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Our Legacy of Faith: A Brief History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints by Paul M. Edwards; *The Church through the Years*, vols. 1 and 2 by Richard P. Howard; *Let Contention Cease: The Dynamics of Dissent in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* ed. Roger D. Launius and W. B. "Pat" Spillman

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Book Reviews

PAUL M. EDWARDS. *Our Legacy of Faith: A Brief History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*. Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1991. 335 pp. Selected bibliography, appendixes, index. \$27.50.

RICHARD P. HOWARD. *The Church through the Years*. Vol. 1, *RLDS Beginnings, to 1860*. Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1992. 402 pp. Bibliography, index. \$27.50. Vol. 2, *The Reorganization Comes of Age, 1860-1992*. Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1993. 531 pp. Bibliography, index. \$27.50.

ROGER D. LAUNIUS and W. B. "PAT" SPILLMAN, eds. *Let Contention Cease: The Dynamics of Dissent in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*. Independence, Mo.: Grace-land/Park Press, 1991. 304 pp. \$18.00.

Reviewed by Louis Midgley, Professor of Political Science at Brigham Young University.

For thirty years, according to William "Bill" D. Russell, there has been "a deepening theological division within the ranks of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints" (*LCC*,¹ 125) between the liberal faction now in control of the RLDS bureaucracy and hierarchy and the remnants of a more traditional RLDS faith.² The dominant RLDS faction—clearly constituting a new "liberal" establishment³—is reforming the Reorganization on lines more or less consonant with what they consider to be respectable, mainline liberal Protestantism.⁴ The four books reviewed here either reflect or describe these changes. The books by Richard P. Howard and Paul M. Edwards rationalize the changes

from the perspective of the RLDS liberal establishment while *Let Contention Cease* offers valuable insights into internal RLDS politics and currently fashionable ideology from a somewhat less partisan perspective.

Theological liberals trained in Protestant seminaries have come to dominate the Reorganization. At first, they infiltrated the bureaucracy and then eventually gained the confidence of the hierarchy. The liberals now control the RLDS institutional machinery and are in the process of altering and amending some traditional RLDS understandings and abandoning others. Radical changes have been made in what the RLDS assume constitutes divine revelation, thereby transforming their understanding of Joseph Smith, his prophetic role, and his encounters with angels and deity; the priesthood; the Book of Mormon;⁵ the book of Abraham; the gathering and Zion; the Apostasy and the Restoration and whether they occurred; and what constitutes a church and hence whether there should be a distinctive community.

These and other changes often fly in the face of previously normative beliefs, practices, and expectations. Even the name of the church, intended to distinguish the RLDS from the LDS, has become problematic and seems to be open to change. Apparently the name is too closely associated with the Latter-day Saints, who are seen as standing in the way of the RLDS gaining respectability in the larger culture.⁶ But the current RLDS leadership sense limits beyond which they cannot move in modifying their community; hence, they are faced with the necessity of managing and suppressing dissent lest the community vanish or fly apart.⁷

One significant obstacle to the formation of an identity distinct from that of the Latter-day Saints and also to the concentration of power by the dominant liberal faction has been the traditional understanding of the RLDS past. Since accounts of the past rest upon texts which are interpretations of events and since all subsequent accounts are also interpretations, historians within the RLDS liberal establishment have sensed that a radical reshaping of the RLDS understanding of their past is both possible and necessary in reconstituting the RLDS community along liberal Protestant lines.

