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Feeding the Flock: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Church and Praxis

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*Feeding the Flock:
The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Church and Praxis*
By Terryl L. Givens

New York: Oxford University Press, 2017

Reviewed by Mark A. Wrathall

Overview

Feeding the Flock is a landmark study of the history of the practices of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Professor Terryl L. Givens's aim in the book is to answer the question "What did Joseph Smith and his successors understand the purpose of the church to be, and how did the resultant structure and forms of practice evolve over time?" (x). As the compound form of this question makes clear, and as Givens reminds the reader repeatedly throughout the book, his project involves attending to the way that theological and practical aspects of the Church inform and affect each other—although in point of fact he tends to focus mostly on the way that theological doctrines inform and shape the practices, not the other way around. So Givens not only explains what Latter-day Saints believe but also shows how the practices of the Church developed over time in such a way as to sustain a form of life that expresses those beliefs. This is a monumental and ambitious task on its own. But Givens further enriches his account by setting his practico-theological account of the Church in a comparative context, drawing out affinities and contrasts between the Church and other forms of religious life (primarily Christian and Jewish).

The first three chapters of *Feeding the Flock* lay out the theological framework that structures the subsequent eight chapters, each of which offers a detailed analysis of some particular domain of Latter-day Saint life and worship. In the opening three chapters, Givens offers an interpretation of the primary purpose and function of the Church: "the church exists as a steward over the authority and ordinances which both foster and constitute a relationality between humans and God on the one hand, and humans with humans on the other. *In sum*," he argues, "*the church exists to create the kind of persons, in the kinds of*

relationships, that constitute the divine nature” (34, italics in original). Givens quite rightly emphasizes the intense focus that Church practices place on developing and nurturing both human relationships to God (“vertical relationships,” as Givens terms them) and interhuman (or “horizontal”) relationships—with a special significance given to familial relationships, a significance that has grown more pronounced over time.¹ This defining purpose of the Church—the purpose of creating a certain kind of person in a certain kind of communion with God and others—is put into practice through the administration of covenants and sacraments, the theology of which is outlined in chapter 2, “Latter-day Saint Covenant Theology,” and chapter 3, “Sacramental Theology.” I’ll return to Givens’s account of this theology later.

The eight chapters that follow show how the Church’s covenant and sacramental theology is worked out in the practices and institutions that structure the Latter-day Saint form of life. Givens reviews the functioning of the various priesthood quorums and offices (chapter 4); the ecclesiastical structure of general and local Church authorities (chapter 5); “salvific” sacramental ordinances, such as baptism, confirmation, the temple endowment, and sealing (chapter 6); “nonsalvific” sacramental ordinances such as the sacrament and priesthood blessings (chapter 7); the use of spiritual gifts and the place of revelation in institutional and personal life (chapter 8); the canonization and interpretation of scripture (chapter 9); the conduct of worship services and the law of the fast (chapter 10); and “boundary maintenance”—that is, the establishment of institutional identity through mechanisms of Church disciplinary proceedings and temple recommend interviews, as well as through markers like strict compliance with the law of tithing and with prohibitions against the consumption of alcohol, tea, coffee, and so forth (chapter 11).

Each of the eight practice-oriented chapters, and the main subsections within those chapters, follow a more-or-less standard procedure. First, Givens situates Latter-day Saint practices in a broader Christian context. For instance, the chapter on salvific sacramental ordinances (chapter 6) begins with a review of the seven sacraments of medieval

1. See, for example, the discussion of sealing in chapter 6: “After a fifty-year meander through various experimental forms, Mormon temple rituals began thereafter to seal parents to children and children to parents, in ascending and descending lines. . . . Since 1894, an increasingly family-centered orientation to both LDS practice and rhetoric has firmly entrenched the traditional, nuclear family as the core image of both Mormon social life and heavenly aspirations” (185–86).

