

TEACHING HISTORY

1218 Harvard Avenue
Salt Lake City, Utah 84105

December 8, 1981

Elder Boyd K. Packer
Church of Jesus Christ
of Latter-day Saints
50 East North Temple
Salt Lake City, Utah 84103

Dear Elder Packer:

You may remember me from your days as President of the New England Mission. I was a recent convert to the Church and a young professor at the University of New Hampshire. You set me apart to the New Hampshire District Council in 1967; since then I have served on the Merrimac Stake and Columbus, Ohio Stake High Councils, and I'm presently a counselor in the Bishopric of the Garden Park First Ward, Bonneville Stake.

I have read your recent address "The Mantle is Far, Far Greater than the Intellect" and I'd like to share my own experience with you. I was raised in a strong midwestern Methodist family and first encountered the Mormon religion as a college student. A classmate, Richard L. Haynie, inspired my interest in the LDS Church by the quiet confidence with which he lived his convictions and the intellectual honesty he displayed in dealing with hard questions. I respected those qualities.

When I entered graduate school at Duke University I took a minor in the School of Theology to explore my growing interest in Christian values. I also studied with two LDS missionaries from Idaho and worshipped alternately at the LDS and Methodist Churches. The result: when Richard Haynie returned from the French Mission the following summer, I asked him to baptize me. It was a thrilling search for spiritual knowledge. I cherished the quest then and I am constantly enriched by the choice I made.

I share my conversion with you because it so clearly reveals the power of unfettered inquiry. What concerns me about your recent remarks is that they seem to assume that open discussion of our history and free access to information will lead people astray. My experience suggests the reverse.

A defensive posture by Church leaders raises questions about the confidence they have in their own authority. And a patronizing attitude on the part of writers or teachers spawns doubts about the authenticity

Elder Boyd K. Packer
December 8, 1981
Page 2

of our history. Neither attitude lends credence to LDS claims. As a young investigator I was bewildered by defensiveness and offended by condescension. I still am. The Church need not justify its past. Nor should it jeopardize its future by abandoning the openness to temporal knowledge that has characterized some of our greatest leaders.

As you pointed out in your speech, our prophets have rightly eschewed claims of infallibility. Once this fact is understood, our heritage is honorable by any reasonable standard. If it is not understood, no effort, no matter how sincere, can succeed in convincing members or non-members of a flawless past. In my judgment, our young people are served better by teachers who help them reckon with the real nature of our history--imperfect, but inspired--rather than by well-meaning instructors who would shield them from certain information or protect them from differing views. One course may build faith in the short run, but it sets students up for needless disillusionment. The other course builds a spiritual foundation that cannot be taken by surprise. By unnecessarily protecting the weak, we may alienate the strong. They need each other and the Kingdom needs them both.

With best wishes,

Sincerely yours,

L. Jackson Newell

cc: President Gordon B. Hinckley