

Why I Doubt the Church's Commitment to Historical Transparency

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Recently Elder Ballard addressed the stakes in the Utah South area. The full content of the address can be found here .

During his address, Elder Ballard counselled parents and leaders to help people find answers to difficult questions, and declared:

The Church is dedicated to transparency and has donated precious resources to provide new insights and offer even more context to the story of the Restoration through the Joseph Smith Papers website and the Gospel Topics essays on LDS.org. It is a remarkable time to study Church history and doctrine, with abundant resources and experts providing helpful background and understanding of our past.

Similarly, in discussing the recently released Gospel Topic Essays, Church Historian Elder Snow said: "we, understandably have not spent a lot of time in the past worrying about these issues

(...). But as the information age is now upon us, we feel with all of this information out there we owe it (...) to provide good, reliable information about these matters”.

While the church has made great strides in recent years, it still has a long way to go before it can credibly claim to be “dedicated to transparency”. Here are five instances in the last eight years where the church has failed to be transparent with its history.

1. Elder Anderson's description of Joseph Smith.

A lot can be said about Joseph Smith, and there is much about his life and religious experiences that we may never understand. For example, it is doubtful that anyone reading this will ever *really* know the details of what happened in the sacred grove (Joseph himself related several different versions of the event). One fact, however, is well established, and is acknowledged by the Church: Joseph married other women without Emma's knowledge or consent. Joseph led Emma to believe that theirs was a monogamous relationship when it was not. In other words, Joseph deceived his wife. Despite this, in his October 2014 General Conference address, Elder Anderson testified that “Joseph Smith was an honest and virtuous man.”

Joseph may have been honest in all other aspects of his life. Perhaps God commanded Joseph to deceive his wife, or he did it out of love for her, or he had to do it to save his life. Any or all of these justifications could be true. One could even argue that deceiving Emma was the moral thing to do (though I am skeptical). None of these justifications change the fact that, no matter what you believe about Joseph's calling, a man who deceives his spouse about marital fidelity is not an “honest man.”

It is time that we stop putting Joseph on a pedestal and view him as a complete person, complex and sometimes flawed. To assert that he was honest is simply not transparent.

2. Milk Strippings

In President Monson's October 2009 General Conference address he relates the account of Thomas B. Marsh and his wife Elizabeth. To briefly recap, the story is that Brother and Sister Marsh left the Church as a result of a dispute over milk strippings. It is ultimately a story about how pride led two prominent members to leave the church because they could not accept the judgment of their priesthood authorities. Brother Marsh then swore an affidavit that the Mormons were hostile toward the state of Missouri. President Monson describes the fallout: “His affidavit led to—or at least was a factor in—Governor Lilburn Boggs's cruel extermination order, which resulted in over 15,000 Saints being driven from their homes, with all the terrible suffering and consequent death that followed. All of this occurred because of a disagreement over the exchange of milk and cream.”

So what's wrong? Well, from all appearances, this story is at best incomplete, and quite possibly a work of fiction. This story has become part of the cultural background of the church, repeated over years from the pulpit and in manuals. Its origin appears to be an 1856 sermon preached by George A. Smith—18 years after the supposed incident. There are no corroborating sources.

This article from lds.org tells a much more complete version of events, and notes that Thomas “was among several Latter-day Saints who became disturbed by the increasingly violent relationship between Church members and their Missouri neighbors.” His concerns were not unfounded; Mormon militia members had recently burned the towns of Gallatin and Millport

This story suggests that an apostate's pride over a trivial disagreement lead to unspeakable hardship for the Saints—but the reality is far more complex. I don't think that President Monson woke up one morning and decided to deceive the membership of the church. I'm actually not even willing to accuse him of lying—because lying requires intent to deceive. But by promoting this story, the church is failing to be transparent about their history, including the role of the Saints in the 1838 Mormon War.

3. Church Essays— Blacks and the Priesthood

From 2014-2016 the Church released a number of essays dealing with “difficult topics” in church history. These essays are written by professional historians and approved by Church leadership. I am hesitant to criticize the essays, because they are a step towards more transparency. However, it would be wrong to say that the essays themselves are transparent.

In the Race and the Priesthood essay, the authors discuss the largely obscured origins of the Priesthood and temple ban on blacks, and the justifications given for the ban. Of the justifications they state “Over time, Church leaders and members advanced many theories to explain the priesthood and temple restrictions. (...) According to one view, which had been promulgated in the United States from at least the 1730s, blacks descended from the same lineage as the biblical Cain, who slew his brother Abel. Those who accepted this view believed that God's “curse” on Cain was the mark of a dark skin (...). Around the turn of the century, another explanation gained currency: blacks were said to have been less than fully valiant in the premortal battle against Lucifer and, as a consequence, were restricted from priesthood and temple blessings.”

Little more is said of the justification for the ban.