Christianity, notes how Luther pruned these seven down to two (baptism and the eucharist), briefly recapitulates Methodist efforts to “[circumvent] sacramental debates,” and finally sets out the Latter-day Saint doctrine regarding those ordinances that are “requisite to (and constitutive of) salvation”—namely, “baptism, confirmation and bestowal of the Holy Ghost, conferral of the priesthood (for men), the endowment, and marriage sealing” (145). Having situated a Latter-day Saint practice in a comparative and historical context, Givens then recounts the evolution of the practice throughout the history of the Church. In addition, he generally offers an account of the theological doctrines that explain or rationalize the practice. For instance, Givens argues that in the theology of “Mormon baptism,” the ordinance “signifies a shift in eternal status that moves far beyond simple forgiveness of sin”—through baptism, an individual begins “the process of initiation, actually re-incorporation, into heirship with heavenly parents” (155). In his review of how the practice of baptism developed over time, Givens relates that at some point, catechumens (or “investigators,” in the Latter-day Saint vernacular) were required to “explicitly and verbally place themselves under a covenant.” But baptism since has evolved into “an implicit covenant,” where the individual receiving baptism says nothing (157). Givens discusses the once-common practice of rebaptism as a way of solemnizing a person’s “fresh start in their spiritual journey” or of receiving a renewed remission of sins (158). He also discusses the now-extinct practice of “healing baptisms” (160–61) before finally turning to the temple ordinance of vicarious baptism for the dead. In this way, the reader is provided with a genealogy of contemporary Latter-day Saint practices. Through a masterful assembling and interpretation of the historical materials, Givens demonstrates just how fluid Latter-day Saint religious practices have been, as Church members have adapted themselves to changing conditions and emerging understandings of the nature, role, and function of the Church. (Changes in 2018 to the organization of priesthood quorums and the Sunday block of meetings and the introduction of the ministering program are the latest examples of the continuing mutability of Church practices.) As a result, reading Givens’s book ought to inoculate Church members against fetishizing the current form of Church organization and practice.

Another recurring feature of Givens’s standard procedure involves highlighting, wherever possible, ancient antecedents of the Latter-day Saint form of the practice—especially when Latter-day Saint practice departs significantly from the practices and teachings of mainstream Christian sects. For instance, in discussing the vicarious baptism for the

dead that is performed in Latter-day Saint temples, Givens discusses the Marcionite (second century AD) practice of vicarious baptism for catechumens who died before baptism could be performed. Information on these historical antecedents will undoubtedly be of interest to members of the Latter-day Saint Church who believe that the current organization of the Church constitutes a restoration of the structure and ordinances of primitive Christianity. But there is a risk of confirmation bias—of falling into the error of fixating on just those historical antecedents (however anomalous and idiosyncratic they might be) that happen to resemble current Latter-day Saint practices and then taking those resemblances as proof that current Latter-day Saint practice is a straightforward restoration of *the* one primordial practice of Christianity. That worry aside, *Feeding the Flock* is essential reading to anyone interested in acquiring a better-grounded appreciation of the meaning and sources of Latter-day Saint religious practices and in obtaining a granular knowledge of the similarities and disparities between the practices and theology of the Church versus other Christian religions.

Salvation as a Form of Life

Givens's interpretation of Church practice proceeds analytically. He dissects Church organizations and practices, places them into distinct categories, and interprets them piecemeal. In proceeding in this way, Givens is able to offer an extremely clear and encyclopedic account of the multifarious aspects of Church practice. The analytic approach, however, risks obscuring the holism that is intrinsic to the practices of the Church—both an internal holism that unites the various practices of the faith and an external holism that connects religious practices with other practices to form a whole, coherent style of life.

