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Helping Those with Religious Questions and Doubts*
D. Jeff Burton, M.A.**

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To some it is given to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. To others it is given to believe on his words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful. (Doctrine and Covenants 46:13-14.)

Mormonism is known, among other things, for its emphasis on personal conviction and strong testimony. Members often expect to receive a manifestation or confirmation that the essentials of the gospel are true. Partly because of this expectation, Latter-day Saints with unresolved religious questions and uncertainties may experience agonizing introspection, emotional difficulties, and even self-imposed alienation.

One aspect of the problem is that while some Latter-day Saints are patient in their seeking for understanding and willing to search for additional insights into unresolved questions of faith, others are troubled by their unanswered questions. They seek a complete fulfillment and understanding and when this ideal is not achieved such seekers often experience feelings of unworthiness or guilt. Perhaps some of their religious colleagues even question their tendency to question, further suggesting that because they are not unruffled in matters of doctrine, there must be something wrong with their faith.

Although many Mormons live comfortably close to an unruffled ideal, others have not achieved such serenity. For example, some seekers repress their natural urge to question in order to maintain an unruffled image, and may settle for the appearance of belief in place of actual conviction. Over a period of time, such self-deception can create emotional conflict and be attended by feelings of guilt and hypocrisy. Bishops, priesthood leaders, Relief Society presidents and friends may hear statements such as:

- I've prayed and fasted but I still have questions. Why don't I get the same answers as others?
- I just can't accept a calling (go to the temple, etc.) while I have these nagging doubts.
- I don't deserve blessings because I have uncertainties and questions inside.

Furthermore, members desiring to discuss their questions and doubts often find communicating about religious issues difficult or impossible. With no exchange of ideas, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual growth may suffer. Failure to engage fellow members in meaningful discussion can result in alienation from the religious community, either through emotional withdrawal or loss of Church activity:

- If I can't have the same assurance as others, I don't want to participate.
- I can't talk to anybody about this.
- If it weren't for the kids (my parents, my wife, my husband), I'd just quit it all.

Persons with unresolved doubts may experience marital conflicts, denial of reality, weakened ability to deal with feelings and emotions, and reduced motivation to learn:

- My wife keeps saying, "Why can't you just believe? Why do you have to question everything?" She thinks I'm not trying, that I'm somehow unworthy of the blessings of a sure knowledge. Why can't she just understand that I do have questions?
- I'm a basket case. I can't get on with anything.

Interestingly, the struggle of a doubter reveals a degree of faith. Without some faith in the restoration, there would be no reason to seek or to be dissatisfied with not understanding it all. People do not seek to understand that in which they have no faith. It is the recognition or hope for truth which helps guide individuals who are ruffled about religious matters.

Religious doubt may arise at any age, but it is more typically seen during the years of intellectual maturation. Counselors should be particularly sensitive to this problem among young adults, and especially among college students:

- I didn't have any problems 'till I started college.
- I've read this book, and it brought up some questions I'm having trouble with.

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Perspectives on Counseling Those with Doubts

Many of the problems associated with religious questions and doubt grow out of misconceptions concerning the relationship of knowledge to faith and belief and the roles these play in our lives. By sharing the following ten perspectives on the nature of religious conviction and commitment, counselors can help struggling members to see their circumstances in a more positive light and pave the way to personal growth and emotional satisfaction.

1. Mormonism and society see different meanings in the terms faith and belief.

Mormons often see the terms belief and faith as synonymous, both being the natural result of learning truth. The scriptures often equate the two words. However, in our present-day society, particularly in the sciences, the terms belief and faith have come to have distinct, mutually exclusive meanings.

In the contemporary sense, belief is a mental state that tells us something is true based on experience, information, evidence, or authority. For example, if we flip a coin fifty times and tabulate the results of heads versus tails, we are likely to believe from the evidence that each comes up about equally. Of course, no one person’s interpretation of the evidence will prove satisfactory to everyone. A mother looks at a newborn baby and has sufficient evidence to believe in the existence of God. But a biochemist looking at the same child may marvel at the power of evolution.

The term faith, on the other hand, refers to a feeling, a trust in “the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). Belief is learned; faith is evidence yet to be learned. Belief is what we really think; faith is what we are willing to accept in the absence of evidence.

The acceptance embodied in faith implies an active personal commitment. Thus, under these definitions, it is possible to question aspects of our religion, yet live the faith by faith.

In counseling others, accept the possibility that you both may be operating under different definitions as you discuss belief and faith. Define your terms to assure clear communication.

2. Doubting is not necessarily a rejection of God.

Again, it is important to recognize the multiple meanings of the word doubt. In its modern, constructive sense, it means to be unsettled in belief or opinion; to be uncertain or undecided. It implies a lack of information or evidence upon which to base a belief. Doubt, according to this usage, is an inevitable consequence of a maturing, inquiring mind, and should be managed, not denied.

