

A DECADE REPORT

*Can there be spiritual life after excommunication from the true Church of God?
For me, the answer is both “yes” and “no.”*

APOLOGIA PRO MEA VIA

By D. Michael Quinn

AT SEVENTEEN, I BEGAN RESEARCHING MORMON history from a perspective I later found in Tennyson’s poem *Ulysses*: “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.” Today, I’ve been asked to discuss how I’ve adjusted to the ultimate consequence of my refusal to yield. When non-LDS reporters ask how I feel about it, I say that to be excommunicated as a believing Mormon is like attending your own funeral.

So the question is, can there be spiritual life after the spiritual death of excommunication from the true Church of God upon the earth? For me, the answer is both “yes” and “no.” I’ll begin with the negative.

First, to be a Mormon is to be spiritually and socially linked to a tight-knit, yet diverse, community. Often they are strangers who become your friends as soon as they know you are a Mormon. Thirty years ago this month, my wife and I moved from Utah to Connecticut, where we knew no one. On arrival, I made one phone call, and shortly thereafter people were at our new residence, bringing food to us and asking if they could help us move in. During our first Sunday of LDS meetings, we linked up with a network of compatible personalities who were friends for as long as we lived among them. Active Mormons socialize primarily with other active Mormons, and on these occasions, some or all of their conversation involves the Church.

When you’re excommunicated, these social relationships end for the most part—not because of ill-will by former friends, but because of the awkwardness and sadness that active Mormons feel in your company. They try to avoid social situations where they don’t feel free to talk enthusiastically about the Church. I regret that loss of social fellowship.

Therefore, I appreciate the fellowship I receive from so many Mormons at Sunstone symposiums and similar gatherings. However, academic conferences (for me) cannot substitute for the fellowship of the Church.



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Second, as a selfish person, I also miss the opportunities and obligations of service to others that the Church provided me from adolescence to middle age—of monthly visiting several families whom I had not previously known, of administering to the sick and dying, of participating in service projects for widows and the needy, and even of attending boring administrative meetings whose main purpose was to discuss ways of serving fellow Mormons.

Whatever benefit to others may reside in the five books and twenty articles I have published during the past ten years, I do not deceive myself into thinking that academic contributions can substitute for giving care to the sick, the dying, the impoverished, the orphaned, the widowed, and others needing human compassion. Nor have I compensated for those losses by submerging myself in humanitarian service. I’m too selfish to motivate myself to follow the secular example of Albert Schweitzer and countless others who have not needed a church to make them follow the Second Great Commandment. Religious fellowship and compassionate service have ended for me as an excommunicated Mormon, and that has been a profound loss. I have occasionally attended meetings of other churches, but, in truth, I’ve had enough of organized religion of any kind. All my sabbaths are secular.

Which leads to a dimension of my experience that totally surprised me. Even though I did not want to be excommunicated, I felt a profound sense of relief afterwards. With all its truth and authority, the Church has promoted policies and ideologies that I could not support. Because it’s no longer my Church, I feel no obligation to make excuses for it nor to remain silent about matters of disagreement. I remain a Mormon in heritage and worldview—in my DNA, if you will—but as an excommunicated Mormon, I’m not required to “sustain” LDS teachings, policies, or prophets when I feel they are wrong. I think that is a good thing.

Nevertheless, I remember what nineteenth-century singer Jenny Lind advised a fellow Protestant who was about to accept Roman Catholic baptism: “[Don’t] expect more of the church on earth than she really can give.”¹

Third, there are limits to my detachment from organized Mormonism. I’ve abruptly refused evangelical Protestants who

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have invited me to endorse their polemical writings about the Church. I've explained the faith-context and differing viewpoints about Mormon controversies to newspaper reporters who expected me to present only the negative. I've been saddened to learn about the deaths of full-time missionaries and of General Authorities, both of whom devote their full energy to serving God and humanity as best they understand. And I've been pleased whenever I've heard that LDS missionaries have been given access to countries where they had previously been forbidden, even though I still have concerns about cultural imperialism in LDS proselytizing.

