

Minding Business: A Note on “The Mormon Creed”

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Michael Hicks

On Christmas Day 1844, William Wines Phelps wrote a letter to William Smith in which he described Mormonism as “the great leveling machine of creeds.”¹ Smith would have understood Phelps’s meaning. His late brother, the Prophet Joseph, had always maintained that Mormonism should not only resist the pat confessions of Christian orthodoxy—which, as he said, “set up stakes . . . to . . . the Almighty”²—but also resist pat formulations of Mormon belief itself. “The Latter-day Saints have no creed,” Joseph had once said, “but are ready to believe all true principles that exist, as they are made manifest from time to time.”³ Yet in September 1844, three months before Phelps wrote his Christmas letter, William Smith scolded a New York congregation for forgetting “the Mormon Creed,” a creed, he observed, that consisted of a single well-known phrase: “mind your own business.”⁴

The use of this Americanism as the “Mormon Creed” appears to have originated in the political controversies of the 1842 Illinois state elections. In a circular dated 20 December 1841, Joseph Smith had urged the Saints to vote with him for the Democratic ticket in the following year’s election.⁵ By spring 1842, the issue of whether or not the Mormons would vote as a block began to heat up in the press. Republican newspapers routinely loosed their invective against both the Democratic-courting Mormons and the Mormon-courting Democrats. They charged the Latter-day Saints and the Democrats with conspiring to keep Democratic incumbents in office while maintaining for the Mormons “extraordinary chartered privileges—over and above those enjoyed by any other sect.”⁶ Matters were not helped when Governor Boggs of Missouri, the man whose vendetta against the Mormons had helped drive them into Illinois, was mysteriously shot from outside his home. Among the Republican journalists, the presumption of innocence was not with the Saints.

Chiefly to rebut the charges being leveled at the Church from Illinois and Iowa journalists, William Smith founded the *Wasp*, a Newspaper dedicated to combatting “the shafts of slander . . . foul calumnies, and base misrepresentations” of anti-Mormons.⁷ In its ninth issue Smith printed this notice:

Mormon Creed

To mind their own business, and let everybody else, *do likewise*. Publish this, ye *Editors*, who boast of equal rights and privileges.⁸

This barb understandably irritated the editors at whom it was aimed. The *Alton Telegraph and Democratic Review* quickly reprinted Smith's notice, followed by this response:

The above is taken from the *Wasp*, a political paper published by the Mormons at Nauvoo. This advice given is *unexceptionable*; and it is to be regretted that it had not been adopted in the "Mormon Creed," when Joe Smith issued his proclamation to elect Snyder and Moore, and defeat the "old settler," Joe Duncan. If the Mormons had minded "their own business," instead of attempting to control the elections of this State as a church, they would have spared themselves the dilemma in which their unwarrantable *spiritual* interference has placed them.⁹

Within a month, the Creed had also aroused the attention of the *New York Herald*'s editor. Apparently considering that the Creed comprised all of Smith's blurb, he wrote of the Mormons' "Delicious Privileges, *according to the Mormon Creed*."¹⁰ At some point in the season, the Creed seems to have appeared in another East Coast newspaper, for the British Mormon paper, the *Millennial Star*, quoted Smith's Mormon Creed (slightly altered) and credited it to a "Boston Paper."¹¹

From this point the Mormon Creed embarked on a long career, its intended audience rapidly coming to embrace members of the Church as well as outsiders. In the weeks preceding William Smith's publication of the Creed, the elite of Nauvoo were introduced by Joseph Smith to a new order of marriage, the rituals of Freemasonry, and the Mormon temple endowment ordinance—all of which were to be concealed from the public. Amid the whispering about these matters at Nauvoo in the early 1840s, a growing spirit of privacy took hold of the Saints. The Mormon Creed became an emblem of that spirit.

