

LETTERS

Mesle Marred?

Robert Mesle raised some very important and complex issues in New Testament interpretation in "The Restoration and History: New Testament Christianity" (Summer 1986). Unfortunately, I feel that his analysis is marred by several unverifiable assumptions and inaccuracies.

His first assumption is that the extant documents written by or about first century Christians (which are by no means limited to the New Testament) are sufficient to give us an accurate understanding of the beliefs and practices of early Christians. In fact, the extant documents are woefully inadequate. Modern scholars and religious leaders continue to churn out new interpretations of early Christianity with no ultimate consensus in sight.

Mesle's second assumption, relating to the dating of New Testament documents, is more subtle. He maintains that since some of Paul's letters were presumably written before any of the Gospels, that Paul is the earliest extant representative of Christian thought (p. 55). This dating of Paul is by no means certain, but even if one accepts it, we cannot also assume that the *ideas* in the Gospels are later than Paul's thought.

There are actually many interpretations of the origin of the Gospels and the Synoptic problem. One school of thought hypothesizes oral traditions of the words and actions of Jesus (the "Sayings" or "Logion" of Jesus) some of which were finally stabilized in written form as the Gospels. If this interpretation is accurate, then the Gospels could simultaneously post-date Paul's writings and still contain material antedating Paul by twenty or thirty

years. Although the Logion hypothesis is only one of several, automatically rejecting the Gospels in favor of Pauline writings as the major source on earliest Christianity is a dangerous oversimplification.

Dating the Gospels is also a complex problem. It is true that most scholars date Mark to about 70 A.D. Why that specific date almost forty years after Christ's death? An earlier date, says one respected source, "is improbable because the development of the evangelical tradition is already far advanced" (Paul Feine, *et al.*, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 14th ed. [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966], p. 70). In other words, these scholars assume that early Christian ideas should be simple. Complex ideas or forms in a given text are interpreted as evidence of late writing. This is an unverifiable assumption.

A second argument for dating Mark to 70 A.D. is that "the threatening nearness of the Jewish war can probably be perceived" (Feine, p. 71). Here it is maintained that if a New Testament text alludes to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. it must have been written after the fact. This argument assumes that there can be no truly prophetic statements in the New Testament.

Irenaeus (c130–200 A.D.) implies that Mark wrote his Gospel after the death of Peter (c65 A.D.) (*Against Heresies*, 3:1.1). However, a much earlier Christian writer, Papias (c60–135 A.D.) and other second-century writers claim that Mark wrote his Gospel, quoting Peter while he was still alive as he related the stories and words of Jesus (In Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 3:39). Clement of Alexandria (c150–215 A.D.) specifically states in his *Hypotyposeis* that "Peter made no objections when he

heard about this (Mark writing down Peter's teachings about Jesus)" (in Eusebius 6:14). Clement thus clearly felt Peter was still alive when Mark wrote his Gospel. (See Raymond E. Brown, *et al.*, eds., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968], 2:21.) In short, the 70 A.D. date for Mark could be correct yet still embody direct quotations from Jesus by Peter — a source much earlier than Paul's letters. We need not, then, necessarily reject passages in Mark in favor of theoretically later statements of Paul.

In several places Mesle states that his "paper presents a standard view held among many New Testament scholars" (p. 56), representing "what is a very widely held consensus of New Testament scholars" (p. 57) and the "standard position of responsible biblical scholars" (p. 59). He provides direct quotations from only three biblical scholars — Bultmann, Conzelmann, and Kasemann.

Bultmann was the founder of an early twentieth-century protestant German school of biblical criticism. Conzelmann and Kasemann were two of his most faithful followers (Brown 2:14–19). Although Bultmann's thought is significant, his ideas are by no means universally accepted. His conclusions are also based on several unprovable assumptions, identified by one critic as "a thoroughgoing Lutheranism and the existentialism of M. Heidegger" (John S. Kselman, 2:14).

