

Why Do Religious Leaders Promote the "One True Church" Idea?

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Each of us has to face the matter—either the Church is true, or it is a fraud. There is no middle ground. It is the Church and kingdom of God, or it is nothing. Gordon B. Hinckley, LDS General Conference, Spring 2003

As Michael Carr noted in his essay "Is the LDS Church the One True Church" (See http://members.cox.net/mcarr29/zarahemla/one_true_church.htm), the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the "Church", the "Mormon Church", the "LDS Church") and many other religious faiths promote the idea that their way of approaching god is either the only legitimate way, or the best way.

The "one true church" idea is particularly influential within the Mormon Church. While the Catholics, for example, have that belief on their books, it is my perception that it has little effect on the average Catholic. However, the daily behaviour and worldview of the average faithful Mormon is heavily influenced by this idea.

As I have deconstructed my experience within the Mormon Church, I have tried to understand where this idea comes from and how it has affected me. For the moment, however, I wish to focus on one small, but important, aspect of this issue. That is, why would the "one true church" idea be of value to religious leaders who are trying to persuade their followers to continue to follow?

I began to wonder about this question years ago when I noticed the frequency with which Church members and leaders repeated to each other what I have come to call the "one true church mantra". That is, "The Church is true." This is shorthand within the Mormon community for the concept that the Mormon Church is god's one and only true church on the face of the earth – the sole organization with god's authority to perform the ordinances necessary to unite families in the hereafter and to gain entry into god's domain, known as the celestial kingdom.

The one true church mantra is repeated regularly when Mormons gather. It is included in virtually every talk or lesson given during Mormon meetings, including the daily religious instruction that most Mormon teenagers receive through the Seminary program. Church members are taught that it should be included each time they state their beliefs (known in the LDS community as "bearing testimony"), and hence it is repeated by virtually everyone (including small children) who bears testimony at the monthly meetings held by Mormon congregations for that purpose. Mormon families are encouraged to bear this testimony to each other at family gatherings, including weekly Family Home Evenings and during the daily scripture study sessions that they are encouraged to hold. It is at least the subtext, if not the text, of many daily family prayers. It regularly finds its place into correspondence between close friends and family members. To test my instinct in that regard, I just opened the family letter that I received from my father and mother this morning, and found their testimony stated both implicitly and explicitly. The one true church mantra also plays a role in Mormon music, and must be stated as a belief by anyone who wishes to enter a Mormon temple, even for the purpose of simply attending the wedding of a family member. Most mormon missionaries express their testimony, including the belief that the Church is "true", many times a day throughout the course of their missionary service. Etc. It is beyond doubt

that great resources within the Mormon community are devoted to hammering this idea into the collective and individual Mormon psyche.

My study of sociology over the years has led me to conclude that when a message of this sort is given a prominent place within a group of people that it must play an important function. That function is often quite different from what those inside the organization, with a limited view of how it affects them, might think. It took me years, and a trip outside of the Mormon Church, to put my finger on the one true church idea's function.

It is my view that the "one true church" concept sets up a false dichotomy that makes it easier for religious leaders to control their followers. For example, if the Mormon Church is either 100% god's true church, or a fraud, and I have a good feeling about some of my experience with it, does that not mean that the rest (about which I don't have a good feeling) must all be true? Does this not mean that I must give complete obedience to Church authorities, even though some of what they tell me to do makes me feel uneasy, or even bad? Does it not mean that some theory yet to be discovered, or one of the current crop that appear to have miniscule probability of predicting reality, must eventually save the day on the Book of Mormon's historicity and the multitude of other "reality" problems the Church's foundational stories have? In these and other ways, the one true church idea greatly aids the Mormon faithful to make the willing suspension of disbelief required to remain faithful.

The "black v. white" approach at the heart of the one true church concept also facilitates the Church's system of conversion and belief maintenance. Church members and potential converts are told to read the Book of Mormon and that they will have a good feeling about it. This may occur simply because the Book of Mormon has some good things to say. In my case, which is typical, the process was helped along by the fact that most of my Mormon friends and relatives regularly told me that they had these good feelings, while for some reason I had not. This created an anxiety in me that grew over a period of years, and became acute as the time for me to commit to serve a mission approached, and my friends were making that commitment.

I accepted the idea that the Church must be completely true or completely false. I had been taught that from early childhood, and did not have a frame of reference within which I could question it. I also felt some good things when I read the Book of Mormon, and my anxiety started to dissipate as I experienced the nascent feeling that the book was "true". The psychologists and brain architecture researchers tell us that the combination of the above elements is enough to create a minor epiphany, which is how I would describe the moment at which I was struck by the realization that the whole thing **MUST BE TRUE!** This experience became the unshakable bedrock on which my testimony stood. And how could the whole thing be false if I have felt something so good about it? That part can't be false. And from there the true – false dichotomy led me to the conclusion that the whole thing must be true. The Church then encouraged me to express this belief, in the form of my testimony, on a regular basis in the fashion described above. This drilled my newfound belief deep into my subconscious. It is my view that the primary function of the LDS missionary program is just that: to engrain as deeply as possible the one true church mantra in the group of people traditionally the most likely to question the values of any group – young males.

