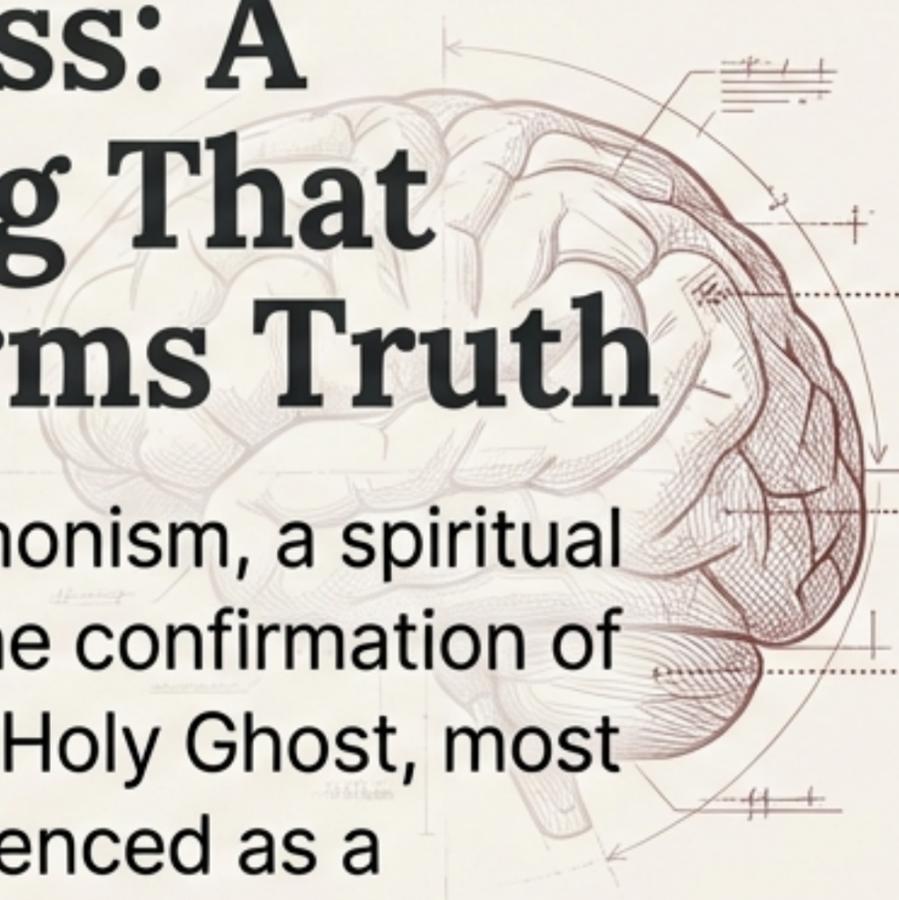


# The Anatomy of a Spiritual Witness

A Psychological and Sociological Investigation into How We Come to 'Know'

# The Spiritual Witness: A Feeling That Confirms Truth

Within Mormonism, a spiritual witness is the confirmation of truth by the Holy Ghost, most often experienced as a powerful feeling.



## Moroni's Promise

*And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God... if these things are not true... he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.*

Moroni 10:4

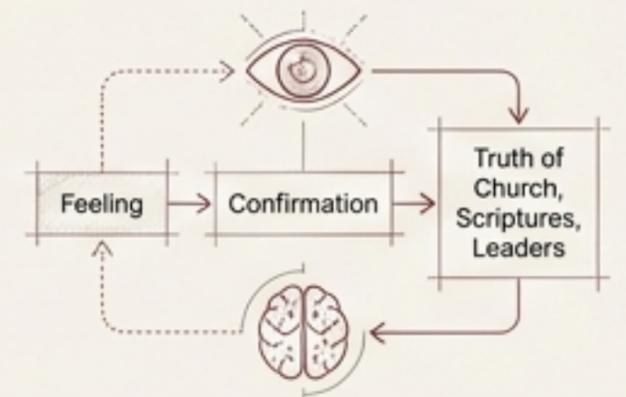
## The Feeling

- ✦ A "warm feeling in your bosom"
- ✦ "Inner peace"
- ✦ "A tingle down your spine"
- ✦ An overwhelming sense of emotion



## The Interpretation

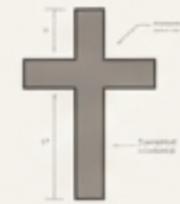
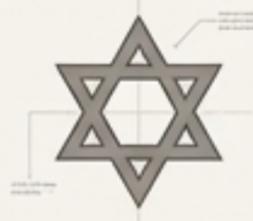
These feelings are explicitly taught to be God confirming the truthfulness of the church, its scriptures, and its leaders.



