

**HOW TO STAY  
IN THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS  
AFTER A MAJOR CHALLENGE TO YOUR FAITH**

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## **HOW TO STAY IN THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS AFTER A MAJOR CHALLENGE TO YOUR FAITH**

A revised and updated version of the original article written by John P. Dehlin\*

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"... If someone can find something in the Book of Mormon, anything that they love or respond to or find dear, I applaud that and say more power to you. That's what I find, too. And that should not in any way discount somebody's liking a passage here or a passage there or the whole idea of the book, but not agreeing to its origin, its divinity. ...

"I think you'd be as aware as I am that that we have many people who are members of the church who do not have some burning conviction as to its origins, who have some other feeling about it that is not as committed to foundational statements and the premises of Mormonism. But we're not going to invite somebody out of the church over that any more than we would anything else about degrees of belief or steps of hope or steps of conviction. ... We would say: 'This is the way I see it, and this is the faith I have; this is the foundation on which I'm going forward. If I can help you work toward that I'd be glad to, but I don't love you less; I don't distance you more; I don't say you're unacceptable to me as a person or even as a Latter-day Saint if you can't make that step or move to the beat of that drum.' ... We really don't want to sound smug. We don't want to seem uncompromising and insensitive.

"There are plenty of people who question the historicity of the Book of Mormon, and they are firmly in this church -- firmly, in their mind, in this church -- and the church isn't going to take action against that. [The church] probably will be genuinely disappointed, but there isn't going to be action against that, not until it starts to be advocacy: 'Not only do I disbelieve in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, I want you to disbelieve.' At that point, we're going to have a conversation. A little of that is more tolerated than I think a lot of people think it should be. But I think we want to be tolerant any way we can. ... 'Patient' maybe is a better word than 'tolerant.' We want to be patient and charitable to the extent that we can, but there is a degree beyond which we can't go. ..."

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, LDS Apostle, PBS Interview, March, 2006

### **FOREWARD AND DISCLAIMER**

#### **Intended Audience**

This essay is intended for LDS Church members who encountered a major trial of their faith, are contemplating leaving the church, and are trying to figure out what options for church engagement are still available to them given their circumstances. In our experience, the two most obvious options for folks in this situation are either: 1) Remain a traditional, literalist, conservative member, or 2) Leave the church altogether, either formally by resigning or informally by "going inactive." The problem is that staying as-is seems impossible to tolerate, and leaving complicates life with the possibility of consequences and regrets.

While we fully support those who choose orthodoxy, we continue to strive to understand those who feel the need to leave. We write this essay to let people know there can also be a middle way within Mormonism that lies between orthodox, literalistic observance and complete abandonment.

This essay explores approaches to navigating a middle way within Mormonism.

If you are completely content with your membership in the LDS Church, or if you have left the church peacefully feeling no desire to return, this essay is not for you.

If there is any text in this essay that comes across as highly offensive to believing church members, or that could be worded better, please do not hesitate to email us at [admin@staylds.com](mailto:admin@staylds.com) with suggested corrections. The same goes for those who decided to leave the church. Feel free to let us know how we can change this document to promote acceptance and understanding for your decision. Please keep in mind though that this document is primarily created to serve the needs of those who are struggling to find new ways of experiencing a space in between the two options of traditional belief and leaving.

### **Important Note to the Users of this Document:**

A middle-way path within Mormonism is somewhere between complete, literal belief and leaving the church. This is not an easy direction to travel. In order to successfully navigate this path, a person must generally let go of their dependence on validation from family, friends and other members of their ward. While that ideal may not sound difficult, we find that it is for a great many people.

Because of the difficulty of this path, we want to emphasize that you should go this direction only if you feel a deep personal desire to make the LDS Church work for you. There are two key ingredients to staying in the church: you have to like it, and you have to believe in it. If you do not like being a part of the church, this article's suggestions will probably not change anything. Your religious life should bring you value and satisfaction. It should do something positive for you. If you like being a part of the church, but have trouble believing in it the way you used to, in a more literal way, then the suggestions in this article might be helpful.

The decision to pursue middle-way Mormonism has to come from you, and you are not a failure if this alternative does not bring you the peace and satisfaction you deserve. This can not be a path that is forced on another person for the convenience of traditional, faithful members. For example, we do not recommend that a faithful LDS member pressure their doubting spouse to travel this road, to force it as a condition of their relationship. We have not seen that as productive in our experience. It tends to make marriage problems worse. If you do enjoy participation in the church, and find it a valuable part of your religious and spiritual life, this article might provide useful suggestions on how to change your perspectives to find a new, alternative faith in the Mormon belief system. Some of us find that we actually enjoy our participation much more after making this shift.

## Disclaimer

Here is some important information about the authors and contributors to this document, who we are, what we represent, and what we are trying to do:

- We do not represent the LDS Church in any official capacity.
- We are in full support of those who maintain traditional LDS beliefs and who fully comply with traditional LDS teachings and practices. These types of members are clearly the backbone of the church. Without them, the church would weaken - to our collective detriment. We fully and enthusiastically encourage all those who want to remain orthodox LDS to continue doing so.
- We are not out to gain converts to alternative approaches or organizations in any way, shape or form. Our only objective is to help those who are seriously contemplating leaving the church to consider different perspectives before making that decision.
- We are in many ways traditional members ourselves, both in practice and in belief. For the most part, we are fully active, temple-recommend-holding members of the LDS Church.
- We are not in any way trying to encourage LDS Church members to disobey their leaders or to slacken their obedience to the church. Again this essay is written exclusively for those who are close to abandoning the church and who are in need of a radically restructured framework in order to try and remain a part of it.

StayLDS.com is not affiliated with any group or movement. We are not "Middle-Way Mormons", inactive Mormons, apostate Mormons, or anti-Mormons. We are Latter-Day Saints with a desire to support other LDS members with real faith issues, with a hope to encourage active involvement in the church, and not to attack the church or its leaders. We have no agenda to organize any types of groups to promote changes to the church. It is about individual growth and support. All are welcome to join the conversation in an uplifting and positive atmosphere.

\*As an important point of clarification, John Dehlin is no longer involved in maintaining and promoting this article. He still believes in the possibility of living a middle-way within Mormonism, but he no longer promotes it as the single best answer to a crisis of faith. It is one of many possible resolutions. We agree. John has handed the project over to Brian Johnston, and the people who run StayLDS.com, and allowed us to use his previous material to continue developing the concept and promote it.

## **WHY STAY?**

There are huge social and spiritual costs to walking away from one's heritage and belief system. We recognize that difficult price. For some, it is better to leave and move on. For some of us, it is better to stay. Seldom in life is there a perfect solution. But finding a way to stay avoids many of those heavy costs. Staying requires us to reconcile our changes in understanding and belief with new perspectives on church participation. When someone becomes disaffected from the LDS Church, it is quite common for them to be accused of lacking faith and commitment. It is also common for them to be accused of grave sin or disobedience to church teachings. Our experience tells us these accusations are not the case for those motivated enough to read a document like this one, to contemplate the meaning of their disaffection, and to seek out alternatives. We have communicated with over 2,000 disaffected Mormons over the past several years. It has been our experience that most disaffected LDS Church members were "guilty," if anything, of caring too much about the church, not caring too little.

### **The Motivation to Stay: Why Bother?**

Some people struggle with the complexity of crafting an approach to church that feels right to them. The difficulty of maintaining their convictions when the tide of the church community seems to be moving in another direction is a burden. It can cause stress and internal dissonance. Many say, "Why bother?" This document attempts to address an answer to this question. Not only do we try to make a case for bothering to try, but we also present practical advice on how to go about doing it. Our ideas and practical advice come from others who have made the attempt with varying degrees of success.

### **What Happened to You**

We receive several emails and other forms of personal stories every week recounting basically the same story -- your story. You are not alone. For reasons both natural and spiritual, some of us are "wired" to go this route. It is part of who you are - part of how God made you. Here are the most common stories we hear from people and their journey into questioning the assumptions and expectations of their faith.

Over time one of several experiences listed in the following sections, or a combination thereof, happened to you.

#### ***Caring too Much, not too Little***

At some point in adolescence or adulthood, you became very serious about Mormonism. You were likely among the most committed, devout, observant church members in your family or peer group. You held a literalistic view of LDS doctrine, took past and present statements by LDS General Authorities seriously, and perhaps even went a bit overboard in your level of church service. You might have burned out doing too much, encountered too many contradictory priorities or zealously and honestly "studied your way out of the church."



### *Stumbled Upon Difficult Church History*

Some life event caused you to increase your study of LDS Church history. Perhaps you were challenged by a friend or acquaintance about an article of church doctrine. Maybe you were called into a teaching position, or some life event caused you to want to know more about history. You decided to research your new interest fully to understand. As you began studying on the Internet or in books, you became overwhelmingly disenchanted by the chasm between what you were now learning and the version of history and doctrine you were taught all your life within the church. What you learned in your new found studies did not meet your expectations. Some of the topics likely included: Joseph Smith's treasure digging and subsequent use of a "peep stone in a hat" to dictate the Book of Mormon, issues surrounding the authenticity of the Book of Abraham, Joseph's polygamy and polyandry, the connection between the Masonic lodge rituals and the LDS temple ceremony, the historicity issues surrounding the Book of Mormon, the events surrounding Joseph's martyrdom, the treatment of blacks, women and dissenters within the church, etc. Surprisingly, your primary sources of study were not anti-Mormon literature. They were very likely to have been taken from church-published speeches, books, articles, and first-hand journals of faithful, devout members (usually general authorities).

### *You Never Received the Witness*

In spite of your high level of devotion to the church, in your heart, you were never completely comfortable saying, "I know the church is true." At some point, you decided to try really, really hard to receive a concrete witness as to the "truthfulness" of the church. Unfortunately, and not from a lack of being "worthy" or lacking effort, you emerged spiritually empty-handed. Moroni's promise simply didn't come true for you, even though you tried again and again.

### *You Became Confused About the Difference Between "The Spirit" and Emotion*

Throughout your membership in the church, you had been taught to equate strong emotional experiences with Mormon-centered manifestations of the Holy Ghost. At some point along the way, you had a deeply moving emotional or spiritual experience outside the context of Mormonism. This experience might have happened when you were watching a profound but fictional movie or reading a great book. It could have happened when you visited a war memorial or while attending another church. You then began to question what the difference was between a Mormon-style spiritual confirmation of "truth," and a basic, human emotional response.

