

Why the True Church Cannot Be Perfect

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In an August 2008 letter to Brigham Young University's student newspaper, a disgruntled student (who believed campus Republicans were deflating his car tires because of his Obama bumper sticker) made this inadvertently revealing statement: "I do realize that although the church itself is perfect, the people in it are definitely not."¹ He was right about the members, of course, but his naïve assumption that the Church is perfect is as illuminating as it is pervasive among Latter-day Saints. It is also fundamentally inaccurate. Indeed, I suspect that this misconception lies at the heart of many of the struggles the Church and its members find themselves facing in our increasingly complex and information-saturated world.

Some members, when confronted with incontrovertible evidence that the Church, its history, and its leaders are not perfect, arrive at an unexpected crisis of faith, and some of them conclude that because the Church is obviously not as perfect as they have perhaps been led to believe, it cannot be true either. On the other side of the ledger, because of the wealth of information available on the internet (some of it accurate and some not), the institutional Church faces increasing challenges in its effort to credibly portray itself and its history in the radiant light it has attempted to establish over the years. Indeed, the institution finds itself having to deal with certain topics and events that it would probably prefer to just sidestep. But, since we are now living in an extended "Mormon moment," this is hardly possible.

The threefold purpose of this essay, then, is to examine the fallacious belief that the true Church must also be perfect, to show that this belief is damaging to Church members and to the

organization itself, and to suggest a more realistic and less stressful understanding of the Lord's work in our day.

The Church as a Living Organism

At the heart of this fallacy may lie nothing more than a superficial understanding of the organization. Now and then, for instance, I hear people make the claim that the Church is perfect because it was revealed by the Lord. What these individuals undoubtedly mean is that the Church is perfect because its basic organizational structure is dictated by revelation, either in canonized scripture or, more recently, through inspiration to the president of the Church.

In one sense, their assertion may be true—the Church is indeed “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone” (Eph. 2:20)—but, in a more practical sense, when we speak of the Church we are not really referring to an organizational chart. The Church is not just a sterile, conceptual structure. Any organization—the Church included—is a living, changing entity, an *organism*, as it were, composed not just of a hierarchical structure, but also of imperfect people, of an evolving culture, and of certain foundational ideas. In the Church, these foundational ideas include doctrines and principles that are constantly being examined, interpreted, and applied by Church leaders and members to ever-changing circumstances. So, if the lifeless institutional structure is the skeleton of the Church, then the living flesh of the organization is its members, with all their warts and blemishes.

Mitch and President Benson

Let me give an example of how human imperfections can produce organizational dysfunction and thus create moral dilemmas for individual members. Many years ago I had a neighbor—let's call him Mitch—who worked as a trauma nurse at LDS Hospital. He was a returned missionary, a husband and father, and an active member of our ward. One of his patients at the time was President Ezra Taft Benson, who had suffered a severe stroke. My memory of the specifics is somewhat cloudy after so many years, but a Church spokesperson had released a statement about President Benson's condition that upset Mitch. The state-

ment must have at least assured the public that President Benson was responding well to treatment and conversing with his wife, because Mitch's response was: "When you've had two massive brain hemorrhages, you're pretty much a vegetable. President Benson doesn't recognize his wife. And he's not talking with anybody." Why, he then asked me, was the Church telling lies? I didn't really have a good answer for him at that time, but I think I could offer one today.

This episode was probably not the only reason for Mitch's eventual decisions—he left both the Church and his family—but it certainly didn't help him any. He apparently never came to understand what I first began to comprehend only after seven years of Church employment. Still, Mitch's question is worth considering. Why *did* the Church release a statement that was not truthful? Somebody, I would guess, failed to grasp the concept introduced above, that the Church doesn't have to be perfect to be true. I can imagine someone reasoning, with that common combination of good intentions and faulty logic, that if the Church is true, then it *has to* be perfect, and in a perfect Church the prophet can't be mentally incapacitated. Not only that, but this person (or perhaps committee) probably assumed that if the truth about President Benson's condition were made public, the public would get the wrong impression. Members who were weak in their faith would certainly lose their testimonies if they found out the prophet was in a vegetative state, because that would mean "continuous revelation through a living prophet" wasn't really continuous.² This concern was actually defused more than a century ago by Elder B. H. Roberts, who explained that revelation is probably more sporadic than continuous.³ The important point, of course, is that it is ongoing.

