

The Shunning Key: *Whom* Mormons shun and *why*

Introduction

The leaders and manuals of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints frequently emphasize [brotherly love](#) and [charity to all](#). Consider this statement by Elder M. Russell Ballard:

Let us reach out in friendship and love to our neighbors, **including those of other faiths**, thus helping to build better family-to-family relationships and greater harmony in our neighborhoods. Remember, too often our behavior is a bigger deterrent to others than is our doctrine. In the spirit of love for **all** men, women, and children, **help them to understand and to feel accepted and appreciated**. (emphasis added) [source](#)

Taken at face value, this statement is incredibly inclusive and loving. Yet many former members describe the loss of close friendships and association with believing members once they leave or question the Church's truth-claims.¹

In a [recent panel discussion](#) an atheist who had heard many stories of atheists and homosexuals being kicked out of their LDS homes (which is certainly on the extreme end of what most former members might experience) asked if there was any doctrinal justification for this behavior (the discussion on shunning begins at about 17:30):

[Atheist] Are you three saying to me that there is nothing in Mormonism that produces shunning?

[BYU Professor 1] In my faith, there is nothing that I have been taught or that I teach that says that we should shun...It's not a Mormon ideal to shun

[BYU Professor 2] There is nothing in Mormonism that would condone the type of behavior you are talking about.

So, is it possible that Mormons shun?² And how is it possible in the face of so many inclusive and loving messages such as the one given by Elder Ballard and those of the two BYU professors?

The Shunning Key

The key to understanding most³ shunning in the LDS Church is to realize that Latter-day Saints would typically never shun someone who merely left the Church or became less-active—these are the kinds of individuals that Church members will often reach out to. Official Latter-day Saint material is rich in examples of members reaching out to less actives or those who had merely wandered from the Gospel path (see [this example](#)).

However, while a lost or wayward “former member” or “less-active” is not typically shunned, there are some categories of individuals whom members *are* explicitly taught to avoid: **false prophets**, **false teachers** (used synonymously with the terms “deceivers” and “antichrists”⁴), and **faith-killers** (“apostate” is a term sometimes used-synonymously with faith-killers). These terms sound extreme—they *must* be a rare exception, right? Who are these false prophets, false teachers, and faith-killers?

Flee from false teachers and false prophets

M. Russell Ballard taught that [false prophets and false teachers are those who](#) (with minor wording

changes to make a list):

1. Declare that the Prophet Joseph Smith was a duplicitous deceiver
2. Challenge the First Vision as an authentic experience
3. Declare that the Book of Mormon and other canonical works are not ancient records of scripture
4. Attempt to redefine the nature of the Godhead
5. Deny that God has given and continues to give revelation today to His ordained and sustained prophets
6. Arrogantly attempt to fashion new interpretations of the scriptures to demonstrate that these sacred texts should not be read as God's words to His children but merely as the utterances of uninspired men, limited by their own prejudices and cultural biases
7. Argue that the scriptures require new interpretation
8. Deny Christ's Resurrection and Atonement, arguing that no God can save us
9. Reject the need for a Savior
10. Attempt to reinterpret the doctrines of the Church to fit their own preconceived views, and in the process deny Christ and His messianic role
11. Those who attempt to change the God-given and scripturally based doctrines that protect the sanctity of marriage, the divine nature of the family, and the essential doctrine of personal morality
12. Advocate a redefinition of morality to justify fornication, adultery, and homosexual relationships
13. Openly champion the legalization of so-called same-gender marriages
14. To justify their rejection of God's immutable laws that protect the family, [they] even attack the inspired proclamation on the family issued to the world in 1995 by the First Presidency and the Twelve Apostles

He goes on to warn:

Our safety, our peace, lies in ... **fleeing from false prophets and false teachers...**⁵

Shun faith-killers

In his 1981 talk [Opposition to the Work of God](#), Carlos E. Asay instructed members⁶:

Avoid those who would tear down your faith. **Faith-killers are to be shunned.** The seeds which they plant in the minds and hearts of men grow like cancer and eat away the Spirit. (emphasis added)

Asay doesn't provide a simple list like Ballard, but we can walk through his talk to determine the characteristics of those he labels "faith-killers". According to his talk (with minor wording modification), faith-killers:

1. Use personal contacts, the printed word, electronic media, and other means of communication to sow doubts and to disturb the peace of true believers
2. Cite changes made in Church publications over the years [to discredit Joseph Smith and subsequent prophets]
3. Do not believe in the New Testament because of discrepancies in it
4. Do not believe in modern prophets and continuous revelation
5. Pin their hopes for salvation upon things other than those related to living prophets and living faith

What constitutes a “faith-killer” is driven home in Asay’s discussion of “a very dedicated apostate” towards the beginning of his address. This “dedicated apostate” did two things: “to discredit Joseph Smith and subsequent prophets, the apostate cited changes made in Church publications over the years” and the apostate pointed out this information to a recent convert.

How often do former members qualify?

A **recent survey** was conducted on former members to better understand why they left the Church. The top 5 reasons given were:

- I ceased to believe in the church’s doctrine/theology (74%)
- I studied church history and lost my belief (70%)
- I lost faith in Joseph Smith (70%)
- I lost faith in the Book of Mormon (65%)
- I lost confidence in the general authorities (50%)

If this survey is at all representative of former Mormons, the majority of Mormons who leave do so *because* they do not believe in the core truth-claims of the Church any more. In addition, the majority of those who disbelieve (53%) now consider themselves Agnostic, Atheist, or Humanist.

Hence a typical former Latter-day Saint, if they ever openly discuss their rationale for doubting the Church’s truth-claims or write anything online, will easily qualify as a false prophet or false teacher. At a minimum, they will likely be a tight fit for Ballard’s criteria #2, #3, #5, #8, #9, and they will likely meet *all* of Asay’s list characterizing a faith-killer.

Hence, those who leave the Church because they grow tired of living the lifestyle (“lazy”) or who would rather live a different lifestyle (“wanting to sin”) are likely to be reached out to and fellow-shipped, at least to a degree. Those who left because they investigated the truth-claims and decided the truth-claims are not sustainable are susceptible to being classified as “false prophets”, “false teachers”, or “faith-killers” (or alternatively, “deceiver”, “anti-Christ”, or “apostate”). Those who are willing and able to share *why* they think the Church truth-claims do not hold up, *ought* to be shunned—according to Ballard and Asay—and these constitute the *majority* of those who leave the LDS Church.

Shunning sleight of hand

The quote from the introduction used as an example of inclusivity in LDS teachings was from Elder Ballard’s General Conference address on false prophets and false teachers. I will reproduce it here:

Let us reach out in friendship and love to our neighbors, including those of other faiths, thus helping to build better family-to-family relationships and greater harmony in our neighborhoods. Remember, too often our behavior is a bigger deterrent to others than is our doctrine. In the spirit of love for **all** men, women, and children, **help them to understand and to feel accepted and appreciated**. (emphasis added)

But, what about “false prophets” and “false teachers”? Are members meant to reach out and help them feel accepted and appreciated? Here’s Elder Ballard’s next paragraph:

Let us remember that it is our duty to be faithful to the restored truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It takes faith—real faith, total and unreserved—to accept and strive to live prophetic counsel. Lucifer, the adversary of truth, does not want us to feel or exhibit that kind of faith. He encourages disobedience, planting defiance in the hearts of the unwary. If he is successful, they will turn away from the light into the darkness of the world. Our safety, our peace, lies in working as hard as we can to live as the Father and Son would have us live, **in fleeing from false**

prophets and false teachers, and in being anxiously engaged in good causes. (emphasis added)

So, members are taught to help “*all* men, women, and children ... feel accepted and appreciated” *but* to simultaneously “flee” from false prophets and false teachers—and most former members easily qualify as such.⁷

