Editor’s Introduction: “The Worst Herricy Man Can Preach”

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Introduction to the current issue, including editor’s picks. Peterson discusses Peter Elias, Amasa Lyman, and the techniques of contemporary anti-Mormonism.
EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

"The Worst Herricy Man Can Preach"

"Peter Elias" (evidently an assumed name), owner-operator of "Mormonism Web Ministries," recently published an issue of his rather puckishly titled newsletter, *The Truth: A Christian Perspective on Mormonism*, in which he put Amasa Lyman forward as his prize example of typical Latter-day Saint teaching. (The newsletter’s apparently ironic slogan, repeated on the masthead of every issue, is "Trust the Truth.") I wish to discuss this issue of *The Truth* here because I think it furnishes a particularly clear illustration of the methodology employed by some zealous critics of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As such, it also provides a good argument for why their books, lectures, pamphlets, cassette tapes, Web sites, tabloids, broadcasts, and seminars should not be taken at face value.

The theme of this particular issue of *The Truth* is "Mormonism: Insulting the Spirit of Grace?" Savvy readers can guess far in advance how Mr. Elias will answer his own question.

Under the rubric of "LDS," Mr. Elias has the following: "We may talk of men being redeemed by the efficacy of his [Christ’s] blood; but the truth is that that blood has no efficacy to wash away our sins. That must depend upon our own action." LDS ‘Apostle’ Amasa M. Lyman, *Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 7, p. 299, 1859.

He contrasts this with "The Truth": "For you know that it was not with perishable things . . . that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers [ie the Law—‘works’], but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. 1 Peter 1:18.”

Mr. Elias subsequently strengthens his argument with two more quotations from Elder Lyman under the subheading of “Trampling on the Blood of Christ?” But this scarcely seems necessary. There appears to be a pretty stark contrast between what Elder Lyman said and what 1 Peter 1:18 says. This is particularly so when that biblical passage is spun by Peter Elias’s hyper-Protestant equation of an “empty way of life” with the Mosaic law—an equation that many observant Jews might understandably regard as demeaning and anti-Semitic—and, in turn, of the Mosaic law with “works” in general. It seems undeniably obvious that Latter-day Saint teaching, as represented by Elder Amasa Lyman of the Council of the Twelve, diverges dramatically from the doctrine of the New Testament. Case closed.

But is it? Can Amasa Lyman’s public musings on the redemptive power of the blood of Christ, or the lack thereof, legitimately be taken as illustrative of the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? Let’s look at the historical background. I shall consult only materials that I have on the shelves of my personal library at home, deliberately excluding the Web and any database software. Nothing among these materials is particularly esoteric or difficult to obtain. They are certainly all within the reach of somebody as devoted to the study of Mormonism as Mr. Elias purports to be. An author who has found Amasa Lyman’s scattered nineteenth-century ruminations can also reasonably be expected to be aware of mainstream historiography on the Latter-day Saints and, most particularly, of the broad outlines of Amasa Lyman’s biography. What does the historical record tell us?

From 1855 to 1859 Lyman seems to have denied Christ’s special divinity and vicarious blood atonement in several conference sermons.

A renowned orator, he told the Saints that Christ “was, simply, a holy man. . . . There was nothing about Jesus but the Priesthood that he held and the Gospel that he proclaimed that was so very singular.”
To counter objections, Lyman argued, "'Well,' says one, 'you do not think much of Jesus.' Yes I do. 'How much?' I think he was a good man." Lyman acknowledged that Jesus "died for the world," but added, "and what man that ever died for the truth that he died for, did not die for the world? . . . Have we found redemption through them? . . . We may talk of men being redeemed by the efficacy of [Christ's] blood; but the truth is that that blood had no efficacy to wash away our sins. That must depend upon our own action."2

