

**“The Gospel is perfect but the people are not”:  
A Critique**

bob mccue

November 10, 2005

<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

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# **“The Gospel is perfect but the people are not”: A Critique**

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To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often. Winston Churchill

## **Introduction**

I was reminded spectacularly a while ago of how imperfect Mormons are, and this started some thought about the old canard “The Gospel is perfect but the people are not”, or as it is sometimes also stated “The Church is perfect, but the people are not.” In order to protect identities, I have mixed up some of the facts that follow. But the essence of what I am about to recount is true to what I experienced.

## **The People Are Definitely Not Perfect**

I was talking with a young LDS friend who some time ago decided not to go on a mission. He knows where I stand, we are friends and I don't think any good would be done were I to push information at him that I don't think he is ready to handle. He seeks my advice from time to time across a wide variety of personal and business issues, and we enjoy each other's company.

### ***Mormon Returned Missionaries Make Better Fathers?***

While chatting, he told me that he was speaking a while ago with the mother of a close LDS friend. She told him that in her experience the LDS men who did not go on missions were less likely to become the kind of fathers who preside over their homes in the way they should. His father – a wonderful man – is a convert who did not serve a mission. Other family members – fine men all – did not serve missions. He is not going to serve a mission.

The woman in question is articulate, intelligent and forceful. He said that he accepted her statement as evidence that she was not to be trusted. But I could tell that what he had been told bothered him. So I broke my usual “hands-off-the-Mormons” rule.

“What about your Dad?” I said. “Great provider. Spends tons of time with his kids and grandkids. Has never had a “high” Mormon calling because he refuses to kiss ass and does not do everything he is told at Church because it would interfere with his work and family activities. From what I can tell, he never accepts anyone else's opinion on anything – religious or otherwise – unless he has thought it through and agrees with it. A great man by every measure I can think of.”

“Why didn't I tell her that!?” he said.

“And how does the rest of the world get along with the Mormon priesthood and returned missionaries?” I wondered. “Let's see. There are 12 million Mormons on the Mormon record books. But I bet no more than 4 million of them are active [I checked later and this is likely

about right – see <http://www.cumorah.com/harvest.html#activity>], and the number is probably less than that given all of the bogus memberships in Latin America where Mormon records indicate that most Mormons live now. But we will assume 4 million. Over half of those are children. That leaves about 1.5 million adults. More than half of those are women, leaving lets say 700,000 active men. How many of those are returned missionaries? Maybe 500,000? Isn't it miraculous that the rest of the world gets along at all?"

And now I was ranting, and could feel my wife tug at my arm.

I continued:

"The next time she says something like that to you, ask her why Utah leads the US in personal bankruptcies, reported spousal abuse, multi-level marketing participation, financial scams, anti-depressant use and certain kinds of suicide. And Utah has the highest concentration in the world of returned missionaries. Mormon culture is toxic. That does not mean it is all bad. It has many admirable attributes. But when you add up the pros and the cons, the cons have it by a wide margin in my view. And don't get me wrong about X [the woman who made the outrageous statement that set me off]. She is a nice lady. She is well-intentioned, energetic, well-read regarding some things, and utterly ignorant regarding Mormonism because she can't afford psychologically to see it as it is. She is culturally blind, as most people are with regard to their dominant culture. That means that when it comes to Mormonism, you should distrust her."

More arm tugging ensued, and I shut up. And I note that I have told my friend many times before that he should not trust me. He should listen to me, and I hope he takes me as seriously regarding religion as he does when he seeks my advice about basketball or business. But it is his life and he needs to make up his own mind after doing his own research.

Since we were talking about Mormon things, we continued. He had mentioned that years ago his Dad told members of his Mormon extended family that homosexuality is biological in nature and that he expected that just as the Church had modified its position regarding blacks and the priesthood, it would eventually do the same with regard to homosexuality. I reminded him of that and told him that I had recently been contacted by some friends in the US who are putting together some information to help an openly gay man who has been an active member of the Church in a large city for a long time to deal with a church court that will likely soon be called to excommunicate him because of his homosexuality. I explained what I was doing to try to help, how it was my understanding that within the gay Mormon community depression and suicide rates are higher than within the gay community at large. And I am sure that many of Mormonism's highest leaders understand the medical and biological data on homosexuality. There have been lectures about it at BYU, and Russell Nelson is an MD. However, if Mormon leaders admit that they have been wrong on this point and science is right, where will that end up? I believe that Mormon leaders feel that they can't afford to admit they are wrong on that point since who knows where that will cause many of their other positions to be questioned, and them demands to be taken less seriously. So, the lives (both in quality and quantity) of gay Mormons will be sacrificed on the altar of maintaining current Mormon authority. This is one of the many things about Mormonism that so thoroughly disgust me I refuse to be associated with the Mormon institution.

