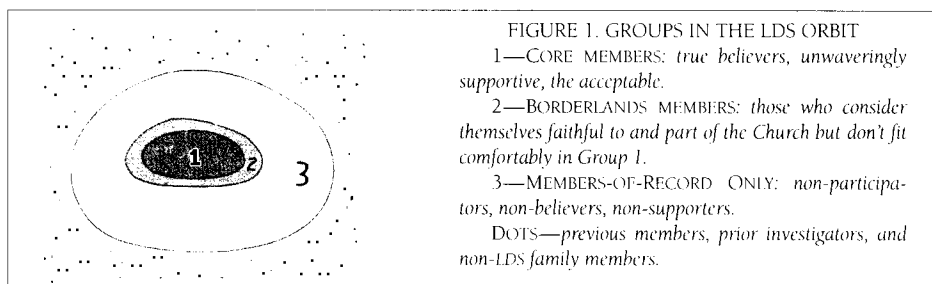


CAN A “FAITH-BASED” PERSONAL RELIGION FIND A HOME IN A “TESTIMONY-BASED” CHURCH?

By D. Jeff Burton



A PROBLEM FOR some Borderlanders (and for many people who leave the Church) is the inability to gain (or keep) a “testimony” and to achieve the unruffled state of perfect knowledge that many Latter-day Saints assume to be the ultimate goal as it pertains to faith.¹ As Church members more and more perceive that “gaining a testimony” is a top priority, the definition of a Group 1 member has narrowed, and many (like me) who are willing to participate strictly on the basis of faith have found themselves outside the “acceptable” group.

I once asked my bishop if I could simply be a faithful Latter-day Saint and still receive all the blessings of activity (e.g., a responsible calling, a temple recommend, and so forth). I explained that being a faithful Latter-day Saint meant to me: that I would be honest with other members of my ward; that I didn't have a burning testimony of the Joseph Smith story (not that I disbelieved—I simply didn't know); that I recognized the validity of Christ's teachings and their eternal impact in people's lives; and that I just wanted to participate and worship with my ward family. His facial expression grew serious, and he said, “It doesn't take much to disrupt a ward.” I took his remark to mean that he believes some members' testimonies are fragile and could easily be lost if people like me were to speak our minds.

In this column, I begin an exploration of the following questions:

- *Can someone develop and live a “faith-based” personal religion (in contrast to a testimony-based religion) within the Church without damaging another's faith?*

- *Can someone receive all the blessings of Church membership and activity by relying solely on faith and faithful behavior?*

These are topics of considerable interest to me, both personally (as a Borderlander who has developed a faith-based, LDS-compatible personal religion) and in my Church service.²

Before we launch this inquiry, however, we must define some of the key terms that will come into play. Terms such as testimony, belief, knowledge, faith, and doubt are loaded with different meanings for different individuals in the Church. For instance, some might say, “When I say I have a testimony, it means I have faith, not necessarily that I *know*.” Hence, we need to explore the overlapping meanings assigned to the same words. In this column, I use the following definitions.

“To Believe”

HERE I mean personal belief. I don't mean belief as a creed or a list of doctrines. In its modern, science-influenced sense, “to believe” is to accept or conclude something from a solid data base. For example, if we flip a coin fifty times and tabulate the results of tails versus heads, we are likely to believe, or “have

a belief,” that each comes up about equally. Personal belief, then, implies a conscious mental acceptance of something as true based on reason, experience, information, evidence, prejudice, or the perceived authority of that proposition's or fact's source. Unfortunately, each person's interpretation of the input information will vary:

- A mother looks at a newborn baby and sees evidence of the existence of God. A biochemist looks at the same baby and marvels at the power of evolution.

- A poet looks at a law-abiding universe as sufficient evidence to prove the existence of a creator. An astronomer looks at the universe and believes it to be only a great ordered randomness.

- One university student says her education caused her to lose her religious beliefs. Another says an identical education has strengthened hers.

- One person believes in Joseph Smith because of the authority of those who proclaim his prophethood. Another rejects the claims about Joseph Smith being a prophet on the authority of those who have problematized his calling.

“To Know”

ALTHOUGH related to belief, in its modern, personal, and intellectual sense, “to know” is to have a clear understanding, to be relatively sure, to gain intellectual understanding as a result of study, experience, reasoning, or evidence. Knowledge is associated with strong facts and evidence—a greatly enhanced belief.