Now, it does admittedly seem a bit strange that Elder Lyman was able to get away with such teachings for so long. Plainly there were those who objected to his teaching. (We aren't told who they were.) Perhaps other General Authorities were unclear as to what he was really saying. Historian James Allen suggests of William Clayton—no General Authority, of course, but a prominent Latter-day Saint and the apostle's relative by marriage—that "he probably never fully understood Lyman's highly sophisticated theological speculations."3 (I know personally of a case in which a person who had long since ceased to believe in basic Latter-day Saint doctrine managed for years to maintain an appearance of orthodoxy through the use of sophisticatedly redefined terminology. I do not believe that this person did so with any malicious intent to deceive, but the end result was much the same.) Perhaps the Twelve simply couldn't imagine that a fellow apostle would hold such opinions and assumed that they must be misunderstanding him. William Clayton's eventual reaction worked out somewhat along the same lines that the apostles' would: His prolonged refusal to accept the accusations against Elder Lyman was followed by profound feelings of shock, betrayal, disillusionment, and revulsion.4 The Twelve had enjoyed long and close association with

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4. See ibid., 340-43.
Lyman, and their personal reactions might very understandably have been similar.

After all, the passage quoted can be taken, at least in part, in a relatively harmless sense: "We may talk of men being redeemed by the efficacy of [Christ's] blood," Lyman said, "but the truth is that that blood had no efficacy to wash away our sins. That must depend upon our own action." From one very important perspective, this is manifestly true. Unless we accept Calvinist or determinist views of human redemption, Christ's blood cannot redeem us if we refuse to accept its atoning power, and the choice to accept it or reject it is a free act on our part. The very next line in Elder Lyman's sermon is "Can Jesus free us from sin while we go and sin again?" Most people would be at least inclined to answer no. So Elder Lyman's declaration that Christ's blood lacks redemptive efficacy in the absence of "our own action" is (on non-Calvinist principles) precisely right. Most Christians—even those beyond the Latter-day Saint community—would accept it in that sense.

But, as it turned out, the doctrine that Lyman held or came to hold was far more pernicious than that. In 1860, he was sent on a mission to Great Britain along with Elders Charles C. Rich and George Q. Cannon of the Twelve. He returned home in mid-May 1862, but not before delivering a notorious sermon at Dundee, Scotland, on 16 March of that year, in which he effectively denied the atonement of the Savior. B. H. Roberts remarks that "No satisfactory explanation appears why this matter was allowed to pass apparently unnoticed until the 21st of January, 1867." But it was not until then...


6. The original sermon may be found in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:296–308. The quoted passage is from page 299.

7. Elder Roberts may be incorrect in his statement that Lyman's heresy "was allowed to pass apparently unnoticed until the 21st of January, 1867." See Van Wagoner and Walker, *A Book of Mormons*, 165. "Finally charged [in 1862] with teaching false doctrine while in Scotland," they write, "Lyman apologized to the First Presidency, and signed a letter asking the Saints for forgiveness." Investigation of this issue is beyond the scope of the present introduction. I think it very probable, however, that Van Wagoner and Walker have mistakenly transferred Lyman's 1867 retraction—see below—to 1862. Nothing else I have consulted mentions his 1862 apology.
that Elder Lyman was brought before the council of the twelve for his heresy.8

Actually, Elder Lyman's heterodox views began to attract the attention of other leaders of the church at least a month before the date given by B. H. Roberts. For example, an entry in Wilford Woodruff's journal for 26 December 1866 reads as follows:

The subject of A Sermon Preached by A Lyman and published in the Millennium Star April 5, 1862, in vol 24 was brought up & redb & it was found to have done away with the Efficacy of the blood of Christ. Presidt B Young said he wished to know what the Twelve had to say about it For he had a god deal to say about it. When you do away with the blood of the Savior you do away with all the Gospel & plan of Salvation. If this doctrin as Preached by A Lyman ... be preached & Published as the doctrins of the Church & not Contradicted by us it would not be long before there would be sym's [schisms?] in the Church. This doctrin as Preached in this Sermon is fals doctrin. If we do not believe that it was necessary for Christ to Shed his Blood to save the world, whare is our Church? It is nothing. This does not Set well upon my feelings. It is grievious to me to have the Apostles teach fals doctrins. Now if the Twelve will sit down quietly & not Contradict Such doctrin are they justified? No they are not.9

Finally, Elder Lyman was summoned before the Council. The story is clearly told in B. H. Roberts’s classic and widely available Comprehensive History of the Church, with which any really serious student of Latter-day Saint history should be familiar.10 However, I shall again go directly to the journal of Wilford Woodruff, a member of the Twelve at the time and the future fourth president of the church. On 21 January 1867, he wrote,

We held a meeting in the Evening as a Quorum of the 12 Apostles to Examine into the subject of Amasa Lyman's teaching false doctrine and publishing it to the world. He had virtually done away with the Blood of Christ [saying] that the Blood of Christ was not necessary for the salvation of man. The Quorum of the twelve were horrified at the idea that one of the Twelve Apostle should teach such a doctrine. After Amasa Lyman was interrogated upon the subject & said these had been his sentiments W Woodruff made the first speech & all the Quorum followed and they spoke in very strong terms.