The Church through the Years and *Our Legacy of Faith* are best seen as official reshaping efforts.⁸ Howard, who has been working on *The Church through the Years* since 1982, has been RLDS Church Historian since 1966. Edwards is director of the Temple School Division⁹ and dean of the Park College Graduate School of Religion. In these capacities, he oversees the training of RLDS clergy. *The Church through the Years* and *Our Legacy of Faith* manifest an institutional authority and ambiance. To accommodate the radical changes in traditional beliefs, the RLDS establishment has found it necessary not only to refashion the traditional account of the Reorganization from its 1850s origin to the present, but, more importantly, to provide an essentially new understanding of those portions of their past that they share with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

To obtain “crucial insights and feedback to the discussions” of goals for the Reorganization (*CTY* 2:364), the RLDS Joint Council¹⁰ called on the services of Protestant theologians, including Dale Dunlap, Carl Bangs, and Paul Jones, all from the liberal St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City. “The outcome,” Howard says, “was a major corrective to the naive claims the Latter Day Saint church had traditionally made about its having replicated the New Testament church in its form, structure, and ecclesiastical officers” (*CTY* 2:364). The end result of this and similar discussions “had major implications for claims to exclusive religious authority, traditionally affirmed by Latter Day Saints” (*CTY* 2:365).¹¹

Where previously the RLDS were anxious to see the Kirtland period as the glory years of the Restoration, Howard insists that what went on in Kirtland was not all that wonderful, but was more like the wild speculation, excesses, and experimentation that the RLDS associate with the Nauvoo period and have struggled to jettison. But the reassessment of the past goes far beyond merely adjusting the RLDS myths of Kirtland and Nauvoo. The more fundamental reassessment is found in the way in which the current RLDS clergy and leadership want to treat issues such as Joseph Smith’s theophanies and the Book of Mormon.

After a glance at several of the accounts of Joseph Smith’s first vision, Howard asserts that in his estimation “history shapes

its own telling. This means there is an inevitable gap between any actual event and ensuing records or interpretations of it. This gap is not so much a matter of simple chronology as it is of substantive content and details" (*CTY* 1:100). What we see in the accounts by Howard and Edwards is an attempt to provide, as far as is currently feasible, a liberal Protestant version of the restoration of the gospel through Joseph Smith. From a Latter-day Saint perspective, though much of the language of the Restoration has been maintained, the substance has been transformed or removed.

By Howard's own admission, his collection of essays "meander[s] all over the place, following a faint chronological line" (*CTY* 2:9). The collection begins with some short essays that provide the setting for an account that transforms the RLDS understanding of the church's past. The function of these essays, which are not particularly well-reasoned or elegantly stated (though unlike Edwards, Howard uses language that manifests the emotional intensity and deep piety typical of his earlier writings), is essentially to bolster and support the changes now being implemented by the RLDS hierarchy and bureaucracy. These essays carry the titles "On Remembering and Forgetting Church History," "Toward a Concept of History," and "Using History Creatively." These essays, which more than any other part of the book express and reflect Howard's own commitments, both introduce and justify essays on "The Social Setting of the Early Restoration," on Joseph Smith and his "visionary experiences," and on the Book of Mormon. And it is here that we find clear indications of a fundamentally different understanding of Joseph Smith's prophetic claims and of the Book of Mormon.

In both *The Church through the Years* and *Our Legacy of Faith*, we are offered novel interpretations of Joseph Smith. What were once seen as realities are transformed into something closely resembling insights, deep feelings, and sentiments. Events and texts (especially the Book of Mormon) are treated in much the same way that biblical materials are handled in fashionably liberal Protestant circles.

Howard and Edwards see a "story" at work behind their faith community (see *CTY* 1:34). But for them that story is malleable because, at least to some extent, its telling depends upon

the assumptions, categories, and explanations of the storyteller. For example, Edwards tells his “story” of Joseph Smith in a somewhat matter-of-fact way. Compared to Howard, Edwards includes little revisionist commentary once he gets into his narrative (see *OLF*, 33–81). But Edwards begins his account by announcing that the Restoration took place in a “time of magic, of metaphysical scares, of buried treasures and awesome places, of extremes of pride and of prejudices; just as it was a time of freedom, newness, dreams and visions, and a place where all those things could well come true” (*OLF*, 22). With such an opening in place, he is prepared to claim that it was in such an “environment in which *Joseph’s concept* took root and shaped the movement—we find that Mormonism rested easily in the nineteenth-century environment” (*OLF*, 24; italics added).

