Turnin the Time over to . . .

Alternate Voices: 
The Calling and Its Implications

By Armand L. Mauss

In recent Sunstone symposia and LDS discussion groups, much attention has focused on Elder Dallin Oaks's remarks about "alternate voices" in general conference last year. I would guess that most of the Saints had no idea who or what he was referring to. Even among the participants in the "unsponsored" literature and discussion groups, there has been no clear consensus about the meaning or the implications of what Elder Oaks said. Some have found it ominous or at least condescending; some have seen it as a harmless, matter-of-fact clarification of leadership attitudes. Some have even taken encouragement from the fact that it was not more specific and constraining. For me the conference address and ensuing discussion have provided the occasion for reflection upon the past twenty-five years of my own intellectual activity in the Mormon arena.

Historical Perspective

To begin with, an historical perspective seems helpful. We have always had "alternate voices" in the Church. I am not referring to apostates (nor was Elder Oaks, I believe) but to certain loyal and thoughtful saints of independent mind who would occasionally question conventional doctrine or policy—and do so publicly. Before about 1940, such public discussions frequently took place in official Church magazines and even among the general authorities themselves. For evidence of this contention, one has only to consult early issues of the Improvement Era, Contributor, and Juvenile Instructor, or to review the careers of figures like B.H. Roberts. Even the LDS Institute program once provided a forum for discussion and sometimes honest disagreement among the devout and intellectually cultivated scholars so often found in the ranks of the Institute faculty in those early days.

In many ways, the Church was like one big family during its first century or so. This was especially true of the general authorities, who constituted a rather small circle of relatives and boyhood friends. Their families shared impeccable pioneer credentials and intimate knowledge of each other. When Orson Pratt disagreed publicly with Brigham Young about doctrine, they had been through too much together for Brother Brigham, even as president, to question basic loyalty and commitment of Brother Orson. When B.H. Roberts and the young Joseph Fielding Smith disagreed publicly about evolution, neither risked suspicions of heresy, apostasy, or disloyalty to the Brethren. When Heber J. Grant as president of the Church disagreed publicly with Apostle Reed Smoot over the League of Nations, it probably never occurred to President Grant to question Elder Smoot's loyalty after their shared travail in 1903. Even when J. Golden Kimball regularly embarrassed some of his colleagues, they knew, after all, that he was "Heber's boy." His rock-solid Mormon heritage was more important than his idiosyncrasies in assessing his reliability.

It is a different church today for reasons that are quite understandable. As in any organization, rapid growth and complexity have brought increased reliance on centralization and standardization (now called "correlation"). Some of the general authorities might still be related to each other, but not nearly so many and certainly not so closely. Recruitment to their ranks comes increasingly from outside the founding families and even from outside North America. Some of the recruits to general authority rank have come up through the Church civil service bureaucracy (especially the Church Education System, C.E.S.) where they have had opportunities to demonstrate their loyalty, but not by questioning "the Brethren," to be sure.

The fact is that the presiding brethren are...
simply not in a position to know each other (especially the Seventy) as intimately as they once did, so they cannot afford to be as tolerant of disagreements, especially open disagreements, even among themselves, as they once were. Their relationships (except the few that are lifelong) are less familial in nature and more bureaucratic. They cannot predict or control as confidently as they once could where such disagreements will end or what the implications will be. The George P. Lee case is a particularly painful illustration of the difficulty that the Church leaders face today in truly knowing and understanding each other's thoughts and feelings intimately. Nor can they know the ordinary Saints as well as their predecessors could; they cannot visit the wards and stakes with any appreciable frequency.

In such a situation, disagreements and serious questions within the ranks (either of the leadership or of the Church as a whole) can no longer be readily contained or managed by resort to family bonds, shared biographies, or mutual reliance on well-known ultimate commitments. Nor can the leadership enjoy the luxury of indulging their individual opinions and disagreements in public. The confidence of the membership and of the local leadership in the general authorities can no longer depend even partly upon a personal awareness of the hearts, minds, backgrounds, or individual charisma of those brethren. That confidence must now rely upon their formal ecclesiastical roles and callings as "prophets, seers, and revelators." The spectacle of public disagreements and serious questions within the ranks (either of the leadership or of the Church as a whole) can no longer be readily contained or managed by resort to family bonds, shared biographies, or mutual reliance on well-known ultimate commitments. Nor can the leadership enjoy the luxury of indulging their individual opinions and disagreements in public. The confidence of the membership and of the local leadership in the general authorities can no longer depend even partly upon a personal awareness of the hearts, minds, backgrounds, or individual charisma of those brethren. That confidence must now rely upon their formal ecclesiastical roles and callings as "prophets, seers, and revelators."

