

My Search for Truth

Introduction

Truth is a light that brightens our path.

I want to live with a loving God in the Celestial Kingdom, surrounded by my family and posterity, ever increasing in truth, power, knowledge, and perfection. Could anything be more wonderful? I love the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I owe so much to the Church. It has provided me with confidence and a belief that I and every other person are children of God. I have basked in the love of a divine Savior who knows my name and believes I am important. The church has given me a purpose in my life, a purpose in my marriage, and a purpose in my family.

The only problem is: I struggle deeply with how true the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is. There is much in both doctrine and history that is troubling and implausible to me.

Make no mistake, this has been the most painful journey of my life. It means questioning treasured beliefs, doubting Church leaders who I respect, and causing real emotional pain to those who cherish more than my own life. It is incredibly tempting to just fake my concerns and live a lie. However, I cannot. I want to choose the right, and I cannot choose the right if I don't know the truth. I must search for truth, no matter how painful, no matter the consequence.

I need the truth to brighten my path.

The Book of Mormon contains a promise that if I read the book and ask God if it is true, then he will reveal its truthfulness by the power of the Holy Ghost¹. Despite years of pleading with a truly sincere heart, absolute real intent, and faith in Christ, I have not received an answer to my prayers. Why is that?

Ultimately, the church does not need to make logical sense. I recognize my limited power of reasoning, and that "God's ways are not my ways." An omnipotent God need not follow any laws of physics or logic. If this is the case, then so be it. I will "trust in the Lord with all my heart, and lean not on [my] own understanding." However, in absence of revelation from God, I am left with nothing but my limited power of reasoning to find the best way forward.

This essay is an attempt to document my journey. My intent is not to tear down the faith of anyone who reads this, but to explain clearly to my loved ones how I got to where I am.

Foundational Question

The question I seek an answer to is this:

"Is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints the one and only true, living church on the face of the earth?"

¹ Moroni 10:3-5

If this assertion is true, then the doctrines taught in the church are true. Jesus is the Christ. We lived before coming to earth and will be resurrected after we die. Families can be together forever. Life on earth has a known purpose!

If this assertion is false, then I must seek elsewhere.

Why Haven't I Received an Answer?

Critical to answering the foundational question is knowing if the Book of Mormon is true. I have never received an answer about the Book of Mormon. There are various reasons I might not have received an answer:

My motives were imperfect. Nobody's intent is perfect, and it is impossible to know anyone else's motives. The intent of my prayers has always been because I want to be a part of God's great work and build up his kingdom. I have never asked with the intent to bring down the church or hurt anyone.

It wasn't God's will. For whatever reason, God might not want me to know the truth yet. If that is the case then I will be faithful to the light and knowledge he has given me. I will do the best with what I have.

His answer was "yes, but not yet." It's a possibility, but this is not distinguishable from no answer at all.

I didn't believe hard enough.² I do not know the exact threshold of acceptable faith I must have before I can receive an answer. While my faith is certainly lagging now, I did have enough faith to leave my family, sacrifice two years of my life, and live in a dangerous, South American country to knock on thousands of doors to spread his word. I loved my mission, and I did serve for altruistic reasons.

I am too wicked. I am not a perfect man. At the same time, I have been legitimately worthy to hold a temple recommend for almost 2 decades, and do not have any intention of breaking any of the commandments.

There's a life lesson I have to learn. I truly hope I will learn whatever lesson God is trying to teach me. By not answering me though, I am left to my own devices to best determine truth.

I have received an answer, but I either refuse to acknowledge it or don't recognize it. This might be true, but I stand by my claim that I have not received any answer that wasn't ambiguous.

God doesn't jump through hoops and perform! He does promise that if I lack wisdom, he will grant it liberally, if I ask with real intent and faith in Christ. My faith in Christ has wavered recently, but this was not always the case and I never received an answer then. I don't expect God to part the Red Sea for me, nor am I searching for a miracle.

God is there but isn't a loving God and just doesn't care. If this were the case, it would be as helpful as him not existing at all.

² Mormon 9:20 - And the reason why he ceaseth to do miracles among the children of men is because that they dwindle in unbelief, and depart from the right way, and know not the God in whom they should trust.

God does not answer because the Book of Mormon is not true. After 36 years of life, pleading on almost a daily basis, I must contemplate the possibility that maybe I have not received an answer because Moroni's promise is false.

Why do I need an answer to the foundational question?

If the church is not true, I want to know! My choices are based on my beliefs. The better I understand the truth, the more deliberately I can live my life.

The various answers to the foundational question will lead me down very different paths. The path I take should be based in truth. I don't want it to be a random choice.

How do I get an answer to the foundational question?

How do we know the truth about anything with absolute surety?

It is possible that I am a brain in a vat floating in a void of space living a virtual reality. There could be wires plugged into my brain sending me all kinds of signals. When I see something with my own eyes, it is really just probes poking my brain to perceive this reality. When I feel a raindrop roll off my hand or cry during a sad movie, it is really just a wire feeding chemicals to my brain.

This is absolutely ridiculous. There is no reason to think that I am a brain in a vat floating in the void of space. Despite the ridiculousness of it though, there is no way to prove it false either. There is no evidence that can discredit the theory that I am a brain floating in a vat. In pondering the brain in a vat problem in the 1500s, a Frenchman named Descartes came to the conclusion that the only thing we can be certain of is that we exist! "I think therefore I am" he famously wrote.

The question is altered: *How can we be 100% convinced that anything else is true with absolute certainty?* We can't! So how can I ever get an answer to the foundational question?

I must perform a risk analysis, consider every possibility, and then take action on what I *believe*. This belief could be so strong that for many things I could say that "I know." For example, I believe so strongly that $1+1=2$, that I have little qualm proclaiming that "I *know* it is true." For the purposes of this essay, when I talk about knowing, what I mean is strongly believing.

Naval Officers, before we do any kind of operation, perform a risk analysis. We do not know exactly what will happen. We try and identify the risks, assess their likelihood and severity, mitigate them, and decide if the benefit derived from the operation is worth the potential risk with mitigations³.

³ Blaise Pascal famously did this with belief in God https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pascal%27s_Wager

Likelihood	Near Certain	Low	Medium	High	High	High
	Highly Likely	Low	Medium	Medium	High	High
	Likely	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	High
	Unlikely	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Medium
	Remote	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
		Negligible	Minor	Marginal	Critical	Catastrophic
		Consequence				

Salvation without exaltation is damnation. At best, the consequence of not believing is damnation in the Terrestrial Kingdom away from my family. Assuming the church is true, believing sets me on a path of eternal bliss in the Celestial Kingdom. The consequence if I choose to believe and am wrong, is a fairly happy life as a Mormon, but potentially wasted purpose and time. With such catastrophic risk, I should choose not to believe only if the likelihood that the church is true is unlikely/remote.

