

PASSIVE AGGRESSION AND THE BELIEVER

K-LYNN PAUL

A Priesthood group of six was contemplating an activity proposed by the group leader. One member objected, but the remaining five supported the proposal so enthusiastically that it was scheduled for the following Saturday. When the day arrived, the objector was the only one to attend. Why do people give lip service to Church principles, practices and programs, but by their actions disavow them? Why do people accept callings or responsibilities in the Church and then make only token attempts to fulfill them—or fail to fulfill them altogether?

Many reasons have been suggested, but to my knowledge one fundamental explanation has been overlooked: "Passive-aggression," a psychiatric term, defined as the use of such means as obstructionism, pouting, procrastination, intentional inefficiency, or stubbornness to reflect the disagreement or hostility one dares not express openly. Often directed toward individuals or institutions upon which a person is over-dependent, it is one of the more widespread phenomena observed by mental health professionals.

Typical examples include the alcoholic, who when angry at boss or spouse does not speak up, but who retaliates indirectly by getting drunk; the wife whose anger at her husband takes the form of indifference; the husband who refuses to discuss mutual problems with his wife; the wife who becomes "sick" the day her husband had planned to go fishing; and the husband who, unhappy with his family relationships, pursues a hobby to their neglect. These passive means really communicate the same message as open active disagreement or conflict. But unlike open disagreement, these methods cannot solve problems because the problems are not brought into the open.

Most well-adjusted people use passive-aggression occasionally, for example, in social settings where one may act "politely" interested, with no intention of following up a suggestion. However, those who use passive-aggression extensively are considered to have a chronically maladaptive and self-defeating "personality disorder."

K-Lynn Paul is a psychiatrist at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Among church members passive-aggression affects such areas as marriage and parent-child relationships as well as member-church and leader-follower relationships. In marriage passive-aggression can be particularly devastating when spouses react against each other rather than discuss and work out differences. When parents treat each other passively-aggressively, their children too learn this method for handling family problems. The tendency may then be passed on from generation to generation.

In the family a small child may dawdle when his parents are in a hurry, keep his room messy when his parents are perfectionistic housecleaners, or "forget" what he is continually told to do. A teenager may patiently listen to his parents, nod in agreement and mumble, "Sure, Dad," and then go out and do exactly the opposite. He may have learned by experience that it is useless to try to communicate or that an attempt will be made to dissuade him from his true feelings. In some families where the policy is to avoid confrontation at all costs, passive-aggression is the only recourse. Individuals with this background often conceive of anger only in terms of top-blowing like a volcanic eruption, and are unaware that anger can be expressed in such useful ways as self-assertion or in the defense of one's rights.

Within the Church, a person may accept a position and then fail to fulfill it, or he may agree to attend a function and then fail to do so—without notifying anyone—often rationalizing his absence by minor medical complaints. Of course failure to attend a function after agreeing to come does not automatically imply passive-aggression. A person can have a legitimate excuse or he may simply be living such a chaotic life, that he does not know from day to day what he will be able to do. But when passive-aggression is present, it can be dealt with directly only when it is recognized by leaders. For example, if a church member states that he feels certain meetings are unnecessary and that his only purpose in attending them is for the "body count," he may be viewed as hostile to the Church. If, however, he says, "I'll be there," and then when questioned later about his absence reports, "I just couldn't make it," the leader may think he needs to be lectured on the importance of the particular meeting. After hearing the lecture he returns to good standing by saying, "I'll try harder next time." But next time may never come. Or he may actually go to the meeting in question but slack off somewhere else.

Why is it necessary to be passive-aggressive if one does not wish to attend some function or hold a certain job? Having heard such axioms as, "One should never turn down a church calling," members in many cases do not feel that they have the option to say, "No." One sister finally accepted a position she did not want as the Friend representative because she was told, "You *have* to have a church job." When she made no effort to sell subscriptions, she was told she would "be happy and get blessings" if she did. Therefore she went through the motions, but passively-aggressively undermined what she was doing with the statement, "I really don't think it's as good as another children's magazine I know of." If members could say no without being considered bad people or without having to carry a burden of guilt, church leaders could honestly work out with each member what is expected of him and what he will do.