Penetrance in LDS thought and action

The pattern of shunning those who speak openly about why they do not believe in the Church’s truth claims is followed in nearly all official LDS material. I’m aware of only one exception—a story by Elder Uchtdorf about an ex-member “David” who debated with members online and was converted through the patient efforts of “Jacob.”⁸

Besides the story of “David” and “Jacob” given by Elder Uchtdorf, I am not aware of a single instance in Church produced material when someone who openly discusses their rationale for rejecting Church truth-claims is reached out to for fellowship (much less engaged with in substantive discussion).⁹ As presented in official Church material, all former members who are fellowshipped either have no intellectual justification for leaving or are completely silent about their rationale.¹⁰

The seventh temple recommend question is a good example of this attitude generally. The question **asks members**: “Do you support, affiliate with, or agree with any group or individual whose teachings or practices are contrary to or oppose those accepted by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?” which strongly implies that such affiliation is to be avoided or one is not worthy of entrance into the temple.

Spotty in practice

Ecclesiastical discipline of individuals who have spoken out about their disbelief generally follows the trend described above. To the degree they speak out and adopt the points outlined by Ballard and Asay is generally the degree to which the individual is likely to be shunned (or their likelihood of ex-communication for openly disagreeing with the Church¹¹).

Although many members shun “faith-killers” to some degree, other members either ignore or are not aware of Ballard’s and Asays direction (or similar directives in Church literature). These other members follow the *preponderance* of messages focused on the inclusive and embracing aspects of the Gospel message and lean towards these when deciding how to treat former members.¹² The tension between avoiding those who speak openly about their disbelief (and protecting others from their influence) and loving and accepting those individuals is demonstrated in the 2017 FairMormon panel discussion **Family Members Who Left**.

Moving Forward

The Mormon Newsroom, in speaking about dialog with those of different religions and those without religion, **offer up this wisdom**:

We generally avoid controversial topics (such as politics, money or religion) at the dinner table. But this can be problematic because if believers aren’t talking faith with family and friends — especially with those who aren’t religious — we leave the door of misunderstanding wide open...”

Perhaps this counsel should be extended to *former members*, too—even those who left for intellectual reasons and speak openly about their rationale? How do members expect to avoid misunderstanding former members (and vice versa) if they are not communicating about these issues? Is it pos-

sible for members to discuss the issues openly, why they view them differently, and then, as needed, politely agree to disagree on some topics? Is there still room to discuss the issues in order to find common ground?

In another article [defending religious dialog](#), the Mormon Newsroom offered perhaps the best counter to the counsel to flee or shun those who have left the Church because they no longer accept the truth-claims:

It feels uncomfortable to listen to critics call our cherished beliefs into question, and yet we show strength by engaging in sincere conversations with those who oppose our views. After all, we trust that ‘truth will cut its own way’ and love will eventually win out in the contest of ideals.

Other relevant perspectives

These resources address—from a variety of viewpoints—the question of how Latter-day Saints should treat or respond to former or dis-believing members or otherwise discuss the topic of shunning in the LDS Church.

- [Do Mormons “Shun” Former Members of the Church?](#)
- [LDSLiving Commentary: To Mormons — Is shunning something we still do in 2012?](#)
- FairMormon 2014 Panel Discussion: [Family Members Who Left](#)
- Rex Pinegar’s 2015 FairMormon presentation: [How to help young Latter-day Saints deal with criticisms against the Church and the doubts they cause while remaining faithful](#)
- Patrick Mason’s 2016 FairMormon presentation: [The Courage of Our Convictions: Embracing Mormonism in a Secular Age](#)

1. One woman [describes her treatment](#):

My story, in a nutshell — extreme TBM [True-Believing Mormon] family. I left the church. What follows is a decade of, first, silent treatment, then an extremely superficial “truce” on holidays but otherwise not much contact, then outright being forbidden from the family home when my younger brother left the church (I must have corrupted him and torn down his faith, so I’m a danger to the family and must be shunned)...

