and mobs motivated by lies. They did not understand him or know what he stood for. The LDS church today has essentially adopted those same slanderous lies as their version of his biography. And many of you think him to have been a pedophile and a liar. I disagree. In 1829 God predicted there would be these opposing views:

The ends of the earth shall inquire after your name, and fools shall have you in derision, and hell shall rage against you, while the pure in heart, and the wise, and the noble, and the virtuous shall seek counsel, and authority, and blessings constantly from under your hand. And your people shall never be turned against you by the testimony of traitors, and although their influence shall cast you into trouble, and into bars and walls, you shall be had in honor. (D&C 122:1-3; T&C 139:7.)

I hold Joseph in high regard, believing he was a much greater spiritual presence than what he claimed publicly—meaning he understated his visionary calling and mission. He was a friend of heaven, and that alone vouches for his character. I think I understand what heaven requires of a prophet. The caricature believed to be Joseph Smith by the LDS church and many of those attending this Symposium is not a fair representation of what is required to have the heavens opened.²³ God does not entrust salvation of the souls of men to the self-indulgent and sexually promiscuous.

Mormonism today seems to agree with one of the anti-Christ characters of the Book of Mormon. It was Nehor whose message was:

“preaching to them that which he termed to be the word of God, bearing down against the church, declaring unto the people that every priest and teacher ought to become popular and they ought not to labor with their own hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people. And he also testified unto the people that all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice, for the Lord had created all men and had also redeemed all men; and in the end, all men should have eternal life.” (Alma 1:1.)

The religion of Nehor is not only practiced by the LDS church, but also by many of that church’s opponents. The many podcasts, websites and ministries that are anti-LDS hope to be popular and supported financially by their audience. In a sense they are part of broadening mainstream Mormonism by the practice of anti-Mormonism. They contribute by advocating either the futility of salvation in the afterlife, or that salvation is generally available without any need to accept or acknowledge Joseph Smith’s contribution to God’s work of saving us. “Mormonism” has therefore become an inadvertent broad tent, being practiced even by everyone attending this Symposium.

²³ The established criteria is set out in scripture: “Verily thus says the Lord: It shall come to pass that every soul who forsakes their sins, and comes unto me, and calls on my name, and obeys my voice, and keeps all my commandments, shall see my face and know that I am, and that I am the true light that lights every man who comes into the world, and that I am in the Father and the Father in me, and the Father and I are one — the Father because he gave me of his fullness, and the Son because I was in the world, and made flesh my tabernacle, and dwelt among the sons of men.” D&C 93:1-4; T&C 93:1.

Sincere Nehorists are preaching, teaching and crying “Lo here! And Lo there!” inside these turbulent LDS competitors’ competition for consideration.

Any attempt to be part of a mainstream of thought is denounced in the Book of Mormon. If there is a “truth” to be valued, then whether it is popular or not the Book of Mormon prefers we follow that truth without regard to the opinion of others:

For the time speedily shall come that all churches which are built up to get gain, and all those who are built up to get power over the flesh, and those who are built up to become popular in the eyes of the world, and those who seek the lusts of the flesh and the things of the world and to do all manner of iniquity — yea, in fine, all those who belong to the kingdom of the Devil — are they who need fear, and tremble, and quake. They are those who must be brought low in the dust, they are those who must be consumed as stubble; and this is according to the words of the prophet. (1 Ne. 7:5.)

Following truth in a lifelong quest to discover more light and truth rewards the seeker. Popularity invariably pulls away from enlightenment and toward decadence. “The truth is not always beautiful, nor beautiful words the truth.”²⁴

Then there is this:

Behold, the gold, and the silver, and the silks, and the scarlets, and the fine twined linen, and the precious clothing, and the harlots are the desires of this great and abominable church. And also for the praise of the world do they destroy the saints of God and bring them down into captivity. (1 Ne. 3:19.)

