

PRESIDENTIAL PONDERING

By Martha Bradley

Every year Mormon historians and interested supporters join together during the first week of May for the annual Mormon History Association meetings. These gatherings are held alternately in the East and the West near sites significant to Mormon history. One of the highlights of each conference is the presidential address which is different from a traditional historical study (although many have taken a historical approach). It is a more personal, often introspective essay, perhaps best described by a past president, Paul Edwards of Graceland College: "A presidential address is an essay of reflection. It is provided by an involved person who, at the culmination of his time in office, feels enough at home to speak freely to those he has come to know and to love." Whatever the form, the presidential essay is almost always worth savoring. Here are some of my favorites.

Paul Edwards, "The Secular Smiths." *Journal of Mormon History* 4 (1977): 3-17.

Paul Edwards addresses the central question, how did a secular people deal with a sacred event? The Smiths experienced a sacred event—a divine confrontation—while living their own secular history. The confusion in distinguishing between the two is in large measure perpetuated by historical studies which have confused Joseph Smith with Mormonism and Mormonism with the Mormon church—a basic confusion between the sacred and the secular.

The part of Mormonism that is sacred is the single moment of confrontation between man and God. The ways in which the Church organization tries to deal with the sacred event are not themselves sacred, but secular, however much they are imbued with an awareness or sense of the sacred event itself.

How then was the event transformed to myth, and how has the Church dealt with this important change? How did the present order of things originate?

The heritage given to the Church by the Smiths was, according to Edwards, "tragic"; it was a sacred burden laid upon the shoulders of a secular people. "The family must account for, and maintain, the sacred mantle; to wear the royal robes. But the robes of prophetic vision are not the common garment, even of prophets."

Edward's thesis rests on three central contentions. First, Joseph Smith Jr. was a mystic, a secular man who saw religion not as an isolated and climactic experience but as an essential and meaningful part of daily life. The mystical experience was not itself organizational, nor was it meaningful or significant in terms of function or position. Second, Mormonism is a "semi-systematic" set of theological arguments and concepts. Finally, Edwards distinguishes between Mormonism and the Mormon church and its programs. To Edwards, the institution seems little more than bureaucracy designed to sustain ritual conceived around the mystical experience.

Mormon theology attempts to portray the sacred event in such a way that it is meaningful to the people, that it helps them to understand themselves, their God, their universe, and the hereafter. The institution has failed in this objective in two basic ways: first, by ignoring the advantage of Joseph Smith's unique message and epistemology and, second, by failing to correctly assess how far the evolutionary development of the doctrines of the Church has gone. According to Edwards, the Church has used its history as theology and in so doing has denied the value of its theology and the heritage of an honest

history.

Douglas D. Alder, "The Mormon Ward: Congregation or Community?" *Journal of Mormon History* 5 (1978): 61-78.

A Mormon ward is a religious community, and as such it is more than a congregation. Whereas a congregation is simply a group of people gathered for religious instruction or worship, a ward is also a social unit that offers chances for fellowship, communion, and association.

Like every community, many of the functions of the ward center on major events of the life cycle. The ward serves as a unit of socialization through which values are both sustained and transmitted through religious rites, rituals, ordinances, and their accompanying symbolic representation. The traditional reiteration and repetition of these expressions of belief as well as participation in ritual serve to reinforce values among ward members.

Ideally, every member is called upon to serve and participates in a variety of different types of activities—speaking in church services, teaching and visiting other members, and presiding as a leader over meetings. The business of the ward is conducted by local leaders who defer to the judgment of the central authority of the Church.

When combined, these two factors—lay leadership and mass involvement—act as a reminder that the ward is first of all a group of individual members. To grasp the significance of the ward as a social and ecclesiastical unit one must go beyond leaders and programs to the people themselves. The ward is, after all, primarily a set of human relationships not simply an organizational convenience: it is people.

The ward in the twentieth century is different than its nineteenth-century antecedent. Both share a common communal heritage through which Mormons have perpetuated a peculiar subculture. Often the Mormon ward was first a village—a geographically separate and distinct unit. The ward and the village were the same. This particular unit preceded the less tangible division into ecclesiastical units (in which

geography was still a factor) that were more expandable, largely suburban, and overwhelmingly pragmatic in both outlook and function.

The modern-day ward community is a more corporate model which administers streamlined, efficient, Churchwide programs that were designed at Church headquarters and that bind each ward to every other ward in the worldwide Church.

For the purpose of analysis, Alder proposes five general categories for studying the twentieth-century ward. Each category considers geography, leadership, ancestry, activity percentages, and implementation of programs. Alder calls the first category the "abundant" ward. It exhibits strength in every area which suggests the interrelatedness of the various elements. Strong leadership directs a full program with high percentages of both participation and priesthood membership. The "adequate" wards and the "limited" wards begin to show differences in the numbers and qualities of participants in activity and priesthood membership. Here, fewer members have fourth and fifth generation LDS ancestors, and the geographic boundaries of the ward themselves begin to expand. The "nascent" and "basic" wards are the most diverse. Their numbers are the smallest and their members are scattered geographically. There are no neighborhood wards in this category.

Alder concludes that it is in this local unit of the Church that we will see whether or not Mormonism has successfully met the challenges of the twentieth century and more importantly whether or not it continues to meet the needs of its members.

Melvin Smith, "Faithful History: Hazards and Limitations," *Journal of Mormon History* 9 (1982): 61-69.

Melvin Smith's presidential address focuses on the question: Is there a genre of faithful history? He suggests that faithful history might be defined as history that promotes faith in God and adds credence to the divinity of his leaders and institutions. But Smith also asks another question: Can history in fact do that?

This query is further complicated for the Mormon historian by the historic nature of Mormon doctrines and the Saints' daily dependence on the religion for answers of eternal import. For Latter-day Saints, religion explains everything.

The pattern taken by faithful historians of the Mormon church was established in the Church's first historical drama by its leading player, Joseph Smith, who set the rules for "witnessing the faith." Joseph's first witness was a spiritual, supernatural experience. In the second instance he chose to use historic witness to verify the divinity of his mission.

Melvin Smith separates faithful historians into three basic groups: The first, or dogmatic historians, see all issues as either black or white and assume that history verifies all of God's prophecies. The middle group, perhaps the safer position, is filled by those who choose to write of only the positive, uplifting stories that support and confirm the gospel message. The final division is less clear cut. Its members are more individualistic in both approach and mentality. They are the integrated, faithful historians who attempt to satisfy the demands of professionalism as well as their own personal conviction that somewhere in the story lies the truth.

Perhaps the more important question is the validity of the presumption that somehow the study of the lives of mortal human beings can be a witness for God. In this sense faithful history, to some degree, presumes to prove or disprove the infinite, or at least some quality or attribute of it.

In answering this question, Smith proposes some other inter-

esting questions for future consideration. He says simply that there are some kinds of truth that are not subject to empirical historical scrutiny and that the proper study of history is mankind not God. Finally, he observes, faithful history is not history; it is a use (even abuse) of history and should be treated as such.

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