After kicking that idea around a bit, I asked him what he thought of the reality that the man I am trying to help is gay, loves being Mormon and is doing all he can not to be thrown out of the Mormon Church. My friend expressed bafflement.

“That,” I said, “makes it clear in my view that there are many ways to view religion and deal with it. I would not tell that man he is ‘wrong’ to be doing what he is. It is his life; he is well informed; and he has the right to live as he chooses. If the niche he has in the Mormon world works for him, great. He is welcome to it. But I personally cannot stand the idea of being associated in any way with an institution that deceives people systematically as Mormonism does, and even worse, will sacrifice the lives of people like homosexuals. I want nothing to do with that kind of thing. We should each decide what is important to us, and act as consistently as we can with that. I am not telling you what you should do. I can’t. You have to decide what your values are and how you will live, and rest assured that there are few things you are likely to do that would impair our friendship.”

### ***The Mormon Mission Experience***

We then changed the subject to basketball, but after a few minutes the Mormon stuff jumped back in. My friend told me about someone he plays basketball with who went on a Mormon mission and had a positive experience. I agreed that sometimes going on a mission can do good things for a young man in terms of teaching discipline and responsibility, but that this education comes at a terrible price. Missionaries are conditioned to obey arbitrary authority exercised by Mormon leaders. They are taught that when it comes to Mormonism, obedience for obedience sake (blind obedience) is of critical importance. This makes it less likely that they will ever find their way out of Mormonism. And then they come home and while at the pinnacle of their obedience to Mormonism are encouraged to commit to the Mormon marriage deal with a faithful Mormon woman where both of them have to make special promises to the Mormon Church that make it a third party to their relationship. Then, they are encouraged to immediately start a family and commit large amounts of time and money to the Mormon Church. This will likely put this poor soul on a treadmill that is designed to run until the day he dies.

“Well”, my friend laughed, “that is not how it went with [friend Y]. He hit the beach almost every day. He ran several kilometres most days. He played on semi-pro baseball and basketball teams. One of his friends came to stay with him for an entire month. Etc. He had a great time.”

“Let’s think about that,” I said. “He makes a whole bunch of promises as to how he will behave. He probably has a form to fill out each week in which he accounts for how he spent his time. He has interviews once a month with his Zone Leader and once every few months with his Mission President. He likely has to lie his way constantly through all of that to avoid being sent home. So, during two years as a Mormon missionary he has been taught that it is OK to make promises and then break them. Great.”

“Fair point”, said my friend.

“Again,” I said. “Mormonism and Mormon missions are not all bad. I learned to speak Spanish on my mission. I learned discipline. I figured out that I could be a good student while I was learning Spanish. But the price I paid was terribly high for that. I believe that I would have been far better off had I stayed in school.”

So, I would agree that "the people" within Mormonism are definitely not perfect.

### **The Gospel is Perfect?**

I did a google search as well as a search of the [www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org) data base of two phrases: “The Church is Perfect” and “The Gospel is Perfect”. I noticed an interesting pattern. By and large,

faithful Mormons do not say “the Church is perfect”, and the lds.org data base does not include a single incidence of that phrase. The faithful almost universally say something like “the Gospel is perfect but the people are not”, and the lds.org site does contain that phrase.

### ***The “Church” v. The “Gospel”***

In 1984 Ronald Poelman, a Mormon General Authority, gave one of many talks that have been given over the years that attempt to explain how the Gospel is different from and yet relates to, the Church. The text of this talk can be found at <http://www.lds-mormon.com/poelman.shtml> and is useful for at least two reasons. First, it provides insight into how LDS leaders see the relationship between the Church and the Gospel, and second, the manner in which it was changed between being read from the pulpit and published sometime later illustrates both LDS leader errancy and the importance Mormon leaders attach to these concepts.

Poelman’s tune does not change much from one version of his talk to another as far as the Gospel is concerned. In the published version, for example, he says:

“The gospel of Jesus Christ is a divine and perfect plan. It is composed of eternal, unchanging principles, laws, and ordinances which are universally applicable to every individual regardless of time, place, or circumstance. Gospel principles never change.”

He goes on to say that:

“The gospel is the divine plan for personal, individual salvation and exaltation. The Church is divinely commissioned to provide the means and resources that implement this plan in each individual’s life. Procedures programs and policies are developed within the Church to help us realize gospel blessings according to our individual capacity and circumstances. Under divine direction, these policies, programs, and procedures may be changed from time to time as necessary to fulfill gospel purposes.”

