

## THE REDEMPTION OF AMASA MASON LYMAN: A LEGAL BRIEF

Scott E. Isaacson

Like most of you, I'm honored to count Elder Amasa Mason Lyman as one of my pioneer ancestors.<sup>1</sup> I am a descendant of Amasa Mason Lyman through Maria Louisa Tanner Lyman, Amasa's first wife, and his son Amasa Mason Lyman, Jr. My great grandmother, Maria Lyman King, whom I knew well—she lived into her 90's and passed away while I serving a mission--was a granddaughter of Amasa Mason Lyman. Sometimes the history we are talking about seems like ages ago, but in other ways, it is closer than we think.

Someone, not me, has said that if it weren't for his apostasy, we wouldn't have much to talk about at these Society meetings. Sad, but partly true. Others have discussed his extensive ministry as missionary and apostle. He certainly deserves great credit as an early Church leader and pioneer. However, I was specifically asked to discuss the restoration of blessings, which of course, is tied directly with his apostasy.

We know the basic facts regarding the restoration of blessings—the ordinance performed in the Temple. But did it work? Did Amasa accept it? Was he, in fact, redeemed? Of course we cannot know for certain in this life.

I am neither a historian nor a theologian. I am an attorney by training and trade and so I would like to make some observations based on my legal training.

The basic facts of the circumstances that lead to Elder Lyman's removal from the Council of the Twelve and eventual excommunication are fairly well known. Leo Lyman's excellent biography contains

---

<sup>1</sup> Scott E. Isaacson is the newly appointed President of the Amasa Mason Lyman Historical and Educational Society.

probably as much of the basic details regarding those events as we are going to have. Understood the basic facts may be, but coming to a complete understanding the situation is a much deeper question.

What do we make of this strange situation, where a man who was very close to Joseph Smith and for thirty years an active associate of Brigham Young, became disenchanted and opposed to the Church (at least opposed the Church leadership) he had dedicated his life to leading and building?

It is not, of course, for us to judge Amasa's life in the ultimate sense, but as I mentioned, I am an attorney and as I have studied and prepared for this Expo, I came to feel that I would very much like to have been Amasa's attorney. We talk about the "judgment of history" and today I would like to be Amasa's attorney today presenting his case before that court. May I pretend that he is my client for a few minutes? I wish I could have written and submitted a legal brief on his behalf at the time. But now, before the judgement bar of history, I think I can make a very good legal case for the following points.

- There is no doubt that my client Elder Lyman eventually lost his apostleship and his membership in the Church. Those are simple facts. He eventually came out in full rebellion against the leadership of the Church, so as his attorney, I'm not here to say he was innocent or even that he didn't deserve his punishment.
- But I am here to say that there are mitigating circumstances that in all fairness should be taken into account in reaching an ultimate judgement of him. That there were factors other than Amasa's own actions that contributed to the situation—contributory negligence, to use another legal term.
- What are some of these mitigating factors? I think there are many, more than I can cover in this short time but I want to mention a few I think are important:
  - First, he didn't commit what we would call an unpardonable sin. The original doctrinal error was not that he ever denied the divinity of Christ or doubted that Christ was the

redeemer of mankind. His original divergence from orthodoxy was to question that the actual shedding of blood was the most important or significant or even necessary aspect of the atonement. Certainly there is much that all Church leaders admit we do not understand about the details of the atonement. This doctrinal dispute cannot in and of itself, be classified as a capital crime, or the unpardonable sin, at least not in my opinion as Amasa's advocate. Of course it is not the kind of thing an Apostle can say, but it is not in and of itself a grievous sin.