Thus Bultmann's Lutheran concept of the "priesthood of all believers" undoubtedly colored his conclusion (echoed by Mesle) that the early church lacked priesthood structure and authority. Perhaps more important, however, is Bultmann's concept of "demythologizing" Christ, which in practice means a rejection of the historical reality of the resurrection, miracles, and prophecies of Jesus.

Mesle also makes some "claims" concerning the early church with which I take issue. Claim one is that "the [early] Jerusalem church was still predominantly . . .

Jewish" (p. 56). In like manner, one could say that the church at Corinth was predominantly Corinthian. However, Mesle seems to believe not only that most Christians residing in Palestine were ethnically Jewish but also that they were still of the Jewish religion. His discussion of some similarities of Christian and Jewish beliefs does not mention some extremely important differences: Christian rejection of the Jewish leadership at Jerusalem in favor of the authority of Jesus (Acts 4:19), independent worship services on "the Lord's day" (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2), accepting Jesus as the Messiah, and the necessity of baptism for Jews. Furthermore, the execution of Jesus, imprisonment of Peter and others (Acts 12), martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7), activities of Saul, and the execution of James (Hegesippus, in Eusebius 2:23) indicate the depth of Jewish resistance to the Christian movement.

Even more problematic is Mesle's assumption that there was a single Jewish religion. Jewish sects of the first century A.D. included Pharisees, Saducees, Essenes, Therapeutae, Galileans, Hermobaptists, Masbothei, Samaritans, Zealots, Hellenists, and others (Hegesippus [c100–180 A.D.] in Eusebius 4:22; Justin Martyr [c100–165 A.D.], *Against Trypho*, Ch. 80). Christianity represented a totally new Jewish sect, which proclaimed the advent of the Messiah, rejected the authority of all previous sects, and soon incorporated gentiles as well.

Mesle sees early Christianity as charismatic rather than institutional, with institutionalism developing only gradually. These statements assume that charismatic and institutional elements cannot coexist in the Church — which is obviously untrue. For example, he maintains that the "followers of Jesus . . . had no separate organization [than the Jews] and certainly no separate priesthood" (p. 59). Based on the original Hellenistic Greek meaning of *ekklesia* he tries to show that the Christians were a structureless group of those who believed in Christ. However, *ekklesia*

among the Christians is not based on a pagan Greek model but is the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew *gahal* (assembly), an Old Testament word which refers to the whole house of Israel. Thus by calling themselves the “assembly” of Israel, the early Christians were clearly stating that they saw themselves as the true Israel, receptors of the new covenant of Christ just as old Israel was the receptor of God’s old covenant of Moses (See Deut. 4:10, 9:10, 10:4, and the comments of P. S. Minear, “Church, idea of” in the *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* [New York, Abingdon, 1962], 1: pp. 607–17).

What Latter-day Saints usually call *Priesthood* is best equated with what is called *power* or *authority* in the New Testament. Christ gave specific authority or power to specific individuals (the Twelve and the seventy [Luke 9 and 10]) to preach, heal, cast out demons, forgive sins, and bind/loose both in heaven and on earth (John 20:23; Matt. 16:19, 18:18). Mesle seems to miss the obvious meaning of these passages. Christ gave his apostles special authority, now called *priesthood* authority.

There is good evidence that the early church contained a clearly recognized hierarchy with offices. Mesle recognizes that the apostles were the leaders (p. 56) but fails to note that their selection of seven deacons (Acts 6:1–6) created an organized body with a set number, called by and subordinate to the apostles, with a specific assignment (serving at the *agape* feast which we today call the sacrament) and “set apart” by a specific ritual: the Apostles “prayed and laid their hands upon them” (Acts 6:6). Titus, as bishop of Crete, was assigned by Paul, an apostle, to “appoint elders in every town” (Tit. 1:5) giving a clear hierarchy of apostle, bishop, and elders. (Mesle maintains that Titus is a late pseudonymous letter. That, however, is another question.) Finally, ritual acts performed without this authority are rejected, as when Apollos and his followers are rebaptized by Paul (Acts 18:24–19:7),

and when Simon is denied the authority to give the Holy Ghost (Acts 8:14–24).

