

**Review of April 2003 Sunstone Article
by Keith Norman Entitled
“The ‘T’ Word: Trading our Birthright for a
Mess of Certainty”**

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I found this article fascinating. Norman has reached many of the main conclusions I did, but apparently many years ago, and has nonetheless found reasons to continue to try to find religious stimulation within the confines of the LDS church. I am certain that it is Sunstone and the alternative LDS community of which it is a large part that keeps him going. And I found myself flirting with the idea that I could perhaps do the same as I read his piece. There is sweet irony in this – Sunstone, vilified as it is by the Church and its mainstream supporters, actually helps many people to continue their participation in the Church by providing them with a community of believers to support them in their LDS belief – something the Church itself does not do. This is a macro example of what happened between me and the micro biology grad student from the US east coast who found in my 70 page letter to my family announcing what from their point of view appears to be my apostasy reasons to continue his association with the Church.

Let me list the ideas Norman refers to in his article that I found on my own before reading his views. Most of these concepts are things that have bothered me for years that I carefully and thoroughly repressed. Once I was finally able to acknowledge that these concerns are legitimate, and that they were not “wrong” or “bad” per se just because they contradicted Church policy or doctrine, they quickly blossomed into well reasoned positions.

p. 24 – Some people attend meetings, pray, keep Church standards while feeling completely disaffected from the Church. This is not because they are bad, but because the Church has let them down, and this is more the Church’s loss than their loss.

p. 24 – The use of the word “Apostasy” to describe an awakening to the reality of the Church and its relationship to the gospel (i.e. Big gap between the two), since that is how most active members of the Church perceive that event.

p. 25 – The “wacko” factor within the Church. It is not surprising that within any large organization there will be wackos. What is surprising, and disturbing, is that the Church’s culture and teachings encourages wackos. This is largely due to the theme underlying most of the Church’s teaching of doctrine that wonderful, mythical, symbolic teachings that can bless our lives in many dimensioned ways are to be understood literally. No need to list the particulars of the wacko behaviour cited in the article.

p. 26 – The arbitrary nature of many of the rules used within the Church and particularly with respect to missionaries. Much of this is of the “obey just because” variety. The idea is that it is good for us to be subject to the control our Church authorities and we should be used to that. This is beaten into us, particularly while serving missions, like discipline and obedience is beaten into new army recruits.

p. 26 – The statistical emphasis of church activity, particularly respecting missionary activities. I have long been certain that some of the things that happened while I was in Peru were terribly wrong. The thousands of baptisms that occurred in some of our neighbouring missions have been shown to have been the result of undue pressure placed by the missionaries on people who will believe almost anything they are told. Those people drifted out of the Church as quickly as they drifted in. We were beaten up terribly by our mission president and leaders because we could not keep pace with the missionaries in northern Peru and Ecuador, where the baptisms came by the thousands per year instead of the hundreds. I will never forget the lectures I received from Gene Cook about how if we only exercised faith as the elders up north did, we would baptize like they did. At the time, I believed every word he said and threw myself head first into the wall he pointed me at time and again. “He could not be wrong”, I thought, “he is a GA.” And what else could I have thought, conditioned as I was? I now recognize his motivational tactics as those used by most high-pressure sales organizations on earth. Not by coincidence, he had been a highly successful insurance salesman before being called as a GA. Under his inspiration, the missionaries in Ecuador, where he was posted and had the greatest influence, went after the weakest segment of a laid back, easily persuaded people like piranhas after fresh meat. The converts came in droves. However, it is much tougher to get those people to do anything on a long-term basis. We now know that to be a cultural trait, which did not exist among the hardened people of the Andes Mountains where I worked. And I am glad that it did not.

p. 26 – The ethnocentricity of the LDS worldview, and even its cosmology. God’s only chosen people just happens to be my people. Therefore, my way of seeing the world, among the millions of options available in that regard, just happens to be the only right one. And while I acknowledge that there are planets unnumbered on which life like mine exists, I live on the only one to which the Saviour of all mankind came. On each of the rest of those unnumbered planets, the same stories of the Saviour are told, but with respect to his visit to my planet, which of all those unnumbered planets was selected as his special place of abode. This form of thinking and seeing the world is as old as man himself, and is rooted in a narrow-minded tribalism that has nothing to do with God. This is something that limits any people who are subject to it. It is therefore a bad thing, and should be left behind on history’s garbage heap.

