

How does Mormonism, with all its obvious virtues, uniquely reinforce the dangers of pride, both for those of us who think we are orthodox and those of us who think we are not?

PRIDE COMETH BEFORE THE FALL: MORMONISM AND THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

By Wayne C. Booth

AS A PRELIMINARY, MAY I ASK JUST HOW MANY of you have felt a fairly strong twinge of envy of *somebody, anybody*, in the last twenty-four hours? No hands, please. I don't want any embarrassment here. Second, how many have felt a bit cross because your talk was not, like this one, scheduled for a plenary session, only for something *somebody* thought was less important? Third and last (still no hands, because we know just how much the raising of hands means in a Mormon congregation), how many of you think those feelings of envy and anger were not just sinful but representative of the worst of all sins, pride?

This is the first chance I've had in a long time to give a sacrament meeting talk. So you'll have to forgive my being tempted into what some would call an obvious sermon, though I prefer to think of it as a meditation—a quite probably boring meditation on the paradoxes raised when we talk about pride, pride as what used to be called a deadly, unpardonable sin.

Having been raised as a devout, orthodox Mormon, I've naturally always been fascinated by the subjects of sin and repentance. A highly sinful and guilt-ridden and even sometimes repentant guy, I've had to think, almost daily, but in ways that shifted from decade to decade, about just why I did that which

WAYNE C. BOOTH is George M. Pullman Distinguished Service Professor of English emeritus at the University of Chicago. He is the author of *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism and The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. This talk is a slightly expanded version of an address Booth gave at the 1994 Chicago Sunstone Symposium on 22 October at the Chicago Marriott Courtyard Hotel.

I should not have done or did not do that which I should have done, and about how I might make up for the sins. As a child of an ostentatiously pious family—a family some of my friends thought *obnoxiously* pious—I felt pretty guilty, as you may imagine, about several sins, especially about being a petty thief.

I was a *skillful* thief and never got caught—except twice: When I was five, my uncle caught me stealing his bag of marbles, and I was locked in a dark closet for a while. At seven or eight, I stole the voters' registration booklet from a post in front of the polling place—just couldn't resist all those lovely blank pages to scribble on. Mama marched me back up to the polling lady and had me weep out an apology. After that, I learned how to do the thieving better. But I remained an occasional thief, and as a thief I repented like crazy, theft by theft—a dime here, a pencil there, even sometimes a book from a bookstore—and I often wondered why the Lord let me get away with maintaining my reputation as one of the most righteous boys in American Fork, Utah.

Just after being ordained a priest, for example, I was assigned to go door to door on fast day morning and collect fast offerings, and I pocketed—well, I can't remember what percentage I stole—probably a tithe? Waves of guilt!—especially as I partook of the sacrament an hour later with an unclean right hand and besmirched, impure heart. Why, I wondered, why oh why did the Lord let me get away with *that*?

Well, surely it was because I was really, essentially, such a good, such a pious, such an important Mormon boy. I was, in fact, proud as a peacock about my absolutely deserved reputation for piety: never touched tea or coffee, always refused to have a beer or cigarette with the *unworthy* boys, never even

joined the watermelon-patch raids. Every Sunday morning I roused other boys out of bed so that the quorum I was proudly president of might have a higher attendance percentage than the *other* quorum, whose president, Garth Meyers, didn't seem to me half so pious. I attended meetings myself 110 percent. I remained a virgin—without too much difficulty. And so on. Oh, I was a good boy, I was. I sang with gusto a song popular with us at that time: “A Mormon boy, a Mormon boy, I am a Mormon boy; I might be envied by a king, for I am a Mormon boy.” (In the talk a bit of the song was sung, as remembered.) It never once occurred to me, by the way, that we didn't have any song that ran, “I am a Mormon girl; I might be envied by a queen, for I am a Mormon girl.”

I can remember even wondering whether, since I was perhaps the most pious boy in town, I just perhaps might be visited by God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ—in person, of course—and told how to take the Church on to its next glories. I knew that the Church needed *some* reforming because it had boys in it who would steal fast offering money, and even worse boys who snuck in a cigarette or chaw of tobacco now and again. And since I was destined in the long run to become God of *another* world, maybe I might be the chosen one to initiate the reform on *this* one, here and now.

(The phrase “chaw of tobacco” reminds me of a conversation with my grandfather, sometime in about 1935. Wayne: “Grandpa, were people as anxious to observe the Word of Wisdom when you were a boy as they are now?” Grandpa Booth, without a moment's hesitation: “Oh, no, not nearly. My own family was pretty strict, but most people in Alpine didn't worry about it much. I was working digging a ditch one day with a bunch of friends and all of them were chewing tobacco. They kept pressing me to take a chaw. Finally, just to get rid of 'em, I took a plug and chawed up the whole plug a bit, then spit it out. None of 'em ever bothered me again about it.”)

It took me some decades to realize that what I had been developing through those years was an especially intense Mormon version of two almost universal human vices: hypocrisy and false pride, habits of duplicity and self-exoneration that became very useful throughout life, believe me, especially during my two years as a missionary—and on through the fourteen years I spent as a college administrator.

