



# When Symbols Become Idols: Remembering What Points Us to Christ

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FAITH

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*From Moses' brass serpent to tools of modern discipleship, how to keep the means of discipleship from replacing the Messiah.*

## The Serpent as a Sacred Symbol

In many ancient civilizations, the serpent was a symbol of kings, royalty, and gods. You can see this on the front of the Egyptian [Pharaoh's crown](#) and in the Mesoamerican legend of [Quetzalcoatl](#), the feathered serpent.

It is also a symbol of Christ. The scripture [story](#) of Moses' serpent devouring the Egyptians' serpents conveyed a powerful theological message that Jehovah is the

superior serpent. As Latter-day Saint scholar Andrew Skinner [points out](#), this story testifies of Christ's supremacy over counterfeit powers.

This context makes it deeply significant that Satan appeared to Eve as a serpent in the Garden. He was appearing as a counterfeit of Christ. [Genesis](#) teaches: "Now the serpent was more subtle (cunning, crafty, clever) than any beast of the field" (ESV), setting up the serpent as a counterfeit messenger—appearing authoritative while steering souls away from Christ. Moses [4:6](#) adds, "Satan put it into the heart of the serpent (for he had drawn away many after him,) and he sought also to beguile Eve."

## The Brass Serpent and the Lesson of Misplaced Worship

The serpent appears again early in the Old Testament. We read in the book of [Numbers](#) that "the people spoke against God and Moses," asking, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food" (ESV).

God responded to their lack of faith by sending "fiery" (poisonous) serpents into their camp, and people began dying. When the Israelites repented and asked Moses to pray for deliverance, the Lord instructed Moses to make a "[serpent of bronze](#)" and fasten it to the top of a pole so that whoever looked upon it would live.

Both [Jesus](#) and [Alma](#) later pointed out that the raised serpent symbolized the Son. Yet [King Hezekiah](#) destroyed the brass serpent made by Moses—called Nehushtan at the time—because the Israelites, in an act denoting cultic worship, had begun to burn incense to it and worship it as an idol.

Did they forget whom they truly worshiped?

Why would the Israelites worship something meant to point them to the Lord? Did they forget whom they truly worshiped? Similarly, do we forget whom we really worship and find ourselves idolizing good things that were meant to lead us to Christ?

## When the Means Become the End

Some things intended to point us to Christ, such as the Church, the Prophet and apostles, the scriptures, church programs, local priesthood leaders, the For the Strength of Youth pamphlet, and even commandments, can sometimes inadvertently become like the brass serpent. They [bring us to Christ](#), but when we treat them as salvific in and of themselves, we risk idolizing them. The Pharisees exemplified what idolizing commandments looks like.

I'm not suggesting anyone does this deliberately, but in our valiant effort to teach members and children to fully participate in church, follow the prophet, and read the scriptures, we sometimes create a culture where these good and righteous things are assumed to be the end goal instead of the means to the end.

## What Does It Mean That the Church Is “True and Living”?

But don't we say things like, “The Prophet will never lead us astray,” “The Book of Mormon is the most correct of any book,” and “The Church is the only true Church?” Yes, but those statements require context.

When we say the Church is “true,” what do we mean? It has the ordinances of the Priesthood, is led by Christ through revelation to His servants, and teaches salvific doctrine. It is divine, it is Christ's Church. Many hear ‘true’ as ‘flawless’: perfectly accurate scriptures, faultless programs, decisions exactly as God would make them. In other words, we interpret “true” as factually binary, all right or all wrong. Many members even feel proud of that idea, believing that all other sects are abominable and all preachers corrupt.

But what happens when the Church changes policies, reverses decisions, or rolls out a less effective program? What do we do when someone says something hurtful, when leaders contradict each other, or when members feel hurt or isolated within church culture?

The problem with this true or false thinking is that when people encounter a problem in the Church, they often feel they have no choice but to leave, throwing the baby out with the bathwater. The assumption is that a divine institution should have no human error, turning every mistake into a potential crisis of faith.

D&C 1:30 states that this is the only “true and living” Church. We often define “true” as “unchanging” or “factually accurate,” but the qualifying word “living” complicates that definition. Another meaning of “true” is “to make level, square, balanced, or concentric; to restore to accuracy or form,” which gives the word a more dynamic, living sense. “Truing a wheel”, for example, means adjusting the spokes so it spins straight and steady, free of wobble.

Perhaps the Church being “true” is like a bicycle wheel, pointed in the right direction, generally straight, yet occasionally needing adjustment. We have to pump flat tires, straighten dents, and realign spokes to keep it true. And as we ride, we make countless small course corrections that keep us moving toward our destination.

To call the Church “living” points to continuing revelation, but it also implies correction, growth, and healing. Recent changes to temple language and partnerships with the NAACP are examples.

It helps to understand the proper relationship between the gospel and the Church. Both are divine, but only the gospel is perfect. Elder Ronald Poelman once said, “Understanding the proper relationship between the gospel and the Church will prevent confusion, misplaced priorities, and failed expectations.” On the other hand, Elder Kevin S. Hamilton taught, “You cannot accept Jesus Christ and reject His Church or His authorized messengers... You cannot separate Jesus Christ from the Church of Jesus Christ.”

The First Vision began with a question.

The Church is a vehicle to salvation, like a car. Compared with others in the lot, it’s the best one. It’s not perfect or the biggest or fastest, and it has dents to buff out. But it’s reliable, offers upgrades, and has the best safety features. We get weekly gas fill-ups and 24-hour roadside assistance. Each model year improves, and it even includes a heavenly OnStar call button. The best feature may be the eternal warranty.