### *You Met Some Amazingly Righteous Non-Mormons*

You gained significant exposure to some incredibly moral and spiritually inspiring non-LDS people. Perhaps they even claimed to have had the same type of spiritual "truth" assurances that you did about their own belief system. They seemed to live a more transcendent life than most of the LDS people you knew -- including yourself. After much contemplation, it did not feel right to simply discard their beliefs and lifestyle as invalid or inferior while continuing to hold your own up as divinely superior.

### *You Did the Math on the Number of LDS Worldwide, and Throughout Time*

You finally did the math, and realized that active members of the LDS Church represent less than .005 percent of the world's total population today, and even less than that throughout history. Moreover, as you pondered your assumptions about an all-powerful and all-loving God, you began to question the incredibly small, but exclusively true, church or "God's franchise" concept. An overwhelming number of God's children, for all intents and purposes, have been excluded from "the franchise" during their lifetime. It did not seem to make sense. Could God truly be that inefficient or ineffective? This lifetime was His plan after all. Also, were so many of His children so fallen or incompetent to not merit the gospel in their lives? If we are His offspring and made in His image, what does that say about Him? These thoughts made you question the fundamental "truth" of LDS Church teachings called the "Plan of Salvation."

### *Political Differences with Church Leadership*

Some major life event, usually involving yourself or a loved one, awakened you to the plight of the "culturally disenfranchised" or the "other" within Mormonism: women, homosexuals, single people, the divorced, intellectuals, part-member families, disfellowshipped or excommunicated members, etc. As you pondered their inadequate status within what you believed to be God's one and only true church, which purports to be based on the teachings of Christ, you began to feel uneasy.

### *Not Feeling Inspired in Church*

You slowly realized over time that you were simply not being spiritually nourished to your satisfaction during regular church or temple service. The church began to feel spiritually empty for you, maybe even spiritually damaging or destructive.

## **Trying to "Un-Mormon" Yourself**

As you traveled down this shocking road of discovery, you began to feel as though the framework for your entire world was falling apart. Your family relationships, your friendships, your code of ethics, even your identity -- virtually everything about you was anchored in Mormonism. Where could you go from here?

Because you had been taught to view Mormonism and the world in a binary fashion, as either completely true or completely false, your immediate inclination was to declare the LDS Church "false" and fraudulent. The next logical step was to abandon it completely. However, there was still a great deal that you loved about the Church. Abandoning it did not feel quite right either.

In our experience, for someone who has reached your level of commitment and devotion to the LDS Church, it is almost impossible to simply "un-Mormon" yourself. As we mentioned before, your entire identity, moral code, sense of spirituality, family and social structures, and even framework for life have been built upon the foundation of Mormonism. It is the same for us. Mormon is simply who we are. This is our tribe, our people. We are Mormons through and through. We could in theory leave the church, but we could probably never, as they say, leave it alone.

Consequently if you are like us, you may find the task of trying to comprehensively extricate yourself from Mormonism as comparable to trying to remove the wooden frame from a standing house and then expecting the house to remain in good stead. It is likely impossible to do so in any constructive manner. Think for a moment about what it would take to completely eliminate Mormonism from your life -- the identity, the community, the familial expectations, etc. For many, it is akin to completely ripping their life apart - piece by piece - until there is little remaining.

For many but not all, this reason alone is compelling motivation to consider finding a way to stay within Mormonism.

### **Other Reasons to Stay**

While we could write an entire book on the many benefits of LDS Church membership, let us share with you a few of them. The people we talk to have experienced many of these:

#### *Spirituality*

The LDS Church provides a forum for nurturing spirituality. No matter how rhetorically persuasive folks like Richard Dawkins, Bill Maher and Christopher Hitchens are, we remain convinced that science and secular humanism alone do not hold all of the answers for humanity. Humans innately crave a sense of mystery, wonder and spirituality. Without it, they often cease to feel motivated to continue striving for truth, beauty, justice and excellence. We acknowledge that neither religion generally, nor Mormonism specifically, hold a monopoly on spirituality. But in our experience, the LDS Church is one viable place to find spiritual experiences. We heavily recommend supplementation -- more on this later.

#### *Community*

We as humans exist and find meaning largely through our relationships with other people. No woman or man is an island. Strong social bonds are irreplaceable for healthy living, and the LDS Church provides community like few other organizations in the world. As most of you will acknowledge, a well-functioning LDS ward does an amazingly good job at helping large groups of people build meaningful, enduring relationships in a relatively short period of time. If you cut yourself off from the LDS Church without finding some type of social replacement, you risk isolation, which can easily lead to sadness and even depression.

#### *Family*

Many of you have very close LDS ties within your immediate family. While family ties should theoretically transcend all others (church included), this attitude is rarely the case within an LDS context. In fact, Christ himself taught that he had come to divide husband from wife, father from son. Consequently, the decision to leave the LDS Church can result in divorce and in estrangement from parents, siblings and children. In many instances, the long-term familial collateral damage caused by leaving the church far outweighs the benefits of leaving, especially if you can find a viable way to stay in the church without going mad. We will discuss more on this later as well.

### Children

Like it or not, it takes a village to raise a child. The LDS Church has proven for many to be a fabulous place to raise children, though we are fully aware there are exceptions to this rule.

### Clean Living

The LDS Church serves as a strong advocate for clean living, family focus, and Christ-like community service. We acknowledge that the church doesn't always live up to the standards it sets. But in our experience, sincere, devout Mormons are consistently identified worldwide as living generally honorable, compassionate, respectable lives. At their core, and in spite of all their idiosyncrasies, Mormons are good people. You, we, and many others in the world have genuinely benefited from association with LDS church members. In addition, we generally acknowledge our own personal weakness and frailty as humans. Many benefit from the encouragement and support the church can provide to avoid alcohol, tobacco, pornography, adultery, financial debt, materialism, cynicism, etc. This type of social environment and encouragement is extremely valuable to us and to our families.

### Some Undeniable Good Within

Even for those who can no longer believe in the exclusive truthfulness of the LDS Church, it would not feel right to completely deny the presence of inspiration and divinity within. Whether it was a special moment during a General Conference talk, a missionary experience, or a quiet moment studying the Book of Mormon, you may have likely felt inspiration and divinity within the LDS Church at some point. It would feel dishonest to completely deny that now for those of us that had those experiences.

### Maybe One of the Best There is

Some ex-LDS find happiness in other churches. But this experience is often the exception. Many of us, after becoming disillusioned with the LDS church, began "church shopping" to try and find a better church. This shopping includes visits to Unitarian, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Catholic and other churches. Unfortunately, none of these churches ultimately felt like home to us. We have not been able to find a better church or organization for us and our families than the LDS church -- warts and all. In our experience, all churches and organizations are a mixed bag of good and bad. Consequently, each must decide what the optimal cost/benefit is for self and family. For us, and perhaps for many of you, the overall best choice is to stay where we are.

### Some of the Doctrine

For members who find themselves doubting the claims of exclusive and absolute truth in the LDS Church, some Mormon-specific doctrines still hold deep meaning. Some Mormon ideas are still inspiring: the idea of an all-loving God, divine individual worth, eternal families, eternal progression, personal revelation, opposition in all things, etc. Yes there have been some crazy teachings in the Church's past. But why throw the positive LDS doctrinal "baby" out with the "bath water?" If one thing is certain in the 21st century LDS church, it is that you do not have to believe everything Joseph Smith and Brigham Young taught to remain a member in good standing. The church has largely

distanced itself from most of its troubling doctrine. Church members should feel comfortable with the option of possibly discarding past folkloric teachings that make us feel deeply uncomfortable. You can continue to embrace that which still resonates in your soul.

### *Openness to Inspiration Within*

Isn't faith the simple act of believing without knowing, or without fully understanding? Faith for many can be like hope instead of surety. To us, this approach is the essence of religious observance -- a simple willingness to be open to the possibilities of the divine. While we're completely comfortable with the notion that "There are many [spiritual] ways up Mt. Fuji," isn't it possible that the LDS Church remains one of the world's viable paths towards enlightenment? For us the decision is clear. The church is as viable a place as any to practice spirituality and self-improvement. To quote the immortal play "Oklahoma!" by Rodgers and Hammerstein:

"I don't think I'm no better than anybody else....but I'll be danged if I ain't just as good!"

In conclusion, if you can truly replace all of these things by leaving the church, then by all means follow your truth. We mean that sincerely. It might be possible. It is also possible to stay. Make sure that staying or leaving, warts and all, you are trading up. Be at peace with your decision. It is up to you. You can trade up by leaving and forming a whole new spiritual and religious framework outside Mormonism. You can also trade up by changing your perspectives and expectations, using the LDS spiritual and cultural materials on hand to build that new framework.

## **HOW TO ADAPT SO YOU CAN STAY**

Now on to the major purpose of this document: more than 30 tips on how to remain in the LDS Church after becoming disaffected. We call these "Reconciliation Strategies." Reconciliation Strategies are changes you decide to make to your belief in and practice of Mormonism. We are talking about a form of adaptation so you can reuse and repurpose what you have already spent perhaps your whole lifetime building.

You do not have to do all of these. You can pick and choose ideas that feel like a good solution. You are free to modify them to your needs or not use them at all. We collected these suggestions from people who expressed a level of satisfaction and personal success in their new spiritual journey within the LDS faith, after experiencing great doubt and crisis. Most importantly, please remember these tips are not the new correct answer for everyone in the church. We openly acknowledge that these alternatives will sometimes not be understood, appreciated or approved by orthodox members who are happy with their status quo within the LDS faith tradition. These are alternative ideas. We have very limited power to change other people, if we can do that at all. We do have the power and authority to decide how we personally experience our religion. The tips we present below have helped others make this internal change -- a form of reconciliation with Mormonism.

## **Keep the Faith**

Resist the tendency to abandon all faith. Just because you have become disappointed by certain aspects of your faith tradition, try not to let go of all the things in your spiritual life that still produce value and goodness. Here are some examples of adapting faith so that it can exist simultaneously with new uncertainty about religious “truth.”