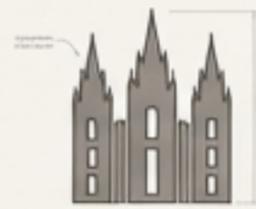
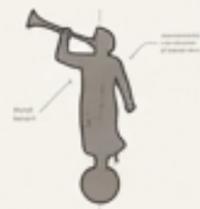
# The Universal Paradox: The Same "Witness" Confirms Competing Truths

Sincere individuals across a vast spectrum of beliefs report the exact same emotional and spiritual confirmations for their own, often contradictory, faiths.

Mainstream Religions



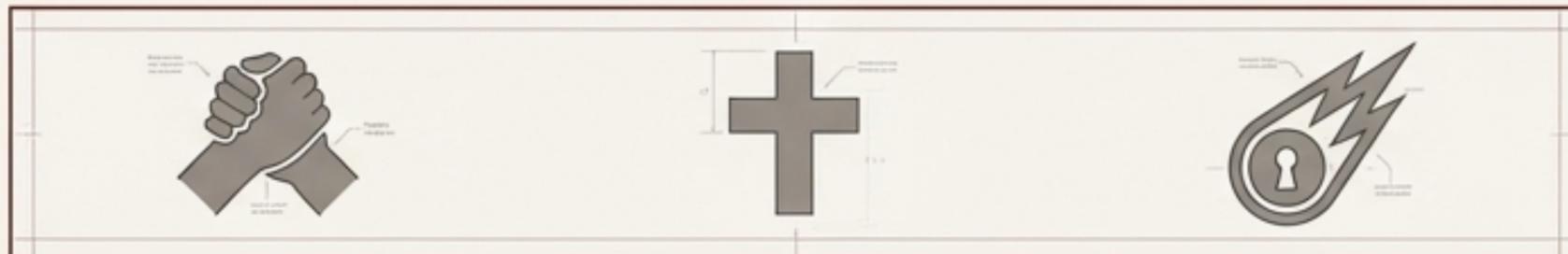
Mormon Splinter Groups

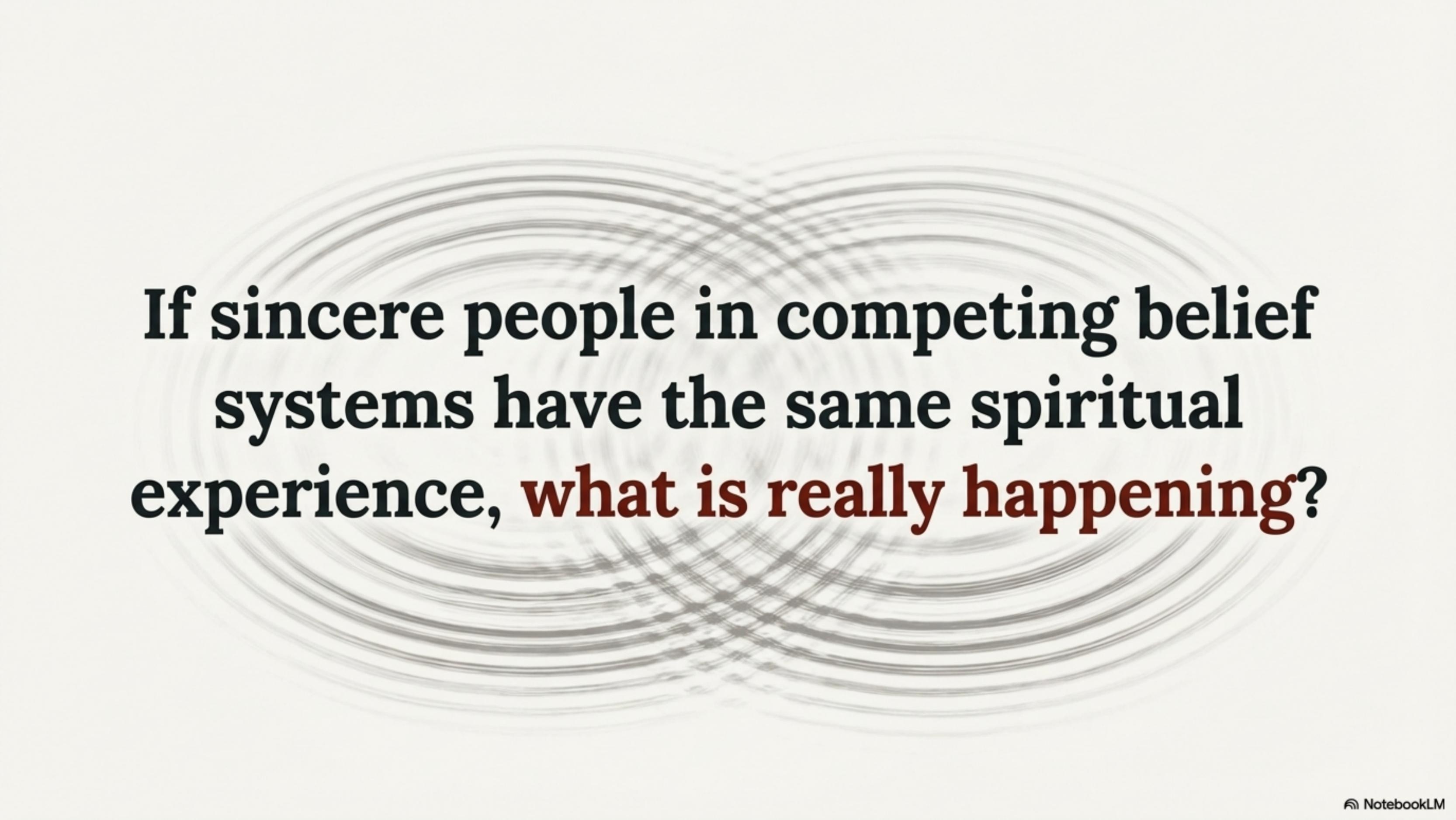


Other Systems



Destructive Cults





**If sincere people in competing belief systems have the same spiritual experience, what is really happening?**

# Creating the Conditions: Indoctrination and Repetition

## Indoctrination

**(Oxford Dictionary):** The process of teaching a person or group to accept a set of beliefs uncritically.

### LDS Application

The church teaches members to only stay within correlated, approved sources and demonizes outside information. Critical questioning of leaders or doctrine is forbidden.

**\*When our leaders speak, the thinking has been done.\***

— Ward Teacher's Message,  
*Improvement Era*, 1945.

## Repetition

The more an idea is heard, the more willing we are to accept it as truth.

### LDS Application

Repetition is embedded in Mormon culture from childhood.

### Key Example

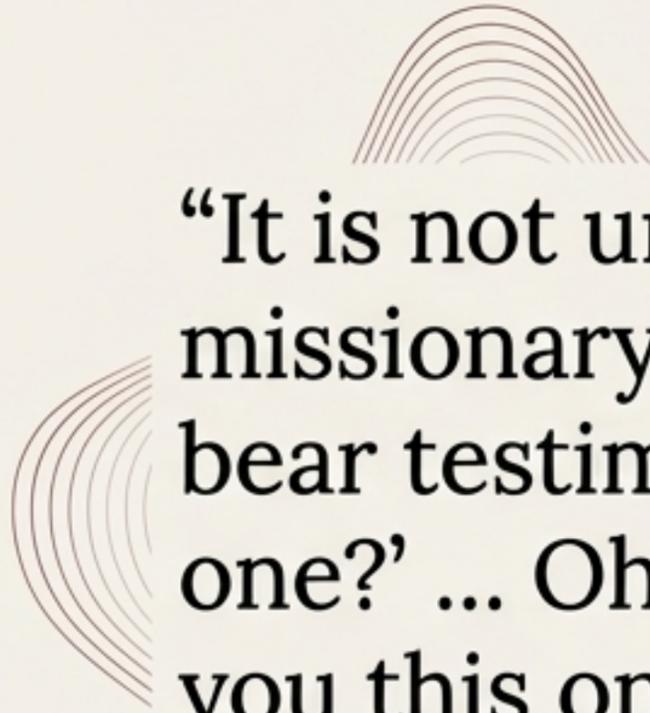


**54x**

The primary song "Follow the Prophet" repeats the titular phrase 54 times in its full version.

# The Illusory Truth Effect: Believing Through Repetition

The tendency to believe information is correct after repeated exposure. Repetition makes statements feel familiar and easier to process, which our brain interprets as truthfulness.



“It is not unusual to have a missionary say, ‘How can I bear testimony until I get one?’ ... Oh, if I could teach you this one principle: **a testimony is to be found in the bearing of it.**”

— Boyd K. Packer



“Read the testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith... Read it often... Listening to the prophet’s testimony **in your own voice will help bring the witness you seek.**”

— Neil L. Anderson



Church leaders actively encourage members to create belief through the act of repeated declaration, a textbook example of this psychological effect.

# Generating the Feeling: The Power of Elevation Emotion

**Definition:** A distinct emotion elicited by witnessing virtuous acts, moral beauty, or stories of human connection and triumph. It often manifests as a warm, expansive feeling in the chest, sometimes accompanied by tears or goosebumps.

**LDS Context:** This emotion is frequently generated in testimony meetings, General Conference talks, and church-produced videos, which are then interpreted as “the Spirit.”