But in modern life, nothing can be known perfectly, only with degrees of confidence. Neither science nor official Mormonism claims perfect knowledge. Thus, knowledge is not without reservation. For example, at three o'clock, I “know” the mail has arrived because it always comes by then. I am very sure when I look out the window and see an envelope in the mailbox. Then I “know” it is there when I go to the box and grasp the envelope. But I am then dismayed when I see that the envelope is a flyer put there by someone working for the corner gas station. Now I believe the mail is late, but I am again surprised to learn that my daughter retrieved the mail at two o'clock and put it on my desk.³

“To Have a Testimony”

AT some point, personal belief can become strong enough to be thought of as knowledge, or, in LDS usage, to be expressed as a “testimony.” Indeed, Mormon “testimonies”

often contain statements of knowing (e.g., “I know Joseph Smith was a prophet.”)

For many members, testimony originates in feelings, emotions, and metaphysical experiences—sources of evidence not generally amenable to measurement and verification and not usually acceptable in scientific inquiry.

Voices of authority also serve as sources of testimony. For example, Church leaders, parents, or missionaries may have told us that God would answer our prayers. Their authority in our eyes was strong enough for us to believe that such a thing could happen. When we prayed, most of us received additional evidence, however subjective, of the “power of prayer.” We thus “gain” a testimony of prayer. Other authoritative sources may include scripture, and even God can be the “authority” on those occasions when he grants a gift of knowledge or provides inspiration.

Other important sources are personal experience and empirical evidence. For example, we don’t, need much personal experience to come to “know” that honesty is the best policy or sharing is useful. Indeed, obeying any commandment usually results in a personal knowledge or testimony of the wisdom of that commandment. But it is impossible to “live” or “test” the historicity of the golden plates, or whether Joseph Smith correctly identified the location of the Garden of Eden. Testimonies of these claims rely on some form of authority. (Living the teachings of the Book of Mormon will lead to a testimony of the benefits of Christ’s teachings, but do not prove or disprove the book’s origins.)

Ultimately, “having a testimony” should be considered a process. The value of our testimonies varies with time, attitudes, experiences, evidences available to us, prayer, study, and our emotions at any given time.

“To Have Faith”

FAITH has many meanings, and again, I use a narrow definition related to personal faith. I do not use faith in reference to a religion or to a religious community, as in “the Catholic faith,” or “the faithful.”

“Having faith” in something—for example, having a personal faith in the Book of Mormon as literally a record of the peoples of ancient America—implies making a bridge between what we know, or believe, about the book and what the book itself claims to be. Faith implies assent, acceptance, and a willingness to try to follow the book’s teachings.

Righteousness and the ability to have faith seem to be related. Job, a righteous man and perhaps the most faithful of all Biblical figures, says, “Though He slay me, yet will I

trust in him” (Job 13:15). Peter says, quoting Habakkuk, “The just shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17; *italics mine*).

I personally believe that the ability to have faith is a gift from God. I reason that it comes as the result of prayer and fasting. I think we have to consciously choose to exercise it—an act of personal will. It may wax and wane as a function of righteousness. I may be wrong, but I believe God’s answer to a request for knowledge may often be given as the strength to have faith.

“Faith” vs “Belief”

FAITH and belief are often regarded in LDS circles as synonymous. Indeed, many would define one by the other. The scriptures often use them interchangeably. However, let’s make a distinction between the two that can help answer the two questions posed at the beginning of the column.

“Belief” implies intellectual assent while “faith” implies confidence, trust, and conviction. Belief is passive—an agreement with, or acceptance of—a suggestion or claim. Faith is active—a reliance and trust which impels one to action. Belief is a product of the mind; faith, a product of the heart.

In Matthew 17:18–21, Christ tells the apostles why they were unable to cast out a devil. The seventeenth-century King James version reads: “And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place. . . .” However, the twentieth-century Revised Standard Version reads: “He said to them, ‘Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, Move from here to there. . . .’” Notice that in the modern translation “unbelief” becomes “little faith.”

An interesting problem related to the word faith is that it has no verb form. There are verbs for belief, trust, doubt, knowledge, and reason. To express faith as action, as a verb, we must use other words: “I believe,” “I accept,” or “I trust.” No wonder there is overlap in word usage.

