

Why do Some Perceive the Church to be a Cult?

Inside and Outside Perceptions versus Reality

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"THE ONLY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MORMONS and MOONIES is about 100 years." This from my car radio as I drove home one afternoon from the office. It was National Public Radio and someone was interviewing two experts on religious cults. The context was the stand-off in Waco, Texas, between cult leader David Koresh and the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. "Here we go again," I thought, "another reference linking Mormonism to cults."

Several years ago I was invited to attend a luncheon sponsored by my company. It was a bring-your-own-lunch affair once a week initiated by a small group of employees who referred to it as the "Christian Fellowship Luncheon." I was told it was non-denominational and that it would be a nice break in the week, so I decided to go to it with the friend who had invited me. The first order of business that day was to go through the calendar and identify who was going to lead what discussions over the next few weeks. The head of the group addressed a fellow sitting next to me saying, "Bob, weren't you going to do something about the Mormons?" "Yes," Bob responded, "I suppose I could do that next week."

I was cautiously elated at the possibility that perhaps beside me sat another Mormon, that perhaps I wasn't the only Mormon in this international corporation after all, and I said to him hopefully, "Are you a Mormon?" He replied, "Oh no, we've been doing a little study of *cults* and I'm doing something on the Mormons." "Oh," I responded, utterly disappointed and insulted—trying hard not to appear utterly disappointed

and insulted. "Well," I said, "I'll surely be interested to hear that. Because, you see, I'm a Mormon, and it's not a cult." Bob's face instantly turned beat red and the leader of the group awkwardly changed the subject. Needless to say, the "Mormon cult" discussion never took place—at least not when I was there.

I had grown up in Utah, and this was my first real encounter with people who considered our church to be a cult. About that same time, I was called to be a Regional Public Communications Director for the Philadelphia Region of the church (which encompasses parts of three states), and as such I have learned all too well that it is by no means rare for the church to be linked with the word "cult," particularly in regions where the church is rather obscure. As I pursued this further, I found that practically every book on the subject of cults refers to Mormonism as a cult to a greater or lesser degree. Furthermore, interest in the subject is consistently high, at least it is in Pennsylvania. At the library I reported to the librarian that not one of the books on my list (from their card catalog) was on the shelf, to which she responded, "Oh, you're researching cults. We can't keep those books in stock—people just check them out and keep them. It's a hot topic." Fortunately, I had a trip to Utah planned where, interestingly enough, the subject of cults did not seem to be so hot a topic, and I was able to find most of the books I needed.

This is a significant issue for the church for the simple reason that people don't like cults, people avoid cults, people actually fear cults. Therefore any perception that the church is a cult carries the high potential of thwarting missionary work, which is no small concern because the first of the church's three-fold mission is to "Proclaim the Gospel."

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND PERCEPTION

Exploring missionary efforts from a different perspective, we find that President Spencer W. Kimball said, "When we have used our qualified [people] to help the apostles to open these new fields of labor . . . when we have used the satellite . . . and all of the media—the papers, magazines, television, radio—all in their greatest power . . . then, and not until then, shall we approach the insistence of our Lord and Master to go unto all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."¹

The "qualified people" who understand how to use the media are generally people in advertising and public relations. And in those fields, the fundamentals of media relations (somewhat overly simplified) are as follows:

1. Spencer W. Kimball, *Proceedings of Regional Representative Seminar* (Salt Lake City, 1974).

- * Identify and analyze what the audience thinks about the product or issue.
- * Determine what we want the audience to think about the product or issue.
- * Assess what messages and strategies will change the audience's thinking in our favor.
- * Execute messages and strategies using creative solutions.

As one might imagine, reality is irrelevant in this exercise. What really matters is perception. And having gone through this exercise repeatedly, I can say that the cult issue is high on the list of problematic perceptions of the church. In fact, in my region it was one of the top three problem areas for the church during my tenure doing regional public relations. (The other two were the perception of obscurity and the perception that the church is not a Christian religion.)

WHAT IS A CULT?

