

Blind obedience and Mitt Romney

By Helen Radkey

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Mormon blind obedience

Since the days of the founding “prophet” of Mormonism, Joseph Smith Jr., presiding officers of the The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) have mandated obedience to Church officials. The LDS Church is a patriarchal religion rooted in the traditions of the Old Testament. Unquestioning loyalty to LDS leaders is an immutable demand placed on Church members—and a fundamental characteristic of Mormonism.

Mormon culture emphasizes the need for members to be obedient to the authoritarian control of Church leadership. LDS authorities believe they have a divine right to impose their will upon others. A member cannot be considered a good Mormon unless he or she is subservient to LDS leaders and demonstrates compliance with Mormon teachings. Mormons may insist they sustain Church officials on a voluntary basis, but if they do not conform to the directives of their leaders, they may be judged to be in a state of apostasy.

Blind obedience compels the subordination of individual LDS Church members to the hierarchical superstructure. It is the invisible glue that binds the LDS Church and the principal ingredient that fuels the wealthy and powerful Mormon machine. Questioning the edicts of LDS authorities is viewed as subversive behavior that undermines religious faith. Blind obedience keeps Church members in check, via an uncomplicated, orderly world, where dissent is largely prohibited and Mormons obediently do as they are told—a psychological pattern generally valued above critical thinking by faithful Mormons.

The oppressive Mormon system

Mormon officials who preside over local LDS congregations, known as wards and stakes, or branches and districts for smaller congregations, are required to exercise strict control over their flocks. They are taskmasters who must ensure members abide by the rules.

A Church member who has violated Church rules is generally subjected to a Church disciplinary council—known as a Church court—an ecclesiastical trial during which the member is tried for violations of Church standards. Serious violations of civil law, spouse or child abuse, adultery, fornication, rape, and incest, usually generate Church discipline. Depending on the gravity of the charge, a disciplined member may be given “cautionary counsel,” or put on formal probation, or disfellowshipped, or excommunicated.

Formal probation involves restrictions of Church privileges for the offender as specified by the Church council. A disfellowshipped Mormon remains a member of the LDS Church, but is no longer in good standing. Disfellowshipped members are not entitled to hold a temple recommend, exercise the (exclusively male) priesthood, partake of the “sacrament” in Church, serve in any Church position, offer public prayer, give a sermon,

or teach a lesson at Church. Excommunication is the most severe judgment a Church court can impose. Excommunicated parties are no longer considered members of the LDS Church and are denied all privileges of membership, including the payment of tithes.

Apostasy ranks high on the list of reasons for excommunication from the LDS Church. An apostate is a member who deserts the faith, a renegade dissenter who once embraced Mormonism, but now rejects it. Turning or falling away from Mormon gospel teachings, especially teaching or following “anti-Mormon” doctrines, and acting in opposition to the Church or its leaders, is perceived as apostasy—spiritual death—alienation from God.

Mormon apostates are “axed” to protect the interests of the LDS Church. When dissidents are labelled with “excommunicated” status, it creates the impression they have sinned. Expelled parties are likely to be discredited, stigmatized, and shunned by other Mormons, thus reducing the “anti-Mormon” influence of ousted members within Mormon ranks.

The LDS Church fails to provide a healthy environment for independent thought. Members are expected to readily accept Church dogma. Many Mormons, including dissident scholars, have been disfellowshipped, excommunicated, and fired from Church-related jobs, for writing and teaching alternate views on topics such as Mormon racism, Mormon feminism, gay rights, genetic science, and Church history. Speaking publicly in opposition to Church policy or doctrine is not tolerated. It does not matter how much supportive evidence, including documentation, is presented, members found guilty are punished through Church courts because they disagree with the “official” LDS position.

LDS officialdom is overly preoccupied with the performance of Church members. The “worthiness” of individual Mormons is measured by their degree of obedience to LDS leaders and the Mormon cause. LDS membership is influenced by the “we alone are right” persuasion, in a delusional world of domination and submission, where the “carrot-and-stick” approach is used to induce members to conform to Church standards.