- Next, one of the common errors that I see among people today, especially among those members of the Church who are troubled by or even leave the Church because of new historical evidence that comes to light, is that they judge the events and situations of the past by today's standards. For example, Seer stones may seem very strange to us, but in the time of Joseph Smith, they were part of the common culture. God has no choice but to work with humans through their current language and culture. One historian said: "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." I promise you that there are aspects of our culture that appear normal and appropriate to us, but 150 years from now, the people then will think we were crazy. So, I ask that it is only fair to try to judge my client, Elder Lyman, in the context of his times.
- So what was different in Elder Lyman's time? Well, almost everything. It would be easier to list the few things that we have in common. He had no Mission President's Seminar, no Preach my Gospel. No modern medicine. Communication was slow and tedious, only by letters—later in his life telegraph. He couldn't pick up the phone to call his First Contact at Church headquarters. Because of his almost constant missionary and preaching assignments he seldom was even present at meetings of the Quorum of the Twelve. He didn't even have scriptures like we do now, with footnotes, cross references

and study aids. The doctrine of the Church was not developed or uniform. He didn't have immediate access to basically all of human knowledge through a device like a smartphone—it would seem a fantasy or miracle to him. He lived in vastly different times and we shouldn't commit the error of applying today's standards.

- My next argument in his behalf, I have to be careful. He was, of course, a first generation Mormon. An early convert. He grew up in a different religion. As President Kimball said, "missionary work is the lifeblood of the Church." According to Elder Richard Cook, "new converts give the Church vitality and strength." I testify that is true. My beautiful wife is a convert, the only member from her family, and my life and the lives of our children and grandchildren have been blessed enormously by the strength of her testimony. But she will tell you that growing up in another Church, even a Christian one, can affect your perception and understanding of things throughout your life. Those of us who are born and raised within the Church, some of us for many generations, grow up with not only the doctrines of the Church, but the Church culture just part of the fabric of our lives. Permit me a personal example.
- I served my mission in Guatemala and El Salvador. I had a missionary companion named Carlos Amezcua who had only been a member of the Church for little over a year before his mission. We were both assistants to the President, so I hope I can say we were okay missionaries. But Elder Amezcua told me that when he first arrived on the mission, on one of his first preparation days, the district of missionaries went to the beach (ostensibly to sightsee and play on the beach) near Sonsonate El Salvador. Elder Amezcua was a surfer from Southern California and when he saw the beautiful ocean he ran right in and began body surfing and swimming. He told me he couldn't understand why some of the missionaries didn't join him (some did). When Elder Amezcua and his

companion got back to their apartment and prepared to go out working that evening, they said their companion prayer and his companion prayed: “Bless Elder Amezcua that he won’t swim anymore.” Elder Amezcua was shocked and had to ask what was going on. After Elder Amezcua told me this story, when the office elders had our prayers we often included, “Bless Elder Amezcua that he won’t swim anymore.” What is the point of this story? Elder Amezcua didn’t grow up in the Church. Those of us who do are aware that missionaries are not supposed to swim. Elder Amezcua had never picked up on that. It’s in the rulebook, but more importantly, it is, or at least was when I served, part of the missionary culture. It was especially dangerous for missionaries to be in the water. This is a trivial example of a true principal—that there is much of LDS culture and perhaps even doctrinal concepts that are “caught” more than they are “taught.”

- Amasa Mason Lyman was a first general member. He became a powerful missionary and preacher of the restored gospel and did tremendous good. But he also carried with him the influences of his upbringing and other contemporary influences. It is way beyond the scope of my presentation to get into how much his growing up in the Universalist church influenced Amasa’s views, but I think the influence was real.
- So, don’t judge my client, Elder Lyman by the standards you may apply to people who have never known anything other than the Church. Especially don’t judge him by the standards of today’s world and Church.
- I have worked as an attorney for the Church in several capacities for the last 20 years. For the first five of those I lived in South America and supervised the legal work of the Church in South America. I had experience with a man who had been a prominent early Church leader in one of those countries. He was a first generation convert. He was also an attorney and had been the Church’s primary local attorney in that country for many years. Unfortunately, we learned that

he had made some mistakes, a serious error in how he had billed the Church. Eventually one of the Church general authorities had to intervene to deal with the situation. I privately expressed my thought to the General Authority that I thought the thing the attorney had done was so serious he should have a Church council to review his membership. I felt that if I, for example, had done the same thing he had done, I would almost certainly be disfellowshipped or even excommunicated. The General Authority told me words to the effect that although his actions were wrong, the Church was new in this country, he was a first generation member, and **that the Brethren had learned that if we punish people like him, we may lose him and his family from the Church for generations.** So although there were consequences for his errors, the local attorney retained his Church membership, and in fact went on to serve faithfully as a patriarch and temple worker.