p. 27 – The use of the term “cognitive dissonance”. A few friends and family members have chided me for the use of this term. I am sorry but that is what I feel, and it is the term that best expresses the concept. It bothers them to hear me use that term because they don’t feel it. The alcoholic is also the last person to be able to perceive his condition. The nature of the socialization that goes on within the Church is such that those socialized do not feel much if any conflict. Again, this is not a new problem. For

example, the term “atheist” has been used mostly throughout history to label people who believed in god differently than those using the label. The Romans called the early Christians atheists. In the sixteen century, the term was used respecting people who began to reject some of the societal standards that had become closely associated with Christian life, even through they still believed in god. As Lucien Fabvre pointed out in his classic “The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century” (summarized by Armstrong in “The History of God” at p. 287) during that period of time “God and religion were so ubiquitous that nobody thought to say: ‘So our life, the whole of our life, is dominated by Christianity! How tiny is the area of our lives that is already secularized, compared to everything that is still governed, regulated and shaped by religion!’ Even if an exceptional man could have achieved the objectivity to question the nature of religion and the existence of God, he would have found no support in either the philosophy or science of his time. A vernacular langue such as French lacked either the vocabulary or the syntax for scepticism. Such words as “absolute”, “relative”, “causality”, “concept” or “intuition” were not yet in use. No society on earth had to that point seriously questioned the existence of God and the role of God in man’s life. In such an environment, how could one feel cognitive dissonance about ambiguities respecting religious and secular life, or the conflict between god and science? There was no conflict. In our day, the Church has carefully constructed a closed system within which it strongly encourages its members to live that is similar in many ways to the 16th century Christian environment. For much of the Church’s history, its system was closed because of the snails pace at which information of any kind travelled, physical isolation in the intermountain west, etc. As the modern world has impinged more and more on LDS society, artificial (intellectual, one might say) barriers have been erected “to protect tender testimonies”, including those of 45 year old former bishops with three university degrees like me. As long as a member stays within the closed system, only listening to and thinking about information purveyed by the Church, there is no cognitive dissonance and it is impossible to understand someone who experiences it. Many of my friends have for that reason seriously expressed the view that I am currently suffering from some form of mental illness. The very power of that closed system, once it is seen for what it is, produces massive cognitive dissonance when one tries to live and relate to people who live within it while having values that are inconsistent with the values it promotes as article of faith. The more powerful the closed system and black and white the values it espouses, the more cognitive dissonance it creates for those who choose to live outside side it, particularly when they wish to retain close ties to people who live with it. Consider the case of my 12-year-old son, Dallin, one of God’s most tender, faithful and obedient spirits. His Dad, whom he loves, no longer attends Church because he does not believe many of the things that are taught there, is not spiritually fed when he goes, and rejects the worldview it inculcates among it members. His Dad teaches such of those things to him as are appropriate for a boy of 12. At Church, he hears nice people passionately teach the opposite. In fact, since those well-intentioned, nice people now fear for his soul since he is living with an evil influence, he is subjected to more of those teachings than ever. And try as they might not to do so, the good people at Church occasionally let something slip that leads him to understand that his Dad, who seems wise and loving to him, is somewhere between evil incarnate and mislead by the devil/wrong (while “doing his best”). What is a boy of 12 to make of all that? Massive cognitive dissonance will

result from his being put in this situation. Consciously deciding to leave a child in an environment like this is akin to naming him “Sue” to make sure he grows up tough. I do not see how cognitive dissonance of this type can be good for anyone. I want to find an environment for my children and me in which we will be encouraged to find and use the best parts of our heritage. Since the Church has developed to a position where, in my view, this is not possible within the Church, I have decided to find this type of community somewhere else, allowing for the possibility that I may come back in the future if the Church changes sufficiently to accommodate me. I am not holding my breath while I wait for that to happen.

I also note that on p. 76 of this Sunstone issue, it is noted that Utah has the highest per capita use of Prozac in the US. Various reasons for this are trotted out. The most obvious is not. Mormon life is stressful, and laced with cognitive dissonance even for those who do not know and would never admit they are subject to it. Occam’s razor would support this conclusion. Each of the reasons proffered by this little article require handsprings to sustain.

p.27 – The idea that whether the Book of Mormon is true or not is not important. Norman indicates that he is “agnostic” on this point, and does not think that it is important one way or another. He is likely a Leonard Arrington disciple in this regard. This is likely to become the only refuge available to thinking Mormons who wish to remain active. The RLDS church has already gone down this path in the face the inexorable march of evidence respecting that book and its background. I, however, disagree that this point is unimportant. Without understanding how the BofM could be both inspired and not historical, we can’t understand what a prophet really is. If we don’t understand how God communicates to inspired men and women like JS, we can’t understand how he may communicate with and the uncertainty inherent in the process. And finally, we cannot understand how we should relate to the prophets. We can’t understand how seriously we must take what many of them have told us about their fallibility. Hence, I disagree both the Norman and Arrington (who said the same thing).

p. 27 - Norman indicates that his son (who inspired the article) cannot live with the “ambiguity” of the gap between what the Church says about the BofM (“most correct book ever written”, the corner stone of “only true and living church” the leaders of which “God will never permit to lead us astray” etc.) and other things and the reality that he now confronts. I am with him there. I think the term “ambiguity” does not capture the issue at stake here. The real problem is “cognitive dissonance”. The truth is supposed to set us free, not imprison us within a secret Mormon ghetto, the denizens of which are in varying degrees feared, pitied and loathed as a special type of plague by their “true believing” LDS brothers and sisters and worse yet, by the leaders God has “chosen” for his “one true church”.

p. 27 – Norman’s son feels that to remain an “active” member of the Church when he doesn’t meet the standards of testimony and obedience would be a betrayal of his integrity. I have said the same thing, I think, in a slightly different way, and I agree with

this point as far as it goes. For me, however, the integrity issue is only part of the problem with continued Church participation. Here are the issues as they appear to me.

