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## **Probing Our Culture with Problematic Data**

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# Probing Our Culture with Problematic Data

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**Kyler Rasmussen**

Review of Jeff Strong, *Torn: Why People We Love Are Leaving the Church and What We Can Learn from Them* (Midway, UT: Coolstream Publishing, 2026). 300 pages. \$21.95 (paperback).

**Abstract:** *Torn provides a mountain of new data on disaffiliation from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, based on the author's deeply personal research efforts. Those efforts allow him to present insights into how and why people report exiting the faith, and how loved ones can stay connected with those who turn away. But the picture he paints of disaffiliation trends and Church culture suffers from an overreliance on shaky data. His excellent pastoral prescriptions will be of value to faithful Saints, but those looking for a clear-eyed view of disaffiliation may need to turn elsewhere.*

**W**hen someone you know leaves The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it's natural to try to understand why. Is it something about them — their behavior, their personality, or their faithfulness? Is it something about you — how you treated them or how you raised them? Or should blame be leveled toward the Church itself — its policies, its leaders, and its culture?

It's relatively easy to find information on these matters, even if true knowledge is elusive. Given the opportunity, former members will often tell you why they left — sometimes at length. For the statistically inclined, there are a number of large-scale surveys with data on religious experience, affiliation, and retention. However, those with experience understand that seeing a number or hearing a story is not the

same as trusting it. Trust requires more than mere exposure. It requires an assurance that a perspective broadly aligns with an external reality and isn't driven by misunderstanding, hostility, fear, or agenda.

It's here that *Torn*<sup>1</sup> enters the picture, a book aimed at helping faithful members better understand those whose connection to the Church has wavered or severed. It centers on the experience of its author, Jeff Strong — a father of three wayward children, a former mission president, and someone willing to personally bankroll a research program dedicated to those who have disaffiliated.

The author puts forward three main assertions:

1. "Many of our members are leaving . . . because their lived experience in the Church has, for them, become intellectually, relationally, and spiritually empty."
2. "Culture powerfully shapes how [history, doctrine, and leadership] are taught, lived and experienced, often in ways we do not intend . . . . Culture can either deepen trust and discipleship — or erode them."
3. "Ordinary, faithful members like you and me have more influence than we realize in cultivating a healthier, more Christlike culture." (pp. 5–6)

He supports these assertions using survey and focus-group responses from over 20,000 current and former members, recruited largely from an online snowball sample<sup>2</sup> drawn from participants in Latter-day-Saint online venues spanning the belief spectrum (sites such as Scripture Central, Faith Matters, and r/exmormon). His research forthrightly accepts the perspective of former members, presenting their narratives with an uncommon textual and visual clarity. The narratives are paired with exceptionally useful pastoral advice, grounded in scripture and the words of Church leaders, which will resonate with anyone familiar with deconversion. Yet, that advice is marred by three interrelated problems: (1) an overreliance on questionable data, (2) notable blind spots not captured by his research, and (3) a warped view of current Church culture.

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1. Jeff Strong, *Torn: Why People We Love Are Leaving the Church and What We Can Learn from Them* (Midway, UT: Coolstream Publishing, 2026).

2. *Snowball sampling* is a technique where survey participants are self-selecting and who participate in the recruitment of additional participants. For further information, see "Snowball Sampling," *Oregon State University*, 14 September 2010, [research.oregonstate.edu/ori/irb/policies-and-guidance-investigators/guidance/snowball-sampling](https://research.oregonstate.edu/ori/irb/policies-and-guidance-investigators/guidance/snowball-sampling).

The author attempts to paint the flow of those leaving the Church as an open and gushing wound, one implied to be a uniquely urgent problem for Latter-day Saints. In shining a light on cultural issues, he falls into the same trap he hoped to correct, adopting a narrowed and skewed vision of disaffiliation. Thankfully, his proposed responses are truly valuable, with a readily evident love for Christ and the Church.

### A Brief Note

It is worth noting that I am approaching this review as an analytics-focused government researcher. Strong made it clear in interviews and elsewhere that he doesn't want undue focus on his research findings. But those findings have been the hook by which he has garnered attention, and they are what most would expect someone with my background to comment on.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, *Torn* is light on methodological detail. I had to reach out to Strong and his research partner, Jeff Dotson (an Associate Professor of Marketing at Ohio State University), to learn more.<sup>4</sup> They were gracious enough to send me draft, unpublished research reports and met with me briefly to answer my questions. Strong also hoped to make updates to the book with additional printings, so this review—based on the first edition of *Torn*—may not match what winds up in future editions of the book.

### A Summary of *Torn*

Before giving my assessment of *Torn*'s strengths and weaknesses, I think it is helpful to provide a summary of the book. The importance comes in ensuring that Strong's reasoning is accurately understood. I try to do so in a matter-of-fact manner, but that approach should not be taken as expressing my agreement with or endorsement of Strong's conclusions. Understanding his positions—and the reasons for those positions—is critical to effectively evaluating *Torn*.

Strong is a former corporate executive (president of Johnson & Johnson), so it is not a surprise that his book reads like it came out of the management section at Barnes and Noble. There are plenty of crisp infographics, (sometimes muddy) analogies, and (maybe too many) bullet-point lists. But with that style comes clear, accessible prose and handy post-chapter takeaways that many will appreciate.

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3. Specifically, my background is in data analytics and survey methodology, which seems relevant for a book driven by a large-scale survey.

4. Video call with Jeff Strong and Jeff Dotson, 13 May 2026.

He also includes scripture references, apostolic quotes, and mission stories that show his sincerity as a faithful Latter-day Saint.

The book is shaped by a metaphor of soil, with soil representing the culture in which Church members are planted and nourished. That metaphor has four parts:

1. **Examine the soil.** How many are leaving, who they are, and why they are leaving.
2. **Prepare the soil.** How culture creates conditions that impact the way faith takes root.
3. **Cultivate the soil.** How to balance the tensions that often push people away.
4. **Bring forth good fruit.** How Jesus Christ can help us transform our culture.

These four metaphorical parts are discussed in the following sections. After examining the arguments in each part, I provide my own reflections on those arguments.

## Part I: Examine the soil

In these chapters, Strong reports the primary findings of his research, including his headline statistic: 40% of active Church members in the United States have left since the year 2000 (p. 16). This represents the rough lower-bound of several different estimates gleaned from his research and national polling, validated by Church researchers with firsthand knowledge of internal statistics. This includes asking respondents who reported actively attending Church at some point in their lives<sup>5</sup> whether they had left the Church (42%), how many in their immediate and birth families had left (48%), and how many of their high-school friends had left (47%). This was supplemented with data from the *Harvard Cooperative Election Study* (HCES), which suggested an apparent 55% reduction in Latter-day Saint affiliation since 2008. It was also supplemented by the *Pew Religious Landscape Study* (PRLS), where 46% of 2024 respondents said that they were affiliated at age 16 but had since disaffiliated.

Strong then presents four main reasons for which former members reported stepping away, with four general categories that he terms as *waves* (p. 20). These were established and shaped through focus groups with former members and quantified by his larger survey.

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5. Strong does not clarify what he considers active or at what points one would need to be active to be considered a fully active member.

- **Wave I – Lifestyle:** “I couldn’t keep living this way” (6%).
- **Wave II – Church History:** “The Church isn’t what it claims to be” (42%).
- **Wave III – Social Issues:** “Even if the Church were true, I couldn’t support this” (33%).
- **Wave IV – Church Experience:** “The Church isn’t led by Christ, and it’s not life-giving” (18%).

Strong outlines each wave, including frequently cited issues and triggers as well as connections to other waves. He doesn’t talk about any of the specific doctrinal or social issues in depth, but points readers to an endnote with works published by Church-affiliated or Church-friendly presses (for instance, W. Paul Reeve’s book on race and the priesthood or Tom Christofferson’s book on LGBT issues).

Then comes his second banner claim: that disaffiliation is accelerating. This one is based on his own data, where most disaffiliates had left within the last few years. He treats this as generally representative of historical trends, with a startling chart suggesting that disaffiliation rates have been *eleven times higher since 2020 than in the 2000s* and about double what they were in 2015–2019 (p. 31). He then classifies his respondents in terms of their current Church activity. The classification includes whether they were currently participating in Church (56%), whether those who were participating currently believed in the truth claims of the Church<sup>6</sup> (about 67% of those currently participating), and whether those who weren’t participating were active in another faith and/or believed in a higher power (a little less than half of former members). These statistics are framed as a wake-up call, with disaffiliation becoming an urgent crisis “not because belief itself is weak but because cultural conditions often fail to engage people through disruption, inquiry, and change” (p. 38).