Back to my legal brief, which word you can see is an oxymoron.

- Another mitigating factor is that, although it is true that Amasa eventually openly rebelled against the Church leaders and criticized them, I would argue that that just proves that Amasa was a human being. He had been embarrassed and excluded by his close associates, perhaps justifiably so, but the hurt must have been exquisite for Amasa. So my client is guilty of being human and subject to human nature and pride.
- The next mitigating factor the judgment of history should take into account is that with all respect, I think the manner in which his case was handled contributed to its eventual sad outcome. Elder Lyman preached doctrine regarding the atonement that was not and is not Church doctrine. I don't mean to minimize it. It was and is false doctrine, and I'm not trying to excuse it. But as I have pondered on the situation, I have asked myself—if the situation had been handled differently, could Amasa have remained in the Church? I think there was a turning

point that if Church leaders would have shown more patience and compassion with him, perhaps he wouldn't have turned so far against the Church leadership.

Reading and pondering over these events has brought to mind another experience from my mission. As I mentioned, I was an assistant to the Mission President in Guatemala and El Salvador and one of my more difficult assignments was to take notes and prepare reports of Church disciplinary councils. A local man who was a first generation leader of the Church in Guatemala—a district president, was brought to the council for “apostasy.” I don't recall his name, let's just call him Brother Garcia. The mission president, the late Robert Arnold, was relatively young, only in his 30s. A fine Church leader. He worked in the Church Education System and introduced the seminary program to Central America. But he was young, and also an American. However, President Arnold had his counselor in the Mission presidency with him, John O'Connell, who although he was also originally from the United States, he had married a Guatemala woman and had lived his entire adult life in Guatemala and was much more familiar with the language and culture.

The disciplinary counsel didn't start of well. Basically, the missionaries had reported to the President that Brother Garcia had been saying disparaging things about the Book of Mormon. Sounds odd, but again, a first generation member. All Brother Garcia's sermons were based on the Bible. The Elders complained Brother Garcia acted more like an evangelical Christian than a member of the Church of Jesus Christ. President Arnold started to challenge Brother Garcia about the things he had been saying. Arguing with him. Brother Garcia argued back. I thought for sure that this council was headed for serious punishment, even excommunication. But then John O'Connell, the counselor in the presidency, spoke up and the best I can recall, he said something like the following: “Brother Garcia, I've known you for many years. I've heard you

bear your testimony about the restoration of the Church. I've heard you bear your testimony about the Temple." (Elder Garcia was one of the few members who had been to the temple—in those days the nearest one to Guatemala was in Mesa, Arizona). Elder Garcia softened and said how much he had loved the temple. Brother O'Connell then continued: "Brother Garcia, you say you have some issues with the Book of Mormon, let me suggest that you and I do the following: why don't you go home and read the Book of Mormon. I'll read the same thing you are reading and you and I will get together each week at my home and I will try to answer any questions you have." As you can imagine the spirit changed entirely in the disciplinary council. Brother Garcia agreed, and the council was ended without imposing any formal restriction on Brother Garcia. I don't know what ultimately happened, but I know that no council was convened again for him during the rest of my mission.