So what is a cult? The answer may be a bit nebulous, depending on the "expert" or lay person you happen to consult. Some of the more radical experts on the subject categorize practically all spiritual experience as cult-ish. Other more conservative cult experts define "cult" in more specific terms. The following is a summation of the more rational and agreed upon descriptors of cults, synthesized from various books and articles on cults²:

1. The existence of a "charismatic" founder or leader to whom members express total allegiance. This leader proclaims doctrine or "Truths" and determines rules for daily life that cannot be questioned. The leader may be considered a messiah or prophet.
2. Individual thought is discouraged. The groups are anti-intellectual. "Knowledge" is redefined as ideas dispensed by the group or its leader. A member is expected to surrender his or her intellect to unquestioned doctrine. (Former cult members report hav-

2. See Willa Appel, *Cults in America: Programmed for Paradise* (New York: Holt Reinhart & Winston, 1983); Robert S. Ellwood, *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1973); Joseph M. Hopkins, "Cult Specialists Assess Non-traditional Religions in the Mid-Eighties," *Christianity Today*, 9 Aug. 1985, 54; Joseph M. Hopkins, "Experts on Traditional Religions Try to Pin Down New Age Movement," *Christianity Today*, 17 May 1985, 68; J. Gordon Melton and Robert L. Moore, *The Cult Experience* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982); Gordon Melton, "Why Cults Flourish," *Whole Earth Review*, Spring 1987, 48; James and Marcia Ruden, *Prison or Paradise? The New Religious Cults* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980); and Steven Strasser and Pamela Abramson, "Why People Join Cults," *Newsweek*, 3 Dec. 1984, 36.

ing gradually become incapable of making even the simplest of decisions on their own.)

3. Many cults regulate much or all of the follower's personal life including diet; use of tobacco, liquor, and drugs; sexual activity and the use of birth control; the choice of marriage partners; and whether, when, and how to bear children.
4. Cults manipulate members through the use of guilt. Any expressions of doubt or dissension are answered with helpings of guilt. (A professor of religion at Temple University, Rabbi Zalman Schacter, maintains that "Any group which equates doubt with guilt is a cult.")
5. Cult members are often isolated from the outside world; they are told that the outside world is evil and satanic and salvation can only come by remaining in the group. In connection with that, he or she is frequently given a new name and/or different or unique clothes and hair styles. And the cult discourages or forbids the follower to have ties with past psychological support systems—family, friends, therapy, etc. The follower is made to believe that all problems can only be solved by the group.
6. Cults claim to possess the one and only truth.
7. They typically believe in an impersonal God, undifferentiated from the universe or creation.
8. Many cults are anti-woman, anti-child, and anti-family. The aim is for all members to be child-like and submissive, so the responsibilities of rearing real children are inconsistent. And family bonds must be subordinated to loyalty to the cult which considers itself as a "higher family."
9. Deceptive recruitment techniques are typical. The potential follower may not be told what he or she is getting into and what will be required.
10. Cult members may live in poverty while leaders live comfortably or in luxury. The followers often work full time for the group with long hours and little or no pay. Some who work outside the group turn their salaries over to the cult.
11. Many have the philosophy that the ends justify the means. And they often feel that they are not subject to civil laws. There is frequently an aura of violence or potential violence.
12. Cults are often shrouded in secrecy and mystery. They keep new members in the dark, promising more knowledge as they become more involved. Some leaders are rarely, if ever, seen.
13. Most are small, often local, and short-lived (they have a significant problem with succession).

A few other extraneous but interesting statements on cults include:

- * Some cult members say "they feel as though they've come home."
- * They generally don't perform ritual ceremony openly, if at all.
- * Science is often joined with traditional religious ideas to give it a more "modern" identity.
- * Cult members are frequently searching for a "spiritual," "mystical," or "ecstatic" experience personally or vicariously through the leader.

Obviously, few, if any, cults measure up to each and every one of these descriptors. And I found it an interesting exercise to explore the extent to which the LDS church might measure up in the eyes of an outsider. Using a scale of 0 to 3 (with 3 being most applicable and 0 being not applicable at all), I made such an assessment of outside perceptions on the chart below. Others would undoubtedly come up with different ratings, based on personal experience with the church, but the ratings below are based on the expected perceptions of people exploring the church from outside the church.