Strong then discusses the experiences of those who left, characterizing their transition as a difficult and often years-long process marked by a discomfort with Church culture and a lack of belonging. For many, the issue became less about questions than conscience, and more about the institution than the reality of God (p. 52). Official Church resources were seen as particularly unhelpful, with nonofficial Latter-day Saint resources, non-Latter-day Saint religious resources,

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6. Strong does not specify what he means by *truth claims*, but this would broadly encompass the claims of the Restoration, including Joseph Smith receiving the revelations he claimed and the Book of Mormon being an authentic ancient record.

and social media perceived as more helpful (p. 48). Most reported reaching out to other members as part of their journey, with spouses and friends being more helpful than parents or Church leaders who tended to reframe inquiry as disloyalty. Those who disaffiliate “learn who they can trust with their deepest thoughts and feelings—and who they cannot” (p. 44).

### Reflecting on part I

I’ll have plenty to say about the data later in this review, but I’ll note that I don’t take issue with the banner 40% statistic, especially if it aligns with what Church researchers have seen in the internal data. The one I have a problem with is the claim of eleven times acceleration over prior decades, which does not seem reasonable. Strong’s wave categorization is useful enough, though it likely masks some important complexities, such as *Lifestyle* (Wave I) incorporating both “mental health strain” and “controlling culture”; and *Church Experience* (Wave IV) combining “spiritual emptiness” and “social exclusion.”

Readers will find that the narratives attached to each wave are idealized and perhaps even sanitized. Strong acknowledges that these stories can be biased by former members’ needs for “inner congruency and validation” (p. 19), but he expends no effort explaining how the stories might be misleading. Nevertheless, I don’t see Strong’s approach as particularly problematic—it can be viewed as an exercise in seeing these members through their own (and perhaps Christ’s) eyes.

### Part II: Prepare the soil

The next few chapters prepare Strong’s readers for the need to alter Church culture. Strong first argues that the light of our gospel experience may be blinding us to problematic cultural elements, just as a car’s headlights can make it more difficult to see objects outside the cone of light in front of us. “Sometimes the very light that guides us can blind us, narrowing our vision just when we need to see more. . . . We cannot respond wisely to what we do not yet see clearly” (p. 61).

He notes that more devout survey respondents were more likely to underestimate the scale of disaffiliation and less likely to correctly identify disaffiliates’ reported reasons for leaving. He frames this in terms of *More Incorrect* reasons (sin, loss of the spirit, led away by the world) and *More Correct* reasons (feeling like they don’t belong, not believing in truth claims, not experiencing the fruits of the gospel)

(p. 60). This suggests an opportunity for active Church members to exercise humility and Christlike love to help them better see and understand the experiences of those who leave.

Strong argues that the more rigid aspects of our culture have served important historical purposes and produced a few positive results but have had unintended side-effects. These side-effects highlight cultural tendencies toward conformity, insularity, and fealty that turn many away from the faith and lead members to react fearfully to external threats (p. 79).

Strong outlines four such threats that he sees as triggering the rise in disaffiliation — the storm that he believes the Church currently faces:

- **Disruptive Technology.** The rise of the Internet and social media have amplified personal expression, spread information, and increased institutional visibility and accountability.
- **Spiritual and Emotional Challenges.** Crises of mental health and loneliness that create a hunger for belonging and meaning.
- **Declining Institutional Trust.** A broad distrust of educational, business, media, government, and community organizations, which has decreased tolerance for perceived institutional shortcomings.
- **Changing Religious Values.** An increased emphasis on religious *experience* and *community* rather than *information* or authority-based *credentials* (p. 98). (Strong doesn't cite a source for this change in values or the way he structures them.)

Strong sees the primary fruit of these changes as *tension* — a feeling of discomfort caused by conflict between internal beliefs and external expectations.

Faithful members are experiencing tension between what they believe, value, and feel called to do in their discipleship and what they perceive they are *expected* to believe, value, and do within Church culture (p. 73). Public perception reflects this tension. A 2023 Pew study found that Latter-day Saints are viewed less favorably than any other religious group in the United States. While misunderstanding and bias play a role, this disparity invites humility and reflection. (p. 99)

Strong uses his survey results to assert that half of active members are uncomfortable with Church culture (p. 82). (Importantly, in his

sample, Strong includes members that were once active but who have left the Church. This greatly qualifies how his findings should be interpreted.) When providing examples of things that cause discomfort, he lists a few items that will sound to some like important doctrines rather than purely cultural practices:

- The idea that God has a plan for each individual.
- Church emphasis on ordinances, covenants, and the temple.
- The emphasis on missionary work and seeking converts, based on the idea that ours is the only true church.

What Strong suggests would make people more comfortable, as an alternative, is emphasizing things that some may find quite familiar:

- God expecting his children to create their own plan for their lives, based on following divine principles and being led by the Holy Ghost.
- Humility, faith, love, and serving others.
- Respecting other faiths as equals, ministering and serving rather than simply converting.

He gives special consideration to the role of women in the Church:

In the modern Church, the public voice and influence of women are often limited. For many, this contrast creates confusion—not about doctrine or priesthood responsibilities but about culture—about whether the Church community today fully reflects the pattern revealed in scripture and the vital role God consistently relied on women to play. (p. 83)

For Strong, the contrast comes from letting traditions or distortions of doctrine take our focus off Christ. He reports that only 47% of “active” respondents see the Church as “very much” Christ-centered (p. 103). He cites several examples, such as promising protection, blessings, and spiritual confirmation that can fail to materialize, refusals to date those who didn’t serve missions, and criticizing those with untraditional clothing and hairstyles (p. 114).

## **Reflecting on part II**

Strong’s point about distortions is a relatable one—it’s hard to go a week without hearing a doctrinal string plucked in a way that’s slightly off-key. (And it’s particularly painful if those off-notes come out of my own mouth.) But he seems to see those distortions as moving in only

one direction. Strong's Christ-focused center of gravity appears to be located squarely with the world's shift in religious values, as adjudicated by public opinion. The storm he outlines is framed as a force of nature, a generational (and directionally correct) values-shift rather than a morally dubious one often aimed at active Church members from those outside the faith. The resulting tension is blamed on faithful members who simply failed to pivot quickly enough in the face of changing winds.

I'm probably not the only one who bristles at these ideas, particularly at the thought that the world would somehow like the Church better if only its members were more humble, Christlike, and service-oriented. (We are already pretty well-known for that!) Those are certainly worthwhile attributes, but it should be noted that Christ's own Christ-like attributes failed to win any popularity contests among the Jews.

Strong's central touchstone through this exploration—the story of *Fiddler on the Roof*—fills me with discouragement rather than hope. That story involves a father bending over backwards to accommodate his children's cultural preferences. But I don't remember that working out well for him, for the village of Anatevka, or for the real-life Jews who remained in Russia over the ensuing decades.

### Part III: Cultivate the soil

It is here that Strong dives fully into his soil-based metaphor, outlining what he sees as four cultural imbalances in the soil of our faith and the tensions that result from them, centered on foundational questions about the nature and purpose of the Church:

- **Hard and Unyielding Soil.** A tension between *Acceptance* and *Standards*, centering on the question: Who is the Church really for?
- **Shallow Stony Soil.** A tension between *Growth* and *Sanctuary*, centering on the question: How can the Church best prepare us for the challenges of real life?
- **Thorn-Choked Soil.** A tension between *Agency* and *Faith*, centering on the question: How can we honor God's gift of agency in a culture that expects compliance?
- **Single-Crop Soil.** A tension between *Harmony* and *Conformity*, centering on the question: How can we be one when we are so different? (p. 198)

He then showcases his key method for highlighting those tensions:

survey items meant to compare respondents' personal beliefs with Church expectations (p. 121). Specifically, he asked respondents to rank or rate the importance of specific items from either perspective, such as "Love and Care for the Poor and Needy." In terms of their personal beliefs, respondents rated that item as the most important, with "Attend the Temple" as the least important. They then rated how important those items would be from the perspective of Church expectations. "Attend the Temple" was among the most important, while "Love and Care for the Poor and Needy" was dead last (figure 1).

