# THE POWER OF WORDS

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Within the Latter-day Saint cultural milieu, there are phrases frequently utilized during church meetings—from testimonies to talks to firesides—that are so ubiquitous that we should rightfully wonder if such statements actually deserve repeating. Irrefutably, these expressions of belief are revered and their sincerity should never be disparaged. However, the popularity of such statements underscores the necessity to dissect and understand their meaning. Only then can we hope to effectively communicate these vitally important truths and realities to others.

There are many common phrases and iterations of these phrases. One such statement is "I know the Church is true." There are many others that are similar: "I know that [insert name of the current leader of the Church] is a prophet of God," or "I know that [insert name of local leader] is called of God." Again, such statements are most often expressed with profound sincerity and should never be ridiculed or mocked. But for the simplicity of this essay, I will focus on the first statement as it contains the basic elements for thorough discussion of the topic.

The phrase "I know the Church is true" is the bedrock statement of many testimonies. While I do not, myself, express these words exactly, I believe I understand the intended meaning. What is implied by this phrase is a general acknowledgement that every good choice, good feeling, and sense of purpose in one's life has emanated from membership in the Church. It means that since one has experienced such undeniable intrinsic benefits from said membership, that that, in and of itself, is an obvious affirmation that it is the true source of spiritual boon. It may

also be an expression from many of a divine personal revelation that the Church is where they are needed and where truths exist. It may also be a statement about the importance of community and losing oneself in a higher celestial purpose. Spoken along these lines, there is a powerful and emotional witness that life's meaning is contained within the organization, experiences, and teachings of the Church. As beautiful and profound as these insinuations may be, nevertheless, the actual words said do not exactly match this meaning.

The word "know" has several definitions in the English language. It can mean having an awareness of something real, having information or an absolute certainty about something, and other definitions like to be familiar with someone. While it is not hard to make a connection with some of these definitions of knowing and what might be meant by a statement like "I know the Church is true," this usage is still not the most clear or insightful. There are better, more enlightening ways to express this, in my opinion. The principal issue with applying a phrase such as "I know" to a gospel topic is that it supposes that the processes of revelation, exercising faith, and acting on hunches are perfect methods that necessarily lead one not just in a direction of belief but to an absolute and certain destination. There is no doubt in knowing. There is also no need for faith when something is known. Alma the Younger alludes to this when he states that faith is "not a perfect knowledge" (Alma 32:26). Therefore, knowledge is not belief. Belief is not knowledge. Knowledge is derived from assimilated *facts* about the observable universe. Belief is derived from assimilated *experiences* that point one to faith. Knowledge is found through *data*, through breaking down a phenomenon to its constituent parts to discover its inner workings. Belief is found through exercising faith, by melding *events* together to discover their underlying meaning. These are key and fundamental differences. The words—"knowledge" and "belief"—are, in fact, not interchangeable. Communicating about belief as if it equates knowledge can lead to severe misunderstanding. This is especially true of those who are new

to LDS culture or who are struggling to identify with LDS culture. A much more accurate way to describe such a testimonial statement, in my opinion, would be to say, "I have faith that the Church is true," or "I firmly believe that the Church is true." This shifts the focus onto the hope that the things felt and observed are from God, not on expressing that something has to be absolute and certain in order to be spoken in a testimony. I understand that this change would appear to trivialize those who have experienced profound heavenly answers where their understanding was illuminated in an undeniable manner. My intention is not to marginalize any such experience, but I think it is important to recognize that this is not the same exact concept as empirical knowing. Faith is a process, not a destination. Faith is a wrestling with doubt, not an exercise in certainty.

The next part of the phrase "I know the Church is true" that merits discussion is the inherent vagueness with the usage of the word "true." In the LDS cultural vernacular, "true" here has a reference to something being real, correct, or actual. In the English language, there are two similar definitions: a state of being in accordance with fact or reality or of being accurate or exact. As we observed with "knowing," we might be implying empirical certainty to processes that are subjective, sensed, or intuited. The usage of a word like "true" might inaccurately denote that all truth and reality can only exist in a binary state. That is, something is either completely true or correct, or it is completely false or erroneous. Such dichotomous claims can really only be defended when demonstrated by repeated experiments in controlled studies. This is generally limited to observable phenomena repetitively confirmed by the scientific method. The beauty here is that anyone can conduct the same experiments—if they have the means to do so—and achieve the same results. But even with scientific inquiry, there are errors, gaps in understanding that need to be corrected. Therefore, not everything with rational, objective reasoning can always be defended as undeniably true. How does this apply, then, to the usage of "true" in a spiritual

