

The LDS Church Is a Cult

LDS Apologetics Research

ABSTRACT

1. Introduction

Few accusations are as rhetorically charged as calling a religious movement a "cult." Critics of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints employ this label to dismiss the faith as dangerous, deceptive, or illegitimate. The accusation typically draws on sociological criteria — centralized authority, financial control, isolation from outsiders, thought control — often framed through models like Steven Hassan's BITE model or Robert Lifton's criteria for thought reform. This document examines whether these criteria, when applied consistently, actually distinguish the LDS Church from mainstream Christianity, and whether the "cult" label functions as a substantive argument or a rhetorical weapon.

2. The Criticism (Steelmanned)

Critics build their case on several categories:

1. **Centralized, unquestionable authority.** The LDS Church is led by a prophet who is sustained as God's mouthpiece on earth. Members are taught to "follow the prophet" and that the prophet will never lead the Church astray. This, critics argue, creates an environment where independent thinking is discouraged and dissent is punished.
2. **Financial control.** Members are expected to pay 10% tithing to maintain temple worthiness. Tithing settlement interviews occur annually. Critics argue this constitutes financial coercion — pay or lose access to the temple, which is necessary for the highest salvation.
3. **Information control.** Critics allege the Church suppresses unflattering history, discourages members from reading "anti-Mormon" literature, and controls the narrative through correlated curriculum.
4. **Social isolation/shunning.** Leaving the Church can result in social consequences — strained family relationships, loss of community, and social stigma, especially in heavily LDS communities.
5. **Thought control.** Temple recommend interviews probe personal belief and behavior. The concept of "worthiness" creates an environment of surveillance. Members who publicly express doubt or disagreement may face Church discipline.
6. **Exclusive truth claims.** The LDS Church claims to be the "only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth" (D&C 1:30), which critics say is a hallmark of cult psychology.
7. **The BITE model.** Steven Hassan's model (Behavior, Information, Thought, Emotional control) is frequently applied to the LDS Church by ex-members and critics.

3. Biblical Response

Every Authentic Biblical Community Had Strong Authority Structures

The Bible presents religious authority, financial commitment, exclusive truth claims, and community accountability as normal features of God's covenant people — not as marks of a "cult."

Centralized authority:

- **Exodus 18:13-26** — Moses served as the sole judge and authority for Israel. He later delegated, but the authority structure was top-down, divinely appointed.
- **Numbers 12:1-9** — When Miriam and Aaron challenged Moses's authority, God struck Miriam with leprosy. Questioning the prophet had severe consequences.
- **Numbers 16:1-35** — Korah's rebellion against Moses's authority resulted in the earth opening and swallowing the rebels. God does not treat challenges to prophetic authority lightly.
- **Deuteronomy 18:18-19** — "I will raise them up a Prophet... whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him."
- **Matthew 16:18-19** — Jesus gave Peter the "keys of the kingdom" — centralized authority.
- **Acts 15:1-29** — The Jerusalem Council made binding doctrinal decisions for the entire Church. Centralized authority, binding rulings.
- **Hebrews 13:17** — "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls."
- **1 Thessalonians 5:12-13** — "Know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake."

Financial commitment:

- **Malachi 3:8-10** — "Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me... in tithes and offerings." Tithing is commanded by God, and withholding it is called robbery.
- **Acts 5:1-11** — Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead for lying about their financial contribution. Financial accountability in the early Church was not optional.
- **2 Corinthians 9:6-7** — "God loveth a cheerful giver." Financial generosity is a core Christian expectation.

Exclusive truth claims:

- **John 14:6** — "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." Christianity itself is the most exclusive truth claim in human history.
- **Acts 4:12** — "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved."
- **Galatians 1:8-9** — Paul pronounces a curse (*anathema*) on anyone who preaches a different gospel. This is far more exclusive than anything the LDS Church teaches.

If centralized authority, tithing, and exclusive truth claims make a group a cult, then ancient Israel and the apostolic Church were cults.

Church Discipline Is Biblical

- **Matthew 18:15-17** — Jesus instructs a process of church discipline culminating in treating the unrepentant person as "a heathen man and a publican."

- **1 Corinthians 5:1-5** — Paul commands the Corinthians to "deliver such an one unto Satan" — excommunication.
- **Titus 3:10** — "A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject."
- **2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14** — "Withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly... note that man, and have no company with him."

Church discipline — including excommunication — is a practice established by Jesus and the apostles, not an invention of "cults."

4. Early Christian/Historical Evidence

The "Cult" Label Has Always Been Used to Marginalize New Religious Movements

- **Early Christianity was called a cult.** The Romans viewed Christianity as a *superstitio* — a dangerous, subversive cult. Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, and Suetonius all treated Christians as members of a dangerous sect. The Jewish authorities in Acts 24:5 called Christianity "the sect [*hairesis*] of the Nazarenes" — literally, a "heresy" or cult.
- **Protestants were called cults.** When Luther broke from Rome, Catholics labeled Protestantism a heretical sect. Anabaptists were persecuted as cultists by both Catholics and Protestants. Quakers, Methodists, and Baptists were all labeled as dangerous sects in their early years.
- **The label functions sociologically, not theologically.** Sociologist Rodney Stark has argued that the difference between a "cult" and a "religion" is primarily one of social power and time. New religious movements that succeed become religions; those that fail remain "cults." The label tells us more about the labeler than the labeled.