Again, these items were completed by both current and former members, and versions of these charts appear throughout the soil-oriented chapters as indicators of how Strong believes that Church culture fails to align with most members' personal values.

Instead of trying to summarize these chapters, I'll just include some relevant quotes, because there are some good ones:

***Acceptance:***

While our cultural soil warmly invites everyone to the meet, we don't allow everyone to run or to run in a way so that they feel they matter. We implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) exclude not by enforcing God's doctrines or standards but by emphasizing lower standards or certain cultural standards above God's higher, essential standards. (p. 130)

***Growth:***

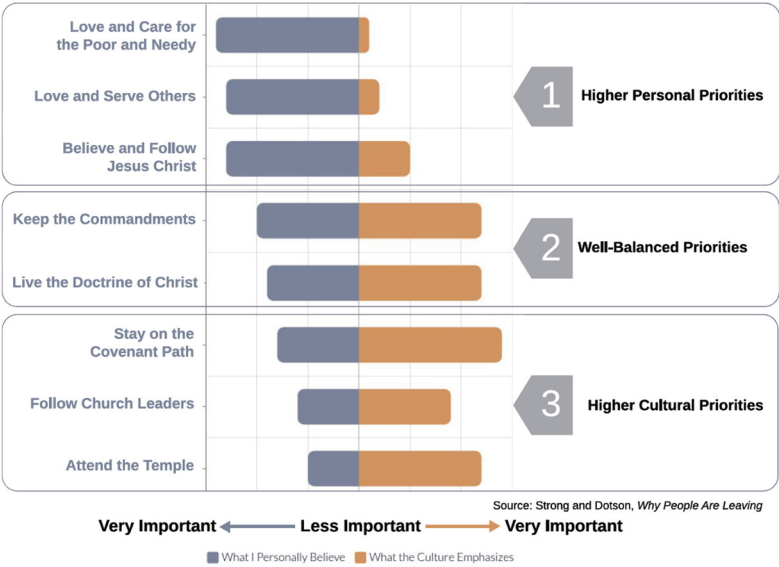
Tradition sometimes prevented our missionaries from drawing strength from Christ and His gospel. It gave them the wrong approach to facing hard things. They wanted to resolve discomfort by avoiding it or seeking quick, superficial relief rather than patiently working through it. They felt pressured to substitute certainty for faith. (pp. 148–49)

***Agency:***

Fealty is an unquestioning, unconditioned allegiance to some sovereign power where truth, goodness, choice, responsibility, reasoning, and even personal revelation are surrendered to that sovereign's authority. Christlike obedience retains these elements because they are essential for our growth as children of God. Fealty chokes the plant; obedience nourishes it. (p. 169)

# What Matters Most—Personal Belief vs. Cultural Emphasis

(Respondents Ranked 8 Religious Priorities)



**Figure 1.** What matters most—personal belief vs. cultural emphasis.  
(Source: *Torn*, 121. Reproduced with permission.)

## Harmony:

Sameness often feels safe. We instinctively shape the soil of our communities to grow what looks familiar. But when sameness becomes the standard, we lose something vital. Differences of personality, experience, and belief begin to feel like threats instead of gifts. People hide parts of themselves to belong. Something inside them withers. (p.184)

For each, Strong puts forward what he sees as Christ’s pattern for restoring balance to the soil. In the case of *Acceptance*, he encourages readers to “see the one, not just the ninety-nine,” to “make love the measure of belief,” and to “let the Church illuminate, not eclipse.” (pp. 142–43). For *Growth*, the focus is on Christ’s transcendence through suffering and self-sacrifice. For *Agency*, it’s on his pattern of leading through persuasion and long-suffering. For *Harmony*, it is on the balance between law and mercy, forgiveness and accountability. The overall emphasis is on avoiding a *sifting* mentality—it is Christ who will be the one ultimately separating the wheat from the tares.

### Reflecting on part III

In these chapters, there is a lot that resonated with me as Strong brought each tension back to Christ's example. But it seemed sometimes controversial when the tensions became more concrete. He gives one example of a professor at a Church university who lost his bishop's endorsement and subsequently his job (pp. 185–86). The reason? Choosing to pay a portion of his tithing to LGBTQ+ organizations rather than to the Church. Strong puts it forward as a harsh example of boundary maintenance based on a "General Handbook definition," particularly in the lack of apparent compassion from university leadership. But his choice of that example feels strangely like *boundary testing*—encouraging dissonance rather than promoting harmony.

In addition, his tensions appear notably one-sided, presenting a misleading (if not false) dichotomy. In each case the tension is between a "balanced" option (such as *Agency*) and an "unbalanced" one (such as *Fealty*). But the imbalance is only on the side purportedly promoted by Church culture—there's no "unbalanced" option on the side of disaffiliates or Church critics (something like *Rebellion*). A more complete view of these issues would highlight the tension that exists on both sides, showing how each would need to compromise to achieve balance.

One can also take issue with how Strong uses and defines a few of his terms. His definition of "fealty"—though useful when characterizing extreme, blind faith—doesn't match how the term was used in an archaic context.<sup>7</sup> A relationship bound by fealty was closer to the Christlike obedience he describes—a mutual, conditional, covenant-oriented bond maintained by choice and love. And "love" has its interpretations as well. Love can mean setting firm boundaries and helping someone work through and deal with discomfort rather than removing it.<sup>8</sup>

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7. Jeb Smith, "Fealty: Love, Loyalty, and Choice in Feudalism," *History Medieval* (blog), 1 December 2024, [historymedieval.com/fealty-love-loyalty-and-choice-in-feudalism/](https://historymedieval.com/fealty-love-loyalty-and-choice-in-feudalism/).

8. "Is Tough Love Better than Gentle Parenting?," *Oak Health Center* (blog), [oak.healthcenter.org/is-tough-love-better-than-gentle-parenting/](https://oak.healthcenter.org/is-tough-love-better-than-gentle-parenting/). I found one quote from this article particularly relevant: "Children don't need parents who bend under pressure. They need parents who can tolerate discomfort without rescuing them from it."

## Part IV: Bring forth good fruit

Strong next prepares his readers for letting go of old beliefs in favor of an alternative approach, a renewal akin to the death of the old self in baptism. With the potential for change comes uncertainty and fear, and Strong works to contrast responses rooted in fear with those fueled by faith. He notes that fear doesn't always stem from doubt or self-defense, but in responsibility. Some feel fear because they love the Church and its cherished truths, as well as the people we have stewardship over. Yet when faced with questions or potentially threatening differences, those who are fearful don't have to rush to act on that fear:

When fear rises (as it will), we can pause, breathe, and invite the Spirit to lead our responses: a slower answer, a gentler tone, a question instead of a conclusion, and an open heart instead of a guarded one. (p. 209)

Members' responses can instead be informed by faith—by trust in God and those they care for. He avoids specific prescriptions, but offers some first steps:

- **Begin with Self.** It helps to have carefully and humbly considered issues related to Church history and doctrine—so members don't react reflexively or dismissively and so they can empathize with those questions when they come. (pp. 224–26)
- **Start Where You Have Stewardship.** All members have built-in connections and responsibilities (marriages, families, friendships) where they can practice that approach. (p. 226)
- **When Stewardship Includes Authority.** These conversations can be especially high stakes, where trust can be preserved or lost. Try listening without steadying, controlling, or redirecting. (pp. 226–27)
- **Choosing Love without Agreement.** It's okay to not agree, despite the tension it can create. (pp. 227–28)
- **Resist the Illusion of Control.** Faithfulness doesn't require control over other people's beliefs, outcomes, or journeys. (pp. 228–29)

Conversations that go well may not keep the person in the Church, but conversations that go poorly can damage relationships, deepen

distrust, and make withdrawal more likely. That's because disaffiliation is more about relationships than information:

Facts matter. History matters. Doctrine matters. But in our research, people did not step away primarily because of those things. They stepped away because they no longer felt like they belonged. (p. 213)

Strong ends the book discussing one of his sons, Cale, who left the Church after coming home early from the MTC (and facing Strong's own fear-based reaction). He talks of soil that was once too hard and dreams that had to be adapted. But he also speaks of hope, of wayward children who were able to find and follow their own path, and of a Church that can find renewed strength in Christ. As Strong concludes:

The Church will not be defeated by the things from our past or the outside. Its greatest threat is becoming hollow, performative, less nourishing, and less alive to those who hunger for God and need it most. (p. 235)

### **Reflecting on part IV**

These chapters are Strong at peak strength. Whatever quibbles I might have simply melt in the face of his sincerity and authenticity. He can talk about these conversations because he clearly had many of them where the stakes were high. He listened to dozens of others as they suggested how to instill trust and connection. There is much of value in part IV. However, given the limitations of Strong's research, those morsels felt like precious shafts of wheat within a field of problematic tares.

