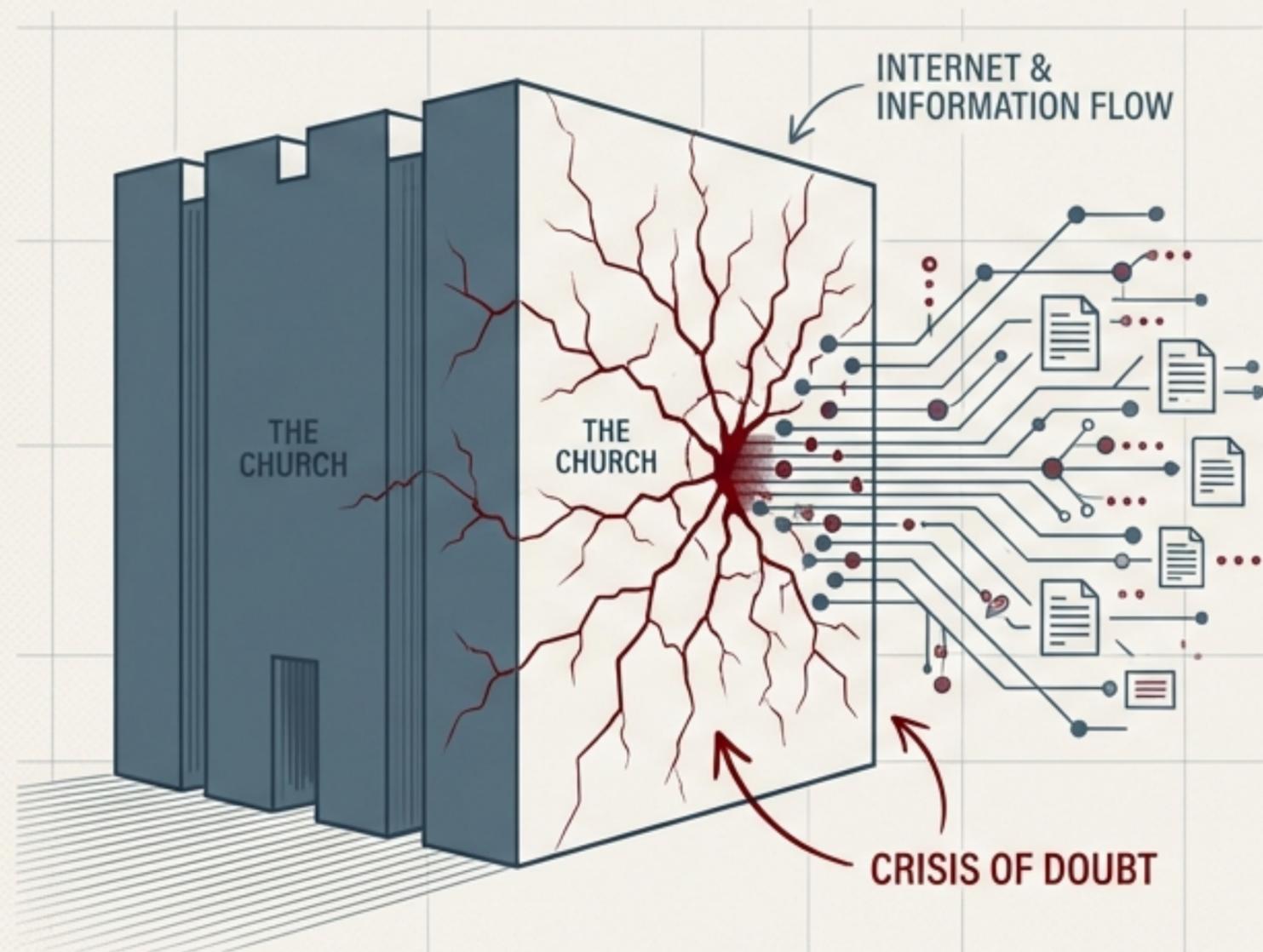
The background features a complex network of light gray arrows and symbols, including 'x' marks and circles, some connected by dashed lines. Several arrows are highlighted in blue and red, pointing towards the central text. The title 'The Doubt Playbook' is prominently displayed in the center, with the word 'Playbook' underlined in red. Below the title, the subtitle 'Deconstructing the Rhetoric of LDS Leaders on Faith and Doubt' is written in a smaller, black font.

