

Utah Valley University

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On Ecclesiastical Endorsement at BYU

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On Ecclesiastical Endorsement at Brigham Young University

■ Scott Abbott

Religion is being destroyed by the Inquisition, for to see a man burned because he believes he has acted rightly is painful to people, it exasperates them.

William of Orange

During Gail Houston's August 1996 appeal of Brigham Young University's decision to deny her tenure, despite overwhelmingly positive English Department and College Committee votes, Associate Academic Vice President James Gordon testified that procedurally the University could not be faulted. Houston broke into his technical testimony to remind Gordon and the appeal panel that the hearing was about more than technicalities, that she was a woman with a family, that she was being forced from a position at a University where she had served with dedication, that the decision, in short, was existentially important to her. Gordon's responded to the panel that in her outburst she had exhibited the behavior that had lead to her dismissal: "From the moment she arrived on campus we have been unable to control her."

On October 22, 1996, [Steven Epperson](#), an assistant professor of history at BYU since 1993, was told that his services would no longer be required as of the end of August 1997. This made him an early casualty of the policy announced by BYU President Merrill Bateman on February 8, 1996, according to which the bishop "of each Church member employed at BYU" would be asked to certify annually "whether the person is currently eligible for a [temple] recommend."

The University clearly has the legal right to establish regulations like the one demanding that all faculty must undergo ecclesiastical endorsement; and Epperson's bishop, for reasons I will enumerate later, would not certify him. Similarly, James Gordon may have been right when he asserted the University correctly carried out its own policies in Gail Houston's case (although the American Association of University Professors has argued otherwise, and is currently formally investigating BYU for academic freedom violations). But when Houston appealed for a wiser, more charitable judgment, when she asked that Gordon, for the University, look into her face and discern there more than the features of a feminist who has supposedly "enervated the moral fiber" of the University, she showed us a way out of the sanctimonious edifice we have constructed for ourselves, or have allowed to be constructed.

In this spirit, I would like you to consider the following portrait of Steven Epperson. My rendering will not do him justice; but it is fuller and more honest than the meager sketch passed from his bishop to BYU administrators. I have known Steven and his family for nearly twenty years. We have collaborated together. We are friends.

Steven was born in Salt Lake City in 1954. After high school he enrolled as a student at Brown University. He served a mission in France from 1974 to 1976. A section from his poem "Tangled Woods and Parisian Light" (Sunstone, April 1991) evokes an experience from that time, contrasting the quiet message of two missionaries with a riot taking place nearby:

. . .

A boy clung to his father's leg
Eyes on the street wide and wincing,
The man cradled his son's head listening
While the other pair spoke in low voices,
Searching for words in an alien tongue.

A dog was strung up on a lamp post,
A placard hung round its attenuated neck,
Its hanging tongue the same deep crimson
As the shrill apocalyptic text
Which it bore upon its broken chest.

The two bent nearer the father and the son
As if to shield them from the proximate menace,
Continuing the tale of a youth
And the questions he bore into a tangled wood.

The serried ranks of acolytes bore the epicenter of the quake away
Leaving clustered knots of onlookers among the rubble
To register the aftershocks, the emptied vials of wrath --

The simplicity of the shouted syllogisms
The utter directness of the violence
The thrill of the extraordinary gesture.

The tale neared its end:

"The woods shone.

The boy returned through the fields,
A live ember of divine words in his hand.
And thus his story began."

Steven was graduated from Brown in religious studies in 1979. He married Diana Girsdansky, whom he had met in the Providence Ward. After he had earned an M.A. from the University of Chicago Divinity School, Steven moved with Diana and their children to Princeton, New Jersey, where they spent a year before beginning a Ph.D. program in religious studies at Temple University in Philadelphia. I still remember the first priesthood meeting I sat through with the young man whose earnest voice and careful thinking made us all look forward to the year he would spend as a member of the Princeton Ward. At Temple, Steven studied with Paul van Buren, now director of the Center of Ethics and Religious Pluralism at the Shalom Institute in Jerusalem, and worked with Mormon historian Richard Bushman, then at the University of Delaware. For a personal description of Steven's years at Temple, see "House of the Temple, House of the Lord: A View from Philadelphia" (Dialogue, Fall 1987).

