AN ESSAY ON TRUTH AND DISCIPLESHIP

WHEN SUSTAINING BECOMES SPIRITUAL COERCION

Why Equating Honest Disagreement with Disloyalty Damages Conscience, Distorts Doctrine, and Corrodes Church Culture

Prepared with doctrinal support from scripture and official Church sources.

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Introduction

The claim that to disagree with priesthood leaders is tantamount to not sustaining them is false. It is not a harmless overstatement, and it is not a small cultural quirk. It is a doctrinal confusion that easily becomes a spiritual weapon. Sometimes it is stated outright. More often it operates as an unwritten rule that everyone understands without having to say. Once members are taught that any serious reservation, contrary judgment, or failure of enthusiasm is a form of disloyalty, sustaining is quietly redefined from covenantal support into emotional submission. That is not the Lord's pattern.

Recent reactions to the new Young Women age-group names have made the problem easier to see, but the issue is larger than one announcement. The deeper problem is cultural and ambient. Many Saints have absorbed the idea that the faithful response to leadership is immediate approval, and that anything less is spiritually suspect. In practice, this turns honest concern into a moral defect and rewards silence, simplification, and reassurance over truth.

The report that follows argues for a sharper distinction. The restored gospel teaches order, stewardship, and revelation. It also teaches common consent, righteous judgment, persuasion, and charity that rejoices in truth. A church culture that cannot distinguish between faithful disagreement and rebellion will not become more united. It will become less honest, less discerning, and eventually less humane.

I. What the Doctrine of Sustaining Actually Is

Doctrine and Covenants 26:2 states that "all things shall be done by common consent in the church, by much prayer and faith." That verse matters because it makes plain that sustaining is not empty pageantry. It is a real act of consent before God. Members are not inert spectators in the Lord's Church; they are moral agents who support the order He has established through faith, prayer, and willing participation.

In that light, sustaining a leader means supporting the Lord's order, praying for those who preside, and refusing the spirit of rebellion. It means showing good faith within one's own stewardship. It does not require a member to call every decision wise, every emphasis compelling, or every policy persuasive. A person may sustain without pretending that all judgment, taste, or concern has vanished.

That distinction is not incidental. If sustaining is redefined to mean aesthetic agreement, emotional enthusiasm, or verbal silence, then common consent is emptied of substance. The uplifted hand remains, but the moral reality behind it has been replaced by performance. The doctrine of sustaining is stronger than that, and more honest than that.

II. What the Doctrine of Sustaining Is Not

Sustaining is not the same thing as agreeing with every judgment call. It is not the same thing as never voicing concern. It is not the same thing as suppressing one's own conscience whenever a leader speaks. The Restoration does teach order, but order is not the same thing as absolute agreement.

Doctrine and Covenants 28 and 43 make clear that revelation for the Church belongs to the one appointed to receive it. In modern terms, Elder Dale G. Renlund has taught that only the prophet receives revelation for the Church as a whole, while individuals receive revelation within their own stewardships. That means members are not free to set themselves up as rival authorities against the Lord's established order. But that is a very different claim from saying that every private reservation or contrary opinion is apostasy.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks drew that line plainly when he distinguished ordinary concern from actual apostasy. Searching for a middle ground, worrying over a doctrine, or not being persuaded by a particular point is not the same thing as open, public, and repeated opposition to the Church or its leaders. The difference matters. Without it, ordinary moral seriousness gets mislabeled as rebellion, and sincere members are accused of disloyalty for doing nothing more than thinking honestly.

III. When Sustaining Is Turned into Spiritual Coercion

The philosophy becomes spiritually abusive the moment sacred language is used to force emotional or intellectual submission. Once "sustain the prophet" or "sustain your priesthood leaders" is used as a way of saying, "Do not question, do not hesitate, do not voice discomfort, and do not trouble the atmosphere with your judgment," the doctrine has been weaponized. It is no longer protecting order. It is binding conscience where God has not bound it.

That is precisely what Doctrine and Covenants 121 forbids. The Lord says that no power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, but only by persuasion, longsuffering, gentleness, meekness, and love unfeigned. That standard rules out more than overt domination. It also condemns the subtler use of shame, insinuation, and spiritual accusation to compel inward compliance. A member may be pressed without ever being formally threatened. He need only be made to feel that faithfulness requires silence.

This is why the issue is more serious than tone. A culture can become coercive even while sounding devout. If a Saint is taught that disagreement itself is evidence of pride, darkness, or lack of faith, he is being pushed toward a false choice: either bury his conscience or accept the stigma of disloyalty. That is spiritually abusive because it asks a disciple to violate truth in the name of order.

IV. The Unwritten Rule: When the Culture Says It Without Saying It

In most wards and stakes, this philosophy is not preached every week in blunt terms. Sometimes leaders or lay members do say it aloud. More often, however, it operates as an unwritten rule. The culture simply understands that serious disagreement places a member under suspicion. That makes the problem both more common and harder to challenge, because what is ambient can always be verbally denied.