Internal holism means that we can't really understand the meaning of any practice in isolation. A corollary is that we can't really understand the significance of any *change* in practice in isolation—the meaning of a change in the practices regarding baptism, for instance, depends on the specific impact it has on other practices. Givens hints at this in discussing how the once-common practice of rebaptism disappeared from Latter-day Saint life—a change, Givens notes, that coincided with a new emphasis on the sacrament of the Lord's Supper “as a means of renewing the baptismal covenant” (160). Givens complains that this new understanding of the sacrament as a renewing of baptismal covenants has “no particular scriptural warrant” (of course, neither did the practice of rebaptism in the first place). But my point is this: to assess

the significance of the cessation of rebaptism for the overall Latter-day Saint experience of the world and our place in it, it matters a great deal that a different practice for covenant renewal emerged to take its place. It matters because it suggests that the form of life stands in need of a mechanism for covenant renewal. It also matters because of the distinctive way that each practice shapes our experience of covenant renewal. One might suspect that covenant renewal through rebaptism imbued the moment with a gravity and solemnity that is easily lost in a routine and simple act like weekly participation in the brief sacrament ceremony.² The holistic character of religious practices suggests, then, that an analytic approach to religious practices needs to be guided by an understanding of the way practices interact in shaping the significance of the whole form of life.

An appreciation of the external holism of religious practices leads us to the same conclusion. We can't fully understand the meaning of any particular set of practices until we see how they interact with other practices in the world. Religious practices are no exception. The practices through which we are initiated into Church membership are meant to transform the way we carry ourselves in everyday life, including how we perceive the significance of the people, events, and situations we encounter and how we are disposed to respond to them. And that means that we can't fully understand the significance of Church practices until we see how they affect the conduct of our day-to-day lives. Givens, at least tacitly, invokes this external form of holism at numerous points in *Feeding the Flock*—perhaps most clearly as he traces the history and evolution of the concept of Zion in chapter 2. “The church is to *be Zion*,” Givens notes, “enfold[ing] us in a society that merges seamlessly with a communal heaven” (34, italics in original). Indeed, Givens describes eloquently the way that Latter-day Saint doctrine equates salvation with a life in which all our social relationships and daily activities are integrated with and expressive of our relationship to God: “Mormons, then, take the project of Zion-building literally, believing that the church must build a community prepared to meet the Lord and join the heavenly community of the righteous. The process of sanctifying disciples of Christ, and constituting them into a community of love and harmony, does not *qualify* individuals for heaven; sanctification and celestial relationality *are* the essence of heaven. Zion, in this conception, is both an ideal and

2. My thanks to Aaron Reeves for emphasizing this point to me in conversation.

a transitional stage into the salvation toward which all Christians strive” (36, italics in original). In the Latter-day Saint understanding, Givens quite rightly insists, salvation is not a reward extrinsic to the relationships we form in the course of our mortal existence. Salvation simply is a particular form of life—one that is well suited for eternity. As we come to be at home in religious practices, the interpersonal relationships that make up this form of life are “established, developed, and secured” (25). And this is why “Mormons believe the institutional church to have a vital—or even indispensable—role in human salvation” (8): “in its final form, the church will provide the structures, principles, and practices that provide concrete preparation for, and assurance of, integration into an eternal heavenly family” (21).

But the holism of practices, both internal and external, renders problematic the most important division that Givens demarcates within Latter-day Saint practices—the division between salvific and nonsalvific ordinances. While conceding that the Latter-day Saint Church “do[es] not have formal categories of sacraments,” Givens holds that “some are clearly essential to salvation and others are not” (145). I confess, the distinction is not clear to me. Consider, by way of analogy, the practice of forming an intimate and exclusive relationship between two equal partners—let’s call this “marriage.”³ Marriage includes a variety of subpractices—for instance, practices for securing and preparing food, for washing clothes and dishes, for raising children, for coordinating daily activities, for fostering and reinforcing shared intimacy and devotion, for extending familial and amical bonds, and so on. Now suppose we live in a society and age of world history that officially recognizes a relationship as a marriage only if the partners perform one particular subpractice—they engage in a specific nuptial ritual.⁴ Suppose further that the society has a mechanism whereby an intimate and exclusive relationship can be recognized retroactively as an official marriage (countries with a legal framework for recognizing common-law marriages have just such a mechanism). And suppose, finally, that some partnerships are unhappy and ultimately founder, while other partnerships are extraordinarily happy and successful—the partners flourish

3. Of course, this analogy is not selected at random. Marriage plays an outsized role in the overall form of life that leads to salvation within Latter-day Saint theology.