My continual goal then, is to assess the likelihood of the foundational question. If there is more than a remote possibility that it is true, then I will believe. Otherwise, I will not.

Ways to Know Truth

There are two widely accepted ways to know something is true, enough to make decisions based on it.

1). **Logic:** Mathematical proof, deduction, critical thought, the scientific method, and Alma's seed test (Alma 32). We try and test, think and deduce.

2.) **Faith in a trusted entity:** Trusted entities might include scientific journals, parents, prophets, the Holy Ghost, scriptures. We gain faith by testing their teachings, and answers to prayer attesting to their truthfulness. As long as our source is trustworthy, faith enables us to learn faster and achieve greater heights.

A teaching of Mormonism is that we start out knowing through faith. Plant the seed of faith, and line upon line, precept upon precept, we are given greater light and knowledge till we become as God, knowing perfectly. Faith is transformed to logic. "... That light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day."⁴ "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as I am known."⁵

⁴ D&C 50:24

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:12

Faith

Faith is much maligned by intellectuals. “Faith means not wanting to know what is true,” said Nietzsche. “Faith means making a virtue out of not thinking. It is nothing to brag about,” quips Bill Maher. I adamantly disagree with these statements. They denote a gross misunderstanding of faith.

If we can never be 100% sure of anything, then there is always an element of uncertainty. “Faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things,” said Alma in the Book of Mormon. Faith is the foundation of action. Faith is liberating; it enables us to move forward without knowing the outcome. If we waited to make choices until we had a 100% knowledge of anything, we would either be paralyzed into inaction by fear, or our choices would be random.

Based on the brain in a vat thought experiment, there is no way to prove with absolute certainty that anything is true. At every point, ALL must act in faith, or be acted upon. At EVERY junction where a decision is made, there is no possible way to know with a surety what the outcome of our decisions will be. Faith is essential to moving forward. Some atheists rail against the illogic of believers in God. But they just don’t understand the logic of it.⁶

In Defense of Faith

If the truth of God is revealed directly, then all other things must make sense somehow, even if there are not simple explanations. God is the ultimate trustworthy source.

Imagine the following conversation between an atheist and a literal believer in the Bible:

Believer: “I believe Noah’s ark is real and the entire world was covered in water.”

Atheist: “There is no rational explanation or scientific evidence that a global flood occurred.”

Believer: “You have to have faith.”

Atheist: “That’s ridiculous! Faith is the excuse people give for believing something when they don’t have a good reason. You’re being irrational.”

Rational faith should be grounded in something. There must be a reason or evidences for believing anything is true. Certainly if there existed massive amounts of scientific evidence that a global flood occurred, faith in its existence is justified through logic.

Even in the absence of scientific evidence, the believer could rationally say that he knew it was true.

Believer: “I have received a confirmation from a trustworthy source that the flood happened. This source has proven so trustworthy, that I know it is true despite the lack of scientific evidence. To deny this source would be even more irrational.”

⁶ There is another aspect of faith that I do not pretend to understand, but is clearly taught over and over again, that faith is power in and of itself. The scriptures teach that if you believe something, there is literal, increased power granted. Not just the power to make wise decisions, but power to literally move mountains, raise from the dead, heal the lame, and give blind their sight. Simply believing opens a channel to the power of God. (Hebrews 11, Ether 12)

Gaining Faith

The wise man built his house upon a rock, the foolish man built his house upon the sand. Faith MUST be built on the most solid foundation possible. We should have good reason for choosing our beliefs over the alternatives and constantly improve the foundation of our faith. I must have good reason to have faith in the Mormon worldview, over the Baptist, Muslim, Scientology, Anglican, Jehovah's Witness, Community of Christ, or ISIS (etc.) worldview. Building a foundation is done through two methods:

1. Performing Alma's test and seeing the results, witnessing miracles, studying the evidences.
2. Performing Moroni's promise and increasing trust in the source of faith.

There is an innumerable range of beliefs humans are capable of. For example, there is a group of people on an island in the South Pacific that believe Prince Phillip is a divine God⁷, a group in India that believe dropping babies from 50 foot heights ensures good health and prosperity⁸, self-crucifixion, flagellation, and many, many, many others. Why are there so many? How did they come about? How do I know that Mormonism is not just another strange belief?

The human brain is a complicated thing. There are barriers to learning the truth that must be constantly battled to find truth, not just in religion. Cognitive Dissonance, Logical Fallacies, and Cognitive Bias all distort truth and replace our foundation of bedrock with shifting sand.

I would like to go through each one and apply it to a faith context. I believe they provide an explanation for the incredible diversity of beliefs held by the billions around the world.

Cognitive Dissonance

"Sometimes people hold a core belief that is very strong. When they are presented with evidence that works against that belief, the new evidence cannot be accepted. It would create a feeling that is extremely uncomfortable ... And because it is so important to protect the core belief, they will rationalize, ignore, and even deny anything that doesn't fit in with the core belief."⁹

Cognitive dissonance is a mismatch between our belief and our behavior. This dissonance is uncomfortable, and sometimes emotionally painful. There are four options for overcoming cognitive dissonance. The correct option depends on the circumstance, and there are scenarios where each option might be the right choice. I got the below from a person who was experiencing discomfort over eating animal products despite being a vegan (this is not meant as an endorsement for or against veganism, it's just an excellent example).¹⁰

1. Change behavior to match beliefs(no longer eat animal products);
2. Justify behavior by changing the conflicting cognition ("It's natural to eat animals and I'm not killing them myself, anyway");

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince_Philip_Movement

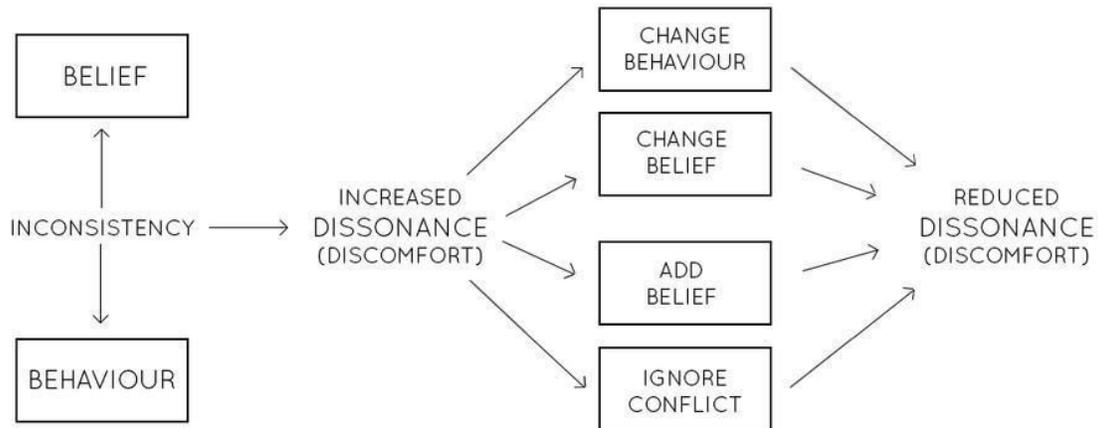
⁸ Seriously watch the video, its intense! https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=60&v=WbOsEmHzq1c