### **The Critique**

As much as I liked the book and valued Strong's wise counsel, I found myself consistently distracted by gaps, blind spots, and overgeneralizations. They include the following.

#### **An overreliance on questionable data**

As mentioned earlier, Strong relies on two main sources: (1) his own survey data, and (2) HCES survey data, as based on an opt-in online panel of respondents from YouGov, a well-known polling firm.<sup>9</sup> The former is used throughout the book, from disaffiliation rates, to the

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9. Tufts University, "About & Methodology," *Cooperative Election Study*, Tisch

beliefs of attending members, to perceptions of Church culture. The latter is used to support some supplementary ideas: that disaffiliation rates have been dramatic enough to substantially reduce overall Church affiliation in the U.S. (the proportion within the U.S. population decreasing by as much as 55%), and that disaffiliation rates are much worse for Latter-day Saints than for other religions (p. 242). Data from Pew is sometimes cited, but not to nearly the extent as the HCES, and not when Pew’s results seem to cut against his narrative.

### ***Strong’s selective snowball***

Most of the charts in *Torn* carry this source note: “Strong and Dotson, *Why People Are Leaving*, 2025.” If you try to Google that source, it’s possible you’ll find things that I did not—Strong and his team have plans to publish some summary slide decks, as well as an eventual publicly available package with all the data and survey instruments. But what I found, scattered through a few online articles, was not encouraging. Strong’s survey data was characterized as “not necessarily representative” by members of his own research team,<sup>10</sup> based on its email list, social-media, and snowball-driven sampling. Experts outside the research team were somewhat more forthright, implying that the survey creates “a skewed story that doesn’t reflect reality in an accurate way.”<sup>11</sup>

My take aligns more closely with the latter. I wouldn’t go so far as to call the data useless—it certainly helps clarify how the Church is viewed by those engaged in the modern Latter-day Saint media landscape. The problem is that Strong shows essentially no restraint in applying the data outside of that limited sphere. He gives lip service to the problem of selection bias but then acts as if that gives him license to interpret the data as fully representative of U.S. membership and those disaffiliating from the Church.

I don’t think that this was maliciously done, but I suspect it was done against the advice of his research team. My impression is that Strong sees selection bias as a minor problem operating on the margins,

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College of Civic Life, [tischcollege.tufts.edu/research-faculty/research-centers/cooperative-election-study/about-methodology](https://tischcollege.tufts.edu/research-faculty/research-centers/cooperative-election-study/about-methodology).

10. Jana Riess, “Former LDS Mission President Explains What We Get Wrong About People Leaving the Church,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 5 May 2026, [sltrib.com/religion/2026/05/05/jana-riess-former-lds-mission/](https://sltrib.com/religion/2026/05/05/jana-riess-former-lds-mission/).

11. Stephen Cranney and Josh Coates, “Unrepresentative Data is Limited in What It Can Show about Latter-day Saints,” *Deseret News*, 7 May 2026, [deseret.com/opinion/2026/05/07/latter-day-saint-stats-representative-data/](https://deseret.com/opinion/2026/05/07/latter-day-saint-stats-representative-data/).

skewing his results a few percentage points one way or another. But in this case, selection effects mean that he could be substantially off the mark on just about every question he tries to answer. His conclusion that disaffiliation is speedily ramping up? That is most likely a product of recency bias, as he probably drew disproportionately from those currently dealing with faith crises. And his view that about a third of attending members don't believe the Church's truth claims? Perhaps that is true among those on Reddit, but not in the Church as a whole—his results are flatly contradicted by more representative sources.<sup>12</sup> (The more likely answer is around 5–10%).

The conclusion that 40% of active Church members in the U.S. have left since 2000 at least treats his data as one indicator among many—shown in combination with external indicators and, as he claims, validated by those firmly in the know. Everything else that results from the survey should be taken as representative of his *sample*, which is a very uneven slice of the Church. The sampled population is probably young, probably leans more progressive politically, and almost certainly taps into those who have a high interest in religious issues, Church history, and questions of historicity.

### **The Harvard Cooperative Election Study**

At first glance, survey data from HCES seems like it should be reliable. It has a large annual sample size (around 50,000), includes weights that adjust for gender, age, race, and education, and carries the reputation of both Harvard and YouGov.<sup>13</sup> But for the purpose for which Strong uses it—focusing on a thin religious minority—the HCES is not the right tool. I see it as problematic for a few reasons:

- **Limited Terminology.** When it comes to stating religious affiliation, the only option available to Latter-day Saints in the HCES is the term “Mormon.” It's possible for people to write in other options and for those to be appropriately recoded, but a significant number of respondents will fail to do that, either skipping the question or responding with “Other.” The survey should be less likely to include those who take issue with the term *Mormon*, particularly since President Nelson's address on the topic in 2018.<sup>14</sup>

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12. Cranney and Coates, “Unrepresentative Data.”

13. Tufts University, “About & Methodology.”

14. Russell M. Nelson, “The Correct Name of the Church,” *Ensign*, November

- **Panel Drift.** The HCES relies on YouGov's opt-in online panel, from which it attempts to draw a nationally representative set of respondents. Respondents have to download and maintain the YouGov app on their phones and have the option to participate or decline any given survey invitation. That sort of sampling method is prone to *panel drift*, the tendency for the characteristics of a panel to change over time. Looking at the data (which is freely available<sup>15</sup>), I was able to find evidence of panel drift (in its measure of political ideology in this case) that closely matches the apparent downward trend of Latter-day Saint affiliation. (See the appendix for details.)
- **Insufficient Weights.** As useful as survey weights can be, they aren't magic—unless sampling is biased in ways researchers are already adjusting for, all weights will do is carry selection bias forward.<sup>16</sup> This can be seen in the panel drift observable in the HCES data, where applying weights does not appear to meaningfully correct that drift (see the appendix). Even if it did, weights are notoriously inadequate when examining small sub-groups like Latter-day Saints and may even amplify error in those cases.<sup>17</sup>

These issues would mean little if other available data agreed with what is reported in the HCES. But comparable data from Pew tells a very different story. The PRLS uses a nationally representative telephone and mail-based sample (with mode depending on year) and is specifically designed to measure and track religious affiliation. While the HCES suggests a distinct drop in Latter-day Saint affiliation since the late 2000s, the PRLS shows affiliation staying relatively stable when adjusting for U.S. population growth.<sup>18</sup> The chart in figure 2

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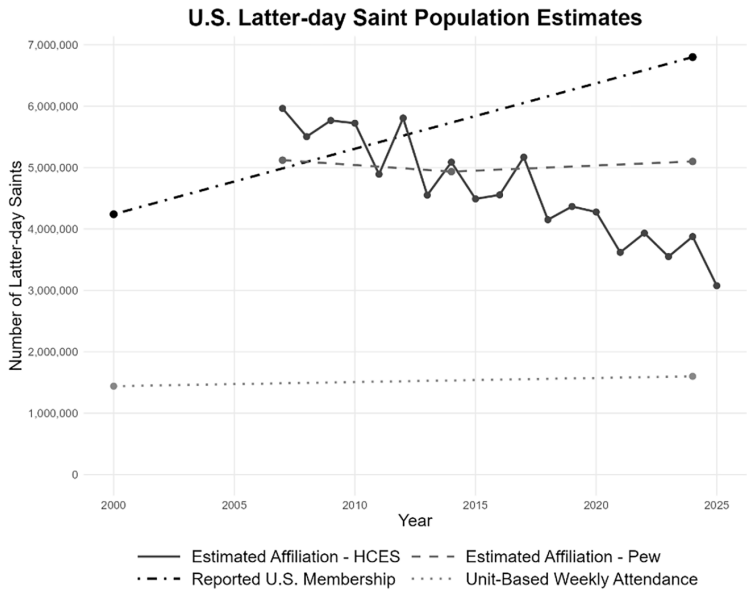
2018, 87–90, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2018/11/sunday-morning-session/the-correct-name-of-the-church](http://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2018/11/sunday-morning-session/the-correct-name-of-the-church).