- You can still believe in God at some level, even if you struggle with the idea of an anthropomorphic God (old man with a white beard on a throne image) or even a mean-spirited God (like He sometimes comes across in the Old Testament).
- You can have a testimony of the value and wisdom of Jesus' teachings, even if you are unsure of the historical Jesus.
- You can still find great inspiration and truth in the Book of Mormon, even if you are unconvinced as to its complete historicity.
- You can still believe that Joseph Smith and President Monson were or are divinely inspired, even while simultaneously being flawed.
- You can still believe that God dwells within Mormonism, while also dwelling elsewhere.
- Even though church members sometimes set things up as "all or nothing," "true or false," "legitimate or a complete fraud," you do not have to bow to this paradigm of thought.

What's wrong with believing that there is both inspiration and imperfection in all things, including our church? The LDS Church may have fallen short of your expectations, but you might still be able to objectively acknowledge there is sometimes inspiration and goodness within it. Resist the temptation to deny any truth, goodness and spirituality within Mormonism.

Every rose has its thorns. Every beauty queen or high school hunk has a pimple or two.

## **Seeking to Understand Others**

Eventually, you may be able to replace your anger at the behavior of imperfect church leadership and members with compassionate understanding for their positions. If you try, it's not hard to do. They come by their positions and decisions quite honestly, it turns out. Think back to your earlier years as a "true believer" in the church. You yourself may have even been dogmatic, boring, judgmental or even bigoted at one point or another. So if this was once true for you, then you of all people should be able to understand their positions now. You probably do not agree anymore with some of your old views, but try and remember what it was like – how sure and right you may have felt. Having compassion for the views of others allows you to have compassion for yourself and your past. People disagree on all kinds of ideas when it comes to religion. That is OK. Coming to terms with this is healthy regardless of our decision to stay in the church or leave.

This one issue of understanding pretty much encapsulates the essence of Christianity: to love, to forgive and to look for the good in imperfect people. It is also the central theme of Eugene

England's classic essay, "Why the Church is as True as the Gospel." (link available at StayLDS.com)

If you can, try to avoid actively pursuing reasons for annoyance or offense, even when you feel that you are being marginalized by people who do not understand you and/or fear you. If you can find a way to love them and forgive them, even as Christ did, you will be a better person for it. We promise. The understanding and acceptance we give to others finds a way of coming back to us in the long run.

### **Understanding the Root Causes of Orthodoxy**

In our experience, the most dogmatic, orthodox people are that way for a good reason. Maybe they had a death in the family and cling to religion as their only hope for seeing that loved one again. Maybe they are struggling with addiction or depression. Maybe they suffer from abuse at home or a horrible marriage. Some people who cling to dogmatic religion most tightly are the ones who are least happy and most scared in their lives. This situation above all others perhaps deserves our compassion and respect. Even for the purely sincere, do you really want to run around trying to disabuse them of their beliefs? Isn't that like running up to random children to tell them that Santa Claus is a fraud? People cling to belief for all sorts of reasons. We often never know completely why. Thoughtful, kind people respect this boundary. If you really want to emulate Christ, start with empathy.

### **Understanding the Brethren's Dilemma**

Many disaffected folk expect LDS general authorities to constantly apologize for all the past errors of the church and to actively promote awareness of the most controversial aspects of LDS Church history. These expectations are unfair and unrealistic.

While none of us who compiled these tips have close relationships with high-ranking LDS general authorities, we've spent some time trying to "walk a mile in their moccasins," so to speak. And while we can't accurately speculate as to what they do or don't know about church issues, we do consider the following two observations:

- Many of us were raised in the church without an awareness of the tougher issues of church history, it very well may be that many of them reached maturity without a deep understanding of these issues as well.
- Assuming that many of them married soon after their mission, had many children, graduated from college, pursued successful professional careers and actively served in high church leadership positions, it could be that for some, even as adults, they did not (and do not) have enough time to dig deeply into all of these tougher issues.

One of the most common attacks made by critics is that the church hides or denies its most troubling history. While the church does not spend a great deal of time discussing the tougher issues in public, it is important to note that the LDS First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve have made numerous attempts at openness and disclosure of tough LDS Church history throughout the years. For those of you who aren't aware, there was a ten-year period of LDS

Church history (1972 to 1982), under the leadership of Church Historian Leonard Arrington, where the church made a significant effort at candor regarding church history. Unfortunately, according to Leonard Arrington, this particular experiment was deemed a failure by church leadership. After a 10-year stretch, the department was closed down. Brother Arrington seemed to indicate in his autobiography that the brethren feared too much of an emphasis on controversial topics, more often than not, leads to decreased church activity and commitment. As many members today continue to be challenged in their faith through exposure to the Internet, this conclusion seems to be validated.

Notwithstanding, we acknowledge that the church continues to make great strides in candor through its promotion of books like *Rough Stone Rolling* and *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* at Deseret Book, and through efforts like the Joseph Smith Papers project. Also, it is important to note that most of what we do know about controversial church history today was provided through the church's own publications, NOT by enemies of the church. As we learn from FairLDS.com, some examples include:

- In the *Friend*, the church openly acknowledged to its children that Joseph translated using a "brown rock" called a "seer stone":

“To help him with the translation, Joseph found with the gold plates ‘a curious instrument which the ancients called Urim and Thummim, which consisted of two transparent stones set in a rim of a bow fastened to a breastplate.’ Joseph also used an egg-shaped, brown rock for translating called a seer stone.”

— *“A Peaceful Heart,” Friend, Sep 1974, 7 off-site*

- Also in the *Friend*, the church acknowledged openly (even to its children) that there was a group of Mormons called the "Danites" who attacked non-members:

"One Mormon, Sampson Avard, formed a group, called the Danites, to seek revenge on the Missourians. But when the Danites attacked the nonmembers, it only gave them more reason to distrust the Saints."

— *Sherrie Johnson, “Persecutions in Missouri,” Friend, Jul 1993, 47 off-site*

- The *New Era* talked openly about the use of the "blood atonement" and polygamy in early anti-Mormon fiction:

"Furthermore, what people heard about the Mormons as they gossiped over the back fence or sat in the barbershop was often twisted and shaped to appeal to the popular appetite for the lurid and sensational: secret rites, priestly orders, blood atonement, polygamy, and white slavery."

—*Neal E. Lambert and Richard H. Cracroft, “Through Gentile Eyes: A Hundred Years of the Mormon in Fiction,” New Era, Mar 1972, 14 off-site*

- The *Ensign* openly published Spencer W. Kimball's repudiation of the Adam-God theory:

"We hope that you who teach in the various organizations, whether on the campuses or in our chapels, will always teach the orthodox truth. We warn you against the dissemination of doctrines which are not according to the scriptures and which are alleged to have been



taught by some of the General Authorities of past generations. Such, for instance, is the Adam-God theory. We denounce that theory and hope that everyone will be cautioned against this and other kinds of false doctrine."

—*Spencer W. Kimball, "Our Own Liahona," Ensign, Nov 1976, 77 off-site*

For more examples, see the following chronologies of polygamy, blacks and the priesthood and Joseph's use of folk magic as examples of additional, undeniable church candor about tougher aspects of its history via its own publications.

### **The Responsibility of Leadership**

If you consider the significant responsibility the brethren have of governing a worldwide church, it is only reasonable to expect them to govern the church in a way that maximizes commitment and happiness for the greatest number of its members. Consequently, the brethren clearly have to ask themselves this question: recognizing the vast majority of members know little of the tougher elements of church history, and only a relatively small group of LDS intellectuals do, which is preferable?

1. Lose some of the intellectuals on the margins by not directly confronting the historical issues. This approach probably risks less than 2 percent of total members. Would these "intellectuals" really be satisfied with apologies anyway?
2. Risk losing and weakening the base core of active church membership, perhaps 98 percent or more, by making them all aware of the tougher aspects of our history and doctrine through an official apology.

Step back and think about it. If President Monson today were to start saying publicly "Joseph and Brigham were wrong about a, b and c, but all of you need to continue believing and obeying x, y and z," it is not difficult to predict the outcome. Many members would simply say "Well, if Joseph or Brigham were wrong back then about a, b and c, why should we believe or follow you about x, y and z?" For the average member, such overt statements would very quickly weaken the prophetic mantle, and reduce member commitment to LDS Church leadership. Whether it fits our sense of the ideal or not, we might not expect LDS Church leaders to erode their own basis of authority. Humans simply do not function this way.

In summary, if you were in their shoes, and the future of the church were riding on your shoulders, would you seek to invite doubt and skepticism with the church membership? This approach would risk destroying an organization that you loved, believed in, and believed was an asset to literally millions of families worldwide. In our opinion, to do so would be grossly irresponsible.

Thus, their dilemma...

## **Publicizing Mistakes and Problems**

You might feel as though the church has a responsibility to be completely open with all of its major flaws and weaknesses; but in the real world, this approach is probably not realistic. For example, do you live up to this standard in your own life? Do you tell everyone you meet, even everyone close to you, all of your deepest and darkest secrets? While it is true that the LDS Church claims to be God's one and only true church, we might try to see that in reality, it is run by imperfect men in less-than-perfect circumstances. Given that realization, why would we expect the church to be any different? It is unreasonable to expect complete transparency from human beings and human organizations -- even ones that claim divine authority. Humans simply don't work that way.

We are not saying it is right for anyone to withhold information about their own wrongdoing from those who depend on them. Ideally, we should all be willing to confess the things we have done wrong and try to make amends. That approach is the ideal for individuals and for institutions. But we all fall short of that ideal sometimes, in some areas. We can try to understand the human institutional impulse to remain silent about missteps. We may eventually look with compassion on the ways in which humans and institutions seek to hide their flaws. We may forgive, and we may leave ultimate judgment to a higher Judge. Even while we do all that, we do not need to say that hiding one's flaws is right or blameless.

## **It's All about the People**

Try to focus on the people at church and not on the "hard to swallow" teachings or doctrines. Get to know people. Find out what makes them tick, why they think the things they do, why they see things the way they do. Even the most dogmatically obnoxious members can actually become wonderful friends if you take the time to get to know them on a personal basis. Work to uncover what's behind the posturing.

This attitude might not work for everyone, for all personality types -- especially those who generally don't like people. Some of us are "people people" by nature. This approach really works for some of us.