This event came to my memory when I read about the details of the meetings that were held with

Amasa Mason Lyman. Leo Lyman, in his excellent and detailed biography, states the following about the initial action by President Young and four of the apostles in which Amasa was essentially removed from the apostleship:

"All indications are that they had simply ascertained that Lyman had acted in precisely the manner reported, with no attempt being made to allow Lyman to explain his actions or beliefs to them...The investigation was not a formal church court, and no observance of church court procedures was in evidence, including some members of the disciplinary council assigned to safeguard the rights of the accused. The report indicates no effort made to hear Lyman out, to discuss his view, or to attempt to reason with him. Perhaps more seriously from a modern perspective, there is no indication in the report of the scripturally require patience and love unfeigned (D&C 121:41) that should be



demonstrated even in cases of disagreement. Layman apparently interpreted this unwillingness to make the effort to understand him as a personal affront of major proportions.”

Time doesn't permit going into the further details regarding what appears to have been a written public confession that the Church authorities, from all appearances, forced Amasa into signing.

I want to be very clear: I am not saying Amasa wasn't in error or that he shouldn't have been corrected or that he shouldn't have been stopped from preaching or even dropped from the Quorum.

What I, as his attorney, am arguing is **the manner in which these events were handled was or should be a contributing or mitigation factor in the judgment of history.** Handled differently, perhaps Lyman wouldn't have fallen as far as he did.

Now, it is certainly not my place to disagree or criticize the Church leaders. I think Elder Lyman had to be corrected. But after my recent study of these events I came away with the sense that perhaps something like what I witnessed as a young missionary possibly could have happened. If someone would have reached out to him with patience and compassion, perhaps history would be different.

My last few arguments:

- Unlike other cases of “apostasy” Elder Lyman’s disagreements and eventual break with the Church leadership was not a cover up for his own personal sin. In all I have read or heard of him there is not any evidence of any personal bad conduct or serious sin. At least at first, it was a genuine difference of opinion or emphasis that created the original rupture with Church leadership.
- It also cannot be said that Amasa’s actions seriously injured the Church. The Church has gone to become a world religion blessing the lives of millions. Perhaps there were some others who

suffered because of his actions, but certainly the primary victims of the error were Amasa himself and those members of his family and their descendants who became bitter and estranged.

- Amasa has paid the price for his actions. His punishment should be limited to time served.

So in summation, what we have here is a tragedy, in the classic sense of the word. A man who was brought down by the excess of his strengths. A classic error or fault that led to an unraveling that in many ways was worse than the original error.

My client, Amasa Mason Lyman made mistakes, serious ones, but I submit he is a candidate for mercy, for leniency and ultimately forgiveness. In my heart, I believe that is actually the case.

I hope that it has been okay for me to pretend to be our Grandfather's attorney in this short discussion. There is a lot more I would like to say and hope to be able to say in the future about this situation. It has been an interesting exercise to review his case from this legal perspective. But I think there is more to it than just an interesting theoretical discussion.

We will all someday actually be called to be judged on our lives. Not before the judgment of history, as I have been pretending today, but before the actual judgment bar of God. At that bar, we will not have some weak attorney like me as our advocate.

Rather we will have, or at least we all hope we will have, the perfect advocate standing by our side.

We have a partial description of how that advocacy will happen. Listen to these words from Doctrine & Covenants Section 45. I truly believe that something like has occurred or will occur for

Grandpa Lyman, but note especially how poignant this must of have been for a man who had doubted the necessity of Christ's shedding of blood:

"Hearken, O ye people of my church, to whom the kingdom has been given; hearken ye and give ear to him who laid the foundation of the earth, who made the heavens and all the hosts thereof, and by whom all things were made which live, and move, and have a being....

Listen to him who is the advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him—

Saying: Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified;

Wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life."

As I said, I sincerely believe that Amasa Mason Lyman has or certainly will ultimately be redeemed. That the Savior who Elder Lyman spend his entire life preaching about and wore out his live building up his Church, will stand as his advocate before the father in spite of Amasa's errors. As ironic as it is, Jesus will offer the Father Jesus' blood as propiation for Lyman's sins. And the Lord is mighty to save.

I hope that this will the lot of each and everyone one of us, who like Amasa are human, and each who have made mistakes and each of us who need the atoning blood of Christ.