It would be wonderful to be able to say now that I suddenly saw the light a year or so ago and got saved, or perhaps last week while preparing this talk: no more hypocrisy, no more false silly pride. It's true that I don't steal anymore, except occasionally a pencil or pad of paper from a colleague's desk. Remnants of the habits of proud duplicity, though, do of course survive, as they do in you—or should I claim only in *most* of you? Shall we have a show of hands? Obviously not.

P RIDE IS SOMEHOW

BOTH THE MOTHER OF

ALL THE LESSER SINS

AND ALSO SOMEHOW THE

MOTHER OF OUR GENUINE

VIRTUES.

I.
THE DYNAMIC BETWEEN
SINFUL ACTION AND
SOUL-STATES

NOW if I were you listening to that autobiographical introduction, which I swear was absolutely honest and humble and un-hypocritical, I would have expected the rest of this talk to be some kind of meditation, or even a sermon, on Mormon hypocrisy and pride, and what to do about it. I have a couple of drafts of that talk, actually, but the topic of this one has burst its bounds and become an essentially unmanageable one:

on the one hand, sin in general and how we Mormons tend to deal with it; on the other, the paradox of the most general sin of all, pride, pride that is somehow both the mother of all the lesser sins and also somehow the mother of many of our genuine virtues.

The explosion of my topic came about as I prepared, over the summer, to teach a class in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. I've never taught much Chaucer before, though I fell in love with his work in a BYU class taught by P. A. Christensen, who could be considered the grandfather of all SUNSTONE editors. As I read the great *Tales* again, with an admiration that by September had increased to idolatry, I finally got around to reading carefully the “Parson's Tale,” the one that Chaucer gives most space to, climactically, at the end; one I had never finished before, both because nobody talks about it much and because as a college student I had found it just plain boring. After all, what did all that talk about pride as the cardinal sin have to do with *me*, whose only sins were masturbation and petty thievery?

The “Parson's Tale” is not a tale at all but a sermon, or what the Parson himself calls a meditation. “You won't get one of these dirty fables from me,” he explains, “the kind that abandon truth for lying fictions. Why should I sow chaff,” he intones, “when I can just as well sow wheat?”¹ His meditation is all about another kind of pilgrimage than the one the pilgrims think they are engaged on: the glorious Pilgrimage, as he says, that is toward not Canterbury, but what he calls celestial Jerusalem. They should be in quest of the condition of soul experienced by the genuinely repentant pilgrim. And the right path on that utterly different pilgrimage is “cleped [called] Penitence,” or Repentance. Repentance is the right path because it covers the commission of both the primary, or deadly, sins and the venial, or easily pardonable, ones.

Why should every human being—not just the visible, open sinners, the thieves and adulterers but every human being—need to repent? Why must even the most pious-appearing folk feel contrition about pride, pray for forgiveness, and try to change their lives for the better? I don't have to tell anyone here that Mormon preachers have often, though not always, el-

evated repentance in the same way to position number one, or at least number two, after faith, as it is in the Articles of Faith.

I confess—note my language—I confess that when I started reading the “Parson’s Tale” I thought to myself, “This subject doesn’t really interest me very much, here in what may well be my last decade; no wonder it gets neglected in the criticism. These days I’m actually not committing any sins—not that I consider real sins. I’m living a pretty decent life, really; haven’t stolen even a book in decades. I don’t even lust after my neighbor’s wife in my heart, let alone in practice. I’ve never committed . . . well, you get the pitch, the kind of self-congratulation one engages in when life seems to be going well and one is doing one’s best not to harm others directly.

I hadn’t read far, though, before Chaucer had turned me back to face the meaning of that kind of self-exculpation: as he moved to exhortations about the one *cardinal* sin, pride, the chieftain, the sin that produces all the others—envy, anger, despair, and so on—he forced me to see that my thoughts about being sinless were themselves inherently, inescapably tempted toward sinfulness; my thoughts had been proud thoughts, self-varnishing thoughts. Pride, the Parson says, following a long line of theologians whom I’d read earlier but sort of put to one side, is the most dangerous and least escapable of all conditions of the soul, what I’ll call soul-states. It cannot be totally escaped because the very effort to master it depends on it: the entirely admirable desire to improve *my* soul or *my* chances for salvation always tempts one toward the cardinal sin, pride, the essential error of seeing oneself as *numero uno*; which almost inevitably leads to the second deadly sin, envy, the ambition to outrank others who think *they* are at the top; which leads to the third, anger and angry treatment of the others *because* they have got ahead; which leads to the fourth, despair (*accidie*; *acedia*; sloth) because one’s ambitions and efforts at angry revenge have failed; which leads to covetousness or avarice or possessiveness, trying to pile up trivial acquirements (still enviously) to stave off the miseries; which leads to gluttony and drunkenness (“If everything else has failed, at least I can gorge”); which leads to (or, as Chaucer puts it, is *cousin* to) lechery, another pleasure than can cover up, temporarily, the blows to pride.

Faced with a list like that, even if I didn’t quite understand all of the “because,” I found that my silent thoughts of comfortable innocence suddenly seemed uncomfortably like the thoughts of that teenage self who had half expected, or hoped for, a divine visitation in some Sacred Grove.

