

WHY APOLOGETICS?

by Lance Starr

The Latter-day Saints have been so repeatedly and generally misrepresented and maligned, that ordinarily little has been done by way of refutation. Were the people to undertake to meet every lie uttered against them and set it right, they would devote the whole of their lives to it and then die without accomplishing the desired object. But there are times when a refutation is necessary; when the whole people awake in earnestness to deny the misrepresentations of those who purposely and wilfully assail them.¹

a•pol•o•get•ics

n. (used with a sing. verb)

1. The branch of theology that is concerned with defending or proving the truth of Christian doctrines.
2. Formal argumentation in defense of something, such as a position or system.

As a faithful and active member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I espouse certain doctrines, teachings and practices that, to the world of modern, mainstream Christianity, are considered unusual by some and heretical by others. I do not find this to be an objectionable situation and I do not particularly care if someone who doesn't share my faith disagrees with me and my church about certain beliefs and practices. In fact, during the course of my life some of the most enjoyable conversations I've participated in were with people of other faiths as we discussed, in a civil and respectable manner, the merits of our various belief systems. However, if someone disagrees with me, I expect them to disagree with me based on true facts and not false notions of what I truly believe and profess.

As anybody who has ever encountered anti-Mormon literature knows, what we believe and what our critics say we believe are often two very different things. Since the publication of Eber D. Howe's *Mormonism Unveiled* in the early 1830s,



the beliefs and practices of the Church of Jesus Christ have been widely distorted and misreported to the point of being unrecognizable. There is nothing more infuriating or more hurtful than having your most cherished beliefs and deeply held convictions twisted, distorted and then held up for public ridicule.

From the days of Christ up until our time, the humble followers of Christ were forced to defend themselves against unfair characterizations of their faith. However, in our own day, there are members of the Church who feel that correcting misconceptions and defending ourselves against calumny is somehow a less than dignified pursuit. In fact, I recently had lunch with a prominent LDS scholar and apologist who recounted the story of a colleague who adamantly disapproved of the practice despite the fact that several General Authorities had consulted with this scholar on apologetic issues.

To be certain, there are some forms of apologetic conduct that are not in harmony with the Gospel or the teachings of Jesus Christ. Attempts to defame other faiths or their adherents are inherently bad because they do nothing more than engender bad blood and contention—which the Savior has made abundantly clear are unacceptable. Nevertheless, it is also abundantly clear that there are times and places when engaging in apologetics is necessary and appropriate. Properly done, apologetics can strengthen faith and fortify testimonies, and this alone justifies the existence of organizations such as FAIR.

MY PERSONAL APOLOGETIC JOURNEY

Over a decade ago, I was a college freshman attending a small school in Southern Montana where I was one of two Latter-day Saint students in the whole school. I was born in the Church and spent most of my early life in Northern Utah and my high school years in Northern Montana. While living in Utah, I was seldom if ever exposed to anti-Mormon literature. The small town in Montana

where I lived was somewhat irreligious (all my friends claimed a denomination but few attended or even understood the basic tenets of their various faiths), therefore the subject of my denominational affiliation seldom, if ever, was an issue. In short, I was never called upon to answer challenging questions about my faith or defend my views from attack. This being the case, I often took my faith for granted.

It was during my freshman year of college that I experienced my first encounter with a “real-life” anti-Mormon. At the time, I had been working very hard on my testimony but as yet had not received the confirmation that all that I had been taught since birth was actually true. My encounter with anti-Mormonism came in the form of a campus outreach missionary from the local Baptist congregation. Upon discovering that I was LDS, he immediately beset me with all of the scandals and the “dark secrets” of the “Mormon cult.”

To say the least, I was stunned. Having never been exposed to such material before, I didn’t know it existed and had no ready reply for any of the accusations hurled at me and the faith I’d held since birth. My faith was shaken and I began to doubt. Fortunately, I had a strong support system, an excellent Institute teacher and, in time, the Lord answered my prayers and I was granted a testimony of the truthfulness of the work. However, I was left with the definite impression that I should have known more and at the time, there was a definite lack of printed material that addressed specific anti-Mormon arguments.

