

## LATTER DAY SAINTS AND CHURCH COOPERATION

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of Latter Day Saints  
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From its very beginnings, the church established in 1830 by the prophetic ministry of Joseph Smith has been more or less unpopular and unwelcome among the fellowship of other Christian denominations. We say this, not to court your sympathy, or to indulge in self-pity, but as a simple statement of fact. This unpopularity culminated in Jackson County in November of 1833, when the Latter Day Saints were driven northward across the Missouri River. It continued in Caldwell and Ray counties, and followed them to Illionis, where the prophet and his brother were eventually martyred in 1844.

Part of the unpopularity of the Saints was sectional and political. A great many of the Latter Day Saints who came westward to Missouri, were Yankees and abolitionists from New England. They were an educated, cultured people. Their neighbors here in Missouri were preponderantly backwoodsmen, a little scornful of book learning, and violently PRO-slavery. Such a combination was not conducive to friendship and cooperation. But part of the differences were religious and doctrinal. The new religionists preached a strange and unfamiliar doctrine, which the Missourians found impossible to believe. Often they preached, and privately boasted within hearing of their neighbors, in ways that were perhaps unwise and inflamatory. Sometimes they even failed to give to their neighbors the RELIGIOUS tolerance which they craved for themselves.

All that is history -- a history which more than a hundred years of time has softened in memory. Our relations with other churches, and with all our neighbors, have improved vastly during that time. We are constantly seeking a better cooperation and fraternal understanding between the several Christian fellowships. We are always happy to join in common movements with other religious bodies for community betterment, civic righteousness, and moral integrity. In this present discussion of our relationships with other churches, we do not ask that you accept our thinking. We ask only that you attempt to understand our thinking, and to give it the same patient, kindly, and tolerant consideration you would wish us to give to the thinking of your group. We ask only that you try to believe us sincere and honest, and activated by what we believe to be deep religious motives in clinging to and promulgating our belief.

In order to understand the relationship of the Latter Day Saint to other denominations, it is necessary first that you be familiar with three or four beliefs which Latter Day Saints universally believe. These are the premises upon which all of our thinking about other churches is based. We believe, FIRST, that the church of Christ--the church which he and his apostles established while here among men--went into apostasy and was lost, during or preceding the Dark Ages. Four things (perhaps more) were lost in that apostasy. First, the organization of the church was lost. Many of the officers SET in the church originally, were gradually forgotten, done away with, or superceded by others not a part of the original organization, so that

a changed, completely different ecclesiastical structure emerged. Second, because of continued personal and corporate transgression, all authority to represent Christ was lost. That authority existed in the original apostles; it was designed to be handed down in perpetuity from them to others; but it was lost because of the wickedness of those who claimed to possess it. Third, the original doctrines of the church were changed, re-interpreted, modified, or abandoned altogether during this apostasy. And fourth, the objectives of the original church were lost sight of, and the church became simply an institution that fitted men to die and go to heaven. In these four ways, we Latter Day Saints believe the church was LOST during the Dark Ages.

Our second basic belief is an outgrowth of the first. If all this was lost, it could no longer be handed down. Reformation had its place, but water can rise no higher than its source. What was needed was A RESTORATION, a new beginning, initiated by God himself. This restoration would necessarily have to be fourfold, to restore the four things lost in the apostasy. It would have to restore, by divine intervention, the primitive organization of the church, with each officer exactly as he was in the days of the apostles, in proper relationship to each other officer and to the people. Such restoration would have to restore the authority to represent God, which apostasy had lost. Such restoration would have to restore the original doctrines of the church, in simplicity and beauty. Such restoration would have to restore the objectives of the church, which had been lost sight of in men's zeal to escape earth and get to heaven. It was this four-fold restoration which Latter Day Saints believe was accomplished through the prophetic ministry of Joseph Smith.

If you accept these premises, as we do, in all good faith and sincerity and earnestness, what follows? Let your mind come over to our side of the fence a moment, and look at the situation from there. If you accept these premises, it follows that this church is the only one with a complete New Testament organization. It follows that this church is the only one to have received authority to minister in God's name, through the several offices of his holy priesthood. It follows that this is the only church with the FULL, and COMPLETE, and pure doctrine taught by Christ. It follows that this is the only church with clear, heaven sent objectives.

