

COVENANT CONFLICT
AN ANALYSIS OF HOW THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS IS
WORKING TOWARDS A PEACEFUL SOCIETY

A thesis submitted to the
Theological School
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in Religion

Advisors: Jonathan Golden, Melanie Johnson-Debaufre

Abigail Eve Harper
Drew University
Madison, New Jersey
April 2026

ABSTRACT

COVENANT CONFLICT

AN ANALYSIS OF HOW THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS IS WORKING TOWARDS A PEACEFUL SOCIETY

Abigail Eve Harper

This thesis analyzes the teachings, theology, and practices of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) through the inverted lens of Johan Galtung's theory of the violence triangle. Galtung theorized that violence occurs in direct forms, structural forms, and cultural forms. He speculated about an inverse being true, where peace exists in direct, structural, and cultural forms as well. This thesis looks at the ways the LDS church's culture, actions, and structure are peaceful and in what ways they are not. The overarching principle within the LDS church that lends itself towards building peace is that it's theology, teachings, and practices invert the idea of what power is. Where power is most often understood as control, which is an inherently violent assumption, power in LDS theology is the choice to have love unfeigned for all, which gives it a foundation of peace. Starting on such a foundation has given the LDS church the foresight and the direction to build up a peaceful culture, actions, and structure. However, because humans are neither innately good nor evil but a combination, so too is the LDS church. While it strives for peace, some of its teachings and practices can be and have been warped to justify the use of violent power. This analysis breaks down the subtleties between the peaceful and violent happenings in the LDS church.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

0.1 Violence, Peace, & Triangles	5
0.2 Thesis	8
0.3 Power	9
0.4 Zion: A Society of Peace	19

PART ONE: CULTURAL: ONE HEART AND ONE MIND

1.1 Covenant Living	28
1.2 And its near enemy	34

PART TWO: DIRECT: DWELL IN RIGHTEOUSNESS

2.1 What sin is	41
2.2 The don'ts	45
2.3 The do's	45
2.4 Sin's near enemy	48

PART THREE: STRUCTURAL: THERE WAS NO POOR AMONG THEM

3.1 The law of consecration	51
3.2 Routinization as consecration's near enemy	57

CONCLUSION: AND THE LORD CALLED HIS PEOPLE ZION

4.1 The power struggle	66
4.2 Puzzle pieces	69
4.3 Conclusion	72

Bibliography	74
---------------------	----

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Jesse Mann, who taught me how to write a thesis and gave me feedback through the whole process. Thank you to Jonathan Golden, for being an incredible example of a peacebuilder and encouraging me to find my way there as well. Thank you to Melanie Johnson-Debaufre for reading the thesis and giving me critical feedback.

Thank you to Chad Ford, whose mentorship and teachings inspired this project. Thank you to Patrick Mason and David Pulsipher for paving the way forward in the LDS peace research field.

Thank you to Jennifer Harper, my mother. None of this could have been possible without her. Thank you to my father, Steven Harper, who has been helping me with my papers since kindergarten and spared no expense to help me with this one. Thank you most to my husband, Wyatt Hunter, for being part of every step of this journey. I would not have made it through without him.

INTRODUCTION

“A major task of peace research, and the peace movement in general, is the never-ending search for a peace culture –problematic, because of the temptation to institutionalize that culture, making it obligatory with the hope of internalizing it everywhere. And that would already be direct violence, imposing a culture.”¹

–Johan Galtung

0.1 Violence, Peace, & Triangles

In 1969 Johan Galtung published a paper that introduced the concept of structural violence to the field of peace research. He defines violence as any influence that keeps human beings from their fullest bodily or mental potential; the most extreme form of this being killing.² He then breaks down violence into two categories: direct and structural. Direct violence is when an actor commits violence whereas structural violence has no actor. It is caused indirectly by a system that is already set in place.³

Twenty-one years later, in 1990, Galtung published a follow up to this work, introducing the concept of cultural violence. Cultural violence is what makes direct and structural violence look, and sometimes feel, right—or at the very least not wrong.⁴ Culture is what we are so surrounded by we do not even realize it is there, until we are in a different one. Using the Atlantic Slave Trade as an example, the capturing, whipping, murdering and movement of African peoples were forms of direct violence. The laws and economies that allowed and benefitted from the enslavement of black peoples was structural violence. Beliefs, whether they were secular ones based on evolution or religious ones about the curse of Cain or Ham, about the

¹ Johan Galtung., "Cultural Violence." *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (1990): 291.

² Johan Galtung., "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969). 168.

³ Galtung, "Violence,"170.

⁴ Galtung, "Cultural Violence," 291.

innate inferiority of black peoples was cultural violence.⁵ I use this as an example because the retrospective lens makes the three points obvious. Violence of all three varieties exist today but tend to be harder to identify or distinguish from each other.

Galtung explains the three aspects of violence, saying “direct violence is an event; structural violence is a process with ups and downs; cultural violence is a permanence.”⁶ These three variations on a theme create the violence triangle. Violence can start at any point on the triangle and be easily transmitted to the others, but so can peace. Instead of being a destructive cycle, the triangle could be positively self-reinforcing. A peace triangle is obtainable by working on all three corners at the same time, not assuming that change in one corner will automatically lead to changes in the other two.⁷ When any one point of the triangle is reinforced, the connection of the sides strengthens the other two points, which return the favor. For all their best intentions, many philosophies that seek to create a utopian, peaceful, or just society fail because they only focus on one or two points of the triangle. For peace to flourish, all three must be tended to.

The law of entropy states that without input, things devolve into chaos. Chaos engenders disorientation and confusion, which stagnate growth. Based on Galtung’s definition, this makes chaos violent. Entropy is a law that peace must abide as much as the physical world does. A peace triangle does not simply exist. And if one is ever obtained it will not persist without constant input.

⁵ Stephen R. Hayes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification for American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁶ Galtung, "Cultural Violence," 294.

⁷ Galtung, "Cultural Violence," 302.

In his 1969 publication, Galtung also distinguished between positive and negative peace.⁸ Negative peace is the absence of violence. Those who study and work in the field of negative violence are like a sports team playing defense: stopping the other team's scoring is like stopping violence from occurring. Positive peace is like a team playing offense: each point they score is like an act of peace. Study and actions in both areas of peace are essential. However, when either positive or negative peace is neglected, just as when a point of the triangle gets neglected, the unbalance causes problems that hinder the persistence of peace. When negative peace is the primary focus, efforts for peace are based on what one is *against*. Being against violence is essential to peace, but opposing violence can quickly devolve into its own form of violence if not balanced with a positive peace view. Similarly, when positive peace becomes the dominant view, it neglects to address harms and can devolve into conflict avoidance rather than addressing conflict in constructive ways.

Some regressed religious mindsets are like an unbalanced negative peace mindset. Fundamentalists are defined by what they are against. They are opposed to sin in whatever form they see it in the world and will go to extremes to stop it. The flip side of this is what is often called 'fluffy' religion. There is no substance other than a warm fuzzy feeling inside and being able to pat oneself on the back for not doing bad things. This is the dangerous form of unbalanced positive peace because it thinks that as long as no violence is in sight, then religion is doing a good job. This often leads to covering up scandals and neglecting issues occurring in the community. This form of religiosity likes the appearance of goodness but doesn't do any of the

⁸ Galtung, "Violence," 183.

work to make it a reality. In the Latter-day Saint scriptural canon of the Book of Mormon, this is articulated in 2 Nephi 28, which reads,

At that day shall [the devil] rage in the hearts of the children of men, and stir them up to anger against that which is good. And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security, that they will say: All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well—and thus the devil cheateth their souls, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell.

The scripture paints a picture of the two unbalanced extremes found in religion: anger or passivity. These two extremes are explained by the Buddhist philosophy of near enemies as explained by Brene Brown's work, *Atlas of the Heart*. Far enemies are the opposite of whatever one is trying to achieve, such as hate being the far enemy of love. Near enemies, however, *appear* to be the objective but actually undermine it. For example, If the objective is love, then a transactional relationship may appear to be the same as a deeply loving relationship, but all the motives lead to disconnection rather than connection in the relationship.⁹ When any part of peacework gets unbalanced in favor of only positive, negative, or one aspect of the peace triangle, it becomes a near enemy of peace.

0.2 Thesis

The near enemy of peace is when peace is forced rather than chosen by an actor's free will (the capacity to choose) and choice (what they decide). Peace can never be imposed because imposed peace is a violence. Enforced 'peace' is done via peacekeepers, who view conflict as a

⁹ Brené Brown., *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience* (New York: Random House, 2021), 252.

problem. True peace is the work done by peacebuilders, who view conflict as opportunities for growth and so will engage in conflict constructively. Accepting Galtung's definition of violence as anything that inhibits a person reaching their fullest potential, eschewing conflict is restricting opportunities to grow in potential, ergo enforced peace is a violence.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS)¹⁰ has a theology that lends itself to building peace by inverting the definition of power. However, because neither its structure nor its people are perfect, it often wrestles with the near enemies of peace in the process.

Using the LDS church as my case study, I will analyze the ways that it is succeeding in building peace by continuously addressing all three points of Galtung's triangle. I will also analyze how the culture, direct actions, and structure of the church is often warped into a near-enemy of peace. I do so not because I believe the LDS church is an exceptional religion in regard to establishing (or striving but failing to establish) peace, but because it is the one I know best. My analysis comes from a deep love for this faith tradition. I admire what I see it doing well and hope to inform some improvement or correction in what I see as its shortcomings or blind spots. My hope is that people of all faith traditions will continue this conversation, analyzing how Galtung's theory of violence and peace relates to them with no intention of tearing any of them down, but with the hope to build them all up.

0.2 Power

The French philosopher Voltaire declared, "Power consists in making others act as I choose."¹¹ Hannah Arendt, a political theorist and philosopher whose work is shaped by her

¹⁰ There are two major divisions in the religion begun by Joseph Smith in 1830: The Community of Christ, based in Independence, Missouri, reports 250,000 members in over 60 countries, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the division I am addressing in this thesis, based in Salt Lake City, reports 17,509,781 members worldwide. These two divisions of "Mormonism" have not always had amicable relations, but they do now.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt., "Reflections on Violence." *Journal of International Affairs* 23, no. 1 (1969). 12.

experiences as a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, counters this point. If Voltaire was right, and the essence of power is the effectiveness of a command, then, Arendt argues, there is no greater power than that which comes out of a gun.¹² While many people understand violence as a manifestation of power, Arendt argues that they are opposites. I will consider her claims later in this chapter.

People who are considered powerful in the world are those who are in charge or in control. This is true for leadership positions, such as a leader of a nation being in power, and intrapersonally, such as a person having power over their own thoughts or behaviors. *Control* is seen as a virtue in the world because when humans lack control we feel the uncomfortable emotion of fear. Latter-day Saint theology inverts the concept of power to be the opposite of control: chosen vulnerability. To understand this, we must understand the context of Latter-day Saint beliefs about power.

Scholars have discovered deep roots in Ancient Near Eastern texts of the divine council. LDS theology takes this further than any other tradition. Based in part on the Book of Abraham, it posits that all people existed as spirits in a premortal realm with Heavenly Parents who created earth as a schooling ground, a place where we could come and experiment with power. Those who chose to use power in godlike ways would be "added upon," or obtain more power (Abraham 3).¹³ The Book of Abraham reads:

And the Gods took counsel among themselves and said: Let us go down and form man in our image, after our likeness; and we will give them dominion over the fish of the sea, and

¹² Arendt, 13.

¹³ Dallin H. Oaks, President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, said "Our theology begins with heavenly parents. Our highest aspiration is to be like them." Dallin H. Oaks, "[Apostasy and Restoration](#)," *Ensign*, May 1995, 84.

over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So the Gods went down to organize man in their own image, in the image of the Gods to form they him, male and female to form they them (Abraham 4:26-27).

Our Heavenly Parents explained their plan for us to grow and become like Them as full heirs (Moses 1:39; Romans 8:16–17). To do this, we had to gain a physical body and be proved in a fallen world where we could exercise moral agency, away from Their immediate presence, “to see if [we] will do all things whatsoever the Lord [our] God shall command” (Abraham 3:25; D&C 93:30–31). There was a problem, however: in such a state, all of us would sin, be cut off from God’s presence, and become unable on our own to become like our Heavenly Parents, who are perfectly whole (Romans 3:23; Alma 34:9–10). God’s plan all along called for Jehovah, the Firstborn, to serve as Redeemer, offering Himself as a voluntary atonement to satisfy justice, enable mercy, and heal every wrong freely repented of while preserving our agency and growth (Moses 4:2; Alma 42:13–15). Lucifer, however, sought to thwart the divine plan by claiming he would redeem all, removing agency in the process and demanding the Father’s honor—a proposal that would have destroyed the very purpose of our existence (Moses 4:1, 3). Our Heavenly Parents affirmed Their original plan with Jehovah, and when Lucifer rebelled against God and Their Anointed, he and the spirits who followed him—“a third part” of the hosts of heaven—were cast out and became the devil and his angels (Revelation 12:4, 7–9; D&C 29:36–37).¹⁴

¹⁴ Philip L. Barlow, "Shards of Combat: How Did Satan Seek to Destroy the Agency of Man?" *BYU Studies* 60:3 (2021): 113-125.

Latter-day Saints thus believe that agency—human free will—was the crux of cosmic conflict between good and evil. In the Book of Abraham, the pre-mortal souls opted for God's plan of empowering people with agency before the creation of earth. Without agency, we cannot have power because the vulnerability must be chosen, and to choose one must be a free agent. Negating agency is, we believe, Satan's plan. As Satan and his followers live as spirits here on earth, we see their influence in those who choose Satan's idea of power, the most extreme cases seen in totalitarian regimes and slavery. The same urge exists in everyday life, manifested as anxieties that lead people to control others and their environment, to their own and others' detriment.

When we feel fear, we are commanded not to seek control, but to exercise faith instead. The more the muscle for faith is exercised, the more capacity we have to love others because as long as we seek to control others, the love is not whole. A biblical scripture that explains this is 1 John 4:18 which reads “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.”

