

## A Model Faithful Voice

*By Gideon O. Burton*

Preface to the 1999 Tabernacle Books republication of England's *Why the Church Is As True As the Gospel*. It was also included in the *Irreantum* tribute issue that came out following England's death.

This version published: *Irreantum* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 46–47

THERE IS A characteristic tone to the essays of Eugene England that is very much at the heart of his views. It is a tone of commitment and faith. I might have labeled England's tone as "thought-provoking," which it is, yet he is so personally involved, so attached to Mormon beliefs, leaders, and people that his essays lack the off-putting aloofness or smugness of an intellectual. I might have called England's tone "personal," which it is, yet his passion is yoked not to an agenda but to the community, the beliefs, and the believers that have nurtured him, and to the truth that Jesus taught would set us free. There is a rigor to England's writing, a persistent sense of fairness—an openness, one might say—that resists the tendency to slip into bias or soapboxing. And there is unmistakable loyalty and optimism, too, side by side with criticism and analysis. Perhaps this is evidence of how seriously England has taken Paul's admonition (which is the epigraph to England's inaugural essay in the first issue of *Dialogue*), "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good" (1 Thes. 5:21). England will not relinquish the gifts of the mind or the heart: he both proves (tests, tries) and holds fast that which is good.

The most appropriate term for the tone of England's essays is commitment and faith. England's "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," observed Orson Scott Card in a review of *Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel*:

[England's] 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.

England conveys what Elder Neal A. Maxwell suggests when he talks about the combination of discipline and discipleship, or what B. H. Roberts intended when that earlier apostle articulated the ideal of "intelligent discipleship":

[Mormonism] calls for thoughtful disciples who will not be content with merely repeating some of its truths, but will develop its truths; and enlarge it by that

development. . . . The disciples of “Mormonism” . . . will yet take profounder and broader views of the great doctrines committed to the Church; and, departing from mere repetition, will cast them in new formulas; cooperating in the works of the Spirit, until they help to give to the truths received a more forceful expression and carry it beyond the earlier and cruder stages of its development.

This is England’s gift, and the unique balance of his prose. England must use his mind in the service of his church, and he will not abandon his faith nor his covenants of consecration which orient the use of his intellectual gifts. He is simultaneously an eloquent apologist for the Mormon cause, and one of its most loyal critics. Once again, Orson Scott Card articulates the careful balance England maintains throughout this particular book of essays:

Implicit in [England’s] 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.

Eugene England has been at the vanguard of many advances in Mormon literature. In 1966 he founded *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, which has provided a venue for the publication of Mormon stories, poetry, and criticism. He has more recently edited three anthologies of Mormon literature. He has shaped both the past and future of Mormon writing through the Association for Mormon Letters, which he cofounded and has actively promoted, through his book reviews and through his scholarly assessment of the Latter-day Saints’ literary tradition. However, I credit England’s greatest contribution to Mormon literature to be the model tone that he has set in his essays. As Mary Bradford has commented in her own seminal article on the personal essay form, Eugene England has been “devoted to the essay as a logical extension of that vital form—the testimony.” These essays, then, are a kind of literary testimony, intended as much to “hold fast to that which is good” as they are to “prove all things.”

The Mormon Literary Library, like so many LDS literary efforts, would never have been possible without Eugene England’s prior work in and ongoing vision of Mormon literature. It is with some pride that we once again make available key writings from this literary pioneer.

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How to cite this essay: Gideon O. Burton, “A Model Faithful Voice,” *Irreantum* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 46–47.

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