

Examining Church Claims

A Multi-faceted Approach to the Claims of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Donald L. Cohen, MD
March 16, 2015

The Church was organized in Manchester, New York, on April 6, 1830. The original name used on that date was actually the “Church of Christ.” This was changed in 1834 to “The Church of the Latter Day Saints,” and then changed again in 1838 to “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (see [FairMormon](#)). Joseph Smith Jr., the first Prophet and President of the Church, claimed that organizing the Church was part of the ‘Restoration’ of the ancient Church of Jesus Christ to the earth. The Book of Mormon is recognized by Church leaders and members as the ‘keystone’ of the religion, and as a part of the Canon of Scriptures. Other writings were similarly accepted into the Canon during the Church’s early years (The Book of Abraham, The Book of Moses, the Doctrine & Covenants).

The Church makes a variety of claims about itself, its origin and teachings, and has sent many thousands of Missionaries throughout the world, to try and convince others that these claims are true. My purpose here is to examine these claims, to see if they hold up under scrutiny.

George A. Smith, an early member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (and grandfather to later President of the Church, George Albert Smith) said:

“If a faith will not bear to be investigated; if its preachers and professors are afraid to have it examined, their foundation must be very weak.”
[Journal of Discourses, Volume 14, P. 216](#)

J. Reuben Clark, who served in the Quorum of the Twelve, and as a Counselor in the First Presidency, stated:

“If we have the truth, it cannot be harmed by investigation. If we have not the truth, it ought to be harmed.”
Quoted in J. Reuben Clark: The Church Years, D. Michael Quinn. Brigham Young University Press, 1983, P. 24

James E. Talmage, another past member of the Quorum of the Twelve, and one of the most respected thinkers in Church history, said:

“The man who cannot listen to an argument which opposes his views either has a weak position or is a weak defender of it. No opinion that cannot stand discussion or criticism is worth holding. And it has been wisely said that the man who knows only half of any question is worse off than the man who knows nothing of it. He is not only one-sided but his partisanship soon turns him into an intolerant and a fanatic. In general it is true that nothing which cannot stand up under discussion or criticism is worth defending”
James E. Talmage (Improvement Era, January, 1920, p 204.)

Hugh Nibley, sometimes considered one of the greatest intellectuals the Church has ever had, made this statement:

"The Book of Mormon can and should be tested. It invites criticism."
Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to The Book of Mormon*, 1957, P. 13.

It is not my intent to make an exhaustive or comprehensive list of all of the Church's claims, and wish to concentrate on the most important ones, the ones that underlie the Church's foundations.

Further, I wish to address these claims from several different perspectives, to provide a more broadly-based analysis. The three approaches I will be taking are:

A. Factual Claims

B. Epistemological Considerations (or how we know what we think we know)

C. Examining the Fruits of the Church in Practice

A. Factual Claims

The Church makes many specific claims about matters of history (both its own, and that of other peoples), the migration of people from one continent to another, the translation of ancient documents, etc. These are perfectly legitimate subjects to be examined using the tools and logic of Science.

I do recognize that some claims the Church makes (for example, concerning the existence and nature of God), like similar claims made by a variety of other religious institutions, are not readily addressed with the Scientific Method. But for better or worse, many of the Church's claims go beyond these more difficult subjects, in making empirically testable statements about people and places.

I don't wish to duplicate the wealth of information and research that is readily available with some brief searching of the Internet. For that kind of comprehensive information, one can go to places like [MormonThink](#), [20 Truths about Mormonism](#), or read through the [CES Letter](#). My goal here is to summarize what I see as the most central and foundational matters, and refer the reader to those and other sites for a more complete picture.

1. The Book of Mormon and The Ancestry of the Native Americans

Joseph Smith claimed to have been directed by an Angel to dig up a set of Golden Plates, which were supposed to contain a written record of the original inhabitants of the Americas. He eventually published a book, the Book of Mormon, which he claimed was the translation of this ancient record, from the 'Reformed Egyptian' in which it was originally written. The importance and centrality of the Book of Mormon is indicated in this quote from Joseph Smith:

"I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion,"

History of the Church, Volume 4, P. 461

Ezra Taft Benson, Church President from 1985 to 1994, said:

"The Book of Mormon is the keystone of our religion... Just as the arch crumbles if the keystone is removed, so does all the Church stand or fall with the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon... if it can be discredited, the Prophet Joseph Smith goes with it. So does our claim to priesthood keys, and revelation, and the restored Church."

[Ensign, November 1986. 'The Book of Mormon—Keystone of Our Religion](#)

The following is quoted from the Introduction to the Book of Mormon, from the official LDS Website:

"The record gives an account of two great civilizations. One came from Jerusalem in 600 B.C. and afterward separated into two nations, known as the Nephites and the Lamanites. The other came much earlier when the Lord confounded the tongues at the Tower of Babel. This group is known as the Jaredites. After thousands of years, all were destroyed except the Lamanites, and they are among the ancestors of the American Indians."

[Book of Mormon Introduction](#)

One point to be noted here is that the Church changed the wording of this Introduction around 2006: whereas before it stated that the Lamanites were the *principal* ancestors of the American Indians, it now states that they are *among* the ancestors. No explanation or acknowledgment of this change was published by the Church, to the best of my knowledge, for the next 8 years. It was finally acknowledged around 2014, in a [footnote](#) in a recent set of Church Essays on various topics.

In recent years, a wealth of DNA evidence has been gathered, which demonstrates that the Americas were peopled by migration from Asia, around 15,000 to 25,000 years ago, over the Bering Strait land bridge that existed at that time. There is absolutely no evidence of the genetic signature of Israelite or Middle Eastern people from 600 B.C., which is when the Book of Mormon claims these people came over.

People defending the Church's claims often refer to 'Haplogroup X', which is a European genetic marker found in certain Native American populations. But the problem here is that the evidence shows that these genes entered the Native American populations anywhere between [12,000 and 36,000](#) years ago, long before the purported arrival of the Nephites and Lamanites. For additional details on the DNA evidence, please go to [Simon Southerton's blog](#).

It seems reasonable to conclude that the reason the Church altered the wording of its Introduction to the Book of Mormon was an attempt to change its claims and positions to be more consistent with the evidence that had become too compelling to simply ignore.

The Book of Mormon speaks of a wide variety of animals, plants, tools, materials, and other cultural practices, often in great detail. Extensive Archaeological evidence is now available, which describes a wide variety of animals, plants, tools, materials and other cultural practices, which are completely different from what is reported in the Book of Mormon. Most of the animals, plants and so forth that the Book of Mormon describes are simply not present in the Archaeological record, and the animals, plants and so forth that actually were present and abundant during the years the Book of Mormon is purported to cover, are simply not mentioned in the text of the Book.

There is a wealth of information on the Internet concerning this topic, but I would like to reference one in particular. It is a Podcast Interview with Dr. Michael Coe:

Dr. Michael Coe is the Charles J. MacCurdy professor emeritus of Anthropology at Yale University and curator emeritus of the Division of Anthropology at the school's Peabody Museum of Natural History. He is an expert on the Maya, who inhabited the same part of Mexico and Central American where Mormon scholars say the events of the Book of Mormon took place.

[Michael Coe Interview](#)

I'd like to include a couple of quotes from a PBS Interview of Dr. Coe, from May 16, 2006, that summarize his perspective on the Book of Mormon:

The Book of Mormon is very explicit about what the Nephites brought with them to this land: domestic animals, domestic crops, all of Old World origin; metallurgy, the compass, things like that. Just take domestic animals, for example. I mentioned horses and cattle. Nobody has ever found the bones of horses and cattle in these archaeological sites. Horses were already in the New World, all right, but were wiped out about 7000 B.C. by people coming in from Asia. They never found horse bones in these early sites between

the prime period, which is 500 B.C. to A.D. 200.; never found cattle bones there; never found wheat or rye and these other things that they grow in the Middle East. Plenty of evidence for all kinds of other things that are Native American, but nothing there. And that's the problem: They simply haven't shown up...