⁹ African colonialism critic Frantz Fanon discussing white supremacy in postcolonial Africa (<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/121175-sometimes-people-hold-a-core-belief-that-is-very-strong>)

¹⁰ <http://plantbasedbride.com/blog/cognitive-dissonance>

3. Justify behavior by adding new cognitions ("I'll go volunteer at an animal shelter to tilt the scales in favor of my being a true animal lover"); or
4. Ignore or deny any information that conflicts with existing beliefs ("Animals don't suffer at slaughterhouses. They don't even know what's happening!")

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE



PLANT BASED BRIDE

The stronger the belief, the easier it is to avoid discomfort. It feels better to give in to comforting falsehoods over uncomfortable truths that require us to humbly change. It is more tempting to justify actions than to modify them, to add to belief than to change it. Sometimes justifying actions or adding to belief IS the correct course of action. However, no honest, truth-seeking person should make a decision based on the amount of pain they can avoid.

One of the worst things for me about my search is the emotional pain it has caused to others. There is pain and discomfort in those who I love as I tell them of my faith struggles. There is pain and discomfort in myself as I see the suffering it causes in them. Cognitive dissonance is real, and it is painful.

When a friend or family member leaves the church it is easier to believe that they just want to sin than it is to believe it is a thoughtful, prayerful, painful decision. At least, that has been the case for me when I saw loved ones leave the church. That an apostate just stopped believing was much harder for me to mentally resolve.

Mistaking the Spirit for Reduced Discomfort

In March of 1844 in upstate New York, tens of thousands of people from all over the United States gathered to witness the second coming of Jesus as predicted by William Miller. When Jesus did not come, it was devastating to his followers. They had given up property, staked their reputation on the event, and shown great faith. Said one follower, "I began to feel faint, and before dark I needed someone to help me up to my chamber, as my natural strength was leaving me very fast, and I lay

prostrate for 2 days without any pain— sick with disappointment.” These believers were faced with serious and painful cognitive dissonance¹¹.

While some modified their belief after so dramatically being proven false, the movement did not die out. There were others who added to their belief. Miller recalculated and discovered he was six months off! It was October 22nd that Jesus was to come. When that date also passed, the group split into several factions as different resolutions to the dissonance appealed to different groups.

In December of that year, a young, 17 year old Millerite girl named Ellen White received the first of over 200 visions she would receive in her lifetime¹². Her revelations comforted the remaining Millerites. They confirmed that Christ actually DID come but not to the earth; it was just the beginning of a glorious movement. The Seventh Day Adventists have grown into a 20 million member church.

As emotional pain is washed away by newfound ways of thinking, the great and sudden relief can be mistaken for the Holy Ghost’s confirmation of those new ways. I do not mean to come across as mocking the Seventh Day Adventists, or thinking that I am better than them. It is a temptation native to us all, and irrational thinking is SO much easier to spot when on the outside. It must be recognized and avoided. Otherwise we are creating God in our own image and bringing Jesus to ourselves, rather than ourselves to Jesus.

Comforting falsehoods must never prevail over uncomfortable truths. Our behavior must conform to the truth. Again, I must have good reason to have faith in the Mormon worldview, over the Baptist, Muslim, Scientology, Anglican, Jehovah’s Witness, Community of Christ, or ISIS (etc.) worldview.

The shelf and doubting doubts

On the surface, ignoring the conflict seems like a bad idea. In the church I’ve been encouraged many times to “doubt my doubts before I doubt my faith,” and to put my doubts on a shelf till I have time to study ponder and pray.¹³ Eventually, I was told, God will resolve each doubt. Given that on a balance, my faith greatly outweighed any doubts, this was not necessarily a bad idea. Core beliefs should not be abandoned on a whim. This is something I have done for over 20 years now. From the time I put my first, small doubt onto a shelf, I held onto my faith, trusting that it would be resolved.

My shelf has broken under the weight. I cannot ignore the conflict any longer and resolve the cognitive pain. There is just too much evidence to process that I cannot place my doubts on hiatus any longer. They must be confronted so that I know my beliefs are built on solid ground and not on a sandy foundation.

Logical Fallacies

In order to understand my search for truth, it is important to go over some typical lines of reasoning that are not actually helpful. There are many reasons given for faith that are just not valid. This is not to say that EVERY believer has fallen for these, or even most. These are assertions I have heard and even fallen for that are problematic. These logical fallacies are a sandy foundation for any belief system and should be avoided by true believers, even if they boost faith.

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52LowEwp42Q>

¹² <https://youtu.be/nH2r0J5VbL4?t=1h19m53s>

¹³ I don’t know who the first person was to use the shelf analogy, but Camilla Kimball was the first I could find (<https://www.lds.org/ensign/1975/10/camilla-kimball-lady-of-constant-learning?lang=eng>)

So many people could not be wrong!

It is impressive to look out over the huge assemblies of the faithful gathered in unified worship. It offers a confirmation that you are doing something right since you are part of a larger community. There are at least three problems with using this to justify belief though.

1. No religion has a majority in this world. Mormonism represents a very, very small fraction of the world population (0.2134%). The vast majority of people believe Mormonism is wrong, if they have even heard of it. If this argument is valid, then Mormonism is definitely wrong.
2. Truth is not determined by popular opinion. Otherwise the earth would still be flat until enough people were deluded otherwise.
3. There are many examples in history where the majority opinion WAS wrong.

The Bible is True Because the Bible Says So!

This is an example of circular reasoning. I could write on a piece of paper that “Mushrooms on pizza is a really good idea,” and then at the bottom write, “This paper is true.” It does not make anything on that paper true.