The collection of "alternate voices" has an important part to play in the life of the Church and of each ward, even when it is worrisome to leaders. Many feel direct spiritual calls to offer their "alternate voices" on occasion. Such calls are clearly implied in Doctrine and Covenants 58:26-28, especially in the passage about being "anxiously engaged in a good cause...of their own free will." It is important to emphasize, though, that these are not Church calls, which can come only through priesthood leadership. We must never confuse our personal spiritual gifts, talents, and calls (whether of an intellectual or any other kind) with callings in Church leadership. We should feel free, in a candid but respectful and constructive spirit, to offer our ideas and suggestions to Church leaders from the greatest to the least, whether they ask us for them or not, for that is what we are called to do. Yet we must never aspire to displace those leaders, to undermine their influence and authority, or in any way to interfere with the exercise of their callings and responsibilities as they understand them.

Such a de facto and tacit separation of responsibilities between Church leaders and "alternate voices" actually works out quite well in practice, as long as there are not excesses on either side (as there sometimes are). The leaders of the Church, including the prophet and president, neither seek nor receive revelation in a vacuum. It is implicit in Doctrine and Covenants 9:7-9 that divine inspiration and revelation come primarily in response to well-considered proposals that we take to the Lord. I think that this is as true for the prophet as for the rest of us. I have always appreciated the care and precision in President Kimball's announcement of the dramatic 1978 revelation on extending the priesthood, where he explicitly spoke of having received confirmation of a policy decision.

Where do Church leaders get the ideas for the proposals that they take to the Lord in search of their revelatory confirmations? We must assume that they get their ideas from many sources, both within and without the Church. Some ideas no doubt come to them from the Saints and leaders in the rank and file; some from "pilot projects" started on local initiative; some from sponsored research; some perhaps from the business world; some even from their wives and children. The "alternate voices" of LDS intellectuals simply add, in a unique way, to the supply of ideas available to Church leaders as they undertake to formulate proposals to take to the Lord. That is an important function for these "alternate voices" and is perhaps the main mission to which they are called. I have had plenty of reasons to believe that our leaders often consider these "alternate voices," and that their proposals to the Lord are sometimes informed by what they read and hear from these sources as well as from others.

I, for one, appreciate this de facto "division of labor" between Church leaders and "alternate voices." Such a distinction is blurred in some of our sister Christian churches which maintain "house intellectuals" hired and salaried primarily to insure that official Church doctrines, policies, and pronouncements are based on extensive scholarly research and made intellectually palatable to the world. To the extent that "alternate voices" depend for their livelihood and professional recognition primarily on Church largesse, they run a constant risk of being muted, moderated, and compromised by organizational imperatives and internal political pressures. (I hasten to add that they do not always succumb to such pressures, as we can see from the number of outstanding "alternate voices" that somehow manage to maintain distinguished and independent careers at BYU; but they are often uncomfortable.) While many Mormon intellectuals might enjoy the luxury of bask-
benefit from this separation. For one thing, they need not feel obliged to evaluate and respond to every idea, proposal, or criticism coming from among the "alternate voices." These are not products that they have paid for, and they need not make "use" of them in order to get their "money's worth" from an investment in professional services (as they might feel obliged to do, say, in the case of the professional consultants whom they occasionally hire). Second, the Church leaders cannot be held accountable for any of the public writings or speeches of "alternate voices" as they might be for the public utterances of "house intellectuals" (and as they once were for the dissident voices publicly expressed from their own ranks).

In sum, Church leaders can get on with the daily business of running a large and complex world organization, with all the pragmatic compromises and adjustments implied in that enterprise, but without having to deal with constant interruptions from internal intellectuals intensely concerned with ideas but lacking either experience or responsibility in practical affairs. My experience in academia convinces me that (with occasional sterling exceptions) intellectuals as a class suffer from a trained incapacity for successful administration. I know exactly what William F. Buckley means when he says that he would rather be governed by the first 500 people in the Boston telephone book than by the Harvard faculty! By all means, let us foster complete freedom of expression, even in the Church, for all kinds of "alternate voices" (academics or not); but let "idea-people" do what they do best—offer creative ideas and informed critiques of the status quo—and leave the practical affairs of Church governance to those who bear the awesome responsibility for it.