As I read further, I found myself thinking about how being raised as a Mormon, with all the obvious virtues of that raising, especially the virtue of a genuine desire to improve myself, had centered my notions of self-improvement too strongly on a narrow code of action-sins, tangible visible offenses, while making it hard for me to recognize, let alone deal with, the subtler, destructive soul-states the Parson dwells on. That got me to thinking in turn about the contrast between the sins our leaders mostly dwell on these days and the sins of pride and hypocrisy that they themselves, like the rest of us, commit daily. And that thought landed me, by about the eighth draft,

into the real puzzler I’ve already been raising here: how *sinful* pride relates to the kind of self-respect that no thoughtful, contrite person would ever want to give up. Please don’t get your hopes up that I’ll resolve the “good pride/sinful pride paradox” in the next thirty minutes. All I can hope to do is to dramatize just why the paradox seems to me uniquely tricky for us Mormons. (If anyone thinks I’m lying about the many drafts, I have the evidence, carefully preserved. If anyone thinks that mentioning them is boasting, a form of pride—well, I’m not sure. Maybe it’s humility: after all, would a really able speaker—Ollie North has become one, according to news reports—have to construct so many drafts?)

In contrast to sins like pride and envy and hypocrisy, what are the sins that are these days most strongly emphasized, in sermons and private interviews and public punishments? I don’t have to tell this bunch that the openly castigated sins are usually not soul-states, like pride and envy and competitiveness, but tangible actions, often of the most trivial kind. Soul-states, like the hypocrisy and self-exaltation I had developed as a young Mormon—sins that in turn can produce horrible actions that never get punished at all—these do get occasional mention, especially by our more thoughtful leaders. But the general emphasis is clear.

Does anyone here want to dispute that claim? Have you heard any sermons on the problem of pride lately? (This time I did ask for a show of hands, and none went up.)

As I was talking with Pete Johnston just before he introduced me, he reminded me of a sermon by President Ezra Taft Benson, in 1986, and he gave me a copy.² I was amazed at how closely it echoed Chaucer’s ordering of the sins, with pride as the “universal sin.” The speech is full of the most astonishing warnings about pride, taken from all of our scriptures. The list is so full that hardly anyone could possibly have brought it up from memory: someone had to use concordances (as I did in preparing this talk) or computer indexes. And I’m afraid that since we now know just how feeble President Benson was by 1986, one may doubt that he himself actually wrote the speech. Will that proud conjecture get me into trouble?

In any case, it’s a fine collection of warnings, including a reminder of why the Nephites fell; it’s a speech that Chaucer would have enjoyed. The chief thing wrong with it in my view is that at too many points it reduces the sin of pride to the sin of prideful disobedience. But that would be the topic for another talk.

In any case, we usually hear more about actions that don’t really matter very much when compared with the soul-states that are “deadly,” in Chaucer’s sense. The difference between them, however, is never easy to trace. Some concrete actions, like deliberate murder or destructive infidelity, do seem to provide direct evidence of inner viciousness; some actions that seem trivial on the surface, like destructive gossip, spring equally from real viciousness; yet some actions that seem unquestionably terrible are, when the true motives are considered, quite venial—that is, easily pardonable.

That we have a history of folk confusion about all this can be seen in a couple of short anecdotes. When I was in college,

my uncle, who worked for the J. C. Penney Company, told me that stores in the larger Utah cities were troubled by a rash of thefts of Mormon undergarments, which in those days Penney's sold. Do things like that still happen, I wonder?

Perhaps an even more revealing story is the one told me forty years ago by my much-admired psychology professor at Brigham Young University, M. Wilford Poulson, another grandfather of SUNSTONE. A friend of his was eager to attend the wedding of his daughter in the temple, and went—for the first time in some years—to request a recommend. The bishop asked him about the Word of Wisdom, and he had to confess that he did drink coffee. The bishop explained that unless he dropped that sin he could not have a recommend. He went away, succeeded for a couple of months in avoiding coffee, and returned to get the recommend. As the bishop happily signed the document, he said, "I'm sure you're going to enjoy the ceremony down there in St. George. It's wonderful down there. They don't even have locks on the clothes lockers." Whereupon Poulson's friend said, or at least claimed he said, "You mean that after all that screening, they don't even get out the thieves!?"

At first such stories seem to be about sinful action: thou shalt not steal; thou stealest, therefore thou art sinful, and if thou stealest undergarments, thou art doubly sinful because of hypocrisy. But what if I told the first story like this?

A devout husband and wife living in absolute poverty are about to have their first child. The wife feels miserable because all her garments are in tatters and the midwives are coming any day now. The husband, penniless but determined to help his wife feel pure through the birthing time, goes to J. C. Penney's and steals . . . etc.

In other words, to steal a loaf of bread to keep one's family from starving is not a deadly, unpardonable sin, as we learn in *Les Miserables*; even to steal a Book of Mormon because you have no money to buy one might be forgiven when the judges in heaven are feeling benign. But what if I stole a leather-bound Book of Mormon only to be able to display it proudly on Sunday morning? In other words, the test is really the soul-state that leads to the deed, and as Poulson set up his story, the soul of the temple locker thief, like the soul of the J. C. Penney garment thieves, is clearly in pretty bad shape: going through the motions of piety is more important than being honest.