As its intended audience expanded, the Creed was shortened. The *Millennial Star* published another note on the Creed in June 1843, but reduced its text to "mind your own business" and gave its own version of the Creed's applicability both to the Gentiles and to some overly-zealous Mormons: "We think the practice of the above [creed] worthy of recommendation to many who are not over scrupulous in their statements respecting the character and religion of the Saints; also worthy the notice of those Saints who forget the gospel by attacking the systems of men."¹² In January 1844, the *Nauvoo Neighbor* published a mock recipe, a cure for the "terrible disorder of the mouth commonly called 'Scandal.'" Among its ingredients was one ounce of "an herb called by the Mormons, 'mind your own business.'"¹³ By the spring of 1844, the phrase had entered the Prophet's public speaking. In his 7 March 1844 address to the Saints, he complained of those outsiders who would not "mind their own business." His solution to their interference was to recommend that the Saints, fittingly, "let them alone to use themselves up."¹⁴

Shortly after Joseph Smith was assassinated, Orson Pratt published the Creed in his *Prophetic Almanac* for the coming year, more or less restoring it to its original wording: “Let every body mind their own business.”¹⁵ But this less direct version of the Creed clearly came to be dominated by the simpler “mind your own business,” which, as the *Times and Seasons* noted in 1846, was “Good Council [sic].”¹⁶

The idiom of “minding one’s own business” can be traced in some form at least back to Seneca.¹⁷ In English usage, one finds Bacon using it in 1625—“Neither can he, that mindeth but his own Businesse, finde much matter for Envy”—and Addison in 1711—“I have nothing to do but mind my own business.”¹⁸ In the American republic, however, “mind your own business” had a special place in folk parlance well before its connection with the Mormons, and was known among frontiersmen as “the Negro’s eleventh commandment.” Joseph Smith’s grandfather Asael cited it as such in a letter to Jacob Towne, 14 January 1796.¹⁹ In 1821, the “Backwoods Preacher,” Peter Cartwright, advised those who were prone to complain about jokes in his sermons, “I want you to take the negro’s eleventh commandment; that is, Every man mind his own business.”²⁰

When the main body of Latter-day Saints moved to Utah, they continued to hold forth the phrase as the Mormon Creed. The *Deseret News*, for example, freely alluded to it in editorials addressed to the outside world: “all is peace and prosperity . . . men are attending to ‘their own business,’ as usual, according to the Mormon Creed”; “‘Mormons’ . . . believe in attending to their own business, and letting foreign matters alone”; “take every liberty of exhorting and advising each accountable dweller within the extended borders of the United States, who really loves his country and her free institutions, to observe the ‘Mormon’ motto of ‘mind your own business.’” One editorial title summed up the Saints’ attitude toward critics of affairs in Utah with the terse inquiry, “Whose Business Is It?”²¹

The Creed also inspired some Saints to versification in the 1850s. An anonymous comic poem titled “Mind Your Own Business” ran as a filler in the 2 March 1854 *Deseret News* (emphasis in original):

The substance of our query	If it is, we’ll join the rabble,
Simply stated would be this—	And act the nobler part
Is it <i>anybody’s business</i>	Of the tattlers and defamers
what <i>another’s business is?</i>	Who throng the public mart.
If it is or if it isn’t	But if not, we’ll act the teacher
We would really like to know	Until each meddler learns
For we’re certain if it isn’t	It were better in the future
There are some who make it so.	To mind his own concerns.

Apparently at least two “Mormon Creed” songs were written in the 1850s. One was by the popular Utah songwriter William Willes and was to be sung to the tune of “In the Days When We Went Gypsying.” Its four

eight-line stanzas emphasized the Creed's prophetic origins, saying it was built upon "the rock of ages" and was endorsed by "the Spirit's warning voice." The Chorus exhorted:

So let us mind the Mormon Creed,
And then we shall all thrive,
Shall hide a multitude of sins,
And save our souls alive.²²

Another was by Emily Hill, contained seven ten-line stanzas, and was to be sung to the tune of "The Ivy Green." The first stanza gives a good sense of its moralistic tone:

'Tis a difficult thing, indeed, to stand
And always do just right,
To fully adopt the Mormon creed
With heart and soul and might;
To know just when to hold our peace,
And when to intercede,
When mercy should indeed prevail
Or justice take the lead—
'Tis a difficult thing, it is indeed,
To fully adopt the Mormon creed.²³

Brigham Young began citing the Creed as early as 1846.²⁴ Indeed, the Creed became so strongly associated with President Young that by 1855 he seemed to have been credited with coining it. George Taylor's elaborate and ornate masthead for his father John's apologetic newspaper *The Mormon* rather prominently displayed a scroll with the words "Mormon Creed: Mind your own business.—Brigham Young."²⁵ President Young explained his understanding of the Creed in an address given on 16 March 1856, in which he discussed a Brother Vernon, who was not well known in the community but who "has been quietly and industriously practicing the principles of our religion":

He is not known except by a few of his associates, who have been laboring with him at the Sugar Works. But, suppose he had been guilty of swearing in the streets, of getting intoxicated, of fighting and carousing, he would have been a noted character. . . . But brother Vernon is almost entirely unknown, because he has lived his religion, kept the commandments of God, and minded his own business. So it is with many in this City, they are known by few, they live here, year after year, and are scarcely known in the community, because they pay attention to their own business.