While the world generally sees violence and power as interchangeable parts, Arendt views them as opposites. She defines power as uncoerced consent, very similar to how I articulate the restored gospel's definition of power as chosen (uncoerced) vulnerability (giving part of yourself to another). Power, she says, far from being a means to an end as violence is, exists whenever people get together and act in concert.¹⁵ The loss of power is what tempts people into violence as its cheap substitute.¹⁶ D&C 121:36-37 states this in reverse, saying,

¹⁵ Arendt, 19.

¹⁶ Arendt, 20.

The rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven, and that the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only [or except] upon the principles of righteousness. [Power] may be conferred upon us... but when we undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man.

The loss of power may tempt people into violence. Conversely, people who violently control or compel others lose their divine power.

Latter-day Saints seek after the fulness of God's power and believe they can access part of it here on earth through covenants. God's power, or priesthood, is explained in LDS scriptural canon, Doctrine and Covenants 121:39-46. Latter-day Saints believe these words were revealed by God to Joseph Smith while he was in jail, awaiting trial for treason against Missouri for prophesying God's coming kingdom. They explain the nature of divine power: it only operates on principles of persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, unfeigned love, kindness, and pure knowledge. Hypocrisy and guile have the opposite effect. Those who choose this power will, God promises, have an everlasting stewardship because it flows naturally, without any need to compel. As phrased by Patrick Mason and David Pulsipher, LDS peace scholars, "to put it bluntly, there is no such thing as enduring coercive power...enduring influence can be built only through trust."¹⁷

¹⁷ Patrick Q Mason and David J Pulsipher. *Proclaim Peace: The Restoration's Answer to an Age of Conflict*. BYU Maxwell Institute & Deseret Book 2021, 4.

Before Joseph Smith's meditation on the nature of power, the letter in which it is originally written states: “it is the nature and disposition of almost all men that 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.” All people must have a capacity, or stewardship, of something to choose either unrighteous dominion (control) or chosen vulnerability (unfeigned love).

As mentioned above, this revelation was dictated by Joseph Smith while in jail in Clay County, Missouri, where he was imprisoned for the winter of 1838-1839. Let us back up to understand why. In 1831, Smith received what Latter-day Saints believe to be a revelation from God, directing them to establish a “city of Zion” in Missouri (D&C 57:1-2). As the Latter-day Saints migrated to western Missouri in politically substantial numbers, other settlers grew frightened and angry. One woman, Delilah Lykins, was the daughter of a Baptist Missionary to the Native Americans in the newly formed Indian Territory in 1831. Mid-summer, Lykins wrote to her parents, saying “The Mormanites¹⁸ are about to take the country. They are preaching and baptising through the country...I think they will take the Shanes family...I do think they ought to be punished”¹⁹

The early Latter-day Saints lived cooperatively. By pooling their resources, they were able to buy land and prosper in a way that disturbed their neighbors, as Lykins’s letter illustrates. Missourians felt that the numbers of Latter-day Saints also threatened their political power. For these reasons, Jackson County citizens drove the Saints from the county in 1833. By 1838 Missouri Governor, Lilburn Boggs, issued an executive order declaring that, “The Mormons

¹⁸ The Latter-day Saints are popularly known as ‘Mormons’ today, however that name arose as shown here as a derogatory name for them and it was never the official name of the church.

¹⁹ Deliliah McCoy Lykins, quoted in Warren A. Jennings, “Isaac McCoy and the Mormons,” *Missouri Historical Review* 61, no. 1 (Oct. 1966): 64-65.

must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the state if necessary for the public peace.”²⁰

Three days after the order was declared, a vigilante group attacked the Saints settled on Shoal Creek. Seventeen Latter-day Saints were killed and another 14 were critically wounded.²¹ Nearby in Far West, under the assumption that they had been invited to discuss ways to defuse the volatile situation, Smith and four other church leaders approached the Missouri Militia under a flag of truce. Parley P. Pratt, one of the men held with Smith, recounts one night of their imprisonment, writing:

“We had listened...as [the guards] recounted to each other their deeds of rapine, murder, robbery, etc., which they had committed among the "*Mormons*" while at Far West and vicinity. They even boasted of defiling by force wives, daughters and virgins, and of shooting or dashing out the brains of men, women and children.

...On a sudden [Joseph] arose to his feet, and spoke in a voice of thunder, or as the roaring lion, uttering, as near as I can recollect, the following words:

SILENCE, ye fiends of the infernal pit. In the name of Jesus Christ I rebuke you, and command you to be still; I will not live another minute and hear such language. Cease such talk, or you or I die THIS INSTANT!

He ceased to speak. He stood erect in terrible majesty. Chained, and without a weapon; calm, unruffled and dignified as an angel, he looked upon the quailing guards, whose

²⁰ Governor Lilburn Boggs., Extermination Order. Sos.mo.gov. Accessed at https://www.sos.mo.gov/cmsimages/archives/resources/findingaids/miscMormRecs/eo/18381027_ExtermOrder.pdf

²¹ Alexander L. Baugh, *A Call to Arms: The 1838 Mormon Defense of Northern Missouri* (Provo, Utah: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History and BYU Studies, 2000), 115–34.

weapons were lowered or dropped to the ground; whose knees smote together, and who, shrinking into a corner, or crouching at his feet, begged his pardon, and remained quiet till a change of guards.

I have seen the ministers of justice, clothed in magisterial robes, and criminals arraigned before them, while life was suspended on a breath, in the Courts of England; I have witnessed a Congress in solemn session to give laws to nations; I have tried to conceive of kings, of royal courts, of thrones and crowns; and of emperors assembled to decide the fate of kingdoms; but dignity and majesty have I seen but once, as it stood in chains, at midnight, in a dungeon in an obscure village of Missouri.”²²

The guards were grotesquely displaying the world’s definition of power. Pratt witnessed what true power was in Joseph Smith that night.

Judge Austin King found probable cause that Joseph Smith and several others had committed capital crimes, and remanded them to jail in December 1838 to await trial the next spring.²³ While freezing, malnourished, and sick with worry for their families, Smith and his fellow prisoners received the teaching from God discussed above about power and unrighteous dominion. While I do not excuse the actions of the mob, nor blame the early Saints for what happened to them, I believe Joseph was realizing that his and his followers' actions had in some ways invited the actions of the mob. In conflict theory terms, they had perpetuated a collusion spiral and were reckoning with their own part in it. They had, like their enemies, gained some authority and then used it to exercise unrighteous dominion.

²² Parley P. Pratt, Jr, editor, *Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt*, 4th edition (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1950), 209-215.

²³ Gordon A. Madsen, "Joseph Smith and the Missouri Court of Inquiry: Austin A. King's Quest for Hostages," *BYU Studies* 43:4 (2004): 91-136.

In the Summer of 1838 some church leaders and members responded to the violence against them with defensive and retaliatory actions.²⁴ They organized their own vigilante militia known as the Danites and their objective was to defend Church members.²⁵ The group intimidated church dissenters and other Missourians. The Danites and other Mormon vigilantes raided two towns they believed to be centers of anti-Mormon activity, burning homes and stealing goods. In the fall of the same year the Danites were mostly absorbed by LDS militia groups, but their actions left a lasting impact that lived on in the social imagination.

After being exterminated from Missouri and spending a winter in what would now be called a refugee camp, the Latter-day Saints created a state-sanctioned militia to protect themselves and the city they founded, Nauvoo, Illinois, which quickly rivaled the largest cities in Illinois in population. This Nauvoo Legion was feared by those who saw the large numbers of incoming saints as enemies. Unlike the Danites, the Nauvoo Legion was chartered by the state of Illinois, and it did not go on the offensive nor retaliate after the murders of Joseph and Hyrum Smith in 1844. I think it likely that Joseph, who ordered the militia to stand down as he and his brother went to Carthage, Illinois to answer charges of inciting a riot, had learned that responding to violence with violence only leads to destruction. The Danites, like the Missouri

²⁴ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Peace and Violence among 19th Century Latter-day Saints*. Gospel Topics Essays (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed February 11, 2026), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/peace-and-violence-among-19th-century-latter-day-saints?lang=eng>.

²⁵ Historians generally agree that Joseph Smith knew of and approved of the Danites but was kept in the dark by Sampson Averd about their renegade plans, and that he did not sanction all their actions. See Leland H. Gentry, "The Danite Band of 1838," *BYU Studies* 14:4 (1974): 421–50; Stephen C. LeSueur, "The Danites Reconsidered: Were They Vigilantes or Just the Mormons' Version of the Elks Club?" *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 14 (1994): 35–51; Alexander L. Baugh, "'We Have a Company of Danites in These Times': The Danites, Joseph Smith, and the 1838 Missouri-Mormon Conflict," *Journal of Mormon History* 45:3 (July 2019): 1–25; and Benjamin E. Park, "The Danite Constitution and Theories of Democratic Justice in Frontier America," *BYU Studies* 60:1 (2021): 43–64.

vigilante groups who had attacked the Saints, were all exercising the world's form of power which is what Smith's meditation on power calls "unrighteous dominion."

On June 23rd, 1844, Smith received a letter from his wife, Emma Smith, entreating him to come home. He and a few other church leaders were in hiding and ready to run. Smith knew that if he went back, he would be killed despite the promises of a fair trial. Reynolds Cahoon, who had brought the letter, told Smith that the troops intended to ravage Nauvoo, and that he would be a coward to stay in hiding while his followers endured it. Smith replied, "if my life is of no value to my friends, it is of none to myself" and he returned.²⁶ He was right, after being taken to Carthage jail, a mob attacked and murdered him and his brother.

I think that by the end of his life, Smith had internalized the teachings he had professed came to him from God: that divine power is characterized by gentleness, meekness, and unfeigned love. Alternative forms of power ultimately fail. Destructive actions, by their nature, destroy and so ultimately self-cannibalize. Constructive actions, by their nature, build and so ultimately will always be progressing. While Smith had to learn these truths and was imperfect at living them, the New Testament gospels give an example of one who did implement these principles.

After declaring himself to be the son of God, Jesus washed his disciples' feet. One who declares himself to be divine, then condescends to do the lowest of tasks, offers a juxtaposition that disciples of Christ have been grappling with for centuries. I believe Jesus's actions illustrated his teachings: that the first shall be last and the last shall be first (Matthew 20:16). I

²⁶ History, 1838–1856, volume F-1 [1 May 1844–8 August 1844], p. 148, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 25, 2026, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-f-1-1-may-1844-8-august-1844/154?highlight=none%20to%20myself>

interpret this passage as those who the world views as first will, in the Kingdom of Heaven, be last because God's kingdom operates on the inverse assumption of what power is. Conversely, those who are considered last in this world for their meekness, humility, and vulnerability will be the powerful in God's kingdom because that is what true power is.

Doctrine and Covenants 18:19 reads that without faith, hope, and charity, you can do nothing. You can do nothing because these are the forms of power. Without them nothing you do lasts or means anything. Choosing each of the responses of faith, hope, and charity puts one in an inherently vulnerable position.

0.4 Zion: A society of peace

The Latter-day Saint scripture canon is replete with the command to establish Zion or the Kingdom of God. The Book of Moses that Joseph Smith revealed in 1830-31 includes a substantial gloss on the few verses about Enoch in Genesis 5:21-24. Latter-day Saint scriptures refer to a few historical instances in which Zion was established (by the Canaanite king Melchizedek's people in Salem, and by the Israelite family whose story is told in the Book of Mormon, whose descendants achieved peace and prosperity for hundreds of years after the resurrected Christ visited them.) But the Enoch prophecy in the Book of Moses is the fullest account of a realized Zion in LDS mythology. It reads, "The Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there were no poor among them" (Moses 7:18).

This scripture does not give a lot of direction on how to make Zion, only what it looks like. But what it looks like is a peace triangle. Being one heart and one mind is a **culture** that is not homogenous, but that seeks the wellbeing of all because it recognizes that we are all connected. Dwelling in righteousness is the constant **direct** actions of positive peace (such as

serving) and negative peace (such as forgiveness). Having no poor means that the **structure** succeeded in caring for all.

The idea of Zion and the command to create it leads to what John Paul Lederach calls the moral imagination. This is “the art and soul of making room for and building the creative act. The birthing of the unexpected.”²⁷ Zion is completely unexpected to the world and its current cultures, systems, and actions. Yet that is the task of the Latter-day Saints: to build it anyway. While the vision is clear, the instruction manual is ambiguous. I believe that is intentional as part of what creates people who are able to build and live in a Zion like society is the growth that happens when we live in tension.²⁸ As Galtung articulates in this section's epigraph, imposing actions, culture or structure is a form of violence. To create a society that is truly and sustainably peaceful, it must be done by the choice of those who reside there. By leaving the instructions vague, the Latter-day Saints are commanded to counsel together. As they do, a variety of different opinions, worldviews, and experiences refine and sanctify each other and Zion becomes unified—not homogenized—in the process. An early 1831 apocalyptic revelation to Joseph Smith foretells a time to come when collusion-fed violence spirals until it pervades every society and place on the planet—except one. “And it shall be called New Jerusalem, a land of peace, a city of refuge, and a place of safety.” Importantly, “there shall be gathered unto it out of every nation under heaven; and it shall be the only people that shall not be at war one with another” (D&C 45:66-71).

Lucy Sargisson, the first professor of Utopian studies, makes some arguments about utopianism that are relevant to this paper. The LDS notion of Zion is a form of utopianism

²⁷ John Paul Lederach., *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. Oxford University Press, 2005, 161.

²⁸ Eugene England, “Why the Church Is As True As the Gospel,” *Sunstone* 22, nos. 3/4 (June 1999), 61–69.

inasmuch as it envisions and seeks for a better world. Utopianism, writes Sargisson, comes in many forms, some religious, some not, some beneficial for society, some dangerous. The common denominator for utopia's is a discontent with the present.²⁹ She warns against what she calls blueprinting. To create a blueprint for a perfect world is to leave no space for dissent, making it by nature conformist and repressive. Blueprinting is a perfectionistic mindset that seeks to create something static. This, Sargisson argues, is a form of totalitarianism, not utopianism.³⁰

To use the terminology of this paper, blueprints are the near enemy of utopianism. Blueprints impose one viewpoint on the world, just as peacekeeping imposes homogeneity. Blueprints take on the appearance of what is hoped for but undermine any attempt that would make a utopia or peace because both require tension for growth and fluidity and movement instead of stasis.

