

*Is the Great Emergence reaching Mormonism?*

# THE WORD OF GOD

## A TALE OF TWO PARADIGMS

By H. Parker Blount

*Both read the Bible day and night  
But thou read'st black where I read white.*

—WILLIAM BLAKE

**M**Y CAR IN THE SHOP TO BE SERVICED, I SAT IN a waiting room dominated by the aroma of brewing coffee and old motor oil. I spied a copy of the *New Yorker* in a pile of magazines scattered across a table, and figured the magazine's cartoons might help me tune out the television's irksome chatter. As I flipped through the pages, an article about the Episcopal Church caught my eye. Not only was there a conflict in the U. S. Episcopal Church, I read, but there was an ongoing upheaval within the worldwide Anglican Church.<sup>1</sup>

In August 2003 at the general convention of the Episcopal Church, Gene Robinson was affirmed Bishop of New Hampshire.<sup>2</sup> The affirmation, however, was not unanimous. Robert Duncan, Bishop of Pittsburgh—who years before had been a seminary classmate of Robinson—opposed the appointment. Bishop Duncan believed that Robinson, being a practicing gay man, was unworthy to hold the position. “I will stand against the actions of this Convention with everything I have and everything I am,” he declared just before he and nineteen other bishops walked out of the convention.

As I read about this exodus, I wondered if such a rupture could ever occur in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Probably not. I thought of the many times I had heard members of the Church comment on controversies in Christian denominations, attributing their rifts and upheavals to a lack of genuine priesthood authority. I distinctly remember my mission president saying in reference to

something that had occurred within the Methodist Church, “Oh, those poor Methodists.” In his mind, we had God's word; others didn't. Oh, the trouble that fact saved us and caused them.

Even though the issue on the table at the Episcopal convention was whether God approved of a practicing gay man serving in the priesthood, the underlying issue was actually something quite different: How is the Bible to be read and interpreted? Bishop Duncan's position was that the Bible is to be taken literally, that what it says is as binding on people today as it was when the words were first uttered. In contrast, the present presiding bishop Katherine Jefferts-Schori saw the Bible as a guide and source of inspiration that, along with tradition and reason, assist the Holy Spirit in providing discernment on questions of faith.<sup>3</sup> How had the two camps arrived at their divergent positions when they were both seeking to be faithful adherents to God's will?

Duncan's position is derived directly from one of the major claims of the Reformers, who argued that the Bible, not the Pope, was God's final word—*sola scriptura, scriptura sola*. From then on, many Protestants have viewed the Bible as God's sole declaration, believing that it contains, in the best form possible (nothing extra, nothing missing, nothing accidentally ambiguous), everything human beings need to live a life approved by God and achieve salvation. Furthermore, many in Bishop Duncan's biblical-literalist camp also claim that to accept, or even consider, anything beyond the Bible's clear witness is to be dangerously distracted.

But, strong as that position remains, another group within Christianity, like a dancer pirouetting to face a different direction, no longer believes that the Bible was dictated by God or that it has an explicit answer to every essential question. In *The Battle For God*, Karen Armstrong points out that as early as 1900 “observers . . . were aware that within almost all denominations . . . there were two distinct ‘churches’ representing the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ way of looking at the Bible.”<sup>4</sup> In much the same way, Marcus Borg argues that these two ways of seeing the Bible are so different that



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they could be considered different religions, even though they use the same language and the same scriptures—“a tale of two Christianities.”<sup>5</sup> “Now, some five hundred years after [the Reformation],” observes Phyllis Tickle, founding editor of the religion department of *Publishers Weekly*,

even many of the most diehard Protestants among us have grown suspicious of “Scripture and Scripture only.” We question what the words mean—literally? Metaphorically? Actually? We even question which words do and do not belong in Scripture and the purity of the editorial line of descent of those that do. We begin to refer to Luther’s principle of “*Sola scriptura, scriptura sola*” as having been little more than the creation of a paper pope in place of flesh and blood one. And even as we speak, the authority that has been in place for five hundred years withers away in our hands.<sup>6</sup>

### THE GREAT EMERGENCE

**C**LEARLY THE INCIDENT between Bishops Duncan and Jefferts-Schori was not just an in-house squabble but reflected a broader paradigm shift within Protestant churches. Tickle suggests that shifts like this are natural and healthy. She writes, “About every five hundred years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at that time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur.”<sup>7</sup> In each of the five-hundred-year upheavals, she argues, the underlying issue is always who or what constitutes God’s authority.

The shift by many Protestants from insisting on *sola scriptorium* to becoming receptive to new sources of inspiration is often referred to as the Great Emergence. Within the context of this Great Emergence, Marcus Borg has named the two basic ways of viewing the Bible the *earlier* and the *emerging* paradigms.

Can these two paradigms also frame ways of understanding and engaging Mormonism? Might they be helpful to someone wrestling with who or what is speaking for God? Obviously I think so—otherwise I wouldn’t be writing this essay.

### THE EARLIER PARADIGM

**T**HE EARLIER AND emerging paradigms are, according to Borg, “quite different visions of what it means to be Christian.” Borg sees the earlier paradigm as having taken shape in the last few hundred years at least partly in reaction to modernity and the rising influence of secular and science-based worldviews. He defines it using six identifying characteristics.<sup>8</sup>

First, early paradigm Christians believe that the Bible is literally God’s word, containing exactly what God wants said on a subject in precisely the way he wants it stated. It answers every essential question and contains all that is



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needed for salvation. Borg refers to this characteristic of the earlier paradigm as *literalistic*.