Let us not be misunderstood here. We do not regard other churches as wicked, or wrong, or completely benighted and mistaken. We do not deny that their ministry is inspired. We believe that God will bless any man or any people exactly to the extent that they serve him and comply with the laws and principles which he has laid down for their guidance. But Latter Day Saints think, rightly or wrongly, that by the grace of God they have been given MORE than other people, and they have proved to their own satisfaction in actual experience that they do have some things which other churches have not. We believe that all men are entitled to know what we have, and to hear our testimony concerning its worth. We assert this with boldness, yet with a humility born of the knowledge that to whom much is given, much is expected, and we have not always returned that which was expected to the God who has blessed us so abundantly.

We disagree on many points of doctrine; but Baptists do not agree with Methodists, or Presbyterians with Episcopalians on all points of doctrine, either. We do not say that other churches are doctrinally ALL WRONG. We are much closer doctrinally to other churches NOW than we were a hundred years ago, for many of the doctrinal beliefs which Joseph Smith denounced as wrong, have been discarded or changed by other denominations in the intervening time.

We are in favor of church cooperation. Our ministers are often members of a ministerial alliance or other inter-church organization, if they are allowed to join without compromising with their basic convictions. But sometimes our ministers and pastors are not welcome in such organizations. What gets us into trouble today is our habit of proselyting among the members of other churches. Modern people can't understand it. They can't see why each church should not be content with its own members -- content to strive for the conversion of those who belong to no church at all, and with an overflow effort expended on foreign missions. They think it somehow unethical to cross denominational lines in seeking converts. They believe that we should let well enough alone, and not encroach on the denominational territory of others.

That gets us at once into a question which is still a very live one. Has anyone the right to disturb the religious thinking, or to change the religious convictions of another? The atheist, the non-Christian who is happy in his unbelief, has a perfect right to resent the intrusion of anyone of any denomination trying to change his thinking, and upset his whole philosophy of life. Within this past year, a discussion has flared over the moral right of Protestants to proselytize in Catholic South America, upsetting the thinking of people long established in one church, and converting them to another. The Catholics demand the right to seek converts in Protestant America; the protestants demand the right to seek converts in Catholic South America; both demand the right to seek converts in any part of the world where they may get a hearing -- among Buddhists, Mohammedans, followers of Confucius, followers of witch doctors, or any other religionists. In the same way, Latter Day Saints feel that they have a moral right which amounts to a duty, to tell ANYONE who will listen of the thing they have found which they believe to be better, more complete, more satisfying, than all the other good religions of the world.

Members of this church rarely join another unless they completely sever their first connections, and strangely enough, it is much harder to get OUT of this church than it is to get in. When a member of our communion moves to a town where there is no congregation of Latter Day Saints, he may start attending and supporting a congregation of some other denomination, but he will not offer a letter of removal, requesting transfer to the new congregation as a member. One reason for this is our peculiar, and narrow concept of church membership. Another is that membership in the Latter Day Saints is membership in the world-wide church or organization, and not primarily in the congregation. Letters of removal are granted for persons going from one of our congregations to another, but not for persons going from one of our congregations to a congregation of some other communion, for that would be tantamount to changing denominational affiliation.

Many of our people in locations where they cannot associate with people of their own faith, have sent their children to the best Sunday School available, and themselves have attended and supported some congregation of another faith. But they are still Latter Day Saints. Their names are carried on our church records, and usually they are loyal to their own church group, refusing to submit their names for membership in a congregation not of their faith. When they can be accepted on this basis, our people are glad to join with other religious people for mutual spiritual betterment. Personally, may I say that during the years when no congregation of my own church was available, I have sung with a Catholic choir, directed a Methodist choir, taught a Congregational Sunday School class, and been a fairly regular attendant at Presbyterian services.

These views of church membership, the exclusiveness of the Latter Day Saints, their seeming refusal to cooperate in some ways, may seem peculiar and unreasonable to many of you. We ask you only to believe that we believe them whole heartedly, sincerely, honestly. If our friends of other churches will try to understand why we act as we do, and if we try to understand them in the same way, we shall be able to cooperate more and more in the support of all that is good, and the defeat of all that is evil, until Christ shall come to level all denominational differences and cause us all to see eye to eye in the perfection of his glory.