First, my personal integrity requires that I do not pretend to be something I am not. This means that when forced by the Church's system to account for my faithfulness to the standards the Church has set in terms of obedience and credence in interviews with Church leaders, I will do so honestly. Hence, I can't hold a temple recommend and am not likely to be given any "calling" that would allow me to influence others. I am OK with that.

Second, as a result of my "testimony" problems, I will be a fringe member of the organization and considered with pity, fear etc. by most other members. I have myself so considered others in similar circumstances. This bothers me, but I can live with it.

Third, I will not tacitly or overtly support the Church's effort to maintain the closed system described above, thereby raising generations of members in the dark. I don't feel the need to "save" the world from Mormonism, but I do feel a duty to make sure that those closest to me have the chance to grow up with their eyes open instead of shut. If I stand silently by while unformed, inane testimonies are borne and incorrect things about God and man are taught, I implicitly support these teachings and they will influence my children and others I care deeply about and feel a duty toward. When I tell my children what I believe, I am fighting the closed system and the conflict between what I teach and what the Church teaches becomes a source of cognitive dissonance for them. I have a serious problem with this.

Fourth, were I not to communicate to those who know me best what my beliefs are, many would rely upon me to maintain the narrow, damaging world view the Church promotes because I am well known within our little community to be a reader and a thinker, and if the Church and what its leaders teach is good enough for me, it should be good enough for those who don't read and think as much as I do. Since I am not prepared to support the closed system in any way, I will not do this. Hence, I decided that I needed to let a certain number of people know how I felt, and why. Word quickly spread from there, and there is not enough chance to worry about that people will think that I am still part of the little knot of people standing in a small circling, looking inward and chanting to each other "we are right, we are right, we are right, ..."

Fifth, I am not being spiritually fed by what happens at Church or much of the stuff the Church produces. Now that I understand the closed system and how it works (it is classic conditioning of the worst sort) I see how the Church, its liturgy, the practise of testimony bearing in a formulaic fashion starting at an early age, seminary and the constant testimony bearing and half truth teaching that occurs there, regular family and personal scripture study, Ensign reading, priesthood lesson reading, Sunday school lesson reading etc. church callings, home and visiting teaching etc., the way in which the temple ordinances are brought into our lives, the nature of missionary training and discipline, etc. – is designed much more to maintain the closed system than to bring us closer to God. After all of that stuff, most of us, even the most enquiring of us, do not have the time or

energy left to look outside the circle. In fact, in an attempt to maintain the closed system, the image of God and his prophets has been in my view horribly distorted. Hence, I find much of what happens at Church to be irritating, but tolerable. However, some of it is hard to tolerate without speaking out and creating cognitive dissonance for those who fear anything that contradicts their worldview, even if it is the truth. It is impossible to escape the oft-used analogy to Galileo and the faithful Roman Catholics of his day.

Sixth, I think there is much more downside than upside for my children if I permit them to be exposed to this conditioning system on a long-term basis. I am trying to find things to read right now from the sociologists that will help me to better understand how childhood and adolescent conditioning affects long term life experience. For those who say that should not rely upon the arm of man in matters such as these, I would reply that the scriptural and Church's view is clearly that this type of conditioning is quite clear. "Train up a child in the way he shall go ...". And remember the great talk Gordon Hinckley gave about the walnut tree a few years ago? He could have easily fixed its grown pattern had he done so while it was young, but having waited until it was mature, not even his best block and tackle could "straighten" the tree out. With regret, he had to lop off one third of its branches to set it back on track. I believed this to be true when I heard it, and still believe it. I just did not guess which third would need to be hacked off me. I note in passing that Gordon Hinckley has made this story a permanent part of LDS pedagogy by finishing the pulpit in the new Conference Centre with veneer from this tree. He understands symbolism. In any event, I have been misled often enough by our well-intended Church leaders in the past that I am no longer prepared to trust them on anything of importance. Hence, before attempting to completely sever my children's ties with the Church I am going to see what the social scientists have to say about this matter. The "nature v. nurture" debate has been going for decades. I have followed it through the popular press. It is now time to get into the primary sources. Were I to rely upon the advice of the Church's leaders regarding the effectiveness of conditioning on children, I would immediately and without hesitation sever our ties with the Church.

