

Fallen Church:

A Brief Exploration of the Decline of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and What Might Be Done to Revitalize It

Written by a former member who gave nearly 40 years of devoted service

Introduction

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was founded in 1830. It grew rapidly and was involved in significant controversy in its early years. The church's founder, Joseph Smith, was killed in 1844, and there were significant questions about his rightful successor. Brigham Young led a large contingent to Salt Lake City, where the church is currently headquartered. Joseph's widow, Emma, remained behind, and their son started the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, now known as The Community of Christ. The church led by Brigham (hereafter referred to as the "Mainstream Church" when the need exists to differentiate it from other branches) grew significantly and practiced polygamy openly until an 1896 edict by a later prophet officially abolished the practice, though it continued in various forms and is still practiced today by splinter groups.

Until recently, it was standard for members to refer to themselves as "Mormons," a term derived from The Book of Mormon, which was purported to be an authentic translation of an ancient record written by the inhabitants of the Americas. It is held to be more sacred and more true than the Bible, and it features an account of Jesus Christ visiting the Americas after His resurrection. "Mormon" was originally a term used by the enemies of the Church, but was later considered an appropriate name by which members of the church and those not part of it could refer to members. It was vilified by a later church leader and fell out of common use by most members, but it is still the term by which most know the church and its members. I will use the term "Mormon" in this book as it is what I grew up with for most of my life. The term "LDS" was also in very common use at one point, though I think it is no longer preferred by adherents.

Some outside the Church refer to it as a cult. Other similar terms might include high-demand religion, high-control religion, and undue influence. Adherents tend to strongly deny that this claim has any validity whatsoever, and I remember taking a strong personal (internal) stand when, as a faithful member, I felt the Church was being cast in an unfair light and misunderstood. However, having studied cults for many years through a behavioral health lens and making sense of my own experiences, there are overlapping elements between the

definition of a cult and standard Church practices. While religion is always a divisive subject, with apologists and accusers completely at odds, I hope to offer a more complete picture that allows the reader to critically examine evidence and decide the truth for themselves.

About Me

I was raised by parents who both belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. My father can trace his heritage to several individuals who came from all around the world and settled in Salt Lake City in the 1800s. My mother was baptized at age 17. I was blessed as a baby, which created my first church record, and baptized at age eight (the earliest age at which one can be baptized and the typical age for those growing up with parents who actively participate in church services). My parents met at Brigham Young University, which is fully owned by the Church. This is a common story for those who grew up Mormon. The Church also runs universities in Idaho and Hawaii.

This essay is being published anonymously because it is not easy in the Mormon community to openly and publicly declare one's decision to leave the faith. Some people quietly stop attending, and others depart very publicly, doing everything they can to explain their reasons for leaving and to point out legitimate problems they see with the Church. I have respect for all sides, and my intent in writing this actually isn't to point out where the Church is defective, although it is, and to encourage others to cease their participation in this organization. Instead, I want to explore the Church more broadly through my newfound lens as a mental health therapist and offer insights into ways it can fulfill its mission.

While I was a member, I felt mental health therapy was not something I needed. I think those who grew up when I did might have had similar views. This is both due to mental health treatment not being as commonly available, as commonly used, or as frequently talked about many years ago, and because the Church presents itself as a complete system for addressing life challenges. This may not be their official position, but it was undoubtedly embedded in the culture of the church in which I grew up. Some of this has changed with time, but I still think many members see therapy as redundant when prayer, church attendance, service to others, and spiritual connection can better address the challenges of living. Some may fear that a therapist would interfere with or be at odds with their faith, and either seek a therapist who is also a Church member or avoid therapy altogether.

I remained an active and devoted member of the Church until just prior to my 41st birthday. I had been depressed for many years before that time, and the more I tried to find happiness using the Church-provided formula, the more depressed I became. It was expressly forbidden to read anything that could be considered critical of the Church. All my life, I took this practice

seriously and only read materials created by the Church or otherwise supportive of its truths. However, I had become desperate, and answers were not forthcoming. I decided to read a book called *The CES Letter*, and a few months later, I stopped participating in Church services.

I then briefly attended a Presbyterian church near my home. I was looking for a way to replace my church community, but encountered in Christianity some of the same challenges I was beginning to question in Mormonism. Specifically, the way LGBTQ+ issues were handled did not seem very aligned with my own values and how I thought members should be treated. I then attended a local Buddhist service and found a sense of belonging there. I appreciated their inclusiveness and what felt like a very practical and individualized approach to spirituality. I now consider myself most closely aligned with the Plum Village Tradition of Buddhism, though I am more of a philosophical Buddhist than a religious one. I have not regularly attended any services for many years. After briefly exploring atheism, I now identify most closely with the agnostic position.

What Is a Cult?

One of the surprising discoveries I made when researching the Church and its practices was the BITE model created by cult expert Steve Hassan. It describes how Behavior, Information, Thoughts, and Emotions are controlled in organizations and offers a way for those evaluating a particular organization to determine the extent to which it may be engaging in undue influence.

Evaluating Whether the Church Is a Cult

Behavior. As a high-demand religion, the Church relies on behavior control as a critical component of how it operates. The Church requires individuals to serve for free (all but the highest clergy are unpaid, and many members—more so historically than now—are unaware that any leaders are paid at all), stating that they are literally being “called by God.” Historically, a call from God by a Church leader was considered a call from God (The Lord) Himself, and refusing was akin to apostasy. This stance has been softened significantly in recent years. Members are also asked to attend Church meetings regularly, with those in leadership positions devoting many hours weekly. Service to other members and non-members is encouraged. Young people may enter full-time proselytizing mission service for up to two years when they turn 18.

