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True faith is not blind. Rather, true faith sees *and* overcomes her adversary.

Teaching Students to Deal with Questions and Doubts: A Perspective and a Pattern

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The Church Board of Education's 2019 "Guidelines for Strengthening Religious Education" include this new language among the "purposes" of religious education—to "*strengthen [students'] ability to find answers, resolve doubts, respond with faith, and give reason for the hope within them in whatever challenges they may face.*"[1]

Why do the Brethren feel we need this new guideline? President M. Russell Ballard told us why in his candid 2016 talk about teaching Latter-day Saint students in the internet age—a savvy, loving, and helpful message that deserves rereading. A key sample: "Today, what [our students] see on their mobile devices is likely to be faith-challenging as much as faith-promoting. Many of our young people are more familiar with Google than they are with the gospel." Therefore, "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. Gone are the days when students were protected from people who attacked the Church."[2]

We do need to help each other with this important but sensitive subject. Although Latter-day Saint young people show higher levels of Church activity than those in other religions, we still lose a significant share.[3] One large survey of local Church leaders found recently that nearly all of those leaders have family members or friends who have experienced some kind of faith crisis—and most of them think we haven't provided adequate information and training to help each other address such challenges.[4]

Marie and I share your passion for the youth of Zion. That's why we, like you, have been so distressed to watch at close range as the internet culture, despite its enormous blessings, has become a carrier of a kind of spiritual virus, infecting and disorienting too many younger—and older—Latter-day Saints.

Given that common concern, Dean Daniel Judd has invited us to share some ideas with you from our book *Faith Is Not Blind*,[5] as well as from our faithisnotblind.org podcast and research projects. We'd also like to share some of what we've learned from these projects about how to mentor students in "looking forward with an eye of faith" (Alma 32:40) when they confront unsettling questions.

Faith Is Not Blind: Origins and Approach

Origins

The perspective reflected in *Faith Is Not Blind* and its related projects had its genesis in a 1963 BYU religion class called "Your Religious Problems," which was taught by West Belnap, then BYU's dean of Religious Education. I met my wife Marie in that class. (Can you imagine your students in half a century still drawing actively on what they learned in your classroom? They just might.) Brother Belnap took the first class hour to share his own personal religious problem: "How can I obtain the gift of charity?" He was surprisingly frank, and what he shared about his search for charity was truly moving. Then he asked each of us to submit a short paper saying how we would resolve his question. That format became the pattern for each of us: pick a question that matters to you, do research on it, then lead a class discussion about it. Then we all wrote about how we'd resolve the concern.

The class was always open, compassionate, and faith-affirming—an edifying combination—even though the discussions included such mind-stretching topics as plural marriage, race and the priesthood, criticisms of the Book of Mormon, Church history, Joseph's teachings, Brigham's teachings,

and how to live the gospel more fully. Brother Belnap wanted us to find our own answers, but he knew just when to give us a helpful nudge.

Often after class, a few of us would keep talking out into the hallway and across the quad. Marie and I were both in that spontaneous little group, and our gospel conversations have continued ever since—culminating with our decision to write *Faith Is Not Blind* together.

If we could have lunch with each of you about today's typical faith-crisis issues (which we would enjoy doing, because we actually would like to hear your thoughts; and we wouldn't ask you to submit a paper; well . . . maybe we would!) and if you were to ask what we have learned in the last 57 years that might help your students with this topic, we would probably hand you a copy of *Faith Is Not Blind*. Then we'd explain that after prayerfully wrestling with various approaches to the book, we consciously chose not to probe much into the debates about specific Church history or other issues. We decided that the best we could offer those who are struggling, and those who want to help them, is *a fresh overall perspective and a pattern* for working through their own faith challenges. In that sense, the perspective you convey and your *attitude* about what happens in your classroom and in your counseling about these issues is probably more important than the details of what you say.

One reader of *Faith Is Not Blind* said the book isn't primarily an apologetic attempt to defend faith, even though our bedrock commitment to the Restoration is clear throughout it. This is because, as Clayton Christensen wrote in his review, *Faith Is Not Blind* is similar to what he did in his classroom teaching: "Instead of telling students *what* to think, I try to teach them *how* to think [so they] can come up with solutions on their own." So, he said, *Faith Is Not Blind* provides "a simple but powerful three-stage framework that you can apply on your own as you come across unexpected [faith] challenges."[6]

As I share the book's basic principles with you here, I hope to show how the process of *working through* questions and doubts can help us to *develop* our faith. However, we don't celebrate doubts in and of themselves; the end goal of discipleship is not to become a doubting Thomas. As Jacob Hess put it, some writers today try to "valorize doubt as a higher state of enlightenment compared to Church members who are supposedly not insightful enough to confront the truth with integrity." But, Hess writes, *Faith Is Not Blind* goes a different direction. It "gently but firmly" points the way *through* doubt "and beyond it" to "a clearing where the mountain pass opens up into a beautiful valley." It does this by creating a context where people can "navigate their

complexities with wisdom and calm"—a place where "questions may be metabolized—digested, processed enough to move forward, if not with their questions all resolved, then no longer weighing on their back heavily."[7]

The book also has an autobiographical feel to it, beginning with my own early navigations through uncertainty. When I was nineteen and about to leave on a mission, I was stuck on the difference between knowing and believing. I couldn't honestly say, "I know the gospel is true." I knew some people expected me to say those words. But, in good conscience I could only say, "I believe it's true." Yet I also believed my faith would grow toward knowledge—which it eventually and surely did, in all the ways Alma 32 said it could.