So far we have, then, a very rough distinction: action-sins, easy to spot and talk about as backsliding, and soul-state sins, elusive as all get out. Of action-sinners there are at least four

THE OPENLY
 CASTIGATED SINS
 ARE USUALLY NOT
 SOUL-STATES, LIKE
 PRIDE AND ENVY
 AND COMPETITIVENESS,
 BUT TANGIBLE
 ACTIONS,
 OFTEN OF THE MOST
 TRIVIAL KIND.

quite different kinds, each with a somewhat different probable relation to soul-state. First, many people get reprimanded or punished for actions that all of us would probably agree are *genuine* sins: sexual abuse, vicious cheating, betrayal of friends or institutions for cash or fame or sex, and so on. A second group commit offenses that most *non-Mormons* and many *Mormons* consider really trivial or even un sinful but that are sometimes made decisive in disciplinary hearings: for example, violation of selected parts of the Word of Wisdom or failure to pay tithing or to perform other duties. A third group commit *belief* sins: those who have become convinced of some truth that is condemned by one or more authorities. A fourth kind are the *belief-sinners* who add to their sinful belief condemned actions that spring from them—adding action-sin to belief-sin—by publishing heresy in *Dialogue* or *SUNSTONE* or openly practicing polygamy or homosexuality. Some just keep their sinful thoughts to them-

selves.

In discussions with Belief-Sinners, I have found that most of them feel righteous, not sinful, righteous in the very point that others consider sinful. In standing up for what is being condemned, they think that they are defending the truth and light, and they are proud of it. They are thus in their own view not sinful *Mormons* but at worst "peripheral *Mormons*"; some of them use the label employed by the late Richard Poll: *Liahona* *Mormons*, non-literalist but devoted *Mormons* who are focused on the true center.³ They are well described by Poulson's favorite epigram: Every *Mormon* trusts his own unorthodoxy. Belief-Sinners, no doubt many of us here, are convinced that the present center cannot and should not hold in every respect; if the center cannot change, at least the periphery should be expanded to enfold at least this one bit of truth now neglected or denied.

Just what a peripheral *Mormon* is will depend on your definition of the center and your relation to it. One could say that peripheral *Mormons* are all those whom this or that authority at the center thinks of as either beyond the boundary or dangerously close to it. "There is a clear center, and you, you peripherals, you borderliners, had better move in closer—or you're out!" But if we define peripheral not as viewed from the center but as viewed from the periphery, the definition gets more complicated and might run like this: peripheral *Mormons* are those who think of themselves as *genuine* *Mormons*, regardless of what anyone at the center says, but who are sure that something the brethren in the center do or say or believe is mistaken. In the first definition, people at the

center arrive at the judgment, "You are a peripheral and that is a moral fault worthy of reprimand or punishment." In the second definition, the dissenter arrives at the judgment, "I am thought to be a peripheral, but that is the center's fault."

The relations among these thoughtful peripherals and the brethren who condemn them are fascinating, once one probes beneath the surface quarrels that get reported in the press. Such relations are entirely different from those between the authorities and the *action* sinners whose thoughts are orthodox. In general, Action-Sinners have no pride in their position: they may not even have hypocrisy, if their punishment comes from open confession. The brethren who judge, however, do exhibit pride, sinful or not, the inescapable pride of the judge.

Action-Sinners (except for the unorthodox believers) are likely to be guilt-ridden because of stealing tithing or secret smoking or drinking or adultery or business cheating or wearing underwear that looks, beneath the semitransparent sport shirt, like the consecrated kind but is not. They know that the judges are justified, and they can always solve their problems by a simple change of conduct: confession, repentance, and reinstatement.

For a good illustration of how sin feels to many in this group, I suggest you read "Snake Man," the 1992 Sunstone fiction contest winner by Angela Wood.⁴ Alison, the heroine, has discovered the joys of fornication with someone she really loves. Her sin is discovered by her bishop, who accuses her of wickedness and denies her the sacrament. She becomes nearly destroyed with a sense of guilt, ostracism, and loss of her religious experience, especially the loss of bliss when taking the sacrament—and then she's restored to full happiness simply by her lover's decision to marry her and thus remove the sin that caused the trouble: "My reverence was back and so was I."

Belief-Sinners, in contrast, simply cannot, by an act of will, get rid of their heretical belief, and in not getting rid of it they almost inevitably join the Brethren in the dangerous land of the prideful or proud in spirit. The relation here becomes more nearly reciprocal: each side is equally tempted to pride. Of course, the critics themselves don't see the relation as equal in the matter of the particular belief: "The Brethren are wrong, and I am right." And the Brethren probably have no temptation to see even the slightest kind of symmetry here.

Even if Belief-Sinners decide to practice hypocrisy and keep their heresy silent, they are still likely to think, "In this one respect at least, in my holding to what I see as the truth, I am superior to those who condemn me for it. And the plain fact is that I cannot, will not, change my belief just because someone tells me it would be righteous to do so."

When, for example, an authority pronounces a solution to a problem and proclaims that further thinking on that problem is now ruled out, no thinking person can order his or her mind into passivity. Whether kept silent or made public, the thought can change only when the thinking changes it. Thus many Belief-Sinners must strongly envy the Alisons of the world, with their relatively easy solutions. In the story, Alison reveals not even a hint of any speculative doubts about the Church, except for her distaste for an authoritarian bishop, combined

with praise for her more tolerant second bishop, who finally performs her marriage ceremony—outside the temple. (In the discussion after the talk, one woman complained that I had far underestimated the power of "Snake Man." She had been moved to tears by it. I had not meant to disparage the story, though she thought I had.) For those of us who became peripherals through serious thought, the Action-Sinners are in an enviable position: just throw the cigarettes or the coffeepot or the lover away and you'll get your recommend and all will be well.

