

# Letter to a College Student

*By Eugene England*

Open letter by England that respond to concerns written by a colleg-age friend about the gospel and this friend's anxiety over continuing to remain associated with Mormonism.

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**Y**OUR LETTER CAUGHT me by surprise, not because your particular form of unhappiness and your objections to the Church are unique—and not only because I remember you as a person living in quite a different universe than the one of sharp criticism and disillusionment which you now project with such vividness. No, my surprise was due mainly I think to the distance that I have moved in my own spiritual life from constant attention to those kinds of problems. Just a few years ago, as an Institute teacher, a member of the Bishopric of a student ward and a managing editor of *Dialogue*, I was confronted daily with the kinds of concerns you express, and I tended to think of them as central to the Gospel experience—to the struggle to know God and Christ and to love others. Now I am seldom involved with those particular problems—although overwhelmed with a whole set of other problems equally as mysterious and difficult and important. That is one measure of the distance between the Stanford Ward and the Faribault Branch.

You talk about your disillusionment with your mission, how, after committing yourself to “offer people peace and kindness and hope,” you found among your companions much “pettiness, narrowness, deceit and childishness, not to mention the obnoxious piety that only those who have the One And Only Way of Truth can possess.” Yes, I’ve seen those things, still do sometimes—in fact find them in myself. And you talk about “bewilderment,” your sense of having been betrayed because your idealism and devotion to the Church have led you to give service to it, but that very service has paradoxically revealed to you “dangerous tendencies in our bureaucratic, businessman’s organization which are spiritually emasculating—namely, commercialism, exploitation of the gullible, statistics, and the self-righteous refusal to admit blunder and consider change where necessary.” Yes, those things are there too. Again, I find them in myself, in my own stumbling attempts to serve the Lord and the Church. And I am sure that you are right in your observation that “maybe it wasn’t so hot in the ‘good old days’ either”—that these problems have been present whenever the Lord’s kingdom was organized among human beings.

Your letter brings back voices from the past, memories of precious friends and of other words spoken in anguish and tears:

Since I’ve stopped going through the formal motions of meetings

and statistics-oriented assignments, prayer and service have become more spontaneous, joyful and personal. And valuable. Am I going to hell? Yet at times I feel alone, like I'm drifting from something which is supposed to be true and good, which may be just another cosmic hoax.

No, I don't think it's a cosmic hoax. And I don't think, as you suggest for a possibility, that the reason for the problems is that people have been taken in, like the congregations of Elmer Gantry and Marjoe but by more clever and smoother operators. No, I find incredible sincerity and great dedication in the Church at all levels. I think that the problems you mention arise not from some group or individual's lack of sincerity or honesty but because of the same kinds of ignorance and sin that beset us all. The special problem in the Church is that our high level of general satisfaction with the Gospel life style and our genuine spiritual experiences and resulting strong commitments tend to make us willing to let sincerity be enough, without requiring of ourselves what missionaries are always requiring of other people whose beliefs they are challenging—that one must be (as completely as possible) right as well as sincere. If we take the whole Gospel seriously it challenges us to be thoughtful, to test, to be sensitive, to be balanced in our use of faith and reason, of experiential evidence and the witness of the Spirit. If more Church members did these things most of the excesses that bother you so much wouldn't happen—but none of us does so very consistently, and that includes you and me.

Your comment about how your life seems to have changed since you stopped struggling directly with the Gospel in Church activity reminds me of a good friend who made a similar decision some years ago. He is possibly the most morally honest and sensitive person I have known, and after struggling for some years he found that he just could not cope with the various forms of bigotry, self-righteousness, etc., that he encountered weekly in Church meetings. It became an unbearable experience for him—psychologically and spiritually—and he and his wife finally decided there was nothing left but to take their family into inactivity. He continues to live the basic moral principles of the Gospel, but he and his family and the Church have suffered a great loss, I think. Though I can understand his decision (and, in fact, approve that kind of “vacation” for a short time for some people when things become unbearable and all attempts to do something about it apparently are unfruitful), I think such a decision as a permanent “solution” is a tragic cop-out. I pray with all my heart that you won't take that route.

I think I know what you and my friend have felt. I've been through some of the pain you describe myself, and I have my own battle ribbons (including a “purple heart” or two) from combat with particular brands of Mormon arrogance and provincialism, the “spiritual imperialism” that you speak of, various forms of fanaticism, racism, militarism, authoritarianism, that I have found in Church circles—and am convinced are deeply contrary to the Gospel and the ideals of the Church. My own missionary experience was no picnic, either. Charlotte and I (who went together as a married couple to Samoa) had experiences On our mission like those you were so appalled by in your own—encountering the invincible ignorance and insensitivity of some young missionaries just off an Idaho farm or Salt Lake's East Beach (I

qualified on both counts) trying to relate to an alien culture, the smugness and self-righteousness of people presuming to take the truth to other people, though they were unable to comprehend either the strengths of those people or their own weaknesses.

You were right in your comment about appreciating the good people you found native to the country where you did your missionary work and your thinking that they should perhaps send missionaries to Zion. We felt that way ourselves many times. And yet you seem not yet to have learned some crucial lessons that, after a good deal of pain, we at least began to learn there: Mainly that we were as guilty of bigotry and insensitivity, of lack of love, in our judgment of some other missionaries as they were in their judgment of the native people; and that despite the mistakes, the bumbling, the blindness in many dimensions of the missionaries, most of them were serving the Lord faithfully in taking, however haltingly and inefficiently, His Gospel of faith and repentance and loving service to people who, in spite of their many great qualities, needed it and were made better by it.