I have since decided that at that age, I didn't have the words to express my faith adequately. The distinctions among knowing, believing, doubting, and wondering are not trivial. But those distinctions are often unclear *because our experience is larger than our vocabulary*. And when our once-untroubled faith abruptly confronts questions that leave us speechless, even temporarily, our faith can seem not only blind, but dumb. Even our spiritual growing pains can make us wonder if something is wrong. But we probably just need more experience and a better vocabulary informed by that experience.

As time went on, I found that "knowing" and "doubting" are not the only alternatives. Nor is it enough to just decide if one is a "conservative" or a "liberal." Such polarizing contrasts not only don't help us, they often interfere with genuine spiritual progress. They can also keep parents and children, or leaders and Church members, from listening to and understanding each other. Too often, young people and other members ask sincere but too-skeptical questions—while their parents and leaders give them sincere but too-vague or too-rigid answers. So the book's purpose is to offer to anyone who has a faith challenge, but especially young people, some words, stories, and concepts that, we hope, describe a *pattern* that leads to confidence and trust in the Lord and His Church.

Our hearts go out to those whose faith becomes unsettled by information or people or experiences that seem to cast doubt on their beliefs. But encountering such surprises and uncertainties can actually be part of faith's natural growth process. We have lived through many such surprises, and we've found that working through such opposition is the only way to develop authentic, well-tested spiritual maturity. That is why the English poet John Milton could not "prize a *cloistered* virtue"—an untested, untried virtue that

"never sees her adversary."[8] True faith is not blind. Rather, true faith sees *and* overcomes her adversary.[9]

So our focus in *Faith Is Not Blind* is on how we can *learn* from our experiences with uncertainty and opposition, rather than being upset or disillusioned by them. We do care a great deal about the historical and intellectual issues that trouble some Church members, but we believe it helps most to step back and see the process of working through those issues as part of a larger process of both intellectual and spiritual development.

Many of you already help your students see through the lenses of such long-term perspectives. You already know how to help them navigate the naturally rough waters of adolescence and young adulthood. And with the language and insight of your own spiritual growth experiences, you can mentor them to see with the eye of faith for the rest of their lives.

Approach

Now let's look more specifically at the book's three-stage process for dealing with uncertainty. This model, which is the book's core concept, is described more fully in chapter 2, "The Simplicity beyond Complexity."[10]

When we're young, most of us tend see life in idealistic terms. As we grow and gain experience, however, we begin to see that there's a kind of "gap" between our idealistic assumptions and what often happens in real life—a natural tension between the ideals of the gospel and life's realities. Think of it as a gap between what *is* and what *ought* to be.

As time goes on, we tend to see more of the gap—perhaps we discover some human limitations in those who have been our heroes, like our parents or an admired friend or leader. Maybe an important prayer goes too long unanswered. Perhaps we run across puzzling new information about some unfamiliar incident in Church history. The MTC appropriately teaches a positive, idealistic vision of missionary work—but the reality of daily life in a strange country with a new language and an inexperienced companion can disappoint those high expectations. Because we are all human, nobody's "real" is unfailingly consistent with one's "ideal."

How can we deal with this "gap" in a productive way that helps us grow? The American judge Oliver Wendell Holmes gave us a framework for our three-stage pattern when he said, *"I would not give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity. But I would give my life for the simplicity on the other*

side of complexity." Holmes's insight suggests to us that well-tested spiritual maturity naturally develops along these lines.

Stage one is the "simplicity *before* complexity," when our faith is innocent and untested by experience. "Ye receive no witness," wrote Moroni, "until after the trial of your faith" (Ether 12:6). *Stage two* is "complexity," when we encounter a trial of our faith and the gap between the real and the ideal. Here we may struggle with many forms of uncertainty and opposition. *Stage three* is the "simplicity *beyond* complexity," when we learn from experience how to develop a settled, informed, "tried and true" perspective—a new simplicity more grounded and realistic than before.

Consider three examples. We once attended a fast and testimony meeting in the women's section of the Utah State Prison. One woman stood before her fellow inmates and said with tearful honesty, "When I was a little girl, I used to love to bear my testimony. I'd run up to the pulpit and say, 'I love my mom and dad. I know the gospel's true. Heavenly Father loves me. Jesus suffered for my sins.' Then I'd run back to sit by my mom and life was good. But now, after all these years, I *know* in a very different way. The *gospel is true.* Heavenly Father *loves me*. Jesus *suffered for my sins*. And now I know what those words really mean." She was discovering the simplicity beyond complexity.

At age eighteen, Holly was extremely active in the Church. Then someone convinced her that a certain doctrine was wrong, and that threw her so far off course that she resigned her Church membership. A few years later, her college roommate was taking the missionary lessons. Holly sat in. Her heart was touched, and she decided to pray for the first time in years. As soon as she said, "Heavenly Father," she began to cry, feeling a tender connection with the Lord that she came to call "the closeness." As that close feeling kept growing, her stubbornness softened into trust; and eventually Holly was rebaptized. She was finding the simplicity beyond complexity.

