

## STAKE HANDOUT

### *HELP THOU MINE UNBELIEF BY STUDY AND BY FAITH*

#### Suggestions and Resources to Work Through Questions Related to LDS Church History, Doctrine, and Social Issues

In the Church, we value truth and we value those who seek after it. Joseph Smith once said, “Mormonism is Truth.” He encouraged the Saints to let truth in no matter what source it came from. Truth is truth. In our faith we are having to do just that. In the Information Age we are becoming aware as a culture that adjustments need to be made in how we tell our story and how we respond to a better grasp of information on our history and doctrine. Many in our faith are having for the first time to deal with this awareness, and it can be unsettling. We are as a church taking steps to respond and likely have a lot of work to do, but in the meantime we must find ways to help each other adapt. Rather than judgment and self-righteousness, we ought to be humble and willing to lift the hands that hang down and to strengthen the feeble knees.

The following handout has been designed to give people the tools they need to press forward through this transitional phase of their faith. This handout is not designed to answer the issues directly. To do so would take hundreds of pages with multiple factions agreeing and disagreeing over what is the best of answers. Instead, here is a surface view of what is helpful and what is not, giving the reader the framework of what may lay ahead, what to be careful of, and what to be aware of as one takes this journey.

#### *Cautions in Research*

- **SOURCES** – Carefully consider the information you are reading. Many sources are witness accounts written years later and may be affected by one’s memory. Also, some details are only found in one source which should give us pause. People on both sides may find certain sources to be untrustworthy due to the bias of the person writing or collecting the information, and so we should spend time studying to know which sources are reliable. In the end, one should not deem all non-Mormon sources as false, nor should one see all “believing” sources as having the best answers. Instead, facts and critical analysis should be weighed by their merit and the strength of their argument, and should be balanced by prayer and spiritual study with an eye single to the glory of God.
- **CONCLUSIONS** – Most of the proposed “facts” you read about on both sides will be true. While in the past, generations would dismiss critical information as anti-Mormon propaganda, it is recognized today that most of what both sides are calling the facts are indeed just that. These facts can seem strange and unusual, or common and consistent. What is debated at large is what conclusions we make from these facts. We should take caution in jumping to one conclusion or another until we better understand the data and context on both sides of any issue.
- **MOTIVATIONS/TONE** – Many of the issues you study out will have a tone. Spending long periods of time reading or listening to those with a negative tone can draw you into a similar emotional feeling. While we should validate the pain of betrayal a critic who once believed feels, or the frustration of one’s answer not being accepted at face value that the apologist (one who defends the position of the Church on any given issue) incurs, one should seek out the most unbiased and objective scholars and research. When either side acts as if they have all the answers and their conclusions are the only possibility, we are likely seeing the most extreme side of that issue.

- **BLACK AND WHITE INTERPRETATIONS** – People struggle with these issues because they are complex. Many of these issues have many conclusions that are valid and reasonable. Both sides have valid points they are making, and we must be careful not to have a dismissive attitude. Any time we dismiss either side out of hand or altogether, we are likely getting stuck in “black and white” thinking.
- **PERSPECTIVE** – As we examine these issues, we are having to gauge motives, cultural influence, family dynamics, generational interpretations and misinterpretations, and over-reaching made by later leaders and scholars and yes, even us. To be aware of perspective means we try to understand these people in the time and place they lived, to give them space to be flawed human beings who may err, and to grant that we may have understood or misunderstood their words at times.

### *Ten General Principles to Work Through Difficult Issues*

1.) **SLOW DOWN:** We have in large measure built our beliefs on a narrative. With the advent of the internet, we are as a Church realizing the narrative is different in some ways compared to the way we framed it in generations past. Recognizing this can be confusing, as it threatens our currently held views, and can catch us off guard. When our world view is forced to change both suddenly and drastically, our brains are trained to find the simplest way to resolve the issue. This usually involves either dismissing the new information and holding on to our old beliefs, giving little chance to learn new truth, or throwing the baby out with the bathwater by letting go of everything. Both of these would be poor approaches to reconciliation. Real faith development occurs over years, and involves us taking our time digging in with real intent to understand what was going on. Many of these issues are complex, and they may take a long time to grapple with and may require much reflection to find the truths within them. You will feel the need to resolve this in your mind quickly, but only patience and earnest reflection will help you find truth you are seeking.