And here is the statement that was in his talk when read from the pulpit that along with other comments along a similar vein likely caused red ink to spill all over him:

“Sometimes traditions, customs, social practices and personal preferences of individual Church members may, through repeated or common usage be misconstrued as Church procedures or policies. Occasionally, such traditions, customs and practices may even be regarded by some as eternal gospel principles. Under such circumstances those who do not conform to these cultural standards may mistakenly be regarded as unorthodox or even unworthy. In fact, the eternal principles of the gospel and the divinely inspired Church do accommodate a broad spectrum of individual uniqueness and cultural diversity.”

This appears to have shown the Church in too human a light for the liking of Poelman’s superiors, and so he (or someone else) rewrote his talk. The language that replaced the deletion just noted was:

“The eternal principles of the gospel implemented through the divinely inspired Church apply to a wide variety of individuals in diverse cultures.”

Hmmmm. So maybe Mormon leaders are not prepared to admit that the Church is not perfect. They do not go so far as to say that it is perfect, only “divinely inspired”. But they were not comfortable owning up to even the little bit of imperfection to which Poelman alluded.

Poelman also foolishly thought that free agency might be used by each member to determine what was “cultural” and hence imperfect and ignorable, and what was “gospel” and hence perfect and obligatory. That is a dangerous idea. If people took it seriously, they might start disagreeing with the leaders. To nip revolution in the bud, the following change to Poelman’s talk was made. Where he had said:

“The orthodoxy upon which we insist must be founded in fundamental principles and eternal law, including free agency and the divine uniqueness of the individual. It is important therefore to know the difference between eternal gospel principles which are unchanging, universally applicable and cultural norms which may vary with time and circumstance.”

we find in the published talk:

“The orthodoxy upon which we insist must be founded in fundamental principles, eternal law, and direction given by those authorized in the Church.”

Other disturbing references to free agency were likewise removed. Hmmmmmm.

Overall, the talk’s deletions and insertions give an interesting sense as to which warts LDS leaders would most like to airbrush out of their tidy picture, and how they prefer to “spin” their corporate image. It does not take much imagination to see the speech writers and spin doctors arguing over how particular words might be perceived much as would be the case before a political rally. This is far from the image of divine inspiration most Mormons have in mind when they think about General Authorities preparing to speak, much less revising their talks without notice after they have been given and prior to publication.

In any event, from my simplistic point of view the important difference between the “Church” and the “Gospel” is that Mormons think one is perfect and are prepared to accept that the other is not. The Church is the collection of imperfect people who try to follow the dictates of the Gospel, which is taken to be the perfect word of God. Mormon leaders are usually quick to admit that they, and all of their predecessors are imperfect, but insist that despite their imperfections the Mormon Church is still God’s church. Mormons say that God must work through the agency of imperfect humans to accomplish his purposes, one of which is the “perfecting of the Saints”.

I recall being moved a number of years ago at General Conference by a women who spoke in that inimitable Intermountain West accent while modelling a squished beehive-type hairdo. She was, I think, I member of Primary General Presidency. She went on about how grateful she was that members of her ward and stake were imperfect! Spectacularly imperfect! This, she gushed, gave her the chance to develop her patience and love in the best possible environment for that kind of thing! The Church was perfecting her because of the imperfections of its members! Isn’t that amazing! I wonder where else on Earth one might find imperfect human beings to test ones’ patience? This must mean Mormonism is “true”!

### ***The Mormon Church is Far From Perfect***

In my view, the Mormon Church is far more imperfect than Mormons can admit. And this goes well beyond its being comprised of imperfect individuals. The Church is structurally imperfect in ways that incline it toward certain kinds of predictable abuses. And these structural flaws are traceable to its foundational instructions as contained in the Doctrine and Covenants, a set of "revelations" Smith purported to receive from God, and in which he was instructed as to how the Mormon Church was to be set up and operated.

For example, the Mormon Church is non-democratic. History teaches us that when humans have power over other humans that is not carefully circumscribed and subjected to checks and balances that the train will run off the rails. It is not a question of "if, but rather of "when" and "how bad will the damage be". This is why the invention of democracy and the emergence of the modern democratic state is considered to be of such monumental importance in human history. Mormon leaders are constrained in many ways by the rights of citizens within the democratic states in which Mormonism operates, but within their sphere of permitted operation they behave as should be expected of non-democratic leaders. They maximize their influence, and distribute as little information as possible to the membership by way of which they might be held to account for their actions, while extracting the maximum amount of resources of various kinds from their membership.

