

Book Review

Eugene England, *Why the Church Is As True As the Gospel*

By Orson Scott Card

Review of Eugene England, *Why the Church Is As True As the Gospel*, (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft), \$8.95.

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EUGENE ENGLAND AND THE LIGHTED LAMP

I CAN'T READ Eugene England's personal essays as a critic. I am too much a part of the natural audience for his words. I can't step outside and dispassionately watch his transaction with his readers. I am caught up, captured, possessed, and for a time I see the world through his eyes.

Later, after reflection, I can report on the experience. That is as close to "criticism" as I can come. It is perhaps the only sort of criticism appropriate for such essays. For Eugene England's commitment to the Church, his truthfulness of vision, his simple clarity of expression defy criticism by any detached standard. In fact, England implicitly denies the virtue of detachment. If your whole self is not involved in what he has to say, then he is not speaking to you at all; and if he is not speaking to you, then you have real cause for self-doubt, for he is speaking to all men and women of good heart.

So what you will read here is not an analysis; at times it may not seem to be "about" England's book at all. It is instead what reading England's words made me want to say, not to him, but to fellow members of his intended audience.

Hugh Nibley wrote the foreword to Eugene England's book—an apt choice, since England is the first writer to merit serious consideration as heir to Hugh Nibley's hitherto unique place in the Church. Years ago, on my mission, I was captivated by Hugh Nibley's essay on priests and prophets. (I have not reread it since, so my memory of it is shaped by what I wanted to hear then and what I have needed to remember since.) He told the story of the Old Testament prophet who came into the city from the wilderness. That prophet was not part of the hierarchy of priests, whose charge was the maintenance of the status quo. He came to shake things up. to cry repentance, to change the life of the people, bring them closer to their covenant with the Lord.

At the time I thought, Yes, that's what the Church needs. The title of "prophet" has been co-opted by the hierarchy. We need people to stir us up, to cry repentance

to the complacent. And because I had this thought during my adolescence, I naturally considered myself a perfect candidate for such a lonely but valuable job. I will stand outside and be a gadfly, thought I.

That is a role that so many of us who have intellectual or artistic gifts choose to take. And yet it is exactly the opposite of the true prophetic role. The outsider is never capable of reforming those inside the community. For why should those who are committed to the community pay the slightest attention to the advice of those who have no such commitment? And if no one listens to you, of what use are your well-meant criticisms?

Bad enough are the “murmurings” of those within the community, poisoning the air, making the community less cooperative, fragmenting it, breaking it apart. Good leaders in every community, including the Church, spend most of their time healing those inner fractures—plugging the leaks in the dam, so to speak. When we think we see bishops or apostles, Relief Society presidents or mission presidents trying to force Church members to be absolute conformists, to make the Church uniform, made up of ranks and rows of marching morons, what is really going on (most of the time) is an attempt to heal breaches, to give the community strength and integrity, to help it continue to exist across space and time instead of crumbling into unconnected individuals. They are trying to keep the Church, our most important community, alive.

Yet at least the murmurers and grumblers and bickerers and snipers are inside the community. When we (we *Sunstone* readers, we intellectuals, scholars, and artists, we who have ingested great dollops of the wisdom of the world) take a pose outside the Church, speaking as if our distance gave us greater perspective, we have crossed the river, taken the elevator, rented a room, and now lean out the windows of the great and spacious building, jeering at those who are trying to guide others to take hold of the Iron Rod.

Because, you see, the distinction between people who hold to the Iron Rod and people who follow the Liahona is spurious. The Iron Rod is the Liahona; the Liahona is the Iron Rod. They both work by faith. The Iron Rod is useless unless you hold to it, follow it; you only do so if you believe it leads somewhere good, and want to go where it leads. The Liahona tells you nothing unless you have exactly the kind of obedient faith that is typified by holding to the Iron Rod. The true Liahona will never prompt anyone to let go of the Iron Rod and wander unconnected through the fog. If you have a Liahona that suggests otherwise, throw it away. It's a counterfeit.

