



Navigating Your Faith Journey: Use Your Head

By [Sam A. Hardy](#) and [Edwin E. Gantt](#)

GOSPEL FARE

June 23, 2025

Is reason at odds with faith? Thoughtful tools from psychology can help steer you in the right direction on your faith journey.

This is the 3rd article in a series of 4. Previous articles in the series: [Navigating Your Faith Journey: Questioning is Good](#), [Navigating Your Faith Journey: Use Your Heart](#),

In this article, we provide suggestions for how to use your head more effectively in your faith journey. This is the third essay in a series on Navigating Your Faith Journey. In the first essay, we made the case that questioning is not only acceptable but can be helpful to your faith journey. Then we promised three follow-up essays in the series where we would provide guidance on how to go about navigating your faith journey productively using your heart, head, and hands. In this third essay, we will focus on the role of the head, meaning your thoughts, intellect, logic, and reasoning. Obviously, separating

humans into hearts, heads, and hands is a bit artificial since we aren't really composed of discrete parts or pieces. Still, it does provide a framework for organizing various aspects of our lives that are relevant to navigating our faith journeys. As such, we can generally imagine that the heart is what provides the power, while the head provides the direction. (If you remember the car analogy from Essay 2, the heart is the engine while the head is the steering wheel.) So, in this essay, we will provide ideas to help you make sure you are going in the right direction on your faith journey.

There is irony underlying the tips we will provide here for using your head to navigate your faith journey. They all come from our discipline of psychology (or at least psychology borrowed them from other disciplines, such as philosophy and science), and psychology is one of the least religious academic disciplines. Nonetheless, we are going to show you how to use certain tools of psychology to help you on your faith journey. We are confident in this approach because these tools have helped us on our faith journeys, and we are not the only ones who have applied these tools to the successful navigation of faith journeys. For example, books such as "[Seekers Wanted](#)" by Anthony Sweat, "[Planted](#)" by Patrick Mason, and "[Wrestling with the Restoration](#)" by Steven Harper articulate similar ideas.

The first tool is *Source Criticism*. In psychology, we value [critical thinking](#), which starts with being critical of sources of information. Just because someone says or writes something doesn't mean it's true. One of the first and most important ways we can think critically about information is by evaluating the source of the information. As we learn and grow, it is best to accommodate information from trustworthy sources. This is as true for the field of psychology as it is for us as individuals. When the two of us do our scholarly writing in psychology, we strive to back up almost every statement with credible [citations of references](#). We prioritize what we learn from the theories and research of qualified scholars in the field over trendy "pop psychology" found on the internet or social media. And even then, we prioritize scholarly writings that have gone through the peer review process, such as in scholarly journals or books. Additionally, we evaluate the credibility of the scholars themselves and their methods, evidence, and arguments, as well as the rigor of the different journals and book publishers who provide the outlets for our

We can generally imagine that the heart is what provides the power, while the head provides the direction.

work. We also generally prioritize primary sources and those that seem to have withstood the test of time. So, when someone says, “Did you know that ...,” and makes a claim about psychology, our first reaction is often to ask about the source of their information. Often, however, people don’t even know, in which case, we will remain skeptical of the information. Or maybe they do know the source, but it doesn’t seem trustworthy, in which case we will similarly remain skeptical of the information.

How might source criticism help you navigate your faith journey? When you encounter information about the gospel or the Church, we suggest you first evaluate the quality and reliability of the source. For example, here are some questions you might ask about the source (the same questions we ask about sources relevant to our field of psychology):

1. *Who said or wrote the information?* Do they have relevant training, education, experience, or expertise? If not, they are likely a less trustworthy source of information on that topic. For example, many of the most well-known critics of the Church have very little, if any, training in relevant areas such as theology, philosophy, and history. Also, what are their biases? For example, many of the most well-known critics of the Church are disgruntled former members. As we will discuss more below, objectivity is a myth. Often, people questioning the Church will seek “objective” or neutral sources, but no such sources exist. It is impossible for humans to be objective; we can’t step outside of our experience to be entirely neutral and unbiased. Instead, look for sources that are fair and honest. Being fair means they listen to other perspectives, seek to understand the strengths and limitations of their own ideas and those of others, and are willing to question and even modify their own views. Being honest means they are sincerely pursuing the truth, trying to convey the truth with integrity, and acknowledging their own biases.