# The Doubt Playbook

Deconstructing the Rhetoric of  
LDS Leaders on Faith and Doubt

# The Church is Facing a Crisis of Doubt. Its Leaders are Responding with a **Playbook.**



The internet has given unprecedented access to church history and information, leading to a faith crisis among many members. In response, top leaders like President Russell M. Nelson are not engaging with the evidence. Instead, they are employing a series of rhetorical tactics designed to discredit doubters, control the flow of information, and reframe faith as a choice made in opposition to evidence.

This presentation deconstructs that playbook, tactic by tactic.

# PLAY #1: Poison the Well - Discredit the Doubter

> “**Lazy learners** and **lax disciples** will always struggle to muster even a particle of faith.”

This tactic is a form of *ad hominem* attack. By labeling those with questions as “lazy” or “lax,” the church preemptively dismisses their concerns without ever having to engage with the actual historical or doctrinal issues. It creates an in-group/out-group dynamic where questions questioning itself is framed as a moral failing. The overlooked phrase “lax disciples” also induces scrupulosity, suggesting doubt arises from not “working hard enough” at belief.

# The “Lazy Learner” Narrative is Factually False. The Church Knows It.

Internal church research contradicts the “lazy learner” smear. A comprehensive study conducted in the early 2010s and submitted to leadership found that those losing their faith were not lazy, but were in fact highly engaged members.



Higher than average education



Higher than average income



Higher than average representation in leadership callings (Bishoprics, Relief Society Presidents, etc.)

> *“The church is losing its best and its brightest.” \*  
> *– Marlin K. Jensen, former Church Historian*

# PLAY #2: Isolate the Doubter & Control the Narrative

> **“Take your questions to the Lord and to other faithful sources. Study with a desire to believe... Stop increasing your doubts by rehearsing them with other doubters.”**

This is a direct instruction to avoid open inquiry. Instead of encouraging a search for truth wherever it may be found, members are told to only consult sources that are guaranteed guaranteed to reinforce the existing beliefs. The command to “stop...rehearsing them with other doubters” actively discourages community and validation among those those with shared concerns, fostering isolation and self-censorship.



# The Outsider Test: What if Another Group Said This?



## An Upset Car Customer

“Stop increasing your doubts by rehearsing them with other upset customers. Take your questions directly to our service center and read our faithful, approved reviews.”

*You'd call a lawyer. This is clearly a tactic to shut down critical thinking.*



## A Questioning Scientologist

“Stop increasing your doubts by rehearsing them with other doubters. Take your questions to David Miscavige and our faithful, approved sources.”

*You'd advise your friend to run. This is the language of control, not truth-seeking.*

# PLAY #3: Redefine “Faith” to Transcend Evidence

## The Setup (Nelson’s Strawman):

“A non-believer might say that faith is for the weak. But this assertion overlooks the power of faith.”

**The Problem:** The core issue isn’t weakness; it’s the conflict with verifiable evidence (e.g., the Book of Abraham translation). Mormonism’s own scripture defines faith as hope in things “which are not seen, which are true” (Alma 32:21).

**The Redefinition:** Leaders are shifting the definition from believing what you *cannot see* to believing what you *can see* is false.

**Analogy:** As one commentator noted, you might have faith in a doctor. But if you receive compelling evidence he has a drinking problem or isn’t qualified, you don’t keep faith in him in spite of that evidence. As the sphere of evidence grows, the role of blind faith must shrink.

GROWING SPHERE OF EVIDENCE  
vs.  
SHRINKING ROLE OF BLIND FAITH



# PLAY #4: Appeal to Sacrifice & Sunken Costs

» "Would nearly 2,000 Saints have **died** along the Pioneer Trail if they did not have faith that the Gospel of Jesus Christ had been restored? ... **Would Joseph and Hyrum Smith have suffered Martyrs deaths**... unless they had a sure witness that it was true?"