Members learn this rule less by formal instruction than by repeated cues: who is trusted, who becomes tense when questions are raised, whose candor is quietly remembered, whose loyalty is doubted, which comments are rewarded, and which produce spiritualized correction. No one has to say, 'Disagreement is not sustaining,' for the community to teach it. Tone, reaction, and consequence do the work.

Leaders bear responsibility here even when they are not the ones speaking the philosophy aloud. If they know, or should know, that honest disagreement is culturally treated as disloyalty and do nothing to disabuse the Saints of that assumption, their silence becomes formative. They may not have authored the unwritten rule, but by leaving it uncorrected they allow it to govern the flock. In that sense, ambient coercion is not less serious than explicit coercion. It is often more powerful.

V. When Honest Members No Longer Feel They Have a Place

Once that unwritten rule takes hold, honest members begin to feel that they no longer have a place unless they learn to perform agreement. The cost of belonging becomes self-censorship. The cost of peace becomes silence. In such a culture, honesty is not received as a service to the body of Christ but as a disturbance to be managed.

That result is not hypothetical. Once members see how the unwritten rule works, they learn quickly what it requires. Speak gently, but never too plainly. Ask questions, but never ones that expose too much. Express concern, but only in ways that reassure everyone that you are still safe. Over time, the atmosphere teaches that candor is dangerous and that acceptance belongs to the agreeable rather than to the honest.

This is one of the reasons the philosophy is so corrosive. It does not merely silence critics. It alienates sincere disciples - often the very ones who care most deeply about truth, repentance, and moral consistency. Such people may still love Christ, still honor covenants, and still desire to remain faithful, yet feel increasingly unable to inhabit a culture that treats honesty as a threat.

VI. Why the Honest Endure So Long Before They Finally Break

The honest usually endure such a culture far longer than the culture imagines. They are rarely the first to revolt. More often they are the last to admit how serious the problem has become, because they begin by suspecting themselves. They ask whether they are hurt, proud, impatient, overly serious, or reading

too much into what they have seen. They wait. They pray. They extend the benefit of the doubt. They try again. They blame themselves before they blame the system. For that reason, when they finally push back or withdraw, it is often not because they were quick to rebel, but because they have reached the point where continued submission feels like a lie.

From the outside, that final break is often misread. It is labeled impatience, negativity, or wounded pride. But from the inside it may feel less like rebellion than the last refusal to pretend. The soul can only endure so long when sustaining is redefined to mean silence, when honesty is continually punished, and when pretense is continually rewarded. A culture that does this will flatter itself that the troubled simply lacked faith, when in truth many of them stayed until they could no longer remain without inward falseness.

That line is different for each person, but the principle is not. Honest members tend to endure until one of several thresholds is crossed: when they are required to call what is harmful harmless, when trust has been so damaged that every fresh appeal to patience feels like an invitation to lie, when their continued presence serves mainly to preserve appearances, or when contempt begins to master the soul. At that point, what looks like rebellion may actually be a last attempt at moral and spiritual self-preservation. This does not make every act of departure righteous. It does mean that a healthy church culture should be far slower to condemn the breaking point of serious people.

That is one of the tragedies of spiritually coercive culture. It usually assumes the honest can be stretched indefinitely. It mistakes long-suffering for infinite elasticity. Then, when the strongest and most conscientious finally reach their limit, the culture explains their collapse as proof that they were never faithful enough to begin with. In reality, many such people endured precisely because they were trying to be faithful. They stayed until the cost of staying became the deformation of conscience, the corruption of charity, or the hollowing out of worship itself. A church culture that cannot see that will not understand why good people eventually break; it will merely keep calling their breaking point rebellion.

VII. When Avoidance Masquerades as Faith

One of the more destructive features of unhealthy church culture is the tendency to baptize avoidance as faithfulness. The member who reassures, softens, simplifies, and looks on the bright side is often treated as spiritually safe, while the member who names contradiction, disorder, or harm is treated as negative. In such a culture, the appearance of peace is valued more than truth, and emotional comfort is quietly mistaken for Christlike maturity.

That confusion has consequences. Real problems go unaddressed because the people least willing to disturb the atmosphere are treated as the most spiritual. Meanwhile, the people most likely to notice rot, contradiction, or misuse of authority are treated as the problem. The person who says, "Something is wrong here," is disciplined socially long before anyone asks whether he may be right.

This distortion becomes even more damaging when it is paired with a double standard. The wounded or searching member is told to be patient with others, not to judge, to trust the Lord, and to show grace for imperfection. Yet he is afforded no such grace himself. His hurt is not treated patiently. His motives are not interpreted charitably. His seriousness is recast as negativity. In practice, he is required to extend a mercy that the culture refuses to extend to him.

That asymmetry breeds humiliation, alienation, and eventually contempt. It should not surprise anyone when a soul repeatedly denied honest reckoning begins to harden. Contempt is not righteous, but it is intelligible. A culture that rewards avoidance, punishes diagnosis, and hides behind devotional cliche should not be shocked when reverence collapses into bitterness.

