

# Give Me That Old Time Testimony Meeting

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MAYBE IT IS JUST SENTIMENTAL MUSING, but I think that I remember a time when things were, well, messy. I remember testimony meetings where the eccentric ramblings of older members consumed large chunks of time, providing both a challenge to the constitution of the deacons dutifully assembled on the front row and ample fodder for laughing family conversations traveling home from church. I could count on the monthly musings of one older sister, speaking in English heavily accented with her native German, proclaiming that she “loved her *fate*.” I can still see my bishop rising reluctantly to correct the meanderings of one brother who held a distinctly apocalyptic view of the world and the immediacy of Christ’s second coming. The proverbial sister who would regularly rise to tell the congregation of her travails with her run-down automobile, always attributing its lack of dependability to Lucifer himself, actually lived in my little ward.

Fast and testimony meetings today are a tame affair. No, not tame—bland, predictable, homogenized, boring, and, above all else, neat—very, very neat. The primary difference that I notice is that the older eccentrics seem to be missing. When I was young, we had a Junior Sunday School that met separately from adults each Sunday. During Junior Sunday School, children were encouraged to file to the podium to “bury their testimonies,” as we said. No children were ever heard from in the Fast and Testimony Meeting; that time was reserved for the adults. Not so now. My ward’s fast and testimony meeting is now dominated by young children, ages ten and younger, who are pressed to the front of the congregation to “bear their testimonies.” Inevitably, beginning by assuring us that they love their parents, these youngsters, perhaps fulfilling the prophecy of Joel (for the third time?)<sup>1</sup>, then proceed to, shall I say, recite,

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1. See Joel 2:28 (“I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions.”); Acts 2:16; Joseph Smith History 1:41.

a rote set of catechisms: they know this is the “true church;” they know that Gordon B. Hinckley (the uniquely middle-initialed adult in their young world) is a “true prophet;” they know that the Book of Mormon is “true;” they know that Joseph Smith was a “true prophet;” *etc.* Often the child’s testimony is aided by one of his or her parents stage whispering the words into the ear of the repeating child.

When the children are not reciting, the adults still speak. But, they do not bear the testimonies that I remember from my youth. Astonishingly, with rare exception, the testimonies of the adults follow the pattern of the children’s. The same set of “I knows” follows the only variance from the children’s testimony—adults will usually preface their remarks with a maudlin tribute to their spouses. Gone are the days memorialized in the Grondahl cartoon where the beleaguered bishop arises after an elderly sister’s testimony to thank her for “her beautiful testimony and update on her cats.”<sup>2</sup> With the seeming precision of a drill team, the adult members of a congregation file forward to say essentially the same thing, albeit with an occasional rhetorical flourish: “I would indeed be ungrateful if I did not stand before you this day. . . .”

What has happened to my Old Time Testimony Meeting?

### *I. Bearing vs. Having*

Three great truths must be included in every valid testimony: 1. That Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of the world; 2. That Joseph Smith is the Prophet of God through whom the gospel was restored in this dispensation; and 3. That the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth.”

Bruce R. McConkie  
*Mormon Doctrine*<sup>3</sup>

The concept embodied in this typically authoritarian quotation from the late Elder McConkie forms, I believe, the basis for the movement to restrict the expression of idiosyncratic views in the modern Mormon testimony meeting. The argument from Elder McConkie’s thought runs as follows: (1) The fast and testimony meeting is a meeting for bearing testimonies; (2) one should not engage in activities for which a testimony meeting is not intended; (3) a testimony has these three elements; (4) therefore, one ought not to speak of items that fall outside of these three elements. I have heard and read local lay members, local leaders, general authorities, and professors of religion make this argument or a form of it

2. Calvin Grondahl, *Freeway to Perfection* (Salt Lake City: The Sunstone Foundation, 1982).

3. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 786.

from the pulpit, in quorum meetings, in missionary training, and in religion classes at BYU for at least 20 years. As a result, the "testimonies" heard each month in fast and testimony meetings have become highly standardized.

This unfortunate consequence, in my view, is completely unnecessary because the reading of Elder McConkie's statement that has yielded this fruit is, I believe, not warranted. A close reading of the entire entry in *Mormon Doctrine* shows that the purpose of Elder McConkie's statement was not to restrict the range of permissible expression in fast and testimony meetings (although one does wonder if he would not have been pleased with the result). For, Elder McConkie's statement was based on a unique use of the term "testimony" in the Mormon culture.

In common usage outside of Mormon culture, the term testimony is the public profession of a religious experience or belief. In common usage one "bears," "relates," or "gives" testimony. Mormons use the term testimony in this sense frequently. "I feel moved to bear my testimony." "The spirit would not let me sit here today without bearing my testimony." "Bishop, I will need a box of tissues before I can bear my testimony." In this common usage, the term testimony does not imply the substantive content of the testimony that is borne. The content of the testimony is the spiritual experience or belief that the person relating the testimony wishes to convey to a listener.