Baptisms for the dead are completed in the temple to ensure that those who never joined the church have a chance to do so in the next life, and everyone is encouraged to engage in family history work to identify unbaptized individuals. Members are strongly encouraged to pay 10% of their income to the Church and are denied opportunities to participate in certain callings or to

attend the temple if they fail to do so. Social pressure to conform to specific norms and standards of behavior can be intense, and those who sin may temporarily lose their ability to take the sacrament—which can feel like public shaming as one typically sits with family and friends at church and must reject the sacrament opportunity, causing others to wonder and perhaps inquire what sin has been committed. Those who sin more seriously may be disfellowshipped or excommunicated. There are no valid reasons for leaving the Church, and this is always seen as the most serious sin with devastating personal consequences—including complete cutoff from family members and possible homelessness due to loss of financial support. This is not something that is officially required or sanctioned by the Church, but it occurs in many cases when someone confesses that they are gay or trans, and in my view, it is a natural result of LDS doctrine.

Tattoos are generally considered problematic; members are not allowed to smoke or drink alcohol or coffee or use illicit drugs, and for most of this century, there was a prohibition on multiple piercings (though one piercing per ear was allowed for women). Men typically do not have long hair, and men in certain Church positions may not have beards. Though members consider themselves Christians, wearing crosses was almost never the norm for most of the church's history. This rule may be becoming more relaxed and less emphasized.

Information. Information control techniques are most evident in the ways the Church ensures that members only access materials that are positive or apologetic in nature. There are many examples of individuals being excommunicated from membership for writing anything that paints the Church in a negative light. This includes Yale-educated historian D. Michael Quinn and the biographer Fawn Brodie, who wrote the book *No Man Knows My History* about the church founder, Joseph Smith. There are also clear rules about what constitutes clear and current doctrine, which generally favors the current prophet over past prophets and Mormon scripture. Words spoken at General Conference, a semiannual event featuring talks by selected Church leaders, are superior to those spoken in other settings, such as special local conferences. The higher the rank of the leader speaking, the more authority their message carries.

Thoughts. There are strategies the Church employs to help members redirect their thoughts when tempted to sin or mentally indulge in inappropriate fantasies. Examples include pithy sayings such as “Hum your favorite hymn,” “Choose the right,” and “Doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith.” A similar thought-stopping technique when there is a risk that members will listen to someone who has left the church is: “They’ve left the church, but they can’t leave it alone.”

Emotions. In the Mormon Church, the source of all truth is the Spirit or the Holy Ghost. Instead of conducting a scientific analysis, the idea is to pray about a particular question, such as the truthfulness of the church or the Book of Mormon. A feeling of confusion indicates a “no”

answer, while a “burning in the bosom” indicates a “yes” answer. There is a considerable amount of social pressure applied to getting the right answer, and facts tend to be secondary to feelings. There are also very specific guidelines for the governance of feelings. If an ordinary member prays about something that the prophet has predetermined, any answer overriding the prophet would be automatically incorrect and indicate that Satan is influencing the decision rather than God. One person cannot receive revelation for another unless that person is within their “stewardship,” meaning they have some responsibility for them. For example, a bishop who leads a ward might receive revelation about which of the lay members should speak in the following week’s church service. But it would be considered wrong for a member of the ward to tell the bishop about a revelation that the member received regarding how the bishop should lead the ward. The only exception is if the member is serving as a counselor or helper to the bishop, in which case this divine revelation could be received and offered to the bishop, who sees this as an important way a counselor supports him in his efforts to lead. However, the bishop has the final say.

When considering whether the Church is a cult, it is important to explore the ways certain freedoms exist and the evidence that could be cited in favor of the organization not being a cult. Unlike some religious groups, members of the Church do not live in a community with only those who think alike. Although many members live in Utah, many non-members do as well. Church members have many more dress options than splinter groups, who have stricter rules about hairstyles and wardrobe. The Church mandates that certain undergarments be worn by those who have participated in temple services, but outerwear remains a personal choice. Members are free to leave, though the Church makes record removal more laborious than I feel it should be. The Church also encourages education, provided it does not conflict with its teachings. The Church does not dictate limits on profession, though it has historically strongly encouraged mothers to remain at home with their children rather than work. The Church contributes time and money to charitable humanitarian causes and purports to bring families together, representing itself as an organization that fosters positive and traditional values. For families and individuals who fit the mold and choose to participate willingly, it can bring a sense of purpose, community, and connection.

Controversial Issues Facing the Church: A Sampler

Tithing

The Church was in debt for over a hundred years. In the 1950s, the financial records became private rather than public information. With increased membership and revenues from members paying 10% of their income to the Church as a charitable contribution, the Church began to accumulate significant wealth. This was bolstered by stock investments. In recent

years, some information has come out regarding the extent of the Church's wealth. The Church broke the law when creating shell companies to hide its activities and was fined \$5 million by the SEC in 2023. This includes the discovery of an investment fund worth over \$60 billion U.S. dollars at the end of 2025. When added to other Church assets, including buildings and farmland, it provides a fuzzy but important picture of just how wealthy this organization is. As a non-profit organization, no taxes are collected on tithing or investment income.

Members often feel positive about the Church's wealth, as they would prefer to see such riches in the hands of an organization that uses them to do good in the world. Others have questions about the Church's collection of tithing from even the poorest around the world. Faith-promoting stories about people in the Third World choosing to pay tithing rather than eat are often told at religious gatherings. The standard story is that everyone will be blessed by God for giving to the Church, as it is a divine command. The Church does engage in humanitarian work, but some feel it gives back too small a percentage of tithing. Others argue that the Church either shouldn't invest in the stock market or should pay taxes on those profits, saying it behaves more like a corporation than a Church.