There is a lot of money in religion. The charitable impulse produces a great deal. Gold, silver, silk and harlots are often where tithes and offerings wind up among successful religious organizations. That is why today we have been taught by the Lord to not gather tithes, but to distribute them locally and immediately within fellowships to those with needs. Those needs include food,

²⁴ Attributed to Laozi (Lao Tzu), who was an ancient Chinese Taoist philosopher believed to have lived in the 6th Century BC.

clothing, housing, transportation, education and medical needs. This precludes the need for any Ensign Peak Advisors.²⁵

What about those “harlots” that creep in at the end of that list? How far does that word extend? Are drag-queens contemplated as part of the harlotry? Transvestites? Is the effort to popularize sexual dysphoria through such institutionalized events as “Pride Month” included as “harlotry?” Can we accept and welcome such conduct while adding “sin no more” tolerance, or something else? If there were to be homosexuals in the final, actual City called by the Lord ‘Zion,’ would they ignite in flames when the Lord appears in His glory? What thoughts expand as we contemplate the “harlots” that are the desires of this great and abominable church? Can we ever discuss the matter without fear and loathing? Or are we doomed to damning one another because we are too immature and foolish to talk honestly and candidly with one another?

Frequently sexual dysphoria has an underlying traumatic cause.²⁶ Many personality disorders are likewise the result of unresolved trauma.²⁷ Certainly the Bible and Book of Mormon have many triggering words. Religion can also be the source of well-intentioned abuse. And good intentions alone cannot repair the scars inflicted.

The anti-Mormons are often as abusive in their approach as the LDS church they oppose. Benjamin Franklin said: “Half a truth is often a great lie.” When the search extends only far enough to discover a justified criticism, the search ought not end. Whatever your conclusion is about Mormonism, you are probably wrong. Even the claim you are thinking for yourself is vain, as Kathryn Schulz explained in her landmark book, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*.

²⁵ This non-profit organization controls over \$38 billion in an investment portfolio for the LDS church and has been fined \$1 million for dishonesty about its affairs. See the SEC release dated February 21, 2023 titled: *SEC Charges The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Its Investment Management Company for Disclosure Failures and Misstated Filings*, available at: <https://www.sec.gov/news/press-release/2023-35>

²⁶ See, e.g., Colizzi M, Costa R, Todarello O. *Dissociative symptoms in individuals with gender dysphoria: is the elevated prevalence real?* Psychiatry Res. 2015 Mar 30;226(1):173-80. doi: 10.1016/j.psychres.2014.12.045. Epub 2015 Jan 23. PMID: 25656174; also sources cited there.

²⁷ See, e.g., Lisa Firestone, PhD, *Dealing with Unresolved Trauma*, Psychology Today, March 2018, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/compassion-matters/201803/dealing-unresolved-trauma>

Thinking for oneself is, beyond a doubt, a laudable goal. But there are three problems with the idea that it is a good way to ward off error. The first is that the glorification of independent thought can easily become a refuge for holders of utterly oddball beliefs. You can dismiss any quantity of informed and intelligent adversaries if you chose to regard them as victims of a collective, crowd-driven madness, while casting yourself as the lone voice of truth. The second problem is (as we have seen), our own direct observations and experiences are not necessarily more trustworthy than secondhand knowledge. ...

The last and most significant problem with the idea that we should always think for ourselves is that, bluntly put, we can't. Every one of us is profoundly dependent on other people's minds—so profoundly that if we took seriously the charge to think for ourselves, we would have to relinquish our faith in the vast majority of the things we think we know. In his *Confessions*, Augustine wrote that,

I began to realize that I believed countless things which I had never seen or which had taken place when I was not there to see—so many events in the history of the world, so many facts about places and towns which I had never seen, and so much that I believed on the word of friends or doctors or various other people. Unless we took these things on trust, we should accomplish absolutely nothing in this life.²⁸

This explanation of the problem of proof, knowledge, and thinking for yourself reminds me of the Second Lecture on Faith. But that is beyond the scope of this talk.

Today the Lord has provided a way to practice Mormonism without the risk of being subjugated to an insecure, insular hierarchy. Hierarchies eventually succumb to the temptation to make the institution itself “God.” Today we are asked to fellowship independently, joining together in our homes without brick and mortar facilities. It is one small precaution against priestcrafts, which always replace priesthood in hierarchical religions. They are described in the Book of Mormon:

²⁸ Kathryn Schulz, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*, New York City, Harper Collins, 2010, pp. 139-140.

He commandeth that there shall be no priestcrafts; for behold, priestcrafts are that men preach and set themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of the world, but they seek not the welfare of Zion. Behold, the Lord hath forbidden this thing; (2 Ne. 11:17.)

