

Mormon Liberals: Friends or Foes?

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30 Sept. 2001

I am often called a “liberal” in LDS circles. I chuckle whenever I hear this, because in settings other than the LDS Church I am generally regarded as somewhat conservative. The terms “liberal” and “conservative” are quite vague, and it would certainly help if Latter-day Saints would use more precise and descriptive terms. But an even better approach is to focus on those specific issues that differentiate “liberal” and “conservative” viewpoints in the Church. To that end, and at a risk of oversimplifying the issue, I propose five characteristics to define a “liberal” Mormon:

1. Liberals tend to read the scriptures less literally as the word of God than other Latter-day Saints. They are more willing to accept that some passages are primarily of literary and pedagogical value, and are not necessary historically or scientifically precise.
2. Liberals generally focus on a smaller set of fundamental beliefs than other Church members, and are content to leave many questions unresolved.
3. Liberals seek harmony, not confrontation, with the findings of modern science.
4. Although liberals treat the counsel of Church leaders with due respect, they often seek custom solutions to life’s perplexing challenges, based on general gospel principles. Liberals reject the assumption that doctrines and precepts taught by general authorities must be accepted without question.
5. Liberals believe in honest scholarly inquiry, even if their findings are not always faith-promoting. They are strong supporters of freedom of expression for all views.

It should be emphasized here that we are not talking about “jack” Mormons, who are only nominally LDS, but instead a body of devoted, faithful, and practicing Latter-day Saints. Some readers may note that the above characteristics are reminiscent of Richard D. Poll’s description of a “Liahona” Mormon [1]. Another excellent (but less well known) article on this topic is Lowell L. Bennion’s essay “Being a Liberal.” Bennion observes, “liberals feel free to think about religion and to make it their own.” [2]

It is a sad fact that toleration of divergent viewpoints has never been a particularly strong point within the LDS movement. Liberals are often guilty of condescension towards those who have adopted a more conservative approach to their belief and participation in the Church, even though conservatives often excel both in righteous living and service. On the other hand, conservatives often have difficulty believing that someone could espouse liberal viewpoints and still be a faithful member of the Church. Overall, the term “liberal” appears to have a rather negative connotation in the LDS community at the present time, being a near-synonym for “apostate” in some circles. Can a liberal approach to the LDS religion be defended?

To gain some understanding of these matters, it is useful first to examine LDS scriptures. With regards to how literally we should interpret the scriptures, there are of course numerous passages urging us to heed the revealed word. But there does not appear to be any prohibition against critical analysis of the scriptures. Instead, the scriptures tell us “he that diligently seeketh shall find;

find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them” [1 Ne. 10:19], and, in an exercise of faith, “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.” [1 Thess. 5:21].

Furthermore, it is clear from any in-depth analysis of the scriptures that they were never intended by their authors to be read as rigorous historical or scientific treatises. For instance, the Bible in particular is not entirely consistent with itself historically (compare, for example, Gen. 6:19 with Gen. 7:2-3, Matt. 1:1-17 with Luke 3:23-38, and Acts 9:3-7 with Acts 22:6-9). This fact must have been recognized by the ancients and was obviously not regarded as a serious flaw. Further, there are numerous Biblical passages that affirm the ancient geocentric cosmology (the notion that the earth is flat, sits immovably on a foundation of pillars at the center of the universe, and that heavenly bodies move on transparent spherical shells about the earth) [see 1 Sam 2:8, Josh. 10:12-13, Psa. 93:1, 104:5, Eccl. 1:5 and others]. It is obvious to us today that these verses should not be interpreted as literal statements of astronomical fact, yet they were so interpreted for centuries, and in fact were at the root of the conflict between Galileo and the Catholic Church in the 1600s [3]. Along this line, much of the difficulty in reconciling the creation scriptures with scientific knowledge evaporates when we retreat slightly from a highly literal interpretation. Note, for example, that the Book of Abraham uses the word “time” (i.e. a period of unspecified duration) for each of the seven “days” of creation [Abr. 4:].