Doctrine and Covenants 49:12 commands us: “Believe in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Ordering someone to believe is like commanding someone to understand. Can it be done simply as an act of will? Usually not. The commandment seems irrational unless we see the verb “to believe” as synonymous with active faith. God can, in fact, command us to “be faithful” or “act faithfully.”⁴

“To Doubt”

DOUBT, again in contemporary usage, means to be unsettled in belief or opinion, to be uncertain or undecided. It means not having sufficient information or evidence upon which to build belief, or having negative evidence. Suppose a scientist administers a particular dose of promising medicine to six diseased rats, and they all die. The scientist must conclude that there is not enough evidence to justify belief that the medicine can be effective at that dosage.

In older religious meanings, the term “doubt” meant “to distrust,” and “to reject.” Employing this sense, the scriptures often commanded us to “doubt not.” In its broad, historical sense, doubt is associated with the most negative of human traits—the absence of trust in God and the rejection of his existence and goodness. Little wonder that the term doubt still suffers from such a strong negative connotation, even today when skepticism and questioning are considered useful consumer and employee skills.⁵

Questioning is the delightful offspring of doubting. Having questions implies a desire to expand the data base upon which beliefs are built. Questions represent the opportunity to exercise faith. Unfortunately, in our LDS culture, religious questioning is often considered to be negative, damaging to testimony.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A TESTIMONY-BASED LDS PERSONAL RELIGION

I BELIEVE that the church has established as a prime measure of worthiness a member’s ability to affirm a testimony of Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the Restoration. Such questions as, “Do you have a testimony of the Restoration?” have become common in temple recommend interviews and personal priesthood interviews.

Based on the definitions used in this column, a Group 1 member is likely to have a testimony-based personal religion. We commonly hear: “I testify that I know the Book of Mormon is true. I know Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. I know the Church is true.”⁶

For testimony-based members, study and learning are often restricted to perusing information which supports the facts and types of experiences underlying the testimony; information which contradicts such foundations is, therefore, wrong. Curiosity is usually circumscribed and limited. Obedience is mostly automatic and unanalyzed. This may sound restrictive and incomplete to SUNSTONE readers, but statistics reveal that about 20 per-

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cent of all Latter-day Saints find this a successful and rewarding approach. For these people, their personal religions are based on it.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A FAITH-BASED LDS PERSONAL RELIGION

WHAT might a faith-based personal LDS religion look like? Common statements a person with a faith-based religion might say or think can be instructive.

- *I don’t know for sure whether or not [insert any religious claim, such as: “Jesus was the Savior of mankind,” “the Book of Mormon is a true history of ancient inhabitants of America,” “the restoration of polygamy was in accord with God’s will,” and so forth], but I am willing to accept the possibility of it being true and will live as if it is through my faith.*

- *Authority-based testimonies aren’t as important to me as other factors of my religious understanding. My life’s experience has taught me the value of _____ [insert any or all of the following: “it is important to be honest,” “it is useful to live according to Christ’s teachings,” “I am blessed when I follow the counsel of Church leaders,” “it is important to pay tithing and make other sacrifices to help people,” and so forth].*

- *I don’t place a lot of emphasis on “gaining a testimony” of those things I can’t learn through my behavior or experience.*

- *God has not seen fit to grant me a “knowledge” of certain matters, and that is okay—I still have a good relationship with him and know that he loves me.*

- *I don’t need a testimony of Joseph Smith to be a good Latter-day Saint and Christian. I sometimes don’t even want a testimony—I’m willing to live by faith.*

For the faith-based member, behavior is freely chosen, and obedience is seen as a faithful response based on reason and lived experience. Learning is not restricted, and new knowledge is evaluated to determine its new impact on faith. Curiosity is free to operate but is tempered by its impact on oneself and others.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ACCEPTABLE FAITH-BASED LDS RELIGION.

AT the beginning of this column, I asked: “Is it possible to live a faith-based personal LDS religious life without destroying another’s faith?” And

“Can one receive membership blessings by relying solely on faith and behavior?” I believe the answer to both questions is “yes.”

If someone is interested in exploring and living a faith-based personal LDS religion, he or she will need to find ways of de-emphasizing the perception of “testimony” as the premier (or only) measure of worthiness and acceptability. “Living by faith,” “correct behavior,” and “good works” will also become equally acceptable measures. Then he or she will need to let those traits be justification for receiving all the blessings of the gospel.

The aim is to allow oneself to move comfortably from, “I must have a testimony,” to “I must follow Christ’s and the Church’s teachings—and, incidentally, that will build my knowledge of important truths.”