Earlier paradigm believers are also *doctrinally oriented*, meaning that to be saved you not only have to believe, but you must believe the right things. Essential to the creed is the belief that God expects you to live his law. Unfortunately, we aren’t “very good at being good,” so emphasis on our sinful nature, along with guilt, repentance, and forgiveness, are staples of the earlier paradigm. Borg calls this the *moralistic* component. Mortality is a trial to be endured for greater reward in the next life; therefore, many of the teachings of the earlier paradigm are *afterlife-oriented*. Any hope of salvation in the next life comes only through Christianity, and according to some sects, only through their administrations.



## Emergents value scripture not as God's literal word but as an inspirational platform through which they can grow in spirit and in understanding of God's will.

Thus, the earlier paradigm is *exclusivistic*. And, according to Borg, the earlier paradigm is distinctly *patriarchal*, in both language and practice.

The crucial planet that these identifiers orbit around like moons is the role of the Bible as God's authoritative voice. It is the source of church doctrine, as well as the practices, actions, attitudes, and beliefs that identify a true Christian.

Evaluating the LDS Church according to these six identifiers, it seems to me that official LDS Church practices, doctrine, and policies are quite compatible with the earlier paradigm classification scheme. Although I haven't found people using Borg's specific template or terminology, I do find people writing and speaking—on blogs and other online forums, in magazines and journals, as well as in podcasts and symposium or conference presentations—about the extent to which the LDS Church is literalistic, doctrinal, moralistic, afterlife-oriented, exclusivistic, and patriarchal.

As noted, the Bible for the earlier paradigm is God's authoritative voice. It is here that something of a hiccup develops in the LDS Church's compatibility with the earlier paradigm. Certainly among Latter-day Saints the Bible is highly prized—Church leaders are continually reminding members to read and study the Bible along with the other Standard Works. What is not said regarding the Bible—al-

though it seems as though it would be considering the Article of Faith that refers to Biblical mistranslations, and the Book of Mormon's declaration of the loss of plain and precious truths—is how the Bible should be approached. Is it to be read literally or metaphorically? Should its primary strength be that of a sacramental gateway into a realm of spirituality that transcends both mistranslations and deletions?

Whatever indecisiveness may exist among Latter-day Saints as to how to approach the Bible, particularly in comparison to the Book of Mormon (the most correct book) there is no question that Church leaders are the ones who have the single authority to speak for God at any given time. As I have often heard it said, the words of the living prophets supersede those of dead prophets. In that way—"whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the

same" (D&C 1:38)—the LDS Church prophets occupy a similar position to the Bible within the earlier paradigm.

In 2003, when Robert Duncan and his associates were using scripture to protest the appointment of a gay man as an Episcopal bishop, Claudia L. Bushman published an article in *Dialogue* titled, "My Short Happy Life with *Exponent II*." In it, Bushman recounts her experience some years earlier with a group of LDS women in the Boston area who decided to publish a newspaper aimed at Mormon women, modeling it after a long defunct newspaper published by Utah pioneer women. The publication, contrary to the Boston women's expectations, did not please Church leaders. Eventually Bushman was instructed by a general authority to disengage herself from *Exponent II*, even though she had felt called by God to run the paper. Of that directive, she wrote, "I was unrepentant, but I was obedient."<sup>9</sup>

At the 2010 Sunstone Symposium, *Dialogue* editor Kristine Haglund discussed Levi Savage's objections to the Willie and Martin Handcart Companies' plans to attempt the trek to Utah, which would entail them crossing the Rocky Mountains very late in the season. Savage pressed his case, accurately predicting the perils the parties faced. Apostle Franklin Richards dismissed Savage's warnings and directed the handcart companies to undertake the journey. Haglund

quoted Savage as saying, “What I have said I know to be true, but seeing you are to go forward, I will go with you, and will help all I can, will work with you, will rest with you, and if necessary, will die with you. May God in his mercy bless and preserve us.”

If I’m reading them correctly, the point from both Bushman and Haglund seems to be: no matter what our opinion may be, no matter how well grounded it is, no matter what our hearts tell us, the best course is to be loyal to the community and obedient to our leaders. In that sense, the LDS Church’s position that Church leaders speak for God is equivalent to the earlier paradigm’s position that the Bible is God’s literal authoritative words. Even if the source of God’s words differs between the LDS Church and the earlier paradigm, the paradigmatic expectations are the same.

Although I see the contemporary LDS Church as being categorically “earlier,” I see Joseph Smith, if not fully aligned with the emerging paradigm, certainly qualifying as a precursor to it. Wherever Joseph was in terms of his theology and religious sensibilities, it is clear that today’s Church has shifted away from the non-creedal Joseph who didn’t want to be trammled into believing any particular doctrine. It has become an earlier-paradigm institution.