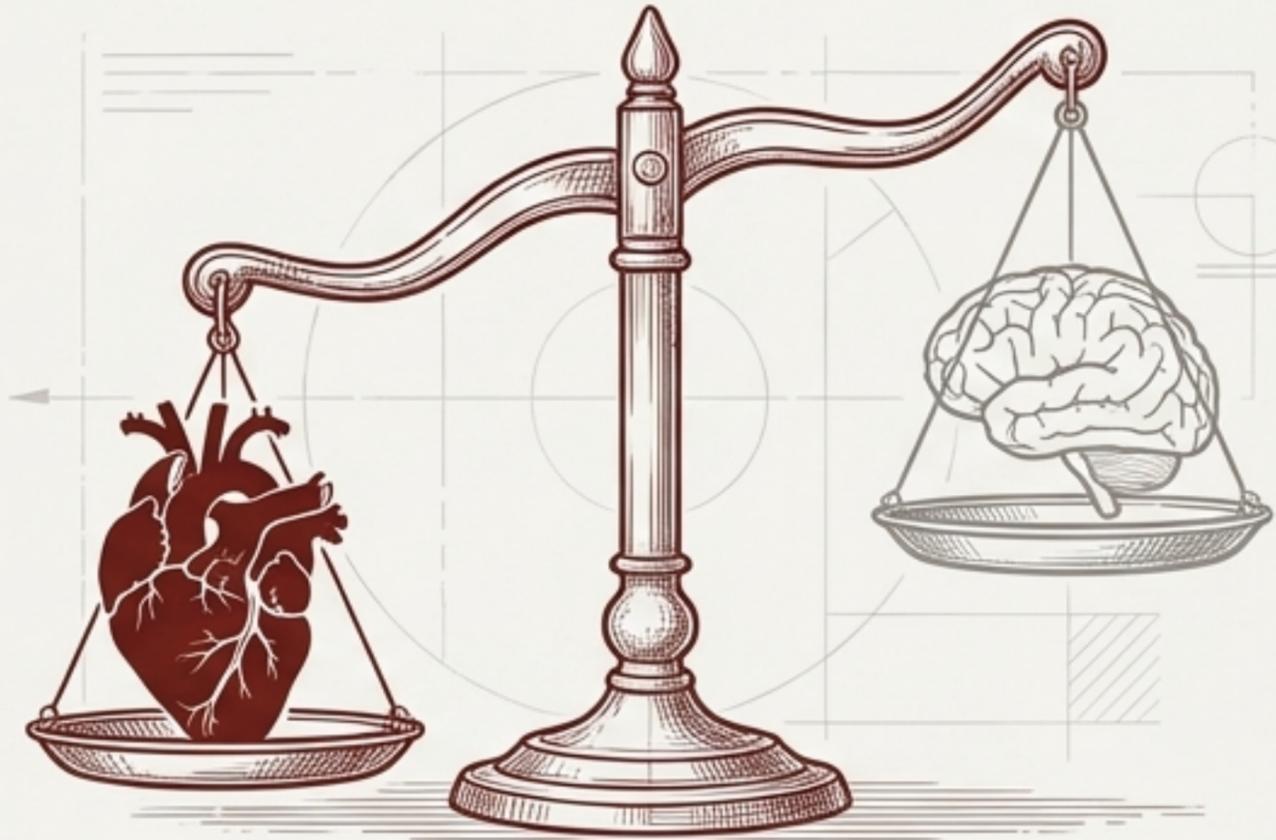
**The Secular Test:** This feeling is not unique to religious settings. It is a universal human response.



Is this feeling the Holy Ghost confirming the truthfulness of Mormonism, or is it a natural human emotion?

# The Foundational Rule: Emotion is Privileged Over Evidence

The church consistently teaches that feelings are a more reliable indicator of truth than critical thinking, historical evidence, or scientific inquiry. Evidence that produces uncomfortable feelings is framed as a tool of the adversary.