After graduation, the Eppersons moved to Salt Lake City, where Steven became history curator at the Museum of Church History and Art. He helped develop the permanent exhibition of Church history now displayed on the museum's main floor and curated various exhibitions on Church history and art, including "The Mountain of the House of the Lord," an exhibit commemorating the centennial of the Salt Lake Temple. In 1993 Steven began teaching as an assistant professor in BYU's history department.

When BYU's new policy required Steven's Bishop, Andrew Clark, to certify his temple worthiness, Clark refused, on the grounds that Steven was not attending Sunday school or priesthood meeting, nor was he currently paying tithing. Some background on both counts will be helpful.

Although he was still paying fast offerings, Steven was in fact paying no tithing at the time. Diana was starting up the Children's Music Conservatory, a public, non-profit, and initially expensive undertaking, and their best estimate was that after the Music Conservatory's summer camp in June it would begin to break even and they would be repaid the money they had paid out.

Hannah, the Epperson's daughter, and Diana were not attending church, the family was going off in different directions, Steven reports, and there was some tension and disagreement. Uncomfortable with that state of affairs, they followed Hannah's advice and sought a Sunday activity they could do together as a family. Eventually they began going to Pioneer Park to join other Salt Lake residents in feeding the homeless. This was a deliberate and thoughtful attempt to keep the family together and focused on Sunday-related issues and services. Between November 1995 and April 1996, Steven raced back from Pioneer Park to attend sacrament meeting in his ward.

On May fifth, several months after Bishop Clark's initial refusal to certify Steven temple worthy and after Steven had been contacted by James Gordon, Steven met with Clark. He offered, despite the family problems it would cause, to attend priesthood and Sunday school in a neighboring ward, and explained he would pay tithing again after the Conservatory's summer camp. On the same day, in an incident that felt, in the context of the attempt to come to terms, like a slap in the face, Clark refused to approve Nick, the Epperson's youngest son, for ordination to the priesthood -- because he would not promise to attend all of his meetings. Nick said he would be with his family half of the month and attend meetings the other half; but this wasn't good enough for Clark.

On May 10, Steven had a follow-up telephone conversation with Clark, who told him that July-September was an insufficient period to judge whether he was a sincere tithe payer, and that no other church meetings would fill the requirement. Steven was a member of the 18th Ward. Period. Clark lectured Steven on principles of "priesthood leadership," explaining that Steven should lead and expect his family to follow as he "laid out the program." (Later in the month, Steven met with Stake President Wood in a desperate attempt to plead Nick's case. Wood listened while Steven explained that it felt to him that Clark was punishing Nick for Steven's choices, but finally said he would have to work out the matter with Clark.)

All Steven could hope for at this point was that the BYU administration would try to understand that his predicament was the result of the inflexibility of his local leaders, and perhaps intervene. On May 17, Steven met with Gordon and told him that Clark had rebuffed his good faith effort to begin paying tithing at the end of June and to attend priesthood and Sunday school in another ward. He asked Gordon to speak with his bishop to try to achieve a compromise. Gordon said he could do nothing.

Finally, in mid-October, Gordon asked Steven if he could speak with his bishop. Steven agreed, asking only that Gordon give him a full report of what Clark said, so that he could verify the information. Gordon agreed. On October 22, Steven was summoned to Gordon's office, to discuss, Steven thought, what the bishop had said. Gordon gave a short report of his conversation with Clark. Steven responded. The letter of dismissal, which Gordon subsequently handed to Steven, was lying on the desk while they spoke. The administration had decided, the letter said, to terminate Steven's contract as of August 1997.

When Gordon later explained, in a Deseret News article about Steven's dismissal (23 January 1997), that the person involved "can give us permission to speak with the bishop, and we will work with people if they are making a good faith effort," it did not match the process Steven had experienced, for Gordon had refused to speak with the bishop to work things out and denied Steven's good faith effort in the face of absolute inflexibility.

I tell this story not to argue that Steven was doing something better than going to church, nor to argue that his stubbornness in the face of what he saw as un-Christian inflexibility was the most politic choice, but rather to point out that routine church activity (as opposed to deeply held values) may be subject to circumstances. What is possible one year becomes more complicated the next; sometimes family dynamics require innovative strategies. A religious community that governs itself according to the spirit of its laws and basic principles, such as the sanctity of marriage, the primacy of the family, self reliance, etc., should be flexible enough to include a variety of non-destructive behaviors. A formalistic, impatient, over-pious community may break its less-orthodox members on the wheel of ephemeral policy. Do thirty years of devotion, tithing, a mission, temple marriage, and church work mean nothing in the face of a year of well-meant but slightly altered church activity?