## Prophets, Fallibility, and the Divine Filter

In the Old Testament, the Lord summoned Gideon to free Israel from Midianite oppression. Gideon raised an army of 32,000, but God told him that was too many, since

He wanted no one else to take the glory. After reducing the army to 300, they triumphed. Yet the people gave Gideon the credit, saying, “Rule over us, for you have delivered us.” Gideon replied, “I will not rule over you, the Lord shall rule over you.”

Latter-day Saint scholar and writer Terryl Givens, in *The Crucible of Doubt*, observes that such [hero worship](#) is common in human history and even within our Church. He cites the old joke that Catholics claim the Pope is infallible but no one believes it, while Latter-day Saints claim the Prophet is fallible but no one believes it. The notion that prophets are infallible specimens of virtue and perfection is “neither scriptural nor reasonable,” Givens writes.

President Dieter F. Uchtdorf likewise [acknowledged](#), “We openly acknowledge that in nearly 200 years of Church history... there have been some things said and done that could cause people to question.... And, to be perfectly frank, there have been times when members or leaders in the Church have simply made mistakes.”

Elder D. Todd Christofferson [added that](#) “not every statement made by a Church leader, past or present, necessarily constitutes doctrine. ... Often it represents a personal, though well-considered, opinion, not meant to be official or binding.”

Scripture reinforces that God speaks to us according to our language and understanding (see 2 Nephi 31 and D&C 1). Revelation filters through human personalities and paradigms. Joseph Smith [acknowledged](#) this, and Moroni echoed it on the title page of the Book of Mormon: “If there are faults, they are the mistakes of men.”

So what does divinity look like filtered through mortals? I find the metaphor of stained glass fitting. Depending on its color and design, the light passing through is beautiful and divine, but still filtered. The filtering makes it unique. Just because there’s glass doesn’t mean the light isn’t divine. Consider how divine inspiration manifests differently through the “stained glass” of Neal A. Maxwell, Brigham Young, Sheri Dew, Jeffrey R. Holland, Gordon B. Hinckley, Bruce R. McConkie, Dieter F. Uchtdorf, or Sharon Eubank, and through your own ward members.

God uses flawed vessels because that’s all He has, but also to teach humility and redirect our worship. He told Joseph Smith in [D&C 121: 1](#), “For unto this end have I raised you up, that I might show forth my wisdom through the weak things of the earth.” Elder

Jeffrey R. Holland [reminded us](#), “Imperfect people are all God has ever had to work with... and when you see imperfection, remember that the limitation is not in the divinity of the work.”

The Lord built checks and balances into His system, councils, quorums, companionships, presidencies, and marriages. Elder Boyd K. Packer [noted](#), “These procedures protect the work from the individual weaknesses apparent in all of us.”

## Two Common Errors in Faith

We tend to err in two ways. First, we don’t take the prophet, the Church, or the scriptures seriously enough. Many of us fail to fully embrace the blessings of following the Brethren, participating in Church, and feasting on scripture. President Nelson [warned that](#) “we should not put question marks where the Prophet has put periods.”

The second error is what New Testament scholar Darrell Bock calls “[brittle fundamentalism](#),” assuming the Church, prophets, or scriptures must be perfect, then losing faith when confronted with imperfection. If we think the Church must be all true or all false, it’s easy to walk away when we find flaws.

## The Value of Honest Questions

To those wrestling with doubts, your questions are valid. There is nothing wrong with you. Questions are how we learn. Nearly every revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants began with a question. The First Vision began with a question.

Uncertainty is uncomfortable, but sincere inquiry is part of discipleship. Answers may come quickly, slowly, or not at all, which is why faith is essential to spiritual growth. Joseph Smith [taught](#) that “a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation.” Perhaps part of that sacrifice is placing our complaints and unanswered questions on the altar, trusting that God values honest wrestling as much as easy belief.

## Creating a Culture Safe for Seekers

A living church must also be a safe place for sincere seekers. If faith is meant to grow through honest inquiry rather than brittle certainty, then questions should not be treated as threats. In practice, however, some members quietly fear that voicing doubts will brand them as disloyal or spiritually weak.

Yet the Restoration itself models a different pattern. Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf [taught](#), “Inquiry is the birthplace of testimony. ... Asking questions isn’t a sign of weakness; it’s a precursor of growth.” Faith that cannot tolerate sincere questions risks confusing devotion with defensiveness.

Mature discipleship makes room for complexity without abandoning commitment. Over time, faith may move from simplicity to complexity and, ideally, return to a deeper, humbler simplicity (see Hafen, [Faith is Not Blind](#)). Creating space for that process does not weaken the Church. It honors the fact that a true and living faith must also be patient, charitable, and resilient.

## Triangulating Truth

So how do we find truth in a fallen world? I try to “triangulate” truth. We can look for where sources converge: the Standard Works, living and dead prophets, personal revelation, reason, teachers, parents, and all good books. Relying on just one or two can mislead us. The Holy Ghost is the ultimate source of truth, but discerning its voice often involves corroboration among these channels since we “see through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

I believe because I choose to, not because of flawless logic.

We must utilize each of these sources rather than idolize them.

## Choosing to Believe

I’ve chosen the gospel of Christ as the reality on which I’ll depend for salvation. I believe this Church is the best vehicle to reach that destination. I believe because I choose to, not because of flawless logic. I have felt the Holy Spirit confirm the truth to me on many occasions.

My testimony waxes and wanes, as everyone's does. Sometimes it nears certainty; other times it leans on faith alone. Yet even in weakness, it calls me to keep trying, to keep seeing light through stained glass.

About the author

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Spencer Anderson holds an MS in Psychology and an MBA, and teaches university lectures on mental and emotional health. His work bridges psychology, philosophy, and spirituality.