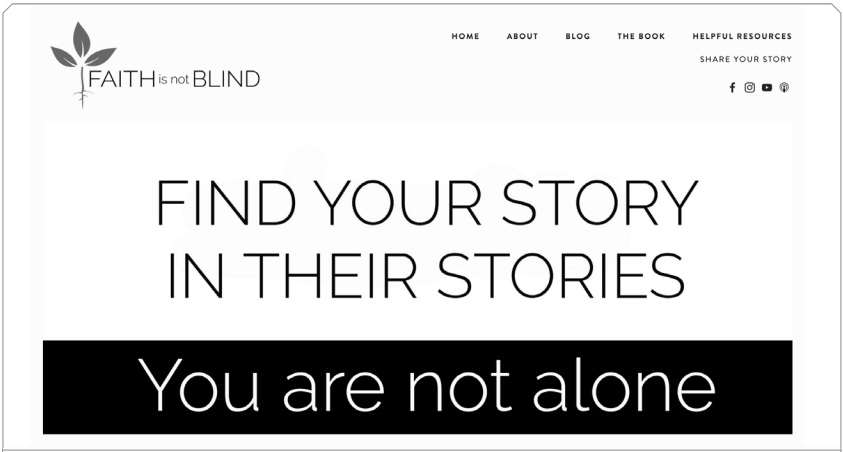
Adam and Eve's experiences follow this same pattern. In the Garden, they had agency, but their faith was innocent, not yet tested. They began to experience complexity as soon as they tasted the fruit—and the complexities mushroomed when they were cast into the thorns and tears of a sometimes brutal, mortal world. But eventually they discovered the meaning of faithfully dealing with all that opposition. When the angel came to teach them the plan of redemption and the center place of Christ's Atonement in that plan, Adam and Eve "got it"—they saw purpose in their Fall, in their anguish, and in their sacrifices. So Eve "heard all these things and was glad, saying:

Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the *joy* of our redemption" (Moses 5:11; emphasis added). She was discovering the simplicity beyond complexity.

As these experiences teach, a life of faith amidst opposition is intended to help our students and all the rest of us navigate our complexities, discover inspired solutions to our own problems, and thereby build our trust and confidence in the Lord and His Church. When we thus learn how to keep our own faith, our faith will keep us—as we discover "the peace of God, which passeth all understanding [and] shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

Mentoring Students: Prevention, Empathy, and Help

Even before publishing *Faith Is Not Blind*, we had the sinking realization that many of those we'd most like to reach don't read many books. They'd rather read a Facebook or Instagram post or watch a YouTube video. So we asked some real people to tell us about their real-life experiences with complexity. Then, encouraged and led by a few family and friends, we began recording these stories—which eventually became the faithisnotblind.org website, highlighted now by seventy filmed twenty-five-minute podcast interviews (more to come) with honest, engaging Latter-day Saints of many ages and backgrounds from across both the United States and Europe. (Free audio versions available under "faithisnotblind" wherever podcasts are found.)



Find blog accounts, podcast interviews, and helpful resources at faithisnotblind.org.

As we and our little team relistened to these interviews, some clear patterns and insights organically emerged—how faithful, normal Church members have navigated "complexities" of all kinds into the maturity of "the simplicity beyond complexity." I want to share some of our main findings now, as some of the illustrations within three categories that will, I hope, help you mentor your students—preventing harm, listening with empathy, and helping when possible. Much of what follows comes from young adults just like those you teach.

Mentoring through Prevention

Faithful students who are spiritually well-grounded *and* who recognize that questions are a normal part of their spiritual development are better prepared than other students to prevent faith crises and turn difficult challenges into faith-building experiences.

Regarding spiritual grounding, religion teachers, like doctors, try first to "do no harm."[11] That's why President J. Reuben Clark said, These youth are "seekers after truth[, and] doubt must not be planted in their hearts."[12] It's also why Elder Neal A. Maxwell was distressed about teachers who "fondle their doubts" in "the presence of Latter-day Saint students who [are] looking for spiritual mentoring."[13]

Moreover, most BYU students probably are not actively caught up in struggles with Church critics. So let's be cautious about making them wonder if the Church is a sinking ship or that their faith is inferior if they haven't had a faith crisis. The large majority come to your classes with a firm testimony about what President Clark called the two "essential fundamentals," that Jesus is the Christ and that Joseph is His Prophet. Probably only a minority of them will experience a genuine faith crisis, but nearly all will encounter other forms of complexity, opposition, and even trauma—unanswered prayers, hard marriages, no marriages, health problems, financial problems, and so on. And many will have family members and friends who struggle with faith issues.

That said, students who don't yet have their own deeply rooted testimony of the fundamentals are perhaps the most vulnerable. Much of the battle over anti-Church topics has now shifted from academic, research-based arguments (where Church scholars have established an impressive record)[14] to personal and online proselytizing—often by aggressive and deceptive former

Church members who are well-funded, who effectively use social media, and who prey especially on the relatively underinformed and ungrounded.

Good parents teach their children to live the commandments and to develop their own well-informed testimony, especially in their own relationship with God. Without that anchor, when young people confront a faith-jolting experience, they may ask, for the first time, do I really believe this? Some will then work hard to build their own private relationship with God. But for others, aggressive anti-Church arguments can collapse their fragile faith like a shell built around a vacuum.

For example, one young man had parents who didn't teach or model authentic *private* religious behavior for him. In their family, "Church" was only about performance-oriented *public* religious behavior. He grew up feeling pressured into Church meetings, seminary, a mission, and a temple marriage—but only because his parents pushed him, and they complained if he didn't respond. His parents also suffered from unfortunate dysfunctions that made them (and, by natural extension, other Latter-day Saint parents) seem to him like hypocrites.

Now he's in an unnerving midlife crisis, and he finds himself shatteringly vulnerable to the whole list of anti-Restoration arguments. A Latter-day Saint therapist tells me that, in his experience, this pattern is not uncommon now, especially in Utah families. When people who have only such a limited background leave the Church, they aren't really leaving "the Church" or the restored gospel; rather, they are leaving a superficial imitation—what one friend calls an "impoverished, depleted" version—of the Church, the only version they really knew.

You will find many natural opportunities to help your students—especially the spiritually malnourished ones—to learn what it means to develop their own *private* relationship with the Lord, their own full-blown experiment with Alma's word. People value what they discover more than they value what they are told. Help them *discover* Him for themselves. It's been striking to learn from those seventy podcast interviews that the single most important factor in seeing stronger faith emerge from various complexities is whether one has, or develops, a close personal relationship—a "connection"— with the Lord. That's what Holly called "the closeness." It was the game changer for her.