## **Focus on the "Average" Member, not the Loudest Member**

Don't judge the church purely by the actions and words of the most vocal, obnoxious members. In pretty much every ward we've attended, the majority of LDS members are quiet, reasonable, practical, sensible folk. Focus on them. Ignore the blowhards if you can't make them your friends. Many of us have found wonderfully thoughtful and live-and-let-live attitudes when we got to know people in our wards better. These great people are often not the ones making the most noise in classes and meetings though. In fact, they tend to be the more quiet folk in the back half of the room.

## **Realize that the Culture is not the Leadership**

Try to keep in mind that the general membership of the church is often completely out of step with the LDS Church leadership. Culture is very hard to change with 5,000,000 active members. Sometimes it just takes time.

If you listen very carefully to General Conference these days, you will find that a great deal of what is taught today by LDS authorities is actually quite positive, uplifting, and even progressive. Long gone are days when general authorities waxed on about Kolob, Adam-God, Quakers on the moon, and the "darkies." Here are the days when General Authorities often urge compassion, tolerance, and basic, clean Christian living.

So keep that in mind. Large ships sometimes take a long time to turn around. The brethren really are trying. We church members are sometimes slow to see and hear the gradual changes.

## **Treat Devout Mormons with Common Respect**

Strive always to be thoughtful, respectful and temperate in your desires to "educate" others, especially in group settings at church. Treat devout Mormons with the same level of respect and common decency that you would a devout Muslim, Jew or Catholic. Unless you are just plain rude and insensitive as a person, you would never remind a Catholic, whom you didn't know well, about the controversial aspects of their church's history such as indulgences or child molestation. You would never mock or question a Muslim about the historicity of Mohammad and the Koran. So try not to treat devout Mormons any differently. Unless you get to know them on a personal level and build up a relationship of trust with them, and then they want to know or struggle with something you can help them with, just leave them alone with all the things that trouble you. Think of this simple maxim: The person with the greater knowledge has the greater responsibility.

Wholeheartedly resist the temptation to disrupt Sunday School, Priesthood, or Relief Society with controversy. Even though these meetings are promoted under the guise of education, education is clearly not what they are about. They are primarily about convincing members to be obedient to church commandments and to promote wholesome living. Learning is far from the primary or even secondary goal. Try your hardest to respect the actual, unstated purpose of the gathering. Instead of disrupting, you might decide to simply excuse yourself or not attend if it is too hard to maintain your "cool." Over time, perhaps after some distance, you may find yourself able to attend again with more patience and empathy.

## **Move Past the "True/False" Binary World View**

The binary world view denotes thinking that something is either completely true or completely false. It rarely allows for middle ground or nuance -- and often does not account for the natural complexities of life and the universe. As needed for your peace and sanity, move past this way of looking at things. We are not suggesting there is no good and evil or right and wrong in the

world. But there might often be a little bit of both, even shades of gray sometimes, in our experience.

If you are unable to continue existing in this true/false paradigm, you may decide that you need to find a healthier way to think about things. Yes, the church pushes this paradigm. For example, by saying that the Book of Mormon is either the most marvelous work ever revealed or the vilest hoax ever perpetrated upon mankind, they promote binary thinking about our scripture. Try to not let statements like that get you down. Church leaders sincerely believe that "it's all true, or none of it's true." Virtually all growing churches do the same. Teaching the "true/false" paradigm is what growing churches do. Did the Catholic Church grow in its heyday by claiming to be just one good option among many? No. They killed people by the thousands who didn't believe in their truth as the one and only way. Protestant religions in the 17th and even 18th centuries did the same thing. Islam has a history of this thinking as well.

If you think about it, what's the point of a denomination at all if it doesn't consider itself to be "God's one true path" or at least the best of all possible paths?

In our assessment, the churches that have let up on emphasizing their unique claims to truth have not grown as quickly as churches that continue to trumpet themselves as the one and only. Growth means living. Anything less means the church is dying. An attachment to a divine and absolute truth creates in most people a duty to act. LDS Church leaders seem to believe that emphasizing the church's "one trueness" is an essential component of survival. They may be right. Take a look at the growth rates of the Reorganized LDS Church (now Community of Christ), Unitarian Universalists or Episcopalians for counterexamples.

### **Dramatically Lower Unrealistic Expectations**

Once you move past the "true/false" paradigm, you can dramatically lower your expectations of the church. If you expect perfection from the LDS Church, or if you dismiss all other churches as abominations, you will realistically be disappointed on both fronts after any amount of serious life experience. If the church leadership falls short at times in your estimation, try to realize they are all trying their best to fulfill their callings while balancing work, family and their own personal stuff. They are stumbling a great deal along the way like we might expect any other normal person trying to juggle so much. As Paul said, "we see through a glass, darkly."

### **Accepting Imperfection**

First of all, remember that losing idealistic perceptions or expectations, and replacing them with more realistic ones, are two very important components of human maturity. For example, our parents are much more limited in their capacity than we thought they were when we were children. The same is true with our teachers and leaders. The founding fathers of the USA were much more complex than we were taught growing up: Jefferson held slaves and may have fathered children with a slave, Benjamin Franklin was a philanderer, etc. Corporations can do both great and terrible things. The same applies to governments, schools and even charities. The world is imperfect. Any organization that is comprised of imperfect people is going to have

flaws. The bigger the organization, the more likely mistakes will happen and the more serious flaws can become.

Even though it might strike really close to home, it's a fair question to ask: why should it be any different with religions or with religious leaders, past or present? If perfection, or anything close to it, is the standard for all organizations or individuals, who will ever measure up? No one will. If you already find yourself severely disappointed with or even disaffected from the LDS Church, it should be completely logical for you to no longer expect perfection from it in any real sense. You can simply drop this unrealistic, unhealthy expectation.

### **Faith is an Amazingly Low Bar**

For many years in the LDS Church, the conditioning for children, and the heavy emphasis for teenagers, has been to say "I **know** this church is **true**." There are at least two very important things going on in that phrase:

1. We are taught to say we "know" before we ever really have a chance to even think about it, or to test its validity, especially relative to other faith traditions.
2. We are taught to characterize the church as "true," which implies both a comprehensive validity to the church, and an implicit non-validity to all other churches.

This approach is not a bad thing. Again, it's simply what religions do. It may be exactly what many young children need to give them reassurance and certainty through the insecurities of young adulthood.

Still ... never forget that faith is the first principle of the gospel. It is foundational, and it is glorious. Christ Himself said "because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed." He didn't say "blessed are those who know." He said "believed." In other words, it is actually a "blessed" state to hope and believe, and not know. We should not in any way feel embarrassed by the fact that we don't know the church is true, or that God and Jesus live. We should feel proud to be believers, in spite of our lack of knowledge.

In addition, the Doctrine and Covenants clearly describes "faith" and "testimony" as a gift. Some people have this gift more naturally, and some do not, at least to begin with. Consider it perhaps a way of thinking and seeing the world. Some people are comfortable making the mental leap from their emotions to a sense of knowing or of experiencing a revealed "truth." Many of us, especially those who collected these tips, are simply not wired to experience spirituality that way. That's OK. We have different "gifts" to share. The universe is full of beautiful mysteries. It is OK not to "know." Hope in something better is another form of faith. One might even argue that it is a more nuanced, sophisticated and practical type truth. In the world (God) needs people like us who question and doubt, just as much as it needs people who feel confident in their sense of knowing. It is perfectly scriptural for some members to have a strong testimony and for others to simply hope or even not believe (in the conservative sense). The church and its membership must allow for this fact.

Try not to feel pressured into thinking that you are inadequate or in any way a second class citizen in the church. Be proud of your hope and belief. Be proud of your faith. Stand up and take your place in the church as a proud, faithful, non-knowing believer. You are in every way as legitimate as the "knower" sitting next to you.

### **Physician, Heal Thyself**

Some (not all) of the people we see leave the church are struggling emotionally in addition to whatever they are feeling about the church. Maybe they have poor health, a really cruddy marriage, a job that makes them miserable or other life experiences or traumas that haunt them.

We're not saying that these folks don't have good cause to be frustrated with the church at times. Many of them clearly do. What we are saying is that some people who leave the church might also have personal problems that extend way beyond the church. Instead of facing those difficult problems, they might focus all their anger at the church. The church is an easy scapegoat because it's a human organization being expected to live up to "only trueness" and perfection. So of course, it let them down.

In the areas where you're seriously disappointed by the church, we are sure you have just cause to feel that way. But in addition to dealing with your church-related frustrations, consider looking very closely at your personal life unrelated to the church. This approach is true for everyone, whether they stay or leave, or even if they never had issues with the church at all. Try to determine if there are any personal issues eating at you from the inside. Jesus taught, "if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." This way of thinking teaches us to deal first with our personal and interpersonal issues so that we do not drag the church into the situation. Buddha taught: Fix yourself, and make peace with your faith tradition before you ever consider abandoning it for something else (even if the "something else" is Buddhism). If you do not resolve the issues that trouble you, you will just bring the anger and issues with you wherever you go. All you have to do is look at the Recovery From Mormonism board to know that healing is not necessarily on the other end of the journey away from the church.

Oftentimes, leaving the church turns out to be an exercise in "throwing the baby out with the bathwater." In many instances we've personally witnessed, the church has served as an imperfect means of bringing about genuine healing in people's lives. By discarding the church, you may risk discarding one potential path to resolving your personal problems.

To borrow a metaphor, an immunization is not perfect. The injection hurts your arm. It causes you to bleed. Sometimes it can even make you feel "woozy." But it can also heal you, or prevent you from getting sick.

So it can be with the church. Not always, but definitely sometimes. The church, warts and all, can be a wonderful place to inch towards perfection. See Eugene England's essay on "Why the Church is as True as the Gospel" for more insight in this regard. It's definitely worth the read.

## Supplement Your Spirituality

If you are not feeling spiritually filled at church, consider supplementing your spiritual study with other non-LDS sources. I know many, many active LDS Church members who look to "the best books" and even to other faith traditions to supplement their spiritual needs. We don't suggest this method as a means to replace LDS scripture, doctrine and theology, but instead to inform it with new light and new angles of understanding.

This approach is even encouraged by LDS scripture, doctrine, and statements by LDS general authorities.

As stated in D&C 88:118:

“And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith.”

