The Swearing Elders:
Some Reflections
A Response to Thomas Blakely

By Richard D. Poll

T he Mormon Seminar of the early 1950s, sometimes denominated the "Swearing Elders" or "Sterling McMurrin's Anti-Mormon Seminar," was an occasional, informal gathering of academic eggheads, mostly LDS, to consider whatever topics its sponsors thought might be of interest. Most of its gatherings were in 1951 and early 1952, though the most historic event associated with it occurred late in 1954. The group is remembered primarily for that 1954 meeting and for the fact that some of its key participants were—and are—significant and highly visible contributors to the intellectual tradition in Mormonism.

Those who attended did not feel they were doing anything unique, subversive, or historic. Most of us knew that Sterling McMurrin and Obert Tanner were unpopular with some of the more conservative General Authorities, but we also knew that they had the support of others, including President McKay. As I recall, Tanner was just beginning to write Christ's Ideals for Living, surely one of the best Sunday School manuals ever, and McMurrin was producing some of his seminal essays on Mormon theology. When we gathered, however, it was not to hear them, but someone from the remarkably diverse array of insiders and outsiders who were invited to dis-
cuss something more or less relevant to LDS history or culture.

Unfortunately I missed most of the seminar meetings to which I received invitations, either because of schedule conflicts or because transportation to Salt Lake City was not always available for a low-income, one-car-in-the-family assistant professor. I remember sessions with Tom O'Dea, Louis Zucker, L. H. Kirkpatrick and Louis Moench. I remember Stanley Ivins sharing his notes on polygamy at a time when official Church literature dismissed plural marriage as the practice of not more than two or three percent of the membership. I remember the session when Apostle Adam S. Bennion talked about problems facing LDS college teachers and showed by his presence that such discussion groups as this were not impermissible. This was in 1954, after the group had met very infrequently for two years, and it did not lead to a sustained revival of activities. Sterling and Obert were developing other interests, and the same was true of Bill Mulder and other participants from the several Utah campuses. Only one meeting followed the Olsen-Cook debate, not because anybody surrendered, but just because nobody scheduled anything or sent out invitations.

The Mormon Seminar, in my view, was not so unique. I find a tradition of open discussion of gospel topics in the history of the Church. There were enough Orson Pratts and B. H. Robertsees in the nineteenth-century Church to engender discussion—even disputation—at all levels of authority. I doubt the Kirtland School of the Prophets was a gathering of devout believers sitting at the feet of the Prophet, nor do I think the prayer circles in Nauvoo were engaged only in rituals and listening for heavenly voices. The Polysophical Society of the 1850s generated enough diversity of viewpoints to upset Heber C. Kimball and Jedediah M. Grant. Self-improvement groups abounded in pioneer Utah; animated discussion of a variety of topics with expert input is associated, for example, with the Wasatch Club to which Orson F. Whitney and Heber J. Grant belonged in the 1880s. The evolution controversy at BYU early in this century was caused partly by the professors taking their views to off-campus study groups and audiences. Throughout Church history, groups have gathered to talk about Mormonism. A prominent continuing example is the fifty-five-year-old Cannon-Hinckley group in Salt Lake, to which some of the General Authorities have coped with similar situations. They counseled with the perceived offenders, issued generalized warnings in public addresses and private conversations, discussed the problem with their less concerned brethren, and ended up doing nothing prescriptive or definitive.

