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## A CHANGED MAN

# PROPHETS AND ASSIMILATIONISTS

By Orson Scott Card

A RECENT ISSUE of *SUNSTONE* reported on some negative reactions to Boyd K. Packer's address on funerals. The gist of those reactions was that general authorities have no business meddling in areas that general authorities don't usually meddle in.

"It isn't that he spoke about funerals," they seem to be saying. "What bothers us is that he demanded we change the way we do things. Worse yet, his changes would give the Church more control over our lives."

Indeed, if there is one theme that runs throughout Elder Packer's career as a prophet, seer, and revelator, it is this: He persists in speaking about topics that few others are willing to touch, and he persists in trying to get us to change our customs in ways that would make us even more different from the world around us than we already are. He expects us to transform ourselves as a people, and he insists on his authority to teach us how to do it.

Let me give you an extended example. Years ago, I sat in the large BYU audience that listened as Boyd K. Packer gave his address on Mormon art. At first I was excited—what other general authority had given art in the Church more than a passing mention?

But soon excitement gave way to dismay. Did he really propose that Eliza R. Snow's and Orson Whitney's tacky little poems be treated as seriously as truly *great* literature?

And when he made his joke about temperamental artists being "more temper than mental" I was offended. He might be an apostle, but what did he know about artists? What did he know about art?

Years went by. I stopped dabbling in writing and made it my career. I went on to graduate school at two universities and began to make some discoveries about the world of lit-

erature in America.

At first inadvertently, but later by design, I did most of my storytelling within the genre of science fiction and fantasy. It is the one genre that allows a storyteller to create worlds that function by different rules; I needed that possibility of strangeness, that control over milieu, in order to tell the stories that seemed most important and true to me.

Science fiction and fantasy are, together, the latest incarnation of the oldest tradition in literature. From Gilgamesh and Odysseus on through medieval romances and the folktales that every community in the world adapts to its own needs, the stories that people have loved and retold all contain strangeness, the possibility of magic, the immanence of powers normally beyond the reach of human beings. My conception of the working of the world was formed primarily by Joseph Smith, and I found it impossible to tell my most truthful stories without strangeness, without the immanence of power.

But my professors, with rare exceptions, despised science fiction and fantasy. I quickly learned that they also did not understand it, did not even know how to read it. I, however, *did* know how to read and understand the works that *they* valued, and I soon discovered that at the heart of every one of their most treasured stories there was a seed of strangeness. But this tiny shred of romance was so buried in details of realism, so camouflaged by flamboyant and distracting style, that it could only be extracted with patient labor. Rarely was it worth the effort.

Why did they insist on telling their stories in disguise? Why did they despise and deplore stories that offered themselves plainly? Their stories had gained nothing and lost much. Their audience, and therefore their ability to influence the world, was small and shrinking.

But there was compensation for the litterateurs, a meta-story that they valued more

than the stories of their purported literature: the story that said, "People who can read *serious* literature are finer, more intelligent, and more important than people who read that easy stuff." Their fiction, by its very inaccessibility to untrained readers, made them an elite.

They have captured the American university English departments, and from that bastion they try—and often succeed—in their effort to make people ashamed of reading any story that is told plainly enough to be understood by an untrained reader. You know how we apologize for the stories we love: "Oh, I just read these romances / mysteries / fantasies for escape." Or: "I only read this sort of thing at the beach / on the plane / when I'm sick."

The academic-literary establishment teaches students to value only those stories that must be carefully explicated and decoded by those ordained to the high priesthood of literature. They have persuaded most Americans that any story that does not require their mediation is trash.

All the arguments and conflicts within the academic-literary establishment are simply efforts to rise higher within their hierarchy. For instance, all the obfuscation of the Deconstructionists can be boiled down to a few clear concepts; but by masking their ideas in a daunting, untranslatable, circular, self-referential vocabulary, the Deconstructionists have been able to pose as an even higher priesthood—Gnostics who pretend to know a Mystery, which gives them power over those who don't know the proper incantations. It is a mass of confusion, designed not to be understood.

I looked at the critical theories of the academic-literary establishment and realized that, with a few exceptions, they were worthless, good only for decoding a certain narrow group of stories. Their theories were incompetent to explain the workings of most of the stories throughout all ages of the world—so they dismissed those stories as not worth reading.

But I saw that every human society in all of history creates and devours stories as their one indispensable crop; we don't contemplate our stories, we *use* them as surely as our bodies use food. Any theory of criticism that excludes the very stories that most people love best is worthless. And any story designed to satisfy the requirements of that worthless theory would have no meaning to most people. "Serious literature" in America is devoted to creating junk food. It may be served on fine china, but it's still a Twinkie, and after fifty

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years it's getting pretty stale.

It isn't just literature. *Every* American art except film has walked down that same road. Young painters and sculptors are taught to despise art that an untrained audience might love. Young musicians are taught to compose music that is deliberately unmelodic and unrhythmic and inaccessible. Young poets are encouraged to believe that clear communication is the enemy, not the essence, of their art.

