Truth and Integrity: A Candid Interface

Robert F. Bohn
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As a student in the 1960s and as a university professor since 1971, I have been intrigued with the intellectual struggle of many Church members (including myself) as they honestly deal with doubt in the pursuit of truth. The following comments from a faithful Church member, whom I will call Brother Jones, summarize the feelings of many who view themselves as "faithful believers," but not "orthodox knowers":

I am an active Latter-day Saint who was raised in the Church and loves the fellowship of Mormonism. However, as I have gone through the academic rigors of questioning and have experienced many different belief systems, I have doubts about some aspects of what the Church teaches. I like to think all of what is taught is true, but when I am honest with myself, I have some questions which seem impossible to answer. I get frustrated at times because I know the Church is good for me and my family because of its many positive features. Without the guidance of the Church and its teachings, I would have become a lesser person. However, at times, I am uncomfortable at church because I do not always feel or think the way the "orthodox Mormon" should. I sometimes get angry because the Church makes people like me feel like they cannot share honest feelings without being labeled a "liberal," "intellectual apostate," or "closet doubter." I am a good person and try to live according to the gospel, but the quick Mormon answer of "studying and praying about it" has not always answered my many questions which generate many new questions. Is there room for someone like me in the Church even though I don't know "without a shadow of a doubt" that all of the Church teachings are true?

His comments cause me to reflect upon how I deal with doubt in my personal pursuit of truth. Sometimes, members are accused of compartmentalizing their "secular knowledge" separately from their
"spiritual knowledge." Perhaps some coping strategies I have developed over the years may provide insights to help questioning members find happiness within the institutional church.

**We Are Responsible for Our Feelings**

It is important to mention early that "the Church" really cannot make others feel a certain way. The Church is an abstract organization which is manifest through its individual leaders and members, who have diverse personalities and gospel perceptions. But even individuals don't make others feel a certain way. We feel bad or uncomfortable only when we allow ourselves to feel that way. In other words, it is our response, or what we tell ourselves about what is happening to us, that causes us to feel a certain way. Each of us is ultimately responsible for how he or she feels.

However, the Church’s social culture does set a mood which can ostracize or provide an environment of nonacceptance of diversity which can influence people to feel uncomfortable at church or to decide to become inactive. Of course, under more serious circumstances, Church excommunication proceedings could cause a person to lose his or her membership.

For the majority of Church members to be insensitive to those holding minority views is not Christlike, as long as the behavior of that minority is not antithetical to the Church. It is too easy to ignore or deny that many are struggling with their testimonies or have some beliefs different from "mainstream Mormonism." Self-righteously saying "You shouldn't feel or think that way about the gospel or the Church" does not change the reality of Brother Jones's feeling and thinking the way he does. It is hoped that the general Church membership will lovingly accept and be more tolerant of reasonable diversity while those who sometimes feel alienated will accept responsibility for their own feelings and apply their talents in a positive way to strengthen others.

**Diversity of Thought and Questioning Are Important**

Honesty in the pursuit of truth is a basic tenet of our church, and questioning is a natural consequence of this process—not grounds for leaving the Church. The LDS thirteenth article of faith reflects open-ended seeking after all that is good:

> We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men; indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition...
of Paul—We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.

President Hugh B. Brown’s remarks in his speech to the BYU student body on 13 May 1969 should give Brother Jones a sense of acceptance and encouragement:

One of the most important things in the world is freedom of the mind; from this all other freedoms spring. . . .

Preserve, then, the freedom of your mind in education and in religion, and be unafraid to express your thoughts and to insist upon your right to examine every proposition. We are not so much concerned with whether your thoughts are orthodox or heterodox as we are that you shall have thoughts. (Speeches of the Year 1968–1969, 9–10)

The free spirit of inquiry was taught by Paul: “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (1 Thes. 5:21). It is interesting to note that prove in Greek means to “examine” or “put to the test.” A scientist before becoming an Apostle, Elder John A. Widtsoe in an article “Is It Wrong to Doubt?” provides helpful insight:

Doubt of the right kind—that is, honest questioning—leads to faith. Such doubt impels men to inquiry which always opens the door to truth. . . .