Unlike Richard L. Bushman, Edwards never suspects that Joseph Smith may have outgrown his immediate environment.¹² For Edwards that rustic, superstitious environment was always controlling. It was simply larded with “mysticism and magic” (*OLF*, 24), according to Edwards, and hence “it was a time when folk religion, with its emphasis on magic and mystical symbols, supported beliefs in supernatural causation to explain those daily events of life that appeared unexplainable” (*OLF*, 25). Edwards’s explanation of the Restoration is stated as a conclusion following from his assertions about the environment: “Like all of us, Joseph was a product of his age and environment. He was a child of his times and reflected the moods, desires, beliefs, and methods of his generation” (*OLF*, 31).

Against the notion of the appropriate environment, Edwards tells his version of “the story.” But, with his assumptions in place, he profoundly modifies “the story.” The genuinely divine element, as it is traditionally understood, has been effectively removed, although the traditional language is allowed to remain more or less in place while Edwards supplements and supplants it with his vague talk about myth, mysticism, magic, and the like.

Edwards’s *Our Legacy of Faith* is an institutional history which seems tame when compared with its author’s usual style. For an indication of his preferred style, one must ponder some of the

passages in his personal essay “Ethics and Dissent in Mormonism” in *Let Contention Cease*.

While *Our Legacy of Faith* and *The Church through the Years* focus mainly on the new history, *Let Contention Cease* provides a description of the impulses at work behind the crafting of these revisionist accounts. The following provides an instructive illustration: “The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints,” according to Pat Spillman, editor of and contributor to *Let Contention Cease*,

began as an organization of dissenters—those who disagreed with others who claimed to inherit the prophetic mantle after the assassination of Joseph Smith, Jr. Since its earliest days, members of the church have cherished their independence of thought and freedom of expression. To observers unacquainted with the church’s history, many of its conferences may have seemed raucous and undisciplined as delegates shouted and contended with one another over minutia and significant issues alike. (*LCC*, 10)

Spillman grants that within RLDS ranks “only rarely has dissent reached levels that large numbers of people have found it necessary to effectively remove themselves from active participation in the church community. Regrettably, the late 1980s was one of those periods” (*LCC*, 10).¹³

What Spillman does not indicate is that when the RLDS liberals and their fellow travelers gained power the traditional believers who publicly protested were at first ignored and then increasingly silenced—that is, they had their priesthood licenses lifted. Those in power have begun to deal with recalcitrant traditional believers with an iron fist. Many traditional RLDS have fled to various sects presumably offering prophetic guidance, or they have separated themselves from RLDS congregations and gathered in what they call Restoration Branches in an effort to remain loyal to their understanding of Joseph Smith and the Restoration.¹⁴ Or some may have simply abandoned their faith. This tragic story is told with some equanimity by William D. Russell (*LCC*, 125–51)¹⁵ and by Larry W. Conrad (*LCC*, 199–239), formerly an RLDS member and now a pastor for the United Methodist Church. These cautious, well-informed, but also candid accounts are, along with a historical account of early struggles

among the RLDS by Roger D. Launius (*LCC*, 17-58), easily the best essays in *Let Contention Cease*, which is more uneven than most collections of essays.¹⁶

The most astonishing essay in *Let Contention Cease*, “Ethics and Dissent in Mormonism,” was written by Edwards, who boasts that

during the majority of my church life I have been a dissenter, my dissent ranging from a slight discomfort over procedures to open rebellion as legalistic interpretations and prejudices became social legislation. Usually I have been in the minority and, with select company, have stood in isolated grandeur in priesthood quorums and church assemblies. (*LCC*, 241)

But where does that leave Edwards now that his views are more or less those of the majority and he has direct access to the levers of power? He is, he reports, quite impatient with those he sees as dissenting from the new liberal RLDS orthodoxy. Complaining about the more traditional believers, he says that “these dissenters concluded that majority opinion is not valid when the body of religious truth is denied” (*LCC*, 242).

