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Is Sure Knowledge an Ideal for Everyone or One Spiritual Gift among Many?

Blair Dee Hodges and Patrick Q. Mason

“I’d like to bear my testimony. I know the Church is true. I know that Heavenly Father lives and loves us. I know that Jesus Christ is our Savior. I know that Joseph Smith was a true prophet and restored the Church on the earth. I know the Book of Mormon is the word of God. I know that the Church is led by living prophets today. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.”

Some variation on this basic formulation is heard throughout The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in its monthly “fast and testimony meetings,” where Church members are encouraged to share personal expressions of faith from the pulpit. Similar testimonies are spoken every day by full-time missionaries around the world and as part of many classes and trainings in the Church. As members do so, the spiritual gift of knowledge is simultaneously affirmed, demonstrated, and reinforced. The mantra of Latter-day Saint faithfulness is “I know.”

The sheer ubiquity of this discursive formulation raises the question of whether sure spiritual knowledge, gained via the witness of the Holy Ghost, is an ideal and even a mandate for all of God’s children seeking salvation, or whether people can be faithful and receive eternal life even when they do not feel they can testify with absolute certainty of core gospel truths. Is faith—akin to belief, hope, or trust and differentiated in many scriptural passages from knowledge—sufficient for salvation, or is it merely a waystation on the path toward greater surety? Furthermore, is there any room in the disciple’s life for sincere doubt, or does doubt represent the antithesis of both faith and knowledge and therefore should be banished from the believer’s lexicon and experience?

Scriptural passages and teachings of modern-day prophets can be mustered to support multiple positions in answer to these questions. For instance, God seems to leave room for honest strivers along the entire belief-knowledge continuum. In a March 1831 revelation regarding the diversity of spiritual gifts, God told the restored Church, “To some it is given by the Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. . . . To others it is given to believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful” (D&C 46:13–14). In this passage, the Lord differentiates knowledge from belief yet validates each and marks them both as salvific. In this essay, we will demonstrate the great value that Latter-day Saints have assigned to the acquisition of spiritual knowledge. But the variety of human religious experience also suggests the importance of validating and embracing the faith of those who desire to believe but do not—and may never in this life—possess sure knowledge.

Saving Knowledge

Latter-day Saint scriptures build on the biblical witness that knowledge ranks among the principal attributes of God and that he desires his children to share his knowledge. Indeed, Adam and Eve became fully human and initiated God’s plan of salvation for his spirit children only after eating the fruit of the tree that granted them knowledge (2 Ne. 2:22–25; Moses 4:11–12; 5:11). Though as a consequence they were driven from the garden and separated from the tree of life, Jesus promised the Fall would be reversed and eternal life would be granted through the acquisition of godly knowledge (John 17:3). Three different lists of spiritual gifts provided in the Church’s canonized scripture agree that “the word of knowledge” is among the chief bequests of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:8; Moro. 10:10; D&C 46:18).

For Latter-day Saints, knowledge is life-giving and sanctifying. The Book of Mormon is bookended, and saturated, with righteous disciples’ desire to *know*, along with repeated promises that knowledge will be granted to those who seek it (see 1 Ne. 11:1–3; Moro. 10:3–5). Joseph Smith’s prophetic career was defined by the quest for and receipt of spiritual knowledge. This pattern stretched from his direct and unmediated knowledge of God secured in the First Vision to the ritualization of godly knowledge introduced systematically, and democratically, through the ceremonies of the temple. God has promised each faithful seeker that “if thou shalt ask, thou shalt receive revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge” (D&C 42:61). Among its exalting functions, the Melchizedek Priesthood

restores and holds “the key of the knowledge of God” (D&C 84:19). Those who obey the Word of Wisdom are promised the “great treasures of knowledge” (D&C 89:19). In the dispensation of restoration, Joseph Smith declared that no earthly opposition can “hinder the Almighty from pouring down knowledge from heaven upon the heads of the Latter-day Saints” (D&C 121:33). Teaching the Saints in Illinois, Smith underscored the role of knowledge not simply as an “advantage” in this life and the next (D&C 130:19) but as an absolute necessity for salvation and exaltation: “A man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge for if he does not get knowledge he will be brought into Captivity by some evil power in the other world as evil spirits will have more knowled[ge] & consequently more power than many men who are on the earth.”¹ In Latter-day Saint scriptural theology, ignorance is damning (D&C 131:6), and knowledge is saving.