To help achieve that change, consider the following suggestions:

1. *Internalize the sentiments of the following scripture and quotes from modern prophets.*

To some it is given 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 (*italics mine*)

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. If a man assumes to deny God and to become an infidel we withdraw fellowship from him. But so long as a man believes in God and has a little faith in the Church organization, we nurture and aid that person to continue faithfully as a member of the Church though he may not believe all that is revealed.

—Joseph F. Smith during the Reed Smoot Hearings.⁷

I want the liberty of believing as I please, it feels good not to be trammelled. It do[es]n’t prove that a man is not a good man, because he errs in doctrine.

—Joseph Smith, correcting the Nauvoo high council for calling up a man for erring in doctrine. He also wrote that he did “not like the concept of a creed [in] which a man must believe or be asked out of the Church.”⁸

2. *Live a life faithful to Christ’s teachings.* In addition to the standards of honesty, love, caring, and patience, this would include the modern requirements to follow our latter-day prophets, participate in Church meetings and activities, and make your life as compatible with the LDS culture as possible.

3. *Make changes in your religious life clear to family, friends, and ward members.* You should do so, of course, appropriately and at the right time. Speak your mind, and don’t be afraid to (tactfully) include statements such as:

- *I don’t have a perfect knowledge of everything. I work daily to build my knowledge of the truthfulness of Christ’s teachings. I do that by study, prayer, and by practicing what Jesus taught us to do. I expect to live by faith until I die.*

- *Testimony is asymptotic in that it may approach perfection but can never reach it. I am constantly building my understanding of truth, and I believe I am moving ever closer to that perfect knowledge. Meanwhile, I am happy and willing to follow Christ’s and the Church’s teachings through faith.*

- *I don’t have a testimony of every facet of our religion. I may never have it. But I live the gospel as if I did. I know that in doing so, I build my knowledge of the truthfulness of Christ’s teachings.*

- *I have struggled with the concept of ‘testimony’ all of my life. I have some questions yet to be answered and wonder about other things. But I live by faith, and I accept that what we are doing is essentially right.*

I believe if Latter-day Saints felt more free to make such honest statements about their faith vs. testimony status, we would find eager and willing takers.

4. *Deal maturely with temple recommend interviews and at other times when “testimony” is called for.* Modify mentally the implications of

the need for a “testimony,” e.g., in the temple recommend interview and testimony meetings, and substitute appropriate statements. For such questions as, “Do you have a testimony of the Restoration?” you might say something like, “I am building a testimony of it,” or, “I accept and follow the principles of the Restoration,” or, “I will live faithfully and as if the Restoration has occurred.” I have found that these types of answers are almost always acceptable.

5. *Accept others as they are (but don't expect them to do the same for you right away).* Recognize that each of us is developing a personal religion and a unique relationship with God. No member's personal religion will be exactly like another's. Let every member live his or her personal religious life without criticism or undue interference. Remember that “treating others as we would like to be treated” has divine foundations.

Remember, we have been rightfully warned against destroying the faith of another member. It is important to again note the difference between a member's “faith” and his or her “testimony.” Based on the terms defined above, a member's “testimony” is constantly in flux, depending upon the evidence accumulated to the moment. “Faith,” however, is a conscious choice and is reasonably independent of the evidences upon which testimony is built.⁹ Recognize also that others will not use the same definitions we have used. Discussion of terms and meanings is usually productive.

6. *Set reasonable boundaries for yourself.* If missionary work is not for you, for example, advise those in authority at the right time. Upon being offered any calling, it is acceptable for you to privately respond, “I don't feel comfortable with that calling at the moment, but do you have anything else you feel I could do?” Bishops and stake presidents appreciate candor, and no one wants someone to have a bad or failing Church-service experience.

IN future columns, I will further explore the development of an acceptable personal religion within the LDS framework and share some recent experiences sent to me by Borderlanders who are working through the issues and problems in their quests to remain LDS. ❧

NOTES

1. In my first column, I introduced the Borderlander member as one who may have an unusual but LDS-compatible outlook on life, a distinctive way of thinking about faith, belief, and testimony, a different view of LDS history, some open questions

about a particular aspect of the Church, reduced or modified activity, or feelings of not meeting Group 1 “acceptability” criteria. (See D. Jeff Burton, “Changing Our Expectations,” *SUNSTONE* [April 2002], 56–57.)