Also, as published in "God's Love for All Mankind" by the First Presidency in February 15, 1978:

"The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God's light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals.

“The Hebrew prophets prepared the way for the coming of Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah, who should provide salvation for all mankind who believe in the gospel.

“Consistent with these truths, we believe that God has given and will give to all peoples sufficient knowledge to help them on their way to eternal salvation, either in this life or in the life to come.

“Our message therefore is one of special love and concern for the eternal welfare of all men and women, regardless of religious belief, race, or nationality, knowing that we are truly brothers and sisters because we are sons and daughters of the same Eternal Father. ”

Another great quote on this idea comes from President Ezra Taft Benson in a 1972 address (words of Orson F. Whitney from a 1928 general conference address):

“Perhaps the Lord needs such men on the outside of His Church to help it along. They are among its auxiliaries, and can do more good for the cause where the Lord has placed them, than anywhere else. ... Hence, some are drawn into the fold and receive a testimony of the truth; while others remain unconverted ... the beauties and glories of the gospel being veiled temporarily from their view, for a wise purpose. The Lord will open their eyes in His own due time. God is using more than one people for the accomplishment of His great and marvelous work. The Latter-day Saints cannot do it all. It is too vast, too arduous for any one people. ... We

have no quarrel with the Gentiles. They are our partners in a certain sense.” (Conference Report, April 1928, p. 59.)

Somehow many of God's children, regardless of religion, seem to be working towards a common goal of love, peace and enlightenment. We have much to learn from our non-LDS brothers and sisters.

### **Tactfully Embrace the Title "Buffet Mormon"**

A "buffet Mormon" is someone who does not believe every doctrine the church might teach and does not do every task the church might ask. A buffet Mormon chooses among what is offered and leaves the rest. The term "cafeteria Mormon" means the same thing. Take the dishes that work for you. Eat them and enjoy them. They are nourishing to the soul. Pass up the dishes that don't work. You can go back later. Perhaps your tastes will change.

Proudly embrace the title buffet Mormon. No one can eat everything in a buffet, even if all of the food is healthy and good. No one, not even the prophets, can do everything that is expected within Mormonism. If you think about it, all Mormons are buffet Mormons. It's just a matter of to what degree and how guilty we make ourselves feel about it. Sure we should all try our best to be as good as possible; however, we all fall short, prophets and apostles included. Believe us on this one. No one can do everything required by the LDS gospel with perfection -- gardens, journals, scripture study, meetings, all the prayers, temple, callings, perfect parent and spouse, earn a living, genealogy, etc., ad nauseam. Stop feeling guilty about it! Embrace it. Decide your limits. Set boundaries. Balance your life to the healthiest extent possible. Make conscious decisions about what you will do and do a good job at it. Explore what speaks to your soul. Several recent conference talks have even encouraged this approach.

#### *Unplug from Caring about What Others Think of You Religiously*

Detach your care, concern, and self-esteem from the judgment of other church members. To become a buffet Mormon, it means that you must not care what orthodox people think about you from a religious perspective. Religion is ultimately a private thing. It's nobody's business but your own. Don't get defensive when people talk badly about you and judge you. Don't become paranoid at what they are saying. Get to the point where you love folks but seriously don't give a hoot about what they think of you in terms of how you display your religiosity. One thing is for certain -- they are most likely hiding their weaknesses and putting their best foot forward. They have their weaknesses too. It's only a matter of what they allow you to see or think. In the end, most people just try their best in private (often falling short). In public, they put on as good a show as they can.

The only thing you should really concern yourself with, what you should really care about, is what good YOU are doing. Serve and have compassion for other people. Learn and grow spiritually. Practice what brings value to you. Push yourself and stretch your limits at times. Be proud of what you do, and be forgiving of others who fall short. We all do.



### Tithing

While we fully support compliance with the traditional LDS interpretation of tithing, we acknowledge that some people who are struggling with their faith decide they simply cannot or will not pay 10 percent of their income to the church any longer, at least until they work through things in a satisfactory way. Once people arrive at this place, it is also quite natural to avoid tithing settlement altogether. These feelings are completely natural... and for many, the law of tithing becomes something they simply cannot approach in the same way they once did. That said, we recommend you think carefully before you discard the law altogether.

For example, if you or your family are still attending church and benefiting, it seems ethical to not be complete freeloaders with the church. In that case, if you're not comfortable giving 10 percent, consider giving 5 percent. If you can't muster 5 percent, give what you feel the church is worth to you in your life. And if you do drop your tithing to 5 percent or 1 percent, we strongly recommend (from experience) that you continue trying to obey the spirit of the law. The concept of tithing certainly sustains the social organization of the church, but it also is a practice of letting go of our attachment to material possession. It is also about sacrificing from our excess to help others in need. This is a beautiful idea, idealistic perhaps, but a solid spiritual practice that can involve us directly in making the world a better place. If you are not comfortable paying all your tithe to the church, consider diverting some to other worthwhile charitable organizations: cleft palate repair, children with AIDS, homeless shelters, the Red Cross, environmental movements, National Public Radio, the Public Broadcasting Service, or other forums, publications, and programs that are important to your spiritual development. The LDS Humanitarian Services fund and the Perpetual Education Fund also seem like very worthwhile places to contribute, if you are comfortable doing so.

Again we encourage nothing less than the paying of a traditional LDS tithe. But if you are unable to pay a full tithe to the church, consider maintaining as much of the spirit of the law as you can.

### Sunday Meetings

If attending three hours of church every Sunday is too much for you right now, instead of quitting church altogether, consider going as often as you feel comfortable. We acknowledge that at times, if you are struggling with your faith, sitting through Sunday School and Priesthood/Relief Society can be very difficult. It is especially difficult when church history is not discussed thoroughly or accurately. If you find certain meetings do you more harm than good, you may decide you need to take a break from some of them from time to time.

If you do stop going to church altogether, make sure to replace it with something *more* uplifting. Keep in mind the statement, "Always trade up." Some examples might include: a hike in the canyon or the woods, a family-centered devotional at your home, or even a

visit to another church. The key is to increase spirituality and connectedness to family and community, not decrease it.

For many of us, stepping back from church attendance for a while helped us realize how much we valued Sunday services. It gave us a chance to clear our head and heart, to see things from a better perspective and to look at things fresh again.

### Callings

If you find yourself uncomfortable with certain callings (e.g. teaching callings during a time of intellectual crisis), instead of turning down all callings, consider asking for the types of callings that would work for you. In an ideal world, you could accept any calling and you would magically have the time and testimony needed. But if a calling isn't healthy for you or your family, God (and even the brethren) would clearly want what's best for you, right? And who knows what's best for you more than... you? They can't possibly know your entire situation. So just be honest with them if you can't serve in the way they'd like. We don't mean tell them your entire situation (see "Be Really Careful What You Tell Others" below). Just tell them that calling isn't right for you, and maybe suggest a calling you would be more likely to accept. Trust us, they'll take whatever service you are willing to offer (eventually, anyway). If they won't, then bonus! More free time! With that said, meaningful service is irreplaceable for healthy living, as you know.

### Temple Attendance

If the temple makes you feel uncomfortable, take a break for a while. Don't sweat it. You can come back to the temple once you've had a break, if you actually miss it. Many of us are surprised at how much we enjoy the temple once we re-engage with it in our own terms, at a frequency that is comfortable to us.

Another idea is to try and see it as a place full of symbol and metaphor. Many people find new life and appreciation for temple participation after letting go of a lot of their literal understanding of the teachings and experiences in the temple. It can still be a sacred and special place, as much as you want to make it for yourself, and an opportunity to get away from the world, to enter into a space of spirituality and contemplation.

### Word of Wisdom

Word of Wisdom compliance is one of the strongest contemporary, cultural identifiers related to belonging within Mormonism. Because so much is attached to this dietary law, we highly recommend you move slowly and consider changes carefully. For better or worse, you will find few things with less tolerance than this topic in our religion. It is a very outward, tangible practice related to adherence; which makes it much different than most other areas of faith transition we discuss in this article. It is not a matter of simply thinking different. This comes down to potentially acting different.

The Word of Wisdom has an interesting history. Readers may have come across historical stories of early Mormon members and leaders who did not practice the Word of

Wisdom as we understand it today, even after it was accepted by the saints as canonized revelation. This may have caused you to question the LDS Church's current interpretations and minimum standards. Perhaps you simply read D&C 89 and noticed other inconsistencies. Regardless of any controversy, there are many positive aspects to the Word of Wisdom. As a broad concept, it embodies the idea of being healthy, strong and spiritual. It is certainly a good idea to avoid addictions that might sap your strength and even lead you to make other poor decisions. Eating healthy and taking care of your self physically is its own reward.

The church provides an active and vibrant social environment supportive of “clean living.” This is an uplifting characteristic of our culture. It is an aspect to be valued and applauded. A person can certainly live a whole and productive life without coffee, tea, alcohol and tobacco. So what is really the harm in that? Even if there is too often a myopic focus on avoiding these “forbidden four” as the totality of Word of Wisdom practice, it does promote a good environment.

The bottom line is this: you are responsible for making good decisions about your health and spirituality. Decide what you want to do. Weigh the pros and cons of your personal practice of the Word of Wisdom. Move slowly making changes, if you decide to make them. If you decide to maintain an orthodox practice of the Word of Wisdom, it will make it socially easier to stay in the church.

#### *Shelve or Toss the Bad Doctrine*

If you find a particular gospel teaching offensive (e.g. Blacks were less valiant in the preexistence.), don't ignore that feeling. Listen to it. If you don't want to believe that God caused a worldwide flood that killed innocent men, women and children, then don't feel compelled to take it literally. If you don't think proxy work for the dead makes any sense for an all-powerful God, then focus on other areas of church doctrine or theology that work for you.

Students of LDS Church history will confirm that a number of LDS tenets that were considered by most members to be hard, unchangeable doctrine have been largely wiped from the books:

- Polygamy as a requirement for salvation
- Valiance in the pre-mortal existence creating our conditions in earth life
  
- Dynastic sealings
  
- Multiple baptisms
  
- Adam-God theory
  
- Native Americans as descendants of Lamanites
  
- and so on...

So if a certain tenet of LDS doctrine doesn't appeal to you, don't worry. Chances are that the church has already chosen to distance itself from the particular doctrine. If not, it may do so in the future. You really don't have to stress out about most, if any, of these speculative ideas.