Members who have testimonies, but who do not fully accept a specific church policy or procedure, often eventually resort to passive-aggression. The person who speaks out with constructive criticism frequently finds himself lumped in the category of "fault-finder," "backbiter" or "nonbeliever." Some church leaders are prone to view all criticism as a threat. They often appear unable or unwilling to differentiate between the person who offers a constructive criticism in the hope that the Church can better fulfill its purpose, and the chronic complainer who finds fault with everything his Bishop or the Church says or does. When an individual does find his constructive criticism viewed as a threat and hears himself denounced or otherwise put down, he may feel that he has no recourse but to speak only to sympathetic soulmates or to resist passively. The local authority, in his self-perceived role of exhorter and encourager, may view such a person as someone who needs to be "worked with." In cases of true need, however, encouragement helps. But if the person is passively resisting, this response may only solidify his resistance.

A particular problem occurs when a husband or a wife has such a demanding church job that the spouse becomes frustrated because the partner is gone from home so much. He or she cannot speak to the brethren because they were the ones who made the call and are probably so overworked themselves that the complainer would feel guilty. He or she cannot speak directly to the partner as this would not be supporting the calling. At this point some spouses may become unconsciously hostile, with the hostility cropping out in little ways—subtle nagging about unrelated topics, greater irritability with the children or even lack of affection. Others may simply become too frustrated to handle all of the added responsibilities without support from the absent mate.

How prevalent is passive-aggression among church members? While it will vary according to circumstance and locality, some examples may give some idea of the extent to which it pervades the Church. In Sunday School a teacher may ask, "And what happened to Joseph Smith in 1820?" A question like this one may be appropriate for the investigator class or the Junior Sunday School, but not for the regular teenage or adult classes. Does anyone say, "Look, don't ask us such obvious questions"? No, people respond passively with a long period of silence, until someone finally recites the answer so the class can move on. Perhaps courtesy is coupled with passive-aggression in this example. However, in similar classes, youth may sit with glazed eyes, tuning out what is said, or occasionally regurgitating a stock answer—and then go out and live as though the Gospel has no part in their lives.

Home teachers procrastinate to the end of the month in spite of all encouragement to the contrary. Members never quite get to their genealogy. Occasionally a non-member or an inactive husband becomes passive-aggressive. Knowing that, more than anything else, his wife would like to have him active in the Church, he may resist as a passive-aggressive way of getting back at her—perhaps because of some unrelated grievance or problem in the marriage.

In the mission field missionaries used to be instructed to pressure their contacts with such questions as, "Now Mr. Brown, is there any *good* reason

you can't be in Church next Sunday?" Questions were worded so that people could not easily say no. Missionaries found people making appointments for discussions and then leaving home rather than feeling free to state openly that they were not interested in the Gospel. Baptism dates were supposed to be set on the first discussion, regardless of whether it was appropriate for the particular contact involved, with the result that many members were afraid to refer their friends to the missionaries. Missionaries could not disagree with these instructions from above and so either had to follow them or resist passively.

Believing as we do in inspired leaders, it still can be difficult to tell where Gospel principles end and leaders' personal views begin, particularly when the latter are preached from the pulpit. Often I think it is hard for the leaders themselves to distinguish which is which. Leaders are prone to view a disagreement with their personal views as a rebellious attack upon the Church. So members keep their own counsel and do as they think best. Nowhere is this more prevalent than on the subject of birth control. More members practice birth control than publicly advocate it. It is instructive to observe the transition in attitude which occurs in the young couple, first loudly promulgating the view expressed by some authorities, and then moderating their view as they have four, five or six children in as many years. Suddenly the couple stops having children, even though the wife has ten to fifteen reproductive years left!