Misattribution

Consider the following silly statement: “God is a block of cheese and told me that water instead of soda will lead me to better health.” Certainly, drinking water is better for health than soda. I can follow Alma’s advice, and exercise faith in this principle by not drinking soda. I can gain a testimony of the principle as I become healthier. I might even receive a good feeling about it at the realization that I’m on a path to great health. I can turn this faith into knowledge as I see the benefits. This does NOT mean that God is a block of cheese or that God told me anything! In the scenario, I gained a testimony of drinking water, but I still cannot prove the existence of God.

Likewise, following the principles of the Gospel can give me a testimony of those principles without establishing the existence of God. This is a big limitation with Alma’s seed method. There is no way to test if any commandment can be attributed to God. It is GREAT for testing the virtue of the commandment, but not the source. To test the source, we must use Moroni’s method.

Further logical fallacies

There are many patterns of thought that maintained my faith, but no longer work for me anymore. The pro LDS website *FairMormon* has a pretty good summary of logical fallacies, and how they have been applied to attack Mormonism.¹⁴ Being familiar with them is critical to not falling into a trap.

Cognitive Bias

A different obstacle to truth is cognitive bias. Sometimes our brain distorts inputs and outputs and arrives at irrational conclusions.

Being susceptible to Cognitive Biases does not make a person weak-minded or delusional. It is a part of being human. It is in our DNA. Biases have been observed in human beings time and time again and are actively exploited by politicians and advertisers everywhere. Scientists jump through hoops,

¹⁴ https://www.fairmormon.org/answers/Logical_fallacies

perform double blind studies, and submit to peer reviews to weed out these biases, and still agonize over the possibility that their unconscious might skew their results.

There are dozens of identified cognitive biases that MUST be mitigated against in order to state with any confidence that something is true. I shall discuss a few that are relevant.¹⁵

Bias Blind Spot

First of all, 85% of Americans think they are less biased than average. For whatever reason, it is much easier to detect bias in others than in ourselves.¹⁶ I have had to consider that with each of the following biases.

Anchor Bias

We are predisposed to give more credence to the first piece of information that we receive. A famous study demonstrated anchor bias by asking people the following questions:

“Is the percentage of African countries in the United Nations greater or less than 65%?”

“What is the exact percent of African countries in the United Nations?”

The text of the first question heavily influenced people’s answers to the second. When 65% was used in the first question, respondents on average answered 45% to the second. When 10% was used in the first question, respondent averages were 25%. Researchers have observed the same effect by spinning a roulette wheel in front of the respondent and asking just the second question.¹⁷

Since its description in the 1970s, anchoring bias has been well-documented in many different fields and scenarios, from real estate to politics.

A good indicator of which religion a person belongs to is to look at which religion their parents belonged to.¹⁸ I can’t even begin to tell you how many people on my mission would not listen to our message because they were a “Catholic family.”

Would I be a Mormon if I were not born into the church?

Confirmation Bias

Confirmation Bias is the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms one’s preexisting beliefs or hypothesis¹⁹. We tend to draw conclusions and then find evidence to support that conclusion. It is the root cause behind thousands of debunked scientific studies, unjust wars, moral panics, and conspiracy theories.

To overcome Confirmation Bias one must observe the evidence, and THEN draw the conclusion. As new evidence is produced, the conclusion must be abandoned and reevaluated. This is easier said than done, and I sincerely doubt that any person has not fallen prey to serious confirmation bias at one point in their life.

¹⁵ Perhaps my choice of which ones to present exhibit bias! If so, please let me know (epachamo@gmail.com).

¹⁶ <https://pubsonline.informs.org/doi/10.1287/mnsc.2014.2096>

¹⁷ https://courses.eller.arizona.edu/mgmt/delaney/p_chapter13.pdf

¹⁸

<https://rsc.byu.edu/archived/religion-and-family-connection-social-science-perspectives/chapter-13-familial-influence>

¹⁹ Plous, Scott (1993). The Psychology of Judgment and Decision Making. p. 233

Early 20th century evangelist and faith healer F. F. Bosworth presented the following, “Any man or woman can get rid of his or her doubts by looking steadfastly and only at the evidence that God has given for our faith. Seeing only what God says will produce and increase faith.”²⁰ I do not believe in evangelical faith healing, but if I were to ignore anything that disregards it and cling to any supporting evidence, my belief in evangelical faith healing would probably grow.

Moroni states “dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith (Ether 12:6).” Jesus states, “Blessed *are* those who have not seen and *yet* have believed.” Demonstrating faith in the absence of evidence appears to be a virtue, and the fewer pieces of evidence, the greater the virtue.

A real hurdle for me is to exhibit evidence-deficient faith without falling prey to confirmation bias. Once I have a desire to believe then I naturally interpret, favor, and recall information that confirms my faith and selectively discard other bits of evidence.

Observer-Expectancy Effect

Sometimes a researcher expects a given result and therefore subconsciously manipulates an experiment or misinterprets data in order to find it. Boyd K. Packer stated, “It is not unusual to have a missionary say, ‘How can I bear testimony until I get one? How can I testify that God lives, that Jesus is the Christ, and that the gospel is true? If I do not have such a testimony, would that not be dishonest?’ Oh, if I could teach you this one principle. A testimony is to be found in the bearing of it!” I so DESPERATELY want that witness. How do I protect against the *Observer-Expectancy* effect and clearly distinguish the Spirit confirming my testimony?

Availability Cascade

Repetition begets believability, and our beliefs are influenced by the beliefs of those around us. Spend 30 minutes watching Saturday Morning Cartoon commercials for kids to see a blatant exploitation of this bias. If something is repeated enough it becomes more and more important until it becomes a part of communal culture.

The best part of waking up is...
Every kiss begins with...
Break me off a piece of that...

An apple a day keeps...
Count sheep to fall...
No use crying over...

Bless the food that it will...
I’d like to bear my... I know... I love...
I’d be ungrateful if I didn’t stand and...

I love the one-ness of the church, how we help each other out, and how members genuinely like to be with each other. However, being such a tight knit group increases the risk of this bias, especially where repetitious and confirmatory testimonials are common.

²⁰ See F. F. Bosworth, *Christ the Healer* (1924), page 23.

Authority Bias

We have a tendency to attribute greater accuracy to the opinion of an authority figure. This was hilariously spoofed in Old Spice in a 2008 commercial.²¹ The actor touts the benefits of Old Spice by wearing a lab coat. “That’s why I can recommend [Old Spice deodorant], I used to be a doctor for pretend!”

In many ways, the church recognizes and actively tries to mitigate against this bias, both on the part of the leader and the followers. Authority figures in the church do not have degrees, or wear special clothing to highlight their authority. A point is made that, “no power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the Priesthood.” The bishops and leaders I have known were all good, humble men.