While it can be frustrating for Latter-day Saints to lack a more explicit 'blueprint' for Zion, that is largely the point. If Zion ever were to become based on an overly prescribed blueprint, it would undermine the fundamental Latter-day Saint principles of agency and eternal growth.

In 1831, Joseph Smith received a revelation for his friend Edward Partridge, whose calling as the first bishop in the LDS church asked him to organize the saints and their cooperative economy. Through Smith, God gave Partridge counsel which is just as pertinent to the Saints striving to build Zion today. He said: "He that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant. Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause,

²⁹ Lucy Sargisson., *Fool's Gold? Utopianism in the Twenty-First Century*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 1.

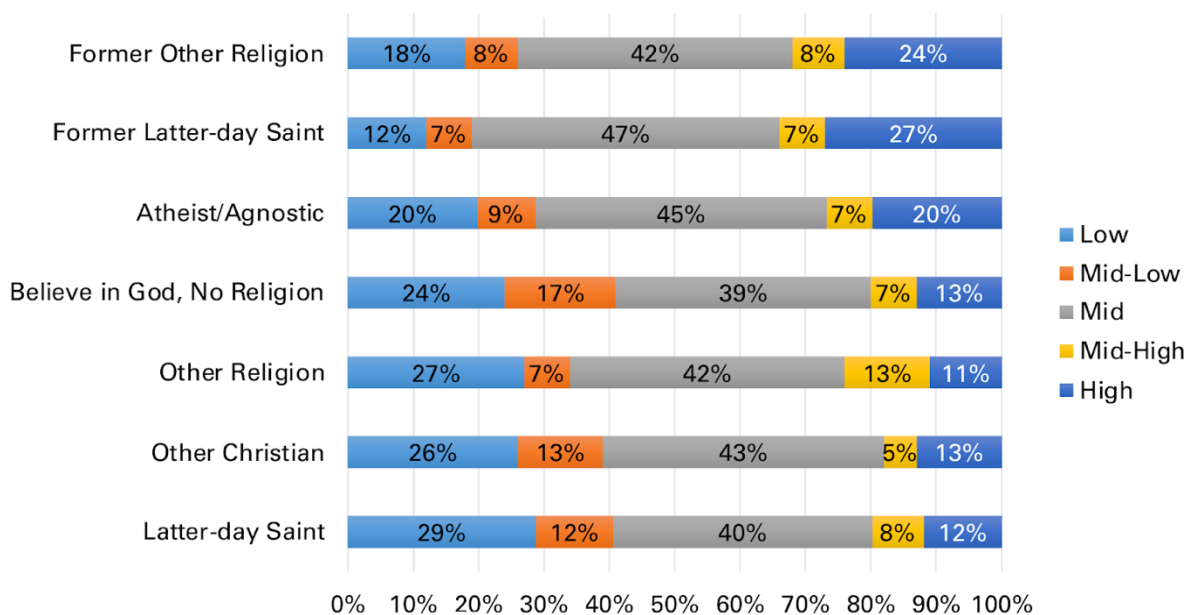
³⁰ Sargisson, 20.

and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness. For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves” (D&C 58:24-29).

A common critique of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is that it breeds perfectionism (blueprinting). The claim is that the high standards set by LDS faith is a source of toxic perfectionism. Justin Dyer, a social scientist who studies human, family, and community development, investigated this claim scientifically. His research findings differentiate between healthy perfectionism and toxic perfectionism. Healthy perfectionism, which is associated with better mental well-being, does have high standards for oneself. The high standard was not the problem. The defining characteristic of toxic perfectionism was feelings of worthlessness whenever one did not live up to the standard. The question then became not whether the church had high standards (it does), but whether the church caused feelings of worthlessness among those who fall short of the standards.³¹

In one study by Dyer and his colleagues, they surveyed 7 groups: current Latter-day Saints, other Christians, other religions, religious nones, atheists/agnostics, former Latter-day Saints, and former members of other religions. They found that there was not a statistically significant difference between the religious groups. There was, however, a difference between the religious groups and the non/formerly religious groups. The non-religious groups had significantly higher levels of toxic perfectionism and lower levels of healthy perfectionism. (See image)

³¹ It should be noted that Justin Dyer is himself a member of the LDS church and is employed and doing his research at a LDS university. While his research is well conducted, it would be beneficial for more research to be conducted on how religion may or may not correlate to perfectionism.



To understand if perfectionism or religious disaffiliation came first, they did a chicken-and-egg study. They found that the disaffiliation did not increase or decrease a person's level of discrepancy perfectionism (the standard they hold for themselves) but it did decrease social perfectionism (the standard they feel others put on them).

They found that healthy perfectionism is linked to intrinsic religiosity and toxic perfectionism is linked to extrinsic religiosity. An intrinsically motivated religious person views religion as an end in-and-of-itself and so attends church, reads scripture, and keeps commandments because they value those actions in themselves. Extrinsically religious people view those same actions as means to an end of either social acceptance, divine blessings, or avoidance of social/divine punishments. The study found that the intrinsically motivated had significantly higher levels of healthy perfectionism while extrinsic religiosity was associated with toxic perfectionism. A different study found that Latter-day Saints were highly likely to be intrinsically motivated.³²

³² Michael A Goodman., "Religion and Perfectionism." *BYU Studies* 63, no. 4 (2024).

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is a phenomenon that appears in Mahatma Gandhi's peace theory. He believed in the unity of means and ends.³³ This means that peace cannot be achieved through violent means. The means *are* the ends in the making. Any process that uses means not aligned with their end goal is engaging in blueprinting because the destination justifies that path. As Arendt puts it, violence is always justified by the goal it is trying to achieve, but since nobody knows the future or can reliably predict it, the means are of far greater relevance than the intended goal.³⁴ Any action that needs justification through something else cannot be the essence of anything.³⁵

Yet another study found that high levels of religious salience (how important religion is to a person's life) was associated with lower levels of toxic perfectionism.³⁶ Overall, this study found that the claim that religion, specifically the LDS church, leads to mentally unhealthy perfectionism is not true. If this is the case, then it seems safe to conclude that the LDS church also does not engage in 'blueprinting.' However, this comes with its own set of problems. With no blueprint, there is a vast spectrum for how Latter-day Saints understand the doctrines of the church and choose to practice the faith. These differences create tension among members.

A sentiment often espoused by Latter-day Saints, especially when frustrated by the immense gap between what Jesus teaches and behaviors of church members, is "the gospel is perfect, but the church is flawed because it is run by imperfect people." I often used this reasoning to console my own frustrations and others around me. Eugene England, an LDS scholar, changed my mind. His essay, "Why the church is as true as the gospel," argues that the

³³ Galtung, Johan. "Cultural Violence."

³⁴ Arendt, 2.

³⁵ Arendt, 18.

³⁶ Goodman, 109.

institution is just as if not more important to salvation as the theology. The gospel is the theory, but the church provides the praxis that teaches us how to love.³⁷ This is the case, England argues, because of two unique structural aspects of the LDS church. The first is that it is a lay church, radically so. Part of our covenantal commitment is to accept and serve in “callings.” A calling is a volunteer assignment in the church that includes the lifetime assignment of apostle to the global church to a short-term stint as a nursery leader in a local congregation. These callings are unpaid,³⁸ interchangeable, and done willingly.

The second key is that LDS congregations are organized geographically, not by choice. Except for wards organized by language for immigrant communities, members attend the ward whose boundaries they live in. Combined, these parts of church structure lead its members into direct and constant relationships with a wide range of people with a wider range of problems. Because of interchangeable callings, we work with, serve, and are served by people we would otherwise never know and sometimes with people we would normally choose to avoid.³⁹ The exasperation, frustration, and hurt that often arises from working with fallible people is put in perspective when, once given a leadership calling, one realizes their own fallibility and the same problems they cause others. The conflict that inevitably arises in LDS congregations is not always an indicator that something has gone wrong. Most of the time, it is a sign that something is going right. The Church is doing its job which is to be the school of love.⁴⁰

³⁷ England, 1.

³⁸ Excepting callings that take up so much time the one doing them cannot work. The prophet and apostles all receive a wage, though it is much smaller than what they would be earning professionally.

³⁹ England, 5.

⁴⁰ England, 10.

In peace theory terms, the LDS church is organized in a way that is purposely meant to bring conflict to the fore and teaches principles that, if implemented correctly, navigate through conflict in a constructive way. Thus innovating creative solutions that were non-existent without the tension of differing ideas and refining the people who are in opposition to each other as they work together.

Inasmuch as violence and power are opposites, where one rules absolutely the other is absent.⁴¹ As the church seeks to fulfill the oft-repeated command to establish Zion we are seeking to rid ourselves of violence so that God's power fully reigns in our lives, or as the late prophet Russell M. Nelson counseled church members: become Israel which means 'let God prevail'. While war has an end in sight, peace does not. War and violence are seeking an end whereas peace is an end in and of itself.⁴² It follows then that Zion is a society that has mastered the means, not fixated on the ends.

In his 1990 publication, Galtung wondered if there is a yet unknown, deeper stratum in human nature that is predisposed to aggression (direct violence) domination (structural violence) and, I would add, justification (cultural violence). If there was then, Galtung argues, the work of the peace researcher is to identify the circumstances that those innate drives are most likely to appear and alter the environment to negate them. LDS theology would respond to Galtung that yes, there is a deeper stratum, and the Book of Mormon calls it 'the natural man' which is an enemy to God and will be forever unless it yields to the enticings of the spirit and becomes submissive, meek, humble, patient and loving (Mosiah 3:19).

⁴¹ Arendt, 21.

⁴² Arendt, 18.

The work of building Zion is the work of transforming people, grace-for-grace, from aggressive, dominating and justifying beings into kind, humble, and honest ones. The LDS church does this directly, by commandments that guide behaviors to do and not do that navigate conflict in constructive ways. It does this structurally, by each member sacrificing ten percent of their income and one-hundred percent of their soul to the church, which uses these resources to clothe the naked and feed the hungry. And it does this culturally, by being a covenant people who understand their relationships as eternal.

1: CULTURAL: ONE HEART AND ONE MIND

“It’s a point of caricature about the Latter-day Saints and a common complaint in the modern age: Mormons are overwhelmingly communitarian. It’s what we do. This robust community is the shining jewel in the Restoration crown. We belong to each other. From whatever beginning to whatever end the universe has in store for us, we belong to each other.”⁴³

–Samuel Brown

1.1 Covenant Living

Latter-day Saints are covenant people. Recently they have adopted the term “covenant path” to describe the life of making, keeping, and renewing promises with God that serve as landmarks for life, a trajectory of literal rites of passage that ultimately returns the person to God's presence. The first covenant can be made as young as eight-years-old when one decides to be baptized. By doing so, the person promises to “mourn with those that mourn” and “comfort those that stand in need of comfort,” and to “stand as a witness of God” (Mosiah 18:9). This is the journey of choosing to live in covenant with God as a person who consecrates their self to the good of God's whole family, ideally discovering in the process the Christian paradox that whoever loses their life for Christ's sake, finds it (Matthew 10:39). Because we are all interconnected, whatever is best for the self is best for the whole, and what is best for the whole is best for the self.

In his book, *Food and Faith*, Norman Wirzba explains what covenantal living means. In short, it is the recognition of the truth that we live in a world that is inseparably connected. This worldview is counter to the predominant secular philosophy, summed up in Rene Descartes famous saying, ‘I think therefore I am,’ and is replaced with the spiritual assumption, beautifully

⁴³ Samuel Brown., “Voices from the Dust: Restoration Ethics at the End of Life.” *Wayfare* (Feb 2025).

articulated in the South African concept of Ubuntu: I am because we are. “To be,” writes Wirzba, “is to be in relationship.”

In the LDS church, covenants are the mechanism of the vertical relationships between people and God and the horizontal relationships between people. God sets the terms and conditions of these covenants, and people choose whether or not to accept them. Those who choose to live in covenant receive an endowment of God's power—priesthood—which disappears the instant it is abused, according to Doctrine and Covenants section 121.

Fidelity to relationships, writes Wirzba, is what arises in the space between how the world is and how we wish it to be. Using the example of a screaming child, Wirzba explains that a parent who wishes for the child to be quiet has two choices. They may walk away, leaving the child in distress because the child is not acting in the way the parent wishes. Or they may choose to attend to the child's needs and soothe them until they are quiet. The first would be forsaking the parents' fidelity to the child, while the second is faithful.⁴⁴ In the moment, the first is the easier of the two but ultimately causes more problems. The second choice is harder, but better overall. This is because the relationship between the parent and child exists, irrespective of if the parent acknowledges it or not. Infidelity is not merely the surface level actions of choosing to act counter to the needs of, or walk away from, a relationship. Rather, unfaithfulness is the falsification of our humanity as beings who always need and receive nurture from each other. It is the denial of both the requirements and blessings of communal life.⁴⁵

In the Latter-day Saint tradition, covenants embody and enact beliefs. To make a covenant in the LDS temple is to choose to promise God you will act in ways that promote the

⁴⁴ Norman Wirzba., *Food and Faith: a theology of eating*, 2nd edition, Cambridge University Press 2019. 20-21.

⁴⁵ Wirzba, 20-21.

good of yourself and others, as beings who are sealed to each other by priesthood. In this way, the Latter-day Saints understand the scriptures on unity, with a direct command from God to “be one; and if ye are not one, ye are not mine” (Doctrine and Covenants 38:27). The Latter-day Saint ideal is to live up to the example of Enoch's utopia:

“And the Lord called his people ZION, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them” (Moses 7:18).

