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Mormonism, Materialism, and Politics: Six Things We Must Understand in Order to Survive as Latter-day Saints

Rick Anderson

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MORMONISM, MATERIALISM, AND POLITICS: SIX THINGS WE MUST UNDERSTAND IN ORDER TO SURVIVE AS LATTER-DAY SAINTS

Rick Anderson

Abstract: We are called as Latter-day Saints to be a force for good in the world in every way possible, which necessarily includes active and positive engagement with political and social issues. At the same time, it is essential to our spiritual survival that we never allow ourselves to forget the radical difference between the philosophies of men — no matter how superficially harmonious some of these may seem with particular principles of the gospel or with some aspects of traditional Mormon culture — and the teachings of the prophets. In a world that constantly entices us with messages designed to lure us away from the eternal truths of the restored gospel and into the embrace of philosophies that are partially and contingently true at best and actively destructive at worst, we must exercise constant vigilance. This essay suggests and discusses six propositions that, if understood and embraced, should help us maintain that vigilance.

The Fundamental Problem

While the wider world and its myriad cultures offer many different theories concerning the ultimate meaning of life, the existence of a reality beyond the natural and physical, and what constitutes a good and noble manner of living, those of us living in the industrialized West are, for the most part, immersed in a culture that promotes, both explicitly and implicitly, a strong philosophy of materialism. This is not only “materialism” in the colloquial sense of an overweening focus on the accumulation of wealth and consumer goods but also in a philosophical sense: the belief that nothing exists that is not physical and measurable.

In this latter sense, the term “materialism” is roughly coterminous with “naturalism” and “scientism.”¹

Even in the United States, where religiosity of various kinds remains widespread (to the head-shaking amusement of our European friends), the controlling assumptions that inform our politics, our systems of education, and our popular culture are overwhelmingly materialistic. Within these systems, materialist and naturalist assumptions are generally treated as reasonable or even as obviously true, while appeals to the supernatural or the transcendent are regarded with tolerance at best, more often with condescension, and at worst with hostility. There are exceptions, of course, and politicians and tastemakers regularly pay lip service to religious values of various kinds, but here in the industrialized West, the cultural water in which we swim every day is that of materialism — in both the consumerist and the philosophical senses.

This reality poses a variety of challenges to Latter-day Saints and especially to those Latter-day Saints who seek fully to be disciples of Christ, to make and keep sacred covenants with a God who is real, and to follow modern-day prophets. Since doing those things necessarily means consecrating our means to the building up of the Kingdom of God, giving the eternal a higher priority in our lives than the temporal, and affirmatively accepting the existence of a reality beyond what is perceivable and measurable by physical senses and instruments, the Latter-day Saint concept of Christian discipleship necessarily constitutes a radical rejection of much of Western culture and the assumptions that shape it. We can reasonably expect our culture to respond with irritation, and even aggression, when it senses our rejection. To be a disciple of Christ means setting oneself at odds with the world in very real and concrete ways; true discipleship is, in other words, a countercultural stance. In reality, it has always been so.

1 The concept of “Mormon materialism” refers to a somewhat different idea: the concept, apparently taught by Joseph Smith, that there is no such thing as “immaterial matter” and that therefore the things we call “spiritual” are, in fact, constituted in matter that is too fine for us to perceive in our fallen physical state. Without rejecting that teaching in any degree, for the purposes of this essay I will use “materialism” in the more commonly understood senses, as explained in the text.

Firm Submissiveness and Gentle Defiance

Being a Latter-day Saint, then, to the degree that it constitutes an authentic commitment to abide by Christ's teachings, keep sacred covenants, and follow the prophets, is simultaneously a position of *firm submissiveness* and of *gentle defiance*. We *submit* by subjugating our will to that of our Master; we do so *firmly* in that we submit to Him without making any apology or excuse to the world for our submission. At the same time, when we stand in *defiance* of the world and its wisdom, we do so *gently*, with meekness, and without arrogance or anger. True disciples do not persecute those who disagree with them, and they do not attack or ridicule the enemies of God's Kingdom — nor, equally importantly, do they fail to stand up to those enemies boldly in defense of the Kingdom when such is called for. Boldness does not require overbearance, and in fact, the boldness required of Christian disciples precludes it.²

Nor does true discipleship require us to withdraw from the world, to see only ugliness in it, or to find no value and even wisdom in the philosophies of men. On the contrary, those who follow the teachings of the Savior will be actively engaged in the world, and those who follow the teachings of modern prophets will seek to understand the world, its people and cultures, and the ways it works.³ This suggests at the very least that both knowledge of and active engagement in social and political issues are expected of us as Latter-day Saints. True discipleship does, however, require us to recognize the transitory and contingent nature of worldly wisdom, and never to mistake the philosophies of men for eternal truth.

