

When Doubts and Questions Arise

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Questions are a critical part of our eternal growth, and searching for answers in the Lord's way can bring us closer to our Heavenly Father.

Largely because of the Internet, it is not uncommon for members of the Church to encounter ideas that challenge their beliefs. Some members find the questions raised to be disconcerting and wonder whether it is acceptable to have a question about their faith.

It is important to understand that it's good to have questions. In fact, asking questions in faith is essential to our spiritual progress. However, sincere questions are not the same thing as doubts.

Questions versus Doubts

What, then, is the difference between a question and a doubt? Questions, when asked with a sincere desire to increase one's understanding and faith, are to be encouraged. Many ancient and modern revelations have come as the result of a sincere question.¹ The scriptural injunction to seek and to ask in order to find is among the most frequently repeated. Sincere questions are those asked with the "real intent" (Moroni 10:4) to better understand and more fully obey the will of the Lord.

A sincere questioner continues to be obedient while searching for answers. By contrast, I have seen that when people doubt their beliefs, they often suspend their commitment to commandments and covenants while waiting for answers. The doubter's posture is generally to withhold obedience or limit it, pending resolution of the doubts.

There is no suggestion in the scriptures or the teachings of the prophets that encourages doubt. In fact, the scriptures are full of teachings to the contrary. For example, we are enjoined to "doubt not, fear not" (D&C 6:36). And in Mormon 9:27, we are encouraged to "doubt not, but be believing."

One problem with doubt is the intent to obey *only after* the uncertainty is resolved to the satisfaction of the doubter. This is the attitude personified by Korihor, who said, "If thou wilt show unto me a sign ... then will I be convinced of the truth" (Alma 30:43).

The power of doubt to destroy faith, hope, and even family is diminished the minute one sincerely says, “I will do the things the Lord has commanded, whether my questions are resolved quickly or ever, because I have covenanted to do so.” The difference between a faithful “I will keep the commandments *because* ...” and a doubtful “I will keep the commandments *if* ...” is of powerful and eternal import.

The Lord’s Pattern for Receiving Answers

As a network engineer, I have to follow strict guidelines if I want my computer networks to be able to communicate with other networks. Sometimes these rules can seem tedious, but when each network engineer follows the same standards, we are able to create something more powerful than each of us working on our own could.

Likewise, if you seek an answer to a spiritual question from the Source of all knowledge, then you have to follow His rules to get the answer. This process requires at least a desire to understand the truth and a willingness to follow God’s will (see Alma 32:27). Otherwise, you run the risk of talking yourself into the answers you want to believe rather than receiving true answers from God.

It is perfectly normal to feel concern and uneasiness when confronted with an unfamiliar idea, especially if it challenges a strongly held belief. What matters is not letting that uneasiness turn us from our covenants during our search for answers. I have learned from personal experience that we cannot turn our back on God and then expect Him to answer our questions on our terms. It takes faith to continue keeping the commandments while our uncertainty is being resolved. It may be tempting to withhold or limit our obedience pending convincing resolution of our concerns, but this is not God’s way.

In practical terms, we must first ask ourselves, “Am I willing to do what it takes to get an answer from the Lord, or do I simply want to do things my way?” The Savior Himself taught this pattern when He said, “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself” (John 7:17).

So the first step in resolving questions is to stand “steadfast and immovable in keeping the commandments of God” (Alma 1:25). Elder Neil L. Andersen of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles asked:

“How do you remain ‘steadfast and immovable’ during a trial of faith? You immerse yourself in the very things that helped build your core of faith: you exercise faith in Christ, you pray, you ponder the scriptures, you repent, you keep the commandments, and you serve others.

“When faced with a trial of faith—whatever you do, don’t step away from the Church! Distancing yourself from the kingdom of God during a trial of faith is like leaving the safety of a secure storm cellar just as the tornado comes into view.”²

Elder Andersen also taught that “faith ... is a decision.”³ The Lord will not force your intellect or your obedience. You must choose faith intentionally! That choice does not violate your intellectual honesty; it is evidence of eternal and divine respect for your agency.