Sometimes the complexity itself can be the catalyst to find that close connection, *if* people are meek enough to allow it. As the pioneer handcart

survivor said, "We became acquainted with [God] in our extremities. [And] the price we paid to [know Him] was a privilege to pay."[15] Not all trauma survivors would feel that way. As Elder Maxwell said, "Experience can either soften or harden doubts [and perhaps trauma], depending on the person's supply of meekness."[16]

In conjunction with our *Faith Is Not Blind* podcast and website, Sarah d'Evegnee, Eric d'Evegnee, and Jacob Hess are also analyzing forty written "stories of return" by people who overcame their personal faith crisis enough to return fully to the Church. The complete findings of their analysis— and the stories themselves—will be posted on faithisnotblind.org, probably in the second half of 2020. They are identifying the most common themes and patterns in the experiences of people who return, which will help others with their journeys through religious complexity—and the teachers, leaders, parents, and friends who support them. Among their key preliminary findings thus far, they report that "*while the stories reflect numerous and widely varying consequential moments and emotions, one's experience with the Divine reflects the single most important hinge point in all the stories*."[17]

Another significant source of prevention is to teach students that hard questions, opposition, and complexities of all kinds are normal and natural—and often enable genuine learning. For example, one of the main themes to emerge from the seventy *Faith Is Not Blind* podcast interviews is that

> being taught beforehand about complexity rather than being surprised by it helps prevent crises and can foster progression and an attitude of appreciation for the richness of history and doctrine. Those who'd been taught this perspective saw their doubts and questions as part of a normal, healthy process rather than being upset or ashamed by them. Often they had a mentor (a parent, leader, or teacher) who taught them this understanding from an early age. These people were actually able to nurture their faith and enjoy the developmental process. [For examples, see the podcasts with Tyler, Bill, Marcus, and Sarah.][18]

The interviews also revealed that some had believed that if they really had "faith," they should also have a "perfect" or "completely certain" testimony. Therefore, these people

> tended to have an "all or nothing" attitude. So when they experienced any uncertainty or serious questions, they became completely unmoored. Many of them referred to this as a "faith crisis" because of the way they viewed the term "faith." And some felt they couldn't stay or be active in the Church unless they were completely certain in their testimony. [But when they learned] to

> broaden the way they perceived "faith" or a "testimony," they were able to work through their doubts and allow themselves to have a dynamic faith that grew and developed. [See Kristine, David L, Zach, Jason, Ryan.][19]

Much like the use of an inoculation to help build immunity in children, our interviews show that those who were taught difficult yet age-appropriate concepts by parents or good teachers were much better prepared when any "complexity" later arose. For example, Bishop Kevin Knight from the Oakland California Stake recently asked the nine hundred members of the faithisnotblind Facebook group for insights to help him lead an assigned discussion among the bishops in his stake on how to counsel "youth who have doubts."[20] Samples from the replies:

> When I first started having doubts, I felt so much guilt. I thought that I wasn't using enough faith. But I've since learned that my questions are what helped me build stronger faith. Questions are beautiful opportunities to grow and become stronger.

> Truth will stand up to questioning. It won't weaken. The key is having them feel comfortable coming to parents or Church leaders with their doubts, rather than Google.

> I would tell them that having doubts is normal. Doubting is an important part of the path to a true, strong, unshakeable testimony.

And Bishop Knight responded: "That's a key point—[to] ensure our youth know that questions—even doubts—are normal and should be talked about openly with parents, leaders, and friends. Kind of like how it used to be common not to talk with children about sex and now it's well understood that we need to."

In today's world, there really are some similarities between talking with our children about sex and talking with our students about criticisms of the Church. On both subjects, the internet now offers totally unfiltered "adult" versions that "tell all" of the supposed but often false "secrets" that aren't appropriate to discuss in classroom settings. One other aspect of "prevention," then, is asking when and how to prepare students to react when they first encounter sensitive, faith-related information.

We now have a superb model for answering this question—*Saints,* the new narrative-based, official history of the Church. Written by gifted Latter-day Saint historians and writers, it weaves reliable, readable, and well-documented accounts about many issues into natural, matter-of-fact key

stories from Church history. On topics ranging from multiple accounts of the First Vision and translating the Book of Mormon to seer stones and plural marriage, *Saints* puts specific issues into a broad, understandable framework—without giving the issues undue attention or taking them out of context. Then if a reader wants to know more, clear and authoritative footnotes point the way for further inquiry. It also helps that the new Foundations of the Restoration class taught in institute classes and at BYU treats Church history more thoroughly than in times past, providing further background for topics and issues that could otherwise be a surprise to students.

After we teach clear and age-appropriate contexts of this kind, we encourage students to ask questions—any sincere questions. That's a good reason for having footnotes. And whether we discuss the question in class or in private depends on the question and on the student. In either case, we are matter-of-factly open to discussion.

Some teachers may hesitate to respond to difficult questions, but we never need to say more than we know. In fact, it may benefit some of our students to learn how we have worked through our own questions without always finding absolute certainty about the answers. And we don't need to be experts on Church history and related subjects, although it will help your more thoughtful and inquisitive students to sense that their religion teacher at least reads and listens well enough to have a good general sense about the issues of the day.

