

BACKSLIDERS

Technically speaking, the word saint comprehended all baptized members, but the less valiant came to be referred to as backsliders. In the use of this term there was always the inference of second-class citizenship without actually implying apostacy or downright wickedness. Those who were often classed in this unsavory but not odious category included the mildly non-conformist coffee drinker as well as the Sabbath breaker or the more offensive inactive tobacco chewer.

For the most part they were innocuous and represented little actual threat to the hierarchy or the well being of those who choose to be in good standing. Nevertheless, their failure to demonstrate positive personal performance together with the fact that they constituted the uncertain element in socio-religious relations posed the ever present possibility that they might slide further into a state of apostacy. This made the situation at least worrisome from the point of view of those who cared.

Among early prominent Americans who observed the life among the Mormons were two military officials on a government assignment, Captain Stansbury, and Lieutenant Gunnison. They came into the territory about the time of the establishment of the Box Elder Settlement. After viewing the situation in various colonies, Gunnison wrote his impression of the Mormons in general.

These Mormons are certainly the most earnest religionists I have ever been among. It seems to be a constant self-sacrifice with them, which makes me believe the masses of the people are honest and sincere....The welfare of the order becomes, therefore, paramount to individual interest, and the union of hearts causes the hands to unite in all that pertains to the glory of the State, and hence we see growing up and prospering the most enterprising people of the age ... combining advantages of communism, placed on a basis of religious duty and obedience to what they call the law of the gospel – transcending the notion of socialistic philosophers, that human regulations can improve and perfect society, irrespective of the revealed word of God •

••• Nor must we look upon all as ignorant and blindfolded, guided along the ditch of enthusiasm by self-deluded leaders. Indeed, almost every man is a priest, or eligible to the office, and ready armed for the controversial warfare. His creed, is his idol. And while among the best proselytes we class many that are least versed in literary attainments, still among them we find literally educated men, and those who have been ministers in other denominations - in fact there seems to be as fair a sample of intelligence, moral probity, and good citizenship as can be found in any normal Christian community... And among the people so submissive to counsel are those who watch with eagle eye that first principles are adhered to....

Captain Stansbury balanced out his rather glowing account of his lieutenant when he wrote in his own official report.

Not that Mormons ever pretend there are no bad men among them!, nay agreeable to their principles, they will tell you that a Mormon if bad, will be worse than other men, because he sins against greater light and knowledge and after receiving the Spirit of God.