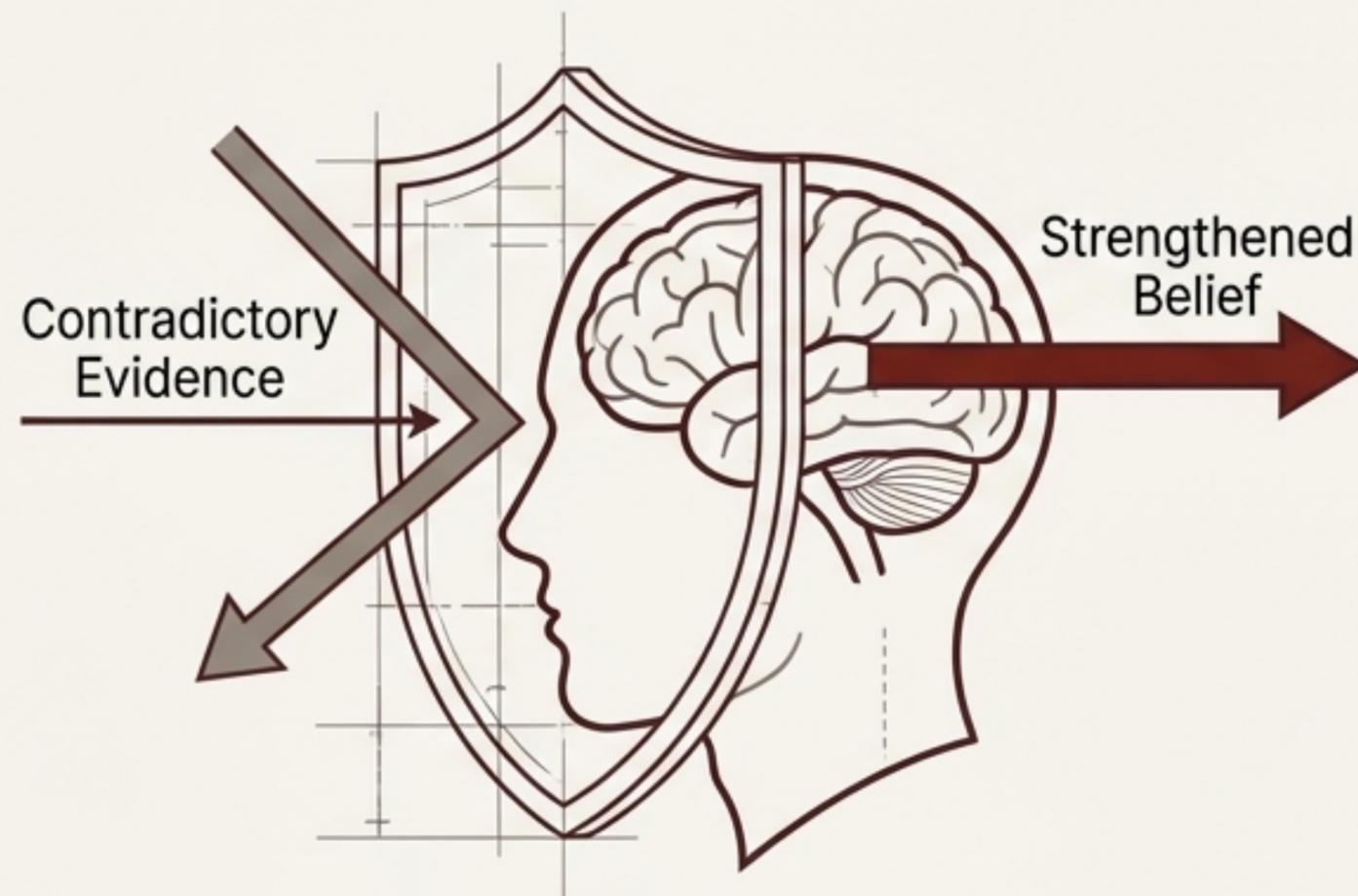


“You will not get to know if the Book of Mormon is true by trying to prove it archaeologically, or by DNA, or by anything else. **Religious truth is always confirmed by what you feel.**”

— M. Russell Ballard

# Fortifying the Belief: The Backfire Effect

When presented with evidence that contradicts deeply held beliefs, our brains can perceive it as a physical threat, triggering a “fight or flight” response. Instead of changing our minds, we often double down and retrench, believing our original position even more fervently.



## Weapons of Mass Destruction (2006 Study)

1. Participants were given a fake article stating WMDs were found in Iraq.
2. They were then given a true article correcting the first, stating no WMDs were found.

