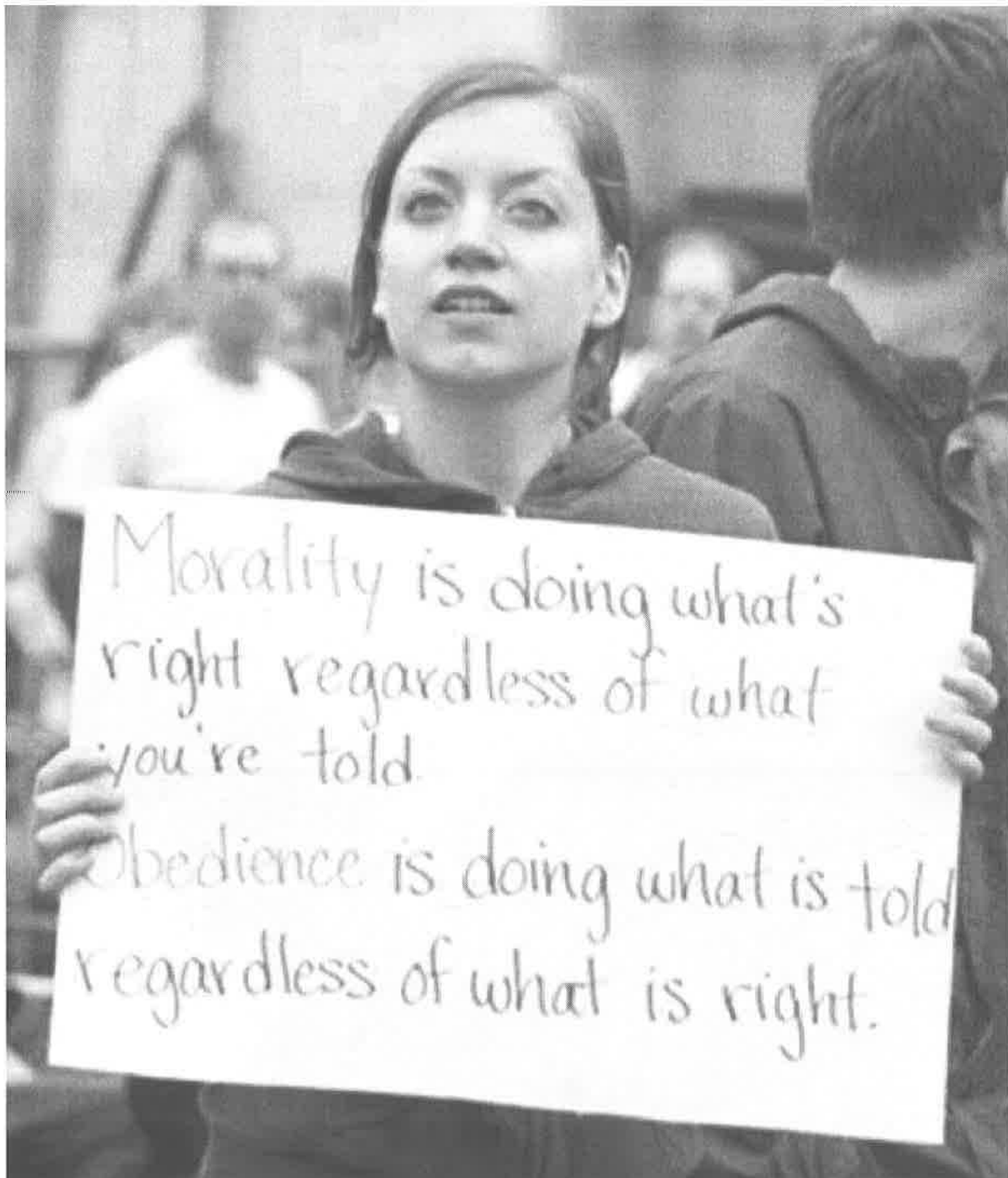


Of Pride and Prophets

by Jeff Swift | May 25, 2015 | Blogs about Blogs, Faith, Featured, General authorities, Individuality, Obedience, Revelation, Truth, unity | 8 comments



People like me get called prideful all the time by our fellow Mormons. It gets old, to say the least. This accusation came up again in the discussion of a blog post titled “How to stay Mormon when you’re tired of Mormons,” which has been making the rounds on the interwebs over the past few days. It is a sincere and well thought-out post by someone who has clearly thought and prayed a lot about this issue. Blogger “ldsphilosopher” over at Millennial Star, another who has clearly thought/prayed a lot about this same issue, posted a response a few days later. In it, the author argues that the “How to stay Mormon” blog post takes on the issue from the wrong angle:

I appreciate that the author of the original post didn’t spend it opining about the faults of the Church, but focusing on what we can do instead. That is a good approach. I just felt that the suggestions given focused way more attention on the self, how we can take care of the self, how we can be true to ourselves, etc., and not enough attention on God and His will.

