

The Mormon Church's Persecution of Christians in Utah

SALT LAKE CITY—On April 7, 2002, the Mormon Church prophet, Gordon B. Hinckley, spoke at the afternoon session of the 172nd General Conference of the LDS Church, acknowledging, in substance, the difference between Jesus in Mormonism and Jesus in historic Christianity. Hinckley said, "As a Church we have critics, many of them. They say we do not believe in the traditional Christ of Christianity. There is some substance to what they say. Our faith, our knowledge is not based on ancient tradition, the creeds which came of a finite understanding and out of the almost infinite discussions of men trying to arrive at a definition of the risen Christ. Our faith, our knowledge comes of the witness of a prophet in this dispensation who saw before him the great God of the universe and His Beloved Son, the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ." Hinckley clearly ridiculed the creeds and ancient tradition of Christianity without providing a shred of evidence to state that such is not biblical. The historic Christian Church believes in Jesus as the Bible teaches—and no further.

That same afternoon, Kurt Van Gorden, mission director for the Utah Gospel Mission, was across the street from the Mormon conference center in Salt Lake City, on a public easement at the Main Street Plaza. He was passing out Gospel literature with his friend Mel Heath. Mormon Church security guards approached and had them arrested, handcuffed, and jailed, on false charges of trespassing, to keep them and their literature away from the Mormon conference attendees. Their arrest took place on the same public easement where they had been handing out their literature.

Van Gorden had been arrested the previous day, April 6, 2002, at the same location. His claim that the Utah Code on trespassing prevents the arrest due to a clause that anyplace open to the public provides a defense against trespassing. Salt Lake City has guaranteed the public easement will remain open to the public.

On April 17, Van Gorden appeared in Utah State Court, to answer the trespassing charge from April 6. As he prepared to plea not guilty, Van Gorden was approached by Assistant City

Attorney Parkinson moments before the Judge was seated and was told that the charges had been dismissed. In a strange set of circumstances, it was discovered that the City Attorney's sought news coverage on the incident by calling the Salt Lake Tribune to issue press statements about the dismissal two hours before they informed Van Gorden that the charge had been dismissed. Van Gorden stated that they had no choice but to dismiss the charge since the Utah Code prevented prosecution of the case. The City Attorney never filed the charge against either Van Gorden or Heath from the April 7 arrest. Van Gorden and Heath maintain that the arrests were illegally performed against the Utah State Code.

In a public statement since the arrest, Van Gorden said, "the Mormon Church and the Salt Lake City Police Department issued press statements containing false information. The dismissed charges only demonstrate that no law was violated by handing out gospel literature while walking on a public easement. The police department and the Mormon Church issued false statements of which they had information to the contrary. For example, I was criticized for handing out 'anti-LDS pamphlets' and 'anti-Church material' on the Main Street Plaza, but the fact is that the literature said nothing about Mormonism whatsoever. It was simply a study on Jesus containing twenty-two Scripture references from the Bible, and they knew this, so why did they lie in their press statement?"

Van Gorden claimed that the Mormon Church was "untruthful by claiming that both Heath and I were asked over a two day period to leave the LDS Church property. Mr. Heath was not present on April 6, and they knew this too. They also lied by stating that we refused to leave the Mormon Church's property, when the fact is, we never once stepped outside of the easement that was designated for public use. Why did they hide the fact that everything took place on a public easement that was irrevocably designated for public use? A church that lies that many times in one press statement needs to be closely watched."

The police department's press statement, according to Van Gorden, "falsely reported that I was arrested

several years ago for passing out pamphlets at the Utah State Fair. Anyone can read the ACLU's web site to get the facts. The truth has been on the Internet for at least five years. The police department knew better than this since it was a defendant in that very case. They lied when they had facts to the contrary. I have never been arrested for anything in my life until April 6 and 7. The police department also said that my wife and sons were cited for trespassing at the Main Street Plaza. This is absolutely false, and they know it, since there would be some kind of police report had they been cited. Nothing like that exists, so why would they lie?"

"People are asking the wrong question," Van Gorden claimed, "the question should be why a church has the power to demand that police officers arrest American citizens who are exercising their constitutional freedoms of speech and religion on a public easement? I am not the only Christian arrested by the Mormon Church when handing out literature. The Mormon Church has falsely arrested other Christians in Arizona, Utah, and California while they were passing out literature on public sidewalks. Two men who had been falsely arrested filed a civil rights lawsuit against the Mormon Church in California. They were arrested while distributing literature on a sidewalk in front of the San Diego Mormon temple. The Mormon Church lost the case, but that has not stopped them from instigating other arrests on American citizens. Someone needs to ask why the Mormon Church thinks it has the power to violate our Constitutional freedoms."

At one time the Mormon Church claimed they were a persecuted people. Persecution in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois, they claimed, sent them to the Rocky Mountains seeking a home. Now, in light of these arrests, the persecuted has now become the persecutors of Christians who dare tell them biblical truth.

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Christian Civil Rights and the Utah State Fair (Van Gorden v. Utah State Fair)

SALT LAKE CITY—A Federal civil rights lawsuit for the equal treatment of Christians at the Utah State Fair was filed in 1997.

Kurt and Cindy Van Gorden, directors of the Utah Gospel Mission, had difficulty obtaining a booth at the Utah State Fair to distribute their mission's books and gospel literature. The couple runs a mission called the Utah Gospel Mission, which began in 1898 in Salt Lake City, Utah. Their request for a Utah State Fair booth began in 1986, but they found it strange that their application was denied when space was still available. Mr. Van Gorden requested booth space again in 1987 and 1988. After the third denial and after being told that the booths were already sold out, the Utah State Fair placed advertisements in several newspapers in August, 1988, stating that nearly 100 booths were still available.