That said, immense respect is given to our leaders. I am not saying this is wrong, but it does create a risk for this bias.

Cognitive Dissonance, Bias, and Fallacies Summary

Our brains’ deficiencies must be overcome to properly discern truth and gain faith. Biases are all around us, and recognizing them will help us mitigate their effects and come closer to the truth.

These are extremely powerful and explain how so many people can believe such different things. If these do not explain it, then I would eagerly and honestly ask, what other explanation is there?

Miraculous Events as a foundation for Faith

Many examples exist in the scriptures (Children of Israel, Laman and Lemuel) of those who see wondrous miracles and still lack faith. I am cautious to even add this section in, because it is clear in the scriptures that “Faith cometh not by signs, but signs follow those that believe.”²² I still include this section because miracles have been large foundation for my faith. In the absence of a discernable answer to my prayers, they were what I clung to.

Miracles are God’s divine blessing to his followers.

On May 13, 1917, three Portuguese children ages 9, 8, and 6 received the first of six visitations from the Virgin Mary, teaching them many things. They were instructed to pray the Rosary daily to bring about the end of World War I, shown a vision of hell, and told that two of them did not have much longer to live on the earth. They were told the purpose of their visions was to spread the Catholic message and increase devotion to the immaculate heart of Mary.²³

Mary told the children that she would appear on October 13 and a newspaper reported that she would perform a miracle. The story of their vision spread like wildfire all across Portugal, and a huge crowd with low estimates of 30,000 people gathered to where Mary would appear. On that day, “the Miracle of the Sun” occurred.

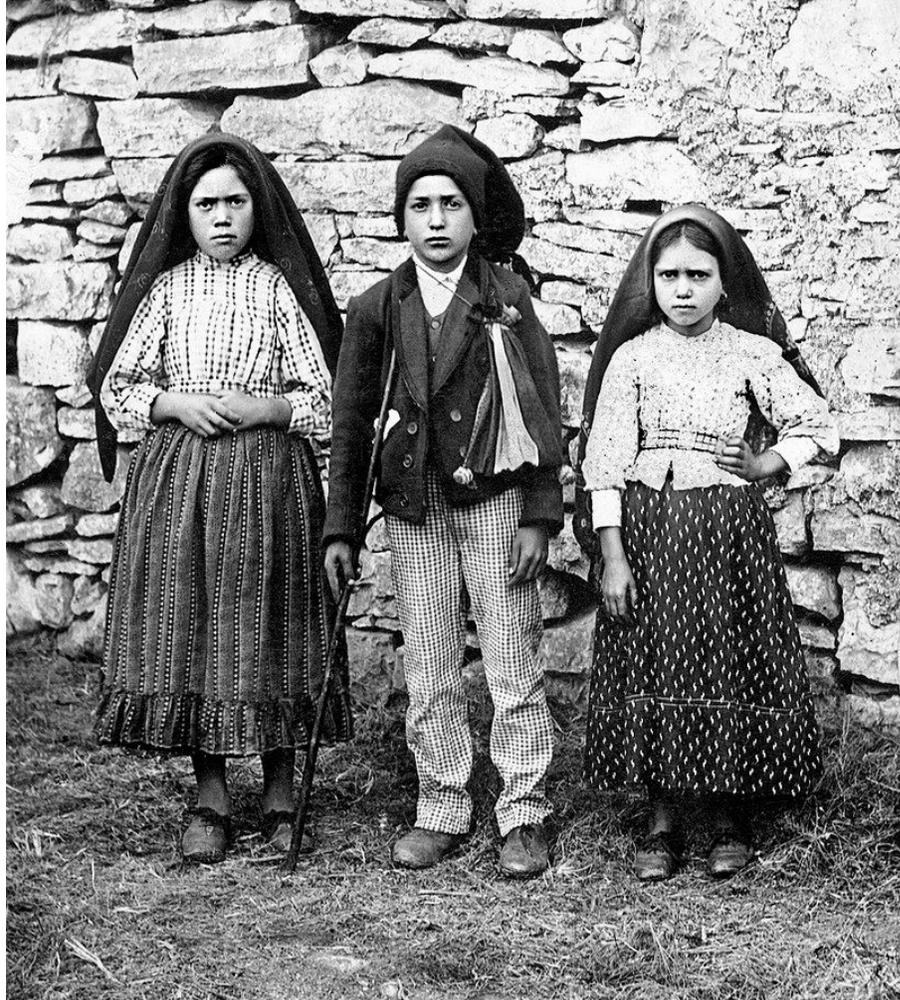
“According to accounts, after a period of rain, the dark clouds broke and the sun appeared as an opaque, spinning disc in the sky. It was said to be significantly duller than normal, and to cast

²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TusJ8HSLaUs>

²² D&C 63:9

²³ <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/saint/our-lady-of-fatima-485>

multicolored lights across the landscape, the people, and the surrounding clouds. The sun was then reported to have careened towards the earth before zig-zagging back to its normal position. Witnesses reported that their previously wet clothes became 'suddenly and completely dry, as well as the wet and muddy ground that had been previously soaked because of the rain that had been falling'.²⁴



Lúcia Santos (*left*) with her cousins Francisco and Jacinta Marto²⁵

Within a month, World War I had ended, and within several years, two of the children died. In 2017, the Catholic church canonized these two children. The third died in 2005 at the age of 97, having devoted her life to spreading the message of devotion to Mary. These miraculous visitations are widely accepted by the Catholic church and have thousands upon thousands of corroborating witnesses.

Many claimed miracles have occurred through the history of the world, not just in the scriptures. How can these miracles be accounted for, especially when they sometimes lead to contradictory conclusions? If it comes from God, then should I not devote my life to the Sacred Heart of

²⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Our_Lady_of_F%C3%A1tima#cite_note-cna-5

²⁵ By Attributed to Joshua Benliel - <http://www.santuario-fatima.pt> in Ilustração Portuguesa no. 610, 29 October 1917, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=6785257>

Mary? If not God, then how is it explained? I do not believe that the Virgin Mary was appearing to these three Portuguese children. How do I know which miracles are of God and which are not? The following is an attempt to categorize all possible explanations for miracles, including this one.

Flat out Deception

Some purported miracles have later turned out to be fraud for money, fame, or a stunt. Many have fallen victim over the centuries to the lies of the cunning. It's often difficult to catch an outright scam, however I'm fairly confident that most televangelists are frauds.