Yet again, our perspective and our attitude about what we're discussing are usually more important than what we say. And if students sense that we seem defensive or afraid to talk with them, they probably won't want to talk to us anyway. As President Ballard counseled Church religion teachers, we should

> know the content in [the Gospel Topics] essays[21] like you know the back of your hand. If you have questions about them, then please ask someone who has studied them and understands them. [Also] become familiar with the Joseph Smith Papers website and the Church history section on LDS.org and other resources by faithful LDS scholars.[22]

Church members naturally expect the Church's religion teachers to be better informed about these subjects than typical local leaders, especially since some data suggest that the Gospel Topics essays still aren't well known among local leaders, let alone among Church members.[23] And as President Ballard added, "You can help students by teaching them what it means to

combine study and faith as they learn. Teach them by modeling this skill and approach in class."

At the same time, religion teachers are not therapists. Some students, sensing that you are approachable, may need appropriate boundaries—because those who have long-term problems, like addictions or disorders, may take more time than you can give. And they will probably be better off talking with a professional therapist or their bishop. Meanwhile, you can lead them to the Church website, which offers them very helpful material on a variety of tough challenges.

Moreover, religion teachers can't all be actual experts in Church history research simply because developing informed historical expertise is so demanding. And do-it-yourself approaches are as prone to possible weakness in history as they are in medicine, law, or engineering. Jed Woodworth, managing historian for *Saints* in the Church History Department, put it this way: "Many have tried to become experts on Church history and have found their efforts to answer on historical terms falling flat." But "the truth of the Restored Gospel does not hinge on research. Rather, testimony is established through *experience*."[24] Knowing well the broad outlines and key events of Church history is valuable and even inspiring. But unguided tours of deeper research waters can be problematic—not because one will then know too much, but because one is likely to know too little to evaluate evidence, sources, and context adequately.

It is still true, however, that the Church's rich resources in Church history have never been more open or more complete than they are now, and we should encourage and guide students as they pursue historical topics that interest them. Interestingly, the *Faith Is Not Blind* podcast interviews showed us that those who had specific questions about Church history or scientific issues navigated their research experiences more positively if they had learned in advance not to be surprised when they discovered that the evidence they find will not always be conclusive and is usually subject to varying interpretations and contextual patterns. And those who wanted to do their own historical research had more satisfying and more reliable experiences when they had a trusted, qualified mentor with whom they could discuss their research methods and questions (see podcasts with David P, Janiece, Jeff, Ryan, and Jason).[25]

Mentoring with Empathy

While all of your students need your listening ear, the ones who are honestly struggling with doubts and questions desperately need your true compassion. In several of the podcast interviews, we learned how disheartening it was to have family members, friends, Church leaders, or teachers judge those with sincere questions for their "lack of faith," sometimes making them feel misunderstood, unloved, or unwelcome—or all three.

Many students will have questions or hear rumors they find unsettling enough that they need help. However, our young adult friends tell us that some of their friends in distress probably wouldn't take their questions to a Church leader or religion teacher. Why? For one thing, in today's culture they often share their generation's general distrust of institutions, especially religious ones, and the people they perceive as representing those institutions. Also, as one young friend said, they worry about being "judged and lectured to"—which tells us, even if overstated, that adult leaders and teachers would benefit from extending greater empathy.

In the meantime, those in need often just talk with friends who may be as uninformed as they are, which only compounds their concern—sometimes in a contagious way. And then they may go to the internet together, without needed perspective or guidance, and the virus spreads.

Studies and interviews among Latter-day Saints who have experienced a variety of faith crises confirm these impressions. As Sarah d'Evegnee found in her podcast interviews,

> Many who shared their doubts with friends and family didn't find a sincere listening ear; rather, they were met with dismissive attitudes and immediate efforts to "fix" their issues. But some had friends and family who extended empathy, honestly listening rather than immediately trying to give advice. These tended to stay in the Church rather than choosing to leave. [See, for example, the *Faith Is Not Blind* podcast interviews with Kristine, Kevin, Jana, Dan, Loretta, and Casey.]

Moreover,

> Many felt they were doing something "wrong" if they had serious questions and doubts. Those who were able to stay in the Church seemed to need added assurance from a leader or family member to know they could stay without yet having a "strong" testimony of complete certainty. Their expectation that they or their testimony had to be "perfect" was a major catalyst for the pain and the discomfort they experienced. Simply knowing that staying in

> the Church was possible, even when they had doubts, helped them stay. [See interviews with Janae, Jordan, Emily C, Emma, and Alyson.]

As Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf said, "I know of no sign on the doors of our meetinghouses that says, 'Your testimony must be this tall to enter.'"[26]

David Ostler found through his surveys and interviews with people experiencing a faith crisis that they were often unwilling to share their problems with local Church leaders because they believed the leaders simply wouldn't "get it." And even when they did talk with their leaders, many found the leaders to be defensive and critical, rather than really hearing them out. Some leaders also wrongly assumed that the doubter's main problems were not praying, not reading the scriptures, and not obeying Church standards—even when they were already doing these things. These attitudes tend to push the questioning person away from further discussion. So Ostler's advice to leaders quotes Stephen Covey: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood."[27]

Other research shows that, even when religious topics aren't involved,

> non-judgmental sharing of experiences is a far more powerful way of changing minds than either trying to shame the other person [or] trying to convince them through structured arguments. . . . Advocates often call out unacceptable views, which can intensify people's resistance, or they make their case through talking points [which] has little effect. We found that simply listening and sharing a relevant personal story successfully lessened people's resistance and increased their openness.[28]

One BYU student told us that religion teachers and campus bishops sometimes "don't understand the seriousness and depth of emotion that questioning or ex-members experience. It is one of the most intense, traumatic experiences, full of genuine grieving, [uprooting] a childhood of understanding, a community, [and] family members." Yet "apologists" often "defend the faith" with such superficial responses as "don't be so quick to believe the first wrong wind that blows." Such dismissive attitudes from authority figures may reinforce fears that the Church doesn't care, can't be trusted, or has hidden information—and a loss of trust is often a much bigger concern than specific historical or doctrinal questions. If we can take unsettled students seriously and "listen loud" with genuine empathy, that sends a needed signal of trust.