The deep spiritual assumption in these teachings is that all life is inextricably bound up together, that individuals are parts of a whole, each necessary for the others. That is foundational to a culture of peace because peace only happens in relationship. Individualist philosophies cannot achieve peace because they negate the interconnection of peoples. If one assumes there is no connection between beings, one cannot work to restore the connection.

The expulsion of the Latter-day Saints from Missouri in 1838–39 illustrates how crisis reinforced a covenantal ethic of communal interdependence within the tradition. After the violence of the 1838 conflict and Missouri’s order that the Saints leave the state, many Latter-day Saint families lacked the resources to migrate. In January 1839, church leaders meeting in Far West adopted a covenant that members would “stand by and assist each other” in leaving Missouri and would “never desert the poor who are worthy.” Nearly three hundred Saints signed the pledge. In the weeks that followed, leaders organized wagons, teams, and provisions to remove impoverished families, coordinating a winter migration of thousands across roughly 180 miles to the Mississippi River.

Today, all willing Latter-day Saints who are offered a “calling,” sometimes more than one at a time depending on needs in their area. Some of these callings, such as a Relief Society President or bishop, are leadership roles equivalent to being a pastor. Others, such as nursery leaders and Sunday school teachers, allow fellow congregants to attend to other meetings or callings while child-care and child-education needs are met. All are vital and interchangeable. This means that someone who is called as a nursery worker for a few years, could later be called as a Relief Society, Young Women's, or Primary President in later years and vice versa. This means that within an average ward (approx 100-200 people) the members will have the opportunity throughout their lifetime to serve in a variety of callings and capacities.

Culture shapes behavior, and Latter-day Saint life reinforces interdependence and mutual support, whether crises are big or small. During my college years I was too sick to leave my bed for two weeks. Unable to go to work, I had to choose to either pay my rent or buy food. I texted my Relief Society president and she and the bishop worked together to deliver food to my door for as long as I needed it.

Aggregate data is not available and wouldn't really convey the depth of the anecdotes I have observed and experienced my entire life: Latter-day Saints (and their neighbors) who suffer the death of a loved one have their congregation rally together to bring them food and mourn with them. Any time a member loses their jobs, their anxiety that follows is lessened because they can turn to their Relief Society President for food and funds for housing. Every week, thousands of Latter-day Saint young people volunteer in soup kitchens around the world. Congregations near prisons have volunteers who go into the prison system weekly to minister to those inside. Several neighbors in my hometown spend an evening during the week and Sunday mornings at the Slate Canyon Youth Detention facility, volunteering to help the troubled teens

and accepting them as they are. There is no way to measure the one-on-one work that one-hundred thousand missionaries do each day as they dedicate a year or two in their late teens, to be at the disposal of those who need a helping hand or a listening ear. If there is an element of accuracy in the caricature of them as pushy proselytizers with a single goal, it should be noted that they serve voluntarily at their own expense, are neither paid nor coerced, and are primarily motivated by a desire to share what brings them joy with others who might benefit from it.

There is no way to count each individual and unique instance in which a person was helped because they belonged to a covenant community, but one that comes to mind as an example occurred in the ward I grew up in. Each ward has a council composed of the women and men who are currently serving as the leaders of the Relief Society for adult women, Primary for all children, Sunday School, and youth leaders including the Young Women President, and the bishop, who oversees the council. This council meets weekly to discuss the needs of the ward. The structure and consistency of this meeting lays the groundwork for potentially incredibly constructive conflict to occur. As the various leaders bring their own unique vantages of the ward to the table and discuss, with charity for each other, how to best help, amazing ideas spring forth.

Just a few years ago in the ward where I grew up, the weekly ward council meeting was held just hours after a man in the ward (the neighborhood congregation) was arrested for child pornography. The council decided together that the bishop should announce this development to the congregation at their main worship service that morning. The bishop informed the ward what had happened so they could protect their children and, in the same meeting, encouraged the congregation to rally together to show this man, and especially his wife, an outpouring of love, which they did. Congregants "ministered" to this sister, as they regarded her. They anonymously

paid for her therapy and attended counseling sessions with her, and some older men in the congregation, whose professional training and experience qualified them, chose to befriend the man, supporting him through repentance, court proceedings, and doctor visits, and learning about the abuse he had suffered as a child and a grown man, showing him better ways to cope and heal than the ones he had been choosing.

This kind of communal solidarity continues in times of crisis. In 1833, Latter-day Saints were mobbed and forced from Jackson County, Missouri. Fellow saints gathered food and clothing and delivered it to them, trekking more than 800 miles by foot. In 1838, Latter-day Saints in Missouri were gang-raped and massacred. When they retaliated, they were forced from the state by the governor's executive order, which we now know was timed to make it impossible for them to benefit from their work to improve thousands of acres of land under the Preemption Act of 1830, making that same land available to the attackers at pennies on the dollar.⁴⁶ The Mormon exiles covenanted with each other that none of them would be left behind in Missouri due to poverty. For Latter-day Saints and other religious minorities, such attacks are not a thing of the past.

On September 28, 2025, a gunman drove a pickup truck into an LDS chapel in Grand Blanc, Michigan, opened fire on the congregation, and set the building on fire. He killed four people and injured eight before police killed him.⁴⁷ The members of the congregation and their neighbors rapidly mobilized networks of support characteristic of Latter-day Saint congregational life. Meals, messages of support, and coordinated assistance for affected families were followed by online fundraisers for the widows and injured victims, which reached their

⁴⁶ Jeffrey N. Walker, "Mormon Land Rights in Caldwell and Daviess Counties and the Mormon Conflict of 1838: New Findings and New Understandings," *BYU Studies* 47, no. 1 (2008): 4–56.

⁴⁷ Associated Press, "Gunman Opens Fire at Michigan Church and Sets It Ablaze, Killing at Least 4 and Wounding 8," *AP News*, September 28, 2025.

goals within days, while additional campaigns were organized to assist survivors and the broader community.⁴⁸ Trained therapists from my ward in New Jersey immediately traveled to Michigan to help the victims of this attack. Notably, Latter-day Saints also organized a fundraising effort for the attacker's widow and child, raising \$300,000 to help treat a son's rare genetic disorder. The dense relational networks of Latter-day Saint congregational culture reinforces communal bonds that hinder the power of violence to fragment the community.⁴⁹ In a covenant community there are no sides. We are all God's children, and we are all connected.

Violent power needs sides because for one to be powerful, one needs to have power over something or someone else. However, divine power only needs the recognition that there are no sides, but parts of one greater whole. Divine power comes from recognizing and living in accordance with what is already true, which is that all people are interconnected—made from the same substance which is “intelligence or in other words light and truth” (D&C 93:36).

In short, there are many actions of peace happening across the globe that never get recorded. In the Latter-day Saint context, these happen because the believers put highest priority on making, keeping, and renewing covenants that include the promise to consecrate their lives to establishing Zion on earth. In Zion, we are all one.

1.2 And its near enemy

The near enemy of covenant living is what is colloquially called ‘Mormon culture.’ This is a sense some members feel, especially those living in predominantly LDS areas such as Utah, that there is a pressure to conform to views and practices that have accumulated regionally but

⁴⁸ Reuters, “Shooter Kills at Least Four, Wounds Eight at Michigan Church,” September 29, 2025.

⁴⁹ “2025 Grand Blanc Township Church Attack,” *Wikipedia*, last modified February 4, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025_Grand_Blanc_Township_church_attack (accessed March 16, 2026).

are not part of the "restored gospel of Jesus Christ." At its most mild, "Mormon culture" looks like petty behavior towards those who don't fit the mold. At its worst, it includes hateful and cruel words and actions towards "others," or to non-conforming insiders. This dangerous mix of social and political culture with religion is a recipe for giving divine approval to flawed human ideas.

This phenomenon is not unique to the LDS faith, but it does take on unique LDS jargon and appearances. However, the deeper phenomenon exists across time and cultures. Group conflict theory shows this well. To tackle the issue at the Mormon culture level, then, would be like merely mowing down weeds that will grow back tomorrow instead of pulling them up by the roots. The issue at hand is not 'Mormon culture,' but innate human fallibilities as they manifest in Mormon contexts.

Some of the biggest problems with Mormon culture are what Irving L. Janis, an 1900s American social psychologist, called groupthink, referring to a group whose desire for harmony and conformity results in minimizing conflict, suppressing dissenting viewpoints, and isolating from outside influences. This results in dysfunctional decision making and disasters. Consider the ward council, discussed positively above. At its best, the various leaders who compose the council bring diverse talents and perspectives to the table and discuss, with charity for each other, how to best help. Wise, inspired decisions are often the result. Unfortunately, so is the near enemy, which undermines the creative potential of the group.

An oft quoted Book of Mormon scripture is that 'contention is of the devil' (3 Nephi 11:29). Latter-day Saints who do not know the difference between destructive and constructive conflict, often view any form of disagreement as 'literally of the devil.' If one starts with this basic assumption, then groupthink is a natural outcome as people avoid any kind of conflict at all

costs. While groupthinkers may cite scripture about unity to uphold their point, I think there is something deeper going on. For most people, conflict causes fear. Conflict is in many ways a manifestation of the unknown. Where we once felt like we had solid footing and a complete understanding of the world, now we are unsure. And that is terrifying. Most people would rather physically put themselves in harm's way than put their worldview at risk, which explains why so many people are willing to die for their beliefs. So, in their fearful state, many people avoid conflict at all costs and, as humans are prone to do, justify their actions after the fact with reasoning and rhetoric, and religious reasoning and rhetoric is especially useful for reinforcing one's worldview.

Janis identified eight symptoms of groupthink, all of which I have seen present to varying degrees within Latter-day Saint culture and church meetings. The symptoms are:

1. Illusions of invulnerability, leading to excessive optimism and risk taking.
2. Unquestioned belief in the morality of the group, leading to group members ignoring the consequences of their actions.
3. Rationalizing warnings that might challenge the groups assumptions
4. Stereotyping outsiders of the group as weak, biased, or stupid
5. Self-censorship of any ideas that might challenge the group's consensus
6. Illusions of unanimity among group members as silence is viewed as agreement
7. Group members who question the group being pressured to conform
8. The presence of mindguards—members who take on the role of shielding other group members from dissenting information.

An 1832 revelation to Joseph Smith about organizing a school to train church leaders says, “Let one speak at a time and let all listen unto his sayings, that when all have spoken that all may be edified of all, and that every man may have an equal privilege” ([D&C 88:122](#)). The Church's current instructions to leaders emphasizes this teaching and gives these directions for councils:

In a council that includes women and men, the leader seeks insights and ideas from both. Women and men often have different perspectives that provide needed balance. Men and women reach better decisions and have greater success in the Lord's service as they value each other's contributions and work together.

A leader guides the council's discussions. However, he or she should listen more than talk. When a council leader shares his or her perspective too early, it can inhibit the contributions of others. When necessary, the council leader gently redirects or refocuses the discussion.

As noted above, every Latter-day Saint congregation has one of these councils. Ideally, they should minimize group think. However, a pressure to conform can lead to it anyway. The congregations that function best, pick people to be in their councils who disrupt groupthink. Many congregations reinforce groupthink, however. It is common in these congregations for members of a council who challenge consensus to be dismissed or "released" from the role or "calling" that includes them in the council.

Groupthink relies on the world's view of power in which there are obviously 'right' and 'wrong' groups of people and the 'right' group needs to prevail. Groupthink assumes that you and yours belong to the 'right' group. Anything that could challenge or disrupt the group's way of thinking and acting is obviously labeled the 'wrong' group. The examples of covenant culture

cited above also had examples of groupthink. Some older people in my home ward were upset with the bishop for telling the whole ward about the man accused of downloading child pornography. They preferred the illusion of harmony over the safety and protection of children. While it was a Latter-day Saint who organized the funds for Sanford's family, and the money was raised because hundreds of Latter-day Saints donated, some opposed supporting the family of the man who had attacked their group.

As Latter-day Saints vacillate between Mormon groupthink and covenant culture, let us remember how the gospel inverts the world's notion of power. One pertinent way this happens is the oft-repeated command in scripture to 'fear not.' Fear leads to either the complete avoidance of conflict or engaging in it destructively. Peace researcher and practitioner Chad Ford illustrates this in his book *Dangerous Love*. He shows that when fear is set aside, humans have an incredible capacity to solve problems constructively, generating ideas that would not exist without the tension of difference.

In an 1844 letter, Joseph Smith wrote that "By proving contraries, truth is made manifest."⁵⁰ By engaging in conflict in a constructive way, Saints can come together and find truth, not in a black and white way, but in a dialectical way. By putting two opposing views side by side, each will refine the other until the best in both remains. This is the work of building Zion: refining all people and ideas into their best selves.⁵¹ The opposite of this refining process, what is termed collusion in conflict theory, is when contraries bring out the worst in the other, making each more jagged and sharp, easier to hurt others and more fragile themselves. The

⁵⁰ Letter to Israel Daniel Rupp, 5 June 1844, p. 2, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 13, 2026, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-israel-daniel-rupp-5-june-1844/2>. Spelling standardized.

⁵¹ Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye, *Sacred Struggle: Seeking Christ on the Path of Most Resistance* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2023).

missing ingredient is the covenant bonds that are filled with charity, or pure love, for those who are different from us.

Another well known and loved Book of Mormon scripture comes from the Israelite prophet Lehi. In teaching his son, Jacob, about God's plan, Lehi explains that there must be "opposition in all things" (2 Nephi 2:11). Lehi goes on to explain the nature of creation, which as peace scholars Patrick Mason and David Pulsipher noted, is full of contraries: day and night, earth and water, male and female, justice and mercy. Lehi drew attention to the contraries in Eden's tree of life and tree of knowledge, one with the sweet fruit of life, the other with the bitter forbidden fruit. It is important to note here that this passage, along with a few others in restoration scripture, give Latter-day Saints a dramatically more positive view of Eve than one finds in Catholic or Protestant Christianity. To Latter-day Saints, Eve is a hero who made the right choice when given an impossible dilemma. By proving contraries, in other words, Eve made truth manifest. Lehi explains that if our first parents had not eaten the bitter fruit, they would never have known joy or misery. They would have existed in a stasis for all eternity, never knowing pleasure or pain. As Lehi's memorable line puts it, "Adam fell that men might be; and men are that they might have joy" (2 Nephi 2:25). The contraries that exist in mortality make joy possible. Contraries fulfill God's plan, which is for Their children to learn for themselves through their own actions, including errors, how to navigate a cosmos full of opposites. As Mason and Pulsipher put it, "rightly understood and engaged, conflict is one of God's great gifts to humanity."⁵²

⁵² Mason and Pulsipher, 68-69.

