

# Dubious “Mormon” Stories: A Twenty-First Century Construction of Exit Narratives

**Gregory L. Smith**

Review of:

- Anonymous, “Conclusions,” MormonThink.com accessed 24 January 2012, <http://mormonthink.com/endpage.htm>
- John P. Dehlin, “How to Stay in the LDS Church After a Major Challenge to Your Faith,” undated, <http://mormonstories.org/other/HowToStay.html>
- John Dehlin, “The Path of the Uncorrelated Mormon,” PowerPoint presentation from Mormon Stories conference, New York City, 26 March 2011.
- John Dehlin, “268–270: Dr. Michael Coe—An Outsider’s View of Book of Mormon Archaeology,” podcast interview, parts 1–3, 12 August 2011, <http://mormonstories.org/?p=1880>.
- Richard T. Steadman and Lauren R. Johnson, “The Cultural Hall Ep. 4/John Dehlin,” podcast interview with John Dehlin, 2 September 2011, <http://www.theculturalhallpodcast.com/2011/09/the-cultural-hall-ep-4john-dehlin/>.
- John Larsen and Zilpha Larsen, “Episode 180: John Dehlin,” podcast interview with John Dehlin, 2 January 2012, <http://www.mormonexpression.com>.
- Open Stories Foundation, “Understanding Mormon Disbelief: Why do some Mormons lose their testimony and what happens to them when they do?,” March 2012, <http://WhyMormonsQuestion.org>.

## Introduction—New Order Mormons and the Internet<sup>1</sup>

The Internet provides an unprecedented means to unite like-minded individuals in virtual communities, no matter how esoteric their interests. Even the Church of Jesus Christ has felt the effects of this social realignment. Members of any social or ideological persuasion can find a congenial group of fellow-travelers, unrestricted by geography or ecclesiastical unit. One group, sometimes termed “New Order Mormons,” is increasingly visible on-line and even in the national media. New Order Mormons (NOM)—a loose designation that parallels what some have called “cultural Mormons,”—maintain familial, social, or cultural ties to the Church while rejecting many of its core tenets. (Many who fit this definition would also not self-identify as NOM.) Some former members go even further, and become ex-Mormons. One student at Yale Divinity School noted that “an entire ex-Mormon movement has emerged in the past several years.... Ex-Mormonism, as it were, has long-existed as a subset of a larger, and

---

<sup>1</sup> I appreciate the frank feedback of many advance readers. I also appreciate those on-line commentators (some anonymous) that pointed out typos, errata, or areas that could benefit from clarification. I include blog links to more involved discussion for those interested (<http://wp.me/p3gtkJ-5q>). I do not speak for any organization or group. Any errors remain mine alone. Some readers will be aware that Dehlin tried to have this review censored. An account of those events and subsequent developments is available in my “Return of the Unread Review: A Mormon Story,” 23 February 2013, at <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/SMITH2-Return-of-the-Unread-Review.pdf>. Consequently, I have made no effort to update the present review with additional material since the September 2011–November 2011 research period, although a few later citations have been added to provide further illustration of my argument. I have also cross-referenced the “Unread Review” essay so that themes can be more easily compared. See also <http://wp.me/p3gtkJ-5B>.

largely Evangelical counter-cult movement. This latest ex-Mormon iteration, however, is characterized by its mostly secular focus.”<sup>2</sup>

From a sociological perspective, NOM or secular ex-Mormons may play any and all of the roles occupied by members at the religious borders and beyond. They may be “leavetakers,”<sup>3</sup> but need not be. Such individuals have been classified by sociologists of religion into five categories. There is some variation in the terminology between authors, but they provide a useful framework for discussing the degree of alienation experienced by those who were formerly believing and fully-active members. The categories also highlight the difference responses to that alienation:

- 1) peripheral members—those who retain some nominal membership. Such members still consider themselves part of the faith and are so regarded by their co-religionists, but they are not full participants in the life of their faith community (e.g., “less-active” members);<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Seth R. Payne, “Purposeful Strangers: A Study of the ex-Mormon Narrative,” working paper draft, Yale Divinity School, 15 October 2007, 2, [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1959555](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1959555). An abbreviated report was also presented at Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City, 9 August 2008, <http://mormonstudies.net/html/payne/strangers.htm>. In this review, I cite the longer working draft paper

<sup>3</sup> When I use the term “apostasy” or “apostate” in this paper, I intend the neutral, sociological sense. I will, however, prefer the more neutral-sounding term “leavetaker” where possible. I use it in a generic sense to refer to any member who is withdrawing, to whatever degree, from full religious participation. Stylistic or citation reasons may, however, occasionally necessitate the use of the other terms.

<sup>4</sup> Eileen Barker, “Standing at the Cross-Roads: The Politics of Marginality in ‘Subversive Organizations,’” in *The Politics of Religious Apostasy: The Role of Apostates in the Transformation of Religious Movements*, edited by David G. Bromley (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 76–83; David G. Bromley, “Sociological Perspectives on Apostasy: An Overview,” in the same volume, 7); Payne, “Purposeful Strangers,” 3–7).

- 2) marginal members—those with profound disagreements with or alienation from at least part of their religion, though “they are also likely to believe that their movement—its beliefs, practices, or members—still has something to offer”;<sup>5</sup>
- 3) defectors—those who leave their faith relatively quietly, often in cooperation with religious authorities;
- 4) whistleblowers—those who, motivated by personal conscience, denounce specific wrongs in their former religion; and
- 5) apostates—those who associate with an “oppositional coalition” arrayed against their former faith.<sup>6</sup>

These are idealized categories and “should not be interpreted as denying or diminishing the importance of mixed types and movement between types. To the contrary; variations... would be expected to constitute the rule rather than the exception....”<sup>7</sup>

Leavetaking, then, need not be all-or-nothing. One might reject such foundational elements as the historicity of the Book of Mormon, the reality of Joseph Smith’s visions, or even the existence of God, and still remain affiliated in some way with the Church. One leavetaker might ask for her name to be removed from the records, another might abandon the Church’s moral code and find his membership in jeopardy, while a third might simply drift into inactivity. Each leavetaker, like each believer, walks his own path. Generalizing about such matters will almost certainly lead us astray in some ways.

---

<sup>5</sup> Barker, “Standing at the Cross-Roads,” 80.

<sup>6</sup> Bromley’s classification only includes the last three categories; Bromley, “Sociological Perspectives,” 5 and David G. Bromley, “The Social Construction of Contested Exit Roles: Defectors, Whistleblowers, and Apostates,” in *The Politics of Religious Apostasy*, 25–38.

<sup>7</sup> Bromley, “The Social Construction of Contested Exit Roles,” 21.

### *Mormon Stories*

Mormonism has recently produced a few particularly vocal and visible leavetakers from traditional or literal-faith Mormonism. One such is John Dehlin, whose statements and publications with *Mormon Stories* are particularly apt for examination because his public status has changed repeatedly. In 2007, one researcher characterized Dehlin as “perhaps the best example” of a believer who now engages in a “strong undercurrent of lively discussion, debate, and conversation involving a wide-range of Latter-day Saints. . . . Dehlin was a once devout Latter-day Saint who encountered all of the historical and doctrinal problems mentioned above but has chosen to remain a Latter-day Saint, and vigorously laud its culture.”<sup>8</sup>

While Dehlin began as a believer with questions, he later then became a more overt doubter that still planned to remain active in the Church, and finally announced his status as an unbeliever. His shifts have been self-chronicled over the last few years on-line. He affirmatively seeks to gather others like him and build rapport among them, all built on the foundation of resources he provides. Understanding what Dehlin says and does is necessary if one wishes to appreciate the present-day NOM/leavetaker approach that the Internet has facilitated. The accounts proffered by such leavetakers typically focus on historical, doctrinal, or cultural issues that leavetakers believe are relatively objective and open to neutral assessment. Yet, while the narratives—the “Mormon stories”—told by many secular leavetakers invoke such concerns, they also reveal that other factors must be considered.<sup>9</sup>

Dehlin’s on-line endeavors endorse skepticism about LDS truth claims, oppose the teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on some matters of sexual morality, and seek to form a network of “uncorrelated Mormons.” These are current or former members whom he wants to help form their own communities, adopt a “commonsense” ethics and morality (which differs from that advocated by the Church), and support each other in a transition to a different concept and practice of

---

<sup>8</sup> Payne, “Purposeful Strangers,” 32.

<sup>9</sup> Payne, “Purposeful Strangers,” 27, 31.

“Mormonism.”<sup>10</sup> This agenda thus blends of elements from the sociological model’s marginal member, whistleblower, and apostate.

Dehlin has been involved in a number of on-line publications, most notably podcasts.<sup>11</sup> He is also active in several other Internet venues and has created a non-profit foundation<sup>12</sup> to advance his goals—both on-line and off-line. In addition to Internet activities, *Mormon Stories* holds “Mormon Stories Conferences” in various U.S. cities, and has announced a German organization with the motto “Mormon culture in stories. Personal. Direct. Uncorrelated.”<sup>13</sup>

Formerly employed in information technology, Dehlin worked for *Sunstone* first as a board member developing the magazine’s on-line presence<sup>14</sup> and later as executive director for a brief period.<sup>15</sup> He has founded several websites, including *staylds.org*, which is “dedicated to helping people who are struggling in some way to remain involved in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints after a major shift in

---

<sup>10</sup> I treat each of these elements in further detail in this review.

<sup>11</sup> A podcast is much like a radio program. It is usually an audio-only file (though video podcasts also exist), which the user can download and listen to at leisure.

<sup>12</sup> “About,” Open Stories Foundation, accessed 28 February 2012, <http://openstoriesfoundation.org/>. The relevant IRS data can be viewed at <http://tinyurl.com/8717rxg>.

<sup>13</sup> Original reads: “Mormonische Kultur in Geschichten. Persönlich. Direkt. Unkorreliert,” <http://mormonstoriesgermany.com/> (23 June 2012). My thanks to Rene Krywult for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>14</sup> Dan Wotherspoon, “Blogging and Podcasting Sunstone Style!,” 15 September 2005, <http://sunstoneblog.com/>. Archived version available at <http://web.archive.org/web/20080905111435/http://sunstoneblog.com/2005/09/15/blogging-and-podcasting-sunstone-style/>.

<sup>15</sup> Carrie A. Moore, “A New Direction for Sunstone?,” *Deseret Morning News*, 7 August 2007, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/print/695198451/New-direction-for-Sunstone.html>.

(or challenge to) their faith.”<sup>16</sup> He has subsequently discontinued his public involvement with that website.<sup>17</sup> Dehlin is likely unknown to most members; he is probably best known on-line for his podcast series *Mormon Stories*. He has twice discontinued the podcast but then resumed it, together with appeals for ongoing financial support. Dehlin was to be paid a salary of \$40,000 dollars by his non-profit organization in 2012.<sup>18</sup> He is pursuing a graduate degree in clinical/counseling psychology at Utah State University.<sup>19</sup>

Dehlin says that he and *Mormon Stories* are objective, that their material and presentation are balanced, and that they do not try to push people into either leaving or staying in the Church. He also says that if he tells people to leave the Church, his own membership will be in jeopardy.<sup>20</sup> His status as a member of the Church assists his efforts to spread his message among members who might be less trusting of a non-Mormon or anti-Mormon source saying the same things. He adapts his message to the audience he addresses—Latter-day Saints often get a modified presentation of his stance and actions when compared to those opposed to the Church.

---

<sup>16</sup> “The Mission of StayLDS.com,” 13 July 2009, <http://www.staylds.com/?p=241>.

<sup>17</sup> Brian Johnson and StayLDS.com, “How to Stay in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints after a Major Challenge to Your Faith,” Open Stories Foundation, 2010, accessed 13 March 2012, <http://staylds.com/docs/HowToStay.html>.

<sup>18</sup> John Dehlin, “298: We Really Need Your Support,” 28 October 2011, <http://mormonstories.org/?p=2151>; “355: What Mormon Stories is Trying to Do, and How to Keep it Alive,” 25 June 2012, <http://mormonstories.org/355-what-mormon-stories-is-trying-to-do-and-how-to-keep-it-alive/>; “Finances,” Open Stories Foundation, accessed 28 February 2012, <http://openstoriesfoundation.org/finances/>; “About,” Open Stories Foundation, accessed 28 February 2012, <http://openstoriesfoundation.org/>.

<sup>19</sup> Kevin Opsashi, “Religious obsession studied; USU team develops treatment,” 2 January 2011, [http://news.hjnews.com/news/education/article\\_97ecb808-1636-11e0-9355-001cc4c002e0.html](http://news.hjnews.com/news/education/article_97ecb808-1636-11e0-9355-001cc4c002e0.html).

<sup>20</sup> See discussion at note 181 herein.

### **A note about methodology**

Dehlin has not published his claims in a book. Instead, he participates in podcasts, web postings, message boards, and on his public Facebook page. This on-line content presents any would-be reviewer with an expansive, scattered collection of disparate material.

In preparation for this review, first Dehlin’s public Facebook feed and websites were consulted. These led to an investigation of what LDS critics and former Mormons were saying about his work and claims, via a search of few message boards. A few of *Mormon Stories*’s more popular podcast episodes and two interviews with Dehlin on other podcasts were also consulted. One of the non-*Mormon Stories* interviews was conducted by a source that seems relatively friendly to the Church, and one by the hostile, ex-Mormon Larsens.<sup>21</sup> There were a few other podcasts or posts which I had read or heard about, and colleagues helped locate them.<sup>22</sup>

Obviously, this brief foray is not systematic or complete. It has only “dipped a toe” into the *Mormon Stories* pool—there are hundreds of hours of audio alone. But, those inclined to dive in completely can at least use the present review to inform them in their personal assessment of the water.

An analysis of *Mormon Stories* will be more thorough and accurate if the data about its claims and approach can be maximized. A broader context may alter how we understand these efforts. We can contextualize *Mormon Stories*’ teachings, claims, and techniques—and perhaps predict their consequences—best by examining the publicly accessible substance of its statements and claims. What, for example, does Dehlin say? What does he say in different venues to different audiences? What do those who follow him say and do? What do those who are hostile to the Church say about his claims and approach? What does Dehlin say about the effects of his activities upon members?

---

<sup>21</sup> “The institution is irredeemable in my eyes and our moral obligation is to get people out of the church.” John Larsen, “Here I Stand,” MormonExpressions blog (12 March 2012), <http://mormonexpression.com/blogs/2012/03/12/here-i-stand/#more-1971>.

<sup>22</sup> I cite each source below as it is introduced.



We will see that Dehlin invokes many of the standard anti-Mormon themes and criticisms. Such claims and tactics are not new. In a few ways, however, *Mormon Stories* is novel. Its approach has been tried elsewhere, but these techniques have now been introduced to a specifically Mormon context for the first time.

### **A Mormon novelty?**

The sociological study of leavetakers has identified common phrases and patterns in what is termed the “exit narrative,” or “apostasy narrative,” which gives an account of or justification for a former-practitioner’s withdrawal from full participation in a group. Mormon leavetakers are presumably as likely to construct such narratives as any other religionist. Dehlin’s leave-taking may, however, be something of a novelty within Mormonism, for two reasons. First, he and his non-profit have set out to reinforce and construct their collective exit narrative using the tools or style of modern social science. Second, and more significantly, he may be the first successful secular “exit counselor” for Mormons.

Exit counselors focused on a religious outlook have long been a feature of evangelical Christian reactions to new religions or “cults.” Mormonism has had its share of such efforts as well: Jerald and Sandra Tanner are probably the best example, but a host of other anti-Mormon “ministries” seek to ease Latter-day Saints from their faith through a combination of scriptural analysis, rational argument, and religious exhortation.<sup>23</sup> The popularity of such counselors generally is perhaps waning in evangelical circles,<sup>24</sup> but Dehlin has adopted much of their tone, methods, and approach toward Mormon matters. He has leveraged sufficient media attention, popular support, and financial resources to possibly succeed where other would-be secular ex-Mormon exit counselors have failed, regardless of whether they have adopted such a self-description or not. We will return to these themes in the final section of this review, once we are familiar with *Mormon Stories*’ approach.

---

<sup>23</sup> See discussion in Payne, “Purposeful Strangers,” 16.

<sup>24</sup> See discussion of several historical LDS examples in Armand L. Mauss, “Apostasy and the Management of Spoiled Identity,” in Bromley, *The Politics of Religious Apostasy*, 51

### A map for what follows

This review is divided into five sections:

- **Part 1—Rhetorical Approach and Technique:** an examination of some of the rhetorical techniques used by *Mormon Stories*.
- **Part 2—Ideology and Actions:** an examination of the ideology behind *Mormon Stories*’ claims, together with actions taken by Dehlin to assure his access to an LDS audience.
- **Part 3—Reactions to and Effects of *Mormon Stories*’ approach:** an examination of the reaction of ex-Mormons and other members of *Mormon Stories* to Dehlin’s efforts. The creation of a parallel “parachurch” support community is also detailed.
- **Part 4—*Mormon Stories*’ Teachings and the Ballard Criteria:** an examination of a few of *Mormon Stories*’ teachings that are problematic when compared with those of LDS leaders.
- **Part 5—*Mormon Stories*, and the Construction of Narrative:** data from parts 1–4 allow an examination of secularist Mormon exit-counseling. This can be understood via the sociological model of the role and construction of religious exit narratives. A potentially novel form of collaborative NOM narrative formation is described (the social science survey), and its flaws discussed.

## Part 1—Rhetorical Approach and Techniques

### The Power of Podcasts

At one point, Dehlin indicated that his stake president would “be reviewing my site,”<sup>25</sup> although he later reported that the evaluation had, in fact, been ongoing for months before.<sup>26</sup> One of his readers

---

<sup>25</sup> John Dehlin, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 5 May 2011 (9:10 PM),

<https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/561146002979>.

<sup>26</sup> Dehlin: “they spent hundreds of hours listening to my stuff, reading my stuff, monitoring my stuff, and taking extensive notes. . . . one member of the stake high council was actually trying to join a private forum to get private

spotted a potential problem with this approach: “Wait, John’s site is very light on text based content, and very rich in podcasts. I’m seeing 254 podcasts and most of them are multi-hour. In order to ‘review’ the content, he will have to listen to most of these.”

This perceptive observation highlights one of the many differences between podcasts and text-based discussions of LDS history, doctrine, or theology. For example, podcasts are not easily amenable to computer-based searches. The speed at which they can be consumed is relatively fixed. At best one can speed the audio playback somewhat. Even having listened to a podcast, one cannot easily cite its contents. One cannot cut and paste text from digital audio or even transcribe the exact argument for further analysis, discussion, comparison, or refutation without laboriously replaying the recording, typing, and double-checking.<sup>27</sup>

Also, podcasts do not provide a mechanism for source checking and citation. One does not even expect such tools, and their absence will excite no remark whatever. There are no footnotes in podcasts. Listeners must simply trust that a speaker is being accurate and honest with them.

Like the written op-ed pieces they resemble, podcasts are entertaining and easily accessible. They can be wonderful tools for producing sympathy, for humanizing people, and for creating a type of emotional resonance. These are not defects, and Dehlin is exceptionally gifted in how he uses the strengths of his chosen medium.

---

access to my friends and communications” (John Larsen and Zilpha Larsen, “Episode 180: John Dehlin,” podcast interview by John Dehlin, 2 January 2012, 24:10–24:50, <http://www.mormonexpression.com>). See note 163 herein.

<sup>27</sup> In this I know whereof I speak. I am grateful for the help of DeeAnn Cheatham, Trevor Holyoak, Dennis McKay, Stephen O. Smoot, James Stutz, and Hales Swift in helping me manage this problem by providing a transcript of one podcast. All analysis and errors remain mine alone.

“Societies,” warned Marshal McLuhan, “have always been shaped more by the *nature* of the media by which men communicate than by the *content* of the communication.”<sup>28</sup> Podcasts are particularly ill-suited to doing what Dehlin initially set as a goal—provide a thorough airing of difficult issues that help people come to some type of resolution consistent with faith. Dehlin admits that he does not go in with much preparation<sup>29</sup> and he at times claims that this is actually a strength:

The best I can try to be is Larry King right now . . . who actually takes the approach of intentionally NOT reading the books or doing background research before he interviews folks. There is definitely a sacrifice in preparedness and scholarship with this approach, but it comes with the advantage of coming at the interviews fresh, with the same eyes as most of my listeners.<sup>30</sup>

“In general,” Dehlin asserts, “I don’t find FAIR or FARMS reviews to be fair or credible. . . . Neither you, nor FAIR/FARMS have instilled within me the desire to read your reviews: quite the opposite.”<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Marshal McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 1967), 8, emphasis added.

<sup>29</sup> Dehlin admitted omitting much significant LDS scholarship from his discussion with Michael Coe: “All the items you list reveal the degree to which I was un-prepared for this interview. In that respect, I am guilty as charged.” Dehlin, comment on <http://mormonstories.org/?p=1880#comment-331732347> (accessed 23 March 2012). This interview is considered in detail at note 74 herein.

<sup>30</sup> John Dehlin, “Shawn McCraney on Mormon Stories,” 5 March 2010 (10:12 AM), [http://www.mormondialogue.org/topic/48196-shawn-mccraney-on-mormon-stories/page\\_\\_st\\_\\_40\\_\\_p\\_\\_1208815075#entry1208815075](http://www.mormondialogue.org/topic/48196-shawn-mccraney-on-mormon-stories/page__st__40__p__1208815075#entry1208815075). My thanks to Cal Robinson for masterful search engine help in locating this exchange, which I remembered but could not find.

<sup>31</sup> John Dehlin, “Shawn McCraney on Mormon Stories,” 5 March 2010 (10:12 AM), [http://www.mormondialogue.org/topic/48196-shawn-mccraney-on-mormon-stories/page\\_\\_st\\_\\_40\\_\\_p\\_\\_1208815075#entry1208815075](http://www.mormondialogue.org/topic/48196-shawn-mccraney-on-mormon-stories/page__st__40__p__1208815075#entry1208815075). My thanks again to Cal Robinson. FAIR is the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (<http://www.fairlds.org>); FARMS is the Foundation for

Thus, Dehlin does not even read much of the material that might at least help tell “the other side”; he decides it is not persuasive before examining it.

### “I’m Not a Reader by Nature”

In fact, Dehlin’s grasp of the relevant literature and issues can be shallow; he is often inadequately-informed. “I don’t think of myself as intellectual,” he says, “because I’m not a reader by nature, . . . but that’s certainly the area that I play in.”<sup>32</sup> This disinclination to read seriously and widely is often evident. For example, he expresses his disbelief in atonement and sin by complaining that “the idea that God makes us imperfect and then we’re supposed to beat ourselves up over our imperfections just seems screwed up to me.”<sup>33</sup> It is shocking that Dehlin thinks this says anything at all about the normative Latter-day Saint views of sin and atonement.

In LDS doctrine, God does not create us. We are eternally coexistent with him.<sup>34</sup> God does not make us imperfect—we simply *are* imperfect, despite his and our best efforts. God had no ultimate control over how we turned out—that was dependent on our own innate character and on our own choices as moral agents. This is a basic doctrine and one of the great philosophical strengths of Mormon theology.

Dehlin offers a rudimentary penal-substitution view of the atonement, explaining, “This idea that we have to punish someone else for a bunch of other people’s mistakes—that just bothers me. The fact that it is even necessary bothers me, and trying to do the math to make it all add up. . . . [P]unishing that guy

---

Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, now the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at BYU (<http://mi.byu.edu>). (Though see “Return of the Unread Review,” for a discussion of a change in the Maxwell Institute’s focus under its current leadership.)

<sup>32</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 52:16.

<sup>33</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 17:40.

<sup>34</sup> See Joseph Smith, as reported by William Clayton, 7 April 1844; quoted in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 359.

over there for what I did doesn’t make sense at all.”<sup>35</sup> The Book of Mormon agrees with Dehlin and explicitly rejects this type of model without serious modification (Alma 34:11–12, 14). Instead, the Book of Mormon moves us into another realm, one in which “infinite and eternal” sacrifice occurs, requiring “God himself” to vanquish death, sin, and suffering (Mosiah 3:28; Alma 7:11–13).

### **The Existence of Jesus**

Dehlin is skeptical about the atonement and resurrection and also skeptical about the very *existence* of Jesus as a historical person.<sup>36</sup> The existence of Jesus is, however, virtually uncontested by biblical scholars regardless of their religious affiliation. Wrote one representative author, “There are a few today who assert that Jesus is a myth who never existed, although it appears that no widely respected scholar holds this position.”<sup>37</sup>

This view was at one point something of an atheist touchstone, but no expert on early Christianity takes it seriously today—only atheist crusaders like Richard Dawkins still invoke it.<sup>38</sup> Despite there being almost universal consensus on this point even among a notoriously fractious group of scholars, Dehlin promotes an absurdity that hasn’t been taken seriously by informed readers for decades. He asks us to be no less trusting when he turns to academic Mormon matters.