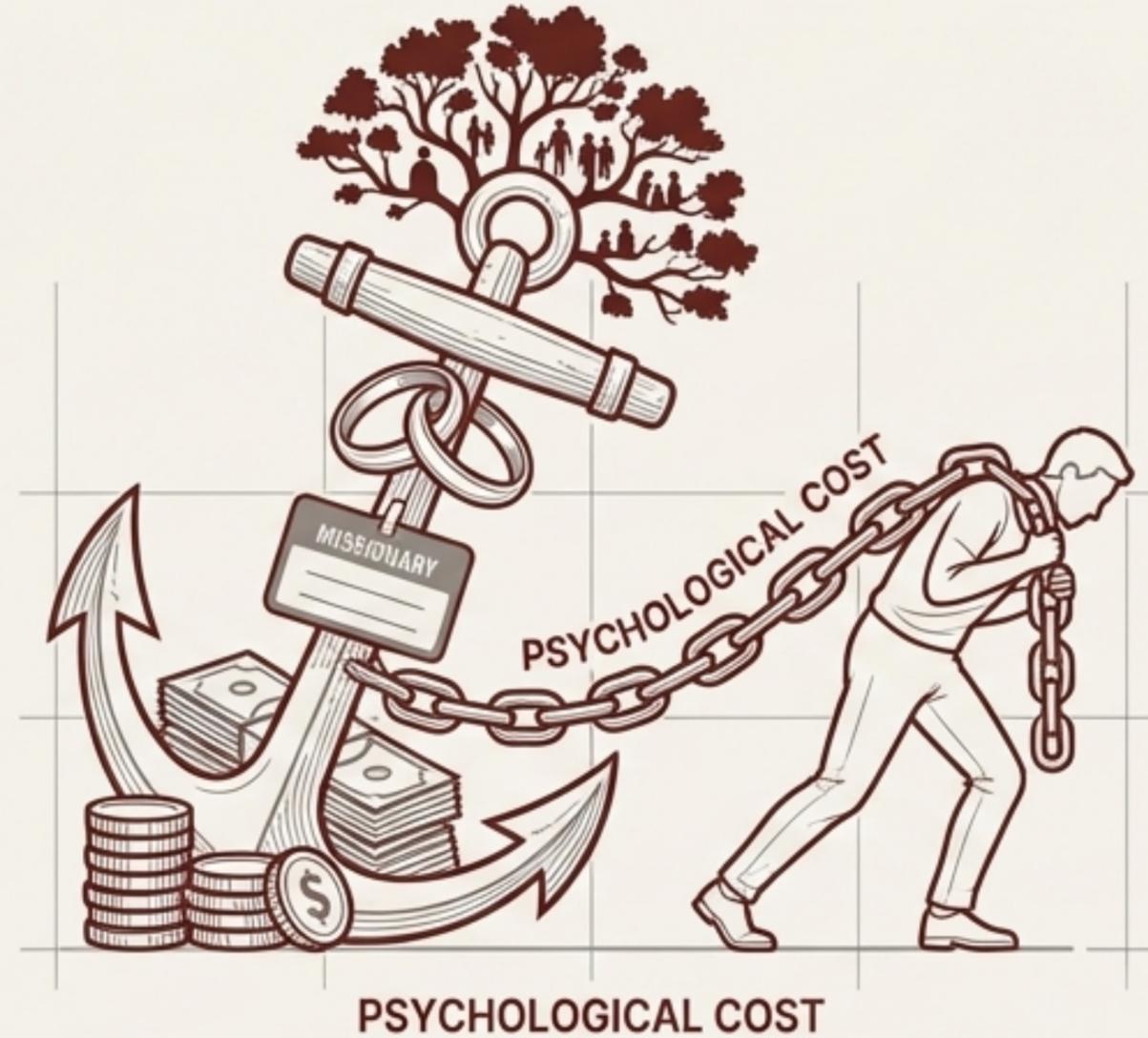
**Result:** Supporters of the war reported being *even more certain* that WMDs existed *after* reading the correction. Their original belief was strengthened by the contradictory evidence.

# The Weight of Investment: The Sunk Cost Fallacy

The tendency to continue a course of action because of previously invested resources (time, money, effort), even when it's clear that the current costs outweigh the expected benefits.

## Everyday Example:

Staying to the end of a bad baseball game you're not enjoying simply because you paid for the ticket. The rational choice is to leave and do something better with your time, as the money is already gone.



## Application to Mormonism:

- Years or decades of tithing (often hundreds of thousands of dollars).
- Two years on a mission.
- Life decisions based on church teachings (marriage, career, family size).
- Passing the belief to children and grandchildren.

**The Psychological Cost:** Admitting the church isn't true can feel like invalidating one's entire life, making it an unbearable psychological bridge to cross.