Groupthink is, in Latter-day Saint terms, living into Satan's plan of complete conformity and enforced harmony, no individual agency to decide or choose. A better-informed theology of conflict can help Latter-day Saints break out of their fear and groupthink. I know because it is what helped me.

The Latter-day Saint understanding of God's purposeful creation, including a fortunate Fall, suggest that the unity of Zion, where all are of one heart and one mind, is not enforced conformity and uniformity. Rather, becoming like God requires openness and vulnerability to the contraries of the world. This means learning to respond—not with fear—but with receptivity and understanding. God, who perceives the cosmos in all its endless diversity, recognizes that these differences are what make creation beautiful and whole. God created contraries and called them good.

2: Direct: Dwell in righteousness

Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction.

—Martin Luther King Jr.⁵³

What sin is

Galtung defines violence as anytime human beings are being influenced so that their somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations.⁵⁴ In Latter-day Saint theology, a person's fullest potential is godhood. Anything that would inhibit a person from reaching this is, therefore, violence. In religious terms, we call that sin.

Some Christian traditions seem to view sin as arbitrary rules created by an ephemeral force. If these rules are kept then the rule-keeper will one day be rewarded with heaven, and if not, punished with hell. Initially, there was nothing in the Book of Mormon or Joseph Smith's early revelations to challenge that.

Smith's ancestors were Calvinists. They believed that God saved sinners or damned them according to “his sovereign pleasure, his arbitrary will, restrained by no obligation.”⁵⁵ Smith's paternal grandfather broke from this tradition. He and his son, Joseph Smith's father, organized a Universalist society of believers that God would save everyone. Though quite opposite in the scope of salvation, Calvinists and Universalists agreed that God made all the decisions about it. Joseph Smith gravitated to soteriology that made space for human will, or what his later

⁵³ Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 53–55.

⁵⁴ Galtung, Johan. "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6:3 (1969): 168.

⁵⁵ Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741), in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 90.

revelations call agency. Of the churches Smith sampled in his teens, Methodism was the one he favored.

Then, in February 1832, while studying the Gospel of John, Smith saw a series of visions that probed what historian E. Brooks Hollifield described as “realms of doctrine unimagined in traditional Christian theology.”⁵⁶ More revelations in September, December and again in May 1833 moved Smith's restored gospel further from traditional Christianity. They envisioned a different kind of cosmos, composed of kingdoms of greater and lesser degrees of glory, light, and power, which is an actual substance that was “not created or made, neither indeed can be,” but it comes “from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space” (D&C 88:7-13; 93:29). This substance is “the law by which all things are governed, even the power of God” (D&C 88:13). The Heavenly Parents of all people who exist on earth, learned and followed this glory, light, power, law until they received “fulness” (D&C 93:8-19) They now give all of us that same opportunity. Translating universal laws into words mere mortals can understand is a fraught process, but one that loving Parents condescend to do again and again throughout human history and cultures.

One of the most marked differences between LDS theology and the rest of Christianity is in the belief that Jesus himself followed this trajectory. Smith's May 1833 revelation offers a midrash on John 1: where Jesus was not fully God at first but became one “grace for grace,” showing us the way to do the same. The revelation, D&C 93, continues to explain the nature of agency. It reads:

⁵⁶ E. Brooks Hollifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought From the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 335. Richard Bushman calls such texts “exaltation revelations.” *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 195.

Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be. All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence. Behold, *here is the agency of man*, and here is the condemnation of man; because that which was from the beginning is plainly manifest unto them, and they receive not the light. And every man whose spirit receiveth not the light is under condemnation. For man is spirit. The elements are eternal, and spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fulness of joy (D&C 93:29-33, emphasis added).

This revelation is why Latter-day Saints believe that all people are co-eternal with God.⁵⁷ God, for saints, is literal parents: more developed beings but the same kind of beings as we are. In their wholeness of power, they created all people from the eternal existing element of intelligence, which is the same substance as light and truth. In their love, God is nurturing us to “grow up” to become like Them. Who They are is beings who use Their capacity as Gods to love, nurture, care, serve, weep with, and hope that Their children will love them back and choose what will make us happy. The one thing they will not do in their infinite capacity, is force us, for if we are forced we do not choose love. To be like Them is to be whole, perfectly passible, capable of both the fullness of joy and vulnerable to pain and suffering that causes gods to weep (Moses 7:28). The greater capacity for grief equates to a greater capacity for joy, for both are generated by the love in our relationships.

Latter-day Saints do not believe in hell, at least not in a traditional Christian sense. Smith's February 1832 visions, D&C 76, describes graded kingdoms of heaven and likens them to the sun, the moon, and stars in their light. The soteriology here mixes the universalism of

⁵⁷ Mason and Pulsipher, 4-5.

Smith's father and grandfather with Smith's agency-honoring inclination. It repeatedly emphasizes that “all might be saved” by Jesus Christ and that he will save “all the works of his hands” (D&C 76:42-44). The celestial kingdom, like the sun, is where those go whose earnest desire is to become as God is. They dwell in God’s presence and “he makes them equal in power, and in might, and in dominion,” fully joint-heirs with Jesus Christ (D&C 76:94-95; Romans 8:17). The Terrestrial kingdom, like the moon, is full of honorable, just people who chose glory, just not the fulness of it, and who therefore “receive of his glory, but not of its fulness.” (D&C 76:76). This is understandable. In LDS theology, to be God is to have an everlasting stewardship that you have proven you can and will care for in love and righteousness. Not everyone wants to develop into the kind of being that could do that well or even want the responsibility and heartache that comes with it. The lowest, telestial kingdom, like the stars, is where those who use and abuse others with no remorse or repentance go. Their choices consigned them to an existence without relationships or growth. They are the last to be resurrected, but they are “heirs of salvation” through Jesus Christ, in an individualized heaven that is not remotely as glorious as God's presence, but still “surpasses all understanding” (D&C 76:81-89).

This is the LDS theological backdrop to the question behind what sin is. It seems to me that most people understand the word ‘sin’ as synonymous with an ‘evil action.’ But my religious upbringing gave me a different definition. Sin is anything that inhibits the divine growth of a human to become their fullest divine potential. Some sins are certainly evil, such as those that intentionally harm others. However, most sins are refusals to grow. This makes them not evil, per se, but ones that certainly inhibit a person's fullest potential.

The Don'ts

'Don't' commandments are important in most religions, and for society generally. Don't kill is a great starting place for how to build peace; So is don't lie, cheat, or steal. However, like negative peace, when the 'don't' commandments become one's sole focus, their religion is likely on its way to fundamentalism.

But there's another form of the 'don'ts' I find pervasive in secular philosophy. There's a notion that as long as I am not a 'bad person' I don't need to follow old-fashioned religious rules. However, this is a rather shallow way to think and leads to a hollow life.

We may prevent damage to a relationship by not actively doing harm, but no relationship thrives from absence alone. Relationships are built in the good we do. Not doing harmful actions is like doing negative peace. Necessary and important, yes, but when it becomes the sole focus of a person, that person regresses to their least developed state of being. All people grow by *doing* and stretching beyond what they are capable of in the present. To expand on Martin Luther King Jr.'s analogy in the epigraph, only light dispels darkness. Light is the constant input of good actions, the doing more than just existing neutrally, by "not being bad." This leads us to the do's of religion.

The Do's

Jesus's Sermon on the Mount encouraged the 'do's.' Do turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39). Do love your enemy (Matthew 5:44). If you don't do these things, how are you any different from others? Anybody can love those who love them. Anybody can hit back when provoked. It takes discipline and love to go out of one's way to do good, not just to avoid doing bad. Just as with positive peace, doing good actions is necessary to build. The structure of the

LDS church subtly promotes the do's all the time. Being a Latter-day Saint encourages attending church weekly, abstaining from certain foods and beverages, accepting callings, counseling with people different from yourself, ministering to families, donating income to feed the hungry, reading scripture, praying daily, and more. Collectively, these actions, when done for the right reasons over a lifetime, make people a better version of themselves than they would be otherwise.

For Latter-day Saints, a large part of the importance of the restoration is the establishment of the New and Everlasting covenant. The culmination of this covenant is a marriage sealing. It is not a sin to remain unmarried in the LDS faith, but nothing is more highly encouraged than covenant marriage. Marriage and family is the ultimate *do* in the LDS community. As Doctrine and Covenants 132 puts it, if a couple is sealed in the marriage covenant and they keep that covenant, "then shall they be gods." Jennifer Finlayson-Fife, an LDS relationship and sexuality coach with a PhD from Boston College in counseling psychology, defines this covenant as promising God and your partner to constantly bring your best self to the partnership.

Finlayson-Fife's work breaks through the conservative cultural noise around relationships, sex, and marriage, and returns to the roots of LDS theology and doctrine to help people make marriage what it was meant to be: Not a duty or an obligation. Not something to be endured or just a mechanism to bring more children to the world. Covenant marriage, rather, is meant to be a place of joy and true belonging to both oneself and to another.

Marriages typically begin with a sense of joy, but if not lived out through the inevitable conflicts of marriage, then the joy is flighty. One becomes fully known by living with a partner through a lifetime, seeing the best and the worst in each other. Conflict, when worked through

constructively, forges stronger bonds. Nothing creates a stronger bond than marriage partners committed to navigating life together. Marriage is a refining and sanctifying school that, when done right, has more capacity than any other institution to bring about joy. (For the same reason, it has an incredible capacity to catalyze misery.) Done well, marriage fulfills two of the deepest human needs: belonging to oneself, and belonging to others. The work of a marriage is how to be true to yourself and how to love another human being for who they are, even though who they are is fundamentally different from you. The work of marriage is to expose our weaknesses, and provide a safe space to overcome them because we are motivated by love for the one our weaknesses impact. In this process, one's best self emerges over a lifetime.

While marriage is the pinnacle example for Latter-day Saints, and an excellent case study of how constructively conflict can fortify a relationship and destructive conflict will ruin one, it is just an example of all the other do's in the LDS faith.

Another big do is to attend church and serve the local congregation in a calling. I saw the fruits of both of these one Fast Sunday in my ward in New Jersey. For Latter-day Saints, the first Sunday of the month is called Fast Sunday because we all fast for two meals and donate the money that would have been spent on those meals to feed the hungry. During the Sacrament meeting hour of church, after the ordinance of sacrament is administered, the microphone is open to anyone in the congregation to share their testimony. I watched as an autistic transgender youth bore a rambling testimony for about twenty minutes. They were followed by a single mother who shared how she recently returned from her father's funeral. She said there were things her father had done that she had never been able to forgive him for, and she hadn't planned on attending the funeral. But the bishop of the ward had counseled with her and given her a priesthood blessing of peace. She had attended, and found closure at the funeral, was surrounded by her

siblings, and had finally been able to forgive her father. She expressed her deep gratitude for that gift. As she exited the podium, a teenage girl with Down syndrome stood up, gave her a hug, then proceeded to share her own testimony. She was followed by a man who I knew to have a very conservative view of gender, but in his testimony he thanked the transgender youth, calling them by their chosen name, for their beautiful testimony and how it had spoken to him.

I thought about how I had just witnessed the fruits of Zion at work, transforming broken people grace for grace into people they never could have imagined themselves to be otherwise. The transgender youth testified about how God helped them through friendship conflict. The man who thanked that youth, his heart changing because he was attending church with that youth, and because they each held callings that put them in contact with each other, had caused each of them to grow past their previous prejudices. The woman who forgave her father and found peace.

Ideally, Latter-day Saints keep commandments not because we believe those who don't are 'bad' or 'evil,' but because we see the value in what the actions bring into our life. We are not just trying to be a good people; we are striving to be godly in all we do. We are striving to be whole. At least, that is what the scriptures teach. Too often does the near enemy of commandments creep in.

Sin's near enemy

The near enemy of commandments is when they become a stick to hit oneself or others. Reflecting on the perfectionism study discussed in the introduction, when commandments become extrinsic motivators they lose their value and purpose. While the study examined the way this becomes internally processed as toxic perfectionism, I theorize that there is an external process that shames and judges others, viewing them as worthless when they are perceived as not

measuring up to a standard. These people tend to stay in the church while those who feel shamed tend to leave. Whether internally or externally directed, the root is the same which is seeing commandments as means not ends. In my observations, this hinges on the difference between being motivated by fear or being motivated by love.

During the 2024 U.S. Presidential election, I saw a fellow Latter-day Saint post a picture of Jesus with the caption “what part of love your enemy don’t you f****ing understand?” I found this such an ironic post. This person was using the commandment to love your enemy as a weapon to hit their enemies with, not as a directive to live. By doing this they drove a wedge deeper between themselves and those they viewed as enemies. I doubt the post changed anybody’s mind, and likely only made the enemies more sure in their position. The darkness of the post was in response to the darkness of those who fear and hate, but it brought no light to the situation. Darkness added to darkness leads to a descending spiral of destruction.

Judging others rather than reflecting on one’s own actions is not a uniquely LDS phenomenon. Psychologically, it is much easier for all of us to critique and judge those around us rather than to metacognitively work on ourselves. This takes on unique forms of judgment in various group settings, depending on the social norms and cultural practices, but it is the same root issue. Jesus also spoke to this phenomenon in the Sermon on the Mount, saying why look at the speck in another's eye but ignore the rod in your own? (Matthew 7:3-4).

