



Navigating Your Faith Journey: Questioning is Good

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Is it okay to question? Yes, it can be an important part of your faith journey.

Part 1 of a 4 part series.

As psychologists with abiding interests in spiritual development and religious belief, we have each spent considerable time in recent years studying [deconversion](#) and the nature of [faith crises](#). Our research suggests that one of the key reasons people leave religion, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is because they feel their religious community dismisses important doctrinal or historical questions and is intolerant of doubt. It is profoundly unfortunate when this happens, particularly in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, because such is not in harmony with gospel teachings. Let's not forget that the process of restoring the gospel in these latter days began with a question—Joseph Smith's first prayer (Joseph Smith History 1:14-19).

While it obviously “takes two to tango,” such that there is always a joint responsibility on the individual and their approach to questioning and on the religious community and their response to questioning, we don’t believe that thoughtful, informed, even penetrating questioning is in itself a problem for faith. Indeed, in this essay, we will draw upon both religious perspectives and scientific findings to make the case that questioning, when understood in the right way, can actually be a healthy part of faith development.

For starters, if you’ve struggled with questions or doubts relevant to religion and spirituality, then you’re in good company. Here are just a few examples of notable religious or spiritual figures who struggled with questions or doubts. In the Old Testament, there’s Abraham (Genesis 17:15-17). As an old man, God told him that his wife was going to have a son. In response, “Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, ‘Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?’” In the New Testament, there’s Peter. We can give him credit for at least one step on the water, but eventually he faltered and sank in the sea (Matthew 14:29-31), and later he denied Christ three times (Matthew 26:69-75). In the Book of Mormon, too, we find both Lehi and Sariah having their moments of questioning. Sariah complained to Lehi when it seemed like her sons had been gone too long on their return to Jerusalem (1 Ne. 5:1-3). And, later, Lehi murmured to God when they struggled getting food in the wilderness (1 Ne. 16:20). A further example, drawn from church history, is Joseph Smith’s famous “O God, where art thou?” prayer of despair in Liberty Jail (D & C 121:1).

Casting a wider net to include other global spiritual leaders, upon [Mother Teresa](#)’s death, it was discovered that her journals contained extensive confessions of feelings of abandonment by God. Indeed, many influential and firmly committed Christian thinkers have admitted to having struggled to reconcile, or at least better understand, their faith in light of certain troubling questions, people such as [Martin Luther](#), [C. S. Lewis](#), [Pope Francis](#), [John Calvin](#), and [Charles Spurgeon](#). And, perhaps most comfortingly, in addition to His question on the Cross, Jesus seems to have struggled, at least on one reading, to make sense of what He was being asked to

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undergo in the Garden of Gethsemane. Scripture teaches us that as the Savior began to experience the weight of sin descend, He was “sore amazed” (lit., “awestruck”) and pled to the Father, “*If it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt*” (Matt. 26:29). Later, Christ’s earthly ministry concluded on the Cross with a question on His lips: “My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). In short, it seems clear that even the best, most religious people to walk the earth can sympathize with your questions or doubts.

The scriptures actually encourage questioning. There’s of course the passage that prompted Joseph Smith to take his questions to God—“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God” (James 1:5). We also have Jesus, as part of the “Sermon on the Mount,” inviting his followers to “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (Matthew 7:7). In the Book of Mormon, we have Moroni’s famous promise, “If ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost” (Moroni 10:4). In modern times, Joseph Smith taught the church leaders to “seek” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:118) and “search” (Doctrine and Covenants 90:24) diligently. Further, in a revelation given to Oliver Cowdery through Joseph Smith, we learn how to use questioning to receive personal revelation. In one place, we are taught that if we “ask in faith, with an honest heart,” then God “will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost” (Doctrine and Covenants 8:1-2), then this is reaffirmed again when we are told to “study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you” (Doctrine and Covenants 9:8). In short, there is no shortage of ancient and modern scripture encouraging us to deeper, sincere, and sustained questioning.

