

# I'M NOT A MORMON, AND NEITHER ARE YOU

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When I was a child, Grandma Holt would slap my mouth when I called myself a “Mormon.” Her post-pioneer youth in Alpine, Utah, was haunted by stories of what the word meant in the mouths of persecutors of the Church who first called us “Mormonites” and then “Mormons.” She told me I was not “a Mormon but a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” and I was to tell anyone who said otherwise.

It wasn't long after her instruction that a kid in the fifth grade at Garvanza Elementary School in Highland Park, California, asked, “You're a Mormon, right?” He wasn't being confrontational, just inquisitive. But I defensively replied as instructed, “No! I'm a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints!” To which he asked, “What's the difference?”

I was stumped.

And I would be further confused in 1956 when open-house tours of the Los Angeles Temple ended, the temple was dedicated, and word went around California that if you weren't a Mormon, you wouldn't be allowed into a Mormon Church.

To counter the confusion between temples and chapels, the Church put up billboards around the metroplex advertising, “You're always welcome in a Mormon Church.”

Grandma never got over it.

But over time, the term was gentrified and accepted throughout the Church. In 1945, the year I was born, Elder J. Reuben Clark (then a member of the First Presidency) insisted the US government—which had used the choir for an inspirational war message—identify the Choir as the “Mormon Tabernacle Choir,” a name that stuck for nearly three quarters of a century.

But no more.

Goodbye to the pleasant alliteration of “Mormon Missionaries,” the self-satisfaction of being a “Mormon boy.” While it once seemed a sensible abbreviation of who we know we are—“Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints”—President Nelson has had the equivalency of a revelation instructing us that for the past more than half century the prophets and apostles have permitted us to devalue the importance of Christ by permitting the omission of Christ’s name from the name of Christ’s church. We are not Mormons, this is not the Mormon Church, and the argument that has arisen, President Nelson says, is not about “branding” but obeisance.

Which raises a question perhaps as important as the argument over branding Mormonism is unexpected: Is it possible to follow the prophet while at the same time doubting that he knows much about branding? And to wonder whether this is the best use of that lighted pen with which he jots down the revelations he receives late into the night?

Two influences have governed the popularity of the moniker “Mormon” in the past:

1. Although there was the occasional kerfuffle by descendants of the pioneers (Grandma Holt) who knew the persecution once associated with the word “Mormon,” utility more than history insisted on the persistence of the once objectionable name.
2. A sensible fundamental of branding is that the brand is an agreement between the company (the Mormon Church) and the customer (us, the media, and everybody who has put the word “Mormon” between tongue and teeth). The company may insist all it wants on what it wants, but ultimately and whoever owns the brand, the *branding* does not belong to the company, whether the product be a patent remedy or a religion.

Vaseline was intended by its inventor to be an ingestible elixir long before it settled down to being an ointment (except in India, where it still is used as a bread spread). And although its inventor ingested two tablespoons a day, and although he lived to be more than a hundred, no one who is not a brand fanatic eats any of it today. Similarly, Dr. Pepper was a tonic, only to be trivialized by its customers to a recreational beverage. Stamp their feet and wave their arms though they may, companies are incapable of defeating popular initiatives.

Except for companies run by Prophets. But even with churches, practicality occasionally insists. How effective would California billboards have been had they advertised,

“You’re always welcome  
in one of the chapels of  
the Church of Jesus Christ  
of Latter-day Saints.”

(Imagine the T-shirt.)

Were it not for debate being short-circuited by heavenly mandate, history, and the brand awareness of a living prophet, one may have inquired of prophets Smith or Nelson: “Doesn’t that seem a tad long for the internet?”

We are not what people call us, nor even what we call ourselves. We are what we believe, what we do (often in spite of what we believe), and what Mormons have ever been: our history, our culture, our practice. Our name—whoever’s name is inside it—is more utility than purpose. And, with so many other churches believing they also belong to Jesus Christ, not even unique.

But what about reverence for the God upon whose sacrifice the church is founded? There is an argument to be made that reverence is more evidenced by *not* using the name of deity, as is the case for Orthodox Jews who believe that either to speak the name of God or to make an image of God is a desecration. (Although even Judaism can suffer from brand deafness: As a child, my wife attended the “The Joseph Eisner Camp Institute for Living Judaism,” a name she relishes repeating today with a tone short on reverence.