On my mission, I was given a copy of a book called *Since Cumorah* by Hugh Nibley. I’d never heard of Brother Nibley but his book was a revelation to me. I discovered that everything that I believed and everything that the Holy Spirit had confirmed to me had a solid basis in logic and fact. I began to realize that the Lord did not expect me to accept everything on blind faith and that the answers to even the most difficult questions were out there.

THE QUESTION OF APOLOGETICS

This brings us to the issue at hand. Is the practice of apologetics by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints a legitimate practice sanctioned by the Lord? I believe that it is. This does not mean that the Lord approves of “Bible bashing” or highly contentious debates where each party tries to win the debate, the truth be damned. The brethren have counseled us to “avoid those who would tear down [our] faith” adding that we should

“not contend or debate over points of doctrine.”²² However, the Lord makes it clear that members of His Church can and should seek to answer difficult and challenging questions about their religion “by study and also by faith.”²³

In the early days of Christianity, the Apostle Paul wrote:

Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort [you] that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.⁴

Paul did not mean that the members should be contentious. He did not want them to quibble over points of doctrine with people whose only goal was to tear down the faith of the followers of Christ. He only wished that they should earnestly seek to defend themselves against the unfair and untrue characterizations of Christians that were then prevalent. One of our modern prophets, Joseph Fielding Smith, once said: “Every member of the Church ought to know that it [the Book of Mormon] is true, and we ought to be prepared with an answer to all of those critics who condemn it.”⁵

The Apostle Paul also prophesied that in the last days many would “depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils.”⁶ He also warned that we must be wise so as not to be taken in by the “cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive.”⁷

THE FRUITS OF ANTI-MORMONS

As a perfect example of what Paul meant, recently a young lady, a member of the Church, wrote a letter to the FAIR Web site.⁸ She said, in part:

I was a faithful Latter-day Saint from the time of my baptism in 1990 up until 1999, Then everything collapsed. A couple that I was close to suddenly left the Church after reading anti-Mormon stuff on the Web. It was the first time this had happened in our ward and we were all very shocked when they were excommunicated for apostasy. I couldn’t understand why they would so suddenly leave; I was sure that I could help them realize they had made a mistake...

When they exposed me to all of the anti-Mormon stuff it totally overwhelmed me. I lost my faith. I struggled for another 18 months; I confided in my

bishop; I was so confused, scared. I needed answers; I didn't get any. I could not remain like that; I could not continue pretending that everything was all right; I felt so bad. I contacted [an anti-Mormon ministry] who put me in contact with a counselor, who convinced me still further that I had been deceived in the Mormon Church. I left the Church in August of last year; I was baptized again in a congregational church ... I have asked my bishop and others many times for help but they are unwilling or unable due to lack of knowledge, and fear that they will jeopardize their faith in the Church as well.⁹

This young lady is not alone in her experience with anti-Mormon literature. There are many members of the Church who have left the fold after being exposed to anti-Mormon arguments and then being unable to find competent responses. David the Psalmist prophesied: "In that day [when] thou shalt come, O Lord... the wicked bend the bow; lo, they make ready their arrow upon the string, that they may privily shoot at the upright in heart, to destroy their foundation."¹⁰ Anti-Mormonism works by trying to undermine the foundation of faith that underlies the testimony of every Latter-day Saint.

THE PURPOSE OF APOLOGETICS

The purpose of apologetic studies is not to try to convert LDS critics, or even to convince them of the errors of their arguments. We know from long experience that such hope is unfounded and unrealistic. Instead, the purpose of true apologetic work is to provide solid, factual answers to those who are investigating the LDS faith or to those whose faith has been wounded by exposure to anti-Mormon rhetoric. The English author, Austin Farrer put it this way:

Though argument does not create conviction, lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.¹¹

This perfectly describes the purpose of LDS apologetics. We do not seek to "convert" anyone. We are faithful members of the Church who realize that conversion is done through the Spirit of God by prayer and fasting and the witness of the Holy Spirit. However, we also believe that a struggling testimony can be aided by solid reasoning and logical conclusions.