Interestingly, even a famous passage of scripture that is sometimes invoked to commend “blind obedience” may actually be teaching just the opposite lesson. In the fifth chapter of the Book of Moses, we read that after Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden, Adam built an altar upon which to offer sacrifice as he had been commanded. However, “after many days” an angel came to Adam to ask *him* a question: “Why dost thou offer sacrifices unto the Lord?” (Moses 5:6). Adam’s response was a fairly straightforward confession of ignorance; he admitted that he really had no idea why he was doing what he was doing, only that he had been commanded to do so. Following such an admission, the angel then proceeded to explain things to him, clarifying the meaning and purpose of building altars and offering sacrifices as being “a similitude of

the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father” (Moses 5:7). Although, as we said, this passage of scripture is often used to encourage obedience to divine command even in the absence of a clear understanding its reasons—an important doctrinal teaching, to be sure—it is also possible to read this angelic exchange with Adam as having been necessitated by virtue of Adam’s failure to inquire more deeply about what he had been commanded to do, what it might mean, or the possible reasons for the command having been given in the first place. Perhaps, that is, at least on this one possible reading, the Lord had given Adam a fair amount of time to think seriously about what he had been commanded, to formulate some clear questions and then seek after answers, but when that seemed to not be happening, he graciously sent a heavenly messenger to invite Adam to greater reflection and truth-seeking.

More recently, modern church leaders have also encouraged greater reflection and sincere questioning. Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf, for example, said, “We are a question-asking people ... because we know that inquiry leads to truth.” Then he pointed to the origin of our church as a young man’s question. More generally, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland observed that “revelation almost always comes in response to a question.” Sister Sheri L. Dew argued that “Questions are not just good, they are vital, because the ensuing spiritual wrestle leads to answers, to knowledge, and to revelation. And it also leads to greater faith.” To make it clearer, the First Presidency stated that “Simply asking questions has never constituted apostasy.” In short, not only is sincere questioning not a bad thing, it is in fact central to who we are as a Church and a critical part of personal revelation and faith development.

It is important here to understand that while the scriptures encourage questioning, they also discourage doubt. Still, doubt is never condemned as a sin any more than fear is. When Jesus caught Peter as he was sinking into the water, he said “O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?” (Matthew 14:31). At the end of the Book of Mormon, the prophet Moroni speaks to us latter-day readers and instructs us to “Doubt not, but be believing” (Mormon 9:27). Similarly, in the latter-days, the Lord urged Oliver Cowdery, through revelation to Joseph Smith, to “doubt not, fear not” (Doctrine and Covenants 6:36). The reason doubt is discouraged is, as Joseph Smith taught, “... doubt and faith do not exist in the same person at the same time ...” So, as Elder John A. Widtsoe argued, “Doubt, therefore, can be and should be only a temporary condition.” Elder Dale G. Renlund clarifies that “Doubt is not the precursor of faith ... To have a question about the Church or its doctrines is not a problem. Choosing to be a perpetual doubter is the

problem.” As such, as Elder John A. Widtsoe also noted, “doubt ... must never itself be an end ... Doubt, unless transmuted into inquiry, has no value or worth in the world.”

It’s important to clarify the difference between questioning and doubting. Many people assume the two words are synonymous, and that to have questions is the same thing as to doubt. However, questioning is the act of seeking greater understanding or clarification, while doubting implies a more negative or skeptical attitude. Asking genuine questions requires taking a more positive and open-minded approach, guided by curiosity and a desire to understand how things can ultimately make sense. Questioning is typically more neutral and inquisitive, open not only to ambiguity but also patient and willing to accept that finding complete answers may take time, requiring both optimistic faith and hard work.