Benny Hinn is a great example of this. With a net worth of \$40 million, he wows audiences by healing dozens, even through the television screen. Desperate people are whipped into a frenzy by lights, beautiful music, and a large crowd of people singing and swaying. They truly believe that they will be healed, so they go up on the stage with this great man. Hinn touches them, and they are overcome with emotion and healed! Until they die because they stopped taking their medicine. When they die, it's because they didn't believe enough, they lacked faith. If there is a hell, Benny Hinn has a reserved seat.²⁶

Thousands of people fall for faith healers and donate billions to their causes. Jesse Duplantis, who owns a multi-million dollar home, recently asked his congregation to buy him his fourth private jet for \$54 million.²⁷ There is every reason to believe that his followers are 100% sincere. They REALLY have faith, and back it up with money. What is driving that belief?

There is a lot of incentive to believe. Believers are told that if they stop, then they are under Satan's power, or that they must believe if they want their miracle, or that if they stop believing they will experience eternal damnation.

Sincere Self-Deception

I am very grateful that LDS Church does not flat out deceive. You do not see prophets and apostles living in multimillion dollar mansions, or dramatizing sacrament meeting to whip up a frenzy. Whatever the church's faults, with few exceptions,²⁸ I believe the leaders of the church to be sincere.

But what if both the leaders and followers are deceived? I believe that the leaders of MOST churches are sincere. I very much doubt that the Pope, Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa, and various Ayatollahs are frauds. I don't think the leader of the Heaven's Gate cult was a fraud either; He put his faith to a test when he, along with his followers, committed mass suicide to get to the spaceship behind a comet. These leaders all believe deeply what they preach. They all believe they have a divine connection with God.

How are so many sincere people self-deceived by miracles? Based on the fact that literally billions of people on this earth believe in mutually exclusive miraculous events, it is not a low number. Sincere leaders with sincere followers can create a positive feedback loop. A leader will give a blessing of healing -> the follower responds positively -> faith in miraculous power grows -> the leader's faith in his blessing power is increased. I think that the visions of the three Portuguese children most likely fall into this category.

²⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HH4J75BfPbA>

²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jm4bcKzc6U>

²⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_H._Dunn

License plate miracle

Driving along the road, you see a random license plate with your birthdate and initials. The probability of seeing that exact number is incredibly rare; it must be a miracle! This is a silly illustration,²⁹ but interpreting rare events as miracles is common. Extremely rare events do happen.

In 2001, a girl named Laura Buxton released a red balloon with her name on it, asking that whoever found it return it to her. The girl who returned it was 140 miles away, the same age, and also named Laura Buxton. Both girls had 3 year old black labs, rabbits, and guinea pigs as pets. Sounds miraculous, right? But as it turns out, they were selectively choosing those commonalities. The person who found the balloon was not actually the second Laura but someone who knew her.³⁰ Joe Dimaggio's remarkable hitting streak, winning the lottery twice, two Dennis the Menace comic strips opening in different countries on the same day, are all rare. But rare does not necessarily mean a miracle.³¹

After this, therefore because of this

This is a conclusion that assumes that if 'A' occurred after 'B' then 'B' must have caused 'A.'
Example: I drank bottled water and now I am sick, so the water must have made me sick.

I met a guy on my mission who saw the outline of the Virgin Mary on an arepa (a thick pancake). It actually made it in the newspaper, because on that same day he was shot (he lived). He believed that God had given him a sign in his breakfast food that something would happen that day.

Misinterpreted Miracles

A certain percentage of cancer patients are going to get better with or without divine intervention. Which ones can be attributed to God and which ones to the law of averages? People who die from cancer after a healing blessing are unable to testify, only those whose cancer is healed or went into remission. Those who are not healed but didn't die are also unlikely to testify (at least in religious circles) about the failed miracle.

Mis-remembered events

One of my favorite Mormon shows growing up was the Windows of Heaven, where Lorenzo Snow received a revelation from the pulpit that if the saints of St. George Utah would pay their tithing, then the windows of heaven would literally open, rain would fall, and the horrible drought would end.³² Unfortunately there is no contemporary evidence that President Snow ever said that, and it was not mentioned in any journals or records of congregation members in any of the dozens of places he preached. Furthermore, the drought didn't end for several more years after the event.³³ The story of the prophecy originated from the memory of his nephew LeRoi Snow some 35-40 years after the event.

²⁹ ... or is it silly? These people don't think so! These people literally believe in the license plate miracle:
<http://www.beliefnet.com/inspiration/angels/2010/06/healing-miracles-of-archangel-raphael.aspx?p=3>
<https://sarahyip.com/licence-plate-miracles-psychic-messages-drive/>

³⁰ <https://www.wnycstudios.org/story/91686-a-very-lucky-wind/> (a great overview of the event),
<https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/whether-balloon/>

³¹ http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2014/02/the_improbability_principle_rare_events_and_coincidences_happen_all_the.html)

³² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tP2RjZ-XFAk>

³³

<http://mormonhistoricsites.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Reexamining-Lorenzo-Snows-1899-Tithing-Revelation.pdf>

It is possible that LeRoi Snow was malicious, but I doubt it. There is a large body of research showing that memory is malleable, and few memories reflect exactly how reality played out. Those memories can feel so real. This is incredibly common and another part of being human.

We think of memory like a video recorder that captures exact events. Memory is more like a jigsaw puzzle, drawing pieces from different parts of the brain to reconstruct an event. It can even be manipulated.³⁴

A tragic example of this is DNA testing. Since DNA testing was introduced in the 1990s, 239 convictions have been overturned. Of those convictions, 73% were based on eyewitness testimony, and 33% had two or more witnesses.

I could write literally hundreds of pages of examples like the above demonstrating how unreliable our memory is, and how memories can be actively induced in people to believe everything from aliens to seeing car accidents in ways that never happened.

The point is, events are often misremembered or given more weight overtime until they are considered miracles.

Regression to the mean

There is a superstition that those who appear on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* will be cursed with poor performance afterwards. Athletes have an average performance, and random variations mean that sometimes they perform better, and sometimes worse. A player is most likely to appear on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* at the times when they are performing at a peak. When the random performance variation goes back down to average, it has been attributed to being on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*.

People also have random variations on how they are doing from day to day. Some people pray harder when they are at their low points. "There are no atheists in fox holes" as the saying goes. If on the next couple days, things improve, the person could possibly misattribute the results to miraculous intervention due to prayer. It could also be that their life would have just gotten better due to the law of averages, even if they hadn't prayed.

Satan

Pharaoh's magicians performed miracles, and based on the New Testament, Satan clearly has power to possess the bodies of animals and humans. He can overpower a fourteen year old boy in a grove praying to God. Some "miracles" could really be deceptions of Satan.

God

The power of God could truly be the cause of miraculous events.