Of course that stance is not entirely unlike the position he has held much of his adult life. The difference, if there is one, is minimal. The “traditionalists,” who are now seen as troublesome by the RLDS leadership, do not urge a break with the understandings upon which the RLDS community has rested. Ironically, the liberals like Edwards, rather than the traditionalists, are the ones who want to cast away what they consider morally defective and intellectually embarrassing remnants of a rustic, parochial past.

Edwards laments that “traditionalists” often now “find it necessary to leave and begin a new church—or more accurately, reestablish a restored reorganized restoration of the reformation” put together in 1860 by dissenters from Joseph Smith’s original restored gospel. And Edwards boasts that his own earlier dissent always involved efforts to “change the church,” that being, from his perspective, highly desirable. “I have,” he boasts, “endeavored to make it what I would consider theologically valid and socially responsible. Granted, my purpose was not to retain its tradition, but to alter it” (*LCC*, 243).

Since Edwards seems to believe that “the church is what the majority considers it to be” (*LCC*, 243), it follows that traditionalists should submit to the new liberal regimen, as he once very reluctantly did before his assent to power, or “alter the church if they can do so by their pressure” (*LCC*, 243). But the traditional believers lack the necessary political skills, money, and power. Hence, they now have no voice within the Reorganization.

For all the seemingly impressive mastery of primary and secondary literature on the Mormon past, Edwards and Howard take a rather slovenly approach to crucial issues. I will provide but two of several possible illustrations. First, neither Edwards nor Howard show any interest in the serious scholarship on the Book of Mormon. When Howard pushes his theory that the book is Joseph Smith’s frontier fiction, though perhaps inspired or inspiring, he cites only the conventional bromides and supports his opinions with either outdated or simply awful essays (*CTY* 1:119–23, 125 n. 12). On this matter, unlike Bushman,¹⁷ he simply ignores information that does not conform to his bias.

Second, both Edwards (*OLF*, 15–16) and Howard (*CTY* 1:17–21) have much to say about memory, remembrance, and forgetfulness in forming and sustaining identity both in individuals and in communities. Howard uses various forms of these words some forty-five times in the first five pages of his book. Since, as Howard correctly understands, the way the past is understood by a people constitutes their memory and hence identity, *Our Legacy of Faith* and *The Church through the Years* constitute an important and even crucial part of the process of transforming the RLDS memory and identity into a more fashionable and presumably more sophisticated and respectable liberal Protestant community.

However, Howard reduces remembering the Mormon past to preserving the figures of that past in a kind of contemporary, symbolic immortality through historical writing. Hence, he advances the odd notion that “if we forget them, part of who they actually were will fade away *from them*. If we forget them, part of who we have become on the wings of the faith will be lost to us” (*CTY* 1:21, italics added). There is much sentimentality in his formulations but less substance. And his history, he claims, is

intended to preserve the RLDS “capacity to be thankful for our heritage [which] rests on the power of memory” (*CTY* 1:20).

All these points are interesting, but Edwards misses the crucial issues. He does so precisely because of a neglect of the literature that makes clear the vital function of “the story” told by believing communities. Howard has a source or two upon which he draws for his ruminations on memory and its relationship to history and to personal and group identity, but the sources are not from prominent writers whose work might have helped him get clear on the role of history in grounding and sustaining communities of memory and faith.