In a similar vein, while there are several modern scriptural references urging us to heed apostles and prophets, careful examination shows that they are invariably given in the context of obedience to the precepts of God [see for example D&C 124:45]. There is no claim in scriptures, ancient or modern, that earthly leaders are infallible. To the contrary, there are numerous examples of scriptural prophets and leaders exhibiting their human sides [Ex. 32:21-25, Num. 20:12-13, Jer. 14:14-15, 23:9-31, Lam. 2:9-14, Ezek. 13:2-9, Matt. 69-75, 1 Ne. 16:20-25].

There are also examples in scripture where inspiration has been received through other than conventional, hierarchical priesthood channels. One example is the Old Testament account of the pivotal discovery of the “Book of the Law” during the sixth century B.C. The scriptural record tells us that King Josiah and the High Priest Hilkiah sought advice from the prophetess Huldah, who gave a revelation in their behalf [2 Kings 22:8-20, 2 Chron. 34:14-28]. Another example can be found in Galatians, where we read that Paul felt compelled to publicly rebuke Peter, the head of the early church, for waffling in acceptance of non-circumcised Christians [Gal. 2:11-14]. The importance of varied spiritual gifts among individual members in the early Church is emphasized in 1 Corinthians, which further advises “the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you” [1 Cor. 12:4-31].

The constitution-like structure described in D&C 107 makes it clear that a system of checks and balances is needed in the Church, just as in any other organization consisting of humans. The principle of common consent, which is mentioned numerous times in the Doctrine and Covenants, makes it clear that responsibility for inspired governance of the Church resides as much in the collective membership as in the leadership [D&C 20:63-66, 26:2, 28:13, 38:34, 104:21, 104:71]. Today dissenting votes are seldom cast in Church meetings, but this was not always the case. Perhaps the most memorable example of the membership withholding consent occurred in 1843, when Joseph Smith proposed to the congregation in Nauvoo that Sidney Rigdon be dropped from the First Presidency. Rigdon however was popular with the members, and they voted down this proposal. Joseph was not pleased with this outcome, but he accepted it as the order of the Church [4].

The importance of freedom of thought and belief is emphasized several times in the Book of Mormon [Alma 1:17, 1:21, 30:7, 30:11]. In the account of the anti-Christ Korihor, we learn that in spite of his repugnant teachings, “there was no law against a man’s belief; for it was strictly contrary to the commands of God that there should be a law which should bring men on to unequal grounds.” [Alma 30:7]. At least one of the recurrent episodes of apostasy in the Book of Mormon began when people of the church “began to persecute those that did not believe according to their own will and pleasure” [Alma 4:8].

As noted above, there is no LDS doctrine of infallibility -- while there is a general belief that the general authorities will not lead the Church into apostasy, there is no claim that any particular leader or teaching is infallible. Indeed, several LDS leaders, including David O. McKay, Spencer W. Kimball and Howard W. Hunter, have explicitly denied such a notion, declaring instead that Christ is our only infallible guide [5]. On the question of when statements and sermons by LDS general authorities are to be treated as authoritative and scriptural, Pres. J. Reuben Clark declared the following:

I have shown that even the President of the Church has not always spoken under the direction of the Holy Ghost, for a prophet is not always a prophet. I noted that the Apostles of the Primitive Church had their differences, that in our own Church, leaders have differed in view from the first. ...

When any man, except the President of the Church, undertakes to proclaim one unsettled doctrine, as among two or more doctrines in dispute, as the settled doctrine of the Church, we may know that he is not “moved upon by the Holy Ghost,” unless he is acting under the direction and by the authority of the President. [6]

Pres. Clark thus makes it very clear that not all writings and sermons of LDS authorities are to be considered scriptural or binding on the membership. Indeed, such a claim could not be defended, because there are numerous differences of opinion in published writings. Compare for example Bruce R. McConkie’s view on whether God advances in knowledge [7] with a statement published by Brigham Young’s presidency in 1858 [8], and compare B. H. Roberts’ discussion on whether advancement between kingdoms is possible [9] with that of Joseph Fielding Smith [10]. As Pres. Clark explains in the above-quoted article, it is the duty of each individual member to seek independent confirmation of teachings given by Church leaders, thus shifting the responsibility of determining when leaders speak with authority from them to us.