They live their religion, love the Lord, rejoice continually, are happy all the day long, and satisfied, without making an excitement among the people. This is "Mormonism."²⁶

Samuel W. Richards summed up this philosophy of the Creed in a Fourth of July toast that same year: "Every man in his own place, minding his own business—that's Mormonism."²⁷

Nevertheless, the “party feeling” was so strong among the Utah Saints that outsiders got just the opposite opinion of their ability to stay clear of one another. Richard Burton noted after his 1860 visit that in Salt Lake City “every man’s concerns are his neighbour’s” then ironically added that among the Mormons “no one apparently ever heard of that person who ‘became immensely rich’—to quote an Americanism—by ‘minding his own business.’”²⁸

After the death of President Young, his successor as Church President, John Taylor, kept the Creed alive. To those who persisted in probing the intrigues and rumors of the “barbarous” marriage practices in Utah, President Taylor wielded the Creed, at the same time encouraging the Saints to cultivate anew a sense of privacy about polygamy, which he called “the secret of the Lord”:

I was lately called upon as a witness . . . I was required to divulge certain things. I did not know them to divulge. Perhaps some of you have had some people come to you with their confidences. I have. But I don’t want to be a confidant. Why? Because if they made a confidant of me and I was called before a tribunal, I could not, as an honorable man, reveal their confidences, yet it would be said I was a transgressor of the law. . . . Therefore I tell them to keep their own secrets, and remember what is called the Mormon Creed, “Mind your own business.”²⁹

In the same year that John Taylor gave this advice, he dedicated the Logan Temple, in which an ornate backpainted glass fixture preserved the Creed in a unique form for future generations:

Mormon Creed
Mind
Your Own Business
Saints
Will
Observe This
All Others Ought To.³⁰

In 1883 a *Juvenile Instructor* article ruminated at length on the Creed, reminiscing that “in the earlier days of the Church the Saints kept cards posted up in their houses containing the ‘Mormon’ creed, ‘Let every man mind his own business!’” The article went so far as to claim that Joseph Smith had once taught that the Creed was “a key by which [the people] could get back into the presence of God,” though no particular source to that effect was cited.³¹ Similar *Juvenile Instructor* editorials appeared in succeeding years, advising the young to remember the Creed. These editorials, written by George Q. Cannon, noted that “our elders are frequently asked for our creed, and people wonder when they are told . . . that the only creed we have is: ‘Mind your own business.’”³² Indeed, Cannon wrote on another

occasion, the phrase was “the only creed that I have ever known the Church to publish as such. . . . Only think of the happiness and peace and good feeling that would prevail everywhere among the Saints if they would live up to this simple yet comprehensive creed!”³³

Yet despite its comprehensiveness, the Creed began to fade from the Mormon idiom. In the early twentieth century, it was occasionally cited by the elderly to the young, as in this 1903 observation by President Joseph F. Smith: “The ‘Mormon’ creed: ‘mind your own business,’ is a good motto for young people to adopt who wish to succeed, and who wish to make the best use of their time and lives. . . . Let it be remembered that nothing is quite so contemptible as idle gossip.”³⁴ But the young Apostle John W. Taylor sadly noted the waning of the phrase: “I sometimes think it would be very well for us Latter-day Saints to attend to one motto that used to be very prominent among us, that is the Mormon Creed—‘Mind Your Own Business,’ and let other people’s alone.”³⁵ About the same time, in the surrounding culture, the phrase underwent a change in status, slipping from eleventh to twelfth commandment in the cynic’s law of Moses—the new eleventh being “Thou shalt not be found out.”³⁶

In the face of the phrase’s devaluation, Mormon “fundamentalists”—ardent preservers of polygamy after the body of the Church did away with the practice—continued to cite the Creed, in part by using it as an occasional source for fillers in an underground publication, *Truth*, whose editors and subscribers saw themselves as continuing the underground marriage practices of John Taylor’s days or even of Nauvoo. Wishing by the Creed to bolster the common secrecy, the fundamentalists published notices such as this:

“The Mormon Motto”

Nosey—Say, it is none of my business, but how does your husband keep his wives?

