

## Sacrament Meeting Talk Sept 22, 2013 Midway 5<sup>th</sup> Ward, Midway, Stake

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### Introduction:

I suspect that the great majority of adults here today know someone --- friend or family member, who at one time was an active and devout member of the Church, but who has formally left the Church or become inactive. The reasons are obviously varied, but one of the reasons is that they were unable to find satisfying answers to many thorny questions.

I happen to serve on a Utah State Board with Elder Marlin Jensen, the former Church Historian and General Authority. I told him of my assignment and asked his advice. He indicated that he believes that the Church is experiencing a sudden surge of attacks and good people are having their faith rattled as a consequence. He called it a crisis of faith. Elder Jensen made another interesting comment. He indicated that he felt that the biggest decision we have to make in life may not be who we marry, but is our choice to be a believer or an unbeliever.

Throughout all of history, there have been large numbers of believers and disbelievers. On that subject Terryl L. Givens, the highly respected Mormon scholar, has written:

*“There are appealing arguments that God is merely a childish projection, that modern prophets are scheming or deluded imposters, and that modern scripture is fabulous fiction. But there is also compelling evidence that a glorious divinity presides over the cosmos, that God calls and anoints prophets, and that his will is made known through a sacred canon that is never definitely closed.”<sup>i</sup>*

Between those two, we all make our choice, or we attempt some middle ground position.

My analysis is that as people grow up in the Church, they go for a long period only hearing one side of the story. In fact, many in my generation and certainly my parent’s generation went their entire lifetimes never hearing the disbeliever’s arguments. But today young people are suddenly confronted with an overwhelming blast from the other side, and the arguments are so new, so logically presented, and so beguiling, that the formerly devout member’s testimony crumbles. They conclude that information has been withheld from them, or that they have been misled or duped. They feel that we’ve treated them like children who couldn’t be trusted to cope with the full story.

As you would expect, the enemies of the Church combine some factual information with a great deal of what appears to be deliberate dis-information and speculation, and everything has a highly mean-spirited, antagonistic spin put on it. Their intent is to lure people away by whatever means they can find. There are no laws of fair play or rules of engagement in this war as far as they are concerned. They ask some questions for which they know there are no good answers. Why did the Prophet Joseph Smith use the seer stone when he had the Urim and Thummim? We might answer, “Because it seemed to work better for him.” But absent Joseph Smith being available for an interview, those questions are hard to answer. They ask some questions for which there are good answers, and they also ask questions for which we’re still seeking good explanations.

Elder Jensen sent me a copy of an unsolicited letter that was sent to several Church leaders in the NY area. It contains 77 pages of specific questions and criticisms of the Church. Much of it focuses on statements made by early Church leaders. To have this extensive document listing of every possible argument against the Church, its early leaders, and its teachings is very troubling to some. One New York Stake is devoting 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday meetings to preparing its members to deal with these aggressive tactics and the issues they raised. One devout young clerk was extremely troubled after reading this document. It would appear that the wolves are killing some sheep. So what do we need to do?

## Recommendations:

1. **Get some exposure to these difficult questions.** Humans naturally avoid threat and danger; because we much prefer security and stability. Psychologists talk about “cognitive dissonance” as a way to explain our pattern to read things that support our current point of view. If I purchase a new Ford truck, I am nearly certain to avoid the ads from other brands, and only read those from Ford. We watch television networks whose views we agree with, not the one on the opposite end of the political spectrum. But, we need to face these issues that could catch us and our children off guard. Here are a few of the most common issues the Church’s critics focus on:

- Book of Abraham and the explanations of its facsimiles
- differing accounts of the 1<sup>st</sup> vision
- mistakes in the King James Bible being included in Book of Mormon
- the relationship between Mormon temple ceremonies and those of Freemasonry
- the translation process of the Book of Mormon
- Blacks and the Priesthood
- DNA of the American Indians
- Statements and beliefs of early Church leaders
- Joseph Smith’s practice of polygamy without full disclosure to Emma

Don’t run away from these. We’ll always have questions. Think of the circle that was your sphere of knowledge when you were a child. As you grew older, the circle became larger. But as this circle of knowledge expands, just over the border that defines your knowledge is your circle of ignorance. The more you know, the more you should realize you don’t know. We will never have answers to every question that the critic or skeptic can ask.