Where does this kind of insistence on the letter of administrative procedure get us? Will more people comply with its demands than before the new policy? And more to the point, will BYU faculty and staff now be more spiritual? Or do others respond to coercion the way I do? My nature is to do well the things I choose and to despise and evade what I am forced to do. Or, if I decide to knuckle under even while disagreeing with the requirement, I experience a diminished sense of dignity. Emphasizing the letter over the spirit shifts a people's sense of morality from heartfelt individual commitment to superficial observance of outward requirements. And the arbitrariness of the policy is staggering; in contrast to Steven's case, one Tooele County bishop has called a ward member who finds church attendance distasteful to serve breakfast to the homeless in Salt Lake City.

Steven Epperson stands for others who are currently under investigation by the BYU administration (on December 13, 1996, Merrill Bateman told BYU Humanities faculty that these number approximately 100) and who, too, may be asked to leave, one by one, in the coming months. By insisting on the letter of its new policy, by weeding out members of the staff and faculty who cannot satisfy individual bishops' personal interpretations of the standard of temple worthiness, no matter how idiosyncratic, what does the University lose?

In Steven, it loses one of the fine apologists for our religion. As an invited speaker at conferences in Jerusalem, Baltimore, the former Soviet Union, and elsewhere, Steven has argued our case eloquently. Thinking people in many parts of the globe hold us in higher esteem as a people because he confesses our creed. Jacob Neusner, distinguished research professor of religious studies at the University of South Florida, begins his review of Steven's book *Mormons and Jews: Early Mormon Theologies of Israel* (Signature Books, 1992) with the words "Brilliantly conceived and elegantly executed," and then writes of

"the doctrines Epperson lays out with the authority of scholarship and the passion of faith. He writes with craft and care; he speaks with humility; in the framework of his subject and his sources, he has given us a small masterpiece" (Sunstone, December 1994, 71-73). And he continues with an anecdote that illustrates the service Epperson has performed for the Church:

A personal word may prove illuminating. The first time I lectured at Brigham Young University, my topic, Pharisaism in the first century, spelled out in four academic lectures, interested only a few. The question periods after each lecture provided an exercise in practical missiology for young Mormons. I was the designated candidate, they, the aggressive proselytizers, and the protracted question periods, for four successive days, concerned only, what does a Jew say to this argument? And how can we devise a compelling answer to that negative response? In the end I wondered why my hosts had gone to so much trouble to bring me to undergo so sustained and demeaning a public roast. I left with the impression that all the Mormons wanted to know about the Jews was why we were not Mormons. When the Mormons sought permission to build their center in Jerusalem, I therefore took note, in the Jerusalem Post, that they have written a long record of persistent missions to Israel, the Jewish people, marked by an utter absence or regard for our religion, the Torah.

But God does not leave us standing still. People change, and God changes us. So I hasten to add that subsequent visits to Provo have proved far more productive. . . . Epperson's definitive work, both the historical and the theological chapters, lays sturdy foundations for the construction of a two-way street, one that both religious communities, each a pilgrim people, stubborn in its faith, eternal in its quest to serve and love God with and through intelligence (which is God's glory), may share as they trek toward that common goal that Israelite prophecy has defined for us all. (73)

Along with Steven's skill as apologist, we lose a talent for thinking creatively about our own beliefs and institutions. Consider, for example, the following depiction of the temple and its possibilities:

The temple is a paradox, an earthly home for a transcendent God. It cannot house his glory, yet he bids his children raise its walls, adorn its chambers, weave its veil. For he chooses just this place and not celestial spheres to disclose and veil his presence among the children of Israel. Signs of fellowship and wisdom, signs of sovereignty and orientation hewn upon the temple's sheer face betoken the knowledge and endowment bestowed within. Mortal hands and eyes are led by ones immortal to frame the fearful symmetry of his form, his house, his kingdom here on earth. We cannot place the crown upon his kingdom -- cannot bind all wounds, sate all hunger, pacify all violence, wipe away all tears. Yet he bids, he demands a realm of equity and justice, now, from our flawed hearts and feeble hands.