My most memorable experience with this approach was a by-product of the Olsen-Cook debate on Joseph Fielding Smith's *Man: His Origin and Destiny*. During the discussion I had commented, “The tragedy of the book, and I see it as a tragedy, is that it will only strengthen the opinions of those who need no strengthening while making things more difficult for Latter-day Saints who do not share President Smith's views.” These remarks were reported to President Smith, who wrote to me concerning the meeting. At his invitation, I made an appointment for my wife Gene and me to call on him in his office on December 29, 1954. It seemed appropriate that Gene and me to go together, because we had enjoyed occasional friendly contacts since the day in November 1943 when he performed our marriage in the Salt Lake Temple. My own links with Brother Smith went much farther back: he had performed the marriage ceremony for my parents; he had visited in our home in Texas while touring the mission; Sister Jessie Evans had worked for my father in Salt Lake before she married Brother Smith; and I had been among the German missionaries who met with them in Hanover and Copenhagen in 1939.
President Smith began by remarking that he wondered if I knew what bad company I was in in the Mormon Seminar. We arrived at 47 East South Temple about a half hour before our appointment with President Smith. On impulse, I suggested to Gene that we see if President McKay might be available, since we understood that his views on Man: His Origin and Destiny, were similar to our own. By happy circumstance, he was free, and his secretary found that he would be willing to see us.

So it came to pass that on the same day in December 1954, Gene and I had private sessions with the president of the Church and the president of the Quorum of the Twelve on the same gospel-related subject. To preserve the event in memory, we wrote a synopsis of each meeting as soon as we got back to Provo. Only an abridged version of the McKay notes has previously circulated. The McKay-Smith era now being historiated, every contention of the McKay notes has previously been approved by the Church; it has implications which we can appreciate. The book has not been published by the Church; we are authorized to quote him on this. The work represents the opinions of one man on the scriptures. Brother Smith’s views have long been known. Striking the desk for emphasis, President McKay repeated that the book is not the authoritative position of the Church. He does not know how it came to be chosen as the authoritative position of the Church, and its effect on testimony, and that he had not published the book entirely on his own initiative. Two or three of the Apostles and two members of the First Council of Seventy had read the manuscript and urged him to publish it. While he did not state that it should be taken as an authoritative Church pronouncement, he declared that he would be happy to retreat from any position taken in the book which could be shown to be contrary to scripture.

President McKay said that he has created a problem. Being written by the president of the Quorum of the Twelve, it has implications which we can appreciate. The book has not been approved by the Church; we are authorized to quote him on this. The work represents the opinions of one man on the scriptures. Brother Smith’s views have long been known. Striking the desk for emphasis, President McKay repeated that the book is not the authoritative position of the Church. He does not know how it came to be chosen as a text for the seminary and institute teachers last summer, but the choice was unfortunate.

Question was raised concerning the feeling of insecurity felt by many Latter-day Saint teachers. President McKay said that we have nothing to fear. One man has been earmarked for excommunication, but he is still in the Church and is basically a good man. The President hopes there will be no open clash over the book because of what it would do to the Church as a whole. Nevertheless, we need lose no sleep over this matter, either for the present or the future.

President McKay mentioned Cressy Morrison’s Man Does Not Stand Alone and Le Comte du Nouy’s Human Destiny as examples of how scientists have dealt with the problem of man, nature, and God. In his opinion these are two of the outstanding books of this century. We do not know enough of the facts to take a definite position on evolution, but the concept is certainly not incompatible with faith. After all, the process of creation is going on continuously. He and Sister McKay saw it in the eruption of Mount Paricutin in Mexico, and the recent earthquake in Nevada produced one of the most spectacular manifestations of the creative process in recent times.

President McKay concluded by stating that Latter-day Saints accept the scriptures, but that every man must interpret them for himself. He repeated his advice that we lose no more sleep about this subject.

Two or three times during the conversation President McKay gave the impression that he would like to add something, and then checked himself. Gene and I left with the conviction that he was in complete sympathy with us.


President Smith began by remarking that he wondered if I knew what bad company I was in in the Mormon Seminar. He described Sterling McMurrin as the leader of the group and a man completely without a testimony. The bishop had planned to institute excommunication proceedings when President McKay had intervened, expressing a desire to talk to McMurrin first. President Smith did not know what the outcome might be.

My defense of the Seminar was based on the fact that many shades of opinion are presented in the group, and that its meetings are not devoted to theological matters but to reports and discussions on topics which are amenable to academic inquiry.