The Latter-day Saints’ early revelations and experiences fostered a culture of spiritual confidence in which surety became not only the end but also the means of their quest for salvation. Joseph Smith taught that when a person had been “thoroug[h]ly proved,” God would say, “thou shalt be exalted,” and the person would “find his calling & Election made sure” and receive “a perfect knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of God.”² As Christians had taught since biblical times, Smith affirmed that it was conceivable for a person “to obtain a promise from God for myself that I shall have Eternal life.”³

However, for most Church members who heard Smith’s sermons, their spiritual surety was of a different sort. Through the knowledge bestowed by the Spirit, they testified that God had spoken in the latter days and restored his Church, and that they had direct access to divine truth through the gift of the Holy Ghost, the words of prophets, and priesthood ordinances. This type of spiritual certainty was a crucial component in the faith that fueled the first decades of the Restoration,

1. “Discourse, 10 April 1842, as Reported by Wilford Woodruff,” pp. [146–47], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 2, 2021, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-10-april-1842-as-reported-by-wilford-woodruff/1>.

2. “Discourse, between circa 26 June and circa 2 July 1839, as Reported by Willard Richards,” pp. 19–21, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 2, 2021, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-between-circa-26-june-and-circa-2-july-1839-as-reported-by-willard-richards/5>.

3. “Discourse, 21 May 1843, as Reported by James Burgess,” p. [8], Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-21-may-1843-as-reported-by-james-burgess/1>. Smith was preaching on the text of 2 Peter 1:10, which exhorts the Saints in the primitive Church to “give diligence to make your calling and election sure.”

sustaining Saints as they endured persecution, crossed the plains, went or sent their loved ones on far-flung missions, settled the West, and built Zion over and over again.

The ideal of seeking spiritual certainty persists in the twenty-first-century Church. In an oft-cited talk, Boyd K. Packer, late President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, advised missionaries to take a “leap of faith,” to declare the certainty of gospel principles they were yet unsure of. “Oh, if I could teach you this one principle,” he admonished. “A testimony is to be found in the bearing of it!” The Holy Ghost would bring assurance to the testifier’s heart and mind, first in the form of faith and eventually as “great spiritual knowledge.”⁴ General conference addresses frequently conclude with solemn affirmations of knowledge about God’s love, Jesus Christ’s divine sonship, the eternal importance of families, the truthfulness of the Church, the authority of the priesthood, and the reliability of Church prophets. Parents are invited to cultivate knowledge in their children in order to ensure righteous development. Former Primary General President Coleen K. Menlove taught, “Children need to be filled with the light of the gospel so when temptation comes they can say: ‘I know who I am. I am a child of God. I know what I am to do. . . . I know who I can become. I can become a righteous young woman,’ or, ‘I can become a righteous young man and receive the priesthood of God.’ Children filled with this knowledge and light can make the decision to reject darkness and turn to the light and peace of the gospel.”⁵

Many of the Church’s distinctive truth claims are wrapped up in history. Specifically, most Latter-day Saints have believed that Joseph Smith *literally* saw God and Jesus in the Sacred Grove; that the angel Moroni *literally* appeared to Joseph Smith and delivered *literal* gold plates to him; that Book of Mormon figures like Nephi, Sariah, and Alma *literally* lived and prophesied on the American hemisphere and that Jesus Christ *literally* appeared to the Lehites after his resurrection; that the actual personages of John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John *literally* appeared and laid hands on the heads of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, *literally* restoring God’s priesthood on the earth in modern times. “In a particularly pronounced way,” Latter-day Saint scholar Terryl Givens observed with regard to the

4. Boyd K. Packer, “The Candle of the Lord,” *Ensign* 13, no. 1 (January 1983): 53. For a more recent example, see Jeffrey R. Holland, “Lord, I Believe,” *Ensign* 42, no. 5 (May 2013), 94.