If you ask me, this is a fair critique and an accurate summary of what the original post was trying to do. And I think ldsphilosopher is on to something—we’re missing the point of church entirely if all we think about is ourselves and what we can “get out of” the Church, particularly when it comes at the expense of focusing on our relationship with our fellow humans and our Heavenly Parents.

At the same time, though, ldsphilosopher glosses over the fact that one of the central points of any organized religion is to form a *community* (Zion, if you will), and that there are community-level problems that cannot always be fixed by individual-level solutions. In this light, I’d like to focus on one of ldsphilosopher’s argument that strikes me as divisively judgmental and has a similar effect on others like me:

For example, what happens when repeated, ongoing counsel from prophets and apostles conflicts with our own understanding of the world? I think that’s where heart of the difficulty lies — some of us simply don’t believe that certain teachings and counsel from prophets and apostles come from God. **(I don’t count myself as one of these — at least on issues where apostles and prophets have spoken unanimously and repeatedly.)** This can create a real discord within the hearts and minds of members of the Church (and amongst each other).

The question of individualism vs. discipleship influences how we approach these sorts of questions. The individualist will assume from the outset that such counsel is part of the “traditions of men,” and will treat invitations to follow such counsel with suspicion (unless and until it can be made sensible within their worldview). Thus, they will encourage you to stop thinking about how “Church leaders” might view you, but to focus instead on God. Counsel from prophets and apostles starts to

blend into and become indistinguishable from “opinions of others”, which we should ignore and follow our heart instead. **To me, this is really an elevation of one’s own wisdom — a stance of pride.** [emphasis mine]

The first paragraph sets up the problem—“some” Mormons just don’t believe everything that the prophets and apostles teach. I agree that the act of “elevation of one’s own wisdom” above the counsel of prophets and of apostles *can* be rooted in pride. But the philosopher’s argument seems to paint with a very broad brush, labeling “prideful” everyone who disagrees with the apostles/prophets on issues the author feels are clearly stated. The statement seems to be “if you ever disagree with counsel from prophets and apostles (in the wrong way), you are prideful.”

On that note, the final sentence in that paragraph is particularly powerful to me. The author stipulates that there is a scenario in which it might potentially be okay to disagree with the prophets and apostles: on issues they have not spoken out on “unanimously and repeatedly.” My question to the author is this: why those two criteria? Is there no other criteria that could possibly be used to determine when it’s potentially okay to disagree with the prophets and apostles? What if, for example, someone else were to use the metric of “I go with what I understand after I fast and pray about it” or “I make these decisions after I’ve done my very best to follow the Spirit”? How come you get to decide that your set of criteria is righteous and the latter two sets of criteria are prideful?

This is an incredibly difficult issue to sort out. Do you follow everything the prophet says 100% of the time no matter what? And if you don’t, how do you make the decision about when you don’t? I have lived most of my life somewhere near the 100% camp, and I know many good people who have pitched their tents there. But I no longer think that’s what our Heavenly Parents want. The 100% option is essentially an answer that precludes all future questions. As soon as you leave the uncompromising realm of 100% obedience in every case no matter what, you’re left with study and faith as opposed to uniformity and knowledge.

Truth is my authority
not some authority
my truth

- Anne Hutchinson

It's clear that the alternative is very fraught and confusing, because the decisions haven't already been made for us—we need to prayerfully and carefully follow the Spirit in every situation. But those of us who believe this *haven't* abandoned our Heavenly Parents for our own personal wisdom. Even Idsphilosopher's dreaded "individualist" focuses on God, albeit at the expense of focusing exclusively on Church leaders. Can we really accuse such people of being unfocused on God, or are they just focused on God differently than some might prefer?

The author blames "real discord" on people who don't agree with the prophet 100% of time. I'm not sure we always deserve the blame for discord. Honestly, it gets tiring to be accused of pride by fellow Mormons. I know how it looks when people disagree with counsel from prophets and apostles. But please believe me, at least, when I say that I'm honestly and sincerely seeking for the truth. Many people like me are as well. In fact, it's probably safe to say that we're all doing our best. I'm trying everything I know how to try. I look at history and see examples of Church leaders, even prophets and apostles, issuing counsel that they have since retracted—not that "it was true then but it's not true now," but full 180 degree change. I read historical accounts of differences of opinion, even disagreements, among prophets and apostles. I listen to and read general conference talks and see everything from subtle differences to direct disagreement. If prophets and apostles don't even think prophets and apostles are correct 100% of the time, should I?

And more relevant to this discussion, should you be calling me prideful if I don't?

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8 Comments

Daniel T. Lewis on May 25, 2015 at 2:17 pm

I find that most Mormons aren't even willing to consider that prophets