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Doubt, on the other hand, tends to be driven more by distrust, suspicion, and a general spirit of disbelief that often partakes of what the philosopher Nietzsche—ironically, himself a doubter—called the “worship of the question mark.” Doubting, in this way, is less interested in finding answers than it is in endlessly searching for them, even as any answers that come along are likely to be distrusted, and commitment to them forestalled. The doubter remains aloof and detached, always waiting for confirmation before moving forward, even though such confirmation, when it does come, is often equally distrusted and rejected, thereby engendering even further doubt. In short, then, a key element of doubting that distinguishes it from sincere question-asking is its grounding in skepticism, resistance to belief, and even the desire for self-justification. Thus, only when doubt is temporary and transforms into faithful questioning can it become truly productive.

As academic psychologists with a wide range of research interests and interdisciplinary training, we are drawn to thoughtful theoretical formulations and careful descriptions of human experience. Although numerous theories about the development of religious faith (and religious doubt) have been proposed by psychological researchers, here we wish to briefly mention two of them that point to the importance of questioning in faith development. The first of these, and perhaps the most prominent theoretical approach to faith development, is James Fowler’s “[Stages of Faith](#)” account. Fowler builds on

pioneering work by [Jean Piaget](#), [Lawrence Kohlberg](#), and others in developmental psychology to describe a series of possible stages through which individuals can pass as they move from a very simplistic, immature spiritual worldview to a more comprehensive, reflective one. However, Fowler's writings are overly complicated, at least for our limited purposes here. Fortunately, other authors such as Brian McLaren, in his book "[Faith After Doubt](#)," have streamlined the model. Here we will explore an even simpler model proposed by Bruce and Marie Hafen in "[Faith is Not Blind](#)." Fowler and the Hafens presumably have somewhat independent intellectual histories, but their models do seem to align well in many respects. The Hafens outline three stages of faith development: *simplicity*, *complexity*, and *simplicity beyond complexity*.

During the first stage of simplicity, people see the Church in very idealistic ways, and the gospel in terms of black and white, often abstract and rigid principles. For example, everything associated with the Church is 100% inspired by God, membership in the Church is always a positive influence for everyone, Church leaders are infallible, living the gospel is straightforward, and knowing and choosing what is right is always clear. Many people go through their entire lives at this stage. This does not, however, preclude them from being great members of the Church, living the gospel in important ways, and following the commandments of Jesus with firm, decisive commitment. These folks are often very traditional, conventional members of the Church. They seldom feel much need to question their faith or practices because such things are "settled matters" and thus not up for further discussion. They may even sometimes feel uncomfortable with questioning.

For some people, though, at some point in their lives, this simple view of faith, the gospel, and the Church can begin to fall apart as they enter the stage of complexity. People most often arrive at this stage during adolescence and young adulthood, when their world expands, and they begin to encounter new and different perspectives. Experience shows them that some things in the Church are not always ideal, and the gospel is not always a simple matter of black and white or the easy application of abstract principle. Maybe they learn about other worldviews in college or on a mission. Maybe they learn about troubling issues from studying church history. Maybe they struggle to reconcile

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church doctrines or policies regarding social issues, such as those related to gender and sexuality. Or maybe they have been hurt in some way by church leaders or other members of the Church, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Again, like the previous stage, some people end up spending most of their lives in this stage, and can be great members of the Church, striving to live the gospel as they understand it, and follow Jesus as best they can. However, it is also true that if people are going to leave the Church, it typically occurs at this stage. This is because it can be such an unsettling stage to be in, as questions and doubts are prevalent and challenging, and clear, easy answers can be hard to come by.

Fortunately, some find their way through complexity to the Hafens' third stage of simplicity beyond complexity. This comes with the development of what is sometimes called tolerance for uncertainty or comfort with ambiguity. In developing this sort of tolerance, they can accept the complexity of the world, the gray areas, the imperfections and ambiguities of navigating the moral shoals of daily life. While they might find satisfying answers to some of their questions, they are also patient with other unanswered questions. In this way, they gain insights and a broader perspective that helps them reconstruct their ways of thinking about our complex world, historical issues, and doctrinal possibilities. For example, they may have come to realize that it is unrealistic to expect church leaders to be infallible (i.e., more than human). Or, perhaps, they work out ways to differentiate the gospel of Christ and His Church from church "culture," temporary policies or programs, of the sort [Neal A Maxwell identified as mere "scaffolding."](#)