J. Reuben Clark has hardly been alone in acknowledging reasonable limits to the authority of declarations by LDS general leaders. Here is a similar comment by Pres. Harold B. Lee:

It is not to be thought that every word spoken by the General Authorities is inspired, or that they are moved upon by the Holy Ghost in everything they write. I don’t care what his position is, if he writes something or speaks something that goes beyond anything that you can find in the standard church works, unless that one be the prophet, seer, and revelator -- please note that one exception -- you may immediately say, “Well, that is his own idea.” And if he says something that contradicts what is found in the standard church works, you may know by that same token that it is false, regardless of the position of the man who says it. [11]

One phrase that is frequently heard when these issues are discussed is “When the leaders speak, the thinking has been done.” Its source is a 1945 ward teaching message:

When our leaders speak, the thinking has been done. When they propose a plan -- it is God's plan. When they point the way, there is no other which is safe. When they give direction, it should mark the end of controversy. God works in no other way. To think otherwise, without immediate repentance, may cost one his faith, may destroy his testimony, and leave him a stranger to the kingdom of God. [12]

Needless to say, many Latter-day Saints were concerned when this article appeared. Here is an excerpt from one letter written by Pres. George Albert Smith in response:

I am pleased to assure you that you are right in your attitude that the passage quoted does not express the true position of the Church. Even to imply that members of the Church are not to do their own thinking is grossly to misrepresent the true ideal of the Church, which is that every individual must obtain for himself a testimony of the truth of the Gospel, must, through the redemption of Jesus Christ, work out his own salvation, and is personally responsible to His Maker for his individual acts. [13]

Another oft-cited statement from LDS literature on this topic is the following comment by Elder George Q. Cannon:

A friend ... wished to know whether we ... considered an honest difference of opinion between a member of the Church and the Authorities of the Church was apostasy.... We replied that we had not stated that an honest difference of opinion between a member of the Church and the Authorities constituted apostasy, for we could conceive of a man honestly differing in opinion from the Authorities of the Church and yet not be an apostate; but we could not conceive of a man publishing these differences of opinion and seeking by arguments, sophistry and special pleading to enforce them upon the people to produce division and strife and to place the acts and counsels of the Authorities of the Church, if possible, in a wrong light, and not be an apostate, for such conduct was apostasy as we understood the term. [14]

Some have interpreted this statement to mean that any material not in complete harmony with the sermons and writings of LDS general authorities is forbidden. However, a closer reading shows that this is not the case -- only those persons who knowingly generate divisions among the members or who slander Church leaders are in jeopardy. Further, this statement contrasts with the following declaration by Cannon himself when he later served in the first presidency:

There must be the greatest possible liberty of thought, of expression and of action in our midst -- that is the greatest possible consistent with good order, and the preservation of the rights of others. Liberty cannot be permitted to degenerate into license, but the utmost liberty can be enjoyed so long as it does not overstep that boundary. It becomes, therefore, a natural duty devolving upon us, with our views concerning these eternal principles that have come down from God, that were taught by God in the early ages unto man, that have been re-enforced from time to time by Him through the silent, unseen agency of His power in various ages -- I say it becomes our natural duty to see that these principles are carried out and maintained in the earth. [15]

As a final point, it should be observed that the LDS Church has little to fear from liberal members. At most a few hundred Latter-day Saints have ever published an article in an independent LDS journal or participated in an independent LDS symposium, and at most a few thousand have

ever read such an article or attended such a symposium. Many liberal Mormons are deeply committed Latter-day Saints. For example, a recent survey of the subscribers of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* disclosed that 88% attend services either every Sunday or most Sundays [16].

I will close by citing eight examples of “liberal” writings and discourse by Latter-day Saints. In the first of these, an early member of the Church questioned the action of Nauvoo High Council action in calling a member to trial for teaching dubious doctrines:

I did not like the old man being called up for erring in doctrine. It looks too much like the Methodist, and not like the Latter-day Saints. Methodists have creeds which a man must believe or be asked out of their church. I want the liberty of thinking and believing as I please. It feels so good not to be trammelled. It does not prove that a man is not a good man because he errs in doctrine. [17]

This 19th-century speaker expressed concern that Latter-day Saints were becoming too trustful and unquestioning in their leaders:

I am more afraid that this people have so much confidence in their leaders that they will not inquire for themselves of God whether they are led by him. I am fearful that they settle down in a state of blind self-security, trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with a reckless confidence that in itself would thwart the purposes of God in their salvation, and weaken that influence they could give their leaders, did they know for themselves, by the revelations of Jesus, that they are led in the right way. Let every man and woman know, by the whisperings of the spirit of God to themselves, whether their leaders are walking in the path the Lord dictates, or not. [18]

This early-20th-century writer declared his view on the question of whether there was life on earth before the Fall of Adam:

On the other hand, to limit and insist upon the whole of life and death to this side of Adam’s advent to the earth, some six or eight thousand years ago, as proposed by some, is to fly in the face of the facts so indisputably brought to light by the researcher of science in modern times, and this as set forth by men of the highest type in the intellectual and moral world; not inferior men, or men of sensual and devilish temperament, but men who must be accounted as among the noblest and most self-sacrificing of the sons of men -- of the type whence must come the noblest sons of God, since “the glory of God is intelligence” (D&C 93:36); and that too the glory of man. These researchers after truth are of that class. To pay attention to and give reasonable credence to their research and findings is to link the church of God with the highest increase of human thought and effort. On that side lies development, on the other lies contraction. It is on the former side that research work is going on and will continue to go on, future investigation and discoveries will continue on that side, nothing will retard them, and nothing will develop on the other side. One leads to narrow sectarianism, the other keeps the open spirit of a world movement with which our New Dispensation began. As between them which is to be our choice? [19]

The fourth example is from the writings of a mid-20th-century Latter-day Saint:

Even the most devout and sincere believers in the Bible realize that it is, like most any other book, filled with metaphor, simile, allegory, and parable, which no intelligent person could be compelled to accept in a literal sense. ...

The Lord has not taken from those who believe in his word the power of reason. He expects every man who takes his “yoke” upon him to have common sense enough to accept a figure of speech in its proper setting, and to understand that the holy scriptures are replete with allegorical stories, faith-building parables, and artistic speech. ...

Where is there a writing intended to be taken in all its parts literally? Such a writing would be insipid and hence lack natural appeal. To expect a believer in the Bible to strike an attitude of this kind and believe all that is written to be a literal rendition is a stupid thought. No person with the natural use of his faculties looks upon the Bible in such a light. [20]

Addressing some BYU students in 1952, this speaker advanced the provocative notion that Darwin’s “beautiful” theory of evolution may be seen in a positive light, as evidence that mankind is destined for eternal life:

[S]cience dominated by the spirit of religion is the key to progress and the hope of the future. For example, evolution’s beautiful theory of the creation of the world offers many perplexing problems to the inquiring mind. Inevitably, a teacher who denies divine agency in creation, who insists there is no intelligent purpose in it, will infest the student with the thought that all may be chance. I say, that no youth should be so led without a counterbalancing thought. Even the skeptic teacher should be fair enough to see that even Charles Darwin, when he faced this great question of annihilation, that the creation is dominated only by chance wrote: “It is an intolerable thought that man and all other sentient beings are doomed to complete annihilation after such long, continued slow progress.” And another good authority, Raymond West, said, “Why this vast expenditure of time and pain and blood?” Why should man come so far if he’s destined to go no farther? A creature that travels such distances and fought such battles and won such victories deserves what we are compelled to say, “To conquer death and rob the grave of its victory.” [21]

This example is taken from the recently published memoirs of a 20th-century Latter-day Saint:

We should all be interested in academic research. We must go out on the research front and continue to explore the vast unknown. We should be in the forefront of learning in all fields, for revelation does not come only through the prophet of God nor only directly from heaven in visions or dreams. Revelation may come in the laboratory, out of the test tube, out of the thinking mind and the inquiring soul, out of search and research and prayer and inspiration. ...

We should be dauntless in our pursuit of truth and resist all demands for unthinking conformity. No one would have us become mere tape recorders of other people’s thoughts. ...

One of the most important things in the world is freedom of the mind; from this all other freedoms spring. Such freedom is necessarily dangerous, for one cannot think right with-

without running the risk of thinking wrong, but generally more thinking is the antidote for the evils that spring from wrong thinking.

More thinking is required, and we should all exercise our God-given right to think and be unafraid to express our opinions, with proper respect for those to whom we talk and proper acknowledgment of our own shortcomings. We must preserve freedom of the mind in the church and resist all efforts to suppress it. The church is not so much concerned with whether the thoughts of its members are orthodox or heterodox as it is that they shall have thoughts. ...