#### THE EMERGING PARADIGM

**T**HE EMERGING PARADIGM is a reaction to the earlier paradigm. It arose, as Borg states, as a result of “Christianity’s encounter with the modern and post-modern world, including science, historical scholarship, religious pluralism, and cultural diversity.”<sup>10</sup> An example of how scientific inquiry has shaped the emerging paradigm can be found in the study of human consciousness. Brain damage, for instance, often results in changes to both personality and cognition—that is to say, changes in how a person perceives and responds to the world. Before science could assess neurological damage and functions, it was plausible to attribute such changes to possession by God or Satan. Now, however, such attribution becomes a second- or third-tier explanation that can seem reductive, immaterial, or feckless even to those grounded in religious faith.

Borg also acknowledges that the rise of the emerging paradigm has been heavily influenced by “our awareness of how Christianity has contributed to racism, sexism, nationalism, exclusivism, and other harmful ideologies.”<sup>11</sup>

Discourse about language—what words can mean, as well as how words and language affect perception and thought—has also shaped the emerging paradigm. Where the earlier paradigm treats the Bible as literal, the emerging paradigm sees it as anything but. In fact, freeing the Bible from its literal constraints is paramount to the “emergents’” philosophy.

As Borg explains it, emergents see the Bible as *historical* (meaning that it is a record for the community that produced it), *metaphorical* (a metaphor being a technique for approaching truths that can’t be adequately captured by words), and *sacramental* (being a vehicle through which the

Spirit can work). As Borg points out, the line separating earlier from emergents can often be traced through controversial issues such as female ordination, homosexual practice, and Christian exclusivity. One’s “take” on these issues is determined in large measure by how one engages the Bible.

Borg’s own view of the Bible is fairly typical of emerging thought: “Rather than seeing God as scripture’s ultimate author,” he writes,

I see the Bible as the response of [the Old Testament and New Testament communities] to their experience of God. As such, it contains their stories of God, their perceptions of God’s character and will, their prayers to and praise of God, their perceptions of the human condition and the paths of deliverance, their religious and ethical practices, and their understanding of what faithfulness to God involves. As the product of these two communities, the Bible thus tells us about how *they* saw things, not about how *God* sees things.<sup>12</sup>

Emergents value scripture not as God’s literal word but as an inspirational medium through which they can grow in spirit and understanding of God’s will; they study the Bible metaphorically. They point out that treating metaphors literally can be dangerous, as illustrated in the Bible itself: when Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born again, Nicodemus tries to grasp how that is literally possible. Likewise, in the earlier paradigm, “born again” is treated as a literal change that makes you acceptable to Jesus rather than as a transformational relationship with the divine. One way of viewing emergents, then, is that they tend to be *actualist*, looking at biblical narratives in terms of the various truths they can reveal, as opposed to declaring one literal meaning that the faithful must accept.

The Bible for emergents then is not, as Tickle says, a written pope. To rely completely upon the scriptures is to deny the very spirit that Christ promised would guide his followers. For example, Frank T. Griswold, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, U.S.A. (1997–2006), observed that in the gospel of John, Christ tells his disciples that many things will yet be revealed to them. “Why didn’t God simply plant the fullness of this knowledge in us at the beginning?” Griswold asks. “Why has it taken us centuries to be able to cure fatal diseases that existed in the Middle Ages? How unkind and thoughtless of God not to give us all the information at the outset. And yet, we’ve been structured in a universe in such a way that truth is progressive.”<sup>13</sup>

#### THE EMERGING PARADIGM CONVERSATION

**B**ORG, TICKLE, AND others speak of the emergent paradigm as a “conversation.” As a case in point, consider Anne Rice (author of *Interview with the Vampire*) a once devout Catholic who made a personal proclamation on her Facebook page in 2010 against the ear-

lier paradigm: “Today I quit being a Christian. I’m out. I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being ‘Christian’ or to being part of Christianity.”<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, she added, “In the name of Christ, I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control. I refuse to be anti-Democrat. I refuse to be anti-secular humanism. I refuse to be anti-science. I refuse to be anti-life. In the name of Christ, I quit Christianity and being Christian. Amen.”<sup>15</sup> She later elaborated that “following Christ does not mean following His followers. Christ is infinitely more important than Christianity and always will be, no matter what Christianity is, has been, or might become.”

Perhaps without knowing it, Rice is engaging in the type of conversation occurring among emergents. What she is walking away from are earlier paradigm characteristics, deciding instead to converse about spiritual things that depart from creedal beliefs and previously established ideology. Tickle refers to these people as the “hyphenates”—“they are the Presby-mergents, the Metho-mergents, the Angli-mergents, the Luther-mergents, and so on.” They are on the fringe, but the imaginative fringe, of their denominations. Tickle likens them to householders who have inherited the old home place who yet “feel a compelling heed to honor the land it sits upon and the trees that surround it, but no need to retain its structural shape.”<sup>16</sup> In the meantime, the emergent conversation is one that shapes the discussants as well as the denomination, but how the conversation will ultimately shape the Church is yet to be determined (and of course, any shape taken as a result of such a conversation will never be final).

Although emergents are usually Christ-centered, they often reject many doctrines and theological concepts from the earlier paradigm. For example, the doctrine of an angry God who can only be appeased through sacrifice is generally repudiated within the emerging paradigm. In their minds, it takes too much juggling to merge an angry God who sends people to hell simply because they have never heard of Jesus with an all-loving God who is concerned with all of his creation. A few years ago, my wife was part of a small group that spent two days with J. Philip Newell, an ordained minister in the Church of Scotland and a scholar of Celtic spirituality, on an island off the coast of Scotland. Newell told the group that his wife gave birth to a son—one of those unexpected later-in-life joys. He said that they refused to let this boy be exposed to the idea that we humans are fallen creatures, full of sin and at odds with God, our only hope for reconciliation being Jesus dying to die to appease God. The family will get up and leave any service where that idea is being preached. We may be incomplete, he said, but we are still sacred beings.