In fact, our efforts have been very successful. A few years ago, Evangelical scholars Carl Mosser and Paul Owens presented a scholarly paper to a conference. In the paper Mosser and Owens stated:

Mormon scholars and apologists ... have, with varying degrees of success, answered most of the usual evangelical criticisms. Often these answers adequately diffuse particular (minor) criticisms. When the criticism has not been diffused the issue has usually been made much more complex.¹²

In other words, the work of LDS scholars and researchers is having a profound effect. We are answering our critics and "contending earnestly" for our faith and belief. Indeed, it is our belief that we are following the admonition of the Prophet Joseph Smith who said it is the "duty of the saints in relation to their persecutors:"

And also it is an imperative duty that we owe to all the rising generation, and to all the pure in heart—For there are many yet on the earth among all sects, parties, and denominations, who are blinded by the subtle craftiness of men, whereby they lie in wait to deceive, and who are only kept from the truth because they know not where to find it. Therefore, that we should waste and wear out our lives in bringing to light all the hidden things of darkness, wherein we know them; and they are truly manifest from heaven—These then should be attended to with great earnestness.¹³

Finally, we hope to live up to the exhortation of Peter who called upon the Saints to "be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason for the hope that is in you."¹⁴

CONCLUSION

While the practice of apologetics might make some members of the Church uncomfortable, it is my own personal experience that it plays an important part in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. There is no question that the scriptures approve of supporting doctrine with logic and defending faith with truthful fact. There are grievous wolves both inside and outside of the flock that prey on the weak and thrive on the destruction of faith and testimony. Apologetic research gives members of the Church of Jesus Christ ready answers to the most difficult questions and provides an intellectual assurance that strengthens the spiritual confirmations that all members of the Church seek. It helps provide a fertile ground where the seeds of

faith can grow unabated by the scorching rays of the hot sun. Lastly, apologetic defense of our faith has forced the critics to face their own falsehoods and exposed their deceitful tactics and brought “forth out of darkness unto light all their secret works.”¹⁵

FURTHER READING

Bickmore, Barry R. *Restoring the Ancient Church: Joseph Smith and Early Christianity*. Mesa, AZ: Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, 1999.

Hickenbotham, Michael. *Answering Challenging Mormon Questions: Replies to 130 Questions about Mormonism*. Salt Lake City: Horizon Publishing, 1995.

Peterson, Daniel C. and Stephen D. Ricks. *Offenders for a Word: How Anti-Mormons Play Word Games to Attack the Latter-day Saints*. Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992.

Reynolds, Noel B. *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*. Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997.

Winwood, Richard I. *Take Heed That Ye Be Not Deceived*. Salt Lake City: Richard I. Winwood, 1995.

NOTES

1. Junius F. Wells, *The Contributor*, Vol. XIII, No. 1, (November 1891), 52.
2. 1989 *Melchizedek Priesthood Manual*, 165. See also Proverbs 18:6; Romans 2:7–8; 1 Corinthians 11:16; James 3:16; D&C 10:63; D&C 19:29, 31; and D&C 50:32–33.
3. D&C 88:118.
4. Jude 1:3.
5. Joseph Fielding Smith, “The Book of Mormon, A Divine Record,” *Improvement Era* (December 1961): 925. Emphasis added.
6. 1 Timothy 4:1.
7. Ephesians 4:14.
8. To understand more about the purpose and mission of FAIR, see the information at the end of this paper.
9. Original correspondence in my possession.
10. Joseph Smith Translation, Psalms 11:1–2. See also Psalms 37:12–14.
11. Austin Farrer, “The Christian Apologist,” *Light on C.S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965), 26.

12. Carl Mosser & Paul Owen, “Mormon Apologetic, Scholarship and Evangelical Neglect: Losing the Battle and Not Knowing It?” *The Trinity Journal*, 19:2.

13. D&C 123:11–14.

14. 1 Peter 3:15.

15. Alma 37:25.

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ABOUT FAIR

The Foundation for Apologetic Information & Research (FAIR) is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing well-documented answers to criticisms of LDS doctrine, belief and practice. Seeking to assist the lay member and scholar alike to respond to intentional and well-meaning attacks on individual faith, FAIR helps publish articles and books that defend the LDS Church, operations Web sites that receive thousands of visitors each day, and sponsors research projects and conferences that provide the LDS scholarly community an outlet for getting information into the hands of the average member. With a 501-C(3) tax exempt status from the IRS, FAIR is funded by the generosity of its members and contributors, now grown to more than 5,000.

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