

WHEN PROPHECY FAILS

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A good friend walked into my office in November 2015 and slumped into the chair opposite mine, utterly distraught. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had just updated its leadership handbook to define same-sex marriage as “apostasy” and to restrict children living with same-sex parents from receiving Church ordinances, including baby blessings and baptisms.¹

I had never seen my friend like this. He was (and is) a lifelong, committed Church member; at the time he was serving on the stake high council. An ardent consumer of Mormon studies scholarship, he was well aware of the twists and turns of LDS history, including challenging issues such as polygamy, patriarchy, and the race-based priesthood/temple ban. He had found a modicum of peace, if not necessarily resolution and full clarity, with the history. But this was different. With his head in his hands, he told me in a blend of sadness and anger, “This is the first time in my life I believe that Church leaders are wrong.”

For him, this was about family. His brother had a grandchild who was scheduled to be baptized that very weekend, but the baptism was canceled because the child lived with her gay parents. Ten years later, despite the Church’s reversal of its policy in early 2019, she still hasn’t been baptized.

Though others were sent out to offer explanations immediately after the policy change became public, Russell M. Nelson, then serving as president of the Quorum of the Twelve, later provided its most full-throated defense. In a January 2016 worldwide address to young adults,

1. Aaron Shill, “LDS Church Reaffirms Doctrine of Marriage, Updates Policies on Families in Same-Sex Marriages,” *Deseret News*, Nov. 5, 2015.

Nelson described the “prophetic process” behind the policy. He said that in the wake of same-sex marriage’s legalization in various countries around the world (including the United States in June 2015), senior Church leaders “met repeatedly in the temple in fasting and prayer and sought further direction and inspiration.” Finally, “the Lord inspired His prophet, President Thomas S. Monson, to declare the mind of the Lord and the will of the Lord” on the subject. Nelson testified that it was a “sacred moment” when he and others felt “spiritual confirmation.” To him, it was a “privilege . . . to sustain what had been revealed” to the Lord’s prophet.²

Three and a half years later, Nelson was back at the pulpit, now as president of the Church. In a September 2019 address given at Brigham Young University, Nelson once again provided the fullest public description of the Church leadership’s decision-making process. This time, however, it was to explain how and why a few months earlier they had reversed the 2015 policy.³ He reiterated that the original policy was “one we discussed at length and prayed about fervently over a long period of time.” He did not mention President Monson receiving revelation or the rest of the leaders feeling special spiritual confirmation. This account made it sound like the 2015 policy came about like most policies do, as the result of well-meaning leaders carefully deliberating about a complex topic and coming up with their best solution. Less Moses on Sinai and more ward council.

President Nelson went on to say that in the months following November 2015, Church leaders learned that “this policy created concern and confusion for some and heartache for others,” including

2. Russell M. Nelson, “Becoming True Millennials,” *Worldwide Devotional for Young Adults*, Jan. 10, 2016, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/article/worldwide-devotionals/2016/01/becoming-true-millennials?lang=eng>.

3. Peggy Fletcher Stack, “LDS Church Dumps Its Controversial LGBTQ Policy, Cites ‘Continuing Revelation’ from God,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Apr. 4, 2019.

for people like my friend. “That grieved us. Whenever the sons and daughters of God weep—for whatever reasons—we weep. So, our supplications to the Lord continued.” After a time, Nelson said, they “felt directed to adjust the policy.” He insisted that “though it may not have looked this way to some, the 2015 and 2019 policy adjustments on this matter were both motivated by love—the love of our Heavenly Father for His children and the love of the Brethren for those whom we serve.”⁴

I think this is one of the most remarkable and perhaps underappreciated statements made by a modern Church president. Two things stand out to me. First, despite many talks over many years instructing members not to send their questions and complaints to General Authorities, it seems clear that General Authorities were flooded with questions and complaints in the wake of the November 2015 policy. There was the obvious theological problem of why children were being punished for the “apostasy” of their parents, seemingly a clear violation of the principle taught in the Church’s second article of faith.⁵ More searing, apparently, was the human toll of unbaptized children and upset parents and grandparents (and aunts and uncles and cousins and friends). The line drawn in the sand went straight through families, which didn’t sit right in a family-focused church.

President Nelson didn’t offer specifics about whose concern, confusion, and heartache caused Church leaders to reverse the policy they had implemented only forty-one months earlier. Whose weeping is seen and heard? Whose tears send Church leaders to their knees? Was it the pain and suffering of LGBTQ members who once again felt shunned and vilified? Or the grief and indignance of orthodox, straight, well-connected grandparents who were denied the opportunity to see their grandchildren blessed and baptized?

4. Russell M. Nelson, “The Love and Laws of God,” speech at Brigham Young University, Sept. 17, 2019, Church Newsroom, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/president-nelson-byu-transcript-september-2019>.

5. Articles of Faith 1:2.

President Nelson's remarks were notable for a second reason. At least rhetorically, sometime between January 2016 and September 2019, "the mind of the Lord and the will of the Lord" morphed into a mere "policy adjustment."

Policy changes happen all the time in the LDS Church, just like in any dynamic organization. In February 2025, for instance, the Church made nearly thirty updates to its *General Handbook*.⁶ Knowing a little about how things work in Church headquarters, I'm confident those changes were the result of rigorous research, thoughtful reflection, extensive deliberation, and prayerful discussion held during many meetings over a span of months, perhaps years. Although these policy adjustments will guide the work of general and local Church leaders around the world, none of the changes were justified with the claim that they came by way of "the mind of the Lord and the will of the Lord." Inspiration in a general sense? Sure. Direct, specific revelation from the God of heaven and earth? Maybe not so much.