W. Woodruff said that he felt shocked at the idea that one of the Twelve Apostles should get so far into the dark as to deny the Blood of Jesus Christ & say that it was not necessary for the salvation of man and teach this as a true doctrine while it was in opposition to all the doctrine taught by Every Prophet & Apostle & Saint from the days of Adam until today. The Bible, Book of Mormon & doctrines & Covenants have taught from beginning to End that Christ shed his Blood for the salvation of man & that there was no other name given under heaven whereby men can be saved, and I can tell brother Lyman that that doctrine will send him to perdition if he continues in it, & so it will any man, & such a doctrine would rend this Church & kingdom to pieces like an Earthquake. There never was nor never will be a saint on the Earth that believes that doctrine. It is the worst heresy man can preach.

When the Twelve got through Speaking Amasa Lyman wept like a Child & asked forgiveness. We then all went into President Young's office & Conversed with him. He felt as the Twelve did upon the subject ownly more so & required Brother Lyman to Publish his Confession & make it as public as he had his false doctrine.\footnote{11. Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 6:321–22.}
Elder Woodruff was precisely right. The concept of Christ's redeeming blood runs throughout uniquely Latter-day Saint scripture just as it forms a dominant theme of the New Testament. As the prophet Helaman said to his sons Nephi and Lehi, “O remember, remember, my sons, . . . that there is no other way nor means whereby man can be saved, only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ” (Helaman 5:9). “O then ye unbelieving,” cried the prophet Moroni, “turn ye unto the Lord; cry mightily unto the Father in the name of Jesus, that perhaps ye may be found spotless, pure, fair, and white, having been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb, at that great and last day” (Mormon 9:6). And the second-to-last verse of the Book of Mormon promises the readers of that volume that “if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot” (Moroni 10:33). There appears little purpose in multiplying such references, which could be done indefinitely. The point seems sufficiently made.

On the following day, 22 January 1867, Elder Woodruff recorded that

We met at Presidets Youngs office to hear Amasa Lyman Confession which he had written & it was not Satisfactory. Presidet Young talked vary plain upon the subject & told Brother Lyman that if he did not make a Confession that was satisfactory he Should write upon the subject himself. He said if it had [been] in Josephs day he would have Cut him off from the Church & it was a question whether the Lord would Justify us in retaining him in the Church or not.12

The 30 January 1867 issue of the Deseret News contained the following statement, published over the name of “A. M. Lyman”:

I have sinned a grievous sin in teaching a doctrine which makes the death and atonement of Jesus Christ of no force,

12. Ibid., 322.
thus sapping the foundation of the Christian religion. The above mentioned doctrine is found in a discourse which I preached on the "Nature of the Mission of Jesus," on the 16th of March, 1862, in Dundee, Scotland, and which was published in the Millennial Star, No. 14, volume xxiv. The above preaching was done without submitting it to, or seeking the counsel of those who bear the priesthood, with whom I am associated. In this I committed a great wrong, for which I most humbly crave and ask their forgiveness, as I do also of all the saints who have heard my teaching on this subject.  

It is possible, as I have suggested above, that Elder Lyman was able to maintain his status in the church for an unexpectedly long time while repeatedly denying the redemptive efficacy of Christ's blood because, when expedient, he coupled a somewhat oblique way of expressing himself with statements to his associates and others that, wittingly or unwittingly, disguised or even misrepresented his real position. The statement cited immediately above may fall into that category. For it represented no real change of heart or conviction.