The result is that young artists who study at American universities and believe what they are taught come away incapable of having any effect on the American people at large. Their art is valued only by a jaded audience that is generally incapable of being moved or transformed except at the shallowest level, which is the same as saying that their art is wasted.

When I finally understood this, I remembered Boyd K. Packer's address to the students and faculty in the arts at BYU. Though his rhetoric was sometimes offensive and his examples perhaps unhelpful, his fundamental message was not only true but the most important thing that Mormon artists could learn: The artistic standards of the world are directly inimical, not only to the Church, but also to art itself.

Many who resented Elder Packer's address said that he wanted to turn our art into propaganda for the Church. This is absurd. He was warning us that we were turning our art into propaganda for worldly elitists. He was warning us that if we believed their lies, we would be incapable of producing art that had any value whatsoever. And he was right. He was also ignored—not by all, but by far too many. BYU's English department too often prides itself on its ability to persuade its student writers to accept the values of the academic-literary establishment. BYU's music department still rewards most those young composers whose music has the least power to move an untrained audience. Only the art and theatre departments occasionally give honor to students and faculty who create works that might have some effect on an audience of volunteers. All these years after Elder Packer's address, BYU still does not take him very seriously.

To put it plainly, Elder Packer was warning Mormon artists of the danger of assimilationism. Assimilationism is the greatest danger facing the Church in America. There is enormous pressure for us to conform to the values of the nation around us. We have weakened under that pressure, and there is grave danger that it will destroy us, not by breaking the Church apart, but by erasing the boundary

between the Church and the world. The Great Apostasy did not come because members left the Church; it came when the Church adopted the values, philosophies, and practices of the world.

As to Elder Packer's recent speech about funerals, it is astonishing that anyone could imagine that it is somehow inappropriate for an apostle to insist on the Church's close involvement with the rituals surrounding death. Putting the bishop in charge of the funeral services does not take control away from the family. The bishop—who knows the family well—is more likely to respond to the desires of the family and the needs of the religious community in which they live than the paid stranger who is usually in charge. At every Mormon funeral I've attended, the family spends most of its time fulfilling the expectations of the undertaker. Do we give greater authority to the American mortician than to the Mormon bishop?

Too often the answer is yes. Yet Elder Packer has not forgotten that Mormonism is a revolutionary movement, that it is our job to subvert or overthrow the world's institutions and philosophies. He reminds us that the gospel touches every part of life, that the Spirit of God cannot be shunted into a small compartment and remain alive in us. He has dared to think and speak about how the Saints must change in order to better fit the gospel.

He is most often criticized by those who prefer to change gospel ideals and customs until it is possible to be a "Mormon" without ever having to go through the embarrassment of being different from the non-Mormons they admire. These assimilationists long to reconcile the world and the Church by changing the Church to fit the world.

If we refuse to let an apostle teach us how we should deal with death, if we refuse to let an apostle teach us how we should conceive and use our art, then in what sense do we sustain him as an apostle? And if, having rejected that apostle, we turn to undertakers and anti-religious elitists to teach us on those same subjects, then in what sense do we remain Latter-day Saints?

Assimilationists excuse themselves by whimpering, "Surely there's nothing wrong with learning truth from many sources. After all, even the apostles sometimes disagree." But they rarely consider and choose between the teachings of apostles; rather they seize on any apostolic statement that seems to justify their adherence to the views of the world. The assimilationists invariably *act* on the assumption that the world knows better than the Church.

Sonia Johnson trusted in the doctrines of feminism more than she valued her fellowship with the Saints; her excommunication only formalized her shift in loyalties from the community of Jesus Christ to a competing one.

The businessmen who erect their obscene mansions on the hills of Salt Lake and Utah valleys trust in their money more than they value their temple covenant of consecration; they struggle to resist fellowship with the faithful poor, forgetting that wealth, not poverty, is the fatal disease of the world.

The professors who teach their students not to create art for the masses trust in the academic-literary establishment more than they value the struggle to bring to pass the eternal life of man; the students who believe them are effectively silenced for life in a world that is hungry for their voices.

Parents who teach their children not to date or marry good and faithful saints of another race trust in the opinions of their bigoted neighbors more than they value Christ's commandment that we be one.

Knowing that these values are contrary to the gospel, many of these assimilationists seek to distort the gospel and deceive the rest of us into thinking it supports the degenerate values they have learned from the world. If they ever succeed, then we, the Church, the salt of the earth, will have lost our savor.

The Church as a community is far from perfect, but its imperfection comes from its failure to live up to the ideals of the gospel, not from the few areas where we have succeeded in differentiating ourselves from the world. The status quo within the Church is not very good, but the status quo outside it is much worse. The Church is in need of transformation, but the true revolutionaries within the Church are those who are radically orthodox, not those who are loudly assimilationist. When Elder Packer says something that makes the assimilationists squeal, it is safe to assume he is doing his proper work as a prophet. ☞