Church members are offered a combination of rewards and punishments to regulate their behavior. Obedient Mormons are rewarded with social acceptance, Church assignments, and the promise of eternal salvation, godhood, and happiness with their families forever. Unmanageable Mormons may be reprimanded and threatened with disciplinary action.

General Authorities of the LDS Church are implicated in abusive behavior because they empower local LDS leaders to maintain “*the law and order of the Church*” through private, faultfinding Church courts that—more often than not—guarantee the “tarring and feathering” of non-compliant members who make a noise—especially a public noise.

In a spiritually abusive system such as the LDS Church, where the belief in an authoritarian priesthood power is extolled, LDS leaders require the place of honor. Mormons are encouraged to place their leaders upon pedestals. Members are taught to never criticize Church leaders, past or present, even if the claims are true. Not only do some LDS officials expect special recognition, they may use their Church status to coerce members by instructing them to deny their inner voice and decision-making process.

Charles Parsons, an LDS bishop in Hurstville, Sydney, Australia, offered me a ward secretarial position, in early 1975, when I was still an active Mormon. After I declined his proposal, Parsons insisted I should have prayed for the strength to fulfill the “calling” and not prayed and asked if the position was God’s will for me—as I told him I had done. After the run-in with Parsons, I received no Church assignments for the next six months.

LDS leaders may give counsel in any area, not just in spiritual matters. Church members do not need to ask their bishops for permission regarding mundane daily acts. Mormons are encouraged to “choose the right” in every aspect of their lives. They are counseled to read the scriptures and pray about private matters. If a personal choice involves the offer of a Church “calling” or work assignment initiated by a Mormon official, like Parsons, for example, the Church requirement would ordinarily take precedence over personal responsibilities. If a member wishes to remain in good standing, he or she will obediently accept all formal Church demands and put his or her “shoulder to the (Mormon) wheel.”

Common consent and rigged Mormon record-keeping

There is a democratic principle in Mormonism, known as the law of *common consent*. “Callings” to positions in the LDS Church are made by authorized leaders and then brought before appropriate Church congregations to be sustained or opposed. Church members do not nominate persons to office, but are asked to give their sustaining vote by raising their right hand in agreement, or they may give an opposing vote in the same way.

It appears members exercise their “free agency” when they accept or reject names, but this function is more or less perfunctory. Mormon congregations have been intimidated into conformity. Members are expected to sustain names presented to them, based upon the assumption that these names have been chosen by Church leaders who represent God.

There are times when *common consent* becomes a figment of the imagination. Acts of protest by members against Church leaders—especially acts of protest in opposition to a group of LDS officials—are viewed as rebellion and will not go unpunished. The issue is always seen as disobedience. There are no structural safeguards against the abuse of Church members who question. Protesters will be accused of not sustaining LDS leaders.

In June 1976, I attended a Sydney Australia South Stake conference, with seven other adult Mormons, to vote in opposition to the stake presidency and stake high council. The LDS officials, whom I voted against, had been responsible for the excommunications of four men—all devout Mormons—in 1975. Before the stake conference, I had interviewed about a dozen key witnesses and became convinced the accused men were innocent.

Retaliation was swift. A letter was hastily hand-delivered to my Sydney home, informing me I had been disfellowshipped from the LDS Church, on March 21—over three months earlier. The letter was signed by Hurstville Ward bishopric members, Bishop Charles Parsons, and “Bro” Allan D. Murrin, 1st counselor. The Church decree listed penalties

and suggestions, but gave no reason for the bishop's court outcome. I was advised I could no longer speak or participate in meetings or attend any assembly of Church officers.

My diminished Church standing was likely conjured up by Parsons, in collaboration with John Daniel Parker—stake president of Sydney Australia South Stake. Disfellowshipped members cannot vote to sustain or oppose the election of Church officers. My disfellowshipment status gave Sydney Mormon authorities an official reason to discount my opposing vote against them at stake conference. My vote could be safely disregarded.

