

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

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The stake presidency has asked the high council to address the topic “reduce and simplify our lives to minimize the commotion prophesied by the Lord.” I’ve felt impressed to talk about a different kind of commotion today, one that the Church and its members are facing in our information-saturated world, and a different kind of simplicity, one that is very elusive and that may take a lifetime to find. I hope you’ll forgive me for following a written text fairly closely, but I’m a writer, not a speaker, and because of the sensitive nature of the topic, I want to make sure I am as precise as possible.

I realize that I am going to be talking to a small minority of you. But I think the topic is important. I won’t ask for a show of hands, but if I did and if I asked how many of you are struggling with questions about the Church’s history or doctrine or scriptures or policies, questions that may be causing you to lose some sleep, I’m guessing I would see a few hands. I would also guess that even more of you know someone—perhaps a family member or a good friend—who has left the Church because of such questions. It’s to you who find yourselves in either of these two groups that I am going to speak today. The rest of you can listen in, because the time may come when you too may find yourselves in one of these groups.

Some of you have known me for a long time. But most of you don’t know what I’ve been doing the past nineteen years. It was actu-

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ally nineteen years ago last month that I took a job as a senior editor at the *Liahona*. After about three years, I was transferred to the *Ensign*. The two experiences were actually quite different, but I want to focus on one particular difference.

When I worked at the *Liahona*, the editorial staff subscribed to the *Salt Lake Tribune*, *BYU Studies*, and maybe *Newsweek*. When I arrived at the *Ensign*, I was surprised at all the publications they subscribed to. These included the *Salt Lake Tribune*, all three major news magazines, *Reader's Digest*, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, *BYU Studies*, *Dialogue*, *Sunstone*, *Journal of Mormon History*, *Utah Historical Quarterly*, *Pioneer* (published by the Sons of the Utah Pioneers), the Community of Christ's magazine, *Vision* (aimed at the Restoration Branches that broke away from the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in about 1984), Billy Graham's magazine, the Seventh-day Adventist magazine, and probably a few more I can't remember.

I wondered why they subscribed to so many publications. And as I thought about it, I decided someone must have wanted us to be informed. Well, I wanted to be informed. So I read it, almost all of it, but especially the Mormon material. In the process, I discovered that I didn't know nearly as much about the Church and its history as I had imagined. I also discovered what we call Mormon studies. This is a field of study that is simply exploding nationwide. Most of the scholars in Mormon studies are active LDS. But some are lapsed LDS, and some are non-LDS. What they produce, however, is not anti-Mormon literature. Most of them simply want to understand Mormonism more fully. And there is a lot of really good scholarship being done.

In 2006, after about four years at the *Ensign*, I jumped ship and took a job as editorial director at *BYU Studies*, where we publish the oldest Mormon studies journal. Which puts me in the middle of a lot of very interesting material. I try to keep current—it's part of the job—but it is really impossible. There is so much being published. In addition to editing *BYU Studies Quarterly*, I also read the *Journal of Mormon History*, *Dialogue*,

Sunstone, and *Mormon Historical Studies*. I attend a few conferences and try to follow what's going on in the Bloggernacle. And I've read about seventy books on Mormonism in the almost twelve years I've been at BYU Studies. None of these is what you would call "Church books." These are mostly serious scholarship on Mormon history, scripture, organization, culture, or theology. So that's what I've been up to.

The challenge is that when you start digging into the details, you inevitably find that nothing is as simple as you thought it was. Our history is often messy. Our doctrine can be something of a moving target. Revelation, both personal and prophetic, is sometimes difficult to interpret. This is just the nature of life. If you get past the surface, pretty much everything is complicated.

The question is, how are we supposed to deal with this complexity? Let me quote Elder Ballard. Speaking to seminary and institute instructors two years ago this month, he said, among other things:

Gone are the days when a student asked an honest question and a teacher responded, "Don't worry about it!" Gone are the days when a student raised a sincere concern and a teacher bore his or her testimony as a response intended to avoid the issue. . . .