It may be forbidden by God, but priestcraft is the inexorable result of a stratified body of believers where power and influence are concentrated in an office. The LDS church was doomed to apostasy as soon as Joseph and Hyrum were killed because offices of “President” and “Patriarch” could be occupied by anyone. There was no need to wait for God to choose a suitable occupant. A vote by common consent was considered enough to put a person in the office. Over time the ill-defined concept of “keys” took center stage. Now, even common consent is irrelevant because the “keys” (whatever you conceive them to be) are held by the leader. Therefore the hierarchy feels comfortable teaching that there is no God today, for the Lord and the Redeemer hath done his work, and he hath given his power unto men. If you want salvation, hearken ye unto my precept. The bloated, distended, swollen, but altogether ill-defined idol of “keys” has replaced the unknowable God described in the Athanasian Creed.²⁹

Mormonism is no longer interested in gathering together believers to establish a city of peace. Instead it is gathering together funds for a ‘rainy day’ and for the payroll needs of far-flung interests of the institution.

And behold, instead of gathering you, except ye will repent, behold, he shall scatter you forth that ye shall become meat for dogs and wild beasts. Oh how could you have forgotten your God in the very day that he has delivered you? But behold, it is to get gain, to be praised of men, yea, and that ye might get gold and silver. And ye have set your hearts upon the riches and the vain things of this world, for the which ye do murder, and plunder, and steal, and bear false witness against your neighbor, and do all

²⁹ The Creed was attributed to Athanasius (298-373 A.D.), Archbishop of Alexandria, however was likely not written by him. The Creed includes the words, “Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit. The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible.” Similarly, the term “keys” used by the LDS church has vague, but prolific, lip-service given in General Conference talks. In the end, it comes down to the right to exercise control and dominion over the church membership.

manner of iniquity; and for this cause, woe shall come unto you except ye shall repent. (Hel. 3:4.)

It becomes apparent that the Book of Mormon unequivocally denounces the LDS church and her daughters. Despite what those who attend Sunstone or post on the exMormon Reddit forum, to listen to Mormon Stories or Radio Free Mormon, watch Shawn McCraney think of themselves, they are all daughters of the LDS church every bit as much as the FLDS and Apostolic United Brethren. Mormonism controls their content. It makes little difference they are pro or con, they are still part of today's Mormonism. They are all comfortably situated in a 'broad mainstream' into which the LDS church's gradualism has been, and is, proceeding.

Joseph Smith hoped to welcome all into a friendly brotherhood of mixed faiths peacefully co-existing. "Have the Presbyterians any truth? Yes. Have the Baptists, Methodists, &c., any truth? Yes. They all have a little truth mixed with error. We should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up, or we shall not come out true 'Mormons.'"³⁰ It was truth, not sectarianism that mattered to him: "One of the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may." In that same spirit, would Joseph Smith be willing to likewise acknowledge, "Has John Dehlin any truth?" and answer, "Yes." And would Joseph ask, "have RFM, exMormon Reddit, or Shawn McCraney any truth?" and admit likewise, "Yes."

Brigham Young twisted big-idea, broadminded Mormonism. He instituted an integrated patriarchal and polygamous society that employed threats, intimidation and murder to reign with blood and horror³¹ in his Telestial

³⁰ History of the Church, 5:517 (23 July 1843).

³¹ As part of the Mormon Reformation, the "Home Missionary Program" was instituted to intimidate the isolated saints. They were subjected to an inquisition to determine whether they were guilty of sins worthy of shedding their own blood under Young's doctrine of "blood atonement." The first four questions posed to church members were: "Have you committed murder, by shedding innocent blood, or consenting thereto? Have you betrayed your brethren or sisters in anything? Have you committed adultery, by having any connection with a woman that was not your wife or a man that was not your husband? Have you taken and made use of property not your own, without the consent of the owner?" For a complete list see Paul H. Peterson, *The Mormon Reformation of 1856-1857: The Rhetoric and the Reality*, Journal of Mormon History, Vol. 15, 1989, p. 59, p. 70. Brigham Young's Reformation included a twenty-seven question interrogation put to all the saints by inquisitorial Home Missionaries. These questions asked about issues such as "betraying your brothers or sisters," committing adultery or shedding innocent blood.³¹ These three sins were grounds for blood atonement. The questions were designed to bring into the homes of every resident of the kingdom the reality that their unfaithfulness may not be tolerated by the kingdom.