Just why is passive-aggression a problem to the Church and its members? First, the strength of the organization is sapped when leaders never know when they can count on people to fulfill their responsibilities. The quality of a church function is lowered when a teacher does not appear and some unprepared person must pinch-hit. The enthusiasm of members is sapped when they feel self-expression is futile.

Second, and perhaps even more important, is that the strength of character of individuals within the Church is jeopardized. Passive-aggressive individuals seldom live up to their potential when they are passive-aggressive from their upbringing or when they become that way as a result of conditions within the Church. It is ironic that the very qualities of character which led people out of their former religions into the light of the Gospel—such qualities as willingness to express dissatisfaction, to question authority and refusal to accept doctrines that appear unreasonable—are felt to be suspect if they are manifested in the members. And yet it does seem at times that some would prefer to prevent the probing, analyzing, questioning and discussing that are for many the means to the understanding of Gospel principles.

What are some of the causes of passive-aggression in the Church? Excessive authoritarianism is one. As Joseph Smith recorded, "We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion. Hence many are called, but few are chosen,"—in other words, maintenance of power and influence "by virtue of the priesthood," rather than by "persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned." (D&C 121: 39-41)

A second cause is insecurity. Basically a rigid or authoritarian person under threat or stress becomes even more so. Thus under the "threat" of a member questioning a church policy, an authority may hold the line even more strongly, and feel compelled to refute the member or to set him straight.

A third cause can be attributed to members, not leaders. Many people have a desire for instructions spelled out in precise detail rather than general guidelines. These members try to pressure church leaders into pronouncing "the final word" on every issue—fostering both increased authoritarianism, and its concomitant—passive-aggression.

The fourth cause, mentioned before, is family upbringing. An interrelationship exists between church culture and family rearing practices, with each affecting the other.

What should be done about passive-aggression in the Church? Should it be eliminated? Can it be eliminated? Is it ever justified? There are institutional changes which if undertaken would make passive-aggression unnecessary. And there are individual steps to be taken if the institutional changes are not forthcoming. I feel that the Church can develop an atmosphere where questions can be raised and then—can be left as questions. It should be emphasized in terms that can be understood by all that a person's loyalty and integrity and devotion to the Gospel are not to be doubted solely because he raises a question or expresses a dissenting opinion. As a corollary, members should be permitted to decline acceptance of positions without having to feel that they are "bad" people.

In social science and family relations classes, the principle of passive-aggression needs to be discussed, including the fact that it is as potentially serious as active aggression. Child rearing particularly needs to be discussed since passive-aggressive behavior patterns resulting from upbringing often persist even in situations where they are inappropriate or self-defeating. In a similar vein, the Church, through its programs, could encourage marriage partners to air and work out their differences rather than silently reacting against each other. As a former Bishop of mine said, "If two partners in a marriage always agree on every issue, it's a sign that at least one of them has stopped thinking."

But what should we do if the Church as an institution or our local leadership cannot or will not tolerate more freedom of expression? What if the authorized channel for problems, grievances or suggestions is the problem? When we as individuals feel trapped in such a situation and wonder if dissent is possible, I would recommend the following steps: (1) Examine ourselves and our motives. Do we really disagree with *what* has been stated or just with the *way* it was stated? When someone presents an idea in an offensive manner, let us have the charity to accept the principle for its own merits, perhaps saying, "I agree with what you say, but you say it so dogmatically that I want to turn you off," and thereby also give him valuable feedback. (2) *Try speaking out.* To remain silent would be to prejudice or write off our leaders and our fellow members as unwilling or incapable of listening to us. Even if we think it won't do any good, or that the group has closed minds, let us make the attempt. We may even find allies who had previously kept silent. If what we say is accepted, we have

accomplished our goal. If we are ignored or put down, the responsibility must be on the shoulders of others. (3) Finally, after repeated attempts, if we find that speaking out is futile or that it may result in an unacceptable loss of status or position in the congregation, there is always passive-aggression. .

FURTHER READING

Jerome L. Schulman, *Management of Emotional Disorders in Pediatric Practice* (Chicago, 1967), especially Chapter 2.