Howard could have turned to Martin E. Marty,¹⁸ perhaps the most prominent contemporary American church historian and a sometime observer of Latter-day Saints, who has shown that “religious communities are not made up of antique-collectors. For instance, the Christian Church is not a memorial society.” Marty then quotes a German theologian who, when “speaking of faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, says that the church is not a ‘keeper of the city of the dead.’ While tradition keeps it healthy, when it loves tradition it is not a community of traditionalists.”¹⁹ From Marty’s perspective, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and especially Mormons “live by stories.” Latter-day Saints, according to Marty,

have not made much . . . of theology: they especially live as chosen and covenanted people in part of a developing history. Much is at stake when the story is threatened, as it potentially could have been when forged documents concerning Mormon origins agitated the community and led to tragedy a few years ago.²⁰

Much is at stake when alternative ways of understanding the crucial founding events and texts (especially the Book of Mormon) are offered to brush aside or radically alter the story that constitutes the memory and identity of a community of faith.

But the most sophisticated treatment of these issues is found in Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi’s magisterial study of Jewish history, memory, and identity.²¹ In an elaborately illustrated and elegantly written book, Yerushalmi has shown that Jewish identity over the millennia has depended on remembrance of the mighty acts of God on behalf of Israel, on the covenant made with God, and on

accounts of the halting response to that covenant, all of which give the people of God warning, moral direction, and finally hope. And when that story was challenged, called into question, or explained away with categories drawn from the secular culture, the Jewish community suffered disintegration and other terrible harms. Yerushalmi's work thus cautions those tinkering with novel, and essentially secularized, naturalistic accounts of the Mormon past, but only if they have eyes to see and a will to learn from the encounter between faith and what Professor Marty and I have both called the "acids of modernity."²² What we seem to be seeing in the books under review is the corrosive effects of secular, naturalistic explanations of the Mormon past on the RLDS community. For these essentially cautionary lessons, though perhaps not intended in exactly that way, we can only thank their authors, even as we wisely prefer to move in other directions by preserving, refining, correcting, and enlarging the story that grounds the community of faith and memory.

NOTES

¹ Citations to the books under review will be parenthetical, with *OLF* identifying *Our Legacy of Faith*, *CTY* (with the volume number) identifying *The Church through the Years*, and *LCC* identifying *Let Contention Cease*.

² These remnants form a group now effectively outside the control of the Reorganization and numbering at least 15,000 and perhaps as many as 30,000 out of the total membership of slightly over 240,000 RLDS. This group consists of "more than 200 independent local groups in thirty-two states, Canada and Australia" (Russell, in *LCC*, 134; compare *CTY* 2:427).

³ Though members of this faction picture themselves as "liberal," they are not necessarily tolerant of differing views.

⁴ The new interpretations of Joseph Smith and his prophetic claims provided by Howard and Edwards justify and bolster the ideology of the faction currently in control of the Reorganization. By making this point, I risk giving offense to those who see the religious world more or less through the lens provided by these books. I am not supportive of the ideology or the politics of the faction that currently has the upper hand among the RLDS. But I do not wish to offend delicate religious sensitivities. I believe that I honor these books by describing their polemical function in the current struggles within the Reorganization.

⁵ For the details on recent RLDS treatments of the Book of Mormon, see Louis Midgley, "More Revisionist Legerdemain and the Book of Mormon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 5 (1991): 261-65, 267-78; and Louis Midgley, "The Radical Reformation of the Reorganization of the Restoration: Recent Changes in the RLDS Understanding of the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2 (Fall 1993): 132-63.

⁶ Beginning with at least the RLDS World Conference in 1992, there has been talk about changing this name. The *Saints Herald* has recently published a number of items discussing the possibility of a name change intended to end what the RLDS see as an unfortunate link with those they tend to call the "Utah Mormons." This discussion should come as no surprise since earlier they made an effort to unofficially shift to the name "Saints Church." While that name is used here and there, it has not supplanted the legal name for either the outside public or RLDS communicants. Signs of a sensitivity about their identity can be seen in the attention the RLDS give in their writings to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The *Saints Herald* regularly contains awkward references to the LDS Church as do the histories by Howard and Edwards.