---

<sup>35</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 17:10–18:00.

<sup>36</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 16:10. Further analysis of these claims is available below in notes 125–132.

<sup>37</sup> Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 62–64. Bart Ehrman, a prominent critic of Christian belief, argues against the Jesus-myth crowd in *Did Jesus Exist?: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (HarperOne, 2012). For more on this claim, see Louis C. Midgley, “Defending the King and His Kingdom,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 2 (2012): 134–137, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/defending-the-king-and-his-kingdom/>.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 122.

### Jerald and Sandra Tanner: Top-Rate Historians

Dehlin informs his audience that

I also have to say very little anti-Mormon literature really exists. That's kind of a bit of a misnomer because let's just take the worst stuff like Jerald and Sandra Tanner, the Tanners, and the Lighthouse Ministry. Those people are top-rate historians, and when they publish a book that you would . . . call "anti-Mormon literature," they're not, like, citing sources of people that had an axe to grind. All you have to do is go to the *Journal of Discourses* or early church newspapers or the Book of Mormon itself to find things that are going to be troubling if your mind is open.<sup>39</sup>

This claim about "anti-Mormon literature" is demonstrably false. Are the Tanners simply "top-rate historians?" Lawrence Foster, a non-LDS historian who has published on LDS matters did not think so: "[The Tanners] always assume the worst possible motives in assessing the actions of Mormon leaders."<sup>40</sup> Todd Compton, a historian who has not published white-washed or devotional history, said that "in matters of interpretation, I have not found [the Tanners] to be reliable."<sup>41</sup> A student of ex-Mormon apostasy narratives likewise assessed the Tanners quite differently than Dehlin does, noting that their "Utah Lighthouse ministry . . . may be classified as contemporary conservative anti-Mormons."<sup>42</sup>

Dehlin attempts to rehabilitate the Tanners by insisting they only cite LDS sources rather than people with an axe to grind. If we consult a single volume, the Tanners' *The Changing World of Mormonism* (1979),<sup>43</sup> we will see many axes being ground. These include (among others) citations of George B. Arbaugh's *Gods, Sex, and Saints* (p. 122); Fawn Brodie (pp. 59, 149, 231, 443); David Whitmer after his

---

<sup>39</sup> Steadman and Johnson interview, 46:30–47:20.

<sup>40</sup> Lawrence Foster, "Career Apostates: Reflections on the Works of Jerald and Sandra Tanner," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17/2 (Summer 1984): 45–46.

<sup>41</sup> Todd Compton, post to LDS-Bookshelf mailing list, no date, copy in my possession, accessed 24 March 2012, <http://www.lds-mormon.com/compton.shtml>.

<sup>42</sup> Payne, "Purposeful Strangers," 16.

<sup>43</sup> Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *The Changing World of Mormonism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979).

apostasy (pp. 41–42, 97, 442, 445–46); the Hurlbut-Howe affidavits (p. 80); M. T. Lamb’s *The Golden Bible* (pp. 141–42); the posthumous John D. Lee (p. 501–3); William E. McLellin (pp. 99–100, 109); James Strang (pp. 99–100); Wilhelm Wyl (p. 230–31); Ann Eliza Webb Young (pp. 239–40); and a volume entitled *The Abominations of Mormonism Exposed* (pp. 212, 236).

But Dehlin is again partially correct when he points out that the Tanners cite a great many LDS sources in addition to these hostile works. He does not tell us that the Tanners are notorious for quote-mining LDS materials. (Compton describes this approach, noting that he suspects they “merely looked through my book for negative proof-texting.”<sup>44</sup>) It is common for the Tanners to provide quoted material that, if consulted in the original, often says something quite different from their snippet filled with ellipses and boldfaced or all-capitalized type. To return again to a single volume, *The Changing World of Mormonism*, the Tanners quote-mine or distort the *Journal of Discourses* at least fifteen times (pp. 25, 27, 29, 186, 220–21, 225–26, 233, 234, 248, 258, 383, 434, 448, 482, 512, 515) and Joseph Fielding Smith’s *Doctrines of Salvation* at least ten times (pp. 27, 39, 150, 179, 398, 418, 488, 501–2). They even succeed in making it appear that the *Ensign* teaches ancestor worship (p. 517).<sup>45</sup> Yet Dehlin unapologetically refers to this as “top-rate” history.

### “Just the Facts, Ma’am”

Dehlin reacts defensively to any implication he might be doing damage to the Saints or their faith. After claiming that listeners “rarely” leave the Church because of what he says, he then explains: “I don’t create this content. I didn’t create the *Journal of Discourses*, I didn’t create the Book of Mormon, I didn’t create the church’s early newspapers. . . . We never talk about, quote, ‘anti-Mormon literature.’” “But,” he continues, “we do talk about things that are in church publications and things that are in Mormon

---

<sup>44</sup> Compton, post to LDS-Bookshelf mailing list, no date.

<sup>45</sup> A convenient summary of the Tanners’ quote-mining is available in the FAIR wiki:

[http://en.fairmormon.org/Quote\\_mining/Jerald\\_and\\_Sandra\\_Tanner](http://en.fairmormon.org/Quote_mining/Jerald_and_Sandra_Tanner).



doctrine.”<sup>46</sup> It is clear to any careful reader, however, that the Tanners and *Mormon Stories* are not simply presenting a straightforward transcript of these early Church documents. They are citing them selectively, they are giving emphasis to some areas and not to others, and they are often misrepresenting them. The manner in which information is presented can influence how it is perceived. *Mormon Stories* is, Dehlin insists, “not anti- or apologetic—we’re just trying to be honest, sincere, and objective.”<sup>47</sup>

He gives an example of his objectivity by discussing the Book of Mormon and DNA:

The Book of Mormon—if you go to the title page it says, “This book is a record of the ancient inhabitants of America.” That’s what it says—and so when we are confronted with scientific data that shows that DNA of Native Americans actually comes from Asia, not from Europe or Israel, you can’t really say that’s anti-Mormon. Those are just facts.<sup>48</sup>

Dehlin is correct that much Amerindian DNA is likely of Asian origin. But it is not this fact alone that will decide such matters—what counts is how facts are arranged, interpreted, and framed. And which facts are *not* mentioned that might also be relevant?

Dehlin omits necessary information by not informing the audience of vital data. Is it a history of all the ancestors, or only some, or only a few? On technical matters like human population genetics, those unfamiliar with the science may see a problem where none exists. Many experts in human genetics and the Book of Mormon text do not regard the situation as presenting serious difficulties.<sup>49</sup> Dehlin does not demonstrate a command of the science involved, but he uses a fact about Amerindian DNA to reach a wide variety of conclusions that are not facts. They are instead interpretations or extrapolations, and

---

<sup>46</sup> Steadman and Johnson interview, 14:10.

<sup>47</sup> Steadman and Johnson interview, 17:45.

<sup>48</sup> Steadman and Johnson interview, 47:37.

<sup>49</sup> A number of DNA experts’ work is conveniently available in Daniel C. Peterson (editor), *The Book of Mormon and DNA Research: Essays from the FARMS Review and the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008), and on-line at <http://mi.byu.edu>.

usually in error.<sup>50</sup> These are discussed further below, but “objective” or “neutral” they are not, any more than the Tanners are top-rate historians with no axe to grind.

### **Telling Both Sides and Poisoning the Well**

Like most of us, Dehlin is anxious to demonstrate that he is neutral and balanced. When asked by LDS interviewers for some good sources on difficult issues, he mentioned MormonThink.com and FAIR.

There’s a website called mormonthink.com that does a really good job of showing the tough historical issues. There’s another one called fairlds.org that also talks about all the tough issues. So I say that those are two places. . . . [fairlds.org] is created by devout, active members of the church, and every difficult issue you can ever want to find there is there. It talks about racism, homosexuality, gender issues, science and religion, magic and the occult, Joseph’s use of peep stones—all that stuff is right there in fairlds.org. If you want another very scholarly, credible place to go, go to mormonthink.com. And they’re less of a faithful site, but they’re every much as accurate as fairlds. Those two places you can go to read stuff.<sup>51</sup>

But here we see the first of many occasions during which Dehlin delivers or creates a different narrative for different audiences. When told that “MormonThink does not give an honest representation of the church, its history, or beliefs,” Dehlin replies that it is better than any other site: “I can’t think of a more honest one . . . warts and all. Can you? Certainly not FAIR or FARMS. Certainly not LDS.org. . . . Both (all) sites are biased—I think that the FAIR site is 50x more biased than Mormon Think. Just my opinion.”<sup>52</sup> Just an opinion—but one that informs the material he produces.

---

<sup>50</sup> Some of Dehlin’s specific claims regarding DNA—which include far more confused editorializing than facts—are discussed below at footnote 91.

<sup>51</sup> Steadman and Johnson interview, 48:44.

<sup>52</sup> John Dehlin, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 3 January 2012 (5:36 PM), 4 January 2012 (9:54 AM), <https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/592940706139>. See <http://wp.me/p3gtkJ-5G>.

Further, we are told, “FAIR/FARMS spin ultimately causes much more harm than good. It’s just rarely credible to thoughtful, objective people who are trying to uncover the ‘truth.’”<sup>53</sup> He elsewhere describes “why I deplore LDS apologetics so much,”<sup>54</sup> and he insists that “20th and 21st century LDS apologetics (FAIR, FARMS, Maxwell institute) will go down as destroying more testimonies than any other single Mormon influence. That’s what happens when you blame the victim, or give very poor and evasive answers to credible issues.”<sup>55</sup>

Dehlin’s expressed views are thus sometimes far more partisan, and he spends considerable effort poisoning the well against those who support the Church. He doesn’t shy away from blanket condemnation and ridicule. For example, upon the death of well-known atheist Christopher Hitchens, Dehlin observed, “I respect the new atheists more than traditional LDS apologists mostly because I find them to be orders of magnitude more: 1) honest, 2) intelligent, and 3) funny.”<sup>56</sup> This does not match Dehlin’s portrait of himself as respectful and fair-minded all across the Mormon spectrum.<sup>57</sup> One reader

---

<sup>53</sup> John Dehlin, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 4 January 2012 (12:41 PM), <https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/592940706139>.

<sup>54</sup> John Dehlin, “Greg Smith, Dan Peterson, John Dehlin, & Lou,” post on *mormondiscussions.com*, 10 May 2012, (4:36 PM), <http://mormondiscussions.com/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=23840&start=105>.

<sup>55</sup> John Dehlin, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 8 June 2012 (8:52 AM), <https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/376554112402668>.

<sup>56</sup> John Dehlin, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 16 December 2011 (9:06 AM), <https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/181949725235108>. Despite Hitchens’s manifest intelligence and gifted pen, his ignorance about even the basic facts of religious history is disappointing. Some of Hitchens’s misapprehensions are corrected in: Daniel C. Peterson, “Editor’s Introduction: God and Mr. Hitchens,” *FARMS Review* 19/2 (2007): xi–xlvi; William B. Hamblin, “The Most Misunderstood Book: christopher hitchens [*sic*] on the Bible,” *FARMS Review* 21/2 (2009): 47–95.

<sup>57</sup> See note 104 herein and accompanying main text for Dehlin’s claims along these lines.

noted how the mention of Hitchens led Dehlin to a knee-jerk “criticism of LDS apologists, and that’s what settles the debate.” Dehlin replied with a smiley face.

### **MormonThink.com**

MormonThink.com is a relentlessly hostile and critical effort, despite its claims to be accurate and balanced.<sup>58</sup> Its articles frequently refer to the standard anti-Mormon sources, such as Jerald and Sandra Tanner’s Utah Lighthouse Ministry, the countercult Institute for Religious Research, the revealingly titled “JosephLied” website, and former member Steve Benson.<sup>59</sup> Wikipedia is, at times, the most neutral source cited.<sup>60</sup>

At the time of Dehlin’s writing, the editor of MormonThink.com described his own efforts in a way reminiscent of Dehlin’s. The editor assures the reader that he is scrupulously honest: “I never lie at

---

<sup>58</sup> “An objective look at Mormons. . . . We present both sides fairly and let the reader decide” (mormonthink.com, accessed 15 November 2011). Some characteristic articles include such titles as “The Book of Mormon is not supported by any archaeological evidence,” <http://mormonthink.com/book-of-mormon-problems.htm#archeology>; “The Book of Mormon is not supported by any linguistic evidence,” <http://mormonthink.com/book-of-mormon-problems.htm#linguistic>; and “The population problems of the Book of Mormon,” <http://mormonthink.com/book-of-mormon-problems.htm#population>.

<sup>59</sup> None of the articles cited in the previous footnote, for example, contain any references or links to sources that might argue for the Book of Mormon’s veracity.

<sup>60</sup> For a discussion of the difficulty of getting balanced treatment of LDS issues on Wikipedia, see Roger Nicholson, “Something Wiki This Way Comes,” FAIR conference presentation, 2001, [http://www.fairlds.org/fair-conferences/2011-fair-conference/2011-something\\_wiki\\_this\\_way\\_comes](http://www.fairlds.org/fair-conferences/2011-fair-conference/2011-something_wiki_this_way_comes). A written version is also available in “Mormonism and Wikipedia: The Church History That ‘Anyone Can Edit’,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1/1 (2012): 151–90, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/mormonism-and-wikipedia-the-church-history-that-anyone-can-edit/>.

church.”<sup>61</sup> However, he found it necessary to remain anonymous to avoid any consequences for his actions: “Only a few trusted non-believers [*sic*] know I own the site. . . . I mostly stay [a member] to help others just finding out the truth. I would be labeled an apostate if it was known so I don’t let that happen.”

Like Dehlin,<sup>62</sup> he says he is “not trying to drive people away from the church. I just want them to have all the info necessary to make an informed decision.” Despite this claim, he reports that he spent a difficult three years persuading his wife to follow him into unbelief: “Took about 3 years to convince her—not a fun 3 years I might add. So here’s [some] hope for those with T[ru]e B[eliever] M[ormon] spouses. . . .”

---

<sup>61</sup> All citations from the discussion at reddit.com, “I am the webmaster of MormonThink.com AMA,” 27 January 2012, [http://www.reddit.com/r/exmormon/comments/ozyfg/i\\_am\\_the\\_webmaster\\_of\\_mormonthinkcom\\_ama/](http://www.reddit.com/r/exmormon/comments/ozyfg/i_am_the_webmaster_of_mormonthinkcom_ama/). Since Dehlin’s endorsement, MormonThink has had two new editors. The first made his opposition to the Church and its beliefs unmistakable (see note 65 herein); the second is equally blunt: “The church is false - fact, period.” (Anointed one [Tom Phillips], “Re: I don't want the LDS Church to change,” post on *Recovery from Mormonism*, 24 December 2012 (8:06 AM), <http://exmormon.org/phorum/read.php?2,741700,742084#msg-742084>.) “If they wish for me to not be a 'member of record' they can excommunicate me,” writes this editor, “But, it will be a painful and media intensive process for them so to do.” (Anointed one [Tom Phillips], “Re: Too bad,” post on *Recovery from Mormonism*, 16 December 2012 (9:07 AM), <http://exmormon.org/phorum/read.php?2,734480,734673#msg-734673>.) “Why such speed with him [former editor David Twede], yet no action against me?” asks the current editor, pointing out that he is “more interested in getting the offensive stuff out to non-Mormons.” (Anointed one [Tom Phillips], “Re: Why are the Mormon Gestapo threatening MormonThink...yet leaving me alone?,” post on *Recovery from Mormonism*, 19 September 2012 (3:57 PM), <http://exmormon.org/phorum/read.php?2,643393,643427#msg-643427>.)

<sup>62</sup> See notes 46–48, 188, 205, 211, and 253 herein. See discussion as it relates to exit-counseling at 334.

MormonThink.com’s editor does admit to some discomfort with what he is doing: “I feel somewhat nervous at church and kinda like a spy or something. . . . If I raise my hand, I will be called on. I am not as bold as I wish I was in my comments.” He explains his approach:

one of the reasons I remain in the church [is that i]t gives me greater credibility when I speak about my own religion instead of it being my former religion. . . .

By subtly mentioning things in meetings I may raise some doubts or by carrying around a copy of [Grant Palmer’s] ‘An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins’ or Sunstone or Dialogue, I am sometimes asked about them and can gently guide someone to further enlightenment about church history.

So you can consider myself one who tries to share the historical problems of the church from within instead of from outside the church.

MormonThink’s editor finds it easier to “subtly . . . raise some doubts” by appearing to be a believer. This necessarily involves considerable deception. He admonishes us to “Remember the Roman Empire; it wasn’t brought down from external forces only, but primarily from internal strife.” Perhaps having revealed too much, he then demurs: “I’m not trying to bring down the church.” However, as he says elsewhere, “I fantasize about a full-blown faith-destroying session.”<sup>63</sup>

When asked why he stays, he insists that he has to because of honesty: “I need to be honest as MormonThink says that it is run by members. Well if I left, that would no longer be true. It’s a sacrifice I make in order to help people and keep the integrity of the website intact.” His disdain for the members is clear: “It is hard to sit though many of the meetings when I know such much more truth than any of them do. And I can’t just stand up and tell them.” He admits that his honesty isn’t all it could be: “The hardest challenge for me is to keep some level of integrity. I never lie at church (i.e. give a false testimony) but I play the game to keep membership but don’t want to be given callings I don’t want.”

---

<sup>63</sup> MormonThink's webmaster, posting as "SpongeBob SquareGarments," on "Recovery from Mormonism" message board, “I do that all the time,” 21 February 2012 (12:50 PM), <http://exmormon.org/phorum/read.php?2,423418,424113#msg-424113>.

Our anonymous undercover unbeliever recommends John Dehlin.<sup>64</sup> And Dehlin returns the favor.<sup>65</sup>

### **Dehlin's Objectivity**

Claims to objectivity come up against the reality that no one is truly objective. As demonstrated above,<sup>66</sup> some will pay lip service to the idea that everyone has biases, while acting as if they have successfully controlled for their own. Still, as Charles Darwin once noted, even in science, theory and

---

<sup>64</sup> All examples to the preceding footnote are from "Conclusions," accessed 24 January 2012, <http://mormonthink.com/endpage.htm>. For a detailed review of many of MormonThink.com's claims, see [http://en.fairmormon.org/Website\\_reviews/MormonThink](http://en.fairmormon.org/Website_reviews/MormonThink).

<sup>65</sup> A subsequent editor, David Twede, described his efforts to spread doubt by posing as an active, believing member. When his Church leaders objected to his tactics, Twede tried to co-opt the media, claiming that he was being silenced for expressing his views about presidential candidate Mitt Romney. Twede's press release emphasized his claim to be "a life-long, fifth-generation Mormon in good standing," despite his previously-announced atheism and desire to lead members from their faith. An initial article by *The Daily Beast* accepted Twede's claims about persecution for his political views. Other media outlets were less credulous, and soon realized that Twede's story was neither plausible, nor self-consistent. Twede ultimately resigned his membership, rather than face Church disciplinary action. (See blog posts by MormonThink managing editor David Twede posted at "Prozacville: Turning black-n-white minds into colorful paisley," September 2012. The blog has been relocated to the MormonThink site at <http://mormonthinkblog2012.blogspot.com/>; Steve Benson, posted on *Recovery from Mormonism*, 20 September 2012; Jamie Reno, "Mormons Want to Excommunicate Romney Critic," *The Daily Beast*, 21 September 2012. For further references and details, see [http://en.fairmormon.org/Criticism\\_of\\_Mormonism/Websites/MormonThink/Media\\_efforts\\_by\\_MormonThink\\_editor\\_David\\_Twede](http://en.fairmormon.org/Criticism_of_Mormonism/Websites/MormonThink/Media_efforts_by_MormonThink_editor_David_Twede).)

<sup>66</sup> See note 52 herein. For another *Mormon Stories* speaker doing the same thing, see note 260 herein.

presupposition guide the very types of observations that will be made and the sorts of data that will be regarded as legitimate or relevant.<sup>67</sup> If this is true of science, how much more of history and religion?<sup>68</sup>

Dehlin temporarily discontinued *Mormon Stories* for a second time partly because of an issue of bias: “I started having my own crisis of faith. And I started feeling like I was tempted to stray from my objectivity and start really pushing people in a direction outside the church, and I realized that I didn’t want to do that either.”<sup>69</sup> He now feels that “I’m kind of at this happy equilibrium where I’m honestly not trying to push people out of the church, I’m not trying to convince them to stay, I just want there to be an open healthy dialogue.”<sup>70</sup> Readers will have to decide for themselves whether Dehlin is truly not trying to push people one way or the other, as there are inherent contradictions in such a position. He tells us that he used to be angry with the church, “but I’m [now] past the point of anger.”<sup>71</sup> Yet when asked, “So you still feel like your identity is tied up in Mormonism?” Dehlin replies emphatically, “My identity is *completely* tied up in Mormonism.”<sup>72</sup>

It could well be that Dehlin is sincere in thinking that bias and even anger do not affect him, that he successfully controls for biases, and that he has adopted a neutral stance toward a matter that completely defines him. But, his many negative comments must raise questions about his assertions of neutrality.

---

<sup>67</sup> Charles Darwin to Henry Fawcett, 18 September 1861, in *More Letters of Charles Darwin*, ed. Francis Darwin (London, 1903), 1:195; cited in Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 35.

<sup>68</sup> See Duane Boyce, “The Spirit and the Intellect: Lessons in Humility,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 50/4 (2011): 75–107, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/showTitle.aspx?title=8814>.

<sup>69</sup> Steadman and Johnson interview, 16:10.

<sup>70</sup> Steadman and Johnson interview, 16:28.

<sup>71</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 22:05–22:10.

<sup>72</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 21:29–21:46, emphasis added to indicate Dehlin’s verbal emphasis.



### **Benefits and drawbacks of podcasts**

In Dehlin's worldview, the Church and its truth claims seem to be always approached from a critical angle, and is thus always on the defensive. Given Dehlin's tendency to avoid asking any hard questions of many critical guests, one does not even have the advantages that a more adversarial *Meet the Press*-style encounter might provide—if one's goal is actually to resolve a difficult or troubling issue in a way that is consistent with faith.

The audience that is most likely to read or to listen to Dehlin are Latter-day Saints with doubts or disturbing questions who may feel alienated or ostracized or that they are the victims of betrayed trust. It is likely an enormous relief for them to be able to find an environment that welcomes, and even celebrates, that experience. Dehlin's podcasts do not question his own convictions and certainties, but focuses on those embraced by what are often caricatures of believers. The normative beliefs and certainties of the general Church membership are the focus of relentless negative analysis, dissection, and criticism.

The audience is repeatedly told that doubts and worries are normal and rational, which is certainly true. They are also told that these and other doubts are shared with a host of intelligent, amiable people who have also not been able to resolve them and retain their faith. Like the new doubter, Dehlin's community has suffered because of what the Church or its leaders have or haven't said or done. The appeal of such things to those who are sincerely troubled is obvious, and there can be some periodic justification for such a perception. But the experience seems rarely followed by a faithful answer to the key issue: must I abandon or radically alter my faith? Confronting this type of question, by Dehlin's own admission, has only resulted in his decision to abandon faith and covenants. Almost everyone has had doubts; almost everyone learns something about a historical figure that is disappointing. Almost everyone has had a bad experience with an imperfect leader, and most of us have probably caused such experiences when we were leaders. Dehlin's organizations take this normal human condition and consistently render it as an experience that can best be eased or eliminated by abandoning literalist belief and joining *Mormon*

*Stories*’ support group. There is little recognition that such experiences are virtually universal, and not inimical to on-going faith.<sup>73</sup>

### **Case Study: *Mormon Stories* and Dr. Michael Coe**

The power of podcasts and Dehlin’s style and approach are well illustrated by his interview with renowned Mesoamericanist Michael Coe.<sup>74</sup> This example illustrates how the power of the podcast—and its perils—can be exploited for rhetorical advantage. It also demonstrates Dehlin’s degree of objectivity and attitude toward those who disagree with him.

The podcast is an excellent example of how Dehlin appears ill-prepared and ill-informed.<sup>75</sup> “I think there are steel swords mentioned in the Book of Mormon, or shields or helmets or whatever,” says Dehlin.<sup>76</sup> There are, in fact, no metal shields mentioned anywhere. Breastplates are mentioned and those who discovered the last battle of the Jaredites are said to have found breastplates “of brass and of copper,” which seem to be something of an anomaly to the Nephites since they are brought back as evidence of an unusual tale (Mosiah 8:9–10). The construction or material of Nephite breastplates is never specified. The word *helmet* is never used in the Book of Mormon. What *is* mentioned is “head-plates,” which is quite a different matter, but the material of which they are made is never described.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> Discussed in a broader context in John D. Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 5.