2. **Inoculation is a good practice.** We’ve all had the experience of going to a physician or nurse to be vaccinated or inoculated. You are either injected or given a nasal spray with a mild version of a disease causing organism. This allows the body to build resistance to it. Note that this is a small, benign dose, introduced over time. Then, the body begins to develop antibodies. When and if we are exposed to that specific disease, our body is now prepared. We prevent individuals from contracting measles, mumps, whooping cough, diphtheria and typhoid and a

host of other diseases, if only they will be inoculated. A full strength dose of all those together would probably kill us, but small doses seldom do any harm and save millions of lives each year.

*We had visiting in our home a few weeks ago several of our grandchildren. Of them, 5 were about to enter the Provo MTC as they prepared to serve their missions. Somehow the topic of polygamy came up and one person mentioned that the Prophet Joseph Smith had practiced polygamy. Eyes widened and jaws dropped. These soon-to-be missionaries had never heard that fact.*

I think it is far better that they hear such truths from me or some other respected leader or teacher and not from an antagonistic preacher or a disaffected former member.

Again, it is easier to cope with these issues when taken in small doses, one-at-a-time, and with a knowledgeable instructor who can provide accurate facts to help everyone understand the truth.

### **3. We live in a different world today. What worked in the past may not suffice today.**

Do we serve our members or youth well by protecting them from these issues? We have been encouraged to teach only faith promoting information. That clearly has value and is effective at conveying the believing point of view. I fear we got by with that when information was harder to access. In this day of the internet, virtually all information is within everyone's reach, instantly and free of charge. I believe it calls for a new practice of introducing these potentially faith damaging issues gradually and presenting them in a balanced way. Teaching the truth is faith promoting in the long run. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that "Truth will cut its own way." We need to combine faith promoting stories and lessons with faith preserving information and lessons. Books have been written and are now available that provide answers to many of these questions.<sup>ii</sup>

I believe it would help if our classes made it more comfortable for those with honest questions to raise them. I've observed that some of our members are totally silent in classes when I know they have disagreements or questions, but they are afraid to speak up for fear of being labeled a "dissident."

We often gravitate in our classes toward pat answers and simple solutions to serious problems and questions. The solution to every problem may not be to read more scripture and pray---it may be to go for a hike in nature, to exercise for an hour, to read a good, practical book on the topic, seek professional help; or talk to a trusted friend.

We have a grandson living in Palo Alto, in the California Bay Area. There is now a Stanford Institute Class dedicated to tackling these topics one-at-a-time and providing perspective to them. I applaud that kind of effort. I also commend the New York Stake that is dedicating the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday to those topics. That seems exactly the right course of action.

4. **There is a difference between the Holy Spirit and our emotions.** I believe we need to build a testimony on facts and reasoning, along with feelings and impressions. Emotion alone leads to blind zealotry. It is instructive that at least twice in the Doctrine and Covenants (D&C 8: 2 and 88:118) we read the message that the spirit will work on both your mind and on your heart. Strong testimonies need both. The spirit will inform and corroborate your study of all truth.
5. **Don't presume that the claim that we are the true Church is accompanied by a claim that we are the perfect Church.** The Church will always be led and populated by men and women who combine divinity and humanity. The early Church in the time of the Apostles wasn't perfect either. Peter and Paul had public disagreements. Because the Church is not perfect does not suggest that it isn't true.
6. **Cut our leaders some slack.** Don't put them on a false pedestal. The Church will always be a bit of a paradox, because of that combination of divinity and humanity.

There is a BYU professor who is a convert from the Roman Catholic faith. He remarked to a colleague, one day:

*I've finally figured it out. In the Roman Catholic Church in which I was raised, the official doctrine is that the Pope is infallible, and in fact, virtually no one believes that; while in the Mormon Church the official doctrine is that the Prophet is fallible. But no one seems to want to believe that.*

I contend that we need to believe that our leaders are fallible in order to keep our sanity and integrity. For example, Brigham Young taught a doctrine that has come to be described as the Adam-God theory. We don't subscribe to that teaching today, and I doubt it was ever widely believed. That does not diminish all the wonderful good that he did.

