

Notes on a Conversation with President Joseph Fielding Smith in his Office.
11:30 a.m., Wednesday, December 29, 1954, on the Subject of the Book: Man,
His Origin and Destiny. Present: Dr. and Mrs. Richard D. Poll

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 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 represented in the group, and that its meetings are not devoted to theological matters by reports and discussions on topics which are amenable to academic investigation.

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 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 prepared to retreat from any position taken in the book which could be shown to be contrary to:

Scriptures. Question was raised concerning whether the Gospel requires a literal acceptance of Eve and Adam's rib. President Smith stated that so little information was available on the 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 not 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. My reply was that these Scriptures are unequivocal, and sufficient for him.

President Smith read extensively from the Scriptures to demonstrate that the prophets have taught that the world was created, according to the Lord's time, in seven thousand years; that it has a temporal history of seven thousand years; and that the millennium and the coming of the earth as a celestial abode are imminent. The recent earthquakes were cited as evidence on this point. He pointed out the 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 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 true. He is also aware that many prominent scientists of the Church, who have no desire to weaken the faith of members young or old, do not share his views; Henry Eyring had recently spent three hours pointing that out to him without, apparently, giving President Smith an opportunity to state his own case.

Agreement was reached that teachers and leaders who seek deliberately to ridicule the Scriptures and undermine confidence in the Church are not entitled to approval or support. Agreement was also reached that scientists can be as dogmatic as other folks, and that scientists who are dogmatically anti-religious are not good scientists.

Question was raised several times during the conversation about the large number of teachers in the Church who do not denounce or debunk, but who do not find it possible to accept all the doctrines which Brother Smith presents as fundamental. They very much prefer to remain tentative in their opinions on these matters. President Smith expressed awe at the size of the group, and remarked that some of them apparently regard him as well beyond their competence in the field of science. He assured that he did not think that they should be censured or barred from teaching.

The conversation concluded with our affirmation that we belong to the group in the Church who find it difficult to accept all the Scriptures literally, but who are desirous of learning the truth and constructively serving the Church. In the university environment we are persuaded that the quest for truth flourishes best when the area is rather narrowly defined within which absolute truth is regarded as already known. President Smith approved of the idea, but pointed out that insofar as he is concerned, where the Lord has spoken through the Scriptures, there is the truth.

The hour and a half session ended on cordial terms. We left with the impression that President Smith was quite as concerned about justifying his own position as about criticizing ours. Since both sides are apparently on the defensive, we feel more optimistic about the possibility of "peaceful coexistence."