4. A ritual is a solemn act performed with express intent and conforming to a set form.

within their intimate and exclusive relationship, and they perform to a very high standard many (although perhaps not all) of the subpractices that contribute to a marriage relationship. Now, my question is this: under these suppositions, can we meaningfully identify some actions or subpractices as “essential” to a successful and happy marriage and others “nonessential”? One might argue that the ritual that solemnizes a partnership as a marriage is essential to a successful marriage because, without the ritual, the partnership wouldn’t count as a marriage in the first place. But one could equally argue that the everyday practices of caring, loving, nurturing, and sustaining one another are essential to a successful marriage because, without them, the partnership wouldn’t be happy or successful. Moreover, given a legal mechanism for retroactive recognition of partnerships as marriages, one might argue that an ability to perform well the everyday practices of a marriage partnership are *more* essential than the ritual. After all, unless those everyday practices are performed well, no subsequent event can make it the case that the marriage was happy. Conversely, a happy and successful partnership can later come to count as a marriage.

Exactly the same considerations complicate the distinction between salvific and nonsalvific sacraments in the Church. In addition to the temple ritual for solemnizing a marriage, the Latter-day Saint form of life involves a number of other ritual acts that give official sanction to various relationships: “Through baptism, we formally and publicly agree that we accept Christ’s invitation to be our spiritual Father. We thus signal our desire to be adopted into His family. Through further covenantal gestures, we affirm our commitment to bind ourselves more closely to Him and concretely establish a relationship of reciprocity, through progressively greater demonstrations of our love and fidelity. And in Mormon temple marriage, individuals enact their willingness to expand the intimate association with the Divine, both laterally through marriage and vertically through posterity” (53). But salvation doesn’t follow simply from entering into these relationships any more than a happy marriage follows simply from the ritual taking of marriage vows. Salvation in the Latter-day Saint view, as Givens so eloquently explains, requires us to learn to be completely at home in the Christian form of life. Given that all the various practices of the Church (and not merely the “salvific” rituals) mutually define and sustain each other in helping us to achieve this form of life, on what basis can we draw a sharp distinction between salvific and nonsalvific practices? It’s true that one might not count as a Christian without baptism. But nor does one attain

salvation (where that means something like coming to be completely committed to, dispositionally at home in, and successful at living a Christian life) without throwing oneself passionately into all the “non-salvific” practices that make up the Christian way of life—the everyday, simple practices of ministering to others in compassion and love, blessing children and attending the sick and dying, communing with others in worship and social activities, praying, and repenting. Because the rituals and saving ordinances of baptism, bestowal of the Holy Ghost, confirmation, endowment, and marriage sealing can be performed retroactively by proxy in the temple, the Latter-day Saint form of life arguably places even greater emphasis on the everyday, mundane activities that “constitute the human family into a durable, eternal, heavenly association” (28).⁵

The Latter-day Saint conception of salvation, in other words, is not achieved by checking off a list of necessary ordinances or assenting to a list of essential beliefs or doctrines. Salvation is the transformation of existence that is effected by our coming to be at home in the world disclosed by our religious practices. Givens notes insightfully: “Salvation is not just *achieved* in community; eternal community is the form salvation takes” (181, italics in original). But if eternal community is the *form* of salvation, then the whole rich texture of our shared way of life is its *substance* and, as such, is equally essential to the achievement of salvation.

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5. There’s much more to be said about the special status of certain sacraments or rituals. Givens discusses the importance of the “salvific” ordinances in providing moral reinforcement (49–50), exercising metaphysical power to sustain our relationships (50), and shaping our character and dispositions through the very act of explicitly performing them (51–52). But even if those ordinances are unique in these respects, they are still not sufficient to provide salvation without being interanimated by the other elements of the Latter-day Saint form of life.