5. Coleen K. Menlove, “All Thy Children Shall Be Taught,” *Ensign* 35, no. 5 (May 2005): 14; see also Glenn L. Pace, “Do You Know?” *Ensign* 37, no. 5 (May 2007): 78–79.

importance of historicity, “the meaning and value of the Book of Mormon as a religious text are tied to a specific set of historical claims.”⁶ Latter-day Saints express spiritual knowledge not just of a set of abstract theological propositions but also of the particular ways that God has acted in and through history.

Dissent and Doubt

Church leaders’ insistence on the literal historicity of miraculous events associated with the Restoration has always provoked skepticism and ridicule from nonbelievers. But with the advent of the information age, and especially the internet’s easy access to information previously hard to come by, the complexities of Church history emerged as a stumbling block for many believers as well. Church members learned that much of what they thought they knew about Church history was incomplete or sometimes wrong and that contrary information they discovered online could not always be easily dismissed as the malicious invention of “anti-Mormons.” When they learned that Joseph Smith gave multiple and varying accounts of the First Vision, or that he translated the Book of Mormon with the use of a seer stone otherwise associated with a now-forgotten culture of folk magic, or that the DNA of the indigenous peoples of the Americas did not bear any indications of Middle Eastern ancestry, many believers began to doubt their testimonies. If Church leaders past and present—especially prophets—had been wrong about historical issues, how could they be trusted on matters of saving knowledge?

To be sure, people have doubted the truthfulness of Latter-day Saint doctrine from the beginning; dissent is a tradition as old as the religion itself. Many people have simply drifted away from Church participation, their enthusiasm waning over a period of weeks, months, or years. This recurrent atrophy only reinforced the Church’s internal message that those members who remained within the fold had to guard against even the beginnings of doubt, which could too easily cascade into apostasy. Yet many Church dissenters—ranging from the Reformed Church in Nauvoo to the Reorganization under Joseph Smith III, from nineteenth-century Godbeites to contemporary fundamentalists and “Snufferites”—have articulated their own certainties. Collectively, they have expressed

6. Terryl L. Givens, foreword to John L. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013), xiv.

their dissent less as a lack of spiritual knowledge than as strong assurances of rival claims to truth and authority.⁷

Despite the persistence of an “I know” culture in Latter-day Saint wards and in the Church at large—and partly in reaction to it—a new dynamic emerged in the late twentieth century, picking up steam in the early twenty-first. A significant number of Church members were and are leaving the faith altogether, often rejecting all of the foundational truth claims they once bore witness of as things that they knew spiritually. Their narratives of dissent and apostasy often form a nearly perfect inverse of their one-time testimonies.⁸ But probably an even larger number of people with doubts remain in the Church. They often struggle silently to reconcile their own destabilized convictions with the expressions of certainty they still regularly hear from the pulpits of general conference and local wards. “Doubt” and “faith crisis” have entered the popular vocabulary and experience of twenty-first-century Church members in ways that would have been virtually unthinkable in previous generations. The recent acknowledgment of the reality of doubt within the membership of the Church has created the space for many people to remain active even with their questions. The prevalence of “faith crisis” has also prompted a series of responses both from the institutional Church and lay scholars and members seeking to preserve room for faith and even spiritual knowledge in spite of aspects of the Church’s history or doctrine that trouble some members.⁹

7. See Ronald W. Walker, *Wayward Saints: The Godbeites and Brigham Young* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

8. See Seth Payne, “Ex-Mormon Narratives and Pastoral Apologetics,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 85–121; E. Marshall Brooks, *Disenchanted Lives: Apostasy and Ex-Mormonism among the Latter-day Saints* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2018). For a critique of ex-Mormon certainties, see Mette Harrison, “The Five Doctrines of Ex-Mormonism,” *Religion News Service*, June 30, 2020, <https://religionnews.com/2020/06/30/the-five-doctrines-of-ex-mormonism/>.