Seventh, I am finding all kinds of interesting things in many religious traditions that feed my soul. When I communicate with members of other faiths, we do so respecting things that have helped us get closer to God and live the ideals Christ and other great teachers have left for us. When I communicate with active members of our church, it usually has much more to do with the closed system. Any "divine" feelings others or I may have as a result of experience outside that system are designed to deceive me, and can't be legitimate. The focus is often on what I believe and the outward observances of Mormonism, instead of how we can all get closer to God and feel his presence in our lives. When I communicate with inactive members of the Church the topic is usually what is wrong with the Church. I already know enough about that, and continued discussion of it is not uplifting. There are too many wonderful things to think about and work on to spend much time on past errors – mine or anyone else's. There are a few ex members or inactive members who are in the same space in which I find myself. I have a wonderful time exchanging positive material with these people, and have a similar experience with a widening circle of friends from many faiths who have the same broad understanding of God's nature, plan for his children etc. as I do. My beliefs in this regard

have a familiar LDS ring to them. My non-Mormon friends largely recognize as I do that belief is a matter of choice. None of us can prove what we believe. All we can do is share with each other the experiences we have had with the divine, and the assumptions about God, his plan for us and mankind etc. that we have chosen to make based on those experiences, and the results we have seen come to others based on following or not certain types of belief. As Juan, the Yaqui Indian shaman, is quoted by Carlos Castaneda ("The Teachings of Don Juan") to say (my paraphrase), "all paths lead nowhere, so it is best to choose a path with heart." He defined a path with heart as one that could be walked to its very end with joy. My path has led me to a point where continued regular participation in the Mormon Church will be a source of cognitive dissonance for me. I am still willing to be taught how this can be otherwise. But have not yet been able to see it.

p. 27 – There was a time when people like Hugh Brown and David McKay asserted a great deal of tolerance for diversity of opinion within the Church. Joseph Smith did the same. As the Church has grown and its members have become increasingly exposed to ideas that contradict church orthodoxy, the closed system has increased in power, and its lines have become increasingly drawn with thick, black markers.

p. 27 – "To express doubt is to sow dissension. To countenance ambiguity is to be lukewarm, a candidate for being spewed out. I am afraid that my son sees the Church as a place where he will be treated with suspicion, or, at best, pity, rather than as a nurturing environment where he can grow and seek to expand his understanding." This captures my feelings and recent experience well.

This brings an example from business school to mind. This is a well-worn case study in business strategy that I suspect is still on most business school curricula. The question is how do you define your market? The railroad companies back around the turn of the century were THE providers of transportation services over land. They made the mistake of defining themselves as railroad companies instead of transportation companies. As other means of moving goods across land developed (trucks and planes), the railroads found that they could not compete in terms of cost and timeliness of delivery respecting most things that needed to move. The market of things that people needed to move was expanding rapidly as local, national and international economies became more trade based, and yet the railroads were having trouble finding people to use them. Most railroads went out of the business, and those that remained to pick up the pieces never again were dominant players in the land based transportation market.

What is the Church's market? It seems to me that at the moment the Church has painted itself into a corner. De facto prophetic infallibility (see below) is one of the pillars on which the closed system is built. To acknowledge that the BofM is not real history, the church is governed by committee not by individual prophetic inspiration, etc. would be a huge blow to the testimonies the Church has created as a by-product of its use of the closed system. The gap between these flawed, weak testimonies and what Arrington called a "real testimony" is 100% the Church's fault. There are many people who see things in the shades of grey I see, and whose needs the Church therefore does not meet.

My guess is that this type of person, as a percentage of all people who are or might become interested in the Church (this is how I would define the Church's market), will grow significantly as time passes. Some, like Norman, will remain members of the church for various reasons. Sunstone and similar Internet based communities like the New Order Mormon web site may help these people continue to participate in the church for a time. However, either the Church expands the definition of the market it will serve, or others will arise to serve it. I have predicted for years that there will eventually be the equivalent of Reform Judaism. And I recently saw on a web site an announcement of a book by the name "Reform Mormonism". The idea of "New Order Mormons" as a parallel to the New Order Amish is exactly the same thing. Either the Church services this market, or someone else will. The Universalisms might be in a position to do this, for example. Henry Eyring, for whom I used to have great respect, is on the record as not liking the use of the term "market" when used in connection with religious things. Someone should suggest that he take a course in lateral thinking and symbolism, and then return to the "invisible hand" of the market and see if he cannot see some analogies that might be helpful to someone carrying his responsibilities.

p. 27 – Description of Norman's interview with the Bishop. There is no room for ambiguity regarding a testimony. It is not enough to "believe". We must know. To not know is an indication of weakness or spiritual inadequacy. This message is given to our children, and they are hence taught to seek for and find certainty where there is none to be found. This negatively affects them in other aspects of their lives, in my view. On page 28 Norman gives an analysis of why and how this negative influence operates in our lives, with which I agree. Having done that well, he does not explain how remaining connected to the Church provides benefits to offset the obvious disadvantages of living within this system. He leaves that to the end of the piece, but then does not explain how he makes these trade offs. I plan to write him to ask for a more full explanation, and to provide him with a copy of this.