It is important to note that one does not have to be an authentic Christian disciple or even a committed Latter-day Saint in order to be a member in good standing of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Although Church members receive regular instruction in gospel principles and doctrine, we are rarely asked directly or officially to account for what we believe; only when applying for a temple recommend is a Latter-day Saint asked formally to say whether she believes in God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost, whether she believes in the restored gospel, and whether or not she sustains the leaders of the Church as prophets, seers, and revelators — and a member does not have to hold a temple recommend in order to be a member in good standing. What this means is that rejecting the world and its philosophies is not

² See Alma 38:12.

³ See Doctrine & Covenants 88:78–80.

necessary in order to be a genuine member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. However, to the degree that we fail, in our minds and hearts, to displace those philosophies in favor of eternal truth and saving doctrine, our authenticity as actual Christian disciples (as distinct from simply members of the Church) is threatened.

Unfortunately, the world will not cede its place in our minds and hearts without a fight. To reject the world is tremendously difficult, and its pull on us is incessant and powerful. This is partly because the world itself offers such tempting delights; it is also because those who embrace the world and its philosophies see those who reject the world as deluded and perhaps dangerous and will work constantly and with great sophistication to entice, cajole, or threaten the followers of Christ out of their discipleship.

Six Propositions

In light of this reality, I suggest six propositions that I believe are essential to understand and accept in order to survive as Latter-day Saints in the world in which we now live. These are not doctrines or principles of the gospel; rather, they are propositions about the nature of the world and human society that I believe we must understand in order for our testimonies to take root deeply and anchor us against the currents that seek to pull us away from true doctrine and from exalting discipleship — or, in other words, for us to survive spiritually as Latter-day Saints.

The first is that **things as they seem to be are not things as they really are**. This is perhaps the most fundamental fact about earthly reality that we have to accommodate in order to be open to the gift of a genuine testimony of the gospel — without which we may survive, and might even continue to call ourselves “Mormons,” but without which we will not be Latter-day Saints in any meaningful sense. If we cannot accept the fact that there is a reality beyond the grasp of our brains and the reach of our temporal instruments of perception and measurement, we will not be able even to start down the road that leads to saving faith in Christ and a testimony of the restoration of His gospel in the latter days.⁴ Belief in Jesus as a real historical figure who set a good example and taught good moral principles can easily take root in a mind committed to the materialist worldview; belief in Jesus as the atoning Christ cannot.

Unfortunately, **the complex of social and cultural systems within which most of us live has a great deal invested in the proposition that,**

4 See 1 Corinthians 13:12.

in fact, things as they seem to be truly are things as they really are. Materialist scientism is the prevailing religion in the developed Western world. Believing in the reality of something beyond the obviously material will attract the world's derision, and actively proclaiming such a belief will tend to invite its anger and its active opposition — although it is also worth noting that in this particular regard (among others) we do have allies among those of other religious faiths. We are called by our Heavenly Father to live and function in this world and in it to stand as witnesses of His gospel. In order to honor and respond to that call, we have to recognize and accept the fact that doing so will get us into some degree of trouble with the world.

In fact, this means that **doing the right thing will often (though not always) mean offending the world.** While the world will generally smile on us for being kind to our neighbors, caring for the poor and needy, and providing for our children (though maybe not for having so many of them), we should be prepared to accept the world's disgust and anger when we follow the prophets. The role of a prophet is to speak hard truths to the world, including the truth that there is a true and living God to whom we owe submission, and our role as Latter-day Saints is to stand for those truths, publicly and without apology. If we cannot accept and endure the world's disapproval, we will not survive as Latter-day Saints — even if we remain in the Church and/or continue to call ourselves Mormons. Consider the implications of Lehi's dream: the failure to bear the world's ridicule is what leads people in that scriptural account to abandon and walk away from blessings and joy beyond any they had previously experienced: they had held fast to the iron rod of truth; they had followed it until they realized the exceptional rewards to which it led; and then, having done all of that work *and while actually enjoying the fruit*, they dropped the fruit on the ground and walked away from it because they could not stand being made fun of by a world that, in many cases, had no idea what it was missing.⁵

However, we need to be very careful. As Latter-day Saints we are also human beings who regularly misunderstand revealed truth, misinterpret prophetic counsel, implement that counsel selectively or incorrectly according to our individual prejudices, and misjudge the boundary that separates our own personal opinions and desires from revealed truth. So while doing the right thing will often offend the world, and we have to be willing to accept that, we also need to be careful not to assume that every time we offend the world as Latter-day Saints, we have necessarily

5 See 1 Nephi 8.

done so by doing the right thing. Authentic discipleship means not only standing unapologetically for Christ; it also means being ready to repent and change when we learn that we have mistakenly been standing for something else.