2. *What was the venue or outlet for the information?* Is it a reputable and credible venue or outlet? Does the venue or outlet have a review process; in other words, are there gatekeepers to ensure the quality of the information? For example, anyone can post anything they want on the internet, but not everyone can publish anything they want in a newspaper, magazine, or book. Those venues have editors.

3. *How old is the information?* Old information might still be good, but it depends. Is it still relevant and accurate? Has the information been revised or challenged in important ways by more recent work?

4. *Is it a primary or secondary source?* You may be familiar with the game “telephone,” where people line up and the first person says something, and then that information gets passed down the line. Invariably, the information the last person gets is quite different from the original. If someone quotes someone else, particularly if they paraphrase, it is always good practice to find the original source before putting too much stock in the information.

The second tool is *Contextualization*. In addition to critically evaluating the sources of information we receive, we also need to appropriately and adequately contextualize the information. Otherwise, it can be misleading. There are several important ways in which we need to [contextualize information we receive regarding the gospel and the Church](#).

1. *Textual context.* Often, information used by critics of the Church comes from obscure quotes from scriptures or modern-day church leaders taken out of the context in which they were originally used. For example, some critics of the Church have taken a quote by Elder Oaks out of context to suggest that he said we should always accept anything a church leader ever says as true, even if it is not. In fact, however, Elder Oaks (who was speaking to historians) was suggesting that [not everything that is true about a person's life is always useful to share](#). He wasn't saying that leaders are always above any correction, only that historians need to be thoughtful about what they share about the people they write about—that they should strive to see the person in context, to not focus on one flaw or misbehavior and use it to define the whole person. Interestingly, in those same comments, Elder Oaks spoke about the importance of being skeptical in our reading and being sensitive to bias in our informational sources.

2. *Historical context.* We have the tendency to interpret historical events through the lens of our current experience. But [historians](#) caution that other historical ages are like other cultures; that is, they often did things differently back then. That doesn't mean we can't think critically about things that happened; it just means our own worldview for doing so is insufficient. We also need to take into consideration their worldview and context. One way in which we can do this is by stepping back and reflecting on what we learn without rendering immediate judgment. Doing this gives us some emotional distance and allows for a more balanced examination. This is especially the case when the information we encounter is negative or surprising. This doesn't mean that we must be totally dispassionate, at least not in the way objective neutrality would require. Feelings

and values can be important in helping us understand and evaluate history. Still, we should rationally evaluate the information we encounter in light of our values and the values of those presenting the information. It also seems best to view historical events in a spirit of charity where we give others the “benefit of the doubt,” especially when they are the target of criticisms that may be one-sided. Being charitable means assuming others are acting in good faith—at least until we find evidence to the contrary. For example, critics often show undue concern that Joseph Smith looked for treasures using seer stones and married teenage women. Our knee-jerk reaction to such things might be bewilderment and disgust. But neither of these things was unusual for that time in which he lived.

3. *Church context.* It is also important to understand if information is primarily at the level of the gospel, the Church, or church culture. The restored gospel of Jesus Christ is 100% true. We readily testify to that. And everyone can receive direct revelation from God that it is true. Typically, however, the gospel comes to us from God and Christ by way of mortal men and women. Often this occurs within the organization of the Church. In other words, that perfect gospel sometimes loses integrity as it passes through human minds and hands on its way to us. In fact, the Title Page of the Book of Mormon acknowledges this when it states: “And now, if there are faults they are the mistakes of men; wherefore, condemn not the things of God, that ye may be found spotless at the judgment-seat of Christ.” The gospel is perfect, but the scriptures and the Church, and any other medium reliant on mortal efforts, are imperfect. To this point, Elder Dale G. Renlund taught: “If you receive what the Lord’s Church offers, you can be perfected in Christ before His Church is perfected, if it ever is. His goal is to perfect you, not His Church” (footnote 35). Still, the Church plays an important role in delivering the gospel to us. If we are thoughtful, we can still hone in on core gospel truths or doctrines. Lastly, our encounters with the gospel often come in our local congregations and our homes. Yet another layer of human minds and hands the gospel passes through, whereby it loses even more integrity. We might call these “folk religions,” and technically, there are as many folk religions as there are members of the Church! Thus, do not confuse the way your Ward or family teaches or practices the gospel, much less the way you yourself do, with being THE GOSPEL or THE CHURCH. Such naivety is easily challenged by attending a different Ward or getting married, where you encounter other interpretations of the gospel and the Church. These three layers are important to remember because the further down the information is, the more prone it is to error.