<sup>74</sup> For a response to Coe and Dehlin, see John L. Sorenson, “An Open Letter to Dr. Michael Coe,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1/1 (2012): 91–109, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/an-open-letter-to-dr-michael-coe/>. See also <http://wp.me/p3gtkJ-5Z>.

<sup>75</sup> See note 30 herein and the subsequent section.

<sup>76</sup> Coe interview, part 1, 24:00.

<sup>77</sup> Alma 43:38, 44; 46:13; 49:24; Helaman 1:14; 3 Nephi 4:7; Ether 15:15.

So Dehlin has not even properly focused the matter upon which a discussion needs to take place.<sup>78</sup> His remarks occupy a single sentence and are over in perhaps ten seconds, and the attack proceeds—yet it takes multiple footnotes and an entire paragraph to even begin to correct his misstatements.<sup>79</sup> Dehlin has laid an unsure (and nonfactual) foundation for discussion in an instant, and any response would likely take pages of print or many minutes of airtime. This demonstrates neither balance nor objectivity.

Five other rhetorical techniques will be examined, with attention given to how they help Dehlin craft his narrative.

### *First technique*

*Mormon Stories'* first technique is to dispute claims that the Book of Mormon does not make. For example, Coe and Dehlin spend considerable energy deriding the idea of “coins” in the Book of Mormon—despite the fact that the Book of Mormon text never mentions “coins” at all, but a weight-based system of exchange.<sup>80</sup> Dehlin sat on a review panel at Sunstone Symposium for Michael Ash’s *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, in which book Ash discusses the coin issue. It can be easily found in the index

---

<sup>78</sup> On Book of Mormon “steel,” see William J. Hamblin, “Steel in the Book of Mormon,” <http://www.fairlds.org/authors/hamblin-william/steel-in-the-book-of-mormon> (accessed 18 April 2012); John L. Sorenson, “Steel in Early Metallurgy,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/2 (2006): 108–9, <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/jbms/?vol=15&num=2&id=423>; John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Utah : Deseret Book Co. ; Provo, Utah : Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1996 [1985]), 277–88.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, William J. Hamblin, “Armor in the Book of Mormon,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 400–24.

<sup>80</sup> John W. Welch, “Weighing and Measuring in the Worlds of the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/2 (1999): 36–46.

under “Book of Mormon > Anachronisms > Coins.”<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, Dehlin told one audience that FAIR’s website “also talks about all the tough issues . . . every difficult issue you can ever want to find there is there.”<sup>82</sup> Yet he did not avail himself of this resource. Nor did he use the Maxwell Institute’s website to provide balance or even an alternative voice to his interview.<sup>83</sup>

Dehlin discloses that “for my listeners, a lot of this information I’m getting for my questions [for Coe] comes from a website called MormonThink.com. It’s an excellent website which lists a lot of this stuff.”<sup>84</sup> On the “Nephite coins” issue, MormonThink.com provides very little, claiming only that “apologist Daniel Peterson of FARMS says that Alma 11, which describes Nephite coinage, is almost certainly *wrong*.”<sup>85</sup> This misrepresents Peterson, who argues that the modern *heading* (and not the revealed Book of Mormon text itself) discussing “coins” is in error.<sup>86</sup> The only source given by MormonThink.com is a website called “The Mormon Delusion.”

It would be fascinating and useful to see Coe actually engage seriously with the evidence marshaled by Sorenson or Peterson, but that can never happen if neither Coe nor Dehlin can tell us accurately what that evidence *is*. They don’t appear to have read the Book of Mormon closely. Coe states frankly that he

---

<sup>81</sup> Michael R. Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One’s Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt* (Redding, CA: FAIR, 2008), 103; see index item on p. 297.

<sup>82</sup> See footnote 51 herein. A Google search of “Book of Mormon coins” yields a link to FAIR’s wiki site: [http://fairmormon.org/Book\\_of\\_Mormon/Anachronisms/Coins](http://fairmormon.org/Book_of_Mormon/Anachronisms/Coins) (last modified 15 November 2011).

<sup>83</sup> See <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/search/?fulltext=coins>.

<sup>84</sup> Coe interview, part 1, 43:08. On MormonThink.com’s hostility and bias, see notes 58–65 herein.

<sup>85</sup> “Nephite coins,” on page “Book of Mormon Problems,” accessed 15 November 2011, emphasis in original, <http://mormonthink.com/book-of-mormon-problems.htm>.

<sup>86</sup> Daniel C. Peterson, “Review of *Mormonism*, by Kurt Van Gorden,” *FARMS Review of Books* 8/1 (1996): 97.

did most of his research on this topic in 1973 for *Dialogue*; he seems to assume that the relevant Mesoamerican and Mormon studies have not advanced the discussion at all.<sup>87</sup>

*Second technique*

A second technique is to engage Coe on matters about which he is not an expert. For example, Dehlin mentions DNA and the Book of Mormon, chiasmus,<sup>88</sup> and the question of whether Mesoamerican languages show any links to the Old World.<sup>89</sup> Coe is quick to agree that these fields of study likewise provide arguments against the Book of Mormon’s authenticity, but he is not professionally equipped to comment on them and he gives no sign of having informed himself about them. (Coe did not know what chiasmus is. Dehlin used Google to find a definition, and the confident declaration that chiasmus doesn’t help the Book of Mormon quickly followed.<sup>90</sup>) Dehlin offers editorial comment about how “DNA evidence and other things have really started people—Mormons—thinking more clearly about what the Book of Mormon claims to be, what type of record and evidence it purports versus the evidence that science continually affords us.”<sup>91</sup> Dehlin mistakenly believes that the idea of a limited geography or small pool of DNA donors causes problems for believers, since “either Joseph and all the prophets from Joseph to now or most of them pretty much all got it all wrong, calling people Lamanites who they shouldn’t have called Lamanites, you know.”<sup>92</sup>

Dehlin omits what population genetics tells us about his proposed scenario—if even a small Lehi colony were added to many indigenous peoples, and if Lehi had *any* descendants in the modern era, then by Joseph Smith’s time *all* Amerindians would be descendants of Lehi. This does not mean that Lehi

---

<sup>87</sup> Coe interview, part 1, 14:00.

<sup>88</sup> Coe interview, part 3, 25:00.

<sup>89</sup> Coe interview, part 1, 56:00.

<sup>90</sup> Coe interview, part 3, 25:00–27:30.

<sup>91</sup> Coe interview, part 1, 45:00.

<sup>92</sup> Coe interview, part 1, 53:30.

would be the majority source of genetic material or that any “Lehite” signal would persist. It means simply that after twenty-six hundred years, if one has any descendants, one typically has a great many descendants. If Dehlin does not understand this, he does not understand the relevant science at all.<sup>93</sup>

Dehlin also uses Coe’s “evisceration” of the Book of Mormon to portray a negative conclusion as inevitable. While acknowledging that in so doing he is “asking [Coe] to step out of the realm of scientist and into the place of a counselor, a father, or a sage,” Dehlin declares:

If the Book of Mormon is a laughing-stock to non-LDS anthropologists, and if the historical record and the scientific record, if 99 percent of it is contradicted by the scientific records versus what’s in the Book of Mormon, this is devastating to me and to my faith and to my religion. And do you have thoughts or feelings or perspective on that clash? You can kind of live in a partitioned world where you kind of reap the benefits of science and of intellectual inquiry and at the same time compartmentalize and still believe. But at some point for some it becomes untenable.<sup>94</sup>

The message conveyed to the listener is obvious—you cannot believe the Book of Mormon literally: if you do, you are either compartmentalizing your intellectual life or you are willing to reject history, science, and 99 percent of the book itself. Dehlin skillfully leads Coe to confirm what *Mormon Stories* has been advocating as part of his “uncorrelated Mormon” effort:

Okay, so you’re saying . . . that you can embrace science and the historical record and either look at religion as more of a social phenomenon, as a moral phenomenon, spiritual phenomenon in your life and just let go of the literality of it all and kinda become, . . . as you wrote in *Dialogue*, become a “Liahona Mormon” or a metaphorical symbolic Mormon, a cultural Mormon and not take the doctrines and the teachings literally. . . . Or you can stop believing but still be a highly moral, ethical person.<sup>95</sup>

---

<sup>93</sup> I discuss this point at length in “Often In Error, Seldom in Doubt: Rod Meldrum and Book of Mormon DNA,” *FARMS Review* 22/1 (2010): 86–88. See also Matthew Roper, “Swimming in the Gene Pool: Israelite Kinship Relations, Genes, and Genealogy,” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 160.

<sup>94</sup> Coe interview, part 3, 47:00.

<sup>95</sup> Coe interview, part 3, 52:00–55:00.

*Third technique*

A third technique resurrects arguments that most LDS scholars and apologists have dismissed because they do not constitute reliable evidence for the Book of Mormon, even though some used to find them persuasive. This includes a supposed elephant glyph that is actually a macaw,<sup>96</sup> Quetzalcoatl as a veiled reference to Christ,<sup>97</sup> and Izapa Stela 5.<sup>98</sup> Some of these may have been current issues when Coe was

---

<sup>96</sup> Coe interview, part 1, 44:00. Brant Gardner identifies the item as a macaw, not an elephant, in *Second Witness*, 6:260. It is mentioned as a possible elephant by Roper and Peterson in 2004, but this one-sentence reference is accompanied by three pages discussing biological remains that they obviously consider of more significance. Daniel C. Peterson and Matthew Roper, “Ein Heldenleben? On Thomas Stuart Ferguson as an Elias for Cultural Mormons,” review of *Quest for the Gold Plates: Thomas Stuart Ferguson’s Archaeological Search for the Book of Mormon*, by Stan Larson,” *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 194–96.

<sup>97</sup> Coe interview, part 2, 10:00. Brant Gardner has likewise been skeptical of this argument: “The Christianization of Quetzalcoatl: A History of the Metamorphosis,” *Sunstone* 10/11 (1986), 6–10, <https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/pdf/055-06-10.pdf>; “Quetzalcoatl’s Fathers: A Critical Examination of Source Materials,” 1997, <http://www.ku.edu/~hoopes/aztlan/tripart.htm>; “A New Chronicler in the Old Style,” *FARMS Review* 19/1 (2007): 13–22; “Where Much Is Promised, Less Is Given,” review of *Decoding Ancient America: A Guide to the Archaeology of the Book of Mormon*, by Diane E. Wirth, *FARMS Review* 20/1 (2008): 15–32; “Excursus: Quetzalcoatl: A Malleable Mythology,” in Gardner, *Second Witness*, 5:353–95. See also Andrew J. McDonald, “New Evidences for Old?: Buyer Beware,” review of *Evidences of Christ in Ancient America*, by Blaine M. Yorgason, Bruce W. Warren, and Harold Brown,” *FARMS Review of Books* 12/2 (2000): 101–18.

<sup>98</sup> Coe interview, part 3, 45:00. Hugh Nibley was criticizing the “Lehi’s Tree of Life” interpretation of the Stela by 1958: Hugh W. Nibley, “M. Wells Jakeman, Stela 5, Izapa (Provo, Utah, 1958),” 1–7. FARMS played a major role in the LDS reassessment of this artifact: Stewart W. Brewer, “The History of an Idea: The Scene on Stela 5 from Izapa, Mexico, as a Representation of Lehi’s Vision of the Tree of Life,” 12–21; “Book of Mormon

doing his research in 1973, but they are not necessarily major topics of interest today. The fact that LDS scholars debate such matters on their merits does not, however, fit the narrative being offered by *Mormon Stories*, in which Mormons (like “Marxists,” in Coe’s characterization) cling to whatever evidence will support their beliefs.<sup>99</sup>

#### *Fourth technique*

A fourth technique creates straw men, easily-dismissed arguments that no Mormon has ever offered. For example, Coe and Dehlin spend time on the obvious and undisputed lack of references to King Benjamin, Alma, Mormon, or Moroni in Mayan texts. Yet no marginally informed Latter-day Saint has ever expected to find such references (see Enos 1:14–16; Mormon 8:14–16). New World chickens are likewise announced to be of Polynesian rather than Middle Eastern<sup>100</sup> descent, although chickens are mentioned in the Book of Mormon only by the risen Christ, in a passage whose language is clearly influenced by the New Testament.<sup>101</sup> In fact, Sorenson mentions the chicken as evidence of transoceanic contact with the Americas from Asia, so he clearly doesn’t think a Middle Eastern chicken is necessary for the Book of Mormon’s antiquity.<sup>102</sup>

#### *Fifth technique*

---

Archaeology: A Rich Source for LDS Folklore,” 19; John E. Clark, “A New Artistic Rendering of Izapa Stela 5: A Step toward Improved Interpretation,” 22–33, all from *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999).

<sup>99</sup> On Coe’s repeated comparison of Mormon archaeologists to Marxists, see Coe interview, part 3, 6:00, 18:00.

<sup>100</sup> Coe interview, part 2, 9:00.

<sup>101</sup> Compare 3 Nephi 10:4–6; Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34. See discussion in Gardner, *Second Witness*, 5:321–23.

<sup>102</sup> John L. Sorenson and Carl L. Johannessen, “Scientific Evidence for Pre-Columbian Transoceanic Voyages to and from the Americas, part 1,” <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/transcripts/?id=154>; citing Tolstoy (1974) for the Asian origin of the chicken.



A fifth technique peppers the discussion with chuckles, giggles, and snorts from Dehlin as Coe gently skewers the naïve Mormon believer. Words aren't necessary to invite the listener to join in the audible mockery.

When overtly expressing their views, Dehlin and Coe usually adopt a kind, even sympathetic tone. This is part of the narrative subtext—*Mormon Stories* is respectful and tolerant, while believers are not. Dehlin summarizes:

Well, this is a tough, I mean a tough thing for believing Mormons to hear, but I think it's important if we are going to live in a world of reality. If we are going to benefit from all that science has provided us, I don't think that we as Mormons can just conveniently dismiss what science and history and linguistics and anthropology and archaeology and genetics all tell us about the Book of Mormon, so I really appreciate you being willing to share with us your life's work and perspective even though it's a really tough pill to swallow.<sup>103</sup>

"If I've done anything right with Mormon Stories," says Dehlin elsewhere, "it's been by interviewing folks from all sides with a similar, respectful tone. I challenge you to find a mean-spirited or sarcastic interview (overall)."<sup>104</sup>

Dehlin's sympathetic tone is also somewhat muted when he speaks to his followers on Facebook. Prior to the publication of the Coe interview, he was more jubilant: "Wow. That's all I can say. Wow. This one's gonna be a tough pill to swallow."<sup>105</sup> In these less formal moments, his attitude toward those

---

<sup>103</sup> Coe interview, part 3, 55:00.

<sup>104</sup> John Dehlin, "Shawn McCraney on Mormon Stories," 5 March 2010 (10:12 AM), [http://www.mormondialogue.org/topic/48196-shawn-mccraney-on-mormon-stories/page\\_\\_st\\_\\_40\\_\\_p\\_\\_1208815075#entry1208815075](http://www.mormondialogue.org/topic/48196-shawn-mccraney-on-mormon-stories/page__st__40__p__1208815075#entry1208815075).

<sup>105</sup> John Dehlin, post on Facebook wall, 11 August 2011 (11:25 AM), <https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/233427193367049>.

believers who are dishonest, unintelligent, or humorless enough to dispute his conclusions is revealed as less tolerant or benign.<sup>106</sup>

### **Dehlin describes his methods**

Dehlin and the Larsens, ex-Mormon atheists who operate their own podcast, discussed their differences in style. The interview is revealing:

Interviewers: We [the Larsens] do tend to take a more negative position. . . . I don't think people confuse us with the regular church stuff, but your stuff—it's a little bit more fuzzy; it might be more confusing.

Dehlin: Yeah.

Interviewers: And that's intentional, right?

Dehlin: I'm intentionally trying to be a safe place for people to initially learn the information and feel comfortable going there. I've always been sensitive to wanting you guys to not feel like I'm calling you negative or unsafe. But I want to build a bridge so that people can get all the facts, all the information, and then make an informed decision.<sup>107</sup>

Though Dehlin relies upon a more gentle approach he is quick to remind us that he doesn't want to convey that the more strident Larsens are “unsafe” for members either. “This is our spectrum, and this is your spectrum, and they're fine. They don't contradict each other even though they overlap partially but not completely,” conclude the Larsens. Dehlin agrees: “And I think we're both needed.”<sup>108</sup> Dehlin interviews potentially faith-affirming guests to give listeners “a sense” that he is “fair and balanced”:

Dehlin: For the people who want to learn, you want to feel as safe as possible. Now, I'm not trying to fool them. My goal isn't to try to get them to leave. My goal is for them to get all the facts. So I don't feel like I'm trying to deceive them, but I don't want to have them turn me off before they even listen. . . . I feel like I hit the tough issues. I just try to interview them in an

---

<sup>106</sup> We have seen this extensively above. See notes 52–56, 113 herein. See also “Return of the Unread Review,” notes 42–44, 51–53, 55, 97, 110–111, 150–151.

<sup>107</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 27:34–28:17.

<sup>108</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 28:20–29:05.

objective way, and try and have that balance, if I do [Grant] Palmer, I do [Richard] Bushman so they'll always get this sense that I'm trying to be fair and balanced.

Interviewer: Palmer is worth a Bushman.

Dehlin: [laughs]

Interviewer: Is that the exchange rate? Is that the trade?

Dehlin: Yeah, it's kind of—yeah, that's the exchange rate.<sup>109</sup>

In his output and professional credentials, Grant Palmer is not of the same calibre as Richard Bushman.<sup>110</sup> The “exchange” being struck seems not to be based on the merits of their scholarly work or the strength of their arguments. Instead, a friendly and faithful voice provides a cushion for the hostile, anti-Mormon one.

Dehlin's promotional material also highlights faithful Mormon guests. In response to “What is the Mormon Stories podcast?” the audience is told that it “explore[s] many aspects of Mormonism and has featured leading scholars like Richard Bushman, Daniel Peterson, and Terryl Givens.”<sup>111</sup> These three are all well-known academics who have defended the truth claims of the Church. None of the critics, ex-

---

<sup>109</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 30:40–32:02.

<sup>110</sup> Palmer has no scholarly publication record in Mormon studies. His first publication was a recapitulation of the standard anti-Mormon canards with a few bizarre novelties of his own that even critics have not embraced (see note 150 herein). Bushman, by contrast, is a prominent academic historian: winner of the Bancroft Prize, Gouverneur Morris Professor of History emeritus at Columbia University, and former Howard W. Hunter Visiting Professor in Mormon Studies at Claremont Graduate University. Bushman has taught at, among others, Columbia, Delaware, Boston College, Brown, BYU, and Harvard.

<sup>111</sup> Anne Peffer, “Podcast Statement of Purpose,” 19 May 2012, (6:41 PM), <http://mormonstories.org/podcast-statement-of-purpose>.

Mormons, and hostile voices given a forum by *Mormon Stories* are mentioned.<sup>112</sup> While he uses an interview with Peterson as a selling-point for his podcasts, only days earlier Dehlin was describing Peterson as practicing “old school, disingenuous, ad hominem-style apologetics...[that] are very, very damaging: to the church,” and declaring that “Daniel Peterson seems to be a pathological deceiver. I don’t know how else to explain his behavior. Crazy.”<sup>113</sup>

Dehlin is described as “a member of the Mormon church, [who] started a podcast dedicated to the open, thoughtful exploration of Mormonism.”<sup>114</sup> This promotional material also notes that his topics include “the reconciliation between faith and the intellect, and apostasy,” but does not disclose that Dehlin has been unable to reconcile his faith with his intellect.<sup>115</sup>

---

<sup>112</sup> Examples include Grant Palmer (4 episodes), Margaret Merrill Toscano (4 episodes), Paul Toscano (7 episodes), Simon Southerton (nearly 3 hours) and Richard Packham (4 episodes). See <http://mormonstories.org/highlights/>, <http://mormonstories.org/348-349-simon-southerton-dna-lamanites-and-the-book-of-mormon/>. For more on Packham, see note 147 herein.

<sup>113</sup> John Dehlin, “Greg Smith, Dan Peterson, John Dehlin, & Lou Midgley,” (12 May 2012), <http://www.mormondialogue.org/topic/57768-greg-smith-dan-peterson-john-dehlin-lou/>; John Dehlin, “Greg Smith, Dan Peterson, John Dehlin, & Lou,” post on *mormondiscussions.com*, 10 May 2012, (8:56 PM), <http://mormondiscussions.com/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=23840&start=126>. Dehlin would also complain in the same message about the “typical D[aniel] C[.] P[eterson] dissembling and distracting.”

<sup>114</sup> Peffer, “Podcast Statement of Purpose.” Compare to the uses of Dehlin’s membership status in note 227 herein, and a “leadership packet” in note 180.

<sup>115</sup> Peffer, “Podcast Statement of Purpose.”

## Part 2—Ideology and Actions

### Temple recommends

The counterpoint to Dehlin’s crises of faith has been his repeated accounts of what his bishop and stake president reportedly think of all this. From 2009 through 2010, his website announced:

I remain an active, temple recommend-holding member of the LDS church. My wife and I currently teach in the Primary and really, really enjoy it. I love both the church and its members deeply—and sincerely hope to see the church strengthen and prosper in the coming years. . . .<sup>116</sup>

This description remained unchanged throughout 2010.<sup>117</sup> Dehlin uses his temple recommend-holding status as implied reassurance: neither Dehlin nor his bishop or stake president consider him ineligible. In mid-2010, Dehlin elsewhere characterized himself as “active in the church” and “currently hold[ing] a temple recommend. I consider myself to be a believer in God, and in Jesus. I also view the church and the Book of Mormon as inspired—although I struggle sometimes with how literal vs. symbolic/metaphorical these beliefs are. In the end . . . I choose to follow/believe. . . . I continually have doubts/concerns . . . but I plan to remain an active, committed member until the day I die.”<sup>118</sup>

More recently, Dehlin described himself as “a semi-active, somewhat Universalistic member of the LDS church.” He rejects the Church’s claim to be the only true Church, though he still believes in God (“though I don’t quite know what that means”). “My goal in life,” we are told, “is to help struggling Mormons find peace during tough transitions.” He reassures readers that “you should know that my

---

<sup>116</sup> John Dehlin, “What Is Your Status Now In The Church?,” 14 April 2009, <http://mormonstories.org/?p=492>, archived web snapshot as of 1 February 2010 (accessed 11 November 2011) at <http://web.archive.org/web/20100201093408/http://mormonstories.org/?p=492>.

<sup>117</sup> See various snapshots available at [http://wayback.archive.org/web/\\*/http://mormonstories.org/?p=492](http://wayback.archive.org/web/*/http://mormonstories.org/?p=492). There are no archives before or after 2010.

<sup>118</sup> johndehlin, comment on “John Dehlin,” 20 May 2010 (7:32 PM), <http://www.lds.net/forums/general-discussion/32092-john-dehlin-2.html#post503963>.

bishop and stake president know all of the above about me, have reviewed what I do with Mormon Stories, and continue to encourage me to remain active, and to feel welcome at church.”<sup>119</sup> Gone is the claim about a temple recommend, but the implied ecclesiastical endorsement of his activities is still there.<sup>120</sup>

In early 2012, when asked about his status, Dehlin reported, “I don’t have a temple recommend right now. I’m temple worthy, but I don’t pay tithing.”<sup>121</sup> Dehlin claims that he would pay his tithing if his stake president would spend it and disclose “where it is going,” but the stake president reportedly refused.<sup>122</sup> Among other things, Dehlin has expressed his disagreement with the Church’s support of Proposition 8 and the construction of Salt Lake City’s City Creek Center mall; he clearly doesn’t wish to

---

<sup>119</sup> John Dehlin, “What Is Your Status Now In The Church?,” 14 April 2009, <http://mormonstories.org/?p=492>.

<sup>120</sup> While dated 14 April 2009, this description is on public display on the FAQ page of his website as of March 2012, <http://mormonstories.org/what-is-your-status-now-with-the-church/>.

<sup>121</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 20:35.