Another described [trying to reach out to his close LDS friends after deciding the truth-claims couldn’t be supported](#):

So I reached out to one of my best friends from college, because he knew me better than anyone. He responded that he was always willing to talk. I had no idea where to begin. In a short amount of time I had already amassed a huge list of concerns which was overwhelming just to try to mentally sort into categories, much less discuss. So I just gave him a bare list of about 30 concerns and asked if he had any preference where to begin... didn’t hear back from him for some time... I eventually got one meaningful response from him, and that was a recommendation that I go to one of our other friends with those questions, because he knew more about church history stuff....So, still desperate to have a meaningful conversation with anybody, I reached out to friend #2. I briefly described my paradigm shift and mentioned that friend #1 had recommended I talk to him. His response was very short. Something to the effect of: “I don’t share your beliefs, and I hope you find what you are looking for.” I couldn’t believe it. I went into a depression...I have maintained my friendship with friend #1, who has not lost his faith as far as I can tell, and has always been gen-

erally uninterested in church history or deep doctrine anyway. I have had no contact with friend #2 since that last message he sent. I honestly, fully thought my friends would talk to me. We used to talk about everything. I thought I knew them better than that.

Here's how one girl described her association with her best friend [after telling her she had left](#):

I've been so down the past few days because of this. I told her on the phone (we live in different states) in September, she didn't give me any response until December, an email. Her response was that I was lying, made her feel "dark and dirty", and that I was being judgemental. I told her I was so confused why she thought all that, asked her what I said to make her feel that way. She's not even willing to talk to me at all anymore because she's worried she'll get defensive and make things worse. I told her the worst thing she could do is say nothing, but apparently she doesn't believe me because she still won't talk to me. It just really, really sucks. I thought for sure she would take it well and she'd be understanding enough to where it wouldn't TOTALLY change our relationship but I could not have been more wrong.

More accounts may be found in the document [How those who leave the LDS Church are viewed](#) under the section "Examples of how people are treated who leave the Church". Many other anecdotes can be found on the [exmormon subreddit](#).↩

2. To "shun" means, according to Merriam-Webster, "to avoid deliberately and especially habitually". The most extreme examples of shunning come from some religious communities (Amish, Jehovah's Witnesses) who *formally* avoid speaking with those who have left the faith. Besides excommunication and disfellowshipment (which are far more mild than the formal shunning in these other faiths) Mormons do not *formally* shun anyone. *General avoidance* and the avoidance of talking about truth-claim issues and/or a person's new beliefs is how I am using the word "shun" in this document. The usage seems justified given how Asay uses the term "shun" and Ballard urges members to "flee". Shunning need not be formally imposed to still qualify as shunning.↩
3. Shunning is also endorsed by leaders in some other, somewhat less dramatic ways.

- **Shun the proselyting efforts.** L. Whitney Clayton clearly qualifies his shunning to focus on the discussion, not the person:

We should disconnect immediately and completely from listening to the proselytizing efforts of those who have lost their faith and instead reconnect promptly with the holy spirit.

Former members are often eager to discuss the reasons they left, but believing members should avoid these kinds of discussions, according to Clayton.

- **Shun by lack of association.** Shunning may also occur inadvertently merely because a member does not feel that a former member still shares their eternal perspective. [Thomas S. Monson encouraged members](#):

We should associate with those who, like us, are planning not for temporary convenience, shallow goals, or narrow ambition—but rather with those who value the things that matter most, even eternal objectives.

Hence, former members may easily end up being avoided as a matter of course as mem-

bers opt to rub shoulders with those who share their worldview.

- **Shun to avoid endorsing behavior.** In an interview for the Mormon Newsroom, Dallin H. Oaks was asked how to respond to a homosexual child who wanted to bring a partner home to visit:

PUBLIC AFFAIRS: At what point does showing that love cross the line into inadvertently endorsing behavior? If the son says, 'Well, if you love me, can I bring my partner to our home to visit? Can we come for holidays?' How do you balance that against, for example, concern for other children in the home?'