The third tool is *Cognitive Flexibility* (also sometimes referred to as tolerance of uncertainty or comfort with ambiguity). Whenever a psychology professor asks a question to a room full of students in a psychology class, there are usually two answers that invariably will work in almost all situations—"both" or "it depends." For example, many people are familiar with the so-called "[nature-nurture debate](#)" in psychology. So, what's more important, nature (our genes) or nurture (our environments)? As you probably guessed, the correct answers are "both" and "it depends." In psychology, we pride ourselves on teaching students critical thinking, a big part of which is cognitive flexibility. People are complex. Life is complex. Students coming in craving simple answers are left wanting, as there are none (and any seemingly simple answer is often wrong). By the time they have completed their psychology degree, we hope they have developed cognitive flexibility. In other words, we hope they appreciate the complexity of human psychology and become accustomed to uncertainty.

People are complex. Life is complex. Students coming in craving simple answers are left wanting, as there are none.

How might cognitive flexibility help you on your faith journey? In the first essay in this series (on Questioning), we outlined the stages of faith (using the Hafens' model): (1) *simplicity*, (2) *complexity*, and (3) *simplicity beyond complexity*. In Stage 1, people figuratively see the world as black and white and thus have minimal cognitive flexibility. But at some point, for many people, that way of thinking is no longer adequate, because the world generally isn't black and white. As Jean Piaget, a pioneer in developmental psychology, explained, when encountering new information, we can either assimilate that information into our current ways of thinking or accommodate it by developing new ways of thinking. According to him, cognitive development happens as people are pushed to develop more and more sophisticated ways of thinking. When people have experiences with or encounter new information about the gospel or the Church that cannot easily be assimilated into their current way of thinking, some choose to abandon the gospel or the Church, but they could instead learn to accommodate. Since simplistic ways of seeing the world are often unrealistic, accommodation means being open to seeing the world as it is; in other words, having cognitive flexibility. One common example noted in our first essay is the simplistic notion that church leaders are infallible. If we hear something a church leader did that seems wrong, our immediate reaction might be to assume that either the information is false, or the Church isn't true

—it's an either/or situation. So, we might immediately dismiss the information to retain belief in the Church. But with more evidence of the truthfulness of the information, we may feel compelled to abandon the Church. But what if, like in psychology classes, the correct answer is “both” or “it depends.” In this case, the information could be correct AND the Church could still be true. But only if we have cognitive flexibility.

The fourth tool is the *Myth Buster*. If you effectively use the first three tools (critically evaluate sources, appropriately contextualize information, and stay open to new ways of thinking), you are well-prepared to sniff out myths about the gospel and the Church. You will encounter many such myths, particularly from popular media, social media, and critics of the Church (often former members). Here we are using the [definition of the term myth](#) as “an unfounded or false notion.” As the famous Mark Twain quote goes, “What gets us into trouble is not what we don't know, but what we know for sure that just ain't so.” Myths emerge, are passed on, and are often rigidly clung to, despite being partially or entirely false. Unfortunately, sometimes they are at least partially started by church leaders, gospel scholars, or well-known church teachers, speakers, or authors. In such cases, they are eventually corrected, but some still hold to the original myth. An example of this are the prior myths regarding race, such as that certain races are inferior due to their premortal status or their lineage through Cain, which have since been [officially corrected by the Church](#). However, often the myths emerge from church culture or society more broadly. One such example stemming from church culture, already touched on above, is that [prophets should be infallible](#). This myth stems from an over-interpretation of statements such as this one by President Wilford Woodruff: “The Lord will never permit me or any other man who stands as President of this Church to lead you astray.” Not only are there numerous instances of self-admitted prophetic fallibility in the scripture (Exodus 4:10; 1 Nephi 19:6), but [church leaders in the](#) latter days have repeatedly acknowledged this as well. Another myth, stemming more from the broader society as well as many within the social sciences, is that there is such thing as objectivity. Critics of the Church claim that they sought “objective” sources, but there is no such thing as an [objective human perspective](#), especially when it comes to such things as interpreting historical events, the meaning of religious doctrines and practices, and other people's intentions or motives. We simply cannot get out of our subjective perspective, no matter