15. Harvard Dataverse, "Cooperative Election Study (CES)," [dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7927/H73T-6K94](https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7927/H73T-6K94).

16. "For Weighting Online Opt-In Samples, What Matters Most?," *Pew Research Center*, 26 January 2018, [pewresearch.org/methods/2018/01/26/for-weighting-online-opt-in-samples-what-matters-most/](https://www.pewresearch.org/methods/2018/01/26/for-weighting-online-opt-in-samples-what-matters-most/). Also see "Survey Weighting Explained: Methods, Examples & Pitfalls," *Lensym* (blog), 22 February 2026, [lensym.com/blog/survey-weighting-guide](https://lensym.com/blog/survey-weighting-guide).

17. Jim Lewis and Jeff Sauro, "To Weight or Not to Weight," *MeasuringU*, 21 January 2025, [measuringu.com/to-weight-or-not-to-weight/](https://measuringu.com/to-weight-or-not-to-weight/).

18. Gregory A. Smith et al., "Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May



**Figure 2.** U.S. Latter-day Saint population estimates.  
(Data source: *Torn*; Pew Religious Landscape Survey.)

shows both those estimates, in addition to two others that Strong discusses in the appendices of his book: official membership statistics from the Church and implied attendance calculations based on Church unit growth over a similar period.

There is also evidence that Latter-day Saints have weathered the secular storm better than many of their peers, especially when looking at those who still attend services weekly, based on PRLS findings from a Brigham Young University research team led by Justin Dyer:

The Pew Religious Landscape Survey (2024) and the Spiritual Seismology Survey (2025) were used to examine national trends of Latter-day Saint retention. In these surveys, “retention” was defined as the percentage of those raised Latter-day Saint who continue to identify as Latter-day Saint in adulthood. . . . When examining those who were raised in a religion and actively participate in that religion as adults (attending religious services at least monthly)

Have Leveled Off,” *Pew Research Center*, 26 February 2025, [pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-leveled-off/](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-leveled-off/).

*Latter-day Saints had the highest percentage of "active" retention of all religions at 42%.<sup>19</sup>*

The raw values (42% of Latter-day Saint youth still attending as adults) are not necessarily good news in and of themselves, and neither are the flat affiliation numbers from Pew, but both significantly undercut Strong's narrative of an urgent crisis, uniquely affecting Latter-day Saints, that can only be addressed through deep-cut cultural reform.

### ***Are disaffiliation rates accelerating?***

I mentioned my deep discomfort with Strong's claimed disaffiliation trends and how recency bias might explain them. Yet that doesn't actually answer the question of whether disaffiliation is accelerating and, if so, by how much. Unless researchers happen to be working directly with data from the Church, the honest response here can and should be: "We don't know." But since Strong has created a scary-looking chart based on his interpretation of the data (p. 31), it's only fair to see what other available data might indicate.

I think there are at least three useful (if imperfect) bellwethers of disaffiliation over time. The first is the PRLS data already cited, where the multi-decade trend of decline in the Christian share of the population seems to stabilize after 2021.<sup>20</sup> Though this is not a direct indicator for Latter-day Saints, there's little reason to assume that the same trends don't apply to Church membership as well, especially in the context of recent growth in converts, missionary service, and Church education enrollment.<sup>21</sup>

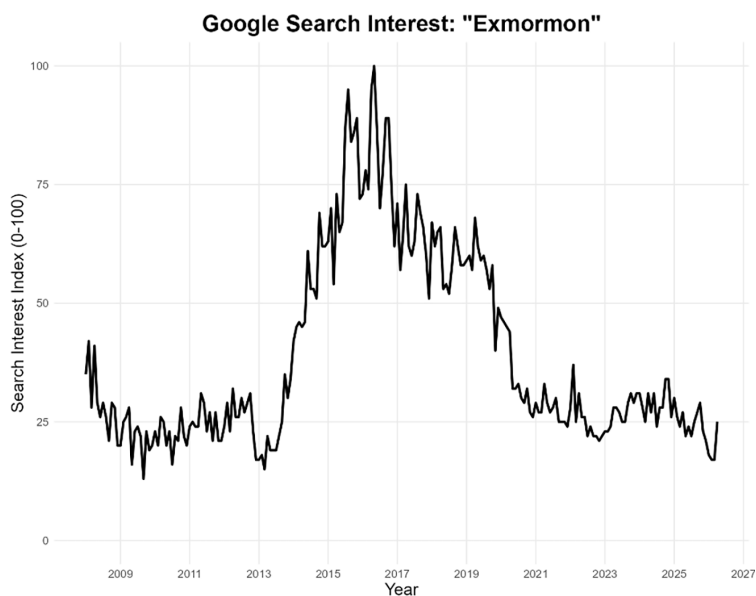
The second comes from Google search data, where trends for the term "exmormon" might be informative. As evident in figure 3, those searches rose rapidly starting in mid-2015 (coinciding exactly with the *Obergefell* decision legalizing U.S. same-sex marriage) and remained strong until the COVID-19 pandemic, after which searches returned

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19. W. Justin Dyer et al., "Latter-day Saint Religiousness, Well-Being, and Retention in the United States," *Family Foundations of Youth Development*, Brigham Young University, 16 December 2025, 2, emphasis added, [foundations.byu.edu/0000019b-1343-d613-a59b-17df82980000/latterdaysaintreligiosity-pdf](https://foundations.byu.edu/0000019b-1343-d613-a59b-17df82980000/latterdaysaintreligiosity-pdf).

20. See the chart titled "After years of decline. . ." in Smith, "Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed."

21. Tad Walch, "Latter-day Saint Growth Tops 66% Since 2000, after 2025 Shattered Old Record for Convert Baptisms," *Deseret News*, 5 April 2026, [deseret.com/faith/2026/04/05/latter-day-saint-growth-tops-66-since-2000-after-2025-shattered-old-record-for-convert-baptisms/](https://deseret.com/faith/2026/04/05/latter-day-saint-growth-tops-66-since-2000-after-2025-shattered-old-record-for-convert-baptisms/).



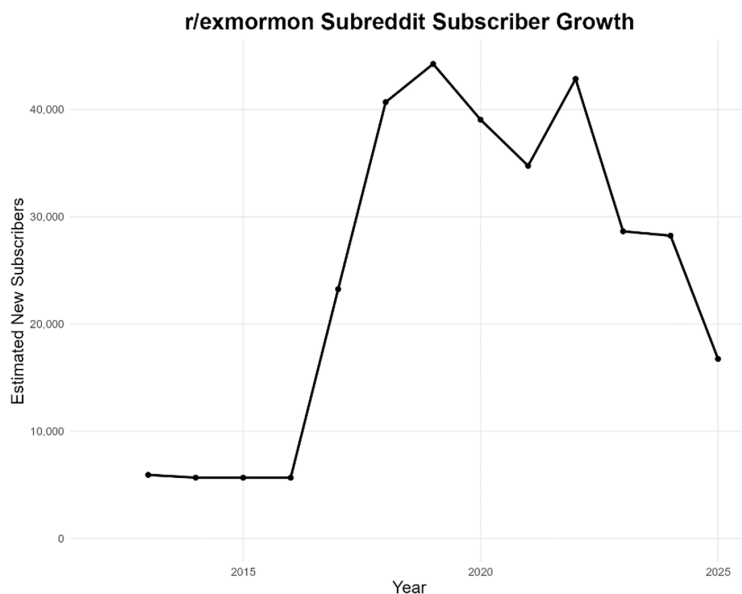
**Figure 3.** Google Trends results for the search term “exmormon.”  
(Source: Google Trends.)

to something resembling a status quo. Some (or much) of that search traffic may have been driven by external interest from those who are curious about people leaving the faith, but it suggests that disaffiliation trends may have long since reached their apex.