I don't really know how my friends that are Mormon archaeologists cope with this non-evidence, the fact that the evidence really hasn't shown up -- how they make the jump from the data to faith or from faith back to the data, because the data and the faith are two different worlds. There's simply no way to bring them together.

[PBS Interview, 2006](#)

2. The Book of Abraham as a Translation of Ancient Papyri

A number of Mummies, along with several Papyri, were found in Egypt by Antonio Lebolo, between 1818 and 1822. Lebolo later arranged to have them sold, and these were shipped in 1833 to Michael Chandler, in New York, for this purpose. He traveled around the Eastern U.S., displaying and selling some of these objects. In July of 1835 Chandler brought the remaining 4 Mummies and associated Papyri to Joseph Smith, in Kirtland, Ohio. Joseph's claims as a Translator, relative to the Book of Mormon, were well known, and Mr. Chandler was curious to see what Joseph would have to say about them.

These objects were purchased by the Church, and Joseph said this about them when he first started his examination:

"[W]ith W.W. Phelps and Oliver Cowdery as scribes, I commenced the translation of some of the characters or hieroglyphics, and much to our joy found that one of the rolls contained the writings of Abraham, another the writings of Joseph of Egypt, etc. — a more full account of which will appear in its place, as I proceed to examine or unfold them."

[History of the Church, Volume 2, P. 236](#)

Joseph eventually published his translation of these Papyri, giving us what we now know as The Book of Abraham. The Introduction to this volume of scripture, from the official LDS Website is quoted here:

"A Translation of some ancient Records that have fallen into our hands from the catacombs of Egypt. The writings of Abraham while he was in Egypt, called the Book of Abraham, written by his own hand, upon papyrus."

[Book of Abraham Introduction](#)

See also [History of the Church Volume 4, P. 524](#)

As with the Book of Mormon, the Church has indicated the importance of the Book of Abraham as a demonstration of the Prophetic calling of Joseph Smith. B.H. Roberts, a very respected Scholar and early Church Leader (serving in the Presidency of the First Council of the Seventy, and as Assistant Church Historian from 1902 until 1933), said this with reference to the Book of Abraham:

"...if Joseph Smith's translation of the Egyptian parchment could be proven discredited, and proven false, then doubt would be thrown also upon the genuineness of his

translation of the Book of Mormon, and thus all his pretensions as a translator would be exposed and come to naught.”

Comprehensive History of the Church 2:138

The original Papyri were thought to have been burnt and lost in the great Chicago Fire, but 10 fragments, including Facsimile 1, were discovered in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, in 1966, and were acquired by the Church in 1967.

First, it turned out that the Papyri themselves dated to around 200 years before Christ, at least 1500 years after Abraham is purported to have lived. This is acknowledged by LDS scholars, as well those outside the Church. This completely contradicts what Joseph said about the Papyri, creating significant difficulties for the LDS scholars trying to reconcile this clear-cut fact and the claims of the Church.

High resolution reproductions of the remaining Papyri have been exhaustively studied by several Egyptologists, and the universal consensus is that Josephs’ ‘translation’ bears no relationship whatsoever to the contents of the Papyri. In fact, the Papyri are a common example of the “Book of Breathing,” a funerary document, for a deceased Egyptian Priest named Hor, with absolutely no connection to Abraham.

Robert Rittner, perhaps the most knowledgeable scholar on this matter, Professor of Egyptology at the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, has completely translated all available Papyri connected with the Book of Abraham. This book is available here:

[The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition](#)

He has referred to the Book of Abraham as:

“a perhaps well-meaning, but erroneous invention by Joseph Smith... Despite its inauthenticity as a genuine historical narrative, the Book of Abraham remains a valuable witness to early American religious history and to the recourse to ancient texts as sources of modern religious faith and speculation. The book still has its uses and significance, but not for the ancient world of Egypt and Abraham.”

[A Response To “Translation and Historicity of The Book of Abraham”](#)

For a more comprehensive information on the Book of Abraham, Kevin Mathie’s website, [Examining the Book of Abraham](#), is quite useful, as is Charles Larson’s book, [By His Own Hand Upon Papyrus](#).

3. The Church’s Version of its own History vs Historical Facts

This covers a large number of topics, which are discussed in great detail on various websites. I will again restrict myself to a couple of foundational issues.

a. The First Vision

Perhaps the most important one concerns what is referred to as ‘The First Vision’, during which Joseph reportedly had some type of divine encounter. The Church publishes and officially endorses the version apparently written in 1838, although not published until 1842. It states that Joseph was 14 at the time, and that it occurred in the midst of a generalized religious revival in his home area at that time. He was supposed to have endured persecution from his public

reporting of this encounter. The actual records of that period do not describe any such revival that year, nor is there any evidence that anyone was even aware of this experience, let alone persecute him for it.

The Church's official version states that Joseph saw 2 personages in this vision, while multiple earlier accounts either omit any mention at all of this experience (mentioning only the Angel Moroni and Book of Mormon visions), or his seeing either a 'spirit', an Angel or Angels, or the Savior.

In general, historical sources recorded closer in time to the actual event tend to be the most accurate, with later accounts more likely to be less reliable. Church Apologists try to smooth over what are major discrepancies and overt conflicts in the various versions, but these efforts seem strained and ultimately unsuccessful, in my opinion.

For very comprehensive information, from those both inside and outside the Church, see the [First Vision](#) section on MormonThink's website. But the bottom line here is that the Church's claims about The First Vision are contradicted by the historical record.

b. The Mechanics of Dictating the Book of Mormon

The Church has consistently described this process, for the last 180+ years, in both word and picture, showing Joseph looking at the characters on the plates, typically separated by a curtain from the scribe, who would write down what Joseph said.

Going back to the actual historical records describing how this was done, a very different picture emerges. Joseph would place his 'seer stone' (a physical stone, brown in color, dug up from a well in 1822 during one of his 'treasure hunting' ventures) at the bottom of his hat, put his head into it, drawing the brim around his head to exclude light, and dictated from what he saw there.

Besides the obvious contradiction with the official account, one enormous problem here is that Joseph did not even use the 'plates' in the process of his dictating the text of the Book of Mormon. This is a huge red flag. If he didn't even need the plates to produce the Book of Mormon, then what was the point of the purported ancient Nephites creating them in the first place? Why all the drama about Joseph's obtaining them, protecting them from being stolen, etc., if they weren't even needed? The whole story simply falls apart, and makes no sense whatsoever.

It is worth pointing out that, just as the Church changed the wording in the Introduction to the Book of Mormon, it is now altering its presentation on how the Book of Mormon was produced. In one of the recent Church essays, it is now reporting the 'head in hat' process, which had typically been dismissed by innocent Church members as anti-Mormon lies:

According to these accounts, Joseph placed either the interpreters or the seer stone in a hat, pressed his face into the hat to block out extraneous light, and read aloud the English words that appeared on the instrument.

[Church Essay titled 'Book of Mormon Translation'](#)

Other areas could be covered here (see the Kinderhook Plates, Greek Psalter, the purported visit of Peter, James and John to restore the Melchizedek Priesthood, etc), and in each and every case, the story the Church portrays as a true account of history is contradicted by the evidence contained in the actual historical records.

Just as the Church altered the wording in the Book of Mormon Introduction, it is now starting to change the history it presents on its website. I suspect the Church will be gradually changing quite a lot of what it is saying and publishing on a wide variety of topics, as the easy availability of information through the Internet basically leaves them with no alternative.