Questions Increase Understanding

Some incorrectly suppose that having sincere concerns about Church history or doctrine is evidence that one is not living up to the standards of the Church. Having questions does not mean you are guilty of some great sin. Questions are a part of life and are necessary for our progression and increased understanding. The concern is not if we develop questions but if we keep the commandments as we work through the process of revelation that leads to answers.

Be aware that Satan can magnify our doubts or lead us to justify our sins. The Holy Ghost will prompt us with uncomfortable feelings when we sin, and we can either repent or reject these promptings. As doubts arise, it may be useful to honestly ask yourself, Is there something I am doing or desiring that is contrary to the gospel? If you answer yes, seek help from your bishop. It can make all the difference! Letting your doubts justify your sins is never a successful substitute for repenting.

Some people also stumble over statements made by Church leaders that have turned out to be incorrect, not about doctrine but in their personal opinions. For example, President Joseph Fielding Smith (1876–1972) wrote in the first edition of his book *Answers to Gospel Questions*, “It is doubtful that man will ever be permitted to make any instrument or ship to travel through space and visit the moon or any distant planet.”⁴

Later, following the Apollo moon landings and the death of President David O. McKay, Joseph Fielding Smith became President of the Church. At a press conference, a reporter asked him about this statement. President Smith replied, “Well, I was wrong, wasn’t I?”⁵

As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles observed: “We [can] consume such precious emotional and spiritual capital clinging tenaciously to ... an incident in Church history that proved no more or less than that mortals will always struggle to measure up to the immortal hopes placed before them.”⁶

Searching in an Uplifting Way

Volumes of books have been written and countless hours have been spent exploring the story of the Restoration. This often leads to an increased understanding, but it can also prompt uncomfortable questions, especially when we don’t understand the motives of the people at the time. It is also easy to get bogged down in searching for historical facts that may be misunderstood or lost to us now, but it is always possible to get real and relevant information from the One who understands all.

This is perhaps the most important key of all: *when we are firm in keeping our covenants and living true to the light we have, the Lord will bless our lives and give us inspiration.* I have felt these tender mercies; they are very personal, direct experiences between us and our Heavenly Father. They are light and knowledge. No amount of reading or studying third-hand experiences can match the power of first-hand experiences given to us by the mercy and love of our Father.

Questions will continue to come up as we pursue a course of daily scripture and other gospel study. When the Lord wants to teach us, He will often do it by giving us a question to ponder. Answers come by being faithful to our covenants and serving others as we study, because that is the pathway to having personal experiences that, over time, provide the answers to all questions.

Notes

1. See, for example, Genesis 25:21–23; Exodus 3:11–22; Mosiah 26; Alma 40; 3 Nephi 27; Doctrine and Covenants 76; 77; 138.
2. Neil L. Andersen, “Trial of Your Faith,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2012, 40.
3. Neil L. Andersen, “You Know Enough,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2008, 14.
4. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* (1958), 5 vols., 2:191.
5. Personal reminiscence of David Farnsworth; the press conference took place on Jan. 23, 1970, six months after the moon landing.
6. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Laborers in the Vineyard,” *Ensign*, May 2012, 32.

Answers to many gospel questions can be found at [lds.org/topics](https://www.lds.org/topics).

Doctrinal Certainties

“I can live with some human imperfections, even among prophets of God—that is to be expected in mortal beings. I can live with some alleged scientific findings contrary to the Book of Mormon; time will correct those. And I can live with some seeming historical anomalies; they are minor in the total landscape of truth. But I cannot live without the doctrinal truths and ordinances restored by Joseph Smith, I cannot live without the priesthood of God to bless my family, and I cannot live without knowing my wife and children are sealed to me for eternity. That is the choice we face—a few unanswered questions on one hand versus a host of doctrinal certainties and the power of God on the other.”

Tad R. Callister, Sunday School general president, “What Is the Blueprint of Christ’s Church?” (CES devotional, Jan. 12, 2014), [cesdevotionals.lds.org](https://www.cesdevotionals.lds.org).