<sup>122</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 20:48–21:29. Money is fungible, so Dehlin can consider his tithing as funding *anything* upon which the Church spends tithing funds. I would be equally correct to conceptualize all my tithing as remaining in the ward, all going to temple construction, all going to administration, and so on. Even if he paid in cash and all his nickels and dimes went straight to purchasing something of which he wholeheartedly approved, that would simply free up others’ tithing funds from the common pool to be used elsewhere. More importantly, he presents the Stake President with an impossible demand—the stake president *cannot* spend the tithing. All such decisions are made by the First Presidency, Quorum of the Twelve, and Presiding Bishopric, and budget funds are then returned to local units for use. The stake president must refuse Dehlin’s offer, because he cannot under any circumstances retain and spend tithing.

support these ventures.<sup>123</sup> Yet the mall has nothing to do with tithing, and the only Church contributions to Proposition 8 were in-kind donations for travel, staff work, and media production.<sup>124</sup>

Dehlin thus confuses the matter when he claims to be “temple worthy” except for tithing. In the same interview, he outlines additional convictions which would likely disqualify him:

1. **God:** “I’m at the point where I realize that God, the probability that God exists is quite low. . . . As I look at the probability that everything that we have here is just random, and there’s no purpose or meaning to it, that actually seems almost as absurd as the idea that there is some type of God. Those seem almost equally absurd to me. . . . there has been enough support for what I’ve tried to do that I just call that God. I slap the ‘God’ label on that, fully aware that there is a low probability that there actually is anything. . . . I’m aware that might be completely a product of my imagination.”<sup>125</sup>

---

<sup>123</sup> As noted in the previous note, money is fungible—but, tax laws prevent the transfer of tithing funds to things like the City Creek Center mall. Were he to pay tithing, Dehlin’s money *cannot* end up supporting the mall—unless he wishes to claim that the Church is violating the tax code and the IRS is oblivious.

<sup>124</sup> On the Proposition 8 funding, see “Media Reports on Proposition 8 Filing Uninformed,” 4 February 2009, <http://newsroom.lds.org/article/media-reports-on-proposition-8-filing-uninformed>. These figures can be verified with the State of California on-line at <http://dbsearch.ss.ca.gov/>. On City Creek Mall, see “Church Releases Plans for Downtown Salt Lake,” *Ensign*, December 2006, 76–80, <http://lds.org/ensign/2006/12/news-of-the-church>; Doug Smeath, “Downtown renovation project,” *Deseret News*, 27 March 2007, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/660205772/Downtown-renovation-project.html>.

<sup>125</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 11:45–15:44.

2. **Jesus Christ:** “I have no idea whether Jesus existed or not. Anyone who says they know, it’s just a matter of faith. I think the probability that Jesus actually really lived and was resurrected is actually really low. And I’m actually not invested in that.”<sup>126</sup>
3. **Atonement:** “The atonement: I just don’t understand the atonement. This idea that we have to punish someone else for a bunch of other people’s mistakes, that just bothers me, the fact that it is even necessary bothers me. . . . Punishing that guy over there for what I did doesn’t make sense at all, and so none of that makes sense.”<sup>127</sup>

There are, in fact, a number of temple-recommend questions that ask about faith in God, Christ, and the Holy Ghost. A belief in Christ’s salvific role is also vital, as is faith in the restoration of the gospel and a commitment to sustain current Church leaders as holding unique and exclusive priesthood keys. If a member honestly does not share these beliefs, that is not cause for condemnation or critique. What is troubling, however, is Dehlin’s insistence that he is eligible for a recommend but for tithing—the claim is false, based upon his own report. If what he says about his nonbelief is accurate—and there is no reason to question it—then his claim to be temple-recommend worthy cannot be.

The situation becomes more remarkable in light of Dehlin’s long history of giving guidance to disaffected members on how to get a temple recommend despite their disbelief in the basics. In a paper targeted at those with doubts, he included the disclaimer that “I never advocate lying.” “But,” he goes on, “I would encourage you to use extreme caution when speaking to church members—especially church leaders—about your issues regarding church history, doctrine or culture. . . . Be very careful before you open up to your bishop about these matters. Once you do, there is likely no ‘stuffing the genie back in the

---

<sup>126</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 16:10. The scholarly consensus on Jesus’s historical existence is discussed above, see note 37 herein.

<sup>127</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 17:09.



bottle.”<sup>128</sup> It is not plain, however, how hiding one’s doubts during a temple recommend interview is much different from lying.

Dehlin tells those “disaffected from Mormonism” that “local leaders are strictly forbidden to add additional questions to the interview.”<sup>129</sup> He then sets out to interpret the temple recommend questions in such a way as to allow one to “honestly” answer as needed to receive a recommend, even if one doubts the fundamentals.

For example, Dehlin notes that “fortunately” the interview “simply ask[s] if you have a testimony of Jesus as your savior (or something to that effect).” This leads him to a remarkable interpretation of what the question may be asking:

Well, at a minimum, I do believe that a man named Jesus once existed, that his teachings have “saved” me from much trouble, pain, and sadness in my life, and that He ultimately died as a martyr for these teachings. So at a minimum, I accept Jesus as my personal savior *in this manner*. I’m also very open, and even hopeful, that there is much, much more to the story (italics added).

The first two questions are: “1. Do you have faith in and a testimony of God the Eternal Father; His Son, Jesus Christ; and the Holy Ghost? 2. Do you have a testimony of the Atonement of Christ and of His

---

<sup>128</sup> John P. Dehlin, “How to Stay in the LDS Church After a Major Challenge to Your Faith,” accessed 19 March 2012, <http://mormonstories.org/howtostay/HowToStayOld.html>; archived copy at [http://www.mormonstudies.net/html/dehlin/how\\_to\\_stay.html](http://www.mormonstudies.net/html/dehlin/how_to_stay.html). A modified version of Dehlin’s original essay at *staylds.org* is cited in note 17 herein. See also <http://wp.me/p3gtkJ-5V>.

<sup>129</sup> Dehlin is mistaken if he believes leaders cannot probe a member’s answers further. Readers should consult Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Handbook 1: Stake Presidents and Bishops—2010* (Intellectual Reserve, 2010), sections 3.3.3, 3.3.4, 7.1.1. Compare note 133 herein. See also <http://wp.me/p3gtkJ-5X>.

role as Savior and Redeemer?”<sup>130</sup> If one cannot accurately paraphrase the questions, either accuracy is not a priority, or one has not given them much thought.

Dehlin goes to great length to parse what he thinks leaders of the Church intended to communicate in the temple recommend interview: “In my opinion, the brethren have intentionally kept the temple recommend questions very simple, and in many ways quite vague.” But when these simple questions do not permit the degree of leeway he requires, he discards their clear intent.

How, for example, can a question about faith in and a testimony of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, avoid the issue of whether one believes Jesus was divine or not? Or resurrected or not? Or whether he really lived or not? We are not asked simply if Jesus saved us from some trouble in this vale of tears, but whether he is Savior and Redeemer. A redeemer rescues us from sin, suffering, and death—this view is not comparable to seeing Jesus as author of some mere wise maxims. Of the atonement, Dehlin says, “Who really understands the Atonement? I would argue that no human really does.”<sup>131</sup> Members are not asked if they understand the atonement, only if they have a testimony of it. The Articles of Faith are clear: “We believe in God the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ. . . . We believe that through the atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved. . . . We believe that the first principle. . . of the gospel [is] . . . faith in the Lord Jesus Christ” (Articles of Faith 1,3,4).

It strains credulity to claim that Church leaders meant to communicate that one could doubt the divine Sonship of Christ and likewise deny the reality or efficacy of the resurrection and atonement and still answer affirmatively to the first two temple recommend questions. There is nothing more foundational to LDS doctrine than Jesus’s divinity and ongoing redemptive power.

---

<sup>130</sup> Most endowed members will know these well; they are cited in Robert D. Hales, “Preparing for a Heavenly Marriage,” *New Era*, February 2006, <https://www.lds.org/liahona/2006/02/preparing-for-a-heavenly-marriage>.

<sup>131</sup> Dehlin later, in a more open expression of disbelief, describes what he believes the LDS view of sin, imperfection, and atonement to be as “screwed up”. See notes 33–35 herein.

Even in the *Missionary Guide* that was provided to all missionaries of Dehlin's era, there are a variety of possible interview questions that could be asked prior to approving an investigator for baptism. One question suggested is: "Do you accept Jesus Christ as the literal Son of God?"<sup>132</sup>

Dehlin asks his readers to believe that the Church thinks believing in Jesus as the literal Son of God is important for baptism, but of no relevance whatsoever when participating in its highest and holiest ceremonies. "Please know," the audience is again told, "that I am not in any way advocating dishonesty or deception here."

If Dehlin or others are not, at present, in harmony with the temple requirements, that is no obstacle to continued membership in the Church or the faithful fulfillment of many Church callings. What is more significant, however, is Dehlin's distortion of the interview's purpose and intent. Believing members regard these issues and concerns as sacred. The leaders conducting the interviews feel a solemn duty to protect members from making promises they will break.<sup>133</sup> But, Dehlin urges his audience to hide the truth, and gives them the intellectual tools to justify dishonesty.

He himself was less than forthright when he complained to the German press in mid-2012 about the "cool reception" he gets "on some Sundays he defies his doubts and goes to church in Logan. 'I am practically the only one in the Ward who is never called to give a sermon.... But I love the singing, and my soul communicates with the Saints.'"<sup>134</sup> It seems unfair to act as if a member who expresses disbelief in God, Jesus, and the Restoration should expect to be asked to preach.

---

<sup>132</sup> *Missionary Guide: Training for Missionaries* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Corporation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1988), 235.

<sup>133</sup> See *Handbook 1*, sections 3.3.3. Compare note 129 herein.

<sup>134</sup> Andreas Ross, "Alltag der Mormonen in Utah," : Für alle Ewigkeit," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6 June 2012, accessed 12 June 2012, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/alltag-der-mormonen-in-utah-fuer-alle-ewigkeit-11775372.html>. My thanks to Stephen O. Smoot for the translation and for bringing this article to my attention.

### **Interviews with leaders**

In Dehlin’s narrative, then, his leaders have examined his *Mormon Stories* output and found nothing that disqualifies him from continued membership in the Church. The audience does not have access to the stake president’s view of the matter, save through Dehlin’s account. Still, Dehlin clearly wants his audience to know about the interviews, and offers them as evidence.

When interviewed for the *Cultural Hall* podcast, Dehlin was praised as an “LDS [person] . . . who publish[es] the history. . . . I think we need people like yourself [i.e., Dehlin] saying, ‘Look, this is what happened, but you know, I still have a testimony, it might be a little different than somebody’s else’s, but I’m a Mormon, and this is what happened’ and . . . having it put in a better light than what some people might on-line, and that’s something I really appreciate.”<sup>135</sup>

In his own case, Dehlin’s advocacy of “middle way”<sup>136</sup> or “Open Mormonism,” ultimately proved untenable. This model suggest that one attend Church for its good social effects even without a belief in its founding narratives, in the Book of Mormon as genuine divine scripture, the divinity of Christ, the existence of God, or the reality of priesthood keys. Dehlin announced in April 2011 (before the *Cultural Hall* interview) that “I’m no longer active in the church” because of “a gradual feeling that full church activity wasn’t really worth the time/effort any more,” in part due to “feeling really uncomfortable from

---

<sup>135</sup> Richard T. Steadman and Lauren R. Johnson, “The Cultural Hall Ep. 4/John Dehlin,” podcast interview by John Dehlin, 2 September 2011, 17:03, <http://www.theculturalhallpodcast.com/2011/09/the-cultural-hall-ep-4john-dehlin/>.

<sup>136</sup> Jennifer Dobner (AP), “Web site is refuge in Mormons’ crisis of faith,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 19 July 2009, <http://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=12871883&itype=NGPSID>. See note 17 herein. Such terms seem roughly equivalent to some varieties of NOM.

an integrity/honesty perspective about ‘looking’ like active, believing members when we didn’t feel that way inside.”<sup>137</sup> In May an administrator at *postmormon.org* reported that Dehlin had told him that

he couldn’t remain a member and avoid the problems with the church any longer. His personal integrity would no longer allow him to look the other way.... He’s meeting with the Stake President in a few days, I assume regarding his disaffection.... Congratulations to you and your wife on your ‘graduation’ from Mormonism John!!!!<sup>138</sup>

Dehlin replied the next day: “Yes . . . I no longer attend church, and [I am] no longer...willing to act or appear as though [I] believe the fundamental truth claims (given existing information). . . . I do not at this time have plans to resign, and my meeting Thursday night is at the request of my stake president.”<sup>139</sup>

### **Dehlin appeals to his audience for help**

In preparation for this meeting, Dehlin solicited feedback on his various on-line projects from struggling or disaffected members. The word spread quickly: “PLEASE support John by posting a positive and constructive comment if StayLDS.com, the Mormon Stories podcast, or even John himself has helped you deal with your faith and connection to Mormonism,” wrote Brian Johnson.<sup>140</sup> A follow-up post by another reader advised readers that “even if you don’t feel that your story is important, **the number** of responses is important, therefore please do your best and post something. He is going to meet

---

<sup>137</sup> Mormonstories [John Dehlin], comment on thread “Conversation on FB with a friend, because oh [sic] John Dehlin,” 12 April 2011 (9:48 AM), <http://forum.newordermormon.org/viewtopic.php?t=20463>.

<sup>138</sup> Jeff Ricks, “Yes, John Dehlin has left the Church,” 3 May 2011 (3:02 PM), [http://www.postmormon.org/exp\\_e/index.php/discussions/viewthread/28352/](http://www.postmormon.org/exp_e/index.php/discussions/viewthread/28352/).

<sup>139</sup> Mormonstories [John Dehlin], comment on thread “Yes, John Dehlin has left the Church,” 5 May 2011 (9:38 AM), [http://www.postmormon.org/exp\\_e/index.php/discussions/viewthread/28352/P40/](http://www.postmormon.org/exp_e/index.php/discussions/viewthread/28352/P40/).

<sup>140</sup> Brian Johnson, “Help John Dehlin!!!,” 3 May 2011 (4:32 PM), <http://www.staylds.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=2447>. Johnson runs *staylds.org* and is a member of the *Mormon Stories* board. See notes 17, 18, and 259 herein.

with a ‘church Leader’ for whatever reason and the more responses he has the stronger his position is in my opinion. At present there are about 143 posts, we can get the word out and greatly increase that number!”<sup>141</sup>

What Dehlin sought from his readers is notable. His own request asked them to describe (1) their current “situation/thoughts/feelings with regard to the church,” (2) “what you feel you are needing/lacking that the church has not yet been able to provide,” and (3) “how Mormon Stories has helped in that journey (if it has).” Dehlin further requested that respondents direct their comments “to your own situation/thoughts/feelings/needs regarding the church” instead of directing “compliments (or criticisms) to any one person involved in Mormon Stories.”<sup>142</sup>

Dehlin’s desired focus, then, was specific criticism regarding the failings or inadequacies of the Church and, presumably, how his efforts were filling those gaps. While he seems to at least tacitly acknowledge that he may not have helped everyone or that there might be criticisms more properly directed at *his* efforts rather than at the Church’s, such criticisms were clearly not what were requested. The point was to make Dehlin’s position “stronger” through “positive and constructive” remarks. “Maybe it would do his stake president and the church pause and make them reconsider their opinion about what to do to John,” mused one reader. “Imagine the power of literally thousands of letters on his behalf.” Dehlin later made it clear that this outpouring of support also had a subtle, implied risk to it: “I think he [the stake president] knew that it would be a non-trivial event if he were to take [disciplinary] action.”<sup>143</sup>

Dehlin was frank about what he wanted volunteers to do once testimonials arrived: “For those who have time, please help me find the best stories or paragraphs from the link below to send to my stake president. . . . I’m going to send him the entire link, but I want to cherry pick some that will be most

---

<sup>141</sup> Fatherof4husbandof1, comment on “Help John Dehlin!!!,” 3 May 2011 (6:29 PM), emphasis in original, <http://www.staylds.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=2447&p=30055>.

<sup>142</sup> John Dehlin, “You, the church, and Mormon Stories,” 3 May 2011, <http://mormonstories.org/?p=1596>.

<sup>143</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 25:40–25:45.

impactful to send in the email to him.”<sup>144</sup> “To cherry pick” is “to choose or take the best or most profitable . . . esp[ecially] for one’s own benefit or gain.”<sup>145</sup> This matches precisely what one reader advised: “My lawyer brain thinks you should highlight comments from: 1) TBMish<sup>146</sup> types who praise the value of [*Mormon Stories*] and say how you helped them stay LDS and 2) people who have left or are no longer LDS who appreciate your compassion, understanding, etc. Stay away from the criticisms.”<sup>147</sup>

*Censorship and cherry-picking*

This approach was adopted. Dehlin has elsewhere protested similar behavior in others. It is instructive, given his rhetoric, to examine his response to negative feedback. It will be seen that the cherry-picking was inadequate, and censorship became necessary.<sup>148</sup>

---

<sup>144</sup> John Dehlin, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 5 May 2011 (9:38 PM),

[https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/112977755454188?comment\\_id=150069](https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/112977755454188?comment_id=150069).

<sup>145</sup> *Collins English Dictionary—Complete and Unabridged* (HarperCollins Publishers, 1991–2003), s.v. “cherry-pick.”

<sup>146</sup> TBM = “True Blue Mormon” or “True Believer Mormon,” a term of mild to moderate derision in NOM Internet culture, referring to those who accept the doctrines and leadership of the Church without serious reservation. TBMs are often portrayed as naive, ill-informed, or duped, in contrast to the enlightened liberal/skeptical Mormon or ex-Mormon. See <http://xmormon.org/d6/drupal/abbreviations>, accessed 15 June 2012.

<sup>147</sup> Deleted post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 5 May 2011 (10:36 PM), <https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/561146002979>, copy in my possession. The thread itself remains on-line.

<sup>148</sup> The “LDS Church creates unnecessary enemies . . . [b]y not being honest about its own history.” Richard Packham, “164–167: Richard Packham and How the LDS Church Creates Unnecessary Enemies,” podcast interview by John Dehlin, 28 June 2010, <http://mormonstories.org/?p=1063>. Dehlin elsewhere criticizes those who will not provide “warts and all” history. (See note 52 herein.)

One poster observed that Dehlin probably “still hasn’t shared his love of all things Grant Palmer.” When accused of being “hung up” on this point, the poster pointed out that “Grant [Palmer] is John [Dehlin]’s doctrinal model. There’s a lot to be hung up on.” He went on to highlight the apparent hypocrisy in what Dehlin was doing: “You asked on your [Facebook] page for people to help cherry-pick the best [testimonials for *Mormon Stories*] for your Stake President. Given your expressed enthusiasm for Palmer as one of the books every Mormon should read, I wondered if you would include it. You defriended me and deleted my question.”<sup>149</sup>

Dehlin has been a long-time admirer of Grant Palmer’s work.<sup>150</sup> He conducted a four-part series of interviews with Palmer,<sup>151</sup> followed by three more to “update” listeners on Palmer’s status and to discuss “sexual allegations against Joseph Smith,” referring to his guest as “the incomparable Grant Palmer.”<sup>152</sup> And in his interview with Michael Coe, Dehlin added, “You know, there’s a really good book by a man

---

<sup>149</sup> John Dehlin, deleted exchange on Facebook wall, 14 May 2011, copy in my possession. The original link has apparently also been deleted.

<sup>150</sup> Influenced by Hofmann’s forgeries, Palmer postulated that Joseph Smith relied on a German work, *Der golden Topf* (*The Golden Pot*), in the composition of the Book of Mormon. Aside from this dubious legacy to Mormon studies, Palmer’s book *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins* contained little that was new—it was simply garden-variety anti-Mormonism attractively repackaged. At present, Palmer is published by the anti-Mormon MormonThink.com (on which see notes 58–65 herein) and the notorious Ed Decker’s “Ex-Mormons for Jesus.” See <http://www.mormonthink.com/grantpalmer.htm> and <http://www.saintsalive.com/resourcelibrary/mormonism/why-william-and-jane-law-left-the-lds-church-in-1844> (accessed 15 January 2013).

<sup>151</sup> See episodes 030–033, 21 June 2006, [mormonstories.org/?page\\_id=102](http://mormonstories.org/?page_id=102).

<sup>152</sup> John Dehlin, “324–326: Grant Palmer Returns to Discuss Sexual Allegations Against Joseph Smith, William and Jane Law, and His Resignation,” 26 February 2012, <http://mormonstories.org/324-326-grant-palmer-returns-to-discuss-sexual-allegations-against-joseph-smith-william-and-jane-law-and-his-resignation/>. Dehlin’s description of Palmer is in Part 1, 3:40. My thanks to Steve Densley for locating the citation.



named Grant Palmer called *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins*, where he tries to explain where he thinks the Book of Mormon came from.”<sup>153</sup>

Dehlin says he wants to be fair and balanced, but he does not seem to consider both sides of the question with regard to Palmer's scholarship. It is evident from his interview with Palmer that he had done virtually no prep work. The “incomparable” Palmer was certainly not asked about the detailed critique his ideas received in the academic world.

Following the appearance of Dehlin's interviews with Palmer, Ben McGuire offered to provide some balance to the discussion. Dehlin was, at this point, still describing himself as an active, believing member who was simply struggling with difficult historical issues. McGuire provided an extensive account of his interaction with Dehlin:

I focused on...the claims of literary reliance that Palmer made and not so much on the history issues (which others were dealing with). . . .Our discussion ended with a non-committal John Dehlin saying that he would get back to me if he decided I was a good fit. He never actually responded to me....

At the time of our discussion, I felt (and his later answer didn't change my opinion much) that in reality, my response was something he wasn't prepared to deal with himself....

John Dehlin bought into Palmer's narrative. . . . My discussion with him dealt with specific details. Specific dates. Evidence for revivals in the right area at the right time. Counter claims to Palmer's textual implications that were very specific. I think that specifics were not what Dehlin wanted to listen to or to try and discuss. . . .

I think that having that kind of a response might have really been showing real fairness on his forum—but real fairness (and giving himself cognitive dissonance) wasn't really what he was interested in. . . . An interview with me would not have furthered his own agenda.<sup>154</sup>

---

<sup>153</sup> Michael Coe, “Dr. Michael Coe—An Outsider's View of Book of Mormon Archaeology,” podcast interview by John Dehlin, part 3, 34:45, accessed 27 March 2012, <http://mormonstories.org/?p=1880>; hereafter cited as “Coe interview.”

<sup>154</sup> Ben McGuire, personal communications, 6–7 November 2011, copies in my possession.

If *Insider’s View of Mormon Origins* was as important to Dehlin’s concerns as he says it was, and if he was truly seeking to resolve those concerns, it is unfortunate that he did not accept McGuire’s offer.

In 2011 one listener questioned Dehlin about the Palmer podcast: “I just finished the Grant Palmer podcast. And I was wondering if there was ever any response from FAIR/FARMS? If so, what podcast was it?” Dehlin did not disclose that McGuire (a FAIR volunteer who has published occasionally with FARMS)<sup>155</sup> had volunteered to provide counterpoint to Palmer’s claims but had never been given a chance to do so. He also did not point her to FARMS’s or FAIR’s complete reviews on-line.<sup>156</sup> Instead, Dehlin simply told the questioner that another Facebook member “might be able to help you.” Yet Dehlin knows that FARMS and FAIR have produced a large body of work that counters Palmer’s theses.<sup>157</sup>

---

<sup>155</sup> See “Viewing author: Ben McGuire,” accessed 7 November 2011,

<http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/authors/?authorID=690>.

<sup>156</sup> Dehlin is well aware that virtually any critical issue is treated on FAIR’s website (see note 51 herein).

<sup>157</sup> Numerous reviews pointed out Palmer’s biases, lapses, and failure to address previous LDS scholarship. James B. Allen, “Asked and Answered: A Response to Grant Palmer,” *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 235–86 (a shorter version was published in *BYU Studies* 43/2 (2004): 175–89); Davis Bitton, “The Charge of a Man with a Broken Lance (But Look What He Doesn’t Tell Us),” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 257–72; “Statement from the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint,” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 255–56; Steven C. Harper, “Trustworthy History?,” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 273–308; Mark Ashurst-McGee, “A One-sided View of Mormon Origins,” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 309–64. The FAIR wiki also has a set of pages dedicated to a page-by-page analysis of Palmer’s book at [http://en.fairmormon.org/Specific\\_works/An\\_Insider%27s\\_View\\_of\\_Mormon\\_Origins](http://en.fairmormon.org/Specific_works/An_Insider%27s_View_of_Mormon_Origins).

All of this brings the audience back to the question: Did his decision to put all his “cards . . . on the table” include his promotion of Grant Palmer’s work? The question and discussion of these matters were both deleted by Dehlin.<sup>158</sup>

Readers might also wonder about Dehlin’s recommendation of Fawn Brodie’s *No Man Knows My History*. One asked him, “In your opinion, which is the better biography on Joseph Smith—No Man Knows My History or Rough Stone Rolling? I am going to the bookstore tomorrow and I really value your opinion.” Replied Dehlin: “No Man Knows My History, for me, is one of the best biographies ever written.”<sup>159</sup>

It is not unusual that a non-believing member would find Brodie appealing, despite her well-documented bias and error. For decades her work has served as a justification for the decision to reject Joseph, among both nonbelievers and cultural Mormons. In the midst of handing over copious testimonials to his stake president, did Dehlin mention that he would be urging everyone to read Palmer and Brodie as the go-to sources?