Summary for the Factual Claims Section:

The evidence is overwhelmingly against the Book of Mormon being a history of ancient peoples. And considering that the Church speaks of this as being the *keystone* of the religion, this is a major blow against its truth claims.

The evidence is overwhelmingly against the Book of Abraham being a translation of an ancient document. This speaks to B.H. Roberts quote above, that if Josephs' translations were shown to be false, it would undermine any pretensions that he had as a translator of any ancient or sacred documents.

The Church's portrayal of key, foundational events in its history, such as The First Vision, or the 'translation' of the Book of Mormon, are also completely contradicted by the historical facts.

Lastly, I would like to include reference to a process called the "Backfire Effect." The following is quoted from RationalWiki on this subject:

*"The **backfire effect** occurs when, in the face of contradictory evidence, established beliefs do not change but actually get stronger."*

[RationalWiki](#)

People on all sides of any given issue need to be aware of this, and conscientiously try to eliminate this, as well as other cognitive biases, from their thinking, if they really want to get to the bottom of whatever topic they're studying. If you find yourself simply dismissing any evidence that contradicts your beliefs, without seriously considering whether or not it could be legitimate, on whatever subject, it would be advisable to stop, and ask yourself if you're being affected by the backfire effect, or other cognitive bias.

Hans Mattson's story is relevant here. He was a fully believing and devoted member of the Church in Sweden, serving as an Area Authority, in the 3rd Quorum of the Seventy, from 2000 to 2005. He eventually became aware of some of the factual problems with the Church's claims, and was shocked by what he discovered. He addresses this in a poignant [interview](#) with Laurie Goldstein of the New York Times, on July 20, 2013. Despite his upbringing and beliefs, he was able to somehow realize that there were very real problems with the Church's claims.

B. Epistemological Considerations (or how do we know what we think we know)

I am by no means a Philosopher, but I think it is crucial to address this topic here. It can get quite complicated, and people have spent lifetimes, written dissertations and countless books on this subject. But basically, what is needed is a reliable method to identify what is likely to be true, and distinguishing this from what is more likely to be false.

The Church teaches that a person can determine the truth by what is experienced as a result of their praying about it. The clearest expression of this idea is contained in the Book of Mormon:

“4 And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

5 And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things.

[Moroni 10:4-5](#)

The most obvious question here, which often doesn't get asked, is how do we know that this method of identifying truth is even valid and/or reliable in the first place? In order for this statement to be 'true', the book itself has to be demonstrated to be 'true'. And how does one establish the book to be true? - by applying the method prescribed in the book. This is a clear-cut example of circular reasoning: "A is true because B is true; B is true because A is true."

In this way, the basis for this method of identifying truth can be seen to be inherently invalid, even on a theoretical basis.

Further problems are encountered when examining how this method is actually implemented in real-world, practical situations. The idea of praying for an answer from God is by no means exclusive to the LDS Church, nor is there anything unique in the experiences that they have in receiving their answers.

One can review the writings from adherents to essentially all religious traditions, and find descriptions of fervent, deeply felt, inherently profound experiences. Those having them are convinced they are receiving absolute truth directly from God, and that they confirm the truthfulness of their particular religious tradition and understanding, whether they are Mormon, Catholic, Baptist, Quaker, Jewish, Muslim, etc.

I have recently come across a YouTube video containing fervid testimonies expressed by believers from quite a few different religious traditions, which eloquently express what I'm trying to address here:

[Can She Really "Know"?](#)

Members of the LDS Church should pay particular attention to the first person in this video, a member of The True & Living Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a polygamous break-off from the LDS Church, in Manti, Utah. This testimony is indistinguishable from the testimonies typically heard in Fast & Testimony meetings of the mainstream LDS Church:

“I've been searching for a witness of this work, and of this Church...

I got my witness, and it's burning within my soul, of how important this work is, and how true it is. I know it is.

And it's hard to believe just a year ago I was in High School, and now I'm in a plural marriage, and struggling.

But I know, without the shadow of a doubt, that this is the Lord's work, that I've finally found it. In the name of Jesus Christ."

Original Recording in [This American Life](#) April 26, 1996.

However profound these experiences feel, whatever their origin or significance, it is thus convincingly demonstrated that they are simply not reliable in determining what is or isn't true. Another YouTube video I came across recently contains an excellent presentation on this topic: [Mormonism: What is the Spirit?](#)

Another useful example involves the various talks, speeches, and books by Paul H. Dunn, a well known General Authority, and a member of The First Quorum of the Seventy, from 1976 to 1989. His talks drew upon various events in his life, and thousands upon thousands of members testified of how they felt the Spirit testifying to them when hearing or reading his words, strengthening their testimonies of the Church.

It turned out that many of the facts and events he spoke and wrote about were either completely false, or substantially embellished. He eventually acknowledged this publicly, and he was given 'Emeritus' status in his Church calling as a result.

My point here is not to criticize or humiliate Bro. Dunn. Clearly, his intentions were good, and there was absolutely no malice involved. No, the point here is that even though people were uplifted by his talks and books, and could feel the 'Spirit' testifying to them, this had no connection to whether or not there was any factual truth in what they were hearing and reading.

Similarly, members can 'feel the Spirit' while reading the Book of Mormon, but this has absolutely no bearing on whether there is a real, factual basis to the events portrayed in the book.

The lesson here is that this feeling of the 'Spirit' is no different from, and no more reliable than, what members rely on as the basis of their Church 'Testimony', in their 'knowing' that the Church is true. The experiences themselves are real, and can be quite uplifting and inspirational. But they are useless in terms of identifying what is factually true.

As another example, I have experienced the same feelings and emotions that members describe as the basis for their testimonies, when listening to *Mozart's Requiem*, seeing a performance of *Les Miserables*, or watching a movie such as *The Natural*. Members' claims that the feelings they experience when reading the Book of Mormon proves to them that the Book is true, are no more justified than my thinking that Roy Hobbs was a real baseball player because I was so moved by the events depicted in the movie.

I invite the reader to do some research on the topics of 'Elevation,' or 'ASMR', and the history of religious experience in general, to gain insight into the types of experiences common to all human beings. This will provide an important perspective on the nature of what are otherwise termed 'spiritual experiences' and their relationship to factual truth.

For a more detailed discussion of this topic, please see the following blogposts I wrote several years ago:

[How Do We Know Whether Something is True or False
Science and Reason are the Final and Default Arbiters of Truth](#)

Lastly, I think it is important to briefly discuss “HeartSell ®” in the context of how and why we come to believe something is true or even just desirable. This is a registered trademark for the marketing approach of the Bonneville International Corporation, a media and broadcasting company wholly owned by the LDS Church.

On a page from their website, with the title “Affecting Change by Reaching the Hearts and Minds of Our Audiences” the following quote describes exactly what HeartSell ® is, and how it can be used:

“Our unique strength is the ability to touch the hearts and minds of our audiences, evoking first feeling, then thought and, finally, action. We call this uniquely powerful brand of creative “HeartSell”® - strategic emotional advertising that stimulates response.
[Bonneville International Corporate Website*](#)

This technique can thus be used to ‘sell’ any product, any idea, irrespective of whether or not there is any truth or real value to it. And without doubt, this technique is used extensively in the various Church media productions, educational materials, etc., and accounts for why people feel the ‘spirit’ and are thereby effectively manipulated into drawing the conclusion that the Church is true. Those are strong words, I realize, but I don’t see any more accurate way of describing what is really going on here.

*Note: some time in early March, 2015, Bonneville International removed all mention of HeartSell from its website; the link above now goes to an archived copy of what that page originally contained. It makes me wonder if this action was taken because of the negative attention and implications the whole concept of “HeartSell” had for the Church.