⁷ On this point, see Edwards, "Ethics and Dissent in Mormonism," in *LCC*, 241-57. Edwards seems to sense that the institutional imperative, to which he now bows, requires that he push the liberal agenda only moderately in order to minimize contention and disaffection. Hence,

the more popular middle-of-the-road responses to the central ideas of our time [those ideas driving the new 'liberal' establishment?] leave us driving one additional nail into the coffins of Mormon dissent. As dutiful followers not only of the church but of the social fads of our civilization, we seek to manage the behavior of the church and in so doing leave behind the passionate source of our dissent. (*LCC*, 253)

In one of the clearest passages in his remarkably confused and confusing essay, Edwards writes: "For the Reorganized Church there is considerable smoke for a fairly small fire; for the Mormons [LDS] not even much smoke. Reorganized Church dissenters will stay longer in the structure, but in the final analysis they will find the need to be outside" (252).

⁸ Howard notes that others see recent developments in the Reorganization differently. A few of these "can (and will) talk back. A few of them can even compel changes here and there, and (prediction here) in fact, did. They're upstairs or out at Herald House" (*CTY* 2:10). Howard's office is just below that of the RLDS Joint Council (First Presidency, Quorum of the Twelve, and Presiding Bishopric) in the new temple headquarters in Independence.

⁹ In 1974 the Temple School replaced the School of the Restoration (*CTY* 2:371), and it is currently housed in the new temple headquarters in Independence. Edwards has directed the Temple School since 1982.

¹⁰ For a definition, see note 8.

¹¹ "Some church members," according to Howard, "became angry on learning that their leaders had turned to Protestant theologians to instruct [them] in the ways of the gospel, and they began stirring others to reaction" (*CTY* 2:420).

¹² On this matter, see Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 7.

¹³ Howard speaks about an RLDS “basic right to dissent” or “inalienable right to dissent from various courses of action or thought embraced by their leaders” (*CTY* 2:414). But dissent can go too far, as it has with the dissent of the traditional believers against the new liberal establishment. Hence, Howard describes the resistance to the liberal takeover as involving “much harmful behavior exercised by some of the more radical reactionaries toward anyone even remotely connected with the changes in the church” (*CTY* 2:422).

¹⁴ While remaining on the RLDS membership rolls, they hold their own meetings, conduct weddings, elect officers, administer “communion,” baptize, and ordain, all without any official authorization (Russell, in *LCC*, 134).

¹⁵ Russell and the loquacious Edwards are the two liberal enfants terribles of the Restoration, though they are now past their prime as provocateurs.

¹⁶ For example, the essay by Steven L. Shields (*LCC*, 59–90) is unoriginal and merely descriptive, and the essays by Donald J. Breckon (*LCC*, 153–76) and Maurice L. Draper (*LCC*, 177–97) are disappointing.

¹⁷ See Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*.

¹⁸ Martin E. Marty, *We Might Know What to Do and How to Do It: On the Usefulness of the Religious Past*, Westminster Tanner-McMurrin Lectures on the History and Philosophy of Religion at Westminster College, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Westminster College, 1989), 3–21.

¹⁹ Marty, *We Might Know What to Do*, 9.

²⁰ Marty, *We Might Know What to Do*, 12.

²¹ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, 1st ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982); 2d ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1989). Gary F. Novak and I attempted to draw attention to this remarkable book in an essay entitled “Remembrance and the Past: Jewish and Mormon Memory and the New History” (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Mormon History Association, May 11, 1984); see also David B. Honey and Daniel C. Peterson, “Advocacy and Inquiry in the Writing of Latter-day Saint History,” *BYU Studies* 31 (Spring 1991): 148–49, 164–66.

²² See Louis Midgley, “The Acids of Modernity and the Crisis in Mormon Historiography,” in *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 189–225, especially 192, 219–20 n. 27. See also Martin E. Marty, “Two Integrities: An Address to the Crisis in Mormon Historiography,” in *Faithful History*, 169–88.