And what about belief and its connection to guilt and from there to control? If the whole thing is true, then I am subject to a massive body of requirements each one of which is a source of guilt, and hence a control lever. If I feel at liberty to believe what I choose, most of my guilt goes away, and with it goes most of the Church's ability to get me to do what it wants.

During my twenty-year plus tenure as a Mormon leader, I heard the terms "cafeteria style Mormons" or "cultural Mormons" used pejoratively to refer to members of the LDS Church who were not as obedient to leadership dictates as the leaders wished them to be. Such members are not as dedicated, obedient etc. as their "faithful" peers, and the leaders fear that such a lax attitude could spread like a form of cancer. This scares the leadership, as do intellectuals who talk openly about problems related to the Book of Mormon's historicity and certain distasteful aspects of Joseph Smith's history. In particular, the leaders fear those Mormons who are prepared to accept that the Book of Mormon contains some inspired writing, but that Joseph Smith made many mistakes while writing it that they are free to reject. If members of the Church feel free to reject some of what Joseph Smith said, they will surely feel free to reject the parts of what current leaders say that do not suit them. This is what the leaders most fear. This approach is a much greater threat to Church leadership than are rabid anti-Mormons.

Cultural Mormons do not do what they are told unless it makes sense, and hence they erode leadership authority. And if they are natural leaders, their attitudes are likely to affect the masses. The sheppard (if not the flock) is better off without such sheep. Hence when they are identified, they must at a minimum be silenced (as long as you are silent, you will be left alone but perhaps watched carefully), but preferably brought back into line. Those who will not get back into line are excommunicated, or as was the case with me, hand in their membership when talk of a "court of love" being held in their honour becomes serious.

To test the sensibility of the black v. white approach, try to think of any other aspect of life in which it would serve us well as a decision making model. Do we accept all of what any school of political thought tells us? How about parenting or child rearing theory? Relationship theory? Educational theory? Economics? Medicine? I cannot think of any other aspect of life in which I would be comfortable accepting the ideas that come from a single source as being my sole guide. Religious belief, in my life, had been established as a unique phenomenon, respecting which all of the rules that governed the remainder of my life were suspended. My acceptance of the one true church concept is what made this possible.

The one true church concept broke down for me as I became aware of numerous other religious belief systems that controlled their followers in precisely the way I was controlled by mine, using the same tools. The theories accepted by these communities were contradictory to those accepted in my community. However, the nature of leadership control was much the same. For many years, I assumed that against all odds my community had the truth and all others were mistaken. As I gradually became aware of the errors that Mormon leadership had made over the years, the lights began to come on. My community was as errant as the others. But, the leaders of my community had much in common with the other religious leaders for whom I had been taught to have disdain. And Mormonism's current leaders were the ones who set up the system designed to keep faithful Mormons, such as me, from understanding their own religious heritage through its history, and hence from understanding the nature of the errors

Mormon leaders have made. Guess toward whom the disdain I was taught to have has now been turned?

Here is a more extensive quote from President Hinkley's talk that is referred to above. There is nothing unusual about it. Countless others of a similar nature could be found. I use this one because it is the most recent I could find.

The book of Revelation declares: "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth" (Revelation 3:15–16).

Each of us has to face the matter—either the Church is true, or it is a fraud. There is no middle ground. It is the Church and kingdom of God, or it is nothing.

This is classic scare/control message, particularly when linked to the rest of LDS dogma in the manner indicated above. It is my view that Church and how it operates make the most sense when viewed through a control/authority paradigm. As soon as I began to use that paradigm to try to understand how the Church has influenced me, things came into focus and I was able to both find the threads that unite my past experience and predict with a high probability of success where things were headed. The "one true church" idea is near the foundation of the LDS control and authority oriented system of religious belief.

As one writer I recently read put it, the question is whether we have religious faith, or whether religious faith has us. If we are well enough informed about what our faith is and how it works in our lives to use it to help us live a full and joyous life, then we have religious faith. If, on the other hand, our beliefs are used by others to control us, then our faith has us. Those others need not be current religious leaders. It is possible to surrender our free will to people who wrote books thousands of years ago that purport to tell us what we should do, or even to abstractions of our own invention.

I have resolved to do what I can to ensure that from now on I have faith, instead of being had by it.