Newell’s attitude is indicative of how salvation is perceived differently by the two paradigms. The earlier paradigm teaches that we are saved to some heavenly position because we believe in Jesus. The emerging paradigm sees the scriptural notion of salvation as referring not to an event occurring in the hereafter but the achievement of wholeness in

this life. According to John Killinger, even with Jesus, “salvation was still, as in Old Testament days, related to the people of God and the land or the earth he had given them to occupy. It was not the isolated event in the life of a single individual which subsequent Christian history was to make of it.”<sup>17</sup> “Salvation,” writes Barbara Brown Taylor,

is so much more than many of its proponents would have us believe. In the Bible, human beings experience God’s salvation when peace ends war, when food follows famine, when health supplants sickness and freedom trumps oppression. Salvation is a word for the divine spaciousness that comes to human beings in all the tight places when their lives are at risk . . . Sometimes it comes as an extended human hand and sometimes as a bolt from the blue, but either way it opens a door in what looked for all the world like a wall.<sup>18</sup>

In the emerging paradigm, God does not confine his work and blessing to Christians but responds to all who hunger and thirst after righteousness.

Emerging Christians are comfortable and content to cooperate with anyone, anywhere, who is about the business of God’s kingdom, regardless of religious persuasion or complete lack of religious sensibility. Emerging Christians are marked by a spirit of collaboration in their work for the new reality that is God’s kingdom.<sup>19</sup>

Not only do emergents resist the idea that a creedal belief is required for God’s approval, they step cautiously around religious institutions as well. Benedictine nun Joan Chittister declares:

Religion is not for its own sake. It is not for the sake of organization or hierarchy, social order or social status. The purpose of religion is to lead us beyond even itself to union with God, to that all-pervading awareness of the spirit of life and truth alive in us now and toward which our lives are directed.<sup>20</sup>

Although I am confident that the Great Emergence was not a construct in Charlotte Brontë’s worldview, there is a passage in her *Jane Eyre* that speaks to the two paradigms. Clergyman St. John Rivers insists that Jane Eyre marry and accompany him to serve up salvation to the pagans of India. When those who are worthy and competent are found, it is their duty, he says, “to stir them up—to urge and exhort them to the effect—to show them what their gifts are, and why they are given—to speak Heaven’s message in their ear,—to offer them, direct from God, a place in the ranks of his chosen.” To which, Jane replies, “If they are really qualified for the task, will not their hearts be the first to inform them of it?” Jane is conveying a simple dis-

inction, but it is a very significant paradigmatic difference. In one view, you are informed by someone else how, where, and when you should serve God, while in the other, you are notified by your own heartfelt promptings as to where God is leading you.

Emergents believe that reality is seen through Paul's glass, darkly. Our grasp of reality is always incomplete and partial, necessitating a more heterodox, open dialogue about theology and truth. Rather than dismissing questions that may challenge doctrine or suggest doubt, the emerging paradigm is driven by them. These questions fuel the conversation and lead to "conversation cohorts." Rather than the "certainty culture" of the earlier paradigm, in emergent circles one encounters a culture that accepts mystery, "grayness," ambiguity, and paradox. Barbara Brown Taylor reports that while attending her dying father, she

discovered that faith did not have the least thing to do with certainty. Insofar as I had any faith at all, that faith consisted of trusting God in the face of my vastly painful ignorance . . . . Since then, I have learned to prize holy ignorance more highly than religious certainty and to seek companions who have arrived at the same place. We are a motley crew, distinguished not only by our inability to explain ourselves to those who are more certain of their beliefs than we are but in many cases by our distance from the centers of our faith communities as well.<sup>21</sup>

A guiding principle for many within the emerging paradigm is found in the words of Micah: "And what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (Micah 6:8). The required humility with which we walk with God makes the certainty of the earlier paradigm both undesirable and impossible.

The question now becomes: Does anything resembling Borg's description of the emerging paradigm, or even the Great Emergence, swim in the sea of Mormonism? Are there signs of Mormo-mergents in the fold? Absolutely. They may not think of themselves as emergents or hyphenates, instead referring to themselves as Liahonas, or Uncorrelated Mormons, or Correlation Minimalists, or New Order Mormons, or Open Mormons, or feminist Mormons, or a slew of other labels. But they contend with similar issues, confronting in particular the same question of who or what possesses God's authoritative voice.

## THE MORMON CONVERSATION

**I**F A KEY component of the emerging paradigm is conversation, or the forming of conversation cohorts, where is this conversation occurring among the LDS emergent types? You will find it on the Internet. Online publishing, writes Kristine Haglund, has removed "barriers to sharing personal experiences and opinions [and] readily cre-

ates a sense of community" generally lacking in "geographically assigned congregation[s]." These various Mormon online conversations demonstrate, Haglund declares, that "you are not alone; other Mormons share your questions and may even have useful answers to some of them." Furthermore, online forums can provide "ongoing convocations of highly specialized likemindedness, from positions all along the orthodoxy spectrum."<sup>22</sup> The impact of these conversation cohorts is sufficiently strong that the Church itself has encouraged members to share their testimonies online, and has engaged in significantly increasing its own online presence.