Dehlin was quick to reply that his critic was “speak[ing] freely about things you have no idea about.” Dehlin insisted that by even asking the question, one was guilty of “assail[ing] the character of your opponent. Classic apologetics. . . . The inference is deception . . . [o]r incompetence on the stake president’s part.”<sup>160</sup> Dehlin wishes to put any suggestion of deception to rest: “I’m working very hard to be completely honest with the stake president. I have no desire to hide anything. My cards are on the table. I will tell him everything he wants to know.”<sup>161</sup>

---

<sup>158</sup> See note 149 herein. Dehlin asks elsewhere if it is “a ‘Mormon’ thing to . . . suppress history/records” (see note 250 herein). For “cards on the table,” see note 161 herein.

<sup>159</sup> John Dehlin, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 30 August 2011 (2:08–2:15 PM).

<sup>160</sup> John Dehlin, deleted exchange on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 14 May 2011.

<sup>161</sup> John Dehlin, deleted exchange on Facebook wall, 14 May 2011.

But what does this mean? It could mean he will answer any question the stake president puts to him directly. Or, it could mean that he will be sure to voluntarily and proactively disclose anything that the stake president might reasonably wish to know. This is essentially the distinction that courts of law strive to highlight when a witness swears to tell “the truth, *the whole truth*, and nothing but the truth.”

The next visit with the stake president is a further example of Dehlin’s habit of using private interviews to establish his legitimacy. “So far, everyone involved (bishop, elder’s [*sic*] quorum president, stake high councilman, and stake president) have demonstrated a great deal of kindness, and a sincere desire to ‘do the right thing,’” Dehlin announced.<sup>162</sup> However, he was less complimentary about leaders’ motives and approach when later describing the matter to his atheist podcast hosts: “It was really kind of CIA, FBI kind of creepy.”<sup>163</sup>

Responding to Dehlin’s report that leaders wanted to “do the right thing,” one reader argued, “The only ‘right thing’ the church could do here would be to apologize profusely for being so incredibly Orwellian and controlling.”<sup>164</sup> Another said: “Either the stake president, one of his leaders, or one of your brothers have been offended by your views and want something to change. Since who the accuser is and what level of power he holds is unknown, we have no idea what the result will be. Most likely, he who is offended will never openly show his face nor state his position in a public forum. To me, this seems

---

<sup>162</sup> John Dehlin, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 23 June 2011 (1:55 PM),

<https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/565530960489>.

<sup>163</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 24:40–24:45. See note 26 herein. The point is not whether Dehlin’s reaction was justified, but that his description varies depending upon his rhetorical needs for a given audience. Dehlin elsewhere also reframes his narrative based on the audience to whom he is speaking: see notes 51–57 and 183–190 herein. See also <http://wp.me/p3gtkJ-5G>.

<sup>164</sup> Post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 23 June 2011 (5:02 PM),

<https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/565530960489>.

cowardly indeed.”<sup>165</sup> “Your podcast and the power of the Internet have brought us together. I think we are becoming a powerful force for positive change,” exclaimed one, “and I still believe that we can rescue Mormonism from the Pharisees if we are united.”<sup>166</sup>

Dehlin’s Facebook wall was filled with well-wishers, one of whom assured him that “any power they may hold over you is fabricated.”<sup>167</sup> Dehlin was compared to the so-called “September Six” but was reassured that “there was not such a bright light shining on them as is right now. . . . Too many people watching.”<sup>168</sup> “Will the church pass this test? I think it will,” opined one.<sup>169</sup> If only “some of your intelligence, insight, and integrity [would] rub off on the inquisitors,” wished another.<sup>170</sup> “Hopefully the church can realize from your example they need to be more truthful, honest and open about Mormon history,” added a third.<sup>171</sup> Others took the opportunity to attack current Church leaders: “I think it’s going to have to be the younger members of the current oligarchy that will affect [*sic*] any real substantial change when it comes to these issues.”<sup>172</sup> Specific condemnation of local and general leaders followed.<sup>173</sup>

---

<sup>165</sup> Post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 23 June 2011 (9:09 PM), URL as previous.

<sup>166</sup> Post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 12 May 2011 (2:01 PM),  
<https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/561666914069>.

<sup>167</sup> Post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 24 June 2011 (6:29 AM),  
<https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/565530960489>.

<sup>168</sup> Post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 23 June 2011 (10:43 PM), URL as previous.

<sup>169</sup> Post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 24 June 2011 (4:43 PM), URL as previous.

<sup>170</sup> Post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 25 June 2011 (10:27 AM), URL as previous.

<sup>171</sup> Post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 23 June 2011 (3:08 PM), URL as previous.

<sup>172</sup> Deleted post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 6 May 2011 (9:41 AM), formerly at  
<https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/203277379711735>.

<sup>173</sup> Deleted post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 5 May 2011 (9:44 PM),  
<https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/561146002979>

Dehlin reported back that his interview with the stake president “went better than I could have ever expected. In summary: very loving man, surprisingly empathetic. Doesn’t see any need to pursue disciplinary action. Acknowledges the tough issues. Sees a need in what I’m trying to do. Wants people like me/us to feel welcome at church. I’m quite happy about it all.”<sup>174</sup>

Dehlin reports success, he gets to remain on the membership rolls of the church,<sup>175</sup> and his stake president “sees a need in what I’m trying to do.” “In the end, my stake president exonerated me and said ‘We find no reason to take church action at this time.’”<sup>176</sup> The audience is to believe that there is no cause for concern—the leaders have reportedly checked it out (this parallels his appeal to his temple recommend status as discussed above).<sup>177</sup> Upon Dehlin’s announcement, this is precisely what some of his admirers concluded: “I am so glad your church recognizes the need for your work.” Some praised the outcome while condemning the church: “Though we often could care less whether or not the church offers any deference, being somewhat legitimized by the institution at the heart of it is a huge victory.” “This movement is huge in my opinion,” claimed another. “I’ve been out for around 5 or 6 years now and just in that amount of time I’ve seen huge changes in the church it’s [*sic*] attitude and temperature. People are really starting to come out of the woodwork and church leaders are comming [*sic*] around as well.”

---

<sup>174</sup> John Dehlin, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 26 June 2011 (8:54 PM),

<https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/568042257829>.

<sup>175</sup> When asked what he wanted the outcome to be, Dehlin replied: “My preference . . . to be left alone . . . or supported” (ellipses in original; no material omitted), post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 23 June 2011 (4:15 PM),

<https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/565530960489>.

<sup>176</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 24:52–25:00. Dehlin also notes that the investigation was a purely local matter: “My brother told me that an apostle pulled him aside after a meeting and told him to tell me that church headquarters had no involvement in this investigation. . . . And I believe him, I don’t believe church headquarters had anything to do with it. I think it was a local matter” (25:45–26:11).

<sup>177</sup> See notes 116–120 herein.

This means “there is room,” declared one, “for seeking truth in the church.” One reader elsewhere wrote that “it seems implied that at least for a period of time, Mormon stories operated under a green light from John’s local leaders.”<sup>178</sup>

Dehlin has created a convincing narrative which says that his leaders both know and approve (or at least don’t *disapprove*) of what he is doing. Wikipedia echoes the same theme, claiming that Dehlin was “exonerated from a series of investigations into his Internet activities (led by his LDS bishop and stake president).”<sup>179</sup> *Mormon Stories* has also prepared a “leadership packet” for local LDS leaders who might be concerned. A few cherry-picked testimonials are again used as evidence, and the leader is assured that the group is not “anti-Mormon.” Faithful and friendly scholars are highlighted, but none of the hostile voices or perspectives are even mentioned.<sup>180</sup>

Given that it would be unethical for the stake president to disclose what he did or didn’t tell Dehlin (or what Dehlin did or didn’t tell him), we are left only with Dehlin’s account of the visit. Dehlin reports that his stake president “said that ‘the line’ is actually encouraging people to leave the church. . . . For him, ‘crossing the line’ means encouraging people to leave. If he finds that in my site content, then we have a potential problem.”<sup>181</sup>

---

<sup>178</sup> Rockslider, posts on “Trail Blazer Brings Hard Choices to Church,” 5 May 2011 (12:05 PM, 4:38 PM), [http://www.mormondialogue.org/topic/54223-trail-blazer-brings-hard-choices-to-church/page\\_\\_st\\_\\_20\\_\\_p\\_\\_1209003800#entry1209003800](http://www.mormondialogue.org/topic/54223-trail-blazer-brings-hard-choices-to-church/page__st__20__p__1209003800#entry1209003800).

<sup>179</sup> “John Dehlin,” *Wikipedia*, accessed 5 November 2011, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Demlin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Demlin). As a source, Dehlin’s *Mormon Stories* website is cited.

<sup>180</sup> “LDS Leadership Information Packet,” *mormonstories.org*, accessed 19 December 2012, <http://mormonstories.org/leadership-information-packet/>. Compare with promotional material discussed in note 114 herein.

<sup>181</sup> John Dehlin, posts on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 5 May 2011 (9:10 PM, 9:19 PM), <https://www.facebook.com/johndemlin/posts/561146002979>.

And since by now one might legitimately wonder, Dehlin elsewhere includes his disclaimer: “For the record, Mormon Stores [*sic*] does not have an explicit goal of leading people in or out of the church, but instead to support people in their LDS-reltaed [*sic*] journeys/transitions, wherever they may end up.”<sup>182</sup> But what does Dehlin say when not addressing his Church leaders? We will now examine what he tells an audience that is hostile to the Church.

### **A different account for an ex-Mormon audience**

Months before his visit with the stake president, Dehlin wanted to interview the prolific ex-Mormon Steve Benson for his podcast. Benson questioned the regulars at the Ex-Mormon Foundation’s *Recovery from Mormonism* message board as to whether he should participate.<sup>183</sup> Richard Packham advised that “John Dehlin walks a very fine line” but noted, “Remember that a lot of people who listened to his podcast about why a Mormon should stay in the church ended up being convinced by that podcast that they should leave.”<sup>184</sup> Another writer cautioned Benson, noting that Dehlin “could be hoping for a certain outcome from an interview with Steve Benson (for example, at least that it wouldn’t be faith-destroying as he is apparently dedicated to supporting the Mormon church).” But, he offered, it might still be worth doing because many people “perhaps wouldn’t read/listen to ‘anti-Mormon’ books or other media but Dehlin’s pod[cast]s are ‘safe’ as he’s a faithful member.” After all, he warned, “most exmos [ex-

---

<sup>182</sup> John Dehlin and the Open Stories Foundation Board, “How has your local Mormon Stories community helped you stay active in the LDS church?,” 11 December 2011, <http://mormonstories.org/?p=2274>.

<sup>183</sup> Steve Benson, 14 December 2010 (6:01 PM), <http://exmormon.org/phorum/read.php?2,55919,56118#msg-56118>.

<sup>184</sup> RPackham, comment on Benson thread, 14 December 2010 (6:36 PM), <http://exmormon.org/phorum/read.php?2,55919,56118#msg-56118>. For more on Packham, see note 147 herein.



Mormons] wouldn't want to support or assist in the promotion of Mormonism. Even if Dehlin tries to be or is objective, still he has a purpose that isn't in line with that of most exmos."<sup>185</sup>

Dehlin quickly intervened to lay such fears to rest:

Regarding my "encouraging members to stay in the church"—this was my position for a time while I was trying to figure out my own relationship with the church (I've vacillated over the years about my own level of activity just as many of you here have), but the StayLDS position is no longer something that I push . . . and I've been very public about this on my podcast a few times now.<sup>186</sup>

So there was a time when Dehlin encouraged people to remain in the Church. But he is no longer doing so. According to one disaffected Mormon, "I spoke with John last week and he openly admitted the whole staylds.com philosophy was not the best and he regretted doing it. So here is me, giving him props for being honest in that regard."<sup>187</sup>

After repudiating his past approach at staylds.org, Dehlin produced the most startling admission:

I now believe that people should follow their joy. . . . period. In or out of the church. That said, I would guess that many more people have left the church than have stayed because of my Internet work—and I'm perfectly happy if they're happy. I mean that. . . . Steve . . . I think your story could help a lot of people. It certainly helped me through a [tough] spot back in early 2000.<sup>188</sup>

---

<sup>185</sup> Nightingale, post on Benson thread, 15 December 2010 (2:30 AM),

<http://exmormon.org/phorum/read.php?2,55919,56118#msg-56118>.

<sup>186</sup> John Dehlin, post on Benson thread, 15 December 2010 (10:11 AM),

<http://exmormon.org/phorum/read.php?2,55919,56118#msg-56118>.

<sup>187</sup> Froggie, "Flat Lander Apologizes to John Dehlin on YouTube," 17 August 2010 (3:40 PM),

<http://thefoyer.org/viewtopic.php?p=191198&sid=87654411c53646a968083ca1596cfa51#p191198>.

<sup>188</sup> John Dehlin, post on Benson thread, 15 December 2010 (10:11 AM),

<http://exmormon.org/phorum/read.php?2,55919,56118#msg-56118>. Ellipses are in original; no text has been removed.

Dehlin appears worried that Benson, a hostile ex-Mormon, might be unwilling to be interviewed for fear *Mormon Stories* will be too favorable for the Church. So Dehlin is quick to assure Benson that he believes that his ventures have resulted in far more people leaving the Church than staying—despite his past public encouragement to stay (which he has since renounced).

Dehlin goes to considerable trouble to be completely honest with Benson and a skeptical crowd of ex-Mormons. The fact that his net influence—as he judges it—is tilted far more toward causing people to leave the Church reassures his audience. Nightingale, who had expressed concerns that Dehlin’s and the ex-Mormons’ goals might not coincide, responded promptly: “Thanks for the clarification and update, John. Good to know.”<sup>189</sup> Given all that we have seen, Dehlin’s admission that he leads far more members out of the Church might be expected, especially given that Dehlin himself can be categorized as a leavetaker.

The question posed by the ex-Mormons is also—not coincidentally—the same sort of question that most interests his stake president, according to Dehlin: What’s the effect on Church members? When Dehlin speaks to LDS interviewers on the *Cultural Hall* podcast, he tells us that Mormons who heard his material “would sometimes leave the church—rarely, but sometimes.”<sup>190</sup> Yet when he needs to reassure an anti-Mormon audience, he tells a quite different story: “I would guess that many more people have left the church than have stayed because of my Internet work.”

Months later, Dehlin reported another change of heart: “I’m active in the church right now and have a good relationship with my stake president.”<sup>191</sup> The previously-produced hostile *Mormon Stories* material remains.

---

<sup>189</sup> Nightingale, post on Benson thread, 15 December 2010 (11:03 AM),

<http://exmormon.org/phorum/read.php?2,55919,56118#msg-56118>; compare note 185 herein.

<sup>190</sup> Steadman and Johnson interview, 15:30; see note 135 herein.

<sup>191</sup> Mormonstories [John Dehlin], comment on thread “Was John Dehlin just excommunicated?,” 11 October 2012 (2:13 PM), [http://www.postmormon.org/exp\\_e/index.php/discussions/viewreply/556078/](http://www.postmormon.org/exp_e/index.php/discussions/viewreply/556078/).

## Part 3—Reactions to and Effects of *Mormon Stories*' approach

### Dehlin and the Ex-Mormons

Given Dehlin's frank assessment of his influence on the Church and its members, it is worthwhile to examine what ex-Mormons or hostile voices think of the *Mormon Stories* project. Organizations such as the Maxwell Institute and FAIR have both dealt with the same types of issues that *Mormon Stories* treats. Efforts from these Church supporters are almost universally vilified by those opposed to the Church or its teachings.<sup>192</sup>

When Dehlin announced his meeting with stake leaders, one *Recovery from Mormonism* poster wrote, "Comeon [*sic*], how can you put a friendly facade to the church when you line up most detrimental, lethal interviews with black sheep one after another? It was obvious. I think John should be congratulated for milking this Gig as long as He did."<sup>193</sup> "I think John will find," wrote another, "that he will be welcome and valued here and among postmos [post-Mormons] far and wide. Now there will not be anyone publicly and actively personifying a sensible 'borderland' for thinking and honorable mormon members."<sup>194</sup> Another argued that even before Dehlin founded *staylds.com*, his feelings were clear: "You could see he saw completely through the crap back then but he seemed determined to help others understand exmos and try to heal the breach. It was a good try but I think we could see then that he clearly knew the church

---

<sup>192</sup> Dehlin himself is likewise uncomplimentary. See notes 31 and 51–57 herein. See also many claims cited in "Return of the Unread Review," notes 26, 33–34, 43–46, 51–53, 55.

<sup>193</sup> Quinlansolo, comment on "John Dehlin on Facebook," 6 May 2011 (8:44 AM), <http://exmormon.org/phorum/read.php?2,186261,186375#msg-186375>.

<sup>194</sup> Rodolfo, "This just in: John Dehlin announces disaffection publicly," 4 May 2011 (2:58 AM), <http://exmormon.org/phorum/read.php?2,184891,184891#msg-184891>.

was a grand fraud.”<sup>195</sup> One worried that “even more valuable is the vast reservoir of [*Mormon Stories*] interviews that tie liberal and ex-mormons to those who stumble into the podcasts in the future. . . . My concern is that by ex’ing John, they will kill any will he has left to continue the ‘ministry’, and kill that tiny bit of credibility required by the newly exploring questioner to listen, credibility that comes with NOT being an ‘Ex’ Mormon, if you follow me.”<sup>196</sup> Others agreed: “I suppose his decision negates the whole ‘he’s an active Mormon so we can listen to him; he’s safe’ factor.”<sup>197</sup> One observed, “I think John fills a useful role for people beginning to leave, and his continued membership gives him credibility with members. Just as Grant Palmer’s continued membership gives him credibility with members.”<sup>198</sup>

After a podcast detailing his unbelief, another poster noted that Dehlin’s “a good bloke. His views towards the church have changed considerably over the last 3–4 years. He knows the truth but he doesn’t rub it in the faces of Mormons. From his pos[i]tion he can reach more people on the inside than anyone else I know.”<sup>199</sup> He’s a “good guy,” writes another. “John knows what[’]s up but plays the middle ground. He functions as sort of a referee between our side and the deluded masses. John has enough credibility

---

<sup>195</sup> Brian-the-christ, post on “This just in,” 4 May 2011 (9:09 AM),

<http://exmormon.org/phorum/read.php?2,184891,184891#msg-184891>.

<sup>196</sup> Patriarchal . . . , post on “Yes, John Dehlin has left the Church,” 5 May 2011 (3:50 PM),

[http://www.postmormon.org/exp\\_e/index.php/discussions/viewthread/28352/P80/](http://www.postmormon.org/exp_e/index.php/discussions/viewthread/28352/P80/).

<sup>197</sup> Apostategal, post on “Yes, John Dehlin has left the Church,” 4 May 2011 (12:22 PM),

[http://www.postmormon.org/exp\\_e/index.php/discussions/viewthread/28352/P40/#487406](http://www.postmormon.org/exp_e/index.php/discussions/viewthread/28352/P40/#487406).

<sup>198</sup> Enginerd, “Flat Lander Apologizes to John Dehlin on YouTube,” 13 October 2009 (3:18 PM),

<http://thefoyer.org/viewtopic.php?p=162535&sid=87654411c53646a968083ca1596cfa51#p162535>. After this was written, Palmer reported to Dehlin that he is no longer a member. As of 2009, however, he had been disfellowshipped, and was thus still a member of record (see notes 151–152).

<sup>199</sup> Simon in Oz, “John Dehlin just sent me a friend request on facebook (swear word),” 6 January 2012 (5:59

PM), <http://exmormon.org/phorum/read.php?2,385050,386036>.

and influence among the believing crowd that he can expose people to ideas and issues that they otherwise would shut out.”<sup>200</sup> Another former member outlined the risk to the Church that he believes Dehlin poses:

Actually, I think someone like John could be more dangerous to the church... If he manages to convince a significant block of LDS that it's okay to take the church as feel-good stories and community and that it may not be literally true... this may close the door for a little while on thinkers like the people in this room feeling that they need to leave the church.

... We [ex-Mormons] can shout and point and use logic all we want, but nobody listens to us. And meanwhile, the church will continue on its merry way, converting the gullible and breeding the next generation of Mormons.

John, however, has a chance of succeeding, by planting a dark little seed of doubt within the church that can only be expunged with public purges. If they don't, that seed will take root and it will be too late.<sup>201</sup>

One “post-Mormon” complained about what he saw as Dehlin’s lack of honesty and forthrightness:

John, this sounds like more of the same yes/no, the-story's-up/the-story's-down, I-am/I-am-not, I'm-doing-this-to-help-you-stay-Mormon/I'm-doing-this-to-help-you-leave, Only-My-Hairdresser-Knows-For-Sure! that has made this lone onlooker such a cynic of not only your work, but you. . . .

I have a problem with what I see as the larger pattern of behavior in this case. I do have a problem with playing both ends off against the middle until you get to the point where you no longer know which way is up. It is the very small matter of integrity. . . .

He was quoted as “a Mormon” in a recent *New York Times* article. I have no idea if the reporter would have even been interested in a quote from Dehlin if the reporter had known he was interviewing a “post-Mormon.” If that reporter is worth his salt, he will be angry and embarrassed

---

<sup>200</sup> Jebus, “John Dehlin just sent me a friend request on facebook (swear word),” 6 January 2012 (10:20 PM), <http://exmormon.org/phorum/read.php?2,385050,386036>.

<sup>201</sup> KingM, “Flat Lander Apologizes to John Dehlin on YouTube,” 15 October 2009 (12:04 PM, 2:51 PM), <http://thefoyer.org/viewtopic.php?p=162841&sid=87654411c53646a968083ca1596cfa51#p162841>.

he published the comments by someone post-Mormon as those of a “Mormon.” It is an important distinction—one the *NY Times* would want to make. And as the reporter could hardly be initiated into the sometimes arcane and Byzantine world of post-Mormonism, I doubt that reporter knew he was publishing the view of someone who has announced—and announced—and announced he is not really a Mormon—only announced it so cleverly those pronouncements were always erased the next day. *Is he or isn't he a Mormon? Only his hairdresser knows for sure!*<sup>202</sup>

The same poster went on to chastise those who, in his view, applauded Dehlin’s stance without regard to his tendency to disguise what the ex-Mormon crowd sees as his true agenda:

It bothers me. And I’m not embarrassed it bothers me. I don’t feel bad about it. It is the sort of duplicity that bugged me in Mormonism.

There is a *weird* undercurrent on this thread that everyone knows Dehlin is a mole in the Mormon church, but he’s our mole, making the double-cross quite all right. So let me see if I’ve got this straight—when Mormons know the church is a lie but play along so that people can stay Mormon, that is wrong, corrupt and evil. But if Mormons know the church is a lie but play along so they can (surreptitiously) help people leave, that is good, okay, and whole. . . .

How about if we take . . . a week to treat everyone in the Mormon church—including Joseph Smith—with the same kid gloves we wear with Dehlin? Can we do it? . . .

I was talking about the bemusing contradiction that what is damned so often in Mormons is admired in Dehlin—who—like the girl in the 40’s and 50’s Coca Cola ads seems a perpetual Virgin on the Verge—always about to succumb, but never quite there. . . .

People suggest Dehlin can keep Mormon Stories alive, which is good because he can appeal to believing Mormons. Is that because those posters would like to see the readers of Mormon Stories stay in the Mormon church? If posters would like to see those readers of Mormon Stories leave, can’t we agree that “mole” rather covers it?<sup>203</sup>

---

<sup>202</sup> Thewriterwithin, posts on “Yes, John Dehlin has left the Church,” 4 May 2011 (1:51 pm), emphasis in original, [http://www.postmormon.org/exp\\_e/index.php/discussions/viewthread/28352/P40/#487406](http://www.postmormon.org/exp_e/index.php/discussions/viewthread/28352/P40/#487406).

<sup>203</sup> Thewriterwithin, posts on “Yes, John Dehlin has left the Church,” 4 May 2011 (1:51 pm, 6:30 pm) and 5 May 2011 (3:58 pm), emphasis in original, [http://www.postmormon.org/exp\\_e/index.php/discussions/viewthread/28352/P40/#487406](http://www.postmormon.org/exp_e/index.php/discussions/viewthread/28352/P40/#487406).

In short, once informed of his stance, those hostile to the Church do not worry that Dehlin’s efforts were working against their own priorities, which are to attack the Church and encourage its members to abandon their faith. Their only complaint was that he was not harsher or did not “come out” sooner. Some regretted that his utility as a “safe” source of anti-Mormon material would be compromised—if he were not a member, he would be *less* effective at spreading doubt. At least one felt that even the benefits (to ex-Mormons) of Dehlin’s actions did not justify his approach.