Part of this may be coming to realize that each person has their own folk religion, a unique set of identity-shaping experiences, and an interpretive lens through which they make sense of the gospel, themselves, others, and the world. In so doing, they become comfortable living the gospel in a way that is deeply reliant on the particularities of the guidance of the Holy Ghost, and they freely allow others to do the same. Having developed this manner of faith, such people follow the teachings of the Book of Mormon and "counsel with the Lord in all [their] doings" (Alma 37:37), trusting in the compassionate mercy of the Savior to see all things to a good end. In short, when people make it through complexity to simplicity beyond complexity, they have a deeper, more personal, and more expansive faith. On the one hand, it is more flexible and dynamic, continuing to evolve and grow; while, on the other hand, it is a more stable faith, based as it is on a more realistic view of the world.

The second theory we wish to touch upon that demonstrates the important role of questioning is [Erik Erikson](#)'s account about the nature of identity formation. Like Fowler, Erikson's own ideas are overly complicated for our purposes. But similarly, others have simplified Erickson's ideas, such as [James Marcia](#) and his concept of identity statuses. Marcia pulled out two processes from Erikson's writings—exploration and commitment—and used them to outline four identity statuses: *diffusion*, *foreclosure*, *moratorium*, and *achievement*. According to Marcia, people in identity diffusion don't really have an identity and aren't doing any serious work to find one (i.e., no exploration or commitment). They are just sort of idling in place. People in foreclosure have adopted readily accessible identities from others around them, but have done so without any real thought or exploration (i.e., commitment without exploration). An example of this sort of thing can be seen in those people who grow up in the Church and accept their identity as a Latter-day Saint, but do so without serious question. They simply adopt the behavioral patterns, beliefs, and attitudes that others around them have endorsed, and do so without any real reflection.

Others, in contrast, find themselves in the throes of persistent exploration of their identity. This is what Marcia termed identity moratorium (i.e., exploration, but no commitment *yet*). However, once people have successfully navigated the waters of moratorium and established their identity, they have come to identity achievement (i.e., commitment after exploration). In other words, these people have found their identity after a period of thoughtful questioning and serious reflection. Hundreds of studies have [compared these four identity statuses on every outcome](#) you can imagine, and typically, people in identity diffusion fare the worst, while people in identity achievement fare the best. In short, according to Erik Erikson, one of the founders of developmental psychology, for us to have a healthy religious identity, we need to go through at least some exploration and questioning. Or, as we frequently say in the Church, we each need to “find our own testimony.”

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We've drawn on religious and scientific sources to demonstrate that not only is questioning not bad for the development and strengthening of faith, but it can be good, if done properly. Indeed, sincere and humble questioning can actually lead one to

deeper faith and a more intimate relationship with God. Hence, the Lord has invited us to improve our relationship with Him by engaging with Him in thoughtful, probing questioning:

“And now come, saith the Lord, by the Spirit, unto the elders of his church, and let us reason together, that ye may understand; Let us reason even as a man reasoneth one with another face to face. Now, when a man reasoneth, he is understood of man, because he reasoneth as a man; even so will I, the Lord, reason with you that you may understand” (D & C 50:10-12; see also D & C 45:10 and Isaiah 1:18).

Such reasoning together would seem to involve not only sustained and serious question-asking, but also the humble and sincere desire to know the truth and follow where it leads.

In this essay, we have used religion and science to make a case that questioning is not only acceptable but even healthy for faith development. Over the next few weeks, we will be releasing three follow-up essays detailing how to go about questioning in a healthy and productive way. In the field of psychology, we often focus on emotion, thought, and behavior as core dimensions of human functioning. In line with this, we will have one essay each on the role of the heart (emotion), head (thought), and hands (behavior) in productive questioning. We hope this series of four essays will provide encouragement and guidance to you on your faith journey.

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