Van Gorden telephoned the Utah State Fair, which was at that time under the Utah's Division of Commerce and Economics, and was told by a state employee that the real reason why his applications had been denied was that they did not want his mission's literature, which critically examined Mormonism, at the fair.

Sensing religious discrimination, Van Gorden went to the Utah Attorney General's office and demanded the same rights for the Utah Gospel Mission that is granted to the Mormon Church's booth. The Mormon Church had a fair booth telling Joseph Smith's First Vision story, where Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists are named as false, abominable, and corrupt, but the Utah Gospel Mission's literature was considered unacceptable because it questioned Mormonism in a few places. No religious equality existed at the Utah State Fair for the Mission's message.

The State of Utah opened a space for the Mission three weeks before the 1988 fair's opening day, but it was soon shut down by the Utah State Fair Board of Directors. The Fair disputed the mission's literature that questioned Mormonism. Van Gorden contacted a Christian attorney, who directed him to contact the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in Utah, which has helped a number of Utah Christians, since they are a minority in the state. He wanted to get the mission booth reopened. Both the

Mormon Church and "Living Scripture" booths freely gave away Joseph Smith's First Vision, which criticized Christian denominations by name. The ACLU accepted the task and the Mission's booth was reopened the following day under the threat of a civil rights lawsuit.

The Mission continued at the fair for nine years with only occasional differences between the fair and the Christian booth. The Mission was distributing between 10,000 to 15,000 free newspapers each year, which was more than other booths.

In 1996 everything changed. A week prior to the Utah State Fair, Van Gorden, who had obtained two booths, sent display books to the Fair for approval. A State Fair representative told him that "this will be the last year that you will have these books at this Fair." Unknown to the Van Gordens, the Fair slipped a clause into their contract that was absent from all other booth contracts. They were restricted from taking photographs of Fair patrons without their express prior permission. The Mission publishes a newspaper. This restriction usurped their Constitutional rights to the free press and free speech while all other booths were free to enjoy their rights.

On September 14, 1996, while passing out their free newspapers, a man and woman, unknown to the Van Gordens walked in front of their booth. The man turned into the adjacent booth and put his hand in front of the Van Gorden's security video camera in the back of the booth and began verbally harassing Mr. Van Gorden. When the man refused to identify himself, Cindy Van Gorden took his photograph to document the harassment. The man moved into the aisle and physically attacked her while he demanded her camera. The couple claimed that the Van Gordens violated their contract's photography clause.

Wondering what kind of set-up this was and how this couple knew the specific clauses of the Mission's contract, Cindy Van Gorden decided to leave the fairgrounds with her camera and the evidence on film. The unknown couple was later identified as Mr. and Mrs. Whittaker, who worked in concert with a Ms. Dahl to shut down the Mission's booth. Mr. Whittaker was the CEO and Director of the Utah State Fair at the time. When he saw Mrs. Van Gorden leave the building with her camera, he called the Fair's security and ordered them to stop her and get her film which she had shot of him harassing them. The security found her and demanded her camera. She told them that it is her property. They launched an assault upon her before several witnesses. She was picked up and slamming into the asphalt and pulled up by her hair twice. One guard,

Mr. Evans, is heard on a cassette tape explaining why he pulled her by the hair. It was because she would not give the film to security. The guards also tried to take the camera out from inside of her clothing, but she was able to hold on to it. Mrs. Van Gorden did not counterattack. She just hung on to her camera as tightly as she could and screamed for help. Others who had booths came out to help her, but the building supervisor, Mr. Tanner, turned his back on her screams for help and walked away. The attack resulted in substantial back and neck injuries to Mrs. Van Gorden.

Detective Werner, from the Salt Lake City Police Department arrived. He handcuffed Mrs. Van Gorden against the protest of the witnesses who told him that she was the victim of an assault. The officer held her for fifty minutes without cause. No charge was filed because she had committed no crime. They realized too late the seriousness of handcuffing and arresting the victim of an assault. The Utah State Fair, in relentless aggression against the Mission, subsequently shut down the two booths for the Utah Gospel Mission.

Attorney Nathan Hult, of Logan, Utah, in conjunction with Stephen Clark, of the ACLU, filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against the Utah State Fair, et al. The main issues included free religious expression, free speech, free press, personal civil rights violations, and Mrs. Van Gorden's injuries caused by the Fair's security, personnel, and the Salt Lake Police officer involved. The video tape, photographs, and cassette tape that caught portions of the attack stands unchallenged. The case lasted on for six years, but in December, 2001, the Van Gordens and the Utah Gospel Mission prevailed through settlement and won all of their issues including satisfaction for the injuries and guaranteed entrance into the Utah State Fair for the Mission's work.

The Van Gordens are thanking God for their victory. Mrs. Van Gorden said, "By God's grace and will, we have the victory in Jesus. The mission is back at the Utah State Fair freely handing out as many newspapers as in previous years. Christians must stand up for the freedom that God gave us."

Whether in Utah or elsewhere, when Constitutional rights are trampled, American citizens must insure the future by challenging oppression. In this case, the Utah State Fair assailants shouted, "That is the lady from the Christian booth," as they attacked Mrs. Van Gorden. Today that is called a hate crime. The defendants in this case knew who Mrs. Van Gorden was and they persisted in their attack. With God's blessings, though, the Utah Gospel Mission prevailed in the end.

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