

Free Speech and Excommunication: *The Dichotomy of two Mormon Values*

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It is somewhat ironic that the LDS church, whose membership overwhelmingly embraces democratic ideals, especially the freedom of speech, would excommunicate a member for expressing dissenting views or writing on controversial issues concerning church history or doctrine. Even at church-owned BYU, students are introduced to the scientific process and are taught to weigh evidence, consider alternative view points, think clearly, communicate effectively, and argue persuasively. Though these students will use these critical thinking skills throughout their lives to examine and make sense of the world around them, they will likely never apply them to their own religion. Sadly, seeking truth *about* the church and seeking the “church’s truth” have proven to be two different things.

Instead of welcoming debate and embracing honest dialogue concerning its rich history, the modern LDS Church has been conspicuously quiet about anything controversial. For many devout but conflicted members, the silence is deafening. There is no official forum for such discussion – no publication where the church openly confronts, confirms, or refutes information that challenges the historical and doctrinal underpinnings of its faith. The church provides its members with no tangible defenses against the steady flow of evidence against its claims. Instead, it endeavors to comfort questioning members with all-to-familiar platitudes, such as “answers to any question can be found in the scriptures,” or “these things are ultimately a matter of faith, and require fasting and prayer to work through.” It is not uncommon to hear assurances from priesthood leadership that “anti-Mormon” publications should be avoided as they have no merit and will only deflate and discourage. Besides, they are the products of bitter, disaffected ex-Mormons with “axes to grind.”

True, we have ancillary organizations like the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies at BYU that confront controversial academic issues. They do not speak for the church, however. After wading through volumes of apologetic rhetoric from university scholars, the questioning member is still left to wonder what the brethren have to say about the issue at hand. He must be content with scholarly conjecture and hypothesis when what he needs is an official, definitive, and even inspired position from the church itself. Even so, FARMS offers the investigating mind years worth of reading material, but even a cursory examination of its publications will reveal a “defense of the faith” that is often transparently polemical in nature. Many of its book reviews are replete with character assassination and diversion while failing to adequately confront core arguments posited by the authors. Daniel C. Peterson, a highly respected representative of FARMS, has acknowledged and defended the use of polemics, exclaiming that he and his fellow scholars in the faith are engaged in a war for souls.

The Church may not defend itself through words, but it does try to protect itself through action. The most lethal tool the church has is excommunication, and although it is a procedure intended to be administered discreetly and locally, it has at times had all

the stealth of a sonic boom. This was certainly the case as news leaked out about the many carefully coordinated, high-profile excommunications of Mormon scholars in the early nineties. This very public show of rigidity and intolerance left the press with no shortage of provocative material to write about. Their suspicions and outrage were only fueled further by the church's move to restrict access to highly sensitive documents in the archives and to require certain patrons to sign agreements that gave the church the right to censor any materials leaving the property. Certainly, this was not only repugnant to a 1st Amendment-loving press, but also disconcerting for many members that for the first time began to wonder if the church actually had something to hide. If, as Boyd K. Packer has pointed out, the Lord's hand has been felt at every turn in the church's history, why not continue the open-door policy and let the past speak for itself? What could we possibly find down there that we could be ashamed of?

Apparently, that's a question the church would rather not explore. Refusing to confront and address *content*, it remains fixated on *conduct*. Excommunication for apostasy is the only real self-defense mechanism that the church seems to employ. It matters not if what the dissident is writing or saying rings true. He is a dissenter and that is enough! It is quite paradoxical that a membership whose social and civic values have been shaped largely by democratic institutions and processes would tolerate such authoritarian tactics. In any other setting, a typical Mormon would emphatically denounce this kind of abuse of power. For instance, he would likely be familiar with a legal system that allows its citizens to appeal a judge's decision on the grounds that a law applied in his case is unconstitutional. The case would then be weighed in a court of appeals, and those judges would examine the constitutionality of the law itself and decide whether to uphold or reverse the original decision. In short, the citizen can confess that he is "out of line," but also argue that the line should not be drawn where it is.

In a church court, however, the lines are drawn in concrete. The doctrines and narratives handed down to us from a string of inspired prophets and apostles are beyond reproach. There is no middle ground for the individual that challenges the historicity of the Book of Mormon but believes it to be inspired 19th century literature, for instance. If he dares to talk or write about his rebellious ideology, ecclesiastical scrutiny is sure to follow. He will no doubt be called into an interview and be enjoined from further digging, speaking, or writing. The fact that he might have a legitimate argument with mountains of evidence is irrelevant. The church simply won't budge on his behalf. The decision is his – move in concert or move on.

To be fair, the LDS Church is a private organization and should have control over its own rules for membership. The church has the right to remove whom it will. Likewise, if members disapprove of anything at all, they should be free to leave, as they are. The problem is that many of its dissenting historians, scholars, and lay members don't want to leave. They love the church, both for what it is and what it could be, and are fully integrated into its cultural and social structure. They still adhere to many of its values and beliefs, and wish to be active in its many worthwhile programs. But these members are forced to make a tough choice: Report the truth as they discover it and risk being cut off, or endure the disquieting effects of self-censorship and preserve full fellowship.

The church clearly allows the individual in question to make his choice. Ironically, though, the church has not granted itself this same freedom – the freedom to critically examine or redefine itself, even as waves of historical and scientific discovery beat at its door. Sadly, the church has backed itself into a corner and allowed little room for accommodation - 175 years of prophets and apostles have drawn their lines in the concrete! Simply put, the church has presented itself as a giant monolithic pillar of truth to be either wholly accepted or entirely rejected. As a result, it is not prepared to deal with members who view its history as a dynamic, intricate web of stories, developments, circumstances, conflicts, and flawed personalities that is both an inspiring piece of art and a mangled mess at the same time.

For the most part, the church is not willing to ask its members what they want their church to be (with the exception of the breakthrough temple survey in 1990 which resulted in the removal of several controversial elements in the endowment ceremony). Instead, members are constantly reminded that it is not their church - it's the Lord's church. He stands at the head of it, and he is an "unchangeable" being. An astute member may point out as many historical "changes," embellishments, inconsistencies, misrepresentations, and outright fabrications as he wants, but if he is not careful, he may soon be doing so without his priesthood. The choice is *his*.