Unfortunately, this persistent misconception about what it means to have a true church sometimes causes people within the organization to overreact, to feel a great urgency to portray the Church as it is not. This is probably just an overzealous manifestation of seeking to put the Church's best foot forward, but too often it turns into excessive agonizing over the Church's public image and, ironically, acting in ways that inevitably damage that public image.

Two Kinds of People

The Church may be true (meaning that it is legitimate or authorized),⁴ but it is certainly not perfect. Perhaps I'm a little slow. It wasn't until I had worked in the Church Office Building for seven years that I finally began to understand this basic truth and its implications. Then again, maybe I'm not so slow. As I listen to frustrated Church members recount their less-than-satisfactory encounters with Church bureaucracy, and as I read letters, essays, posts, comments, and articles by disaffected Saints in newspapers, magazines, books, blogs, and other forums, I realize that many people struggle with this basic principle—some even to the point of forsaking their affiliation with the Church.

The gap between a true church and a perfect one may fall along any of several fault lines, but regardless of the particular issue that disconnects the ideal from the real, the fact remains that the Church is not perfect. And this bothers two different kinds of people. It bothers the first sort so much that they seek to erase the disconnect by either hiding the truth or hiding from it. As is only fair, however, the true-but-not-perfect sword cuts both ways. People on the other side of the misperception, like Mitch, also fall for this fallacy. A friend who read an earlier version of this essay observed that most of the Latter-day Saints he knows who are “fragile” in their faith are “walking on the thin ice of their overexpectations.” They assume that since the Church claims to be true, it is somehow also claiming to be perfect. And when they learn an uncomfortable truth about Mormon history or when somebody in a position of responsibility makes a particularly egregious mistake, these members of the second group find the resulting cognitive dissonance difficult to deal with. They see the imperfections and the attempts by members of the first group to either whitewash or ignore those flaws, and they see hypocrisy. This bothers them so much that their testimonies suffer and sometimes even die, especially if those testimonies are founded upon a warm, fuzzy feeling or a logical assemblage of intellectual notions rather than a genuine witness from the Spirit. These are the type of people who say, “The Lord would never permit his church to produce a fruit so rotten as the Mountain Meadows Massacre.” Either way you approach it, however, the belief that the true Church also has to be

perfect creates difficulties and inflicts damage on individuals and the organization.

A More Useful Metaphor

A basic principle that, if understood, would help both of the above-mentioned groups is the notion that the Church not only *is not* perfect, but *cannot* be, at least not here, not now in this fallen world. If the Church were perfect, it would fail miserably in its mission, which is, in part, to perfect *us*. In essence, if God were to spell out specifically for his apostles and prophets and stake presidents and bishops and auxiliary leaders every step in the Church's onward march of establishing his kingdom on earth, if he were to dictate every decision and inspire every policy, he would defeat his own purpose. What purpose? To help us become as he is.

As disconcerting as this idea might appear on the surface, both reason and experience suggest that God treats the Church in much the same way he treats each of us. As we strive to learn and grow and follow the Savior, our Heavenly Father intervenes periodically in our lives in ways that maximize our opportunities for growth and service. Sometimes when we pray for guidance, the Spirit gives us quiet promptings and confirmations. At other times, perhaps to steer us away from danger or to change our direction in a dramatic way, he may prompt us (or even set the celestial equivalent of neon signs in our path) without our even asking. But often when we pray for guidance or for knowledge in making decisions, the heavens are perfectly silent. In these perplexing instances, God expects us to use our own intelligence; his revealed word; the counsel of family members, trusted friends, and ordained leaders; the gospel values we've accepted; and our best understanding of the circumstances we're facing to make decisions on our own, and to trust that he will warn us if we go too far astray. And more often than many of us wish, he even allows us to experience the negative consequences of our unwise decisions— so that we will learn wisdom.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks has taught:

What about those times when we seek revelation and do not receive it? We do not always receive inspiration or revelation when we request it. Sometimes we are delayed in the receipt of revelation, and sometimes we are left to our own judgment. We cannot force

spiritual things. It must be so. Our life's purpose to obtain experience and to develop faith would be frustrated if our Heavenly Father directed us in every act, even in every important act. We must make decisions and experience the consequences in order to develop self-reliance and faith.