In contrast, the more traditional meaning of doubt includes the notion of distrust. In a religious context, doubt is associated with a rejection of God and a thankless denial of his goodness. Is there any wonder the word doubt has such a strong negative connotation?

Sincere questioners can be encouraged to be willing to disclose their commitment to learn at the same time they reveal their questions. They can also avoid being hurt or offending others by choosing their words carefully and defining any likely-to-be misunderstood expressions.

3. “It is not permitted to know everything.”—Horace.

We in the church often use the words, “I know” to describe our testimonies (e.g., “I know the Church is true.”) This use of the word know usually means strong belief or faith (e.g., “I intensely believe the Church is true,” or, “My faith is strong that the Church is true.”)

To know, in its modern, technological sense, is to have a clear understanding, to be relatively sure. Knowledge is familiarity with or awareness of facts and evidence. But in mortality nothing can be known with perfection, only in degrees of confidence. While science and statistics have developed elaborate methods for testing, verifying, and strengthening the evidence upon which beliefs and knowledge are based, not even scientific tests produce perfect knowledge. Furthermore, scientists themselves use faith when they rely on their own methods or unproven assumptions, or when confidence limits exist, however small.

Questioners can be shown that since no one can claim perfect knowledge, it is only reasonable to expect a degree of uncertainty in this mortal life. Discuss the different uses of the words knowledge and to know.

4. Most Mormons wonder about religious things.

Wondering is a common and natural reaction to all but the most commonplace information. What Mormon, for example, hasn’t had one or more of the following thoughts cross his mind at some time?

- Why would God command . . .
  - Adam and Even not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil?
  - Nephi to kill Laban?
  - Joseph Smith to practice polygamy?

- Did Joseph Smith truly . . .
  - translate gold plates and papyri?
  - follow the Lord’s will?
  - find the Garden of Eden?

- Is my bishop (father, husband, stake president, leader) really inspired in this call (decision, release, judgment)?

A popular approach to dealing with such wondering is to blame Satan, or the weakness of the questioner. But if wondering is natural, if seeking more light and knowledge is a legitimate gospel activity, and if one so seeking is obedient to gospel principles, then guilt and repression of questioners are unnecessary, and only serve to cause pain and to divert attention away from dealing responsibly with real religious issues.
5. Everyone is a believer to some degree; our uncertainties vary in strength.

Latter-day Saints who are uncertain about particular tenets of the religion should not be hasty in applying negative labels to themselves. Such negative self-labelling undermines self-esteem. A little belief is like a seed: nourishment and care may produce a tall, strong Tree of Knowledge. But that takes faith, time, and work.

Point out that varying strengths of belief in different facets of the gospel are not uncommon, and are not the same as unbelief; indeed, it is highly unlikely that any two people will share exactly the same convictions on all issues. Help the person with questions or doubts to see himself as an integral part of a diverse Church, rather than as an outsider.

6. When properly approached, questioning is a vital part of the learning process.

Having questions implies a desire to expand the information upon which beliefs are based. Mormonism celebrates intelligence as “the glory of God” (D & C 93:36), and proclaims that man is saved no faster than he gains knowledge. Obviously, such commitment to learning cannot be served by suppressing inquiries about the kingdoms of heaven and earth.

On the other hand, a philosophy of sincere inquiry does not license questions asked in a spirit of challenge or misunderstanding. Suppose a Church member has trouble dissenting? Such threatening overtones can frequently be avoided by prefacing questions with honest statements of feelings:

“I’m troubled by . . .”

“It bothers me greatly, but I am skeptical of . . .”

“My heart tells me . . .”

“I feel anguish when I think about . . .”

“Please don’t misunderstand me; inasmuch as I am a committed, faithful member of the Church, I have a question I’d like your opinion on . . .”

“This is a question that has caused me a lot of turmoil. I want to talk to you because I respect you. I wonder if you could tell me what you think about (know about) . . . ?”

“I wonder if you’ve ever had the same question that’s been running through my mind: . . .”

“I haven’t enough information yet to have a perfect knowledge of the issue, but here’s what I believe . . . (here’s the evidence upon which I base my belief . . .)”

Counsel that the pursuit of truth is rarely harmed by sincere questions made in the spirit of humble curiosity. Review with the person non-threatening ways of asking questions. Encourage the person to be honest about his feelings.

7. The blessings of the gospel come through faithfulness and obedience; particular beliefs may vary within certain bounds.

Some Mormons assume that there is only one way to believe in Church doctrines. Quite to the contrary, a great deal of freedom exists on matters of belief in religious matters. Joseph Smith, as reported in the History of the Church 5:215, said, “the most prominent difference in sentiment between the Latter-day Saints and sectarians was that the latter were all circumscribed by some peculiar creed, which deprived its members the privilege of believing anything not contained therein, whereas the Latter-day Saints have no creed, but are ready to believe all true principles that exist.”