2.) **ASK FOR HELP:** Unfortunately we have a Church culture that is uncomfortable with doubt and tough questions. What this means is others out of their defensiveness or threatened feelings may use shame or shunning to compel you to stop questioning. This is wrong but it likely will happen, and often has the opposite effect than these members intend. The concern here is feeling that there is no safe space for your questions and therefore you might distance yourself from this atmosphere, and hence the Church. Instead we must find people in our ward, stake, or other circles of family or friends who will honor our questions and validate our emotional and spiritual struggle. Look for people who can accept that these issues are complex. Seek out people who rather than solely insist you pray and read more scripture, though hopefully these practices are still in your life, can walk with you as you examine these questions. There should be no shame or shunning in their approach, and if you can find someone who has been through this, even the better. If the person draws your conclusions for you either by trying to convince you the Church is false or by telling you there are simple, clean answers to every question, perhaps another mentor or guide should be sought. A path of seeking answers to tough questions is the most positive when you have another person who can objectively travel this journey with you. Please find help.

3.) **TAKE A BREAK:** This truth-seeking journey can be overwhelming. It can throw you off balance and push you to attempt to move quickly to put pieces back the way you had them. While this feels natural and necessary, the fact is that something else must occur. Instead of putting things back the way they were, you will need to put things together in a new way. You may have to re-evaluate your assumptions and your expectations, and permit yourself to let them change. There is a tension that comes from trying to change the facts you are learning to fit with your current assumptions. The reality is that on some of these issues you will instead need to allow your assumptions and expectations change to fit the facts. This takes time and it requires you to step away at times from this plunge into information-seeking to be able to absorb what all of this means, regain balance, and be able to do the inner work needed to find the peace you seek. God is calling you to grow, but he is not asking you to do it in a few short weeks or months. This takes time and it requires breaks so you can regain focus.

4.) **STAY GROUNDED IN CHRIST AND COVENANTS:** Ultimately the Gospel is about our relationship with the Savior, and it is the Church's responsibility to point us to Christ. The Church being constituted of flawed members is flawed itself. One of the assumptions that must change is a view that the Church is perfect, or near it. The Church is flawed and at times deeply. This is because we are imperfect and we are the body of Christ. Consider for a moment that by the Church being deeply flawed, it actually does its job and points us to Christ. The imperfect Church inspires us to let go of it as our foundation and instead build upon Christ. It essentially says, "I will let you down, I may hurt you, and I will certainly disappoint you. I am not the Rock. Christ is the Rock. Look past me to Him. I am simply here to show the way, which is Christ."

5.) **STUDY AND FAITH:** If we operate solely by faith we are likely at times to dismiss truth in favor of our comfortable beliefs. That, in essence, we will ignore new truth when it comes because we already have the safety and comfort of our current beliefs. At the same time, if we solely use study to decide spiritual truths, we are likely to miss the deep Gospel truths that will come to you in this journey. Study alone without a spiritual component will keep God from whispering deep insights to your soul. In reality, and scriptures agree, this journey is best traveled utilizing both tools hand in hand. As God has instructed, we should learn by **STUDY** and by **FAITH**. Some of the answers may be that the facts require us to change and shift in our assumptions, and some of the answers may be that the conclusion with the weaker argument may actually be the correct conclusion. While some of the answers may be that all is fine without having to change. In all likelihood, each of these will occur on dozens if not hundreds of issues.

6.) **QUESTIONS ARE HONORED:** Our faith began on the desire of a young man to ask tough questions, expecting God to answer them. God honors questions and seeking. One of the things he asks of us, though, is real intent. That we be truly seeking. Again, it is easy to either become dismissive as a believer or cynical as a disbeliever. Both of these are contrary to the heart of a seeker. Real growth happens when we stay away from these extremes. Be open to additional truth that may conflict with old assumptions, and also be willing to keep asking sincere questions, even when the answers seem to be slow in coming or seemingly stalled. Many of these questions simply do not have great answers. Perhaps all of the answers appear reasonable on one issue and none of the answers will fit well on another. While it would be nice to have absolute answers to our questions, we must realize like in life, these spiritual, doctrinal, historical, and theological questions may never have definitive answers that satisfy us. Yet we are called to be truth-seekers, and to keep searching and keep asking. The scriptures are full of accounts of prophets, and even Christ himself, who at times felt abandoned by God, as they failed to receive the answers they were seeking in the moment they were seeking them.

7.) **FAITH AND DOUBT:** Leaders have at times suggested where faith was there could be no doubt. Perhaps though, doubt and faith are two sides of the same coin. That for us to have real faith operative in our life, there must be a reason to disbelieve as much as a reason to believe. That one must be aware of doubts in order to act in faith. Both of these present with us keep us on our toes. They, when present together, keep us from blind unquestioning obedience on the one hand and cynicism and abandonment of faith all together on the other. Doubt your doubts, but also don't allow yourself to feel shame as you become aware that you have them.