President Nelson may protest that those of us who protest are not protesting a brand but a revelation . . . which may be . . . *in addition to protesting the rebranding of a brand*. Either it’s branding on which the Prophet is insisting, or it is branding upon which Jesus once insisted. And either way, it takes a lot of thinking to figure out the magic hidden in what appears to be so catastrophic a branding blunder as so long a name, no matter whose name is in it. Especially given the new requirements of the digiverse, which are increasingly more present and insistent than those of God’s universe.

But in spite of this most recent slapping of my mouth for calling myself a Mormon (and this time the slap is by a prophet!) I have a more private and personal concern. I believe myself to be a Mormon. Still. But many in my family would argue I am a “Jack Mormon,” a pejorative originally associated with gentile friends of the Mormons, but the target having migrated to describe those of us who are Mormons of some sort but do not replicate the actions or opinions of the Mormons who call us “Jack.”

I understand that President Nelson has made us no longer Mormons, but what about us Jack Mormons? What am I?

My wife answers, “What you’ve always been: a sinner.”

Precisely. And that, I believe, is the fundamental issue of character and behavior and belief with which not only my wife but my Prophet should be more concerned.

Instead, the Prophet tells us:

My dear brothers and sisters, I promise you that if we will do our best to restore the correct name of the Lord’s Church, He whose Church this is will pour down His power and blessings upon the heads of the Latter-day Saints,<sup>17</sup> the likes of which we have never seen.<sup>1</sup>

This abstract promise to *open the windows of heaven* is what got us paying tithing, so it’s no surprise President Nelson should use it to jack up enthusiasm for abandoning the name my grandmother tried until her dying day to get me to abandon.

And there you have it. As little as I liked being a Jack Mormon, and as little as Grandma Holt liked me being a Mormon, they were identities I understood and had made peace with being called.

But now we’re told that *hearing* without protest the name “Mormon”—a name previous prophets robbed of its persecutory power by making it our own—is a betrayal, that every time someone calls us by it is not merely a convenience or an ignorance but an *opportunity for crusade*; a crusade that if we do not make it, we risk having “failed to *defend* the Savior Himself.”

I know that a “false equivalency” is subjectively equated, that recognizing one depends on one’s values as much as one’s education. And

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1. Russell M. Nelson, “The Correct Name of the Church,” Oct. 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2018/10/the-correct-name-of-the-church?lang=eng>.

finding an example that is universally received can be challenging. Which is why I recommend the false equivalency provided above. Calling oneself a Mormon may or may not deserve a mouth slap. But it certainly is not equivalent to being a traitor to the cause of Mormonism or to “crucifying anew” our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

So, I’m ready to admit I don’t like any of the new brands so well as I liked the old ones, and I believe the new ones more likely to be a betrayal of our history, our culture, and our once-healthy sense of irony. Nor will promising to bless me more than tithing blesses me get me to pay one decimal point more than I do.

But I have friends more principled than I am who say they simply wish the Prophet would come up with more important revelations than the “Block Plan” and rebranding us from “Mormons” to “Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Sainters.” While I have admitted to sharing their agitation, I must also admit to being less agitated today than when President Nelson’s attitude was maturing from his earliest pronouncement that the Lord “impressed upon my mind the importance of the name,” to the dictum that “It is a command of the Lord.”

My more principled friends again express the desire that President Nelson would have revelations affecting *persons* more than *style guides*. (A more specific and generous policy regarding LGBTQX would be a good place to begin, they say. That, and making Trump supporters ineligible to attend the Temple.) But President Nelson insists (by increasingly dramatic rhetoric and accusation) that this present revelation is more important than either names or style guides.

Perhaps. And perhaps it’s because I’m old that my expectations are more easily fulfilled than by being worried more than I already have been by Grandma Holt and President Nelson. All I know is that I recently attended Sacrament Service with my daughter, and that we no sooner had sat and sang and had the sacrament passed than . . . *it was time to go*. I turned to her and whispered, “If for no other reason than shorter Sunday meetings—and by whatever name anyone brands the change—I support President Nelson as our Prophet!”