Equity Text A

Equity Text A

STRATEGIC ANALYSIS

STRATEGIC ANALYSIS

EMOTIONAL LEVERAGE

## 1 Logical Fallacy

This is **not evidence of truth**. People in many faiths (Jonestown, Heaven's Gate, Islamic extremists) have died for their beliefs. **Martyrdom doesn't validate truth claims.**

Doesn't = TRUE

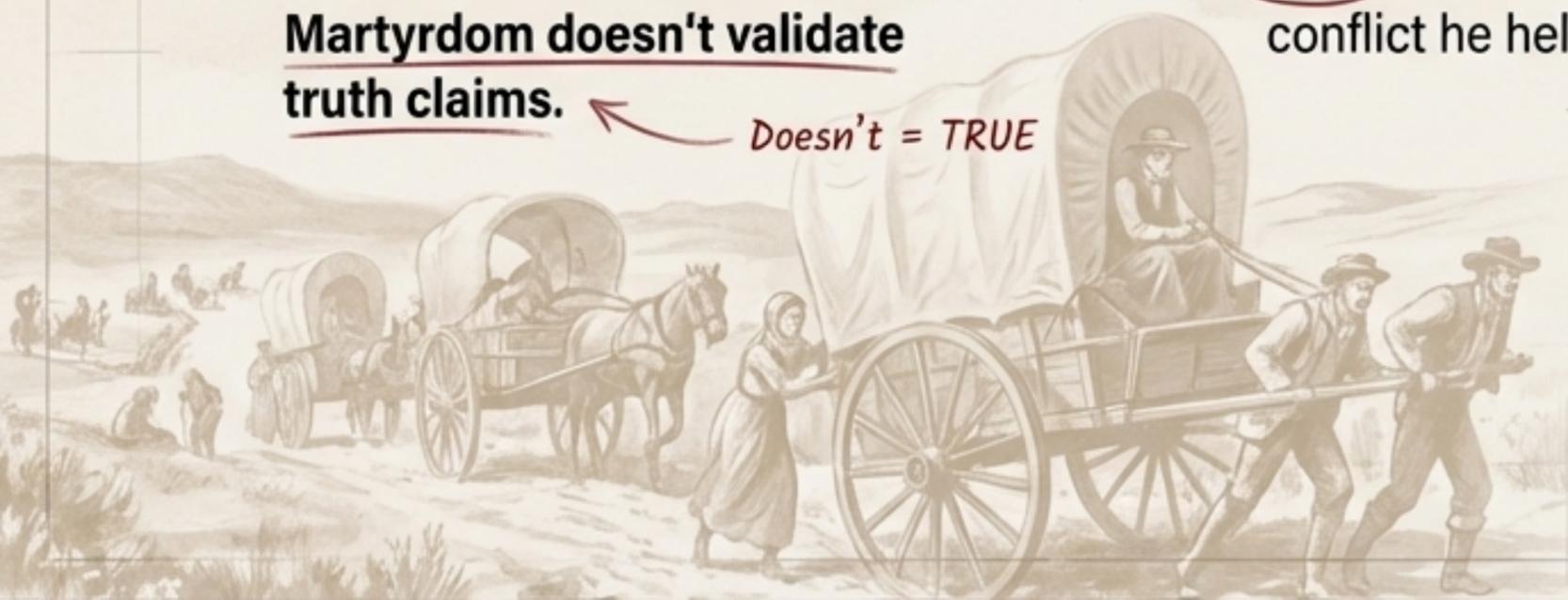
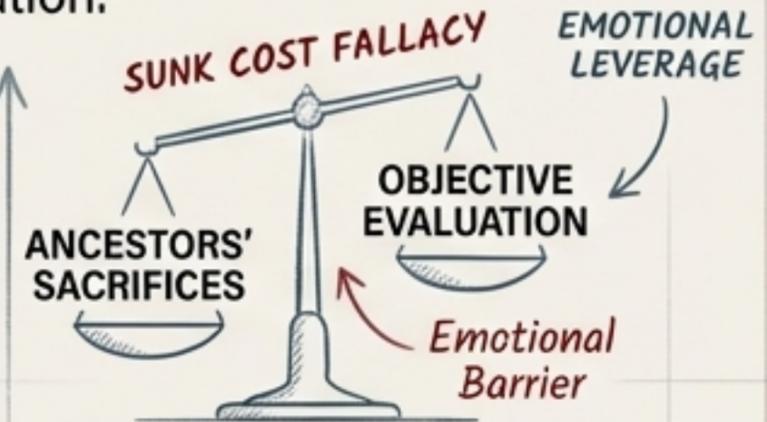
## 2 Historical Inaccuracy

Joseph Smith's death was not a passive "lamb to the slaughter." He had a gun and **actively fought back**. It was the violent end to a conflict he helped create.