In support of this approach, in May of 2007 the church put out a press release called "Approaching Mormon Doctrine" which should be encouraging to folks like us. It reads (in part):

- "Not every statement made by a Church leader, past or present, necessarily constitutes doctrine. A single statement made by a single leader on a single occasion often represents a personal, though well-considered, opinion, but is not meant to be officially binding for the whole Church."
- "Some doctrines are more important than others and might be considered core doctrines. For example, the precise location of the Garden of Eden is far less important than doctrine about Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice."
- "Latter-day Saints place heavy emphasis on the application of their faith in daily life. For example, the active participation of Latter-day Saints in their community and worldwide humanitarian programs reflects concern for other people. As Jesus Christ declared, 'By their fruits ye shall know them.'"
- "Individual members are encouraged to independently strive to receive their own spiritual confirmation of the truthfulness of Church doctrine. Moreover, the Church exhorts all people to approach the gospel not only intellectually but with the intellect and the spirit, a process in which reason and faith work together."

To us, this press release provides clear signals that outside of the core tenets of Christianity (faith, hope, charity, love, repentance, etc.), there is a very high degree of latitude for personal beliefs about what constitutes Mormon doctrine and what does not.

Another excellent article on this subject was written by Don Ashton, it is called "Mormon Doctrine. What's Official and What Isn't." (available at StayLDS.com) The core of binding doctrine in Mormonism is actually very small and is mostly abstract. That small core is actually good and very effective. Flexible, broad religious ideas are better suited to stand the test of time, leaving room for them to be used in the context of our changing society and environment. Many of the teachings we grow up thinking are required and eternal are, in fact, not official points of doctrine set in stone.

*Keep the Good. Ignore the Bad. You are the Captain of Your Ship.*

In summary, embrace what works for you and your family and reject what does not work. At least put down the burden for now. **Throw away all of the guilt!** And most importantly, know that God would really want it this way. God gave you a brain and a heart for a reason. Use them. Make decisions about what is best for you. Do the best you can, and put the rest in the hands of the Lord.

Seriously. You are the captain of your ship. Free agency was given for a reason. If you are having trouble with this concept, spend some good time in prayer and/or contemplation. Let go. Feel the unconditional love and total acceptance of your Savior. Whatever you decide, everything is really going to be OK.

## **PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND COMMON CONCERNS**

### **Be Really Careful What You Tell Others**

We never advocate lying, but we would encourage you to use extreme caution when speaking to church members, especially church leaders, about your issues regarding church history, doctrine or culture. Do not unnecessarily introduce topics or issues to church leadership that will threaten their faith, or cause them to question your loyalty. Resist the temptation to go into the bishop's office and dump all of your doubts and fears upon him. Frankly, the overwhelming majority of bishops are not trained or equipped to handle tough church history or doctrine, or even simple nuance for that matter.

Most of the time, LDS bishops just are trying to keep their own jobs and families from falling apart; while also trying to keep the ward running. They busy helping people with all kinds of day-to-day needs. Tackling polyandry and peep stones are about the furthest things from their minds -- and should probably remain so. If you never bring this stuff up, it likely will never come up. If you do bring it up, it might lead to really uncomfortable and highly discouraging situations. That response is what we often hear from people.

Also, realize there can be a huge variation in approaches and reactions depending on the bishop. We've seen super-tolerant bishops who will accept virtually any type of faith as valid, even a hope. We've seen bishops who are hard liners, and who will actively seek to prevent you from baptizing your own children if you happen to express the wrong concerns. There are over 28,000 bishops and branch presidents (2009 stats). That broad of a group is going to lead to a lot of variance depending on personalities, maturity and your local culture.

Be very careful before you open up to your bishop about these matters. Once you do, there is likely no "stuffing the genie back in the bottle."

### **Can You Be Honest and Ethical and Stay?**

Can you be an honest and ethical person staying in the Church if you really don't believe everything? People bring up this question a lot. It has various permutations, but the essence of the question is this: People around you might think you are a true believer, or mistake you for someone who is very devout, when in fact you have doubts or do not believe everything. This worry is related to the issue of not caring what others think about you religiously. We mentioned that topic above. But this anxiety is the opposite problem. Some people have concerns about being honest or feel like they must walk around with a scarlet letter sewed to their clothing. The best advice we can give is to find a balance between being authentic and burdening everyone else with your problems.

Most people at Church have at least some doubts and concerns. Most people don't do everything on the checklist. It is fine to talk about these concerns with people we really care to share them with. But it is far more positive and productive to focus on the common good and the common

perspectives we share with others. Our beliefs are really nobody's business unless by sharing we can reach out and help someone else.

### *Being Honest without Being Confrontational*

This skill takes practice. It takes a lot of personal discipline. Some people have the gift of this social skill more than others. If are having intense feelings about your changing views, it is probably not the best time to share them with your Sunday School class.

Resist the temptation of feeling the need to correct people openly. You will hear comments from teachers and students that are not historically accurate and/or complete. Sometimes you can nudge the conversation in a better direction. Sometimes you just have to let it go. Take a look at the paragraph below about building and spending social capital in your local ward.

To be honest or direct without being confrontational is an art. The best overall strategy is to frame things as your opinion or to talk in probabilities. Another important aspect is to communicate with less certainty. This approach allows others to have a conversation with you. And it also gives people room to disagree respectfully.

### *Adapting Lessons When Asked to Teach*

The new 2010 Gospel Doctrine manual has minimal material. It seems to be about half the size of past manuals. That is actually good for our problem! You can adapt lesson material to your comfort level and to the needs of class members. Many people who are new to an exploration of staying in the church after experiencing doubts are uncomfortable with lessons. Make them your own. We find that people in a class enjoy something heartfelt and positive. Presenting something sincere and uplifting can be tricky if you are still having a lot of concerns. So perhaps taking a break from callings where you have to teach is a good idea, at least until you are comfortable with teaching again.

## **Setting Boundaries with Other People and the Organization**

Defining our limits tends to be a tough one for some of us to learn. We are often used to saying "yes" to every request. Some of us were even taught to never turn down a calling, seeing it as always 100 percent inspired. We are not telling people to reject callings, but seriously think about your personal boundaries. What amount of time can you give? We highly encourage you to give service to others, to take callings and to be an active part of your ward community; but we all have to set up boundaries and maintain them. This process is important for practical reasons of living your life. It is also important emotionally to not feel compelled or guilty.

## **Protect Yourself and Your Loved Ones**

As Bonner Ritchie is fond of saying: Only you can protect yourself from organizational abuse. Try to remember this truth at all times, as you would with a job, school or marriage. Make sure to never allow yourself or your loved ones to be put in a position of being taken advantage of.

Never let your "good sense" safety guard down, not even with the church or church leadership. Not with scoutmasters. Not with Young Men's or Young Women's leaders. Not with home teachers. Not even with bishops. The vast majority of active members are good and decent

people -- some of the best we know. But the LDS Church membership is also, on some level, just a cross section of our local communities.

### **What if Your Spouse is still very Orthodox?**

This topic alone deserves an entire book on the subject. We can only brush on the very surface of the relationship issues that get tangled up in marriages when spouses diverge in their perceived levels of orthodoxy. Please know that the love, acceptance and tolerance you give to your spouse who remains orthodox will return to you. It is normal for spouses to grow and develop differently over the course of a marriage. People change. Change does not have to be the end of a marriage. In fact, mixed-faith marriages outside of Mormonism are very common and can be successful. They are much more obvious though, most of the time.

We do not recommend trying to pressure your spouse into reading all that you are reading or learning about everything controversial about the church that interests you. They may NEVER be interested in it. You will have to come to terms with this fact in order to move forward. Many members of the church are just interested in the experience they have on any normal Sunday. That experience is the church to them, and the messy historical details disrupt it.

The main advice we can give is this: Always try to separate church problems from relationship problems. We tend to mix those up, especially when one spouse is more orthodox and the other is not (or is starting to diverge).

### **Raising Children**

This topic can be volatile. What will you teach your children about religion in general and about their LDS Church specifically? Your children may have been doing all the normal church activities and attendance, and now the family is changing. We hear this question a lot when people talk about not hearing the "true story" growing up. They don't want their children to go through the same turmoil of discovering that the church was not all they had assumed. Here are some suggestions.

#### *Be Specific About Why You Go*

Many of us actually teach our kids (and this idea is kind of tough, we'll admit) that we don't go to church because we think our church is better than others. We tell them that we go to the LDS Church because:

- It embodies much of our culture and heritage -- the faith of our fathers, so to speak.
- We like it.
- We feel it's as good a place as any to seek out spirituality and community (maybe better in some ways for our particular needs).

In addition, we never discuss the church with them in terms of it being "true" or inherently superior to other churches.



### De-program as Necessary

Some of us have used Sunday dinner time to ask the kids what they were taught on Sunday and to "de-program" or "disabuse" them of any bad teachings. This discussion was valuable because it re-trained them to realize that they didn't need to blindly believe everything they were taught in church. We have explained to them, when age-appropriate, that adults teaching them have their opinions about the gospel and that they may or may not be right. It is OK to think differently or to have another opinion.

Here is a list of a few ideas that we might tell our children we have problems accepting. Disagreeing with these ideas is a highly personal decision. But this list reflects examples of ideas we know people sometimes reject:

- **Vengeful God:** You can teach your children that it's okay to reject the idea that God was behind all the genocidal killings in the Bible (of men, women, children and animals). Take the opportunity to teach them that scripture is imperfect and often mixes up God's teachings with human interpretations and biases. Yes, it will be a stretch for them to understand. But it would be even more confusing to teach them that God loves them, wants to protect them, and often kills His children as He sees fit.
- **Goodness, not "One Trueness":** Never lie to your children, or mislead them into thinking that you believe things you really do not. This dishonesty will only come back to bite you in the end. Make it very clear at an early age (We recommend eight years old.) that you do not take them to the LDS Church because you believe it to be the "one and only true church." In our experience, this concept will actually be very intuitive for them to understand. Take the time to explain that you are Mormons by culture and heritage, and you have a great deal of love and respect for the church. But you do not believe everything that the church teaches. They shouldn't feel compelled to believe everything either. Also make it clear to them that you deeply value and respect all faiths and denominations. The Mormon Church has some good things that you agree with, some bad things that you don't agree with, and that standard is the same for other religions. Encourage them to decide for themselves exactly what is true and what is error -- both within the church and without. In the end, teach them to respect the church but never blindly.
- **Fallibility:** Do your best to lovingly instill within your children the notion that all people have good in them, and all people make mistakes -- including church leaders like prophets, bishops and Sunday School teachers. This idea is intuitive for them as well. Do your best to lovingly and subtly de-mystify Joseph Smith, Thomas S. Monson, the bishop, and others, without tearing them down continually. Focus on the good. But be open about the bad. Use instances of prophet-worship in church or in general conference as teaching moments. For example, when Joseph's martyrdom is discussed as a "lamb to the slaughter" or in stories where he appears "completely innocent," take the time to explain the full story surrounding Joseph's incarceration. This broader understanding will help lower your children's unrealistic expectations of leadership, which will help to avoid setting them up for disappointment later on. Also, make sure to reinforce the notion that non-LDS leaders also can have great inspiration

and goodness: Gandhi, Mother Theresa, the pope and even some atheists we know, etc.