³⁴ "Many researchers have created false memories in normal individuals; what is more, many of these subjects are certain that the memories are real. In one well-known study, Loftus and her colleague Jacqueline Pickrell gave subjects written accounts of four events, three of which they had actually experienced... Remarkably about one third of the subjects reported partially or fully remembering the false event. In two follow-up interviews, 25 percent still claimed that they remembered the untrue story, a figure consistent with the findings of similar studies."

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/do-the-eyes-have-it/>

Summary

How big are the God and Satan category of miracle? I am not aware of any miracle that can be positively and verifiably attributed to God or Satan that does not plausibly fit in one of the other categories. The foundation of my faith cannot rest on miracles.

Back to Moroni's Promise

The foundation of my faith can only rest on revelation from God. The pattern for receiving revelation is clear. Prayerfully ponder and sincerely ask God if it is true, and then he will answer you. I believe that there is something that truly happens when people pray. I think the "burning in the bosom" is real. While never felt during prayer, I have felt powerfully good feelings at other times, including in religious settings. There are two alternative explanations:

1. God is speaking to me.
2. There is something powerful happening in the brain that is mistaken for God.

The Ambiguity of the Holy Ghost

The promptings of the Holy Ghost are purposefully ambiguous. Visions of angels, burning bushes, or seeing God face to face are not common events, even among faithful members of the Church. I am not aware of any LDS prophet or apostle who has *unambiguously* claimed to have seen Jesus in the last 100 years. Even for those who have seen Jesus, it is a rare event. The most common mode of revelation is through a "still small voice," or a "burning in the bosom."

Elder Dallin H. Oaks stated in reference to Alma the Younger's miraculous visitation, "I've never had an experience like that and I don't know anyone among the First Presidency or Quorum of the Twelve who've had that kind of experience. Yet every one of us knows of a certainty the things that Alma knew. But it's just that unless the Lord chooses to do it another way, as he sometimes does; for millions and millions of His children the testimony settles upon us gradually. Like so much dust on the windowsill or so much dew on the grass. One day you didn't have it and another day you did and you don't know which day it happened. That's the way I got my testimony."³⁵

God, speaking to Moses, Miriam, and Aaron said, "If there be a prophet among you, I the LORD will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream. My servant Moses is not so, who is faithful in all mine house. With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not dark speeches."³⁶

A common question by members of the church is "How do I tell the difference between my own feelings and the promptings of the Holy Ghost?" Good feelings can come from music, art, winning a video game, watching sporting events, drugs (so I've heard), and hugs. Many prophets and apostles have discussed how to understand and distinguish the Holy Ghost from good feelings, but more often "quiet and small ... incremental ... simple."³⁷

³⁵ <https://soundcloud.com/mormontalk/elder-oaks-youth-fireside-01-23-2016> time - 31:28

³⁶ Numbers 12:6-8

³⁷ <https://www.lds.org/new-era/2014/06/what-if-i-dont-feel-a-burning-in-the-bosom?lang=eng>

When God reveals things to us, it seems they are not meant to be clear, at least not initially or in the majority of cases. Learning to feel and understand the promptings of the Holy Ghost is essential to receiving revelation.

There might be many good reasons for why the Holy Ghost is ambiguous, but regardless of the reason, it makes it difficult to know if my feelings come from God or my brain.

Boyd K. Packer and others have asserted that there is no way to describe how the Holy Ghost feels to one who hasn't felt it. To him, it is like salt. You can say what it doesn't taste like, and you can describe what it looks like. But like the spirit, one who has tasted salt cannot provide a way to tell someone who hasn't tasted salt what it tastes like. Said President Packer, "We do not have the words (even the scriptures do not have words) which perfectly describe the Spirit."³⁸ It appears that the Spirit is something that you know it once you feel it.

What if the Holy Ghost were our Brain?

What would the world look like if the Holy Ghost were really brain chemicals? We would see massive confusion in the world as each religion would receive "answers" confirming their pre-existing beliefs. Essentially what we see right now.

Please see Appendix A for hundreds of testimonies of people from other religions, many of whom claim their God sent them a powerful, overwhelming feeling confirming the truth of their religion. They speak of the burning in their soul, the overwhelming peace they feel, and the sense of knowing. Believers of these religions are sure that God gave them the truth. Why would God tell so many people different things?

A common answer is that God gives some truth to all people, and the Spirit testifies of those truths. If God is sending his Spirit to testify of the partial truths each religion possesses, it is sure causing a lot of confusion. People cling to their complete belief system after feeling ambiguous divine confirmation, even to those parts that are clearly against Mormon teachings.

Consider this testimony: "I've been searching for a witness of this work and of this church. And just tonight I got my witness. And it's burning within my soul at how important this work is and how true it is. I know it is. And it's hard to believe that just a year ago I was in high school. I was in plays. I was a typical teenager. And now I'm in a plural marriage and struggling. I'm not going to lie to you. But I know without a shadow of doubt that this is the Lord's work, that I have finally found it. And I love you guys, and I'm thankful for your prayers and for all that you have to offer me. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen."³⁹

This is a catholic testimony: We "were spoken to by the Holy Spirit, Who told us, 'This is the truth. If you reject it, you are in danger of hellfire. Do you accept My teaching and will you say 'Yes' to the Catholic Church? Or will you reject My teaching?"⁴⁰

³⁸ <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1983/01/the-candle-of-the-lord?lang=eng>

³⁹ <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/21/transcript>

⁴⁰

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170117041132/http://forums.catholic.com/showthread.php?s=a6b9d46e8a908115175337f6a6f2b181&p=7769447#post7769447>

These people received a confirmatory spiritual answer that specifically told them something against God's commandments was true. As Appendix A shows, these examples are not rare or cherry picked.

I believe these people are feeling something. I don't think they make it up. If they aren't feeling the spirit, then am I? How do I know that I'm not feeling exactly the same thing that billions of others are feeling, and not the Spirit? If it is truly the Spirit that we all feel, testifying of some truth, then how do I know that it is not me who has the partial truth? Am I conflating my experience with the rest of what comes with Mormonism? Who am I to say that billions of others are confused into believing the rest of what comes with their respective religions?

Spiritual experiences can also be mimicked with drugs.⁴¹ In other words, we can replicate the feeling of the spirit by changing the chemicals in our body and brain.