The House of the Lord is the matrix for the kingdom of God on earth. The temple transmutes city and wilderness: it pursues neither Eden, nor the heavenly Jerusalem. It sanctions neither a naive return to a romanticized past, nor the negation of the sensuous

present, the real, for an abstract future. Rather, by a mysterious alchemy conjured through the conjunction of words from an improbable rite, it would bridge the rift between parents and children, the whole estranged family of Adam and Eve, and it would establish Enoch's city here, in this world, through unnumbered acts of charity and justice. (Dialogue, Fall 1987, p. 140.)

We lose, in addition, a fine critical eye. Steven recently published, for example, at the invitation of the editor of *BYU Studies*, a review essay of Robert Millett's and Joseph McConkie's *Our Destiny: The Call and Election of the House of Israel* (SLC: Bookcraft, 1993), a review that will help us, if we listen, move beyond morally ambiguous patterns of accepted thought. Steven points out, for instance, that

. . . . the authors contend that since "literal blood descent" from Abraham delivers "the right to the gospel, the priesthood, and the glories of eternal life," "rights" by blood descent are crucial for the exercise of legitimate authority to establish and maintain the Church. They claim that such authority is rooted securely, since the church's early leaders "were all of one stock," sharing with Joseph Smith a "pure . . . blood strain from Ephraim"; they are "pure-blooded Israelite[s]." This teaching, they assert, is to be taken literally; it is "neither myth nor metaphor." ("Some Problems with Supersessionism in Mormon Thought," *BYU Studies* V. 34, No. 4, 1994-1995, 132)

He then demonstrates that such assertions of pure blood lines are biological nonsense and points out that when the authors cite William J. Cameron as an authority and a "wise man," they are associating themselves with the thought and person of the editor of Henry Ford's *Dearborn Independent*, a virulently anti-Semitic weekly, with a man who was subsequently the editor of *Destiny*, the publication of the anti-Semitic Anglo-Saxon Federation of America. Cameron maintained, Epperson writes, "that Jesus `was not a Jew. And the Jews, as we know them, are not the true sons of Israel. It was the Anglo-Saxons who descended from the ten lost tribes of Israel'" (133). The review ends with a question: "Is it possible that, just when the LDS community is emerging from ethnic, linguistic, and geographical parochialism to become a world-wide religion, that *Our Destiny* would unwittingly turn us back?" Millett and McConkie had the opportunity to defend themselves, so this was no one-sided polemic. (And in fact, Steven received a letter from Salt Lake lawyer Oscar McConkie threatening legal action for having supposedly called Joseph McConkie racist.) Rather it was the kind of activity you hope university professors will engage in; for in the give and take of discussion ideas are sharpened and deepened and revealed for what they are.

Epperson was hired at BYU, in part, because of the quality of his book *Mormons and Jews*, which won the Mormon History Association's 1993 Francis Chipman Award for Best First Book and, in an earlier form, the MHA's William Grover and Winifred Foster Reese Best Dissertation Award. In the Fall of 1995, Steven underwent a routine third-year review in which departmental, college, and university committees judged whether he was making the progress in citizenship, teaching, and scholarship required of an assistant professor. During the process, the orthodoxy and quality of *Mormons and Jews* became the crucial questions in evaluating Steven as a professor, even though the book had been

disallowed for consideration as productive scholarship during Steven's three trial years because it had been published prior to his arrival at BYU. Academic Vice President Alan Wilkins, after an hour-long discussion of the book's orthodoxy with Steven, asked "What would you do if the General Authorities asked you to suppress this, not to teach it, to recant? If they declared that this work wasn't doctrinally sound?" Steven replied that "that is their prerogative; they determine what is doctrinal for the Church. That's not what I do. I don't claim or teach this as doctrine. But I have done a professional job of recovering and re-presenting to readers what is in the historical record."

In late September 1996, nearly half a year after the results of other third-year reviews were announced, James Gordon asked Steven if he could send copies of the book to two outside reviewers for evaluation, and Steven agreed. Two weeks later, however, the evaluation was cut short with the letter announcing that Steven's bishop would not judge him temple worthy. Because of the six-month delay, Steven lost crucial time in the search for another academic position.