And while all members should respect, support, and heed the teachings of the authorities of the church, no one should accept a statement and base his or her testimony upon it, no matter who makes it, until he or she has, under mature examination, found it to be true and worthwhile; then one's logical deductions may be confirmed by the spirit of revelation to his or her spirit, because real conversion must come from within. [22]

The next example is from an LDS scholar who is still living. He was one of the founding editors of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, which is regarded by many to be a "liberal" publication. In one of his published books, this scholar investigated the authenticity of the accounts of misfortunes and deaths that befell those who were involved in Joseph Smith's assassination [23]. Many Latter-day Saints through the years have regarded these stories as gratifying confirmations of Joseph Smith's divine mission. But this scholar concluded,

A persistent Utah myth holds that some of the murderers of Joseph and Hyrum Smith met fittingly gruesome deaths -- that Providence intervened to dispense the justice denied in the Carthage trial. But the five defendants who went to trial, including men who had been shown to be leaders in the murder plot and others associated with them, enjoyed notably successful careers. ...

Mark Aldrich was elected to three terms in the upper house of the [Arizona] territorial legislature, acting during the 1866 term as its president. He died in Tucson at the age of seventy-three. ... William N. Grover was appointed U.S. attorney for the eastern district of Missouri. He was still living [in Warsaw, Illinois] in 1890, prosperous and respected. ... Thomas Sharp ... was unsuccessful as a Republican candidate for Congress in 1856, but in 1865 he was elected to a four-year term as judge of Hancock County, where he was "greatly esteemed". ... [He] died in 1894 at the age of eighty. ...

Orville H. Browning, the leader of the defense, was one of the founders of the Republican party, and in 1860 he played a significant role in securing the Republican presidential nomination for Abraham Lincoln. In 1861 he served an interim appointment in the Senate until the state legislature filled the vacancy created by the death of Stephen A. Douglas, and he acted as "Lincoln's mouthpiece" in the Senate during this period. President Andrew Johnson named Browning secretary of the interior in 1866. [24]

In short, this author courageously reported that there is no substance to the stories of these men suffering serious misfortunes or dying unnaturally. He and his co-author were well aware that their findings would not be faith-promoting for the many LDS readers who have drawn comfort from these stories through the years. Indeed, I am aware of at least one person who mentioned her dismay in reading this material as one factor in her subsequent departure from the Church.

The final example cited here expresses an optimistic, progressive sentiment, which contrasts sharply with the frequently-heard rhetoric within the Church that our modern society is in rapid decline:

But in a larger sense this has been the best of all centuries. In the long history of the earth there has been nothing like it. The life expectancy of man has been extended by more than 25 years. Think of it. It is a miracle. The fruits of science have been manifest everywhere. By and large, we live longer, we live better. This is an age of greater understanding and knowledge. We live in a world of great diversity. As we learn more of one another, our appreciation grows. This has been an age of enlightenment. The miracles of modern medicine, of travel, of communication are almost beyond belief. All of this has opened new opportunities for us which we must grasp and use for the advancement of the Lord's work. [25]

If we were to categorize the above-quoted views on the basis of the criteria listed at the beginning of this article, we would have to conclude that they are fairly "liberal." Five of the eight champion secular learning, modern science and technological progress. Two emphasize the need for freedom of expression in the Church. Two recommend that we not unquestioningly accept a doctrine or instruction simply because it is taught by a general authority. Two present an enlightened view of scriptures. At least one is a striking example of honest scholarship, published in spite of the fact that it may be challenging to the faith of some members. And in at least three cases, the person quoted was fully aware that the position he was declaring was not held by certain leaders of the Church at the time. Yet to the author's knowledge none of these eight persons was ever censured by the Church for expressing their views. All were (or have been) in full fellowship throughout their lives.

Who are these free-thinking, "liberal" Latter-day Saints? They are, in order: (1) Joseph Smith, (2) Brigham Young, (3) Brigham H. Roberts, (4) Joseph Fielding Smith, (5) David O. McKay, (6) Hugh B. Brown, (7) Dallin H. Oaks and (8) Gordon B. Hinckley. Evidently "liberal" Mormons are in pretty good company.

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