- **No Superiority:** Sometimes it's a bit natural for LDS kids to think that a person is inferior if that person smokes, drinks alcohol, watches R-rated movies, attends another church or no church at all, is gay, has tattoos or in any other way falls short of the Mormon norm. Make sure to constantly reinforce the falseness and danger of such ideas as completely un-Christ like and prideful. We do hold ourselves to a certain standard. But in no way should we ever use that standard to elevate ourselves above others.
- **God is not a Bigot:** If you're not happy with the historical status of women, blacks, Native Americans or homosexuals in the church, use it as a teaching moment to explain that churches (like schools, businesses, governments, etc.) have weaknesses. They should not ever feel compelled to believe any church teaching that propagates bigotry.
- **Science and Religion:** At the appropriate time, you'll want to explain that religion and science do not have to conflict. Your kids do not need to fear science any more than they do religion.

To summarize, teach your kids to do in church what you teach them to do with everything in their lives, including TV, movies, books, school, friends, etc. Seek out the good in these things (for there is great good in all of them). Avoid the bad in these things. Teach them to never blindly believe or follow everything they're told in any of these areas -- church or otherwise. Should your children demonstrate respect? Of course they should for those who deserve it.

Teach them to use their heads, hearts and spirit -- together -- to determine for themselves what is right and wrong. The church is actually a wonderful laboratory to help practice and will eventually instill this teaching within them.

#### *Focus on the Positive*

When we first started asking our kids at Sunday dinner to enumerate all they learned in church that day, we began picking it all apart. We tried to systematically analyze and criticize all of the bad stuff. As you might imagine, this practice ended up being a very negative experience for all; and it tended to amplify the negative aspects of their church experience in their minds. Simply put, this approach was a disaster.

It took us a while to realize that cynicism and negativity were more harmful to our souls than dogmatic religious tenets and observance. Consequently, we have tried to teach our kids correct principles, tell them they don't have to believe all things they are taught and encourage them to focus on the positive aspects of church in our conversations, wherever possible.

In summary, we strongly recommend keeping your focus on the good in the church because there is much good. Kids should feel comfortable talking openly about their frustrations. But they also need to be reminded to seek out the good in imperfect situations: in church and in all other aspects of their lives. This attitude is an extremely healthy life skill. It is a gift you can give your children by example.

### **A Place to Serve, Not to Be Served**

Think of the church as a place to serve, not a place to be served.

Without the church-supported community, how else would you find out about the sister who is pregnant on bed rest and needs a meal for her family? Or the good brother or child who has cancer? Or the widow? Or the father who has lost his job? Chances to serve are chances to love, to build meaningful relationships and to build your own sense of worth and self-esteem. They are even chances to "lose yourself" in service and put your own problems in perspective.

Nonetheless, in giving service, you do not need to run faster than you have strength. You can respond to many service opportunities by silently saying, "If I could help, I would. But my needs and my family's needs come first. I do not have the emotional or financial resources or time to help in that particular situation."

Still, the church can be a great place to find out about opportunities to serve that will fit your ability to give. And who knows, every once in a while (especially if you've paid your dues by serving others), that service just may come back to you in a time of real need.

Don't think of the church as a place to "receive." Think of the church as a place to give. Eventually you will find that in giving, you receive. This is one of the great strengths of a community, especially a religious community.

### **Building and Spending Credit in Your Ward**

There's an old saying that is pithy but nonetheless valid: "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." In our experience, this statement is true.

Think of your engagement with your ward as a credit/debit system. Try to focus the bulk of your time and energy on serving those around you. Be at as many service projects as you can. Show up for every move you can. Bail the high counselor out when his car breaks down. Take meals to your bishopric and Relief Society presidency. Be the type of Christian you want the church to represent.

Then once you've done all you can to build up a bank account of love, respect and credibility within the ward and stake, you may be able to slowly, gently, and in a non-threatening way let both your leadership and select members know you are not a typical Mormon -- even unorthodox in some ways. Over time you will discover others like you in this regard. There always are -- usually among the quiet or "inactive." You will eventually find people who are willing to open up to you and discuss things freely (though maybe only in a one-on-one setting).

Over time, if you keep your bank account of ward service "in the black," you will change hearts and minds. You can literally transform an entire quorum or Relief Society, even a ward community into a more loving, open-minded, informed and compassionate place.

The potential is limitless.

## **Temple Recommend**

The temple recommend interview process is very intimidating to folks who have become disaffected from Mormonism. More often than not, we hold in our minds an extreme, literalistic, orthodox and dramatically unrealistic expectation as to what the bishop or even the brethren expect us to believe when they ask the recommend questions. For example:

- When they ask about God, we assume they require us to believe in a male God with 10 fingers and toes, who has many wives, dwells on Kolob and was once a man like us on some other world.
- When they ask about the "restoration," we assume they mean a near-perfect Joseph Smith who never swore, drank, got angry or prophesied incorrectly. We also assume they mean other churches are victims of the Great Apostasy.
- When they ask about sustaining a modern prophet, we assume they mean we cannot ever disagree with a current church position (like homosexuality), and that we cannot hold non-LDS leaders as divinely inspired as well.
- When they ask about tithing, we assume that they mean "gross," not "net" or "increase."

Truth be told, there have been numerous LDS general authorities who differed among themselves on a whole host of fundamental aspects of Mormon doctrine -- from the nature of God and man, to the atonement, to Word of Wisdom observance.

We should not assume that our interpretations of church doctrine and policy must align perfectly with those of Brigham Young and Bruce R. McConkie. Apostles themselves have differed greatly over issues like evolution, birth control, age of the earth, Book of Mormon historicity, valiance of blacks in the pre-mortal existence, etc.

Consequently, you might consider lowering the pressure that comes from assuming your answers to the bishop's questions have to line up exactly with the most literalistic and extreme interpretations of LDS doctrine. There's a reason why David O. McKay stopped publication of Bruce R. McConkie's Mormon Doctrine. It's because much of the book actually wasn't Mormon doctrine.

### *The Brethren May Want to Be Inclusive Regarding Temple Attendance*

- **Intentionally Vague Questions:** In our opinion, the brethren have intentionally kept the temple recommend questions very simple and in many ways quite vague. At a minimum, you must admit that they definitely could have been much more specific, if they had wanted to.
  - They don't ask "Do you know," but instead, "Do you have a testimony of ...?"

- They never mention Joseph Smith by name in the entire interview.
  - The term "restoration" is actually, in itself, quite vague.
  - They don't try to specify what is meant by "tithing," nor do they ask for a copy of your W-2. And they don't provide much detail regarding the Word of Wisdom other than mentioning tea, alcohol and tobacco by name.
  - In our mind, they keep it very simple -- intentionally so.
- **No Additional Questions Allowed:** Local leaders are strictly forbidden to add additional questions to the interview. To us, this move signals that the brethren are looking to set a minimum standard, not a maximum one.
  - **You are the Judge:** They ultimately expect you to judge your own worthiness and provide the leadership as a second-line support when and where you feel they are needed. Otherwise, they have wisely left the decision ultimately between you and God.
  - **Nobody's Perfect:** Finally, remember that all temple attendees fall short in their worthiness at some point. The church and the temple exist to help perfect the weak. They are not there to further exalt the unblemished.

#### *An Approach the Temple Recommend Questions*

Before we address some of the specific temple recommend questions, we must begin this section by emphasizing something very clearly. ***We do not encourage or condone lying or deception of any sort during the temple recommend interview.*** If you do not feel like you can answer the questions with integrity, then you should not in any way try to deceive your ecclesiastical leadership.

The following section is merely an attempt to acknowledge and explore both the existence of uncertainty and the diversity of views that clearly dwell within the broad LDS community with respect to doctrine and theology. We would hate for folks to unnecessarily exclude themselves from the blessings of temple worship based on rigid or incorrect perceptions that are more cultural than gospel based.

- **God:** When they ask about belief in God, they don't ask if you believe in an anthropomorphic God. At a minimum, perhaps you believe in some divine power, force, and sense of meaning or purpose in this life. If so, you could be honest in using the label "God" to describe that indescribable power. If you are comfortable with that, then perhaps you could answer this question in the affirmative. It is something to consider.

Also, it would be silly to deny the possibility of an anthropomorphic God. Who really knows, in the end, what is out there? We might even be surprised. This is what we call "faith" or "hope," and certainly it meets Christ's bar of worthiness (as mentioned above).

- **Jesus:** Once someone begins studying the process by which the New Testament was compiled, which includes that it wasn't actually written by the apostles but handed down by oral tradition sometimes generations before it was actually written down, it becomes quite natural to begin questioning one's assumptions about a historical Jesus.

Fortunately, when church leaders ask about Jesus and the atonement, they don't go into this detail. Instead, they simply ask if you have a testimony of Jesus as your savior (or something to that effect).

At a minimum, you might believe that a man named Jesus once existed, that his teachings have "saved" us from much trouble, pain, and sadness in our lives and that He ultimately died as a martyr for these teachings. So at a minimum, you might feel comfortable accepting Jesus as your personal savior in this manner. We're also very open, and even hopeful, that there is much more to the story of Jesus. Again, this attitude is the essence of faith and hope to us.