The telltale dates on the letter I received from Parsons told the story. The letter was dated May 31, and was delivered on June 30, which was 101 days after the date of the action. According to the (Church) General Handbook (1968), a disfellowshipped member should be notified of the conditions of that penalty when the penalty is imposed. If that person does not attend the trial, he or she should be notified by two Melchizedek Priesthood bearers or by registered letter. Parsons violated Church rules. I did not attend the trial on March 21 and was not notified of the result until June 30. My disfellowshipment status appears to have been quickly determined after my opposing vote at the June conference.

Those subject to Church disciplinary sanctions have a right of appeal. An accused member may appeal the decision of a disciplinary council within 30 days of the decision. Parsons dated his letter, May 31, and it was handed to me on the night of June 30, exactly 30 days later. Parsons and Parker had strategically managed to block my right of appeal.

Records of LDS Church disciplinary proceedings that result in disfellowshipment or excommunication should be sent to the LDS First Presidency, as stated in the General Handbook. Nearly four months after the bishop's court, Church headquarters had not received the record—another reason why my disfellowshipment did not occur in March.

When I protested to LDS officials in Salt Lake City, a letter, dated July 9, 1976, from the Office of the First Presidency stated "...according to the Confidential Section of the Membership Department..." the record of my trial had not reached General Church Offices. The letter also stated: "There is no provision for receiving direct testimony on an appeal to the First Presidency since all appeals are handled only on the basis of the official record made by the lower court." I was advised I would first have to appeal to the high council court before an appeal to the First Presidency could be entertained. In other words, I would have to appeal to Parker concerning the judgment of the ward trial.

Parsons had also signed the disfellowshipment letter on behalf of Hurstville Ward bishopric member, Hugh Nugent, 1st counselor to Parsons. A year later at my home, in June 1977, Nugent told me in front of witnesses that he had no idea why I had been disfellowshipped. All three members of a ward bishopric are expected to participate in bishop's courts which have jurisdiction over all ward members. If my disfellowshipment had occurred on March 21, Nugent should have been aware of the reason for the verdict.

The Hurstville Ward bishopric was part of a Church hierarchy that was more concerned with status than pastoral care. Running amok with Church-sanctioned authority—with the

support of LDS General Authorities and back-to-back LDS mission presidents in Sydney—LDS officials in south Sydney bullied members on a ward and stake level, until all Mormons who objected to their overbearing behavior were driven out of the Church.

Sustaining “right or wrong” and kangaroo Church courts

The sustaining “right or wrong” belief has its roots in early Mormonism, in a secret, oath-bound vigilante group known as the Mormon Danite band or “Destroying Angels.” Mormon Danites took oaths to support a brother “right or wrong” even unto the shedding of blood. They were expected to sustain, protect, defend, and obey Mormon leaders under all circumstances. Members of the Danite band considered themselves as much bound to obey the heads of the Church as to obey God. To disobey was punishable by death.

My rude awakening to the modern-day version of the sustaining “right or wrong” Mormon rule came through Charles Parsons, when he unexpectedly stopped by my home on February 11, 1976. Parsons demanded that I meet with Parker that evening or a Church court would be convened. My Church membership was on the line, according to Parsons. When I asked him why I should meet with Parker, he insisted, “there could only be one voice in the stake and that was the voice of Stake President Parker.” Parsons then said I was required to sustain Parker “right or wrong.” I refused those terms on the spot.

It is commonly taught in the LDS Church that members should support all actions by presiding Church officers. If these actions are flawed, Mormons believe the leaders—not the members who support the incorrect actions—will be held accountable. According to Parsons, if the excommunications of the four Mormon men occurred in error, I was still expected to sustain Parker regarding those stake disciplinary council judgments—even though I believed all parties were innocent of any violation that could justify such action.

