

TURNING THE TIME OVER TO...

J. Frederic Voros Jr.

"THE FIRST STEP IS THE HARDEST"



WILLIAM BLAKE, "Air" from *For Children: The Gates of Paradise*

God has not given us the spirit of fear. Fear of Church discipline, fear of eternal failure, fear of each other—these are not of God.

The Olive Branch was an *ad hoc* group of members and nonmembers who organized to announce a one-time meeting as well as gather donations and signatures for a newspaper ad protesting recent excommunications ("Six Intellectuals Disciplined For Apostasy," SUNSTONE Nov. 1993). The following is a talk given at the Olive Branch Sunday Devotional on 5 December 1993 ("Disciplinary Actions Generate More Heat," SUNSTONE Dec. 1993).

THERE WERE, I know, good reasons not to attend this devotional. Perhaps you are like me in this: the road from where I was to this hall was difficult. It reminds me of St. Denis, the patron saint of France, who according to legend walked from Montmartre almost to Paris—carrying his head in his hands, a feat about which one Madame du

J. Frederic Voros Jr. is a lawyer and a writer living in Salt Lake City.

Deffand observed, "The first step is the hardest."

Thanks to the Olive Branch for putting together the ad and this devotional. I gladly signed the ad as many of you did. Perhaps some of you have had experiences like the one I had this week in connection with it. I work in the Utah State Capitol and one of the investigators there said to me in passing, "Church security was up here yesterday asking where your office was. We told them you weren't here." I took his comment as a jest; but the joke turns on an unspoken and probably unconscious uneasiness about the reach of Church security.

Similarly, after the excommunications in September, a number of friends contacted me to say, "Be careful. Lay low. Don't do anything rash." On Friday a very mainstream friend called and said, "I saw your name on the news the other night. Have they done anything to you?" I know many of you have received similar calls and expressions of concern.

About six months ago a Church leader said to me, "Think of your children. They do not begin where you began, but where you are now." His statement was true, of course, but was it intended as kindly advice, or a threat? Was it meant to inspire thought—or fear?

Our text for this evening is from 2 Timothy 1:7: "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind."

We Mormons feel fear all right: fear that if we publicly disagree we may be punished; fear that if we espouse unwelcome ideas or doctrines—however true—we may be disfellowshipped; fear that if we tell an unfriendly truth about the Church or its history we may be excommunicated. And recent events prove that such fears are not irrational. Like no other religious community that I know, ours is shot through with fear.

I want to tell you a story set in another community beset by fear. In this community lived a man much like you and me: a man born blind. Jesus healed him one Sabbath day by spitting into the dirt and pressing the clay into his eyes, then telling him to wash in the pool of Siloam. (See John 9:6-14.)

The Pharisees probed this event. The man told them that Jesus "put clay upon mine eyes, and I washed, and do see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not of God, because he keeps not the sabbath day." Others said, "[But] how can a man that is a sinner do such miracles?"

The Pharisees refused to believe that the man had been healed until they spoke with his parents. They asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? how then does he now see?" His parents said, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind: but by what means he now sees, we know not; or who has opened his eyes, we know not: he is of age; ask him: he shall speak for himself."

His parents said this "because they feared the Jews: for the Jews had agreed already, that if any man did confess that he was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue." Or, as rendered by theologian J. B. Phillips, "the Jews . . . had already agreed that anybody who admitted that Christ had done this thing should be excommunicated."

The Pharisees again called in the man who had been blind, and said to him, "Give God the praise: we know that this man is a sinner." But he answered, "Whether he be a sinner or no, I know not: one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see." They asked him again, "What did he to thee? how opened he your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you did not hear:

why would you hear it again? will you also be his disciples?" Then they reviled him, and said, "You are his disciple; but we are Moses' disciples. We know that God spoke to Moses: as for this fellow, we know not from whence he is."

The man answered and said unto them, "Why here is a marvellous thing, that you know not from whence he is, and yet he has opened my eyes. We know that God hears not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and does his will, him he hears. Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind. If this man were not of God, he could do nothing."

They answered him, "You were altogether born in sin, and do you teach us?" And they cast him out.

When Jesus heard of this, he said, "For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind."

Some of the Pharisees which were with him heard these words, and said to him, "[So,] are we blind also?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you should have no sin: but now you say, We see; therefore your sin remains."