No! Doubt is not wrong unless it becomes an end of life. It rises to high dignity when it becomes an active search for, and practice of, truth. (Evidences and Reconciliation, 29–30)

In conjunction with the standard works, the mantle of authority for Church doctrine rests upon the shoulders of the prophet. Nevertheless, each of us in turn has a personal responsibility to be true to our consciences as we pray and try to understand what the Lord is telling us relative to revealed doctrine.

Brother Jones’s frustration associated with the pursuit of truth while maintaining integrity is more prevalent than he thinks. Knowing that other committed Latter-day Saints likewise struggle in their pursuit of truth should provide Brother Jones with some consolation. Articles such as these provide a healthful forum which reflects the encompassing scope and love of the Church for all of its members—theological conservatives, moderates, liberals, and others—who are trying to live according to the gospel.

Brother Jones should feel somewhat relieved knowing that there are many members who share his doubts yet find fellowship within the Church. But how do the Brother and Sister Joneses find satisfaction within the Church while maintaining their integrity about having less than orthodox religious views? That is what this article is all about.
Questions Increase As Knowledge Increases

Elder Theodore Burton, who was a professor prior to his calling as a General Authority, gave some valuable insight to a group of BYU students many years ago. He drew on the chalkboard a rectangle, representing the knowledge of all truth. He then indicated that at birth all are without knowledge of any truth; so our rectangles are blanked out. He then drew within the rectangle a very small circle which represented our gaining knowledge. As children, we experience limited knowledge so our circle of awareness of truth is small.

He pointed out how, in the beginning, the circumference of the small circle touches only a little of the blackness of the rectangle’s area of darkness (lack of knowledge about truth). But as we mature and gain knowledge of truth, our circle becomes larger and its circumference touches more areas of the unknown. Consequently, as we gain knowledge, we tend to have more questions because we are exposed to more of the unknown. Only when our circle of knowledge about truth completely fills the area of the rectangle of all truth will we stop having questions.

Elder Burton’s analogy helps us to accept more easily the geometric progression of questions which occur in all areas of study, including the gospel. While it helps to symbolize our experience as we obtain knowledge, it does not eliminate the reality that the educational process of learning usually generates more questions than answers. Thus, having faith in the gospel does not require ultimate closure on all issues.

During our temporal stay on earth, our circle of knowledge about truth will never come close to filling the rectangle of darkness; therefore, we will always have questions until we become one with God and are all-knowing. Paul summarized it in his epistle to the Corinthians: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Cor. 13:12).

“I Don’t Know” May Be What We Should Most Know

Sometimes we become so obsessed with having to know all of the answers that we forget that the answer to so many of our questions is “I don’t know.” God revealed in the Old Testament: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord” (Isa. 55:8). We must learn to deal with our finite limitations while we enjoy the pursuit of truth.
Often we become irritated with "the Church" about "teachings" which are sometimes promulgated even though they are not really doctrinal or binding upon the membership. Classic examples of open issues include evolution, age of the earth, how God created the earth and living things, effects of the premortal existence upon mortality, to what extent God intervenes in our lives, to what extent scriptures are to be understood literally, how the different human races developed, to what extent the Church should use its resources beyond traditional applications, economic policy, women and the priesthood, and politics.

Our finite minds are limited, and we need to be more patient because we believe that God "will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God" (Ninth article of faith). Until all has been revealed, there are many open-ended questions that we may enjoy discussing but that will not be totally resolved during mortality. Perhaps part of the plan of mortal maturation is spending a lifetime dealing with dilemmas and ambiguities.

My way of coping with unresolved questions is to store them on the "question shelf" within my mind. Periodically, I review these questions and issues as I gain more experience and knowledge. Sometimes I enjoy the exhilaration of getting some insight about an item on my "question shelf." At other times I just generate more questions about my questions. The pursuit of truth is never ending and requires a great deal of patience. In the meantime, we need to learn to say more often "I don't know," which is a legitimate response when we really don't know!

**Spiritual Insight Requires a Different Sense**

When I get too carried away with analyzing the gospel, I am reminded of Paul's admonition:

> Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor. 2:13-14).