Armed Resistance

## 3 Psychological Tactic

This invokes a "**sunk cost fallacy**." It implies that leaving the church would be a betrayal of your ancestors' sacrifices, creating an emotional barrier to objective evaluation.



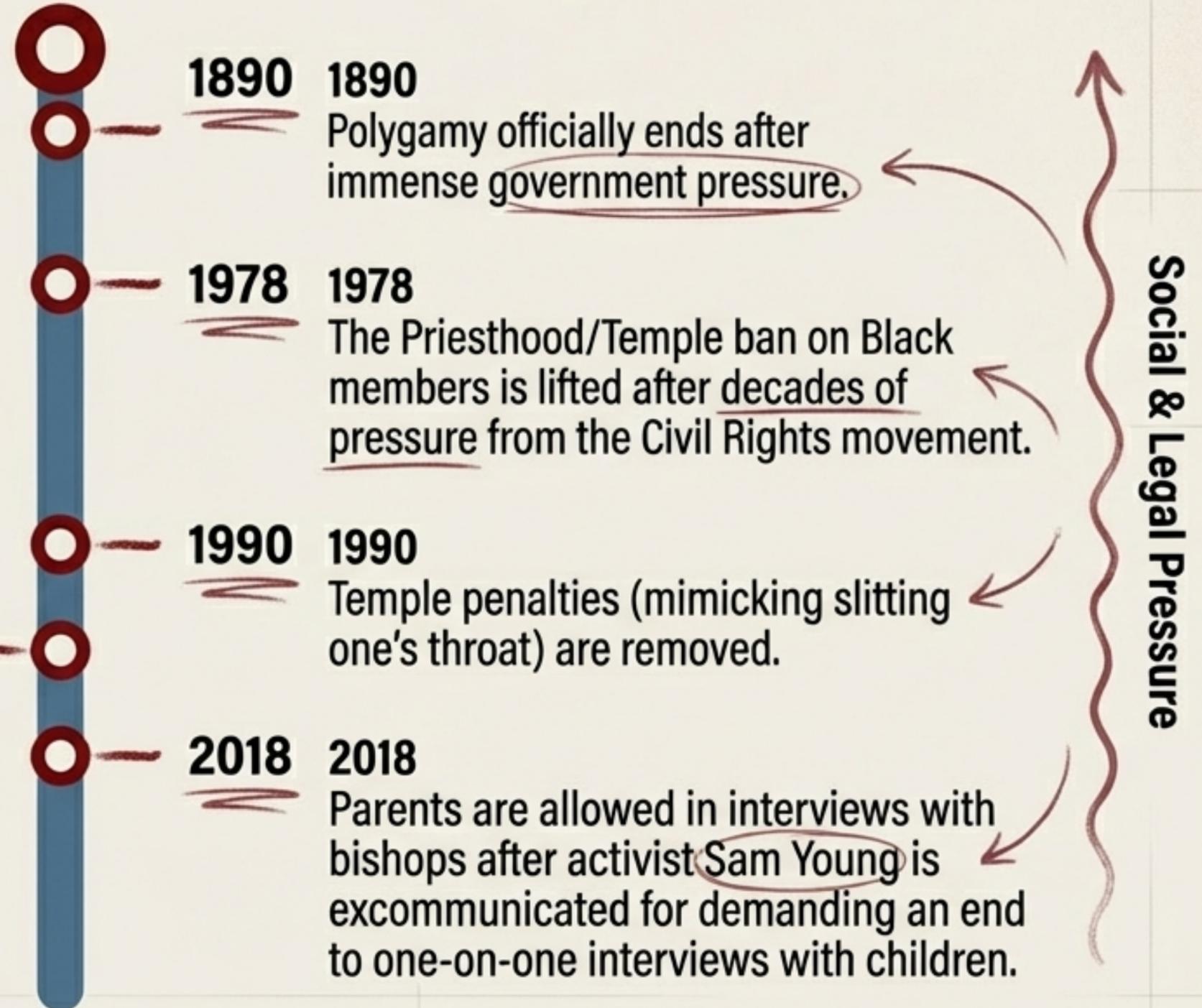
# PLAY #5: The Myth of the Unchanging Church