9. Beginning in November 2013, the Church began publishing an online series of “Gospel Topics Essays” to address various theological and historical points of concern, available at <https://www.lds.org/topics/essays?lang=eng>. See Tad Walch, “Essays on Mormon History, Doctrine Find New Visibility in Official App, Sunday School,” *Deseret News*, December 26, 2016, <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/865669945/Essays-on-Mormon-history-doctrine-find-new-visibility-in-official-app-Sunday-School.html>. See also Terryl L. Givens and Fiona Givens, *The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014); Patrick Q. Mason, *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015); and Laura Harris Hales, ed., *A Reason*

Three Views

The contemporary situation, with antecedents but no direct precedents in the Church's history, has produced new debates over the possibility and desirability of certainty as part of an individual's spiritual journey. At least three distinctive positions, even camps, have formed. On one side are secularists, including many profoundly disaffected and alienated former Church members, who discount or deny the reliability of claims of sure spiritual knowledge. This position can range from a hardened atheism that denies the existence of God (and thus the very possibility of spiritual communication) to a more specific rejection of Latter-day Saint truth claims. Skeptics insist that believers' supposed knowledge is built upon wishes more than facts, that the Church's teachings are fundamentally based on falsehoods and delusions, and that various religions' competing assertions of exclusive truth negate any single claimant's case.¹⁰

On the other end of the spectrum are those who absolutely affirm not only the possibility but the reality of sure spiritual knowledge, not just as the limited experience of a select few but as the mark and meaning of a Christian life. Many of these defenders of (the) faith have doubled down on the Church's truth claims and tend to doubt the legitimacy of other people's expressed doubts. In this context, a lack of assurance is interpreted as a sign indicating a person's lack of worthiness or more generously a temporary spiritual shortcoming that could be alleviated with sincere desire and effort. "As doubts arise," an article in the Church's official magazine for adults once counseled, "it may be useful to honestly ask yourself, Is there something I am doing or desiring that is contrary to the gospel? If you answer yes, seek help from your bishop. It can make all the difference! Letting your doubts justify your sins is never a successful substitute for repenting."¹¹ For those whose souls

for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016).

10. A paradigmatic and influential example of the skepticism expressed by a disaffected Church member is Jeremy T. Runnells, "CES Letter: My Search for Answers to My Mormon Doubts," CES Letter Foundation, <https://cesletter.org/>.

11. Adam Kotter, "When Doubts and Questions Arise," *Ensign* 45, no. 3 (March 2015): 38. See also Hugo Montoya, "Overcoming the Danger of Doubt," *Liahona* 23, no. 9 (September 2017): 44–47; and Valerie Johnson, "Overcome Your Doubts with Study and Repentance, BYU–Idaho President Says," *Church News*, September 26, 2018, <https://www.lds.org/church/news/overcome-your-doubts-with-study-and-repentance-byu-idaho-president-says?lang=eng>.

burn with the fire of faith, it can be simultaneously bewildering and painful to watch the embers of spiritual conviction die out in those they love, leading them to believe that something sinister (or sinful) must have acted as an extinguishing agent. The often well-intentioned stigmatization of doubt in Church culture results in feelings of alienation and loneliness among those who deal with questions about aspects of Church doctrine or history.¹²

Between these two opposing camps—which of course can be and often are reduced to caricature—is a third position, or more accurately a cluster of closely related middle ways. In a stirring address to employees of the Church Education System, President M. Russell Ballard directly urged educators to take a more thoughtful and sympathetic approach to doubt than in times past. “Gone are the days,” he said, “when a student asked an honest question and a teacher responded, ‘Don’t worry about it!’ Gone are the days when a student raised a sincere concern and a teacher bore his or her testimony as a response intended to avoid the issue. Gone are the days when students were protected from people who attacked the Church.” Ballard affirmed that greater “gospel transparency and spiritual inoculation through a thoughtful study of doctrine and history, coupled with a burning testimony, is the best antidote we have to help students avoid and/or deal with questions, doubt, or faith crises they may face in this information age.”¹³

Middle-way perspectives have typically emerged from an appreciation and validation of the wide range of lived experiences present within the contemporary and historical Church. Doubt is recognized as an authentic reality for many people in the twenty-first century, but so is sure spiritual knowledge. Church leaders often make the distinction between the spiritual corrosiveness of perpetual doubt and the positive value of curiosity and questions as part of the search for spiritual knowledge.