1. Charismatic founder or leader—determines doctrines and rules that cannot be questioned	3
2. Anti-intellectual—individual thought discouraged	3
3. Regulation of the follower's personal life (diet, tobacco, liquor, marriage, children, etc.)	3
4. Manipulation of members through guilt	3
5. Isolated from the outside (evil) world (new names, clothes, hair, etc.)	2
6. Claim to possess the one and only truth	3
7. Characterization of God as impersonal, undifferentiated from the universe	0
8. Anti-woman, anti-child, anti-family	1
9. Deceptive recruitment techniques	0
10. Striking difference in lifestyle between members and leaders	0
11. Ends justify the means, disregard for civil law	1
12. Shrouded in secrecy and mystery	2
13. Small, local, short-lived; problem with succession	2
 Average	 1.8

After finishing this exercise, which rates the church as more cult-like than not, I was struck with the thought that if Jesus were on the earth to-

day, he would probably be considered a cult leader, even though many of these descriptors do not apply to him, just as many do not apply to the church. Further, it is an interesting exercise to measure such groups as Baptists and Catholics against these descriptors, and, though the answers would turn out somewhat differently, the total scores would probably be similar to those for Mormonism. Nevertheless, those other mainstream religions aren't described in the literature as cults—Mormonism is. One reason could be that they have stood a longer test of time, but after contemplating the subject, I am convinced that there is a lot more to this issue than that.

Beyond what the so-called "experts" think, it is even more important to take note of what the *non-expert* public thinks of cults. The LDS church periodically commissions Gallup polls and, from that source, we've learned that the public at large primarily considers cult members to be fanatical followers of a charismatic leader where mindless or blind obedience is expected. (A few secondary characteristics of cults identified in this poll included such things as doctrines that are not based—or not solely based—on the Bible, power over members' money, and not being Christian in nature.) In 1979 approximately 15 percent of respondents considered the Mormon church to be a cult. In 1988 that percentage had grown to approximately 20 percent.

I wanted to learn further how those lay perceptions related to my region, so I conducted my own informal survey. Although the sample was too small to be considered statistically valid, the results were nonetheless enlightening and, for the most part, agreed with the top characteristics of cults identified in the Gallup poll. In my survey I asked the following:

- * What do you think are the primary characteristics of cults?
- * Would you want to be associated with a cult?
- * If so, why? If not (and the answer was always to the negative), what characteristics of cults would you find most troublesome?

The responses to these questions without exception drew words like brainwashing and mind control. The conclusion I derived from those responses was that people were afraid of cults primarily because they were afraid of having someone or something controlling them or restricting their freedom.

What must be remembered at this point is the fact that where public relations is concerned perception is what matters. Neither the reality of the situation nor the viewpoints of "experts" are as critical to the issue of resolving public relations problems as is public perception.

Interestingly, however, when comparing the perceptions of cults from the public point of view with the characteristics of cults from the "expert"

point of view, I find that numbers 1 through 4 on the expert list apply to the issue of control most directly. This is relevant in light of the fact that those four characteristics also happen to be the ones that most apply to the LDS church from the standpoint of outside perceptions. The logical conclusion is that people who perceive the church to be a cult assume that the church engages in mind control and in restricting members' freedoms.

OUR "POSITION" RELATIVE TO THIS PERCEPTION

This is a fascinating perception when contrasted with Mormonism's doctrine of the plan of salvation and with the pivotal role of free agency as set forth by Jesus Christ in the pre-existence. In that light, our perception problem is ironic. There was, of course, a contrasting plan presented by another of God's children, Lucifer—a plan devoid of free agency. How important free agency must be for God to have suffered the loss of a third of his children over the issue.