What is the content of these Mormon-based online conversations? That depends on where you look. Certainly there are circles devoted to advocating an approach to Mormonism squarely aligned with the earlier paradigm. But vibrant exploration and expression of emerging attitudes from Mormons about their faith also abound. Along with the types of emergent sensibilities Borg and others identify with regard to scripture, salvation, and community, you find considerations of uniquely Mormon issues such as uncertainty about precisely what it means to view Church leaders—who are sometimes notoriously wrong and occasionally admit to speaking not as prophets but as men—as God's authoritative voice, as well as constructions and deconstructions of "official" Church history and scriptural texts (including the historicity of the Book of Mormon and Pearl of Great Price).

Though it is not unheard of for these issues to be raised in Sunday School settings, the resulting conversations are too often less a discussion of the topic than a prescription about how a member "in good standing" should believe and behave with regard to it. A sister who reported reluctance to speak up in the Gospel Doctrine class not because she is shy but because her view seems at odds with what was being said, stated, "I believe the same things other Latter-day Saints believe. I believe that Jesus is my Savior and that the Book of Mormon is what Joseph Smith said it is. I believe in the power and authority of the priesthood. But I also believe in me, in my own ability to receive divine inspiration, and to think with the brain God gave me. I believe He even offers me a chance to become divine—but not by being indiscriminately obedient."<sup>23</sup> Another reports, "I find myself having more religious disagreements with my fellow [LDS] Church members than with those of other faiths." And it is at church, of all places, "where I feel the most tentative about sharing my religious views, . . . [and] I'm not entirely sure what to make of that."<sup>24</sup>

But for Mormons, this tale of two paradigms has a precedent. In 1967, Richard Poll, a Brigham Young University faculty member, spoke in a Palo Alto Ward sacrament meeting about faith and about different ways Mormons perceive pronouncements from Church leaders. That talk formed the basis of an essay titled, "What the Church Means to People like Me."<sup>25</sup> As metaphors for two types of Mormons, Poll used the iron rod from Lehi's dream of the Tree of Life and the Liahona compass.

In Poll's typology, Iron Rod Mormons believe Church

leaders possess a definite answer for all questions. Liahona Saints, on the other hand, view that proposition more skeptically. “The problem [for the Liahona member] is perceiving the will of God when it is mediated—as it is for almost all mortals—by ‘the arm of flesh.’ The Liahona is convinced by logic and experience that no human instrument, even a prophet, is capable of transmitting the word of God so clearly and comprehensively that it can be universally understood and easily appropriated by man.” Like those Tickle mentions who view scripture as imperfect and its messages incomplete, Liahona Latter-day Saints see the scriptures as “sources of inspiration and moral truth, but they leave many specific questions unanswered, or uncertainly answered.”

In 1989, some twenty years after first delivering his talk, Poll published “Liahona and Iron Rod Revisited.”<sup>26</sup> There, he observes that “The labels of Liahona and Iron Rod identify responses to religious authoritarianism . . . [and] the distinction . . . is most clearly discernible in response to the question: Is the more reliable test of the validity of a statement its substance or its source?” His personal answer is that substance transcends source.

As a student at BYU, I attended a small gathering at which Poll discussed these two ways of being Mormon. I had not yet read his essay, but I remember talking to him afterward and deciding that though I could conceptually categorize myself as a Liahona, in practice, I was an Iron Rodder. Just as Robert Duncan represented Anglicans who believed that they must obey the literal words found in the Bible, I and several million other Mormons believed that God expected us to obey his living servants. We believed that priesthood authority trumped our own insights and convictions, and therefore trained ourselves to question, suppress, or ignore our own compasses. I remember many times when I wasn’t certain I could trust my heart—a deeply ironic state of affairs for a Mormon who is supposed to believe that he can receive inspiration, guidance, and wisdom through the Holy Ghost.

A number of years later, I was attending church far from BYU and Utah Valley. During sacrament meeting, our bishop distributed postcards and instructed us to write a local television station to protest an upcoming program about Jesus. He didn’t tell us in what way the program was objectionable or how he came about his information. I went home and sat tapping the card against the surface of the kitchen table. Though I believed that I would never be led astray by a priesthood leader, I felt quite uncomfortable protesting a program about which I knew nothing. It may seem a small doubt, but in my mind, it was a fundamental question of faith—a question of obedience. In the end I wrote nothing on that postcard and I did not send it. At some level, I understood that I had opened a small crack in my perception of how one should obey priesthood leaders, and in doing so (though I didn’t recognize it at the time), I was opening the door for other thoughts to emerge.

Shortly thereafter, one of my friends in the ward told me that he had mentioned the bishop’s instruction to his father-

in-law, a general authority. His father-in-law told him that the LDS Church had contributed financially to the production of this program and that he was upset that the bishop had instructed us to protest the program. Did that relieve any concerns I had about not writing? No. It only further confused me, because now I knew that priesthood leaders could ask members to do things that, if not wrong, were not in the best interest of the members or the Church. Did that mean they didn’t speak for God even when they thought they did?