This story cuts close to the bone. We recognize many of the Pharisees' methods: judging from afar; denial of others' experiences; emphasis on enforceable rules; reliance on authority; enforcement of silence by ecclesiastical discipline; curtailing discussion with accusations of personal unworthiness; and control through fear.

But the scripture teaches that God has "not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." It continues, "Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God; Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began." (2 Tim. 1:7-9.)

We are called not according to fear, but grace. We should not fear that we are unworthy. Of course we are! But Christ's love and grace are not to the worthy alone, but to the unworthy; not to the righteous alone, but to the unrighteous; not to the pharisee alone, but to the sinner. And his salvation perhaps is only to the unworthy, the unrighteous, the sinner. Only they need a savior. It is only the blind that he blesses with sight.

He loves us without limit. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall

tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, [nor, might I add, bishops, nor stake presidents, nor apostles,] nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:35-39.)

Through Joseph he said, "this is my doctrine—whosoever repenteth and cometh unto me, the same is my church." (D&C 10:67.) From this church no stake president can excommunicate us. But why would any Church leader want to? Why would any leader wish to govern by fear? The most likely answer, I submit, is because he himself is governed by fear.

Our leaders will not bring the finances of the Church into the light. Why not? What investments have they made that they do not want revealed? What payments have they made or received, what millions have they lost or gained, what money have they borrowed or lent that they do not want known?

Our leaders will not bring the history of the Church into the light. Why not? Why must it be buried in the First Presidency's vault, hidden even from them? Why must our common history remain, at least in part, secret?

Our leaders will not bring the health of our president, Ezra Taft Benson, into the light. Why not? Why must they read coyly worded statements at conference designed to lead us to believe that he is mentally alert when in fact he cannot recognize close family members?

Our leaders will not bring their secret dossiers on suspect Saints into the light. Why not? What do those files contain that they cannot be shown even to the people on whom they are kept?

Our leaders will not meet with the Saints except under carefully controlled circumstances, sometimes including promises of confidentiality. Why not? What are they afraid we will ask them? What are they afraid we will tell them? What do they wish to say that others may not hear?

Finally, our leaders will not admit the paucity of their revelations or forthrightly discuss the existence or frequency of their contacts with heavenly powers. Why not?

What do they fear? I don't know. I can only surmise. Perhaps it is us. Not us here tonight, but the Saints in general. Perhaps it is our judgment. Perhaps they fear that if we knew their methods and their incomes and their humanness and their hearts, their fail-

ures as well as their successes, the difficulty they and their predecessors have had in receiving revelations, perhaps they fear that if we knew all this, we would cease to believe and make a mass exodus out of the Church on their watch. So they give us nothing to judge. No financial statements. No documents. No open files. No open hearts. No target.

If this is their fear, to them I would say: you have misjudged the Saints. Our faith is not founded on you. It never was. We never believed it was you who opened our eyes and made us see. We never believed it was you who made our hearts burn within us. We never believed you were the way, or the truth, or the life. Our faith is founded, must be founded, on Another, who is your Master as well as ours.

Lay down your burden of perfection. It is too heavy for you; it is too heavy for any mortal. Come down from your upper rooms and your red chairs and let us converse as brothers and sisters, as our Heavenly Parents and our common Savior must want us to do. We are on the same side of the great divide between Savior and saved. Like us, you cannot be saved by your works, only by his grace. Like us, you must admit your blindness before you receive sight.

You are not our fathers, and we are not your children. You need not withhold information from us for our own good. Like you, we are adults. We do not hold you accountable for the success of the Church, whatever you may think that means.

I know there are Saints who insist on being dependent on you, who want you to feed and carry them rather than learning to walk on their own. Such a relationship is spiritually unhealthy for you both. Do not encourage them. If they are of age and have been in the Church a few years, kick them out of the nest. Insist that they begin to grow spiritually, or they never will attain "the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." (Eph. 4:13.)

God has not given us the spirit of fear. Fear of Church discipline, fear of eternal failure, fear of each other—these are not of God. We must cast them out as we would any other spirit that is not of God. These may be cast out only by love: His boundless love for us, and our imperfect love for one another. But we as a community can cast out our fear only when we first have the courage to acknowledge that it exists. Perhaps this first step is the hardest.

May we all, leaders and members and friends alike, through the grace of Christ and by whatever humility and courage we can kindle, learn to recognize and release our fear and live as he has taught us, with love toward him and each other. 