Jed Woodworth, whose experience as a Church historian has led him into many such discussions, has also learned why two apparently similar people may react to the same new information very differently—one may be disturbed by it while the other welcomes it. Why?

> The intellectual problem presented to us should be placed within the larger life context unique to the person to whom we are ministering. Another person, when presented with the same information, does not feel the wound the doubter feels so keenly, underscoring the importance of understanding the particular life course. Our listening should seek to understand why *this person* finds the information damaging. Why is resilience not a possibility for them?
>
> Recovering the life context often involves the discovery of other unhealed wounds: harmful family dynamics, discouraging missionary experiences, clashes with institutional authority, naïve views of Church history, idealized views of prophets, sin, lack of recent spiritual experience, shame or anger stemming from the Church's position on social issues, or other kinds of disappointment.[29]

So, he concludes, if the questioner doesn't feel understood in his or her personal context, that only compounds the institutional trust issue. And unless a person feels heard, nothing else we do or say will matter much. Finally, only after a mentor helps the person through what may be an extensive spiritual healing process can the original intellectual issues be reframed in new and acceptable terms.

Mentoring with Help

Once a student develops enough trust with a mentor to feel safe in expressing his or her deepest concerns, it may be timely for the mentor to offer a few perspectives, patterns, and suggestions—not as edicts, but as ideas worth considering.

Religion teachers and bishops pray to find the sensitive balance between their obvious but often unspoken tie to the Church and their deep, authentic interest in a young person as a person, not a project. I know of one young single adult who was at first intimidated and suspicious of what she assumed was her new YSA bishop's "policeman" role. But after he found low-key ways to let her come to know him, she finally felt safe enough to share her secrets and ask her scary questions. After a few visits, she said, "He treated me the way I think the Savior would have treated me." And permanent personal blessings followed.

In such safe contexts, a religion teacher's institutional role is clearly a strength because when the student comes to trust the teacher, he or she is implicitly trusting the Church—the flip side of losing institutional trust when some other Church leader appears to trigger a negative complexity. Moreover, Church members do expect religion teachers to understand and be able to explain (as distinguished from simply asserting a conclusion) a historical or

other controversy in the light most favorable to the Church, even when the lack of clear and conclusive historical evidence allows only a *plausible*—that is, a *reasonable*—faithful interpretation.

When discussing such cases, it may help if students can learn why the Lord deliberately refrains from providing so much overwhelming evidence about all kinds of questions (even about whether He exists) that we feel *compelled* to believe only one way. He wants not only to preserve our agency; He also wants to help us *learn* from needing to make crucial choices. As written in *Faith Is Not Blind*,

> We can't "prove" enough about such questions to answer them with sure certainty. So the Lord wants us to choose where to repose our trust, through a demanding, searching, personal process that connects us to Him—and with what all of our experience teaches us about whether we can trust Him.
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> The Lord often puts us in such places, where we're not forced by the circumstances to believe, even as He then invites us to "be believing." For "as many as *received* him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that [choose to] believe on his name" (John 1:5, 11-12). Why? Because something happens to people who [choose to] receive Him. They learn. Following his will changes them. Our uncoerced choices set in motion the process of becoming like Him.
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> The Lord sees an infinitely bigger picture than we do. If we want the blessing of that infinite perspective, we give Him and His Prophet the benefit of the doubt—which is ultimately a trust issue. And only if we extend our trust is He able to help us learn what He wants us to learn. We value what we *discover* far more than we value what we're *told*.[30]

So, after we weigh the plausible evidence for both sides of an important question, what usually tips the scale is not simply the weight of the evidence, but our own choice. As Terryl and Fiona Givens have said, God designed this reality because what we choose to believe and "embrace, to be responsive to, is the purest reflection of what we love."[31]

This same perspective will help protect students against the claims of anti-Church critics who unjustifiably assert that they base what they say only on "objective" evidence. As Jacob Hess has written, the evidence these critics present isn't as objective as they claim; rather, they are only presenting their particular interpretation of the evidence. But after piling up a "growing aggregation of disconcerting evidence," they teach their listeners to put these uncertainties on their shelf of unanswered questions—until the pile is heavy enough that the shelf breaks.

However, "it's not the evidence that broke your shelf. It's the intensity of suspicion [the critics have created] *around* the evidence." The critics will ask whether we have the integrity to follow their version of the truth. But given the inconclusive nature of each piece of the evidence they have alleged, the real issue is whose interpretation of the evidence is most trustworthy; that is, in whose advice do we have the most confidence in the midst of unavoidable uncertainties?[32]

Incidentally, "the burden of proof" or the standards of proof used in criminal cases, civil cases, and other cases in our legal system offers a useful comparative tool when we want to understand how much evidence, and what kind, should be enough to "prove" (or "disprove") a historical claim. In addition to the standard outcomes of "true" and "false," what does a jury (or we) do when, even after much effort, the real answer is—"we can't tell for sure"? That's when the legal standard about which side should receive "the benefit of the doubt" can decide a case, and lawsuits deal constantly with that problem. For an understandable description of how the legal system's approach can help us weigh evidence about Church history, watch or listen to the *Faith Is Not Blind* podcast by "Bill"—Bill Barnett, a lawyer in Denver.