I have found the following books of enormous help in coming to a better understanding of just how and why we come to believe the things we believe:

[Why We Believe What We Believe - Uncovering Our Biological Need for Meaning, Spirituality, and Truth](#), by Andrew Newberg, MD and Mark Robert Waldman

[On Being Certain - Believing You Are Right Even When You’re Not](#), by Robert A. Burton, MD

[Mistakes Were Made \(But Not By Me\) - Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions and Hurtful Acts](#), by Carol Tavris and Eliot Aronson

[How We Believe: Science, Skepticism, and the Search for God](#), by Michael Shermer

Finally, the following book encourages people to use the same critical thinking skills that they use to see how other religions and religious claims are false, in examining their own beliefs:

[The Outsider Test for Faith - How to Know Which Religion is True](#), by John W. Loftus

Perhaps Mark Twain said it best:

“The easy confidence with which I know another man's religion is folly teaches me to suspect that my own is also.”

C. Examining the Fruits of the Church in Practice

I first need to make a crucial distinction here, between the Corporate and Institutional Church, and the Church that exists in the lives of the individuals and families that comprise the various Wards and Branches of the Church.

Even though I was a convert to the Church, I raised my family in it, and was therefore able to recognize and appreciate the real sense of community and belonging that is created by the various individuals and families in the congregations, as they strived to live according to the beliefs they had accepted. I valued being able to move from one part of the country to another, and instantly have a new set of friends who were more than willing to provide physical and material assistance in the move, and in accepting us into the community. I recognize, respect, and appreciate the integrity and motivation of the vast majority of those who fill the pews each Sunday, and run the various organizations and activities of the Church on the local level.

That said, I also recognize that this same sense of community and belonging can be found within the congregations of most other religious traditions, so there really isn't anything particularly unique about the communities of the LDS Church. So while these fruits are good, they don't have any implications concerning the truthfulness of the Church's claims, just as they don't for those other religious, or even non-religious communities.

What I wish to address here reflects a reality different from the one that exists in the Wards and Branches. In fact, many, perhaps most, members can live their whole lives totally at the local level, and be completely unaware of what is taking place at the Corporate and Institutional level of the Church.

1. Financial Matters

There are several aspects to this issue, and once again I'll try to touch on the most important ones.

a. Lack of Financial Transparency

The Church does not disclose much of anything about its finances. For a Church purporting to having been created by Jesus Christ, who often had some harsh things to say about the rich, this waves a huge red flag to me. The fact that they keep these matters hidden from public view, with no accountability to those who freely contribute their hard-earned funds, raises the inevitable question of what they might have to hide. Lack of disclosure doesn't imply guilt, but it is not unreasonable to be suspicious. What do they have to lose by simply being open and up-front about their finances?

On this topic, it is very interesting to note that Church leaders, including the President of the Church, have been deceptive on this topic when speaking to the media. On January 9, 2002, President Gordon B. Hinckley was interviewed by Helmut Nemetschek of ZDF German Television, at 47 East South Temple in Salt Lake City. The following is an excerpt from this interview on the subject of financial transparency:

HN: *In my country we say the people's churches, the Protestants, the Catholics. They publish all their budgets annually to all the public. Why is not this possible for your church?*

GBH: *Well, we simply think that information belongs to those who make the contributions, not to the world. That's the only thing. Yes.*

[ZDF Interview with Gordon B. Hinckley](#)

This is simply not true. The Church doesn't make that information available to the membership of the Church, and they are the ones making the contributions. Again, why misrepresent the facts on this matter, unless there are things that they would rather keep from the membership?

The Missionaries are sent out to teach the world about the Church, and as part of their message they speak of the Church not having a paid ministry. This is, at best, misleading (although the missionaries themselves are innocent here, and are only teaching what they themselves have been taught).

The fact of the matter is that most of the General Authorities, and Mission Presidents, do in fact receive compensation from the Church, in the form of 'living allowances,' or 'stipends.' Now I don't think any reasonable individual would challenge the appropriateness of their being compensated for their services. But when they do this without being open about it, and while having its representatives teach others about there being 'no paid ministry' in the Church, it does raise legitimate concerns.

And why are the actual figures not disclosed? Are the amounts high enough that it would put them in a bad light, relative to the meager income of so many Church members?

Finally, I think it is useful to consider this quote from the Gospel Principles Manual, Chapter 31, on Honesty:

When we speak untruths, we are guilty of lying. We can also intentionally deceive others by a gesture or a look, by silence, or by telling only part of the truth. Whenever we lead people in any way to believe something that is not true, we are not being honest... Honest people will recognize Satan's temptations and will speak the whole truth, even if it seems to be to their disadvantage.

[Gospel Principles Manual, 2011, Chapter 31, Pages 179-83](#)

The Church would do well to follow the same principles it expects its members to obey.

b. Tithing

The Church currently teaches that Tithing should be a tenth of one's income, and that this is generally considered to be one's Gross income, before taxes, living expenses, or other deductions. There is some uncertainty on the Gross vs Net issue, although one can readily find Conference Talks and other official Church publications that endorse Tithing on the Gross.

But regardless, this is, by definition, a 'Regressive' process. This tenth is applied uniformly, regardless of one's income, and so will have greater impact on lower income individuals than higher income earners. There is a significant problem here for the poor, in that paying a full tithe, as it is currently defined, could leave them without sufficient income to live, let alone save for the future.

For example, take a family of 4. Using a Living Wage Calculator from an [MIT website](#), such a family needs at least \$40,000, before taxes, to just meet their basic expenses. If they earn this

amount, and pay a Tithe of \$4,000, this leaves them with \$36,000, which is not enough money to meet basic needs.

Contrast this with another family of 4, with Gross Income of \$400,000. Yes, the Tithe here is much greater, at \$40,000, but this doesn't impact their ability to meet their basic needs, and in fact, comes purely out of 'discretionary' funds.

The emphasis on the importance of Tithing in the Church is enormous. A recent article in the Ensign, by Aaron L. West, included the following:

"If paying tithing means that you can't pay for water or electricity, pay tithing. If paying tithing means that you can't pay your rent, pay tithing. Even if paying tithing means that you don't have enough money to feed your family, pay tithing. The Lord will not abandon you."

[Ensign, December, 2012](#)

I find this attitude to be abhorrent, and incompatible with the message I receive from reading Jesus' words in the New Testament.

Yes, the Church does have its own Welfare system, that should theoretically kick in, to make up the difference for that poorer family. But it seems clear to me, after reading account after account after account, from actual members, that the Church has become increasingly restrictive, and arbitrary, in drawing on these funds. (The Church also discontinued their paid Janitorial staff years ago, and now require the members to provide those services as volunteers, but that's a subject for another time.) There is also the matter of members being embarrassed to seek assistance, which further compounds the problem.

And ironically, in the absence of financial transparency, it is impossible to assess to what extent the Church is, or isn't, meeting their responsibilities to the poor.

Another aspect of Tithing which I find troubling, is the Church's requiring that individuals pay a full Tithe before being granted a Temple Recommend, which provides access to their most sacred Temple Ordinances, regardless of whatever other Christ-like traits and behaviors they might have.

I understand why access to these Ordinances is restricted to those with a real commitment to living the commandments. And now it may be just my own personal quirk, but I find it hard to imagine Jesus Christ telling somebody they can't enter the Temple because they had failed to fill a financial requirement (especially for the poor, who are barely getting by to begin with).

c. City Creek Mall and other Financial Outlays

The Church recently invested between \$1.5 billion and \$5 billion dollars (apparently the difference depends on whether or not other aspects of the Salt Lake City downtown redevelopment project are included) on a commercial enterprise, the City Creek Mall. Regardless of whether or not official Tithing funds were used, and whether or not it will be generating profits down the road, I find this also quite troubling.