There is, however, an oddly Mormon usage of the term "testimony" that Elder McConkie employs in his *Mormon Doctrine* entry. Mormons frequently think of a testimony as a set of core beliefs, and can be heard to say, in this sense, that they "have" a testimony; have "lost" their testimony; are "struggling" with their testimony; or "have a weak" testimony. In this sense, a testimony is not the thing that is "borne" or stated to another, but is the *belief in the basic set of principles* that is, in some person's view, necessary to be a true Latter-day Saint. Thus, in the *Mormon Doctrine* entry, Elder McConkie speaks of "receiving" a testimony or "having" a testimony. That is, Elder McConkie is circumscribing the minimal set of principles that he thinks is necessary to be a good Mormon. The quotation above is nothing more than his simple summary of these core principles as he understood them.

It is this uniquely Mormon double usage of the word testimony that allows those who would restrict heterodox speech in Mormon testimony meetings to point to Elder McConkie for authority. Elder McConkie was laying out his view of the *minimal* set of beliefs that one had to *receive* or *have* in order to be a believing Mormon. Those who want to limit what is said in testimony meeting take the quotation from this uniquely Mormon context, where a testimony represents a minimal set of beliefs, and place it into the context of a testimony that one *bears* or *expresses* to conclude that one may not, bearing a valid testimony, stray beyond the

bounds of what constitutes a “valid testimony.” This, to put it bluntly, is a mistake of sloppy thinking and careless usage, exploited by those who simply would suppress the dynamic, extemporaneous, charismatic, and idiosyncratic nature of the religious experience that may be expressed in a testimony meeting. To put it another way, simply because Elder McConkie’s minimal set of core beliefs is limited to three items, one need not conclude that the only beliefs or experiences that can be talked about in testimony meeting are those three things.

## *II. Kierkegaard’s Garage Sale*

It seems that in modern Mormonism, the concept of faith has been greatly cheapened. This stems from two competing concepts of faith and the triumph of the lesser form in contemporary thinking among lay Mormons. To begin, consider the two formulations of “faith” that Mormons usually refer to in discussing the concept.

The first articulation comes from the Epistle to the Hebrews: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (11:1). Much has been written about this passage by non-Mormon writers, but because this learning is seldom repeated in Mormon circles, I will summarize it here. The first key element of faith to the author of Hebrews is its object: one has faith in “elpizo” or something that is desired or wished for and in “things not seen.” That is, the object of faith must be something uncertain that the believer believes in despite its uncertainty. The second element of faith to the author of Hebrews is hidden to many modern readers of this passage by the archaic use of the words “substance” and “evidence” in the King James translation. The Greek text uses the words “hupostasis” and “elegchos” for these concepts. “Hupostasis” is literally an object that has been placed under another as a basis or foundation. Thus, the “hupostasis” is the basis or foundation of belief. “Elegchos” is used only twice in the New Testament, in Hebrews 11 and 2 Timothy 3:16. In 2 Timothy, the word is translated as “reproof,” indicating its base meaning of “conviction” in the sense of being convicted of a crime or accusation. Thus, for the modern reader, perhaps a better rendering of this verse would be: “Now faith is the basis for hoping and the conviction in things that we do not see” or “faith is the foundation for hoping and proving the reality of the unseen.”

The purpose of the foregoing analysis is to make clear the view of faith set forth in Hebrews, that “faith” is hope for things of which one cannot be certain. It is the spiritual and psychological state of acting on premises that one cannot be sure of—of hoping and believing firmly in goals that lie forever beyond the horizon. The remainder of Hebrews 11 builds upon this conception of faith and hope by giving a series of examples of the heroes of faith and how they exercised faith by doing great

acts to realize their hope in the goodness of an unseen God. In Hebrews, this conception of faith and hope is the pinnacle of spiritual achievement, among the highest goals to be striven for: "And now abideth faith, hope, and charity, these three. . ." (1 Cor 13:13)

The second conception of faith, and the conception that dominates modern Mormon thinking, is found in the Book of Mormon. In Alma 32, we find a description of faith that anticipates (by more than a century) the very words of the Epistle to the Hebrews, "if ye have faith, ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true." The Book of Mormon exposition, however, quickly departs from the conception of faith found in Hebrews by portraying faith, not as the ultimate spiritual goal to be achieved, but as an interim step between the weakest form of belief and "perfect knowledge." In an analogy that is oft quoted and discussed in Mormondom, the passage in Alma compares the achievement of sure knowledge to the planting of a seed (belief) that, when nourished, begins to grow into a state of faith, and that, when fully matured, replaces faith with a "perfect" knowledge, rendering faith "dormant." Faith in the Book of Mormon is a mere rest stop on the straight and narrow path to perfection.