Mesle claims that “it is not until the second century A.D., however, that we have textual evidence for deacons and bishops as formal officers” (p. 63). If one accepts Pauline authorship, or even a pre-200 A.D. dating of Titus and 1 and 2 Timothy, the evidence for first-century bishops is unquestionable. Even if these letters are pseudonymous, Clement, bishop of Rome from about 88–100 A.D., who probably knew Peter and Paul during their last days in Rome, wrote to the Corinthians c95 A.D.: “They [the apostles] preached in provinces and cities appointing the foremost converts (*aparche*) having tested them by the Spirit, as bishops and deacons for future believers” (First Epistle of Clement, 42.4, my translation).

Other early Christian traditions agree that bishops were appointed in several major cities within twenty years of the death of Jesus. Some of the earliest are Linus as bishop of Rome c64–76 A.D. (Irenaeus 3:3.3; Eusebius 3:13); Eumenes as bishop of Alexandria from c52–65 A.D., followed by Mark (author of the Gospel) from c65–75 A.D. (Eusebius 3:11), and James, the brother of Jesus, as bishop of Jerusalem by 50 A.D. (Eusebius 2:1).

I agree with Mesle that both early Christianity and Mormonism have developed over time. I would also agree that many Latter-day Saints have little appreciation of this fact and approach the history of religions rather simplistically. But recognizing that the ideas and institutions of both primitive and Restored Christianity developed over time does not preclude divine intervention and guidance in this historical process.

William Hamblin
Hattiesburg, Mississippi

Loving, Not Liberated

I am writing in response to the article “New Friends” (Spring 1986), a “liberated” view of homosexuality in the Church

The author unfortunately felt “liberated” in that he can now talk to gays as people. Sadly, for Church members, that *is* liberated.

His understanding of gayness seems to stop there, and the population he counseled can hardly be called random. If I speak for more gays than myself, and I believe I do, then I think a more accurate position is this: While society and especially the Church have combined to produce the “severe guilt” and “social estrangement” many gays feel and almost all of us must struggle with personally, many do so successfully, only to find that while *we* could accept the Church (despite what we consider a medieval view of women, politics, etc.) it becomes a different matter when it can no longer accept *us*. Many gays quietly slip away from the Church with their faith in God usually intact though somehow changed. Others stay, with the tortuous knowledge that they can never participate fully and that the same brothers and sisters who profess to love everyone in the ward on Fast Sunday would feel a little differently if the truth were known.

This issue is not one Mormons can ignore. If one in ten people are gay, as current statistics suggest, simply keeping good company as a youth will not change that. The author attributes “manipulative relationships” to gays. Some gay relationships are difficult while many work well — like many LDS heterosexual marriages.

The bottom line is that gayness exists in the Church. Consequently, the Christ-like response would be compassion for an individual struggling to resolve the deep-seated conflict between what is part of himself or herself and the external demands of the Mormon view of morality, not, for example, the 1985 excommunication of a Utah man who told his bishop he had AIDS.

There is much that is good and beautiful in LDS theology. Some people who recognize their homosexuality are willing to walk the mental tightrope to stay in the

Church while others can't. Either way, the decision is extremely painful — like cutting out a part of yourself. “Being liberated” seems a less appropriate response for heterosexual members than being loving toward those finding their own answers.

Many of us who have chosen a path apart from traditional Church views hope the Church will find a way to embrace all people, but find we feel surprisingly free and are happy with the new insights into ourselves we have gained and the love we have opened ourselves up to. The gay relationships we develop in love and hope are too often confronted with fear and hatred. Surely there is far too much of that in the world already.