For a Church that claims Jesus Christ as its head, whose mission is world-wide, I find it hard to understand why funds of this magnitude were utilized in this manner, to benefit a very small geographic area, in an area which is already quite wealthy by global standards. Again, it is hard

for me to visualize Jesus Christ making this kind of allocation, while world-wide starvation, and daily deaths of innocent, malnourished children, are such huge problems. Imagine what could have been achieved if these funds had been used to build schools, feed children (including malnourished children who are already Church members), combat malaria, build infrastructure in developing countries, etc.

The Church has similarly recently invested huge sums of money into commercial enterprises in Philadelphia, PA, Phoenix, AZ, Orlando, FL, and is the largest private landowner in Florida. It is estimated to have assets at least in excess of \$30-40 billion, and annual tithing income of \$5-8 billion. Again, exact figures are hard to come by, because of the absence of financial transparency, but these are likely to be close to the actual numbers according to multiple news sources.

There is no inherent problem with having assets of this proportion, but a reasonable individual can have legitimate questions about how these funds are being used, and how consistent those uses are with the teachings found in the New Testament.

Lastly, the Church has spent quite a lot of money on Temples - both the land, as well as the buildings and accoutrements themselves. While I understand the intent here, I still have trouble reconciling the vast sums of money that are spent here while so many children suffer and starve. Surely, there must be a better way to balance these concerns. This quote from the Book of Mormon seems to have this same message:

37 For behold, ye do love money, and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your churches, more than ye love the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted.

[Mormon 8:37](#)

And perhaps I have a fundamental misunderstanding here, but it is very hard for me to see Jesus condoning such large expenditures for ordinances for the dead while there is so much pain and suffering among the living, who would benefit enormously, in very real, concrete ways, if those funds were used in their behalf.

44 Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

45 Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

[Matthew 25:44-45](#)

2. Church Leadership and Policies

a. Church Leadership

The main leadership of the Church includes the First Presidency, and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. They are seen as Apostles in the same sense as the Apostles in the New Testament. The holders of these offices are also described as being Witnesses of Jesus Christ. The implication of this terminology, and the way they speak of this to the membership, is that they communicate directly with Jesus Christ, just as they say Joseph Smith did.

But when they are asked directly about this, they don't give a straight forward answer, and sometimes express disappointment at being asked the question in the first place. Sometimes they'll use cryptic wording, or deflect the question saying that those experiences are too sacred to share. In more recent years, it seems that they refer to their calling as being witnesses of the 'name' of Jesus Christ, which, to me, further obfuscates the issue.

This all seems quite disingenuous. After all, Joseph Smith is seen by the Church as having perhaps the greatest, most sacred experiences of all, and he wasn't shy about publicly proclaiming them. My suspicion is that the spiritual experiences of current Church leaders are simply no different from those of the membership, and there is nothing 'Special' about them at all.

President Hinckley basically acknowledged this during several different interviews he had done. It is not at all common for Church leaders, especially Church Presidents, to speak publicly on this topic, so I think it would be worthwhile to quote several of these:

DR: *As the world leader of the Church, how are you in touch with God? Can you explain that for me?*

Gordon B. Hinckley: *I pray. I pray to Him. Night and morning. I speak with Him. I think He hears my prayers. As He hears the prayers of others. I think He answers them.*

DR: *But more than that, because you're leader of the Church. Do you have a special connection?*

Gordon B. Hinckley: *I have a special relationship in terms of the Church as an institution. Yes.*

DR: *And you receive.....*

Gordon B. Hinckley: *For the entire Church.*

DR: *You receive?*

Gordon B. Hinckley: *Now we don't need a lot of continuing revelation. We have a great, basic reservoir of revelation. But if a problem arises, as it does occasionally, a vexatious thing with which we have to deal, we go to the Lord in prayer. We discuss it as a First Presidency and as a Council of the Twelve Apostles. We pray about it and then comes the whisperings of a still small voice. And we know the direction we should take and we proceed accordingly.*

DR: *And this is a Revelation?*

Gordon B. Hinckley: *This is a Revelation.*

DR: *How often have you received such revelations?*

Gordon B. Hinckley: *Oh, I don't know. I feel satisfied that in some circumstances we've had such revelation. It's a very sacred thing that we don't like to talk about a lot. A very sacred thing.*

[David Ransom Interview, November 9, 1997](#)

And there was this exchange between Larry King and Pres. Hinckley, on Sept. 14, 2001, three days following the 9/11 attack:

KING: *President Hinckley, though, couldn't He have prevented this?*

HINCKLEY: *Oh, I suppose so. I believe he's all powerful, yes. I don't know His will. I don't know how He operates. His wisdom is greater than mine. He sees beyond what I see. But I have confidence, overwhelming confidence in the fact that He, who sees life, in its true and eternal sense will provide for those who suffer as these people have suffered as a result of this atrocity, which has been committed against the nation, which we love.*

[Larry King Interview, Sept. 14, 2001](#)

Lastly, this is from another Larry King interview in 2004:

KING: *You are the prophet, right?*

HINCKLEY: *Right.*

KING: *Does that mean that, according to the church canon, the Lord speaks through you?*

HINCKLEY: *I think he makes his will manifest, yes.*

KING: *So if you change things, that's done by an edict given to you.*

HINCKLEY: *Yes, sir.*

KING: *How do you receive it?*

HINCKLEY: *Well, various ways. It isn't necessarily a voice heard. Impressions come. The building of this very building I think is an evidence of that.*

There came an impression, a feeling, that we need to enlarge our facilities where we could hold our conferences. And it was a very bold measure. We had to tear down a big building here and put this building up at great cost.

But goodness sakes, what a wonderful thing it's proven to be. It is an answer to many, many needs. And I think it's the result of inspiration.

KING: *And that came from something higher than you.*

HINCKLEY: *I think so.*

[Larry King Interview, Dec. 26, 2004](#)

As an active, believing member at the time of several of these interviews, I clearly remember how surprised and disappointed I was in how Pres. Hinckley presented himself, and the Prophetic office. Here was an opportunity to speak boldly to the world, following the example of the Prophets of old, proclaiming whatever God would have him speak. But instead, I saw a very likeable, pleasant person, with a good heart, but with no more knowledge, power or authority than anybody else, with no 'direct line' to God, despite what members may generally believe, or are led to believe.

One final, brief quote, from current Church President, Thomas S. Monson, at the ribbon cutting for the City Creek Mall (discussed above) in March, 2012:

"1, 2, 3, Let's go shopping."

Considering the questionable financial and ethical dimension to this project, and the dignity that might be expected from God's Prophet, this just seems completely inappropriate. I have seen comments by active, believing Church member who also expressed discomfort about this quote.

In this context, I have also been bothered over the years when the First Presidency issues letters requesting that if members have questions about the Church, the Gospel, etc., that they shouldn't write to the General Authorities, and should address them just to their local leaders.

Similarly, as discussed above, there are many issues and concerns surrounding aspects of the Church's history and teachings, which are contradicted by the available scientific and historical evidence. Surely this would be an important, even crucial area, where the leaders of the Church, sustained as Prophets, Seers and Revelators, would be able to obtain revelation, and provide at least some answers, once and for all. What is the point of having Prophets if they are unwilling to declare doctrine, and provide definitive answers to members' questions?

Instead, this task has seemingly been delegated to various BYU Professors who have functioned as informal, unofficial apologists for the Church. This leaves the membership in a quandary - they are told not to ask questions of the General Authorities, and are left solely with the conjectures of these men and women to try and deal with their questions, but who cannot speak with any authority for the Church. And ironically, many of their answers and explanations actually contradict the statements and writings of current and past Church Presidents and leaders.