It was only a generation ago that our young people's access to information about our history, doctrine, and practices was basically limited to materials printed by the Church. Few students came in contact with alternative interpretations. Mostly, our young people lived a sheltered life.

Our curriculum at that time, though well-meaning, did not prepare students for today—a day when students have instant access to virtually everything about the Church from every possible point of view. Today, what they see on their mobile devices is likely to be faith-challenging as much as faith-promoting. . . .

For *you* to understand the doctrinal and historical content and context of the scriptures and our history, you will need to study from the "best books," as the Lord directed. The "best books" include the scriptures, the teachings of modern prophets and apostles, and the best LDS scholarship available. . . .

When something has the potential to threaten our spiritual life, our most precious family relationships, and our membership in the kingdom, we should find thoughtful and faithful Church leaders to help us. And, if necessary, we should ask those with appropriate academic training, experience, and expertise for help.

This is exactly what I do when I need an answer to my own questions that I cannot answer myself.

That's a rather remarkable statement from an apostle.

Let me add, though, that the best LDS scholarship will very often raise questions rather than answer them. And that's okay. As I said, life is complicated. Our history is complicated. Our doctrine is complicated. Church leaders are not infallible. This means that a simple approach to Mormonism is likely not going to produce very good results in the long run.

Years ago I came across a quote that has helped me a great deal. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, "I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity." It's sometimes easy and comfortable to ignore the complexity, to be content with a simplicity that is more blindness than awareness. But there are dangers with this approach. Sometimes life doesn't allow us to be content with this easy sort of simplicity. But the simplicity on the other side of complexity has to be earned. The only way out is through.

So let me address three aspects of the complexity in Mormonism and try to give some helpful perspectives on dealing with LDS history, LDS leaders, and LDS doctrine.

Messy History

When I started reading books and articles on LDS history, I discovered that my knowledge of Mormon history up to 1847 was rather superficial, and after that, it was pretty much nonexistent, because 1847 is where the

Gospel Doctrine curriculum mostly stopped. But the Church is radically different today than it was in 1847 or 1890 or 1930 or 1960. How did we get from there to here? Well, that's a long and complex story. But let me share something that has helped me in my effort to grapple with the difficult aspects of Mormon history. It's a very simple idea, but I find it profound. "Events do not tell their own stories." Let me repeat that: "Events do not tell their own stories." Instead, historians use their limited understanding of events to create stories about them. Which means that all history is interpretation. Let me repeat that: all history is interpretation. And all historians have an agenda. They pick and choose details, they add a little spin, they let their biases and opinions color their account. And most important, they leave things out. They have to. Sometimes they embellish; they add details.

The ideal, of course, is to have a history that is as objective as possible and as complete as possible. But we always fall short of the ideal. So every history is interpretation. And that includes the histories the Church has published. This is not a bad thing. It's unavoidable. But for many years, the Church published histories that left a lot of detail out, and this created biased or one-sided views of past events. And this has caused the Church problems in recent years, because once some of the details became public, it looked like the Church had been producing a sugarcoated narrative. We all like to put our best foot forward, but if we only talk about how wonderful we are, it's obviously an incomplete picture, because we are imperfect and history is messy by nature. Fortunately, the Church is doing better now. It is approaching its history in a much more open and balanced way, especially with the Joseph Smith Papers.

Still, since all histories are biased, in our search for truth we somehow need to find ways to recognize the biases and agendas and to see behind the curtain, as it were, so that we can filter out as many impurities as we can. And the only way I know to accomplish this is to simply read a lot of history. When you see events through the eyes of many interpreters, you start to get a more complete picture, you become aware of which

sources historians are using, how reliable those sources are, and how the historians are employing them. You also come to recognize the spin historians put on their accounts, or the choices they made in deciding what to emphasize and what to leave out, and this helps you sort out what rings true from what doesn't.