Now, we will admit that there is much about the mechanics of the atonement and the afterlife that we do not understand. But fortunately we are not alone in this regard by any stretch. Who really understands the atonement? We would argue that no human really does. So don't feel so bad if you don't either. It doesn't make you defective. It means you are normal.

- **The Restoration:** Restoration, as you will notice, is one of the broadest terms of all. What exactly is meant by the restoration? The Articles of Faith? The Book of Mormon? Dynastic sealings? Adam-God theory? Polygamy? Theosis?

We can assure you that you could say to virtually any bishop, "I don't believe that polygamy is doctrinal, nor that blacks were less valiant in the pre-mortal existence," and you would still qualify for a temple recommend, even though Joseph or Brigham "restored" these teachings and taught them as "doctrine."

And so it is with other aspects of the restoration. In our mind, there are core teachings of the restoration, and then there are highly speculative and peripheral ones. For us, the core teachings of the restoration are: faith, repentance, baptism, service, charity, love, families, clean living, etc.

In addition, you might feel comfortable believing that the teachings and theology taught by Joseph Smith drastically improved, and in some cases even restored, truth and goodness to the world relative to the prevailing Christian teachings of the day. Just take a few of the 13 Articles of Faith as examples:

- We learn that the Bible was flawed, sometimes tragically so. Hooray!!!!
- We learn that men are accountable for their own sins and that babies who die before the age of eight will not go straight to hell. Wooo hoooo!!!!
- We learn that all churches should be respected and that people should be free to worship according to their own consciences. We're down with that!!!!

For some of us, there is enough goodness and truth in the restoration to allow us to say that we have a testimony of it. We do not understand, nor do we agree with, every teaching uttered by Joseph Smith or Brigham Young. But then again neither did President Gordon B. Hinckley. See his comments to Larry King about polygamy ("not doctrinal") and his comments to Time magazine about God once being a man ("I don't know that we teach it. I don't know that we emphasize it.") Didn't President Kimball himself say that Adam-God was not doctrine? If Presidents Hinckley and Kimball clearly taught us that not all the teachings by Joseph and Brigham are to be blindly believed, it is our opinion that we should take them at their word.

In conclusion, there is much good in the restoration that we can stand behind. That said, you don't have to feel compelled to believe all that has been associated with it from 1830 to now.

- **Thomas S. Monson as Prophet:** When they ask about support of President Monson, we feel comfortable accepting him as our prophet for two main reasons. First, we no longer expect perfection from any man, prophets included. Second, listen very carefully to his conference talks. Virtually everything he teaches today we feel good about, including staying out of debt, avoiding pornography, being a good husband and father, etc. There really isn't much in the way of dramatic or challenging doctrine being taught over the pulpit at general conference anymore.

Some of us are not crazy about the church's stance on gays and women's roles. But we see the church as making positive progress (relatively speaking) on these fronts. As long as they continue to march in the right direction, we can take the good with the bad and accept President Monson as prophet, seer, and revelator for the church. It takes a long time to make deep changes to a culture, sometimes generations.

We are not required in the interview to denounce Buddha, Ghandi, Martin Luther or even David Wilcox as being uninspired. So we don't feel compelled to read this interpretation into the question. Accepting the current president of the church as "the prophet" does not have to exclude anyone else from being an inspiration in our lives.

The question about keys and authority can still be tricky for some of us to get our hearts and minds wrapped around. There are some alternative ways of seeing this though. Do you think someone else has the keys and authority for the LDS Church specifically? Probably not. So why not agree that the current president of the church has them. It really doesn't have to matter that much.

This question is largely targeted historically at weeding out fundamentalists or people who belong to other break-away Mormon splinter groups. If that is you, which we doubt, then you really shouldn't have an LDS temple recommend anyway. It isn't a question of not being a good person or about worthiness.

So in this alternative view, which you might be able to become comfortable with, President Monson has the "keys" or authority to lead members of the LDS Church.

You don't have to feel compelled to deny that God made provisions for the other 99.95 percent of His children.

And again, who knows for sure? Maybe the church does have some uniquely special and specific role to play in the salvation of the world. If it doesn't spiritually, then maybe it does temporally. It might for the members of the Church. This attitude, again, is where faith or hope comes in to play.

- **All the Other Questions:** We agree that official members of anti-Mormon or apostate organizations should not be members of the church in good standing.

Also, as a group, we are huge fans of the Word of Wisdom, law of chastity, honesty, absence of family abuse, tithing (charitable giving) and garments, etc. Throughout our lives, we have tried to obey all of these commandments even during the times we felt disaffected from the church. So our recommendation to all of you is: Never let up on these practices. Clean living is the way to go.

Still it is fair to say that at least some of these items are open to some personal interpretation. For example:

- One could argue pretty soundly that based on a literal reading of D&C 89 someone who eats meat regularly (and we count ourselves as fully culpable in this regard) is at least equally in violation of the Word of Wisdom as someone who drinks a glass of wine occasionally with a meal. Nevertheless, thousands and thousands of non-winter meat-eaters enter the House of the Lord each day and are not blocked by church leadership for doing so.
- When asked about wearing garments "night and day," wide variations exist in this regard. Some wear garments while exercising, working in the yard, etc. and some don't.
- A bishop in a family ward once declared officially from the pulpit that if tithing was paid on anything less than the gross of one's income, it was inadequate. After a stake-wide rebellion ensued, the bishop received a polite but firm reprimand from the stake president and apologized for his misstep to his congregation. The church has specifically chosen to leave tithing up to personal interpretation.

Please know that we are not in any way advocating dishonesty or deception here. We are simply noting the undeniable reality that many of these questions are subject to at least some private interpretation. We should feel assured in knowing that the brethren ultimately and wisely have left this decision between us and God -- and for good reason.

In conclusion, always answer honestly. But do not unnecessarily exclude yourself from the blessings of temple attendance because of rigid interpretations if it is something that you feel might be good for you spiritually.

## **Priesthood Blessings and Ordinances**



For men in the church who experience a crisis of faith, or lose a literal belief in priesthood authority and power, giving priesthood blessings and performing ordinances can be a challenge. We commonly hear concerns from those whose faith has changed, or have doubts, that they feel like they are being dishonest serving others without an absolute belief they hold exclusive divine authority or supernatural magic power.

The decision to continue acting in a religious priesthood capacity or not is a deeply personal choice that you will have to make, in a way that you are comfortable living. There really isn't a single correct answer for everyone making their way through a crisis of faith. Many decide they are not comfortable acting in the role of priesthood holder. That is fine. Perhaps that is the best choice while you sort out your faith and relationship with the church. You can change your mind later. If people in your life are expecting this role from you, find a way to confidently and peacefully tell them you aren't in the right frame of mind and spirit to do those things right now.

So long as you are a member in good standing, and were ordained by the church, you have religious authority to perform rites as a service to members of the church. You may not see this as an absolute and exclusive authority from God, but it is certainly authority to do so from the organization itself. And the ordinances are not for your benefit, they are a service to the people who want to experience them. It is about their faith, not yours. It is between them and God, not you. This is an alternative way of viewing priesthood ordinances and blessings as a loving service given to your friends and family. The power comes from their faith and desire to make their experience meaningful.

## **CONCLUSION**

The middle way of Mormonism is not for everyone and is definitely not likely to be sanctioned by church leaders anytime soon. Nonetheless, we have corresponded with literally hundreds of disaffected Mormons over the past several years. It amazes us that an astoundingly large percentage of those who have left the church have not, in the long run, found the peace, solace and spirituality they thought they would find through leaving completely. Some have found what they need through leaving, we readily admit that. Sometimes, it really is what someone needs in order to move on with their life. But a heavy percentage of those who leave to this day write us to say, "I wish I could go back. I thought I wouldn't miss it, but I do. I desperately miss the church. I just don't know how to return, or how to make it all work."

We hope for at least some of you, these suggestions will prove useful in a journey back or at least in helping you find peace and compassion in looking back upon your time in the church.

Regardless of your choices, if you've made it this far in the essay, we are connected! As fellow travelers on this wonderful and bizarre Mormon journey, we wish you Godspeed. Please keep in touch. You can reach us at StayLDS.com where we host this document.

**In the Body of Christ, Every Part is Needed**

For us, aside from all that we and our families gain from membership in the church, it helps to know that in many small ways, we're doing our part to eliminate ignorance, pain, and insularity within Mormonism. Instead of leaving, we make the conscious decision to stay and be a part of the solutions. In general, the way to positively impact the members of an organization is to do so from within. Once you've removed yourself from the community, it is far too easy for them to tune you out, so to speak.

For the past several years, our collective mantra has been:

- More knowledge
- Less pain
- More open forums

...within Mormonism.

The church needs more voices in support of these tenets -- not fewer. In the body of Christ analogy, all body parts are needed, even the backside. By remaining a legitimate member of the group, you can play an integral role in helping make it better for those who remain within.

They need us, and we need them. It's that simple.

### **A Deeply Personal Journey**

You are in charge now. You can judge and value as good as anyone else. You have permission to do so. Everything from here on out is a deeply personal journey. Others will not make the same meaning or practice the same conclusions. You are doing the best you can with what you have been given. But God expects you to use your brain and sort things out. Put the rest in the hands of the Lord. Everything will be "OK."

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Some additional resources you may find valuable in this context:

Classic essays on staying in the church as a different sort of Mormon:

- [What the Church Means to People Like Me, by Richard Poll](#)
- [Why the Church is as True as the Gospel, by Eugene England](#)
- [Jeff Burton's Borderlands articles](#)

For audio programming that deal with topics on "How to Stay," [check out this link](#).

An audiovisual screencast on why people leave the LDS Church and what family, friends, and community can do about it:

- [Why They Leave](#) (requires Internet Explorer)

From the "How to Stay in the LDS Church after Losing Your Faith " Workshops:

- Seattle -- October 2007
  - The [audio](#) from this presentation
  - The [PowerPoint deck](#) from this presentation.
  - The [music](#) used in this presentation (please purchase from the authors if you like)
  - The [videos](#) from this presentation
  - The [PDF](#) from the October 2007 Sunstone Workshop entitled, "How to stay..."
- Salt Lake City -- August, 2007
  - The [audio recording](#)
  - The [PowerPoint file](#) from that presentation

Please let us know your thoughts and how we can improve.

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