In a way, the same easy solution is available to those who become peripherals because of some questionable action by this or that leader. I can remember my own shock, at sixteen, when I heard gossip about the dishonest real estate dealings of a bishop I had admired. But the shock was easily assuaged when I chatted with people like my stake president, Clifford Young—a wonderfully sympathetic man of great integrity, who taught me that every church suffers from the mistakes and even the misbehavior of individual authorities, and that to break with the Church because it had one dishonest bishop would be absurd. In short, when Church leaders commit obviously sinful actions, peripherals can be brought back to comfortable membership just by correcting the practice. I'm thinking here of the grotesquely dishonest baseball conversions in England, the commercialized quotas that Elder Marion Hanks cleaned up as assigned by President David O. McKay. I've encountered several statements by missionaries who were sickened by the orders they received when the quota practice was at its worst, but who later became satisfied when the worst of the anti-spiritual mistakes were corrected.

In short, whether the sinful conduct is yours or a leader's, the threat of a real split simply disappears when the backslider's conduct is reformed or the cheating bishop is overlooked in the name of the larger picture.

Notice again that peripherals of the belief kind, when they don't speak out, feel hypocritical, yet when they do speak out they feel a sense of personal righteousness; they are defending the true church against genuine backsliders: the authorities. Like the polygamist factions, and unlike the heroine of "Snake Man," such critics feel little or no sense of guilt about their beliefs, no matter how much internal suffering they may feel about not being loyal or about being rejected. They are sure that the error is at the center, not out here in the periphery: "My task," they think, "if I am honest, is to ensure that at least in the long run what looks peripheral now will become the center."

I think something like this fact explains why the Church leaders now seem to be moving to more doctrinal rather than merely behavioral excommunications. Ordinary behavioral lapses have to be dealt with, of course, but they do not in any way really threaten anyone at the center. Diverse sins can be quickly and quietly handled, with no threat to the Church except for the chance that the bad behavior may produce some imitators. But when someone claims that we, the Brethren, are wrong in our thinking, that we are teaching falsehood, that we are inconsistent, that we are violating what Joseph Smith

taught, that we are concealing or denying the truth—for example, claiming that the Holy Ghost is female—that kind of peripheral talk impugns the very structure of our authority and must be stamped out, especially when the heretic is so proud that he or she insists on making the claims publicly.

This reciprocity of pride, in both the accusers and the sinners, brings us back to the Parson and his meditation on the cardinal sin. Just why is it that pride threatens us all at our very core? What is it about human life as we fall into it that makes us all so strongly inclined to be sinful? The actions we commit are still important, of course, and the Parson gets around to talking about some of them; but the soul-states that lead to the actions are the real subject, as they were in President Benson's sermon.

Too often this difference between actions and soul-states has been trivialized into a sharp contrast between faith and works, with Mormonism on the side of works. In the scriptures, faith without works is dead; but works without faith are, if you read closely, also dead. No Mormon I know of has fallen into the error of some Protestant extremists in saying that works don't count, and only a small minority of so-called Cultural Mormons have suggested that works are everything. The real difference I'm grappling with is between looking only at surface results of character, the visible "works" that seem to imply good character, and looking at your own character (no one else can do it for you), looking at it not as measured only by visible results, but as measured by standards of what constitutes a soul worth saving.

Once you start thinking about these two different emphases, you discover that we have always had in the Church a powerful minority of those who preached mainly about the second kind, the Parson's kind, the condition of the soul, and they have usually done so not in the oversimplified form, "If you feel saved by Christ you are saved"—but rather by saying that if you manage to get your soul in order the good works will follow. We have a strong tradition that says works without the right soul-state are meaningless: "Wherefore," we read in Doctrine and Covenants 22:2, "although a man should be baptized an hundred times, it availeth him nothing, for you cannot enter in at the straight [sic] gate by the law of Moses,

I F YOU THINK,
 RIGHTLY, THAT IN YOUR
 DEEPEST SOUL YOU ARE
 WORTH AS MUCH AS
 ANYBODY ELSE, THAT
 INDEED THE WHOLE
 OF CREATION
 IS ORGANIZED TO GIVE
 YOU A CHANCE TO
 PLOW AHEAD, YOU WILL
 BE TEMPTED TO MOVE
 A STEP FURTHER AND
 CONCLUDE THAT JUST MAYBE
 YOU ARE WORTH A
 BIT MORE.

neither by your dead works." (Just how much pride in me does it reveal when I claim that "straight" should be spelled "strait" here? The error has been corrected in editions later than the one I'm using, which belonged to my father.) In that tradition, the soul-state is usually summarized with the essential word "faith." Unfortunately, that word is far too often trivialized to refer not to "fundamental constructive habits of heart and mind," but rather to "unthinking acceptance of what somebody higher tells you." The more powerful minds in this tradition, however, like Obert Tanner in his wonderful book, originally but no longer a Sunday School manual, *Christ's Ideals for Living*,⁵ and President David O. McKay in many a sermon, have concentrated on the inner virtues that must exist if the external actions are to be considered virtuous and not just conformant.