Dehlin says that the negative reaction by ex- and post-Mormons “hurts a lot.”<sup>204</sup> “What’s hard about the post-Mormons for me,” complains Dehlin, “is that they don’t realize how they and we share so much, have so much in common. If their goal is to get people out of the church, I at least get people to the point where they know a lot of the facts and have the chance to make that decision. . . . I sometimes wonder why they can’t see that I’m on their team to some extent. I just don’t go that far to say I want them out.”<sup>205</sup>

Those who desire that the Church should fail have a well-tuned sense for what serves their purposes and what does not. Dehlin’s approach is generally applauded (though sometimes critiqued for not going far enough fast enough); the approach used by the Maxwell Institute or FAIR is not. This is a convincing confirmation of Dehlin’s own assessment expressed to anti-Mormons: his approach causes more departures than resolution for those with doubts or concerns.

In public Dehlin does not tell anyone point-blank, “You should leave the church.”<sup>206</sup> He explains his decision to delete extremely hostile posters from his sites:

---

<sup>204</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 32:23.

<sup>205</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 34:27–34:59.

<sup>206</sup> He does, however, tell people that “I firmly and honestly believe that for many of the people I’ve worked with—to heal (psychologically, emotionally, etc.) the only option IS to leave the church.” See notes 240–241 herein and related main text for citation and further information.

I hope that people can see that if the conversation on my Facebook page or Mormon Stories blog are rants and sort of angry, then it’s just going to turn people off and it defeats the whole purpose of why I exist. . . . What gets people banned is if they say “Joseph Smith was an ass” or “The church is a cult,” because that’s not a level of discourse that is sustainable for the audience I’m trying to reach. . . . I just wish people could be cool . . . and get what I’m trying to do, play along and help me be successful, don’t get mad at me.<sup>207</sup>

Dehlin wants them to be courteous and nonthreatening so that the conversation he generates will not “turn off . . . the audience [he’s] trying to reach”—that is, believing members.

**“Uncorrelated Mormons”<sup>208</sup>**

While remaining in the Church, Dehlin also seems to treat it as a mere social group and wants to create a “support system” for those he calls “uncorrelated Mormons.” The German press describes his goals: “The former Microsoft employee has given up his job in Seattle in order to have time for his second self-imposed mission: to confront the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with its contradictions. From within.”<sup>209</sup>

One supporter summarized a matching perception of Dehlin’s goals and tactics:

I, like many, couldn’t stay in the church after learning the things that I learned. I like your idea of trying to make change from the inside. I am just afraid that it is a fruitless effort. . . . The [General Authorities] know that even though you don’t come out and encourage people to leave the church, the facts that you share with people lead many of those people to leave church, and the leaders will want to stop that bleeding, and usually that involves discrediting the person who is bringing the facts to light.<sup>210</sup>

---

<sup>207</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 35:37–36:24.

<sup>208</sup> “Uncorrelated Mormons” is Dehlin’s designation for those who align with his beliefs. See notes 10, 13, 95, 212–213, 225–226, and 240 herein, and further discussion in this section below.

<sup>209</sup> Andreas Ross, “Alltag der Mormonen in Utah.” My thanks again to Stephen O. Smoot for the translation.

<sup>210</sup> Keith Holloway, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 11 May 2011 (5:14 AM), emphasis added, <https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/561146002979>.



This analysis, coupled with Dehlin's description of his approach, is striking because it precisely echoes the approach taken by anti-cult "exit counselors." One exit counselor described the theoretical approach:

The primary difference in exit counseling is its voluntary nature but there are other differences as well....

The process itself differs from deprogramming, in our opinion, because it is a much more respectful approach, it is non-confrontational, the exit counselors have to prove their credibility, there is much more **interaction** with the information and it seeks a **primary cognitive** rather than a primary emotional response....

Let me also say here that exit counselors realize that an intervention is only the first step. If the person decides to leave the group there is a long road to recovery ....

In...exit counseling ... the purpose of the intervention is **not** to get someone out of a cult. While that may be a desired outcome, the **purpose** is to give the group member the information that enables them to make a fully informed choice.<sup>211</sup>

Dehlin's support system serves to communicate the cognitive information that can eventually lead to "uncorrelation," acts as a type of surrogate family who is concerned about the struggling member, and then provides an on-going support network for those successfully "uncorrelated."

Because of the Church's problems with "credibility and integrity," Dehlin's PowerPoint told the first *Mormon Stories* conference/retreat on 26 March 2011, "there is a significant trend towards disbelief and disengagement (uncorrelation) in the LDS church."<sup>212</sup> He tells his audience that "if you haven't already become uncorrelated, you likely will, and the majority of your children or loved ones [*sic*] children most

---

<sup>211</sup> Carol Giambalvo, Thought Reform Consultant, "From Deprogramming to Exit Counseling to Thought Reform Consultation," American Family Foundation conference 2000, Seattle, Washington, 2000, emphasis in the original, <http://web.archive.org/web/20050215103819/http://home.aol.com/carol2180/deprogra.htm>

<sup>212</sup> John Dehlin, "The Path of the Uncorrelated Mormon," PowerPoint presentation from Mormon Stories conference, New York City, 26 March 2011, slide 38. See also John Dehlin, "254: Exploring the Future for Uncorrelated Mormons with John Dehlin," 29 April 2011, <http://mormonstories.org/?p=1583>. See also <http://wp.me/p3gtkJ-5G>.

likely will.”<sup>213</sup> Although Dehlin did not tell his audience to leave the Church, he assured them they probably will stop believing and disengage because the Church is not credible. One doesn’t have to leave, but those who are not credulous or lacking integrity probably will. (One might note too this label’s implied critique of the Church’s correlation committee.)

Despite claiming elsewhere that the Church needs to change to accommodate those with these concerns, he is frank in his assessment to his audience that “there is probably little to nothing substantive that the church can do about it (and stay strong).”<sup>214</sup> Dehlin is blunt about the fact that if his counsel is successful and his advice is taken, it would substantially weaken the Church.

Since Dehlin has concluded that the Church can do little or nothing to change what he views as an inevitable outcome, he has ambitious plans for setting up “communities of support” and other social arrangements to give his uncorrelated Mormons cohesion and identity.<sup>215</sup> This includes everything from *Especially for Youth* events for teens to dating services, study groups, and “alternative forms of spirituality.”<sup>216</sup> Recently, a “Mormon Stories Sunday School,” has been started, inviting readers to “[i]magine the best class in the coolest ward ever.”<sup>217</sup> Dehlin also sought “a few really sharp, believing and committed (to Mormon Stories AND the church) people to partner with me on...podcast planning.

---

<sup>213</sup> Dehlin, “Uncorrelated Mormon,” slide 41.

<sup>214</sup> Dehlin, “Uncorrelated Mormon,” slide 40.

<sup>215</sup> The parallels with anti-cult exit counseling are again striking. Compare, for example, the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA)’s local meetings and special events, which include “talks by experts, discussions, videos, poetry readings, and other activities. Special events may be 2-3 hours in length, or they may be one day or more.” (“Local Meetings and Special Events,” ICSA Home, [http://icsahome.com/infoserv\\_respond/event\\_localmeetings.asp](http://icsahome.com/infoserv_respond/event_localmeetings.asp) [accessed 12 June 2012].)

<sup>216</sup> Dehlin, “Uncorrelated Mormon,” slide 44.

<sup>217</sup> Jared Anderson, “Mormon Stories Sunday School,” (27 June 2012), <http://www.mormonsundayschool.org>.

This would be a 1-2 year *calling*.<sup>218</sup> Despite these religious trappings, Dehlin emphasizes that the arrangements are “NOT a church/religion,” and he claims they “can coexist with church/religion.”<sup>219</sup>

Dehlin speaks of hopes for an alternative religion of some type, one based on the Church (though he may regard it as unlikely to happen). Citing an article called “Comparisons between Mormons and Jews,” he writes, “If only both [Jews and Mormons] had successful reform movements . . . someday we’ll have that in common too.”<sup>220</sup> And Dehlin sees himself and his academic and/or religious allies as key instruments in altering matters, since following his Master’s thesis he announced the :“submi[ssion of] the first complete draft of a paper on ‘sexual orientation change efforts in a large Mormon sample.’ A few huge milestones for me/us. We’re gonna change the world, ya’ll! For the better.”<sup>221</sup>

Dehlin wants to support “alternative approaches to a moral framework,” and he requests help finding videos “that teach good morals and values for kids from 6 to 16 years old . . . I’m just wondering how best to help instill good morals/values/ethics, and even spirituality in your children without religion. I’m looking for resources to help replace what church often tries to provide.”<sup>222</sup>

Dehlin seems to regard religion as nothing but a social phenomenon, style and image rather than substance. If he can but maintain the social benefits of the Church, he seems to think that he can replicate all its positive effects and none of what he sees as its negatives. His end would require, in effect,

---

<sup>218</sup> John Dehlin, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 4 July 2012 (6:59 AM),

<https://www.facebook.com/johndeclinpublic/posts/413521595356262>, emphasis added.

<sup>219</sup> Dehlin, “Uncorrelated Mormon,” slide 45.

<sup>220</sup> John Dehlin, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 9 December 2011 (3:53 AM), ellipsis in original, <https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/275409705842708>.

<sup>221</sup> John Dehlin, posts on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 9 December 2011 (9:38 PM), <https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/587931659309>. See also <http://wp.me/p3gtkJ-5G>.

<sup>222</sup> Dehlin, “Uncorrelated Mormon,” slide #44; John Dehlin, posts on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 6 March 2011 (4:09 PM, 9:38 PM), <https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/547983211319>.

Christianity without Christ. His quest would require reasoning without revelation, passion without prophets.

What is offered lacks the power or promise of a Church but still aims to accomplish the same things—morality, spirituality, social cohesion, love and service, family stability, volunteerism, and so forth. He hopes to base this on “common sense values/ethics”<sup>223</sup> One person’s common sense values are often, sadly, another person’s ridiculous superstition. Others have discovered that “those who ‘debunk’ traditional...values have in the background values of their own which they believe to be immune from the debunking process.”<sup>224</sup>

At any rate, his vision of support groups and post-Mormon *Especially for Youth* events is open to all Mormon comers—but “Mormon” in a different sense. The “Mormon Stories Shared Value Statement” proclaims that “one can be Mormon or claim a Mormon identity without necessarily adhering to the teachings or doctrines of any religious organization.”<sup>225</sup> He will retain the label “Mormon” but aims to remake it and redefine it in the public mind as a mere cultural label. One can be Jewish, after all, and be Orthodox, Reform, or even atheist.<sup>226</sup>

---

<sup>223</sup> Dehlin, “Uncorrelated Mormon,” slide #46. This may be more difficult than he believes, given how much the moral heritage of the west continues to rely upon Christianity. For an extensive argument on these lines, see Eastern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart’s *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor explores similar ground on a much broader scope in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>224</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, in Lewis, *Selected Books* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 410.

<sup>225</sup> John Dehlin, “Mormon Stories Shared Values Statement,” 25 July 2011, (5:38 PM); also at <http://openstoriesfoundation.org/>.

<sup>226</sup> Dehlin uses the explicit example of “Reform Judaism” in his call for “a new collective identity.” Dehlin, “Uncorrelated Mormon,” slide 44. See also his wish for a “successful reform movement” akin to Judaism in note 220 herein.

There are additional advantages to Dehlin if he can continue to label and advertise himself as Mormon. He is at present conducting a study on the experience of homosexuals within the Church. He is portrayed as “a Mormon graduate student” who is “a lifelong member of the LDS church.”<sup>227</sup> Dehlin’s attitude toward homosexual acts is opposed to the Church’s stance,<sup>228</sup> but some LDS participants in his study might well be unaware of this if he only describes himself as a life-long Mormon. They may expect, but not get, someone who is fundamentally friendly to their values and covenants. Dehlin has also offered

---

<sup>227</sup> Joanna Brooks, “Landmark Survey of LGBTQ Mormons Launched,” 13 July 2011 (11:42 AM),

[http://www.religiondispatches.org/dispatches/joannabrooks/4859/landmark\\_survey\\_of\\_lgbtq\\_mormons\\_launched\\_/](http://www.religiondispatches.org/dispatches/joannabrooks/4859/landmark_survey_of_lgbtq_mormons_launched_/);

Kristen Munson, “When Religion Goes Awry,” *Utah State Today* (16 February 2012),

<http://www.usu.edu/ust/index.cfm?article=50792>. Compare also note 111 for further use of Dehlin’s membership for promotion.

<sup>228</sup> See, for example, John Dehlin, post on Benson thread, 15 December 2010 (10:11 AM),

<http://exmormon.org/phorum/read.php?2,55919,56118#msg-56118> on same sex marriage. Dehlin elsewhere recently

refused to support the Church’s stance on gay marriage, and declared that “I do not believe that sexual relations within the bonds of marriage are sinful,” which in context referred to same sex marriage. He also pointed out that “I am aware of wards where gay and lesbians in committed same-sex (sexual) relationships are allowed to remain in good standing with the church without penalty...with full knowledge of the bishops involved.” Dehlin, post on

Facebook wall, 3 March 2013 (9:50, 9:51 PM), <https://www.facebook.com/kyler.rasmussen/posts/415244551899112>,

See also notes 270–271 herein. See also <http://wp.me/p3gtkJ-5T>.

to counsel couples regarding the difficulties that arise when one spouse leaves the Church,<sup>229</sup> and is preparing materials for the USU counseling center to use in helping students “navigate a crisis of faith.”<sup>230</sup>

Maintaining his membership is also necessary for Dehlin to make claims like, “[I’m] proud to be a Mormon. Not so proud of my church today,” when the Church expressed its disappointment with a ruling involving same-sex marriage.<sup>231</sup> The Church’s behavior is “dysfunctional,” “misguided,” and “broken,” but “I stay [in the Church],” he told the Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, “because maintaining my membership increases my ability and influence to effect positive change within the church.”<sup>232</sup> One example of such efforts is starting a discussion of how to “deal with anti-gay-marriage rhetoric at church.”<sup>233</sup>

Dehlin is also a more attractive media subject as a Mormon. Reporters can describe how he was “riveted to his theater seat, having flashbacks,” at *The Book of Mormon* musical.<sup>234</sup> “Ex-Mormon likes the

---

<sup>229</sup> John Dehlin, “123–125: What to do when your husband loses his LDS testimony—Jacque Parts 1–3,” 17 February 2010, <http://mormonstories.org/?p=852>; Natasha Helfer Parker, “207–208: Dealing with a Husband’s LDS Disaffection as a Believing Wife,” 29 October 2010, <http://mormonstories.org/?p=1311>.

<sup>230</sup> John Dehlin, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 14 Nov 2012 (12:31 PM), <https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/653978795319>.

<sup>231</sup> John Dehlin, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 8 Feb 2012, (7:23 AM), referring to “LDS church, others respond to Prop 8 decision,” 7 February 2012, (8:12 PM), <http://www.ksl.com/?nid=148&sid=19153139&pid=2>.

<sup>232</sup> John Dehlin, “Why I Stay,” Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium 2012, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/101274458/Why-I-Stay-John-Dehlin-2012>.

<sup>233</sup> John Dehlin, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 14 Feb 2012, (4:10 PM), <https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/248626098551888>.

<sup>234</sup> Laurie Goodstein, “Trying to Relish the Big Time, Even When It Brings a Cringe,” *New York Times* (30 March 2011), A13. A large picture of Dehlin smiling and applauding is included.

*Book of Mormon Musical*” is a much less compelling headline than what he can offer at present. The post-Mormon author who was critical of Dehlin’s tactics pointed to this possibility:

I just suspect Dehlin of darker reasons. Like if *Time Magazine* wants quotes from a thoughtful, conflicted Mormon, he wants to be around to fill the void. Okay. Snarky and unfair. I just choose to doubt his reasons. He seems to me to get plenty out of playing both sides, so as with Joseph Smith, where there is great profit, there should be great suspicion.<sup>235</sup>

The *Book of Mormon musical*, a satire filled with obscene language and mockery directed at Latter-day Saint beliefs, was applauded by Dehlin before he had even seen it. “It’s time for us [Mormons] to grow a sense of humor,” Dehlin chides, describing it as the LDS equivalent of *Fiddler on the Roof* for Jews and *The Sound of Music* for Catholics.<sup>236</sup>

*Fiddler* and *The Sound of Music*, however, did not argue that Jewish and Catholic beliefs were absurd lies for the gullible. Dehlin did not acknowledge that when beliefs which are held deeply and sincerely are subjected to relentless and obscene mockery, some people may fail to see the humor—whether they share those beliefs or not.<sup>237</sup> Dehlin shows little empathy for the Mormon believer. His attitude might be seen by some as contemptuous towards those with whom he still claims some nominal connection.

---

<sup>235</sup> Thewriterwithin, post on “Yes, John Dehlin has left the Church,” 4 May 2011 (7:14 PM),

[http://www.postmormon.org/exp\\_e/index.php/discussions/viewthread/28352/P80/](http://www.postmormon.org/exp_e/index.php/discussions/viewthread/28352/P80/).

<sup>236</sup> Jo Piazza, “‘South Park’ Creators’ Mormon Musical Has Some Mormons Excited, Others Suspicious,” 27 January 2011, <http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2011/01/27/south-park-creators-mormon-musical-mormons-excited-suspicious/>.

<sup>237</sup> See, in contrast, John Mark Reynolds, “Amos and Andy and the Book of Mormon,” *Washington Post*, 15 June 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/on-faith/post/amos-and-andy-and-the-book-of-mormon/2011/06/15/AGRIHPWH\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/on-faith/post/amos-and-andy-and-the-book-of-mormon/2011/06/15/AGRIHPWH_blog.html).

## Part 4—*Mormon Stories* and the Ballard Criteria

### **Elder M. Russell Ballard’s Criteria**

The techniques and approach discussed in Part 1 will predictably disincline *Mormon Stories*’ audience to take LDS truth claims seriously. This tendency can be partially explained by its founder’s claims and convictions.

Like any organization in a pluralistic and wired world, the Church through its leaders seeks to maintain the integrity and consistency of the principles it values. This imperative is now more far-reaching in our interconnected world of global publishing and the Internet. Those who offer what the Church would regard as a mistaken view on important matters are no longer confined to a local ward or stake as they may have been in the past.

Public clashes may be inevitable when disaffected members seek to persuade others. Elder M. Russell Ballard cautioned the Church against those he called “false prophets and false teachers.” Such individuals, he said, often advance teachings such as the following:

- “They declare that the Book of Mormon and other canonical works are not ancient records of scripture.”
- “They deny that God has given and continues to give revelation today to His ordained and sustained prophets.”
- “[They] attempt to change the God-given and scripturally based doctrines that protect the sanctity of marriage, the divine nature of the family, and the essential doctrine of personal morality. They advocate a redefinition of morality to justify fornication, adultery, and homosexual relationships.”
- “Perhaps most damningly, they deny Christ’s Resurrection and Atonement, arguing that no God can save us. They reject the need for a Savior. In short, these detractors attempt to reinterpret the



doctrines of the Church to fit their own preconceived views, and in the process deny Christ and His messianic role.”<sup>238</sup>

*Statements by Mormon Stories and Dehlin: scripture and the Church*

“I...consider it to be a very low probability that the LDS church, Joseph Smith, or the Book of Mormon are exactly what they (the church) claim them to be. I know many, active, temple recommend holding LDS church members who feel the same way.”<sup>239</sup>

Dehlin also instructs readers that: “leaving the church can be an act of great courage and integrity,”<sup>240</sup> but “it is NOT my ambition in any way shape or form to keep people in the church (nor to get them out of the church, for that matter).” However, “I firmly and honestly believe that for many of the people I’ve worked with—to heal (psychologically, emotionally, etc.) the only option IS to leave the church.”<sup>241</sup>

In the German press, Dehlin calls himself “‘a kind of public enemy number one’ of the [LDS] church leadership,” and is described as one “who stubbornly demands answers...[and] says that the Church has been stuck in puberty for decades. But now that Mitt Romney has lead the attention of the world to his religion, it [the Church] stands ‘a step before the entrance of adulthood’.”<sup>242</sup>

---

<sup>238</sup> M. Russell Ballard, “Beware of False Prophets and False Teachers,” *Ensign*, November 1999, 62, <http://www.lds.org/ensign/1999/11/beware-of-false-prophets-and-false-teachers>.

<sup>239</sup> John Dehlin, “My Facebook Comments Policy,” post on Dehlin’s Facebook page, 2 April 2012 (5:12 PM), <https://www.facebook.com/notes/john-dehlin/my-motives-with-facebook-and-mormon-stories-aka-my-facebook-comments-policy/10151445558205408>.

<sup>240</sup> John Dehlin, comment on “254: Exploring the Future for Uncorrelated Mormons with John Dehlin,” 29 April 2011, <http://mormonstories.org/?p=1583#comment-194533365>.

<sup>241</sup> Mormonstories [John Dehlin], “Flat Lander Apologizes to John Dehlin on YouTube,” 14 October 2009 (1:17 PM), <http://thefoyer.org/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=9733&start=15>, all caps emphasis in original.

<sup>242</sup> Andreas Ross, “Alltag der Mormonen in Utah.” My thanks again to Stephen O. Smoot for the translation (see note 134 herein).

*Statements by Mormon Stories and Dehlin: Church leaders and their teachings*

In August 2010, Dehlin accused LDS leaders of creating misleading media advertisements that “do not reflect Mormon doctrine and teachings when it comes to race, gender equality and individualism. . . . The church will eventually need to confront . . . a disconnect between its public message and its teachings.”<sup>243</sup> This led him to say, “when the church will see and internalize the values and sentiments reflected in these videos . . . I will once again reconsider my covenants of **full** obedience and consecration. Seriously. Right now, partial consecration is the best I can muster.”<sup>244</sup> No definition of “partial consecration” was provided.

“At some point,” claimed Dehlin in the aftermath of California’s Proposition 8, “the church either needs to stand behind its policies (polygamy, blacks, gays, etc.) or apologize for them. This nuanced meandering, de-emphasizing and double-speak without accountability and double-speak without accountability or atonement HAS to stop at some point. I love the church, and the brethren...but too many people are getting hurt. This has to stop.”<sup>245</sup> He continued later:

---

<sup>243</sup> Felicia Biberica and Elicia Dover, “Mormons Present New Face in Ad Campaign: Some Question Whether Ads Are True to Faith or PR for Mitt Romney Presidential Run,” *ABC News*, 15 August 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/print?id=11407317>.

<sup>244</sup> [John Dehlin], “A New Church?—The New Mormon.org PR/Marketing Campaign,” 9 August 2010, emphasis in original, <http://mormonmatters.org/2010/08/09/a-new-church-the-new-mormon-org-campaign/>. Dehlin’s identification as the author is made in Andrew S., “Oh, John Dehlin, what will we do with you?,” 16 August 2010, <http://irresistibledisgrace.wordpress.com/2010/08/16/oh-john-dehlin-what-will-we-do-with-you/>. See <http://wp.me/p3gtkJ-5I>.

<sup>245</sup> John Dehlin, post on [mormonmatters.org](http://mormonmatters.org), 25 September 2010 (9:04 AM), <http://mormonmatters.org/2010/09/27/elder-marlin-jensen-apologizes-for-proposition-8>. Ellipsis and emphasis in original; no text has been deleted. This page and its comments have been deleted; copy of the original in my possession.

I am growing tired of these private, one-off apologies and assurances that still allow for double-speak....

I feel that if the brethren are going to claim to be prophets, seers and revelators...and if they are to expect obedience from church members...they need to be more careful....and act more responsibly. I feel like they need to learn to "repent" in the same way that they encourage us to repent: confess...and forsake.<sup>246</sup>

“Churches need loyal opposition to remain healthy,” claims Dehlin.<sup>247</sup> Elder Ballard, however, disagrees: “in the Lord’s Church there is no such thing as a ‘loyal opposition.’ One is either for the kingdom of God and stands in defense of God’s prophets and apostles, or one stands opposed.”<sup>248</sup>

The Internet makes it simple to communicate a message without the need to say much. Simply posting an article about something done or said by the Church, or even “[I] just heard a rumor that” the Church was going to say or do something, was enough to provoke other readers into extensive critique and denunciation, with Dehlin merely providing the initial impetus and forum: “Ya’ll ready for this?”<sup>249</sup> Many readers were ready, at least, to assume the worst. For example, a Mormon politician’s decision to purchase the hard drives in his administration’s computers prompted Dehlin to ask, “Is this a ‘Mormon’ thing to do (suppress history/records) or not?”<sup>250</sup> A Church spokesman’s discussion of why he would not be seeing the *Book of Mormon* musical was described simply as “Michael Otterson blows it.”<sup>251</sup>

---

<sup>246</sup> John Dehlin, post on mormonmatters.org, 25 September 2010 (11:44 AM), link as above. Ellipses in the first paragraph represent text I have removed; those in the second are Dehlin’s, and no text has been omitted.