President Smith explained that he had long been concerned over the problem of evolutionist teaching and its effect on testimony, and that he had not published the book entirely on his own initiative. Two or three of the Apostles and two members of the First Council of Seventy had read the manuscript and urged him to publish it. While he did not state that it should be taken as an authoritative Church pronouncement, he declared that he would be happy to retreat from any position taken in the book which could be shown to be contrary to scripture.

Question was raised concerning whether the gospel requires a literal acceptance of the scriptures. President Smith answered in the affirmative. Question was then raised concerning Eve and Adam’s rib. President Smith stated that so little information was available on this subject that he did not teach about it. Question was then raised concerning the adequacy of the scriptural references, about three in all, upon which the doctrine depends that there was no death upon the earth before the Fall; this is the doctrine which is chiefly at issue between the literalists and many geologists, biologists, and historians in the Church. His reply was that these scriptures are unequivocal, and sufficient for him.

President Smith read extensively from the scriptures to demonstrate that the prophets had taught that the world was created, according to the Lord’s time, in seven thousand years; that it has a temporal history and a spiritual history, and that the millennium and the renewing of the earth as a celestial abode are imminent. The recent earthquakes were cited as evidence on this point. He pointed out from scripture that all life existed spiritually before being placed on the earth, and repeatedly emphasized that God did not create death. Death is the consequence of the Fall, physically as well as spiritually, and for all forms of life as well as the children of Adam. This belief is held to be basic to an understanding of the atonement of Christ, though President Smith acknowledged that there are those in the Church who apparently accept the Atonement without following the literalist explanation of creation and the Fall.

Asked if there has not been difference of opinion on this subject among the General Authorities since the early days of the Church, President Smith stated that that is possibly true. He is also aware that many prominent scientists of the Church, who have no desire to
under the title, "The Iron Rod." In that sermon he endorsed the definition of a liberal in the Church as "merely one who does not have a testimony." For Elder Lee, the issue between people with answers and people with questions was that clear cut.

I do not claim that Correlation is the only cause, or the only consequence, of the trend toward authoritarian conservatism in the institutional Church in the last twenty-five years or that Elder Lee was the only source of the Correlation movement. But I do suggest that Elder Lee was the right man in the right place at the right time to influence these changes and that he will surely be remembered as one of the ten most influential General Authorities in the history of the Church.

Certainly Correlation is the primary contributor to the sense of isolation, even alienation, that many reflective Latter-day Saints feel in the Church today. This can hardly be otherwise when the official instructional programs in all Church organizations are designed to inhibit thoughtful discussion. Teachers are provided with detailed manuals and charged not to go outside them except to the scriptures and a very limited number of answer books. They are provided with outlines of points to be made, quotations to be read, questions to be asked, right answers to be provided if they are not spontaneously forthcoming, and conclusions to be reached. They are admonished to bear testimony at the end, even as McMurrin was urged to testify at the end of meetings of the Mormon Seminar. One result is that almost any literate Latter-day Saint can teach a class, which is an outcome not without merit in a fast-growing and far-flung Church.

Another result is that almost all manuals for adults are remarkably bland and almost all classes for adults are remarkably tranquil. Since the efficient Sunday schedule leaves no time for informal discussions between meetings, the kind of interaction that SUNSTONE-type Mormons enjoy now takes place almost entirely outside chapel walls. This, in my view, is regrettable.

However, I remain optimistic. Over the years I have come to know many General Authorities personally and through historical research. These contacts have reinforced the conviction derived from that enriching experience with President McKay and President Smith in 1954—that my Church is led by prophets who are dedicated, kind, loving, often inspired, individualistic, human, and fallible. This conviction undergirds my testimony of the importance of continuing revelation and the inevitability of institutional change. It helps me as an emeritus egghead and former Swearing Elder to face the frustrating features of Correlation with the optimistic confidence that these, too, will pass.

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