Certainly, I am not the only one to consider this question. In 2008, when Church leaders called for members to support Proposition 8 to end same-sex marriage in California, it generated considerable tension not only between the paradigmatic positions, but within the hearts and minds of many individuals. Some felt conscience-bound to oppose Proposition 8, but did not want to oppose their leaders or be out of harmony with the church they loved. In the end, many followed their conscience and went against the directives of Church leaders.

Then a strange thing happened. Following the 4 November 2008 vote, the Church issued a news release stating, “Before it accepted the invitation to join broad-based coalitions for the amendments, the Church knew that some of its members would choose not to support its position. Voting choices by Latter-day Saints, like all other people, are influenced by their own unique experiences and circumstances. As we move forward from the election, Church members need to be understanding and accepting of each other and work together for a better society.”<sup>27</sup>

It was a heartening statement, but the question still remained: when priesthood leaders asked Church members to not only vote in favor of Proposition 8 but to work and donate to ensure that marriage between same-sex couples would be prohibited, were they expressing God’s will, or their “well-considered opinion?”<sup>28</sup>

We can ask the same about a number of issues. Withholding the priesthood from women: well-considered opinion, or God’s word? The verses discouraging the eating of meat in D&C 89: well-considered opinion, or God’s word? The current stand against tattoos and body piercings: well-considered opinion, or God’s word? Admittedly, my tastes do not include multiple ear piercings, but is that issue actually on God’s agenda? Does the Spirit indeed find a body with multiple earrings inhospitable? Not long ago, during a reunion my wife had with an old friend, she heard all about how pleased her friend was that her married daughter had removed one of her two ear ornaments in order to “follow the Prophet.”

Sister Chittister remembers as a novice asking a superior, “What if we are told to do something we believe is wrong?” The answer—familiar to many Latter-day Saints—was: “Then the one who gives you the command will be accountable for it. Your obligation is simply to obey.” And then Chittister derails the answer entirely “But that answer is far too easy. If all I have to do is to listen to someone else, then what happens to the

purpose for which we have been born? For what are we really responsible? Or is free will only a sham?"<sup>29</sup>

She continues in a vein that many emergents will resonate with:

Spirituality is what takes us beyond religious practice to the purpose of religion: the awareness of the sacred in the mundane, the consciousness of God everywhere, in everyone . . . Religion itself is not sacred. And if or when it pretends to be, it can stop a soul in mid-flight from ever being able to find God in the midst of life. Then we make the means the end. Then we take a spiritual process designed to help us find God in life and turn it into God. And that is a weak and pathetic substitute for the very meaning of life.<sup>30</sup>

Spirituality is a belief that there is something divine in who and what we are, a valuation of our spirits and their intrinsic and enduring worth, an awareness that the Spirit speaks to spirit. Indeed, Martin Luther, the founder of the Reformation, argued that every person is a priest or priestess of his or her own soul. The emerging paradigm goes back even further, to the day of Pentecost (which was itself a "church" shakeup event) when those gathered experienced the gifts of the Spirit, the manifestation of Jesus' promise that he would send another Comforter who would teach them all things. The emerging paradigm places its emphasis upon the rights of the individual to embrace the Christian life through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The earlier paradigm creed that Christ appeased an angry God by dying on the cross is being replaced in the emerging paradigm by attempts to put the teachings of Jesus into practice through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Road to Emmaus story teaches us that we aren't to be guided by conformity to dictated beliefs and rituals but by trusting our inner voice. The source of authority is not outside us but within.

The difference between the earlier and emerging paradigm is not a difference between liberals and conservatives, or even the iron rods and Liahonas. It is, in the words of Diana Butler Bass, "a divide

between institution and spirit"—between the institution's determination to maintain hierarchical authority and doctrinal purity, and "regular people confidently assert[ing] that spirituality is a grassroots adventure of seeking God, a journey of insight and inspiration involving authenticity and purpose that might or might not happen in a church, synagogue, or mosque." The institution's reaction, says Bass, to "increasingly fixate on order and control," causes them "to be less responsive to the [spiritual] longings of those they supposedly serve."<sup>31</sup>

Latter-day Saints Phil McMormore and John Kesler, for example, have both found spiritual transcendence and transformation through meditation. Kesler has said that the purpose of a workshop he teaches is "to introduce meditative practices that invite Mormons into the mystical implications of their own tradition but also to stretch a bit beyond the Mormon 'spiritual field.'" For the last several years, McMormore has engaged "in the practice of meditation and the study of Eastern spiritual practice and philosophy."<sup>32</sup> Through his experiences, he has come to see Christ's teaching as more resonant with Eastern traditions than with much of the traditional Western (including Mormon) interpretations of Christ's teaching. According to McMormore, the short version is that Christ's message is about experiencing



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spiritual transcendence now, in this life, and less about the heaven of the next life. Both Kesler and McLemore encounter many Latter-day Saints who are orthodox in their practice but nevertheless do not find the spiritual sustenance they long for within Church routines, and as a result are turning to other sources for spiritual enrichment.