YOU CANNOT UNDERSTAND a community if you do not live as a committed member of it. Outsiders—even neutral or sympathetic ones, like anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, theologians who try to understand what Mormonism is, what Mormons are—always embarrass themselves when they draw conclusions from their observations. For observing the words and actions of the Saints tells little about what those words and actions mean: their cause and purpose, and the degree of importance the Saints give to them. From the outside the Church looks monolithic; from the inside we see how hard it is to make a coherent community out of the myriad purposes and opinions and concerns and needs of the Saints.

Communities, after all, exist only as they are believed in by the members of the community—they are creatures of faith. The Church is what we believe it to be, and what we believe it to be directs our behavior within the community of Saints. The very fact of your committed participation in the community changes it to some degree; the very fact of your committed participation also changes you. Only in that synthesis of self and community does the individual acquire any power to change the Church; only in that synthesis does the Church acquire any power to change the individual. That is what I misunderstood in reading Nibley's essay and thinking that it justified my foolish idea of believing in the gospel without participating in the Church. The prophets of the Old Testament were not members of the hierarchy in their day, but they were members of the community. They came from the wilderness into the city preaching the same gospel and the same God that the priests in the temple served and worshipped. No matter how angry people might become at some of the things they said, those who met them, who heard their words, could not doubt that they belonged. They were members. They spoke to Israel from within Israel.

Christ went to the temple to teach, not because that's where the crowds were—he gathered crowds quite nicely without seeking them out—but because he was a committed member of a temple-centered community. He affirmed the truthfulness of the law and the prophets even as he transformed the people's understanding of them; he demanded more, not less rigorous obedience to the fundamental law.

I have learned over the years that the Spirit never speaks to me when I ask for blessings for myself. Guidance in those times always comes from someone else—from my wife, my bishop, a teacher, a book. But when I am participating in the Church, and a member needs something that I cannot provide yet which must be provided, then the Spirit will sometimes answer that member's prayer or need or hope through me. It is only as we serve each other in righteousness that Christ can act through us; and unless we are engaged in the works of Christ through the Church, which is the body of Christ in the world, becoming together his hands and his feet, his ears and his mouth, so that his will is enacted through our actions, his mind spoken through our words, then all our wisdom, our learning, our intelligence are like a tree that puts forth neither leaves nor fruit. Not only will it give no benefit to anyone else; such a tree is also doomed to die.

WHICH BRINGS ME back, at last, to Eugene England and his book of essays. The title essay, "Why the Church Is As True As the Gospel," explicitly expresses this commitment to the community of Saints. England is walking the narrow path on which our feet are also set, he is holding firmly to the iron rod to which we also cling, and because of that his words of encouragement and chastisement, of insight and illumination, all have meaning to us. We know that what he describes we will also see as we progress along the path to the tree; and if we have already passed through the experience he describes, we recognize that he is speaking truthfully if not always perfectly, and he helps us make new sense of and gain greater strength from those events in our past.

Eugene England, then, like Hugh Nibley before him, is actually fulfilling that prophet-role that is not available to heads of the hierarchy, for their ordination as