I have rejected for as long as I can remember the idea that we must "know" the things we are encouraged by the Church to testify respecting. This has also been the subject of "spirited" debate in our High Priests group, with Wayne Gedlaman and me on one side and most of the rest of the group on the other.

p. 28 – Mormons believe in eternal progression and continual learning. Mormons believe that many great and important things of truth are yet to be revealed, and that these things are revealed a little at a time. The fact that this process mirrors the development of science is something that I have always found comforting. However, the Church and its members habitually measure "faithfulness" by a person's unwillingness to deviate from the Brethrens current position, whatever it may be from time to time. I am sure that there was a time when it was anathema within the Church to disagree with BY's Adam God doctrine. I agree with all of this, and the other points he makes in this paragraph. However, I would make the additional connection to the closed system. To maintain the closed system, the primary organizational value must be obedience to those who tell us what we can look at and what we should not. This is what led at least one of Juli's faithful, active LDS friends who I considered to be my friend as well, to encourage her to

break up our family and leave me, to save her and our children from my influence. In this good but horribly narrow and misinformed woman's mind, the value of obedience to the changing dictates of the LDS Church's hierarchy trumps keeping loving families together. This is precisely what Christ taught against as he illustrated masterfully how the Jew's "purity" system in his day missed the point – we are to love one another and serve God by serving each other. Obedience to the Jews' purity system or any other system of rules is only a means to an end – not an end per se. The LDS church today suffers from a similar ill. Obedience to a wide range of behavioural and belief oriented rules is our equivalent of the Jews purity system. One of our classic purity rules is the word of wisdom. The Jews purity rules were in large measure designed to allow them to tell a believer from an unbeliever with a moment to two – it was an outward sign of faith. One of the analogies the LDS church has is the Word of Wisdom, which has travelled along way from the point Joseph Smith made, as he gave lectures on the WofW and then walked into the street, mounted his carriage, and lit a cigar before riding through the streets of Nauvoo to make the point that this was not an iron clad rule. I suspect that if Christ came to Salt Lake City, the first thing he might do is insist on sharing a good bottle of wine with Gordon Hinckley in the most public place possible just to make the point. I have not inclination toward using any of the substances proscribed by the WofW, largely because I had lots of experience with them during my youth and do not see value in their use. But that is the point. It is good advice to stay away from these things, particularly if you have the mild obsessive-compulsive personality I have. However, even for me, to celebrate an important occasion with a friend by having a little of the expensive wine he has purchased for the occasion is a good thing, not a bad thing, and from now on I will see it as such.

p. 28 – Other people celebrate and worship God in manners that are every bit as valid as the LDS way, and the Church could learn a lot from some of those people. I could not agree more. I enjoyed his story of his experience with a welcoming Pentecostal congregation. I note that a good part of the allure the Church has in its early days was a much more direct, primal connection to god that is much like what has made the Pentecostals so successful today. Karen Armstrong in *The Battle for God* explains how the charismatic connection to deity that has been a part of worship from time immemorial seems to satisfy some deep need all mankind has. Religions that have met these needs have flourished over time to time, while espousing belief systems that are all over the map. The common denominator seems to be the ability to help people connect to this tremendous source of energy, peace and joy we call God. As the *Teachings of Don Juan*, *the Birdmen of Peru* and other books of that sort about modern, primitive belief systems point out, the ancients likely used hallucinogenic plants to aid this process, and the modern primitive mystics are known to do this. Whether these are aids to find God or not is an issue to discuss at some other time. I don't believe they are, but understand that there are good arguments to the contrary. This is one of those things that can't be proven or disproven. In my view we should choose what to believe based on our best judgement as to what will work for us. Using drugs that are potentially addictive and harmful to my body in other ways as a "shortcut" to God is not in my view a good idea. I think I can get the best part of the experience provided by these aids through learning how to engage in

deep meditation, etc. I want the peace of the eastern mystics, not the whirling of the dervish and kinds of the experiences that Don Juan helped Carlos Castaneda to achieve.

In any event, in its early days the LDS faith was much more charismatic than it is today. The Book of Mormon paints a similar picture – regular miracles, speaking in tongues, King Lamoni and Alma the Younger’s dramatic spiritual rebirths etc. It is not surprising that the BofM would reflect the experience of the early LDS community, now that I understand more about how it came into being. I recently read a portion of Zina D. H. Young’s diary written during her early twenties, and covering the year immediately following the death of Joseph (to whom she was secretly married) and Hyrum. She noted meetings at which she personally participated in speaking and interpreting tongues at roughly two to three month intervals. They were written about as common places. My great grandmother, Catherine Love Paxman, who was a polygamous wife and immigrated to Canada from Utah after her husband died in an accident and she was left penniless as the third wife who had no claim on his considerable estate (which the first wife would not share), wrote of regularly doing the same thing in the Southern Alberta of the early 20th century, and of “prophesying” and providing priesthood type blessings to her sisters on occasion. The bureaucratization and corporatization of the Church has largely eliminated this kind of thing, and I think we are poorer for it.