8.) **NEW FRAMEWORKS:** Church is a microcosm of life. In life, our parents and others who cared for us taught simple stories to explain complex ideas and complicated information. Over time we began to grasp those complexities and paradoxes. The Church is no different. We began by being taught a simple narrative that prompted faith and reliance on God to grow in this life. As we grew in the Lord, we came to realize these stories were more complex. Rather than black and white, there may be a lot of gray. When this shift occurs, we must feel empowered to make transitions in how we frame our beliefs, how we reconcile teachings within our lives, and how we balance authority. We have been taught to trust in others just as our parents taught us to trust in them. And just as you one day had to move out of their home and claim authority within your own life, God is calling you to do the same spiritually. By the power of the Holy Ghost **YOU** may know the truth of all things. Rather than hand your authority over to another, God is calling you to claim the inner authority of the Holy Ghost within you. Christ said He had to leave so that the Comforter might come. Some translations even have him saying it was our advantage that He go so the Holy Ghost could come. It almost seems that Christ was implying that He, as the mortal Christ and authority outside of His disciples, had to leave so that the spiritual Christ, or inner authority, could arrive. Such a departure and an arrival was to our advantage.

9.) **BE PATIENT AND DIG DEEP:** These issues are full of nuance, complexities, and paradoxes. A little digging will show you differences between beliefs you held with certainty and new narratives which require adjustment. Some of these beliefs you held were unique to you, or your family, or your ward or stake. Some of these beliefs are held throughout the Church. Regardless of how widespread these beliefs are, some of them will need adjustment and some will simply need to be abandoned altogether. A little digging only shows us that something is different. A lot of study and prayerful research will add context to help you more fully understand why this new information conflicts with past held beliefs. Only in this context can we find the why and not just the what of this change.

10.) **FAITH, CHOICE, AND COMMUNITY:** Members who have been through this transitional journey share several things in common. Many of them report losing some level of certainty, but finding so much more power in faith. Many report that they arrive at a place where they no longer scratch and claw for answers, as if having answers is life and death, but instead they relish in the questions. Many report that in the end there was no definitive nail in the coffin either way, and hence they saw faith as a choice. Many find a middle ground where they have taken responsibility for their beliefs, and they choose what they will place faith in and what they won't. They, in essence, own their faith. It is theirs and no one gets to impose on them something they don't choose for themselves.

We recognize that this phase may be full of tension, angst, and hurt. You may feel a loss of trust and feelings of betrayal. We validate that to some extent that is natural. Yet, as we press forward with a steadfastness with an eye toward Christ, we can move through such feelings and emotions to find more peace, more grace, more mercy, and more love. As we point ourselves more toward Him, more securely on Him as our foundation, regardless of our conclusion, we will find ourselves in a healthier and more transforming space.

## **Resources**

### **Official Talks**

"Come, Join with Us" President Uchtdorf October 2013

"Lord, I Believe" Elder Holland April 2013

"The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21st Century" Elder Ballard

"Trial of Your Faith" - Elder Neil L Anderson October 2012

### **Books**

Help Thou Mine Unbelief, by Nancy Phippen Browne

The Crucible of Doubt, by Terryl and Fiona Givens

Navigating Mormon Faith Crisis, by Thomas Wirthlin McConkie

Planted, by Patrick Mason

Rough Stone Rolling, by Richard Bushman

Letters To a Young Mormon, By Adam Miller

For Those Who Wonder, by Jeff Burton

### **Articles**

“Pray With Your Feet” – <http://richalger.blogspot.com/2012/09/praying-with-your-feet.html>

“Letter to a Doubter” – <http://teryllgivens.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Letter-to-a-Doubter.pdf>

“Joseph Smith and His Critics” – <http://www.lifeongoldplates.com/2008/08/bushmans-introduction-to-joseph-smith.html>

### **Great Articles on Faith Development**

[http://www.faithformationlearningexchange.net/uploads/5/2/4/6/5246709/faith\\_development\\_faith\\_formation\\_-\\_keeley.pdf](http://www.faithformationlearningexchange.net/uploads/5/2/4/6/5246709/faith_development_faith_formation_-_keeley.pdf)

[http://www.thebattleofarmageddon.com/stages\\_of\\_faith.pdf](http://www.thebattleofarmageddon.com/stages_of_faith.pdf)

### **Websites**

<http://FairMormon.org>

Adapted from an original handout written by C.J. Sorenson from the Richmond 2nd Ward