Kingdom. I spoke about that in a previous Sunstone Symposium³² and will not address that again here. Young's leadership viewed outsiders or non-Mormons with disdain as though they threatened his kingship. His fiery rhetoric helped inspire the Mountain Meadows Massacre. While employed as LDS Church Historian, Richard Turley acknowledged, "tough talk about blood atonement and dissenters must have helped create a climate of violence in the territory, especially among those who chose to take license from it."³³ That would be the apologist's view, but more candor would admit that Stake President Isaac C. Haight and other LDS leadership organized and executed the slaughter at Mountain Meadows, even holding a prayer circle prior to the killing.³⁴

Wilford Woodruff wanted to keep the polygamous practices in place but tried to hide it from public view to get statehood. Congress, the President and the US Supreme Court would not be placated, and when the Edmunds-Tucker Act passed in 1887 both the church and its Perpetual Emigrating Fund were disincorporated. Woodruff yielded and by September 24, 1890, President Woodruff knew the U.S. Supreme Court had found the federal campaign against Mormonism to be constitutional. The church's property was forfeited, trustees had acquired title, and criminal prosecution for bigamy was lawful. In the face of that pressure, the "Manifesto" was issued pretending the practice of plural marriage was over.³⁵ It was a lie. The Manifesto was written by church lawyers in response to the Utah Commission's finding that plural marriages were continuing in Utah even after the U.S. Supreme Court decision. Woodruff's Manifesto denies the report. Later in 1890, when the abandonment of polygamy made statehood at last possible, Mormonism reached a point of "abandonment of its violent culture and the beginning of its selective memory of a turbulent past."³⁶ Polygamy continued, but went underground.

From 1903 to 1907 the US Senate debated whether to seat Reed Smoot as a member of the Senate. This was before Senators were popularly elected, and he had been appointed by the LDS church-dominated legislature. During the Reed Smoot Senate Confirmation Hearings, LDS President Joseph F. Smith testified

³² In the 2012 Sunstone Symposium I read an abridged paper titled *Brigham Young's Telestial Kingdom*, which was subsequently published with two other papers in the book *Essays: Three Degrees*. That paper is available on my website denversnuffer.com to download.

³³ Ronald Walker, Richard Turley Jr., and Glen Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows: An American Tragedy*. (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008), p. 25-27.

³⁴ Before executing their plan, "The men sat in a circle off by themselves and began by praying for 'Divine guidance,' a sacrilege that only the passions of the time could explain." *Id.*, pp. 187, 189.

³⁵ It constitutes Official Declaration 1 in the LDS Doctrine and Covenants.

³⁶ D. Michael Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power*, (Signature Books, Salt Lake City, 1997), pp. 260-61.

under oath that the practice of polygamy had ended. Apparently, shortly after that testimony, he took the step to officially end it and submit to US rule. That change of direction was not merely submission to the government, but Mormons changed culturally as well. The ambition to create an independent kingdom turned to dust, and uber-Americanism became the new order of things. Baseball, apple pie, Boy Scouts, pledges of allegiance, and hopeful conformity into the American ideal was progressively how Mormonism projected itself into the Twentieth-century. It worked.

Gordon B. Hinckley helped accelerate this assimilation using public relations tools. Opinion polling and focus group testing informed LDS programs, messages and even temple changes. Social science tools became the new form of ‘revelation’ as the institution adopted social studies and marketing tools in the quest for popular acceptance.

The unsteady course that the LDS church has followed over their history resulted in a compromised, untenable message now that alienates everyone on one issue or another. The message is as frayed and discordant as this:

-Homosexuality is evil and God destroyed Sodom because of its wickedness

-BUT, children are innocent before God

-HOWEVER, children raised by homosexual parents cannot be baptized because of the malevolent influence of the parents until after they leave home at 18

-EXCEPT, we’ve changed our mind now that we think about the unaccountability of children for the sins of their parents

-AND, now that we think about it, everyone has sexual fantasies, so if your queer and only fantasize then you’re not unlike the typical Elders Quorum President who fantasizes about women he can add to his harem in the afterlife because of D&C 132³⁷

-SO, we’re tolerant and accepting of everyone, and love queers, but don’t approve of their behavior; ‘cuz God destroyed Sodom after all...

OR, as discordant as:

-We teach that Joseph Smith lied about multiple wives

-We lied when we said publicly that we abandoned the practice

³⁷ The tragic legacy of polygamy lingers in LDS minds. See Carol Lynn Pearson’s *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy: Haunting the Hearts and Heaven of Mormon Women and Men*, Pivot Point Books (July 12, 2016).