Moreover, one of the most common arguments made by anti-Church critics is that when they learned new information (at least it was new to them) about an incident in Church history, they often claimed that Church leaders had covered up the complete story—or that the Church had simply lied—in order to protect the leaders' power and control. We discuss this issue in *Faith Is Not Blind*[33] but add just one other comment here.

Over the past generation or two, our culture has gradually changed in significant ways, blending with and perhaps causing similar changes in academic and professional standards. Some of this is simply generational change. And on such complex topics as LGBT issues, the surrounding culture has undergone massive changes while the Church's teachings are just what they've always been. But those without that historical perspective can understandably wonder why the Church doesn't align its teachings to be in tune with the times. On the general topic of how cultural changes affect the way history is written, here is Jacob Hess's informal summary of his essay, "Did the Church Lie to Me?" His original article is cited in the footnote.

> Condemnations of historians of the past from the present represent a remarkable ethnocentrism—applying our standards of share-all, reveal-all (including the ugly stuff) therapeutic culture . . . to a generation who came home from

> war and *didn't want to talk about the awfulness* . . . a generation that witnessed painful abuse, and often (tragically) didn't want to talk about it (at least not as we do today) . . . and yes, who wrote histories about America and the Church that focused more on the positive elements, with less acute attention on the messy, harder elements. Should that really surprise us so much? And even if it does, might we recognize the leap we're making to impose a narrative of deception on top of it all? ("My American history teacher lied to me too!")[34]

Those whom we interviewed often told us that, after prayerfully weighing all of the plausible evidence about hard questions, if the available evidence couldn't conclusively settle the outcome, they learned to give the Lord and His Church the benefit of the doubt. Having done all they could, they deliberately chose to give their trust not only to the Lord and His Prophet; they were also giving it to the gospel and its power—the combined personal assurances from all the Latter-day Saints that the Lord keeps His promises. In all their paradoxes and uncertainties, the Saints reflect those assurances in the shining eyes of a million personal discoveries.

> It will strengthen us to trust the hard-won personal testimonies from these thousands upon thousands who have read, thought about, and prayed over the Book of Mormon, year after year; who have served missions of faith and sacrifice all over the world; who have intimately felt the Lord's influence, His closeness to them; who have seen the promises of the Redemption bear sweet fruit in their lives and the lives of those closest to them; who have often told the Joseph Smith story to their children, their friends, and to strangers—and felt the spirit of its simple, pure truth. We "are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1).
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> These are they who have grown beyond complexity to the calm trust of informed simplicity; who trust prophetic leadership not as the outcome of cunning calculations, but because they have discovered the same convictions and feelings in their own souls. They have found their own answers, even if not yet all of the answers they seek. They know enough that they cast not away their confidence. They are not of them who draw back (see Heb. 10:35–39).
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> "These are they which came out of great tribulation [and complexity], and have washed their robes . . . white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:14).
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> "To him that *overcometh* will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame" (Rev. 3:21).[35]

True faith is not blind. Rather, true faith sees *and* overcomes.

Conclusion

What an opportunity you have—to prepare your students to turn their complexities into learning opportunities (prevention), to show real compassion

to the struggling ones (empathy), and to assist their navigation of turbulent spiritual waters (help). I know that your students, who now include our grandchildren, want and need your mentoring. We hope that you, in your own way, might do for them and our grandchildren what West Belnap did for us. What did he do?

West once said to me about BYU religion teachers, "Some of them have it in their heads, and some have it in their hearts. But it's best when they have it both places." West had it in both places. Educated at a leading divinity school, he understood both history and the modern culture. He had unusually good sense about how to read a book—or a person. He knew a sound argument from a weak one. Yet, like Nephi, he also delighted in the scriptures, and he yearned to understand and live the deep things of God. He was honest and had good judgment, and he knew and loved the Brethren. He embodied what he taught, mentoring us both to think incisively and to become true disciples. What made his teaching so effective? He

- required critical, constructive thinking and reflective writing;
- encouraged us to search out our own answers, but pointed us to reliable sources;
- asked us tough questions, jogging us to think clearly and pray earnestly;
- gave us intellectual or spiritual nudges when we needed them;
- allowed us to struggle in our seeking and encouraged us when we needed it;
- assured us that the answers to our questions would come—in the Lord's timing.

In order to teach us the pattern of how to ask honest religious questions and to seek responsible and Spirit-confirmed answers, in our first class he shared his Jacob's ladder wrestle to answer his own religious question—"how can I obtain the gift of charity?" As he told us how his faith had developed from his childhood on, it was soon clear that his question was not just a matter of intellectual curiosity. He candidly shared some of his most personal spiritual experiences from his two-way relationship with the Lord. We sensed that for him, talking about one's "religious problems" is a faith-affirming and weighty process that requires complete, mature openness.

He finally told us how puzzled he was that he didn't feel he had been able to obtain charity—the pure love of Christ. He knew what it was. He knew

everything the scriptures taught about it—such as how it reflects the divine nature and that God has promised it to "all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ" (Moroni 7:48). Yet, he meekly told us, despite years of trying to live as pure a daily life as he knew how, the gift had eluded him. We sensed the poignant sincerity of his desire.

Only a few years later, West died in his mid-forties from a prolonged and terribly painful brain cancer. At his funeral, Elder Harold B. Lee spoke of his friendship with West. He said that when the brain tumor persisted after two surgeries, West told him the pain was so unbearable and the prognosis so dim that he wondered if he shouldn't forego further treatment and let himself go quickly. But Elder Lee counseled him,

> West, how do you and I know but what the suffering you're going through is a refining process by which [the] obedience necessary to exaltation is made up, [perhaps] greater than all the rest of your life. Live it true to the end, and we'll bless you and pray to God that pains beyond your endurance will not be permitted by a merciful God.[36]

West followed that counsel, accepting an unknowable degree of suffering before finally being released in death.