The issue at stake was the 1975 excommunications of four Mormons—Wallace Brown, Jeffrey Watts, Brian Watts, and Paul Knightley. These men lived in Bankstown Ward, adjacent to Hurstville, in the Sydney Australia South Stake, presided over by Parker.

Jeff Watts, an associate of Wallace Brown, was the first to be excommunicated. Brown was allowing LDS missionaries to use his home to teach prospective converts. Watts was upset when missionaries abruptly stopped coming to Brown’s home. They were teaching two people there and Watts was concerned the couple would be lost to the LDS Church. He phoned Earl Carr Tingey, president of the Australia Sydney Mission, and asked for an explanation. Tingey refused to respond. Watts questioned Tingey, at a Sunday meeting at Bankstown Ward, a few days later. After Tingey brushed him aside, Watts told Tingey his behavior was unlawful. Jeff Watts was speedily excommunicated by a stake high council court, upon the basis of “evidence” from LDS mission president, Earl Tingey.

The final point put to Jeff Watts at his excommunication trial was, “Do you accept what we say as leaders of the Church in this stake?” Watts replied, “Yes, in righteousness.” According to Watts, the court’s answer to his response was, “No, right or wrong!”

After the trial of Jeff Watts, there was an attempt to excommunicate Wallace Brown, the following night. Brown had challenged a stake presidency edict that prohibited his wife, Taisa, from asking the children in her Bankstown Ward classes to kneel in prayer to maintain reverence. Taisa was told this behavior was too much like the Roman Catholics. Wallace Brown claimed stake officials had interfered with his wife's prerogative.

Brown had also corrected Maximilian Forstpointner, the bishop of Bankstown Ward, who had tried to arbitrarily change the time of Sunday priesthood meetings without an elder's quorum vote. Brown asked Forstpointner to obey the Church law of *common consent*. Forstpointner condescended and allowed the elder's quorum to vote. Shortly thereafter, Brown received a scribbled carbon copy charge sheet summoning him to a stake high council court. With no verifiable charges presented against him, Wallace Brown was disfellowshipped at his first Church court, which lasted nine hours, until the cock crowed.

Bishop Maximilian Forstpointner confronted Brian Watts and Paul Knightley soon after Brown's first trial and demanded to know if they would support him "right or wrong." These two young men stood firmly against Forstpointner's requirement and they were soon summonsed to a Church court. The question of sustaining "right or wrong" was put to them a number of times, and they were drawn into nasty disputes and name-calling by those who presided over the court. Watts and Knightley were excommunicated because they refused to sustain local Church leaders, especially Forstpointner, "right or wrong."

Brian Watts and Paul Knightley were probably excommunicated to eliminate them as witnesses so they could not testify against Forstpointner. They were present when he attempted to change the priesthood meeting time in violation of the *common consent* law.

Wallace Brown was excommunicated from the LDS Church three months after he was disfellowshipped. Independent witnesses, who were waiting outside the court at Brown's excommunication trial, claimed he was verbally abused in an "unchristian-like manner" by LDS authorities during his rowdy second trial. Brown openly criticized this court for excommunicating Brian Watts and Paul Knightley. Facing no specific charges—and dealing only with personal harassment—Brown declared he was "in the synagogue of Satan..." He left the room and was subsequently excommunicated from the LDS Church.

In November 1978, while still listed as a disfellowshipped Church member, I prepared a seven-page pamphlet, *Free Agency and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Australia*, with the assistance of another member, John Mitchell. The pamphlet outlined the "...disintegration of respect for the rights and freedom of the individual within certain quarters...of Sydney...In the Church in Sydney, a number of individuals have been removed from the fellowship of the Church for failing to sustain their local leaders right or wrong, i.e., obedience to authority without regard to personal feelings, conscience, personal revelation, any second witness, self respect, or right of choice..."