ELDER OAKS: That's a decision that needs to be made individually by the person responsible, calling upon the Lord for inspiration. I can imagine that in most circumstances the parents would say, 'Please don't do that. Don't put us into that position.' Surely if there are children in the home who would be influenced by this example, the answer would likely be that. There would also be other factors that would make that the likely answer.

I can also imagine some circumstances in which it might be possible to say, 'Yes, come, but don't expect to stay overnight. Don't expect to be a lengthy house guest. Don't expect us to take you out and introduce you to our friends, or to deal with you in a public situation that would imply our approval of your "partnership."

A non-believing, openly atheist child easily qualifies as "false teacher" or "faith-killer", and it seems reasonable that parents would want to follow Oaks advice to keep them from influencing other children in the home.↩

2. The [New Testament Student Manual](#) uses the terms "antichrist" and "deceiver" somewhat synonymously with those described by Elder Ballard in his talk on false prophets and false teachers in its discussion of 2 John 1:7-10.↩
3. To "shun" means, according to Merriam-Webster, "to avoid deliberately and especially habitually". To "flee" from someone seems synonymous with (or perhaps even in excess of) shunning them. Elder Ballard's talk is referenced in the New Testament Student Manual in association with [2 John 1:7-10](#) where John directs Church members to deal with those who do not "confess that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh" to "receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed". Preceding the quotation of Elder Ballard, the manual explains:

John was not suggesting that the Saints should fail to extend common courtesy to those who taught contrary doctrines. However, since early Christian congregations gathered to worship in the homes of Church members, traditional customs of hospitality could inadvertently enable heretical teachers to infiltrate congregations. Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles warned modern Church members not to associate with deceivers and antichrists operating in our day...

↩

4. The directive to shun faith-killers was repeated [in the 1995 Ensign](#) and is in the [current Book of Mormon Teacher Resource Manual](#).↩
5. How can Elder Ballard reconcile these two contradicting statements? Generally speaking, in-group/out-group psychology suggests that [a hated outgroup is frequently viewed as subhuman](#); hence, "false prophets" and "false teachers" aren't readily viewed as *people* needing

inclusion but as *enemies* to avoid (or fight).

LDS doctrine provides some justification for (or at least resonance with) de-humanizing those who speak out against the Church. Joseph Smith taught that those who leave the Church “left the neutral ground... [and] can [never] get back on to it” ([source](#)) and will inevitably **become servants of Satan**. And, while exactly who becomes a son of perdition and goes to outer darkness **is not well defined**, Brigham Young taught that sons of perdition are **effectively annihilated**. Note that Elder Asay uses the phrase “put them out of existence” several times **in his talk** as if to allude to the eventual fate of apostates.↵

6. In his October 2016 General Conference address entitled “**Learn from Alma and Amulek**”, Elder Uchtdorf tells the story of “David”, a man who “came across some information about the Church that confused him.” He became “unsettled” by the “negative material” and eventually resigned from the Church. David spent time online debating with members of the Church, and one member, “Jacob”, “was always kind and respectful to David, but ... also firm in his defense of the Church.” Eventually, despite finding it difficult to overcome his “pride”, David was rebaptized into the Church.↵
7. If you are aware of any material that contradicts this claim, please notify me so I can update this article.↵
8. Again, if you find any official LDS material that contradicts this claims, please notify me.↵
9. Compare **Bruce Holt’s excommunication** with **Jeremy Runnells’ excommunication**.↵
10. The decision to shun because of differences in doctrine versus including others with dissimilar views and embracing differences of opinion is one manifestation of a deeper tension between the totalistic and individual-growth mindsets that are part of the fundamental fabric of the LDS Church. See **the three-fold nature of the LDS Church: corporate, totalistic, and individual-growth**.↵