Often myths emerge from church culture or society more broadly ... and stems from over-interpretation of statements.

how hard we try. Every human perspective is a perspective from somewhere, with various biases already baked in. This doesn't mean that all perspectives are equally biased or equally unreliable. It only means that there is no "[view from nowhere](#)" that we can invoke to establish objective, neutral truth, or to which we can just "outsource" our thinking regarding difficult questions.

The fifth and final tool is *Questioning Assumptions*. This is, perhaps, the most difficult tool we have to offer, but also the one that may prove to be the most helpful. As we just noted, every human perspective is a perspective from somewhere. In other words, the way in which we make sense of and experience the world, and even the questions we ask about our faith journeys, arise out of some very basic assumptions we have about the world, ourselves, and others. These assumptions concern our basic sense of how we can know things to be true or false, how things ought to be, and what interpretations or understandings of events "just make sense." Because they are so basic to our experience of the world, these assumptions are also mostly taken for granted, and thus, we seldom examine or clarify them to ourselves. This does not mean that our most basic assumptions cannot be accessed, evaluated, or critically examined. In fact, it is vital that we not only take careful stock of the assumptions that others seem to be operating from to better evaluate the arguments they make and the evidence they present, but we also need to carefully think through our own assumptions to know why we find some ideas particularly troubling or persuasive.

The most basic way to examine assumptions—both our own and those of others—is to simply ask questions about why a given idea or criticism that we've encountered seems so odd, troubling, or wrong. For example, maybe you just encountered an account of events from church history that seems really confusing, inconsistent with what you've previously heard, or paints a picture of hypocrisy. You ask yourself about the assumptions you (and the source of the information) have regarding the nature of historical truth and historical research. That is, are you bothered because you assume that historians simply relate the plain facts of the past and tell things as they really were, with no interpretation or bias involved? If so, you might be troubled because you assume that what you just learned must be a fact rather than a

Almost all historical events, and the lives and actions of people in history, have multiple possible understandings and plausible interpretations.

narrative account that has been creatively produced out of competing interpretations and plausible storylines. However, no professional historians believe that what they are doing is just reporting objective facts about the past. Instead, most understand that they are weaving a narrative account, from their own perspective, while trying to be as fair and honest as possible—but always with limitations and biases. Almost all historical events, and the lives and actions of people in history, have multiple possible understandings and plausible interpretations. Thinking through alternative approaches or perspectives can be helpful in evaluating the reliability and believability of information we encounter, especially in the context of navigating a faith journey. For more on how to identify and work through hidden assumptions, particularly in the context of issues related to faith crises, we suggest starting [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), or [here](#).

In summary, we have provided you with five tools to help you on your faith journey: (1) Source Criticism, (2) Contextualization, (3) Cognitive Flexibility, (4) Myth Buster, and (5) Questioning Assumptions. As we noted at the start, these are tools that scholars and psychological researchers like us use in our research and writing. They are tools we teach our students. But we have noticed they have also helped us and many others navigate our faith journeys “using our heads.” For [faith and reason](#) are not in conflict, but are mutually reinforcing, and [both are necessary](#) for us to find our way forward.

About the authors

Sam A. Hardy

Sam Hardy has a PhD in developmental psychology and is a professor in the Department of Psychology at Brigham Young University. He studies religious and spiritual development across adolescence and young adulthood, with a focus on deconversion, reconversion, and faith crises.

Edwin E. Gantt

Edwin E. Gantt is a Professor of Psychology at Brigham Young University. He is the author of numerous scholarly articles and books, including *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Psychological Issues* and *Who is Truth? Reframing Our Questions for a Richer Faith* (co-authored with Dr. Jeffrey L. Thayne). He has a Ph.D. from Duquesne University.