Fallible Leaders

Now let me say something about fallible leaders. None of us would claim that our leaders, local or general, are perfect. No leader would claim to be perfect. President Uchtdorf addressed this idea a couple of years ago in general conference. But in practice, we tend to treat our leaders as if they were infallible. We treat them as if they are always inspired. This can cause some unrealistic expectations and some real complications when we discover that they aren't always inspired. I want you to think about the name of the Church. It has two parts. It is the Church of Jesus Christ, but it is also the Church of the Latter-day Saints. We sometimes think that it's just the Lord's church and that all inspiration has to come down the leadership pipeline. But Joseph Smith referred to the Church as a theodemocracy. We often act as if it is just a theocracy. Everything is top-down, and it's all inspired. So we neglect the democracy part. I've heard a few comments by General Authorities recently acknowledging the necessity of inspiration coming up from the rank and file. So this view is starting to change.

Several years ago, I published an essay titled "Why the True Church Cannot Be Perfect." I want to share a few paragraphs from it.

A basic principle that, if understood, would help [most Church members] is the notion that the Church not only *is* not perfect, but *cannot* be, at least not here, not now in this fallen world. If the Church were perfect, it would fail miserably in its mission, which is, in part, to perfect us. In essence, if God were to spell out specifically for his apostles and prophets and stake presidents and bishops and auxiliary leaders every step in the Church's onward march of establishing his kingdom on earth,

if he were to dictate every decision and inspire every policy, he would defeat his own purpose. What purpose? To help us become as he is.

As disconcerting as this idea might appear on the surface, both reason and experience suggest that God treats the Church in much the same way he treats each of us. As we strive to learn and grow and follow the Savior, our Heavenly Father intervenes periodically in our lives in ways that maximize our opportunities for growth and service. Sometimes when we pray for guidance, the Spirit gives us quiet promptings and confirmations. . . . But often when we pray for guidance or for knowledge in making decisions, the heavens are perfectly silent. In these perplexing instances, God expects us to use our own intelligence; his revealed word; the counsel of family members, trusted friends, and ordained leaders; the gospel values we've accepted; and our best understanding of the circumstances we're facing to make decisions on our own, and to trust that he will warn us if we go too far astray. And more often than many of us wish, he even allows us to experience the negative consequences of our unwise decisions—so that we will learn wisdom.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks has taught: "What about those times when we seek revelation and do not receive it? . . . Sometimes we are left to our own judgment. . . . Our life's purpose to obtain experience and to develop faith would be frustrated if our Heavenly Father directed us in every act, even in every important act. We must make decisions and experience the consequences in order to develop self-reliance and faith. Even in decisions we think very important, we sometimes receive no answers to our prayers. This does not mean that our prayers have not been heard. It only means that we have prayed about a decision which, for one reason or another, we should make without guidance by revelation."

Someone once quipped, "Good judgment comes from experience; experience comes from bad judgment." Often this is how we learn, as difficult as it seems. . . . If Heavenly Father wanted to impede us in our progression, he would answer every prayer immediately and specifically, spelling out exactly what we should do in any situation. Likewise, if he wanted to cripple his chosen servants—prophets, apostles, stake presidents, bishops, quorum and auxiliary presidents, home and visiting teachers, and parents—he would tell them exactly what to do every

step of the way. If he led them by the hand and never let go, they would remain infants.

Because this must be so, we have to put up with each other's failures. And the prophets and apostles are not immune to this. And it's okay. I realize that this means we will sometimes have to deal with policies, on both the local and general Church level, that are difficult or that even cause a significant amount of pain, but there really is no alternative. So we must be patient with each other and help each other grow.