An apostle, who later became President of the Church, said that man would never reach the moon. When this was raised with him after men had landed on the moon and returned home, he said, "I was wrong."

Another Apostle spoke at BYU and said the earth is 6,000 years old. He has the right to say that, because he sincerely believes it. I have every right and the responsibility to accept that point of view or reject it based on the scientific and spiritual evidence available to me. I should not be expected to accept that statement of the earth's age, merely because it was an Apostle who said it.

7. **Some would have you believe that anyone who delves deeply into our early history will probably encounter some dark secret that will surely rattle their testimony.**

Nothing could be further from the truth. A great many of the people who know the most about Joseph Smith's life are devout believers. As one historian wrote: The truth of the gospel and the divinity of Joseph Smith's calling as a prophet of the restoration do not depend on his behavior as a human being and do not require perfection in his life."<sup>iii</sup>

The Church has had, and continues to have, excellent historians who are devout, active members of the Church. Why does Richard Bushman who wrote *Rough Stone Rolling*, the accurate and balanced biography of Joseph Smith, not become tipped over by knowing of Joseph's humanity? I think these

scholars look at the preponderance of evidence, and see the balance of good in counterpoint to any things that trouble them. They examine their own experience.

8. **Someone who had gone through a crisis of faith said recently, “I believe the Church is true---enough.”** We have been accustomed to thinking in binary terms about the Church—either it is true or not true. This person escaped from that simplistic thinking and came to a wise conclusion that was satisfying to them.

## Conclusion:

Speaking now personally, it is easier for me to believe than to disbelieve. I believe strongly in a divine creator. If I and a friend were hiking, and came upon a shiny object in the dirt, assume for a moment that we brush it off and discover that it is a tablet with wi-fi access. Assume then that my companion says, “Isn’t evolution wonderful. Given billions of years of time and the coming together of elements, this electronic tablet was created. I would look at him and say, “I find it far easier to believe it was made in a factory in China and someone dropped it here by mistake.” And yet finding such a device is not as improbable as finding living creatures and plants, human beings, and a complex solar system. I simply cannot believe the world was created by chance.

Similarly, in my opinion, a 24 year old, uneducated young man could not write a book in 75 days that is as complex as the Book of Mormon, containing such profound messages and powerful doctrines. He could not have in a few years given the world a new view of mankind, with an eternal existence, inherent innocence, perfect freedom and infinite potential---views that were completely at odds with the prevailing theology of his day.<sup>iv</sup>

My recommendation is that parents and grandparents have frequent and honest conversations with youth. My recommendation is that we have honest conversations with each other about those parts of our history that might cause some to have doubts. I strongly believe that the adversaries of the Church will continue. We should be able to have calm, intelligent conversations about their questions and be able to present an appropriate counterpoint to these critic’s concerns, not necessarily with the hope of changing their minds; but to prevent any other sheep from being lost.

Finally, there is a quotation that I have been unable to find the exact wording for, but the essence goes something like this. I believe Anne Morrow Lindberg wrote it:

*The world would be a better place if those who believed would not look at the skeptics as if they were morally inferior; and if the skeptics would not look at the believers as if they were intellectually deficient. In truth, the believer can be a scoundrel and the skeptic can be an ignoramus.*

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<sup>i</sup> Terryl L. Givens, “Lightning Out of Heaven: Joseph Smith and the Forging of Community,” *BYU Studies* 45, No. 1 (2006)

<sup>ii</sup> Michael Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, Second Edition, 2013, is one such book. This Foundation (FAIR) has extensive publications that could be described as “apologetic” on behalf of the Church’s point of view.

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<sup>iii</sup> Davis Bitton, “I Don’t Have a Testimony of the History of the Church”, FARMS Reviews, Volume 16, Number 2, 2004, p. 354. (Don’t be misled by the title of this talk. Bitton was a devout believer.)

<sup>iv</sup> Those ideas come from Terryl Givens’ talk that is referred to in the footnote i.