Even in decisions we think very important, we sometimes receive no answers to our prayers. This does not mean that our prayers have not been heard. It only means that we have prayed about a decision which, for one reason or another, we should make without guidance by revelation.⁵

Someone once quipped, "Good judgment comes from experience; experience comes from bad judgment." Often this is how we learn, as difficult as it seems. God wants us to learn not just to be obedient to specific commands but to "be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of [our] own free will. . . . For the power is in [us], wherein [we] are agents unto [ourselves]" (D&C 58:27–28). He doesn't want us to become robots or computers, automatically following every command in minute detail. He wants us to become gods.

If Heavenly Father wanted to impede us in our progression, he would answer every prayer immediately and specifically, spelling out exactly what we should do in any situation. Likewise, if he wanted to cripple his chosen servants—prophets, apostles, stake presidents, bishops, quorum and auxiliary presidents, home and visiting teachers, and parents—he would tell them exactly what to do every step of the way. If he led them by the hand and never let go, they would remain infants. They would never grow in their ability to make decisions, use good judgment, or exercise initiative. Latter-day Saints love to sing "I Am a Child of God," but many seem to forget that children are supposed to grow into something other than children—adults—and God is unwavering in allowing us the freedom to explore exactly what that means. Indeed, he is so hands-off at times in this process that life's experiences can often become rather perplexing.

It becomes quickly apparent after even a cursory reading of Church history that the Lord wasn't spelling out specifically how the Restoration should unfold. His hand was in the broad strokes, but the finer detail was and is tainted by human inadequacy and error.⁶ Even the Lord's revelations to Joseph Smith were not perfect; they were couched in the prophet's imprecise human lan-

guage: “Behold, I am God and have spoken it; these commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding” (D&C 1:24). The reason Church history is so messy (and sometimes so uncomfortable for those who desperately want a perfect organization and therefore feel compelled to sanitize its past) is that the Lord was more interested in the growth of individual leaders and quorums than He was in having a perfectly logical and orderly unfolding of His kingdom in the latter days. And if some of those leaders and quorums made mistakes and perhaps never learned from them, it is a testimony to the fact that God is serious about our development and our free will.

In a nutshell, then, if the Church were perfect, none of us ever would be. But the Church is not perfect. On the local level, this imperfection is taken for granted. Few people, inside or outside the Church, have any illusions about the fallibility of their fellow ward members or their LDS friends. But on the impersonal, general level—where the Church is presented through carefully screened, scrutinized, and simplified publications or distant, carefully choreographed encounters with revered leaders who are deemed to be perpetually inspired from on high—we sometimes find ourselves believing the unbelievable. We also find ourselves struggling to navigate the complex and idealistic terrain of corporate mission statements and public-image production. If we carefully consider the purpose of the Church, however, we will not be so squeamish about its imperfections.

Maybe we just need to embrace a new metaphor. Perhaps it would be more useful to portray the Church not as a perfectly designed and smoothly functioning machine that sweeps up multitudes of converts and churns out prodigious quantities of laudable good works, but as a laboratory—God’s grand laboratory—where we are allowed to experiment with dangerous substances such as free will, authority, differing perspectives, disagreement, incomplete intelligence, and unrefined personalities. In this new metaphor, the Church is a somewhat-controlled environment where we don our lab coats, roll up our sleeves, and get down to the business of finding solutions to real problems. In our experiments, we are able to apply our minds, hearts, ingenuity, initia-

tive, and faith in creating crude approximations of something truly wonderful. And if we sometimes mix the chemicals wrong and blow up part of the lab, so what? In this metaphor, there is also room, refreshingly, for such realities as humor and irony.