Nobody in this tradition has said that getting your soul in order is easy. But they have done their sermonizing in the service of strengthening the virtues rather than dwelling on specific actions that may or may not be deadly offenses, depending on the soul-state that produces them. I have recently taken a quick look back through the indexes of the collected sermons of various leaders, searching especially, on this preliminary cut, for references to pride and humility (I wonder if there is a CD-ROM indexing all of the sermons of all of the authorities?). Is it surprising that the references are relatively few, and that they seem to decline with the decades? Still, there is the tradition, in my view exemplified wonderfully by the sermons of Marion D. Hanks.

The opposite tradition is dramatized daily, as you all know. Consider the recent decision at BYU not to allow a screening of *Schindler's List*. BYU refused to show certain scenes of frontal nudity and violence; Spielberg refused to cut them. So students at BYU will not be shown *Schindler's List* (unless they go downtown, which I hope most of them will). Now what kind of thinking must have been engaged in to arrive at that decision at BYU? How do you decide that it is worse for students to see scenes of humiliating frontal nudity and brutal killing, both of which the movie powerfully condemns, than for them to be made to feel in their souls something of the ultimate viciousness of the holocaust? Well, you decide that specific superficial no-no's are the only thing that matters. The ultimate habits of mind and heart of our students are less important than the frozen code.

II.
MORMON TEMPTATIONS
TO PRIDE; INDIVIDUAL
PROGRESSION AND HIERARCHY

As you can see, I'm wrestling clumsily with at least three questions larger than I can answer: First, "How does Mormonism's current emphasis on what precise actions are unforgivable and keep one permanently out of the celestial kingdom or, on the other hand, guarantee one's entry—how does that emphasis relate to and even endanger the construction of souls worthy of salvation?" And the second question: "How does the kind of self-esteem that makes life worth living relate to pride as a deadly sin?" And the third question: "How does the proud criticism we peripherals offer exhibit the same dangers and thus unite us, at a deeper level, with the pride of the Brethren?" I'll have time now for only a fragment chosen from where those questions lead: some speculation about just why the destructive kind of pride is uniquely threatening to Mormons. Once we ask, not just, "What must I do to be saved?" but "What must I be or become?"—once we ask just what soul-states represent in themselves a move toward salvation—we are led to speculate about just what habits of mind and heart Mormonism, by its very nature, implants and reinforces.

Before looking at the distinctive Mormon temptations, let's look again at just why, as the Parson and President Benson claim, destructive pride is a universal human problem. The pride the Parson dwells on is a sense of self-exaltation, not pride as self-respect but pride as self-importance, self-aggrandizement: the notion that I am either Number One or very close to it or wanting to rise above my neighbor. It is, as he puts it, loving oneself more than God, or elevating one's "self" and its desires over love of God and neighbor. Whether we think like Augustine—heretically, from the orthodox Mormon perspective—that we are tempted because we inherit Adam's transgression, or that it is because—as some scientists now argue—natural selection long ago turned our genes in that direction, or that it is because our culture has made us competitive, or that it is simply because we have been self-centered creatures from before the beginning—whatever the cause, the plain fact is that when we consult our hearts honestly, all of us find destructive forms of pride and the consequences of pride. We're all too much like a woman my wife and I met in Chicago decades ago, just after an apostle had stayed overnight in her home. "Believe me," she said, "I was the humblest person in the world that day."

Which leads us to the important corollary of the claim that the sin of pride is universal: as I've already suggested, it puts us all in the same boat, from top to bottom of the hierarchy. It's not that we all think we are in fact number one in any worldly measurement; everyone but the Church president knows that being number one is out of sight. The problem is that we all are tempted to think that we are number one in real importance, regardless of rank—just by virtue of being who we think we are. Even those who think of themselves as honestly

struggling to become perfect by subduing all temptations—as honestly humble—are in that very act caught in the paradox of proud ambition.

Well, then, how does Mormonism, with all its obvious virtues, uniquely reinforce the dangers of such pride, both for those of us who think we are orthodox and those of us who think we are not?

First, let's think about the orthodox, and especially about the plight of those elders who feel the responsibility for dealing with people who take part in meetings like this Sunstone symposium. In that recent issue of SUNSTONE, Richard Poll openly states his misgivings about how harmful kinds of pride are nourished by two frequently touted virtues: the virtuous claim to "prophetic infallibility" at the top, and the virtuous practice of "unquestioning obedience" down below. He cites, as quite a few others whom he dubs Liahona Mormons have done, verse 39 of Doctrine and Covenants 121: "We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion." That's the Lord talking, though it's a little hard to see why, as He says, He had to learn that from experience. In Poll's view, it is not just that the notion of infallibility is absurd and directly counter to our belief in continuous revelation; the real problem is that if I believe that I am infallible, or even if I believe that someone over me is infallible, the belief is likely to prove harmful to my character.

Poll cites a few instances of contradictory pronouncements from apostles, not to denigrate those apostles for disagreeing—he admires disagreement—but to underline the fact of contradiction: at least one of the contestants in any dispute must exhibit inescapable human fallibility. Now absolute obedience depends, of course, on a claim to infallibility, and that claim is just plain inseparable from the sin of pride.