Prophets, Seers, and Revelators perforce redefines those three words and those three roles. However much their minds may wander in seeking new understanding, in puzzling out the billion questions yet unanswered, the billion sights as yet unseeable by our present feeble light (which is, even so, the brightest light of understanding available in the world), their position at the head of the Church makes it impossible or undesirable for them to speak of those wonderings and speculations. They understand too clearly the price the Church has paid in the past when that limitation on the hierarchy was not understood and observed—when Brigham Young spoke his speculations on the role of Adam, when John Taylor expressed his conviction that the loss of polygamy would mean the apostasy of the Church, when a twentieth-century apostle uttered his tentative ideas about a relationship between lineage and the degrees of glory in the afterlife, when another twentieth-century apostle published his speculations about the future role of blacks in the Church as if they were Mormon doctrine. Because every word of a General Authority is seized upon, magnified, distorted, and then broadcast willy-nilly through the Church, causing tremors and upheavals in the community of the Saints, they must weigh their words carefully, or, in some cases, cause harm because they do not weigh their words carefully enough. Their position of authority gives them great power to influence and bind together the community, but that power must be used delicately, for it can cause division and fragmentation, confusion and weakness. All their words and acts are confined by the needs of the Church: because these men are the center, they must hold firm, they are not free to fly, not in public at least, not where others will mistake their personal speculations for firm doctrine. They must speak the fundamental truths that will make us one, yet when they attempt to elaborate on them they run the grave risk of obscuring them.

This is why the Church needs Hugh Nibley and Eugene England. They are not invested with official authority, so that the only authority they have in their writing is its truthfulness, the resonance of their ideas in the hearts of their readers. They have the freedom to be sincerely wrong without disrupting the community of Saints. Where the leaders of the Church must, as servants of the host, prepare the wedding feast and keep all in order, a Nibley or an England can, without harm, carry a lamp of his own to the wedding, bringing a gift of light to all who partake of the feast.

I APPROACHED *Why the Church Is As True As the Gospel* already disposed to agree with the title essay; some of you may be more skeptical. What struck me most forcefully, however, was that most of the other essays bore out the truth of his title essay. That is, his best and most valuable insights could only have been spoken by someone who sees the world from the perspective of a committed member of the Church. I have read other works by LDS writers of great intellectual gifts, who misunderstood what matters and tried to see the Church from the perspective of the world's intellectual elite; their analysis was sometimes impressive, but it meant nothing, since it could not be translated into good action. England's analysis, on the other hand, is sometimes unsatisfying, but when translated into action, it is invariably good, leading to Good. That makes England's essays worth writing, worth reading, and a valid part of the upbuilding of the Kingdom of God. This is a consecrated book,

even if it is not always correct.

Two essays in *Why the Church Is As True As the Gospel* do not follow this pattern. “Shakespeare and the At Onement of Jesus Christ” and “Hawthorne and the Virtue of Sin” are not written to fellow Saints but rather to fellow scholars of literature. Though they are infused with England’s faith, these two essays are a clear contrast with the rest of the book, and however interesting they are as an intellectual exercise, however, I would love to have been surprised by them in a scholarly journal, they are futile by comparison with the other essays in the book. If they were all he wrote, England would merely be a Mormon intellectual, of which the Church already has an oversupply, considering that the need for them is so very small. England is at his best—as are all teachers at all times—telling stories, rather than explaining someone else’s stories.

For Eugene England is not a Mormon intellectual. To call him that is to deny the value of his work. His life is not the servant of his mind: his mind is the servant of his life. He is a Saint whose abilities are consecrated to the building up of the Kingdom of God. Among those abilities are intellect and language, but there is no hint in his writing that he esteems them any higher than other abilities that he or other Saints might have. The head does not say to the hand, I have no need of thee. England neither has nor supports the notion that the “life of the mind” is a valid goal for the Latter-day Saint. If you long for someone to tell you that your unconnection with the Church is the result of your superiority, that you cannot fully participate in the Church because of your artistic sensitivity or intellectual discipline, you will find no comfort from Eugene England. Implicit in his writing is the truth that life without full participation in the Church is not life at all. Implicit also is the truth that full participation in the Church does not require or even reward the abandonment of intellect. The true Saint hungers for greater light and knowledge, and greater light and knowledge cannot be had apart from participation in the community of Saints.

So England’s book cannot be read safely. You cannot receive even a portion of the value of this book if you do not put yourself at risk in the reading of it, if you are not willing to be changed. But if you place yourself in his hands and receive his words with an open, undefended heart, he will bring you closer to the Spirit of God and closer to the community of Saints. That, and that alone, is the work worth doing.

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