More importantly, however, **even when we are not wrong, but are in fact doing the right things and standing for the truth, those who oppose us are not necessarily operating in bad faith.** Some people who oppose us in our efforts to live and proclaim the gospel are doing so as conscious agents of wrong. I tend to think that these constitute a small minority of our opponents. Most of those who oppose us believe sincerely that doing so is the morally right, or at least intellectually responsible, thing to do. These people may be deceived but are probably not insincere, and that matters. Recognizing that they are not evil should not lead us to sympathize with their misguided positions, but responding to our enemies as if they are evil is probably not a wise or productive approach, nor is it obviously in keeping with the teachings of Christ. We can — and, as disciples of Christ, we are instructed to — stand our ground without returning railing for railing or assuming that we know the hearts of those who set themselves up as our enemies.⁶

In doing all of these things, we need to bear in mind that **the very elect may be deceived.**⁷ Our testimonies are often fortified by the examples of spiritually powerful people around us. Being strengthened in this way is a blessing to us, and being such an example to others is part of our duty as Latter-day Saints. However, if our testimonies are founded on those examples, rather than merely fortified by them, we are relying on the arm of flesh and building our spiritual houses on foundations of sand. Our testimonies must have independent foundations of revelation that do not rely on the faithfulness of anyone else.⁸

Mormonism and Politics

This brings us to the issue of Mormonism and politics, an issue that most readers may, at this point in the essay, be wondering if I was ever planning to address.

What does politics have to do with the aforementioned points relating to testimony and faithfulness? The careful reader will have noticed a conceptual thread binding all of those points together: it is the thread of intellectual and spiritual independence from the world, in

6 See 1 Peter 3:9, 3 Nephi 6:13.

7 See Matthew 24:24.

8 See JST Mark 9:40–48, especially v. 44.

the face of both its opposition and its enticements, and regardless of its opinions of us as Latter-day Saints, whether positive or negative.

The world will always oppose the gospel for the simple reason that the gospel exists to change the world radically. It is on the earth in order to call people out of the world; to extract us from the world's behavioral patterns and from the visceral, transitory pleasures those patterns offer; to encourage us to turn our backs on the ideologies in which the world has invested so much; to turn our hearts from supporting the ideologies and systems of selfishness, egocentrism, power-seeking, materialism, coercion, and conflict on which Satan's kingdom is built; and to turn our hearts towards the building up of the Kingdom of God on the earth and the establishment of a Zion society in which such things are obviated and done away.

Among these ideologies and systems are every single social and political philosophy conceived by mankind. To be sure, not all political ideologies are equally noxious. It is also true that the great majority of political ideologies embrace at least some principles that are in harmony with eternal truth.⁹ A political ideology that contains some truth is not, however, the gospel — any more than a pile of sawdust that contains some flour is bread.

If no political philosophy can be counted on to offer pure, complete, and consistent truth, then it should be clear that the allegiance we hold to any political philosophy should be contingent at best and that our deepest and most unswerving loyalty are reserved for the principles of the restored gospel.

In light of this reality, it should come as no surprise that **those who oppose us and want us to fail as Latter-day Saints are to be found across the political and social spectrum.** Some of them oppose virtually everything we stand for; some support some aspects of the restored gospel (doing good to all people, the sanctity of the family, etc.) but really wish we would shut up about other things (consecration, priesthood authority, the Book of Mormon as a historical record, etc.)

This last proposition has important political and spiritual implications, particularly for Latter-day Saints in countries like the United States, where there is a deep and growing divide between those on the political Left and those on the Right.

I have seen people leave the Church because it is too conservative, and I have seen people leave it because it is too liberal. I have seen people

⁹ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Does the Church Endorse Political Parties?" <https://www.mormon.org/faq/political-beliefs>.

leave the Church because they disagreed with the Church's stance (or lack thereof) on one particular social issue or another. Many of us have heard members of the Church complain that the prophet should speak out more in support of some initiative or philosophy that they passionately support and that he should be quiet and leave public commentary to the experts when he expresses disagreement with their favored position.