Left out of the essay is that these explanations were not just *theories* proposed by leaders and members of the Church, but these teachings on race were promulgated as doctrine by the First Presidency of the Church. A statement, signed by the First Presidency in 1949 reads:

The attitude of the Church with reference to Negroes remains as it has always stood. It is not a matter of the declaration of a policy but of direct commandment from the Lord, on which is founded the doctrine of the Church from the days of its organization, to the effect that Negroes may become members of the Church but that they are not entitled to the priesthood at the present time. The prophets of the Lord have made several statements as to the operation of the principle. President Brigham Young said: “Why are so many of the inhabitants of the earth cursed with a skin of blackness? It comes in consequence of their fathers rejecting the power of the holy priesthood, and the law of God. They will go down to death. And when all the rest of the children have received their blessings in the holy priesthood, then that curse will be removed from the seed of Cain, and they will then come up and possess the priesthood, and receive all the blessings which we now are entitled to.”

President Wilford Woodruff made the following statement: “The day will come when all that race will be redeemed and possess all the blessings which we now have.”

The position of the Church regarding the Negro may be understood when another doctrine of the Church is kept in mind, namely, that the conduct of spirits in the premortal existence has some determining effect upon the conditions and circumstances under which these spirits take on mortality and that while the details of this principle have not been made known, the mortality is a privilege that is given to those who maintain their first estate; and that the worth of the privilege is so great that spirits are willing to come to earth and take on bodies no matter what the handicap may be as to the kind of bodies they are to secure; and that among the handicaps, failure of the right to enjoy in mortality the blessings of the priesthood is a handicap which spirits are willing to assume in order that they might come to earth. Under this principle there is no injustice whatsoever involved in this deprivation as to the holding of the priesthood by the Negroes.

The First Presidency

If the essay was transparent, it would acknowledge that the doctrine of the church did, in fact, change. Instead the authors attempt to lessen the role of the Church as an institution in the false policies of the past. They fail to be "dedicated to transparency".

4. Church Essays— Joseph Smith Polygamy/Polyandry

The Church makes remarkable strides towards transparency in this essay—acknowledging that:

- Joseph Smith married between 30-40 plural wives
- Such marriages may have included sexual relations
- Joseph was sealed to a number of women who were already married
- Joseph married at least one girl as young as 14 (or as the essay puts it "several months before her 15th birthday)

Again, it would be wrong to describe this essay as fully transparent. Not because it fails to report all of the details about plural marriage (I am sensitive to the need to make the essay a readable length), but because it attempts to obscure the details of Joseph's relationship with 14 year old Helen Mar Kimball.

The essay reports that Helen was sealed to Joseph "several months before her 15th birthday". It is obvious from this description that the essay authors are uncomfortable with the fact that Joseph married a bride who was so young (though I'm not sure that 15 years old is any better than 14). The essay then claims that "Marriage at such an age, although inappropriate by today's standards, was legal in that era, and some women married in their mid-teens".

The authors imply that there was a different standard for marrying age in 1840 that made such unions more acceptable. This is a prevarication. The same statement from the essay could be applied today: "In California, Massachusetts and New Hampshire, marriage at (14 years old), although inappropriate by today's standard, is legal and some women marry in their mid-teens." Our discomfort with the idea of Joseph marrying a 14 year old girl is not the result of presentism (as the essay suggests). The inappropriateness of marriage between a 14 year old girl and a 37 year old man was the same in Joseph's day as it is today.

The essay goes on to claim that "Helen Mar Kimball spoke of her sealing to Joseph as being 'for eternity alone,' suggesting that the relationship did not involve sexual relations." At first this quote would seem to be straightforward evidence that the relationship was not sexual.

However, if one tracks down the source of the quote, it is clear that the essay takes the quote out of context. The quote is taken from a poem written in 1881 by Helen Mar Kimball. It reads (with the relevant quote highlighted):

*I thought through this life my time will be my own
The step I now am taking's for eternity alone,
 No one need be the wiser, through time I shall be free,
 And as the past hath been the future still will be.
 To my guileless heart all free from worldly care
 And full of blissful hopes and youthful visions rare
 The world seamed bright the thret'ning clouds were kept
 From sight and all looked fair but pitying angels wept.
 They saw my youthful friends grow shy and cold.
 And poisonous darts from sland'rous tongues were hurled,
 Untutor'd heart in thy gen'rous sacrafise,
 Thou did'st not weigh the cost nor know the bitter price;
 Thy happy dreams all o'er thou'st doom'd also to be
 Bar'd out from social scenes by this thy destiny,
 And o'er thy sad'nd mem'ries of sweet departed joys
 Thy sicken'd heart will brood and imagine future woes,
 And like a fetter'd bird with wild and longing heart,
 Thou'lt dayly pine for freedom and murmor at thy lot;*

*But could'st thou see the future & view that glorious crown,
 Awaiting you in Heaven you would not weep nor mourn.
 Pure and exalted was thy father's aim, he saw
 A glory in obeying this high celestial law,
 For to thousands who've died without the light
 I will bring eternal joy & make thy crown more bright.
 I'd been taught to reveire the Prophet of God
 And receive every word as the word of the Lord,
 But had this not come through my dear father's mouth,
 I should ne'r have received it as God's sacred truth.*

It is clear from the poem that Helen thought her marriage to Joseph wouldn't change the way she lived her life—but later found she was mistaken. It is certainly not evidence that her sealing to Joseph was non-sexual.