"It takes faith to follow prophets rather than pundits and popular opinion." Leaders consistently claim the church does not bend to social pressure. *Equity Text A*

STRATEGIC CLAIM

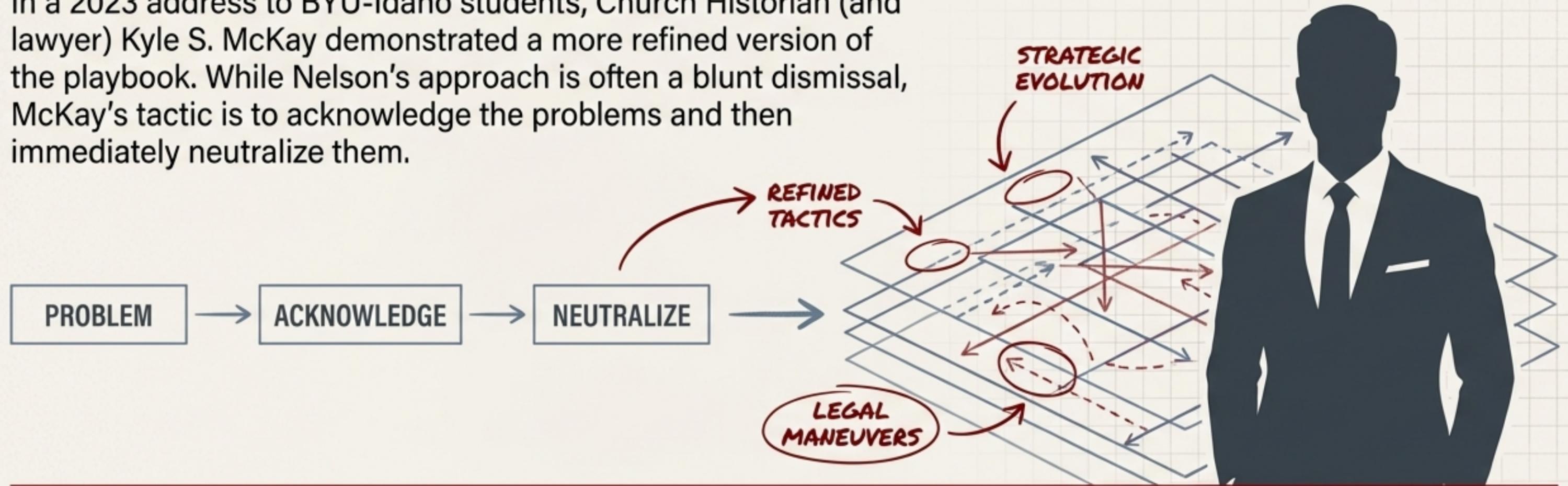
The 2015 policy declaring same-sex couples "apostates" and banning their children from baptism is abruptly reversed after massive member backlash.

2019



# THE PLAYBOOK EVOLVES: THE CHURCH HISTORIAN TAKES THE FIELD

In a 2023 address to BYU-Idaho students, Church Historian (and lawyer) Kyle S. McKay demonstrated a more refined version of the playbook. While Nelson's approach is often a blunt dismissal, McKay's tactic is to acknowledge the problems and then immediately neutralize them.