2. I have spent much of my LDS religious service as a lay counselor helping those struggling with “testimony” issues and have extensively written about it: [in an essay that appeared in the *Association of Mormon Counselors and Psychotherapists Journal* (1985); in a chapter of *Counseling—A Guide to Helping Others*, vol. 2, edited by R. Lanier Britsch and Terrance D. Olson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985–2000); in articles in *This People* magazine (Summer 1991); and in my book, *For Those Who Wonder* (Bountiful, Utah: IVE Press, 1984–2002) which is in its fourth edition, has seen seven printings, and was for many years carried on Deseret Book's shelves].

3. We approach perfect knowledge asymptotically. Science and statistics have developed elaborate methods for testing, verifying, and strengthening the evidence upon which beliefs and knowledge are based. But no test produces perfect knowledge. For example, to determine the toxicity of a chemical, we may conduct studies with mice. Varying amounts of the chemical may be injected to determine the LD-50 (the lethal dose for 50 percent of the mouse sample.) The results suggest the toxicity of the chemical, but few would claim perfect knowledge. In this modern sense, knowledge can be thought of as near-perfect or almost infinite belief.

For some, a little evidence is sufficient to graduate a “belief” to “knowledge.” For others, a great deal of evidence is required. Suppose a person is phoning a friend. After three rings, one person may hang up, “knowing” that the friend is out. Another person may wait ten rings before hanging up. Still another may wait twenty rings “to be sure.” Still, we can never have absolute knowledge that the friend was not home. Perhaps he or she was in the shower. Perhaps the friend would have picked up the phone on the twenty-first ring.

4. Generally, one can build a “testimony” of any religious claim that is testable or related to behavior, e.g., honesty, prayer. Honoring one's parents will generally provide evidence over time of the worth of that commandment, for example. Faith is generally required for any religious claim that isn't related to behavior or that can't be tested. That would include: Jesus as the Savior of mankind, baptism as a vehicle of forgiveness, God having a body of flesh and blood, etc. Although it may be okay to interpret “belief” as “faith,” we should not confuse the opposite of belief (doubt) with the opposite of faith (distrust, nihilism). When an emotionally distraught person says, “I doubt (and I feel guilty about doubting),” we talk about living by faith. Doubt and faith go together like hunger and food. Hunger drives the search for food, and doubt can drive the search for new understanding.

5. As Francis Lee Menlove has so eloquently written [*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1 (spring 1996), 44–53], almost every LDS person experiences religious uncertainties, questions, and doubts of varying intensities—admitted or not. Our agency requires us to make continual choices. The “veil” suggests that we will rarely have complete information to be certain that any given religious issue is correct. A person who fails to tune into his or her awareness, and who represses the natural urge to question in order to maintain an image of absolute

certainty, may settle for the appearance of being a true believer rather than for its actuality. In those unable to acknowledge and manage doubts, individual conscience and the weight of authority may come into conflict. One or the other might be denied for the sake of emotional stability. Unfortunately, the denial of either is not desirable. Denial of conscience can create unthinking robots. Denial of authority inevitably results in inactivity and the loss of church blessings.

6. If we should ask, “How do you know these things are true?” the Group 1 member will likely respond, “Because I've prayed about it and the Holy Ghost has manifested the truth of these things to me.” (Source: The voice of authority.) This manifestation is sometimes described as a “burning” and a “feeling that it is right,” something suggested in Doctrine & Covenants 9:8: “But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; and then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.” According to Moroni 10:4, a testimony of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon can be obtained, as follows: “And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.” This scripture contains a powerful (but conditional) divine promise and makes the LDS Church unique among Christian churches. However, one of the caveats listed in Moroni 10:4 is “having faith in Christ.” This makes a lot of sense if we use the definition of faith as noted above.

7. *U.S. Senate Document 486 (59th Congress, 1st Session) Proceedings Before the Committee on Privileges and Elections of the United States Senate in the Matter of the Protests Against the Right of Hon. Reed Smoot, a Senator from the State of Utah, to hold his Seat*, 4 vols, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1906): 97–98.)

8. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1980): 183–84.

9. Open and ongoing discussions of religious issues and evidences will likely change a person's levels of belief, knowledge, and testimony. As these vary, commitment to faith can remain constant, but a person's exercise of faith will likely vary inversely with levels of belief and testimony. So we should avoid such faith-damaging activities or statements as: “The Church is not true.” “There is no God.” “The Book of Mormon is not of God.” “Joseph Smith was not a prophet.”

Please send me any of your thoughts, experiences, or tales from life in the Borderlands.

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