Later in that same year, "Accused again of teaching the same doctrine, Lyman was dropped from the Quorum of the Twelve, disfellowshipped, and advised by President Young to find activities employing his head and hands so 'health of mind and body will attend you.'" President Young seems to have felt that Amasa Lyman was, as we would term it today, mentally ill or emotionally unstable. Part of

13. Cited at Roberts, A Comprehensive History of the Church, 5:271 n. 34. It is striking, by the way, that either Elder Lyman or his leaders or both thought that "sapping the foundation of the Christian religion" is something that a Latter-day Saint is capable of, but also something that a Latter-day Saint should not do. Anti-Mormons frequently charge that Latter-day Saints have only recently claimed to be Christians. However, no theological stance of a Buddhist or other non-Christian can weaken the "foundations" of Christian teaching. Nor, from the perspective of a Buddhist or other non-Christian, would there be anything wrong with holding a view that conflicts with Christian foundations. That the leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints thought Lyman's views dangerous to "the foundation of the Christian religion" is rather persuasive evidence that they regarded themselves as Christians. Why else would they care?

Wilford Woodruff’s journal entry for 29 April 1867 reads as follows: “I met with Presidt Young and the Twelve in Council to take into Consideration the Case of Elder Amasa Lyman who had been preaching Heresy doing away with the Blood of Christ. . . . We herd the Testimony against him and herd his own remarks. We finally voted to silence him from Preaching.” On the following day, the journal reads: “I met with the Twelve at Bishop Murdock’s & the Subject of A. Lyman was again taken up and investigated and he was silenced from Preaching because he had done away with the blood of Christ in his teaching.”

Charles Walker, an ordinary member of the church living in Washington County, wrote in his journal for 5 May 1867 of a conference in St. George attended by Brigham Young and several of the apostles. “The Church Authorities were presented,” he recorded. “Amasa Lyman was dropt from the Quorum of the Twelve for In-fide[l]ity.” Lyman’s expulsion from the ranks of the apostles was subsequently formalized between sessions of the general conference of the church in the new Salt Lake Tabernacle, on 6 October 1867. Joseph F. Smith was then called to fill the vacancy in the Quorum left by the apostasy of one of its members.

Unfortunately, Amasa Lyman continued on his heretical course and was altogether expelled from the church in 1870. Charlie Walker, learning the news down in St. George on 1 June 1870, thought the excommunication worth noting in his journal:

I see by a notice in the Deseret News, that on the 12th of last month, Amasa Lyman formerly one of the twelve apostles has been cut off from the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints for apostacy. Strange—Strange. Once so high and now so low. May God preserve Me in the truth.

When Lyman died in 1877, he was a practicing spiritualist and a vocal dissident from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It thus seems rather peculiar, to say the least of it, that Peter Elias has chosen Amasa Lyman as his star witness to the beliefs of Latter-day Saints on the very subject for which Lyman was excommunicated. With others, I have been leaving messages on Mormonism Web Ministries’ electronic message board since 5 May 2000, calling upon Mr. Elias either to explain or to retract his use of Amasa Lyman as a representative specimen of Latter-day Saint teaching on the blood of Christ. As of 1 August 2000, Peter Elias has not only failed either to justify or abandon this brazen misrepresentation of Mormon doctrine, but, in fact, he has not replied at all.

Sadly, though, given the track record of hard-core fundamentalist Protestant anti-Mormonism, Mr. Elias’s behavior isn’t surprising. These people are simply not reliable in representing Latter-day Saint beliefs to their vulnerable audiences. I’ve recently been listening to anti-Mormon cassette tapes while driving. When one is in a certain mood, such listening can be both entertaining and educational. For instance, from Sheila Garrigus’s “My Years as a Mormon,” a lecture given by a leader of “Ex-Mormons for Jesus” in an unidentified southern California church some years ago, I learned that one can be a devout Mormon without believing in Jesus, but that faith in Joseph.

19. Van Wagoner and Walker, A Book of Mormons, 165–66. Martha Lyman Roper and Francis M. Lyman, his daughter and his son (who himself served as an apostle), reported dreams in which a repentant Amasa Lyman (who had died in 1877) appeared to them, begging for the restoration of his blessings and authority. The request was granted by President Joseph F. Smith in 1908. Leonard Arrington reports that Amasa Lyman “was posthumously reinstated in the Church, his fellow apostles believing that he was mentally incompetent at the time of his apostasy.” See Leonard J. Arrington, From Quaker to Latter-day Saint: Bishop Edwin D. Woolley (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 444.


21. We had a similarly one-sided correspondence regarding another set of his grievous distortions a year previous to this one.