In the last year (2014), the Church has finally published a number of Essays on various controversial topics, but at least at the time of this writing, it is difficult to find them on the LDS website. They are also anonymous and undated, raising questions about their authorship and authority.

When Church leaders want something brought to the attention of the membership, they have a letter from the First Presidency read at every Sacrament Meeting throughout the Church. Why not with this? Do they not want Church members to be more fully informed on these matters?

The Church seems to rely increasingly on its Public Relations arm, to deal with questions from the Press, or basically anybody else. I find myself asking the question of why a Prophet, who is supposed to have the 'ear' of God, the only one on Earth with the authority to speak for God, has need of a Public Relations Department to begin with?

I find it unsettling that the General Authorities sell a variety of books on Gospel Topics, through Deseret Books, and presumably profit from these sales (a reasonable assumption, in the absence of financial disclosure). These men compare themselves to the Prophets of the Bible, in terms of their relationship with God, and their roles in proclaiming the Gospel - I find it hard to imagine Moses, Isaiah, Paul, and so forth, charging the people for access to their messages.

One final area I'd like to cover for this section concerns the Mark Hoffman matter. Hoffman was a Church member, who sold the Church a large number of alleged historical documents, dealing with important aspects of Church history. There is a now famous photograph showing Mark Hoffman meeting with then Church President Spencer W. Kimball, 1st Counselor N. Eldon Tanner, 2nd Counselor Marian G. Romney, and Apostles Gordon B. Hinckley and Boyd K. Packer.

As events unfolded, Hoffman turned out to be a master forger, and as his operations began to unravel, he ended up a murderer as well, planting bombs that killed innocent Church members.

This is important for several reasons. First, it is often preached from the pulpit how Church leaders, from the highest authorities, to the local Bishops and other leaders, have a special gift of 'discernment,' which provides insight and knowledge, directly from God, about Church members, assisting them in their service to the Church. I cannot imagine a more colossal demonstration of the absence of 'discernment' than what is seen in the Hoffman affair. The entire First Presidency and several other Apostles and General Authorities were completely fooled. Again, I acknowledge that these men cannot be expected to be perfect, but given how members are expected to respect and reverence the leaders for their gift of discernment, and to obey any counsel they receive from them, this speaks eloquently to the absence of any such gift.

The other reason I've included this incident is because of the Church's initial motivation in purchasing these documents. Many of them had material that could prove embarrassing to the Church regarding its history. And so, for at least for some of these documents, they were quietly

purchased in order to be hidden away in the Church vaults, so their contents would not be publicly available or accessible.

b. Church Policies

Racism and Social Issues

It seems ironic, and the opposite of what might be expected, to see the Church as an institution on the wrong side of the major moral and human rights issues of our time. The Church denied the Priesthood to Blacks for almost 180 years, until this Doctrine was reversed in 1978 (for documentation that this wasn't simply a 'policy,' see the statement of the [First Presidency, August 17, 1949](#)). Further, there is implicit Racism in how Native Americans are addressed in the Church's teachings as well.

This is readily categorized as Institutional Racism, involving both Blacks, and Native Americans, and is found in both the Scriptures themselves, as well as in statements by Church Presidents. Consider the following quotes:

And Enoch also beheld the residue of the people which were the sons of Adam; and they were a mixture of all the seed of Adam save it was the seed of Cain, for the seed of Cain were black, and had not place among them.

[Moses 7:22](#)

The first man that committed the odious crime of killing one of his brethren will be cursed the longest of any one of the children of Adam. Cain slew his brother. Cain might have been killed, and that would have put a termination to that line of human beings. This was not to be, and the Lord put a mark upon him, which is the flat nose and black skin. Trace mankind down to after the flood, and then another curse is pronounced upon the same race - that they should be the "servant of servants;" and they will be, until that curse is removed; and the Abolitionists cannot help it, nor in the least alter that decree.

[Brigham Young, Journal of Discourses 7:290-291](#)

And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity. For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint; wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them.

[2 Nephi 5:21](#)

The day of the Lamanites is nigh. For years they have been growing delightsome, and they are now becoming white and delightsome, as they were promised ([2 Ne. 30:6](#))... There was the doctor in a Utah city who for two years had had an Indian boy in his home who stated that he was some shades lighter than the younger brother just coming into the program from the reservation. These young members of the Church are changing to whiteness and to delightsomeness.

President Spencer W. Kimball, [Oct. 1960 General Conference](#)

And yes, it is understood that Church leaders, like anybody else, are human, with their own weaknesses and imperfections, and are not seen as being infallible. But yet, there were many, many people outside the Church, dating back to the earliest years of the Church, who were somehow able to see this issue correctly, and worked conscientiously toward eliminating racism

from society. Why wasn't the Church on the forefront of this issue, rather than seemingly being reluctantly dragged into the 20th century? Further, it appears we are seeing the same process going on now, with respect to both Women's rights, Gay and Lesbian rights, Gay Marriage, etc.

Women and the Priesthood

There is then the issue of ordaining women to the Priesthood. Prior to 1978, it was basically inconceivable for most members to see a change in Church doctrine/policy to allow Blacks to hold the Priesthood, believing that the Brethren, and therefore God, had already clearly spoken on this issue. This seems to accurately describe current attitudes on the issue of women's ordination.

As shown above, there are multiple scriptural passages justifying the prior racially based Priesthood restriction. Ironically, with regard to the Priesthood being restricted to males, there aren't even any actual scriptural passages that justify this practice. Ally Isom, official Church spokeswoman, during an interview with RadioWest's Doug Fabrizio, was asked:

D. Fabrizio: *Where does it say in Mormon doctrine that women can't have the priesthood?"*

A. Isom: *It doesn't.*

[Radio West Interview](#)

Given how things have worked in the past, I suspect that, down the road, Church doctrine and policy will change to allow women to hold the Priesthood, just as it did with Blacks.

Church and the Family

The Church presents itself as being 'family friendly,' and in many respects it is. But unfortunately, there are several areas where family conflict, which could otherwise be avoided, is being created.

One area concerns Temple Marriage, specifically Temple Marriage in the United States. 'Eternal Marriages' are performed only within the Temples of the Church, and only members with a current Temple Recommend are allowed to enter and witness the ceremony. This creates a major problem for families who are not all members, or even for those who are members, but for whatever reason do not hold a current Temple Recommend (see the discussion above, where financial considerations and paying of a full tithe will sometimes have this result).

There is now a long-standing policy such that if a couple, wanting to include important family members who are not allowed to witness the Temple Marriage, decides to have a public, civil marriage first, they are then penalized by not being allowed to then have that marriage 'Sealed' in the Temple for a full year. To me, this is unconscionable, and the very opposite of 'family friendly.'

Ironically, the laws in many European countries are different, and it is actually a requirement for the civil marriage to be performed first. The couple is then at liberty to go right away to the Temple, to have their marriage Sealed.

There is absolutely no reason that this same Policy could not be implemented in the United States. Instead, the Church apparently chooses to create conflict and ill-will within families, which would seem to be completely inconsistent with its claim to be 'family-friendly.' There have been rumors of such a policy change taking place, and if so, many families will breathe a huge

sigh of relief. But even so, that fails to excuse the past and current behavior, which has caused so much pain and sorrow.

And while the Church publicly preaches that the family comes first, the reality is quite different. For example, if a close family member of a full-time missionary, even a parent or sibling, dies while he or she is on their mission, that missionary is encouraged to stay in the mission field, and not return home even temporarily to attend the Funeral. How is this putting the family first? And the reality of Church callings, especially ones involving leadership positions, is that huge amounts of time are devoted to the Church, rather than the family. Typically, the father and/or the mother are already required to be away from the family for many of the children's waking hours, to earn a living; callings often add significantly to the number of hours spent away from the family. The message might be 'family first,' but the reality is 'Church first.'