Copies of the *Free Agency* pamphlet were mailed to the presiding officers of every stake, ward, district, and branch of the LDS Church in Australia, each Mormon apostle in Salt Lake City, various LDS mission presidents around the world, and selected Church

members in Sydney. John Mitchell and I were promptly excommunicated, along with Stuart Olmstead, who had financed the distribution of the tract. Parker had been replaced by Graham Sully as stake president. Prior to my excommunication trial, when Sully handed me the court summons, he accused me of “causing confusion in the Church.”

The non-specific “*conduct in violation of the law and order of the Church*” charge was given as the reason on paper for the excommunications of Wallace Brown, Jeff and Brian Watts, Paul Knightley, John Mitchell, Stuart Olmstead, and myself. In actuality, Sydney LDS authorities had overstepped their boundaries—expected unquestioning obedience—and overreacted when they were faced with objections to their behavior. They responded the only way they knew how, by taking punitive action against the members involved.

A number of Mormons in Bankstown and Hurstville wards were familiar with the details of the seven excommunications—and did nothing—along with other members who did not want to know the facts. In spite of the tendency to look the other way, around the time of my exodus from the LDS Church, in early 1976, roughly 30 Mormons left the Church because of the excommunications and the sustaining “right or wrong” requirement.

Death to the “Ark-steadiers”

Two years after I moved to Salt Lake City, Wallace Brown died in Sydney, in July 1986. After I received the news of his death, I met with Mormon bishop, Larry Shaw, at his home in Salt Lake City. I notified Shaw of Brown’s death and informed him that Brown had been unjustly excommunicated from the LDS Church in 1975. I also advised Shaw I intended to publish an account of my LDS experiences—as a tribute to Wallace Brown.

Shaw compared the LDS Church to the legendary Ark of the Covenant, built in the time of Moses. He flatly stated that God had killed Uzzah, as recorded in the Old Testament book of 2 Samuel 6:6-7, because Uzzah had tried to steady the Ark of the Covenant when he was not authorized to do so. God would also strike me down, predicted Shaw, if I committed any action (such as publications) which could harm the LDS Church.

The present-day Mormon interpretation of the story of Uzzah is applied to the relationship between members and the LDS Church. Members are instructed they should not correct Church leaders or Church policies, despite any good intentions. Mormons are taught the leaders of the Church are in charge and it is not their place to correct them.

On September 11, 1986, I sent a letter to the First Presidency, the highest-ranking governing body of the LDS Church, advising them I wanted my name cleared of any wrongdoing implied on Mormon records. I requested Church records show I was no longer a member of the LDS Church because I requested this and for no other reason. I objected to the sustaining “right or wrong” mandate imposed by Sydney Church officials.

At my Salt Lake City home, in August 1987, Paul Mecham, stake president of Salt Lake Granite Stake, showed me a letter, dated December 1, 1986, from the First Presidency, affirming my excommunication from the LDS Church. The letter had been signed by

each member of the First Presidency, Ezra Taft Benson and Gordon B. Hinckley, both now deceased, and Thomas S. Monson, current Church president and “living prophet.”

Thomas S. Monson, and other LDS higher-ups at Church headquarters in Salt Lake City, who were flooded during the 1970s with appeals of concern regarding the abuse of power by Sydney LDS leaders, were complicit in backing blind obedience. Without exception, they rejected all pleas for help and “rubber-stamped” the Sydney excommunications.

Former LDS bishop, Larry Shaw, resurfaced when he phoned me from Atlanta, Georgia, on February 27, 2012. At the time, my research discoveries on the proxy baptisms of well-known Holocaust victims, such as Simon Wiesenthal’s parents and Anne Frank, were receiving extensive media coverage and would prompt Mormon officials to make technological changes that would block my access to their database of proxy rites.

During the hour-long phone call, Shaw attempted to pressure me back into the LDS Church through forceful persuasion. He refused to accept my complete renunciation of Mormonism. I interpreted his call as personal harassment because of the work I had done to uncover posthumous rites for non-Mormons, which had damaged the reputation of the LDS Church. Shaw asked me about my health, three times, and implied that I might soon be going to the other side because of my age. He had called to silence me as a dissenter.