As I went through the faith deconstruction process, I became frustrated because I had donated to the Church for many years, but I felt the ways my funds were used were not fully disclosed. I also donated based on an understanding of the Church's truth claims that had changed, feeling deceived by the way the story of the Church as representing God on Earth had been carefully crafted, and by my own mindset carefully curated from childhood.

Missionary work

When I was growing up, males could serve full-time 2-year preaching missions beginning as early as age 19. I did not serve a mission and faced a lot of pressure as a result. Females could serve 18-month missions starting at age 21, but did not generally experience the same pressure to serve as their male counterparts. Some missions are served within one's own country, while others are overseas and involve learning a new language. The missionary age requirement has been lowered to 18 for both men and women in recent years, and instead of a preaching mission, individuals have the option to remain at home and serve as volunteers for 18 months (females) or 24 months (males). Many young people struggle with the intensity and rigor of preaching missions, coming home early due to symptoms of anxiety or depression. Some will switch to service missions as a result.

There are Missionary Training Centers in certain parts of the world where those learning languages can spend more time than those who speak their native language. While serving a preaching mission, missionaries are assigned a companion with whom they spend nearly every minute of every day. Schedules are strict, and quotas exist to keep missionaries focused on their

task. These quotas include baptisms, teaching lessons, and spending time in public talking with people about the Church. Male missionaries wear white shirts and ties with distinctive black name tags, often riding bicycles but sometimes assigned a car. One day each week is set aside for tasks such as laundry and cleaning. Otherwise, missionaries are expected to study and teach from sunup to sundown (and beyond). Those assigned to a third-world mission tend to have more success than those in developed countries, where religion is becoming less of a fixture in the public arena.

Many faithful members who served missions describe them as the “best years” of their lives and a time when a “testimony” (belief) in the Church became more fully developed. Others have more difficult experiences and may struggle to understand how to reconcile their experiences with the standard/expected positive narrative. Those who later leave the Church may describe their mission as an extremely difficult time during which they felt a loss of autonomy and personhood. Missions disrupt lives at a critical time, when high school is ending and adulthood is beginning. Missions impact romantic and family relationships. Not serving a mission may limit dating opportunities.

In the past, those who came home early were assumed to have sinned. Now, anxiety and depression are more likely culprits, but it can still look and feel like a public failure. Even coming home to address a medical challenge may feel shameful. Missions may be an intense experience that is more about indoctrination and obedience than about the missionary work itself. Those who pass the test are seen as better suited for leadership positions in the Church and may be viewed as better potential romantic partners.

Racism

Until 1978, blacks were unable to hold the priesthood. This policy was set in place by Brigham Young in the mid-1800s. The Book of Mormon says that black skin is a curse for being sinful, though the most direct statements of this have been changed in later editions. Although it was reported as a revelation from God to the prophet, like many such revelations, environmental circumstances also contributed to this change. In the 1960s, the U.S. Civil Rights Movement led to desegregation and other rights that black Americans previously had not enjoyed. The Church had also started doing more missionary work in Brazil, where it was much more difficult to separate those with black ancestry from those without. Additionally, some hardline church leaders who had previously opposed the move died, paving the way for change.

The Church’s connections with Native American tribes who inhabited the Utah area remain troubling in various ways. The Mountain Meadows Massacre involved a group of Mormons who dressed as Native Americans and even involved some actual Native Americans to waylay a

Missouri wagon train. The Church claimed for most of its history that the Native Americans were the descendants of the Lamanites, who, along with the Nephites, are the main characters in the Book of Mormon. In later years, this was downplayed due to a lack of DNA evidence; they were supposedly descended from a single family that emigrated from Jerusalem to the New World 600 years before the birth of Jesus. The Church ran adoption programs, displacing Native American children and placing them in homes with white adoptive parents. Some praised the program by saying it was making the skin of Native American children “whiter.”

Truth Claims

The Church claims to be the only true Church on Earth, stating it is the only means by which anyone can return to heaven. Those who fully understand it and reject it will be worse off in the afterlife than those who never knew about it. The challenge for some, myself included, is reconciling these claims when one realizes how many flaws the system has. If this is God’s only true Church, one might expect it to be better. Many approaches are taken by adherents to maintain their beliefs. These include thought-stopping techniques such as separating cultural practice from doctrine and ascribing flaws to human imperfection rather than God. Ex-members often talk about the concept of “putting it on the shelf” when something doesn’t make sense. They are told to trust God’s plan and say it will be understood or worked out in the next life, and it is a matter of faith in this one. Some describe their decision to leave the Church as an experience of having their “shelf break.” It’s an apt metaphor for the very real impact associated with realizing one’s life has been dedicated to a false cause.

It isn’t hard to see how having parents who bring children to Church every week for their whole lives and growing up surrounded by others with the same beliefs while being exposed to no contrary voices can lead to indoctrination. It wasn’t so much a matter of exploring different options and choosing the best one. There was only ONE option presented, and those who rejected it faced significant resistance from family members and lost their community. They were also told they would “burn in hell” for eternity. Parents were taught that the failure of wayward children would be theirs if they fell short in their responsibilities, and the concept of having an eternal family in heaven at the end of one’s life was sought after as the highest possible attainment. When a child rejected the Church, family members were left to grieve not just a personal choice impacting their child’s life, but an eternal loss of family connection.