Those of us who would take seriously and conscientiously the calling of "alternate voices," however, must be prepared to accept the implications of so doing, whether we would be listeners or speakers in such a challenging enterprise. Even as listeners we are responsible for the evaluation of what we hear. Intelligent evaluation, especially in spiritual matters, is not possible without a considerable personal investment in studying, both widely and deeply, in prayer and in meditation. The hearer (or reader) of "alternate voices" who is not willing to do all this is only a dabbler and is far better off sticking with the Standard Works and the correlated lesson manuals.

People who read SUNSTONE and other "alternate" sources mainly to make mischief (and I know a few) are intellectual adolescents. They are searching less for understanding than for cheap shots at traditional shibboleths, or for juicy and scandalous tidbits about Church leaders past and present. I have one more caveat (with apologies to Dante!) for those who would be conscientious listeners of "alternate voices": Abandon certainty! Never again will you enjoy the immunity to doubt and ambiguity that went with your previous life. But then the ability to live with perpetual ambiguity is also a trait that distinguishes adults from adolescents.

DECALOGUE FOR DISSENTERS

My remarks in this final section are directed mainly to those who would undertake to join the ranks of "alternate voices" as speakers, not just as listeners. These include, I hasten to add, not only academics or other professional intellectuals but anyone who would aspire to be efficacious in offering alternative ideas or counsel to the Saints and their leaders at any level, whether in the pages of Dialogue and SUNSTONE, in ward council, priesthood quorums, Relief Society, or Sunday School.

I would like to share ten principles that I have learned, sometimes painfully in the breach, during the past twenty-five years from my own efforts to offer an effective "alternate voice" at various forums and occasions. As a rhetorical devise, I will use the imperative tone appropriate for a decalogue; I apologize in advance if the tone also seems imperious in places. Also, since my efforts have taken place in the context of an ultimate commitment to the LDS faith, some of the following principles will be less applicable to those who don't share that commitment.

1. Seek constantly to build a strong personal relationship with the Lord as the main source and basis for your own confidence in the alternate voice you are offering. We often have to do without the Church's approval, but we need the assurance of the Lord's.

2. Do your homework before you speak up. We must be sure that our knowledge of the scriptures, of history, and of other relevant data on a given matter will bear up well under scrutiny and under efforts at rebuttal. Otherwise, our offerings will be exposed as unreliable, we will lose credibility as intellectual leaders or teachers, and we will be suspected even by our sympathizers of mere malcontents. No one expects infallibility, but we must know whereof we speak, especially if we espouse an unpopular or untraditional idea.

3. Relinquish any and all aspirations (or even expectations) for leadership callings in the Church. Actually, that is wonderfully liberating. In any case, stake and ward leaders, to say nothing of general authorities, rarely call people to powerful positions who are suspected of too much "independent thinking." To be sure, the ranks of "alternate voices" have provided occasional examples of bishops, stake presidents, and Relief Society leaders showing that there may be some happy exceptions to this generalization, but don't count on that. If you have a career in C.E.S. or in any other Church bureaucracy, don't expect approval or promotion to accompany your identification as an "alternate voice."

4. Endure graciously the overt disapproval of "significant others," including family members, but never respond in kind. Lifelong friends and old missionary companions may sever (or reduce) friendship ties when they learn that you are one of "those." They simply cannot understand what your "problem" is. If such reactions prove especially crucial in your case (e.g., if your marriage is threatened), you will have some tough choices to make.

5. Pay your "dues" as a member of the Church. Pay your tithing, make clear your willingness to serve wherever called, and do your best to get your children on missions. Try as hard as anyone to "keep the commandments." You still probably won't get much Church recognition, but you will win over a few who once looked on you with suspicion. More important, you will make it difficult for your critics to dismiss you as an apostate, for all will see that "thy faithfulness is stronger than the cords of death." (D&C 121:44).

6. Be humble, generous, and good natured in tolerating ideas that you find aversive in other Church members, no matter how "reactionary." As "alternate voices," we cannot complain when we are ignored or misunderstood if we respond with contempt toward those whose ideas we deplore. Besides, if we have any hope of educating them, we have to start where they are and treat them with love and tolerance. No one is won over by being put down, especially in public. Whether in our writing or in our exchanges during Sunday School classes, we must try to be gracious as well as candid (difficult though it be at times) and always remember to show forth afterward an "increase of love toward him whom thou has reproved, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy" (D&C 121:43).