It's significant, then, that the prophet and president of the Church subtly muted his claim that the November 2015 policy came by revelation. To be clear, nothing in President Nelson's September 2019 address explicitly denies or reverses what he said in January 2016. It may be that his own personal understanding of what happened in that room of leaders in 2015 didn't change at all. Nevertheless, his public characterization of the event did change. Even in a church that believes in ongoing revelation, it would be theologically problematic to say that the mind and will of the Lord had changed so dramatically in less than four years. Fortunately, President Nelson said no such thing. Instead, prophecy became rebranded as policy.

As we saw over the course of his dynamic presidency, Russell M. Nelson was supremely confident that God really did speak to him, to other leaders of the Church, and to ordinary Church members.

6. "Summary of Recent Updates," *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Feb. 2025, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/summary-of-recent-updates?lang=eng>.

Seeking, receiving, and trusting revelation was a major theme of President Nelson's teaching. So why retreat from his earlier claim, even if only rhetorically?

This is hypothetical and provisional; I'm open to other, better explanations. But perhaps the rhetorical shift came as a way of coping with the realization that in this particular case, prophecy had failed.

When Prophecy Fails is the title of a classic social psychology book published in 1956. Written by Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, it told the story of a small group in Chicago that believed in the prophecies of a woman named Dorothy Martin. She claimed to receive messages from extraterrestrial aliens about apocalyptic floods that would soon engulf much of the globe and annihilate those who were not rescued by flying saucers. When the predicted date for the cataclysm came and went, members of the group were forced to make sense of the cognitive dissonance between their sincerely held beliefs and actual events (or in this case, non-events). Drawing on this and several case studies from Christian history in which prophesied events did not come to pass, the authors showed that failed prophecy does not always lead to the collapse of a religious movement. In fact, believers often go the opposite direction, increasing their personal commitment to and evangelization for their faith. Unable to simply ignore the failed prophecy, the faithful come up with a variety of ways to rationalize it and fit it into their newly adjusted beliefs.⁷

Does the November 2015 policy fit in the category of failed prophecy? That depends on (a) whether it was a prophecy and (b) whether it failed.

7. Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World* (University of Minnesota Press, 1956). *When Prophecy Fails* has been critiqued for its methodology, but its hypotheses about cognitive dissonance and how religious groups deal with the failure of prophecy remain a touchpoint for other scholars. See, for instance, Lorne L. Dawson, "When Prophecy Fails and Faith Persists: A Theoretical Overview," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 3, no. 1 (1999): 60–82.

Was it prophecy? The policy did not claim to predict future events, which is what most people think of when they hear the term. In Latter-day Saint theology, however, prophecy is considered less a matter of “foretelling” than “forthtelling.”⁸ President Nelson’s comments in January 2016 clearly indicated his belief (which he wanted those in his audience to adopt) that the policy was an authoritative pronouncement that came directly from God through His prophetic mouthpiece. From this perspective, the policy flowed from genuine prophetic utterance, thus making it a form of prophecy.

Did it fail? By almost any measure, the answer has to be yes. It was a *theological* failure, immediately and robustly criticized by many for going against the Church’s own teachings about personal agency and the non-transferability of moral culpability from one person to another. It was an *organizational* failure. President Dallin H. Oaks acknowledged that the original policy did not deliver on the Church’s broader goals to reduce hate and contention and increase love, goodwill, and understanding. By affirming that the Church’s positions on homosexuality and same-sex marriage did not change with the policy reversal in 2019, the First Presidency implicitly signaled that the 2015 policy was an unnecessary and failed attempt to protect those core teachings.⁹ It was a *public relations* failure, undermining much of the goodwill that the Church had earned through its open support of the “Utah Compromise,” a widely praised series of legislative actions in early 2015 that guaranteed both religious freedom and LGBTQ rights in housing and employment.¹⁰

Most importantly, the 2015 policy failed on a *human* level. President Nelson explicitly admitted that it had caused enormous confusion, pain, and heartbreak. The policy hurt individuals and families. It

8. “Prophet,” Bible Dictionary, accessed Oct. 7, 2025, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/bd/prophet?lang=eng>.

9. Stack, “LDS Church Dumps.”

10. Laurie Goodstein, “Utah Passes Antidiscrimination Bill Backed by Mormon Leaders,” *New York Times*, Mar. 12, 2015.

barred innocent children from receiving the spiritual power associated with priesthood ordinances. It weakened many people's faith and compounded the challenges that many felt in staying with the Church in a decade already awash in faith crisis and religious disaffiliation. It signaled to LGBTQ children of God—along with many of their family members, friends, and allies—that even if they wanted this church to be their spiritual home, it would continue to be a place of profound discomfort and sometimes outright rejection.

Failed prophecy is not a death knell for faith. Individuals and movements can move on. They can be creative not just in rationalizing away the failure of prophecy but in making meaning of it. Christians believe that even in the midst of failure there is always the possibility of redemption. If anything, the occasional failed prophecy—especially when it comes to a religion replete with otherwise successful and salvific teachings—serves as a helpful reminder that prophets are not God and the Church is not heaven.

In 2019 the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints learned. It got better—at the very least, it went back to not being worse. But for forty-one months, Church policy did unnecessary harm. Those scars still remain. Some wounds are visible, while others remain unseen and with the underlying pain unvoiced. The work of reversal was relatively simple, if rare for an organization that doesn't like to do U-turns. The real work—the work of healing and reconciliation after harm has been done—is far harder and longer. Much of that work still remains to be done.

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