p. 28 – Moral and spiritual certainty are both limiting and dangerous. The Taliban are an example of what the extreme manifestation of these forces can do. I agree. The *Battle for God* and *History of God*, both by Karen Armstrong, are the best I have read in my attempt to understand where this influence comes from, why it is bad, and how I should counteract these things in my life.

p. 28 – The idea that our status in this life depends upon how righteous we were in the pre-existence is a particularly ethnocentric and dangerous idea. This is deceptive self-flattery in the extreme. I also agree that this kind of thinking is precisely what stuck the LDS church with the blacks and the priesthood policy, and meant that we kept it for as long as we did.

p. 28 – 29 – Literalism is a possible outgrowth of the modern LDS quest for religious certainty. I particularly like the talk show story about the member who said that the most important thing we need to have to get into the celestial kingdom are the signs and tokens from the temple. I know many members of the church who would perhaps not say that they were the most important thing, but who believe that they are essential. The talk show host’s comment that this marks the Church as a cult is fair. It is a cult to many of its members, whether that is its intent or not. Cult members, of course, are unable to see that they are within a cult until they break free. That is part of the definition of a cult. Hence, it does no good to talk to members of the church about the possibility that the church exercises a cult like influence in their lives.

p. 29 – “Most [church members] in fact, tend to think of salvation or heaven as being a reward granted for observing the proper ordinances, rules and actives, rather than a state of being, the natural condition attendant on the development of a loving, Christ like

character. Although we talk about them as covenant ceremonies, we are prone to let “saving ordinances,” from baptism to endowments, become magical talismans instead of symbolic markers along our path of progression.” I agree that this happens, but it is less than the general rule. In fairness to the Church, I should note that a serious attempt is made to teach the symbolic importance of temple marriage, baptism etc. However, the closed system has a powerful influence that operates in the other direction, overpowering this symbolism much of the time. I am taught, for example, that my baptism symbolizes my rebirth etc. Great symbolism. However, I am also taught that without my particular form of baptism and belief, no one else can find God. This cuts me off from 99% at least of all of the good ideas man has had respecting how to draw close to God and achieve the rebirth I was pointed toward as an 8 year old child. I would call this a limited symbol. I don’t think JS intended it to be such. I really think he intended that truth from all climes would be welcomed into our church as it presented itself. I think Hugh Brown believed that too, and perhaps others. The fact of the matter is quite different. Hence, useful symbolism and myth are fenced into make sure they do not interfere with the Church’s control over the faithful.

JS had a great intuitive understanding of the importance of symbol, ceremony and liturgy, and their connection to belief and a feeling of respect for the sacred. At the beginning, he thought he had created a free wheeling form of religion that would allow man to experience God in an individual fashion. This was quickly bureaucratized after his death for the reasons indicated above.

p. 29 – Our insistence on being “God’s only true church” is less than endearing to outsiders. I agree. But what that attitude does to our worldview is much more important than how it justly offends those of other faiths. I do not wish to be associated with any group of people who have that attitude in such a way that it will be attributed to me.

p. 29 – There is a “virtual idolatry” of current ecclesiastical leaders. Norman says this is an outgrowth of the LDS quest for certainty. Armstrong in *The Battle for God* shows how this is a basic fundamentalist trait.

p. 29 – “The difference between Catholics and Mormons is that we disbelieve in opposite doctrines. Catholic dogma proclaims the pope to be infallible, but our average Catholic doesn’t really believe it. Mormon doctrine, by contrast, teaches that the prophet is subject to human error and correction, but we Mormons don’t believe that. We have enthroned obedience as the first law of heaven (on what authority, I haven’t been able to find out), and the saying the “when the prophet speaks, the thinking has been done”, still finds widespread support among the membership.” I agree in full. I also agree with the rest of the paragraph that indicates how JS contradicted this with his teachings (see p. 30).

p.29 – “Sometimes it seems as if we have decided that, okay, we have tried free agency and individual responsibility, and now we know it doesn’t work. Let’s go back to plan A: compelling righteousness, suppressing alternate voices and choices. Unity is defined

as uniformity. Diversity in anything other than surfaced skin colour is a cancer in need of radical surgery.”

p. 30 – “I fear we are losing the best and brightest of the rising generation who feel so trammelled, and I count my son among them. When our testimony bearing dogma becomes a straight jacket, perhaps it is time to change.” I agree with this, but it makes more sense to me in the closed system context. The testimony issue is one of the outcomes that results from a decision to “protect tender testimonies”. That is where this all starts in my view.