Ann Bullock
Seattle, Washington

A Question of Love

As the anonymous author of “New Friends” (Spring 1986) points out, we do not know enough about homosexuality to be dogmatic. In view of that, I'm surprised that the author clings so dogmatically to the view that homosexuality is a sin. The basic element of sin, it seems to me, is choice — knowingly choosing to do wrong. Being homosexual involves no such choice. Consider for a moment the therapy, money, agony, and prayer that thousands of gay men and women have spent trying (unsuccessfully) to *unchoose* their sexual orientation. Like heterosexuality, homosexuality is in itself morally neutral; it's what you do with it, the actions which result from it that may be right or wrong, good or sinful.

The author seems to have bypassed one basic question: What is wrong with being homosexual? Our deep social and religious prejudice against homosexuality is easily reinforced with an occasional comment about how “unnatural” it is. But for a significant portion of our society, including LDS society, I assure you it is very natural.

The author mentions (p. 140) the "overwhelmingly negative" aspects of being gay: severe guilt, social estrangement, manipulative relationships, and childlessness. Guilt is heaped on homosexuals (including by religious institutions). And, while it is indeed severe, it is imposed, not intrinsic. If the Church started accepting gay people as equal members, that guilt could turn to pride and self-esteem.

The same can be said of social estrangement. We Latter-day Saints pride ourselves in being a people whose commitment to truth enables us to stand up to social rejection. We understand that the correctness of an action is not in any way measured by its social acceptability. Likewise, the morality of a homosexual life is not measured by its social acceptability.

Some gay relationships are indeed manipulative, as the author notes, but so are many heterosexual relationships. A manipulative relationship is equally wrong, whether it's straight or gay. The same can be said about violence, criminal behavior, or promiscuity. To imply a causal relationship between these problems and homosexuality is to confuse the issue and impede discussion of the real questions.

The infertility of homosexual relationships strikes at the heart of Mormon sexual ethics. Yet if we reject all relationships which are nonreproductive, many heterosexual relationships will have to be rejected as well, both those which are naturally nonreproductive and those where couples take conscious measures to preclude procreation. I do not undervalue the importance of procreation in the Lord's plan. At the same time, it would not be the central issue in my judging the morality of a relationship.

Can or should homosexuals try to "change?" Various methods have been used to try and induce change, including electric shock (using pornographic materials), behavior modification therapy, fasting and prayer, and good old-fashioned guilt. But the goal of "change" is rarely well-defined. LDS psychologist Victor L.

Brown, Jr., an advocate of homosexual change, says that the goal is *not* to become heterosexual but is rather "a kind, humane, overall enjoyment of warmth and affection with both men and women, without erotic undertones" (Victor L. Brown, Jr. *Fred's Story* [Sacramento, CA: HR Associates, 1985], p. 13). These are noble aspirations, to be sure, but they are hardly the private domain of heterosexuals. The world is full of homosexuals who enjoy kind, humane, overall enjoyment of warmth and affection with both men and women, but this does not change their sexual orientation.

What if the tables were turned, and heterosexuality was considered wrong? How much electric shock and therapy would it take for you to change your sexual orientation, to develop a deep romantic attraction for persons of your same sex? How long would you have to pray to God before you could become a happy and loving homosexual?

The author has seen no positive long-run benefits from the practice of homosexuality. From my own experience as a gay Mormon, let me suggest three. First is an inner sense of integrity and wholeness. Somewhere inside most gay Mormons is a sense of disconnectedness, of hypocrisy which is fueled by the constant charade of dating people you are not emotionally attracted to, faking interest to maintain social acceptability, and suppressing natural sexual and relational desires. Words cannot describe the wonderful sense of deep healing that occurs as you accept yourself for who you are and realize that God does not hate you.

Second, the moral practice of homosexuality by homosexuals opens the door to the experience of true and honest reciprocal love. This experience is at the heart of our human existence (and our Mormon Christian faith) but is denied to homosexuals when they are forced into unnatural heterosexual relationships. I have been impressed with the beauty and depth of love in some gay couples. The spontaneity and honesty of that love would never be avail-

able to these same people in heterosexual relationships.