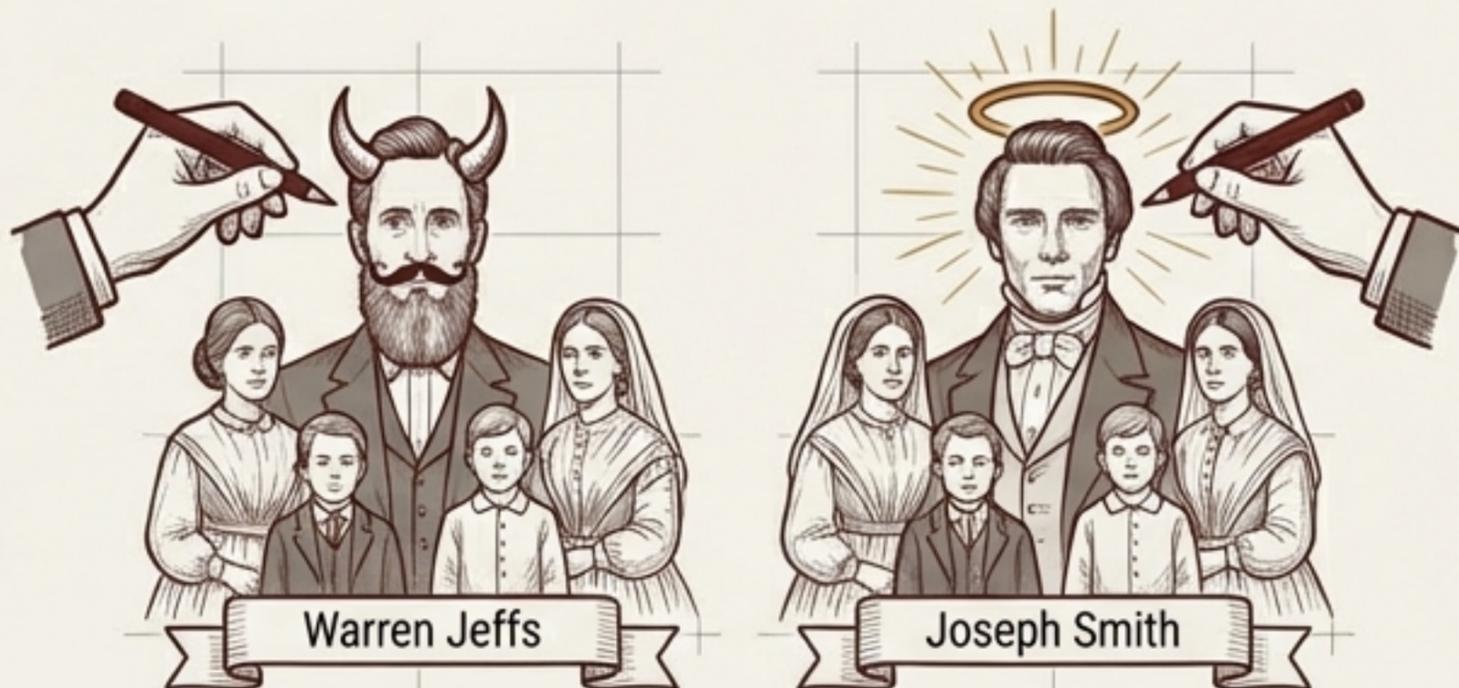
# Bending the Logic: Motivated Reasoning and Special Pleading



## Motivated Reasoning

Seeking out information that confirms our existing beliefs while avoiding, dismissing, or discrediting information that contradicts them.

When presented with the **CES Letter**, a believer immediately seeks out apologetic rebuttals (like FairMormon or Jim Bennett's reply) rather than engaging with the primary sources and evidence cited in the original document. The goal is not to find the truth, but to defend a belief.



## Special Pleading

Applying different standards to "our" group than we apply to others, without adequate justification.

Condemning cult leaders like Warren Jeffs for manipulating young followers into polygamous marriages, while excusing the exact same patterns of behavior in Joseph Smith by claiming he was acting on God's command.

# Case Study I: The False Witness of Paul H. Dunn



## Background

Paul H. Dunn was a highly popular and beloved General Authority in the 1970s and 80s, renowned for his charismatic storytelling.

## The Feeling

Thousands of Mormons felt the “Spirit” powerfully during his talks, interpreting it as a divine confirmation of his stories and the truthfulness of the church.

## The Stories

He told incredible, faith-promoting stories of his experiences in World War II and as a professional baseball player, describing miraculous divine interventions where bullets tore through his clothes but left him unharmed.

## The Reality

An investigation revealed that Dunn had fabricated nearly all of these stories. He was later forced to confess and was given emeritus status.



**The Conclusion:** A spiritual witness is not a reliable indicator of factual truth, as it can be powerfully elicited by fabricated narratives.

## Case Study 2: Russell M. Nelson and the Spiraling Plane



### The Story (as told by President Nelson)

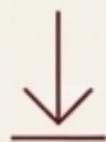
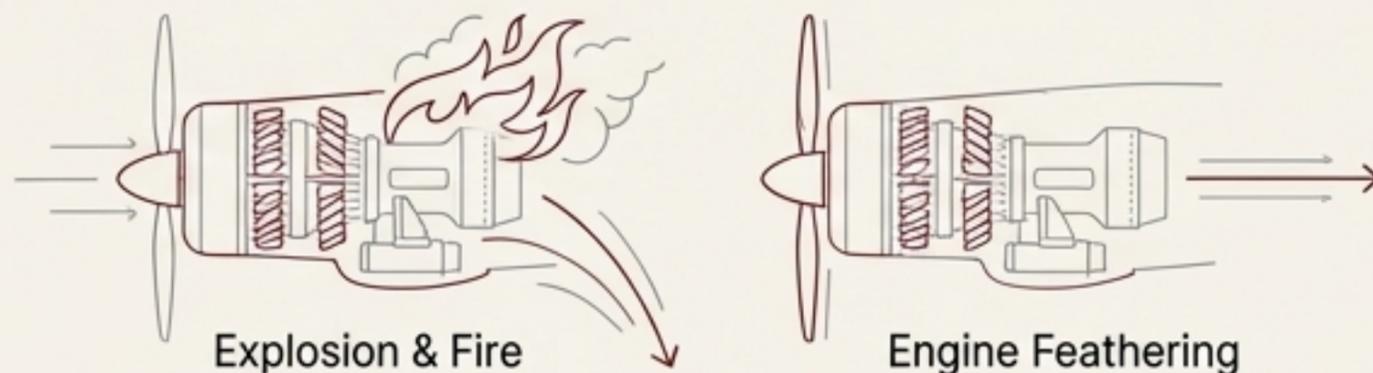
While on a small plane, an engine exploded, spewing flaming fuel. The plane went into a “spiral dive” and was “careening to the Earth.” **Miraculously**, the dive extinguished the fire and the pilot landed safely. Nelson remained perfectly calm, at peace, and ready to meet his maker.