Lucy—That’s right, it is none of your business.³⁷

One of the ironies of Mormon history is that would-be preservers of plural marriage began to take up the Mormon Creed as their own, aiming it squarely at the institutional Church.

Among the English-speaking Saints at large, the phrase is now barely a memory, though its substance, the ideas of stewardship and of “creed” itself, continues to provoke discussion.³⁸ The saying seems to have taken its place in a dim corner of Church history. One encounters it, if at all, in reprint anthologies of quotations from early Church leaders, where it probably strikes contemporary observers as little more than a rhetorical curio—a fit subject for a scholarly note. But with its comic touch and common sense, the Mormon Creed embodied much of the spirit of quintessential

Mormonism, which, perhaps not surprisingly, has shown itself the great leveling machine of even its own creed.

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1. *Times and Seasons* 5 (1 January 1884): 758.
2. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith*, vol. 6 of *The Religious Studies Monograph Series* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 238, 256.
3. Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter. day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. Revelation., 7 vols. (reprint; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 5:215 (hereafter cited as History of the Church).
4. See Minutes of the New York Conference, 4 September 1844, Journal History of the Church, Library-Archives, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.
5. For the text of the circular and a commentary by Roberts, see *History of the Church* 4:479–80.
6. “The Mormons,” *Alton Telegraph and Democratic Review*, 9 July 1842.
7. “Introductory,” *Wasp*, 16 April 1842. For background of this newspaper, see Jerry C. Jolley, “The Sting of the Wasp: Early Nauvoo Newspaper—April 1842 to April 1843,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 22 (Fall 1982): 488–89.
8. *Wasp*, 11 June 1842, emphasis in original. This appears to be the Creed’s first publication as such; its private origins and evolution remain unknown.
9. “Mormon Creed,” *Alton Telegraph and Democratic Review*, 2 July 1842, emphasis in original. The Warsaw Signal, the *Wasp*’s best-known rival, no doubt would have commented on the Creed, but it temporarily suspended publication from 4 May to 9 July 1842.
10. “Rising in the World,” *New York Herald*, 13 August 1842, emphasis in original. The article was reprinted in John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints; or, An Expos, of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (Boston: Leland and Whiting, 1842), 159–61.
11. “Mormon Creed,” *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 3 (October 1842): 112. It is conceivable that the *Star* editors were alluding to a Boston paper publication that antedated Smith’s *Wasp* notice. My research has so far failed to confirm this hypothesis.
12. *Millennial Star* 4 (June 1843): 29.
13. “Recipe,” *Nauvoo Neighbor*, 10 January 1844.
14. Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 322. See also 24 September 1843, 250, for an earlier articulation of the same principle: “In Nauvoo every one Steward over their own.” When, in early summer, Joseph received a request to return to Nauvoo and face the law, he may have been alluding to the Creed when he burst out, “I know my own business.” Stephen Markham alluded more obviously to the Creed when, several days earlier, a committee of Mormons conspiring to get Joseph back to Nauvoo invited Markham to join them: “Mind your own business, brethren,” he said, “and let Joseph alone.” See Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith, Prophet’s Wife, “Elect lady,” Polygamy’s Foe, 1804–1879* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984), 187–88.
15. Orson Pratt, *Prophetic Almanac for 1845* (New York: Privately printed, 1845), 5.

16. *Times and Seasons* 6 (15 January 1846): 1103. This was reprinted from Samuel Brannan's *New York Messenger*. Compare the more genteel notice published in *Times and Seasons* 5 (15 May 1844): 542: "An excellent role for living happy in society, is never to concern one's self with the affairs of others, unless they desire it."

17. See *Ludus de Morte Claudi*, sec. 10: "I always mind my own business." Paul the Apostle may have had a similar thought in mind in 1 Thessalonians. 4:11, which is found in some modern translations as "mind your own business."

18. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Business": "to mind one's own business." See also Burton Stevenson, comp., *The Home Book of Proverbs, Maxims and Familiar Phrases* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 263–64.

19. Asael Smith's letter reads, in part, as follows:

Give my best regards to your parents, and tell them that I have taken up with the eleventh commandment, that the Negro taught to the minister, which was thus:

The minister asked the Negro how many commandments there was; his answer was, "Eleben, sir." "Aye," replied the other: "What is the eleventh? That is one I never heard of." "The elebenth commandment, sir, is mind you own buisness."