What I suggest, then, no doubt committing the sin of pride, is that the Brethren might well worry more than they do about two ways in which Mormonism increases their own natural human temptation, and the temptation of all of the rest of us, to fall into the soul-state sins.

The first of these temptations reinforces a general danger that we inherit from American history: the overemphasis on individualism that has by now to a great degree replaced the communitarianism that marked early Mormonism. The combination of capitalism with rugged individualism has led Americans in general to sound not just like a "me-generation" but a "me-century." I'm not rejecting the essential elements in individualism: the key notion that every person is equally precious. I would deplore any return to that branch of Christianity that taught us that we are base creatures, worms who should crawl miserably through life hoping that some capricious Grace will save some of us even though we're worthless. As Mormons we're taught that we are *somebody*, indeed have been somebody important from a time before time began. Our tradition is deeply, spiritually egalitarian: every individual human soul is precious, inherently worth as much as any other soul. We are surely right to take pride in this tradi-

tion of justified self-respect.

We do take pride in it. The danger is that if you think, rightly, that in your deepest soul you are worth as much as anybody else, that indeed the whole of creation is organized to give you a chance to plow ahead and realize your full potential, you will be tempted to move a step further and conclude that just maybe you are worth a bit *more*; just maybe you can plow ahead a little faster than your neighbor and then—well, after all, isn't getting ahead the whole point? To discuss adequately this particular danger of our progressive doctrinal reinforcement of general American dangers would require a book about the tension in Mormonism between individualism and communitarianism, with a long chapter on the United Order; every time I read about why it failed, I want to weep. And every time I see business advisers like Steven Covey reducing Mormon doctrine to just what enables one to get ahead in business, I don't weep but cringe.

The second reinforcer of the wrong kind of pride is more obvious, not quite so complicated, but even more powerful: our hierarchical organization. If all the traditional theologians and prophets, including Joseph Smith and President Benson, are right in saying that every human being is sinful when tempted to think of himself or herself as number one, what could be more dangerous than to receive an official declaration from God that you have been promoted—placed ahead of the rest on the great inclined plane of progress? And what could reinforce that danger worse, for a male, than being repeatedly told, as I was when a boy, that your promotion to deacon, or priest, and on up means that you're on your way to becoming a God? Just think of how far ahead you may ultimately get. First, you are a Mormon; that puts you ahead of something like five billion other human beings, give or take a few million. It was less than half that many when I was a kid, but still the ranking felt pretty good, enviable by any king of a country with a small enough population. Which leads to elevation number two: you are a male. That puts you ahead of more than half the Mormon population; you're in the top three or four million. Then, if you keep your nose clean by obeying all of the superficial commandments—the visible trivialities without worrying about the deadly sins—you will soon find yourself rising, with increasingly impressive titles and decreasing number of rivals: you become a bishop and you are now ahead of hundreds of thousands of Mormons who are not bishops, including many of your high school buddies; you can hope to become a stake president, and so on. Wow! Your obituary listing of positions is growing longer and longer. (In high school, how hard my young self worked to ensure that my

A REINFORCER OF
 THE WRONG KIND OF PRIDE
 IS OUR HIERARCHICAL
 ORGANIZATION. WHAT
 COULD BE MORE DANGEROUS
 THAN TO RECEIVE AN
 OFFICIAL DECLARATION
 FROM GOD THAT YOU HAVE
 BEEN PROMOTED?

listing of activities in the yearbook was longer than anyone else's. And how grief stricken I was when I was not elected Representative Boy!) And let's just imagine, as I confess that I once imagined might happen to me, that you finally become an apostle. God has said it: you are now one of the top fifteen.

Even if you're the type who along the way has tried to cultivate humility, just *look* at what you've now been told: with the present seniority system, so long as you do not get caught committing any of the dozen or so *undeadly* sins—that is, if you don't drink or smoke in public and do nothing else that is banned, if you never dispute publicly and implacably with any brother higher in line than yourself, no matter what is the actual condition of your soul from day to day, you are destined finally to become number one, not just in the Church but in the world. Your only rivals, in the long run, are the

dead prophets.

Think about how good that must feel: When you become one of the Twelve, no matter how badly you commit the sin of pride (whether in your heart or publicly), the sin of envy (in your heart or publicly), and so on down the line (the only one you cannot exhibit publicly without being kicked out is number seven, licentiousness), you will be ahead of four billion, nine hundred and ninety-nine million, nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine other human beings. Your becoming number one will not depend on how you build your character through decades of trial; it will not even depend, as does the election of the Pope, on some council's judgment of your character and leadership ability or your political prowess. You are already elected: and if you can convince yourself during prayer that the voice you hear is God's voice, your voice becomes God's voice. (In the discussion afterward, I was given the rumor that there is a special secret blessing conferred upon those who finally join the Twelve, telling them that they are now *guaranteed* to end up in the celestial kingdom. How would one go about checking on that rumor?)

I don't have to remind you here just how much evidence of destructive pride certain authorities at all levels have exhibited through our lifetimes, just as we questioners have often exhibited self-aggrandizement in our various forms of peripheral rebellion. I'll not name names, because I'm afraid that if I named authorities I might be excommunicated, and if I cited overly proud rebels I might be hooted out of this room. Thus I exhibit the sins of hypocrisy and self-protection, sins that spring from the deadly, that is, *almost* unpardonable, sin of pride.