or faith-based inquiry? It would ostensibly appear that repeated, similar feelings about the same ontological concept might imply its truth. There certainly is power in repeated divine confirmation of ideas that we accept as correct or actual. Nevertheless, we are led to ponder what it might mean that something—particularly, spiritual or faith-based—is "true." For instance, if we declare that "the Church is true," does this mean it is so in the binary or all-or-nothing sense? Are there indeed only two possible outcomes from that question? Is it factual to say that "the Church," the organization apparently created by God for the benefit of man, has never during the entirety of its lifetime of being influenced by human hands and hearts experienced shortcomings, errors, or oversights, or even had occasional events that harmed members? To me, this last question is perhaps the most preposterous. I do not believe it is even remotely possible to defend a narrative to suggest that "the Church" has always been led perfectly and never had to correct errors in course and in doctrine. This is not to say that the same Church is not led and inspired by God, but rather that it is incorrect to assume it is "true" in the absolute sense of the word. There are two doctrinally and theologically supported reasons for this: the vitally important gift of agency and the veil that separates heavenly from earthly experience. If it were God's intention to send us to Earth to, with perfect certainty, navigate through the vicissitudes of life, there would be no risk and little growth. True enlightenment derives from "see[ing] through a glass, darkly," as stated in 1 Corinthians (13:12). This implies formative learning from experience, not because we know the answer exactly, but rather because we are willing to discover it over time and over repeated prayer to the being who knows all. None of us would grow if all knowledge was so overtly extended; therefore, it is important to note that our understanding is not absolute. Thus, when we speak of religious concepts existing in a "true" state, we must recognize that this comes with limitations.

The next problem with describing the Church as "true" is that there is inherent ambiguity about what this actually means. Are we generally

saying that we believe in the Restoration, that Jesus Christ is leading the Church, that the Book of Mormon contains the word of God, that the Church is a good place where the Spirit can be felt, etc.? I surmise that this is what most intend. However, it is critical, in my opinion, to be much more specific in our communications. For instance, it may be apropos to cite a personal experience where heavenly guidance was received on how to interpret and apply a particular scriptural verse to your life. This would mean that the scripture that has been read is true in the sense that you have been instructed in how it is relevant to your life. Another example would be recounting how a vexing situation was instrumental in building your testimony on the concepts of fasting and prayer. Such examples go on and on. The more general or vague we are about our spiritual experiences, the less significant the impact when we declare them to be "true." The more specific we are about how something is real in our lives, the more we can convey its genuineness. Perhaps a more accurate way to describe the "trueness" of a spiritual reality is to say that "I believe there is truth to that concept." Or "that specific topic is one that is real to me and for this reason . . ." I think we lose certain individuals, and often ourselves, when we utter blanket statements like "the Church is true," especially without being specific about its real-life application. A more fitting proposal might be to, rather than explaining *why* the Church is true, focus more on *what* about the Church is true. For instance, the Church's teachings about faith have been instrumental for me in developing a strong and personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The Church's long-standing focus on families has undoubtedly fostered deeper love in my own family. Other such examples abound. It is also useful—though unpopular—to reflect on what about our conceptualization of the Church may not be so true. To embrace, rather than avoid, uncomfortable facts regardless of how much we worry about their impact to our faith. This will instill in us the most honest narrative, the one that has the most power to truly enlighten and save lost souls.

What, then, is the epistemological alternative within LDS culture to using words like "knowing" and "true"? The exact answer is likely to vary based on the unique experiences and perceptions of individuals; however, there are common threads. If we treat faith as belief and not absolute certainty, we allow our hearts and minds the openness to hear new words, to have new celestial insights, and to be taught by the Spirit. By contrast, if we know something is true, why would we ever pray about it or ask probing questions? If we state that we know something is true—and, in particular, if a sizeable portion of the most active and visible membership does this—we may inadvertently imply to others who are still growing in faith that their spirituality is defective or subpar. We may also stop all honest inquiry into key spiritual or doctrinal issues that we as a Church so desperately need to discuss. The better way, in my opinion, is to assert the reality of doctrinal truths through the sharing of relevant experiences, through the particular and specific ways Church membership has demonstrated itself to be a blessing, through applying principles in practice (not just in word), along with many, many other ways. This form of testimony has more power to motivate, inspire, and move others toward action as they see how—in reality—the things we regularly speak about resonate.

As a church, we should continue to express what we believe. We should also be honest about what it means to believe, to know, and what we declare as truth. While the whole point of this essay may appear to some trivial and semantic, missing the point of what creates an ardent, heartfelt testimony, and overly critical of enduring cultural tradition, there is yet power in the actual, specific words we choose to say and in how we choose to perceive them. If it is truly our aim to have the Church reach hearts and souls around the world, we then should be mindful of the words we use and how we communicate our own beliefs to others.

The most powerful testimony I have encountered has not emanated from speakers that insist what they "know is true" (or at least these

words are not the focal point), but rather from the expression of how their specific experiences have solidified their beliefs. Such words are substantial not because we blindly accept the words of declaration from someone, but rather because their experience relates to our own experience, which pierces the soul with testimony. In sacrament meeting talks, Sunday School discussions, youth lessons, or other such venues, the strongest impact will arise from the specific and intentional application of gospel principles to real-life circumstances. Extending undue emphasis on expressions of certainty, in reality, only obscures the true purpose behind our mortal existence.

SCOTT SANDERSON {astro.solitario@gmail.com} is an aspiring writer who has begun composing articles on themes that are underrepresented within routine LDS discourse. This piece is the first of hopefully many that will explore issues of relevance to the modern Latter-day Saint. Sanderson lives in Washington, Utah, where he works as an assistant professor at Utah Tech University and a medical laboratory scientist (MLS) at Intermountain Health.