7. Show some empathy and appreciation for Church leaders, male and female, from the
general level down to the local ward and branch. Anyone who has ever held a responsible leadership position knows how heavy the burdens of office can be, especially in callings like bishop, Relief Society president, and stake president (to say nothing of apostle), in which the decisions made can affect countless numbers of people for good or ill. We may privately deplore the poor judgment, the unrighteous domination, the insensitivity, and even the outright ignorance of some leaders. Yet, after all, they are, like us, simple mortals doing their best according to their lights. Some of them sacrifice a great deal for no apparent benefit, and all are entitled to our support, and occasionally our praise, whenever these can reasonably be given. When they do something outrageously wrong, they need our sympathy even more. "There but for the grace of God . . ." etc.

8. Do not say or do anything to undermine the influence or legitimacy of Church leaders at any level. They have their callings and prerogatives, and we should not step forth to "steady the ark" by publicly offering our alternative leadership. Please don't misunderstand: I am not advocating silent submission in the face of official stupidity. There is much that we can do without playing the role of usurper. When we write for publication, let us by all means criticize policies, practices, or interpretations of doctrine; but let us not personalize our criticisms with ad hominem attacks. They are not only discourteous and condescending, but quite unnecessary. (They can also get you "ex-ed.")

We should feel free, though, to seek private interviews and/or correspondence with Church leaders, including our own bishops, in which we can offer, in a spirit of love and humility, our constructive criticisms and suggestions. If these are ignored, then at least we have exercised our callings as "alternate voices," and we have done so without sowing seeds of contention. We are not responsible for how a given leader carries out his or her stewardship. Yet we are not powerless, which leads to the next principle.

9. Take advantage of legitimate opportunities to express your "alternate voices" and to exercise your free agency in "alternate" ways within the LDS church and culture. We must never lapse into a posture in which we just sit and gripe. If we find the correlated lesson manuals to be thin fare, it is up to us as teachers to enrich them with relevant supplementary material (including some "alternate voices"). If we are not teachers, then at least we are obligated as class members to speak up knowledgeably and enrich the class, not simply boycott it.

If we find a general intellectual famine at Church, then we are free to start study groups of our own to supplement the Church fare for those who feel the need. Some of our more conservative leaders may not like such unsponsored study groups, but they have no right to forbid them, and they seldom try (but don't forget principles 2, 3, and 4). In short, even if we are not bishops or general authorities, and even if we are ignored by those who are, there is much constructive that we can do with our "alternate voices": "For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as they do good they shall in nowise lose their reward" (D&C 58:28).

10. Endure to the end. The calling of "alternate voice" is too important for us to allow ourselves either to be intimidated by the exercise of unrighteous dominion or to be silenced by our own fatigue. "And let us not be weary in well doing; for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not" (Galatians 6:9; D&C 64:33).
I have seen many a rich harvest in people's lives from seeds planted by "alternate voices," and I hope to live to see many more.

Though I have often failed to comply with all ten of these principles, I have learned from my failures as well as from my successes that the likelihood of influence and efficacy for "alternate voices" depends heavily upon compliance with those principles. They also add up to a personal philosophy that has yielded me a great deal of inner peace in my years of coping with the predicament so common among "alternate voices": commitment to the religion but a feeling of marginality in the Church. That is my testimony.

---

PSALM FOR A SATURDAY NIGHT*

Bring forth thy Sabbath, O Lord,
For I am ready.

I have anointed my head with jubilation
Pressed from thy ripest blessings.
My soul has been washed in thy raining grace,
And I am clean and shining.
O deliver thy Sabbath, for I await!

I have clothed me in a garment of repentance;
The ragged sins of this week have I cast off.
My hair is perfumed with the unguent for forgiving;
There remains no burr or tangle to snarl the sweep of love.
O sanctify thy Sabbath, and let its mantle fall about me!

I have adorned by hand with jewels of compassion.
My feet are shod with eagerness for thy service.
Here in the pulsing darkness I hate my breath
And urge the stars on in their passage.

Bring forth thy Day, O Lord,
For thy servant waits.

---ELOUISE BELL