All I really want to ask, in this bit about the hierarchy, is,

first: if you had to list the reasons why no one up there changes the seniority system, where on your list would you place the motive of personal pride? But in fairness I have to add: if you had to list *your* motives for the last unorthodox talk you gave or decided not to give, where on your list would soul-state sins like false pride or hypocrisy be placed?

III.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The need for Mormon soul-state "orders."

ATALK like this one ought to end, like those Communist sermons we used to hear, with the question "What is to be done?" The answer for us as individuals is in one sense easy: more genuine soul-searching—could we call it *genuine* prayer?—and less self-congratulation. But what about the Church? The Brethren can hardly decide to excommunicate every member who exhibits strong pride! They'd catch almost everybody, including themselves. Should they excommunicate all members who exhibit unusual pride by speaking out about this or that bit of historical evidence, or doctrinal contradiction, or misbehavior by some authority?

I think instead of more threats and excommunications, what the Church needs, desperately, is a Church-wide study commission on the deadly sins and how to cultivate their opposites, like true humility—how to maintain our desire to improve our soul-states. If the authorities don't want such a commission, then we peripherals will just have to go on constituting something like it ourselves. Perhaps we could hope for a time, in this discouraging world, when the leaders would establish not just a Soul-State Commission but a variety of subordinate "orders" like those Orders that have grown up within the Catholic Church: originally heretical but finally embraced—Franciscans, Benedictines, and so on. Such Orders provide critical crosslights on one another, as well as refuge for those who appear heretical in some lights but at heart are committed.

We could have Bensonians to study pride and pursue humility; Sunstonians or Dialogians to explore and recover from our documents whatever will strengthen character in the threatening modern world; recognized feminist groups to study the theological implications of praying to our Mother or claiming that the Holy Ghost is a female. Or we might be more systematic and simply hope for "Mormons for Truth" (including scientific matters and post-modernist theorizing of the kind Jim Faulconer so wonderfully performs), Mormons for Justice, Mormons for Mercy, and Mormons for Beauty.⁶ As you know, we already have peripherals of these various kinds in rudimentary and largely unrecognized or even condemned forms. Why not give them official status? How would it really hurt the Church to give official status to such a lively variety of exploring devotees?

Surely the most needed of these, the most vital subordinate order, should consist of those who, like St. Augustine and St. Francis and Chaucer's Parson, and the many within Mormonism who have kept that tradition alive, are perpetually

probing the true grounds for character decline. I haven't thought of a good name for them—perhaps the Order of Humblers or Order of Pride-Sniffers? They would be charged to study, humbly but aggressively, every conference speech, every best-selling biography or autobiography of a leader or rebel, to determine the self-pride quotient. Their annual report, published with graphs showing increase or decrease, would thus provide just what the current hierarchy and every one of us heretics needs: a steady reminder that God moves in a more mysterious way than current hierarchical practices and current attacks on the hierarchy tend to acknowledge.

IV.

ALL IS VANITY

PART IV of my talk, you'll be glad to hear, is quite short. It consists of a question and a non-answer. The question: Where would the Order of Pride-Sniffers place Wayne Booth, after hearing or reading this talk and asking, "Is he guilty of the wrong kind of pride?" The answer: How could anyone except someone guilty of outlandish pride ask such a rude question? ☐

NOTES

1. Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me,
For Paul, that writeth unto Thymothee,
Repreveth him that weyven soothfastnesse
And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse.
Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest,
Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest?
(Geoffrey Chaucer, "Parson's Tale"—prologue, lines 31–36 [Riverside Chaucer, ed. F. N. Robinson (Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 287.]
2. Ezra Taft Benson, "Cleansing the Inner Vessel," *Ensign*, May 1986, 4–7.
3. Richard D. Poll, "What the Church Means to People Like Me," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 2 (winter 1967): 107–17; and also in *History and Faith: Reflections of a Mormon Historian* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 1–13. I sincerely hope that everyone here will get around to reading Poll's fine article in the summer SUNSTONE: "A Liahona Latter-day Saint," Sept. 1994, 35–38.
4. Angela Wood, "Snake Man," *SUNSTONE* 17:2 (Sept. 1994), 49–54.
5. Obert C. Tanner, *Christ's Ideals for Living* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union Board [n.d.; preface dated 1954]).
6. I'm not quite sure where to fit the polygamists. Perhaps an order of Restorationists: those who want to go back to glass sacrament cups; those who hate the three-hour Sunday sessions, or who lament the demise of mid-week meetings like the old MIA and Primary and Relief Society meetings; those who, like me, miss some of the old hymns or the wordings that have been changed: in short, an Order of Nostalgics? The hymn wording I most want restored, by the way, is the one recently changed in "Today while the Sun Shines." They've dropped the old conclusion, "There is no tomorrow / But only today," and changed it to "Prepare for tomorrow by working today!" (*Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* [Salt Lake City: LDS Church, 1985], 229.)

**"Myth Making & Myth Breaking: A Discussion of
Mormon Hierarchy: Origin of Power"**

Transcript of the B.H. Roberts Society Meeting,

23 Feb. 1995

\$3.95 plus tax & shipping

Available from:

Benchmark Books: (800) 486-3112, or (801) 486-3111