It is true that I've given encouragement to Fundamentalist Mormon polygamists, but not because I'm interested in joining them, nor to embarrass the monogamous Church, nor to ignore the fact that there are unhappy polygamist wives and children. I've spoken and written favorably about current polygamists because I support the efforts of all people to maintain loving families in whatever way they choose—without coercion and without fear.

However, I admit that my non-participation in *any* religious fellowship may be a flaw in my own personality or spirituality. I have friends, from my adolescence to the past year, who have left Mormonism for other fellowships. Having once served as full-time LDS missionaries, they have become Jewish, Sufi Muslim, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Gnostic, Quaker, Unitarian, New Age, or members of gay and lesbian churches. Some of them have said that, like me, they still see the world through Mormon lenses. Others do not.

Has my personal relationship with God changed since my excommunication? Again, "yes" and "no."

I do not have the same interactive engagement with God as I did while I was a missionary, a branch president, an elder's quorum president, a temple ordinance worker, a Gospel Doctrine teacher, a counselor in two bishoprics, or a member of a stake high council. These Church callings required me to



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seek God's guidance and strength more intensely and diversely than is necessary when you are living your life outside the Church.

However, I still feel the "burning of the Spirit" within me from time to time. I still talk with God as my Heavenly Father, give thanks for His many blessings, seek His guidance, and ask His intervention for myself and others. Although intellectually I believe in Mother in Heaven, spiritually my relationship on earth has always been with the Father.

Since adolescence, however, my intense faith has co-existed with a sacrilegious sense of humor. I'm not sure whether there has been an increase in my laughing at religious jokes, retelling them, or giving my own jibes.

I feel the same convictions about the afterlife that I did from my teenage years onward. In view of latter-day revelations, Mormons don't—or shouldn't—believe in a "hell" of never-ending punishment and torment. Instead, Latter-day Saints believe in eternal "degrees of glory" for every human being except those who hate God eternally. After death, I expect to be as close to God or as distant from His presence as we are both comfortable to be. If that means we can embrace once or twice, that will be enough. If it means that I will serve Him and others worthier than I from a distance throughout

all eternity, then I am satisfied. There is nothing wrong with being a "mere" servant to God in the afterlife.

And if my eternal status is like a twinkling star, rather than the brilliant sun of those who are "exalted," then I will be happy to be in my proper place in companionship with others who are comfortable in my presence. If I am not mistaken, "happy" is the word the founding Mormon prophet Joseph Smith used to describe those in the lowest degree of glory.

Nevertheless, some Mormons regard me as a danger here and now to God's Church:

- because I claim that a compassionate, clear-eyed view of Mormonism's fallible past is better than pre-

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sending it as a morality play directed at every step by the hand of God;

- because I claim that an active intellect is as important to God as a humble heart;
- because I claim that men are no more important than women in *any* field of activity—secular or sacred;
- because I claim that a woman's priesthood endowment in an LDS temple is the same as a man's receiving priesthood through ordination;
- because I claim that the mutual love of two men or of two women is as valid as the mutual love of a man and a woman;
- because I claim that prophets can be both inspired and uninspired, well-intentioned and mistaken, compassionate and insensitive, insightful and uninformed, kind and cruel—in other words, as fallible and complex as all other human beings;
- because I claim that you can serve the Church faithfully by being in loyal opposition;
- because I claim that excommunication—like other ordinances performed in the Church—depends completely on your personal relationship with God and the Holy Spirit of Promise before that ordinance has any eternal significance whatever;
- because I claim that any church that dismisses its non-conformists as expendable is a church that has forgotten the Savior-Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to seek the one lost sheep; and
- because I claim that people like me have nothing

to fear in the afterlife from our Heavenly Father, even though we have much to fear on earth from people who say they serve God by promoting suspicion, fear, hatred, and violence.

There are Mormons and other Christians who deny one or more of those claims, but I think such people do not understand either the gospel or the Savior.

I close with a statement of my faith, a testimony that is ancient:

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his
name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of
death, I will fear no evil:
For thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they
comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine
enemies:
Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of
my life:
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.*

—Psalm 23

Amen. 

NOTE

1. Anne C. Rose, *Beloved Strangers: Interfaith Families in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 98.



"Purge? Purge? What purge? I don't know anything about a purge. . . ."

Pat Bagley