The Church informs one’s entire worldview, with LDS doctrine over the years commenting on any subject one could imagine. From believing in creationism instead of evolution to trying to fit a Church narrative onto potentially contradictory facts (the existence of dinosaur bones, despite the Earth being literally 6000 years old, is one example), the mental gymnastics required to make it all fit were exhausting. When my own shelf broke, it wasn’t just a question of where I would spend my time on Sundays. My entire worldview collapsed, and in a very real sense, it

felt like I was dying (because a part of me was). I had the unenviable task of trying to figure out how the world actually worked vs. the story I had been told all my life. I am an educated individual. I had already attained one master's degree and was working on a second when my faith crisis began. This didn't stop me from believing what the Church had taught me all my life about how the world worked and about its own history. I had no reason to believe they would lie; quite the opposite, in fact. The challenge is that the Church wasn't prepared for the age of the Internet. When they completely controlled the narrative, it fit together like a beautiful tapestry. When the full story is known, the truth is far messier.

Book of Mormon Translation and Evidence

The Church-approved origin story of the Book of Mormon involves an angelic visitation to Joseph Smith, who was 17 at the time. Four years later, he retrieved a record written on gold plates and began translating it, with the help of assistant scribes, completing the work in 1830. Fawn Brodie shared a different view: Joseph Smith used a seer stone, placed it in a hat, then covered his face with the hat and dictated the words he saw. It was derided as false, but the Church had—and still has—Joseph's seer stone in its archives. Decades later, D. Michael Quinn wrote about the folk-magic origins of the early Church and was excommunicated for it. The Church acknowledges Joseph's history as a paid treasure seeker prior to becoming the founder and prophet of their Church, but it isn't a central part of their narrative.

Adherents praise The Book of Mormon as an epic tale that someone with Joseph's background and education could never have written. They readily dismiss arguments claiming it is anything but divinely translated. Critics point to external evidence, such as the View of the Hebrews, a book Joseph likely had access to, which contained many similar themes. They also discuss historical contradictions and possible anachronisms, such as the use of metals not yet in common use and the mention of horses, for which there is no historical evidence of their presence in the New World during that era. It also directly quotes Bible passages that mirror the King James translation, and some have questioned whether certain passages in the book of Isaiah would have existed in 600 B.C. when the Book of Mormon character Nephi quoted them.

I have read the Book of Mormon 30 times. It has many positive qualities, yet leaving has given me a different view of it. The opening of the book features God commanding Nephi to commit murder. This was just accepted as truth, but if it is true, the moral ramifications are staggering. It seems quite easy to see how something similar to the Muslim concept of jihad could arise. Like Christianity, Mormon theology uses many military metaphors. Nauvoo, the city in Illinois (United States) where the Mormons settled in the early 1840s and built a thriving community, was home to a legion, and Joseph Smith was its head.

Ongoing Revelation

A key component of LDS faith is the ongoing leadership of a prophet (the president of the Church) who reveals new commands from God and makes policy changes. Sometimes these directly conflict with previous prophetic policies, as in the 1978 revelation allowing blacks to have the priesthood. Though core scriptural texts remain essentially the same, the words of modern leaders are written and also considered scripture if spoken at the general conference. The official canon has not been updated in over a century, but a document known as the Proclamation on the Family and another entitled The Living Christ have served to encapsulate cornerstone policies guiding the modern Church.

When a new revelation is received, members tend to embrace it and adapt quickly to the changes. What God's prophet says goes, even if it contradicts a previous prophet or—more rarely—scripture. Others see these changes as problematic, as they seem to be evidence that an unchanging God changes His mind. The Church does not apologize for its past policies, even those critics denounce as harmful. Many things that members believed would or could never change actually do, and the speed at which they move from one side of an issue to another is remarkable. When harmful past policies are pointed out, members' responses can sometimes feel like gaslighting, as the impact of those policies is minimized or denied. What was once seen as a core unchangeable doctrine is later seen through a completely different revisionist lens. “That never happened” is far too common a response from members when former members describe life in the Church in previous decades. For an organization that leverages its history at every possible opportunity when it serves the purpose at hand, the Church is very quick to encourage others to let go of hurt and move on.

Sex and Sexual Predation

The Church refers to sex outside of marriage as the “sin next to murder.” Very specific rules were created for adolescents recommending such things as not dating until 16, dating only in groups, and avoiding masturbation and pornography. These materials have evolved over the years, but sexual sin remains a key focus of the organization. Adolescents regularly meet with a middle-aged male bishop and are asked poignant questions about masturbation and sexual behaviors. Sexual sin is expected to be confessed to regain worthiness. Church leaders ask about sexual partners and talk with the partner's bishop if the partner is also a member of the Church. The Church is powerful and not afraid to use its power in ways that some might consider boundary-crossing. I was a notetaker in a disciplinary council during which a young woman was told she must cut all ties with her sexual partner or risk losing her Church membership. This meeting consisted of 4 middle-aged men and one young woman. For more severe offenses, the “sinner” is brought before a council consisting of 15 men. It is a horribly imbalanced system for

any female but seems particularly likely to cause trauma for someone without a fully developed frontal lobe.

I had no idea whatsoever about how the Church handled sexual predators, but after leaving, I quickly became aware of deeply problematic practices in this space. Police reports are almost never made. The Church requires leaders to call a hotline and speak with a lawyer, establishing attorney-client confidentiality and protecting the information from being reported. Like Catholicism and Evangelical Christianity, there seem to be some unfortunate dynamics that combine to make Churches particularly ineffective at stopping sexual predators and protecting children:

- The belief that such matters can be managed successfully by the Church, as sex is a domain in which they operate and counsel individuals
- Freedom of religion protecting church leaders from being mandatory reporters
- The naïve belief that pedophiles can repent and reform with the right interventions (based on a Mormon/Christian worldview about sin and choice that does not make room for the realities of psychological disturbance, predation, anti-social behaviors, and psychopathy).
- A desire to avoid negative press associated with sexual offense occurring in a church setting
- Cognitive dissonance occurring due to seeing a person in a positive religious context and later discovering disturbing truths about private sex/predatory acts.