Mormon temple oaths

Faithful Mormons believe their first and foremost duty is uncompromising loyalty to the LDS Church and unquestioning obedience to Church leaders. Obedience is perceived as an active demonstration of implicit trust in the Mormon faith. Mormons who participate in LDS temple ceremonies are locked into a loyalty-to-Church mindset through the rites performed in LDS temples, which include oaths of loyalty and sacrifice to the Church.

The endowment ceremony serves as a rite of adult initiation in LDS temples. During the temple endowment, Mormons take oaths to obey Mormon gospel laws, which include:

The *Law of Obedience* requires participating temple patrons to promise to obey the law of God. Mormons understand the LDS Church to be the one true source of God’s law.

The *Law of Sacrifice* requires participating temple patrons to covenant to sacrifice all that they possess, even their own lives, if necessary, in sustaining and defending “the kingdom of God.” To a Mormon, the term “the kingdom of God” means the LDS Church.

The *Law of the Gospel* includes an admonition to avoid speaking evil of the “Lord’s anointed [Church priesthood leaders].”

The *Law of Consecration* requires participating temple patrons to consecrate themselves, their time, their talents, and everything the Lord has blessed them with, or whatever he may bless them with, to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for the building up of “the [Mormon] kingdom of God on the earth...”

Mitt Romney's Mormon indoctrination

Mitt Romney has been exposed to Mormon authoritarian rule since infancy. Mormonism has been the dominant influence in the forging of his core values and identity. Romney has internalized a theology that unreservedly claims that the LDS Church is “the only true Church” and rejects divine authority in other faiths. Mormons believe the United States was created and chosen by God, as the latter-day “Promised Land,” where Mormonism could come into existence and flourish as the “restoration” of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Many Mormons believe the USA will eventually become a Mormon-ruled theocracy.

As an oath-taking temple Mormon, Romney has consecrated his life, talents, and worldly goods to the LDS Church. To be faithful to his temple vows he must also support Mormon ecclesiastical rule. That means following directives from Temple Square as well as his local Church leaders. The issue is whether Romney would be able to separate his actions as president from Mormon doctrines, edicts, and rules governing human behavior.

Differing views on faith have no place in the secular political sphere and the shaping of political policies. The multicultural USA includes Mormons, millions of believers in non-Mormon religions, and non-religious citizens. We should not be governed by a president who has taken private oaths to prioritize the advancement of Mormon agenda above other interests. Flexibility in the rule of law is the hallmark of a successful government.

Mitt Romney is a religious authoritarian whose zeal for Mormon rules mirrors that of his Church. If Romney was the commander-in-chief of this country, he would probably expect to be supported, without question, as he has undoubtedly done in the past when he served in Mormon leadership positions. Like many—if not most LDS leaders—Romney is likely to be insistent on the “rightness” of his position. As a Mormon bishop and stake president in the Boston area, he was used to dictating actions and having members obey his instructions. He did not have to make a case, or answer questions, for his decisions.

In Church, Romney frequently spoke about obeying authority and God's fixed standards. During Mitt Romney's years as a bishop and stake president, he would have disciplined Church members and played an active role in excommunicating Mormons. Romney has reportedly said he would support any Mormon bishop who initiates an excommunication from the LDS Church. He has also said he would not question the reasoning behind the excommunication, even if it was for differing views, and not misconduct. This attitude demonstrates Romney's blind trust in the Mormon system, his one-eyed support of rank and file LDS officials, and his sustaining of Church court judgments “right or wrong.”

Mitt Romney is part of an aggressive Church that demanded blind obedience to its leaders in the past, expects it from members today, and will likely expect it in the future. If Romney is elected as president of our nation, we Americans may soon be required to sustain the White House “right or wrong,” in conformity with the Mormon imperative.

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