In 2016, a study was done on faithful Mormon volunteers, all of whom were returned missionaries. They read scriptures, prayed, and watched "Mormon Messages," and were asked to press a button when they felt the Spirit. The same pleasure/reward parts of the brain that light up when people are in love, hear beautiful music, and are under the influence of euphoric drugs lit up in the brains of the volunteers.⁴² These are people who knew what salt tastes like. This particular study on Mormons confirmed the results from previous studies on Franciscan Nuns, Pentecostal women speaking in tongues, German-Christian Evangelicals, Danish Christians, Brazilian Mediums, and Chinese Christians. People's brains do light up with chemicals when they feel the Spirit.

In short, when Mormons sense the spirit they feel physically similar to how people in other religions feel the spirit. It is possible that the Spirit is more than just good feelings. But if so, one must sense and discern it by wading through the good feelings caused by the brain's chemistry. Discernment is that much harder, and ambiguity is increased.

It is possible that I have felt the Holy Ghost. One thing I can say with certainty is that I have never without a plausible doubt in my mind been able to attribute these feelings to any supernatural power and not my own brain. I do not know what salt tastes like.

The Foundational Answer

"Is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints the one and only true, living church on the face of the earth?"

I cannot say "yes" to that question with integrity.

At this point I am agnostic in my thinking. I don't find any convincing evidence for God. I do not have faith in and a testimony of God the Eternal Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost. I do not have a testimony of the Atonement of Christ and of His role as Savior and Redeemer. I do not have a testimony of the restoration of the gospel in these the latter days.

I believe the feelings I felt the love of a divine Savior came from my brain.

⁴¹ <https://www.npr.org/2009/07/21/110997741/is-this-your-brain-on-god>

⁴² <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17470919.2016.1257437>

I am still open to the possibility and would be ecstatic to find out that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is true. It would be so relieving and make my life a lot easier.

If the Church is not true, what then?

This is truly a frightening proposition. I don't want to leave the church. There is a lot of comfort and stability in being a part of it. Leaving would be like sawing off a limb with a dull blade.

Faking a testimony is a very real temptation. It's kind of a perverse choice. If I lie, then I keep my temple recommend. If I tell the truth, I risk losing it. Faking a testimony decreases stress and sorrow in my relationships and keeps me associated with a wonderful organization. Telling how I truly feel risks social ostracism, not being able to baptize Penny, or ordain my little boy to the Priesthood. It means potentially missing my children's weddings. It tears my heart in half, desiring a double life, yet loathing the hypocrisy.

Would God punish me for faking a testimony? Wouldn't that be lying?

Even if it is self-delusion, is it ok to believe what I want? Instead of believing the most plausible thing, perhaps my ethic should be to believe something that is less plausible but that brings me greater joy. If reality turns out to be depressing, that there is just a dark void at death, that there is no purpose, or right and wrong, then does truth really set me free? Why not believe a wonderful, fake reality? The placebo effect is a real effect, so why not just enjoy the placebo?

If it is impossible to prove the existence of God, then does it matter if I just choose to believe in God despite the evidence? If believing in God, going to church, and singing hymns provides me with contented fulfillment, and not believing in God sentences me to a lonely life of anguish and bitterness, then why not just believe?

I don't have an answer to any of these questions yet. I do know that my beliefs and actions have ripple effects across generations, which is indeed a frightening responsibility.

To Those I Love

If there is anything in this document that you feel was disrespectful or argumentative, please let me know so I can change it. I want people to understand my point of view, not disrespectful of your cherished beliefs.

I know that even after reading this, there will be those who still just don't understand why I would think this way. I don't think you are an idiot if you feel I am still wrong. There are those who will suffer lasting emotional trauma as they cope with this new reality and for that I am so sorry. It was never my intention to hurt anyone.

I am open to talking about it. Please don't feel like I will hold it against you if you send me quotes from church leaders or passages from the scriptures. I am truly touched that you would share something with me that is so important to you. If I am wrong I want to know!

I don't want to argue about it. I don't want to tear down your belief. I care about you, and if it is important to you, then it is important to me, and I will treat your cherished beliefs with respect.

There is not a single person that I want to cut off my relationship with because of this. I owe so many people so much, and am so grateful for all the love and understanding that I have been given throughout this journey.

Appendix A – Testimonies of other Religions

Below are hundreds of testimonies of other religions, a great number of them feeling exactly what I would describe as the spirit.

<http://testimoniesofotherfaiths.blogspot.com/>

<https://www.christian-faith.com/christian-testimonies/salvation-testimonies/>

<http://www.hopeforthebrokenhearted.com/faith-testimonies/>

<https://www.islamtomorrow.com/converts/women.htm>

<https://www.lifestream.org/what-does-gods-presence-feel-like/>

Heaven's Gate Final Testimonies: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8bHkGtL95Y>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXFYtgSfbgs>

Fundamentalist Mormon Testimonies

<https://www.thisamericanlife.org/21/transcript>

"I had an experience where four dispensation heads came across the veil and laid their hands on my head-- Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Moses-- restoring again the apostleship. And this happened on a Sunday. They were magnificent resurrected beings clothed in white garment, white clothing, their robes hung to their ankles. They had white hair and beards. They were magnificent, and I was overwhelmed with the Holy Ghost. And it's been interesting to observe. People give up their careers and their professions, their businesses, and begin to gather here in Manti."

-Jim Harmston

"I've been searching for a witness of this work and of this church. And just tonight I got my witness. And it's burning within my soul at how important this work is and how true it is. I know it is. And it's hard to believe that just a year ago I was in high school. I was in plays. I was a typical teenager. And now I'm in a plural marriage and struggling. I'm not going to lie to you. But I know without a shadow of doubt that this is the Lord's work, that I have finally found it. And I love you guys, and I'm thankful for your prayers and for all that you have to offer me. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen."

Shaker Testimonies

<https://archive.org/details/holysacreddivinestew>

"...Language cannot describe the sensations of my soul . . . all became calm; and an inexpressible feeling, as of a consuming fire within, filled my mortal frame."

-Philemon Stewart;
May 4, 1842; New Lebanon
Shaker Prophet, prior to receiving a revelation

"I have an evidence within my own heart, beyond all wavering or caviling feelings whatever... These things have been made as plain to my view, as the natural elements above, or the inhabitants of the

earth below; therefore it would be as reasonable for me to dispute my existence, as to dispute the reality of them. I therefore stand as a witness before God and all men, through time and in eternity, that it is in truth and reality the word of the one and only true and living God, which is contained in the pages of this sacred Book.”

-Harriet Goodwin

February 18, 1843

One of the 11 witnesses to the Holy Roll and Book pg. 291

“I looked and beheld an innumerable host of flaming heralds, having wings; and they moved swiftly forward to meet us. They held in their mouths the preceding Sacred Roll. . .I have both seen and felt the irresistible influence of his holy power, which I cannot deny.”

John Allen

April 17, 1843