22. See, for example, correspondence with Concerned Christians of Mesa, Arizona, and the Reachout Trust in the United Kingdom, available for inspection at shields-research.org/CC02.htm, shields-research.org/CC01.htm, shields-research.org/CC03.htm, and shields-research.org/rot.htm.
Smith is mandatory.23 The Savior, Ms. Garrigus explained, is "not important" in Mormon theology. In fact, during her thirteen years as a Latter-day Saint, she never heard the name “Jesus Christ” in any Mormon meeting except as appended to prayers (which can only, by the way, be offered by males). And she didn’t own a Bible during that time, because Latter-day Saints are not encouraged to read the Bible. And, when her nonmember husband rather abruptly became a committed fundamentalist Protestant, Ms. Garrigus’s bishop explained her options to her: (1) She could divorce her husband. (2) She could remain in her marriage and at her death become a ministering angel to better Mormons than herself. (3) She could remain in her marriage but, at her death, be sealed to a faithful Mormon man as his plural wife. She initially chose the third option. So, with her bishop’s encouragement, she telephoned a Latter-day Saint man whom she had dated before her marriage, and he happily accepted her request to be his plural wife in the life to come.

From the question-and-answer session following Kurt Van Gordon’s lecture on “Mormonism” at Calvary Chapel in Chino Valley, California, on 1 June 2000, I learned of John F. Kennedy’s appearance in the St. George Temple.24 I also discovered that Latter-day Saints view the words creation and procreation as synonyms. Among other things, this explains the manner in which Mormon women in Utah typically introduce their families: “These,” they say, pointing to their kids, “are the children I created.” (I confess to never having heard that kind of language.) I also learned that Latter-day Saint men have the “option” of resurrecting their wives or not. Naturally, this puts Mormon women in a “precarious position.” For, if a wife doesn’t treat her husband well enough, he might be inclined to let her simply “lay in [her] grave and rot.” (I envision putting this principle to

23. A recording of Ms. Garrigus’s lecture was thoughtfully provided to me, along with other equally persuasive materials, by a group calling itself “Firefighters for Christ,” based in Foothill Ranch, California.

24. Alert reader Robert Durocher sent this important document to me. The tape is identified as CS0200 of Calvary Chapel’s “Cult Series,” which identifies itself, modestly enough, as “A Foundation for Living.”
immediate domestic use. No more steamed carrots! No more demands that I clean up the pile of books and papers beside my bed!) And I learned of a case where a woman’s father-in-law helped her at a certain point in the temple—and thus, without her agreement or prior knowledge, acquired her as a plural wife in the world to come (apparently nullifying the sealing ceremony that immediately followed).

To borrow the language of Brigham Young, the only ethical course for Peter Elias would be to publish his confession and to make it as public as he has his false characterization of Latter-day Saint doctrine. It is a course one might recommend to others, too.

This discussion of Peter Elias, Amasa Lyman, and the techniques of contemporary anti-Mormonism is more relevant than it may at first appear to the contents of the present issue of the Review. Much of this issue is devoted to an examination of the multiauthored *Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism* and the works of the late “Dr.” Walter Martin.

**Editor’s Picks**

But let’s talk of happier things. As I have been doing in recent numbers of the Review, it is now my pleasant duty to offer my own (unavoidably subjective) recommendations of some of the books that we consider here. My opinions derive, in several cases, from personal and direct acquaintance with the materials in question. In all instances, I have determined the rankings after reading the relevant reviews, and after further conversations either with the appropriate reviewers or with those who assist in the editing of the Review. As always, the final judgments, and the final blame for making them, are mine. And, as I have cautioned before, the number of asterisks a given work receives might have been different yesterday, or if I had enjoyed a better night’s rest. (The decision of whether or not to recommend a book at all is much more firmly based.) Nonetheless, and for whatever it is worth, this is how my rating system functions:
**Outstanding, a seminal work of the kind that appears only rarely.**

*** Enthusiastically recommended.

** Warmly recommended.

* Recommended.

Now that the drum roll has died down, I offer my picks from the present issue of the *Review*:


** James E. Faulconer, *Scripture Study: Tools and Suggestions.*

** Edwin B. Fimpage and Richard C. Mangrum, *Zion in the Courts: A Legal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900.*

** Jay E. Jensen, *Treasure Up the Word.*


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