### The Feeling

This story, told with soft music and emotional pacing, elicits a powerful Elevation Emotion, interpreted by members as a witness of Nelson’s prophetic protection and status.

### The Reality (from flight records)

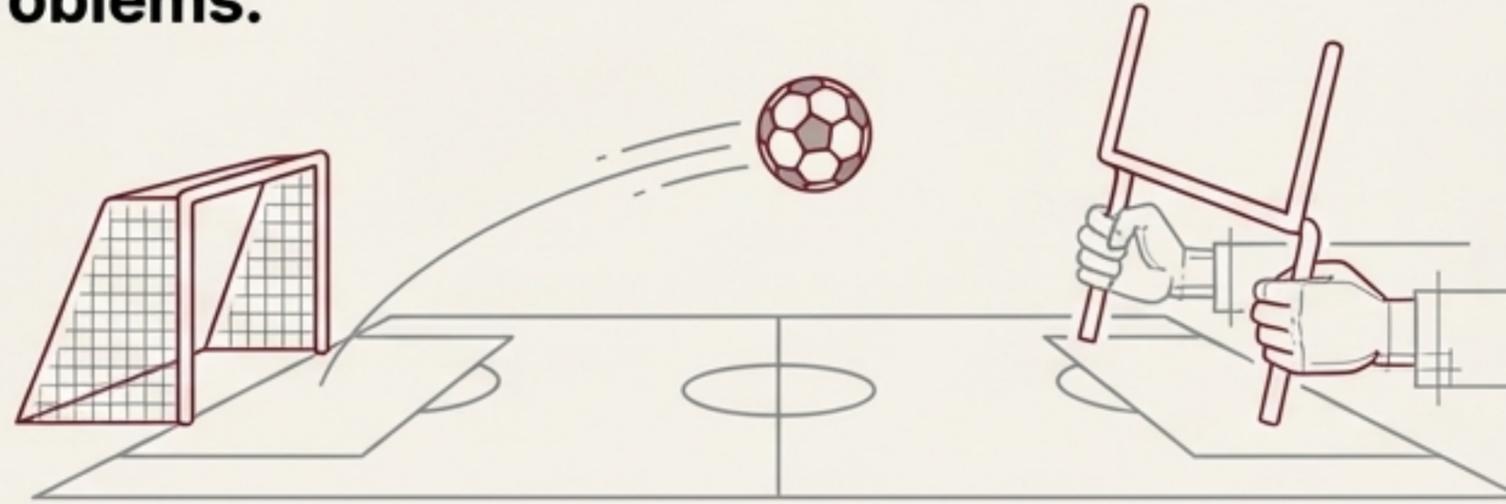
- No engine explosion or fire. The plane experienced “engine feathering.”
- No “spiral dive.” The pilot made a precautionary, not an emergency, landing.
- The NTSB report showed **no external damage** to the plane.



The Conclusion: The emotional core of this faith-promoting “miracle” is based on exaggeration and fabrication.

# Redefining the Past: The Fallacy of Equivocation

The use of ambiguous language to conceal the truth or to avoid committing oneself; prevarication. **In this context, it involves changing the definitions of core terms to neutralize historical problems.**



Term	Original Meaning	Redefined Meaning
Translation	Rendering text from one language to another.	"A revelatory process."
Skin	Literal skin color.	A metaphorical "aura" or state of being.
Horse	An equine animal.	Apologetic suggestion of a "tapir."

This is a tactic used to shift the goalposts, making it impossible to evaluate the church's claims based on the plain meaning of its own scriptures and historical statements.

# An Alternative Explanation: A Real Feeling, A Human Experience

The goal is not to deny the power of your experiences, but to reframe their source. These profound moments of clarity, peace, and connection are **not proof** of a single religion's claims; they are part of the universal human condition.

---

## A Modern Witness (Mike's Story)

While building the LDS Discussions website, I was feeling discouraged. Late one night, I received a rare email from someone struggling with the church. **The sender had the exact same first and last name as my child, lived 15 minutes away, and had the same phone area code.** The coincidence was so staggering I got goosebumps. As a believer, I would have interpreted this as an undeniable sign from God that I was on the right path. Today, I see it as a powerful, meaningful coincidence that happened at the moment I needed it.

The experiences are real. The feelings are valid.  
**The interpretation belongs to you.**