Temples

The Mormon temple ceremony is less secretive now due to Internet videos and pictures released by non-members. However, members must promise not to disclose what happens inside the temple or face significant consequences. I attended many times. In context, I had no issue with what was happening. Largely influenced by Masonic ceremonies (likely copied almost completely in the beginning), the temple ceremony has evolved over the years. It involves learning “signs and tokens” to return to heaven, and at one point features a group prayer chant where participants stand in a circle and repeat what is being said. This may be one of the most obvious cult-like practices in the organization.

Baptisms for the Dead

The Church baptizes dead people who were not baptized when they were alive. Other ordinances are also performed by proxy by a living individual for someone who has died. As one can imagine, some who practice other religions are not appreciative of this practice. This was one of the doctrinal issues I wrestled with before leaving, as I was beginning to learn about Buddhism and struggled to understand how it made sense in God’s plan to tell the Buddhists

they were wrong and explain that Mormon rituals had been performed for them if they were willing to forego their beliefs and choose to follow the Mormon God in the next life.

“Eternal Polygamy”

Despite the existence of a Book of Mormon verse forbidding the practice, the founder of Mormonism introduced the practice of polygamy, marrying multiple wives in secret, many of whom were underage. He also practiced polyandry by marrying women who were already married to other men. Polygamy continued when the Church moved to Salt Lake City. Though the mainstream Church disallows the practice of polygamy now, a man whose wife dies remains “sealed” (eternally married) to his first wife after being sealed to another woman. A woman cannot do the same with multiple husbands. So even though the practice has ceased, LDS women must still grapple with the idea that they may not be alone in heaven with their husband and will have to share him.

The “Sanitized” Joseph Smith

Joseph Smith is presented as an unequivocal hero in Church media. He is gentle, fun, deep, and has commanding charisma and presence. Some of this characterization is undoubtedly true, as his accomplishments in building a Church community out of nothing are remarkable. But like a funeral in which only good things are spoken about the deceased, there is a truer picture beneath the love and laughter. Emma Smith’s story is deeply tragic. Though she denied her husband’s polygamy, she was not unaware or unaffected by his dalliances, catching him in the barn with a hired girl. Oliver Cowdery, one of the early leaders of the Church and a key contributor to the Book of Mormon translation, called it a “dirty, filthy, nasty affair.” Joseph started a bank that collapsed, was arrested on several occasions, and spent time in prison. These are referred to generically as persecutions in LDS apologetics, but that is only part of the story. The death of Joseph was brought about in part by his stealing of Masonic rituals and the destruction of a printing press that was saying negative things about him. He wasn’t a hapless Jesus-like figure who spoke truth and was innocently killed. The way he lived and the decisions he made directly led to his death.

Centralization

While practices were once more varied among congregations, over time the Church has exerted centralized influence to create a monolithic approach to worship that is largely the same everywhere in the world. A surprising number of local matters involve the Church’s top leadership. Members are not permitted to select their preferred congregation or local leader, with boundaries being set geographically. If someone attending a Christian Church disagrees with the pastor or practices, a new congregation can be found. Members of the LDS Church have no comparable option.

Christianization

The exclusion of the Mormon Church from a list of Christian churches made by the United States Pentagon is the most recent in a long series of controversies surrounding whether or not the Church is a Christian organization. This is one reason the Church's full name now includes the name Jesus Christ, which is prominently featured in the official logo. Leaders and members do consider themselves Christians because they believe in Christ. Others argue they are not traditionally Christian and have a variety of non-Christian beliefs and practices, such as temple worship. The Church in general seems to be leaning in a more Christian direction in recent years, including well-known Christian hymns in services that were previously not available in Mormon hymnbooks.

Patriarchy

Women have limited leadership roles and must always get approval from a man when making decisions impacting the organization. Males have the “priesthood,” which gives them authority in the organization. Husbands are the head of the home and can provide a priesthood faith blessing to family members and others when ill or feeling the need for divine assistance. Priesthood leaders can “ordain” others to the priesthood itself and to various priesthood offices. Women cannot hold the priesthood, meaning in a home with a single mother and a 12-year-old son, the 12-year-old son is considered the “priesthood” head of the home.

Splinter Groups

Perhaps the most infamous splinter group is the Fundamentalist (FLDS) Church, which is still headed by Warren Jeffs despite his arrest several years ago. This Church practiced polygamy and underage marriages. It more closely resembles the early LDS Church than the mainstream Church does and is the subject of a number of jarring cult documentaries. Other groups in Utah also practice polygamy.

Dualism and Mysticism

After leaving the Church, I began to explore various religious traditions including Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, Bahai, and Islam. I found much to appreciate in these traditions that I previously knew very little about. While I was a member, it was difficult to appreciate them for what they were because I felt I had the truth and couldn't help but lament other world religions that were comparatively misguided. Reading the Tao Te Ching was a transcendent experience that I would have described as “feeling the spirit” when I was a faithful member. Similarly, the Bhagavad Gita was remarkably incisive and beautiful. Sufism and Zen traditions are remarkably wise. In particular, the Hindu philosophy of Advaita caught my attention. It seemed so opposed to the Mormon tradition, which constantly pits good against evil. Christianity has similar

dualistic themes such as the parable of the sheep and the goats, or the wheat and the tares. I love the idea of non-dualism, interconnectedness, and Satori or enlightenment. Zen koans can help individuals rise above conventional thinking and see reality for what it is, without the stories the brain tends to project upon it.