Among other things, the non-democratic nature of Mormonism explains the astronomical percentage of blood and marital interrelationships within the ranks of high Mormon leadership. The perquisites of Mormon leadership do not generally include a lot of money. But if you don't think that the right to order people around and have them worship you is something people will do almost anything for, read a little history.

I laughed out loud a short time ago when Gordon Hinckley, the current Mormon prophet, feigned astonishment that one of his sons had been nominated for high office within Mormonism. "I had nothing to do with it", Hinckley assured his listeners. His son was called by God to Mormon officialdom, and Hinckley himself was not involved in the process. And I believe him, at least to the extent that he was not directly involved. That is the beauty of the Mormon leadership system – Hinckley would not have to do anything. The rest of the leaders know what to do to keep the game going.

At the congregational level, Mormon leaders are generally chosen from among the more financially successful and respected of the male members. Some of them (Bishops particularly) are then required to dispense advice regarding important, intimate personal problems. These include marital disputes, career advice, teenage difficulties, who one should marry, whether one should go on a mission or to university, etc. The advice most often handed out by these generally well-meaning men is that one should obey the Lord's commandments (that is, stop sinning as defined by Mormonism), spend more time praying and studying the scriptures, and immerse oneself in Mormon service. That is one size fits all advice provided by men who have in general no training in counselling, and are not considered to need any. They rely upon "god's inspiration" to guide them in the advice they give.

If a Mormon bishop is confronted by someone who is obviously mentally ill, most of the time he will tell them to see a doctor. And Mormonism has set up its own psychological counselling system so that Mormons in many places do not have to see a non-Mormon for help with life's emotional challenges. This was likely done because non-Mormon psychologists, oddly enough, often regard Mormonism itself as a big part of the problem and recommend disengagement. As

this pattern became clear, the Mormon Church invested heavily in training and then employed a cadre of counsellors who would offer different advice that encouraged Mormon to remain Mormon.

I heard a few days ago about a young friend who is going through a difficult adjustment after coming home from his mission. He is having trouble deciding what to do for a career and hence what to study; his lacks confidence in his own judgement for a variety of reasons; etc. His bishop's advice – “pray more, study your scriptures more, immerse yourself in church service, and are you sinning?” The boy does not think he is sinning, but who knows. If he follows the Bishop's advice and does not feel better, what is likely to happen? He will become more depressed because not only does he feel poorly, but God is not responding to him and the most likely reason for that within the Mormon worldview is that he is sinning. And so a more strict adherence to Mormon behavioural norms would follow, and this cycle could continue for some time. That could be depressing on a new level. I suspect his difficulty lies in the kind of thing a good psychologist and some career counselling could straighten out without too much trouble.

A medical doctor friend told me recently of a call he received from a bishop of an LDS singles ward with whom he has been friends for years. The bishop was concerned with the degree of depression he was seeing and hearing about during the interviews he conducts with members of his ward. He wanted the docs advice as to whether the problems he was hearing about were clinical, and hence whether he should refer members of his ward to a doctor, or whether the “pray more and stop sinning” advice was enough. This bishop is more perceptive than most.

After listening to the bishop's summary of the problems his ward members had, my friend said that most of what he heard sounded clearly clinical to him, and he asked what percentage of the ward was in this state. The bishop replied that he thought it was in the 50% range. Lots of kids are depressed because they are not married, and perhaps have sexually sinned while trying to get married. Others are depressed because they don't want to get married and are under a lot of pressure to do so. Others because they are terrified of going on missions, and under great pressure to go. Others because they are simultaneously trying to give heavy time to LDS service and get the kind of grades they need to have to follow the LDS path – successful professional etc. with large family and a high Mormon calling. Pretty picture. How do I get some of that?

So, we will agree that the Church is not perfect, and its members certainly are not. What, then, is the “gospel”, how does it relate to the “Church”, and is it reasonable to say that the “gospel is perfect”?

### ***But Surely the Gospel is Perfect***

The “gospel” is generally defined as the good news of Christ's redemption, usually interpreted as that version contained in the four canonical “gospels” in the New Testament. “Gospel” is also used as a synonym for “true”, as in “it is gospel!”. However, in the Mormon context the word “gospel” has a different meaning. In its introduction, the Book of Mormon proclaims itself to be the “fullness” of the Gospel. This no doubt follows various D&C passages that also say this (see for example, D&C 20:9, 135:3). And in the Mormon temple, prior to 1990 those who made the promises that are part of the Mormon “endowment” ceremony were required to agree that they would obey “the Law of the Gospel as contained in the Book of Mormon and the Bible”. In 1990, this was modified to say, “the law of the Gospel as contained in the Holy Scriptures”, which would bring the D&C (amendable at any time by Mormon leaders) and other statements by Mormon leaders that are regarded as canonical into the Mormon definition of “gospel”. These

include all statements of Mormonism's highest leaders made twice each year at Mormonism's general conferences. This is consistent with other aspects of the Mormon temple ceremony in which Mormons promise absolute obedience to Mormon authority.