Steven Epperson's case is serious enough if it stands alone. But there are professors and staff members in every department of the University whose lives are under scrutiny at the moment, whose years of devoted and skillful service are being discounted under the new ecclesiastical endorsement policy. And if, for various reasons -- perhaps feeling themselves victims of unrighteous dominion, out of pride, from sheer obstinacy -- they refuse to comply to whatever their particular bishop requires, however arbitrarily, we lose their services. I am not arguing for leniency for rapists and thieves and plagiarists. BYU has routinely fired staff, faculty, and administrators caught in acts of moral turpitude. No matter what their skills, a morally solvent institution cannot afford to have such people around.

That is not, however, what is at stake here. The question is why the behaviors that we require of all members of our community, the laws by which we judge one another good or bad, must proliferate as they have. Why must we raise peccadillos to mortal sins? We would all agree that an absolute requirement against murder is in all our best interests and that it is appropriate to force one another not to murder. The consequences of a murder so far outweigh any benefits of free agency that we simply outlaw it.

But what about the cases of occasional church attendance or sporadic tithe paying? There are obvious spiritual benefits to paying tithing, to take the latter example; and a Church university all of whose faculty and staff pay tithing may be an especially fine place. The sweetness of that utopia diminishes, however, when compliance is forced. As opposed to a case of murder, the claims of free agency weigh heavy here.

No, one may argue, we are firing people who don't pay tithing or go to church so that we may employ only people who want to do so. And our new interviewing and screening procedures are aimed at ensuring such voluntary compliance; we are justified in our current practice of turning away for positions candidates who have current temple recommends but who, for some reason, have gone without a recommend previously. My answer is that you simply cannot ensure voluntary compliance. You can't even ensure

involuntary compliance for that matter, for there are some bishops who refuse to play this spiritually destructive game. But "ensure" and "voluntary" don't belong in the same sentence. Remember the old joke about free agency and how to enforce it? You can kick out some of the students who wear shorts above the knee and thus force most of the others to wear longer shorts. You can fire faculty members who, for whatever reasons, don't go to church enough to satisfy their bishop and thus put the fear of ecclesiastical non-endorsement into their colleagues. But why would you want to do that? Trust, President Hinkley reminded members of the BYU community on 13 October 1992, comes from the top down.

So, to review my argument: 1. If forced compliance to proliferating policies has little spiritual benefit to the individual or to the university; and 2. if the principle of free agency (over which the war in Heaven was fought) is of extreme importance both to individuals and to the university; then 3. in all cases of transgression except those so egregious that we would all see them as unacceptable, the transgressor might receive charitable counsel but ought never to be coerced to be "good" (by expulsion from school, if a student, or by firing from a job, if staff or faculty). "Teach them correct principles, and let them govern themselves," said our founding Prophet. Do we not believe him? And why do we ignore the clear words of Jesus Christ? "Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel" (Matt. 23:24).

Scott Abbott
Sunstone, February 1997

APPENDIX

LETTER FROM STEVEN EPPERSON TO HIS COLLEAGUES

My dear colleagues:

I have been informed by University administrators that my contract will not be renewed after its expiration in August, 1997. The immediate cause cited for that decision is my failure to obtain, over a reasonable period, the letter of ecclesiastical endorsement which we all must now secure annually in order to remain employed at BYU. It is, I believe, an unfortunate decision. But I will not appeal it or seek to have it set aside. Six months of interviews have served only to disclose how differently my bishop and I perceive my stewardship as husband, father, and priesthood holder. Six months of meetings have only disclosed how willing University administrators are to grant local ecclesiastical leaders inordinate power to determine who works and who does not work for this institution. I cannot imagine, as a condition for employment, submitting annually to the intrusive scrutiny of my private family life mandated by this ill-conceived policy.

It is very important to me, no matter what disagreements there may be between us on this policy issue, that all of you understand how appreciative I am of the confidence and fellowship you extended to me three and a half years ago when you voted to welcome me as a member of this department. I have never taken that trust lightly; I treasure it to this day. I hope only that you will not feel that your good will was mis-placed. When I signed

my letter of appointment in 1993, I had every expectation that my stay at BYU would be an enduring and productive one. I am sorry and disappointed, keenly disappointed, that my stay here will be so brief.

I sincerely wish all of you the very best of success in your research, teaching, and service here. We have a marvelous body of students-intelligent, well-meaning, curious and decent-who need excellent teachers/scholars/saints to assist in their pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. May we be equal to them.

The contract I signed in July is good for the academic year 1996-97. I look forward to our continued professional and personal associations through this year and beyond.

Sincerely,

Steven Epperson
Department of History