It is difficult for me to understand completely what Paul means as I wrestle with "spiritual" knowledge and the "rational" process of pursuing truth. Nevertheless, during those introspective times when I am tuned into God's "spiritual frequency" which speaks to my spirit, I feel the warmth of his Spirit, which touches my soul, giving me the assurance that the gospel is true.
Even though Oliver Cowdery was visited by an angel, was shown the Book of Mormon plates, and heard the voice of the Lord, he still struggled with his testimony. To give Oliver Cowdery assurance, a revelation was given to him and Joseph Smith in April 1829:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, if you desire a further witness, cast your mind upon the night that you cried unto me in your heart, that you might know concerning the truth of these things. Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God? (D&C 6:22-23)

It helps me to review my own personal spiritual experiences that remind me of God's influence in my life and how he has at times spoken peace to my mind concerning those things that matter most.

Religious Dissection Can Destroy

Sometimes we can become so carried away with analyzing and dissecting our religious feelings and perceptions that the probing process becomes a tool of destruction. Illustrating this point, I am reminded of how eager I was to understand totally the nature of frogs. Unfortunately, however, in the process of dissection, cutting, and probing the frog, I took the life of the animal I wanted to understand.

While all analogies have their shortcomings, including this one, we should not lose sight of the potential damaging effects of religious dissection. The core of our religion is based upon subjective feelings and spiritual experiences that are not totally measurable by mortal means. A religious faith is by definition not finite knowledge.

Trying to critically analyze and dissect every aspect of our religiosity may destroy the beauty and simplicity of that which we love. However, in this case, the life is more important than that of our friendly frog. It has to do with the spiritual lives of ourself, our loved ones, and others who mean so much to us.

A Testimony Is a Gift and Some Must Believe Others

Why some receive stronger witnesses and revelations while others do not is still an unknown for me. I continue to exercise faith that someday I will understand God’s sense of equality. The reality that different people receive different witnesses of the truth was evident soon after the Church was restored. On 8 March 1831 Joseph Smith received a revelation on this subject as recorded in the 46th section of the Doctrine and Covenants. Of particular relevance are the verses outlining those gifts “that are given unto the church” (v. 10):
For all have not every gift given unto them; for there are many gifts, and to every man is given a gift by the Spirit of God. To some is given one, and to some is given another, that all may be profited thereby. To some it is given by the Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that he was crucified for the sins of the world. To others it is given to believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful. (D&C 46:11-14)

Life seems to provide tests in different ways to different people. Perhaps one of the challenges for some intellectuals in the Church is to remain righteous as committed "believers," with the ongoing quest of becoming "knowers." Nevertheless, "believers" can strengthen the Church with their gift of "the word of knowledge, that all may be taught to be wise and to have knowledge" (D&C 46:18).

The "believers" might appear to possess the lesser gift of verse 14: "To others it is given to believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful." However, whether a member has the gift "to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (v. 13) or the gift "to believe" others (v. 14), the result is the same—namely, eternal life (God’s greatest gift) "if they continue faithful."

**Knowing the Gospel Is True Is a Progressive Process**

In the process of studying the German and English languages, I have gained some insight into my perception of what "knowing the gospel" means. When testimonies are shared in German using the present tense, we are limited to one way of expressing wissen, "to know," in that we would say *Ich weiss, dass das Evangelium wahr ist* (I know that the gospel is true). However, in English we have three ways of sharing the present tense of "to know." In the simple English present tense of expression we say "I know." In the emphatic present tense we say "I do know." In the present progressive tense we say "I am knowing."

I like the added dimension of the progressive tense in English. Rather than being limited to saying 'I know the gospel is true,' we can more meaningfully say ‘I am knowing that the gospel is true.’ In other words, knowing is a changing progressive process—rather than a static event. We are each on different rungs of the progressive ladder of "knowing."

The awareness of the present progressive tense ‘am knowing’ helps us become tolerant of little children who say ‘I know,’ while accepting our own level of knowledge. It should also motivate us to attain higher levels of knowing which others have already achieved.
Truth Is a Personal Experience

Words mean different things to different people. What one member means when he says “I know something is true” may be somewhat different from another, but both can be honest and sincere about their own experience of “knowing.” Marvin Rytting, a psychology professor and active Latter-day Saint, shared his insightful views about testimony:

When I say that I know that the Gospel is true, I am saying that I experience it as being true. I am comfortable making that statement—it is honest. I could not honestly say the formulaic testimony, however, if I had to mean that I am certain that my religious views are completely accurate and that everyone who disagrees with me is wrong. And I could not sit through testimony meetings if I had to interpret other people’s testimonies as meaning that their ideas are correct. With my translation, I can say (in my mind, of course), “yes, you experience the Gospel as being true and so do I, and the fact that my truth and your truth are different is irrelevant.” We can even experience the world in exactly opposite ways and both of us can know that our experience is true—we each experience what we experience. My definition allows me to translate these absolutistic statements into personal ones. . . . “Bearing my testimony” for me becomes sharing the truth that I experience—the meaning that I find in life. I realize that it will not be the same as the meaning that each of you experience, but I am willing to grant the validity of your truth for you and hope that you will grant me the validity of mine for me. It is all I have to share because “all I know are my experiences.” (Sunstone, July–August 1982, 60)

Each of us must honestly come to grips with our personal perception of reality. Even though good members may disagree on a given issue, we can at least allow each other enough room to experience what we experience. Expecting every member to experience everything exactly the same way is not only unrealistic but also contrary to the gospel teachings of free agency and tolerance.

Integrity Is Essential to One’s Peace of Mind

A friend of mine was stricken with cancer. Shortly before he died, I asked him what was the most important message he could leave with his children. His response was “To maintain their integrity.” The wholeness implied by integrity encompasses honesty with oneself. Not acknowledging our testimony when we have one is as dishonest as pretending to have a testimony when we do not.

Wherever a person is in his “experience” within the Church, he needs to honestly accept himself. Since all of us are at different stages
of the "knowing process," we mean different things even when we use the same words—like "I know." If a member feels more comfortable with other words, that's all right too. Some like to use words like "believe," "hope," "faith in," "would like to believe," etc. We need not feel that there is only one "true" way to share our feelings about the gospel. Nevertheless, no matter where we are in our knowledge curve, we need to climb toward higher ground.

Whatever we say or do should be consistent with our own experience. Only then will we find the peace that comes with personal congruence between what we know, what we believe, how we live, and what we experience—that is integrity. Unfortunately, most of us know more than we do, do not introspect enough upon our deeply felt beliefs, and do not honestly evaluate the implications of our experiences.

Knowing That the Church Is Good Can Help Us

Philosophers, theologians, and thinkers have wrestled for centuries with the notion of "What is truth?" For some, the idea of arriving at "truth" appears to be an impossibility. If getting hung up on the issue of "truth" is causing problems because of not trusting our feelings, which we typically associate with a testimony of the Restoration, what can the Brother Junes of the Church do?

Perhaps we need to resolve an earlier question while continuing to seek our spiritual knowledge of religious truth. While pursuing the question "Is this or that LDS church doctrine or historical event true?" perhaps we should also ask, "Is the LDS church good for me and my family?"

The word good is an extension of the word God. Many intellectuals feel very comfortable within the fellowship of the Church because they experience personal growth within the Church and feel that it is "good." If it is good, then it is godlike. If it is godlike, that seems to be reason enough for activity so each family member can enjoy the personal growth that comes from living the gospel and participating in the many fine Church programs. Feeling good about the Church's goodness will help while we are continuing to struggle with knowing that it is the only true church (see D&C 1:30).

Love Is the Core of the Gospel, Not the "Perfect Testimony"

Paul's teaching to the Corinthians is as applicable today as it was then, as he focused upon the core of the gospel of Jesus Christ: "And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and
all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove 
mountains, and have not charity [love], I am nothing' (1 Cor. 13:2).

It is interesting to note that we cannot truly know God unless we 
learn to love. To teach this point and to emphasize how God's core 
personality trait is love, from which all other characteristics flow, 
John wrote: "He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love'' 
(1 John 4:8).

The hypocritical behavior of the biblical Pharisees who wanted 
everyone to act and believe as they interpreted the law provides us with 
an important caution today. Trying to catch Jesus in heresy, a Pharisee 
lawyer asked: 'Master, which is the great commandment in the law? 
Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy 
heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. . . . And the 
second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. 
On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets'' 

Since love is the weightier matter of the gospel, it would seem 
that there is plenty of room for a wide range of Church members. The 
Church was not restored for the perfected saints; it was created ‘‘for 
the perfecting of the saints’’ (Eph. 4:12). All of us are working con­
tinually on some aspect of our imperfection. Some may be struggling 
with ‘‘truth’’ while others must overcome an unloving or judgmental 
attitude. The multitude of imperfections among us are too numerous 
to list, but each of us knows where he or she needs to spend time work­
ing. The fellowship of the Saints is a great place to help each other 
grow, not a place selectively to decide who should be tolerated.

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