So, for Mormon purposes the gospel is Christ's message as contained in the Bible (as far as it is translated correctly), as restored by Joseph Smith in the Book of Mormon, and most importantly, as stated by Joseph Smith and other Mormon leaders in any way that is regarded by Mormon leaders as being part of the Holy Scriptures.

But hold on. Didn't we agree above that the Church itself is not perfect? And now we learn that the Church is defined by the D&C which is part of the perfect gospel? Isn't that contradictory? If the gospel (the D&C) defines the Church, how can the Church be imperfect from a structural point of view?

I suspect that the Mormon answer to this question would be that only the parts of the D&C that do not relate to the "human" side of the Church are perfect. Another way to look understand this is that anything that relates to the pre-existence or life after death or the nature of god, etc. is the gospel and the rest is not. That is, anything that can't be disproved is the gospel and hence perfect. Hmmmm. While I can understand why a Mormon might say this, it seems to quite clearly contradict many other things that Mormon leaders have said, as well as the Mormon temple ceremony. And, if the gospel is perfect, it does a pretty poor job of letting you know where its boundaries are. Is that not a contradiction in terms? How do you get poorly defined perfection?

In any event, one might note that both the Bible and the Book of Mormon are notoriously difficult to interpret, as evidenced by the fact that there are numerous Christian and Mormon sects. If the gospel is perfect, why it is so confusing?

The Mormon answer would be that the Bible and Book of Mormon are only confusing to those who do not accept that the only people on earth who have the authority to speak for God are Mormonism's leaders. And they say, as do other religious leaders, "Obey us and give us your money and other resources." Hmmmm. It is almost tempting to think that there is a scam going on here. Lots of nice sounding things that fall apart on analysis. Nah, it couldn't be that. These Mormons are far too nice and well-intentioned to be scammers, aren't they?

What we are really confronted with in the relationship between the Church and the gospel in Mormon doctrine is circular logic. That is, the definition of one thing relies upon another, which in turn relies upon the first. The gospel is perfect; the Church (including its leaders) are not perfect; and the gospel is defined by the Church's leaders. So, the perfect gospel is defined by imperfect leaders? Hmmmm. Houston, we have a problem.

This is part of one of Mormonism (and other religions') oldest tricks. Joseph Smith, for example, is God's prophet and inspired by him, unless he is proven to be wrong. In that case, he is assumed to have made a human error that does not invalidate his prophetic power with regard to all that has not been proven wrong. And this is the case even when we learn that many of his errors were due to his having decided to mislead his followers because that would be in everyone's (and especially his) best interest.

In like fashion, any error that Mormon leaders are shown to have made in defining the gospel was never really part of the gospel. This must be so because the gospel IS perfect. Hence, by definition anything that is eventually found not to be perfect was not part of the gospel. The

error, really, was ours. We thought that because the imperfect Mormon leaders told us what the gospel was and that it was perfect, that everything they said about the gospel was accurate. We have been told that the leaders are imperfect and should not have been confused.

**Where is the Firm Foundation?; the Iron Rod?; the Unchanging Eternal Word of God?**

“Well then,” a confused Mormon might ask, “how can I know what is true? If the members are imperfect, and the leaders are imperfect, and the Church itself is imperfect, I thought that I could at least rely upon the Gospel. That was my unshakeable bedrock. And now you are telling me that I can’t even rely on that as it is set out or interpreted by Mormon leaders in the Holy Scriptures? You say that I should be ready at any time to be told that what I have been told is part of the perfect gospel was just another error? Now I am really confused.”

I can imagine the response of the Mormon leaders: “I bear you my solemn testimony, with tears streaming down my cheeks, that I know the gospel is true and perfect and that Joseph Smith restored it to us in spite of his imperfections. I know this beyond a shadow of a doubt. I have felt it in my very soul. I testify this to you in the name of Jesus Christ, and promise you in his name that if you will remain faithful to Mormonism, you will receive blessings beyond your ability to imagine them in the Celestial Kingdom!!” [pause for effect]

Well, that makes me feel much better about all of this.