p. 30 – I like the reference to Lavina Fielding Anderson. The malcontents in the church perceive themselves as beautiful fruit on a tree that no one will pick and eat. They therefore eventually fall off and rot around the rots of tree, making it richer and healthier in the end, so that it will continue to produce beautiful fruit. Norman likes the “we are the manure of the Church” analogy better, since he comes from a farming background. I accept this analogy as valid, and believe that without question those who stay within the church, fight through the cognitive dissonance etc. will have a beneficial effect on the church. My Dad and I have agreed that the LDS feminists have had the effect of causing the brethren to move the little bit they have toward allowing the women a greater voice within the Church, for example. However, at this point I am not interested in living out my life to improve an organization that in my view is doing much more harm than good in my life and in the lives of those I love. My first duty is to my children, not to the future generations of church members who may live in a slightly less dysfunctional organization because of my actions. In fact, I think that the best thing that could happen to the Church is if en masse, all members like me left and agreed to come back if and when things start being done in a more sensible fashion. The analogy to dealing with alcoholics is compelling. We are taught not to be enablers. That is, we should not do anything that will support the alcoholic in his destructive behaviour. This will help him to bottom out sooner, and therefore to recover sooner. The life cycle of the Church’s current behavioural pattern is likely to be measured in decades if no generations, not years or months. I suspect that no matter what I do, I will never see any material change to the Church as a result of my efforts. Hence, I should not decide what to do on this basis. Rather, I should decide what I should be based on how my actions will affect those I am responsible for – me and my children, and their children. I should also consider Don Juan’s wise words. It is quite possible that all paths lead nowhere, so choose one with heart. Living out my days in a fog of cognitive dissonance cannot be good for me, and hence cannot be what the God I choose to believe in wants for me. Hence, I will find a way to live in an environment that encourages me to be my best self, and my children to do likewise.

p. 30 – Norman tells a great story about a woman who bears the kind of testimony I have (an honest, real testimony) and apologized for not “knowing”. When he reassured her that she was OK, and was overheard by another ward members, he was told that she (the other ward member) would pray for him.

p. 31 – Children are particularly good at repeating things that bring them adult or parental approval. Hence, the stream of kids to the front of the chapel to repeat what the others before them has said.

p. 31 – We need to stop telling each other and others that we have the only true church.

p. 31 – Norman believes that the LDS church has the most logical and advanced stage of spiritual and metaphysical knowledge yet attained by humanity. In yet another bit of delicious irony, his authority for that is a book published by Sterling McMurrin, a prominent professor of philosophy years ago at the U of U, who was an avowed humanist/atheist who still wanted to keep his church membership. Nothing any mainstream church member has written or is likely to write could have led to that conclusion. It took an atheist who has travelled the world of knowledge and put Joseph Smith and his teachings into that context to explain how powerful the beliefs system JS created is. I don't know enough about this to agree or disagree, but will get McMurrin's book. It is of course published by Signature, not Deseret. (BM Note – This is written months after the rest of this essay. I have now read McMurrin's book, and disagree with Norman on this point, as did McMurrin. McMurrin characterized Mormonism's theology as crude. I characterize it in the same way. Joseph Smith may have had a few original ideas, but he borrowed almost everything he used from elsewhere. I will give him credit for weaving it together in a creative fashion, however. His imperative seemed to be staying in control, and he came up with interesting idea after idea when pressed against the wall in that regard.)

p. 31 - 32 – The LDS emphasis is far too much on orthodoxy of belief that Christian living. And yet, Norman tells two good stories about people who have joined our church because of the wonderful love they have felt from the members. That does not surprise me. LDS people are good people, who generally try hard to do their best within unnecessarily and harmfully narrow confines. The Church could do, in my view, much more in a larger market and with a larger mandate. However, the money might not roll in as it does, and the centralized control that currently exists would dissipate. Therefore, the current leaders will not move in this direction until they are forced to do so. I don't see anything on the horizon that can do this.

p. 32 – It would ease the dissonance in LDS lives if we could acknowledge safely that we don't have all the answers, that our leaders have been wrong on lots of big things etc.

p. 32 – Prophecies, patriarchal blessings etc. do not always come to pass. This is because good people who prophesy and give such blessings sometimes make mistakes. I have told my children exactly this, almost word for word.

p. 32 – God is not as controlling as many people think. Free agency and eternal law requires God to keep his hands off except in extraordinary circumstances. Allowing church leaders to do the decision making for us instead of struggling with life's ambiguities runs contrary to the plan of salvation and the free agency it espouses. Again, I have said all these things.

p. 32 – 33 – Norman concludes with his testimony, which he could probably get away with saying in testimony meeting. The only part that might cause the Bishop some trouble comes at the end where he says that he does not think that before the bar of god on judgement day he will be asked which church he belonged to. But even that could be interpreted to mean that our church is still the one true church on this earth, and that all others will have the chance to join in the “spirit world”, and after that the idea of a “church” will not matter. I could bear the same testimony. But why would I want to do that? Would I learn anything from it? No. Would anyone else learn anything from it? Maybe a little, but probably not. Would anyone be misled by it? Yes. Hence, I would never do that because all the regular members would hear those carefully chosen words and believe that I was part of the “we are true crowd” bunch. I do not want anyone to think I stand with those people, and the main function of testimony bearing within the Church in my view is to create the illusion that we should all continue to follow as we are following. It is a big part of the closed system.

p. 33 – Finally, we get to the place where he tells us why, on balance, he continue to choose to worship within the LDS system. He says “I feel deeply that, for me, here and now, this church is the place where I can best develop my divine potential, despite or maybe even because of its limitations and flaws.” That is what it comes down to, doesn’t it. Does what you are doing from a religious point of view “work” for you. He does not attempt to explain how all of the problematic things he has pointed out can be dealt with, why they might be good for him (as he hints they are), or why he has chosen to forego the chance to go down any other of the many paths available to him.