-SO, we are just like Joseph Smith when we lie about multiple wives
-AND, we've added it to our scriptures (even though it was a lie)
-BUT, we really now do want to stop that excess wivery thing so Joseph F. will mail out a letter (and it's not scripture),
-AND SO, now 'all we have to do is take these lies and make them true'³⁸
-THEREFORE, D&C 132 authorizing plural wives, and OD1 ending it will both remain LDS scriptures...
-BECAUSE we are just like Joseph Smith when we lie about stuff; and that is how 'modern prophets' always act...

I'm trying to understand their position and I think that represents a fair retelling of it. Maybe not, but I've tried to pay attention and I'm not deliberately mischaracterizing their message(s). It is an on-again/off-again attempt to be traditional and untraditional, not too hot, but not too cold, firm, but yielding when needed. If the LDS church is ashamed of its history, it would be better for the institution and its members for the leaders to confess and drain the infection than to deny and lie. I'm not suggesting that as an attack or as an enemy. I'm sincerely trying to be helpful. I hate to witness the LDS church failure now underway. If it is to be reversed, it can only come through institutional confession and acknowledging errors—or what the scriptures term “repentance.”

Wouldn't we all be better off if there was one, consistent, unchangeable message that was reliably stated across the centuries. You can disagree with it, argue against it, reject or accept it but it should be knowable and unchangeable if religion is serving its purpose.

If there was a broad mainstream of popular opinion in the 1920s, supported by popular opinion, journalism and entertainment, (and there was) did the LDS church fit in then? How about the broad mainstream in the 1950s? How well did the LDS church adapt to the cultural changes of the 1960s? What about the morass of today's broad mainstream? Can today's mainstream even be defined? Can the same church attract membership from the ranks of Democrats and Republicans, New Green Deal advocates, Black Lives Matter, NRA members, Bill Maher, and Tucker Carlson fans? Probably not. If the organization is trying to be all things to all people.

³⁸ See, George Michael, *Freedom* (lyrics) Columbia Records, October 1990.

Probably so, if the message is a timeless statement of moral values that advises people and lets them govern themselves. A religion needs to stand for something solid, reliable and knowable.

Churches must understand that drifting along with the stream, choices need to be made. It is impossible to float along rudderless without getting grounded on one bank or the other.

As the Book of Mormon reminds us, popularity may be profitable, but it can be morally hollow:

O ye wicked, and perverse, and stiffnecked people, why have you built up churches unto yourselves to get gain? Why have ye transfigured the holy word of God that ye might bring damnation upon your souls? Behold, look ye unto the revelations of God, for behold, the time cometh at that day when all these things must be fulfilled. Behold, the Lord hath shewn unto me great and marvelous things concerning that which must shortly come at that day when these things shall come forth among you. Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shewn you unto me, and I know your doing, and I know that ye do walk in the pride of your hearts. And there are none, save a few only, who do not lift themselves up in the pride of their hearts, unto the wearing of very fine apparel, unto envying, and strifes, and malice, and persecutions, and all manner of iniquity. And your churches, yea, even every one, have become polluted because of the pride of your hearts. For behold, ye do love money, and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your churches, more than ye love the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted. O ye pollutions, ye hypocrites, ye teachers who sell yourselves for that which will canker, why have ye polluted the holy church of God? Why are ye ashamed to take upon you the name of Christ? Why do ye not think that greater is the value of an endless happiness than that misery which never dies? Because of the praise of the world? Why do ye adorn yourselves with that which hath no life, and yet suffer the hungry, and the needy, and the naked, and the sick, and the afflicted to pass by you and notice them not? Yea, why do ye build up your secret abominations to get gain? And cause that widows should mourn before the Lord, and also orphans to mourn before the Lord, and also the blood of their fathers and

their husbands to cry unto the Lord from the ground for vengeance upon your heads? Behold, the sword of vengeance hangeth over you, and the time soon cometh that he avengeth the blood of the saints upon you, for he will not suffer their cries any longer. (Mormon 4:5.)

The mainstream now more closely resembles the fountain of filthy waters described in Nephi's vision than a pure and healthy stream. The voice of gladness Joseph wrote about in 1842³⁹ has lost its vigor, and is not likely to be heard again from the conference center pulpit. Thankfully, Mormonism does not belong to a single franchise.

If Mormonism welcomes all truth from whatever source provides it, then instead of debating fashion, politics and social causes, why not teach the brotherhood of man, man's eternal nature, doing good unto others? All this by focusing on the crucified and risen Lord.

The End

³⁹ Letter of Joseph Smith written on September 6, 1842, in relevant part found in D&C 128:19-21; T&C 151:15.