Unfortunately, in my view, in our testimony meetings the Book of Mormon's view of faith has carried the day. Everyone *knows* everything. Worse, many know everything "beyond a shadow of a doubt" or with "every fiber of [their] being"! Even three-year-olds are coached by parents to say that they *know* that "this is the only true church." I must wince and return to Hebrews 11 where the author, so acutely aware of the anxiety that must follow every step of the person of faith in a world of sorrow, disappointment, pain, and suffering, recounts the heroics of the greatest exemplars of faith, and can only admiringly allow:

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed themselves strangers and pilgrims in the earth. (Heb. 11:15)

How is it, one must wonder, that these people, young and old, all "know" all of these things while Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob spent all of their days in a *vain* search for a city having foundations whose builder and maker is God? How can we, one after another, stand and recite the same three things that we *know*, when these heroes of faith had to resign themselves to being strangers, foreigners, outcasts, and pilgrims?

Soren Kierkegaard lamented in his time:

Not merely in the realm of commerce, but in the world of ideas as well, our age is organizing a regular Clearance Sale. . . . In our time, nobody is content to stop with faith but wants to go further. It would perhaps be rash to ask

where these people are going, but it is surely a sign of breeding and culture for me to assume that everyone has faith, for otherwise it would be [odd] to be . . . going further. In those old days it was different, faith was a task for a whole lifetime, because it was assumed that dexterity in faith was not acquired in a few days or weeks. When the tried oldster [Saint Paul] drew near to his last hour, having fought the good fight, and kept the faith, his heart was still young enough not to have forgotten the fear and trembling that chastened his youth, which the man held in check, but which no man quite outgrows . . . except as he might succeed at the earliest possible opportunity in going further. Where these revered figures arrive, that is the point where everybody begins to go further.<sup>4</sup>

Let me suggest that if the Danish existentialist was witnessing a clearance sale on faith, he was lucky. For, in Mormondom, faith has been reduced to a garage sale trifle, a hasty souvenir stop on the way to the "perfect knowledge" proclaimed every month from our pulpits. One can sit through dozens of Mormon meetings and never hear any member say in any context "I believe that this church is true" or "I have hope that my faith in Christ is not in vain" or "I have faith despite my doubts and weaknesses." I can count on one hand the number of times that I have heard anyone say in any public context in a Mormon meeting that they believe one of the "minimal" elements of "testimony" in the face of any expressed doubt. In our testimony meetings faith is not adequate; everyone has joined the mob from Kierkegaard's day to rush beyond faith.

In short, virtually the only permissible expression of belief in a contemporary Mormon testimony meeting is phrased as "I know." As David Knowlton has pointed out, ritual rhetoric in religious communities actually can create belief systems.<sup>5</sup> Where virtually all expressions of religious conviction are preceded by an expression of absolute knowledge, any speaker who wishes to express his or her "mere" faith, belief, or hope will feel subtle but certain pressure to refrain from standing before the congregation. As this behavior is repeated over time, members of a community will come to believe that in order to maintain standing in the community, they must always speak in terms of absolute surety. Gradually those who express doubt will be viewed as heterodox and pushed to the edges (if not over the edge). Members are forced to confront their doubts, their disappointments, their fears, and their struggles where nobody can see. The act of doubting or struggling in itself becomes a token of weakness or evil. This pattern is begun at a young age in Mormondom as young children, who could not distinguish Moroni from, say, the latest

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4. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953), 23.

5. See David Knowlton, "Belief, Metaphor, and Rhetoric: The Mormon Practice of Testimony Bearing," *Sunstone* (April 1991): 20–27.

television action figure, are taught to proclaim that they “know that the Book of Mormon is true.” We then see the nightmare of Kierkegaard enacted before our eyes. Faith is no longer developed in the crucible of anguishing doubt and struggle. Hope is no longer nourished in a community of uncertain seekers striving for truth. Charity is not forged in the struggle for love in a world filled with disappointment and tragedy where frail humans share one another’s burdens. Moses’ mother does not weep as she tells of hiding her son in the reeds to avoid execution. Noah does not tell of building an ark in the desert. Abraham does not tell of raising his knife to murder his son before the face of God who has commanded human sacrifice. No, all of the struggle, the angst, the fear and trembling are swept away, banished from our thoughts by our counterfeit proclamations, recited from our infancy, that we already “know” what *Noah, Abraham, and the mother of Moses* died only hoping. We have surpassed the great strangers and pilgrims of the earth by proclaiming it so!

#### CONCLUSION

Mormons have learned since a young age the *first* principles and ordinances of the gospel. We have discounted the *greatest* principles of the good news—faith, hope, and charity. Let me suggest that our faith would be strengthened and our spiritual experiences deepened if we simply dropped the artifice of proclaiming in our meetings that we “know” everything and if we ceased to prod our children to do the same. Let me further suggest that our ability to bear one another’s burdens and build a Christian community would be enhanced if we did not restrict the content of our spiritual discourse to the “three great truths” of Elder McConkie. Would there be unpleasant results from allowing doubt and fear to be expressed, of permitting members to say they merely *hope* that their faith is not in vain? Would our meetings be different if our testimonies were filled with stories of the human struggle for hope in the face of anxiety? There would be odd moments, awkward glances at the podium, giggling deacons, just plain dumb utterances. Things would be . . . messy. I believe, however, that we would all be richer for the clutter.