Messages from the Prophet

The world is filled with enormous suffering, disease, hunger, torture, conflict, war. One would expect the Prophetic Voice to speak out boldly on these topics. It is therefore so incongruous when General Conference talks, and counsel from the First Presidency, seems to place so much importance on so many relatively inconsequential matters: how many earrings are acceptable for a female to wear, the crucial importance of obedience to one's leaders, the paying of a full tithe, and other offerings, etc. Yes there are other messages about following the example of Jesus, which are more consistent with the mission of the Church. But if I were to visualize what I would have expected from God's True Church, and his chosen Prophet, it would bear little resemblance to what I see in the Church today.

Polygamy

One final topic for this section is Polygamy. Most people today recognize this as a practice which devalues women, treating them as male property, valuing them primarily for sex and reproduction. In the early days of the Church, Polygamy was considered an essential part of the Church, and a requirement for entry into the highest degree of the Celestial Kingdom. Brigham Young said:

"The only men who become Gods, even the Sons of God, are those who enter into polygamy. Others attain unto a glory and may even be permitted to come into the presence of the Father and the Son; but they cannot reign as kings in glory, because they had blessings offered unto them, and they refused to accept them."

[Journal of Discourses Volume 11, P. 269](#)

In fact, early Church leaders went so far as to condemn monogamy, as shown by this quote from Brigham Young:

"Monogamy, or restrictions by law to one wife, is no part of the economy of heaven among men. Such a system was commenced by the founders of the Roman empire....Rome became the mistress of the world, and introduced this order of monogamy wherever her sway was acknowledged. Thus this monogamic order of marriage, so esteemed by modern Christians as a holy sacrament and divine institution, is nothing but a system established by a set of robbers.... Why do we believe in and practice polygamy? Because the Lord introduced it to his servants in a revelation given to Joseph Smith, and the Lord's servants have always practiced it. 'And is that religion popular in heaven?' it is the only popular religion there,..."

[The Deseret News, August 6, 1862](#)

Joseph Smith married at least 34 women, including 10 teen-agers, the youngest of whom was 14 (he was 37 at the time of that marriage). He also married 11 women who were then already married to other men (called 'Polyandry'). The Church has finally acknowledged these facts in the [Essays](#) I've already referred to.

In the case of that 14 year-old, Helen Mar Kimball, she was promised that if she agreed to Joseph's request for marriage, that her whole family would receive exaltation. She later expressed her thoughts on this subject:

"I would never have been sealed to Joseph had I known it was anything more than ceremony. I was young, and they deceived me, by saying the salvation of our whole family depended on it."

[Mormon Polygamy: A History, by Richard S. Van Wagoner](#), P. 53

This seems to me to be a manipulative practice of the worst kind.

Eventually, the Church was forced to abandon Polygamy, but the scriptural basis for it as a practice, both in this world, and the next, is still very much a part of LDS Theology (see [Doctrine & Covenants 132](#)). And ironically, if you do read that section carefully, you'll see that Joseph actually violated almost all of the stipulations listed there, for how Polygamy was to be practiced, and he would therefore be condemned by it, as a result.

But the Church now consistently tries to distance itself from this practice, which was originally considered an integral part of the Restored Gospel. Consider this quote from Pres. Gordon B. Hinckley, when he was asked about Polygamy by Larry King on TV:

I condemn it, yes, as a practice, because I think it is not doctrinal.

[Interview with Larry King, Sept. 8, 1998](#)

This is disingenuous at best, and overtly deceptive at worst. This reflects the behavior of a Public Relations conscious Corporation, rather than the courageous declaration of a Prophet of God, who would proclaim even unpopular truths.

In this manner, the Church quietly changes its doctrine, and the things it teaches as true and important, while at the same time declaring that the truth never changes. And they expect the members to simply obey everything that they proclaim as God's everlasting, unchangeable truth, despite the fact that these teachings have changed in the past, and most likely will change again in the future.

Summary

My intent here was to approach the Church's claims about itself, its history, and its mission, from several different perspectives, rather than relying on a single dimension. The conclusion seems inescapable: the Church is not what it claims to be, and the claims that it makes are demonstrably false. And while there is a wonderful community of believers at the 'grass roots' level, the actions, attitudes, and behaviors of the Institutional Church are incompatible with what a reasonable person would expect from God's 'true Church.'

The Church has actively discouraged its membership from seeking information from any source but those officially sanctioned and approved by the Church. Those who venture outside those restrictions are generally vilified, and seen as rebellious, wicked, not to be trusted. The epithet 'anti-Mormon' is attached to anything and everything that does not support the official positions and teachings of the Church, and members are strongly urged to avoid anything or anyone that might threaten their Testimony.

This attitude is the complete opposite to the openness to truth expressed by Church leaders like J. Reuben Clark and James E. Talmage, quoted at the very beginning of this document. Consider these more recent statements:

"It is quite another thing to criticize or depreciate a person for the performance of an office to which he or she has been called of God. It does not matter that the criticism is true."
Dallin H. Oaks, "Reading Church History," CES Doctrine and Covenants Symposium, Brigham Young University, 16 Aug. 1985, page 25

"It is my province to teach to the Church what the doctrine is. It is your province to echo what I say or to remain silent."
[Bruce R. McConkie, 1981, in a Letter to Eugene England](#)

"I know that the history of the church is not to seek apologies or to give them," Oaks said in an interview. "We sometimes look back on issues and say, 'Maybe that was counterproductive for what we wish to achieve,' but we look forward and not backward." The church doesn't "seek apologies," he said, "and we don't give them."
Dallin H. Oaks, [Salt Lake City Tribune, Feb. 4, 2015](#)

There is a temptation for the writer or the teacher of Church history to want to tell everything, whether it is worthy or faith promoting or not. Some things that are true are not very useful.
[Boyd K. Packer, CES Symposium, Aug. 22, 1981](#)

I have a hard time with historians because they idolize the truth. The truth is not uplifting; it destroys. I could tell most of the secretaries in the church office building that they are ugly and fat. That would be the truth, but it would hurt and destroy them. Historians should tell only that part of the truth that is inspiring and uplifting.
Boyd K. Packer, Quinn (ed), Faithful History: Essays On Writing Mormon History, p 103, [fn 22](#)

The authoritarian nature of current Church Leadership is demonstrated quite clearly in these quotes. If Church leaders were fully and humbly confident of the truthfulness of their claims, the accuracy of the history they teach the membership, this need for controlling the conversation, for discouraging open inquiry and discussion, would not exist.

The Church recently reduced the ages for Missionary service for both men and women. Whether or not this was the intent, one of the results would be to have these young members, who apparently are leaving the Church in significant numbers, being more fully indoctrinated and committed to the Church during those critical post-adolescent years. This is when most people start the important process of asking serious questions about life, values, purpose, and begin the process of defining for themselves who they are.

In the interest of fairness, the following are links to a few of the 'Apologetic' websites, where active Church members attempt to address the various issues and controversies surrounding the Church, just a few of which I've touched on here.

I have read from these sites extensively, especially at the beginning of my journey. I found them interesting, but not convincing. My biggest dissatisfaction here is that they typically start with their conclusions, find evidence that will support that conclusion, and trivialize or ignore the evidence that doesn't. This is the opposite of the Scientific Method, as I've discussed above.

I have also been dismayed seeing so much energy there being spent attacking the individuals presenting arguments against the Church, rather than dealing with the issues themselves.