President David O. McKay wrote, "Next to the bestowal of life itself, the right to direct that life is God's greatest gift to man . . . Freedom of choice is more to be treasured than any possession earth can give."³ Marion D. Hanks said, "God so loved us that he would not shield us from the perils of freedom, from the right and responsibility to choose. So deep is his love and so precious that principle that he, who was conscious of the consequences, required that we choose."⁴ President Spencer W. Kimball said, "I would not, even if I could, force your thinking, for free agency is the basic law of God and each one must assume the responsibility for his own response."⁵ Henry D. Moyle suggested, "Examine any movement that may be brought into our midst . . . and if it . . . attempts to deprive us in the slightest respect of our free agency, we should avoid it as we would avoid immorality or anything else that is vicious."⁶

Of course free agency is pivotal. The purpose of our earthly experience (in addition to gaining a body) is to be tried and tested, to gain experience to learn and grow. We would not inhibit the growth of our children by making all their decisions for them, and neither would God. If we are to become like him we must gain decision-making skill through the choices we make. Elder Neal A. Maxwell described us as being "enclosed in a mortal cocoon or classroom . . . With an understanding of God's plan of salvation, we know that . . . the striving, the suffering, the tutoring, and the enduring experiences of life all play their part in an intelligible

3. David O. McKay, in *Improvement Era*, Feb. 1962, 86.

4. Marion D. Hanks, "Agency and Love," *Conference Report* (Oct. 1983), 21-23.

5. Spencer W. Kimball, "Absolute Truth," *Ensign* 8 (Sept. 1978): 3-8.

6. Henry D. Moyle, in *Conference Report* (Oct. 1947), 46.

process of helping us, if we will, to become as the Savior beckoningly invited, 'Even as I am'." He further emphasizes, "Truly, of all the errors mortals could make, God's plan of salvation is the wrong thing to be wrong about! No error could be more enormous or more everlasting in its consequences!"⁷

THE PERCEPTION PROBLEM PERSISTS

Clearly, the doctrines of the LDS church are 180 degrees away from any pursuit of mind control. Nevertheless, here we are with this perception problem. And unless we decide to go after only that segment of the population with character disorders (people who prefer to avoid the responsibilities associated with freedom), we must recognize this perception of Mormon mind control as a worthy adversary to missionary and public relations efforts. At one time I was having lunch with a colleague who, as an advertising account executive, serviced a Utah ski resort account. He remarked how impressed he was with Temple Square, how impressive the family orientation of the church was, etc. "But, wow," he said, "all that *control* stuff is down right scary." And his remark was not out of character with comments of other colleagues which reflect the same perception of control.

Interestingly enough, in spite of doctrinal evidence to the contrary, this perception of the church is not restricted to those outside the church—there are those inside the church as well who, though they are active in every sense of the word, feel that their free agency is challenged by others in the church.

If, as we have demonstrated, this cult issue does indeed inhibit the primary mission of the church "to proclaim the gospel," then we must further be willing to explore the possibility that something in the church structure (that is the organization and/or the practices of its people) is out of balance with the gospel relative to our doctrine of free agency.

CAUSES AND CURES?

If we were to speculate on factors that could contribute to internal and external perceptions that the church is control-oriented, many would include such things as the emergence of priesthood leadership with its implication of male domination over women. The list might also include such issues as academic freedom at church educational institutions as well as the guidance to avoid "alternative voices" and the disciplining of

7. Neal A. Maxwell, "The Great Plan of the Eternal God," *Conference Report* (Apr. 1984), 27-31.

the “September Six.” But the issue I wish to explore is much less well defined. I would refer to it as “the prescriptive tendencies of the Saints.”

Joseph Smith said that we teach correct principles and the people govern themselves.⁸ And Doctrine and Covenants 58:26 states that “It is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward.” Why, therefore, do so many of us feel duty-bound to prescribe so specifically how we all should live the gospel? And why do so many of us seek to be commanded in all things?

I heard of an excellent high council speech that was entitled “Barnacles of Our Faith.” As the title might suggest, the speaker’s purpose was to identify the core principles of the gospel and to expose a few of the extraneous things that we tend to attach to the gospel. We probably don’t think much about our individual testimonies to sort out which aspects are precious and which are barnacles. And it, frankly, requires an ambitious exercise in free agency to discern where the teaching of principles ends (or should end) and where the governing of self begins. But the larger problem in all this is not so much that our barnacles may inhibit our individual growth, but that we tend to criticize others who may not be following “the program” in the same way that we are. It is human nature to think that one’s own approach to life is the right approach and that others haven’t seen the light yet. In answer to that tendency, J. Reuben Clark said, “We must give up this idea too many of us have, that our way of life and living is not only the best, but often the only true way of life and living in the world, that we know what everybody else in the world should do and how they should do it.”