The evidence of sexual relations in Joseph's marriage to the 14 year old Helen Mar Kimball is fragmentary at best—and I understand the essay authors not wanting to review all of the arguments in the essay. However, using the above referenced quote to suggest that Helen and Joseph's marriage "did not involve sexual relations" is sloppy at best and deceitful at worse. It does not suggest a dedication to transparency.

5. Sidney Rigdon and the Transfiguration of Brigham Young

Unfortunately there are many instances where the church history curriculum is far less than transparent. One example is the way that the succession crisis is treated in church history curriculum. Most of us are familiar with the following version of the succession crisis, taken from the Primary 5 manual, published in 1997 and last used in 2013 (scheduled to be used again in 2017):

Sidney Rigdon, who had been First Counselor to Joseph Smith in the First Presidency of the Church, had become displeased with the Church and had moved to Pennsylvania against the wishes of the Lord (see D&C 124:108-110). However, when he heard about the death of the Prophet, Sidney returned to Nauvoo. He felt that because he had been in the First Presidency, it was his right to be the next leader of the Church. (...)

At a meeting of the Church on 8 August 1844, Sidney Rigdon gave an hour-and-a-half-long speech on why he should be the leader of the Church. Brigham Young then gave a short talk, and while he spoke a miracle occurred. To the people in the audience, Brigham Young suddenly looked and sounded like Joseph Smith. (...)

Through the miracle of the transformation of Brigham Young, the Saints learned that after the Prophet died, the power and authority to lead the Church were held by the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

There are two reasons why this narrative is not transparent. The first is that it falsely claims that Rigdon “had moved to Pennsylvania against the wishes of the Lord”. To support this claim, the manual authors cite D&C 124:108-110, which does indeed instruct Rigdon to stay in Nauvoo. The date of this revelation, however, is Jan. 19, 1841. Rigdon did not arrive in Pittsburg until June 27, 1844—the day of Joseph’s death. One could hardly say that he had “moved” there. Further, the reason that Rigdon went to Pittsburg was because *Joseph asked him to*. In a journal entry on June 22nd, 1844, Joseph reports “I have sent Br. R[igdon] away [and] I want to send Hiram away to save him [too], to avenge my blood.” Beyond Joseph’s desire to protect Rigdon from the mob around Nauvoo, Joseph had a political reason to send him away— As Joseph’s running mate in the presidential election, Rigdon had to establish residency outside of Illinois.

The second reason that this narrative is not transparent is that it does not accurately reflect the contemporary reports of the August 8, 1844 meeting. Apostles Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, Willard Richards and Wilford Woodruff all made diary entries on August 8, 1844, and none of them suggest a miraculous transfiguration took place. Nor do any other journal entries of the period. Nor do the newspapers who reported on the meeting. In fact, it was not until 13 years later, in 1857 that the first reference to a transfiguration was made.

Among those who reported the miraculous transfiguration was Apostle Orson Hyde. Speaking in General Conference in 1869 he reported being in the crowd on August 8, 1844 and testified “it was not only the voice of Joseph, but there were the features, the gestures and even the stature of Joseph before us in the person of Brigham. (...) everyone who was in the congregation— everyone who was inspired by the Spirit of the Lord—felt it. They knew it. They realized it.”

There is a problem with Elder Hyde’s account, however. Wilford Woodruff’s journal makes it clear that Orson Hyde did not arrive in Nauvoo until August 13th, and could not have witnessed

the meeting about which he so fervently testified.

It would appear, much like the story of the milk strippings, the "transfiguration of Brigham Young" is an after-the-fact creation. To present it as fact is not transparent.

For much more on this event see [this article in Dialogue](#).

Does historical transparency really matter?

Elder Ballard seems to think it does—why else would he make a point of emphasizing that the Church is "dedicated to transparency"? It is my sincere hope that the LDS Church will move towards complete transparency—not just in historical matters but in all matters. Half-truths, carefully crafted prevarications and faith promoting myths will not survive the increased light of the information age. The best way to start would be to publically acknowledge and correct the falsehoods of the past, followed by a thorough review of current curriculum to ensure that it represents the best in scholarship and transparency. The Sunday School curriculum for 2017 is Doctrine and Covenants and Church History, so there is no time like the present to start. Until this happens, the membership of the church will have many reasons to doubt the Church's dedication to historical transparency.

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