Failure as Part of God's Plan

If the Church were perfect, we would have little opportunity for growth. And, more importantly, we would not have the opportunity to *fail* in any way. In fact, a perfect Church in mortality would be a devilish institution, exactly what many of us assume Lucifer promised in the premortal existence to deliver in this one.⁷ This thought should give us pause, for whenever we feel the urge to portray the Church as perfect, we may end up inadvertently advertising for the adversary.

A unique element in the Mormon view of theology is that failure is an integral part of God's plan—and this theological notion applies to organizations as well as individuals. This insight might allow us, for instance, to give a more comprehensive interpretation to the episode of Church history known as Zion's Camp. (Our current reading of this affair glorifies the silver lining while almost totally dismissing the dark cloud.)⁸ It might also induce us to stop idolizing the handcart migration—a flawed program from poverty-inspired start to abrupt end—with our own romanticized mock treks. Most importantly, acknowledging the honored place of failure in God's plan might allow us to gain a new appreciation for our own personal and inevitable Zion's Camp debacles and handcart disasters.

Just as God does not condemn us individually as long as we are repenting and moving generally in the right direction—even if it seems at times that we are stumbling and bumbling and meandering toward our eventual goal—so he also does not seem to mind if the Church takes a few missteps, adopts ineffective programs and wrongheaded policies, or even tramples a few toes, as long as it is moving overall in the right direction and accomplishing its purpose. Indeed, all evidence suggests that God is a whole lot more liberal with us and with the Church than we are. We tend to be rather judgmental of each other, and some of us are very hard on the Church, even though we expect God to grant us a rather generous allowance for error as we follow the gospel path

ourselves. According to Mormon legend, J. Golden Kimball was once asked whether he stayed on the straight and narrow. “No,” he replied, “but I’ve crossed it many times.” We may laugh at such a candid confession and hope God will permit us the same allowance, but for some reason we don’t imagine he would grant the Church or especially its current leaders such liberty.

Free Will and Progress

As I grow older, I become increasingly convinced that nothing is more sacred to our Heavenly Father than our free will (which Mormons refer to as agency).⁹ In fact, our free will is so sacred to him that only very rarely will he violate it, *even if that means allowing us to violate each other’s free will*. And we do. Regularly. Church leaders, for example, are learning to use authority appropriately in the only way they can—by experience—which explains why Joseph Smith’s observation holds just as true for Mormons as for those who don’t share our convictions: “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, [that] they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion” (D&C 121:39). Even Joseph struggled at times with the competing demands of exercising authority. Indeed, the only way God could possibly prevent us from abusing authority would be to deny us any latitude by prescribing exactly how we are to promote his work. But that would prevent us from learning how to righteously exercise authority. Trial and error is a cluttered and chaotic way to learn things, but sometimes it is the only way.

We understand well enough the difference between the plan God presented to us in the premortal world and Lucifer’s proposed alternative. Even so, many of us seem to wish God would use some of Satan’s methods as he administers the Church in mortality—to make sure it is effective and efficient and, well, perfect. But he will neither coerce nor control us; nor will he prevent most of our mistakes or simply pretend they didn’t happen. He will guide and command and warn and even chastise and forgive, but he is serious about allowing us both the freedom to choose and the opportunity to experience real consequences. The reason for this is that in God’s mind perfection is the end result, *not the process*. It is the destination, not the path leading there.

Still, it is good to note that even with all its imperfections, the Church is nevertheless able to accomplish a great deal of good in the world and fulfill the basic function the Lord requires of it, which includes providing the ordinances of salvation, teaching fundamental gospel truths, offering a sanctuary from the wickedness of the world, and creating local communities within which we can support and love each other along the pathway to individual and collective perfection.

“To Whom Shall We Go?”

After the bread of life sermon, many of Jesus’s disciples were offended and “walked no more with him. Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? . . . Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life” (John 6:66–68). Apparently, even Jesus, who was sinless, was not perfect enough for many of those who had followed him. He taught difficult doctrines and didn’t meet their expectations. Do we then have any right to expect more from his sin-stained servants?