At one point in our mission I wrote a letter to Elder Marion D. Hanks, then of the First Council of Seventy, much like the one you sent me. After letting me cool off for awhile, he wrote back probably the most helpful letter I have received from another human being in my life; he taught me to see the danger of riding off by myself on a white horse, to realize that just as One must not only be sincere but also right, so one must not only be right but also effective, and it wasn't very effective to go around self-righteously condemning my fellow missionaries or harboring resentments against them when I should be facing up to my own failings and weaknesses, and showing them increased love along with the right example.

I also began to see in Samoa how important the Gospel itself is—more important than my impatience with the weak vessels the Lord must choose to carry it to the world. Before we left for our mission Charlotte and I had been exposed somewhat to the social action idealism of the University of Utah and there was some vague questioning in our minds about whether really the best way to relate to and serve other societies was to go with a challenge to them to take on a new faith; shouldn't we rather be trying to help them with their medical needs, farming needs, educational needs, in short, to develop them since they were an "underdeveloped" country?

We actually did make contact with many varieties of human pain and need in that still rather primitive society in Samoa but found that, despite the reality of their suffering from things like lack of good medicine, lack of good farming techniques, even their suffering from the oppression of colonial British society based in New Zealand, the Samoans suffered most deeply and most damagingly from directly personal and family problems—lack of ability to control anger, insensitivity to certain dimensions of loyalty in their relations with each other, simple ignorance about how to fulfill some of their capacities and yearnings for intelligence and understanding and expression. In short, they most needed the Gospel, with its individually liberating idealism, explicit moral and spiritual instruction, and opportunities for practical development. We saw that the cultural relativists that we had studied in college were wrong, that adultery for instance was not harmful to people in our society merely because they had been taught it was wrong and therefore felt guilty.

It was clearly harmful to people in Samoa for intrinsic reasons; even though some of them had not been taught adultery was wrong, they suffered the natural results of such action—the breakdown of human relations and of crucial family strength, of the sense of individual worth and self-control and of fidelity to another person that lies at the heart of a good marriage. As a result in the graphic words of Jacob in The Book of Mormon, “Many hearts died, pierced with deep wounds.” But when such people joined or became active in the Church they found the support the Gospel provides for family unity and trust, for loyalty between husband and wife, through teaching and helping people to live the commandments of God—and they were incredibly happier, more liberated, though still “underdeveloped.”

This awareness, that the Gospel is so overwhelmingly valuable that it crowds out the temptation to be overwhelmed by the mistakes people make trying to translate its ideals into specific Church expression and action—and the real intellectual problems and puzzles that such human expression of the Gospel can get us involved in—has come to us most powerfully here in Minnesota, trying to serve as branch president to a group of about one hundred saints scattered over seventy-five miles. We range from hard core, Utah-born, inactive to new, bright-eyed, convert student. All of us are guilty at various times of most of the forms of bigotry and hypocrisy and of the various dangerous tendencies in bureaucracy and self-righteousness that have repulsed you, but at the same time there is closeness, communication, self-development and moving, penetrating spiritual experience available to us through our association and service in the Church—and I mean feelings and experiences crucial to our joy and progression that we just wouldn’t have without the Church.

We see families united when one or both parents join the Church and take seriously the covenants of baptism. We see a young man, long devastated by drug experience and divorce and plagued by continual despair, respond to the challenge to gradual return to activity in the Church and use of his priesthood and thus begin to grow spiritually and in self-confidence and become a new person.

At our Easter service last month our visitors included a large family of Spanish Americans from Texas whom the missionaries had contacted. The family had with them a grandmother visiting from Mexico who spoke no English. It happened that our main speaker, Frank Odd, was a recent addition to our Branch who teaches Spanish at St. Olaf College. After a moving personal witness of the meaning of Christ and the new life he brought us, Brother Odd asked us to excuse him while he spoke to a person there who had not been able to understand any of the service to that point. Then he gave the grandmother a special message in Spanish and bore his testimony to her. And though we did not understand much of what was being said then, we felt deeply a spirit of love and conviction witnessed by the Holy Ghost. Tears are shed often at our meetings, not “potato love” tears of gullible self-congratulation, but tears of joy and recognition of goodness and truth—such as those we shed recently while a man who had been inactive forty years passed the sacrament to us as a new deacon, beginning to prepare to baptize his wife and children. Or when a young man spoke last week with marvelous, miraculous effectiveness about his conversion to the Gospel and the value of the Church to him while standing before us as a living witness to what he was saying, because we were aware that

through his involvement and service in the Church he has grown in just a few years from a totally withdrawn and inarticulate, even vocally and socially crippled person, to the dynamic young husband and father we saw before us.

Well, perhaps the awareness you expressed—that your own perspective may be faulty—is your saving grace. I believe that is the key for you, as it has been for me, and hope that I can help you see that feelingly, as some others have helped me. I continue to believe that the burden of change is on the persons, like yourself and me, who see the problems, who are pained by the failings of the Church. Since we are the only ones who see what we think is “wrong,” we are the ones who must do something constructive about it, because the people who are committing the errors can’t see them. What we can do about these problems is not leave, desert, turn the Church over to those who may be perverting it, nor is it to remain within but to withdraw spiritually through our own self-righteousness; we must reach out in love, trying to help—and also trying to learn, through our cooperation and common service, from the perspective and commitments of other people, learn to see our own faults—lack of courage, perhaps, lack of whole-souled commitment, failings which may be in the long run, more destructive than the ones we are condemning.

I love the Church with all my heart and mind, but it’s a love that has to be developed, renewed—one which I know can lapse, can ebb and flow. I hope you’ll give the Church a chance—again and again. It needs you—and you need it, because it is the means that the Lord has given us to struggle with the great moral and spiritual imperatives from God for attaining the possible Godhood within us. I think the Church is by far the best place to do that and the only place we really can, partly because of the very challenges that human association in the Church context provides and which have been so upsetting to you.

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