The LDS Church Does Not Meet Academic Criteria for a Destructive Cult

Scholarly literature on destructive cults (Lifton, Singer, Hassan) identifies specific features of groups like Jonestown, Heaven's Gate, and Aum Shinrikyo:

- **Physical isolation from society.** LDS members live in normal neighborhoods, attend public schools, hold secular jobs, and interact freely with non-members.
- **Prohibition on leaving.** LDS members can and do leave the Church. There is no physical restraint, no compound, no confiscation of documents. The Church processes resignation requests.
- **Sexual exploitation by the leader.** There is no such practice in the LDS Church.
- **Violence or threats of violence.** There are no such practices.
- **Complete financial exploitation.** LDS tithing (10% of income) is a voluntary religious practice found in many faiths. The Church provides extensive welfare, education (BYU), employment services, and humanitarian aid in return.
- **Destruction of family ties.** The LDS Church's central theological focus is the eternal family. Family Home Evening, temple sealing, and genealogy work are core practices designed to strengthen family

bonds.

5. LDS Doctrinal Position

The Church Actively Encourages Learning, Questioning, and Personal Revelation

- **D&C 9:8** — "You must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right." Individual reasoning and prayer are commanded.
- **D&C 88:118** — "Seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith." Broad intellectual engagement is encouraged.
- **Moroni 10:3-5** — The foundational LDS conversion process is personal prayer and individual revelation — not coercion or manipulation.
- **Articles of Faith 1:11** — "We claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may." Religious freedom for all is a core LDS belief.
- **Articles of Faith 1:13** — "We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men." These are not the values of a destructive cult.

The Gospel Topics Essays Demonstrate Transparency

The Church has published detailed essays on difficult historical topics — plural marriage, the Book of Abraham, race and the priesthood, Book of Mormon translation, and others — on its official website (churchofjesuschrist.org). This is the opposite of information suppression.

Structure Reflects Biblical Patterns

The LDS Church structure — prophet/apostles, seventies, bishops, elders, deacons — mirrors the New Testament Church:

- **Ephesians 4:11** — "He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers."
- **Ephesians 2:20** — "Built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets."
- **Luke 10:1** — Jesus appointed seventy others.
- **Philippians 1:1** — Paul addresses "bishops and deacons."
- **Titus 1:5** — Paul instructs Titus to "ordain elders in every city."

6. Key Scriptures

Scripture	Relevance
Numbers 12:1-9	God defends Moses's prophetic authority severely
Numbers 16:1-35	Challenging divinely appointed authority brings judgment
Malachi 3:8-10	Tithing is a divine command
Acts 5:1-11	Financial dishonesty in the early Church was punished by death
Matthew 16:18-19	Jesus gives Peter centralized authority (keys)
Acts 15:1-29	Jerusalem Council makes binding decisions for all Christians
Hebrews 13:17	Obey and submit to Church leaders
Matthew 18:15-17	Jesus commands church discipline processes
1 Corinthians 5:1-5	Paul commands excommunication
John 14:6	Christianity's own exclusive truth claim
Acts 24:5	Early Christians were called a "sect" (cult)
Ephesians 4:11	Biblical Church has apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers

7. Responses to Common Objections

"The prophet is treated as infallible — you can't question him."

LDS doctrine does not teach prophetic infallibility. The Articles of Faith state belief in the Bible "as far as it is translated correctly" (AoF 1:8), implicitly acknowledging human limitation even in scripture. Brigham Young taught: "I am more afraid that this people have so much confidence in their leaders that they will not inquire for themselves" (*Journal of Discourses* 9:150). The expectation is personal revelation to confirm prophetic counsel.

"Tithing is financial coercion because it's tied to temple worthiness."

The biblical tithe was also tied to covenant standing (Malachi 3:8-10). Jesus taught that following Him required giving up everything (Luke 14:33; Matthew 19:21). Financial sacrifice as a condition of full discipleship is a biblical pattern, not a cult marker.

"Members who leave are shunned."

The LDS Church has no formal shunning doctrine (unlike, for example, Jehovah's Witnesses). Individual social dynamics vary, but the Church teaches love for all, including those who leave. Cultural imperfections in specific communities are not official Church policy.

"The BITE model proves it's a cult."

The BITE model is a popular framework, not a peer-reviewed diagnostic tool. When applied consistently, it captures features of virtually every organized religion, political party, military

organization, and even some workplaces. It is too broad to distinguish the LDS Church from mainstream religious communities.

"Exclusive truth claims are a red flag."

Then Christianity itself is a red flag (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). Every religion that believes it has true teachings implicitly claims some degree of exclusive truth. The relevant question is whether a group permits freedom of conscience — and the LDS Articles of Faith explicitly affirm religious liberty for all.

"The temple is secretive and that's a cult indicator."

Sacred/secret distinctions exist throughout the Bible. The Holy of Holies was accessible only to the high priest (Hebrews 9:7). Jesus told His disciples things He did not share publicly (Mark 4:34). Paul speaks of "the deep things of God" (1 Corinthians 2:10). Sacred space and restricted access are biblical, not cultish.

8. Conclusion

The "cult" accusation against the LDS Church is a rhetorical strategy, not a substantive theological argument. When the criteria used to label the LDS Church a cult — centralized authority, tithing, exclusive truth claims, church discipline, sacred ordinances — are applied consistently, they capture every major religious tradition in history, including ancient Israel and the apostolic Church. The LDS Church lacks every defining feature of destructive cults as identified by serious scholars: physical isolation, sexual exploitation, violence, prohibition on leaving, and complete financial exploitation. The Church encourages individual study, personal revelation, family strengthening, and religious liberty for all. The "cult" label reveals more about the rhetorical aims of the critic than about the character of the Church.

Further Reading:

- [FAIR: Is the Church a Cult?](#)
- [Gospel Topics Essays](#)
- Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Mormonism* (Columbia University Press, 2005).
- Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (University of Illinois Press, 1985).