Now and then, when I come face-to-face with imperfections in the Church, inconsistencies in its doctrines, perplexing incidents in its history, or deficiencies in its leaders, I look in vain for a viable alternative and find myself crying out with Peter, “To whom shall [I] go?” As aggravating as I find Church bureaucracy, and as much as I wish our theology were more complete and our history less troubling, I can’t deny that I know things I can’t deny. I have received a witness from the Holy Ghost about Joseph Smith that I simply can’t dodge, discount, or explain away. Without going into detail,¹⁰ I’ll just say that this was much more than a warm feeling in my heart.

And what about all the doctrines that I cherish and believe and sincerely hope are true? How could I forsake these? Yes, polygamy bothers me—not the fact that it *was* practiced, but the *way* it was practiced—and yet if I toss polygamy out, I must also discard the nature of man, the nature of God, and their relationship to each other.¹¹ A theology without the premortal existence, the physical resurrection, the three degrees of glory, and eternal marriage would feel empty and unenticing.

Frankly, there is not another Christian denomination or non-

Christian religion whose God I am even remotely attracted to. Oh, to whom shall I go? I have no choice but to stay with the only Church that has the authority Joseph received from heaven and passed on to others. What this means is that I have to learn to live with imperfections and inconsistencies, and this leaves the door wide open for a handful of paradoxes and ironies.

A Final Word

The foregoing discussion is in no way intended to justify either category of troubled Latter-day Saints in their sometimes extreme reactions to the Church's imperfections. People who see the Church's flaws should neither try to whitewash them nor become so offended that they abandon their covenants. A reasonable middle path is simply to acknowledge the Church's imperfections (and even their necessity) while working constructively to eliminate the most obvious and troublesome ones. Of course, determining just where to draw the line between those imperfections that are unacceptable or harmful and those that are innocuous or even helpful is a difficult question that we will undoubtedly face again and again. But if we face it openly and with faith, we can certainly benefit from the process, both individually and collectively.

Notes

1. "Tire Prank," *Daily Universe*, August 5, 2008, <http://newnewsnet.byu.edu/story.cfm/69136>.

2. It may be argued that revelation is *continuing* and not *continuous*, but the term *continuous revelation* has been used by Church leaders for decades—indeed as recently as President Monson's use of the term in the October 2008 general conference—to describe the Church's relationship with the Lord. Other examples include a 1989 talk by Elder James E. Faust titled "Continuous Revelation," in which he said: "I wish to speak today of a special dimension of the gospel: the necessity for constant communication with God through the process known as divine revelation. . . . This process of continuous revelation comes to the Church very frequently. . . . This continuous revelation will not and cannot be forced by outside pressure from people and events." James E. Faust, "Continuous Revelation," *Ensign* 19, no. 11 (November 1989): 8, 10. President Hinckley also made the following statement: "In other words, we believe in continuous revelation." Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Quorum of the

First Presidency,” *Ensign* 35, no. 12 (December 2005): 48. Although these leaders used the term *continuous revelation*, the context of their usage indicates that they probably meant *continuing*. Elder Faust refers to “constant communication,” but he also states that “continuous revelation comes to the Church very frequently.” If something is continuous, it cannot happen “frequently.” To be continuous, it would need to happen nonstop, day and night, 24/7, 365 days a year. The dictionary definition of *continuous* is “marked by uninterrupted extension in space, time, or sequence.” “Ongoing” is probably a more accurate description of the Lord’s communication to his agents on earth.

3. Elder Roberts very candidly discussed the limited nature of God’s direct involvement in day-to-day Church governance in an *Improvement Era* article at the time of the Reed Smoot Senate hearings—when questions were being raised about the autonomy of Church leaders. Wrote Roberts:

“There is nothing in the doctrines of the Church which makes it necessary to believe that [men are constantly under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit], even . . . men who are high officials of the Church. When we consider the imperfections of men, their passions and prejudices, that mar the Spirit of God in them, happy is the man who can *occasionally* ascend to the spiritual heights of inspiration and commune with God! . . .

