

Chapter 10

Studies of Mormon Fissiparousness: Conflict, Dissent, and Schism in the Early Church

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Mormonism, the new American religion formally organized by Joseph Smith Jr. and a few followers on April 6, 1830, has produced more than a hundred independent organizations in its brief history. Dissension, sedition, and tergiversation were common during the Mormon prophet's lifetime; and between 1830 and 1844, there were at least ten breaches in the church's organization. Smith's martyrdom in 1844 effected a leadership crisis, fragmentation of the church at Nauvoo, Illinois, and at least twelve more distinctive groups over the next decade. Most Latter Day Saint factions have continued to generate additional fissures.

In spite of the proliferation of Latter Day Saint associations, studies of Mormonism have focused almost exclusive attention on its one or sometimes two largest, most auspicious representatives. While its other assemblies are small and less successful by comparison, they are not insignificant. The various Latter Day Saint factions warrant scholarly study in and of themselves as collective efforts to deal with the ultimate, sacred meaning of human existence. Different versions and associations of a common religious tradition, even (and sometimes especially) when they have not flourished, provide invaluable opportunities for comparative study. Scrutinizing the ways in which different collectivities emerged and developed is crucial for an understanding of Latter Day Saint doctrines, practices, and activities. The formation of independent assemblages of Mormonism indicates unequivocally that it is exceedingly complex and diverse. Scholarly interpretations that completely ignore its variations and the social processes whereby they emerged and developed overlook one of its utterly essential and intriguing features. An adequate scholarly understanding of this new American religion in all of its heterogeneity and vicissitudes consequently necessitates explicit recognition that there are a variety of Mormonisms.

Fissiparousness (or schism), the division of an organization into two or more separate collectivities or groups, transpires through a complex social process.¹ It fundamentally involves conflict and dissent over ideology (values, beliefs, norms), practices, activities, and especially authority, frequently resulting in struggles for power and control of an organization. Conflict is inevitably expressed symbolically by competing ideologies, and it may center predominantly on collective values and beliefs, or practices and means of goal attainment. Disharmony may extend over a lengthy time before separation. Opponents generally proceed by defining one another as significantly different and then deviant, com-

1. Nancy T. Ammerman, "Schism: An Overview," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 13:98-102.