It appears that Elder David S. Baxter of the First Quorum of Seventy has noticed the same thing. He states:

Our Sunday worship and instruction time should not simply leave us with an even longer checklist of things to do. While we know that “faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone “ (James 2:17), we should also recognize that works without faith are equally sterile. Perhaps we might do less rushing around on Sundays with bulging briefcases, assignment lists, and schedules. Perhaps we could spend more time just sitting, in a sense of perfect stillness, with open scriptures and open hearts.<sup>33</sup>

Elder Baxter sounds surprisingly similar to Len Hjalmarson, a Canadian street minister, who wonders “have we gone too far? Is the western church too organized? Do we have too many charts, too many plans, and too much structure? Is there a point where our knowledge and our plans can actually suppress the work of the Spirit?”<sup>34</sup>

When I think of our LDS preoccupation with *doing* (“Teach me all the things I must do, to live with Him one day,” we sing), I am reminded of a passage in James Hilton’s novel *Lost Horizon*. Miss Brinklow, a Christian missionary, asks Chang, their guide and host at the Shangri-La, what the lamas do. “They devote themselves, madam, to contemplation and to the pursuit of wisdom.” “But that isn’t doing anything,” she says. Chang replies: “Then, madam, they do nothing.”

Within the emerging paradigm, Christ’s gospel is not seen as a church program. For example, in *Leaving Church*, Barbara Brown Taylor tells of meeting a friend who had once attended church with her but who had moved to another city some years before. When she asked about his church activity (yes, it even happens among non-Mormons!), he said that he no longer attended church because “After a lot of listening, I think I finally heard the gospel. The good news of God in Christ is, ‘You have everything you need to be human.’ There is nothing outside of you that you still need—no approval from the authorities, no attendance at temple, no key truth hidden in the tenth chapter of some sacred book. In your life right now, God has given you everything that you need to be human.”<sup>35</sup>

What Taylor is saying, both with her friend’s words and her own, is that even though we call a church building the “house of the Lord,” God doesn’t necessarily live there. Rather, she suggests, God lives in the world: a most potent place to acquaint ourselves with the divine.

What if people were invited to come [to church] to

tell what they already know of God instead of to learn what they are supposed to believe? What if they were blessed for what they are doing in the world instead of chastened for not doing more at church? What if church felt more like a way station than a destination? What if the church’s job were to move people out the door instead of trying to keep them in, by convincing them that God needed them more in the world than in the church?<sup>36</sup>

While speaking at general conference in 1984, Elder Ronald E. Poelman drew a distinction between the Church and the gospel:

The gospel is the substance of the divine plan for salvation and exaltation. The Church is the delivery system that provides the means and resources to implement this plan in each individual life. [Furthermore] . . . as individually and collectively we increase our knowledge, acceptance, and application of gospel principles, we become less dependent on church programs. Our lives become gospel centered.

As many of us know, it turned out that Elder Poelman’s distinction was not an acceptable view at the time, and in a quite unique circumstance he was charged with re-recording an edited version of his talk—minus the bulk of his distinctions. Within Mormonism, the Church, the gospel, and kingdom of God are often conflated, as if they are one and the same.<sup>37</sup>

Emergents of all stripes, including Mormons, are saying they *aren’t* the same. Concerns about efficiency, orderliness, and performance, with a centralized administration making decisions about meetings and curriculum, have overshadowed the spiritual and transformative roles that are basic to religious worship, creating for many members a spiritual hunger. On this point I am in strong agreement with the emergents in their insistence that the heart matters. The heartbeat of God is echoed in the beating of each human heart, but we feel it in our own, not another’s. However efficient it might be organizationally for God to tell priesthood leaders what directives to pass on down the chain to members, I have found that the most efficient way for God to speak to me is directly. After all, both scripture and the example of Joseph Smith teach us that “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him” (James 1:5).

One of my religion professors at BYU liked to say, “It takes a revelation to understand a revelation.” It was his way of saying that the language of the Spirit is often not straightforward but embedded in paradox. Joseph of the “coat of many colors” expresses this idea when he tells his brothers to not grieve over what they did to him because “it was not you that sent me hither, but God” (Genesis 45:8). While I don’t particularly care for the god characterized by

the Joseph story, I am struck by the paradox and mysteries of how life does indeed shape us. And yet we often resist the mystery, wanting our gospel to be literal and explicit. I remember a sacrament meeting where a counselor in the bishopric told the congregation that he had attended a funeral at a Protestant church and marveled at how little the preacher knew about God. He said he wanted to tell that preacher “all about God.” I thought to myself, “I would like to be part of that conversation, because I don’t really know much about God!” Believing God is a literal father with a tangible body who is capable of producing offspring does not suddenly shine a bright unfaltering light on God’s nature for Latter-day Saints, while the rest of the world remains in darkness.

Just as there is a deep struggle between the hyphenates who affiliate with the emerging paradigm and those who adhere to the earlier paradigm, the same struggle is recognizable among members of the LDS Church. Protestant, Catholic, and Latter-day Saint hyphenates are seeking a way of community and worship with and among those who are, as William Blake says, reading black while they, the hyphenates, are reading white. I am grateful for the increased attention on these different ways of orienting toward scripture, Church leaders, God, and community, for I think it will lead to an expanded perspective on how we recognize and do God’s will. ☞