<sup>247</sup> John Dehlin, post on mormonmatters.org, 25 September 2010 (12:26 PM), link as above.

<sup>248</sup> M. Russell Ballard, “Beware of False Prophets and False Teachers.”

<sup>249</sup> John Dehlin, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 15 November 2011 (8:04 PM), <https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/582966429669>.

<sup>250</sup> John Dehlin, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 5 December 2001 (8:51 PM), <https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/170528716378274>.

<sup>251</sup> John Dehlin, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 15 April 2011 (9:49 PM), <https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/201299226577306>.

When the Church surveyed members about which on-line sources they used, Dehlin told the press: “I consider it progress that they [Church leaders] are thinking more like a company and less like the Soviet Union.”<sup>252</sup>

Although Dehlin claims on occasion that the Church is motivated by money, he considers himself free of such motives.<sup>253</sup> “The financial benefits are not there [in podcasts],” he says, but “the social benefits are amazing.”<sup>254</sup>

*Table 1: Some of the “Worst Talks Ever” Given by Church Leaders*

Author	Title (Date)—Focus [Category]
Spencer W. Kimball	“Love versus Lust” (1975)—sexual purity [2]
	“Marriage and Divorce” (1976)—divinity and necessity of marriage, need for unselfishness in marriage [2]
	“On My Honor” (1978)—BYU dress code, honor, integrity [1, 2]
Dallin H. Oaks	“Criticism” (1987)—how to handle disagreements with general and local Church leaders [1, 3]
	“Alternate Voices” (1989)—caution against self-appointed teachers and advocates within the Church, necessity of distinguishing between official and unofficial Church voices [1, 3]
	“Pornography” (1996)—counsel against pornography and immodesty [2]
	“Love and Law” (2009)—the love of God, how love does not remove the need to keep commandments [2]
	“Two Lines of Communication” (2010)—personal and Church-leadership revelation [1]

---

<sup>252</sup> John Dehlin, cited in Tony Semard, “Church asks Mormons: Which websites, writers do you read?,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 5 October 2011 (4:56 PM), <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/news/52682333-78/church-lds-mormon-survey.html.csp>.

<sup>253</sup> “Don’t . . . say I’m being like the church and authoritative and controlling, because I have very different goals. I’m not trying to line my pockets or push people one way or the other” (Larsen and Larsen interview, 20:35, 36:26–36:34). On financial matters, see note 18 herein.

<sup>254</sup> Larsen and Larsen interview, 33:40–33:50.

<b>Boyd K. Packer</b>	“To Young Men Only” (1976) <sup>255</sup> —counsel against masturbation [2] “To The One” (1976)—counsel against homosexual acts [2] “The Candle of the Lord” (1983)—testimony and nature of spiritual witness “The Unwritten Order of Things” (1996)—principles and examples of Church procedure and governance [1] “Cleansing the Inner Vessel” (2010) <sup>256</sup> —chastity and agency [1, 2]
<b>Jeffrey R. Holland</b>	“Safety for the Soul” (2009)—testimony of the Book of Mormon, inadequacy of secular explanations for it

<sup>255</sup> Some have on occasion informed me that the Church is trying to “distance” itself from this talk because it is absent from lds.org. I find that unlikely, since the talk was *never* published in the *Ensign* for the general church membership. (Ted Jones verified in a print copy that Elder Packer’s talk was not published in the November 1976 *Ensign*. It was, however, published in the official *Conference Report* [October 1976]: 97–102, on-line at <http://ia700800.us.archive.org/7/items/conferencereport1976sa/conferencereport1976sa.pdf>.) Thus, the talk’s absence is not a change. Mention is made of the talk by Marion G. Romney, “Your Gift From God,” <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1976/10/your-gift-from-god>, and this likewise appears in the print edition.) Masturbation is still regarded as something to be refrained from and repented of, and the Church continues to print the talk in pamphlet form. See *Church Materials Catalog 2010: United States and Canada: For Church Units* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010), 48. It is available in French, English, and Spanish. The talk’s first lines read: “There are present in this priesthood session only brethren. I approach a subject that could not appropriately be discussed if there were others present. I have prayed fervently for inspiration as I speak to young men of Aaronic Priesthood age: to young men only.” Elder Packer is thus clear that he regarded the talk as directed at a narrower audience: hence, among other things, the talk’s title. Some may regard this as unnecessary or old-fashioned, but its absence then or now from the *Ensign* cannot be interpreted as a repudiation, since it was (and continues to be) published by the Church for leaders’ use. See <http://wp.me/p3gtkJ-5K>.

<sup>256</sup> I have written elsewhere of the anger and misrepresentation with which this talk was greeted by some opposed to the Church’s teachings about homosexual acts and other sexual sin. One of the organizations then under consideration was founded by John Dehlin (see note 228 herein). See “Shattered Glass: The Traditions of Mormon Same-Sex Marriage Advocates Encounter Boyd K. Packer,” *Mormon Studies Review* 23/1 (2011): 61–85.

In September 2011, Dehlin praised the “really important work”<sup>257</sup> done by those who prepared a list of “The Worst Talks Ever”<sup>258</sup> given by Church leaders. While one or two of the talks have perhaps not worn terribly well, some of these “worst” talks were given by Church presidents or current apostles. (Table 1 lists some of the talks, their date of address, and a brief summary of their contents. The reader is encouraged to read them in their entirety.)

Most of these talks fall in into three broad (but not mutually exclusive) categories: (1) talks that involved matters of priesthood and apostolic authority, (2) talks that spoke of sexual morality and other commandments, and (3) those addressed to critics within and without the Church. The table indicates such categories in square brackets.

*Statements by Mormon Stories and Dehlin: chastity*

*Mormon Stories*’ listeners are also directed to what Dehlin called “one of my favorite [podcast]...episodes ever,” dedicated to a discussion intended to “help many LDS couples.”<sup>259</sup> Here we are told that LDS intimate relationships might be enhanced by the use of masturbation and erotica.

---

<sup>257</sup> John Dehlin, post on Facebook wall, 3 September (8:14 AM),

<https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/142669399159575>.

<sup>258</sup> “A Mormon in the Cheap Seats: The WORST Talks Ever,” 3 September 2011,

<http://www.dovesandserpents.org/wp/2011/09/10-mcs-worst-talks-ever/>.

<sup>259</sup> John Dehlin, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 10 March 2011 (9:06 PM),

<https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/139634816101703>. Natasha Parker, the interviewer for this episode of *Mormon Stories*, sits on the board of Dehlin’s *Mormon Stories* organization. “Mormon Stories Board of Directors,” <http://mormonstories.org/the-mormon-stories-board-of-directors/> (accessed 8 May 2012).

*Mormon Stories* tells us: “I wanted to try and get a more objective perspective on the topic, and let’s try not to get the Mormon bias in the way, although I realize there are always biases.”<sup>260</sup>

*Mormon Stories* offers us “objective” material asserting that masturbation and soft-core pornography or erotica has been unfairly stigmatized by LDS doctrine.<sup>261</sup> The practical application of such a stance is clear: a member whose wife was upset because he looks at *Victoria’s Secret* catalogs is said by Parker, one of *Mormon Stories*’ frequently-cited experts on sexual matters, to not have a pornography problem at all. (A reader pointed out to me that the wife also complains about her husband watching *Dancing With The Stars*—I discuss this matter in further detail at the blog link below.)<sup>262</sup> In doing so, *Mormon Stories* effectively minimizes the woman’s concerns by redefining the problem which she perceives, and placing it outside of the pornographic realm.

Many Mormons would disagree with the argument offered by *Mormon Stories*, partly because it completely misconstrues one of the doctrinal bases for the law of chastity, which has never been about any supposed psychosocial benefits or risks, though these no doubt exist.<sup>263</sup> The commandment is based

---

<sup>260</sup> Natasha Parker, “#245: Pornography, Masturbation, Sex and Marriage in Mormonism,” 10 March 2011, 00:00:58, <http://mormonstories.org/?p=1506>.

<sup>261</sup> Dallin H. Oaks said: “Some seek to justify their indulgence by arguing that they are only viewing ‘soft,’ not ‘hard,’ porn. A wise bishop called this refusing to see evil as evil.” “Pornography,” April 2005 general conference, <http://lds.org/general-conference/2005/04/pornography>. See also <http://wp.me/p3gtkJ-5R>.

<sup>262</sup> Parker interview, 5:10–11:35. See notes 259–260, 265 herein for further material from Parker. See <http://wp.me/p3gtkJ-5M> for a discussion of how the addition of the *Dancing With The Stars* claim does not solve the problem here discussed—it makes it worse.

<sup>263</sup> Dallin H. Oaks taught: “Brethren, *you have noticed that I am not discussing the effects of pornography on mental health or criminal behavior*. I am discussing its effects on spirituality—on our ability to have the companionship of the Spirit of the Lord and our capacity to exercise the power of the priesthood” (Oaks, “Pornography,” emphasis added).

on the teachings of Jesus (Matthew 5:28; see also 3 Nephi 12:28) and the need to moderate our enjoyment of all physical goods within bounds set by the Lord if we are not to lose our capacity to enjoy them (D&C 59:18–20; Moroni 9:18–20). Elsewhere, Dehlin also urges his readers to consult further “wisdom from my dear friend.”<sup>264</sup> This answer was directed to an LDS mother concerned about her son’s use of pornography and masturbation. The advice was not friendly to the Church’s teachings.<sup>265</sup> The Church, Dehlin’s friend tells us, produces “shame” when it discourages these acts, and they ought to be normalized for teens.<sup>266</sup>

LDS leaders, in contrast to *Mormon Stories*’ portrayal, have described masturbation as “not anything so wicked nor . . . a transgression so great that the Lord would reject you because of it, but it can quickly lead to that kind of transgression. It is not pleasing to the Lord, nor is it pleasing to you. It does not make you feel worthy or clean.”<sup>267</sup> Spencer W. Kimball described it as “a rather common indiscretion” and urged “anyone fettered by this weakness [to] abandon the habit before he goes on a

---

<sup>264</sup> John Dehlin, post on Dehlin’s Facebook wall, 7 December 2011 (10:28 AM),

<https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/289647271073601>. See also <http://wp.me/p3gtkJ-5P>.

<sup>265</sup> “I do not agree with taking a strict stance on teenage masturbation.” Natasha Helfer Parker, “Teen Masturbation,” 2 December 2011, <http://mormontherapist.blogspot.com/2011/12/teen-masturbation.html?zx=63f710e79efe3ff0>.

<sup>266</sup> See also Dehlin: “Mormons, like Catholics and many others, are taught don’t masturbate, it’s bad, it’s a big shame thing, and so people learn to hide it” (Parker interview, 12:32).

<sup>267</sup> Boyd K. Packer, “To Young Men Only,” October 1976 general conference. See Table 1 above for Dehlin’s assessment of this talk. Dehlin tells us, instead, that “masturbation can keep you from moral transgressions” (Parker interview, 17:06.) Theologically, this might be likened to praising tobacco because it keeps you from smoking crack cocaine. The fantasy life and inflamed passions that almost invariably accompany masturbation might also serve as a type of gateway to more serious sin.



mission or receives the holy priesthood or goes in the temple for his blessings.”<sup>268</sup> Neither of these is the language of shame, catastrophizing, or even severe condemnation.

According to *Mormon Stories*’ expert there are “many other medically sound reasons” not to oppose masturbation.<sup>269</sup> However, what medical science can reliably say about spiritual matters, which provide the framework for these teachings, was not addressed.

Two success stories provided by *Mormon Stories* are of interest in this context: one was an LDS man who ultimately turned for a time to solo masturbation (among other techniques) to cope with his wife’s lack of interest in sex. The other was an LDS couple who opted for an “open marriage” because of the husband’s homosexuality—they remained together with their children, but both enjoyed other sexual partners. Chastity, in this case, was declared by Dehlin’s expert to be part of “the Mormon construct” that was “not [a]...viable option for them.”<sup>270</sup> Dehlin told the *New York Times* that “There’s no place for gays and lesbians in the church right now. You have three options: celibacy for life, heterosexual marriage or excommunication.”<sup>271</sup> For *Mormon Stories*, chastity for members with homosexual desire is no place, not a viable option.

---

<sup>268</sup> Spencer W. Kimball, “President Kimball Speaks Out on Morality,” October 1980 general conference, <http://lds.org/general-conference/1980/10/president-kimball-speaks-out-on-morality?lang=eng>.

<sup>269</sup> Parker, “Teen Masturbation.”

<sup>270</sup> The expert remarks, “They’re Mormon. . . . I am very impressed with them. They are very, very wonderful to each other and have really explored so many options. They are very devoted to their children, and the Mormon construct does not offer any viable options for them.” Jennifer Finlayson Fife and Natasha Helfer Parker, “#280: How to Have Better Sex in Your Mormon Marriage,” interview with John Dehlin, 3 September 2011, <http://mormonstories.org/?p=1942>, 1:43:50–1:49:32.

<sup>271</sup> Jack Healey, “Gentle Dissent in Mormon Church on Gay Marriage,” *New York Times* (12 June 2012): A17, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/12/us/dissent-on-gay-marriage-among-mormons.html>.

Dehlin’s public Facebook page also serves to disseminate such views: on a link to an account of a young LDS woman who decided not to keep the law of chastity, he wrote: “Love it!”<sup>272</sup>

*Statements by Mormon Stories and Dehlin: Jesus Christ, his Resurrection, and the Atonement*

As discussed above, Dehlin expressed skepticism about Christ’s divinity and even the existence of an historical Jesus. He expresses disbelief and disinterest in the Resurrection and the Atonement.<sup>273</sup>

## Part 5—*Mormon Stories* and the Construction of Narrative

Having seen what *Mormon Stories* says and does, and the effects which Church critics and its founder believe it has, some conclusions can now be drawn.<sup>274</sup> *Mormon Stories* merits study partly because of its secular parallels to anti-cult ministries and exit counselors and for what it illustrates about religious leavetaking. Dehlin’s recent and rapid changes in self-identity are also a researcher’s dream, since one can examine the same subject at different stages of leavetaking. The sociological study of leavetakers has identified common themes and patterns in what is termed the “exit narrative” or “apostasy narrative.” Such accounts typically “refer...to events [connected with a religious group] that flagrantly violate some fundamental cultural value and which evoke moral outrage to the extent that social control actions against

---

<sup>272</sup> Elna Baker, “Guess What? I’m Not a Virgin Anymore!,” *Glamour* (April 2011), <http://www.glamour.com/sex-love-life/2011/04/guess-what-im-not-a-virgin-anymore>. Dehlin’s remarks are 30 March 2011 (2:56 PM), <https://www.facebook.com/johndeclin/posts/153090308088491>. The page has either expired or been deleted, copy in my possession. Baker would later be a featured guest at a *Mormon Stories* conference: John Dehlin, “380, New York City Conference Pt. 2 with Elna Baker,” 28 October 2012, [http://mormonstories.org/elna\\_baker/](http://mormonstories.org/elna_baker/).

<sup>273</sup> See note 126 herein. Further discussion at notes 33–38, 125–132 herein.

<sup>274</sup> All the experts cited in this section, with the exception of Armand Mauss, are non-Mormons. I am here drawing on a broader non-LDS discussion of leavetakers.

the group perpetrating the event are warranted.”<sup>275</sup> Nineteenth century isolation and an inclination to believe the worst made many Mormon apostasy narratives seem plausible: debauched polygamy, tales of human sacrifice, deviant economic systems, and theocratic despotism. In the twenty-first century *Mormon Stories* focuses instead on such cultural values as a claimed lack of tolerance, openness, or intellectual integrity.<sup>276</sup> In a more secularist vein than most sectarian exit counseling, *Mormon Stories* denounces an authoritarian leadership structure, unpopular views on sexual behavior, and political involvement with unpopular causes, such as opposing gay marriage.<sup>277</sup> The social control must come, not from the outside, but from within the Church. Uncorrelated Mormons should be entitled to claim Mormon identity, *Mormon Stories* will guide them on how to oppose political talk at Church of which the group disapproves, and so forth.<sup>278</sup>

Lawrence Foster noted that “rather than moving on to make a new and more happy life for themselves, career apostates tend to define themselves more in terms of what they are against rather than what they are for. Yet their personal ambivalence also may reflect an ambivalence at the heart of the movement with which they maintain such an intense love-hate relationship.”<sup>279</sup> In the same vein, Dehlin

---

<sup>275</sup> James T. Richardson, “Apostates, Whistleblowers, Law, and Social Control,” in Bromley, *The Politics of Religious Apostasy*, 173.

<sup>276</sup> See notes 52, 148, 212, 228, 243–250, and 252 herein.

<sup>277</sup> See notes 252–253, 320 (leadership); 259–260, 264–266, 272 (sexuality); 228, 270 (homosexuality); and 211, 215 (exit counseling) herein.

<sup>278</sup> See notes 175 (remaining a member), 225–226 (“Mormons” as title for non-believers) and 233 (dealing with Church discussion which opposes gay marriage) herein.

<sup>279</sup> Foster, “Career Apostates,” 54. Compare with citation of Foster’s later work in Armand L. Mauss, “Apostasy and the Management of Spoiled Identity,” 51.

has told us that he remains completely defined by his Mormon-ness, even though he does not believe the Church’s truth claims.<sup>280</sup>

Stuart Wright notes that “the apostate carves out a moral or professional career as an ex, capitalizing on opportunities of status enhancement afforded the individual through organizational affiliation with the oppositional groups.”<sup>281</sup> Dehlin remains a member of record, so he is not an “ex” in the technical sense—though we recall that leavetakers of all types usually demonstrate “mixed types and movement between types...variations...would be expected to constitute the rule rather than the exception...”<sup>282</sup> Thus, while he is in some ways a peripheral or marginal member, he has other traits which mirror those of a sociological apostate. Like the apostates discussed by Wright, for example, Dehlin’s visibility and status have been enhanced—he gains the “social benefits” that his efforts bring. He has appeared in the national and international media, and will reap financial reward from members of the oppositional groups he has founded.<sup>283</sup>

A key part of the “post-involvement identity” (or, in Dehlin’s case, his “post-belief identity”) “is negotiated within the interactional context of a countermovement coalition and subsequently packaged for public consumption as the ‘wronged’ person.” It is not incidental that there is an almost religious dimension to this process:

The apostate seeks to polarize the former and present identities, accentuating a personal transformation akin to conversion. Indeed, the intensity and zeal in which the apostate embraces the new moral vision, seeks atonement through public confession and testimony, and makes salvific claims of redemption, at least suggests that the ex-member’s new affiliation may be analyzed as a type of quasi-religious conversion in

---

<sup>280</sup> See note 72 herein.

<sup>281</sup> Wright, 97.

<sup>282</sup> See note 7 herein.

<sup>283</sup> See, for example, notes 15, 18, 136, 234, 243, and 254 herein.

its own right....It is typically characterized as a darkness-to-light personal transformation.<sup>284</sup>

Dehlin presents many examples of this type of behavior. He announces that in regards to Mormon homosexuals, “We’re gonna change the world, ya’ll! For the better.”<sup>285</sup> His decision to announce his lack of belief is driven by a moral imperative.<sup>286</sup> Just because Dehlin conforms to the sociological pattern does not mean he is wrong, or dissembling, or insincere. But, his claims and approach are predictable, and in such situations the virtues of objectivity, intellectual rigor, tolerance of differing views, and balance are difficult to achieve, both because of the involvement of non-rational factors and a universal human tendency to reinterpret the past in light of present needs, beliefs, and priorities. We have seen precisely that difficulty at great length above. Dehlin’s new identity puts a premium upon these virtues, because they are an intrinsic part of the narrative he has adopted for himself and his endeavors. It is therefore important that he insist he possesses them, though the social science evidence suggests that few in Dehlin’s situation would be likely to do so.

The dilemma which leavetakers of all types face is a cruel one, and the solution is thus often radical:

How does one explain such total immersion in a religious group if the individual has come to the conclusion that it was a mistake and that he or she does not wish to continue participation any longer?... In exchange terms, the social group [outside the religion] demands reparation equal to the offense. Consequently, the disgruntled ex-member pursues the apostate role with the same vigor and intensity that characterized his or her former commitment....<sup>287</sup>

Recall that Dehlin envisions an entire *Mormon Stories* “parachurch”<sup>288</sup> of study groups, conferences, Especially for Youth, dating services, alternative spiritualities, Sunday School, and supporters who have

---

<sup>284</sup> Wright, “Exploring Factors That Shape the Apostate Role,” 97.

<sup>285</sup> See note 221 herein.

<sup>286</sup> See, for example, note 137 herein.

<sup>287</sup> Wright, “Exploring Factors That Shape the Apostate Role,” 103.

<sup>288</sup> John Dehlin, post on Mormon Stories Facebook wall, 8 October 2012 (1:55 PM),

“callings” to help with podcasts.<sup>289</sup> He insists that this is “NOT a church/religion,” though it appears to fill much of that function psychologically and sociologically.<sup>290</sup> “[D]econversion and conversion may be distinguished but not completely separated in analysis,” reminds Barbour, “for they represent differing perspectives on the same human experience of transformed loyalties or altered trust.”<sup>291</sup> “The disengagement [from the religion] process,” says Wright, “is not complete until the individual is socially relocated and supported by a new plausibility structure that separates and insulates the ex-member from the previous role identity and belief system.”<sup>292</sup> With his former self completely enmeshed in Mormonism, and his present self still defined by such matters, Dehlin can be seen as now fashioning a new role for himself.

Above all, “apostate narratives are marked by a singular concern with pre-empting any questions that may be raised regarding the facticity of the claims made.”<sup>293</sup> To question Dehlin’s formulation is to be charged with hurting others or increasing their suffering.<sup>294</sup>

Apostate narratives require an audience, for the sponsoring audience actually co-authors the narrative, not as literal co-authors, but as an audience in the truest sense of the word. Here their sponsorship is not of a polished narrative ready to secure for itself a listening public, but of a developing narrative, one that they, as hearers, help secure in the first place. At its most basic level, this involves providing a contextual

---

<sup>289</sup> See notes 215–218 herein.

<sup>290</sup> See note 219 herein.

<sup>291</sup> Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion*, 74.

<sup>292</sup> Wright, “Exploring Factors That Shape the Apostate Role,” 107.

<sup>293</sup> Daniel Carson Johnson, “Apostates Who Never Were: The Social Construction of *Absque Facto* Apostate Narratives,” in Bromley, *The Politics of Religious Apostasy*, 124.

<sup>294</sup> When Dehlin heard that this review was in preparation, he wrote to a Seventy and copied Dan Peterson: “Please, please stop the personal public attacks of people who are struggling with legitimate issues” [John Dehlin, e-mail to Elder [Seventy] and Dan Peterson, 26 March 2012 (12:03 PM)]. For more details, see Smith, “Return of the Unread Review,” notes 43, 52–53, and 55 therein.

framework toward which the would-be apostate can orient his stories, as well as inducing him to do just that.<sup>295</sup>

*Mormon Stories* and Dehlin's other venues provide both an audience and a forum for the mutual creation of such narratives for all. They also provide the raw material necessary for the new recruit's own narrative. Such accounts start to sound very similar, yet "all of [this]...can proceed without open collusion between the would-be apostate and the audience that sponsors the developing tale. It all occurs without there being an explicit understanding that narrator and audience are conspiring to (re)construct the narrator's past."<sup>296</sup>

*Mormon Stories* has, in fact, provided a fairly transparent example of this process in action. What one author bemoaned as "occur[ing] almost entirely behind the scenes, a fact that clearly make it difficult for social scientists to analyze any of it," we can watch Dehlin's organization do before our eyes.<sup>297</sup>

***Mormon Stories's* Survey—the "scientific" construction of a modern exit narrative?**

As we have seen, *Mormon Stories* has gone to considerable lengths to craft the narrative using traditional techniques. However, I think we may now have the chance to observe a new style of exit narrative for Mormonism. Despite the relatively new approach, we will see that the dynamics and pressures to which it is responding are not new. The apostasy narrative of the nineteenth century used a novel-like formula and affidavits swearing to the tale's veracity; the twentieth century might be said to have used the form of written secular scholarship; *Mormon Stories's* novelty relies on the use of statistics and social science techniques.