Fortunately, none of us is under any obligation whatsoever to embrace in an unreserved and uncritical way any worldly political philosophy or platform. Speaking from an American perspective, we may find that the platform of one particular party comports better than the others with our own understanding of what is good and true. Thinking in broader terms, each of us may identify as more "conservative," more "moderate," or more "liberal," feeling that one or the other of those positions on the political spectrum is the wisest and the most often correct. Taking such a position does nothing to threaten our authentic discipleship.

What none of us should do — what would threaten our survival as Latter-day Saints, both individually and collectively — is to drift from contingent alliance ("I am a liberal or a conservative because I generally agree with that philosophy, recognizing its limitations as a source of reliable truth") to unswerving allegiance or, far worse, to the belief that to be more enthusiastically and purely an adherent of that philosophy is necessary to be a better and more faithful Latter-day Saint.

The danger in doing so lies in two dimensions: first (and more abstractly), it is to make what philosophers call a "category mistake," by confusing the philosophies of men with eternal doctrine; second (and more concretely), it is to treat as steady and constant a guide-star that is, in fact, erratic and unreliable by its very nature. The fact that liberals may often seem closer to the teachings of scripture on matters of socioeconomic equality¹⁰ or that conservatives seem generally closer to the Church and its teachings on matters related to sexual behavior and family values¹¹ does not mean that either of those worldly philosophies can be relied upon to harmonize consistently with divine teaching on other matters.

In the final analysis, there is simply no way to live comprehensively according to the teachings of the Church without living highly selectively according to the teachings of the world. "My ways are not your ways,"

10 See Doctrine & Covenants 78:6, 82:17, and 104:16; also, 2 Corinthians 8:14.

11 See The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," <https://www.lds.org/topics/family-proclamation?lang=eng>.

the Lord has sternly rebuked His disciples more than once,¹² and it is essential to our spiritual survival that we both believe and apply that sobering principle in our lives.

Failing to do so can lead us into a host of intellectual, spiritual, and social behaviors that are dangerous both to our own spiritual survival and to that of others. These can include:

- Wrestling the scriptures to suit our prejudices or using only those passages of scripture that flatter our social beliefs while ignoring those that complicate or even contradict them.
- Condemning or persecuting those whose social and political views differ from our own.
- Communicating to others (intentionally or not) that holding social or political views different from our own would make them unwelcome among the Saints.
- Teaching for doctrine the philosophies of men.¹³
- Seeking to gather disciples unto ourselves, rather than inviting all to come unto Christ, a practice condemned by prophets both ancient and modern as “priestcraft.”¹⁴

It is important to note that what leads to these behaviors is not the adherence to any *particular* worldly philosophy — it is the unswerving adherence to *any* worldly philosophy rather than to the revealed truths of the gospel.

All of these tendencies have a single antidote: genuine and submissive Christian discipleship informed by an independent testimony of the restored gospel, built on a solid foundation of fidelity to saving and exalting covenants and a willingness to heed and follow the prophets called by God to lead His church on the earth. There is no other way for us to survive spiritually as Latter-day Saints.

Rick Anderson is Associate Dean for Collections and Scholarly Communication in the J. Willard Marriott Library at the University of Utah. He earned his B.S. and M.L.I.S. degrees at Brigham Young University, and has worked previously as a bibliographer for YBP, Inc., as Head

12 See Isaiah 55:8–9, Ezekiel 18:29, Hebrews 3:10.

13 See Colossians 2:8, Matthew 15:9.

14 See Alma 1:16, 2 Nephi 26:29; also, Elder David A. Bednar, “Seek Learning by Faith,” *Ensign*, Sept. 2007, 66–67.

Acquisitions Librarian for the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, and as Director of Resource Acquisition at the University of Nevada. He serves on numerous editorial and advisory boards and publishes regularly in the library literature. In 2008 he was elected president of the North American Serials Interest Group, and he was named an ARL Research Library Leadership Fellow for 2009–10. In 2013 Rick was the recipient of the HARRASSOWITZ Leadership in Library Acquisitions Award and was invited to give the Gould Distinguished Lecture on Technology and the Quality of Life at the University of Utah. In 2015 he was elected president of the Society for Scholarly Publishing. He is a popular speaker on subjects related to the future of scholarly communication and research libraries.