## NOTES

1. Peter J. Boyer, “A Church Assunder,” *New Yorker*, 17 April 2006, 54–65, [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/04/17/060417ja\\_fact5](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/04/17/060417ja_fact5) (accessed 4 June 2012).
2. Unlike the LDS Church where members sustain a person called to a Church office, there are several steps and votes in the Episcopal Church. Gene Robinson was elected bishop of the New Hampshire diocese by the clergy and members of the diocese in June 2003. But the full Church must consent at a general convention, which in this case was held in August 2003.
3. Katharine Jefferts Schori, “The Origins of Life: An Episcopal View,” *NPR*, 8 August 2005, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4761130> (accessed 4 June 2012).
4. Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism* (New York City: Ballantine Books, 2000), 144.
5. Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 15.
6. Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 46–47.
7. *Ibid.*, 16. Tickle acknowledges she is drawing upon comments by Mark Dyer, an Anglican bishop, who has declared that about every five hundred years institutional Christianity is forced to have a giant “rummage sale.”
8. Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (New York City: HarperOne, 2001), 7, 11–12.
9. Claudia L. Bushman, “My Short Happy Life with Exponent II,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 191.
10. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, xii.
11. *Ibid.*, xii.
12. *Ibid.*, 22–23. Emphasis in the original. One of the most outspoken voices regarding the use—or what he calls the misuse—of the Bible, is that of now-retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong. In his book *The Sins of the Scriptures*, Spong takes issue with those who insist the Bible contains the actual words of God. For example, he asks, “Do we really worship a God who plays favorites, who chooses one people to be God’s people to the neglect of all the others” (18)? Or, “Is it the ‘Word[s] of God’ when the Psalmist writes about the Babylonians who have conquered Judah: ‘Happy shall he be who requites you with what you have done to us! Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks’ (Psalms 137:8-9)?” (18).
13. Boyer, “A Church Assunder,” 62.
14. <https://www.facebook.com/anmericfanpage/posts/129786343731298> (accessed 4 June 2012).
15. <https://www.facebook.com/anmericfanpage/posts/113868381998571> (accessed 4 June 2012).
16. Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, 142.
17. John Kerlinger, *The Salvation Tree*, (New York City: Harper & Row, 1973), 18.
18. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 226.
19. Kevin Corcoran, “Thy Kingdom Come (on Earth),” in Scot McKnight, et al, *Church in the Present Tense*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 68.
20. Joan Chittister, *Welcome to the Wisdom of the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007) 30–31.
21. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*, 224.
22. Kristine Haglund, “Mormon Publishing, the Internet, and the Democratization of Information,” *Patheos*, 9 August 2010, <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Mormon-Publishing-the-Internet-and-the-Democratization-of-Information?print=1> (accessed 4 June 2012).
23. Lisa Torcasso Downing, “Belonging,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 36, no. 3 (2003): 233.
24. “Lynette,” “Religious Differences,” Zelophehad’s Daughters, 15 October 2006, <http://zelophehadsdaughters.com/2006/10/15/religious-differences/> (accessed 4 June 2012).
25. Richard D. Poll, “What the Church Means to People Like Me,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1967): 107–17.
26. Richard D. Poll, “Liahona and Iron Rod Revisited,” in *History & Faith: Reflections of a Mormon Historian* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1989), 15–27. Online version available at: <http://signaturebookslibrary.org/?p=8302>.
27. “Church Responds to Same-sex Marriage Votes,” *LDS Newsroom*, 5 November 2008, <http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/news-releases-stories/church-responds-to-same-sex-marriage-votes> (accessed 4 June 2012).
28. A 2007 LDS Newsroom release states, (see <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/approaching-mormon-history>) “Not every statement made by a Church leader, past or present, necessarily constitutes doctrine. A single statement made by a single leader on a single occasion often represents a personal, though well-considered, opinion, but is not meant to be officially binding for the whole Church.” Elder D. Todd Christofferson employs that same statement in his April 2012 General Conference address. There is something about the idea that Church leaders need to inform members that although their (Church leaders’) personal statements aren’t meant to be binding, they, nevertheless, are “well-considered” that begs for additional comments. At the very least, the statement seems to motivate one to wonder if there is ever an occasion when a Church leader’s statement, past or present, is a poorly thought out opinion?
29. Chittister, *Welcome to the Wisdom of the World*, 54.
30. *Ibid.*, 30–31.
31. Diana Butler Bass, “When Spirituality and Religion Collide,” *USA Today*, 16 April 2012, 9A, <http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/story/2012-04-15/rowan-williams-retires-anglican-church-archbishop-canterbury/54301424/1> (accessed 4 June 2012).
32. Philip G. McLemore, “The Yoga of Christ,” *SUNSTONE*, June 2007, 30–45.
33. David S. Baxter, “Overcoming Feelings of Inadequacy,” *Ensign*, August 2007, <http://www.lds.org/ensign/2007/08/overcoming-feelings-of-inadequacy> (accessed 4 June 2012).
34. Len Hjalmanson, “Coloring Outside the Box,” *Next-Wave*, <http://www.next-wave.org/aug01/coloring.htm> (accessed 4 June 2012).
35. Taylor, *Leaving Church*, 219.
36. *Ibid.*, 222.
37. [www.lds-mormon.com/poelman.shtml](http://www.lds-mormon.com/poelman.shtml) (accessed 4 June 2012). This site provides a comparison between Poelman’s speech as originally delivered in general conference and the text printed in the *Ensign*. See also Joseph Geisner, “Very Careless in His Utterances: Editing, Correcting, and Censoring Conference Addresses,” *SUNSTONE*, December 2011, 14–24, <https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/very-careless-in-his-utterances-editing-correcting-and-censoring-general-conference-addresses-part-i/> (accessed 4 June 2012.)