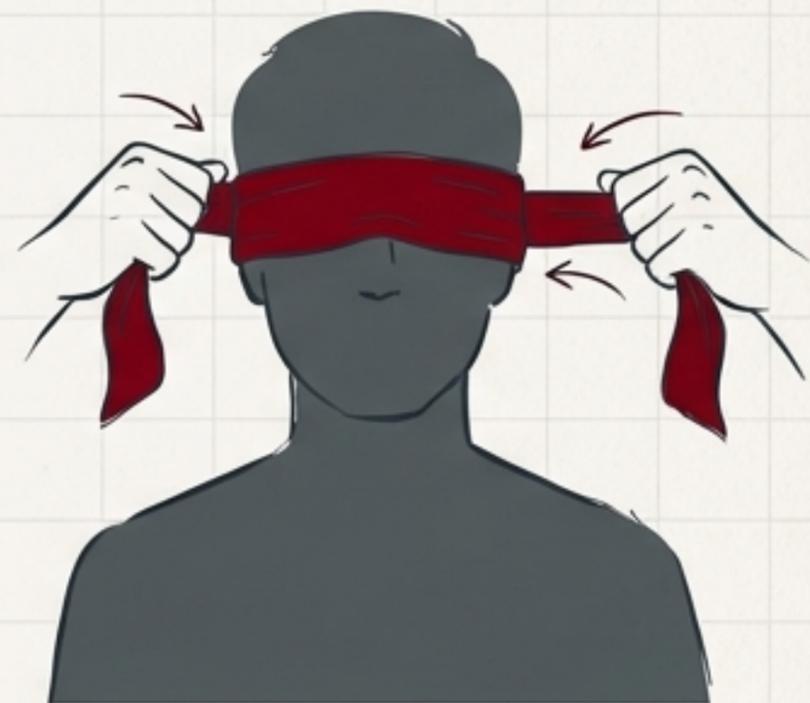


MCKAY MAKES A STUNNING ADMISSION, ACKNOWLEDGING THERE ARE: **“COMPELLING REASONS TO DOUBT”**

THE WORD "COMPELLING" IS A DELIBERATE CHOICE BY A LAWYER. IT MEANS "FORCEFUL," "DEMANDING ATTENTION," AND "CONVINCING." HE IS ADMITTING THE EVIDENCE AGAINST THE CHURCH'S CLAIMS IS POWERFUL.

## PLAY #6: Acknowledge, Then Command Willful Ignorance

> “Is your knowledge and testimony of truth strong enough that you can **stare down compelling reasons to doubt and choose to believe?**”



STRATEGIC IGNORANCE

This is an explicit endorsement of willful ignorance. If reasons to doubt are “compelling,” the intellectually honest approach is to investigate them. Instead, McKay advocates for a faith that is defined by its ability to *ignore* convincing evidence. He is not offering answers; he is offering a strategy for disregarding uncomfortable truths.

## PLAY #7: Frame Doubt as a Satanic Attack

THOUGHT-STOPPING

> “And what did you think? Satan would throw up flimsy, easily dismissible reasons to doubt? No, they will be flattering and enticing. If the **Prince of Darkness** transform himself into an angel of light, then surely he can put forth ideas and arguments that appear enlightened.”

THOUGHT-STOPPING

ULTIMATE FEAR

### Analysis

- This is a classic thought-stopping technique used in high-demand groups.
- It pairs the natural process of critical thinking with a source of ultimate fear (Satan).
- It creates a paranoid mindset where a person cannot trust their own evaluation of information (“it might *appear* enlightened but is actually evil”).
- This emotionally manipulates members into fearing their own intellect and reinforces dependency on leadership to discern truth from deception.

# The Ultimate Gaslight: “Finding Answers... Is Not the Solution”

→ **“Please understand, finding answers to these perplexing questions ultimately is not the solution. The solution is a sure and certain foundation... Jesus Christ.”**

## **Analysis** Equity Text A

In a university setting—a place dedicated to questioning and finding answers—a church leader explicitly states that the solution to intellectual problems is to stop seeking answers. This is the endgame of the Doubt Playbook: to fully circumvent the process of critical thinking and replace it with unquestioning belief in the institution. It is a direct contradiction of the ethos of higher education.

# Doubt is Not a Sin. It is the Beginning of Intellectual Honesty.

The Doubt Playbook is designed to make members afraid of information, ashamed of their questions, and isolated from their peers. But once you see the plays, you can't unsee them.

CLARITY & INTELLECTUAL HONESTY →

- **Doubt isn't "lazy":** It's the result of **diligent, often painful, research.**
- **Doubt isn't "Satanic":** It's a **fundamental human process** that drives progress and learning. The LDS Restoration itself was allegedly born from Joseph Smith's doubts.
- **Doubt isn't weakness:** In a high-demand system, it is an act of **profound courage.**

THE DOUBT  
PLAYBOOK

UNRAVELING  
THE CONFUSION

EMPOWERMENT

UNRAVELING  
THE CONFUSION

# The Gift of a Faith Crisis is Your Life Back

The journey through doubt is often difficult, marked by feelings of isolation and loss. But the ultimate outcome is the recovery of one's own agency. Moving past a faith based on controlled information and thought-stopping tactics allows you to build a life based on your own conscience, values, and a commitment to verifiable truth.



Everyone deserves **informed consent**. The goal is not to destroy faith, but to provide the **uncensored information** necessary for individuals to make their own authentic decisions. **That is true agency.**