I am reminded of the passage from the History of God (pp. 297 – 99), in which Armstrong describes a bit about the life and religious beliefs of Blaise Pascal. By age 11 he had worked out by himself the first 23 propositions of Euclid. A genius by any definition, he went on to become one the greatest scientific innovators of all time. At age 31, he had a powerful “divine” experience similar to some I have had. Remember, he lived at a time when everyone believed in God, and started with the premise that God exists. He interpreted this experience as showing him that his faith had been “too remote and academic”. While I am nowhere near as smart as Pascal, my experience over the past several months has lead me down the road he travelled hundreds of years ago. I agree with and had already reached before I knew anything about Pascal’s religious beliefs each of the following positions Armstrong attributes to him. (1) He did not believe God’s existence could be “proved” in the manner many theologians cum philosophers attempted to prove it. Hence, he rejected what Armstrong calls of the god of the philosophers. His position was: “We are incapable of knowing either what [God] is or whether he is ... Reason cannot decide this question.” He also held that it cannot be proven that God does not exist. He was in that sense, an agnostic. (2) However, his direct experience meant that as far as he was concerned, God existed. That is, he believed in a God of personal revelation. (3) He believed that it made sense to bet that God existed and act as if he did because “as the Christian progresses in the Faith, he or she will become aware of a continuous enlightenment, an awareness of God’s presence that is a sure sign of salvation. It is no good relying on external authority; each Christian is on his own.” (p.

299 HofG). I would add to that the idea that once we have made the leap of faith, we are able to experience the God of revelation more frequently and powerfully. Hence, while we must walk by faith in the sense that logical proofs don't work, we are not left with proof. Our personal, subjective experience is what matters most; (4) Humanity cannot barter its way to the distant God by arguments and logic or by accepting the teaching of an institutional church. But by making the personal decision to surrender to God, the faithful feel themselves transformed, becoming "faithful, honest, humble, grateful, full of good works, a true friend." Somehow the Christian will find that life has acquired meaning and significance, having created faith and constructed a sense of God in the face of meaninglessness and despair; (5) God is a reality because he works; (6) Faith is not intellectual certainty but a leap into the dark and an experience that brings a moral enlightenment.

The last two are the most important to me. Pascal has nicely summarized for me, hundreds of years in advance of my own experience, how to deal with these matters. I feel the whisperings of the spirit as I read what he says. The god I have experienced is not necessarily the personal god of Christianity, and I catch glimpses of him/her/it most frequently when I review the macro level patterns in life's data that scientists and other thoughtful people provide for us.

Speaking of which, the feelings I get while reading or listening to things are important to me in the same sense that Pascal's experience with the "God of revelation" were important to him. Since we are making a conscience choice to believe in something that can't be proven, it makes sense that our feelings will play a significant role in this. There is also no doubt that our feelings are significantly influenced by what we know. That is how I can explain the very different experiences I now have when I read certain things that now that used to make me feel good. I now see much that is going on that I could not see, and this changes the feelings that come to me.

I recently read papers by six people on the same topic. Three of them were by Boyd Packer, Dallin Oaks and Henry Eyring, all writing on various aspects of why the Church must control what people talk about, write about etc. as far as the gospel is concerned. The other three were Leonard Arrington, the former Church historian who died a faithful member of the Church, Michael Quinn, an historian, and excommunicated member of the Church, and Todd Compton, also an historian and marginal member of the Church. Other religious historians have written about the same thing. Quinn and Compton are two of the most respected historians, from a professional point of view, who write about LDS matters.

After reading those papers, there is no question in my mind as to who is inspired of God and who is not respecting this matter. Packer, Oaks and Eyring are all obfuscating, using flawed logic and arguing for results that are contrary to God's plan of salvation, as I understand it, as well as in violation of basic human rights, as I understand them. Their positions do not hold water, and "feel" bad to me. Arrington, Quinn and Compton feel right, and their logic makes sense in every way. Hence, they are my authorities on this point. The Church has surrendered the moral high ground it should occupy. I regret that,

but cannot change it. If and when the Church returns to that moral high ground, I will become a supporter again. Until then, my path will go a different way.

I stand with Pascal. God is a reality because he works. He works in my life. The Church, as it presently stands, does not. Hence, I choose to go elsewhere.