We can watch *Mormon Stories* mobilize their community for further narrative creation if we briefly examine the results of an on-line survey, "Understanding Mormon Disbelief." Such surveys and their mass of statistical tables and colorful graphs lend an objective, scientific air to the narrative, but they do

---

<sup>295</sup> Johnson, "Apostates Who Never Were," 131

<sup>296</sup> Johnson, "Apostates Who Never Were," 132

<sup>297</sup> Johnson, "Apostates Who Never Were," 132.

not guarantee factuality any more than did the sworn statements that accompanied both pro- and anti-Mormon polemic in Joseph Smith’s era.

The survey’s report begins with a caveat:

As the survey sample was not random, the Open Stories Foundation makes no claim of representativeness or statistical significance in the sample. This survey is representative of the respondents only, although we feel that many points of this analysis are indicative of the experiences of many people in the church who pass through a crisis of faith and emerge as disbelievers.<sup>298</sup>

If a survey is not conducted according to scientific norms, it is not clear what value it has to others.<sup>299</sup>

The Open Stories Foundation claims it contains meaningful information: “we feel that many points...are indicative.” The results are publicized because “we feel” they are representative, but such personal belief is not really admissible as evidence. Other unpopular religious groups have already seen the same tactics used against them:

these ex-members feed into the controversy in a number of other ways: At the level of basic research, these individuals are respondents to pseudo-scientific surveys designed

---

<sup>298</sup> Open Stories Foundation, “Understanding Mormon Disbelief: Why do some Mormons lose their testimony and what happens to them when they do?,” (March 2012): 4, <http://WhyMormonsQuestion.org>.

<sup>299</sup> Such “convenience sampling” is useful for some purposes, such as the early development of hypotheses for future testing by more appropriate sampling techniques. They are the beginning of research, not the finished product that the release of a report implies: “[C]onvenience sampling can be useful to researchers in a number of ways. For example, responses from a convenience sample might be useful in developing hypotheses early in the course of research, identifying various issues surrounding the research subject, defining response categories for multiple-response questions, or collecting other sorts of noninferential data.” Matthias Schonlau, Ronald D. Fricker, Jr., and Marc N. Elliott, *Conducting Research Surveys via E-mail and the Web* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2002), 8. See also <http://wp.me/p3gtkJ-61>.



to substantiate such claims as that “cult” brainwashing techniques induce mental illness in their members....<sup>300</sup>

*Mormon Stories*’ study also reports that “[i]n addition to standard reporting of data, various statistical techniques and methodologies (multiple linear regression, factor analysis, etc.) were utilized to gain additional insights from the data.”<sup>301</sup> But, if the data are not gathered in a statistically significant way, it does not really matter what kind of sophisticated techniques are applied to them. Poor data cannot be made into robust data by varying the technique used to analyze them.

*Not statistically rigorous*

The first serious problem is that the survey’s participants are self-selected, as noted above. *Mormon Stories* did not take a random sample of members who leave the Church or even those who have decided the Church is not what it claims to be. Instead, they prepared a survey and then recruited participants through Dehlin’s podcast and others’ on-line sites, encouraging the audience to participate and to spread the word.<sup>302</sup> The academic literature on surveys points out that since respondents self-select when approached in this way, results are exaggerated.<sup>303</sup> *Mormon Stories*’ report ignores this issue.

---

<sup>300</sup> James R. Lewis, “Adidam, Controversy, and Former Members,” paper presented at 2009 CESNUR Conference, Salt Lake City, Utah, 11–13 June 2009, [http://www.cesnur.org/2009/slc\\_lewis.htm](http://www.cesnur.org/2009/slc_lewis.htm). Lewis also notes that “Rather than responding directly to mainstream social science, a handful of anti-cultists with academic credentials have instead conducted research on their own terms, creating alternative periodicals, which feature pseudo-scientific studies supporting the ‘cult’ stereotype.” See also “Return of the Unread Review,” notes 29, 31 therein.

<sup>301</sup> “Understanding Mormon Disbelief,” 4.

<sup>302</sup> “A link to the survey was posted on several sites associated with the “Bloggernacle”, or LDS-themed blogs, as well as through social media.” [“Understanding Mormon Disbelief,” 4.] We recall Dehlin’s past practice of using the same channels to explicitly recruit supportive testimonials (but not critical ones) to present to his stake president—see notes 144–148 herein.

<sup>303</sup> *Conducting Research Surveys via E-mail and the Web*, 33.

*Mormon Stories*' audience is almost certainly composed of many people who are troubled about the Church's history, its stance on sexual behavior, or the other issues that interest Dehlin. The social groups to which they belong will likewise tend to be made up of those who share their biases and concerns—we tend to socialize on-line and off-line with those who agree with us about matters we deem important. Predictably, the survey finds that those who listen to Dehlin's podcast and read his material about the problems with history and sexual behavior in the Church are troubled by the Church's history and stance on sexual behavior.

*Memory and retrospective accounts*

*Mormon Stories*' efforts to use the survey to construct a narrative of why some Mormons disbelieve highlights a second difficulty: “Autobiographical memory is a constructive process: . . . People's current goals and knowledge influence recollections.”<sup>304</sup> This applies to everyone. One author makes the same observation in his analysis of secular and sectarian ex-Mormon narratives: “after-the-fact narratives are inherently unreliable in establishing the authenticity of actual occurrence.”<sup>305</sup>

*Mormon Stories*' questionnaire asks people to describe why they made a decision in the past. What were the factors that led them to conclude the Church was not what it claimed to be? A change in religious worldview can be a major life event, so memories might well be vivid. However, the psychological literature is clear that conclusions about our past mental state based upon retrospective reporting are also highly unreliable. “We often edit or entirely rewrite our previous experiences—unknowingly and unconsciously—in light of what we now know or believe. The result can be a skewed

---

<sup>304</sup> Michael Ross and Anne E. Wilson, “Constructing and Appraising Past Selves,” in *Memory, Brain, and Belief*, edited by Daniel L. Schacter and Elaine Scarry (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 232, 233; cited in Gardner, *Gift and Power*, 74. At the time of publication, both authors were members of the Department of Psychology, University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.

<sup>305</sup> Payne, “Purposeful Strangers,” 2.

rendering of a specific incident, or even of an extended period in our lives, that says more about how we feel now than what happened then. Thus, without knowing it, we can modify our own history.”<sup>306</sup>

“Unfortunately,” noted the National Academies Press in 1988, “asking people about the past is not particularly helpful: people remake their views of the past to rationalize the present and so retrospective data are often of uncertain validity.”<sup>307</sup> As a recent popularization put it, “Today, there’s broad consensus among psychologists that memory isn’t reproductive—it doesn’t duplicate precisely what we’ve experienced— but reconstructive. What we recall is often a blurry mixture of accurate recollections, along with what jells with our beliefs, needs, emotions, and hunches. These hunches are in turn based on our knowledge of ourselves, the events we try to recall, and what we’ve experienced in similar situations.”<sup>308</sup> A variety of biases affect such efforts to establish past views, beliefs, and influences, especially about a subject as emotionally-freighted as religion.<sup>309</sup>

Someone in the Open Stories Foundation has had instruction on social science research techniques. This is evinced by the insertion of a disclaimer stating that *Mormon Stories*’ survey is not statistically rigorous. Despite this, *Mormon Stories* still wishes to use the survey to construct narrative,

---

<sup>306</sup> Seema L. Clifasfi, Maryanne Garry, and Elizabeth Loftus, “Setting the Record (or Video Camera) Straight on Memory and Other Memory Myths,” in *Tall Tales about the Mind and Brain: Separating Fact from Fiction*, edited by Sergio Della Sala (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 61; cited in Gardner, *Gift and Power*, 119n1.

<sup>307</sup> Dean R. Gerstein, Duncan Luce, Neil J. Smelser, and Sonja Sperlich, editors, *The Behavioral and Social Sciences: Achievements and Opportunities* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1988), 173.

<sup>308</sup> Scott O. Lilienfeld, Steven Jay Lynn, John Ruscio, and Barry L. Beyerstein, *50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology: Shattering Widespread Misconceptions about Human Behavior* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 68.

<sup>309</sup> Daniel L. Schacter, *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 138–139.

and encourages the audience to draw conclusions based upon the responses. But, as the experts warn, “hindsight bias...is ubiquitous: people seem almost driven to reconstruct the past to fit what they know in the present. In light of [a] known outcome, people can more easily retrieve incidents and examples that confirm it.”<sup>310</sup>

It is thus not clear what can be concluded from such a survey, save that *Mormon Stories*’ audience now agrees with Dehlin.

### *Priming and cueing*

The third serious problem with the survey is the phenomenon of “priming,” in which “semantic memory—the intricate network of concepts, associations, and facts that constitutes our general knowledge of the world” can be influenced by material to which we are exposed prior to answering questions.<sup>311</sup> Such “priming,” notes Schacter, “occurs independent of conscious memory.”<sup>312</sup> Simply put, the survey does not present a blank slate to those who now disbelieve. Instead, it offers a list of issues, and asks the participants to rank them. This produces multiple potential sources of error and bias:

- By printing a long list of potential responses, the survey might lead some to decide that something which now bothers them also caused their disaffection. But, if they had been asked to remember without any cueing from the survey, this issue might not have come up.
- The survey’s format makes it clear that a large focus is upon historical matters and issues such as feminism and gay rights. This can serve as a subtle and possibly unconscious clue about what the researcher hopes to discover. There is a natural tendency for research subjects to wish to please

---

<sup>310</sup> Schacter, *Seven Sins of Memory*, 147.

<sup>311</sup> Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching For Memory: The Brain, The Mind, and The Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 169. Another aspect of memory which operates on a non-conscious level, termed the “perceptual representation system,” (PRS) also handles simpler types of priming, and normally works in close concert with semantic memory (166–172).

<sup>312</sup> Schacter, *Searching For Memory*, 167.

researchers with whom they have a pre-existing relationship. (In a similar way, patients who are being treated by a physician with whom they have a long-standing relationship will tend to report more success than those treated by a researcher they do not know, because they wish to validate their physician's hard work and please her.)

- Because those taking the survey know that its results will be made public and used to further *Mormon Stories'* goals, they may emphasize issues which concern them because they wish to draw attention to these concerns, even if those issues actually played a minimal role in their exit. Likewise, they may downplay reasons for leaving that do not match the narrative which the *Mormon Studies* community is crafting.
- The survey's focus on problems with the Church is akin to asking a sample of divorced husbands to describe why their marriage failed via a list composed mostly of faults in their wives. Such an approach would tell us a great deal about the husbands' current state of mind, but reveal relatively little about why the marriage failed or how the husbands contributed to its failure.<sup>313</sup>

In a survey of ex-Mormon exit narratives, one author noted precisely these sorts of problems:

The discussion of doctrinal issues and specific LDS truth claims [in exit narratives] is present in nearly all of the narratives but is generally proffered as an after-thought recitation without evidence of a deep grasp of the historical or theological questions at hand. This recitation generally follows the discussion of cultural estrangement and in many cases functions in the narrative to justify or validate the estrangement described previously. In only rare cases are doctrinal concerns and problems described as the genesis of the exit process. Rather, doctrinal and historical issues function to solidify or widen the gap between the author and Mormonism.<sup>314</sup>

Thus even after the fact, the ex-Mormon accounts do not evince a deep familiarity with the historical or doctrinal issues that trouble them, and upon which *Mormon Stories'* survey focuses. (This is akin to Dehlin's superficial and misleading engagement with Book of Mormon historicity during his Coe

---

<sup>313</sup> This precise scenario has been studied, with predictable but illuminating results; see Schacter, *Seven Sins of Memory*, 141–142.

<sup>314</sup> Payne, "Purposeful Strangers," 27.

interview.) Rather, doctrinal or historical concerns grow in importance later. This dynamic reversed the author’s expectations: “most of these narratives deal directly with issues of cultural pressure and disengagement and that the narrative authors generally address specific doctrinal concerns only in an after-the-fact manner.”<sup>315</sup>

This author’s empirical observations can be explained partly through the phenomenon of priming, in which the ex-Mormon community helps to socialize the new leavetaker. That the survey is after-the-fact likely magnifies these effects.

*The narrative agenda*

“Memory selects and distorts in the service of present interests. The present interest may be narrowly defined—memory may be called up and shaped in an instrumental fashion to support some current strategic end.”

— Michael Shudson<sup>316</sup>

The survey participants’ sympathy with *Mormon Stories*’ goals adds an additional wrinkle. Much of its audience knows what *Mormon Stories* is trying to accomplish with their survey. Dehlin is understandably anxious to disprove the notion that people leave the Church to cover or rationalize their present or intended sins, or some other less respectable reason. He draws attention to the historical and social issues that he believes are problematic and which he tells his audience will cause most of them to become “uncorrelated” Mormons if they have integrity.<sup>317</sup> This may explain why the report highlights the fact that “the issues that scored the lowest in terms of self-rated impact were [1] desire to sin [2] being offended.”<sup>318</sup> Such reports may be accurate, but it is difficult to assess them in this context. It could also be that sin and taking offense are least likely to be reported because wanting to sin or being offended are seen, in both LDS culture and western society more broadly, as poor excuses for leaving. All the problems of biased recall and selective memory will of necessity come into play when this question is

---

<sup>315</sup> Payne, “Purposeful Strangers,” 23–24.

<sup>316</sup> Shudson, 351; cited in Gardner, *Gift and Power*, 119.

<sup>317</sup> See note 212 herein.

<sup>318</sup> “Understanding Mormon Disbelief,” 8.

asked. Autobiographers recounting a loss of religious conviction “usually reject their religion for reasons of conscience, that is, because of a commitment to intellectual honesty or because they see certain beliefs as having a destructive effect on their society.”<sup>319</sup> This is simply how such people—from every faith tradition, and other deeply held belief systems such as Marxism or feminism—tend to frame such matters to themselves and for public consumption.

It is not difficult to sympathize, then, with Dehlin’s desire to eradicate the idea that his or others’ doubts springs from sin.<sup>320</sup> The survey is an opportunity for the disaffected and disenchanted to speak collectively to the media and perhaps the Church. It can be used to confront family members who will not accept the reasons they have given for leaving. *Mormon Stories* and the Open Stories Foundation play the role of “sponsoring organization” in the recitation and formalization of apostasy narratives, even among those who are elsewhere on the leavetaker spectrum:

The sponsoring audience actually promotes and shepherds the apostate narrative once it has been fashioned. The support and certification of the sponsoring audience builds the credibility of the account and the certitude and confidence of the apostate-narrator...Separating the narrative spatially, temporally, and informationally from the receiving audience renders the narrative mysterious and unverifiable even while its veracity and accuracy are being proclaimed.<sup>321</sup>

*Mormon Stories* adds a modern, scientific sheen to this phenomenon by certifying the collected anecdotes of disaffection with social science and statistics. The anonymous accounts cannot be verified, and individual accounts cannot be dissociated from the group. The audience gets only the data and perspective provided by *Mormon Stories*, and these perspectives are then homogenized into a numerical value. In this case, the scientific veneer serves to heighten their apparent “veracity and accuracy” while in

---

<sup>319</sup> Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion*, 4.

<sup>320</sup> See anonymous survey respondent #243 who tells the Church, “Please don’t treat doubt as a sin,” while #1736 says, “The way that church leaders demonize people like me at conference is so upsetting.” [“Understanding Mormon Disbelief,” 6.]

<sup>321</sup> Bromley, “Sociological Perspectives,” 9.

fact subtly separating the audience from them even further. The *Mormon Stories* community creates its own confirmation bias. This is why medical doctors pound a maxim into their students: “The plural of ‘anecdote’ is not ‘data’.”

*A revealing omission*

There is, however, one element of the survey that is useful in a provisional way, but it serves mainly to confirm that the data set is not terribly robust. Of the “issues contributing to disbelief,” having “no spiritual witness” is ranked of “low importance,” averaging only 1.21 out of 4.<sup>322</sup> Even Ethan Smith’s *View of the Hebrews*, the “Mark Hofmann scandal,” and problems with local leaders all scored higher.<sup>323</sup> That is, these issues bothered *Mormon Stories*’ audience, on average, more than not receiving a spiritual witness did.

Put another way, this means that only 21% of those surveyed reported that not having a spiritual witness was “a major factor” in their decision.<sup>324</sup> How can this be? If there is one matter that is consistently emphasized in the Church, it is the absolute necessity of personal revelation and the importance of knowing for oneself. It seems extraordinarily unlikely that the rest of the sample received revelation confirming that the Church was true and yet chose to leave anyway because of issues surrounding sexuality or history. It is possible that the majority of the survey respondents are lying when they say that not having revelation was not of much importance to their decision, but that seems implausible.

The more convincing explanation is that not having revelation simply does not hold a prominent place in the narrative that *Mormon Stories* has advanced. Dehlin wants to emphasize how objective, fair, and balanced he and his followers are. He insists, for example, that a rational consideration of the Book of

---

<sup>322</sup> “Understanding Mormon Disbelief,” 12.

<sup>323</sup> “Understanding Mormon Disbelief,” 26. The report renders the name as “Hofmann” (9, 11), “Hoffman” (12, 26), and “Hofman” (17). The first is correct.

<sup>324</sup> “Understanding Mormon Disbelief,” 8.



Mormon compels us to conclude that it cannot be historical.<sup>325</sup> DNA or historical issues are presented as serious problems.<sup>326</sup> Appealing to revelation is, in this world-view, non-rational. As a result, I suggest that Dehlin’s audience was simply not primed to regard revelation as something upon which their survey responses ought to focus. And so, the survey reports that it was of little importance in causing them to leave, though its presence or absence can in reality hardly have been insignificant to anyone with any exposure to LDS culture and training.

This dynamic is precisely what the sociological literature would lead us to expect. “Emphasis on the irresistibility of subversive techniques is vital to apostates and their allies as a means of locating responsibility for participation on the organization rather than on the former member.”<sup>327</sup> Dehlin achieves this same effect (consciously or otherwise) by emphasizing his life-long membership in the Church and his family background—he did not, in this reading, have a real choice, but as soon as he began to look and think for himself, he had to change his views. His culture and upbringing are what subverted his intellect. “This [type of] account avoids attribution of calculated choices that would call for invoking the label of traitor.”<sup>328</sup> To have received revelation and then to reject it, or to have never seriously sought it, is to betray the heart of the LDS religious project—and so, *Mormon Stories* and its survey participants mostly disregard personal revelation as a factor when they fashion their retrospective exit narratives.

## Conclusion

*Mormon Stories* has many points of contact across the leavetaker spectrum. But, when viewed through the lens of the sociology of religious apostasy, its dynamics are nothing new. Perhaps the role that best encapsulates Dehlin’s current endeavors is that of exit counselor.<sup>329</sup> One hostile voice even

---

<sup>325</sup> See notes 94–95, 103 herein.

<sup>326</sup> Steadman and Johnson interview, 47:40–48:45; also notes 48, 91–92 herein.

<sup>327</sup> Bromley, “The Social Construction of Contested Exit Roles,” 37.

<sup>328</sup> Bromley, “The Social Construction of Contested Exit Roles,” 37.

<sup>329</sup> See note 211 herein for an example.

worried about what excommunication could mean for this aspect of Dehlin’s work, using quasi-religious language:

My concern is that by ex’ing John, [the church] will kill any will he has left to continue the ‘ministry’, and kill that tiny bit of credibility required by the newly exploring questioner to listen, credibility that comes with NOT being an ‘Ex’ Mormon, if you follow me.<sup>330</sup>

Exit councilors often “frame...[religious change] in terms of medicalization replete with terms like ‘recovery,’ ‘rehabilitation,’ and ‘healing’ in describing work with ex-members.”<sup>331</sup> In a therapist voice, Dehlin announces that “I firmly and honestly believe that for many of the people I’ve worked with—to heal (psychologically, emotionally, etc.) the only option IS to leave the church.”<sup>332</sup>

Wright quotes one exit counselor describing his work: “I am not trying to make someone into my follower; once my job of presenting information, laying out alternatives, and counseling is accomplished, it is up to the individual to make use of the experience.”<sup>333</sup> Dehlin uses almost identical language as he explains that he is just a neutral source of information, nothing more.<sup>334</sup> But, as we have seen, *Mormon Stories*’ information is neither complete nor accurate. The material reviewed herein has a persistent bias and it is oriented against the Church’s truth claims, its moral teachings, its leaders, and the doctrine of Christ.

The exit-councilor role is replete with the same dynamics as Dehlin’s account, since when one “assume[s] a career as a professional ex,” this “offers an outlet for redemption by internalizing as a moral mission the spiritual duty (counseling career) of helping both oneself and others. One’s past experience as

---

<sup>330</sup> Patriarchal ..., post on “Yes, John Dehlin has left the Church,” 5 May 2011 (3:50 PM),

[http://www.postmormon.org/exp\\_e/index.php/discussions/viewthread/28352/P80/](http://www.postmormon.org/exp_e/index.php/discussions/viewthread/28352/P80/).

<sup>331</sup> Stuart A. Wright, “Exploring Factors That Shape the Apostate Role,” in Bromley, *The Politics of Religious Apostasy*, 101–102.

<sup>332</sup> See notes 240–241 herein.

<sup>333</sup> Wright, “Exploring Factors That Shape the Apostate Role,” 106.

<sup>334</sup> See MormonThink.com’s editor echoing the idea at note 61, and Dehlin at note 62 herein.

an ex uniquely endows the individual with special qualifications, proving professional and moral differentiation from other counselors whose therapeutic skills are merely mundane and ordinary.”<sup>335</sup>

This is the type of social benefit and capital that Dehlin so appreciates from his podcast work: “It’s really rewarding, it’s just personally rewarding to be a meaningful part of someone’s faith journey and help alleviate pain.”<sup>336</sup> One sociologist noted that “there is the development of an emotional bond between therapist and client... ‘a surrender’ to the therapist who ‘enact[s] a powerfully charismatic role in the professional ex’s therapeutic transformation.”<sup>337</sup>

Dehlin says much about his desire to help and heal people, and since his disaffection has even embarked on professional training in psychology. Even his research focus has a religious angle, as he focuses on obsessive compulsive symptoms with a religious dimension.<sup>338</sup> It is laudable to want to help others. But, as far as the Church of Jesus Christ is concerned, he generally helps members by moving them intellectually away from belief. He also moves them emotionally and spiritually away from the Church’s traditional support systems.

Even before leaving the Church, Dehlin detailed his views on power and influence within the community of Saints: “power does not abdicate itself voluntarily...it must be forced. Gentle patience ends up just enabling, and drawing out the pain for those who are inflicted [*sic*] ....”<sup>339</sup> Such an approach evinces a profound misunderstanding of how God produces change in others (see D&C 121:36–46). It would seem that Dehlin is instead ready to try to force the issue—he cannot control or displace Church

---

<sup>335</sup> Wright, “Exploring Factors That Shape the Apostate Role,” 108.

<sup>336</sup> Larsen and Larsen, 34:00–34:27.

<sup>337</sup> Wright, “Exploring Factors That Shape the Apostate Role,” 107.

<sup>338</sup> See note 227 herein.

<sup>339</sup> John Dehlin, post on mormonmatters.org, 25 September 2010 (11:44 AM),

<http://mormonmatters.org/2010/09/27/elder-marlin-jensen-apologizes-for-proposition-8>. Ellipses in the original; no text has been omitted. The original post has been deleted; copy in my possession.

leaders on their own turf, so he will create parallel communities of Mormons (whether active, disaffected, or former). He even advises members against sharing their concerns—which he conspicuously disclaims having planted or fostered—with other Church members, especially leaders.<sup>340</sup> He seeks to replace this social system with his own group, with its own ethos and counter-narrative, with him in a position of leadership. And, he apparently believes that he is succeeding, since he declares that far more people leave than stay because of his efforts.<sup>341</sup>

Dehlin and the leavetakers among his audience will continue to offer narratives about the Church: their Mormon stories. It should be remembered, though, that “[d]econversion narratives are ideological weapons in conflicts involving substantial financial interests of both deprogrammers [exit counselors] and religious groups.” “We need to consider not only...[their] form and religious significance but also the politics of deconversion, the role of stories of lost faith in various struggles for power.”<sup>342</sup> Most of the Saints are, unlike *Mormon Stories*, not anxious to grab for “the church’s own levers of power.”<sup>343</sup> Those wishing to be harmless as doves but wise as serpents will still recognize, however, that not everyone who approaches the flock with claims to be fair, friendly, and forthright should be followed (John 10:1–9).

---

<sup>340</sup> See note 128 herein.

<sup>341</sup> See note 188 herein.

<sup>342</sup> Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion*, 182.

<sup>343</sup> John Dehlin, “Greg Smith, Dan Peterson, John Dehlin, & Lou,” post on *mormondiscussions.com*, 10 May 2012 (4:36 PM), <http://mormondiscussions.com/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=23840&start=105>. See “Return of the Unread Review,” note 51 for further discussion.