In the April 2023 General Conference, the late LDS prophet Russell M. Nelson said in his sermon, "Peacemakers Needed":

If a couple in your ward gets divorced, or a young missionary returns home early, or a teenager doubts his testimony, *they do not need your judgment*. They need to experience the pure love of Jesus Christ reflected in your words and actions.

If a friend on social media has strong political or social views that violate everything you believe in, an angry, cutting retort by you will not help. Building bridges of understanding will require much more of you, but that is exactly what your friend needs.⁵⁸

Nelson's call to Latter-day Saints illustrates that judgment is a pervasive problem among us, and that we can and should do better. The urge to critique others stems from a false sense of power: superiority. Violent power works by putting someone down, making them inferior to the superior judge. Latter-day Saints are not immune to this very human, very harmful instinct, but our teachings call on us to rise above it. Commandments are expressions of love, both from a God who gives them knowing they are the path to the greatest happiness, and those who strive to follow them to the best of their abilities because they love the God that loved them first. The near enemy of commandments is viewing the same directives not as a path of light to follow, but ways to trip people up on their journey of life and condemn them the second they fall. Jesus taught in Matthew 22:39-40 that the two greatest commandments are to love God and love your neighbor.

Latter-day Saints keep commandments as ways to bring light into the world because, like our Savior, with whom we are in the process of co-creating, we aren't here to condemn the world, but to save it (John 12:47).

⁵⁸ Russell M. Nelson, "Peacemakers Needed," April 2023 General Conference. Emphasis added.

3: Structural: No poor among them

Said Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananiah: "I was traveling, and I met with a child at a crossroads. I asked him, 'which way to the city?' and he answered: 'This way is short and long, and this way is long and short.' I took the 'short and long' way. I soon reached the city but found my approach obstructed by gardens and orchards. So I retraced my steps and said to the child: 'My son, did you not tell me that this is the short way?' Answered the child: 'Did I not tell you that it is also long?'"
 –Eruvin 53b

The Law of Consecration

The ultimate covenant in the Latter-day Saint temple endowment is to accept the law of consecration.⁵⁹ From a revelation to Joseph Smith in February 1831, it is to “remember the poor, and consecrate of thy properties for their support that which thou hast to impart unto them” (D&C 42:30).⁶⁰ Smith's revelations certainly did not originate the religious obligation to care for the poor, but it became paramount and institutional in his “doctrine and covenants.” That 1831 revelation continues, “if thou obtainest more than that which would be for thy support, thou shalt give it into [God’s] storehouse.” The storehouse then uses the collective resources to administer those in need. But consecration is more than just giving away one’s excess; it is the sanctification that comes from giving intentionally, willingly, and for the right reasons.⁶¹ In their temple rituals, Latter-day Saints covenant to consecrate *all* they have, which goes beyond physical assets to time, talents, and energy, to build up God’s kingdom on earth.

It is common for Latter-day Saints to compare the law of consecration favorably to capitalism or communism, depending on their own views. It is neither. It rejects Adam Smith's

⁵⁹ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “What Is Temple Endowment?,” accessed March 25, 2026, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/temples/what-is-temple-endowment?lang=eng>.

⁶⁰ Revelation, 9 February 1831 [D&C 42:1–72], p. 4, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 25, 2026, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-9-february-1831-dc-421-72/4>.

⁶¹ Steven C. Harper, “All Things Are the Lord's!: The Law of Consecration in the Doctrine and Covenants,” *The Doctrine and Covenants: Revelations in Context*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, J. Spencer Fluhman, and Alonzo L. Gaskill (Provo and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2008), 212–28.

motive of one's own interest in favor of love for God and neighbor (D&C 42:29). But it also rejects state or church ownership of the means of production (D&C 42:32-33).

The world operates on the assumption that power is what allows someone to be safe and in control. This can be wealth, means of production, capital, positions of power, ect. Jesus flipped that assumption, illustrating in teaching and action that divine power comes from vulnerability and love, and where one loves another, one does not control the other. These base assumptions about what power is are the reason that secular and political philosophies consistently fail in creating peace. Peace comes from vulnerability and love, not fear and control. This is also the reason why religion operates in a different way than politics. But there is another reason why the law of consecration is neither capitalism or communism.

Latter-day Saint historians identify three doctrinal pillars of the law of consecration: agency, stewardship, and accountability.⁶² Agency is the volition to act independently, in concert with or counter to the will and commands of God. Without agency, what people give will not be sanctified and if it is not sanctified, it is not consecration. Giving is only consecrated when done out of one's own choice for the right reasons, not compelled.

Once something has been consecrated it is no longer the person's. It is God's. This shifts the mindset over what one has from being an owner to being a steward. An owner is accountable to no one. A steward, while having the capacity to do what they wish with their stewardship, is accountable to the owner who is, in this case, God. As owner, God commands all assets to be used to bless all Their children. In Doctrine and Covenants 38, God's voice says,

⁶² Andrew H. Hedges, J. Spencer Fluhman, and Alonzo L. Gaskill, editors, *The Doctrine and Covenants: Revelations in Context*, ed. (Provo and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2008), 212–28.

What man among you having twelve sons, and is no respecter of them, and they serve him obediently, and he saith unto the one: Be thou clothed in robes and sit thou here; and to the other: Be thou clothed in rags and sit thou there—and looketh upon his sons and saith I am just?...I say unto you, be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine.

God's promise is that whoever is a good steward will inherit all that They have. A unique aspect of LDS theology is the belief that mortal life on earth is educational and probational. We are here to learn how to live a heavenly life. We are here to learn to hold Godly power, which can only be "handled" by persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, love unfeigned, kindness, and pure knowledge (Doctrine and Covenants 121:41-43). This leads to the third leg of consecration. All people will be accountable to God for what they did with what They gave them. But we can only be held accountable because we freely chose (agency) and had assets to choose with (stewardship).

Capitalism diverges from consecration in several ways. It enthrones private ownership and embraces agency in the process, leaving no room for stewardship and therefore accountability. Communism also diverges, but in the opposite direction. In a communistic society there is no agency for one to choose what they will or won't do with assets, the government decides for all. However, a communist government does mimic the concept of giving people 'stewardships' although, without agency one is never truly a steward. Similarly, communism imposes a kind of accountability, counter-correcting for capitalistic attitudes, but no real accountability can exist without individual agency. What ends up happening is the governing body who is supposed to hold others accountable has no accountability, and ends up abusing its power. After a violent struggle with the white citizens of Missouri in the 1830s that completely dispossessed the Latter-day Saints economically and politically, Joseph Smith spoke as much of

himself and the saints as for the Jacksonian settlers when he revealed, “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” (121:39-40).

Capitalism and communism are both built on a secular assumption of power. Because each are missing essential pillars of consecration, neither communism or capitalism have led to societies that truly care for all, that “remember the poor” and “look to the poor and the needy, and administer to their relief that they shall not suffer” (D&C 38:35; 42:30). Consecration is built on the assumption that power is choosing to be vulnerable—vulnerable in caring for others, for care can lead to heartbreak, and vulnerable in giving away some of your assets to those in need.

As of 2026, the LDS church has 17.5 million members.⁶³ Most of them have not covenanted to keep the law of consecration, but millions have. When a Latter-day Saint receives their endowment (which they can choose to do after the age of 18), they make a covenant to keep the law of consecration. One way they observe that covenant is to tithe ten percent of their wealth. Another is to give a monthly fast offering, whatever it costs them to eat two meals, to the Church. With the resources resulting from these offerings, in 2024 Latter-day Saints expended \$1.45 billion to relieve poverty worldwide, contributed 6.6 million volunteer hours, and completed 3,836 humanitarian projects in 192 countries and territories.⁶⁴

The Church operates three universities and two colleges, one of which is completely online and available to anyone with access to the Internet, anywhere in the world. These

⁶³ “The Church Worldwide.” *Church Newsroom*, Accessed on March 1, 2026 at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/learn/facts-statistics?lang=eng>

⁶⁴ “Explore the Caring for Those in Need Summary.” *Church Newsroom*, accessed on March 1, 2026 at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/serve/caring/annual-summary?lang=eng#00000194-7007-da15-a1bc-7d1776b90000>

educational resources are heavily subsidized by tithing, so that people who would otherwise not be able to access or afford higher education can receive it.

As part of its Bishops Storehouse, the Church operates a chain of thrift stores, Deseret Industries, which provides affordable clothing and home goods and employs people who cannot find work elsewhere, either for disabilities, substance abuse, a criminal record, or because of language and immigration barriers. The workers have access to free language classes and self-reliance courses, giving them valuable work experience and new tools to expand their possibilities in the workforce.

In 2018, then Prophet Russell M. Nelson, met with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and began an ongoing dialogue with them about how Latter-day Saints could work to abandon a racist past and proactively help the black community.⁶⁵ Three years later President Nelson announced the church would donate \$1 million each year for the next three years to the United Negro College Fund, \$250,000 to the Amos C. Brown Student Fellowship to Ghana, and \$2 million a year for the next three years to those in underprivileged areas of the U.S., for education and increased self-reliance.⁶⁶

In 1998, Latter-day Saints in South America started the Helping Hands organization that has since spread throughout the global church. In trademark neon yellow shirts, volunteers of Helping Hands respond to disasters whenever they strike. A few of the stories written about their work include cleaning up after hurricanes, cleaning rivers in El Salvador, starting recycling

⁶⁵ Peggy Fletcher Stack., “After a historic meeting, Mormon prophet Russell Nelson, NAACP president call for greater civility and an end to all prejudice.” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, May 17, 2018. Accessed on March 1, 2026 at <https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2018/05/17/after-a-historic-meeting-mormon-prophet-russell-nelson-naacp-president-call-for-greater-civility-and-an-end-to-all-prejudice/>

⁶⁶ “A Juneteenth Update on How the NAACP and the Church Are Blessing God’s Children.” *Church Newsroom*, 19 June 2022, accessed on March 3, 2026 at <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/juneteenth-2022-naacp-initiatives-update>

campaigns in Costa Rica, Cleaning up after an earthquake in the Philippines, donating 400,000 trees to Haiti, or working to reduce hunger in the Eastern US.⁶⁷ This worldwide organization utilizes the locals on the ground to help their communities in whatever needs arise.

A structure that has the capacity and the desire to do such work, is in many ways a structure of peace. As Melissa Inouye once said, “I claim this church as my own and am proud of what is praiseworthy. But there is one church and I am also ashamed of what is shameful.”⁶⁸

The ninth of thirteen articles of Latter-day Saint faith declares: We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the kingdom of God. We believe that the LDS church is part of an ongoing restoration of God’s kingdom that seeks to establish Zion but is not there yet. This process takes time, agonizingly long in some cases, but it is the long-short way. As the process of creating Zion is transforming violent people into peaceful beings, God does not do the work outside of problematic people. They do the work through the problematic people. Indeed, the problematic people are the work. In 2018, Dale G. Renlund, one of the current twelve apostles, said in a conference talk,

“Our Heavenly Father’s goal in parenting is not to have His children *do* what is right; it is to have His children *choose* to do what is right and ultimately become like Him. If He simply wanted us to be obedient, He would use immediate rewards and punishments to influence our behaviors.

⁶⁷ “Helping Hands.” *Church Newsroom*, accessed on March 3, 2026 at <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/helping-hands>

⁶⁸ Melissa Inouye., “A Church That is Real.” *Wayfare* (Jan 2025).

But God is not interested in His children just becoming trained and obedient “pets” who will not chew on His slippers in the celestial living room. No, God wants His children to grow up spiritually and join Him in the family business.

God established a plan whereby we can become heirs in His kingdom, a covenant path that leads us to become like Him, have the kind of life He has, and live forever as families in His presence.”⁶⁹

Because this is the work, the longer path of allowing sins and mistakes to occur so that we can learn and grow from them is part of the plan. To Latter-day Saints, the shorter path, one where we would not be free agents, was Lucifer's rebellious idea in the pre-mortal divine council.⁷⁰

Routinization as consecration’s near enemy

The near enemy of Latter-day Saint consecration stems from what Max Weber termed the routinization of charisma. Charismatic leadership has no legal legitimacy to its rule but is followed because of a belief people have in the leader’s special powers. Many religious organizations start off with charismatic leadership. However, as Weber notes, charismatic rule is inherently unstable because charisma, over time, becomes mundane.⁷¹

As the LDS church became established, the charisma started to wear off, and the growing membership required a more institutional structure. The magnitude of the structure of the LDS church is what allows it to care for so many so well. But its institutional nature has also become a

⁶⁹ Dale G. Renlund, “Choose You This Day,” October 2018 General Conference.

⁷⁰ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Pearl of Great Price: Book of Moses*, Moses 4:3, accessed March 25, 2026, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/pgp/moses/4?lang=eng>. Philip L. Barlow, “Shards of Combat: How Did Satan Seek to Destroy the Agency of Man?,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2021): 113–26, accessed March 25, 2026, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol60/iss3/10>.

⁷¹ Max Weber., *Economy and Society a New Translation*. Edited and translated by Keith Tribe. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press, 2019. 337.

stumbling block as it makes changes difficult. As the church sought for stability, it adopted views and systems from the larger culture that were not original. Racism and sexism both became institutional in blatant and subtle forms, shaping the church structure and its policies.

In 1852, Brigham Young, the successor to Joseph Smith as prophet of the LDS church, instituted a race-based priesthood ban. It prohibited black men from being ordained to the priesthood and black women and men from participating in temple rituals. Racist teachings began to be taught to explain the policy which was so at-odds with the Book of Mormon's teachings that "All are alike unto God, black and white, bond and free..." The race restriction was reversed in 1978, extending ordination to all men and temple covenants to all members of the church. While the church today disavows all the racist explanations for the policy, they persist among older church members, and the racist policy is a blight on church history that is painful for many. Elder Peter M. Johnson of the Seventy said in the October 2025 General Conference: "Early in my missionary service, I learned that there was a period when those of Black African descent were not allowed to enjoy *all* of the blessings of worshipping in the house of the Lord. Learning this for the first time brought feelings of anger, confusion, doubt, and fear. These feelings were so intense that my ability to recognize the Holy Ghost was lost for a season."⁷²

I believe that church leadership have the best of intentions for all church members, but the top leadership is predominantly white, which means they lack the lived experience to fully understand black Latter-day Saints and aspects of church culture or policy that are difficult for

⁷² Peter M. Johnson, "The Power of Ministering to the One," *General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 195th Semiannual, Sunday morning session, October 5, 2025, accessed March 25, 2026, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2025/10/44johnson?lang=eng>.

them. This has been gradually changing since the reversal of the racial restriction, and in 2022 Tracy Y. Browning, a black woman, was called as a counselor in the Primary General Presidency.