Many Mormon sermons focus on the importance of Church membership and the consequences of leaving. Those who leave are painted as failures, sinners, and outcasts, and are considered lost sheep (and prodigal sons/daughters). Those who stay are good, and those who leave are bad. Social pressures make it difficult to practice any degree of customized Mormonism except in small ways. There is also no mystical tradition in Mormonism. Obedience, authority, and patriarchy are seen as the highest forms of spiritual practice. Studying the six stages of faith originally proposed by Fowler (and later revised by Peck into the four stages of faith) was eye-opening. Obedience is a feature of the first two of Peck's stages, while non-literal belief and engagement with religion as a mythical experience is considered the highest stage of faith. Mormon theology completely opposes this concept, and I suspect the lack of options for growth as true spiritual maturity is sought partially explains the number of individuals leaving the faith in recent years.

Politics

The Church claims to be politically neutral but reserves the right to be involved when moral issues are in play (as with abortion and gay rights). In the United States, the Church was heavily involved in the passage of a California law banning gay marriage (Proposition 8). Most modern members align with the Republican Party in the United States, with a large percentage of the Utah legislature consisting of practicing Mormons. This gives the Church significant influence in its home state. The Church also participates in lawsuits associated with issues that could impact freedom of (their own) religion, frequently filing amicus briefs with the United States Supreme Court through their dedicated law firm, Kirton-McConkie.

Faith Crisis

I fully expected to be LDS all my life. My faith crisis wasn't something I chose. I believe it was the result of cognitive dissonance that could no longer continue. The cost of questioning is high, and the cost of leaving is higher. I didn't speak to my immediate family for six months after leaving, and my large community shrank to almost no one. Lifelong friends stopped talking to me when I shared that I had left the Church. One family member said hearing the news of me leaving felt like being "kicked in the stomach." It was isolating and came at a high cost, resulting in the end of a long-term romantic relationship because of the associated tensions. My own children didn't speak to me for years. To me, this experience that is had by many points to some of the cult-like aspects of the Church. I was still me, but my closest connections were severed by differences in

belief. This caused me to feel that it wasn't me they appreciated, but my faithfulness and agreement with them on fundamental principles.

The values of the Church played a significant role in my own personal identity development. This influence continues even after leaving. In some ways, I felt that the Church set me up to leave by its own contradictions. I was taught the importance of honesty, yet the Church lied about its real history. I was taught the importance of sexual purity, yet the sexual activities of its founder were anything but pure. I was taught the importance of loving others, yet the Church told me who was more worth loving than others. I was taught I had a divine origin and destiny, yet Church teachings resulted in deep shame and perfectionism rather than personal improvement. I was taught the Church was the only way to be happy, yet the more I engaged with it, the sadder I became. I wanted (and still want) what the Church promised. I am actively looking for ways to help others and love them the way Jesus would, but I have realized the Church organization acts more like a self-interested corporation and cares more for its own image and wealth than for using its vast resources to feed the hungry and end poverty. My mission to love others, given to me by the Church, remains intact even after I discovered they are not what they advertise themselves to be. I did consider remaining in the Church to try to change it from the inside, but there were too many structural barriers keeping the status quo firmly in place.

The Church as a Toxic Lover

Many of the things members accept because it comes packaged in the form of divine love would not be acceptable in other contexts. Wives covenant to obey their husbands in Mormon temples (even those who are single covenant to obey their future husbands). Authority can be misused and abused in both Church and home settings. Those who are brought up with a culture of obedience to authority, including to husbands and church leaders, are susceptible to undue influence by others as well.

God requiring Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and turning it into a test of faith is toxic. So many things that happen in the Old Testament are utterly unacceptable by today's standards. Christ's mission to Israel and not others in the New Testament is discriminatory. While deep spiritual truths lie within these systems and other major world religions, discernment is needed to know when and how to adapt. Critical thinking is, well, critical. Teaching people to trust their intuition and feelings over authority is a beginning of reform.

Cults perpetuate the founder's personality into perpetuity. Joseph Smith's and Brigham Young's still echo loudly, yet in some cases they should not. Scientology seems to have come from the disturbed mind of L. Ron Hubbard, and the toxic practices he started still continue today. Every

effort should be made to eradicate the residual toxicity from Mormonism. Keep the gold and toss the rest.

Needed Reforms

The Church does change very, very slowly on its own. However, with declining attendance in developed nations and church buildings being sold, reform now seems to be a matter of long-term survival and relevance. While many churches are experiencing declining attendance, addressing known issues in the Mormon Church can only help. Otherwise, the Church will change from a thriving organization with full congregations to an organization with vast wealth and no future. While revolutionary change is a dangerous path and could cause the Church to further splinter into toxic divisions rather than addressing the core issue itself, accelerated evolution is likely the best solution to satisfy those who need change to stay in the Church along with those who will resist and distrust changes that are too sudden, drastic, or significant.

Treatment of LGBTQIA+ Individuals

Those who are LGBTQIA+ cannot have a positive experience in the LDS Church, being offered half an existence by remaining celibate. Even if the Church ceases to emphasize conversion therapy or advocating for mixed-orientation marriages (two practices that still occur), internalized homophobia remains a significant issue for members. The book *The Miracle of Forgiveness* by Spencer W. Kimball, one of the Church's leaders in the late 20th-century, was in common use when I was younger. It contained a story about a family who, when sending their son on a mission, told him they would prefer that he come back dead than immoral. Too many LGBTQIA+ individuals adopt a similar approach to their own internal desires, determining that death is a better option than to allow "same sex attraction" to lead them astray. This doctrine is harmful, deeply dangerous, and utterly inhumane. Christianity has the same issue and requires the same reforms. So much is understood scientifically about genetics and sexual orientation that could not have been known in the ancient world.