Third is the sense of freedom that comes with positive acceptance. Not the freedom from moral law nor the freedom to live a sexual free-for-all, but rather the freedom from imposed expectations and from an unnatural lifestyle, the freedom to live honestly and to make life decisions that promote personal integrity and spirituality. This freedom is totally taken for granted by heterosexuals. The terrible price of this freedom for gay people, however, is that it usually means losing membership in the Church. It's hard to say whose loss is worse, the gay person who no longer benefits from the blessings of membership, or the Church who is losing their strength and ability to contribute.

The author's love and concern for gay people is exemplary, and I wish it were more prevalent in the Church. I believe we agree that the basic problem is not homosexuality but ignorance. Stereotyping has prevented Church members from looking at the real issues.

I've always felt that the term "sexual orientation" was a misnomer and implied that homosexuality is essentially a genital experience. I wish we could call it "affectional orientation," because the question is not sex. The question is love.

For a more complete discussion of homosexual change, I strongly recommend *Prologue: An Examination of the Mormon Attitude Towards Homosexuality* (1978), available from Affirmation/Gay and Lesbian Mormons, P. O. Box 46022, Los Angeles, CA 90046.

Paul-Emile LeBlanc
Orléans, Ontario

Proliferating the Personal

I enjoyed Lance Larsen's personal review of Ed Geary's *Goodbye to Poplarhaven* in the Fall '86 issue. It has the wonderment of discovery that reviews often lack.

I would like to take issue with him, however, on his statement that Geary's "triumph is muted by the diminishing status of the personal essay as a serious literary form." He admits that Mormon letters are an exception and rightly quotes Gene England and Clifton Jolley for support. But he is wrong in thinking that the personal essay is going downhill in America as a whole. A look around a bookstore should convince him.

Critic George Core supports my view in a review of John Lahr's *Automatic Vaudeville: Essays on Star Turns* (N.Y.: Knopf, 1983, 141 pp., \$15.95).

"Only 40 years ago, a reviewer could say that E. B. White was possibly our sole essayist. By then White (and a few other writers like A. J. Liebling and Joseph Mitchell) had re-invented the essay as a usable mode of American writing. We have since passed through an age in which the best literary critics—Edmund Wilson, Allen Tate, Malcolm Dowley, and others—almost cornered the essay; and for at least a decade the literary scene. Never mind the critics who would try to convince you that fiction or poetry or drama or even criticism is currently the Great American Literary Form. . . . Today the personal essay is thriving in this country. Any general reader knows as much" (*Washington Post*, Book World Section, Sunday, 3 Oct. 1983.)

Core names are John McPhee, Edward Hoagland, Larry King, Joseph Epstein, Susan Jacoby, Noel Perrin, Jane Kramer, Joan Didion, Hunter Thompson and Woody Allen. I would add Carol Bly, Barbara Lazear Ascher, Phyllis Rose, Gloria Steinem, Robin Morgan, John Barth, Cynthia Ozick, and Alice Walker. I also recommend the recent collection of *Hers* essays from *The New York Times* (Nancy R. Newhouse, ed., N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1986.)

The Best American Essays is hot off the press too (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1986). This new series joins *Best Ameri-*

can Short Stories. The series editor explains in the foreword that the collection responds to the "essay as a vital and remarkably versatile literary form. . . . [It is] personal, fluid, and speculative" (p. viv). Editor of this volume Elizabeth Hardwick adds a significant definition of the personal essay: "Most gathered here are self-propelled, and a few are responses to an occasion. All have knowledge casually at hand, the knowledge of a free and unbound intelligence and sensibility. . . . Some are straightforward and some wind

through the paths of memory, the unmapped individual experience. Such is the way in the art of the essay" (p. xxi).

I think too of the popular Garrison Keillor. In fact, I would say that Ed Geary is Mormonism's Garrison Keillor if I didn't think Ed surpasses Keillor as an essayist.

Women and men, Mormon and non-Mormon are increasingly choosing the personal essay as the literary form for our time.

Mary L. Bradford
Arlington, Virginia

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