An example of leaders genuinely trying but still lacking lived experiences, comes from a post written by Sistas in Zion, a media presence run by two black Latter-day Saint women, Tamu Smith and Zandra Vranes. After the passing of Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, an apostle in the church, one of them wrote a Facebook post about her experiences with Elder Holland. She wrote of a conversation she had with him, where she asked a difficult question and his answer did not satisfy her, so she shut the conversation down. A few months later she was invited to a worldwide training for church leaders. When she entered the room, Holland went to her, called her by name, and gave her a hug. She tried to apologize for their last interaction, but he stopped her and said that it had deeply mattered to him. It had led him to ask difficult questions and to see things differently.⁷³ That is the work of constructive conflict—that is the work of Zion, transforming people grace for grace into more divine beings. Even apostles.

Sexist policies were less dramatic and visible than racist ones. Latter-day Saint women were actively charismatic during the first dozen years of the restoration. A June 1830 revelation through Joseph Smith to his wife, Emma Hale, legitimized her spiritual gifts and said she should be ordained to use them in ministering to the body of the church (D&C 25). In 1842 the Relief Society was founded, and she was ordained as its president, with similarly charismatic counselors and a secretary. The twenty founders of Relief Society soon expanded to hundreds,

⁷³ Sistas in Zion, December 28, 2025, *Yesterday*, an article by Peggy Fletcher Stack in *The Salt Lake Tribune* stirred up a lot of conversation and questions. *Y'all are a mess sometimes*. "Facebook" <https://www.facebook.com/sistasinzion>

then thousands of Latter-day Saint women.⁷⁴ Women now lead not only the Relief Society, but the Primary organization for children and the ministry to young women. However, as the church has become more bureaucratic, these organizations, while still run by women, ultimately account to the men at the top of the church organization. Within the LDS church structure as it stands today, every woman leader ultimately reports to a male leader. On a ward level, the women account to their male bishop. On the general level, the General Presidents of Relief Society, Primary, and Young Women account to the male apostles. These top leaders have curbed the acceptable charismatic gifts of women over time. As mentioned, in the early days of the church, women gave healing blessings, washed and anointed the sick, and laid on hands to rebuke illnesses. This practice gradually declined over time for a combination of reasons, medical advances foremost among them but also the routinization of the ordinances in the church. Women ministered less formally, passing on their gifts primarily orally. Their participation in ordinance work outside the temples gave way when male leaders began to emphasize the passage in James that says to call for the elders (males) to minister to the sick.⁷⁵

Today it is common to hear people say that Latter-day Saint women do not “hold the priesthood,” but the last two prophet/presidents have pushed back against that characterization. In 2014, then apostle and current president, Dallin H. Oaks, said,

“We are not accustomed to speaking of women having the authority of the priesthood in their Church callings, but what other authority can it be?”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, p. 7, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 25, 2026, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/30>.

⁷⁵ Stapley, Jonathan A., and Kristine Wright. "Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism." *The Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 1 (2011): 1-85.

⁷⁶ Dallin H. Oaks, “The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood,” April 2014 General Conference.

Just as racist policies did not align with what restored scriptures teach, the rhetoric around women not having priesthood power doesn't align with what happens in LDS temples today. Every endowed woman in the LDS church is an ordained priestess, and as such has an endowment of priesthood power. Late Church president Russell M. Nelson emphasized this, teaching that every person who makes and keeps sacred covenants and participates worthily in priesthood ordinances has direct access to the power of God, and that those who are endowed in the house of the Lord receive "a gift of God's priesthood power" and the knowledge of how to draw upon it, regardless of gender. Nelson concluded with words that would have resonated with Joseph and Emma Smith and the earliest Relief Society, but which had not been mainstream for a century:

"The heavens are just as open to women who are endowed with God's power flowing from their priesthood covenants as they are to men who bear the priesthood."⁷⁷

The racial priesthood restriction was reversed on a specific date in 1978. Sexist aspects of church structure have been more gradually changed. Many of them were removed under President Nelson's leadership, and I believe there is still more changes to come, beginning with all members understanding and recognizing the priesthood that endowed women hold. Many male leaders believe that they always have the final say because they "hold the priesthood." While most members see the bishop as the head of a ward, I understand that a bishop and a Relief Society president are meant to be equals, a male and a female leader working together to serve their ward members. They are meant to council with each other and come to agreements together, not for one to offer opinions but ultimately be overruled. I have seen that happen. I've

⁷⁷ Russell M. Nelson, "*Spiritual Treasures*," *General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 189th Semiannual, Sunday morning session, October 2019, accessed March 25, 2026, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2019/10/36nelson?lang=eng>

also seen the opposite--bishops and stake presidents repeatedly overruling women's input, including mine.

The last aspect of church structure that I see gradually changing is policies and approaches to LGBTQIA+ Latter-day Saints. There are good reasons to hope for continual progress in this area because considerable change in the church's position has happened in my lifetime. In 2008, the First Presidency of the LDS church wrote a letter to all members in California, urging them to support Proposition 8, a state constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage.⁷⁸ Fourteen years later, in 2022, (after years of engaging in dialogue with LGBTQ groups) the same leaders released a new statement expressing gratitude for those who worked for the passage of the Respect for Marriage Act, which protects the rights of "our LGBTQ brothers and sisters," and siblings. The Utah law also protected religious freedom protections. This context leads me to understand the church's statements as LDS church leaders being more concerned with their religious freedoms being in danger than they are frightened of gay marriage being legalized. Similarly, Church leaders learned that LGBTQ people were frightened that their rights were in jeopardy. This common ground allowed all parties to unite behind a bill to protect each and all their rights. The end of the 2022 statement reads,

"We believe this approach is the way forward. As we work together to preserve the principles and practices of religious freedom together with the rights of LGBTQ individuals, much can be accomplished to heal relationships and foster greater understanding."⁷⁹

⁷⁸ "California and Same-Sex Marriage." *Church Newsroom*, 30 June 2008, accessed on March 13, 2026 at <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/california-and-same-sex-marriage>

⁷⁹ "Statement on the United States Congress Respect for Marriage Act." *Church Newsroom*, 15 November 2022, Accessed on March 13, 2026 at <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/respect-for-marriage-act-statement>

The changes haven't just been the church's relation to politics either. In 2015, the Church created a policy that meant any child of gay parents had to receive First Presidency approval to be baptized if they were under age 18. The First Presidency reversed the policy four years later in 2019, allowing for children of LGBTQ parents to be baptized.⁸⁰ While these seem like baby steps, they are still steps that are worth celebrating. They show that the Church may be moving slowly but it is moving towards becoming a more inclusive and loving space for all of God's children. This progress within my lifetime is a testament that change does occur in the Church, and that it is likely to continue. Many of these changes occurred because Church leaders met with, and learned from, LGBTQ people and Church members who were hurt by policies. In 2018, President Russell M. Nelson, late prophet of the LDS church, taught that good inspiration is based on good information.⁸¹ I believe that revelation also comes from constructive conflict, because when we engage in conflict while deeply seeing each other, more truth is brought to the table. Before, all we could see was the truth that was visible to us.

While there is no official polling of Church members to see how the leaders' words and actions have changed the average members' attitudes, there are a few polls of people living in Utah, a state that is roughly 47% LDS.⁸² In 2014, 57% of Utahns said they were opposed to gay marriage. In 2022, 72% supported it.⁸³

⁸⁰ "Policy for Children of LGBT Parents, Members in Gay Marriages." *Liahona*, May 2019, accessed on March 13, 2026 at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2019/05/news-of-the-church/policy-for-children-of-lgbt-parents-members-in-gay-marriages?lang=eng>

⁸¹ Russell M. Nelson "Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives." April 2018 General Conference.

⁸² Ryan T. Cragun, Bethany Gull, and Rick Phillips. "Mormons Are No Longer a Majority in Utah: Causes, Consequences, and Implications for the Sociology of Religion". *Journal of Religion and Demography* 10.1-2 (2023): 162-184. <https://doi.org/10.1163/2589742x-bja10019> Web.

⁸³ Bob Smietana., "How getting burned by Prop 8 led the LDS Church to back a federal same-sex marriage act." *The Salt Lake Tribune*, November 17, 2022. Accessed on March 13, 2026 at <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2022/11/17/how-getting-burned-by-prop-8-led/>

In 2017, M. Russel Ballard, an apostle of the church, did a Q&A session at BYU. In response to questions about the LGBT community, he said they have a place in the kingdom, even if it is currently hard to see. That we must all do better to listen and understand what our LGBT siblings feel and experience, and that we must do better than we have in the past so that everyone has a spiritual home in the Church. He added, in response to another question, that the Church's policy is in support of civil rights for all people, including LGBT people, and that it condemns bullying and harassment of any kind in the strongest terms. The Church openly supported the LoveLoud festival held in Utah, Ballard said, to send a strong message that LGBT youth and adults should never be mistreated.⁸⁴

While Latter-day Saint leaders are changing, a structure as big as the LDS Church makes it difficult for that to trickle down to the laity. In 2026, four years after the Church released a statement that working to protect LGBTQ rights was the path forward even if its position on marriage has not changed, and 9 years after Elder Ballard counseled saints to do better regarding our understanding of the LGBT community, I heard a sermon about how the prophets foresaw the evils of LGBTQ movements in society today. I wished I could tell that speaker that was not the current position of the prophets. But I missed the opportunity for a constructive conflict. Someone who is engaging in that conflict is Charlie Bird, a gay Latter-day Saint who continues to be as involved as church policy allows while being married to his husband. Bird's most recent book, *Expanding the Borders of Zion*, is a step by step guide for how Latter-day Saints can be more inclusive of our LGBTQ siblings even without changing Church policies or doctrines.⁸⁵ Bird's work circles back to the cultural level. LGBTQ people are, he repeats throughout his

⁸⁴ M. Russell Ballard, "Questions and Answers," Brigham Young University devotional, November 14, 2017.

⁸⁵ Charlie Bird, *Expanding the Borders of Zion: A Latter-day Saint Perspective on LGBTQ Inclusion* (n.p.: Birdhouse Books, 2022).

sphere of influence, our covenant siblings and fellow children of God. As such, we are commanded to love them, not ostracize them. John Paul Lederach, a peace professor at Notre Dame, has illustrated that for sustainable peaceful changes to occur, all levels of society must be addressed, but none more so than the grassroots level. Lasting change occurs there.⁸⁶

All three points of Galtung's triangle are necessary for peace, but they are all interconnected as well. Cultural, direct, or structural changes reshape the others. Change is happening slowly, because that is the pace of the long-short way. To go faster, or to force change, or to not meet people where they are, is the short-long way. It leads to a dead-end with barriers too high to climb. The world's form of power would say time is inefficient, and to make the end happen now. Use might to make right. But God's power is nurturing and long-suffering. Vulnerability leaves room open for mistakes to occur and pain to be caused. Mistakes and pain are part of the Latter-day Saint past and present. May we, as the prophets have counseled, engage in constructive conflict with people different than ourselves, to heal relationships and foster greater understanding.

⁸⁶ John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997).

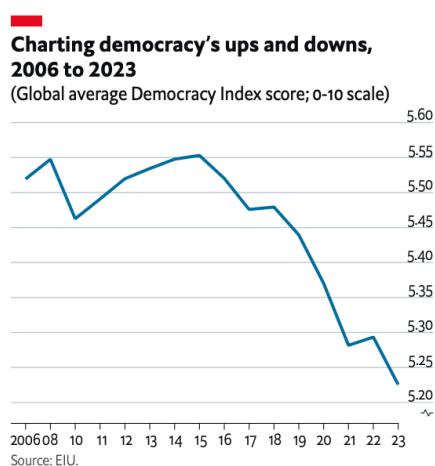
4: The Lord Called His People Zion

“If might makes right, there is no room for love in this world.”
–The Mission

The power struggle

To paraphrase Albus Dumbledore at the end of the fourth Harry Potter book, it is my belief that we are all in for dark and dangerous times ahead. We are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. The spreading of discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open.

According to Democracy Index, as of 2023 less than 8% of the world’s population live in a full democracy while almost 40% live under authoritarian rule.⁸⁷ This marks a new low since the index began in 2006.⁸⁸ The many variations on violent power, authoritarianism being one of its most extreme forms, operate on fear, hate, and control; and it’s on the rise.



⁸⁷ Economist Intelligence Unit. “Democracy Index 2023.” EIU report, accessed March 12, 2024 at <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023/>

⁸⁸ Economist Intelligence Unit, 3.

Stephen O. Smoot, a doctoral candidate at the Catholic University of America, published an article in the *Latter-day Saint Historical Studies* in 2025. It is based on a never-before-studied 500-page dossier the Nazis compiled on German Latter-day Saints during the Third Reich. There are examples in it that illustrate how Latter-day Saints responded to the most infamous example of totalitarian power in both the best and worst ways, with a whole spectrum in between.