The third comes from Reddit subscription data for the r/exmormon subreddit (as extracted through an AI search). As the largest online gathering place for former Latter-day Saints, and the source of much of Strong’s survey sampling, the rate of subscriber growth over time (figure 4) may have its own story to tell. Despite some gaps and unfortunate changes to how those subscriber numbers were tracked, those rates suggest that growth exploded starting around 2016, and though growth was consistent through 2022, it is no longer at its heyday.

Together, these indicators tell a somewhat consistent story of slowing disaffiliation, and one that resonates with my personal observations, having watched some in my family and my local wards leave over time. The values-laden storm that Strong presents was real but may be winding down as many of those apt to leave have already made that choice.

Based on this, I think Strong is incorrect, but I don’t think that matters much. Arguing about when and to what degree that trend began



**Figure 4.** r/exmormon subreddit subscriber growth. (Source: Reddit.) Note: A number of r/exmormon Reddit threads track subscriber growth for the year 2012, 2017, and 2018 to 2025. Values from 2013 to 2017 represent linear annual estimates based on the difference between 2012 and 2017 subscriber values.

or ended doesn't invalidate his overall argument. If his book had come out in 2018 the narrative would've been perfectly applicable, and his diagnosis and cultural recommendations would've been much the same. Even if this current storm is ending, it is only a matter of time before the Church faces a similar cultural challenge. The more pertinent question isn't *when* cultural change might be needed, it's whether that change would accomplish what Strong hopes.

### **Blind spots at the edge of the light**

Strong clearly wants his research to shed light on things that are hard to discern. The irony is that the limitations of his own survey-informed perspective may have created similar blind spots—aspects of disaffiliation and the cultural storm that he either misses or declines to discuss within *Torn*. I cover three of those below.

#### ***Missing those who fade away***

Examining the broader deconversion literature, there seems to be an entire class of disaffiliates who simply aren't represented in Strong's

four-wave structure: those who “fade away” from activity or who simply aren’t interested in religion. This is a solidly sized portion of those who disaffiliate — in Pew data they represent two of the top three reasons that people leave their childhood faiths, with 38% of respondents selecting each.<sup>22</sup> That might be somewhat lower for a high-engagement faith like the Church, but it shouldn’t be zero.

Of the four wave categories, *Lifestyle* might be the best fit here, but that’s not how Strong uses it. For him, that category is about the demands of the religion being too much to sustain full activity. In my discussion with Strong, he confirmed that he did receive some limited responses along the “fade away” lines in early focus groups, but they never made it to the final list of survey items.<sup>23</sup> This isn’t surprising given his focus and his sample: he was looking for people who were actively engaged in resolving questions of faith, not those who felt those questions were unimportant in the first place.

If there is a hidden fifth category of disaffiliation — what someone might term *Apathy* — it is an open question what type of religious culture has the highest probability of keeping them engaged or re-engaging them. I suspect Strong would point to a Christ- and Spirit-focused faith as essential for helping apathetic youth lock-in to the gospel, and I would agree with him. But could clear boundaries and a more straightforward link between behavior and God’s promises also play a role? If our traditional culture helped earlier generations move forward through times of trial, as Strong implies, could removing it make the present one less likely to care?

### ***A room-sized political elephant***

There is a consistent thread in *Torn* that is made even more conspicuous by its absence. Strong assiduously avoids any mention of political ideology. In over 298 pages, the word *conservative* appears only once in the context of ideology, though there are plenty of references to conservative estimates. The words *liberal* or *progressive* never appear in *Torn*.

For a book trying to persuade often-conservative members to let go of tradition and culture, this is probably the right strategy. But

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22. Becka A. Alper et al., “Why Do Some Americans Leave Their Religion While Others Stay?,” *Pew Research Center*, 15 December 2025, [pewresearch.org/religion/2025/12/15/why-do-some-americans-leave-their-religion-while-others-stay/](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/12/15/why-do-some-americans-leave-their-religion-while-others-stay/).

23. Video call with Jeff Strong and Jeff Dotson, 13 May 2026.

Strong's storm of shifting values occurred at the same approximate timeframe that Latter-day Saints moved their voting intentions nineteen points to the left.<sup>24</sup> The impact of social media, the ongoing mental health crisis, and the changing religious emphasis are all deeply intertwined with that ideological shift, even if the direction of causality isn't always clear. And that shift has implications for Strong's proposed solution. Readers get a hint of the ideological change that Strong may want to see in an easy-to-miss paragraph in part II:

Many who leave the Church—and many who stay while feeling conflicted—perceive a gap between what the Church teaches and what they sometimes observe institutionally. They recognize devotion and sacrifice yet do not always see corresponding engagement with the suffering, inequality, and division that mark modern life. For example, calls for peacemaking in contrast to persistent political division in the Church, significant investment in temples in contrast to the plight of the homeless, some who prioritize serving the dead over serving the living, and caring for members in the fold more than for people outside of the fold. (p. 99)

Strong mentions a gap perceived by those who leave the Church. It is not hard to read into that gap a desire for greater alignment with progressive ideals—for the Church to engage more in social justice advocacy, to more clearly call out and condemn conservative strains of thought, to spend (more of) its money in the ways progressive members want it spent, and to otherwise cater more to the preferences of those critical of the Church. Changing Church culture to reduce or eliminate perceived gaps would presumably help progressive members feel more comfortable at Church. But at what point would conservative members start to feel out of place, like *they* didn't belong?

If the focus is on retaining membership, Strong's soil balance would need to cut both ways. *Acceptance* should include those with more traditional beliefs. It should have patience with those at earlier and simpler stages of *Growth* or who use their *Agency* to promote Church traditions. *Harmony* needs to include voices that urge caution and

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24. Brad Jones, "Two Decades of Partisanship in the Cooperative Election Study," *YouGov*, 24 March 2026, [yougov.com/en-us/articles/54389-two-decades-of-partisanship-in-the-cooperative-election-study](https://yougov.com/en-us/articles/54389-two-decades-of-partisanship-in-the-cooperative-election-study). Yes, I'm referencing the HCES data for this. Yes, panel drift could be impacting this too. No, I'm not happy about it.

protection and obedience. That means no one can ever be truly isolated from tension and discomfort. All of those who stay must instead make a choice to carry forward despite uncomfortable feelings.

### ***Rose-colored disaffiliates***

In Strong's admirable quest to listen to and understand those who leave the Church, he has purposefully adopted the most charitable lens possible. This approach has undeniable merits, yet it misses the fact that disaffiliation, culture, and conversations are all two-way streets. His intended audience is faithful Latter-day Saints, and he encourages them to look inward to help build the best tools for retaining faith. But the picture of an otherwise-faithful, well-informed, Christlike disaffiliate will not always survive contact with reality. If and when parents and leaders are faced with disaffiliates who appear misinformed, accusatory, and belligerent, they may find the process even more discouraging than Strong suggests. Not all will approach conversations that way, but more than a few will, and Church members wanting to adopt Strong's more open approach may need to be prepared to turn the other cheek when encountering that behavior.

This may be especially true when disaffiliates have internalized some of the cultural elements that Strong is working to adjust. Black-and-white thinking, distortions of doctrine, and uncritical acceptance of (new-found) authority can make open conversations difficult. That doesn't make Strong's approach wrong, but it may make it more difficult (if not impossible) to master.

Strong's lens extends to his forthright acceptance of the views of disaffiliates as accurate by default, whether that be in their reasons for disaffiliation or their perceptions of Church culture, doctrine, and practice. The social psychologist in me<sup>25</sup> is keenly aware that survey responses are often self-serving, including when it comes to religious practice.<sup>26</sup> Josh Coates, in describing how he interprets responses to his own representative survey, says, "We think this portion of the

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25. His heart still beats, deep down, where the government can't find it. See Kyler R. Rasmussen et al., "Social Desirability Bias in Pornography-Related Self-Reports: The Role of Religion," *Journal of Sex Research* 55, no. 3 (2018): 381–94, doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2017.1399196 for a sense of what he looked like.

26. Constantine Sedikides and Jochen E. Gebauer, "Religiosity as Self-Enhancement: A Meta-Analysis of the Relation Between Socially Desirable Responding and Religiosity," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 14, no. 1 (2010): 17–36, doi.org/10.1177/1088868309351002.

survey is only useful in answering the question ‘What do former members prefer to respond when asked on a survey why they left?’”<sup>27</sup> Strong seems aware of this as well (p. 19), but that doesn’t stop him from presenting them without meaningful caveat, or from mixing those responses with those of faithful members. This often left me wondering how much the hand of desirability (from either current or former members) affected the results. (Which is even more tragic given how practical it is to measure and adjust for social desirability.)