VIII. The Difference Between Respect and Flattery

Respect for priesthood leaders is a virtue. Gratitude for sacrifice is a virtue. Praying for those who preside is a virtue. But flattery is something else entirely. Scripture repeatedly treats flattery not as harmless praise but as a means of clouding judgment, protecting ambition, and leading people along.

In a church setting, flattery appears whenever leaders are treated as though honest evaluation itself were irreverent. It appears when every criticism is interpreted as pride, every sober warning as negativity, and every expression of discomfort as a failure to sustain. At that point, respect has been replaced by image-protection. Leaders are insulated rather than helped.

Weak leaders are not strengthened by managed praise. They are strengthened by truth told in order, by counsel given in good faith, and by a culture that allows honest feedback without branding it as rebellion. The moment a community cannot distinguish respect from flattery, it becomes incapable of serious self-examination.

IX. What Faithful Sustaining Actually Looks Like

Faithful sustaining is harder than either reflexive criticism or reflexive deference. It honors the Lord's order. It refuses the spirit of rebellion. It stays within stewardship. It prays for those who preside. But it also tells the truth, judges righteously, proves all things, and speaks the truth in love. Charity and honesty are not enemies in the restored gospel.

A faithful Saint may therefore say, "I sustain the Brethren, but I do not find this decision persuasive," or, "I honor priesthood order, but I cannot pretend this does not trouble me." Such statements are not automatically proud. They may be wrong in substance. They may even be poorly timed. But they are not in themselves evidence of apostasy. They are often evidence that conscience is still alive.

The more excellent way is not emotional compliance. It is truth with charity, order with conscience, humility without flattery, and loyalty without falsehood. That path is more demanding than cliche

reassurance and more obedient than self-appointed resistance. It is also far more consistent with the Lord's own pattern.

X. How Leaders Keep Sustaining in Its Proper View

If the foregoing distortions are to be corrected, leaders must do more than denounce apostasy in the abstract. They must teach clearly that sustaining is not emotional or intellectual surrender. It is covenantal support for the Lord's order. A bishop, stake president, or auxiliary leader who treats every reservation as suspect will not produce faith. He will produce pretense. Leaders keep sustaining in its proper view when they make plain that members may remain faithful, orderly, and supportive even while still wrestling honestly with a decision, an emphasis, or an application.

That requires discipline in how authority is spoken about. Leaders should distinguish carefully between doctrine, policy, counsel, and personal interpretation. Revelation for the Church belongs to the prophet. Local leaders do not strengthen the Saints when they deliver their own framing with the same moral weight as revealed doctrine. Much confusion could be prevented if leaders said more often, in substance, 'This is what the Church has established, and this is how I presently understand it.' Such language does not weaken authority. It disciplines it.

Leaders must also build councils and presidencies in which honest speech is genuinely safe. The Church's own handbook says that council members should speak openly and honestly, that diverse viewpoints enrich the council, and that the leader should listen more than talk. Doctrine and Covenants 88:122 adds that all should speak in turn so that all may be edified and have an equal privilege. A leadership culture remains healthy only when people can speak candidly without fearing that candor itself will be read as disloyalty.

Just as important, leaders must refuse the temptation to use priesthood language as a shortcut to compliance. Doctrine and Covenants 121 does not allow influence to be maintained by spiritual pressure, public shaming, insinuation, or the suggestion that disagreement itself is proof of pride. A leader who says, 'Help me understand your concern,' teaches one culture. A leader who says, 'If you really sustained your leaders, this would not trouble you,' teaches another. The first honors both order and conscience. The second protects authority by making honesty feel dangerous.

In practical terms, leaders keep sustaining in its proper view when they say out loud what many members rarely hear: that support is not the same as sameness, that honest questions are not betrayal, that councils are not theater, and that faithfulness does not require the burial of judgment. A church culture formed by those habits will not become less reverent. It will become more truthful, more stable, and more capable of real unity.

Conclusion

The philosophy that equates disagreement with failure to sustain is not a safeguard for faith. It is a distortion of faith. It is spiritually abusive because it pressures conscience with sacred language. It is corrosive because it rewards avoidance, encourages flattery, and teaches honest members that their candor is spiritually unsafe. And it is doctrinally careless because the restored gospel does not define sustaining as the burial of judgment.

The Lord's pattern is better. He requires order, but He also requires persuasion. He establishes prophets, but He does not command the suppression of conscience. He calls for charity, but never at the expense of truth. Zion cannot be built on emotional blackmail, devotional cliche, or managed agreement. It can only be built by Saints who honor both truth and order, and who refuse to confuse silence with faithfulness.

Sources and Doctrinal Anchors

- Doctrine and Covenants 26:2; 28:2, 6-7; 43:3-4; 121:34-46.
- John 7:24 (KJV); 1 Thessalonians 5:21 (KJV); Ephesians 4:15 (KJV); 1 Corinthians 13:6 (KJV).
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- Elder Dale G. Renlund, "A Framework for Personal Revelation," General Conference, October 2022.
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- Doctrine and Covenants 88:122.
- General Handbook, 4.4.3-4.4.5, "Leadership and Councils in the Church of Jesus Christ."
- Church Newsroom and First Presidency materials on the April 2026 Young Women age-group name change.