Perhaps one of the most notable examples among Latter-day Saints was the excommunication of Helmuth Hubener. Hubener was a teenage saint who secretly listened to forbidden BBC radio broadcasts and distributed anti-Nazi leaflets. He was arrested at age 17 and executed by the Nazi regime by guillotine in 1942. While Hubener's actions are heroic, the local church's response was not. Hubener's branch president, equivalent to a pastor, Arthur Zander, was pro-Nazi and he excommunicated Hubener for treason, nullifying Hubener's covenants and membership. While other church leaders who were not members of the Nazi party protested Hubener's excommunication, they eventually capitulated to Zander out of fear of what the Nazis would do to them and their congregants if they did not visibly show they were distancing themselves from Hubener.⁸⁹

The vast majority of the Latter-day Saints living in Nazi Germany (there were 8,000)⁹⁰ remained politically neutral, a long-standing policy in the church. They neither joined the Nazi party nor went out of their way to oppose it. Despite the church's efforts to appear harmless, the Nazis did not believe the Latter-day Saints were compatible with the regime. One Fraulein Peycke was assigned to monitor Heber J. Grant (the Church president/prophet at the time) when he toured Europe in 1937. She reported that, although he avoided any mention of politics, "the

⁸⁹ Josh Coates and Stephen O. Smoot, "The Nazi Secret Police Files on the Latter-day Saints," *Latter-day Saint Historical Studies* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2025): 18.

Hubener's covenants were restored to him after the war by the first presidency in Utah.

⁹⁰ Coates and Smoot, 4.

views of the Mormons and the articles of their creed do not fit our time or National Socialist Germany.”⁹¹

Paul Herbert Schieck illustrated what Peycke suspected. Schieck was arrested on March 27, 1936 after refusing to perform the Nazi salute and sing either the German National anthem or the Nazi Party anthem at a company event. During his interrogation he said,

I neither sang nor raised my right hand during this. My reason for this is thus: I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). As such, I support the establishment of the kingdom of Zion. It contradicts my personal beliefs to serve both Zion and another Reich. The Mormons intend to establish and build a Zion that is free from national ties...I find only contradiction between the goals of Zion and the national anthem and the German salute and therefore to my inner convictions.⁹²

In 1936, John A. Widtsoe (one of the twelve apostles) condemned both communism and nazism as ideologies that “must be resisted by Latter-day Saints,” because they violated moral agency. Any system, he said, that violates to the least degree a person’s right to act for themselves is not of God.⁹³ His warning holds true today as authoritarianism restricts people’s agency across the globe. The current prophets are aware of this too. On March 12, 2026 the First Presidency sent an invitation to church members to join in a unified fast on Sunday, July 5, 2026 to express sincere gratitude for religious liberty and to pray that these freedoms would be extended to all people throughout the world.

⁹¹ Coates and Smoot, 24-25.

⁹² Coates and Smoot, 74.

⁹³ Coates and Smoot, 10.

Puzzle pieces

In 1842, at the request of John Wentworth, the editor of the Chicago *Democrat*, Joseph Smith wrote a letter about who the Latter-day Saints were and what they believed. From this letter came the thirteen articles of faith. The last of these reads,

We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men; indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul—We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.

While attending an interfaith event, I heard Rabbi Robert L. Tobin of B’nai Shalom explain his belief that all religions are like pieces of a puzzle and the full picture, or God’s work, can only be finished if each piece does their part. In my study of religious faiths, I have found virtuous, lovely, and praiseworthy aspects of each. I learned as a child (when I memorized the thirteen articles of faith) to seek after these things. This essay was an exercise in exploring how the LDS faith’s beliefs and organization lends itself to building a peaceful society. However, I believe my church is only one piece of the puzzle, and we need all to finish the picture.

Latter-day Saints are often criticized for having canonized scripture beyond the Bible. And yet, despite us being frustrated by this critique, some Latter-day Saints fall into the same trap. Anything not in the ‘quad’ scriptures of the Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price, some will dismiss as uninspired. But the Book of Mormon teaches otherwise. In 2 Nephi 29, it reads in God’s voice,

Know ye not that there are more nations than one? Know ye not that I, the Lord your God, have created all men, and that I remember those who are upon the isles of the sea; and that I rule in the heavens above and in the earth beneath; and I bring forth my word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth?

Wherefore murmur ye, because that ye shall receive more of my word? Know ye not that the testimony of two nations is a witness unto you that I am God, that I remember one nation like unto another? ...for my work is not yet finished; neither shall it be until the end of man, neither from that time henceforth and forever.

Wherefore, because that ye have a Bible ye need not suppose that it contains all my words; neither need ye suppose that I have not caused more to be written.

For I command all men, both in the east and in the west, and in the north, and in the south, and in the islands of the sea, that they shall write the words which I speak unto them; for out of the books which shall be written I will judge the world, every man according to their works, according to that which is written.

Any inspired writing found anywhere in the world is God speaking to Their children. No one religion or culture has a complete understanding of God, and that is one reason we need each other.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Latter-day Saints use the term *Zion* for an inclusive, peaceful society, and in Joseph Smith's vision of Zion, other faiths were present.⁹⁴ The original Council of Fifty, a group convened by Smith with the goal of establishing a government in preparation for the eschaton, included three people who were not Latter-day Saints.⁹⁵ The

⁹⁴ Patrick Mason., "The Possibilities of Mormon Peacebuilding." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 37, no. 1 (2004), 31.

⁹⁵ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Council of Fifty*, Gospel Topics Essays.

Ordinance in Relation to Religious Societies in the City of Nauvoo, the headquarters of the LDS church between 1840-1846, reads

Be it ordained by the City Council of the City of Nauvoo, that the Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Latter-day Saints, Quakers, Episcopalians, Universalists, Unitarians, Mohammedans [Muslims], and all other religious sects and denominations whatever, shall have free toleration, and equal privileges in this city.⁹⁶

One of the most repeated commands God gives in the Doctrine and Covenants is to establish Zion. Section 45 includes an apocalyptic picture that explains why. The day will come when the whole world will be ravaged by war, so much so that all people will need to choose between these two forms of power—take up a sword or flee to Zion. Section 45 reads:

It shall come to pass among the wicked, that every man that will not take his sword against his neighbor must needs flee unto Zion for safety.

And there shall be gathered unto it out of every nation under heaven; and it shall be the only people that shall not be at war one with another.

And it shall be said among the wicked: Let us not go up to battle against Zion, for the inhabitants of Zion are terrible; wherefore we cannot stand.

And it shall come to pass that the righteous shall be gathered out from among all nations, and shall come to Zion, singing with songs of everlasting joy.

Religion is uniquely positioned to build a peaceful society because it operates on all three points of Galtung's triangle. Religion has the capacity to be incredibly violent for this same reason. The invitation of this chapter is for all religious peoples to explain how their own

⁹⁶ Ordinance, 1 March 1841–E, as Published in *Times and Seasons*—A, p. 337, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 14, 2026, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/ordinance-1-march-1841-e-as-published-in-times-and-seasons-a/2?highlight=Mohammedans>.

practices and beliefs lend to building a peaceful society. It is my hope that we can learn from each other to accomplish the work together.

Conclusion

Both the members in the LDS church and the church as a whole, struggle with the innate instinct of self-preservation and fear-based thinking. These understandable yet problematic ways-of-being readily accept the violent power of control as something that will be a safeguard from harm and fear. However, this sense of security ultimately fails because it is based on a lie. Vulnerability is choosing to remain in truth.

The LDS church wrestles with these innate drives because it had been commanded to build Zion. Something that sees the truth: that we are all divinely interconnected. That we are meant to be one. While violent power is alluring, it is not aligned with LDS teachings, theology, and beliefs. We believe we are led by Jesus Christ, and while on earth His teachings and life inverted the ideas of safety, security, and control and showed that love was worth dying for. Because love is the only ultimate power that exists in the universe.

Because both the human instinct and these theologies exist in the church, sometimes the near enemy, which is violent power disguised as church teachings, takes root. This takes the form of Mormon culture over covenant living, judgment over guidance on commandments, and rigid and suffocating hierarchy over a structure that enables exponential amounts of service. While each of these has intricacies could be analyzed, they can also be simplified to “pure religion.” Samuel Brown, an LDS author who explores intellectual theology, once wrote,

“Latter-day Saints believe that the purpose of mortality is to learn how to live heaven life. And heaven life is the life of the gods. And the gods love people who are struggling and

suffering, and the gods never give up on them. Let's stare at that for a moment: serving people who struggle is the work of eternity. If that is true... What should we be doing with our mortal lives?"⁹⁷

May we spend our mortality striving to create Zion, where we are one, dwell in righteousness, and have no poor among us.

⁹⁷ Samuel Brown, "Voices from the Dust: Restoration Ethics at the End of Life," *Wayfare*, February 27, 2025, accessed March 23, 2026, <https://www.wayfaremagazine.org/p/voices-from-the-dust>.

Bibliography

Introduction

Alexander L. Baugh, *A Call to Arms: The 1838 Mormon Defense of Northern Missouri* (Provo, Utah: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History and BYU Studies, 2000).

Arendt, Hannah. "Reflections on Violence." *Journal of International Affairs* 23, no. 1 (1969).

Boggs, Governor Lilburn. Extermination Order. Sos.mo.gov. Accessed at https://www.sos.mo.gov/cmsimages/archives/resources/findingaids/miscMormRecs/eo/1838102_7_ExtermOrder.pdf

Brown, Brené. *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*. First edition. New York: Random House, 2021,

Delilah McCoy Lykins, quoted in Warren A. Jennings, "Isaac McCoy and the Mormons," *Missouri Historical Review* 61, no. 1 (Oct. 1966): 64-65.

Eugene England, "Why the Church Is As True As the Gospel," *Sunstone* 22, nos. 3/4 (June 1999), 61-69.

Galtung, Johan. "Cultural Violence." *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (1990)

Galtung, Johan. "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969)

Goodman, Michael A. "Religion and Perfectionism." *BYU Studies* 63, no. 4 (2024).

In Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 3:190-91.

Lederach, John Paul. *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. Oxford University Press, 2005,

Mason, Patrick Q, & David J Pulsipher. *Proclaim Peace: The Restoration's Answer to an Age of Conflict*. BYU Maxwell Institute & Deseret Book 2021,

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. *Peace and Violence among 19th Century Latter-day Saints*. Gospel Topics Essay.

Sargisson, Lucy. *Fool's Gold? Utopianism in the Twenty-First Century*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012,

Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:290.

The autobiography of Parley P. Pratt. Accessed at <https://mldb.byu.edu/ppprat26.htm>

Cultural

Brown, Samuel, "Voices from the Dust: Restoration Ethics at the End of Life." *Wayfare* (Feb 2025).

Letter to Israel Daniel Rupp, 5 June 1844, p. 2, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 13, 2026, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-israel-daniel-rupp-5-june-1844/2>

Mason, Patrick Q, & David J Pulsipher. *Proclaim Peace: The Restoration's Answer to an Age of Conflict*. BYU Maxwell Institute & Deseret Book 2021, 68.

Wei-Tsing Inouye, Melissa. *Sacred Struggle: Seeking Christ on the Path of Most Resistance*. Deseret Book 2023.

Wirzba, Norman, *Food and Faith: a theology of eating*, 2nd edition, Cambridge University Press 2019. 20-21.

Direct

Galtung, Johan. "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969). 168.

Mason, Patrick Q, & David J Pulsipher. *Proclaim Peace: The Restoration's Answer to an Age of Conflict*. BYU Maxwell Institute & Deseret Book 2021.

Russell M. Nelson, "Peacemakers Needed," April 2023 General Conference.

Structural

“A Juneteenth Update on How the NAACP and the Church Are Blessing God’s Children.” *Church Newsroom*, 19 June 2022, accessed on March 3, 2026 at <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/juneteenth-2022-naacp-initiatives-update>

“California and Same-Sex Marriage.” *Church Newsroom*, 30 June 2008, accessed on March 13, 2026 at <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/california-and-same-sex-marriage>

Dale G. Renlund, “Choose You This Day,” October 2018 General Conference.

Dallin H. Oaks, “The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood,” April 2014 General Conference.

“Explore the Caring for Those in Need Summary.” *Church Newsroom*, accessed on March 1, 2026 at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/serve/caring/annual-summary?lang=eng#00000194-7007-da15-a1be-7d1776b90000>

“Helping Hands.” *Church Newsroom*, accessed on March 3, 2026 at <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/helping-hands>

Inouye, Melissa, “A Church That is Real.” *Wayfare* (Jan 2025).

Sistas in Zion, December 28, 2025, *Yesterday, an article by Peggy Fletcher Stack in The Salt Lake Tribune stirred up a lot of conversation and questions. Y’all are a mess sometimes.* “Facebook” <https://www.facebook.com/sistasinzion>

Stack, Peggy Fletcher. “After a historic meeting, Mormon prophet Russell Nelson, NAACP president call for greater civility and an end to all prejudice.” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, May 17, 2018. Accessed on March 1, 2026 at <https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2018/05/17/after-a-historic-meeting-mormon-prophet-russell-nelson-naacp-president-call-for-greater-civility-and-an-end-to-all-prejudice/>

Stapley, Jonathan A., and Kristine Wright. "Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism." *The Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 1 (2011): 1-85.

Steven C. Harper, "All Things Are the Lord's': The Law of Consecration in the Doctrine and Covenants," *The Doctrine and Covenants: Revelations in Context*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, J.

Spencer Fluhman, and Alonzo L. Gaskill (Provo and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2008), 212–28.

“The Church Worldwide.” *Church Newsroom*, Accessed on March 1, 2026 at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/learn/facts-statistics?lang=eng>

Weber, Max. *Economy and Society a New Translation*. Edited and translated by Keith Tribe. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press, 2019. 337.

Conclusion

Economist Intelligence Unit. “Democracy Index 2023: Age of Conflict.” EIU Viewpoint, 2024, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023/>

Josh Coates and Stephen O. Smoot, “The Nazi Secret Police Files on the Latter-day Saints,” *Latter-day Saint Historical Studies* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2025):

Mason, Patrick. "The Possibilities of Mormon Peacebuilding." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 37, no. 1 (2004), 31.

Ordinance, 1 March 1841–E, as Published in *Times and Seasons*–A, p. 337, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 14, 2026, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/ordinance-1-march-1841-e-as-published-in-times-and-seasons-a/2?highlight=Mohammedans>.

Samuel Brown, “Voices from the Dust: Restoration Ethics at the End of Life,” *Wayfare*, February 27, 2025, accessed March 23, 2026, <https://www.wayfaremagazine.org/p/voices-from-the-dust>.