### **A warped view of Church culture**

Reading through Strong’s culture/personal comparison charts, it doesn’t take long to realize something is off. One can almost immediately see where each sentiment might be coming from (such as Church culture expecting you to “follow the principles, guidance, and counsel provided by Church leaders”; p. 172). But there are also clear distortions that miss or downplay key aspects of that culture, like suggesting that Church culture places little to no importance on “lov[ing] and car[ing] for the poor and needy” (p. 121). Someone should tell that to those making all the weekly Bishop’s Storehouse runs, or those collecting the thousands of food drive bags, or those routinely asked in ministering interviews how that low-income single sister is doing. No one can reasonably say the Church doesn’t have a culture that expects its members to care for the poor.

Strong’s portrayal is, more often than not, a funhouse mirror. Its curves and bulges will be familiar enough to those who have seen the Church and its members at their worst, but the mirror has some severe bends. These bends are rooted in sampling from an unrepresentative subset of its members and by mixing faithful and non-faithful responses. I also suspect it was bent to the breaking point by the way Church culture is set up as a foil.

Strong makes a point of acknowledging that there are many positive aspects to Church culture, but the way he talks about it often equates *culture* with what he sees as negative, doctrinally distorting, and unnecessary. I don’t have a copy of all the survey materials, but even if Strong and his team were trying hard to avoid this problem, I suspect respondents were primed to treat Church culture as an effigy,

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27. Jana Riess, “Who Is Leaving the LDS Church? Eight Key Survey Findings,” *Religion News Service*, 7 March 2024, [religionnews.com/2024/03/07/who-is-leaving-the-lds-church-8-key-survey-findings/](https://religionnews.com/2024/03/07/who-is-leaving-the-lds-church-8-key-survey-findings/).

one representing everything that's seen as harmful or annoying in Church experience.

This is partly evidenced by the gap between perceived cultural expectations and stated personal beliefs. What is *culture* if not the combined beliefs of a group put into action within a community? Strong defines it as “the shared patterns of meaning, belief, and behavior that shape how a community lives” (p. 74). One could argue that there's a disconnect between the culture that Church leaders are putting forward and what's internalized by the membership, but that doesn't quite fit for a Church with strong lay participation. Many of those taking the survey are the ones teaching the lessons, setting up the ministering routes, organizing the Christmas food drive, and, ostensibly, complaining about the deacon who doesn't wear a tie. They *are* the culture.

If Church culture promotes “following the guidance of Church leaders” as more important than “following Gospel principles and seeking God's inspiration” (rated as 64% and 34% respectively; p. 172), then, presumably, a large portion of Church membership actually believes that. Who are those people? Clearly not the ones filling out the survey. When rating “personal beliefs,” those same items registered at 2% and 62% (p. 172). If someone does believe it, it is someone else; the other; the *Church bogeyman*.

It may be possible to think of people who probably are that bogeyman. Try this, though: Run through the entire ward roster and see how many of them can you find. Is your bishop one of them? Is your Relief Society president? How about your stake president? Perhaps not, and they would almost certainly say they're not if they were filling out the survey. Maybe that survey telegraphed the “wrong” or “cultural” answers, and no one wanted to pick them, but that would be yet another distortion, another bend in the funhouse mirror that further distances Church members from Church culture.

Now, those bends serve a useful purpose. Exaggerating the differences between personal beliefs and cultural expectations can help one see the problematic bits more clearly. But I suspect they better represent the imagined culture of fifty years ago than they do any given ward today.

### **Will Cultural Change Stem Disaffiliation?**

Cultural shifts speak to another element that Strong tends to downplay—there has been real and meaningful change in Church culture across the span of generations, almost exclusively in the directions

that Strong is trying to promote. One doesn't have to look farther than the *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet to see that kind of change in action.<sup>28</sup> He does acknowledge this in spots, but it raises an important question: If the Church has already been adapting its culture, and disaffiliation spiked in the midst of those changes, why should we expect further change to slow or reverse disaffiliation trends?

### Unintended effects

As much as Strong promotes responding with faith instead of fear, his approach is, in part, about making the reader afraid—he wants to shock readers into action by depicting a deepening storm of disaffiliation, with fealty as the "virus" that directly produced the storm (p. 170) and for which his cultural remedies are the only cure. Those cultural remedies are more than just trimming around the edges of the closed and more traditional parts of Church culture. They threaten to cut into the flesh-laden skeleton of doctrine—ideas like "God has a plan for us" and "the Spirit will lead us in all things," and whether tithing should be paid to the Church instead of toward whatever recipient the member pleases.

What Strong presents in *Torn* is an alternative cultural vision, not an unvarnished slice of non-culture. Much of it happens to better align with scripture and the recent words of prophets and apostles, and he's worked hard to ground his view on that foundation. But as with the Church's current cultural landscape, his may result in unintended effects that may be hard to see until widely adopted and applied.

There are glimmers of those unintended effects in broader patterns of disaffiliation within Christianity as a whole. From Strong's reasoning, culturally conservative churches should have lost more members than progressive ones, but the opposite occurred.<sup>29</sup> Mainline Protestant churches moved their teaching and their doctrine in near lockstep with culturally liberal ideals, and they were the ones that saw the greatest declines in affiliation and engagement. This may be, in part, because those institutions seemed superfluous and interchangeable with political and social advocacy groups. But it was also because

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28. *For the Strength of Youth: A Guide for Making Choices* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2022), [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/for-the-strength-of-youth](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/for-the-strength-of-youth).

29. Daniel K. Williams, "The Pew Religious Landscape Study: Is There a Future for Mainline Protestantism?," *Substack*, 2 March 2025, [danielkwilliams.substack.com/p/the-pew-religious-landscape-study](https://danielkwilliams.substack.com/p/the-pew-religious-landscape-study).

that shift generated conservative schisms that drained large blocks of those institutions' lifeblood, cracking them apart at the foundations.

In that light, and in light of Dyer's analysis of the PRLS data, the Church seems to have done a decent job in walking the tightrope between cultural adaptation and cultural preservation. Accelerating the pace of cultural change could risk upsetting that delicate balance. Rebuilding the Church's institutional apparatus to serve the "one" could create an entirely new slew of "ones" for would-be shepherds to chase.

### **A lack of intended impacts**

Even if the Church's conservative block could be trusted to stay faithful through thick and thin, would changing Church culture have prevented the shock of disaffiliation the Church has experienced? Would changing it bring back those who've already wandered? I'm confident that Strong's more open approach to questions and conversations would have a positive impact for many. The overall effect on disaffiliation, however, might be more muted than he may expect.

Strong talks about not having the Church sort and sift its membership, favoring and promoting certain perspectives over others (p. 218). But he underestimates the extent to which disaffiliation is a self-sifting process. I can appreciate that those who stay and many of those who leave have a lot in common, with a core of faith and love for God. But available data suggest there are also real differences in values and temperament—ones that might make it hard for many to stay even in the best of circumstances. People who disaffiliate tend to be higher in perfectionism than those who stay<sup>30</sup> and they share dramatically different moral foundations.<sup>31</sup> They're lower on average when it comes to valuing loyalty and purity, and, upon deconversion, may experience a personality shift away from Honesty-Humility.<sup>32</sup> These differences

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30. Justin Dyer and Michael Goodman, "Does Religion Lead to More or Less Perfectionism?," *Deseret News*, 4 January 2025, [deseret.com/faith/2025/01/04/faith-and-perfectionism/](https://deseret.com/faith/2025/01/04/faith-and-perfectionism/).

31. Josh Coates and Stephen Cranney, "Applying Moral Foundations Theory to Current and Former Latter-day Saints," *Deseret News*, 16 February 2024, [deseret.com/2024/2/16/24074596/applying-moral-foundations-theory-to-current-and-former-latter-day-saints/](https://deseret.com/2024/2/16/24074596/applying-moral-foundations-theory-to-current-and-former-latter-day-saints/).