If God intended us all to be the same, he missed the boat—each individual, indeed each creation, is so strikingly unique that individuality must be highly important to our Father in Heaven. But what of the scriptures that talk about unity and “oneness”? In Doctrine and Covenants 38:27 we read, “If ye are not one, ye are not mine.” Indeed, some interpret “oneness” in that scripture to mean “sameness”—the need to think the same and do the same. But when we explore the context of such scriptures we find that “oneness” has a lot more to do with love and compassionate service and economic security for all and caring for each other. A unified society is one bound together in unconditional love—a love that is inconsistent with judging and the resulting imposition of guilt over “the barnacles of our faith.” So in reality those two interpretations of that scripture are diametrically opposed to each other.

But we are so good at imposing guilt on each other, and we are so

8. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938).

good at accepting and internalizing guilt feelings. I have heard it asked if there is room in the church for the individual anymore. One friend pondered, "Can we each respond differently to the intricacies of life and each still find a place in Heaven?" Indeed many perceive that church practice stifles the free expression of thought and encourages blind obedience. At the very least, it appears that many of us in the church have decided that it is much easier to tell people exactly how to live rather than teach correct principles, as Joseph Smith had proclaimed as part of our creed.

In this respect, we as a people are probably more at fault than most of the general authorities. The "Brethren" rarely make hard and fast rules. They exhort us . . . strongly at times . . . relative to particular issues, but they also exhort us to prayerfully consider the issue relative to our own lives. It is the general church membership that pushes the grey issues associated with the application of gospel principles over into the black and white column. It is, of course, easier that way.

The issue of following the prophet(s) bears further exploration. Since one of the most common characteristics of cults is the existence of an authoritarian leader, the manner in which we follow a prophet is at issue. Certainly, it is not appropriate from a religious or public relations standpoint to defend or apologize for the existence of prophets. But if we insist that everyone "Follow the Prophet(s)" without reference to our individual right and obligation to study it out in our own minds and gain our own individual testimonies of what is said and how it should apply to our individual lives, then, in essence, we are setting the prophet up as a dictator. And we are omitting from public expression the precious principle of free agency—the very thing that sets us apart from the cults of the world. In public relations terms, free agency is our "differentiator."

The scriptures and latter-day writings are clear on this issue. In Thesalonians we are exhorted to "prove [test] *all* things." J. Reuben Clark was quoted as saying that it takes a revelation to know a revelation. Surely we are not naive enough to think that every single word that proceeds forth from the mouth of a prophet comes from a divine source. Consider Paul's message to the Corinthians to the effect that women should not be allowed to speak publicly in church. Consider statements about blacks prior to the revelation granting priesthood to black men. And consider the instances when general authorities seem to contradict each other.

How, then, should we "follow the prophet(s)?" And how should that be reflected in our rhetoric? In accordance with the above, we should follow a prophet in a revelatory way, using individual thought and prayer to discern the truth of the message and how we should apply it in our individual lives. Brigham Young declared, "The Spirit of revelation must be in each and every individual to know the plan of salvation and keep in

the path that leads to God.”⁹ Apostle Richard G. Scott said, “I am conditioned to receive and to interpret divine aid given to mark my path with clarity. No friend, bishop, stake president, or general authority can do this for me. It is my divine right to do it for myself.”¹⁰ That is the kind of rhetoric that will help differentiate us from the cults of the world.

As the ashes started to cool on the cult disaster in Waco, Charlie Gibson, on ABC’s “Good Morning America,” asked a cult expert, “At what point does religious devotion become religious obsession?” When the member “surrenders his or her logical thought processes to others,” came the answer.