[FairMormon](#)

[Mormon Voices](#)

[SHIELDS](#)

[Jeff Lindsday's Website](#)

I also wanted to include links to the Church's recently published Essays on a number of topics. Some of these are difficult to find, and are not directly linked from the main homepages:

[Church Essays](#)

[Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo](#)

While these are not as complete or as thorough as many, myself included, would want, they are at least the first time where the Church has officially acknowledged these problems, with an attempt to respond to them. Before this, many of these issues were just dismissed as 'anti-Mormon lies.'

As I've stated earlier in this document, I fully expect there to be continued changes in both Church Doctrine and Policy, resulting from the pressures created by the ready availability of accurate information which undermines the basis for established Church Doctrine and Policy.

And most likely, these changes will be seen as the result of 'continuing revelation.' I would be more willing to accept this if in fact these changes and revelations expanded upon and clarified previous revelations, doctrine and policy. But instead, they completely contradict those prior 'revelations,' and those prior proclamations are then simply ignored. This completely undermines the validity of the whole process of 'revelation', past or present.

Final Thoughts - Potential Harm

Several years back, I was discussing some of these matters with one of my daughters, and she posed this question to me: Let's just say you're right, and that the Church's claims aren't true. What is the harm in staying in it, and being involved with it? We're happy, we're living good lives. What is the harm?

I think that is an excellent question, but at that time, I wasn't prepared or able to give her an adequate reply. But I've thought a lot about it since then, and want to conclude by providing a better answer to that question.

1. Because members are actively discouraged from critical examination of the Church's claims, effectively creating an independent 'island' of reality, or a mental 'blind spot,' where the regular rules of evidence don't apply, I think this results in harm to a person's thought processes and critical thinking skills.

In turn, I think this can result in a person's being more vulnerable, or gullible, to other claims being made without evidence, which appeal to their emotions or other non-rational mindsets. It can also make a person more likely to distrust scientifically established facts and conclusions, since they are taught not to 'trust in the arm of flesh,' and that the only absolutely reliable indication of truth is their testimonies, their individual, subjective experiences.

This also tends to create a 'magical' world view, where they live in a 'cocoon,' seeing the world as they want it to be, rather than as it really is. It can lead to poor decision making, placing too much importance on subjective emotional states and experiences.

Taken to the extreme, the results can be tragic. The case of the [Lafferty Brothers](#) is especially poignant here. Dan and Ron Lafferty murdered their sister-in-law Brenda Lafferty, and her 15 month old baby Erica, because they trusted the 'revelations' they received, and were convinced that this is what God wanted them to do. The scriptural precedent is right there in the Book of Mormon, where Nephi kills Laban, in cold blood, because he was convinced that this action was commanded by God.

Lastly, the Church effectively treats the members as perpetual children, and makes them dependent on the Church for approval on virtually all aspects of their lives (even down to how many earrings it is 'acceptable' for a woman to wear). They are taught to trust in the Church, and its leaders, even more than trusting their own understanding and insights. N. Eldon Tanner, of the First Presidency confirmed this when he said:

"When the Prophet speaks,...the debate is over.."
[Ensign, August 1979](#)

2. Very real problems are often created in families where one or more individuals don't fit the 'mold' of the traditional Church member. This is especially the case with Gay and Lesbian children (or adults), whose very identities and deepest desires are seen as unacceptable before God, if not overtly evil. The tragedy of so many teen suicides speaks eloquently to this very real danger.

And even if individuals or families adopt a more tolerant and open personal attitude, the Church they support with their money, activity, and devotion, has been actively working to deny these individuals the right to the same relationships that the rest of society enjoys. The Church's

efforts in support of Proposition 8 in California is a powerful case in point. This has to at least create some internal conflict and stress, or 'cognitive dissonance,' which is unhealthy for anyone's well-being.

3. There is a very real, very substantial financial cost to full Church participation. This is especially true for members on the lower side of the income scale, as discussed above. Their financial future and stability are very much jeopardized as a result of this enormous drain on their resources.

4. I am a male, and do not feel comfortable or qualified to effectively address this next area, but because it is so important, and affects so many females, of all ages, I felt I at least need to refer to it. In many ways, women occupy a 'second class' status in the Church, in that any of their actions and decisions are always subject to being approved, or over-ruled by the men who preside in positions of authority over them. When women in the Church are asked about this, they'll very often state that they feel equal to men, and don't see any problem in this regard. But the fact of the matter is that they aren't equal. Equality isn't a matter of 'feeling' equal; it's a matter of being equal.

Many women in the Church may not feel discrimination or inequality, and accept and love their Church-defined primary role as wives and mothers. But even here, circumstances and even biology may prevent these women from fulfilling even these roles, resulting in sadness and discouragement. And some women simply don't feel the same 'call' to be wives and mothers, and find themselves marginalized, and more affected by the limitations created by the Church's narrowly defined gender roles for women.

But it is much better to have this addressed by the women themselves, and for this, please see online forums such as [Feminist Mormon Housewives](#), [Young Mormon Feminists](#), [Ask Mormon Girl](#), [The Exponent](#), and many others.

5. The Church's extreme, over-emphasis on modesty and chastity, ranking infractions here next to murder in terms of seriousness, can make it difficult for women, and men, to incorporate sexuality into their lives and relationships in a healthy manner as they mature. And the Church's prohibition on masturbation, seeing it as a major offense against God, contributes to this distortion of sexual function and identity, causing unnecessary guilt and suffering for many people. Consider these quotes from recent Church Leaders:

"Better dead clean, than alive unclean. Many is the faithful Latter-day Saint parent who has sent a son or daughter on a mission or otherwise out into the world with the direction, 'I would rather have you come back home in a pine box with your virtue than return alive without it' "

- Bruce R. McConkie, Mormon Doctrine, Second Edition, Page 124

"Also far-reaching is the effect of loss of chastity. Once given or taken or stolen it can never be regained. Even in forced contact such as rape or incest, the injured one is greatly outraged. If she has not cooperated and contributed to the foul deed, she is of course in a more favorable position. There is no condemnation where there is absolutely no voluntary participation. It is better to die in defending one's virtue than to live having lost it without a struggle."

Spencer W. Kimball, The Miracle of Forgiveness

So while the Church 'works' in many respects, for many of its members, creating communities, providing a sense of purpose, and opportunities for service, there are clear and present dangers, some more obvious than others, affecting both genders, and all age groups.

And when these dangers are seen in the context of critical examination of the actual claims of the Church, where the evidence is compellingly stacked against the truthfulness of those claims, the need for members to very carefully examine their minds, their hearts, their beliefs, their actions, and their commitments, becomes crucial.

About The Author

On a personal level, my life has been an ongoing search for the Truth. It has been the primary motivational force in my life, along with my love for my family. That search led me into the Church many years ago, and ultimately it led me out. My heart is the same; my desire to 'choose the right' unchanged. As I have grown and hopefully matured in my understanding of myself, and the world around me, it has been extremely important for me to maintain an open mind, and always consider the possibility that I could be wrong.

That same attitude prevails today - I am willing to go wherever credible evidence leads. If evidence comes forward that demands I reconsider any or all of my current positions, so be it. I remain ready to correct any errors in my understanding, and get that much closer to the Truth. This approach has given me an inner sense of peace, a broadening of understanding and perspective, that in fact has deepened considerably during the years since I reluctantly came to the realization that the Church wasn't what I had hoped and prayed for; not what it claimed to be.

I have a brief bio posted on the MormonThink website, for those who are interested:

[Searching for Truth: My Journey Into, and Out of, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#)

I also have a small blog with my thoughts on a number of topics that are important to me:

[The Examined Life](#)

Finally, I can be contacted by email at dlcphoto@gmail.com.

To the readers of this small piece, I wish you all well in your journeys toward Truth.