“We should recognize the fact that we do many things by our own uninspired intelligence for the issues of which we are ourselves responsible. . . . He will help men at need, but I think it improper to assign every word and every act of a man to an inspiration from the Lord. Were that the case, we would have to acknowledge ourselves as being wholly taken possession of by the Lord, being neither permitted to go to the right nor the left only as he guided us. There could then be no error made, nor blunder in judgment; free agency would be taken away, and the development of human intelligence prevented. Hence, I think it a reasonable conclusion to say that *constant, never-varying inspiration is not a factor in the administration of the affairs of the Church*; not even good men, though they be prophets or other high officials of the Church, are at all times and in all things inspired of God. It is only occasionally, and at need, that God comes to their aid.” B. H. Roberts, “Relation of Inspiration and Revelation to Church Government,” *Improvement Era* 8 (March 1905): 362, emphasis added.

4. An organization cannot be “true” in the same sense that a principle, a doctrine, or a fact can be true, meaning “conformable to an essential reality.” Thus, when we speak of the restored gospel being true, we mean something very different from what we mean when we say the Church is true. If we use the scriptural definition of truth—“knowledge

of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come” (D&C 93:24)—then every church is “true,” in other words, it is as it is. So when we speak of the organization being true, we mean that it is legitimate, that it is authorized by the Lord. This is a different but equally acceptable meaning of the word *true*.

5. Dallin H. Oaks, “Revelation,” devotional address given at Brigham Young University on September 29, 1981, <http://speeches.byu.edu/reader/reader.php?id=6846&x=65&y=7>.

6. I suspect the finer details are also quite often enhanced and blessed by the ingenuity and genuine goodness of human agency also, but that is a topic for another day.

7. Personally, I don’t agree with the belief that Lucifer’s plan was to coerce us to do good and to keep the commandments. I prefer the idea that has been addressed thoroughly of late that the devil was really proposing to simply save us in our sins. Either way, though, Lucifer’s church would have been perfect—either by force or by twisted definition, sort of like the former Soviet Union, where there was no pollution because the government declared that there was no pollution.

8. At present, we tend to emphasize that the purpose of Zion’s Camp was to train up the future leaders of the Church. But this was not at all the purpose of that long march. The Lord’s purpose is stated very clearly in the D&C. “I will give unto you a revelation and commandment, that you may know how to act in the discharge of your duties concerning the salvation and redemption of your brethren, who have been scattered on the land of Zion. . . . Behold they [my people] shall . . . begin to prevail against mine enemies from this very hour. . . . Behold, . . . the redemption of Zion must needs come by power. . . . And my presence shall be with you even in avenging me of mine enemies, unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me” (D&C 103:1, 6, 15, 26). They went to Missouri to restore the Saints to their lands. But in terms of fulfilling the Lord’s initial purpose, Zion’s Camp was a total failure. In D&C 105, the Lord rescinded the commandment to “fight the battles of Zion” (v. 14). Because of “the transgressions of my people,” he explained, “it is expedient in me that mine elders should wait a little season for the redemption of Zion” (v. 9). In other words, the elders of the Church failed in this venture because of personal disobedience.

9. See Robert D. Hales, “Agency: Essential to the Plan of Life,” *Ensign* 40, no. 11 (November 2010): 24–27; <http://lds.org/ensign/2010/11/agency-essential-to-the-plan-of-life?lang=eng>. To most English speakers, *agency* means simply the capacity or obligation to represent another person, to act on another’s behalf. This common meaning of the term appears in D&C 58:27–28: “For the power is in them, wherein they are

agents unto themselves.” When we have freedom to choose, we are not agents unto someone else, obligated to carry out that person’s will, but are agents unto ourselves, free to carry out our own wishes. *Free agency*, a term that has fallen out of favor in the Church, probably brings to most people’s minds the idea that a professional athlete can jump from one team to another when his contract expires. To avoid the confusion these terms can cause, I have used the term *free will* in this essay.

10. For that detail, see Roger Terry, “Frau Ruster and the Cure for Cognitive Dissonance,” *Dialogue* 40, no. 3 (2007): 201, <http://dialoguejournal.metapress.com/app/home/contribution.asp?referrer=parent&backto=issue,13,13;journal,15,33;linkingpublicationresults,1:113395,1>, or (perhaps unauthorized) at <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Frau-Ruster.html?b=1&showAll=1>.

11. I have a complicated relationship with polygamy. While I find it unappealing personally, I realize I would not be here without it, being the descendant of a second wife on each side of my family history.