During the push for the Equal Rights Amendment many Mormons accepted at face value and with no thought or study the position of the prophet against the amendment. They followed Elaine Cannon’s exhortation, “When the prophet speaks, the debate is over.” Subsequently, when they demonstrated publicly and were asked by the press, “Why are you against the ERA?” they stated in wide-eyed innocence, “Because the prophet told me to be against it.” Now if you’re a news consumer outside the church, what perception does that imply? On the other hand, some people made it a matter of study and prayer, and a few who identified a plausible rationale for that stand were subsequently able to be a more positive emissary of the church.

There may be added benefits to this idea of *following the words of the prophets in a revelatory way*. It could indeed boost the overall spirituality of the church as we do a little less resting on an easy “do-as-you’re-told mentality” and, instead, do a little more flexing of spiritual muscles in struggling to get answers for applying the gospel to our individual circumstances.

One further note: While it may be true that as a people we are more rule-oriented than most of our leaders intend us to be, we certainly could use more encouragement from our leaders to flex our spiritual muscles. Statements about the importance of free agency are not easy to find in the “official church literature.” Those quoted in this essay were mostly buried in articles about obedience to rather black and white commandments. That is not an inappropriate place to talk about free agency—it is certainly true that sins against the more black and white commandments result in the loss of certain freedoms. But I was surprised that I did not find references to free agency in a broader context. Many, if not most of us, are challenged far more with choices that are grey in nature than we are with choices that are black and white. We are daily choosing between the lesser of two evils or the greater of two goods. But we hear little about the

9. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* 9 (1862): 279.

10. Richard G. Scott, “The Plan for Happiness and Exaltation,” *Conference Report* (Oct. 1981), 12-14.

exercise of free agency in this context and receive little encouragement to think for ourselves and to gain personal revelation for dealing with the grey issues in our lives.

In conclusion, I would summarize the issues discussed in this essay as follows:

1. We have a perception problem in that many people perceive the church to be a cult.
2. Most people equate "cult" with mind control, which means that many people believe the church to be associated with mind control.
3. That perception is detrimental to the first component of the three-fold mission of the church—to proclaim the gospel.
4. That perception is inconsistent with our doctrine of free agency.
5. There are conditions that lend credence to both internal and external perceptions of mind control on the part of the church.
6. Assuming that there is credence to the above perceptions, we must also assume that some of our behaviors are inconsistent with our own doctrine of free agency, which is fundamental to the plan of salvation and is the cornerstone of our gospel.
7. It requires far more than window dressings from the church Public Affairs Department to correct these internal and external perception problems.

Let me briefly illustrate that last point with an example from the advertising industry. Several years ago the Ford Corporation had a serious perception problem—that they made cheap cars lacking in any quality. The advertising department mounted an aggressive campaign to change the perception and they adopted the slogan "With Ford the Quality is Job 1." They measured perceptions before, during, and two years after the start of the campaign and, though they had not yet eradicated the perception problem, they found that overall perceptions of the product improved dramatically, as did sales. However, as much as that advertising manager would like to have taken full credit for that result, he had to emphasize that the key to that growing success was the fact that they could validate their claims, that in fact there were broad and sweeping changes in the organization that gradually resulted in the actuality of improved quality, which gave credibility to their claims.

In church public relations we don't usually mount those kinds of advertising campaigns, but we do create opportunities for publicity, at which time we are asked difficult questions about our negative perceptions. Granted, where the cult issue is concerned we have a great story to tell relative to our doctrine of free agency, but insofar as our perceived ac-

tions do not match our words we lack credibility.

And, finally, it is the gospel that is true and relatively unchanging. The church consists of an imperfect organization and imperfect people striving to become perfect—which is to say—striving to come more in line with the gospel. And if free agency is the basic law of God, the cornerstone of God's plan of salvation, then the problem is critical from much more than a public relations standpoint. As Neal Maxwell said, "Truly, of all the errors mortals could make, God's plan of salvation is the wrong thing to be wrong about! No error could be more enormous or more everlasting in its consequences!" I submit, therefore, that the time has come for the church and its people to take a careful look at the issue of control and blind obedience in an effort to come more in line with the gospel principle of free agency.