One of the worst policies in this space was implemented between 2015 and 2019. It forbade the baptism of children of gay couples until they were 18. It also required them to disavow the lifestyle of their parents before being baptized. Since all policies are attributed to divine revelation and given as a "command from God" rather than the decision of an individual or committee, the fact that it only lasted four years makes it unique in LDS history. It is good that it ended, but why was it started, and why did God change His mind so quickly?

Women and the Priesthood

Recently, women were given the opportunity to serve as Sunday School presidents in addition to leading the Relief Society organization (for adult women) and the Young Women's organization for adolescent girls. It's a change, but women have so little power in the Church. Some don't want it, stating they are content with the status quo as they believe it is ordained of God for things to be this way. I believe women should be given the opportunity to have more leadership positions at all levels of the Church. Their voices should be heard and honored more often. It seems too much to believe they could have the full priesthood and serve as Church leaders at the highest levels, but this is where I'd like to see things go rather than enshrining 19th-century ideas of patriarchy into the Church forever and calling it divine will. Heavenly Mother could also be more openly worshipped instead of hidden away "out of respect."

"Only True Church" Claims

The Church is a relatively young religion, which makes it self-protective compared with older, more established religions that have existed for millennia. While these may still battle for relevance in modern life, the desperate striving and need to make all the puzzle pieces fit together perfectly may be less of an issue in older religions that have struggled and strived and found a space to subsist. The arrogance of a comparatively small religion claiming to be the only way to God cannot be overstated. The problem is supposedly addressed with the idea that post-life Mormonism can still provide a way to God, but this obviously is a solution that sits well with Mormons and no one else. I prefer an approach that allows research, experimentation, and exploration. If the doctrine is true and the lifestyle is preferable to other lifestyles, it ought to speak for itself.

Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon is a minefield of problems, despite being described in its introduction as the "most correct book on Earth." As a collection of stories, it serves as a useful moral guide. As a literal history, it lacks an evidential basis. America's archaeology and Mormonism have not, and will not, converge. It can remain a religious text with useful elements that can be drawn upon for inspiration, but nothing more.

Church (Ward) Choice

Allowing individuals to attend the ward (congregation) of their choice would provide an option for some who want to remain in the Church but struggle with a particular leader or person who attends their assigned congregation. Like school choice, it might also put some pressure on local congregations to be better to attract more members. Knowing they have a captive audience reduces leaders' accountability to parishioners.

Temples

The Masonic and secretive nature of temple services requires significant reforms. This is where many of the most extreme cult practices occur. When I was a member, a common comparison made was that the temple was the “University of the Lord.” The same ritualized service was performed each time, and it did have a kind of meditative quality that allowed for inspiration as the rituals were performed from rote memory and the mind could work on addressing certain challenges. Why not take this a step further and turn temples into something of a day-use convent, where parishioners can visit to read, study, meditate, and pray in quiet solitude?

Finances and Tithing

Full financial disclosures should be made, and significant increases in humanitarian giving are necessary to justify the Church’s non-profit status. Clearer divisions should be made between non-profit Church operations and for-profit investments. Tithing should be stratified, with the poorest individuals not required to pay anything while wealthier members in developed nations carry the burden of financial contributions. Funds similar to university endowments should be established to perpetually pay for certain areas of Church operations, such as maintaining buildings.

Gerontocracy

The Church’s leadership succession system is based on the order in which individuals were called, which means that by the time the most senior individual becomes a prophet, that person is likely at least 80 years old (and sometimes 90 or more). A system similar to the Vatican’s election of the pope should be established, allowing high-level leaders to select the best person for the job.

“Eternal Polygamy”

Either men should not be allowed to be sealed to more than one woman (e.g., when a man’s wife dies and he remarries), or women should be allowed to be sealed to more than one man. Women should also have the option of canceling their sealing, as men are allowed to do.

History

The Church should be open and transparent about its history and no longer sanction or muzzle the findings of historians. Where the record is fuzzy, confusing, or open to multiple interpretations, the Church can add the wisdom of revelation to clarify rather than rewrite the historical record. They should apologize for past wrongs and acknowledge the humanness of former leaders. This is currently done subtly, such as in situations when doctrines like “blood atonement” cease to be taught or followed, but clear edicts are needed instead of quiet

disappearance. Blood atonement was taught for many years by Brigham Young, and the basic idea was that certain sins could only be atoned for through the death penalty rather than being pre-addressed by the death of Jesus on the cross.

Sexual Predation

New policies are needed to require leaders who become aware of sexual predation in their congregations to report them to the appropriate authorities. Local leaders should be mandatory reporters. Those who are convicted or confess to acts of pedophilia should not be allowed to participate in Church services in any capacity, and this ban should be permanent. Children deserve to be protected.

Religious Freedom

Due to its history of perceived persecution, the Church tends to have a victim mindset associated with any potential encroachment on its religious freedoms. It is an interesting stance for an organization that possesses such vast wealth and power. The Church should work to protect the religious freedom of its members (which it currently does) and individuals of other faiths (which it currently does not do). Separation of Church and State should be valued, and except in matters impacting religious freedom, the Church should be uninvolved in politics at all levels of government. Care should be taken to work more closely with local officials to adapt temples to fit building codes. Arguments about the Heber Valley Temple (due to the bright lights the building emits and the valley's dark sky designation) and the town of Fairview, Texas, with whom there was a dispute about the height of the temple spire do not engender warm feelings about the organization. The Church shouldn't use its power to bully small towns into submission but should instead follow its own teachings and model Christian love.

Race

Brigham Young was racist. Some argue that he was a "product of his time," but if he was listening to God, then God is racist, and that is a religiously untenable position. Brigham Young University should be renamed, and the second Mormon prophet should be valued as an administrator and organizer of the exodus west but *not* as a divine mouthpiece of God in every case. His beliefs were too extreme, and many of his words and doctrines would shock the current Church were they to be preached or practiced now.