Similarly, President Joseph F. Smith testified before the Congress of the United States that Latter-day Saints “are given the largest possible latitude of their convictions, and if a man rejects a message that I may give to him but is still moral and believes in the main principles of the gospel and desires to continue in his membership in the Church, he is permitted to remain.” In the same setting, he observed that members of the Mormon church are not all united on every principle. Every man is entitled to his own opinion and his own views and his own conceptions of right and wrong so long as they do not come in conflict with the standard principles of the Church.

The priority of faithfulness over particular beliefs is further demonstrated in the temple recommend interview, which probes a person’s behavior, obedience, attitude, faithfulness, and commitment.

It is possible to show that questions and uncertainties concerning religion need not keep a person from participating in all facets of the gospel, and need not prevent him from full enjoyment of gospel blessings. Through faithfully living the gospel, one may gain a witness that the gospel is true.

8. Not all information is correct; no source of information is complete.

No single earthly source of information can exhaust the facts concerning any gospel issue. Furthermore, some sources are wrong and others are written to deceive. Still others are well-intentioned but misleading. Historical studies, for example, are subject to many limitations because they involve not only the acquisition of sometimes
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scarce factual information, but also the dubious process of correctly interpreting that information. Caution the person against jumping to conclusions based on inevitably inadequate information. Re-emphasize the need for faith during the information gathering and knowledge development phase.

9. Personal responses to questions and doubts can be controlled by the individual.

We need not be ashamed of or concerned about authentic emotions. We need not avoid feelings of sadness when a friend dies; we do not try to avoid feelings of joy when we are blessed; and we need not avoid feeling unsettled.

When we do not understand something important, we can keep seeking understanding, or we can give up. Our reactions to our feelings are as important as the feelings themselves, and we can manage our behavior. Control and positive management of difficult emotions are always helped by understanding the emotion—its origin, its reason for being, and its potential solutions.

It is possible that a person’s troubled response to doubt and questioning is related in part to the way he was reared. Suppose, for example, as a young boy he innocently asked, “Did Joseph really see God?” If his parent or teacher responded with horror, “Of course he did! How could you ask such a thing?” the child may have concluded that questions are unimportant or bad. As he grew to adulthood, he may have come to see skepticism and curiosity as defects in his character. Personal doubts may have been seen as inappropriate temptations rather than challenges to be explored and investigated. Thus, leaders, teachers, and parents may have unwittingly planted the seeds of trouble years ago.

A person may also be influenced by local responses to perceived skepticism. The local community may encourage guilt as a response to one’s doubt and inculcate the notion that questioning is a sign of sin, slothfulness, or error. Such negative reactions represent the fears and weakness of individuals and are not part of the gospel.

Help the person to understand himself and his local environment, and urge him to accept these conditions with patience and love while learning new ways to manage questions and doubts. After all, compassion for the uncompassionate is central to the Savior’s mission.

10. Religion has a spiritual component that is essential to the learning process of spiritual truths.

As the Doctrine and Covenants tells us, some are given to know, and others are given to believe on their words. We have no way of discerning in advance who will know and who will live by faith; nor do we know why the Lord has established such a system. We don’t even know which of the two is more blessed, but we do know that to those given to continue faithfully in the absence of knowledge, there is a promise of eternal life.

There is a spiritual dimension to religion, sometimes called the supernatural or metaphysical, which cannot be explained by contemporary empirical methods. And we believe that a person’s spirit and mind can be taught truths which cannot be learned otherwise. But this requires obedience, faith, and a sincere heart.

So explore with the “sincere doubter” the possibility of giving the spiritual side of life a better chance to succeed. Explore the possibility that the person’s attitude, or personal sin, may be blocking spiritual learning.

In Summary

As in all counseling, Church leaders, parents, and friends need to show concern, compassion and understanding for the pain and difficulty the religious doubter may be experiencing. In addition, there are a number of practical suggestions (or, challenges) the counselor can offer the person:

• Look within, analyze feelings, and determine true beliefs; don’t be afraid of what is found.

• Work to be worthy of building faith through obedience, prayer, study, and good works.

• Establish personal study programs to expand the information and evidence upon which beliefs and knowledge are built.

• Give spiritual methods a chance.

• Seek help when needed and admit fallibility.

• Talk about questions in tactful, nonthreatening ways. Be willing to listen to the insights of others. Don’t forget to express positive beliefs and levels of faith, too.

Finally, counselors should leave their charges with hope. James Francis Cooke said it best: “The most welcomed people of the world are never those who look back upon the bitter frustrations of yesterday, but those who cast their eyes forward with faith, hope, courage, and happy curiosity.”

For further reading:

Faith. (Salt Lake City Deseret Book) 1983.