32. Samantha Stronge et al., "Religion and the Development of Character: Personality Changes Before and After Religious Conversion and Deconversion," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 12, no. 5 (2021): 801–11, [doi.org/10.1177/1948550620942381](https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550620942381).

do not mean members should be content with their disaffiliation, but it does mean members should be prepared for them to make different choices — to sometimes let go of the rod when faced with inevitable dark mists.

Should those who left have been expected to remain in a Church they see as all-too-imperfect, with truth claims and doctrines that they no longer endorse, and which has, at times past and present, emphasized obedience and purity of heart, mind, and action? Would community, belonging, and personal growth be enough to keep them in the pews? (Or at least to check the "Mormon" box when responding to large-scale surveys?) It might be possible to make these individuals *comfortable* at Church, but it's another step entirely to expect them to *value* and *sustain* that Church. Plus, if the conservative schisms witnessed elsewhere in Christendom are any indication, the result may be altogether less valuable to those who remain.

### Summary and Conclusion

Having now gone beyond mere exposure when it comes to Strong and to *Torn*, can readers trust the vision of Church culture the book depicts? Is there an assurance that Strong's perspective broadly aligns with an external reality and isn't primarily driven by data rooted in hostility, fear, or agenda? When it comes to the data and the research he presents, I don't think so — there is an external reality that he keeps a toehold on, but that likely bears only a loose connection to what is contained in the book. I don't think he's driven by hostility, but there are hints of both agenda and fear that can't quite be squashed.

What I trust more than his data is his firsthand experiences with those who have disaffiliated; in the connections he built as he listened and tried his best to learn. In that he has done his best to walk a line of devotion to Christ and a love for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, while seeing opportunities for change.

What I trust most is that Strong is right to focus on *trust* — that the ability to help youth and those who question hinges almost entirely on how much the one trying to help is perceived as trustworthy. That places a high responsibility on everyone, particularly those in leadership, to act and communicate in a way that fosters trust. Members cannot do that perfectly, and nobody should expect the Church to be perfect either. But members can haltingly strive to live up to the Christ-centered example laid out by scripture and the Spirit and Church leaders, adapting to change while keeping hold of the rod.

I am only in charge of that change to the degree I have stewardship, and I trust leaders who have a broader stewardship than I do. Strong wants members and leaders to start pushing more strongly for cultural change. Others might think that cultural change has already gone too far. That the Church's retention rates remain high relative to other denominations suggests that it's hit an appropriate balance, and that the trust I have in Christ to help guide our leaders hasn't been misplaced. Even with that trust, I can carefully consider those who may feel like they are on the margins, who feel that the ties binding them to the Church are beginning to fray. My words and actions could add a bit of tension to those edges. Or it could help pull them a bit closer—to those who care, to where they are needed, and, most of all, to Christ, whose ties to humanity are marked in blood, by nail and spear, and whose love will never be frayed or torn.

## Appendix

In assessing data from the *Harvard Cooperative Election Study*, I decided to move beyond Latter-day Saint affiliation and look at other variables to see if there were similar trends that seemed to cut against what can be seen in other, more robust sources. One variable with that potential was *political ideology*—specifically, the proportion of respondents who identified as being Conservative or Very Conservative. Large-scale surveys like Gallup and Pew suggest that this variable has been unusually stable over the past 30+ years, usually hovering around 37%.<sup>33</sup>

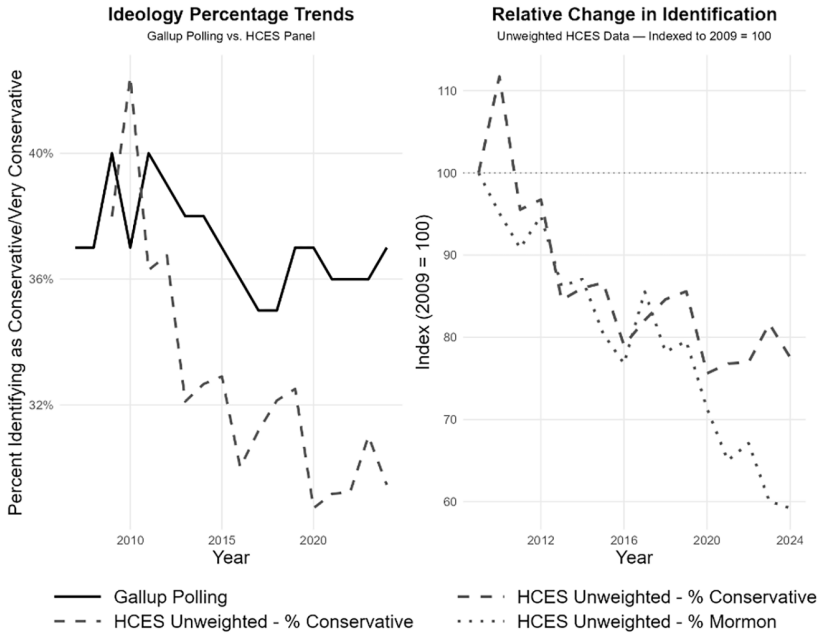
The unweighted HCES data, which provides a look at those who are making up the online panel, shows a substantial drop, and one that closely mirrors the drop seen in Latter-day Saint affiliation over the same period. Where that affiliation departs from those broader conservative trends is around 2018, the year of President Nelson's address on the name "Mormon."<sup>34</sup> Figure 5 shows how the unweighted HCES compares to the Gallup polling for political ideology, as well as relative changes in HCES political ideology and Latter-day Saint affiliation.

This is clear evidence of panel drift, where those identifying as *Conservative* or *Very Conservative* (and, by extension, Latter-day Saints, who themselves tend to be conservative) are systematically

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33. Megan Brenan, "U.S. Political Parties Historically Polarized Ideologically," *Gallup*, 16 January 2025, [news.gallup.com/poll/655190/political-parties-historically-polarized-ideologically.aspx](https://news.gallup.com/poll/655190/political-parties-historically-polarized-ideologically.aspx).

34. Nelson, "Correct Name of the Church."



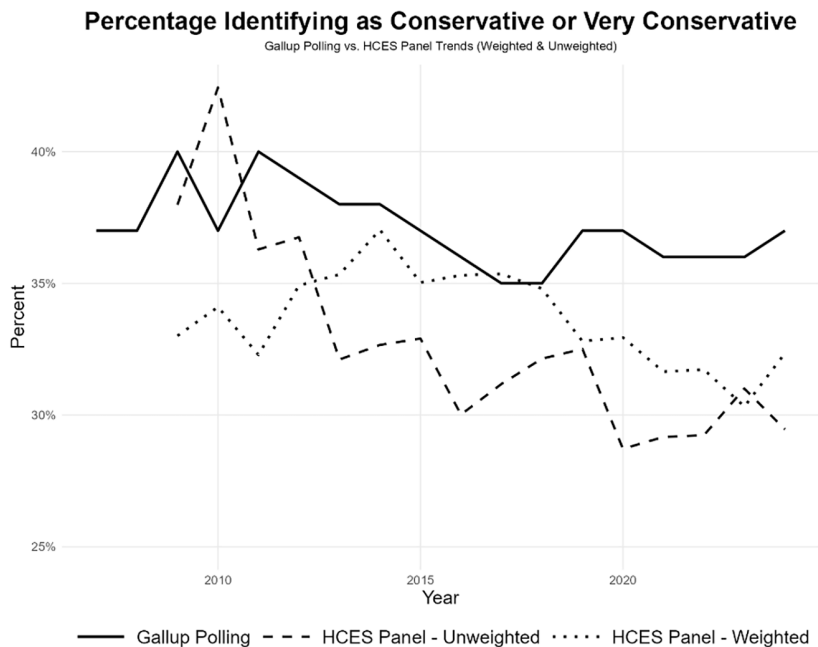
**Figure 5.** Evidence of panel drift in HCES data. (Source: HCES; Gallup.)

less likely to be part of YouGov’s opt-in panel over time. But does applying weights to the HCES data help stabilize political ideology? Not really, as is shown in figure 6.

The weighted values show notable variability, are often substantially lower than the Gallup data, and still suggest a more dramatic drop over time. If the weights result in noisy and misleading data for a measure that includes 30–40% of the sample, such should inspire deep skepticism about its ability to accurately account for sampling bias in small sub-samples.



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**Figure 6.** The effects of weighting on HCES panel data. (Source: HCES; Gallup.)

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