As we listened to Elder Lee, we couldn't help remembering that classroom discussion about charity a few years earlier. As we thought of West's heartfelt desire to be Christ's consecrated disciple, it was as though he were still teaching us. He couldn't have known how dear the price for charity might be. Had his excruciating illness somehow led him to his heart's desire? We couldn't know, but we kept wondering—maybe it isn't possible for us to have Christ's charity without in some way, physically or otherwise, entering into "the fellowship of His sufferings" (Philippians 3:10). After all, the charity and the suffering are but two sides of the same, single reality—His love for humankind is fully intertwined with the exquisite pain of what Elder Maxwell called Christ's "earned empathy."

With his head and his heart, West Belnap taught us that sincere religious questions deserve to be taken seriously—and that answers that develop our souls do come. The motivating quest to answer those questions with our eyes and our hearts wide open can have eternal consequences. West taught us that faith in Jesus Christ is not blind. RE

Notes

1. Church Educational System, "Guidelines for Strengthening Religious Education in Institutions of Higher Education" (unpublished document, 12 June 2019).

2. M. Russell Ballard, "The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21st Century" (address to CES Religious Educators, Salt Lake Tabernacle, 26 February 2016).

3. John Gee, *Saving Faith* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2020), 20–21, 289.

4. David B. Ostler, *Bridges: Ministering to Those Who Question* (Sale Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2019), 14–16.

5. Bruce C. Hafen and Marie K. Hafen, *Faith Is Not Blind* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018).

6. Clayton Christensen, review of *Faith Is Not Blind*, by Bruce C. and Marie K. Hafen, *Deseret News National Edition*, 20 February 2019.

7. Jacob Z. Hess, email to Bruce C. Hafen, 9 April 2020.

8. John Milton, *Areopagitica* (1644).

9. The language in these last few paragraphs is slightly adapted from *Faith Is Not Blind*, chapter 1.

10. A free e-copy is available at https://deseretbook.com/Faith-Is-Not-Blind-Chapter-2.

11. Hippocratic Oath taken by medical students preparing to practice medicine.

12. J. Reuben Clark Jr., "The Charted Course of the Church in Education" (address to seminary and institute of religion leaders, Aspen Grove, Utah, 8 August 1938).

13. Bruce C. Hafen, *A Disciple's Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 166.

14. See, for example, from two evangelical scholars speaking to their colleagues in 1996 after their visit to BYU: "At the academic level, the Evangelicals are losing the debate with the Mormons. We are losing the battle and do not know it. In recent years the sophistication and erudition of LDS apologetics has risen considerably while Evangelical responses have not." Carl Mosser and Paul Owen, "Mormon Apologetic, Scholarship and Evangelical Neglect: Losing the Battle and Not Knowing It?," *Trinity Journal* (1998): 179–205, quoted in Hafen, *Disciple's Life*, 512–13, along with the more complete context.

15. Francis Webster, quoted in James E. Faust, "The Refiner's Fire," *Ensign*, May 1979.

16. Neal A. Maxwell, *That Ye May Believe* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 191–92.

17. Jacob Z. Hess, email message to Bruce Hafen, 12 April 2020. For a good description of how a relationship with God helps with faith challenges, see/hear the podcast with Espen Amundsen.

18. Sarah d'Evegnee, email message to Bruce Hafen, 12 April 2020.

19. d'Evegnee, email message to Hafen, 12 April 2020.

20. Faith Is Not Blind Facebook Group post, 17 November 2019.

21. In 2013–14 the Church posted eleven new Gospel Topics Essays on churchofjesus christ.org, providing thorough, well-documented articles on many of the topics that had attracted the most interest and visibility by anti-Church websites, podcasts, and blogs—such as plural marriage, race and the priesthood, gender, the Mountain Meadows Massacre, Heavenly Mother, Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon, and the Book of Abraham.

22. Ballard, "Opportunities and Responsibilities."

23. Ostler, *Bridges*, 29–31, 136–38. In seeking a remedy for this lack of awareness, David Ostler's own home stake organized a successful weeknight institute class devoted just to these essays. It was taught by a mature and well-qualified instructor and attendance was voluntary (pp. 137–38).

24. Jed Woodworth, email message to Bruce Hafen, 7 February 2019.

25. d'Evegnee, email message to Bruce Hafen, 12 April 2020.

26. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Receiving a Testimony of Light and Truth," *Ensign*, November 2014, 22.

27. Ostler, *Bridges*, x–xii, 6, 42–44.

28. Mike Cummings, "Study Finds Non-judgmental Approach Can Reduce Prejudice," *Yale News*, 7 February 2020, at https://news.yale.edu/2020/02/07/study-finds-non-judgmental-personal-approach-can-reduce-prejudice.

29. Woodworth, email message to Hafen, 7 February 2019.

30. Hafen and Hafen, *Faith Is Not Blind*, 122.

31. Terryl L. Givens and Fiona Givens, *Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book 2014), 144.

32. Jacob Z. Hess, "It Wasn't the Evidence That Broke Your Shelf," *Meridian Magazine*, 3 December 2019.

33. See Hafen and Hafen, *Faith Is Not Blind,* 19–21, 29–34.

34. Hess, email message to Hafen, 9 April 2020. See Jacob Z. Hess, "Did the Church Lie to Me?" *Mindfully Mormon* (blog), 2 April 2015, https://mindfullymormon.org/2015/04/02/did-the-church-lie-to-me.

35. Excerpts from Hafen and Hafen, *Faith Is Not Blind*, 127–28.

36. From tape transcription of funeral, as quoted in Hafen, *Disciple's Life*, 60.