Faith Crisis

Those who have doubts or questions should be encouraged to decide for themselves which path is best, while family members and ward members can emphasize the importance of personal choice and ongoing love for that individual "no matter what." In any organization, it can be difficult when someone chooses to leave. It happens in places of employment all the

time, and light teasing is often an expected part of the process. In a church that teaches it is the only way to God, the stakes are infinitely higher. Yet the LDS Church professes to emphasize agency and should do so more genuinely and openly. (Real agency is talked about in the Church, but only to emphasize why the pro-Church choice is the only one that makes sense.) This will ease the transition away from a comfortable, known community and is more likely to facilitate a return to the fold than condemning sermons. “I can believe what I want to believe, and you can believe what you want to believe” should be the mantra for those who remain faithful when someone chooses to leave.

Grace and Unconditional Love

I knew someone who worked for the Church magazine, *The Ensign* (now called the *Liahona*, referencing a Book of Mormon story about a compass given by God to Lehi’s family to help them find their way to the new world). He told me the Church would now allow the use of the term “unconditional love” in their publications, as it implied that anyone could do whatever they wanted and still be saved. Unlike evangelical Christianity, the Mormon Church seems to see God’s grace as a threat to its power. They want to be the way to heaven and strongly emphasize the fact that you can’t get there without them. The emphasis on works, in my view, contributes to significant mental health challenges as Church members work to meet rigorous religious and social standards, seeing themselves as unfaithful when their human flaws prevent progress. Toxic perfectionism abounds, and this contributes to burnout. The Church wants to keep you so busy that you don’t have time to think about how their practices and doctrines don’t make sense.

Narrow the Scope

The Church seems to have an opinion about most things, including science and medicine. While they are welcome to contribute to public dialogues in their own domain, it seems that the scope of their doctrine should not try to encompass everything. By reducing their scope to religious matters, the Church can create a reality in which deconstructionists will have fewer reasons to question the entire system as new scientific findings that contradict Church teachings emerge. This has been a key challenge for those in the modern era who have access to the Internet and aren’t interested in blind belief.

Deemphasize the Apocalypse

The Church’s focus on the return of Jesus and the apocalyptic events preceding that moment contributes to feelings of fear in some members and may be used as a tool of cult control. While also part of the doctrines of Christianity, overfocusing on this topic creates unhealthy outcomes and increases leadership control over members.

A Spectrum of Worship

The idea of a Cultural Mormon (similar to an ethnic Jew) would be welcome news to those who have left but still have Mormon roots and practicing family members. This could be one end of a spectrum of spirituality that allows room for different ways of practicing while still emphasizing core practices. Those who agree with most doctrines but struggle with some should be allowed to explore their feelings and doubts within the context rather than being unofficially shunned or socially censured. “You don’t have to believe everything we believe, now or in the future. Just keep coming; we want you here,” would be a much better message than continuing to emphasize the need to fit into a very specific mold or be excluded from the group.

Proselyting Missions vs. Service Missions

Missionary work made sense in Joseph Smith’s time as one of the few avenues available for growing the Church rapidly. Things are very different in 2026. By switching from proselyting missions to service missions only, voluntary humanitarian work could become a central focus. This would give missionaries a clear purpose and improve the Church’s reputation as an organization deserving its non-profit status. It would also enhance public relations as others would view the service provided by the Church for everyone (not just its own members) and connect it with the way Christ served others during His brief ministry.

Coffee and Other Pharisaical Rules

While certain aspects of the Word of Wisdom are backed by science and health claims, such as proscribing tobacco and alcohol use, others such as coffee and tea remain forbidden without any scientific backing whatsoever. It seems to be an extension of misunderstandings about health and “hot drinks” emanating from the 19th-century. There are more important battles to be fighting than this one.

Masturbation and Pornography

Church teachings about masturbation conflict with psychological views seeing it as part of normal development. While it can be addictive and interfere with healthy sex in marriage (and should be dealt with by a mental health counselor if this occurs), it isn’t inherently wrong. By forbidding it, the Church is dictating how individuals and couples should handle their own personal sex lives. Again, this seems to be an extension of 19th-century misunderstandings about the practice. Pornography too can become addictive and problematic, and in such cases a mental health counselor or 12-step group may be able to help. But the Church does not distinguish between occasional viewing and addictive consumption. Members may get the impression that looking at pornography once means they have deeply erred. The shame arising

from this, coupled with caustic sermons forbidding pornography, may combine to create or exacerbate the problem rather than helping individuals experience healthy sexual exploration.

More Recommendations, Fewer Edicts

While core doctrines can continue to be emphasized and encouraged, most issues facing the Church and its members can be navigated without top-down commands. Individuals and families have access to resources and personal revelation that can help them live positive moral lives and do not need to outsource all their thinking to Church leaders.

Congruent Words and Actions

The temple marriage ceremony does not once mention the word love. Instead, it focuses on eternal power and dominion. This dynastic language is unbefitting the occasion and detracts from the focus on marital harmony. If a couple cannot find a way to set aside their own egos and love each other with their flaws, they will divorce before they ever make it to the possibility of eternity. Paul's words in 1st Corinthians chapter 13 should instead be the central focus of this ceremony.

Core Doctrines

While faithful Church members reading these words are unlikely to agree with many or any of them, it could be asked if the Church would still even maintain its identity should all of these reforms be implemented. Yet core components supporting families, communities, and a positive way of life would remain. People who have left may feel comfortable returning, which could help the Church increase focus on its humanitarian mission. It would also be better suited to help parishioners navigate the real challenges of modern life, which include isolation and aimlessness. There is much that is good in the Church, and it could use a lot of improvement.