12. Those trying to minimize the conflict between believers (or “knowers”) and doubters have produced lists of recommendations for how those whose faith remains secure can more compassionately relate to those with doubts. See M. Sue Bergin, “Keeping the Faith,” *BYU Magazine*, Spring 2014, <https://magazine.byu.edu/article/keeping-the-faith/>; Mason, *Planted*, esp. 17–19.

13. Russell M. Ballard, “The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21st Century,” address to Church Educational System religious educators, February 26, 2016, <https://www.lds.org/broadcasts/article/evening-with-a-general-authority/2016/02/the-opportunities-and-responsibilities-of-ces-teachers-in-the-21st-century>. For similar expressions from senior Apostles, see Holland, “Lord, I Believe,” 93–95; Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come, Join with Us,” *Ensign* 43, no. 11 (November 2013): 21–24.

Doubt is never upheld as a positive virtue in the scriptures, whereas questions drove Joseph Smith into the grove of trees. BYU–Idaho geology professor Julie Willis’s “three primary points about questions and questioning” among Latter-day Saints, shared during a university devotional, exemplify this trend: “1. Asking questions is part of our religious heritage. 2. Questions of different types can be sources of intellectual stimulation and light. 3. Challenging questions are not forbidden and can be embraced with faith and light.”¹⁴

A growing number of Church leaders, scholars, and members acknowledge the brittle nature of an all-or-nothing approach to spiritual knowledge that leaves no room for questions and vilifies any form of doubt. They concede and even commend the fact that a person may question some aspects of Church history and doctrine while retaining and acting on a personal testimony of core principles. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland publicly acknowledged the “desperation” that nearly all Church members feel at some point as we wrestle with what we do not know or understand. His counsel was to “hold fast to what you already know and stand strong until additional knowledge comes.” For those unable to express the language of knowledge, Holland affirmed “with all the fervor of [his] soul that *belief* is a precious word, an even more precious act,” and that a person need not ever feel ashamed for “only believing.”¹⁵ Without abandoning the possibility and even ultimate desirability of spiritual knowledge, the vocabulary of this middle way is more expansive than the traditional formula of “I know.” People increasingly invoke words like *believe*, *hope*, *resonate*, *love*, *insightful*, *compelling*, and *profound* to describe their encounter with gospel principles and practices.¹⁶ While refusing to valorize doubt for its own sake or affirm it as a desirable endpoint of a person’s spiritual quest, the twenty-first-century Church seems to be carving out more space for people who have not yet achieved—and may never in this life attain—absolute spiritual certainty.

14. Julie Willis, “Gaining Light through Questioning,” Brigham Young University–Idaho devotional, July 1, 2014, <https://www.churchhistorianspress.org/at-the-pulpit/bonus-chapters/bonus-chapter-7-gaining-light-through-questioning-julie-willis>.

15. Holland, “Lord, I Believe,” 94, emphasis in original.

16. Caroline, “Knowing, Believing, and Hoping: Going beyond the Usual Testimony Words,” *Exponent II*, May 6, 2018, <https://www.the-exponent.com/knowning-believing-and-hoping-going-beyond-the-usual-testimony-words/>.

Conclusion

In the end, Latter-day Saint theology makes room for people at all points of the faith spectrum. While affirming that every human being possesses innate spiritual gifts, the revelations celebrate the diversity of those gifts and that “all these gifts come from God, for the benefit of the children of God.” Some are given “the word of knowledge,” while others are “given to believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life” (D&C 46:14, 18, 26). For those who do not experience even a “particle” of these gifts of spiritual knowledge, the self-willed “desire to believe” is hailed as sufficient (Alma 32:27). The Church struggles to find a place for those who have categorically ruled out the very possibility of spiritual experience. But for those who are open to the search, however uncertain the path, one of the primary attractions of the Restoration is the promise of an eternal existence characterized by the pursuit and reception of ever-greater knowledge and light, which “groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (D&C 50:24).

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