Shifting Doctrines

This reality also affects our doctrine. Some Latter-day Saints have questions about various points of doctrine. I am one. In fact, there's probably not a single doctrine that I don't have questions about. Sometimes in the Church we get the idea that we have **ALL THE TRUTH**—bold, underlined, and in capital letters. But, again, reality is not so simple. Many of our fundamental doctrines have shifted or developed over time. Joseph Smith apparently found some of the doctrines in the Book of Mormon unsatisfactory, because he changed or expanded them. One particular doctrine, about what happens to those who don't hear the gospel in this life, went through at least four different changes to get to where it is today. The doctrines surrounding our understanding of premortality developed over a long period of time as we tried to reconcile the various things Joseph taught at different points in his life. I find it particularly significant that the version of premortality that most Latter-day Saints now embrace was first proposed by Elder B. H. Roberts early in the twentieth century, and at that time it was rejected by the First Presidency. So the notion that our doctrines were revealed from heaven pure and whole and perfect does not square with the historical record. Which, in my mind, is a wonderful excuse for us to acquire more humility about what we claim to know and to ask more questions. Joseph Smith was one of the greatest questioners in the history of religion. We could do worse than to follow his example.

So, with our doctrine, as with our history and our leaders, there is a lot more complexity than we sometimes like to imagine. And again, it's okay. Apparently, this is how God wants it. Religion, like life in general, is much more ambiguous than we want it to be. In Mormondom, we crave certainty, but certainty about some things is very elusive.

Way back in 1979, when Bruce Hafen was president of Ricks College, he gave a devotional address at BYU titled "Love Is Not Blind: Some Thoughts for College Students on Faith and Ambiguity." I would recommend you read it. When he talks about ambiguity, he means the gap between the ideal, which we focus on a lot in the Church, and the real, which is how things actually are. It is that gap I've been talking about today. Sometimes, when we have high expectations, and either the Church or its leaders or its doctrine fall short, we experience frustration. Today, this is often referred to as cognitive dissonance. Whatever we call it, though, it can damage our faith. Bruce Hafen offers a good perspective on dealing with cognitive dissonance or, as he calls it, ambiguity.

Borrowing terms from G. K. Chesterton, Brother Hafen talks about three kinds of people. The first group comprises those people Chesterton labeled optimists. They don't deal well with the gap between the real and the ideal, which causes them either to be blind to the real problems that exist or to actually erase them from their minds. For these people, everything is wonderful—and simple.

The second group comprises those people Chesterton labeled pessimists. They see the problems, the reality of mortality, but they focus so exclusively on it that they tend to erase the ideal. They see only how things are, not how they should be. Those who are troubled by imperfections in the Church or its leaders and leave the Church often fall into this category.

The third level, and this is where I hope we can be, is the group of people Chesterton called improvers. They see the ideal, they see the real, they recognize the gap between the two, but they attempt to do something constructive about closing the gap. I have recognized in my

own life that I can do a lot more to help change things that need to be changed in the Church, at both the local and general level, if I stay in the Church and remain loyal to its ultimate mission. Standing outside as a critic may be intellectually satisfying to some, but it's mostly fruitless.

So if you are struggling over some issue or are dealing with a loved one who is struggling, be patient. Don't bail out when you face ambiguity. Work through the complexity. Be an improver. We believe in ongoing revelation, not in infallibility, and sometimes even things we were certain would never change do change. God has certainly not revealed everything, and he may yet surprise us.

Conclusion

Finally, let me cycle back to what I said about doctrine and offer maybe one insight into how we might reach that simplicity that lies on the other side of complexity. BYU professor Charles Harrell, who wrote a book detailing many of the changes in LDS doctrine over the years, made a very important point at the conclusion of his book. He said simply that nobody is saved by theology. This reminder always brings me back to what we really need to be concerned about, and maybe this is at least a portion of the simplicity we will find on the other side of complexity:

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? Or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the king shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." (Matt. 25:34–40)

I believe this. I believe this is what God wants of us. The Church may not meet our expectations of perfection in every way. But it does provide us a framework within which we can practice this type of Christian love. And practice is what we need.

So, hang in there. Be patient. It's okay to have questions. It's okay if some questions don't have good answers. At least not yet. Apparently, this is the way God wants it. So let's do the best we can and try to love and serve each other in ways that will make a difference.

God bless you all in your efforts to overcome the challenges of mortality, including the unavoidable complexity of many things.

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