So I choose to do, and give myself but little concerns about what passes in the political world. (Asael Smith to Jacob Towne, 14 January 1796, Essex Institute, Salem, Massachusetts. Published in Richard L. Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New England Heritage: Influences of Grandfathers Solomon Mack and Asael Smith* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1971], 119)

20. *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, the Backwoods Preacher*, ed. W. E Strickland (New York: Carleton and Porter, 1857), 218; see also Albert D. Richardson, *Beyond the Mississippi: From the Great River to the Great Ocean. . . 1857 1867* (Hartford, Conn.: American Printing Co., 1867), 289. A Utah Mormon gave a toast on 24 July 1854 to "The Mormons—They know how to keep the eleventh commandment, viz.:—Mind your own business." See *Deseret Weekly*, 3 August 1854.

21. All quoted from the *Deseret Weekly*: "Signs of the Times," 7 February 1852; "States," 6 November 1850; "Facts and Suggestions," 17 June 1858; and "Whose Business Is It?" 20 January 1858. See also "Mind Your Own Business," 3 October 1855.

22. This Mormon Creed song is mentioned in the report of the New Year's ball at the Salt Lake Social Hall (*Deseret News*, 22 January 1853) and in the report of Fourth of July festivities (*The Mormon*, 11 July 1857). Willes published the song's text in his *Mountain Warbler* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1872), 42–43. I have been unable to locate the tune.

23. *Deseret Weekly*, 25 March 1857. See also the mention of this song's performance at the Fourth of July celebration of that year, *The Mormons*, 11 July 1857. The best known setting of Dickens's "The Ivy Green" was that by Henry Russell; Emily Hill's lyrics, however, do not seem to fit that setting.

24. See the Twelve to Orson Hyde, 16 March 1846, in Eldon J. Watson, *Manuscript History of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Privately printed, 1971), 88. See also Brigham Young's discourse of 6 February 1853, "Organization and Development of Man," in *Journal of Discourses* 2:92.

25. A facsimile of the masthead is found in B. H. Roberts, *The Life of John Taylor, Third President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1963), opposite 247. See also "The Mormon," *St. Louis Luminary*, 10 March 1855.

26. *Journal of Discourses* 3:254–55; see also 3:152 and 5:292.
27. *Deseret Weekly*, 9 July 1856.
28. Richard E Burton, *The City of the Saints*, ed. Fawn M. Brodie (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1963), 257.
29. *Journal of Discourses* 25:355 (19 October 1884). See also Charles W. Penrose, “The ‘Mormon Creed,’” *Deseret Weekly* 38 (30 March 1889): 430–31, directed at critics of the Church. One wonders if this 1882 statement by H. H. Almond, made during the government’s antipolygamy campaigns, might have any particular reference to the Mormons: “The devil has got a lot of maxims which his adherents . . . are not slow to use,” including “Mind your own business” (see *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, 3d ed. Revelation. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970], 533).
30. This piece is in the possession of the Museum of Church History and Art, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.
31. “Mind Your Own Business,” *Juvenile Instructor* 18 (15 August 1883): 250–51.
32. “Editorial Thoughts,” *Juvenile Instructor* 21 (15 December 1886): 376. Here and elsewhere, Cannon seems particularly troubled that the Mormon children were growing up ignorant of the Creed.
33. Ibid. 20 (1 May 1885): 108–9. An interesting account of how the Creed was used by parents against their children appears in Charles L. Olsen, *Autobiography*, 27, microfilm of typescript in Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
34. *Improvement Era* 6 (March 1903): 388; reprinted in *Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Joseph F. Smith*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1919), 136. President Smith’s statement was also reprinted in the “Two-Minute Sermon” section of the *Deseret News*, 24 November 1934. See also “The Mormon Creed—Special Services at Hanley,” *Millennial Star* 71 (28 January 1909): 54; and “Mind Your Own Business,” *Improvement Era* 10 (July 1907): 812.
35. Quoted in *Truth* 7 (January 1942): 190. I have been unable to locate the original publication of this statement. Since Taylor was excommunicated in 1911, it undoubtedly was prior to that date.
36. See Stevenson; *Home Book of Proverbs*, 264; “The Eleventh Commandment,” *Contributor* 15 (October 1894): 765.
37. *Truth* 4 (January 1939): 160.
38. See, for example, Michael Hicks, “Do You Preach the Orthodox Religion?: Thoughts on the Idea of Heresy in the Church,” *Sunstone* 6 (September–October 1981): 32, and the response to it in Mark C. Dangerfield, “Do You Teach the Orthodox Religion?” *Sunstone* 10, no. 11 (1986): 19–20.